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THE GLASS CEILING AND BEYOND

Tracing the explanations for women's lack of power in sports journalism

Erin Whiteside and Marie Hardin

The Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM), a networking organization for women in sports-media careers in the US, commemorated its 25th anniversary in 2013. For AWSM, certainly, there was reason to celebrate, as it reviewed changes in the mediated sports landscape over the past three decades. Women are now more visible on sports cable television and as columnists or writers for major sports publications than ever. It is impossible, for instance, to watch ESPN's signature show, *SportsCenter*, without seeing women reporting stories and perhaps anchoring the desk. Women dominate the "sideline reporter" position in game broadcasts of college and professional sports.

The increased visibility and opportunity did not come easily. The history of women covering sports in the US is one of struggle. The right of female sports reporters to have the same access as their male counterparts, for instance, was decided in a 1978 decision by a federal judge after *Sports Illustrated* writer, Melissa Ludtke, was barred from Major League Baseball (MLB) locker rooms (Ricchiardi, 2005). Still, well beyond that legal victory, female sports-writers faced "a gauntlet of intimidation" on the job (Ricchiardi, 2005, p. 59). Perhaps the most famous – and ugly – example of the struggle for women to have the opportunity to cover sports, without harassment, was that of sportswriter Lisa Olson, who was harassed in a National Football League (NFL) locker room in 1990 and subsequently filed a lawsuit.

Although incidents of blatant harassment have subsided (but not disappeared – the harassment of Mexican sports reporter Ines Sainz at an NFL training facility in 2010 received a great deal of media attention), women in the field face other roadblocks to thriving in a staunchly male-dominated profession (Ricchiardi, 2005). The percentage of women covering sports has not climbed substantially in the past decade, and top-level positions in most sports departments continue to be dominated by men. Long-time sports reporter Joanne Gerstner (2005) wrote in a column for the trade publication *Editor and Publisher*, women might secure entry-level jobs but are discouraged from moving up. "I've had [AWSM] members tell me stories of applying for jobs as editors or columnists, only to be told that the paper wasn't 'ready' to have a woman in that position," noted Gerstner. "Others have had editors openly question them at job interviews about their family plans or how they would juggle children and being an editor. Would a man receive these same illegal questions?" (Gerstner, 2005, p. 5).

Scholarly research into the status of women in sports journalism has documented the progress – and lack thereof – that women have made in the field, and the reasons sports departments remain generally unwelcoming places for women to build careers. Scholars have argued that the role of women in the production of mediated sports has implications for the ways sports are culturally understood and covered; the role of women in mediated sports is also one important indicator for fulfillment of the promise of Title IX, the US law protection equality of opportunity in sport for girls and women. This chapter reviews research focusing on the roles, opportunities and representation of women in US sports journalism.

Women in sports departments: The research

Research tracking the demographics of sports departments and the experiences of female sports journalists began in earnest during the mid-1990s. Little was published before that outside the anecdotal, first-person accounts of reporters such as Susan Fornoff (*Lady in the locker room*, 1993) and Alison Gordon (*Foul balls: Five years in the American League*, 1984), and coverage of court challenges waged on behalf of female reporters who had been harassed or barred from locker rooms, such as Ludtke and Olson.

Cramer (1994) and Miller and Miller (1995) were among the first to publish scholarly accounts examining the environment for women covering sports. Cramer interviewed 19 female sports journalists, each with an average of 11 years' experience, about their jobs and about women's sports coverage. The women who were interviewed expressed ambivalence about their careers, citing excitement of the beat and travel as reasons for staying with their jobs but the demands on their time as a drawback. Most said their supervisors supported them but also that they had been sexually harassed or assaulted on the job. Others described difficulties in gaining interviews with athletes who refused to talk to female reporters. The women also saw covering women's sports as a way to stall their careers because of the low status of women's sports in their newsrooms. They believed that, as more women entered sports departments, the stature of women's sports would inevitably increase.

Survey research of women in the industry

Miller and Miller were among the first to publish the first of a handful of studies surveying members of the AWSM about their experiences covering sports. The scholars asked the members about their experiences in newsrooms, interacting with reporters, editors, and managers. Generally, respondents characterized sexual discrimination and even harassment as routine. When women are hired, "[T]hey are expected to know less and adhere to higher standards of performance while tolerating lower salaries, less desirable assignments, and sexist comments in the workplace" (Miller and Miller, 1995, p. 888). In a survey of 89 AWSM members several years later for a master's thesis (Hoshino, 1998), respondents expressed frustration at being passed over for promotions and at salary inequities. Almost half (48 percent) of respondents also reported being sexually harassed, oftentimes by sources and in locker rooms.

Studies since 2000 generally echoed the findings of earlier research. Smucker, *et al.*'s (2003) survey of AWSM members who work at daily newspapers found that, although they expressed general satisfaction with their careers, they were not satisfied with the opportunities for advancement. A survey of 144 AWSM members by Hardin and Shain, (2006a), found similar

results. Most said they were satisfied with their jobs, but more than half reported having experienced sexual discrimination in the newsroom and in the field when reporting stories. A strong majority (85 percent) said they believed that discrimination was a barrier for women in the field. Respondents also noted long hours, relatively low pay, and a lack of opportunities for advancement as reasons they considered leaving the profession (Hardin and Shain, 2005). Hardin and Shain, who also assessed the career spans of the participants, observed that the average career span for women in the field was short; only a few persisted for more than ten years.

Hardin and Shain also conducted focus groups with women who worked in sports journalism at varying levels. Participants, who ranged in age from 25 to 60, described the work they did in positive terms: "It's an unbelievably rewarding and exciting profession" (Hardin and Shain, 2005, p. 28) one participant said, which was typical of responses about the nature of work covering sports. They saw gender-related discrimination as a routine part of the job, however. They also believed that efforts by sports departments to hire a woman in order to diversify worked to help them secure entry-level jobs; however, they felt that once hired, they were under constant pressure to "prove themselves" (Hardin and Shain, 2005, p. 29) and were unlikely to be promoted.

Studies on demographics and hiring

The first scholarly studies aimed at providing a baseline understanding of the demographics in newspaper sports departments and whether women were not, indeed, likely to be promoted, was not published until 2006. Until that point, the ratio of women to men covering sports had not been systematically tracked. An informal survey by Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) in 1999 found that only ten percent of sports reporters were women (Skwar, 1999). Another informal survey of 50 newspaper sports departments in 2001 showed that women constituted about 13 percent of employees, and just two of the 50 sports departments had a female sports editor (Etling, 2002). Research indicates that many sports editors (41 percent, according to a 2005 survey) believe they do not have an ethical obligation to increase the number of women working in sports departments (Hardin, 2005).

Two empirical studies looking at sports department demographics were published in 2006. Hardin and Whiteside (2006) surveyed sports departments at the top 200 circulation US newspapers and found that just 11 percent of all sports-department personnel were women. Newspapers with the highest circulations (more than 250,000) employed a slightly higher percentage of women: 13 percent. Overall, one in ten women was in a supervisory role; most were reporters. Another study published the same year, but surveying members of the APSE, an industry group of 300 newspapers, found that women were almost 13 percent of total staffs for those publications that participated (Lapchick, Brenden, and Wright, 2006). Lapchick and colleagues' most recent study of participating APSE-member sports departments, published in 2010, found that women were about 11 percent of all sports staffers (Lapchick, Moss II, Russell, and Searce, 2010). Far less research has been conducted on the ratio of women to men in television sports production; one study, in 2006, put the percentage of women working in sports in the top-50 US television markets at 11 percent (Hardin, Genovese, and Yu, 2009).

Sports departments are far less diverse, in terms of their ratio of women, than other areas of the newsroom. Demographic data for US newsrooms shows large differences in the representation of women in various roles. In 2006, for example, women constituted 40 percent of

reporters across all areas of the newsroom, compared with just ten percent in sports. The biggest disparity is in supervisory roles, where, in 2006, women comprised more than one-third of editors in other parts of the newsroom (compared with seven percent in sports; Hardin and Whiteside, 2006).

Theorizing women's subordinate status

Scholars who have studied the working conditions for female journalists suggest that sports departments are a space within newsrooms where a number of complex dynamics intersect – including those involving the norms of news production and cultural understandings of sport – to create unique challenges for women (Hall, 1996; Miloch, Pedersen, Smucker, and Whisenant, 2005; Staurowsky and DiManno, 2002). For instance, a survey of sports editors found that about a quarter of participants believed that women are naturally less athletic than men and half of those surveyed saw Title IX as “unjust to men’s sports” (Hardin, 2005, p. 73). These attitudes reflect the process of hegemonic masculinity, or the “pattern of practice” that upholds male privilege and contributes to the maintenance of patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity stems from the more general notion of hegemony, a theory first conceptualized by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci that refers to the process by which individuals consent to their own domination and internalize certain ideology as commonsense and natural. Importantly, hegemony does not mean control via force, and indeed, Gramsci was most interested in the process by which working-class individuals during the industrial period appeared to willingly subscribe to prevailing norms about their class status and, despite their overwhelming numbers, accept their role as subordinates to an elite few.

Hegemonic masculinity

Sports are often described as a hegemonic institution because its organizational practices and discursive frameworks function to normalize women’s inferiority and continually provide the justification for their (accepted) marginalization. Going further, sports are a space in which an ideal type of masculinity is celebrated; examples include the visibility and cultural primacy bestowed on men’s sports in which strength and power are fully on display, the glorification of athletes who play through pain, as well as the militaristic narratives that often encompass major sporting events. Over time this pageantry transforms sporting spaces into essentially male spaces, making women’s inclusion seem illogical and unwarranted (Messner, 2002). Further, because gender is conceptualized as two concepts on opposite ends of a binary pole, women face cultural sanctions for embodying masculine traits. Ultimately, the celebration of all things masculine is protected as a benefit that only men earn the privilege of enjoying. Stereotypes about the “butch” female athlete are one reflection of how such ideology functions as a lens through which meaning is constructed (Griffin, 1998). Such commonsense logic about women’s lack of fit in sports explains the challenges that women face in sports media careers, and it is this deployment of such ideology over time that undergirds the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity.

Regarding hegemonic masculinity in sports journalism, overtly sexist discourse still occurs (for example, MLB, 2012); such discourse invites viewers to consider women not as capable and professional figures in sports but as sexual objects, and, more generally, reasserts men as the rightful embodiment of athleticism. However, overtly sexist discourse is generally frowned

upon in a day and age where girls are routinely educated about their limitless potential in all fields, including those traditionally dominated by men. Thus, the expression of hegemonic masculinity is often more subtle. One oft-cited example is the relative paucity of women's sports content published or aired by sports media outlets. The lack of visibility given to women's sports conveys a lack of legitimacy, and is a practice that renders men's sports as "authentic sports, and women's a pale comparison" (Duncan, 2006, p. 236). Sports journalism practices and value systems function in a similar way. In long interviews, Hardin and Shain (2006b) noted how women in the industry recognized their lack of power and inability to gain respect on men's terms. At the same time, however, the women in their study used gendered labels to criticize women who did succeed – describing those women as "too bossy" or as using their sexuality in unethical ways (Hardin and Shain, 2006b, p. 335). Because the pursuit of power was seen as violating gender norms, it was ultimately rendered as a negative ambition for women. When dominant ideology functions as a lens for meaning-making in a way that privileges men as it did in this case, the hegemony in the sports department "retains its power" (Hardin and Shain, 2006b, p. 335). Dominant ideology also provides justification for a division of labor that favors men. Women are often denied opportunities for covering high profile assignments, like the World Series (Ricchiardi, 2005). Further, survey data has shown that women feel pigeonholed into covering women's sports; in the male-defined culture of sports journalism, such sports are considered lower value, and thus low-status beats (Cramer, 1994; Miloch, *et al.*, 2005). Access to highly valued assignments (men's sports) is critical to the promotion process, making a gendered division of labor especially problematic for women.

The process by which women's marginalization is normalized, also happens through the deployment of ideology related to workplace routines considered commonsense. Women may be viewed as ill-fitted for leadership positions because of prevailing norms related to the news production process in which reporters are expected to be available at all times (Robinson, 2005). When hours at work are privileged over quality work output, total availability is then transformed into competence; doing so puts individuals with families and other non-work priorities at a decided disadvantage. Furthermore, in sports, most events happen at nights and weekends, a time when the primary caretaker is usually required to be home with children. Despite cultural shifts in attitudes toward childrearing, women still report a pessimistic outlook about the prospect of raising a family and building a successful career in sports journalism (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009; Hardin, Shain, and Poniatowski, 2008). The lack of institutional childcare support, combined with ideology that dictates women as naturally better suited as the primary caretaker function simultaneously to create unique challenges for women in an environment where total allegiance to the profession is considered a hallmark of the ideal worker.

Tokenism

Research has demonstrated that few women stay in sports journalism over the entirety of their professional careers; these high turnover rates are consistent with scholarship on tokenism, which examines the experiences of minorities in group settings. Tokens are often viewed as representatives of a category and are evaluated based on stereotypes of the category they represent (Kanter, 2003). This process explains why so many women in sports journalism report feeling pressure to prove their worth. Lingering stereotypes about women's lack of athletic aptitude and knowledge related to sports in general create a set of expectations that

women must overcome as long as they occupy a token status. As one woman explained to researchers about her early days on the job, "I felt right away that I needed to prove myself because I wanted them to respect me as their equal and as someone who had equal sports knowledge as them" (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009, p. 637). In an open-ended question on a survey by Miloch, *et al.* (2005), female sports reporters were asked about advice they would give young women; the top answer was "know your stuff," a comment that hearkens to questions about women's competence in sports (Miloch, *et al.*, 2005, p. 227). Men are not subject to such evaluations, as their sports knowledge is considered a given by way of their gender, an example of a type of invisible privilege enjoyed by men.

As a symbol of difference, tokens are highly visible; Kanter (2003) suggests that tokens respond to that visibility in three ways, including: 1) over-achieving in order to assuage concerns about their competence; 2) seeking ways to turn their visibility into an advantage; and 3) working to blend in and thereby minimize their difference. Because of their minority status, it is a risk to challenge dominant workplace value systems and indeed, much research on women in sports journalism has noted the ways in which women appear to subscribe to cultural norms that otherwise cement their outsider status. In interviews, female sports journalists resist indicting problematic workplace cultures and instead focus on adapting to issues like perceived gender discrimination. Doing so allows women to assimilate and – as much as possible – essentially minimize their difference. Hardin and Shain (2006b, p. 331) also noted how women in their study used the idea of developing a "thick skin" as a coping mechanism when facing questions about their competence.

Others may actively work to position their gender as an advantage. For example, women have described seeing their gender as a useful tool in garnering interviews their many male colleagues may be otherwise unable to secure; although such strategies may provide a short-term benefit, they also ultimately limit the possibilities of increased gender diversity. After all, if being a "scarce commodity" as a female sports journalist is an advantage, there is no motivation among women to relinquish that advantage. Furthermore, allowing sexist jokes to continue unabated, or coping with unwarranted criticism of one's aptitude by ignoring it, may create a sense of acceptance, but also facilitates the maintenance of a system that delegitimizes women's status (Claringbould, Knoppers, and Elling, 2004).

Hegemony is at its most powerful when individuals see the opportunity for resistance as futile and accept the given power structure as natural. The resistance among women to challenging sexual harassment and discrimination noted by Hardin (2005), Miller and Miller (1995), and others is evidence of how hegemony works. Women should not be blamed for failing to take a more activist role, however; as tokens they have little power to challenge a system that in many ways is organized to normalize their outsider status.

In working to relieve women from the pressures of token status, scholars have advocated increased attention to diverse hiring practices. The industry has followed suit and the lack of diversity is an issue that is routinely discussed in industry publications. Yet, improvements in gender diversity have not materialized. One reason may be the practice of homologous reproduction, or the process of hiring individuals that match the characteristics of those making such employment decisions (Whisenant and Mullane, 2007). Given that (white) men occupy the vast majority of leadership and authority positions in sports journalism, attention should be given to how this process may be manifest in sports. Related, women have reported feeling on the outside of informal networks; these types of (male-dominated) groups are essential to gaining access to opportunities that may lead to promotions (Kanter, 2003).

Conclusions: Remedies for change

Scholars have suggested several remedies for addressing the ongoing problems facing women in the industry. As tokens, women hold little power and face great risks in challenging workplace value systems that privilege men. It is no wonder that few women cite sexual harassment or gender discrimination as reasons for leaving the industry. The recognition about their lack of power may also explain why aspiring sports journalists resist labeling themselves as feminists (Staurowsky and DiManno, 2002).

However, research has noted that once tokens reach a critical mass of 15 percent of any given group, change becomes more realistic (Grey, 2002). Thus, the tandem goals of hiring, coupled with a focus on retention, may aid women in reaching a critical mass in sports journalism. Once they do so, women may feel safer in challenging comments or practices that question their legitimacy. A critical mass may also help raise awareness of issues uniquely facing women. A longitudinal study has shown that female sports journalists routinely report feeling pessimistic about the prospect of balancing work and family (Hardin, Shain and Poniatowski, 2008; Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Women have suggested that flex-time or on-site childcare would help in that regard (although such programs would have to be used by everyone – men included – or as Hardin, *et al.* (2008) point out, they would simply function to further mark women's difference).

Perhaps a less obvious challenge facing women is gaining access to informal networks. Kanter (1977, p. 181) notes that, often in organizations, lower-level workers are aided through what she calls "sponsorship" from someone in a leadership position. The sponsor aids in everything from mentorship to more informal assistance, including creating opportunities for networking, social invitations, and so on. Sponsorship is extraordinarily valuable in that it is an outward indicator of an association with power; although such a relationship is important for all workers, it may be especially so for women, who "need even more the signs of such influence and the access to real power provided by sponsors" (Kanter, 1977, p. 183). Because, as Claringbould, *et al.* (2004, p. 710) note, sports journalism is so "skewed" in favor of (white) men, it is critical that advocacy groups work to create sponsorship opportunities for women. One such group is AWSM, and scholars such as Hardin and Shain (2006a) and others have encouraged the organization to continue its efforts to fill this void. Staurowsky and DiManno also urge faculty members to consider the issues presented in this chapter when advising female students. They suggest faculty work toward uncovering internships that may be especially hospitable to women, and address these issues with potential employers. Most importantly, they urge faculty to avoid leaving young female sports journalists "to take on the system in isolation" (Staurowsky and DiManno, 2002, p. 154).

Although these ideas may provide a short-term benefit, improving opportunities for women in sports journalism may only happen once commonsense understandings about gender and sports change (Hardin, *et al.*, 2008; Hardin and Shain, 2006b). Advocating for increased and better women's sports coverage may be one way such a shift could occur; seeing more women engaged in athletic pursuits – especially strength sports in which women use their bodies in powerful ways – disrupts cultural norms about sports and gender that may prove liberating for women. However, when women are covered, too often their athleticism is downplayed in favor of narratives that showcase normative femininity. The *Sports Illustrated* 2010 Olympics preview issue is one example (Russo, 2010). In putting Lindsay Vonn on its cover, the magazine made a pointed shift in its practice of featuring male athletes nearly

exclusively (Bishop, 2003). Yet Vonn's athleticism was not on display; rather, the image hinted at her sexuality and invited the viewer to consume Vonn as an object, rather than an active, athletic subject. Discourse that consistently downplays women's athleticism guards against challenges to male superiority in sports and normalizes women's outsider status. Interestingly, more women in the industry may provide an antidote to problematic depictions of female athletes (for example, in a content analysis, Kian and Hardin (2009) found that women used less stereotypical frames when covering female athletes compared with men). Changing the way women's sports are covered is critical to addressing the persistent lack of diversity in sports journalism. Ultimately, as Hardin and Shain (2006b) note, women are unlikely to earn acceptance in sports journalism until they earn acceptance in sports.

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16

UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGEST SHOW IN MEDIA

What the Olympic Games communicates to the world

Andrew C. Billings and Natalie Brown

In an age of fragmented media consumption, the anomalies are the media offerings that still offer tremendous demographic reach. Programs such as *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars* draw a multitude of ages and backgrounds within a weekly viewership of 20–25 million Americans (Seidman, 2011). The Super Bowl offers a singular yearly rating that is the envy of all US media content, drawing over 100 million viewers, regardless of the teams that are playing or the media markets in which they reside. The men's FIFA World Cup soccer tournament offers reach beyond a single nation, with billions of people watching at least part of a game (FIFA Online, 2011). However, one consistent major player within all megasports (and mega-media) offerings has been the Olympic telecast. In a variety of ways, the Olympics represents the most epic scope of all: billions of people watching among virtually every nation, over 200 different nations competing, and 17 consecutive days in which the Olympic telecast dominates all media coverage: often morning, afternoon, evening, and late-night (Billings, 2008).

Because of the tremendous size and diversity of the audience within a plethora of media formats (television, newspaper, Internet, magazines, radio, and more), a great deal of scholarly examination has been devoted to the manner in which the Olympics are conveyed worldwide as well as the lessons we can learn from these depictions (see Real, 1989; Puijk, 1997). These discussions have involved issues such as politics (Espy, 1979; Larson and Park, 1993), power (Larson and Park, 1993; Schaffer and Smith, 2000), gender (Toohey, 1997; Billings, 2008), nationalism (Bairner, 2001; Billings and Angelini, 2007), ethnic representation (Hartmann, 1996; Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan, and Leggett, 1996), (dis)ability (Brittain, 2009), and many, many more. In essence, these scholars collectively argue that sport is not just a microcosm of society, but that society is a microcosm of sport; to learn about the Olympics is to learn about the state of the world today (see Dayan and Katz, 1992) – the issues that matter to us and the manner in which we discuss them.

In many ways, the “Olympic ideal” runs counter to these discussions as academicians have analyzed them. This “ideal” argues that individuals, rather than nations, can compete every four years without restriction based on their politics, identity, or economic status. However, when the competition is actually held, media gatekeepers (and, increasing, at-home enthusiasts turned social media producers) describe the competitions within troubling terms of “us” vs. “them” and