

# HALF THE STORY? OLYMPIC WOMEN ON ABC NEWS ONLINE

---

## Abstract

*A content analysis of the ABC News Online website during the 2000 Olympic Games reveals a select few female role models were available to young audiences. One female athlete was 'news-privileged'. Cathy Freeman's exposure came at the expense of her Australian team mates, especially those women who won medals in team sports. While the results indicate an improvement in both the extent of women's sports coverage and the range of sports covered, stereotypical descriptions often characterised adult females as emotionally vulnerable, dependent adolescents. Male athletes were never infantilised and were far less likely to be described in emotive terms.*

The purpose of this study was to examine the treatment of elite Australian athletes in the new sports media. Both the amount and nature of Olympic coverage on *ABC News Online* are important because the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's responsibilities include the provision of a comprehensive and non-discriminatory news service.

## Sport and media sports: Still bastions of male domination?

Sport is a vital part of Australian popular culture, yet it remains a zone of exclusion and inequality. Despite millions of dollars in government funding, female participation rates in sport and physical activities remain well below those for males.<sup>1</sup> This gender imbalance has been attributed, in part, to the images presented by the mass media. According to Robertson (1997), the mass media routinely expand the social horizons of their audiences, providing symbolic role models for social learning. In their examination of the status of women in sport, Schell and Rodriguez (2000) contend that male hegemony, legitimated by the media, presides over the institution of sport in capitalist society. Culturally, sport reflects men's dominant values and ideals about, for example, who can play and the ideal athlete. Through the media, society receives notice that certain sports are for white, able-bodied, heterosexual males and other sports, if they must compete, are for females. Bryson (1987) argues that the messages of male hegemony in sport are served up through extensive media coverage of men's athletic events while simultaneously trivialising or limiting attention given to women's sport.

## Gender in media sports

Australian research on gender representation in sports coverage has focused on newspapers (see, for example, Menzies, 1989; Mikosza, 1997), while cross-media

---

comparisons (Alston, 1996; Phillips, 1997) have been limited to the traditional media. Little is known about online sports media and to what extent 'the gender-stereotyped messages, inherent in the print media ... are replicated by their cyberspace counterparts' (Robertson, 1997: 103). The literature reveals no previous empirical studies examining the portrayal of gender in online Olympic sports coverage. The Olympic Games is the largest sporting event in the world, in terms of participants and spectators, and Sydney 2000 drew thousands of athletes to compete in front of 7 million ticket holders and a global television and internet audience estimated in the billions. During the Games, site accesses for ABC *Online* peaked at more than 7 million, while ABC *News Online* received 1.7 million weekly page visits in 2000-2001 (ABC, 2002). Thus the online arm of Australia's national public broadcaster was a significant source of information about the Olympics.

Studies of gender bias in media sports content have focused on representation, or the quantitative presence of the group of interest, and respect, or the treatment and status given to this group (Kane, 1996; Kinnick, 1998). In this analysis, representation refers to how much coverage Australian female athletes receive compared with Australian male athletes, their team population, and the proportion of Australian medals won by gender. Representation also refers to the coverage of women competing in sex-typed sports (categorised as female-appropriate, male-appropriate and neutral). Lack of respect is when the media trivialise the seriousness and importance of female athletes. Sources of this bias are a focus on appearance (in descriptions), characterisations of weakness, and linguistic sexism (such as trivialising language, and the more frequent use of martial metaphors in descriptions of men's sports).

### **Who gets the 'press' and how much do they get?**

Studies in Australia (Mikosza, 1997; Brown, 1995) and overseas (Adams and Tuggle, 2003; Flatten and Matheson, 1996) confirm Rowe's (1991) observation that not everyone has an equal chance of being represented in sports media coverage. In terms of the number of press or magazine articles, article size and total word counts, female representation is only a tiny proportion of or significantly less than that accorded to men (Francis, 2003). The prime positions of the front, back and top of newspaper pages, the 'splash' or Top Stories pages of sports websites, and early segments of television sports shows are often out of bounds for sportswomen (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003; Kachgal, 2001; Phillips, 1997). Women's sports are also given less prominence than men's events when they appear in combined reports. Males, for example, were first mentioned in 100 per cent of articles in the *Times* coverage of swimming at the Seoul Olympics (Hargreaves, 1994).

A prevalent theme in the literature of Olympic sports coverage is that, for a short time, sportswomen get a better 'deal'. NBC's 2000 Olympics telecasts gave American female athletes 44.8 per cent of air time. To get coverage, however, females had to be involved in socially acceptable, individual sports (Tuggle et al., 2002). The coverage of women's team sports is important because 'it helps break

---

stereotypes of women holding ancillary positions by showing them in active leadership and decision-making roles' (Higgs and Weiller, 1994: 2). At the 2000 Olympics, US television (as it did in 1996) devoted more air time to men's team sports (56.3 per cent) than to women's team sports (43.7 per cent) (Tuggle et al., 2002).

## Respect in reporting

Articles about female athletes focus more on their looks (Bridge, 1994) and age (Phillips, 1997) than on their accomplishments or abilities. Other 'loaded' tactics are to refer to females' 'dating habits', or to their marital or family status (Eastman and Billings, 2000: 9), and to describe women athletes in ways that stress emotional weakness, such as 'dissolving into tears', while applauding men for their toughness when they confront stressful situations (George et al., 2001: 7).

Kane (1994) contends that media portrayals of women athletes are 'exclusively' ambivalent. These mixed messages 'juxtapose positive descriptions and images with descriptions and images that undermine and trivialise women's efforts and successes' (Wensing and Bruce, 2003: 387). Writers have also identified bias in sports media coverage that highlights women's failures and men's achievements; infantilises women by calling them 'girl' or 'young lady' but gives men adult status by referring to them as 'man' or 'old fellow' (Eastman and Billings, 2000); and applies the imagery of war, a primary province of males, more frequently to men's sports than women's sports. For example, where men 'crash through' the defence, women 'move against' it (Duncan et al., 1990: 3).

Characterisations of sports, according to their perceived sex-appropriateness, demonstrate what Watkins (1973: 35), writing in the 1970s, called the 'cultural lag' confronting female athletes in 'the realm of one of the last bastions of male domination'. Historically, outright opposition to women's participation in sport has been based on misconceptions that women were physically and emotionally more delicate but less competitive and aggressive than men, and their relationship with men was one of dependence. Such sexist notions have been challenged strongly since the late 1960s, but their impact on the entire character of sport is still evident today (Cashmore, 2000). Females' sport involvement is considered either socially acceptable or unacceptable, based on how each sport conforms to traditional/historical and/or modern images of appropriate female behaviour (von der Lippe, 2002); and beliefs regarding the sex-typing of sports are likely to be reflected in the popular media's description of female athletes (Jones et al., 1999).

Sex-typing puts sports into three categories: male-appropriate, female-appropriate and neutral.<sup>2</sup> Tuggle et al. (2002) report that sport has been a major site for reinforcing gender stereotypes, by restricting media coverage to appropriate female sports, and by portraying women athletes according to the sex-appropriateness of their sports. In contrast, Vincent (2000) found a similar amount of newspaper coverage was devoted to females competing in appropriate and inappropriate sports.

## Examining differences in coverage for females and males

Three hypotheses are proposed about differences in coverage for Australian female and male athletes competing in Sydney in 2000. *ABC News Online* is expected

---

to echo the traditional media's trend of disproportionate coverage in the number of words, lead reports and first mentions within reports that it devotes to each gender.

*Hypothesis 1: Australian female and male athletes and women's and men's sports will receive differential coverage on ABC News Online during the 2000 Olympics; that is, females will receive less coverage than males.*

Historically, females competing in physically attractive sports have been more likely to receive media attention than those competing in hard contact sports or sports involving explosive strength and physical power. In this study, sports were categorised according to Daddario's (1998) criteria for gender-appropriateness (see note 2).

*Hypothesis 2: Australian female athletes competing in so-called 'female-appropriate' sports will receive more coverage on News Online than those who compete in inappropriate sports.*

As noted, the media see appearance, relationships and emotions as relevant in descriptions of female athletes, while biased explanations for success or failure and linguistic sexism present women's sport and sportswomen as anomalies. The ABC's Editorial Policies (1998) instruct staff to avoid discrimination and stereotyping, by treating all sections of society with respect, and avoiding the use of prejudicial language.<sup>3</sup>

*Hypothesis 3: Given the ABC's editorial guidelines, the portrayal of Australian female athletes on News Online will not reflect previously identified forms of gender bias.*

## **Method**

The sample consisted of one bulletin per day of *ABC News Online's* Olympic coverage from 13 September to 2 October 2000. A total of 19 bulletins, from the site's two splash pages — [abc.net.au/news](http://abc.net.au/news) and [abc.net.au/olympics/news](http://abc.net.au/olympics/news) — and the main (Tier Two) reports linked to these pages, provided the context units. Daily bulletins were selected from between 2.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m. to accommodate Olympic schedules and peaks in ABC online audience activity at 4.30 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. (Alysen, 2000), and to counter the repetition, in early bulletins, of sports news reported the previous day. Sample size was also determined by a unique goal of the study — to investigate how Australian female and male athletes only were represented during Olympic competition — and by its definition of sports reports.<sup>4</sup>

A primary goal of content analysis is to describe characteristics of the content of the mass media's messages. Berelson (quoted in Frey et al., 1992: 195) defines content analysis as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication'. He advises researchers to study both the substance of the manifest content (what is said) and its form (how it is said). After Kinnick (1998), variables relating to both form and substance were observed when constructing coding categories. Coding units relating

to form included placement or prominence of reports in the website's Top Stories summary section, and use of elements indicating visual hierarchy (internal order of coverage in combined gender reports) on the site's second-level or Tier Two pages. For report substance, coding indicated the gender of the featured athlete, and mentions of (i) appearance, (ii) relationships, (iii) emotions, and (iv) successes and failures.<sup>6</sup> Language was examined along gender lines for the use of martial and trivialising language.

A trained postgraduate student and the author content coded a sub-sample of nine odd-number bulletins (out of 19). The overall proportion of intercoder agreement was .85. Next, the author recoded all *News Online* Olympic sports reports about Australian athletes, and the sample yielded 44 010 words. The data were subjected to chi-square analysis (in all calculations,  $p = .05$ ) and Kruskal-Wallis H testing.

## Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Australian female athletes would receive less coverage than males. It was partially supported across the three variables. Male athletes received slightly more words (50.5 per cent), and chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference by gender ( $X^2(1) = 4.56, p = .033$ ). While females received 56 per cent of lead stories, there was no statistically significant difference by gender ( $X^2(1) = .111, p = .739$ ). Males' achievements were first mentioned 1.6 times more often in combined reports, but the difference by gender was not statistically significant ( $X^2(1) = 3.765, p = .052$ ). Table 1 presents a breakdown of coverage.

**Table 1: Coverage by gender of Australian athletes on ABC News Online**

	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Words	21 781	49.5	22 229	50.5	44 010	100
Lead reports	5	56.0	4	44.0	9	100
First mentioned	26	38.0	42	62.0	68	100

Hypothesis 2 stated that *News Online* coverage would favour Australian women who competed in socially acceptable sports. It was not supported. Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed that the number of words about females with regard to sport appropriateness was not statistically equal ( $H = 11.19, X^2_{.05}(2) = 5.99$ ). The mean ranks suggest male-appropriate sports received the highest coverage scores (13.5), with female-appropriate sports receiving the lowest scores (7.166). Table 2 presents a comparison of proportionate coverage of gender-typed sports.

**Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis H for female sports coverage by gender-appropriateness on ABC News Online**

<i>Sport</i>	<i>Sport score</i>	<i>Gender-approp.</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Ranks assigned to female-approp. i = 1</i>	<i>Ranks assigned to male-approp. i = 2</i>	<i>Ranks assigned to gender-neutral i = 3</i>
Trampol.	8	Female	1	1		
Sync. swim.	14	Female	2	2		
Equestrian	15	Neutral	3			3
Gymnastics	26	Female	4	4		
Soccer	162	Male	5		5	
Diving	225	Female	6	6		
Shooting	335	Neutral	7			7
Beach v/ball	358	Neutral	8			8
Kayaking	418	Male	9		9	
Cycling	540	Male	10		10	
Triathlon	601	Male	11		11	
Tennis	608	Female	12	12		
Rowing	611	Male	13		13	
Sailing	854	Neutral	14			14
Softball	1131	Male	15		15	
Water polo	1210	Male	16		16	
Basketball	1320	Male	17		17	
Swimming	2116	Female	18	18		
Hockey	2416	Male	19		19	
Athletics	7687	Male	20		20	
		$T_i$		43	135	32
		$n_i$		6	10	4
		Mean rank		7.166	13.5	8

$H = 11.19$        $X^2_{.05}(2) = 5.99$

Hypothesis 3 predicted that, in light of ABC editorial policies, reports about sportswomen would be unlikely to contain instances of bias. It was partially supported, with differences in portrayal by gender varying across the seven indicators. Chi-square analysis revealed there was no significant difference between women and men in the incidence of: descriptions about their physical appearance ( $X^2(1) = .2$ ,  $p = .655$ ); references to relationships ( $X^2(1) = .364$ ,  $p = .546$ ); references to success ( $X^2(1) = 3.6$ ,  $p = .058$ ); references to failure ( $X^2(1) = 2.4$ ,  $p = .121$ ); and use of martial descriptors ( $X^2(1) = .254$ ,  $p = .614$ ). However, there were significant differences by gender in the incidence of: descriptions of emotions ( $X^2(1) = 5.582$ ,  $p = .018$ ); and use of trivialising or infantilising language ( $X^2(1) = 12$ ,  $p = .0005$ ). Tables 3 and 4 show these results.

**Table 3: Descriptive statements by gender for Australian athletes on ABC News Online**

	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Appearance	21	47.0	24	53.0	45	100
Relationships	24	54.5	20	45.5	44	100
Emotions	50	63.0	29	37.0	79	100
Success	68	42.5	92	57.5	160	100
Failure	24	40.0	36	60.0	60	100

**Table 4: Instances of linguistic sexism by gender for Australian athletes on ABC News Online**

	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Martial metaphors	74	52	68	48	142	100
Trivialising references	12	100	0	0	12	100

### Findings on coverage for females and males

At first glance, coverage of Australian female and male athletes in Sydney seems equitable, with the greater number of events open to women in 2000 and the record number of 283 women in the Australian team (compared with 343 males) contributing to their profile. Yet close inspection reveals that more than one-fifth of the 21 781 words about females highlighted one competitor: Cathy Freeman.

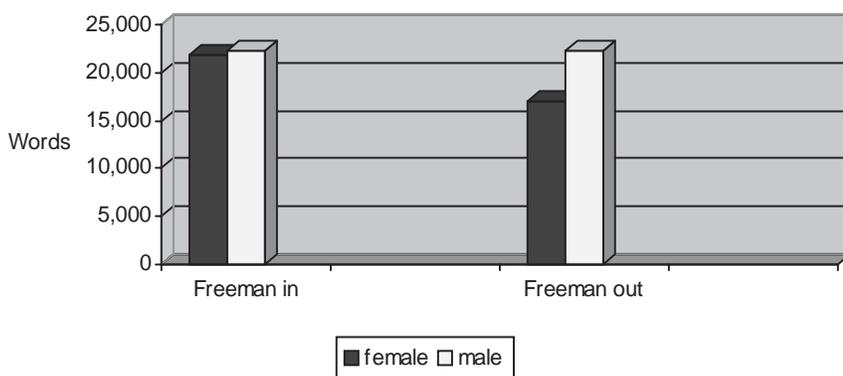
Freeman's profile, on the back of an individual gold medal, creates an interesting 'eclipse' effect. She monopolised female sports coverage while other Australian sportswomen, both individual and team competitors, were generally ignored. Hockey coverage, for example, amounted to 2416 words, despite these women reaping a double success in Sydney. The Hockeyroos won their second consecutive Olympic gold medal and their captain, Rechelle Hawkes, was only the third Australian to win three Olympic gold medals in the same event. Water polo made its Olympic debut in Sydney. Australia's women's team, despite winning gold, received only

1210 words of coverage. Australia's least covered female gold medallists, beach volleyballers Natalie Cook and Kerri Ann Pottharst, earned just 358 words.

Freeman's profile on *News Online* suggests that she was Australia's most successful athlete in Sydney. She was not. Six other Australians won individual gold medals. Athletes of both genders won multiple medals. Yet Freeman's coverage is almost three times that received by Ian Thorpe who, with three gold medals (two in relays) and a silver medal, was the most featured male athlete (1640 words). If gold medals are a standard for coverage, based on the 4850 words about Freeman, Australia's six other individual medal winners were entitled to a total of at least 29 100 words on *News Online*.

Removing Freeman's total from the word count for Australian sportswomen makes a meaningful difference to the percentages of coverage for females and males at the Sydney Olympics. Without her, women's percentage of coverage drops by 6.3 per cent to 43.2 per cent, while men's percentage of coverage increases to 56.8 per cent. Thus, one female athlete's Olympic campaign accounts for the overall, proportionately equitable distribution of coverage for sportswomen, as shown in Figure 1.

Freeman's Olympic campaign and success embody elements of the newsmaking process, satisfying the news values of prominence, timeliness, human interest, conflict, controversy, consequence and cultural and geographic proximity. While Freeman's 400 metres win brought together several themes — the drama of the withdrawal of her main rival, France's Marie-Jose Perec; the end of a 10-year, gold medal drought in track and field for Australia; the symbolic triumph of social justice (Freeman as the first Aborigine to win an individual Olympic gold medal for Australia); and 'a moment of national reconciliation' (Greenfield and Williams, 2000: 56) — an examination of race and its influence on coverage is outside the scope of this study.



**Figure 1: Effect of the 'Freeman factor' on sports coverage by gender on ABC News Online**

Compared with Freeman, Australia's elite female athletes who competed in team sports were deprived in coverage and in content on *News Online*. The profile of these team players (33 per cent of Tier Two words) does not match their four

---

gold medals in hockey, water polo, sailing and beach volleyball (67 per cent of Australian female gold medals). Nor does it match the coverage for Australia's men's teams, who won five gold medals but received 1313.8 words per medal, compared with 1209.5 words per medal for women. More revealing is a comparison within sports. In basketball, for example, Australia's women's team won silver and garnered 1320 words of coverage. Australia's men's team finished out of the medals, yet their profile on *News Online* (2964 words) easily outstripped the attention paid to the Opals. These findings may support Kachgal's (2001) conclusion that online sports sites, by ignoring or under-reporting the achievements of some sportswomen, marginalise female athletes in the same way that traditional media do.

Unlike traditional media where sportswomen have been under-represented in mainstream sports news, female athletes were visible on *News Online*'s prime location of the Top Stories splash page. Females received 56 per cent of all leads but, given the sample size, it is difficult to describe the trend of sports coverage in Top Stories placement. While this seems a positive finding, *News Online* did give men's events prominence over women's sports in combined gender reports. Males and their sports were first mentioned in 62 per cent of combined reports. There were no parallels with the overtly biased practice of positioning outstanding female achievements after major stories on male losses.

In 2000, male athletes comprised 55 per cent of the Australian team and won 62 per cent of Australia's medals. Against these indices, males deserved more than 50.5 per cent of words on *News Online*. Australian females, however, seem to have received more coverage (49.5 per cent of words) than warranted by either their medal success (38 per cent of Australia's tally) or participation (45 per cent of the team). The results are consistent with American television coverage of the 2000 Olympics where US females also got more airtime (44.8 per cent) than their share of medals won (41.2 per cent of the US tally). However, to gain exposure, US sportswomen had to compete in socially acceptable individual sports. US women in team sports received less than half of the airtime devoted to individual sportswomen (Tuggle et al., 2002). Australian females, too, got more coverage on *News Online* if they competed as individuals, rather than as team players.

The contrast with the US study, and with 'a pattern that observers of sports coverage have noted for decades' (2002: 371), is that individual Australian females received more coverage when they competed in inappropriate sports. If, traditionally, women who compete in male-appropriate sports have received less coverage because they challenged traditional sex role stereotypes about sport involvement, *News Online* may be challenging these stereotypes too. The mean number of words for women in male-appropriate sports (1609.6) is more than five times the means for female-appropriate and neutral sports. Even without the 'Freeman factor' (in a male-appropriate sport), these sports remain, proportionately, the primary focus of coverage for Australia's women. So the gender appropriateness of women's sports may be a dead issue. Vincent (2000: 1) suggests that such classifications are 'no longer an accurate reflection of how society views women competing in sports requiring speed, strength and power'.

---

No differences based on gender were apparent in proportionate references to athletes' appearance or relationships. While both genders were subjected to gratuitous references to age, only Jelena Dokic's familial ties (her 'controversial' father, Damir) were scrutinised in two reports about the tennis player's Olympic campaign. Of the 50 emotional descriptors for women (compared with 29 for men), more than 85 per cent referred to females' loss of control: they 'burst into tears', 'broke down in tears' and 'cried before a game'. Only one report about men's hockey described how 'some of the Australian players went down on their knees and wept openly'. In women's hockey, gendered descriptors framed Australia's third successive Olympic title in terms of emotional dependence, as 'a fitting farewell for the Hockeyroos' lord and master Ric Charlesworth'. Also disturbing were instances of male 'ownership' of female teams, and attributions of women's success to male guidance or direction. The Hockeyroos were twice described as 'Ric Charlesworth's women' and once as 'Charlesworth's girls', as though they were their coach's possessions. There were no ownership or emotional dependence analogues in the 20 male relationship references.

Males were 1.3 times as likely to be recognised for their successes and 1.5 times more likely to have their failures highlighted than females. However, *News Online's* focus on female emotions and attributions of success to male guidance echo the bias of traditional media, reminding women who venture into the domain of male sports that they occupy a secondary status (Cashmore, 2000). Surprisingly, *News Online* used slightly more sport-war metaphors for female events than male events. Vivid descriptions of female aggression were most often seen in reports about male-appropriate sports. Only women were trivialised by the use of infantilising references. Male athletes were never referred to as 'boys'. Of the 12 references to adult sportswomen as 'girls', eight appeared in direct quotes from Australian female athletes.

Regardless of the source, infantilisation demeans adult females and helps to undermine sportswomen's status. Its apparent acceptance and use by contemporary Australian female athletes who called their adult peers 'girls' begs the question, 'Do they care?' Hargreaves (1993: 179) has noted that male hegemony in sport 'has never been static and absolute', and that some women and men support, accommodate or collude in existing patterns of discrimination in sport, while others oppose them and struggle for change. Sportswomen looking for change will have priorities. If one of them is how they are treated in the media, some female athletes may desire more coverage ahead of reversing perceived 'minor' cultural conventions (such as being called girls).

## **Influences on Olympic coverage**

Overall, *News Online's* Olympic coverage appears to signal an improvement in the media's treatment of female athletes, notwithstanding the obstacles to parity of coverage enshrined in the politics of Olympic competition that is restrictive of sportswomen's access to the sports arena and medals. Setting aside the inflation effect of the 'Freeman factor', what else could explain the atypical levels and types of coverage for sportswomen on *News Online*? An international event of the

---

size and elite nature of the Olympics, combined with its conduct on Australian soil, has the potential to foster an intensity of national interest and pride in the media of the host nation. During the Olympics, the media concentrate on the athletes of their own country and on the medals they win (Pfister, 1987). Much Olympic sports journalism, in the lead-up to and during the Games, routinely resembled a form guide. The media appraised the chances of their home country athletes — based on their performances, including results and/or experience; prevailing conditions such as the athlete's physical and emotional well-being, the track, and even the weather — against those of their competitors, not only as personal rivals but, as Rowe (1991) contends, as instruments of ideological rivalry between nations.

National, and especially international, sports, and success in them, have 'a symbolically unifying power', and global media mega sports events such as the Olympics and the soccer World Cup have become 'orgies of ... nationalism' (Rowe, 1999: 23). Could nationalism spark an increase in the coverage given to Australia's female Olympians? No, according to Hargreaves (1986). Although he argues that the media are the most important institution reproducing national identity today, Hargreaves says when sport is politicised at events, such as the Olympic Games, the media confirm a hegemonic system: '[It] is then that media sport is deployed in support of dominant groups' interests, and that it amplifies, rather than simply reinforces social forces.' (1986: 160)

Hargreaves' case for exaggerated hegemony (and the 132 events open to women in Sydney, compared with 168 for men) suggests that Australian women athletes would get less coverage during the 2000 Olympics than in a non-Olympic period. Conversely, Tuggle and Owen (1999: 2) say that for nearly 40 years the spotlight has shone more brightly on women during the Olympics than at other times. In the same period, non-Olympic coverage of sportswomen has lagged far behind that given to their male counterparts, with the exception of professional tennis, where heavily sponsored coverage of women's tennis can rival men's coverage (Daddario, 1998). Theberge and Cronk (1986: 293) credit the 'comparatively better treatment of female Olympians' to the resources invested by commercial sports in obtaining media coverage during such events. According to this view, sportswomen's higher visibility during the Olympics is a de facto benefit of their brief inclusion in the commercial sports arena. These arguments suggest that success, or nationalism, or commercialisation, or commodification, alone or in combination, might have moderated male hegemony and helped to steer Australia's female Olympic athletes to greater and atypical prominence on *News Online*.

## Conclusion

The ABC's guidelines for news presentation include the goals of accurate, impartial and objective journalism. Fair reporting does not mean endorsement of the status quo. Any practice that infers a lower status for sportswomen or devalues their contests, such as undue emphasis on female emotions and exclusive infantilisation — both of which were observed in *News Online*'s Olympics coverage — conflicts with the organisation's guidelines. ABC journalists are required to treat all sections of society with respect and to avoid the use of prejudicial language. Under-coverage

---

of females in team sports, despite their medal successes, may instil or reinforce in *News Online*'s audiences the stereotypical belief that some women's sports are less powerful, less interesting and thus separate and different from men's sports. Such conjecture needs detailed audience research to be tested properly.

*News Online*'s failure to accord females competing in Olympic team sports coverage consistent with their success has wider social and practical implications. Women's sport in Australia suffers from low participation and high dropout rates. Only 245 300 women and girls play basketball, hockey, soccer, softball and volleyball. The sporting and social reality is that these Olympic team sports are not fashionable, especially when compared with the 319 500 females who play netball (ABS, 2000), a non-Olympic team sport. Nor is the popularity of women's Olympic team sports likely to increase while the media define them as unworthy or less worthy of coverage than individual contests for both genders or male team sports. The relative absence of women's team sports from *News Online* Olympic sports coverage could compound the 'symbolic annihilation' of these female athletes (Kane and Greendorfer, 1994). A positive slant is that female individual and team sports across sex-types were highlighted, rather than socially acceptable sports. Ironically, *News Online*'s coverage is out of synchrony both with popularised Australian sports and with the structure of the Olympic Games.

Australian sports media studies from 1988 to 1996 show consistent under-coverage for females. With 49.5 per cent of words, the quantitative presence of Australian female athletes on *News Online* easily outstrips that achieved in the above studies. However, the findings also suggest that the gender-stereotyped messages inherent in the traditional media are replicated in cyberspace. In one respect, this is not surprising. If the bulk of *News Online*'s 'repurposed' Olympic sports content originated from ABC radio and television newsrooms, any inequitable coverage, stereotyping and trivialisation of female athletes in original copy might not be filtered out in the transition to online publication.

The messages of online media (both what is portrayed and what is left out) are important because of the web's growing relevance and 'the extent to which the mass media's gender-stereotypical messages affect adolescent girls' perceptions of their roles in society' (Robertson, 1997: 103). Subrahmanyam et al. (2001) report that girls are getting socialised by the internet at an earlier age. Pre-teens spend as much as 20 hours a week online and, as age goes up, so does the amount of time spent on websites. Compared with the messages of recognition and respect for sportswomen in previous studies of traditional and new sporting media, this study's findings suggest significant improvements in coverage for sportswomen on *News Online*. What detracts from this finding is that such coverage was not inclusive of all Australia's successful sportswomen.

## Notes

- 1 In 2001, the Howard government said it had committed approximately \$547 million to sport development, participation, management and anti-drugs initiatives (AFG, 2001). Of Australia's 4 million sports participants in 1999-2000, 1.7 million were females, while the gap in participation rates also favoured males — by 8.7 percentage points (ABS, 2000).

- 
- 2 Male-appropriate sports (such as basketball, soccer and football) emphasise physical strength or power, stamina and contact through active, aggressive and autonomous behaviour. Female-appropriate or 'socially acceptable' sports (such as gymnastics, ice skating and ballet) emphasise aesthetics and beauty but discourage physicality (Daddario, 1998; Jones et al., 1999). Golf, tennis and volleyball are seen as neutral sports. Sports' classifications according to sex-type appear in the author's MA (Hons) thesis.
  - 3 Section 9.4.1 says: 'ABC programs should not include language or images that are likely to encourage denigration or discrimination against any person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability or illness, social or occupational status, sexual preference or the holding of any religious, cultural or political belief. The use of language and images that perpetuate myths or reinforce stereotypes based on any of the above groups should be avoided ... The ABC recognises that women are still under-represented in many respects ... Program makers should not use language and images which convey outdated and often discriminatory assumptions about the social and domestic roles of men and women. For example, irrelevant references to women's physical appearance, age, marital status or maternity can be offensive and should not be made.'
  - 4 Sports reports are those reports whose topics or themes are contests, achievements, or issues affecting *only* individual Australian Olympic athletes or teams. The study excluded the opening and closing ceremonies; reports about economic, political or social conditions affecting sport; and reports about coaches, venues, payments or sponsorships, sports administration, performance enhancing drugs and drug-testing procedures.
  - 5 Examples of descriptors relating to appearance, relationships, emotions, and successes and failures can be found in the author's thesis.

## References

- Adams, T. and Tuggle, C. 2003, 'ESPN SportsCenter and Coverage of Women's Athletics: "It's a Boy's Club"', *Research Paper Abstracts*, National Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, August, [www.aejmc.org](http://www.aejmc.org)
- Alston, M. 1996, *Goals for Women: Improving Media Representation of Women's Sport*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga.
- Alysen, B. 2000, *The Electronic Reporter: Broadcast Journalism in Australia*, Deakin University Press, Geelong.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1998, *Editorial Policies, April 1998*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, [www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs.htm) (accessed May 20 2000).
- 2002, *Annual Report 2000-2001*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, [www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/reportsindex.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/reportsindex.htm)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, *Participation in Sport and Physical Activities: Australia 1999-2000*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/Lookup/NT0000B89E](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/Lookup/NT0000B89E)
- Australian Federal Government 2001, *Backing Australia's Sporting Ability: A More Active Australia*, Australian Federal Government, Canberra.
- Bridge, J. 1994, 'Media Mirror: Sports Pages Still a Bastion of Maleness', *Quill*, vol. 82, no. 5, p. 22.
- Brown, P. 1995, 'Gender, the Press and History: Coverage of Women's Sport in the *Newcastle Herald*, 1890-1990', *Media Information Australia*, vol. 75, February, pp. 24-34.
- Bryson, L. 1987, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 10, pp. 349-60.
- Cashmore, E. 2000, *Making Sense of Sports*, 3rd edn, Routledge, New York.
- Daddario, G. 1998, *Women's Sport and Spectacle: Gendered Television Coverage and the Olympic Games*, Praeger, Westport.
- Duncan, M.C., Messner, M., Williams, L. and Jensen, K. 1990, *Gender Stereotyping in Televised Sports*, Amateur Athletics Foundation of Los Angeles, [www.aaflo.org/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport2\\_.htm](http://www.aaflo.org/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport2_.htm)

- 
- Eastman, S.T. and Billings, A.C. 2000, 'Sportscasting and Sports Reporting', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 24, no. 2, May, pp. 192-314.
- Flatten, K. and Matheson, H. 1996, 'Newspaper Representation of Women Athletes in 1984 and 1994', *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, <http://rdsweb2.rdsinc.com>
- Francis, S. 2003, *Coverage of Female Athletes in Women's Sports Magazines: A Content Analysis*, Research Paper Abstracts, National Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, August, [www.aejmc.org](http://www.aejmc.org)
- Frey, L.R., Botan, C.H., Friedman, P.G. and Kreps, G.L. 1992, *Interpreting Communication Research*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- George, C., Hartley, A. and Paris, J. 2001, 'The Representation of Female Athletes in Textual and Visual Media', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 94-101.
- Greenfield, C. and Williams, P. 2000, 'The Sporting Gamble: Media Sport, Drama and Politics', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, no. 97, November, pp. 47-58.
- Hargreaves, J. 1986, *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain*, Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, Oxford, Cambridge.
- Hargreaves, J.A. 1994, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sport*, Routledge, London.
- 1993, 'Gender on the Sports Agenda', in A.G. Ingham and J.W. Loy (eds), *Sport in Social Development: Traditions, Transitions and Transformations*, Human Kinetics Publishers, Champaign.
- Higgs, C.T., and Weiller, K.H. 1994, 'Gender Bias and the 1992 Summer Olympic Games: An Analysis of Television Coverage', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 234-46.
- Jones, R., Murrell, A.J., and Jackson, J. 1999, 'Pretty Versus Powerful in the Sports Pages', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 23, pp. 1-8.
- Kachgal, T.M. 2001, 'Home Court Disadvantage? Examining the Coverage of Female Athletes on Leading Sports Websites — A Pilot Study', paper presented at the National Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, DC.
- Kane, M.J. 1996, 'Media Coverage of the Post Title IX Female Athlete — A Feminist Analysis of Sport, Gender and Power', *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 95-127.
- Kane, M. J. and Greendorfer, S.L. 1994, 'The Media's Role in Accommodating and Resisting Stereotyped Images of Women in Sport', in P.J. Creedon (ed.), *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Kinnick, K.N. 1998, 'Gender Bias in Newspaper Profiles of 1996 Olympic Athletes: A Content Analysis of Five Major Dailies', *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 213-37.
- Mack, J. 2000, 'A Comparison of Magazine Summer Olympic Coverage by Gender and Race: A Content Analysis of Sports Illustrated', paper presented at the proceedings of the 83rd annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Arizona, 9-12 August.
- Menzies, H. 1989, 'Women's Sport: Treatment by the Media', in K. Dyer (ed.), *Sportswomen Towards 2000: A Celebration*, Hyde Park Press, Melbourne.
- Mikosza, J. 1997, *Inching Forward: Newspaper Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Womensport Australia, Canberra.
- Pfister, G. 1987, 'Women in the Olympics (1952-1980): An Analysis of German Newspapers (Beauty Awards Vs. Gold Medals)', paper presented at 'The Olympic Movement and the Mass Media: Past, Present and Future Issues' conference, Calgary.
- Phillips, M.G. 1997, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia 1996*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.
- Robertson, B. 1997, *How Do Our Daughters Grow? Adolescent Socialization Messages in Selected Print and Electronic Media*, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago.

- 
- Rowe, D., 1991, 'Sport and the Media', *Metro Magazine*, vol. 86, pp. 41-47.
- 1999, *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Schell, L.A. and Rodriguez, S. 2000, 'Our Sporting Sisters: How Male Hegemony Stratifies Women in Sport', *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 15-35.
- Theberge, N. and Cronk, A. 1986, 'Work Routines in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women's Sports', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 3, pp. 195-203.
- Tuggle, C.A. and Owen, A. 1999, 'A Descriptive Analysis of NBC's Coverage of the Centennial Olympics: "The Games of the Woman?"', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 171-82.
- Tuggle, C.A., Huffman, S. and Rosengard, D. S. 2002, 'A Descriptive Analysis of NBC's Coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics', *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 361-75.
- Vincent, J. 2000, *Cross National Comparisons of Print Media Coverage of Female/Male Athletes in the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta 1996 (Georgia)*, Dissertation Abstracts Online, <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org>.
- von der Lippe, G. 2002, 'Media Image: Sport, Gender and National Identities in Five European Countries', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 371-95.
- Wensing, E.H. and Bruce, T. 2003, 'Bending the Rules: Media Representations of Gender During an International Sporting Event', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 387-96.
- Watkins, G.G. 1973, 'Cultural Images and Their Effects on Female Sports Participation', *Australian Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 32-37.
- Women's Sports Foundation 2003, *Women's Sports and Fitness Facts and Statistics*, The Women's Sports Foundation, [www.womensportsfoundation.org/binary-data/WSF\\_ARTICLE/pdf\\_file/797.pdf](http://www.womensportsfoundation.org/binary-data/WSF_ARTICLE/pdf_file/797.pdf)

*Dianne Jones is a Lecturer in Journalism in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Southern Queensland.*