



Women and Sport on TV

This Factsheet has a number of aims:

- Investigate the visibility of women's sports on TV,
- Explore whether the way women's sport is covered on TV is significantly different to the coverage of men's sport,
- Provide some case study examples for use in exam and coursework responses.

Introduction: Women's Sport in Society

Before considering the place of women's sport on TV, it is worth considering the status of women's sport in wider society. A 2015 report by the charity Women in Sport compiled a range of statistics to illustrate the extent to which women participate in sport in the UK. They found that 8.6 million men take part in some kind of sporting activity at least once per week, while only 6.8 million women do so. They found that 49% of the national governing bodies of a range of sports had less than a quarter of their board membership made up of women. Only 11% of the chairs of national governing bodies were women.

Commercial sponsorship in women's sport is far less valuable than in men's sport. The most valuable sponsorship deal in women's sport in 2013 was a deal between Continental and the FA Women's Superleague for £450,000. In contrast, the most valuable sponsorship deal in men's sport that year was the deal between Adidas and Chelsea FC, totalling an eye-watering £280,000,000.

Activity

Carry out your own content analysis of sport on TV. Closely examine the TV schedules for a week. How many hours of sport are there on TV during the week? How many hours are men's and how many are women's? How many hours are there of different sports? Does your research show that women's sport is not being treated on par with men's?

Talking About Women's Sport

Research by Cambridge University Press in 2016 found that there are significant differences in the language used to discuss men's and women's sport. Experts analysed databases containing billions of words relating men and women and how they are described in Olympic sports. They found that the words *men* or *man* occur up to three times more often than *women* or *woman*, indicating that men's sport is discussed more than women's sport. One exception was that women were mentioned more often when there was a need to describe which gender was participating. References to *women's football* or *women's golf* were common, but when men's football was referred to it was often just called *football*.

Common terms used to refer to women included *aged*, *older*, *pregnant*, and *married* or *unmarried*. Top word combinations for men on the other hand included words such as *fastest*, *strong*, *big*, *real*, and *great*. Researchers also found that language was often used to infantilise women, who were often referred to as *girls*, whereas men were referred to as *boys* much less frequently.

The research covered a wide range of written and spoken English taken from a wide range of media sources and arguably shows that coverage of women's sport has an element of sexism. However, the rower Anna Watkins has been quoted by the BBC as saying that she feels that sexism in media coverage is decreasing and it's good that people are becoming more aware of it as an issue and are able to point out sexism when it occurs.

Why Is This important?

Media representations are a key factor in our understanding of the world around us. Representation of gender can play a key role in the way boys and girls begin to understand their roles in society, so if women's sport is not visible on TV, it is likely that girls will come to think of sport as something that is not for them. The figures quoted in the first section of this factsheet show that far more men take part in sport regularly than women, it seems probable that the relative lack of women's sport on TV is a factor.

In 2014, the England Women's Rugby team won the world cup in France and the tournament proved a hit with TV viewers. Before the start of the tournament, plans were in place to broadcast 15 live matches across the world to a potential audience of 289 million households, more than in any previous tournament. However, despite the resources put into the tournament, there was plenty of evidence that the women's game is not seen as important as the men's, for example England's quarter-final game against France was only shown on the



Manchester City, champions of the FA Women's Superleague, sponsored by Continental Tyres.

<http://blobs.continental-tyres.com/vww8/servlet/image/545640/uncropped/748/0/2/conti-cup-pic-01.jpg>

If we turn our attention to media coverage of women's sport, the picture is a similar one. Only 7% of all media coverage of sport is made up by women's sport, and only 2% of the coverage in national daily newspapers. TV on its own fares slightly better, but still only 10% of TV coverage is of women's sport. It's very clear that sport is an area where the status of women is far behind that of men.

BBC following calls from a number of campaigners, and even then it was only shown on BBC2.



England were the winners of the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup, a victory shown live on the BBC and credited with encouraging many women and girls to take up the game.

http://ichef.bbci.co.uk/onesport/cps/480/mcs/media/images/77153000/jpg/_77153263_englandwomenone.jpg

In an interview with The Daily Telegraph, England's Emily Scarett has suggested that England's success in the tournament, and the accompanying media interest, has led to a big upswing in participation in women's rugby, with 26,000 women and girls regularly playing the game and over 300 rugby clubs having women's teams. Professionalism was introduced to women's rugby in England following the world cup win, and the Rugby Football Union has set a target of doubling participation to over 50,000. If TV companies can be persuaded to show more games, these targets will be easier to achieve.

Case Study: Olympic TV Coverage

While the amount of women's sport shown on TV is an area of concern, there are also issues with the manner in which women's sport is represented too. Perhaps the most common criticism made of media representations of women is that women tend to be sexualised far more than men, and subject to the male gaze. Recent research into the 2016 Olympics in Rio has suggested that this issue is just as much a problem in sports coverage as in other types of media.

Andy Billings, a sports professor at the University of Alabama and part of a group researching TV coverage of the Olympics, has analysed the coverage of the games on the American NBC network. Billings has commented that NBC's coverage is very progressive in many ways, with 60% of airtime going to women's sport by the halfway stage of the games. Prior to the London Olympics, men's events had received more coverage – this can be seen as progress.

However, Billings also notes that accusations of sexism do remain. "We'd be naïve if we didn't acknowledge that the sports they are showing, a lot of them involve women in swimsuits and leotards," he said. As an example, the women's gymnastics had 3 hours more TV time than the men's event. Although Billings does also acknowledge that the American women's teams had a much greater chance of medals than the men, making the event more appealing to viewers.



The beach volleyball match between Germany and Egypt at Rio 2016 raised some interesting discussions around representation as the Egyptian team competed in Burkina's, rather than the skimpy bikinis favoured by their opponents.

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/file/Get/28eddf56-88f6-471f-8bfc-470b29c8718c>

Perhaps most revealingly, Billings notes that women's beach volleyball received 2 hours and 45 minutes of coverage on NBC, while the men's event warranted just 35 seconds of screen time. Women's beach volleyball has achieved a particularly high profile since its introduction to the Olympics in 1992 as a demonstration event in Barcelona, much of its popularity seeming to stem from the bikinis worn by many of the female players.

Putting women's bodies at the centre of the coverage is not limited to competitors, but to presenters as well. The BBC's coverage of the 2016 Olympic swimming gala became the subject of much comment in the press during the games due to the outfits worn by the host, Helen Skelton. Skelton attracted a lot of comments in the press and on social media for the revealing outfits she wore while presenting the event; a further reminder that even in sport, women are often judged more on their appearance rather than their abilities.



The BBC presenter Helen Skelton, hosting coverage of the swimming competition.

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/skelt5.png?w=430>

Tennis is arguably a sport where the status of the women's game is closer to parity with the men's than team sports like rugby and football. The BBC devotes a huge amount of screen time to coverage of Wimbledon every summer, but they attracted a complaint in the summer of 2016 suggesting that far more time was devoted to men's matches than women's. The same year, BBC commentator Andrew Castle was forced to apologise for a remark he made about the girlfriend of Marcus Willis, a player defeated by Roger Federer in the second round.

As a shot of Dr Jennifer Bate (who is a dental surgeon) appeared on screen Castle remarked "I wish my dentist looked like that." Bate used Twitter to reassure Castle that she had not been personally offended, but many viewers were bothered by the apparent sexism of the remark.

Activity

There was plenty of controversy during the 2016 Olympics in Rio concerning remarks made by a number of TV commentators. These included:

An American commentator remarking that US gymnast Simone Biles; "...might even go higher than the men."

After the Hungarian swimmer Katinka Hosszu had won a gold medal, a commentator referred to her husband (who is also her trainer) as "the man responsible."

A BBC commentator was criticised for referring to a women's judo final as "a cat fight."

An NBC commentator referred to the US gymnastics team looking like they "might as well be standing in the middle of a mall."

The men's singles tennis champion, Andy Murray, had to point out to the BBC's John Inverdale that the Williams sisters had won "about 4 each" after Inverdale congratulated him on being the first person to win 2 Olympic tennis golds.

Carry out some further research of your own into these comments. Do you agree that they are sexist? What arguments, for and against, could be made?

Case Study: The Women's Football Show

The Women's Football Show is a weekly programme, broadcast on BBC2, providing a round-up of action and news from the Women's Super League. It was first broadcast in 2013 and is a key part of the steady growth of women's football on the BBC. For example, in 2015, BBC3's coverage of England's third place play-off match in the women's world cup achieved an audience of 1.4 million people as England beat Germany, and the BBC broadcast live coverage of every game. The women's FA Cup Final has become a fixture on TV in recent years, returning to the BBC in 2013 after a spell with ITV and Sky.



Jacqui Oatley and Tina Daheley:
Hosts of the Women's Football Show on BBC2

<https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/images/ic/336x189/p03pgtv0.jpg>

The show broadly follows the format of Match of the Day, featuring a host and guest pundits commenting on the football action that is shown in highlights packages, such as the title deciding clash between Chelsea and Manchester City, which was the first match featured in the edition broadcast on 25th September 2016. As with MOTD, the action is described by two commentators, on this occasion Lucy Ward and Steve Bower.

Perhaps significantly, the main commentator on the Chelsea vs. Man City game is a man (although his name is given second in the introduction by host Jacqui Oatley), and the commentators on the other games are also men. It would seem more appropriate for the commentators to be women, and the fact that they aren't suggests that there may be a lack of suitably qualified women available to fill the roles.

However, the host and the two studio guests are all women and it is worth noting that host, Jacqui Oatley, was herself the first female commentator for a game on Match of the Day, back in 2007. The onscreen graphics are identical in style to those used elsewhere on BBC football coverage and the opening montage that sets the scene for the main game has a high level of production value and would not look out of place on MOTD. The variety of camera angles used during coverage of the game suggests that a good number of cameras have been used to cover the game, suggesting that the BBC are prepared to invest in decent coverage of women's sport. The show seems to be squarely aimed at a female audience and is free of the sexist remarks and objectification that has been identified in other sports coverage.

That said, there are other indicators that the show does not have the status of MOTD. The studio is much smaller and does not feature the flashy virtual background of MOTD, suggesting the show does not have the status of its men's equivalent. It is broadcast very late on a weekday evening in a slot that is unlikely to attract a large audience, and it is shown on less popular channel (BBC2 rather than BBC1). In addition, the show only lasts for 30 minutes, significantly shorter than MOTD which is shown on a Saturday and often lasts up to 90 minutes (and is repeated on Sunday mornings for anyone who missed it) as well as having a second edition (MOTD2) on Sundays. The Women's Football Show has to squeeze in coverage of divisions 1 and 2 in its time too. However, the edition from the 25th Sept does end on a high with the hosts commenting on the fact that The Guardian newspaper, for the following day, had run a photo on its front page of Man City winning the WSL title, a big boost for the game. All in all, the Women's Football Show seems to provide evidence that TV is beginning to take women's sport more seriously, although there is still a fair way to go before equality with men is achieved.

Activity

Search online for information about the This Girl Can advertising campaign, which was designed to encourage more women to take up sport. There is an excellent case study available to read on campaignlive.co.uk. What did the research that led to the campaign suggest were some of the reasons why women don't participate in sport as much as men? How was the campaign designed to overcome these issues? How successful do you feel the campaign was?

Acknowledgements: This Media Factsheet was researched and written by Rob Hind and published in January 2017 by Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Media Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136