

## The media's reaction to sexism in sport: A critical discourse analysis

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In April 2007, after a week of media frenzy, Don Imus was fired for comments he made on his radio show regarding the Rutgers' women's basketball team. His now infamous description of the team as "nappy headed ho's" was reported and scrutinized extensively by the national media. USA Today columnist Christine Brennan commented, "When an issue like this explodes in our culture, the first outrage is usually racial, the second, gender-related. And so it is in this case. First came Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, weighing in loudly, metaphorically shutting down the factory. Then came the women's voices, not quite so full of force. Their reaction appeared more muted because the mainstream sports media rarely pays as much attention to women's issues as they do African American issues.."(2007, p. 10).

The purpose of this study was to use critical discourse analysis to examine the media's reaction regarding negative incidents and sexist comments towards women in sport. Studying the media is important because of its power in constructing, reinforcing, and maintaining hegemonic masculinity (Bryson, 1994, Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Weiller & Higgs, 1999; Weiller, & Martin, 2003). As Gitlin stated, "The mass media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology" (1980, p. 2). Thus, critical discourse analysis can illuminate how dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity impact women's place in sport. Birrell and McDonald (2000) called for a deeper and more complicated analysis of common discourse, with a greater consideration of multiple sites of power. This study is significant because it uses a critical cultural studies lens in analyzing the mainstream public representations of sexism in the sports world.

Four U.S. newspapers representing different areas of the country (New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and the Dallas Morning News) and the USA Today were utilized for analysis. The coverage of three different negative incidents involving women in sports was analysed. The first involved a White female race car driver, Danica Patrick, and Formula One President Bernie Ecclestone. The second involved a Black female National Basketball Association (NBA) referee, Violet Palmer, and radio commentator Cedric Maxwell. The third involved Linda Vivas, a former volleyball coach at California State University, Fresno. The three incidents involved varying degrees of sexism. These three were chosen because they were the most highly reported stories over the past three years and thus, provided the most data.

In each of these three incidents, the mainstream media representations were considered both thematically and rhetorically (Birrell & McDonald, 2000). The researchers analyzed the accounts separately to determine emerging themes. After this initial analysis, individual interpretations of the data and dialogue among the researchers led to inter-subjective agreement on the emergent themes and their interpretations. Preliminary analysis revealed several themes.

The most dominant theme was silence. Although these three incidents contained clear examples of sexism, the mainstream media gave the incidents relatively little attention. This silence suggests both that sexism is pervasive still in sport and that it is so acceptable, open sexism calls for little comment. In fact, there existed a "taken for granted" aspect of the press coverage that sexism is a "natural" part of sport. While the press often reacts (appropriately) with indignation relative to racist events, such scrutiny was often absent from reports on these sexist events.

Another theme was a sexist media. The more "sexy" the object of sexism, the more coverage the media afforded the incident. Danica Patrick, a candidate for various website polls on the sexiest athlete in America, made better copy by virtue of her appearance than the less conventionally attractive Vivas and Palmer. Thus, even in reporting sexism, the press engaged in voyeurism of a sexually attractive athlete which has been found in other critical analyses of women's sports coverage (Cohen, 1993; Davis, 1997; Duncan & Messner, 1998; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane and Greendorfer, 1994; Messner et al., 2003).

Consistent minimized apologies was another theme. That is, when apologies were provided for the sexist comment, a limited version of the event was acknowledged and conditional phrases (e.g., "if I offended") were utilized. Such apologies are often used to suggest that anyone who finds the comments sexist are being too sensitive (Disch & Kane, 2000). While the press reported the apologies, the reports rarely commented on the disingenuous nature of the apology.

Further, in each case, the men making the comment generally held more social capital and more sporting power than the woman involved (e.g., a famous retired athlete serving as a broadcaster, the president of a sport organization, and an intercollegiate sport

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administrator). With the press engaging in the tactics described above, that power may remain unquestioned, and perhaps even more solidly affirmed (Bryson, 1987; Gitlin, 1980). Taken together, these themes provide evidence that the media continue to reinforce the hegemonic masculine construction of sport in America and reify traditional power dynamics in sport.

In the presentation, these themes will be further elucidated and verified. Additionally, results will be discussed relative to appropriate theoretical underpinnings in order to propose extensions to current theory. Finally, practical implications derived from the results will be forwarded along with suggestions for future research.