

Sports and Media Coverage

Cindy Lin

The University of British Columbia

The intertwined relationship between sports and media coverage has been a popular topic among previous studies. There is no doubt that sports events and activities are prevalent in our modern society. For example, Olympics games, NBA, and other sports games can be seen on daily newspaper, websites, television, and even social media nowadays. The extent of the media impact is far beyond athletes and sports teams, it also includes the spectators and the business world (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). In light of the influences of sports and the portrayal of media coverage on sports, this paper aims to analyze the roles of media in sports, methodological development of media coverage on sports, negative and positive impacts of media on sports and society, and the implications of previous research studies. With modern examples and the findings from research journals, readers can have more insights into the delicate balance between sports and media coverage.

It's known that media serves as an entertainment for the public and allows people to enjoy the excitements of sports activities regardless of their locations. (Marwat, Waseem, Khattak, Abbas, & Bi Bi, 2014). Also, mass media acts as a vehicle that carries different sports information and a mode that shapes audiences' attitudes toward gender roles and gender relations. For example, media differentiates sports suitable for males and female based on the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. (Pedersen, 2003). In addition, Marwat et al. (2014) noted that famous athletes often become the role models in the society, which explains why outstanding player like Kobe Bryant is often admired by young kids who want to model after his performances on the basketball field. What's more, beyond the field, audiences get to know the countries because of the representation of famous athletes in the media (Marwat et al., 2014). Some examples include tennis player Roger Federer from Switzerland, soccer player Neymar from Brazil, sprinter Usain Bolt from Jamaica, and female golfer Yani Tseng from Taiwan. Taking economic aspect into account, media helps advertise major sports events and promote the sports industry, which is considered a growing business in the marketing world. (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). In fact, sports sponsoring and owning rights for live transmission in international sports events such as Olympic Games generate large revenues for media companies. (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). On the one hand, media benefits from reporting sports games; on the other, media engages more audiences into the world of sports. Therefore, in this sense, media and sports are interdependent. Media coverage on sports events also creates a common topic for people interested in

sports to join the conversation and adds some thrills (e.g. your favorite team wins the champion) in our mediocre lives (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). For the Chicago Cubs fans, watching Game 7 of the Major League Baseball (MLB) World Series definitely stimulated their nerves since it has been 108 years after the last championship title (Witz, 2016).

When it comes to the methodological development of media coverage on sport, technology advancement is indispensable in the evolution. As technology and science have progressed over the past few decades, the channel of communication changed from printed media, telegraph, radio, and eventually to digital media. In 18th and 19th century, sports articles could be read in the daily newspaper, magazines, and periodicals. For example, one could read sports news in the newspaper called the *New York World* in 1883, or in the *Sporting Magazine* in 1792 England (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). With the introduction of telegraph transmission in the late 19th century, sports fans could receive instant information about the sports events taking place far away from their homes. Entering 20th century when the radio broadcasting system emerged as a more effective communication tool, people were able to follow their favorite sports games everywhere due to the prevalence and accessibility of radio medium. In addition, real-time sports reporting provided radio listeners with more sensations and excitement, as if they were in the games, than printed media (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). While radio transmits sounds in the sports games, television allows viewers to hear the sounds and see the live performances at the same time. The added visual experiences and other features of television such as slow-motions and replays rendered televised sports popular among sports fans. With the introduction of World Wide Web, sports fans could create websites for their favorite athletes and connected with other fans. Moreover, people could gather background information about different kinds of sports and received updated sport news via the websites (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). Moving into the era of social media, fans can check the new posts from their favorite sports teams and players on their portable devices; while sport organizations utilize social media in marketing to attract more fans and build up consumer-brand relationships. The features of social media such as group discussions, private message, and fan pages render them popular among players, marketers, and fans (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). Martin (2012) found that the majority NFL fans use social

media to gather sports information, engage in online virtual communities, and interact with NFL teams and players on fan pages. Despite of the popularity of social media and other broadcasting media, Marwat et al. (2014) noted that printed media still has its value and remains influential in the promotion of sports events.

While media plays a crucial role in the promotion of sports involvement, it is often criticized by scholars that portrayals of female and male athletes manifest the gender stereotypes and the concept of hegemonic masculinity and “sex-appropriate” sport. Studies show that the female athletes receive more media coverage on “sex-appropriate” sports such as figure skating, swimming, and ballet than “sex-inappropriate” sports; while male athletes received more media coverage on “sex-appropriate” sports like soccer, basketball, and rugby (Pedersen, 2013). The biased coverage stems from the classification of sports type: female appropriate, male appropriate, and neutral. This classification fits well within the framework of gender stereotype and the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, which secures male’s dominant position in the society (Pedersen, 2013). Females are expected to participate in sports that show their beauty and aesthetic; males are supposed to play sports that emphasize physical strengths and aggressive behaviours. Toffoletti (2016) pointed out that sexism exists in the sports coverage and indicated that sportswomen received less overall media attention than sportsmen. According to the study done in the 1997 by Tuggle, only 5% of the sport time was about female athletes on ESPN *SportsCenter* and CNN *Sports Tonight*. Even with the establishment of Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA), Adams & Tuggle (2004) indicated that male athletes still receive more media coverage than female athletes.

Negative consequences followed by the skewed depictions in sports coverage include trivializing sportswomen’s achievements by emphasizing their sexuality and appearances (Pedersen, 2003) and normalizing heterosexuality as the ideal athletes (Apostolis & Giles, 2011; Toffoletti, 2016). Shifting focus from sportswomen’s competence to sexuality is a denial of females’ power (Toffoletti, 2016). For example, the cover photo of the magazine *Sports Illustrated* featured attractive women wearing bikini rather than pictures of competent swimmers (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). In terms of the normalization of heterosexual athletes as “ideal,” Nicolas & Audrey (2011) found out that the

magazine *Golf Digest* reinforced golf as a sport for white, wealthy, heterosexual people in their media analysis. Obviously, this representation ignores and disrespects golfers of different ethnicities and non-heterosexual golfers. Beck & Bosshart (2003) remarked that journalists report more pictures of female athletes in tears, a sign of weakness in the society, and attribute the failure of sportswomen to incompetence and lack of mental toughness. On the contrary, the failure of sportsmen is due to the nature of competitive environment. Through perpetuation of gender inequality (Toffoletti, 2016) and empowerment of male privilege (Adams, Ashton, Lupton, & Pollack, 2014) in the sports coverage, media mirrors the mainstream culture and reflects the norm of the society. Indeed, media is a powerful tool in shaping one's worldview, and it can be a two-edged sword: benefiting one group (males) at the expense of others (females).

Another group of athletes are also underrepresented in the mainstream media: people of color. Before 1970s, black athletes were rarely seen in media coverage. What's worse, media reinforced negative racial stereotypes through depicting black athletes as arrogant and violent, and attributing their success on the field to their innate ability rather than effort (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). For example, most reports on black athletes emphasized their power and speed rather than their intelligence, skills, and strategies used in the games. However, the society seems to hold a different standard for exceptional black athletes such as tennis players Williams sisters and NBA legend Michael Jordan, who receive positive portrayals that allow them to transcend from their racial stereotypes (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). While previous studies shed light on the distorted portrayal of black athletes in media, relatively few studies focus on other ethnic groups such as Asian-Americans and Latin-Americans. Current NBA player, Jeremy Lin, and the "Linsanity" phenomenon in 2012 might be a great example for future researchers to study. In 2012, Jeremy Lin was in the spotlight of media coverage because of his unexpectedly well performance for New York Knicks. While media made Jeremy Lin rise to fame, it also sparked some controversy due to the offensive headline "Chink in the armor" in ESPN (McNeal, 2012). Therefore, future studies can look into the media portrayals of athletes in other ethnic groups and analyze whether the depiction matches with the existing racial stereotypes. With more insights into the topic, we can have a broader sense of understanding of the influences and biases of media coverage among different ethnic groups.

In addition to the issues of race and gender inequality in media coverage, it's reported that sports journalists tend to favor athletes or teams with specific national affiliation (Stepanova, Strube, & Hetts, 2009). The heated controversy in 2002 Olympics pairs figure skating demonstrated the media biases in political context. In the same event, one could see two different versions of reporting among American media and Russian media. While American media made arguments in favor of Canadian skaters' performance; Russian media praised Russian athletes more in the statement (Stepanova et al., 2009). The news headline from US media was "Canada cry: Judges ripped off pair's gold"; in contrast, headline from Russian media was "Canadians got 'gold' by whining again." Differences in interpretation of the same event were due to the existing political stances and national tensions. Although media reporting in this single event was skewed, Stepanova et al. (2009) implied that more in-depth and cross-cultural studies are necessary to generalize the results. From this study, we can see how media reflects the nationalistic feeling and may not be objective enough to detach itself from historical and political contexts.

Despite its negative impact in shaping the existing stereotypes and political attitudes, media still has its values in the society. Thanks to the mass media, billions of people nowadays are able to enjoy watching sports games at the comfort of their homes. In addition, spectators can follow several sports events taking place in different countries at the same time. In fact, this far-reaching effect has led to globalization of sports community where majority of population can identify the symbol of Olympic Games, the Five Rings. (Zbigniew, Krzysztof, Michal, Julia, & Piotr, 2012). While the participants of World Series are not from all over the world, but mainly North America, this annual championship in MLB did attract fans and spectators from all over world. Following the globalization, sports gradually transformed into a professional career, attracting the investment of sports organizations and marketing companies who see the profits behind this growing industry. Martin (2012) noted that revenue generated from sports industry in the U.S is about fifteen times greater than in film industry. The so-called 'Big Four' including the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL) contribute nearly \$23 billion annual revenue to the U.S economy. Furthermore, the scale of sports industry extends beyond athletes, becoming inclusive of coaches,

personal trainers, and managers of the sports teams. As sports become more specialized and professional, the term ‘amateur’ is gradually removed from the major sports events. For example, in the 1980s, International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) brought track and field sports into professionalism and thus dropped the term ‘amateur’ in the 2001 World Championships in Athletics in Edmonton (Martin, 2012). With increasing standards of athletic performance, audiences can enjoy more excitements from the fierce competitions and be amazed by athletes’ outstanding skills. For example, 1992 United States’ Men’s Olympic basketball team was also known as “Dream Team,” which featured one of the best NBA players, Michael Jordon. Therefore, media helps sports events become more attractive to spectators and even produces the role models for the audiences.

Outstanding athletes are often admired by people who want to achieve the success in the given sports fields (Marwat et al., 2014). Media is also an effective educational tool which teaches audiences the rules of different sports and imparts the value of sportsmanship. For example, many adolescents reported that they learned the rules of volleyball by watching games on TV. Last but not least, watching sports games can be an escape from the reality. Spectators are immersed in a different world full of excitement, fun, and sense of achievements. For some people, this entertainment helps them recharge the batteries before getting back to tedious daily routines (Martin, 2012).

Besides the abovementioned positive impact, some studies indicate that media coverage of sports is utilized to express national identity (Kösebalaban, 2004). In the international sports events, national teams strengthen the sense of belonging to the country and distinguish the differences between ‘we’ and ‘they’. Kösebalaban (2004) analyzed the articles written by Turkish columnist and journalists during 2002 FIFA World Cup, and found that the commentaries in the newspaper reflected the idea of patriotism and set the boundaries between Islamic culture and Turkish culture. In other words, media coverage helps form the national identity and strength national unity via the social construction of ‘The European Others’ and the denial of Islamic culture as part of their culture.

In addition to the formation of national identity, media also influences one’s social identity. Martin (2012) sheds light on the relationship between social media usage and sports brand loyalty in National Football League (NFL) by looking at the social identity theory, the concept that one identifies others in the same social group as “us.” The transparency of the players’ personal

information on social media such as Facebook and Twitter helps build up the connection and interpersonal relationship with fans. The study implied that socializing with fans by responding the comments and providing more information related to teams on social media can strengthen the fans' loyalty and increase the sense of belonging (Martin, 2012). In addition, fans identify players as human brand and show their supports by 'liking' or 'following' their favorite team and players on Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, marketers can take advantage of the features of social media to advertise sports products and grow the fan base. While most sports stars convey positive images and leave good impression on fans, some of the sports celebrities are depreciated by general public. Recours, Pappous, Dantin, & Griffet (2011) examined people's reasons of depreciating athletes and their ideal image of the athletes. Based on the results, lack of competitiveness, sociability, and morality are reasons why public detests the athletes. For example, Marie-Jose Perec, one of the best runners in the world, was depreciated because of her antisocial behaviors during 2000 Summer Olympics. Since depreciated athletes project a flawed image, Recours et al. (2011) implied that marketers should be cautious when choosing the athlete endorsers for their advertisement.

In summary, sports and media are inseparable in our modern lives. While media coverage on sports is not bias-free, it facilitates the growth of sports and marketing industry, the general public's participation in sports, and the idea of patriotism (Kösebalaban, 2004; Martin, 2012). Moreover, watching sports games can be entertaining and educational (Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Martin, 2012). Although media bias perpetuates the existing stereotypes and gender inequality in the society, it also highlights the mainstream cultural values and social issues we need to be aware of. In the future, media should be more sensitive about its own bias and be more inclusive in reporting the sports events. For example, female and male athletes deserve equal amount of media coverage and attention. Regarding the direction of future studies, I suggest that researchers can probe into the relationship of media and athletes from the minority groups. Also, future studies can explore more about the media portrayal of depreciated sports figures and its impact on the ideal self-image. With more insights into the pros and cons of media, we are able to filter the incoming information and evaluate its truthfulness.

References

- Adams, C., Ashton, M., Lupton, H., & Pollack, H. (2014). Sport is king: An investigation into local media coverage of women's sport in the UK East Midlands. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(4), 422-439. doi:10.1080/09589236.2013.795114
- Adams, T., & Tuggle, C. A. (2004). ESPN's sports center and coverage of women's athletics: "It's a boys' club". *Mass Communication & Society*, 7(2), 237-248.
- Apostolis, N., & Gilesa, A. R. (2011). Portrayals of women golfers in the 2008 issues of golf digest. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28(2), 226-238.
- Beck, D., & Bosshart, L. (2003). Sports and media. *Communication Research Trends*, 22(4), 7-18.
- Kösebalaban, H. (2004). Turkish media and sport coverage: marking the boundaries of national identity. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 13(1), 47-64.
doi:10.1080/1066992042000189715
- Martin, S. D. (2012). Share, like, tweet and cheer: An examination of social media usage and the NFL (Order No. 3600710). Available From ABI/INFORM Collection. (1447013817).
Retrieved from
<http://ez.sccd.ctc.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.seattlecentral.idm.oclc.org/docview/1447013817?accountid=145>
- Marwat, M. K., Waseem, M., Khattak, H., Abbas, A., & Bi Bi, I. (2014, August). Mass media and promotion of sport [PDF]. Retrieved from [http://www.ajssh.leena-luna.co.jp/AJSSHPDFs/Vol.3\(3\)/AJSSH2014\(3.3-20\).pdf](http://www.ajssh.leena-luna.co.jp/AJSSHPDFs/Vol.3(3)/AJSSH2014(3.3-20).pdf)
- McNeal, G. (2012, February 18). ESPN uses "Chink in the Armor" line twice- ESPN fires one employee suspends another. Retrieved November 6, 2016, from
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/gregorymcneal/2012/02/18/espn-uses-chink-in-the-armor-line-twice-did-linsanity-just-go-racist/#13c6721e7029>
- Pedersen, Paul M. "Examining stereotypical written and photographic reporting on the sports page: An analysis of newspaper coverage of interscholastic athletics." *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal* 12.1 (2003): 67. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Oct. 2016.

- Recours, R., Pappous, A., Dantin, P., & Griffet, J. (2011). "I am not your fan": The role of projection and identification processes in the depreciation of public sports figures. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 3(2), 58-70. Retrieved from <http://ez.sccd.ctc.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.seattlecentral.idm.oclc.org/docview/1660171264?accountid=145>
- Stepanova, E. V., Strube, M. J., & Hetts, J. J. (2009). They saw a triple Lutz: Bias and its perception in American and Russian newspaper coverage of the 2002 Olympic figure skating scandal. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(8), 1763-1784. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00503.x
- Toffoletti, K. (2016). Analyzing media representations of sportswomen: Expanding the conceptual boundaries using a postfeminist sensibility. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 33(3), 199-207. doi:10.1123/ssj.2015-0136
- Witkemper, C., Lim, C. H., & Waldburger, A. (2012). Social media and sports marketing: Examining the motivations and constraints of twitter users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21(3), 170-183. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/docview/1324536399?accountid=14656>
- Witz, B. (2016, November 3). Cubs end 108-year wait for world series title, after a little more torment. Retrieved November 6, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/sports/baseball/chicago-cubs-beat-cleveland-indians-world-series-game-7.html? r=0>
- Zbigniew, D., Krzysztof, J. W., Michal, L., Julia, M., & Piotr, R. (2012). Mass media and professional sport. *Baltic Journal of Health and Physical Activity*, 4(4), 284. doi:http://dx.doi.org.seattlecentral.idm.oclc.org/10.2478/v10131-012-0028-6