

An Overview of Media Coverage of Gay Male Athletes

Abstract This chapter discusses prior research about media coverage of gay male athletes, much of which has been analyzed through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. Media sociology and more specifically Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchical Influences Model, the theoretical linchpins of this book, are introduced. Sports journalism's designation as "the toy department"—an area of the field dismissed as lacking in critical perspective and depth—is addressed in more detail and incorporated into the media sociology approach taken here, as is content analysis, the primary method used for the studies in this work.

Keywords Media coverage · Gay male athletes · Hegemonic masculinity
Media sociology · Sports journalism · Content analysis

Much of the research examining media coverage of gay male athletes is viewed through the lens of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Dann and Everbach 2016; Dworkin and Wachs 1998; Hardin et al. 2009a; Kian and Anderson 2009; Kian et al. 2015a) and thus by extension, heteronormativity, and homophobia, which Donaldson (1993) termed a bed-rock of the concept.

As articulated by Connell (1990), hegemonic masculinity is "the culturally idealized form of masculine character" (p. 83) which places great importance on qualities emphasizing power and dominance such as physical strength, toughness, competitiveness, force, and speed, as well as the

subordination of women in society (Connell 1990; Hardin et al. 2009a; Trujillo 1991). Ultimately, according to Hanke (1990), hegemonic masculinity defines “what it means to be a man” (p. 232).

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is “exclusively heterosexual” (Anderson 2002, p. 861), which Connell (1987) calls the most important feature of the theory. Emphasizing this point, Anderson (2005) states “Being a man in the hegemonic form in contemporary culture is first and foremost, not to be, act, or behave in ways attributed to gay men” and “Hegemonic masculinity not only requires that a male maintain 100% heterosexual desires and behaviors, but that he must continually prove that he is heterosexual” (p. 22). In other words, “Compulsory heterosexuality...is key to the construction of an idealized masculine identity and homophobia has become central in that construction” (Hardin et al. 2009a, p. 184) because it is the primary agent to combat unacceptable feminine behavior (Anderson 2005).

According to Trujillo (1991), “Perhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport” (p. 292). Research has found that sports—and contact sports in particular—reproduce and define hegemonic masculinity, because “an athlete represents the ideal of what it means to be a man” in contrast to what it means to be gay (Anderson 2002, p. 860) and serve to discourage boys away from qualities associated with femininity or homosexuality, thus marking sports as a prominent source of cultural and institutional homophobia (Anderson 2005, 2015). Dworkin and Wachs (1998) refer to prominent heterosexual athletes as “icons of hegemonic masculinity” and note that those sports in which men “dominate or display the elements linked to the ideologies of masculine physical superiority are those most valued by our culture” (p. 2).

The primary way that these athletes reach icon status is through coverage in the media. “Media representations of sport personalize hegemonic masculinity when they elevate individuals who embody its features as role models or heroes worthy of adoration and emulation,” according to Trujillo (1991, p. 293). The important role of the media as an agent for affirming and bolstering hegemonic masculinity in their coverage of sport has been addressed by numerous scholars (e.g., Hardin et al. 2009a; Hargreaves 1982; Jhally 1989; Trujillo 1991). Hargreaves (1982) said the media typically presents sports “as symbolic representations of a particular kind of social order, so that in effect they become modern morality plays, serving to justify and uphold dominant

values and ideas” (p. 128). Jhally (1989) contends that the relationship between sports and the media is so intertwined that it amounts to a “sports media complex” because the public primarily consumes sports through the media and college and professional sports are dependent on media revenues, thus making it the most powerful institution reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Hardin et al. 2009a).

Dworkin and Wachs (1998) analyzed media coverage of NBA star and (now) Hall of Fame member Magic Johnson and four-time Olympic gold medal-winning diver Greg Louganis after each announced they were HIV-positive. In their examination of articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, they found Johnson was covered much more extensively. They surmised this—at least partially—is due to the fact that diving, with its lack of physical contact, plays no role in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. The authors found other significant differences in coverage that they contend ultimately served to present Johnson as a hero and Louganis as deviant due to Johnson’s status as a heterosexual and Louganis’ as openly gay.

One prominent frame expressed in the articles was of surprise that Johnson, as a heterosexual, had contracted HIV. This, according to Dworkin and Wachs (1998), served to imply that someone who is gay, such as Louganis, is inherently at risk because of his lifestyle. In addition, Johnson was universally praised for letting the public know that heterosexuals can also be infected. The authors write that this theme also serves to perpetuate that it’s still gay men who are primarily at risk. Interestingly, in coverage of Louganis, no expressions of shock or surprise that he was HIV-positive were found, thus serving to reinforce what Dworkin and Wachs (1998) term the “undiscussed (assumed) inevitability of HIV/AIDS for homosexual men” (p. 8).

Another aspect of coverage addressed was Johnson’s attractiveness to the opposite sex. Dworkin and Wachs (1998) said his role and responsibility in contracting the virus was not discussed and instead, blamed female groupies. There was no such discussion of the blame on aggressive men in articles about Louganis. In addition, while Johnson’s story was framed in terms of his wife, there was no mention of Louganis’ long-term partner. The authors conclude that their analysis found that “sports media are active in the reproduction of ideologies which privilege heterosexual male behavior” (p. 14).

Trujillo (1991) reached a similar conclusion in his study of print and television media coverage of Major League Baseball pitcher and (now)

Hall of Fame Member Nolan Ryan. He found that Ryan was presented as a safe and acceptable image of male sexuality. So acceptable in fact that in numerous articles, male sports journalists were comfortable enough to comment directly on Ryan's physical appearance, referring to him in such terms as "uncommonly handsome," and "surely one of the most handsome in baseball." In part, as Trujillo notes, their comfort is because of Ryan's understated style. However, it also has much to do with the overall presentation of Ryan as a "White middle-aged, upper-class, banker-athlete, with working-class cowboy values, who was raised by a middle-class family in a small rural town, and who is a strong father and devoted heterosexual husband" (p. 303). In other words, he is arguably the perfect representative of hegemonic masculinity.

While not the focus of this work, it is important to note that such values also significantly impact coverage of women's team sports, but in a different manner (Hardin et al. 2009a). According to Kane (2013), "sport media is an especially effective tool for preserving male power and privilege" (p. 233) and that sport in and of itself "emphasizes a value system that promotes and maintains sexual stereotypes" (Kane 1988, p. 88). Lenskyj (2013) writes that "In the world of competitive sport... the appearance of heterosexuality has long been promoted through implicit or explicit regulations concerning clothes, hairstyles, comportment and personal narratives" (p. 139) and that these regulations are communicated via the media.

Hardin et al. (2009a) note that because sports are generally perceived as masculine, female athletes are often presumed to be lesbian thus, many media outlets have been reluctant to cover women's sports in general, and in particular, those sports perceived as more masculine in nature such as hockey and rugby (Kane and Lenskyj 1998). In other words, the media symbolically annihilate female athletes, especially those who are strong and powerful because they are perceived as a threat to hegemonic masculinity (Dann and Everbach 2016; Duncan 1990). Dann and Everbach (2016) compared coverage of WNBA star Brittney Griner's coming out announcement to that of Collins. They found that coverage of Griner, an athlete who "defies social constructions of femininity" (p. 169), was treated as a minor news story and received much less media attention.

A different tactic, but one with the same goal of countering or minimizing the appearance of lesbianism, is to frame coverage of female athletes in ways that emphasize their femininity, as opposed to their athletic

talent (Hardin et al. 2009a; Kane 2013; Leskyj 2013). As Knight and Giuliano (2003) put it, this requirement by the media that female athletes “overcompensate for their masculine behavior on the field by acting in traditionally feminine ways off the field” assures audiences that female athletes are heterosexual (p. 273). Similarly, they note that coverage often emphasizes their relationships with men. While there continues to be a huge discrepancy in the amount of coverage female athletes receive compared to male athletes, there are some small signs of progress in that in recent years in that coverage has become less sexualized (Cooky et al. 2013). In addition, Lenskyj (2013) writes there is evidence suggesting “the emergence of more progressive trends in media treatment of sexuality issues” (p. 147), while Dann and Everbach (2016) say they found “hesitant acceptance” (p. 185) in coverage of gay athletes, likely due to changes in society.

Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge that there have been challenges to hegemonic masculinity since its development and that along the way it has acquired new meanings. “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals,” they state. “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (p. 836). Thus, it adjusts to societal changes (Hardin et al. 2009a).

The decreased level of homophobia is a change of particular importance to this project. Anderson (2015) writes that while conducting research documenting the experiences of both heterosexual and homosexual men in sport, he began to see a shift in attitudes toward homosexuality, noting that with the decline of homophobia, the stigma of homophobia is also reduced. The gay male high school and college athletes he interviewed in a 2002 study reported they primarily had positive experiences coming out, but many reported they had expected to be bullied and harassed after doing so (Anderson 2002). However, in a replicate study, he found that “much of the internal turmoil and anxiety” (p. 258) among the athletes in the earlier study was absent and that their straight teammates were much more accepting of and willing to talk with them about their sexuality (Anderson 2011).

The public has also become increasingly supportive of gay athletes. A 2015 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute and Religious News Service found that 73% of Americans would support a pro sports team signing a gay or lesbian player (Waldron 2015), while a study

conducted by The Center for American Progress reports that 56% of fans said they would have a more positive opinion of professional sports teams that expressed support for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender LGBT-inclusive laws,” and only 7% said they would have a more negative position (Durso and McBride 2015). This increased acceptance of gays and lesbians in sport has resulted in more athletes coming out (Anderson 2015). Indeed, Kian et al. (2015a) point out that Jason Collins’ appearance on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* would have been difficult to fathom 20 years prior. But, despite these advances, Billings et al. write that “controversies abound surrounding homosexuality in sports” (p. 146) and that homophobia is still rampant because “gayness...represent[s] the antithesis of masculinity, athleticism and power” (p. 146) and while more professional athletes have come out in recent years, such announcements, because they are still rare, are seen as newsworthy. Researchers have also called for additional studies in this area (Kian et al. 2015a).

A number of scholars have analyzed media coverage of former NBA player John Amaechi’s coming out story (Hardin et al. 2009a; Kian and Anderson 2009). Amaechi announced he was gay in conjunction with the release of his autobiography *Man in the Middle* during an interview on ESPN’s *Outside the Lines* in February 2007.

Amaechi’s NBA career spanned 6 years with the Cleveland Cavaliers, Orlando Magic, and Utah Jazz. The journeyman was known primarily as the first British player in NBA history and received some attention in the press for turning down a \$17 million contract offer from the Los Angeles Lakers to remain in Orlando for a much smaller salary (Amaechi 2007). Twice named a First Team Academic All-American during his collegiate career at Penn State University, Amaechi was popular with the media and was even named to the 1999 All-Interview First Team (Blau 2007).

He kept a low profile after retiring to England in 2003, but that all changed after his announcement. His story garnered significant media coverage which intensified after Tim Hardaway, another former NBA player, made a series of homophobic comments about Amaechi and the prospect of having a gay teammate during an interview on *Miami Herald* columnist Dan LeBatard’s radio program. “I hate gay people, so I let it be known,” Hardaway said. “I don’t like gay people and I don’t like to be around gay people. I’m homophobic” (Banks 2007, p. 128).

Hardin et al. (2009a) examined 31 sports columns about Amaechi in US daily newspapers. Their goal was to study “how opinion leaders in the sports/media complex...would situate sexuality, masculinity and homophobia” (p. 189). They also wondered if decreased levels of homophobia in USA might mean columnists would be more likely to use Amaechi’s coming out story to denounce homophobia.

While the columns did criticize those making homophobic comments about Amaechi, most did not go beyond that, and thus, according to Hardin et al. (2009a), covered up the role of institutional homophobia in that they tended to assume hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism are a natural part of the sport. Additionally, they reported that some columnists tended to “blame the victim” by claiming that players who failed to come out were lacking in bravery. In addition, some used disparaging comments about Amaechi’s playing abilities which suggested his status as a marginal player meant “his coming out was not very meaningful and could not be used to gauge homophobia in men’s professional sports” (p. 194) and also subtly reinforced the idea that gay athletes are out of place at the highest level of sports. Overall, they found, similar to Dworkin and Wachs (1998), that the columnists made the “ideological repair necessary to maintain the status quo while they positioned themselves as progressive and tolerant of alternative identities in sports” (p. 195).

Kian and Anderson (2009) came to somewhat different overall conclusions in their textual analysis of 190 newspaper articles about Amaechi published in the USA and several other countries. While both studies noted that some stories and columns suggested that Amaechi’s coming out was primarily for financial gain since it coincided with publication of his book, Kian and Anderson (2009) said that the “most dominant narrative enforced notions that sport, and in particular the men’s team sport locker room, will be one of the last venues to accept gay males as equals” (p. 806).

They also found that the Amaechi’s coming out story prompted some journalists to discuss sport’s societal role and its relationship with homosexuality. Kian and Anderson (2009) note that some articles claimed openly gay athletes might have a more difficult time finding acceptance in the mainstream media than from fellow athletes, while others concluded that sports have been slow to accept gay athletes and should take a more active role in supporting gay rights.

However, Kian and Anderson (2009) differed from Hardin et al. (2009a) in their interpretation of the articles and columns that criticized Hardaway and others who made homophobic remarks about Amaechi. They state that these articles—even the ones criticizing Amaechi’s skill—are lacking in overt homophobia. Although they acknowledge many of the articles contained some heterosexism and were skeptical of the level of acceptance athletes have for gay athletes, “none of the writers for the 190 newspaper articles or editorials came out and said that gays do not belong in the locker room...For a highly masculinized profession and sexist group of mostly men, this seems to be a considerable finding” (pp. 811–812). This, they believe—unlike Hardin and colleagues (2009b)—is evidence that “sport reporters rejected the domineering, homophobic behaviors of orthodox masculinity” (p. 812) and made it more inclusive. Furthermore, they speculated that, based on the results of their study, an athlete who came out while still active professionally in one of the major team sports would be treated favorably by print media.

A pair of more recent studies has looked at media coverage of Jason Collins. Billings and colleagues (2015) examined newspaper articles and tweets during the first week after Collins came out. They found 17 themes present in the 364 articles (which were coded for the presence of up to three primary themes per article), but two were most prominent. More than 28% of the themes hailed Collins’ coming out as a “watershed moment” for gay rights, while the theme of celebrity support for Collins made up more than 26% of the themes. They report that these two themes were present more than all the other themes combined and that 74% of the articles featured the “watershed moment” theme, and the celebrity support theme was primary in 70% of the articles.

For the tweets, more than one-third fell into the “Other” category, which Billings et al. (2015) said, focused “more on ancillary appearances and stories surrounding Collins” (p. 151) such as noting that Collins was going to appear on a particular television show. Among specific themes in the 7356 tweets analyzed, the most frequently tweeted theme (12%) linked Collins to the civil rights movement. Other prominent themes were voices of general support (9%), tweets combining Collins’ announcement with religion (just under 9%), and celebrity support (also just under 9%).

The overall tone of the stories was enthusiastically supportive, according to Billings et al. (2015). However, they caution that the “celebratory nature of the reactions runs the risk of falsely assuming that [Collins’]

coming out symbolizes full equality for gays and lesbians in sports and the culture at large” (p. 154). Similar to Hardin and colleagues (2009b), they write that such reactions “falsely position the world of sports as an equal playing field” (p. 154) and ignore the fact that homophobia remains prevalent in sports.

Another noteworthy result from the study is that fewer than half of the stories quoted Collins directly, and the percentage of stories quoting him diminished over the week-long time period examined. While acknowledging that perhaps the perception was that he had already told his story in the first-person article in *Sports Illustrated*, Billings et al. (2015) said that “Collins became someone who was talked about rather than someone who was telling his own story” (p. 154).

Kian et al. (2015a) studied coverage of Collins during the first 4 days after his announcement in leading newspapers and popular sports Web sites in the USA. They discovered four primary themes in their analysis of the 93 articles in their sample. Similar to Billings et al. (2015), one of the prevalent themes was that Collins’ coming out was greeted as a historic moment, not just in sports, but in society in general. “News on Collins was not just framed as a story exclusively for sports followers, but rather the breaking down of a major barrier as American society moves further toward the eventual recognition of gays and lesbians as equals in a free society,” they said (p. 625). Second, the study found that many of the articles focused on the responses of other professional athletes and key figures in sports responded to Collins’ coming out story. These articles were likely to state that the sports world was ready for openly gay athletes.

The third theme noted that while some members of the media, most notably Chris Broussard, criticized Collins’ description of himself as a Christian, many more sports journalists criticized such comments as being antiquated. The final prominent theme of coverage was whether or not Collins—who as noted earlier, made his announcement after the conclusion of his season and was a free agent—would be signed by another team. Kian et al. (2015a) said these articles focused on the historical significance of Collins’ coming out, but believed it would have more impact if here were able to play in the league as an openly gay man.

The researchers also analyzed 41 articles published after Collins was signed by the Brooklyn Nets. Once again, they found that many of the articles highlighted the importance of Collins’ suiting up in the league. In addition, coverage stressed that his presence in the locker room

was not a distraction. Kian et al. (2015a) note, as Collins did when he announced his retirement, that the story quickly disappeared from the headlines after his first few games. They said this was because “there was no controversy to report and Collins—although a contributor as a reserve—was by no means a star player” (pp. 633–634).

Media coverage of Collins and Michael Sam was compared in a 2016 study by Luisi et al. (2016). They examined 405 quotations used in 47 articles in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* published during the first week after each athlete came out. The quotations about Collins were primarily positive, indicating a more inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009) in the NBA, a league “where many of its members are open and welcoming toward homosexual male athletes” (p. 1324). However, many of the quotes about Sam were mixed leading the researchers to contend that “the NFL exhibits greater characteristics of a traditional hegemonic masculinity, with an exclusionary attitude toward homosexuality” (p. 1329).

Taken as a whole, it can be said that, while the initial study about Sam found mixed results, studies of coverage about Amaechi were positive overall, and those examining the coming out story of Collins were even more supportive. But, given that research in this area is still developing, Kian et al. (2015a) call for additional studies of how the media frame gay athletes. This project takes up that call, but from a bit of a different framing perspective. Instead of examining coverage of Collins and Sam primarily through the lens of masculinities, the research here looks at media coverage of the two athletes’ coming out stories from a media sociology perspective.

MEDIA SOCIOLOGY

Researchers acknowledge the vastness and even vagueness of the term media sociology. For example, Waisbord (2016) writes that “media sociology is not a unified field with common questions, arguments, and research directions.” In fact, he refers to it as a “postdiscipline” in that media sociology “is not concerned with firm disciplinary boundaries... it is driven by permanent curiosity about social problems and analytical knots tying media and society together” (p. 2). Shoemaker and Reese (2014), in the latest edition of their classic work *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective*, say they use the term media sociology “because it comes closest to describing what we are

interested in” but they also note that it “does come with ambiguities and disadvantages” (p. 2). Their perspective stems from what they perceived as an overemphasis on research examining processes and effects and uses and gratifications “where the specifics of the message were almost beside the point” (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, p. 392). Instead, they advocate an influences on content approach because content and the forces that shape it are crucial to study and understand.

A prominent stream of media sociology research addresses issues regarding journalism as a social practice. Two foundational studies in this realm are David Manning White’s (1950) examination of “Mr. Gates,” a newspaper wire editor and Warren Breed’s (1955) analysis of social control in the newsroom (Reese and Ballinger 2001). White looked at the decisions made by the wire editor in selecting stories to be published and concluded that his decisions were “highly subjective...[and] based on the gatekeeper’s own set of experiences attitudes and expectations” (p. 386). Subsequent examination of this study suggested that White had placed too much emphasis on the power actually held by gatekeepers. “Making this gatekeeper the focal point of the process assumes he has before him the entire range of the world’s daily happenings,” according to Reese and Ballinger (2001, p. 647). In reality, his choices were primarily made from what stories the wire services sent him. Indeed, Hirsch’s (1977) reanalysis of White’s study found that the proportions of stories selected by “Mr. Gates” were nearly identical to the types and proportions of stories sent to him by the wire services. Breed (1955) sought to discover how newspaper organizations impart their policies to journalists and maintain them even if they conflict with professional norms. He found that the newspapers never specifically outlined their policies to journalists; instead, the policy was enforced subtly and learned through on the job-socialization with one’s peers and senior colleagues.

Subsequent newsroom ethnographies have described the content produced by journalists as a social construction of reality (Tuchman 1978). Similarly, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) refer to the world portrayed in the media as a mediated reality in that “producers of news...content mediate reality through the mere process of doing their work, but also because of their relationships with culture, power and ideology” (p. 39). Journalists often resent this assertion that news is manufactured (Schudson 2003). But, that is not to say that news content is fiction, instead the point is that what becomes news is influenced by numerous forces and that research examining “questions of power, control, structures, institutions, class and

community” in journalism has come to be emblematic of what is called media sociology (Reese and Shoemaker 2016).

This framework is most notably articulated by Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) Hierarchical Influences Model, which attempts to take into account the multitude of forces that simultaneously impact media content. The model is comprised of five levels of influences, arranged from macro to micro: social systems, social institutions, organizations, routines, and individuals. The most micro of the levels, the *individual* level, concerns the individual characteristics of news professionals. The *routines* level addresses the patterns and structures through which journalism is conducted. The *organizational* level deals with influences relating to specific media organizations. The *social institution* level describes “how the various organizations doing media work cohere into a larger institution,” along with journalism’s relationship with other institutions of society (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, p. 402). The *social system* level, the most macro of the levels, looks at “traditional theories of society and power as they relate to media” (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, p. 403) including ideological forces. Hegemonic masculinity, the focus of much of the research about gay male professional athletes discussed earlier in this chapter, would be considered a social system level of influence under the Hierarchical Influences Model.

Given the sheer volume of influences on content—each of the five levels of Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) model is in turn comprised of a myriad of forces—it is beyond the scope of this book to address influences at every level. Instead, as an examination of journalistic content about the coming out stories of Collins and Sam, the focus here is on the routines level, which occupies a prominent place in the media sociology literature. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) state that routines, defined as the “patterned, repeated practices, forms and rules that media workers use to do their jobs” (p. 165), must be studied in order to gain a better understanding of media content. Furthermore, they say that a large portion of news media content is a result of routine forces. Lowes (1999) makes a similar proclamation regarding sports journalism content. Fishman (1980) refers to routines as the “crucial factor which determines how newswriters construe the world of activities they confront” (p. 14).

Sports journalism’s designation as the toy department—an issue of prime importance to this work—is directly related to the routines level of Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) model.

THE TOY DEPARTMENT

Perhaps at first, the toy department label might at seem like a benign moniker, “a place dedicated to fun and frivolity” (Rowe 2007, p. 384), given its popularity with the public. However, ultimately, it serves to label sports journalism as lacking the professional standards of other forms of journalism especially in terms of engaging in the watchdog role of the press (Hardin et al. 2009b). Indeed, a major criticism of sports journalism is that it lacks a critical perspective (Rowe 2007). Numerous scholars and critics contend that coverage needs to be and, in fact, deserves to be held to higher professional standards as exemplified by more public service and investigative reporting because of the important role sports play in society (Hardin et al. 2009b; Jurkowitz 2006; Kenney and Keith 2008; Oates and Pauly 2007; Poole 2009). For example, Hardin et al. (2009b) write that sports “hold a central place in modern popular culture and civic life” (p. 325) and can serve as a platform for discussion of important issues. Similarly, Boyle (2013) says that because of its connection to politics, economics, and culture, substantive coverage of sports can offer “rich and illuminating avenues into the relationship between media and society and the power structures that shape and influence our daily existence” (p. 89). In an interview, Dave Zirin said that because of the public’s affinity for sports, it can offer a more honest venue for discussion of important issues such as homophobia, racism, and sexism than political coverage does (King 2008).

Newspaper sports journalists surveyed by Hardin et al. (2009b) tended to agree that sports reporters needed to do more investigative journalism and that their primary goal should be to serve as a watchdog for the public. However, an international survey of newspaper sports journalism in 37 countries found that the majority of coverage focused on previewing games or events and descriptive reporting of those games and events (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005). Little attention was paid to issues such as sports financing, the politics of sport, and social aspects of the sport. In fact, the title of the report calls sports journalism “The world’s best advertising agency.” The results of that survey, according to Rowe (2007), show a lack of “critical journalistic engagement” in much of sports coverage (p. 389) and “provide little to counter accusations that sports journalists exist in a fairly cosy world with limited horizons and that they are likely to leave sustained, intensive critical inquiry into sport and its relationship with other major areas of society to others” (p. 399).

Rowe (2007) contends that more sports journalism should take a problem-oriented approach. Such an approach presumes that behind any identified problem there is a question or questions that need to be answered. By addressing the inherent questions, journalists provide better coverage that gets at the political, financial, and/or social implications of the problem.

The lack of problem-oriented coverage is influenced by sports journalists' dependence and close relationship with sports officials and the athletes they cover (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). These sources, according to Lowes (1999), provide the bulk of the daily material sports journalists report. As a result, coverage is largely uncritical because journalists want and need to maintain good relationships with them and not risk losing access to information.

Examples of sports journalists addressing important issues certainly exist, though critics contend this kind of reporting remains rare. Rowe (2007), in analyzing results specific to Australia in the aforementioned international survey of newspaper sports journalism, found that only 17.5% of articles in the Sydney Herald were problem-oriented, though he noted that when a story was problem-oriented, it tended to be prominently positioned. Lowes (1999) says "it takes a huge event such as the Olympics to open up an opportunity for journalists to ram through truly critical news items on the world of major-league sports" (p. 102).

However, there are signs of change. Sherman (2011) says that coverage of important issues like early onset dementia in NFL players, performance-enhancing drugs, and the exploitation of college athletes shows that "[s]ports journalism has now fully arrived in a new, crusading era" (para. 1). He also notes that reporters are asking tougher questions of team and league executives. Libit (2011) uses reporting of various scandals in college sports as evidence that sports journalism can be more than the toy department by helping to "establish the idea that sports should be subjected to the same journalistic scrutiny as other institutions in our society" (p. 29).

Furthermore, Morrison (2014) contends that sports coverage "has taken the lead ... in audience engagement, creative use of technology, and experimental story presentation" (p. 16). She notes the toy department moniker actually made innovation seems less risky to sports journalists and editors.

Nevertheless, criticisms persist. Cyd Zeigler, arguably the most noteworthy chronicler of issues and concerns regarding gay athletes, says

most sports journalists are “fans with an audience...who aren’t looking to uncover truths, they’re interested in talking with their sports heroes and sharing their love of sports with the world” (Zeigler 2016, p. 158). Chotiner (2014) summarizes the toy department issue by asserting there are two kinds of sports journalism. He refers to the first as “serious” journalism that looks at subjects like corruption, the business of sports, and issues of race, class, and gender. He says the second kind form of sports journalism, which is more common, consists primarily of game-related stories and predictions. He says this form of sports journalism has a single benefit, “bringing joy to sports fans” (para. 4).

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The method utilized in the trio of studies conducted for this book is content analysis, defined informally as the systematic assessment of media texts. Given the importance assigned to content in media sociology, it is a most appropriate method. “Conceiving content as a variable, specifically a dependent variable,” Reese and Shoemaker (2016) write, “allows linking it to a host of contributing factors and connects well with a long tradition in communication of content analysis, of systematically examining features, and classifying them into reliably observed categories” (p. 392). Taking this perspective into consideration the content a researcher examines is evidence of antecedent conditions and processes that shape its production (Riffe et al. 2005). Media sociology does not regard news content as a mirror of reality, but instead as “an implicitly true indicator of social reality” (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, p. 392). Thus, news content is the product of routines, practices, values, and norms (Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Tuchman 1978). Furthermore, examining content has often been lauded as unobtrusive in that it can be examined after its production and from there “inferences about the conditions of its production” can be made “without making the communicators self-conscious or reactive to being observed while producing it” (Riffe et al. 2005, p. 11).

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