

Women's sports coverage: online images of the 2008 Olympic Games

Dianne Jones

Abstract

A content analysis of sports photographs from the 2008 Olympic Games on ABC News Online shows greater exposure for sportswomen who stepped outside the boundaries of conventionally appropriate female behaviour to participate in power sports and team sports. Yet, in total, female athletes received far fewer photographs than male athletes. Frequent depictions of them as passive subjects rather than active competitors in their sports echoed the historic and stereotypical treatment of women in sports media. News Online's coverage was heavily tilted towards three types of sports – swimming, athletics and basketball – limiting the opportunity for portrayals of successful female and male athletes in lesser-profile Olympic sports. The findings of this study are also compared with News Online's reporting of two previous consecutive Olympics.

Introduction

In the battle for coverage on the sports pages and airwaves, men and their sports have it in the bag. There is a clear margin between the level of media attention given to men's sports and that given to women's sports. Feminist scholars claim that females' participation in sport is seen as a deviation from the (male) norm. At best, the media's "gross under-reporting" of female athletes and their sports gives readers, listeners and viewers "the impression that few women participate in sports" (Huffman, Tuggle & Rosengard, 2004, p. 477). At worst, ignoring women's sport in the media "perpetuates patriarchal ideology and reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypical images of femininity" (Crolley & Teso, 2007, p. 150).

Researchers argue that money interests determine sports journalism's agenda. Professional male sports which create the biggest turnovers in advertising, sponsorship, numbers of television viewers and spectators in the stadium dominate the international sports press (Jorgensen, 2005). Lowes says the news industry demonstrates "little interest in women's sports" and clearly "genders its sports coverage" (1999, pp. 20-23) to cater for male tastes in the pursuit of male audiences and advertising revenue. These narrow priorities leave a large pool of competitors absent from everyday coverage and "invisible" to sports audiences – except during two weeks every four

years when sportswomen competing at the Olympic Games get comparatively better media treatment (Tuggle & Owen, 1999). How female athletes are framed on the world's largest and most important sports stage warrants close scrutiny (Tuggle, Huffman & Rosengard, 2007, p. 53).

Using content analysis, this study examines the images of female and male athletes presented on ABC News Online – the website of Australia's national public broadcaster – in coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games. It investigates how that coverage compares with previous Olympics studies by the author: Sydney in 2000, the ABC's first online Olympics (Jones, 2003), and Athens in 2004 (Jones, 2006). Only one other series of studies has tracked Olympics coverage by gender on a major broadcaster over consecutive Games. Since 1996, Charles Tuggle and his colleagues have monitored NBC's telecasts of the Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing Olympics (Tuggle & Davis, 2009; Tuggle et al., 2007; Tuggle, Huffman & Rosengard, 2002; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Results from 2008 showing substantial differences on ABC News Online in the representation of one gender over another are important since, as Fountaine and McGregor note, "comparative research over the years allows for monitoring of trends rather than simply providing a snapshot approach to news content" (1999, p. 115).

Literature review

Kane (1996) says there is widespread concern about the relationship between sport and the mass media. While "the media may appear to simply 'report what happened'", in reality they "actively construct news through frames" (1996, p. 4). Framing highlights some bits of information, making them more salient or noticeable by placement or repetition (Entman, 1993). According to Goffman (quoted in McQuail, 2000), we need frames to organise otherwise fragmentary items of experience or information, to "build 'the pictures ... in our heads' – the stereotypes on which we base our thinking" (Tuggle et al., 2002, p. 362). The power of "presence and absence" in framing 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 et al., 2004, p. 477). As a result, in sports, just as in news coverage, "frames help portray who is an authority, and who is marginalized" (Billings, Angelini & Eastman, 2005, p. 157). Looking at how sports media use visual frames "has been deemed particularly useful for examining images of gender" (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf & Hardin, 2002, p. 344).

Scholars examining print and broadcast sports media have found "marked biases" (Billings et al., 2005, p. 156) in favour of male athletes and men's sports. In terms of overall coverage, numerous studies (see Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Fountaine & McGregor, 1999; Huffman et al., 2004; Jorgensen, 2005; Tuggle et al., 2002) show sportswomen have been grossly under-represented in the numbers of stories, the column centimetres or minutes of airtime devoted to their achievements, the placement of articles, the number, size and placement of photographs, and the range of sports depicted.

Readers of newspaper sports sections are more likely to see a photograph of a male athlete (Duncan, Messner & Williams, 1990; George, Hartley & Paris, 2001). Photographic profiles for women often fall well below half the number of images devoted to men and men's sports, and rarely reflect their participation in sport (Alston, 1996). From capital city dailies in Australia to broadsheets in Britain, male bias in the choice of sports photographs (George et al., 2001) has resulted in the publication of up to 17 times as many photographs of men's sports as of women's sports (Menzie's, 1989). In US newspapers, men have received 13 times as many photographs as women (Duncan et al., 1990). Two studies, 20 years apart, of leading US sports magazine *Sports Illustrated* found only 5 and 6 per cent of photographs respectively were of female athletes (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003). In its stable mate, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, sportswomen featured in just one quarter of all photographs (Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002).

Unequal coverage is not confined to mainstream media. Despite the introduction of anti-discrimination laws in the United States in 1972, female athletes remain underrepresented. On sports websites sponsored by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), more than half of all baseball reports included photographs of players, but less than one third of softball stories were accompanied by photographs (Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley & Ashley, 2000). Images on commercial sports websites also highlight male athletes. In Kachgal's (2001) study of three leading US sports sites, men registered 86 per cent of photographs. The fewer images of women (22 out of 162) meant more news items about females contained no photographs of them.

As well as their invisibility, when women do receive coverage their stories and photographs are rarely integrated into mainstream sports news. Few women's sports make it to the prime locations of the newspaper front or back page, or above the fold (Duncan, 1990). Kachgal (2001) found only 18 per cent of top stories on the splash pages (prime location) of sports websites featured females. In a similar vein, 10 per cent of images on the BBC sport site's "Pic of the day" page depicted female athletes (Women's Sports Foundation UK, 2004).

Every four years spikes do occur in female sports coverage. Bruce (2006) notes a "significant change" in the New Zealand press's focus when the Olympic Games are under way, with female athletes receiving almost twice as much newspaper space as males. Knoppers and Elling (2004) observed a 10-fold increase in women's sports coverage on television during the 1996 Olympics compared with non-Olympics periods. King (2007) also found a turnaround in coverage for female athletes in Olympics coverage in 2004, in both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*. Women received greater article, headline and photographic coverage than men. Sportswomen appeared in 43 per cent of all photographs in six US, UK and Canadian newspapers during the 1996 Olympics (Vincent, Imwold, Masemann & Johnson, 2002).

Hardin et al (2002) reported a similar result in US newspaper coverage of the 2000 Olympics. The overall proportion of photographs favoured men (52 per cent versus 48 per cent), in line with the demographics for the US Olympic team (55 per cent males, 45 per cent females). Similarly, the 38 per cent of 2000 Olympics photographs of sportswomen in newspapers in Belgium, Denmark, France and Italy matched participation rates for those countries (Capranica et al., 2005). And, while men received almost two-thirds of photographs in coverage of the 2000 Olympics on ABC News Online, the 38 per cent of photographs devoted to women matched their medal success at the Games. On News Online's "Top Stories" page, images of sportswomen in 2000 shared equal billing with men (Jones, 2003). In 2004, the number of lead story photographs of female athletes on News Online jumped to twice the number for males, but just under half of those photographs of women accompanied stories about "failure, conflict and controversy" (Jones, 2006, p. 122).

Media images of females have traditionally shown them competing in individual rather than team sports (Alston, 1996; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). This historical bias against women's team sports is a further "disturbing example of asymmetry and exclusion ... [that] fails to reflect the reality of [women's] sport participation patterns" (Kane, 1996, p. 6). In Australia, media coverage for the leading women's team sport, netball, is a fraction of the media attention devoted to the male team sports of cricket, basketball and Australian Rules football, which have far fewer participants (Australian Sports Commission, 2007). Higgs and Weiller say the coverage of women's team sports is important because "it helps break stereotypes of women holding ancillary positions by showing them in active leadership and decision-making roles" (1994, p. 2).

Women's team events received almost six hours less airtime and fewer press photographs respectively than women's individual competitions in US telecasts and newspaper coverage of the 2000 Olympics (Hardin, Chance et al., 2002; Tuggle et al., 2002). When compared with the US Olympic team's demographics (45 per cent females and 55 per cent males), women received favourable newspaper pictorial coverage (48 per cent of images). Women's team sports, too, were well represented and were more likely to appear in an Olympic photo than were men's teams.

This reflects, arguably, the greater number of team sports available to women in Sydney, or the high gold medal count for US women's teams (Hardin, Chance et al., 2002).

With such a small percentage of images of females published on average, what is depicted in those photographs becomes even more important. Duncan argues that photographs are powerful tools for creating preferred meanings. Because of their "ability to project an aura of naturalness, realism and authenticity" (1990, p. 23), through "selection, composition and manipulation" (Rowe, 1999, p. 120), an apparently innocent record of events is, instead, often politically motivated (Duncan et al., 1990).

Researchers find female athletes are framed in images "in ways that clearly reflect and reinforce dominant stereotypic ideologies" (Kane, 1996, p. 3). Ways of maintaining male hegemony and suggesting "otherness" for women can include an excessive focus on women's physical appearance, poses resembling soft-core pornography, emotional displays (tearful female athletes) and sexual difference (portrayals of women as passive participants in sports and men as active competitors) (Duncan, 1990; Hargreaves, 1986).

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). Rowe notes that because "the action sports photograph is the premium sports image ... a considerable degree of cultural power attaches to being conspicuous in the sports media" (1999, p. 123). Hardin et al (2002) reported the perpetuation of sexual difference through newspaper portrayals of women as passive participants in sports considered "feminine", while cover photographs on university-created media guides also portrayed women athletes in passive and traditionally feminine poses (Buisse & Embser-Herbert, 2004). George et al (2001) found the British media gave preference to male action shots (78 per cent of male photographs) over female action shots (52 per cent), and females were twice as likely as males to be shown in passive shots.

In contrast, there was little evidence of bias in newspaper photographs of 1996 Olympic athletes, where females were more likely to be depicted engaging in sport than males (58 per cent of images versus 53 per cent), and slightly less likely to be depicted in passive positions (Kinnick, 1998). A similar positive result was found in the author's study of Olympics coverage by ABC *News Online* in 2004. Sportswomen were portrayed in action more often than in passive poses, and more often in active poses than male athletes (Jones, 2006). On the downside, the proportion of active images of women fell to 60 per cent compared with 69 per cent in 2000 (Jones, 2003).

Researchers have observed a link between the media's coverage of female athletes and the degree of "gender-appropriateness" or social acceptance of the sports in which they compete (Metheny, 1965). Historical and sexist notions of women's physical and emotional delicacy, non-competitiveness, passivity and dependence on men may have been challenged strongly since the late 1960s, but their impact on the entire character of sport is still evident today (Cashmore, 2000). As Mason and Rail note: "In general, individual and aesthetic sports have been portrayed as 'gender-appropriate' for women, and team sports, sports requiring strength and power, and sports involving body contact have been portrayed as 'male-appropriate' sports." (2006, p. 29) Kane (1996) says media coverage reflects these gender role expectations. As a result, females who cross over into more male-dominated sports are largely ignored (Duncan, 1990).

Photographs in the leading US magazine *Sports Illustrated* have accentuated the traditional definition of femininity by frequently featuring women in the sex-appropriate sports of ice skating and gymnastics (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Tuggle and Davis (2009) found NBC's coverage of women's events at the Beijing Olympics was confined to "socially acceptable" sports (which accounted for 97 per cent of female sports' airtime). But, in contrast, photographic coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics on ABC News Online showed a clear focus on females competing in

male-appropriate sports (64 per cent). Only 28 per cent of images were devoted to women competing in female-appropriate sports and 8 per cent went to neutral sports (Jones, 2006).

Research questions

This study builds on the author's research examining ABC News Online's pictorial coverage of female athletes at the 2000 and 2004 Summer Olympic Games. The primary question is: Has there been any change in the number and nature of images published on News Online during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, or did photographic coverage reflect the differential treatment accorded female and male athletes on the website in 2000 and 2004? Findings from 2000 and 2004 (Jones, 2003; 2006) provide a baseline for comparison, and an indication of whether the 2008 data represent regression, maintenance of the status quo, or improvement in News Online's performance.

Based on the findings of previous studies, the following questions guided data collection and analysis:

1. What was the level of photographic coverage given to female and male athletes?
2. Did photograph placement with the lead story on the website's splash page (T1) give one gender more prominence than the other?
3. Did photographs frame female athletes as passive rather than active subjects?
4. Did coverage of women's sports concentrate on individual competition rather than team events?
5. Were women depicted more often competing in so-called "appropriate" sports than in "inappropriate" sports?

Method

The website www.abc.net.au/olympics was the sampling unit for this study. While the sample period of the Olympic Games is pre-determined, different time zones and peak viewing times for News Online in Australia were considered when designing the sampling plan. The sample consisted of the splash pages (T1), and Tier Two (T2) stories linked to them, collected across 18 days from August 7 to August 24, 2008. Sampling began two days prior to the official start of the Games to accommodate coverage of football (soccer) matches. The splash pages, where only the top three stories were accompanied by photographs, and the top 10 Tier Two (T2) Olympic sports stories were downloaded three times each day, between 12pm and 4pm AEST, 4pm and 8pm AEST, and 8pm and 12am AEST, yielding a total of 54 Olympic bulletins and 702 stories. Opening and closing ceremonies were not included in the analysis. The sample yielded 478 images for content analysis.

Sports photographs were defined as those images featuring Olympic athletes and illustrating stories whose topics or themes were sports contests, achievements, or issues affecting those Olympians. For example, a photograph of an athlete accompanying a story about the athlete's medal chances was eligible since the story was a preview or speculator about competition. Photographs of individual athletes or teams which accompanied stories updating a country's medal tally were not counted since the stories were essentially about medal counts, not the athletes whose portraits appeared as generic illustrations.

One photograph showing athletes of both genders was categorised and counted as a mixed gender image. The number of athletes appearing in a photograph was not counted. The traditional, print-prominence measure of photograph size was discounted, since all photographs ac-

accompanying the top story on the splash page were of similar size and orientation, and all were approximately eight times larger than the images accompanying stories two and three on the splash page. Within T2 stories, photographs were also of a uniform size. While a small number of T2 stories carried more than one photograph, in a slide show format, there was no apparent connection between this format and the story's position within the bulletin. Only the first photograph in each slide show was categorised and counted since it was the only photograph seen when the story was first accessed. Graphics were not counted.

All photographs of athletes were examined according to gender for frequency and categorical variables based on previous studies (Duncan, 1990; Kachgal, 2001). Photographs of sports-women and men were coded for placement with the lead story on the T1 splash page. The content of all T1 and T2 photographs was examined for depictions of passive or active poses. Passive images showed athletes doing nothing or motionless (such as recovering after exertion or suffering from an injury), appearing only from the neck up (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; that is, they were shown competing in or about to compete in their sport (for example, diving into a pool, paddling a kayak, or poised on the starting blocks).

Coding photographs for sports consisting of both team and individual contests, such as swimming, rowing and sailing, posed a problem. This was addressed by examining the accompanying story for its first reference to an individual or a team competition, and coding the photograph accordingly. For example, a photograph of US swimmer Michael Phelps with a story about the US team's 4 x 100m medley relay win was coded as a team sport photograph. On the other hand, a photograph of Phelps winning the 100m butterfly was coded as an individual sport image.

Photographs were also examined for depictions by gender of athletes competing in female-appropriate, male-appropriate and gender-neutral sports. 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. Shooting and volleyball are seen as neutral sports. These categories are based on the classification system developed by Metheny (1965), and widely used by researchers who have examined the stereotypical gender appropriateness of different sports. The author also used these categories in studies of 2000 and 2004 Summer Olympics photographic coverage on ABC News Online (Jones, 2003; 2006), so their retention maintains consistency in coding across three Summer Olympics studies, and enables like-with-like comparisons with both the author's and other researchers' studies.

Content analysis, commonly used to discover and describe the quantitative content of the mass media's messages in an objective and systematic way (Frey, Botan, Friedman & Kreps, 1992) and "determined as an effective way to examine media images of minority or historically oppressed groups" (Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002, p. 348), was used to address the research questions. Hard copies of the context units were printed to create an archive of faithful and identical data for coding.

Coding was completed by the author. Intracoder reliability was established by comparing coding sheets on identical data completed six months apart. A sub-sample of nine odd-number bulletins out of 18 was recoded and each key variable was tested for intracoder reliability using Scott's pi. The variable, the percentage agreement and the Scott's pi were: gender of athlete (98.1 per cent, 0.962); active or passive depiction (92.6 per cent, 0.852); team or individual contest (98.1 per cent, 0.962); and gender appropriateness of the sport (100 per cent, 1.0).

Frequencies and chi-square analysis were used to analyse, by gender, the independent variables of T1 and T2 story photographs, photograph placement, photograph context and type of

sport depicted. Frequencies and Kruskal-Wallis H analysis were used to analyse, by gender, the sex-type of featured sports¹.

Results

In total, 400 photographs of athletes were analysed. One photograph of the Australian equestrian eventing team, categorised as “mixed gender”, was not included. Table 1 displays the results regarding coverage given to male and female athletes. Men received far more photographs than women (228 to 172).

In 2008, women were still shut out of competing on equal terms with men. Only 45 per cent of Olympic events were open to them (International Olympic Committee, 2009). Women made up 46 per cent of the Australian Olympic team and won half of the nation’s 46 medals. If medal success alone is a predictor of coverage or an indicator of equitable treatment, women should have received up to 50 per cent of photographic coverage on News Online – since the media highlight the achievements of their nation’s athletes, affirming “the strong nationalistic fervor ignited by the Olympics” (Capranica et al., 2005, p. 214). Based on their participation in Beijing, women were entitled to up to 46 per cent of Olympic sports photographs. Female athletes were featured in 43 per cent of photographs on News Online, lower than either Australian women’s medal success or participation rate would seem to warrant.

In terms of the placement of photographs (see Table 1), female and male athletes shared top billing in the prime location of lead story photograph on the site’s splash page (T1). There were 23 lead story photographs of women and 24 of men. For women this was also their best result, by location, in terms of the proportion of female images compared with male images. In contrast with lead photographs, two-thirds of story 2 photographs on the splash page featured male athletes, and men were 1.3 times more likely to be depicted in a T2 story photograph than women. Chi-square analysis revealed a highly significant difference between women and men as the subjects of sports photographs on News Online, $X^2_{.05}(1) = 7.84, p = 0.005$.

Table 1: Photographs by gender of athletes on ABC News Online

Photograph location	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
T1 lead photograph	23	6	24	6	47	12
T1 story 2 photograph	14	3.5	28	7	42	10.5
T1 story 3 photograph	21	5	23	6	44	11
T2 main stories photographs	114	28.5	153	38	267	66.5
Total	172	43	228	57	400	100

Female athletes were more likely to be shown as passive subjects than active competitors, with passive shots accounting for 58 per cent of all female images (see Table 2). There was a significant difference in the number of images of active and passive female athletes, $X^2_{.05}(1) = 3.93, p = 0.047$. For men, too, passive images outnumbered action shots. Passive shots featured in 57 per cent of male photographs, resulting in a significant difference in active and passive depictions of men, $X^2_{.05}(1) = 6.33, p = 0.012$.

Table 2: Depictions of active and passive athletes by gender on ABC News Online

Photograph context	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Active	73	18	95	24	168	42
Passive	99	25	133	33	232	58
Total	172	43	228	57	400	100

More photographs showed women competing in individual sports than in team events, a finding that is not surprising given that there were many more individual Olympic events than team events for females. In swimming, for example, 14 of the 17 events for women were individual contests, while only two out of 23 women’s events in athletics, the relays, were team contests. Of all photographs of females, 91 featured individual sports and 81 featured team sports – a far higher frequency for team sports than their number on the Olympic program would seem to warrant. The difference in images was not statistically significant, $\chi^2_{.05}(1) = .581, p = 0.446$.

Teams consisting of women competing together claimed nine (39 per cent) of the 23 medals won by Australian women in 2008. Against these performances, it appears that women competing in team events (47 per cent of all female photographs) received more than their fair share of coverage.

Both women and men were more likely to appear in photographs of traditionally “male-appropriate” sports. Of the 172 photographs of women, 95 or 55 per cent showed them competing in male-appropriate sports. Almost twice as many photographs were published of men competing in male-appropriate sports as of men competing in female-appropriate and neutral sports combined (144 to 84). Kruskal-Wallis H analysis (see Table 3) also shows that the mean ranks for appropriateness suggest male-appropriate sports received the highest coverage score (8.9 for women, 9.5 for men), with the lowest score going to neutral sports (5.5 for women, 7.0 for men). This finding is a turnaround for women’s sports coverage compared with the 2000 and 2004 Olympics, when neutral sports received the highest coverage score (Jones, 2003; 2006).

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis H for photographs by gender and appropriateness on ABC News Online

	Female			Male		
	Rank assigned to fem-approp	Rank assigned to m-approp	Rank assigned to neutral	Rank assigned to fem-approp	Rank assigned to m-approp	Rank assigned to neutral
T_i	32.5	71	16.5	34.5	104.5	14
n_i	4	8	3	4	11	2
Mean rank	8.1	8.9	5.5	8.6	9.5	7

Female: $H = 7.25 \quad \chi^2_{.05}(2) = 5.99$

Male: $H = 6.44 \quad \chi^2_{.05}(2) = 5.99$

Discussion

In three consecutive Olympic Games studies, photographic coverage for women on ABC News Online has see-sawed: from numerical underrepresentation (38 per cent of photographs in 2000) (Jones, 2003), to more than half of all photographs in 2004 (53 per cent) (Jones, 2006), only to dive again in 2008 to 43 per cent. Unlike the two previous Olympics, in 2008 women’s coverage fell well short of their contribution of 50 per cent of Australia’s medals. The encouraging news in proportionate coverage in the low forties is that at least this result betters the usual fare for women’s sports coverage outside of the cycles of Olympic and Commonwealth Games – when the media’s exclusion of women and their sports corresponds to a “symbolic annihilation” (Kachgal, 2001; Kane, 1996).

Several studies show sports photographs of women tend to be in less prominent locations in newspapers and on sports websites than those of men (Duncan et al., 1990; Kachgal, 2001; Women's Sports Foundation UK, 2004). Based on the total number of photographs accompanying lead stories on ABC News Online, women and men were given equal prominence, a similar result to News Online's coverage in 2000 (Jones, 2003). Sixteen of the 23 lead photographs of women from Beijing featured medal winners, although more than half of these were from one sport – swimming.

Coverage on News Online mirrors a pattern seen in the US news media's Olympic Games reporting in 2008 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). It was heavily tilted towards just three types of sports. Swimming, which attracts virtually no attention outside of the Olympics and Commonwealth Games, swamped every other sport on News Online. It took up more than one-quarter of coverage with 107 photographs. The only other sports to hit proportions in double figures were athletics at 17 per cent and basketball with 12 per cent.

This preoccupation with swimming reflects the emergence of one male athlete as a major news figure and his domination of coverage in the first week and a half of the Games (suggesting editorial decisions that were independent of national achievement), and the multiple successes of Australia's female swimmers. US swimmer Michael Phelps left Beijing with a record tally of eight gold medals. Phelps appeared in 30 images on News Online. He was the focus of almost three in every five photographs of men's swimming. His efforts attracted five lead photographs alone, or one fifth of all lead images of male sports. Of Australia's male swimmers, only Grant Hackett's silver medal in the 1500m freestyle rated a lead photograph.

Australia's female swimmers won six of the national total of 14 gold medals, and 12 of the country's 20 swimming medals, yet they featured in less than half of the 107 photographs of swimming – overshadowed by the attention devoted to Phelps. Also, a high proportion of Olympic stories about women (110 or 39 per cent) were not accompanied by photographs, a finding that is comparable with Kachgal's (2001) study of online sports reporting.

At first glance, the variety of female athletes and their sports depicted in photographs on News Online in 2008 is a positive outcome. Fifteen sports were represented in the tally of 172 photographs. Closer inspection shows a continuation in T2 photographs of the trend set in lead photographs: a low level of exposure for all but three sports in which Australian women won medals. Only 25 photographs were allocated to the six sports of triathlon (one gold medal, one bronze), sailing (gold), canoeing/kayaking (silver, bronze), diving (silver), cycling (bronze) and softball (bronze). At the same time, basketball (silver) received 27 photographs. As in 2004, Lauren Jackson was again the "face" of Australia's Opals, this time with 12 photographs – an outcome, it could be argued, that reflected her domestic and international playing profile, but one that suggests the media is yet to accept female team sports "as legitimate contests worthy of whole of team coverage" (Jones, 2006, p. 124).

Women in all sports were hard to find in action photographs in 2008. In a disappointing result, the proportion of passive images of women on News Online has risen every four years, from a base of 31 per cent in 2000 to 40 per cent in 2004 and 58 per cent in 2008. This way of framing females, in terms of the number of passive and active poses, reinforces stereotypes and trivialises the athleticism of female athletes by showing them motionless (Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002). In lead photographs on the splash page, only eight out of 23 female images from Beijing showed women competing in their respective sports. The closer to the front of the bulletin, the more likely it was for a T2 photograph of a woman to show her doing nothing. Two-thirds of story 1 photographs, half of story 2 and story 3 photographs, and 81 per cent of story 4 photographs showed female athletes in passive poses.

Not one of the 19 shots of Australia's most photographed Olympian, swimmer Stephanie Rice, showed her competing – a stark contrast with the even split of action and posed portraits in

the 30 images of swimmer Michael Phelps. Instead, Rice, who won three gold medals (two individual and one team), was portrayed standing in her lane and saluting her supporters after winning the 400m individual medley (this photograph was used twice to lead successive bulletins, and appeared in a splash page slide show of highlights); posing on the podium with her second individual gold medal (this lead photograph also appeared in the splash page highlights, and was used again on August 23 in a lead story about Rice's selection as the Australian flag bearer for the closing ceremony); and celebrating on the podium with members of the freestyle relay team (the same photograph was used twice as a lead).

Arguably, the nature of Rice's exposure on News Online is as much about her achievements as her appearance. Rice fits the image of the ideal female athlete. Toned, strong, lean, conventionally pretty or sexually attractive sportswomen are particular favourites of the media (Hargreaves, 1986). All individual photographs of Rice were close-ups, accentuating her facial features. They give no hint of her athleticism. Such stereotypical portrayals, Duncan (1990) has argued, trivialise women's athletic performances and create sexual difference. Sexual difference was also perpetuated in News Online's framing of Rice and other female swimmers, in 48 out of 51 photographs, as passive participants in a sport considered "feminine" (Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002).

Despite the stereotypes observed in News Online's coverage of female swimmers, there were positive signals for women's sports:

- Women competing in team sports, generally portrayed as inappropriate for females (Tuggle & Owen, 1999), were neither under-represented nor ignored. They featured in just under half of all photographs. This marks a major turnaround from 2004 on News Online when women competing in team sports appeared in less than one third of photographs of female sports (Jones, 2006).
- Researchers argue that sport has been a major site for reinforcing gender stereotypes, by restricting media coverage to appropriate female sports. In a rare exception, Vincent et al (2002) reported a similar amount of newspaper coverage devoted to females competing in female-appropriate and female-inappropriate sports at the Atlanta Games. News Online bettered this mark in 2008. The most covered group of sports for women was clearly the so-called "inappropriate" or male sports of athletics, basketball, water polo and hockey.
- By extension, the "double whammy" in media coverage for sportswomen is participation in a male-appropriate team sport. Not so on News Online in 2008. The most frequently depicted women lined up in male-appropriate team sports. And they were seen, most often, playing their sport.

Conclusion

The general message from this study is one of mixed signals. The steady climb in women's sports coverage towards gender parity, observed in the author's content analyses of two previous Olympics on News Online (Jones, 2003; 2006), faltered in 2008. Although nowhere near the levels of marginalisation experienced by sportswomen beyond Olympics coverage, a clear pattern of differential and inequitable photographic treatment resurfaced on News Online. Female athletes and their sports were underreported on three key measures – frequency by gender, medal counts and participation rates. In contrast, women did take an equal share of lead photographs on the site.

Showing far fewer photographs of women in total, and a limited selection of women in them, potentially increases the power of both "presence and absence" (Entman, 1993; Huffman et al., 2004), or who is featured and who is ignored. Based on previous studies, the sports media's ultimate framing of sexual difference would be coverage focused on the posed female athlete who

engages in an individual, socially acceptable female-appropriate sport. She was there on *News Online* in 2008, in second place on the coverage table, by virtue of the attention devoted to women's swimming and the overwhelming majority of passive shots of those women, particularly Stephanie Rice.

Even so, male-appropriate sports remained, proportionately and in their mean value, the primary focus of visual coverage for women. In view of this finding, is the gender appropriateness of women's sports a dead issue? Vincent (2002) suggests that such classifications, devised in the 70s, adapted in the 80s, and still in use, may be dated. Or this result may be "reflective of a cultural shift towards a greater social acceptance of female athletes competing in sports and events requiring speed, strength and power" (2002, p. 327), such as basketball, hockey and water polo, which under the current definitions are considered female-inappropriate.

Alternatively, that women were seen, most often, in action in male-appropriate team sports may not be as encouraging as it first appears. It could merely reflect the link between the success of Australian women's teams, who were responsible for nine of the 23 medals won by Australia's female athletes and the media's tendency to highlight the achievements of its home country athletes, or it could indicate the media's perception that interest in women and their sports peaks during elite sporting events such as the Olympic and Commonwealth Games.

Looking a little deeper, a clear bias is evident in women's team coverage on *News Online*, one that cannot be justified or explained by medal success alone. A third of all team sport photographs, 27 out of 81, went to basketball where Australia won a silver medal. Just under half of these photographs focused on the Opals' captain, Lauren Jackson. In contrast, water polo – another male-appropriate team sport in which Australia's women also won a minor medal and which, like basketball, runs over several days and rounds of competition – featured in 13 photographs, less than half of the attention devoted to basketball. The Stingers' most photographed player, Gemma Beadsworth, was the subject of just four images.

Research into sports coverage on Australia's public broadcaster is important. Its value has been evidenced by the inclusion of findings from the author's analyses of 2000 and 2004 Olympics coverage by gender (Jones, 2004; 2006) in two Australian government reports, *About time! Women in sport and recreation in Australia* (Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee, 2006) and *Towards a level playing field: sport and gender in Australian media* (Lumby et al, 2010). This study of the photographic profiles of female and male athletes in 2008 provides more than a snapshot of the gendered treatment of athletes. It has allowed comparisons across three successive Olympic Games. Building a longitudinal, empirical profile of the coverage of sportswomen provides a body of evidence about trends in the underrepresentation of female athletes on *News Online*. After Knoppers and Elling (2004), the major findings of the content analyses will be shared with sports journalists from the ABC in a forthcoming study exploring the context of these results; that is, the role those journalists play in producing such gendered coverage.

Note

1. The Kruskal-Wallis H test is a distribution-free, one-way analysis of variance based on ranks. Observations in the combined sample of photographs 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, it can be concluded that there is a difference among the population distributions by gender (for male-ap-

appropriate, female-appropriate and gender neutral sports); that is, the number of photographs is not statistically equal with regard to “appropriateness”. If H is less than 5.99, there is no difference in the population distributions.

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Author

Dianne Jones is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.