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George B. Cunningham, Janet S. Fink, Alison Doherty

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Steve Bien-Aimé, Marie Hardin

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28

GATEKEEPING AND SPORT COMMUNICATION

Steve Bien-Aimé and Marie Hardin

Introduction

Perhaps no other issue has frustrated, with good reason, women’s sports advocates over time more than this: the vexing and persistent practice of mediated sports producers – no matter the platform, no matter the time period – to ignore and marginalise female sports competitors. But why? There is, of course, more than one answer to this question, which has been pondered by mostly by scholars of sport sociology, who have looked at the issue through a variety of feminist lenses and through Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony.

As scholars of journalism and mass communication, we have taken a different approach to the question, adding theories from our field to understand decision-making by media producers around women’s sport. In this chapter, we discuss gatekeeping and how this concept has been applied to questions about (non)coverage of women’s sport. We provide an overview of gatekeeping, discuss how it has been integrated into research involving sports journalists and newsrooms, and review the impact gatekeeping practices have had on how sports news is covered. We then suggest ways research might further address sexism in coverage.

Overview of gatekeeping and journalism

Sport journalists receive a great deal more information than they ever disseminate to the public, even in the age of social media. In fact, it could be surmised that all individuals, as a matter of practicality, do not blindly regurgitate every piece of information they receive; there is a filtering process that occurs. In mass communications, this phenomenon is called gatekeeping (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Scholars (e.g., Singer, 2001; Shoemaker, 1991; Sundar and Nass, 2001) have traced the concept of gatekeepers to social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947). Lewin theorized about how families made decisions regarding food consumption. He looked at the different channels – food growers and food consumers – in decision-making about eating (p. 145). Lewin wrote, ‘Gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by “gate keepers.” In the latter case an individual group is “in power” for making the decision between “in” and “out”’ (p. 145). In the cases of food growers and consumers, some dominant person or group must decide what crops are produced, and another dominant person or group must decide what foods are suitable for a family to consume. Farms do not all grow the same crops and households
do not purchase every item found in a supermarket. Instead, these entities are subject to a process whereby filtering occurs through a number of channels, involving economic, environmental and social factors, among others.

White (1950) is widely credited as being the first scholar to apply gatekeeping to mass communications, or more specifically to journalism (e.g., Cassidy, 2006; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011; Shoemaker, 1991; Toledo Bastos, Galdini Raimundo and Travitzki, 2013). White wanted to understand how an editor selected stories from various wire services to run in a newspaper. ‘Mr Gates’, as the editor was dubbed, was essentially the sole arbiter in deciding which articles to accept and reject. Near the conclusion of the article, White (1950) wrote: ‘It begins to appear . . . that in his position as “gate keeper” the newspaper editor sees to it . . . that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true’ (p. 390).

There are various models of gatekeeping, depending on the contextual setting (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). For sport communications scholars, Abraham Z. Bass’s notion of gatekeeping could prove beneficial. Bass (1969) examined the news decisions made at United Nations Radio. He saw the gatekeeper function performed twice, once in ‘news gathering’ and again in ‘news processing’ (p. 72). Editors were not the only individuals who decided what news was disseminated to the public; reporters also acted as gatekeepers. Editors do not leave newsrooms and acquire information. They can only ‘process’ the information reporters gather. Therefore, there is a lot of power in the hands of reporters both in terms of whom they talk to and whom they ignore, and how reporters frame the information they receive. Editors also have gatekeeping power; thus, there are two sets of gates.

There are various factors that influence gatekeepers’ decisions. While people make personal decisions about what information is shared and what information is excluded, institutions do shape gatekeepers’ choices (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). For instance, a social media manager for a sports team most likely will not post information criticising a star player, even if that star player performed poorly. Institutionally, there are most likely norms (whether spoken or unspoken) that would discourage disparaging information to pass through the gate of that particular team.

An individual’s background cannot be ignored as also influential. A person’s educational level, childhood and experiences help form a certain worldview. In addition, one’s race, sexual orientation and other socially constructed identities work to place that individual in a unique position in society. Berry, Jay and Lynn (2010) combine the importance of background and identity by stating, ‘We are not only the sum of our parts but also the sum of our experiences’ (p. 6). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) relate an individual’s complexities to how that person would function as a gatekeeper: ‘An African-American heterosexual woman from a middle-class background who graduated from an Ivy League university may go through a different decision-making process than a white gay man who comes from a working-class background and attended a small state university’ (p. 43).

Influences outside of reporters and editors could also impact gatekeepers’ decisions. The audience (or perceived audience) for information is one example of a possible external pressure, although scholars differ on whether the audience does impact news choices (Shoemaker, 1991). However, journalists have relied upon their knowledge of their ‘audiences’ to justify their decisions. In terms of how Dutch sport journalists portrayed women and reported on female athletes, Knoppers and Elling (2004) found that these journalists based their decisions on what they perceived to be audience desire. Knoppers and Elling also reported that the perceptions of audience desires and tastes seemed to reflect the journalists’ own views.
Exploring the role of ‘audience’ in gatekeeping

As former practising journalists, we bring to our research a first-hand understanding of the phenomena that Knoppers and Elling (2004) explained in their research: An understanding of ‘audience’ that permeates the practice of newsgathering and reporting, making its way – often without explicit acknowledgement – into the decision-making process about content. There is no question that the rise of the internet, social media and digital technologies has taken much of the guesswork out of understanding audience demographics and consumption patterns, but that has certainly not always been the case, as it was not in 2005, when Hardin (2005) launched the first survey to link gatekeeping and sport coverage. Furthermore, as a White woman (Hardin) and Black man (Bien-Aimé), both of us are part of under-represented groups in the sport-media workplace; thus, we are interested in the way identity and the gatekeeping process are linked.

It was with those interests and background that Hardin (2005) surveyed 285 newspaper sport editors in the southeastern United States, exploring the relationship between the gendered identities of sports editors (primary decision-makers about coverage), their understanding of reader interests and gatekeeping. She found that sport editors were overwhelmingly White men. Although almost 90 per cent of editors felt confident they knew what their readers wanted, only 42 per cent had a formal way (such as monitoring calls to the sports department or conducting informal focus groups with individuals recruited by reporters) to assess audience interest. From the data, Hardin reached a similar conclusion to that of Knoppers and Elling (2004): journalists perceive they know what their audiences want, and they judge these interests to be aligned with their choice to predominantly cover professional men’s sports and provide scant coverage of women’s sports. Hardin (2005) concluded that editors’ ‘sense about audience interest is driven, at least in part, by personal beliefs and hegemonic ideology about women’s sports’ (p. 72). The reliance on intuition, not hard data, could have significant implications for how women’s sports are covered. About 44 per cent of respondents said reader interest was low or non-existent for women’s sports; that hunch could lead editors to block stories regarding female athletes and competition from being published (Hardin, 2005).

Hardin (2005) also sought to gauge sports editors’ perceptions on the quality of female athletes. For instance: do editors view female athletes as equal to their male counterparts? About one-third of editors surveyed believed women to be athletically inferior to men and that women were not as interested in sports compared with men. These same editors might use these personal beliefs to justify ignoring women in sport because more attention should be given to the supposedly superior male athletes (Hardin, 2005).

The results were not surprising, given our own newsroom experience and understanding of the dynamics that permeate the sports beat – perhaps best explained for the uninitiated in Inside the sports pages (Lowes, 2000), which, though dated, still captures the general dynamics in sport beat reporting. Although ‘objectivity’ has long served as the holy grail in newsrooms and, more recently, in sports departments as they sought to lose the ‘toy department’ image and be perceived as legitimate journalistic enterprises, this research seemed to confirm that the personal beliefs of sports editors (often driven by their identities, no doubt; as we discuss later, male and female journalists express different beliefs about the value of women’s sport), along with their unsubstantiated assumptions about ‘reader interest’ both drove, then justified, their decisions about content.

Applying gatekeeping to sport coverage

Modern sport has been viewed as a place for men to dominate (Burstyn, 1999; Cahn, 1994). The mentality is based upon sport being a place for men to demonstrate their masculinity and
supposed physical superiority. Under this framework, women are often treated as substandard to men in sport. Understanding how sport journalists reify the idea of sport as male is important to us as mass communication scholars; as we understand how it occurs, we can work to address attendant newsroom practices and priorities.

Evidence for case studies is not difficult to find. The case of Becky Hammon provides an opportunity to demonstrate how even in celebrating an achievement, sport journalists continue to reinforce sport as masculine. Hammon has been ranked as one of the top fifteen players in the history of the Women’s National Basketball Association (NBA, 2014). However, it is only when Hammon was hired to be the assistant coach for the National Basketball Association’s San Antonio Spurs that she received significant media coverage. Pay attention to how journalists described the news. CNN.com began its story this way: ‘In what many sports fans view as a historic move, the reigning NBA champion San Antonio Spurs announced the hiring of Becky Hammon as assistant coach’ (Martin, 2014). ABCNews.com went in a similar direction: ‘Becky Hammon has made history as the first full-time female assistant coach in the NBA, but she says that was never her intent’ (ABC News, 2014). Few, if any, journalists have found it particularly newsworthy that men coach women successfully (see Gino Auriemma of the University of Connecticut women’s basketball team or Bill Laimbeer, formerly of the Detroit Shock). However, journalists found it especially newsworthy and groundbreaking that Hammon, a sixteen-year professional and former Olympian, is coaching men as an assistant.

Most journalists covered this story similarly; again, we find gatekeeping instructive as a lens. Shoemaker (1991) would likely view the similarities in the Hammon coverage as another form of gatekeeping; the socialisation of journalists into a ‘pack mentality’, where reporters essentially follow each other so as to not deviate from the path and potentially look foolish to their peers. To put this in a simpler way: If we all do it, we all can’t look bad if we’re wrong. Referring back to Hammon, it would appear that the gatekeepers are acknowledging they view the Women’s National Basketball Association as inferior to the National Basketball Association and/or female basketball players as inferior to male basketball players.

Of course the most obvious evidence of journalists’ tendency to devalue female athletes, based on a number of gatekeeping factors, is in the amount of media coverage women’s sport competition receives. There is no shortage of studies that document the persistent disparity (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum, 2013; Fink, in press). A longitudinal study of television coverage on local network news and on ESPN’s SportsCenter shows that female athletes get very little – miniscule is not too strong a descriptor – airtime (Cooky et al., 2013). This has been the case for decades, across college and professional sports, and across print, broadcast and online media. For instance, in a 1998 examination of the sports sections of The New York Times and USA Today, and the content of Sports Center and CNN’s sports television shows, Eastman and Billings (2000) reported that female athletes received less than 10 per cent of television coverage and less than 20 per cent of the newspaper coverage. In an analysis of newspaper (print and online) coverage during the 2006 NCAA men’s and women’s basketball tournaments, Kian (2008) found that the men’s tournament received an overwhelming amount of the coverage.

If female athletes receive significantly less media attention than male athletes, then it is important to examine the sex composition of sport newsrooms. Richard Lapchick has analysed the racial and gender breakdowns of selected sport departments for years, assigning grades for departments’ commitment to diversity. In the 2012 assessment, Lapchick and his co-authors again gave newsrooms an F for gender diversity. Women comprised 14.6 per cent of staffs and only 9.6 per cent of sports editors (Lapchick et al., 2013). The substantial disparity could help begin to explain why female athletes receive so little media coverage. As Hardin argued (2005),
if men have little direct experience with female sport, then men might have more of an inclination to dismiss it.

Understanding the gatekeeping role in sport is critical because reality is socially constructed (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Ferri, 1988; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009; Parker and Easton, 1998). Individuals’ perceptions of the world are shaped by their environments and what they are taught to believe. Journalists often provide the lenses by which the public sees events, mediating reality. How stories are written, how videos are produced and who is included and excluded go a long way in determining how society views sport. This is not to disregard agency on the part of media consumers. Furthermore, this is not to discount the role of audience desires and demands – by virtue of clicks, downloads and screen-time – all of which can be measured, taking the guesswork out of what media producers can be certain will draw individuals and, thus, be sold to advertisers. However, if the gatekeeping process consistently and broadly produces homologous content, audiences may not know what they are missing and dominant paradigms (in this case, an understanding of the superior athletic body as masculine) go unchallenged.

Extensions and applications of gatekeeping in sport communication

While not explicitly mentioning gatekeeping, Hardin and Whiteside (2009) described gatekeeping’s negative effects for female sport journalists. Hardin and Whiteside interviewed female sport journalists to understand how they navigated the industry. They found that female sport journalists were readily made aware of their marginalised status and were often told they were unqualified by their colleagues. In addition to feeling they constantly had to validate themselves to men, the female journalists expressed frustration in working a grueling schedule without the possibility of moving to the top ranks. The sexist conditions and overwork pushed some women out of sport journalism. Hardin and Whiteside (2009) explained:

The women who left and those who considered leaving presented their decisions as individual, free choice. They acknowledged barriers such as the time demands and what they called a ‘boys-will-be-boys’ culture, but did not see these barriers as institutionally constructed. Instead, they accepted them as natural and immutable. Jane, the copy editor who was verbally abused on the copy desk, did say that supervisors needed to ‘do a better job of overseeing everything’ (i.e. spotting and stopping harassment), but did not see the sports-journalism environment, which privileges men, as part of the problem.

(p. 643)

If men create the structure by which sport must be practised, then it is through this paradigm that one must view the status of female sport journalists. There is a gendered gate preventing women from practising sport journalism in an environment that acknowledges them entirely as equals to men.

Hardin (2013) has suggested that the lack of women in the sport media workplace could be linked to content that excludes female athletes and, certainly, gatekeeping as a theoretical lens would support this suggestion. Research already points to differing attitudes among women and men in sports journalism towards Title IX and women’s sports. Surveys of journalists across print, broadcast and online formats have demonstrated that women put a higher value on coverage of female athletes and generally believe the women’s sport does not receive enough coverage.
Content analyses examining differences in the ways women and men cover sport confirm that women cover female athletes in more positive terms than their counterparts (for instance, see Kian and Hardin, 2009).

Gatekeeping has also been extended to examine decisions made by sport-talk radio programming directors. We surveyed directors from across the United States to explore demographics and programming decisions (Hardin, Antunovic, Bien-Aimé and Li, 2013). The directors were overwhelmingly white men and many directors believed their listeners had little interest in female sport. We surmised the following:

[T]he lack of programming directed at female listeners suggests that directors are either not concerned about attracting them or they presume that female listeners are interested in the same content as male listeners . . . It is implied, based on these estimates, that if female listeners are interested in the station’s programming, they are interested in sports associated with masculinity and packaged in a way to appeal to a particular male target demographic.

(Hardin et al., 2013, p. 417)

Sports information has also been examined with gatekeeping as a theoretical backdrop, with the understanding that the availability of information sources, such as those provided by sports information operations, impact decision-making by gatekeepers (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). If information is hard to obtain, journalists must put forth the effort to seek it out; on the other hand, when the information is readily available it is easier to disseminate. Because we already know that media operations dedicate far more resources towards reporting on men’s sports, the availability of information and material on women’s sports by those responsible for providing it on behalf of sports organisations (such as universities) becomes critical for coverage.

In that light, Hardin, Whiteside and Ash (2014) surveyed sport information directors, the individuals who provide much of athletic programmes’ information to the news media, to gauge their attitudes on gender-related issues. They found that sport information directors did not believe female athletes needed additional resources from schools. This viewpoint ‘may reflect a sincere belief that female athletes already have equal resources, or – more problematic – a belief that while the values of equity and fairness are just and good, women have not necessarily earned the right to those resources’ (Hardin et al., 2014, p. 57). They speculated that sport information directors normalise the disparity in coverage between male and female sports. Further, many sport information directors did not object to assigning staff based on gender (i.e., men assigned to men’s sports and women assigned to women’s sports):

Such logic, however, necessarily puts women at a tremendous disadvantage in the sports information workplace, virtually guaranteeing their inability to climb through the ranks in athletic departments in any kind of critical mass because of their lack of access to high-visibility assignments (such as men’s basketball and football), which are considered essential for promotion.

(Hardin et al., 2014, p. 58)

If women are precluded from reaching the highest levels of gatekeeping, this could help explain the treatment of women within sport.
Future directions for gatekeeping

Although gatekeeping in sport media has been examined both in media composition and in overall media coverage, gatekeeping should be explored on a more fundamental level. There are many ideological assumptions that enter the sport media lexicon that are rarely challenged. For example, the practice of asymmetrical gender marking (Billings, Halone and Denham, 2002; Halbert and Latimer, 1994; Messner, Duncan and Jensen, 1993) – using women to describe one league, but not using men to describe the other league, a Women’s National Basketball Association in contrast to the National Basketball Association – might be better explained through a personalised level of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) ask, ‘How much autonomy and power do individual gatekeepers have to impose their own agendas on media content? What conditions are conducive to the exercise of personal judgment over more structural constraints?’ (p. 134). If an editor wanted to make it a practice to call the National Basketball Association, the Men’s National Basketball Association, would that be allowed/tolerated by the publishers?

Gatekeeping must also be examined more deeply at the source level. As Cooky et al. (2013) indicated, professional sport leagues and universities play a role in promoting their athletes to the media. Hardin et al. (2014) examined attitudes of sport information directors. However, further understanding the decision-making process as to which sports and which athletes receive more resources towards media engagement could yield much beneficial information for sport communication.

Note

1 This chapter is a reflection on Hardin (2005) and the work related to it.

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Applying the gatekeeper influence in sport communication model

Erin Whiteside

I often refer to my career before entering academia as my prior life. During that time, I worked in sports media, an industry largely dominated not simply by men, but by an ideology that provides the logic for marginalising women and women’s sports. While there, I understood that girls and women faced challenges in earning credibility and respect, particularly when it came to garnering media coverage. Still, it was not until encountering the scholarship of Marie Hardin (2005) that I finally acquired a toolkit with which to interpret my experiences and observations, and develop ideas for addressing systemic inequities related to gender in sports media.

Hardin’s work (2005) represents a major contribution to sports media literature, as it demonstrates the social construction of sports media through various influences in the gatekeeping process. Sports media is a key space in which shared cultural meanings are negotiated, contested and affirmed, and thus analyses of coverage are critical in understanding the ways in which sports media contribute to the maintenance of invisible social hierarchies. Still, too often scholars focus solely on critiquing content itself and ignore the modes of production that give rise to that content. Hardin’s article and other research exploring how attitudes among gatekeepers may explain trends in content (e.g., Hardin, 2013; Hardin and Shain, 2005a; Hardin and Whiteside, 2009a; Hardin, Whiteside and Ash, 2014) take into consideration the processes of sports media production, thus offering insight into how and where change may occur, a goal that is at the heart of all critical (and feminist) sports studies scholarship.

In my own work, I have incorporated the concept of the social construction of sports news to offer both an explanation for why we see certain trends in content, and how various attitudes towards girls and women manifest themselves in sports media. For example, in a study in which we analysed high-school basketball coverage, we found that girls competing at that level are not presented in overly feminine frames, and that they also receive similar resources to boys when they do receive coverage (Whiteside and Rightler-McDaniels, 2013). Along with arguing that the coverage we analysed may function in liberating ways by offering a more agentic vision of female athletes to readers, we also drew from ideas grounded in the social construction of news to consider why we observed these trends and what factors may have been part of the gatekeeping process. Still, such studies offer an incomplete picture of how gender identities are constituted through sports media discourses. To that end, we have continued to survey sports media professionals about their attitudes toward women’s sports and Title IX, as part of a wider project aimed at understanding how these concepts are negotiated and, ultimately, presented to the public (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009a; Hardin et al., 2014).

The social construction of news is a multi-faceted process mediated by numerous gatekeepers and influences. Surveys can measure attitudes among key individuals in that process and thus demonstrate how those attitudes may shape content. Ideologies, however, do not exist in a vacuum. In other work, Hardin has interviewed sports media professionals on some of these issues (e.g., Hardin and Shain, 2005b, 2006; Hardin, Shain and Schultz-Poniatowski, 2008; Hardin and Whiteside, 2008, 2009b, 2009c, 2012; Whiteside and Hardin, 2011). Scholars should similarly employ an ethnographic approach to further illuminate the complexities in the sports media production process, including how gender-related attitudes function in everyday decision-making.
Doing so will ultimately provide a more detailed picture of how various trends in content manifest themselves and where change may be most likely to occur.

Note

1 Erin Whiteside is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Electronic Media at the University of Tennessee.

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