

## Changing the Field of Play: Women in the Sports Media

Toni Bruce  
University of Waikato  
(tbruce@waikato.ac.nz)

Keynote presentation at the International Working Group on Women and Sport Conference: Play | Think | Change  
(Sydney, Australia, May 2010)

### Introduction

Before I begin I want to acknowledge the Gadigal people who are the traditional owners of this land, as well as everyone from around the world attending the conference. Tena koutou katoa and thank you all for coming out this morning.

In the speeches last night during the opening of the conference, we heard a lot about media coverage – and the terrible lack of it. What I am talking about today will only reinforce much of what was said about the ongoing failure of the mainstream media to recognise and celebrate the athletic excellence of sports women. However, rather than re-stating the obvious (although I will do some of that), I want to embrace the theme of the conference, and start a conversation about how we can **THINK** differently about how to **CHANGE** (raise) the visibility of female athletes. I think the evidence is too consistent – over too long a period, over too many different types of media (see Bruce, Hovden & Markula, 2010 for an overview) and despite many efforts on the part of supporters of women’s sport to effect change – for us to be able to continue down the path we’ve been on (although I do think it is worth continuing such efforts). I want to suggest we look to a different place to **‘PLAY’**.

When we look at media, we generally consider two main issues: quantity and quality. Quality has been improving over time; when women do gain coverage – particularly when they are representing their nation – the coverage tends to treat them ‘fairly’. This is not to say there is not room for improvement – clearly there is, but we have come a long way from the stories before World War II that focused more on how women served tea than on their performance as athletes.

When we look at the quantity of coverage, however, we can see there has been virtually no change in the last 30 years, and in fact even since the 1960s (Bruce et al, 2010; Bruce, 2008; Bruce, Falcous and Thorpe, 2007). (OK, so we’ve had a five-fold increase but only from 2% to 10%.) Our figures (see Figure 1 below), although these are from New Zealand, reflect international research.

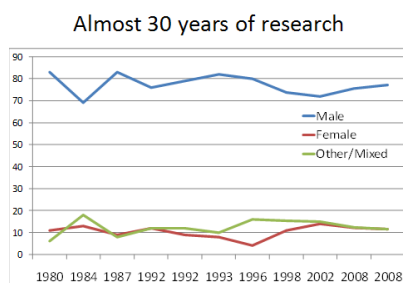
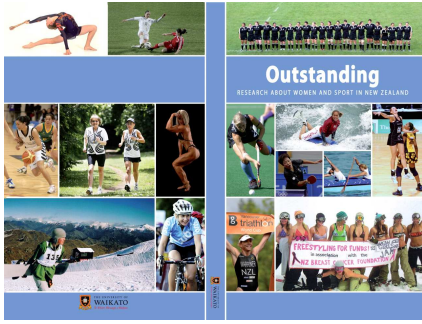


Figure 1: New Zealand sports media coverage by gender from 1980 to 2008

One of the things that fascinates me is that, as my New Zealand colleagues describe it, despite the fact that “Longitudinal analyses have confirmed the structural rigidity of the gender inequity of press coverage...male journalists seem genuinely surprised by arguments about gender inequity and poor coverage of women’s sport and may in fact idealise the space and time allocated in news to sportswomen” (Fountain & McGregor, 1999, p. 124).

It may be the women’s sport is so generally invisible that one or two stories on the same day really stand out!

While I was preparing for this presentation, I happened to be listening to an interview with archer and almost-Olympian Geena Davis, and what she said seemed to really sum up one of the key ideologies (or underlying assumptions) that explain why women’s sport coverage remains so LOW. Davis said: “Hollywood sort of operates under this assumption that women will watch men but men won’t watch women” (in Ryan, 2010). I think we can just substitute ‘sport’ for Hollywood in this quote. A very recent study of French sports media decision-makers came to a similar conclusion. Bridget Gee found that decision-makers in TV and newspapers “repeatedly described” the audience for sports media as primarily male and “therefore assumed to be naturally adverse to women’s sports” (Gee, 2010, p. 57).



And this assumption is also really clear in attempts to get the first ever edited collection of research about women in sport in New Zealand published (Obel, Bruce & Thompson, 2008). It was rejected by numerous publishers because the focus was assumed to be too narrow: One said he would not publish it because only half the students would be interested in reading it. So, in the end, it only saw the light of day because my Faculty, which doesn't normally publish books, took on the project and, as a result, we have no promotion and no links to a major publisher. This to me is another very clear example of the 'truth' of Davis' comments.

And what is the problem with this? I think Geena Davis is again on the right track when she argues "We are teaching girls to be happy about watching boys... [and] boys that they don't have to watch stories about girls" (Geena Davis, in Ryan, 2010).

Certainly sports journalists do not react well when women's sport advocates try to bring these inequities to their attention. In New Zealand, for example, such research is "persistently rejected as irrelevant" and the "findings are often ignored or trivialised by news management and journalists" (Fontaine & McGregor, 1999, p. 113). In 2008, at an event launching a major women's sport competition, the top newspaper sports executive in New Zealand said he threw away research on gender inequalities (Cox, 2008, personal communication).

So I decided to confront one of the major objections that sports journalists (most of them male) have had about previous research – which was, on the surface, a methodological issue. In order to challenge their rejection of existing research because it only focused on a few weeks at a time, I was able to secure funding to analyse an entire year's worth of two major New Zealand newspapers. And what were our results? As you can see in Table 1, they are essentially the same as all the previous studies, and only slightly higher than the 9% in Australian TV news reported by Federal Sports Minister Kate Ellis last night (see Lumby, Caple & Greenwood, 2010).

Table 1: Newspaper sports coverage by gender in two New Zealand newspapers in 2008

Newspaper	Male %	Female %	Mixed %	Neutral %
New Zealand Herald	75.5	12.1	7.5	4.9
Waikato Times	77.1	11.5	8.3	3.2
Longitudinal (New Zealand) results	83.0	9.0		

There was only 1 'blip' in the findings (see Figure 2): Can you figure out why? It was during the Olympic Games, an event that a range of different studies have shown usually results in decreased coverage for male sport and either an increase in female sport and/or a major increase in mixed coverage (which is stories and photographs that include both women and men) (see Bruce et al., 2010 for an overview).

2008 (1 full year)

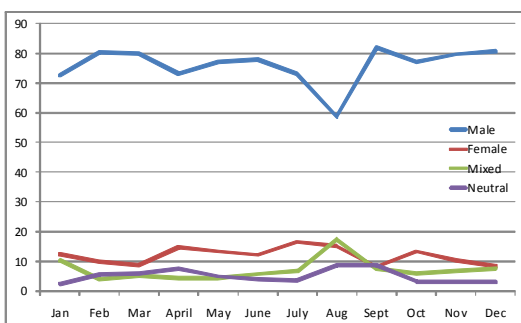
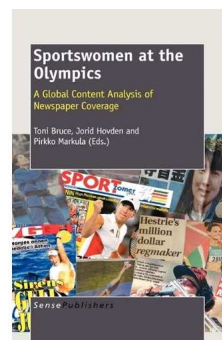


Figure 2: Month by month sports media coverage in one New Zealand newspaper in 2008



- |                |             |
|----------------|-------------|
| Denmark        | Norway      |
| Sweden         | England     |
| France         | Spain       |
| Belgium        | Germany     |
| Czech Republic | Hungary     |
| United States  | Canada      |
| China          | Japan       |
| South Korea    | Turkey      |
| South Africa   | New Zealand |

Figure 3: Countries involved in the largest ever study of Olympic coverage by gender

This kind of 'blip' was a consistent finding in the largest-ever study of Olympic coverage – which a Norwegian colleague Jorid Hovden and I initiated and led – involving 18 countries, of which 14 involved non-English language media (Bruce et al, 2010, see Figure 3).

As you can see in Figure 4 (below), the difference between female and male coverage closed considerably in coverage of the Olympic Games (although it was much worse than usual for any coverage that was not about the Olympics as you can see in the Non-Olympic column). These are the overall findings, and they were reasonably consistent across most of the

countries involved in the project, but I thought you might like to see the individual country results – and there are a couple I would like to highlight (see Figure 5).

## 2004 Olympics

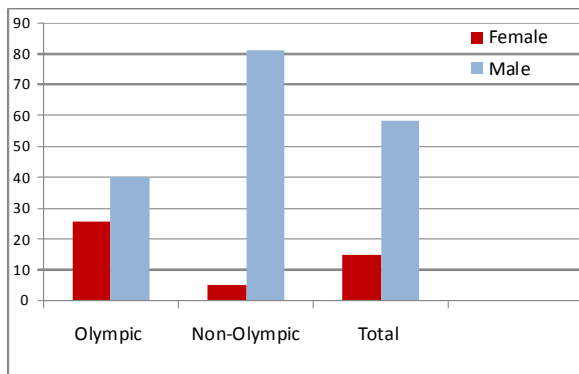


Figure 4. Gender differences in Olympic, Non-Olympic and Total newspaper sports coverage during the 2004 Olympic Games

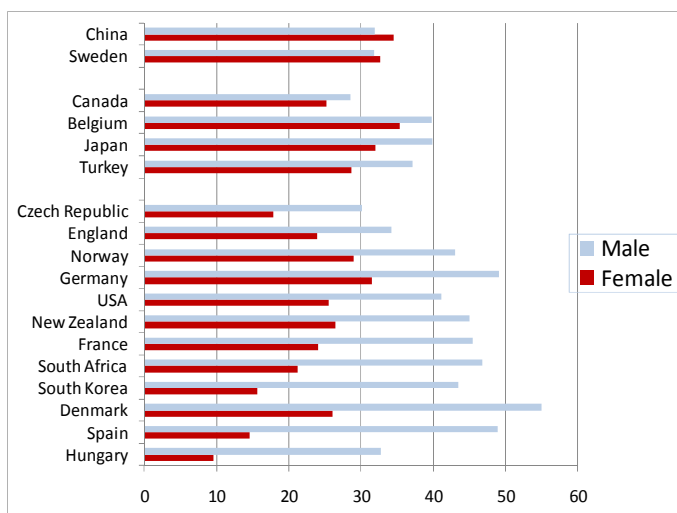


Figure 5: Gender differences by country in newspaper sports coverage of the 2004 Olympic Games

Note that China and Sweden both gave more Olympic coverage to female athletes than to males. This seems like a fantastic outcome – but it does come with a rider. The Chinese results, for example, still under-represented women who made up 66% of the Chinese team, and won 61% of the Chinese gold medals (which is what the Chinese media really focus on) but their level of coverage did not represent this dominance.

In addition a number of the countries, including Sweden found that the media focused on only a few female athletes, almost always ‘their own’ and overwhelmingly medal winners – thus representing a much narrower range of women’s sports, and suggesting that female athletes are only of interest if they are winners (or expected to win), while men’s sport is seen as interesting in its own right (and not only when medals are expected or won).

Historically, the major explanation that has been used to explain these kinds of findings is nationalism but during this study our French colleagues argued that what they called **the Olympic Games effect** was actually only a contextual effect that arose because there were a similar number of sports (thanks to the International Olympic Committee’s efforts towards gender equality) and women made up 40% of the Olympic participants. In this context, it was possible for the media to represent women “sans effort” (without effort) because both women and men were in the stadiums at the same time (Quin, Wipf & Ohl, 2010). Certainly, when we look at media coverage more broadly, and especially outside of major global events like the Olympics, the media do not seem to make much effort to represent women’s sport.

One of the reasons why I think things have not changed is that there may be a perceived ideological incompatibility between ‘journalistic norms’ and the more human-rights orientation of those who seek more coverage of women’s sport.

For example, when describing the selection criteria they use to make decisions about what sports to highlight, journalists use words like *straightforward*, *natural*, *simple*, *commonsense* and *neutral* (see Fountaine & McGregor, 1999; Gee, 2010; Knoppers & Elling, 2004). Indeed, Knoppers and Elling (2004) found in interviews with Dutch sports journalists that they “inevitably began the interviews by asserting that the criteria for selection are straightforward and simple and that they themselves are ‘neutral’ in applying these criteria to the selection process” (p. 60).

I do not have time to deconstruct all the problems that exist with the reasons that journalists give for why women’s sport doesn’t get much coverage – but one major issue seems to be *their* understanding of gender. Research strongly indicates that sports journalists believe they are gender neutral, as in the following quote from a male sports journalist in France:

“When there is a good performance, whether it’s a man or a woman, I concentrate on the performance. Ah, otherwise, I’d be an old macho... I try to be objective... To me, there aren’t men and women; there are athletes. [Hugo]” (Gee, 2010, p. 48)

However, I want to suggest that instead of being gender neutral, sports journalists are instead gender blind(ed?) by the power of the ideology that sport is inherently male, an ideology that leaves no other position for women than as ‘different’, and ‘other’, and women’s sport as inferior and less interesting, etcetera. Hardin (2005) points out that sports editors who resist this dominant ideology “are scorned” by their peers (p. 63). The secondary position of women’s sport is clearly illustrated in the following quote from a male Dutch sports journalist (the key ideologies revealed in bold):

“You select...using journalistic norms. That is why a men’s tournament can be more important than a women’s event. The women’s world championships in basketball **just aren’t as important** as the men’s championships. When you have to choose who gets seven minutes of air time and who gets four, then **naturally** the choice falls on the men. Women would not choose any differently.” (Knoppers & Elling, 2004, p. 65, bold added)

In addition, readers/listeners/viewers asking for more coverage can be dismissed as unfairly seeking “promotion” – because what they are asking for is seen to be ‘out of the norm’. In the context of growing evidence that sports media decision-makers tend to listen to opinions that reflect their own and ignore or downplay others, it appears that they use feedback and surveys to corroborate their own editorial decisions, rather than to serve as sources of inspiration or motivators for change. As Gee (2010, p. 40) found, when audience opinions differ from those of decision makers, their views are dismissed:

We’re receptive to letters from readers, people complaining, etc. We take on board their comments but they don’t have any influence. [Gaston]

You can’t always take surveys at face value. You can learn from them... but you shouldn’t overturn things because readers say “I want more of this or that” [Sandrine]

They can direct us, help us... Often when the audience speaks out, it’s to complain. [Leon]

So this leads me to crux of my **thinking** about how we can **change** the paradigm, change the way that women’s sport becomes visible to the broader public. I think we are left in a somewhat Catch 22 position: Do we take the idealistic position (what is fair, what is right) and keep banging our heads against a fairly unyielding brick wall or do we want to adopt a more realistic position that recognizes what is, and tries to work with that? [This is not to undercut attempts to make change that are more realistic. One of Minister Kate Ellis’ points last night about tying funding to media coverage of women’s sport could be the right kind of carrot, or maybe stick, to effect some change but I want to discuss the second position of trying to work with the situation as we find it, rather than as we want it to be.]

## Options

One option is to give in and provide mainstream media with the limited range of what it thinks it wants – beautiful, “sexy” women, nationalism elements and exceptional performances – but this approach would not take us very far forward.

You know the saying ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. Well, it is broke and I’m not sure we can fix it, and I wonder whether it is worth the precious time and energy of women’s sport supporters to keep doing the same thing, when doing the same thing seems to lead to the same outcomes. The challenge of this conference as I understand it is to think differently and to act differently in order to create the change we want.

Another option, and the one I hope will start us thinking differently, is the option to move to a new playing field where ‘we’ control our own images and have the chance to reach a world-wide audience of billions rather than thousands. Today, the challenge is to move from being **relatively passive consumers of content** controlled and produced for us by others (e.g., sports journalists) to becoming **creative producers of content** (for in-depth discussion of this issue see Steal this

film II, 2007). Indeed, for the cost of a few hundred dollars and access to a computer and the internet (which I know would be challenging for those in less wealthy nations), it is possible to get a video camera and computer editing programs (which anyone can use) and produce your own content. As media theorist Felix Stalder has argued, “one of the things that we are seeing coming out is culture where things are produced because people care about it and not necessarily because they hope other people will buy it. So what we will see is things made by the people for themselves” (interviewed in *Steal this Film II*, 2007, 39:33-39:47).

And there are plenty of examples of women’s sport organisations or athletes or individuals who have begun this journey. For example, Womentalk sports.com is a portal where people interested in writing/blogging about women’s sport to share their views, comment on each other’s ideas and create a vibrant community. And it does on occasion garner mainstream media coverage. The organiser provides a space for people to come together but does not produce most of the content – instead the organiser relies on the interest and **passion** of others to produce material and contribute to building a community (see Hardin, 2009). [This is not to argue that the blogosphere is a centre of enlightenment. Clearly it is not. Sport sociologist Nicole LaVoi reported recently that “many sports blogs are very sexist, heterosexist and sometimes racist. Most sport bloggers can write unfettered and have nearly no critical perspective, no[r] desire to foster one” (LaVoi, personal communication July 13, 2010) and Marie Hardin (in press) argues that the sports blogosphere “can still be summarized as reinforcing traditionally masculine, patriarchal hegemony, where women remain marginalized and without power” (p. 1).]

In terms of visual imagery, sports organisations and companies have set up internet TV sites to provide content that the mainstream media ignore. For example, Paralympics TV and World Championship Sports Network are both ‘professional’ websites covering both male and female sports, but predominantly in areas not usually given mainstream coverage by media. It is hard to believe that YouTube is only five years old but according to the Youtube company blog (in Hope, 2010, para. 4), it averages 2 billion viewers per day with the average user spending 15 minutes per day on the site: “What started as a site for bedroom bloggers and viral videos has evolved into a global platform that ... broadcasts entire sports seasons live to 200+ countries” (Youtube company blog, in Hope, 2010, para. 4).

And I think that what we might call the ‘Youtube phenomenon’ could have positive impacts for women’s sport. Since the advent of Youtube, we have entered a time when content is king (or perhaps queen in our case), where getting something out is more important than the quality of that content (see also *Steal this film II*, 2007). So, today, it doesn’t matter if it is a parent or a fan who films and edits a game; if Youtube or your website is the only place to get it, people will go there.

Indeed, anecdotally, more and more sport organisations whose sports are generally ignored by the mainstream media are using Youtube as a resource for promoting their sport: filming with inexpensive equipment and editing and posting 10 minute (max length) highlights packages of all games in the season.

And just last night I found out about how the Football Federation of Victoria is using the internet. For the same amount they paid for delayed coverage on community television with an extremely limited audience, they are now able to provide live streaming of one top level game per week (sometimes men, sometimes women) to a potential audience of who knows how many. Even more interesting is the involvement of football fans via a Goal of the Week competition, sponsored by SOLO, in which fans send in video for consideration (and can win a small cash prize). As a result they get free content provided by passionate fans: a win-win situation.

MarthaHucker.com is a low to no budget site started by Rita Langely, a New Zealand downhill mountainbiker dissatisfied with the media coverage of women’s downhill biking, who decided to do something about it (Emma Wensing, personal communication, May 2010). Langely started the site in about mid 2008, and it has now gained advertising and sponsorship and is the go-to site for women’s downhill mountainbiking. AS MarthaHucker.com shows, in the current moment we are seeing a shift to producing things that people care about, not things they think someone will buy (or pay for).

In the current moment there is a growing focus on **PASSION NOT PROFITS**: more and more individuals are producing things for free and sometimes asking for small donations from people who like the service being offered. This approach is something the GEN Y (and even GEN Xers) are used to doing, and which may well become the most effective ‘economic’ model for internet content (*Steal this film II*, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

So, to conclude, I think we need a new paradigm. The old one hasn’t work and, despite women’s sport supporters’ best efforts to assist and educate the mainstream media, nothing much has changed. While new media are not a panacea, they do at least offer women’s sports the chance to control their own content, to engage the passion of their fans, and to make the most of new, cheaper, easier-to-use technologies that might allow them to reach the world and, in doing so, change it for the better. Thank you very much.

## References

- Bruce, T., Hovden, J., & Markula, P. (Eds.) (2010). *Sportswomen at the Olympics: A Global Comparison of Newspaper Coverage*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Bruce, T. (2008). Women, sport and the media: A complex terrain. In C. Obel, & T Bruce & S. Thompson. (Eds.) *Outstanding: Research about Women and Sport in New Zealand* (pp. 51-71). Wilf Malcolm Institute for Educational Research, the University of Waikato.
- Bruce, T., Falcous, M., & Thorpe, H. (2007). The mass media and sport. In C. Collins & S. Jackson (Eds.). *Sport in Aotearoa/New Zealand society* (2nd ed.) (pp. 147-169). Auckland: Thomson.
- Fountaine, S., & McGregor, J. (1999). The loneliness of the long distance gender researcher: Are journalists right about the coverage of women's sport? *Australian Journalism Review*, 21(3), 113-126.
- Gee, B.L. (2009). *Sports media decision-making in France: How they choose what we get to see and read*. Unpublished Master's thesis, Massey University, New Zealand.
- Hardin, M. (2009). *The power of a fragmented collective: Radical pluralist feminist technologies of the self in the sports blogosphere*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Henley, M. (2010). *The end of the affair: After 47 years Netball New Zealand establishes a relationship with a new broadcasting partner*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Knoppers, A., & Elling, A. (2004). 'We do not engage in promotional journalism': Discursive strategies used by sport journalists to describe the selection process. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 39, 57-73.
- Lines, G. (2000). Media sport audiences – young people and the Summer of Sport '96: Revisiting frameworks for analysis. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22, 669-680.
- Lumby, C., Caple, H., & Greenwood, K. (2010). *Towards a level playing field: Sport and gender in Australian media January 2008-July 2009*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Sports Commission.
- Obel, C., Bruce, T. & Thompson, S. (Eds.) (2008). *Outstanding: Research about Women and Sport in New Zealand*. Hamilton: Wilf Malcolm Institute for Educational Research.
- Ryan, K. (2010, March 12). Nine to Noon with Kathryn Ryan. Radio New Zealand National. Available from [http://podcast.radionz.co.nz/ntn/ntn-20100312-1010-Feature\\_guest\\_-\\_Geena\\_Davis-048.mp3](http://podcast.radionz.co.nz/ntn/ntn-20100312-1010-Feature_guest_-_Geena_Davis-048.mp3)
- Steal this Film II* (2007). [Documentary] The Noble League of Peers. Available for free download from <http://www.stealthisfilm.com/Part2/download.php>
- Hope, D. (2010, May 17). YouTube celebrates five years on web. TechNewsDaily. Available: <http://www.technewsdaily.com/youtube-celebrates-five-years-on-web-0572/>