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**Newswork, News Values, and Audience Considerations: Factors that Facilitate  
Media Coverage of Women's Sports**

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## **Newswork, News Values, and Audience Considerations: Factors that Facilitate Media Coverage of Women's Sports**

### **Abstract**

Substantial research indicates that women's sports and female athletes gain only a small fraction of sports media coverage worldwide. Research that has examined why this is the case suggested this can be attributed to three particular factors that govern sports newswork: the male-dominated sports newsroom, ingrained assumptions about readership and the systematic, repetitive nature of sports news. This study sought to explore women's sports coverage using a different perspective, exploring cases where women's sports gained coverage. It identified Australian newspapers that published more articles on women's sports, relative to their competitors, and conducted interviews with both journalists and editors at these newspapers. It found that small, subtle changes to the three newswork elements that had previously relegated the coverage of women's sports now facilitated it. This research provides evidence that, at least in some newspapers in Australia, sports newswork has developed to include the coverage of women's sports.

**Keywords:** Sports Media, Women, Gender, Newspapers, Newswork

## **Newswork, News Values, and Audience Considerations: Factors that Facilitate Media Coverage of Women's Sports**

When the Australian Diamonds netball team won the 2015 Netball World Cup, the achievement was published on the front page of every major newspaper in Australia. The Matildas, the national women's soccer team, also appeared on front and back pages of Australia's newspapers, as a result of making it to the quarter-finals of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Locally, women's Australian football, the national women's soccer league, and the ANZ Championship netball league also gained significant newspaper coverage, so much so that major metropolitan daily, *The Age*, felt compelled to publish an article titled "Sunday explainer: why women's sport is big right now" (Stanton, 2015), while other members of the media have begun to publically critique myths about women's sports and called for more coverage (see, for example, Swanton, 2016).

These examples of the increased coverage of Australian women's sports and the concomitant public attention are significant because research has argued not only that women's sports have not received coverage in sports media, but that their non-coverage was the result of a sports newswork system that has been historically resistant to change. Research that has explored the underrepresentation of women's sports in the

media has pointed to particular conditions of sports newswork that have relegated the coverage of women's sports, in particular: the male-dominated, hegemonic nature of sports newsrooms (Gee & Leberman, 2011; Hardin, 2005; Knoppers & Elling, 2004), ingrained assumptions of readership expectations among the profession (Rowe, 2007), and how these play into the systematic nature of sports news production (Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Sports newswork is based on a "beat" or "round" model, where reporters are assigned to cover particular sports or teams. The masculine, hegemonic nature of the sports newsroom and assumptions about who reads sports news have led to mostly men's professional sports being assigned as beats. As Hardin (2010, para 1) argued, "It's not that women aren't playing. They are, and in huge numbers. Simply put, staffers aren't assigned to cover women's sports". The system of sports newswork has developed to favour men's sports over women's.

However, there are instances where women's sports have been assigned as a beat, such as netball in New Zealand and Australia (Bruce, 2015; Nicholson, Zion, & Lowden, 2011), which indicates that something within the newswork model – whether personal, organisational or cultural – has changed to accommodate the coverage of women's sports. While women's sports coverage is not as plentiful as men's in Australia, research has found that when covered it is likely to be reported in similar terms to men's sports – that is, not trivialized or sexualized as has been found in other

contexts (Caple, Greenwood, & Lumby, 2011; Lumby, Caple, & Greenwood, 2010; Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson, 2015). Given this framework, this study sought to examine the structure of sports newswork in Australia and whether particular elements of newswork had led to the facilitation of women's sports coverage.

### **Literature review**

Research has consistently found that the volume of women's sports media coverage is less than men's sports (Bernstein, 2002; Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Fink, 2014; French, 2013; Godoy-Pressland, 2014). Media content analyses have offered crucial perspectives regarding the ways in which women's sports are represented; however, content analysis alone offers little insight into the institutional structures that govern the process of news production from the viewpoint of those who produce it: journalists and editors. Research that examines the institutional forces that govern the production of sports news point to three newswork factors that have relegated the coverage of women's sports: 1) the male-dominated nature of the newsroom; 2) ingrained assumptions about what works for the readership; and 3) the interplay of the first two factors on the systematic nature of sports news production.

Historically, sports journalists and editors, in the US, UK and Australia in particular, are more likely to be men (Creedon, 1994; Hardin, Shain, & Shultz-

Poniatowski, 2008; Nicholson, et al., 2011; Salwen & Garrison, 2008; Schoch, 2013), and the sports newsroom has been a particularly male-dominated, hegemonic environment. The nature of this male-dominated newsroom has meant that women in the sports media profession often adapt their professional practice to this patriarchal environment, in order to become accepted (Hardin, 2013; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Kian, Fink, & Hardin, 2011; Schoch, 2013). Sports newsrooms are run by men and men decide that men's sports have the most news value. Most often this is justified by stating that the sports news audience wants to hear about men's sports (Rowe, 2007). However, as Hardin's (2005) study of US sports editors found, readership considerations were not likely to be built on solid foundations, but instead driven by personal beliefs and a hegemonic ideology regarding women's sports. Whether founded or not, this logic, about readership preferences, determines key elements of sports newswork (Lowes, 1999; Theberge & Cronk, 1986).

Research examining the structures underpinning women's sports coverage has demonstrated that the production of sports news is "newswork", a routinized practice governed by specific values and structures (Lowes, 1999; Marr, Francis, & Randall, 1999; Schoch, 2013; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). More broadly, newswork comprises the rules and regulations for the gathering, selection, and production of news (Deuze & Marjoribanks, 2009). In particular, newswork is based on a routine that makes covering

the unexpected possible (Tuchman, 1973) and is governed by shared cultural ideas, the concept that newswriters are gatekeepers (Schultz, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Usher, 2012) and notions of news values. Harcup and O'Neil's (2001) re-evaluation of news values suggested there are ten – the power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow up and newspaper agenda – and argued that a combination of any of these would virtually guarantee coverage. However, there is also evidence that journalists' personal beliefs are an important part of determining how the news is governed. Schultz (2007) joined Cottle (2003) to argue for a conceptualization of newswork that is built on understanding journalistic practice as a combination of structural, social, and cultural influences, where the “‘journalistic gut feeling’ entails both explicit dominant (orthodox) and dominated (heterodox) news values, as well as silent, taken-for-granted (doxic) news values” (Schultz, 2007, p. 204). Determinations of newsworthiness, then, should be viewed as originating in the structural, social, and cultural underpinnings of the profession.

In sports newswork, news value is predominately associated with men's sports. Knoppers and Elling (2004) examined the Dutch print media's coverage of women's sports and found journalists viewed themselves as neutral and used traditional journalistic discursive strategies of “interest” and “objectivity”. However, Knoppers and Elling (2004) argued that discourses of objectivity – routinely put forward by journalists

as guiding selection choices and a central, guiding tenet of journalistic professionalism (Schudson, 2001) – were in fact riddled with subjectivity. The prevailing assumption was that the top quality stories, and therefore those most worthy of inclusion, would emanate from men’s sports. For example, a participant in Knoppers and Elling’s (2004) Dutch study stated:

You select [sport news] using journalistic norms. That is why a men’s tournament can be more important than a woman’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... (p. 65)

Gee and Leberman’s (2011) exploration of French print and televisual sports media revealed that editorial decision making regarding suitable content rested on considerations of newsworthiness, citing performance as a major contributive factor. However, the authors noted that performance alone was insufficient cause to provide coverage of women’s sports as decisions to include notable performances in women’s sports necessarily required reducing the coverage of men’s sports, raising concerns about loss of audience and advertising revenue. Further, Gee and Leberman (2011) found little difference between the approaches of male and female newswriters, leading the authors to conclude that “the principal justification looming over editorial choices was commercial” (p. 338).

The principal organizing element in sports journalism and newspaper newswork in Australia is the “round”, which involves a journalist being assigned to a particular sport or team; in other countries, such as the US, this is referred to as a “beat” (Hardin, 2010), the term that, for clarity, will be used throughout the remainder of this article. The beat gives the journalist responsibility for covering news emerging from their specific area (Lowes, 1999). The key aim of a beat is to ensure a steady stream of news with which to fill the paper, by deadline, every day. In Lowes’ (1999) study this created a situation in which beat reporting material filled the news, even if it was not newsworthy. This is evident in the exchange between Lowes (1999) and an editor:

Question: But what if a reporter decides not to submit any news items about his beat because there is simply nothing worth writing about?

Answer: Oh, he’ll find something, he has to. As I told you, that’s what they’re paid for – writing stories about their team. (p.42)

Assigning a beat to a particular sport immediately prioritizes its coverage, and legitimizes the sport, code, or team it covers. Journalism work is therefore organized by a system that is defined by news values, but also readership considerations, and in the case of sports, both these factors prioritize the coverage of men’s sports.

Sports newswork prioritizes men’s sports based on sports newsworkers’ personal belief that men’s sports are more newsworthy and important to their audience (Gee & Leberman, 2011; Hardin, 2005; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Lowes, 1999; Theberge &

Cronk, 1986), and therefore, men's sports are most likely to be assigned as a beat, which ensures regular coverage in sports news. The result is that men's sports have become accepted as a legitimate and consistent feature of the news agenda. As argued by Fink and Kensicki (2002), "although there are possibilities for breaks within an ideological media position, routine practices and claims of professionalism create an atmosphere that makes challenging media constructions of reality extremely difficult" (p.320). On the strength of this research, it is not surprising that coverage of women's sports remains low; the system of sports newswork has developed to make women's sports a low priority in the sports news agenda.

However, there is some evidence that women's sports and female athletes have been integrated into the newswork system in Australia; Nicholson, Zion and Lowden's (2011) study found that journalists identified netball – a sport played only by women at the elite level – as a beat they covered. While Lumby, Caple and Greenwood's (2010) study found the overall coverage of women's sports was still low compared to men's, the coverage was less likely to trivialize women's achievements or treat female athletes in a sexualized manner. As such, the Australian context offers an interesting case for further exploration. While women's sports do not represent a large proportion of sports news, there is evidence in Australia that when they are covered, they are reported in similar terms to men's sports. Within this framework, this study sought to turn the

women's sports coverage question upside down. Instead of asking, "Why do women's sports not receive coverage?", it posed the question, "How did women's sports end up on the agenda in a system that so often relegates their inclusion?" Therefore, our main research question was: "What are the newswork factors that facilitate coverage of women's sports in Australian newspapers?" In so doing, we respond to calls for research that examines internalized journalistic beliefs imbedded in journalistic practice (Schultz, 2007), as well as research that examines the role that affect plays in coverage (Bruce, 2015), and how organizational and professional cultures influence the construction of sports news (Wenner, 2015).

### **Method**

The study was undertaken in two phases. First, we sought to establish which newspapers covered more women's sports than their competitors. This study deliberately chose not to examine the coverage of women's sports relative to coverage of men's sports, given that previous research suggests that women's sports coverage still makes up less than 10% of media overall in Australia (Caple, et al., 2011). Instead, this study chose to reframe the scope of inquiry to examine which Australian newspapers covered women's sports more than others. This could be considered problematic as the amount of women's sports coverage is still likely to be small relative to men's. Ideally, a study of this type would examine media that covers women's sports

on parity with men, yet – as years of content analysis indicate – this is not likely to be a reality in the short-term. Rather, this study argues that examination of the underpinning facilitating factors where women’s sports do make the news agenda – even if these instances are small – is a worthwhile addition to the literature on women’s sports coverage. Data was gathered from the eight major print media daily newspapers over a six-month period that included a Commonwealth Games and part of a national netball league season. The circulation of each of the newspapers was at least 100,000 per day, together representing approximately 94% of Australia’s daily newspaper circulation. Basic descriptive statistics were used to determine the volume of coverage, according to author and outlet. After identifying these journalists and outlets, we sought to interview editors and journalists who had published the most women’s sports coverage relative to their competitors.

Ethics approval was sought and received through the university ethics board to conduct interviews with journalists (n=4) and editors (n=4), employed in the news outlets identified as having published substantially more women’s sports content than was found in their equivalents. Six of the eight interviewees were men and two were women. The interview participants were contacted by telephone and email and invited to participate in the study; all invited participants agreed to take part. Four interviews were conducted face to face and four via telephone. The interviews focused on the

newswork practices at the participants' respective newspapers. Questions focused on every-day work practices, news values, newsroom structures, the operation of beats, and specific questions about the value of women's sports.

The data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using NVivo to store, sort, and code the data, two researchers independently undertook a comprehensive deductive and inductive analysis using constant comparison techniques to guide the analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). At each level of analysis the two researchers followed iterative consensus validation processes whereby differences found in coding were discussed until consensus was reached. In addition, a peer review was conducted by a third researcher. Issues of trustworthiness and validity of interpretation were thus addressed through the use of multiple researchers, iterative consensus, and the use of the third researcher as a peer reviewer throughout the analytical process. The qualitative, exploratory nature of this study and its small sample size obviously limit its generalizability to other contexts, however, the outcomes of this research provide important insights into the ways in which an influential set of individuals understand their work practices and how this translates into the ways in which news is constructed.

## Results

The initial scoping phase of this study found 1760 articles on women's sports in eight major daily newspapers over a six-month period. All articles reporting on women's sports or discussing female athletes were included in the sample, however, articles discussing female sports administrators, female coaches, or female trainers (in the case of thoroughbred horse racing) were excluded from the sample. Articles were scanned for content to ensure that the focus of the article was the female athlete or women's sports.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1 near here\*\*\*

Within this sample three newspapers were responsible for 56% of this coverage: the *Adelaide Advertiser* (18.8%); *The West Australian* (18.4%); and the *Courier Mail* and *Sunday Mail*, the weekday and weekend version of the same newspaper (18.4%). *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* accounted for a further 14.7%. Interviews were conducted with sports editors in the sports departments of these four newspapers. Participants, for purposes of confidentiality, have been assigned a pseudonym: Simon Devitt; Paul Barnard; Jack Stewart; and Marco Faulkner (all male). Individual author by-lines were also analysed. Although many of the women's sports stories either had no by-line or an Australian Associated Press (AAP) by-line, this analysis revealed four

journalists who had written the most women's sports content within the sample. Three of these journalists worked at newspapers listed above, while one worked for *The Age*. For the purposes of confidentiality, each of these journalists has been assigned a pseudonym: Ben Garcia (male, 117 articles); Gwendolyn Smith (female, 71 articles); Rose Williams (female, 67 articles); and Fred McEvoy (male, 44 articles). The following section presents the qualitative results from the interview phase of the study that sought to answer the research question: "What are the newswork factors that facilitate coverage of women's sports in Australian newspapers?" This study found that subtle changes in the three main factors that have traditionally relegated the coverage of women's sports – male dominated newsrooms, assumptions about readership and the systemic nature of news production – had, in this case, led to the facilitation of women's sports coverage; each of these factors will now be discussed.

#### The Male-dominated Sports Newsroom

Of the eight participants in this study six were male – including all four editors interviewed – and two were female. All four of the reporters – two female and two male – were experienced senior journalists, each of whom had been assigned the netball beat. While this indicates that the sports newsroom is still mostly male, there was evidence that women were a common feature of the sports newsroom. Each of the editors interviewed had at least one female reporter in their sports newsroom and most had

employed multiple women. There was also evidence that these women were valued.

When asked about the employment of female reporters, Simon Devitt, editor, noted:

Our chief of staff now is a female and I think that's great. One, because she's a terrific operator but I think that she does sometimes bring another, "have you thought about this?", a female opinion to the table which is good. I'm working at the moment to bring on a female rugby league writer next year which I think would bring another element to our coverage again, this person that I have in mind is a terrific operator and really knows her stuff. I'm completely against the token female in your sports department but I do think that female journalists, I'll use [female journalist] as an example in Sydney, I think her interviewing style can get people to say [more], and I don't know whether it's female or just because she's a terrific journalist, but she produces some copy and insights into people that others can't.

The participants in this study indicated that they rejected the notion of a woman being hired solely to cover women's sports or that it was the responsibility of women to do so. For example, Simon Devitt, editor, said:

I don't like the idea that you need a female to cover female sport, I think that's as outlandish as saying well only guys can cover rugby league. You know what I mean? ...I'm really against that sort of view like I think a good journalist is a good journalist regardless of what their gender is.

Gender, therefore, was not the primary determination in allocation of beats within the newsroom, at least in the case of these newspapers.

Ingrained Assumptions about Readership

As noted in previous research, the newswriters interviewed as part of this study aligned their justification of news selected with audience expectation. For example, Marco Faulkner, editor, stated: “it has to be news, it has to be a preview of a major sporting event or it just has to be interesting, something that’s going to entertain our readers”. Newswriters explicitly described selection decisions based on commercial interests; that is, meeting perceived audience preferences: “you have to make news judgements on every page in terms of what’s most important to our readers” (Simon Devitt, editor). Similarly, Jack Stewart, editor, stated that decisions by staff within his newspaper were based on “what we think news will sell newspapers and what our public and our readers want to read”. However, there was considerable difference in how the newswriters in this study defined or understood their audience expectations.

There was evidence throughout the study that notions of audience interest or preference were based on personal beliefs and assumptions – rather than evidence or research – and in some cases it was clear that these beliefs and assumptions still prioritized the coverage of men’s professional sports. Fred McEvoy, journalist, argued that decisions were made on “instinct”, while Marco Faulkner, editor, used “crowd figures”, the “pull” of the sport and some audience research in making audience-based news decisions. The interviews highlighted the problematic nature of audience considerations in sports newswriting and that the traditional focus on

men's sports still influences decision making in sport newsrooms. For example, discussing netball coverage, Marco Faulkner, editor, said:

We cover them every week, it might be a preview or a review. No, they don't get the same amount of coverage as the men and that's not a sexist view. I mean we go on crowd figures and, you know, basically the pull of the sport.

Gwendolyn Smith, journalist, also expounded this view – that men's sports would always gain more coverage – but did not necessarily agree with it:

I think that people get almost sick of wall-to-wall footy and cricket, but when I was writing football and cricket and I wrote a particularly interesting piece about someone or football mostly, I would get so much more feedback from that than anything I wrote about tennis or netball. It's just the way it is, people are way more interested in footy. I could have written the best ever tennis story and a middling football story and the middling football story would get a hundred times more attention and interest.

However, some of these newswriters emphasized the value in providing women's sports stories to their audience. There was evidence that a particular sport's high participation rate was influential in decision making, as participation rates represent a potential audience: "I think the netball's grabbed some of the limelight because they have a huge grassroots base, there's so many females that play it" (Jack Stewart, editor). Commercial considerations of female audience preferences influenced decisions about inclusion of women's sports, as the following quote from Marco Faulkner, editor, demonstrated:

I think the research that I've been involved in shows that women, when they're reading a sports section and they see a photo of a woman they will stop and read

the story. They want to know what that person's done. ... It's one of the things I use on a day to day running of my sports section; we seriously can get them in [to the paper] and they get in on merit, so let's get them in because it opens the doors for more female readers of our paper as well.

There was also evidence within this study that newswriters were aware of potential inaccuracies or bias inherent in traditional conceptualizations of commercial logic as it relates to news selection, as Fred McEvoy, journalist, articulated:

You know, a lot of the editorial decisions you see here are made on instinct, thinking we want to see Sharapova in a pretty dress, we want to see those sorts of images and those sorts of stories in the paper but, is that what people are genuinely interested in? Particularly people who follow sports that are played exclusively by women.

The diverging views presented in this section illustrate that there is still no cohesive view on audience preferences. Further, participants' responses illustrate that personal preferences and ingrained assumptions about the readership are still likely to influence decision making about newspaper sports news coverage. However, these interviews also indicated that personal preferences, which had been likely to relegate women's sports previously, were now leading these newswriters to actively question traditional notions of sports readership.

### The Systematic Nature of Sports News Production

This study revealed that the production of newspaper sports news was still governed by a heavily routinized cycle, where the beat system and traditional news values

determined what appeared in the newspaper each day. The appearance of women's sports in the news pages could be explained by the fact that women's sports had often been allocated to journalists as a beat and that female athletes were considered to possess the same news value as male athletes, which potentially represents significant changes in the discourse of women's sports media coverage.

The main factor that explained why these newspapers and journalists covered women's sports was that a sport in which female athletes were participating was assigned to a journalist as a beat. In this study, the sport was netball, a sport which is only played by women at the elite level. Each of the four editors interviewed for this study indicated that netball was assigned as a beat at their newspaper and the four journalists indicated that netball was either their main beat or was one of multiple sports which their beat had to cover. Netball has had variations of a semi-professional league since 1985 in Australia and since 2006 has been regularly broadcast on Australian television. In 2008, the ANZ Championship – “the first professional netball competition in Australasia” (ANZ Championship, 2015) – was established, with five teams from Australia and five from New Zealand. In the 2015 season one game a week was broadcast on free-to-air television, with the remaining broadcast on pay (cable) television channel Fox Sports (Niall, 2015). In addition, the Australian national team have won 11 Netball World Cup titles and three Commonwealth Games gold medals

(Netball Australia, n.d). Netball's television coverage and the national team's international success in part explain why the sport has been assigned as a beat in major Australian newspapers (Nicholson, et al., 2011). When asked why they covered women's sports, journalists stated they did not actively champion them, but did so because the sport was in their beat and it was their personal work responsibility to do so. For example, Ben Garcia, journalist, said:

I didn't know anything about netball, I didn't know the rules, didn't know anything, but when we take on a [beat], this gives you an opportunity to do something, it's what you make of it.

Another journalist emphasized that as part of her beats, which also included Olympic sports, coverage of both male and female athletes was required because, "if you cover your sport properly, you should know it better than anyone and that means every aspect of it" (Rose Williams, journalist). Professional responsibility, related to the assigned beat, guided their professional practice over and above personal preference, as this quote from Ben Garcia, journalist, demonstrated:

Netball's not my favourite sport, believe me, cricket and rugby league are my far away [favourites], but I just have massive admiration for the girls and the people involved with the [professional netball team]; they're brilliant and as a journo you feed off that and you want to do what you can to put them out there.

The positive description of female athletes was also evident in a response from Gwendolyn Smith, journalist, who noted that she preferred covering

women's sports rather than men's sports, because they were more receptive to the media and were often better interviewees:

They're really fantastic to access, the netballers, because they're still so keen for any publicity. It's so different to, you know, footballers or cricketers...they're very, very approachable and enthusiastic.

In addition to demonstrating journalists' professional approaches to sports coverage, these quotes also illustrate the, albeit inferred, role that emotions play in decision making about inclusion; Ben Garcia's admiration for the athletes clearly influenced his approach to their coverage, while Gwendolyn Smith highlighted ease of access and approachability.

Editors described the importance of journalists' knowledge of their beat for newswork. Marco Faulkner, editor, stated: "I'm not going to pretend to be across every sport out there so I rely on my [beat] people to one, pitch ideas, but then two, to also have a sense of where it sits in the order of the day". Another editor, Simon Devitt, concurred:

I tend to delegate a lot of responsibility to them because sport's such a big thing and then I can't be here for 18, 20 hours a day, so they're the experts really. I put the pressure on them to monitor their [beat] properly.

Each journalist spoke of a personal responsibility to cover their beat well and editors shared this expectation of their journalists. Assigning women's sports to a beat

also allowed journalists to negotiate for the inclusion of stories, as Ben Garcia, journalist, explained:

On days when there's no space and space is lacking they will say, "Oh, I don't need a netball story", but I will go to them and say, "Listen, I've got a story", and I will go to the [netball team] or [netball association] and we'll make something up to make sure there's a story to go in.

While the beat model in these cases promoted the coverage of women's sports, there was evidence that some existing features of newswork still demoted them. In particular, space constraints, which change daily, influenced selection decisions. For example, Marco Faulkner, editor, explained that he only finds out at 11.00am each day how much space he has and that most pages are not finalized until 12:30pm. As clarified by Fred McEvoy, journalist, each page is likely to have a number of set elements or "furniture" that must run. The furniture was most likely to be men's professional sports:

Furniture is the stuff like, that column runs on a Friday, this column runs on a Monday. They call that furniture because it's locked in the same sport every week. Usually that sort of space would go to the major football codes, which in this state is rugby league by a long way. And during cricket season you probably do cricket.

Fred McEvoy, journalist, explained that at his newspaper, "netball wouldn't normally be regarded as part of the furniture...I fight for it". While this indicates that men's sports retain priority, it also illustrates the capacity, derived from the sport's beat status, for journalists to negotiate for inclusion within the existing system. However, Marco

Faulkner, editor, emphasized that his previous expectations of furniture had changed recently as he moved to make more of his journalists justify their stories:

We've changed the focus here a little bit. Not taking the focus off [the league], which of course is our bread and butter, but I've made [the league] writers fight harder for their space. I'm trying to make them, the racing writers, fight harder for their space as well, even though we've got a contractual arrangement with the TAB, so we're committed to a page a day... but we take greater interest in what goes in there now.

Perhaps the most important question concerning the beat was how women's sports – in these cases netball – became established as a beat? Interestingly, only one participant could clearly identify exactly when netball became a beat at their newspaper. Ben Garcia, journalist, described how a former female colleague “instigated netball coverage in this country by going to the boss and saying there should be more, so our paper, her and [Newspaper] basically started netball coverage in this country”. Other journalists and editors interviewed as part of this study could not clearly identify the origins of the netball beat; rather, the journalists emphasized that it was already an existing beat when they started working at their respective newspapers. Why women's sports had continued to be a regular beat appeared to be related to the fact that women's sports were justified as having similar news values to men's sports. This led to a situation in which women's sports became a required feature of the sports pages, as the following comment from Simon Devitt, editor, demonstrated:

Certainly with the [netball team]; they're an important part of our sporting fabric now in [this state] so definitely we have an expectation of a number of stories through a weekly cycle featuring them.

An additional framework that governed the production of news in these newspapers was traditional news values, such as timeliness, celebrity, quiriness, or controversy. However, the most common news value was one specific to sports: success. Newswriters concurred that winning was key to inclusion in the sports section – regardless of gender – and that better women's coverage was linked to a period of success: "I think also we're probably looking at success. I think when teams go well you're probably more likely to get behind them and do well," noted Jack Stewart, editor. Fred McEvoy, journalist, agreed: "it's a bit hard to sell a story about a bloke finishing top ten, weighed up against one of the women finishing on the podium".

While success was most commonly used by newswriters to justify women's sports coverage, traditional news values – such as human interest – also resulted in coverage. The following quote, from Jack Stewart, editor, demonstrated how traditional news values influence decision making:

In the last few weeks we've done some stuff on the [W-League team – Australia's semi-professional soccer league] who've had a dismal run for a fair while ... we basically got behind them, got involved with some of their pregame stuff just for a broader interest. A couple of the players had some good stuff, one of them decided that she was going to auction stuff to raise money to fund herself, so some of them have delivered stories that we think will attract the reader.

Quirkiness or human interest was cited as an influential news value, as illustrated in the following quote from Fred McEvoy, journalist:

It's got to have a combination of those elements. It's got to be fresh news or exclusive news, you know, something a little bit perhaps quirky but also something that affects the big names and the big players in sport.

There was some evidence within the interviews that the news value of celebrity was a factor determining inclusion: "I guess, you know, [she] is one of those female athletes who crosses the sort of line into celebrity for us, doesn't she?" (Paul Barnard, editor). Controversy and scandal – mainstays of journalistic practice – were cited as somewhat influential on selection: "If there's some controversy or if there's some scandal or whatever, great; but I don't think that is always is the be-all-and-end-all in a good story" (Simon Devitt, editor).

An additional element in news justification and selection was the availability and quality of accompanying imagery. Newswriters were in agreement about the influence of images in determining selection and treatment of stories, as these examples encapsulate: "I've got four of the best sports photographers in the country; we're so vision driven" (Paul Barnard, editor); "I'll have a fantastic image for a weekend paper and it's going to get a seven-column page run because it's such a good photo" (Simon Devitt, editor); and "every story is basically judged on its merit or on the photograph

that comes with it because the photograph is a big part of the package” (Rose Williams, journalist). In fact, the appeal of a great image is such that it can entirely influence news selection, as this quote from Simon Devitt, editor, showed:

There are also images that are so striking that you actually have to find the words to go with the image...., for example, this is a quirky picture, this one here [pointing to a newspaper image]. Would this story have run without it? Possibly not.

Newswriters noted that women’s sport organizations that paid greater attention to providing the print media with images deemed attractive or interesting were more likely to receive coverage, as Simon Devitt, editor, made clear:

One thing that [the netball team] probably do better than nearly any other sporting body in our town is photos. We’ve got one guy who’s a terrific photographer but they work really well with him to get different shots; I don’t just have to rely on match shots or training shots, they go that extra yard to set up some funky sort of things, so that terrifically helps their cause because good pictures are increasingly hard to find.

Interestingly, when discussing news values, the issue of balance between the coverage of men’s and women’s sports was raised. Those interviewees who stated that balance positively favoured women’s inclusion included those that suggested that their newspaper did not want to have an all-male sports section. For, example, Gwendolyn Smith, journalist, noted:

They’re always looking for sort of quality content and they’re always very conscious too of trying to have the balance of, you know, men and women. It’s never going to be 50:50 but they’re very conscious that they don’t want to be an all-male sport section.

Marco Faulkner, editor, argued that his paper regularly previewed and reviewed the netball team, even though they weren't particularly successful, noting, "I think it's important for the paper and also to promote women's sport that we try and carry as many pictures of women as we can and we regularly run them. We try and support them where we can". Other interviewees, however, explicitly stated that news was selected on merit rather than any perceived need to achieve gender balance. For example Rose Williams, journalist, stated: "I am a firm believer a story is based on merit in male or female sport; I just don't think it should matter".

### **Discussion**

Previous research has posited that the skewed nature of the media agenda could be attributed to three particular elements of sports newswork: the male-dominated, hegemonic nature of sports newsrooms (Hardin, 2010; Knoppers & Elling, 2004); ingrained assumptions about reader expectations (Hardin, 2005; Rowe, 2007); and the systematic nature of sports news production (Gee & Leberman, 2011; Lowes, 1999; Marr, et al., 1999; Theberge & Cronk; 1986) – including that men's sports are inherently more newsworthy than women's sports and are more likely to be assigned as a beat. The results of this study are therefore significant as they provide evidence that

subtle changes in these three factors facilitated women's sports coverage in the four Australian newspapers.

### The Male-dominated Sports Newsroom

This study did not attempt to map the demography and gender composition of sports newsrooms but through the interviews was able to establish that women were commonly employed in the sports newsroom in these Australian newspapers. In addition, this study was able to show that the division of sports news beats was not made entirely along gender lines, as two of the journalists interviewed whose main beat was netball were male. All four editors were male, yet their news outlet published more coverage of women's sports than their competitors. As the quotes from Simon Devitt, editor, illustrated, these newswriters also realized the potential value of adding women's perspectives to the newsroom. While previous research has indicated that women rely on adapting to the patriarchal environment to succeed in sports journalism (Hardin, 2013; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Kian, et al., 2011; Schoch, 2013), this study provides examples in which female traits were highlighted as a positive. This study also found that women potentially play an important role establishing women's sports as a key part of the news agenda; for example, journalist Ben Garcia noted it was a woman who established the netball beat at his newspaper. However, this research suggests that coverage of women's sports occurs within existing male-dominated sports newsrooms,

and that women's contribution within these newsrooms is valued. This in itself is perhaps partially responsible for the acceptance of women's sports into the news agenda in these outlets.

### Ingrained Assumptions about Readership

The journalists and editors in this study used justifications of readership to explain their decisions related to the coverage of men's and women's sports. The historical commercial logic governing the sports pages – that men's sports sells because it is what readers expect (Gee & Leberman, 2011; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Hardin, 2005, 2010) – was noted in the interviews in this study. Like Hardin (2005) and Rowe (2007), this research found that these sports media decision-makers based their ideas of audience readership on personal beliefs and ingrained assumptions rather than hard evidence or research. However, this study also found evidence that personal preferences were actually leading newswriters to challenge these traditional notions; for example, Fred McEvoy, journalist, questioned whether or not readers wanted to see Maria Sharapova in a pretty dress, an example of both the entrenched ideas about sports news audiences and the potential to undermine them. Several newswriters in this cohort also expressed a desire to “help” women's sports by providing coverage, which is in itself an important finding in a system that has traditionally stated that women's sports are not worthy of coverage. This suggests that the Australian print media landscape differs somewhat

from that which has been previously reported elsewhere, such as in the US where Hardin (2010) argued that editors' conceptualizations of value exclude women's sports, or in the Netherlands, where the newswriters in Knoppers and Ellings' (2004) study were unwilling to provide coverage to promote women's sports, and also in France, where Gee and Leberman (2011) found that commercial logic was the determining factor of coverage, and this usually excluded women's sports. This variation in opinion regarding the issue of merit, in concert with newswriters' questioning of traditional appraisals of audience preference, is indicative of a system that is capable of accommodating the coverage of women's sports.

#### The Systematic Nature of Sports Newswork

This study confirmed that sports newswork in Australia is similar to other international contexts: it is a highly-structured, routinized system, driven by a beat model. The appearance of more women's sports coverage in these newspapers could be attributed to the fact that netball had a beat assigned to it. In this way, the study confirms previous research that indicates the assignment of a beat to a particular sport immediately legitimizes its coverage (Hardin, 2005; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Lowes, 1999; Marr, et al., 1999; Rowe, 2007; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). It also indicates that Australia operates in a similar context to New Zealand where netball has long been part of the sports media agenda (Bruce, 2015). While few participants in this study could identify

how netball became established as a beat, the study can help explain why netball's beat status has been retained, as discussed below.

Journalists and editors in these newspapers stated that women's sports were recognized as having inherent news value and that in some cases this value was equal to men's sports. The most commonly invoked news value was success, which is perhaps unsurprising in the sports journalism context; success is a vital component of the hard news of the sport section. However, previous research had indicated that even success would not guarantee women's sports coverage; for example, one participant in Knoppers and Elling's (2004) study of Dutch newspapers argued that women's sports would never be seen as equivalent to men's sports. In contrast, editors and journalists in this study argued their coverage of women's sports was due to the success of female athletes, suggesting that they viewed them as serious athletes whose performance warranted coverage. For the newswriters in this study, the decision about which athletes to write stories about rested less on gender than it did on success. While Bruce (2016) noted that this is more likely to occur in the context of international sports mega-events, where the gender of the "model citizen" is less relevant than their nationality in that context, this study provides evidence that this also occurs at a state level in Australia. When discussing the element of success, the journalists and editors justified the record of their state's netball team when it came to coverage. In this way this study

provides confirmation of Bruce's (2016) analysis, which asserted that the sports news landscape is changing, throwing off old, simple gender dichotomies in favour of conceptualizations that favour athleticism, achievement, and appeal to national and/or state pride. This is an important repositioning of women's sport and female athletes within sports media.

Finally, Theberge and Cronk's (1986) examination of the beat model argued that part of the reason men's sports continued to be the cornerstone of the beat model was that men's sports organizations had developed institutional resources to support it, for example via regular press conferences. The interviewees in this study spoke of working with sports organizations to facilitate stories and provide attractive and compelling images, with one editor stating that the netball team often went out of their way to create an image with news appeal or value. Given there is evidence that men's professional sports are limiting media access (Sherwood, Nicholson & Marjoribanks, 2016; Suggs, 2015), this is potentially indicative of the empowerment of female athletes and women's sports organizations to exploit the sports newswork system to their advantage. It is important to note here that netball is a unique case, in that it is a sport played only by women at the elite level and there is no men's version to distract from its coverage. However, growth in the coverage of netball is perhaps indicative of the increasing organizational capacity of netball governing bodies, which has allowed them

to strategize and manage media relationships, and in so doing, position netball as a sport with an established and interested audience. This study, therefore, provides evidence that the structures governing the production of sports news have not changed significantly, but what has changed is the status of women's sports within the system.

### **Conclusion**

The most salient and revealing finding from this study, which sought to understand why some journalists, editors and news outlets cover women's sports, was that subtle changes in the three factors of sports newswork that once conspired to relegate the coverage of women's news had helped to facilitate it. Women's sports were included in these newspapers' coverage because they have been accepted into the routinized work of sports journalism; that is, women's sports have been assigned as a beat, deemed newsworthy, and of interest to readers. In turn, women's sports organizations, such as netball, or other organizations which have female participants, have developed resources to help sustain this ongoing coverage. Women's sports coverage, in particular netball, appears to have been normalized and subsumed into the regular newswork structure that governs sports. Viewed within the overarching context of sports news production, the inclusion of women's sports in these outlets can be understood as indicative of the changing environment of mediasport in Australia, which assigns news value based on a range of factors and which is concerned less with gender and more

with success, inter-organizational co-operation, mutual understanding of news value and journalists' and editors' professional and personal beliefs. The results of this study provide confirmation of Bruce's (2016) assertion that the rules of women's sport coverage are changing. While traditional notions – such as the commercial value of men's sports – continue to be in evidence, new rules are more readily applied, which view female sportswomen as serious athletes, possessing news value, and representing audience interest. Less interested in whether women's sports are as objectively good as men's, the newswriters in this study cited the elements underpinning their practice as sports organizations' good performance, openness to collaboration and provision of access, relevance and interest to audiences, in concert with newswriters' own professional responsibility. These systematic and affective elements coalesce to ensure that women's sports in these outlets continue to be on the news agenda.

This study has some limitations. First, this study did not attempt to explore the quality of women's sports coverage – simply quantity – and therefore further detail about the nature of the coverage found in these newspapers was not established. Second, this study did not explore the volume of women's media coverage in relation to men's as previous research indicates that women's sports are not close to achieving parity in coverage with men's sports. This potentially means that the women's sports coverage was still relatively insignificant compared with the majority of sports news published.

Instead, this study aimed to simply focus on a small, but significant, sample of major national newspapers that published stories on women's sports. Another limitation is that in this small sample, the results cannot be generalized to the wider field. In particular, given that these were newspapers that provided greater women's sports coverage than their competitors, they were of course less likely to exhibit the sexist views reported in previous research. However, given these newspapers are some of the largest in Australia, this study provides important insights. Due to its limited scope, this study is restricted in terms of unpacking the reasons that underpinning the establishment of structures and routines that include coverage of women's sports at these outlets. The aim of this study was to explore whether there was anything special about the newswork structures of the organizations and the journalists that did publish women's sports coverage. We found that there was not, but rather, these news outlets' institutionalized practices and structures had evolved to include women's sports. Future research that further unpacks how women's sports acquire beat status in some media outlets but not others would be a valuable contribution to the literature. In particular, the example given by Ben Garcia – where a female journalist had instigated and prioritized the coverage of netball – potentially indicates that women have a significant role to play in the inclusion of women's sports, as argued by Hardin (2013). Given the importance placed on audience considerations and concomitant lack of supporting evidence, we also reiterate Hardin's (2005) call for studies that examine audience preferences of

sports media; such research would be beneficial in advocating for the inclusion of women's sports and female athletes in the sport pages.

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**Table 1: Newspaper coverage of women's sport**

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
The Adelaide Advertiser * (Jack Stewart)	332	18.8%
The West Australian * (Marco Faulkner)	325	18.4%
The Courier Mail/Sunday Mail * (Simon Devitt)	325	18.4%
The Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph * (Paul Barnard)	258	14.7%
Herald-Sun/Sunday Herald Sun	197	11.2%
The Age / Sunday Age	113	6.4%
The Sydney Morning Herald/Sun Herald	107	6.1%
The Australian	102	5.8%
<b>Journalist</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Ben Garcia*	117	6.6%
Gwendolyn Smith*	71	4.0%
Rose Williams*	67	3.8%
AAP Journalist^	57	3.2%
AAP Byline	47	2.7%
Fred McEvoy*	44	2.5%
Male Journalist 1	35	2.0%
Female Journalist 1	28	1.6%
Female Journalist 2	26	1.5%

**\*Indicates those interviewed in this study.**

**^AAP journalist.**