

'Miami foot-brawl' and the 'Malice in the Palace': Examining gender reporting differences in the sports media

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Abstract 140**

On November 19, 2004, in a nationally televised basketball game between the NBA's Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers, a fight erupted between members of the Pacers and fans in the stands. Less than two years later, on October 14, 2006, an on-field brawl occurred during a college football game between the University of Miami and Florida International University. Coverage of both fights was widespread, appearing on sports pages across the country and on national television networks such as ESPN. While both fights were unfortunate incidents for the teams and leagues involved, the reaction of the media to each event offers a unique opportunity to explore the differences in coverage tone and approach by reporters of different genders.

Exploring the differing manner in which male and female sports reporters write about the same topics is a natural extension of existing research directed at gender-based variations in communication. Gendered language, and differences in communication based upon gender, have been explored in a variety of different areas, including interaction goals (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002; Kunkel, 2002), stereotypical language (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2002), socialization (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003), and self-presentation (Shaw & Edwards, 1997). Differences in story content based on the writer or editor's gender have been demonstrated in previous studies, including differences in sources chosen (Armstrong, 2004; Zoch & Turk, 1998), tone of news coverage (Craft & Wanta, 2004), language choice (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993), and other areas. The examination of these differences is of particular importance to the field of sport communication, particularly when considered through the lens of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The focus of this study was to investigate whether there were differences in the nature of the written coverage of the two brawls, based upon the gender of the journalist writing the story. Articles written within 24 hours of the each incident were identified, as was the gender of the journalist who wrote each article. In order to control for editorial policies, stories were only selected from newspapers which printed at least one article or column from both a male and a female journalist (N=8). The study utilized a qualitative approach to article analysis, examining differences in word choice, sourcing, characterization, and other elements in articles written immediately following the brawls.