

# Online coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games on the ABC, BBC, CBC and TVNZ

## ABSTRACT

The same pervasive strategies that relegate women's sports coverage to secondary status in the traditional sports media are apparent in online coverage. Content analysis of the extent and nature of 2008 Olympic Games coverage by four national public broadcasters shows men and their sports were *the* story in Beijing. The gender gap in story numbers favoured male athletes by a margin of four to one. Men's achievements were given more prominence than women's with twice as many lead stories and photographs of male athletes taking top spot on the websites' splash pages. The content of photographs and the language of online stories also perpetuated gender stereotypes and sexual difference by framing sportswomen as emotionally weak or dependent and less committed than male athletes.

Keywords: women, sport, gender, female athletes, Olympic Games, online, hegemony

*DIANNE JONES*

*University of Southern Queensland*

**L**OVE OR hate them, there is no escaping the amount of space, time and money the media devote to sports. Men's sports, that is. For sport remains 'a domain for white, able-bodied, heterosexual males where women are often relegated to second class status' (Schell, 2000, p.17) by extensive media coverage of the 'cash cows', the elite male, professional, commercial spectator sports (Lowes, 1999). If the commercial media have little interest in women's sports, and gender their coverage to cater to male tastes in the pursuit of male audiences and advertising revenue (Jorgensen, 2005), what is the state of play with public broadcasters? This article examines the mediated coverage of a major sporting event by the public broadcasters in

four countries—Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. It investigates how the ABC, BBC, CBC and TVNZ framed female athletes in 2008 on the world's largest and most important sports stage (Tuggle, Huffman, & Rosengard, 2007), the Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup>

### **Gendered coverage—under-reporting, sexualisation and trivialisation**

Online media coverage is a frame, 'a window on the world through which we learn of ourselves and others' (p. 55). Those examining sports coverage have looked at how the media use frames, denoted by the use of keywords, phrases and visual images, to actively construct sports news (Kane, 1996). The power of 'presence and absence' in framing (Entman, 1993) can influence audience understanding since 'one meaning is conveyed by what gets covered, but another equally powerful meaning is conveyed by what does not receive media attention' (Huffman, Tuggle, & Rosengard, 2004, p. 477). As a result, in sports coverage, 'frames help portray who is in authority and who is marginalised' (Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2005, p. 157). Studies of sports media portrayals have documented how marked biases exist in favour of male athletes and men's sports with female athletes framed as fundamentally different from their male counterparts. In terms of their representation or the quantity of coverage they receive, sportswomen's achievements have been 'reduced to bite-sized mentions in all forms of media' (Smith, 2011, p. 37) and restricted in the range of sports depicted (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). In terms of respect or the nature of the coverage given to female athletes, when the media trivialise or downgrade the seriousness and importance of sportswomen, they devalue them and what they do (Kinnick, 1998).

A series of studies in the US found the proportion of airtime given to women during televised sports news ranged from 5 percent to 8.7 percent (Duncan & Messner, 2000). Newspapers, regardless of the type, have 'seriously underreported women's sports in proportions that reflect the findings of television studies' (Duncan, 2006, p. 235). Flatten and Matheson (1996) reported inequity and unfairness in the British press where women's share of sports articles was just 7 percent. Research on Australian, Canadian and New Zealand newspapers has yielded comparable results (Lumby, Caple, & Greenwood, 2010; Mikosza, 1997). Women's coverage in six New Zealand newspapers accounted for only 4.4 percent of the space devoted to sports news (McGregor & Fountaine, 1997).

On sports websites, coverage of male athletes has outstripped that of female athletes by four to one (Kachgal, 2001). Few women's stories or photographs make it to the prime locations of the newspaper front or back page or above the fold (Duncan, 1990). In a similar vein, the splash pages of sports websites are mainly reserved for male athletes with women appearing in just 18 percent of top stories (Kachgal, 2001).

Even when the quantity of coverage appears to represent gains in their mediated profile, such as during the Olympic Games, studies report a heavy emphasis on a select few female athletes and their sports in online stories and photographs (Jones, 2004, 2006b, 2010) and over-exposure of women as passive subjects in photographs (Jones, 2006a). With such a small percentage of photographs of female athletes published, on average, in print and online publications, what is depicted in them becomes even more important. As a staple of sports photography, the action shot reinforces and confers 'status on an elite sporting body by showing it doing extraordinary things that so many people admire and envy' (Rowe, 1999, p. 123). Passive women, by implication, are sexually different—neither powerful nor capable of doing extraordinary things. Kane (1996) says female athletes are framed in images in 'ways that clearly reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies' and suggest 'otherness' (p. 3). Historically, women get more coverage 'if they are physically attractive and scantily clad, which tends to deemphasise their athletic prowess' (Bissell & Duke, 2007, pp. 49-50). Otherness is also suggested in emotional displays where text and images focus on tearful female athletes (Jones, 2004).

Women who compete in socially-acceptable or so-called 'feminine' sports such as gymnastics, diving and figure skating have also received disproportionate television airtime (Tuggle, et al., 2007) and newspaper space (Mason & Rail, 2006). Such biased coverage reinforces masculine hegemony through its emphasis on sports considered gender-appropriate or feminine (Greer, Hardin, & Homan, 2009). The collective result of the dearth of coverage for women's sports in television, newspaper, magazine and online accounts is the marginalisation of women's participation, 'rendering men's sports authentic sports and women's a pale imitation' (Duncan, 2006, p. 236).

There are many ways for the discourse of mediated sport, whether written, verbal, visual or a combination thereof, to frame contests and athletes' performances and they are rarely, if ever, unambiguous. A common feature is the sports media's insistence on sexual difference in references to female

athletes. Sports writers see appearance, marriage and emotions as relevant in descriptions of women (Bridge, 1994), while conventionally pretty or sexually-attractive sportswomen tend to be the particular favourites of the media (Bernstein & Galily, 2008). Studies report instances of women being compared with men as though the male was the model athlete, but never the reverse (Eastman & Billings, 2000), and identification of female athletes by their relationships, inferring women's lower status (Shugart, 2003). Commonplace, loaded tactics include referring to women's marital or family status or boyfriends to reassure audiences of women's heterosexual priorities (Stevenson, 2002).

Media explanations for success and failure can also contain bias when they highlight women's failures and men's achievements. Eastman and Billings (2000) noted gendered differences in sports broadcasters' commentaries. When men failed, commentators more often attributed it to a lack of athletic skill. When women failed, it was more often attributed to a lack of commitment. Another way to set women's sports apart from the normal and present them as anomalies is through linguistic sexism. Here, language advances stereotypes by devaluing women, usually through defining them narrowly, or ignoring them or depreciating them (Bissell & Duke, 2007). Such rhetoric includes calling women 'girls', no matter what their age (also called infantilisation) (Jones, 2003), and the more frequent use of martial metaphors that valourise strength and aggression, characteristics that are inconsistent with femininity, to describe men's sports (Kinnick, 1998).

### **Research questions**

This study builds on my previous content analyses of Olympic sports coverage by the ABC in 2000 and 2004 and the BBC in 2004 (Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). It explores what characterises the level and nature of gendered sports coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games on the websites of the national public broadcasters in four countries. The following questions guided data collection and analysis:

1. Did female and male athletes receive differential coverage in terms of the number and prominence of online stories and photographs?
2. Were female athletes covered more often competing in so-called 'appropriate' sports than in 'inappropriate' sports?
3. Did female and male athletes receive differential treatment in terms of the nature of stories and the content of photographs?

## **Method**

The units of observation were the Olympic Games websites of the ABC, BBC, CBC and TVNZ at:

- [www.abc.net.au/olympics/](http://www.abc.net.au/olympics/)
- [news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/default.stm)
- [/www.cbc.ca/olympics/](http://www.cbc.ca/olympics/)
- [tvnz.co.nz/olympics\\_2008\\_index/olympics\\_index](http://tvnz.co.nz/olympics_2008_index/olympics_index).

The broadcasters were chosen because of their respective national prominence and the popularity of their online sports sites, their histories of Olympic Games coverage and their audiences in 2008. All reported record page views for their Beijing Olympics coverage.

The sample consisted of three bulletins per day from each website, from August 7 to August 24, 2008. A total of 54 bulletins from the sites' splash or Tier 1 pages (T1) and the top 10 main or Tier 2 (T2) Olympic sports stories linked to them provided the context units. The bulletins were downloaded three times daily, between 12pm and 12am AEST. Sports stories are defined as reports whose topics or themes are contests, achievements or issues affecting individual Olympic athletes or teams. Sports photographs are images featuring Olympic athletes only and illustrating sports stories or blogs. Hard copies of the context units were printed for coding.

The coverage was examined using content analysis which is commonly used to discover the quantitative presence or absence of messages (the recognition given to athletes of each gender) and the message characteristics (the respect accorded each gender) in an objective and systematic way (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). Variables relating to both the form of the manifest content and its substance were observed when constructing coding categories (Kinnick, 1998). The coding units relating to form were the placement or prominence of a story as the lead item in the top 10 story headlines or summaries on a site's splash page (T1) and the placement of an athlete's photograph with the lead story on the T1 splash page.

Story substance was examined for forms of bias identified in previous studies of sports reporting (Duncan, 1990; Kachgal, 2001). These included the gender of the athlete written about, the gender of the athlete pictured and the gender-appropriateness of the sports covered. Stories about both female and male athletes were categorised according to the gender of the first-mentioned

athlete. Photographs featuring both female and male athletes were categorised as mixed gender shots but were not counted.

Sports were classified by sex-type based on the classification system developed by Metheny (1965), refined by Daddario (1998) and widely used by researchers to examine the stereotypical gender appropriateness of different sports (Jones, 2003, 2006b). Female-appropriate sports such as gymnastics and diving emphasise aesthetics and beauty but discourage physicality. Male-appropriate sports such as basketball, hockey and water polo emphasise physical strength or power, stamina and contact through active, aggressive and autonomous behaviour. Neutral sports include shooting and volleyball.

Differences between the sites in the presentation of stories and photographs were taken into account during data categorisation, using guidelines from my previous online analyses (Jones, 2004, 2006b). Some of these differences contributed to the greater number of photographs than stories in the 2008 sample. Stories were also examined for instances of linguistic sexism and mentions of athletes' appearance, relationships, emotions, successes and failures. Any descriptor concerning a theme was counted as one instance of that theme and sorted separately for women and men (details of descriptors are available from the author). The content of all T1 and T2 photographs was examined for depictions of passive or active poses (Duncan, 1990; Jones, 2006b). Passive images showed athletes doing nothing or motionless, appearing only from the neck up in mug shots, clearly posing for the camera, or celebrating rather than actively competing in their sport; for example, giving a victory salute. Active subjects were clearly doing something competitive.

An independent coder and I coded separately a sub-sample of 23 percent of Games stories. Inter-coder reliability was determined using Scott's pi and the overall proportion of agreement was .91. Next, the research assistant coded sports reports from August 7 to August 24, 2008. Frequencies and chi-square tests using the significance level of 0.05 were used to analyse, by gender, the independent variables of T1 and T2 stories and photographs, story and photograph placement, photograph context and the language of stories. Frequencies and the Kruskal-Wallis H test were used to analyse, by gender, the sex-type of featured sports.<sup>2</sup>

## **Results**

A total of 1720 Olympic sports stories and 1960 photographs were published online by the ABC, BBC, CBC and TVNZ. The first research question asked

whether the four broadcasters covered female and male athletes differently in terms of the number and prominence of online stories and photographs. Male athletes received the majority of attention (see Table 1). There were 1018 stories about men compared with 702 about women, and 1210 photographs of men compared with 750 of women. Male athletes also featured in more lead stories than females (122 for men, 68 for women) and more lead photographs (127 of males, 60 of females). Chi-square analysis showed a significant difference in favour of men as the subjects of sports stories ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 58.06, p = 0$ ), photographs ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 107.96, p = 0$ ), lead stories ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 15.35, p = < .001$ ) and lead photographs ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 24.01, p = < .001$ ).

**Table 1: Online sports stories, photographs and prominence**

	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Stories (T1 and T2)	702	41	1018	59	1720	100
Photos (T1 and T2)	750	38	1210	62	1960	100
Lead stories (T1)	68	36	122	64	190	100
Lead photos (T1)	60	32	127	68	187	100

Note: By athlete gender

The second research question asked whether stories about female athletes more often featured them competing in so-called ‘appropriate’ sports than in ‘inappropriate’ sports. On the four sites, 702 stories from 32 different sports were published about female athletes. The most coverage went to sports that were categorised as male-appropriate. These received 400 stories. A total of 219 stories were written about women competing in feminine sports, while

**Table 2: K Wallis H test for female sports stories by sex-type**

	Female-appropriate	Male-appropriate	Gender-neutral
$T_i$ (ranks)	122.5	311.5	94
$n_i$ (sports)	8	17	7
Combined mean rank	15.3	18.3	13.4
ABC top mean rank	—	15.8	—
BBC top mean rank	13	—	—
CBC top mean rank	13.1	—	—
TVNZ top mean rank	15.7	—	—

gender-neutral sports yielded 83 stories. Kruskal-Wallis H testing shows the coverage of female athletes was statistically equal with regard to appropriateness ( $H = 1.52$ ,  $X^2_{.05}(2) = 5.99$ ,  $p = 0.47$ ). The mean ranks for appropriateness suggest male-appropriate sports received the highest combined coverage score (18.3), as shown in Table 2.

The third research question asked whether female and male athletes were treated differently in terms of the nature of stories and the content of photographs. In terms of the occurrence of the following themes within stories:

- a. the appearance of athletes was mentioned 1198 times, with 680 references to men and 518 to women, and there was a significant difference by gender in favour of men ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 21.91$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- b. female athletes' relationships were referred to 115 times compared with 71 for men, and the difference in favour of women was statistically significant ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 10.41$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- c. the most references to emotions concerned male athletes with 415 mentions while females received 321, a significant difference by gender in favour of men ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 12.01$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- d. references to success were most often about men (834) compared with 539 for women, and the difference in favour of men was significant ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 63.38$ ,  $p = 0$ );
- e. female athletes' failures were reported far more frequently than males' failures (329 times compared with 165 times), and there was a significant difference by gender in favour of female athletes ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 54.45$ ,  $p = 0$ ).

Martial language was used in association with male athletes 728 times compared with 380 for females, a statistically significant difference by gender in favour of men ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 109.3$ ,  $p = 0$ ). Adult male athletes were described in infantilising terms 46 times. Adult females were the subjects of 40 references. There was no significant difference by gender ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.52$ ).

Of the 1960 photographs of Olympic athletes, 402 framed women as active competitors and 348 showed them in passive poses. Male athletes were pictured competing in 535 images compared with 675 passive shots (see Table 3). There was a significant difference in favour of active images of sports-women ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 3.88$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). In contrast, there was a significant difference in favour of passive photographs of men ( $X^2_{.05}(1) = 16.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



**Table 3: Photographs of active and passive athletes by gender**

Photograph context	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Active	402	21	535	27	937	48
Passive	348	18	675	34	1023	52
Total	750	38*	1210	62*	1960	100

Note: \* Percentages do not sum up due to rounding.

## Discussion

The content analysis of 2008 Olympic Games sports reports indicates varying degrees of imbalance in the four broadcasters' coverage of female and male athletes. Complicated, nuanced and different pictures have emerged for each site. While this section discusses the study's collective findings, it also highlights conformity with or departures from those results.

### *Stories in 2008*

In several respects, the findings mirror numerous studies that have noted the sports media's tendency to accord lower news value to the participation of women in sport. The majority of 2008 Games stories concerned male athletes' contests. Women's sports received 41 percent of stories on the four sites, significantly less than men's sports. The worst result for women was on TVNZ where they registered just over a third of all stories. Women fared better on the ABC, with 47 percent of stories.

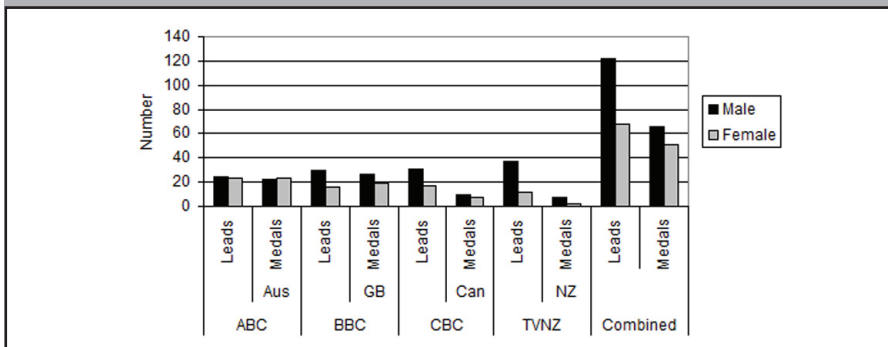
Studies of sports reporting by traditional and online media have recorded dramatic but short-lived spikes in women's sports coverage coinciding with the Olympic Games. In 2000, the ABC gave similar attention to female and male athletes, but women's coverage was inflated by an intense focus on indigenous athlete Cathy Freeman (Jones, 2004). The outcome for sportswomen in 2008, in terms of combined story numbers and in comparison with other studies of Olympic Games reporting, confirms a historic pattern: there is a glass ceiling in the range of 30 to 35 percent of Olympics coverage, except at those times when the exposure of a select few athletes further boosts women's coverage.

### *Top stories – reserved for male athletes*

Just as women were less visible than men in stories, they were also relegated to secondary status as subjects worthy of leading a bulletin. Almost twice as many stories about men took the top spots compared with lead stories about women (122 to 68). This result still betters the usual fare for women outside

Olympic competition. For example, Kachgal (2001) reported that fewer than one in five top stories on the splash pages of US sports websites featured females. As Figure 1 illustrates, the number of leads allocated to men is almost twice the combined number of medals won by male athletes from Australia, Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand at Beijing. Compared with their combined medal tally, women received a slightly higher proportion of lead stories.

Figure 1: Lead stories and medal wins by gender



That women shared top billing with men in lead stories on the ABC, as was also the case with the ABC's 2000 Olympics coverage (Jones, 2004), underscores the extent of the deficit for them on the other sites, especially on TVNZ. Despite comprising 46 percent of New Zealand's Olympic team, women received less than a quarter of TVNZ's 49 lead stories. Women won two of the country's three gold medals, yet only track and field athlete Valerie Vili's gold in the shot put was highlighted (in successive bulletins).

#### *Photographs and their prominence*

Photographs played a vital role in the four broadcasters' Olympics coverage. As with stories, their use was clearly slanted towards enlivening, dramatising and drawing attention to men's sports. There were 1.6 times as many shots of men than of women and twice as many photographs of men than women were paired with lead stories on the four sites. The greatest disparity in the treatment by gender occurred on TVNZ where women received 172 photographs and the lowest proportion of coverage (one third). On three different days TVNZ published three photographs of female athletes compared with same day totals of 18, 24 and 29 photographs of male athletes. TVNZ devoted

14 percent of lead photographs to female athletes—well below their national team population of 46 per cent and their 22 percent share of the national medal tally.

On the BBC, photographs of sportswomen echoed its 2004 Olympics coverage (Jones, 2006a). Once again, one of the most visible athletes was the runner Paula Radcliffe. Radcliffe's 19 images accounted for 8 percent of female coverage, even though she left Beijing without a medal. In contrast to the 2004 Games when women were the subjects of 58 percent of lead photographs on the BBC (2006a), their share in 2008 plunged to 27 percent. The ABC's photographic coverage of female athletes in three successive Olympics since 2000 has see-sawed from a low of 38 per cent to more than half of all photographs in 2004, only to dive again in 2008 to 43 percent (Jones, 2010)—well short of the 51 percent of Australia's medals won by women. Photographs of women have tended to be in less prominent locations on sports websites than those of men (Kachgal, 2001). Only the ABC gave equal prominence to women and men in lead photographs in 2008.

#### *Women in sex-typed sports*

Women were more likely to appear in stories about traditionally inappropriate sports. More than half of their stories concerned sports sex-typed as male-appropriate. There was no difference statistically in the coverage for women with regard to appropriateness, but the ABC was the only broadcaster where masculine sports scored the highest mean rank.

The result echoes coverage in 2000 when the ABC also focused on female Olympians competing in masculine sports (Jones, 2003). Typically, to get coverage, females must be involved in socially acceptable sports that emphasise aesthetics and beauty but discourage physicality (Mason & Rail, 2006). The 2008 profile of male-appropriate sports on the ABC stems from a focus on basketball and water polo in which Australia's women's teams were the reigning World and former Olympic champions. Their campaigns had obvious national news value. The recognition of female athletes who crossed over into sports sex-typed as male infers that their participation (or success) in male-appropriate events is just as valuable as men's involvement—at least at the Olympic Games.

#### *The nature of stories in 2008*

The treatment of female athletes by each of the broadcasters perpetuated certain stereotypes. Most references to appearance were factual accounts of

athletes' injuries or physical characteristics pertinent to their sport, such as weight in boxing and judo, but there were exceptions. Since differences by gender in the frequency of descriptive statements could be due to the greater number of stories about men compared with women, the data was analysed to reveal the number of *stories* by gender containing references to appearance, relationships, emotions, success and failure. The higher proportion of references to women's appearance on TVNZ (in 38 percent of female stories compared with references in 24 percent of male stories) included sexually suggestive and irrelevant commentary, such as: 'she said as she caressed the gleaming medal around her neck. Looking pretty in pink, Liukin ...' and 'Australia's Libby Trickett was told by coaches to do what every woman hates—build up her backside'.

There were no instances of men being compared with women in sports narratives (Eastman & Billings, 2000), but an ABC story praised US swimmer Katie Hoff as 'the female Phelps', as if Michael Phelps, as a male, was the model athlete. Sports writers see females' familial, romantic and other relationships to males as relevant in descriptions of sportswomen (Daddario & Wigley, 2007; Jones, 2003). Despite the smaller number of stories about women, on the CBC and TVNZ their relationships were more than twice as likely to be mentioned as men's. The BBC's reference to a male athlete in a story about swimmer Stephanie Rice undoubtedly reflected an effort to play up a human interest angle. A quarter of the story focused on Rice's personal and social life:

Before heading out to Beijing, Rice was making headlines away from the pool in Australia.

Just before the Olympics she broke up with fellow Aussie swimmer Eamon Sullivan, who is competing in the 50m freestyle, and was previously asked by Swimming Australia to block public access to her personal facebook page which had pictures of her in a policewoman's uniform. (BBC, 2008, 'Rice sees off Hoff for shock gold')

Rice is a woman competing in a sport sex-typed as appropriate but one where the 'male' traits of physical strength and explosive power are on show. As Stevenson (2002, p. 212) has observed, 'references to a sportswoman's feminine credentials, such as boyfriends ... are commonplace and reassure audiences of gender priorities'. Reporting contextually irrelevant snippets of

Rice's love life reassures audiences of her traditional femininity centered on her heterosexuality.

The denial of power to women through gendered commentary (Daddario & Wigley, 2007) was apparent in coverage on all four sites. Women were described in ways that stressed emotional weakness or dependency. The BBC referred to cycling gold medallist Victoria Pendleton's mental state and to the team psychiatrist who had 'lifted her spirits'. Emotional descriptors on all four sites focused on women who 'fled in tears' and 'burst into tears and had to be consoled'. Men's character flaws were less likely to be characterised as faults. By implication men who were 'distraught', 'devastated', 'aghast' or 'furious' responded to disappointment with more stoicism than women who lost control and cried.

Success references for women outnumbered failure references by three to one, but men's successes were 3.8 times as likely to be mentioned as their failures. Stories exhibited bias by attributing men's failures to a lack of athletic skill, while women's failures were put down to a lack of commitment, a lack of courage or poor judgment. There was overt bias when stories about women's success were tempered by criticism of previous failure or disappointment. An ABC story about swimmer Libby Trickett contained this admonition: 'Australia's Libby Trickett has atoned for her lax performance last night, qualifying fastest for the final of the women's 100m butterfly at the Beijing Olympics.'

Farrell (1989, in Daddario & Wigley, 2007), has argued that athletes who fall short of media-hyped expectations are often the targets of media criticism. World champion runner Paula Radcliffe trained for Beijing with a stress fracture in her leg. She came 23<sup>rd</sup> in the marathon. As in 2004, when the BBC framed Radcliffe's disastrous Olympic campaign in ambivalent terms (Jones, 2006a), in 2008 it criticised her 'lack of preparation' as she 'limped across the finish line' but then praised her determination to finish. A series of photographs showed a distressed Radcliffe crying, framing her as a vulnerable woman unable to keep her composure in the face of disappointment.

Losses were also rehashed in coverage of male athletes' performances but, unlike women, men were lauded for their courage and determination to put the bad times behind them. The CBC's coverage of the Canadian men's eight highlighted its failure in Athens in 2004. When the men won gold, the CBC reported they had 'finished the job they started four years ago' and since 'their disaster in Athens, the crew has toiled under the single-minded focus of winning in Beijing'.

The fewer martial references for females (one third of descriptors) could be connected to the fewer stories published about sportswomen. A breakdown of the data to reveal the number of stories containing martial metaphors shows little separated the genders. Kinnick (1998) has argued that the absence of martial language from women's sports coverage is sexist because it sets females apart from the normal (males are aggressive), presenting them as anomalies. Against this background, and given the dominance in 2008 of the feminine sport of swimming in women's coverage, it is surprising that so many women's stories contained martial references. Writers have also reported sharp contrasts by gender in verbal attributions of athletes' strength and weakness (Duncan, Messner, Williams, & Jensen, 1990) and more vivid descriptions of male aggression in sports sex-typed as female (Kinnick, 1998). Across a range of sports in 2008, and with no apparent correlation to a sport's sex-typing, descriptions of female and male athletes' performances used corresponding metaphors. Both genders were 'dominant', 'powerful' and 'strong'; they 'shattered' and 'pulverised' their opponents in 'blistering' performances and 'thumping' victories.

Relatively few infantilising descriptions were used; most appeared in direct quotes from athletes and coaches. On the ABC, and as observed in previous studies (George, Hartley, & Paris, 2001; Koivula, 1999), journalists described women as 'girls' but they never called men 'boys'. TVNZ used condescending descriptors for adult women, calling them 'glamour girls', 'our golden girl', 'princess', 'eternal bridesmaid' and 'super-mum'. Aside from these instances of bias, the findings suggest that such terms which devalue sportswomen's status and their performances are slowly disappearing from the lexicon of most sports journalists.

#### *Photographic content—active and passive athletes*

Athletes were shown most often in passive or posed shots. Only the CBC and TVNZ gave preference to action shots of women (70 percent of female photographs), while TVNZ published more photographs of active than passive men. Those women and men who appeared as passive or motionless subjects were denied the cultural power attached to the premium sports image, the action shot (Rowe, 1999).

Historically, the print media have perpetuated sexual difference by portraying female athletes as passive participants in sports considered feminine (Hardin, Chance, Dodd, & Hardin, 2002). The ABC and BBC continued

this trend. Not one of the ABC's 19 shots of Australian swimmer Stephanie Rice showed her competing but there was an even split of action and poses in the 30 shots of the most featured male athlete, swimmer Michael Phelps. I have argued elsewhere that the ABC's treatment of Rice is 'as much about her nationality and accomplishments as her appearance' (Jones, 2010, p. 98). The triple gold medallist fits the ideal image of the toned, strong, lean, conventionally attractive female athlete. All individual photographs of Rice were close-ups, accentuating her facial features and minimising her athleticism. They showed her celebrating or posing with her medals. This way of framing female athletes, by repeatedly showing them posed or motionless, reinforces stereotypes and trivialises their athleticism (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002).

On the BBC, where in 2004 three out of four photographs depicted sports-women as passive subjects (Jones, 2006a), there was some improvement. The proportion of passive female images fell to 64 percent, but there was a sting in the tail. Of the 13 lead photographs showing women competitors (there were three times as many photographs of men), fewer than half of the nine photographs of GB sportswomen showcased their achievements. Instead, a passive photograph of runner Paula Radcliffe focused on her failure in the marathon. Three lead photographs of GB women who won gold medals, in swimming and sailing, also showed those athletes doing nothing. In T2 photographs, more than 60 per cent of shots showed women and men posed or motionless.

## **Conclusion**

The clear message from this study of the extent and nature of online sports coverage by four national public broadcasters is that men and their sports were *the* story in Beijing. Kinnick (1998, p. 215) has argued the absence of women from the sports media is not inconsequential. The implicit signal is they either 'do not exist', or they 'have no achievements that are newsworthy'. The achievements of male athletes were the focus of coverage by all four broadcasters on 16 out of 18 days. Stories about male sports outnumbered those about female sports—at times by as much as four to one—and men's photographs led two out of every three bulletins. In the worst result for women, the ABC published one story and no photographs of them on August 13, yet women also fared best in coverage on the site with 47 percent of stories and 43 percent of photographs. Bias in favour of male sports was

most obvious on TVNZ where two thirds of stories and photographs were devoted to men.

Writers have noted how the discourse of mediated sport culturally constructs sexual differences between women and men and addresses sports audiences as though such differences are natural and real (Duncan, 2006; Kane, 1996; Kane & Buysse, 2005). A particular strategy of Olympics coverage in 2008 was the gratuitous attention devoted to female athletes' roles as wives and mothers and their romantic and other relationships with males, and the absence of comparable coverage of male athletes. This practice, noted in other studies, defines sportswomen in terms of their 'other' orientation (the default position in our society is the male/masculine) (Duncan, 2006), certifies that while 'women may be athletes ... they are primarily females' (Koivula, 1999, p. 603) and reminds readers that female athletes are specifically heterosexual women (Daddario, 1998). Shugart (2003) says sexualising women in this manner 'renders them consistent with rather than threatening to existing concepts of gender' while accommodating, reinforcing and cultivating 'established gender types in the media at large' (p. 8).

Sexual difference was constructed in stereotypical accounts of sportswomen as emotionally and physically weaker than men and far more dependent on others for their success and psychological well-being—similar to the biased treatment of female athletes in previous Olympics coverage (Jones, 2004; Kinnick, 1998). In several instances, the broadcasters framed female athletes as emotionally vulnerable; questioned their physical and mental capacity to compete at elite level in sports considered masculine; intimated that they needed third party guidance from a coach, a psychiatrist or a family member in order to overcome nerves and achieve success; and questioned women's commitment and athletic consonance when they failed to live up to media-hyped expectations.

Mediated coverage of women's sports, both historical and contemporary, perpetuates male hegemony in myriad ways (Duncan, 2006; Shugart, 2003)—including those observed and described in this study which resulted in disproportionate recognition of female Olympians and indicated a lack of respect for them and their achievements. Publishing far fewer stories and photographs of women than men potentially increases the power of both 'presence and absence' or who is featured and who is ignored by the sports media (Entman, 1993; Huffman, et al., 2004). On TVNZ, women were



virtually ignored in top story selections. Fewer than a quarter of lead stories and only 14 percent of lead photographs featured female athletes. They were also hard to find down the running order, appearing in one out of three stories and photographs.

CBC audiences had to wait eight days into the Games to see a photograph of a Canadian woman in the lead spot on the site's splash page. In contrast, Canadian men who withdrew from competition were given top billing in text and images. The steady climb, in successive Olympics Games since 2000, towards gender parity in women's photographic coverage on the ABC faltered in 2008. Female athletes' share of photographs on the BBC also fell from 38 per cent in 2004 (Jones, 2006a) to 35 percent in 2008.

In spite of the stereotypes in the four broadcasters' coverage in 2008, the ABC bucked a historic trend by giving the most female coverage, by a clear margin, to women in the 'male' sports of athletics, basketball, hockey, water polo and cycling. It is unclear if this reflects the stereotypically feminine appearance of some female athletes in those sports or media perceptions of a peak in public interest in female athletes and their sports during the Olympic Games. It could also stem from the success of Australian women across a range of sports, irrespective of sex-type, and the media's tendency to highlight the achievements of their home country athletes.

This content analysis of coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games on the sites of four national public broadcasters has provided the first comparative international perspective of the gendered treatment of female athletes by online sports media. While the findings mirror the traditional male dominance of sports news, they tell only half the story. Further research is warranted to explore the sports journalists' and editors' gendered story selection processes. Using their accounts of production processes should help to build understanding of what sports reporters do and why before calling for changes to their practices.

## Notes

1. (a) Between March 2003 and July 2011, TVNZ operated as a commercial performer with a set of public broadcasting objectives set out in its Charter. The New Zealand government has since passed legislation which repealed the Charter (<http://tvnz.co.nz>, nd). At the time of this study, the four broadcasters examined could be termed 'semi-commercial', receiving revenues from various combinations of licence fees, public funding and advertising. (b) For the first time in the history of

the modern Games, in 2008 in Beijing women competed in 45 percent of Olympic events ((International Olympic Committee, 2009)).

2. The Kruskal-Wallis H test is a distribution-free, one-way analysis of variance based on ranks. Observations in the combined sample of stories by sex-type are listed and ranked in order of magnitude from smallest to largest. If the H statistic is greater than or equal to 5.99 ( $df = 2, p = 0.05$ ), it can be concluded that there is a difference among the population distributions for male-appropriate, female-appropriate and gender neutral sports; that is, the number of stories is not statistically equal with regard to 'appropriateness'. If H is less than 5.99, there is no difference in the population distributions.

## References

- Bernstein, A., & Galily, Y. (2008). Games and sets: Women, media and sport in Israel. *NASHIM: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, 15, 175-196.
- Billings, A. C., Angelini, J. R., & Eastman, S. T. (2005). Diverging discourses: Gender differences in televised golf announcing. *Mass Communication and Society*, 87(2), 155-171.
- Bissell, K., & Duke, A. (2007). Bump, set, spike: An analysis of commentary and camera angles of women's beach volleyball during the 2004 summer Olympics. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 13(1/2), 35-53.
- Bridge, J. (1994). Media mirror: Sports pages still a bastion of maleness. *Quill*, 82(5), 22.
- Daddario, G. (1998). *Women's sport and spectacle: Gendered television coverage and the Olympic Games*. Westport: Praeger.
- Daddario, G., & Wigley, B. J. (2007). Gender marking and racial stereotyping at the 2004 Athens Games. *Journal of Sports Media*, 2(1), 29-51.
- Duncan, M. C. (1990). Sports photographs and sexual difference: Images of women and men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7(1), 22-43.
- Duncan, M. C. (2006). Gender warriors in sport: Women and the media. In A. A. Raney & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Handbook of sports and media* (pp. 231-252). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Duncan, M. C., Messner, M., Williams, L., & Jensen, K. (1990). Gender stereotyping in televised sports. Retrieved on February 12, 2001, from [aafla.org/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport2\\_.htm](http://aafla.org/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport2_.htm)
- Duncan, M. C., & Messner, M. A. (2000). *Gender in televised sports: 1989, 1993 and 1999*. Los Angeles: Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.
- Eastman, S. T., & Billings, A. C. (2000). Sportscasting and sports reporting. Retrieved on May 22, 2000.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- Frey, L. R., Botan, C. H., Friedman, P. G., & Kreps, G. L. (1992). *Interpreting communication research*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

- George, C., Hartley, A., & Paris, J. (2001). The representation of female athletes in textual and visual media. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 6(2), 94-101.
- Greer, J. D., Hardin, M., & Homan, C. (2009). "Naturally" less exciting? Visual production of men's and women's track and field coverage during the 2004 Olympics. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 53(2), 173-189.
- Hardin, M., Chance, J., Dodd, J. E., & Hardin, B. (2002). Olympic photo coverage fair to female athletes. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 23(2, 3), 64-78.
- Hardin, M., Lynn, S., Walsdorf, K., & Hardin, B. (2002). The framing of sexual difference in SI for Kids editorial photos. *Mass Communication and Society*, 5(3), 341-359.
- Huffman, S., Tuggle, C. A., & Rosengard, D. S. (2004). How campus media cover sports: The gender-equity issue, one generation later. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7(4), 475-489.
- International Olympic Committee. (2009). Women in the Olympic movement. Retrieved on December 14, 2009, from [www.olympic.org/Documents/Reference\\_documents/Factsheets/Women\\_in\\_Olympic\\_Movement.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Reference_documents/Factsheets/Women_in_Olympic_Movement.pdf)
- Jones, D. (2003). *Half the story? Olympic women on ABC News Online*. Unpublished M.A. (Honours), University of Wollongong, Wollongong.
- Jones, D. (2004). Half the story? Olympic women on ABC News Online. *Media International Australia, February*(110), 132-146.
- Jones, D. (2006a). *Picture this: A cross-national study of the portrayal of female athletes in images of the 2004 Olympic Games*. Paper presented at the International Sports Studies Conference, Victoria University, Melbourne.
- Jones, D. (2006b). The representation of female athletes in online images of successive Olympic Games. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 12(1), 108-129.
- Jones, D. (2010). Women's sports coverage: Online images of the 2008 Olympic Games. *Australian Journalism Review*, 32(2), 89-102.
- Jones, D. (2012). Swifter, higher, stronger? Online media representations of gender during the 2008 Olympic Games. Paper presented at The British World: Religion, Memory, Society, Culture Conference, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia, 2-5 July. Refereed proceedings [http://eprints.usq.edu.au/22030/1/BW2012\\_\(2\).pdf](http://eprints.usq.edu.au/22030/1/BW2012_(2).pdf)
- Jorgensen, S. S. (2005). The world's best advertising agency: The sports press. Retrieved on December 5, 2005, from [www.clubedejournalistas.pt/Portals/57ad7180-c5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/sport\\_press\\_survey\\_english.pdf](http://www.clubedejournalistas.pt/Portals/57ad7180-c5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/sport_press_survey_english.pdf)
- Kachgal, T. M. (2001, August). *Home court disadvantage? Examining the coverage of female athletes on leading sports websites—a pilot study*. Paper presented at the National convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, DC.
- Kane, M. J. (1996). Media coverage of the post Title IX female athlete—a feminist analysis of sport, gender and power. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, 3(1), 95-127.

- Kane, M. J., & Buysse, J. A. (2005). Intercollegiate media guides as contested terrain: A longitudinal analysis. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22, 214-238.
- Kinnick, K. N. (1998). Gender bias in newspaper profiles of 1996 Olympic athletes: A content analysis of five major dailies. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 21(2), 213-237.
- Koivula, N. (1999). Gender stereotyping in televised media sport coverage. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* Retrieved on August 21, 2000, from [www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m2294/1999\\_Oct/59426460/print.jhtm](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2294/1999_Oct/59426460/print.jhtm)
- Lumby, C., Caple, H., & Greenwood, K. (2010). *Towards a level playing field: Sport and gender in Australian media*. Retrieved from [www.ausport.gov.au/participating/women/research](http://www.ausport.gov.au/participating/women/research).
- Mason, F., & Rail, G. (2006). The creation of sexual difference in Canadian newspaper photographs of the Pan-American Games *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 15(1), 28-41.
- McGregor, J., & Fountaine, S. (1997). Gender equity in retreat: The declining representation of women's sport in the New Zealand print media. *Metro*, 112, 38-44.
- Matheson, H., & Flatten, K. (1996). Newspaper representation of women athletes in 1984 and 1994. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 5(2), 65-83.
- Metheny, E. (1965). *Connotations of movement in sport and dance*. Dubuque: W.C. Brown.
- Mikosza, J. (1997). *Inching forward: Newspaper coverage and portrayal of women's sport in Australia*. O'Connor: Womensport Australia.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2008). The media's Olympics: How the news media have covered the Games in Beijing. Retrieved on December 14, 2009, from [www.journalism.org/sites/journalism.org/files/Olympics%20REPORT%20PDF.pdf](http://www.journalism.org/sites/journalism.org/files/Olympics%20REPORT%20PDF.pdf)
- Rowe, D. (1999). *Sport, culture and the media: The unruly trinity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Shugart, H. A. (2003). She shoots, she scores: Mediated constructions of contemporary female athletes in coverage of the 1999 US women's soccer team. *Western Journal of Communication*, 67(1), 1-17.
- Smith, P. (2011). A kick in the right direction. *The Walkley Magazine*, 68, (Oct-Nov), 37.
- Stevenson, D. (2002). Women, sport and globalization: Competing discourses of sexuality and nation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26(2), 209-225.
- Tuggle, C. A., Huffman, S., & Rosengard, D. (2007). A descriptive analysis of NBC's coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics. *Journal of Sports Media*, 2(1), 53-75.

*Dianne Jones is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.*  
 jonesd@usq.edu.au

Copyright of Pacific Journalism Review is the property of Auckland University of Technology and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.  
<http://www.aut.ac.nz/depts/commstud/journ/pjrsubs.shtml>