Chapter 4
The Funhouse Mirror:
The Blogosphere’s Reflection of Women’s Sports

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ABSTRACT
Depictions of professional sports and athletes in U.S. mainstream media have generally been indicted for reinforcing masculine hegemony and ignoring women’s and amateur sports. This study explored the attitudes and values of independent sports bloggers in relationship to gender and, more specifically, to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded institutions. A survey of 200 independent sports bloggers was conducted to determine whether the sports blogosphere provides an alternative to depictions of sports offered through mainstream media coverage. Survey results demonstrate that the sports blogosphere has yet to become a truly alternative, egalitarian space for sports commentary. The analysis suggests that increased participation of female bloggers who are willing to cover female athletes and advocate for women’s sports can alleviate the situation. Otherwise, the sports blogosphere will merely replicate old-media values.

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INTRODUCTION

Sports coverage in the United States has been the object of strong criticism over the past several decades for marginalizing female athletes, ignoring women’s sports and generally objectifying women. This topic has been the focus of scholarly activity by media and communication scholars, and it is rare that researchers have found exceptions in mainstream media to the prevailing pattern of framing sports as the natural domain of men.

A variety of rationalizations have been used for the failure of mainstream sports journalists and media producers to adopt more progressive lenses. Those explanations have generally integrated an understanding of cultural masculine hegemony with that of gatekeeping processes at the institutional (e.g., newsroom culture, economic structures) and individual (e.g., social identity) levels within media organizations.

One reason for scholars’ close attention to gender dynamics in sports is the understanding that such dynamics matter; they reflect and influence understandings of gender and, consequently, shared concepts about the roles, opportunities, and rights of men and women in sport and in society. For instance, research has focused on media coverage of women’s sports and the framing of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (hereinafter “Title IX”), which prohibited discriminating on the basis of sex in federally funded institutions (Messner & Solomon, 2007). Since 1973, Title IX has protected the rights of girls and women at educational institutions to participate in sports in equal measure with boys and men. Media researchers have argued that the way women’s sports have or have not been covered, along with the way Title IX has been presented through the media, influences public opinion (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009a). Unfavorable public opinion could undermine enforcement of the law and diminish opportunities for female athletes. The sports blogosphere, which has risen in popularity at least in part because of perceptions that it is an alternative to mainstream media coverage, has also not escaped such critiques; it should be noted, however, that little research has been done to critically assess gender-related dynamics (or others, such as those involving issues of race) in the sports blogosphere (Zirin, 2008).

Sports advocates, though, have also envisioned the blogosphere—and the Internet in general—as a plethora of possibilities for exposure and promotion for women’s sports (Maxwell, 2009; Messner, 2002). This vision has been underpinned at least in part by an understanding of the World Wide Web as free of the institutional/economic pressures—“gatekeeping” factors—that constrain mainstream media content. The argument to justify non-coverage of women’s sports because they don’t “sell,” for instance, cannot keep a women’s sports fan—or thousands of them—from maintaining blogs that position women’s sport as important (and worthy of legal protection). Institutional decisions to marginalize female athletes based on beat-reporting norms also, in theory, dissipate in a blogosphere where individuals can form networks to promote traditionally marginalized sports and athletes; gatekeeping in its traditional sense, then, collapses (Singer, 2006; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

This research explores the attitudes and values of independent sports bloggers in relationship to gender and, more specifically, to Title IX. The influences on decision-making and gatekeeping in mainstream sports media, such as institutional culture and journalistic norms, are often muted in the blogosphere, making social identity and cultural hegemony more salient influences on decision-making about content. Thus, the attitudes and values of sports bloggers are important for understanding the culture of the sports blogosphere and for speculating on its potential as a site for alternatives to mainstream sports media outlets. The authors assess those attitudes and values to better understand the sports blogosphere in relationship to traditional media forms and to speculate on its potential for alternative depictions of sports.
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