Who Speaks on Footballers and Sexual Assault? A Gender Analysis of Sports Reporting

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Abstract
The recent spate of sexual assault allegations made against Australian Football League (AFL) players has generated intense media scrutiny and public concern. Following from similar highly publicised allegations directed at the National Rugby League, these incidents have engendered significant debates around sexism and football culture in the popular press. It is the media’s response to allegations of sexual assault made against AFL footballers that will be analysed here. This study offers a content analysis of articles from the sport sections of two major Australian newspapers, The Age and the Herald-Sun, with the aim of assessing the prevalence of women’s perspectives on the issue of player misconduct and whether the gender of the reporter has any bearing on gender stereotyping in sport reporting. By assessing how the phenomenon of player misconduct has been covered in sport news, this paper evaluates the media’s role in changing dominant attitudes and perceptions of gender relations in Australian society.

Introduction
There has been considerable feminist analysis on the impact of sport media in shaping prevailing beliefs and attitudes about gender. These studies have sought to understand how cultural meanings of gender are enacted, perpetuated and legitimated through sporting coverage as well as evaluating the strategies through which gender bias may be contested and redressed (Creedon 1994; Duncan and Brummet 1993; Hargreaves 1994). The issue of women’s representation in sport media tends to focus on the lack of coverage of female athletes and analyses how the coverage itself constructs gender difference and perpetuates gender stereotypes and inequalities. There has also been research on the representation of women associated with male sports such as cheerleaders, calendar girls and fans (Cere 2003; Davis 1989; 1997).

This study takes a different approach to the question of how women are represented in sport news. Through a content analysis of reports on sexual assault allegations against
AFL players during a thirteen-month period, this study ascertains the frequency of women journalists and sources in these articles and their impact on news values. Given the primarily male audience for sport news (McNair 2003; Whannel 1998: 222), the visibility of women’s opinions on sexual misconduct by footballers is an important dimension in theorising how media institutions shape public discourse and understandings of gender.

Method and Findings
Newspaper stories were located using the Factiva database and the search terms ‘Australian Football League’, ‘AFL’, ‘football’, ‘sexual assault’, ‘women’, ‘sexism’, ‘violence against women’, ‘rape’, ‘sex’. The search was limited to the sport sections of the Herald-Sun and Age newspapers, the two major papers in Melbourne. These newspapers were chosen due to the significant coverage they devote to AFL, which itself is influenced by the popularity of the sport in Melbourne. Articles for analysis span the period of March 2004 to April 2005. This timeframe covers the first of a series of highly publicised allegations against AFL footballers and reflects the ongoing nature of the issue.

Fifteen articles were found to report on AFL player misconduct during the set period. In order to evaluate the prevalence of women’s voices on this issue in sport news, a quantitative analysis was conducted to ascertain the number of stories written by female reporters and the number of female sources cited in stories, relative to male journalists and sources. These were then divided according to newspaper.

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<th>Herald-Sun</th>
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To assess whether the gender of the reporter influences gender stereotyping, a grounded theory approach was used to ascertain common themes in the depiction of male and female behaviour. Two major themes emerged. First, that of ‘predatory females’ and ‘confused players’. Second, the idea that inappropriate male behaviour is an individual rather than cultural phenomenon.

Given the small number of articles analysed, this study offers only preliminary findings. It is intended to form part of a wider investigation of the Australian print media’s coverage of sexual misconduct across all football codes. Future research will compare commentary from different sections of the newspaper to explore where women’s perspectives prevail, what kind of women’s opinions are solicited, if and how they differ from male views, and who the target audience for women’s views might be. Another intended study involves analysing how the issue is constructed in ‘feminised’ media spaces like women’s magazines to ascertain whether gendered subjectivities are articulated according to anticipated audience.

Analysis

Approaching the issue of who speaks about sexual misconduct from a quantitative angle reveals significant differences in the numbers of male and female reporters. Twice as many stories were written by men as women; numbers which are consistent with research indicating a male bias in sport reporting attributed to a lack of female journalists in sport and decision-making positions (Claringbould et al. 2004).

This gender imbalance is also evident in the expert sources used for comment. In the fifteen stories, the number of men cited was over five times that of female sources. The prevalence of male voices of authority can be explained in structural terms by the overwhelming proportion of men as players and in senior executive and administrative positions in the AFL, as well as male reporters’ access to spaces such as the locker room and boardroom via boys’ networks. It is also plausible that cultural factors inform the selection of sources, such as the assumption that men have greater knowledge of sport,
hence are more qualified to comment. As noted by Armstrong, ‘writers bring professional and personal beliefs and values into coverage’ and this may include gender biases (2004: 149). Yet the bias toward using male sources of authority is not confined to male reporters, with studies by Claringbould et al. noting that women often uphold gender inequalities in sport coverage. Their research shows that women feel pressured to write like their male counterparts in order to be seen as objective and professional reporters (2004: 715).

The disparity in the number of women commenting and reporting on the issue is quite different, however, between the papers. Of the six articles from the Herald-Sun, all were written by men who cited no female sources. The articles from The Age showed a more equitable gender breakdown, with five articles written by female journalists and four by men. The stories by women journalists featured four female sources, yet their male counterparts did not follow suit, citing only one female source in their reports. These findings support existing research indicating that ‘the presence of females in the byline is a significant predictor of females appearing within the news story’ (Armstrong 2004: 139).

While an assessment of the number of female journalists and sources that appear in the sporting pages reveals women are underrepresented, this tells us little about what bearing the gender of the reporter has on how masculinity and femininity is depicted in sport stories. The rest of this paper is concerned with analysing the discourses employed by journalists writing about the AFL and sexual misconduct to ascertain whether the reporter’s gender informs narratives of gender identity.

One theme that emerges is that of ‘confused players’ and ‘predatory females’. This narrative prevails in two articles, one by ex-player Tim Watson and the other by journalist Mike Sheahan. Both stories seek to explain the cause of accusations of sexual misconduct against AFL players. Despite emphasising the need for sportsmen to take greater responsibility for their actions, Sheahan argues that it is the cultural shift in women’s sexual behaviour that has led to allegations being made against footballers. He
states that footballers are ‘confused by what they see as a radical departure by women from the conventions that have applied for as long as they can remember. The pop star/groupie suddenly carries a trip wire’ (2004: 41). Watson echoes this notion of men as victims of predatory females:

A couple of girls made it clear to everyone that they were keen to attract the attention of a couple of the players. One girl was so convinced of her intentions she sidled up to the coach to explain to him what she planned to do later in the night to one of his players. The team left the function as a group and went back to the hotel without the adoring fans. At 2am they were woken up by a loud banging on doors by the girls from the function. A senior player eventually convinced the girls they were in the wrong place and that they should go home…This is told not to excuse the behaviour of any player who assaults a female, merely an example of what the modern AFL player is confronted with (2004: 16).

What emerges from this scenario is the image of the ‘modern player’ as a victim of celebrity culture and a new sexual order where men struggle to ward off the advances of women who won’t let up — a stereotype that is as old as Adam and Eve.

Sheahan, too, perpetuates the myth of the ‘obsessive’ female fan, as well as that of the ‘vindictive’ woman:

there are women known at every club for their obsession with players, for their persistence, for their loyalty, misplaced as it so often is. There is the “jilted lover” aspect, too, when affection for one party simply is sex for the other. Then there’s the rape card as an alibi, when someone feels degraded, when someone needs to explain to a husband/partner/parent where they’ve been or why they are distressed (2004: 41).

In addition to constructing men as confused victims and women as sexual predators in a new gender landscape, these articles reinforce the notion that such incidents are a product of wayward individuals, not a culture that perpetuates disrespect for women. Writing in the Herald-Sun, Essendon player James Hird claims that excessive media scrutiny constructs an image of all footballers as complicit in reckless behaviour:

in the past six months, if you had arrived in Melbourne for the first time, you would think that most AFL players were drug-takers who could not control themselves around women, loved fighting and hated umpires. I know this is not correct, but does the public? (2004: 90).
For Hird, these activities are the result of individual choice and players who conduct themselves appropriately should not suffer the consequences for others’ misdemeanours. This argument neglects to consider the role of sporting institutions such as the AFL in the social construction of masculinity. Sport plays an important role in the constitution of gender identity, with characteristics like risk-taking, physical strength and power integral to male sporting culture (Messner and Sabo 1990). Even in articles that speak out against sexual misconduct, the onus is on individual responsibility rather than changing gender attitudes in football (deKroo 2004). This is reiterated in reports which highlight that clubs are taking responsibility by running education programs, yet stress that clubs cannot police individuals who are ultimately responsible for themselves (Ralph 2004: 47; Ziffer and Jonhson 2004: 15).

Despite prevailing narratives of women as complicit in sexual assault and the individual’s responsibility for regulating behaviour, dominant discourses of gender do not go unchallenged in the sporting pages. At the outset of her story ‘Why football needs women’, The Age’s chief football writer Caroline Wilson identifies the construction of women in football according to two types: ‘one was bright and blonde and young and pretty…the other was dark and damaged’ (2004: 1). Through the article she unpacks the limited stereotypes of women proffered by football culture and identifies the structural inequalities and ‘anti-woman’ culture of the AFL as central to how players’ perceive women. Although she cites three male AFL executives to gauge the significance of the AFL’s women’s week in light of sexual assault allegations, she does so to ascertain women’s place in the game, and devotes much of the article to women’s experiences of football culture and how they are positioned in subordinate and peripheral roles.

In contrast to their male contemporaries who explain footballer’s behaviour through narratives of individualism and gender stereotyping, reports by female journalists start from the position that it is the responsibility of institutions to change cultural practices. These articles draw on the expert authority of spokeswomen from women’s welfare agencies to articulate strategies to curb sexual misconduct by players (Ryan and Quayle 2004: 2; Quayle et al. 2004: 712). Not only do they cite women, but use male sources
that advocate against violence (Quayle et al. 2004: 14). However, using female sources is not confined to female reporters with one male report from *The Age* quoting women claiming to have been sexually assaulted by footballers (Cooper 2004: 3).

Citing women as expert authorities in sport articles contests the notion that women do not have the requisite expertise to provide sporting commentary (Claringbould et al. 2004: 711). Moreover, the significant number of female sports reporters at *The Age* challenges the view that sport is a male preserve. Yet it is significant that the female authorities cited were from women’s organizations rather than the AFL. While women outside the AFL are used to comment on ‘women’s issues’, those in its structures are either not senior enough, visible enough or considered expert enough to speak for the AFL.

The presence of female reporters in football writing has multiple effects, namely, offering positive depictions of women, critiquing the AFL’s masculinist culture and contesting the notion that sport is a male domain. It is more difficult, however, to gauge whether the presence of female reporters in the paper and their reporting practices translate into a shift in readers’ perceptions of footballers and sexual assault. Comparing a broadsheet newspaper like *The Age* to the *Herald-Sun*’s tabloid format provides insights about the demographic reading the articles, and accordingly, the degree to which challenges to dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity in football culture may be accommodated by readers. In an Australian context, tabloids are not only smaller in size with shorter articles and more pictorial content than broadsheets, but are aimed at a wider readership, as reflected in their higher circulation figures. Broadsheets market to an upper socio-economic bracket and claim a large proportion of tertiary educated professionals as their readers (McNair 2003). The political orientation of *The Age* reflects this demographic of educated readers and anticipates that those who read it are open to ‘progressive’ and non-conventional viewpoints (such as the views of women in the ‘male’ sport section).

The question that emerges, then, is whether an increase in female voices in the sport section of *The Age* translates into a shift in social attitudes of its predominantly male
readership? It could be argued that its readers are versed in a language of gender equality and familiar with a critique of the masculinist culture of Australian Rules. Hence the visibility of women in sport supports the progressive position of the paper and its audience. In comparison, the Herald-Sun’s lack of female sport reporters and sources in the debate on football and sexual assault maintains a conservative gender hierarchy that potentially reflects the low status of women’s opinions in the eyes of its sport editors and what they perceive to be the interests of their readers (Cramer 1994: 167).

Conclusion
Preliminary investigations of the reporting of player misconduct in the Australian print media indicate that it is predominantly the opinions of male experts that are solicited by sport journalists, and that these reporters are mainly male. Moreover, some of the articles by men perpetuate negative stereotyping of female sexual behaviour. Yet a breakdown of ‘who speaks’ on the issue in terms of newspaper affiliation reveals a more complex picture.

This study identifies a considerable female presence in the sport section of The Age on the reporting of player misconduct, in terms of both female journalists and sources. The articles written by women reporters draw on female sources of authority and identify the prevalence of sexist stereotyping in other media outlets. In contrast, the opinions solicited in the Herald-Sun were from male sources and all the articles in the sporting pages were written by men. Although condemning sexual violence, these stories did not seek to challenge deep-seated stereotypes of female behaviour nor did they question the masculinist culture of football as a factor in sexual misconduct allegations. This tendency, however, is not confined to the Herald-Sun, with reports by male commentators in The Age also promoting such news values. Assessing the differences between the Herald-Sun and The Age’s practices of reporting on sexual misconduct in their respective sport sections exposes the importance of the newspaper’s ideological position in identifying ‘who speaks’ about sexual misconduct at its effects on shaping readers’ attitudes.
Footnotes

1 A full list of articles is available from the author on request.

References


