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Critical Feminism and the Australian Sports Media

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# Has She Got “Sex Appeal?”: Critical Feminism and the Australian Sports Media

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*Abstract: Apart from a few exceptions, women's sports are omitted from both free to air television broadcasts and the sports pages in Australia. Such an absence is explained by one television network as the need for sports media to focus on "premium and significant sports." These "significant" sports in Australia are often described as Australian football (AFL), rugby league (NRL), soccer, and cricket, and all are known for their high profile competitions and male participants. Defining men's sports as significant results in sports journalists focusing their attention to commentate on and write about these sports, usually to the exclusion of women's sports. Therefore, this results in a plethora of sports media around men's sports, sporting competitions, and male athletes in Australia, and very little media attention awarded to female sports, sporting competitions, and female athletes. This sports media culture is also fueled by the opinions of many unqualified (predominantly male) ex-athletes working as "sports journalists." At present, most (if not all) of the cricket, AFL, and NRL commentators in the television broadcasts in Australia are ex-players. Ex-athletes reporting on sport further promotes a masculine culture in the sports media in Australia, whereby women are further disenfranchised from sporting coverage. Using a critical feminist lens, this culture is explored in the current manuscript.*

*Keywords: Women, Sport Journalism, Australia*

The following quote is from an award winning and celebrated senior sport journalist at *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, Australia:

Women's soccer is a joke. Women's cricket is not much better. Netball is OK, sometimes, when there is nothing else on. But women's basketball is not. Women runners, jumpers, throwers, cyclists and swimmers do their best, but it is, by definition, second-best (Baum 2006, 6).

Such a statement typifies the value placed on women's sports in Australia by much of the public and certainly, at least, some sport journalists. Such comments are not a surprise given that the sports on television in Australia are generally characterised by two factors, money and male.

The current manuscript investigates the contemporary culture of women's sports in the press, and more specifically, on television as regular weekly fixtures in Australia. At present, much of the broadcasting of sports in Australia on free to air television focuses on male sports, while there is only sporadic coverage on female sports. Pay television broadcasts more women's sports in Australia compared to free to air, however access to this format is limited to less than one third of the population (Goldsmith 2013). Using a critical feminist analysis, this paper also links the coverage of women's sport to the male dominated field of sport journalism and to the phenomena of ex-athletes presenting, commentating and writing about sports in Australia. This analysis also shows how the two factors above, operate within a society where women are still systematically devalued in many spheres (particularly under the newly elected Abbott liberal government) contribute to the disenfranchisement of women from the sports media.

## A Brief Historical and Contemporary Examination of the Climate for Women in Sports Coverage in Australia

Bullbeck dates the beginning of women's liberation in Australia to the summer of 1969/1970 (1997, 22). The late 1960s and early 1970s were intense revolutionary years where many ordinary women were engaged in the excitement of change (in women's rights) in Australia (Lonsdale 1997, 83). 'Liberal feminists' during this period focused on the individual rights and

equal opportunities for women and argued that legal and social changes would help women achieve these opportunities. However, liberal feminism has been criticised by many feminists, as it focuses on the gendered inequalities in society and getting women to the same 'starting line' as men, without critiquing the oppression of women based on the power structures of patriarchy in society. This time period also saw the emergence of more radical thoughts encircling feminist theory. According to Donovan (2000), 'radical feminist theory' was also developed during the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thompson (2001, 3) explains that radical feminism identified male domination and strongly opposed it. According to Maynard (1998), radical feminists looked into 'men's social control of women through various mechanisms of patriarchy... especially violence, heterosexuality and reproduction, where men as a group are seen as responsible for maintaining women's oppression' (253).

In Australia today, there are some parts of society where even a liberal form of feminism is not practised. In fact, comments, gaffes and taunts around gender and sexism are often played down and 'laughed off' by politicians, journalists and even some women. This culture is reflected in comments made by some of the most powerful people in Australia. For instance, in the lead up to the 2013 Federal election, the recently appointed Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, described one of his female candidates Fiona Scott as "young, feisty" and having "sex appeal" (Ireland and Swan 2013). While the physical appearance of this candidate was irrelevant to her role as a prospective member of parliament, Abbott's comments demonstrate that women are still judged (at least partly) on their (sexy) physical appearance.

Prior to becoming Prime Minister, as the Opposition Leader, Abbott was also accused of blatant misogyny by then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. During his time in politics, Abbott has made comments such as '...men have more power generally speaking than women, is that a bad thing?'; 'What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...'; and '...but what if men are by physiology or temperament, more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command?' (*Transcript of Julia Gillard's Misogyny Speech* 2012). What all of Abbott's comments indicate is that in many ways, feminism has taken a backwards step in Australia recently. While the history of feminism and the feminist backlash has helped to inform the culture of equality in some spaces in Australian society today, there are still many parts of society where women fall behind men. It is no surprise then, that this is the case in sports for female athletes and female sports.

The female sports that are seen on television and found in the sports pages in Australia are often framed in traditionally feminine and heterosexual ways, and the image of female athletes is important (See Lumby, Caple and Greenwood 2009; Litchfield and Osborne, in press). In sport, femininity and hetero-sexy attractiveness are paramount for women athletes and women's teams hoping to gain sponsors, media attention and the attention of specific groups of fans. Such a culture has been demonstrated by the images of near naked female athletes on calendars, in advertising photo shoots and in some cases, on the sporting field (i.e., lingerie football). This culture in sport is not exclusive to Australia. In the United Kingdom (UK), Caudwell (2003) explores this regulating and subjugating of women in the sports arena and in particular around their bodies. In her research on women football (soccer) players, she explains that '...women's bodies are sites/sights for the [re]articulation of sex-gender-desire' (Caudwell 2003, 374). In other words, she explains that the women football players in her study were '...particularly aware of their embodied identity as 'woman'...', and that this was often aligned with (being or performing) heterosexual and feminine (2003, 376). This culture was recently reinforced by UK Minister of Sport and Equalities Helen Grant, when she suggested that British women should be encouraged to participate in 'feminine' sports like cheerleading and ballet (Sanghani 2014). Grant's comments strengthen the ideal that women should remain feminine while participating in sport and masculine female bodies should be questioned.

Despite (male) muscularity being the norm in sports, female muscularity is often criticised.<sup>1</sup> In her book, *Sporting Females*, Hargreaves (1994) suggested that ‘female muscularity is overlaid by techniques of sexualisation, falsifying the notion of fitness, and trivialising female sports’ (161-162). While time has awarded incremental changes in this discourse, a certain amount of anxiety about sporting females still remains. As a result of this cultural anxiety, the ‘sex appeal’ of women athletes (and women generally as outlined by Australia’s Prime Minister) is still important and strong (and not traditionally feminine) women are often excluded from the media reports on women’s sports (also see Harris and Clayton, 2002).

Over the last two decades in Australia, various studies were conducted on women in the sports pages, sports news and televised sports coverage (Phillips 1997; Toohey 1997; Mikosza 1997). Focusing on print media in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, Phillips’ (1997) study discovered that 10.7% of the newspaper coverage of sport was devoted to women’s sports and women athletes (1997, 4). Whereas, Toohey’s (1997) research looked at the Australian television coverage of the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games. Her research found that female events received around 33% of the television coverage in 1980 and around 27.7% in 1984 (Toohey 1997, 19). However, in Toohey’s (1997) research, she also outlined ‘a selection of Australian studies of coverage of women’s sport in the media between 1980 and 1992’ (21). This selection included studies on newspaper and television coverage, and indicated that in studies during these dates, women featured on the sports pages between 1.3% and 13.2% of the time in Australia (Toohey 1997).

More recently, research on women in the sports pages and in televised formats in Australia reveals very little change. A report released by the Australian Sports Commission and the University of New South Wales on televised sports, indicates that 81.1% of sports coverage was on male athletes and men’s sports, 7.4% of sports coverage on ‘other’ (or gender neutral topics), 2.8% of sports coverage is on mixed sports (males and females combined), and 8.7% of sports coverage was on women athletes or women’s sports (Lumby, Caple and Greenwood 2009). In a ‘snapshot’ of their larger longitudinal study, Litchfield and Osborne also found that women were under-represented in the sports pages between 2008-2012 in Australia, during Olympic and non-Olympic years. While women received more coverage than usual during the Olympic Games years in 2008 and 2012 (around 14%), they received significantly less in non-Olympic years (around 4.5%) (in press).<sup>2</sup> Such figures can be attributed to the lack of female sports regularly broadcast on television in Australia.

## Theoretical Framework

Kane and Maxwell (2011) have recently acted on the call to expand the boundaries of sports media research and ground such research in critical social theories. They suggest that ‘scholars who study sport from a critical theoretical lens examine whether sport organizations and structures privilege some groups over others (e.g., women vs. men)’ (2011, 203). Hence, in the current manuscript, critical feminist theory is used to challenge the deeply embedded assumptions and ideologies about women and sport that are played out in the media (Kane & Maxwell 2011; Birrell 2000; and Hoerber 2007). There are a number of gender imbalances of power in all roles and positions in sports and the sports media, particularly the institutional arrangements both between and among men and women. Additionally, these imbalances usually result in a process where women are devalued and marginalized in a systematic manner. The

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<sup>1</sup> While many in sport appreciate and applaud strength and the hard work required to attain a strong and powerful physique in sport, there are still many persistent voices criticising women’s strong bodies. For instance, tennis player Sam Stosur has been regularly criticised for her physique being too much like a male’s physique, and has often been accused of ‘playing like a man’ by journalists and other tennis players. See Swanton, 2013; ESPN, 2012; and Walton, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Online research has also been conducted around the Olympic Games and women’s images in the sports news in Australia (Jones 2010; 2006; 2004), but online sports media coverage is not the specific focus of the current manuscript.

media and specifically the sports media, are one of the most powerful institutions in shaping cultural beliefs in society, and therefore play a large part in this marginalisation and subjugation. As outlined in the current study, this marginalization is demonstrated through the absence of equal media coverage of women's and men's sports, a process that celebrates (male) ex-athletes commentating and writing about sport and a lack of (long-term) opportunities for many female sport journalists.

## **The Role of Television in Promoting Women's Sports in Australia**

For television corporations in Australia, the sporting marketplace is crowded with football codes, cricket and horse racing. All four major football codes, Australian Rules football (AFL), rugby league (NRL), rugby union, and soccer (A League), all of Australia's male team's cricket matches, and the 'Spring Racing Carnival' are broadcast on television in Australia each year. There is also widespread interest in other sports, such as tennis, swimming and to a lesser extent, golf. There are/have been a number of well publicized business partnerships between men's sports and the media, in particular, News Limited and various NRL teams. In such a climate, women's sports receive sporadic coverage at best on Australian television screens.

In early 2013, the Australian women's cricket team (the Southern Stars) won the women's world cup of cricket. Many of the world cup matches were broadcast live on pay television station *Fox Sports*. Additionally, the Southern Stars recently won the 2014 World T20 Championships, however only two of their matches were broadcast in Australia (the semi-final and final), also on *Fox Sports*. Unfortunately, only viewers (less than 30% of Australians) who subscribe to and pay for *Fox Sports* are able to view such matches (Goldsmith 2013) and therefore, female sports are either viewed infrequently or not at all by the majority of Australian television viewers. Female sports that do receive coverage on free to air television stations in Australia tend to be sports that have both male and female competitors. The two main sports that fit into this category are tennis, with the Australian Open grand slam event and lead in tournaments around Australia, and swimming, where the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, world and national swimming meets are often broadcast. On pay television (*Fox Sports*), women's golf, tennis, soccer and cricket feature periodically, but as outlined above, is therefore only accessed by less than 30% of the population in Australia (Goldsmith 2013).

The Women's National Basketball League (WNBL) also features regularly on non-commercial television station, the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)* in Australia. However, during the regular season, there are no live matches and only one game is broadcast each week: 'Each Saturday afternoon *ABC Grandstand* brings... all the action from the game of the week at 4.00pm on *ABC1*' (*ABC Grandstand Sport* 2013b). During the final series, all matches are shown live on the *ABC*, however this only accounts for four live matches each season. Similarly, the women's premier soccer competition in Australia, the 'W League', has one match broadcast on the *ABC* each week during the regular season and three live matches during the final series (*ABC Grandstand Sport* 2013a). By comparison, in sports such as the AFL, NRL and men's cricket, all season matches (and many pre-season matches) are shown live on Australian television.<sup>3</sup>

Netball is the standout women's sport and it has been regularly broadcast on Australian television for several years. Netball is the most participated in sport in Australia for women, with over 1.2 million participants registered to play (Netball Australia 2013). From 2008, the National and trans-Tasman tournament was broadcast in Australia on prime time television. However, in early 2013, free to air television station, *Network Ten*, axed their broadcast of the National and trans-Tasman netball tournament, the ANZ Championships. The explanation from Network Ten regarding the axing of the netball was that 'netball was not a "premium and significant sport"'

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<sup>3</sup> This coverage is spread between free to air and pay television broadcasts.

(Halloran 2013). Just prior to the 2013 tournament beginning, the broadcast rights in Australia were picked up by *Fox Sports* and the *SBS* network; however, all of the *Fox Sports* matches will only be available to those who subscribe to pay television. Therefore, these particular games are only available to a small segment of the Australian population.

### ***The Representation of Women Athletes in Sports Coverage***

The small amount of broadcasts (and print articles and news reports) devoted to women's sports and women athletes are often framed in such a way that devalues women athletes. Some fifteen years ago, Duncan and Messner suggested that the media's approach to female athletes and sport demonstrates an example of 'symbolic dominance', a process that 'emphasises the difference between men and women (in sports reporting), where men represent the standard and women represent the other' (1998, 180). Such symbolic dominance occurs via a regular set of processes, including the hyper-feminized images of women, hegemonic masculinity, infantilising and gender marking women in sport and the sport media.

More recently, Messner states that, 'having women as strong and powerful, challenges that dichotomy of the cultural norm we live today' (*Playing Unfair*, 2002). Athletic and masculine females are often seen as abnormal (Hargreaves 1994; Kane and Maxwell 2011). Women athletes are portrayed in the media more off the field than on it, and the portrayals off the field, mainly focus on the athlete's physical attractiveness.<sup>4</sup> The images of athletic and strong women are less regularly included in the media as they challenge the cultural norm of femininity.

Hyper-feminised images of women are one way that the media sexualises women athletes. This sexualisation reinforces the process of hegemonic masculinity in sports and the sports media. It is important to explain however, that the media is not solely responsible for this exploitation. Women athletes themselves accept this cultural discourse and their feminine roles within it, in order to receive endorsements and media coverage. Nearly two decades ago, Duncan argued that '[w]omen in contemporary western culture are socialised to regard themselves through the (masculine) eyes of others' (1995, 268), and this consent to femininity also occurs with athletes. Today, this culture is still present and transpires into young female athletes such as Ellyse Perry (a dual Australian representative in cricket and soccer), regularly presented off the field in evening dresses and high heels in newspaper articles and interviews (See images in Halloran 2013; and Le Grand 2013).

Along with the sexualising and feminising of women in the sports media, women athletes are also regularly infantilised (Kane and Maxwell 2011; and Wensing and Bruce 2003). Infantilisation occurs when women are referred to as 'girls' and their first names are used, whereas for male athletes, the term 'men' and surnames are usually used in sports coverage (Wensing and Bruce 2003). Gender marking is also prevalent in sports coverage and occurs when the media identifies a sporting competition as a 'women's' sporting competition, or an athlete as a 'woman' athlete, in order to designate the event/athlete as inferior to a men's competition or male athlete (Wensing and Bruce 2003; Litchfield 2006). In contrast, men's sporting events are often not gender marked and classified as 'the/an event' and male athletes are simply designated as athletes and not gender marked (Wensing and Bruce 2003).

### **The Role of Media Outlets and Sport Journalists in Promoting Women's Sports**

Blame for the lack of and type of reporting and broadcasting of women athletes and women's sports can be placed on newspaper editors, owners and television corporations' shoulders. The 'premium and significant sports' in Australia attract large fan bases (including international

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<sup>4</sup> See *Playing Unfair*, 2002; and Wensing and Bruce, 2003.

audiences), sponsorships and, therefore, media coverage. Coakley, Hallinan and McDonald suggest that:

Traditional gender patterns in media coverage have been slow to change partly because sports media organisations worldwide have cultures and structures that are deeply gendered. They've been organised and scheduled around men's sports, just like the work routines and assignments of sports reporters. Therefore the coverage of women's events often required changes in institutionalised patterns of sports media work. (2011, 404)

Additionally, the majority of sport journalists are male and the 'higher status assignments' in sports media work are those that deal exclusively with men's sports (Coakley et al. 2011), therefore, reports on women's sports are often not 'worthwhile' in terms of status and a journalists' career progression.

According to the description above, the institution or culture of sports media is to blame for the treatment of women athletes and women's sports. However, can blame be also put on sport journalists? According to the 'Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance' (formerly the Australian Journalism Association), the role of the journalist involves 'respect for truth and the public's right to information'; 'describ[ing] society to itself'; and to 'scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable' (2012). To be a journalist is a 'privileged role'. Those who write are read by many and those who commentate are listened to with respect by many. Therefore, the information that journalists disseminate helps to form public opinions and decisions. This is also the case for sport journalists. Despite the role of a (sport) journalist being to present the 'truth', this 'truth' is predominately subjective, that is, at times (and beyond score lines), purely the opinion of the writer. To carry such an enormous amount of cultural power must come with scrutiny and accountability to ensure that all perspectives are presented.

At present, an equal representation of male and female sport journalists are not being read, listened to or consumed. The International Sports Press survey in 2011 showed that the world of sport journalism is very much male orientated. In the research that represented over 80 countries, a total of 90% of all pieces of sports media were written by male sport journalists, 8% were written by female sport journalists and 2% were written by both male and female sport journalists jointly (International Sports Press survey 2011). In an Australian context, Rowe, Payne and Lorentzen suggested that there was a 'significant discrepancy in the numbers of male and female journalists represented in the survey' (2013, 239). These findings should not be surprising in Australia, with very few visible female sport journalists writing, reporting and commentating on sport.<sup>5</sup>

Female sport journalists such as Jacquelin Magnay and Jessica Halloran have criticised the 'boys' club' of sport journalism in Australia. In fact, in 1993, Magnay went to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to get equal access to the dressing room to interview NRL players. She explained that 'everyone questioned my motives — Why did I want to go into the dressing room? Did I just want to perv? Get myself a boyfriend?' (Magnay 2009). Very few people understood that she was simply trying to fulfil her role as a sport journalist, by having access to the players for post-match interviews. Halloran's (2007) article in the *Brisbane Times*, 'Boys' club as insecure as the nightwatchmen', details the insecurity surrounding females working as sport journalists and commentators in cricket. She also explains that:

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that there are not a number of talented and visible female sport journalists in Australia. Several female sport journalists such as Caroline Wilson from *The Age*, Georgina Robinson from *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Jessica Halloran from *The Daily Telegraph* immediately come to mind as standouts in their field.



It would be fair to say that while women can be seen on television, it is preferred that their opinions on sport are not heard. Why? Is it because some of the old boys feel threatened when we put a high heel on their turf? (Halloran 2007)

Those women who do have the rare opportunity to commentate on men's sports are often criticised. The female voice on sports broadcasts is often a foreign concept and condemned by audiences and sometimes even by, male sport journalists. After landing a job with the *Nine Network* in 2006 to report on cricket, Stephanie Brantz's role included interviewing bikini clad models and was told by network bosses that the (men's) cricket team refused to be interviewed by her (Halloran 2007).

Kelli Underwood also made history in Australia by being the first woman to commentate on an AFL match on prime time television in 2009. However, she faced heavy criticism in relation to her 'annoying' voice and her perceived lack of knowledge of the game. In early 2011, *Network Ten* bowed to the pressure faced by such criticisms and demoted her to the position of boundary commentator, ending her time at being a full-time football commentator with the network (Ralph 2011). More than likely, Underwood's position in the commentary box would have been filled with an ex-Australian Rules football player. Commonly, many of the sports commentators in Australia, particularly in 'major' sports on television rely on the comments of 'experts', who are generally ex-players. This culture further disenfranchises women from the sport's news, televised sports and the sports pages.

### ***The Role of Ex-athletes "Expert" Commentators in Promoting Women's Sports***

The late, great Howard Cosell constantly railed against the "jockocracy" of the sports media - the fact that networks often hired former players as announcers, even when the players had little or no media training. In the celebrity culture of the 21st century the jockocracy is alive and well, and thanks to technology the athletes-turned-media stars have even more platforms on which to appear. (Schultz 2007)

In a contemporary culture explained as 'celebrity sport journalism' by Boyle (2006), current and ex-athletes are employed to work as sports writers and sports broadcasters all around the world. In Australia, 'celebrity sport journalism' exists in nearly all major sports and in both broadcast journalism and print media. In three of the larger sports in Australia, AFL, NRL and cricket, this culture is rife. In fact, 'qualified' sport journalists are in the minority and ex-players form much (and sometimes all) of the commentary team and sports writers for each sport.

The Australian Open tennis is no exception to this rule. Broadcast on *Channel Seven*, the commentary box is filled with ex-tennis players, such as Jim Courier, Todd Woodbridge, Rennae Stubbs, Henri Leconte, Roger Rasheed, John Fitzgerald and Sam Smith. Cricket is particularly guilty of this as well. All of the commentators for cricket on the *Nine Network* in Australia are either ex-players from Australia or abroad. Why is there such a culture of ex-athletes acting as sports commentators, sports writers and sports broadcasters? They are popular; sports fans know who the commentator or writer is and on many occasions, respect their opinions and 'inside' information on an athlete or team. However, these factors do not necessarily equate to good sport journalism, nor good ethics. In 2012, for example, we heard about how 'brilliant' Jim Courier thought Marcos Baghdadis was for breaking four tennis racquets in 25 seconds; Courier suggested that tennis didn't interfere too much with being a mother for Kim Clijsters; and he also explained how Bernard Tomic's girlfriend was proving to be 'more popular' than Tomic, because of her 'stunning' looks (*Channel Seven*, 2012). Such comments can hardly be called insightful, ethical or responsible journalism.

In terms of AFL in Australia, many ex-players become specialist columnists for newspapers, part of the broadcasting team on game days and even host their own football related sports shows. Incidentally, in the netball broadcasts (while still on *Network Ten*), *Network Ten* decided

that an 'expert' on the game might be a former AFL player, Luke Darcy. Therefore, Darcy co-hosted with a former netball captain, Liz Ellis. These ex-athletes (in this culture) are presented to the sports fans as the experts. Therefore, we must treat these people as the experts in the sport journalism field, and as such, criticism of their writing, commentating and broadcasting performance is required and justified.

Holding a privileged role means that those working as 'sport journalists' or 'expert' commentators in newspapers, television and online, have a great responsibility to ensure they provide a high standard for newcomers and aspiring sport journalists. However, this is not the case and in fact, much of the sport journalism we see and read today lacks critical enquiry, references to wider social issues and is pervasively gendered. These 'experts' are modeling practices to future sport journalists that will continue to be replicated time and time again, unless there are changes.

Television networks and online sports news outlets, such as *ESPN*, *Fox Sports* and *Sky Sports*, all have a considerable amount of 'space' to fill each day, week and year. Bull (2008) explains that because television channels, newspapers and online sports news outlets are 'compelled to fill such volumes of space, the stories are overstretched, and over-exposed'. Therefore, there appears to be a never ending stream of jobs for ex-athletes in the sports media, all while many university educated sport journalists find it difficult to find employment.<sup>6</sup> The combination of a dearth of educational and practical experience in journalism and the culture of filling spaces each and every day, hour and minute, results in a lack of quality (on the most part) in pieces included in the sports news. That is particularly true of those pieces written and spoken by ex-athletes (with no formal journalistic qualifications). The growth of online sports reporting/cyber sports media has provided an additional space where constant replication occurs on men's sport stories. Again, this culture disenfranchises women's sports and provides a lack of depth on women athletes and women's sports reporting.

This culture that privileges male sport journalists and ex-athletes reporting on sport is pertinent to the discussion on women athletes and women's sports on television and in the sports news. Such a culture does not promote an equal representation of men and women in sports media coverage. In fact, by sports networks and newspapers employing a large percentage of male sport journalists and ex-athletes to report on men's sports, the Australian sports media loop (that focuses on men's sports, particularly sports such as AFL, NRL, rugby union and cricket) continues. Combining the subjective positions of predominately male sport journalists, male ex-athletes (posing as sport journalists) and a history that has almost ignored women's sports, the diagnosis is grim for women athletes and women's sports receiving more sports coverage than they do at present.

## Changing the Current Culture

It is difficult to change a culture when power is the central issue. Essentially, the lack of women athletes and women's sports in the sports media in Australia can be attributed to a variety of issues, including the required 'heterosex' image of female athletes, the culture of ex-athletes working as sport journalists, less numbers of female sport journalists (compared to male sport journalists) and the culture of 'big business' sport in Australia. All of these issues combined contribute in some way to the discussions around the disenfranchisement of women in the sports media in Australia and a number of incremental steps can be made to help change this culture with relatively little disruption.

When sports media telecasts are judged by their ratings and (perceived) audience appeal, it is not difficult to see why some ex-athletes are employed in sport journalist roles. It is a difficult

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<sup>6</sup> The first author coordinates a 'sport journalism' undergraduate double degree at a higher education institution in Australia and has observed on a number of occasions the lack of available roles for graduates in sports writing and sports commentating.

predicament for sports media organisations, considering the perceived audience interest and the popularity of most high profile elite sportsmen and the 'popularity' of male sports. However, such positions should not be at the expense of quality sport journalism. Nor should such an appointment be at the expense of the exposure of women's sports. We need to encourage diverse, inclusive and quality sports reporting and commentating by ensuring that most sport journalists have at least some education on what the role of a sport journalist should be. Therefore, qualified sport journalists represent an incremental step forward in changing this culture.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that all qualified sport journalists will promote equal gendered sports coverage, nor write and commentate in positive ways about women's sports. However, their university education around wider social issues in sport should set them up to consider sporting issues from a variety of perspectives, and hopefully they will also question and criticise the current culture of women's sports coverage.

Additionally, assumptions cannot be made about female sport journalists choosing to report on female sports. It is not a 'fix all' solution to focus our energy solely on increasing the roles for female sport journalists, although this is still important. If a female sport journalist desires career progression in sport journalism, she would benefit from focusing on the 'big business' sports in Australia, which just happen to be men's sports. We cannot assume that women sport journalists would report more favourably on women's sports, however, this remains unknown until we have more representation of women in writing, presenting and commentating on sport. Moreover, this issue is not just a women's issue, it is a 'sport' issue, and therefore, male sport journalists need to be proactive in their reporting also. Male sport editors, commentators, writers and broadcasters are in a position to change discourses and the culture around these issues. Again, these are small incremental changes that can be made without threatening the status quo.

Affirmative action is also another possible solution to this issue, however, such a solution would require many changes. Jim McKay (1997) wrote about affirmative action in sporting organisations in Australia, New Zealand and Canada over fifteen years ago, based on labour, power and cathexis theory presented by Connell (1987). Affirmative action ties in with critical feminist frameworks and would require a considerable shift in culture in the Australian sports media. While such an action may be required in relation to women's sports coverage and roles for female sport journalists in Australia, this process would be extremely difficult to enact, particularly with the increase in private ownership of media outlets and sporting teams in Australia. Also, with the economic considerations of sports coverage and sponsorship at play, equal sports coverage for male and female sports is perhaps just a lofty ambition. Even the basic form of feminism, for example, getting women to the same starting line as men, is not present in this situation. Perhaps critical feminism is not the solution to this issue. While critical feminism is used to outline the problems, we may need to start with liberal feminism to begin the solution. Therefore, incremental steps to change the culture are required and while critical feminism practices that define the power inequalities are useful, change will need to occur slowly.

One question still remains to be tackled. We are led to believe that there is not the same size audience for women's sports as there is for men's. However, this question has not been asked of television audiences or sports fans. Even if this was the case, surely a greater exposure of women's sports generally would create more audience interest. Unquestionably, an increase in coverage of female sports in print, television and online media is superior to the little coverage received at present. Audience interest cannot be gauged until an increase in exposure of women athletes and women's sports is embraced (long-term). This again, is only an incremental change firmly nestled in a liberal feminist framework, and certainly not too threatening to the current culture.

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<sup>7</sup> New online publications in Australia, such as the *Guardian Australia online* will also help with this. The *Guardian Australia* online, launched in Australia in 2013, is operated by the parent company, *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom, and has offered a different quality and diversity in the Australian news media scene to what currently exists. Please see *ABC news*, 2013.

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