AFL Women’s: The Media Framing of a New Professional Sport League

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Introduction
Historically women’s sport has been absent from the sports section of the newspaper, and when it has appeared the athletes have often been sexualised and infantilised. However, a recent stream of research indicates that this might be changing. This paper explores media coverage of a unique context, the launch of the first elite women’s Australian Football League (AFL) in 2017. The men’s AFL is the most successful sporting code in Australia and the introduction of the women’s league provides a unique perspective on which to explore the media framing of the lead into this new professional sport league.

The league, to be known as AFL Women’s was launched in 2016 and will have teams from eight of the 16 AFL clubs: Adelaide, Brisbane Lions, Carlton, Collingwood, Fremantle, Greater Western Sydney, Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs. Each club will have 25 players, including two marquee players. The clubs were provided with the opportunity to nominate priority selection players and were also able to sign an additional two rookies who haven’t played football before. The clubs’ lists were completed at the AFL women’s draft in October 2016. Players in the national women's league will be part-time athletes and the first year of competition will be played in February-March 2017 with all games to be broadcast on television or via AFL.com.au.

Framing of Women’s Sport and Female Athletes
As Entman (1993: 52) noted, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text.” By invoking certain frames, media can select and highlight some issues or views, while relegating others. Historically women's sport and female athletes have been missing from the sports media agenda (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015), but when they are present coverage is likely to be framed in a way that trivialises women's sport. Fink (2014) noted that women's sport are likely to be gender-marked, infantilised, sexualised or feminised and generally presented as less-worthy than their male counterparts, in both the language used to describe them and a lower quality of production values. But recent research has also offered a counterpoint to these narratives, suggesting that while there may not be as much coverage of women's sport, there are different frames being invoked. While Cooky, Messner and Musto’s (2015) paper noted that the level of coverage of women's sport was at one of its lowest levels in their 25-year longitudinal study “we saw little if any insulting and humorously sexualized stories about women athletes in 2014.” In Australia, a recent study noted that female athletes were treated both verbally and visually as serious athletes who are very much in control of their emotions (Caple 2013, p. 127). In light of this research, this paper explores the way the female athletes of the new AFL league have been framed. This paper also takes cues from Bruce’s (2016) important article that suggests that it's no longer useful to use basic dichotomies to explore women in sport, (such as pretty versus powerful), and we will explore the coverage of the women’s AFL from this perspective.

Method
In 2016, AFL Women’s was officially launched, including bid development, announcement of the eight successful clubs, selection of marquee and second tier athlete allocations and the first female AFL draft. During this 12-month period the authors have collected print media articles from eight national newspapers, those with circulation over 100,000 in all states of Australia except Tasmania. These articles were collected via the Factiva online newspaper database using the search terms – AFL and women* for the time period from Jan 1 2016 continuing through to December 31 2016. Once all articles are checked and duplicates removed, PDFs for all articles are downloaded into NVivo software for analysis.

Concurrently with the collection of print media articles, media releases and reports from AFL.com (the league's official news source) were also downloaded into NVivo for analysis. All text, headlines and accompanying
photographs are currently being analysed. The data analysis for this project will be a hybrid inductive/deductive model (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The themes presented here will be arrived at through a systematic coding process, including a broad read through, a search for recurring concepts and patterns, and then a grouping together of recurring concepts and patterns into themes to make sense of the data and address the research aims of this project. Deductive coding was first undertaken for the following themes: 1) social outcomes (e.g. – gender equity) and 2) commercial outcomes (e.g. market expansion). In addition to identifying the overarching framing of the new league by the media, we also seek to identify how the media are framing the gender appropriateness of women’s AFL, being a traditionally male sport.

Findings
Initial findings from the first 10 months of the new league have found two clear narratives being presented by the media. In the lead up to the announcement of the eight successful clubs, and naming of marquee players, the framing of the league and its athletes has been largely gender neutral, with the women being described first and foremost as athletes, and images presenting them in training or playing clothing and action shots. There has remained a focus on their roles outside of football, however framed as athletes first.

After the announcement of the successful clubs in June 2016, this narrative has shifted to include a discussion of gender equity, particularly the substantial salary gap between the male and female AFL contracts. Although much of the media coverage remains focused on commercial outcomes, social media campaigns (#takeyourbootsoff) and opinion pieces alike have repositioned the AFL Women’s league as a space for gender equity.

Through looking at the text and images in media coverage of the new league we have initially found that although the athletes and clubs are being presented in commercial, and largely with an athletic identity, it appears that gender inequity will continue to be a secondary framing of both the athletes and the league. Findings and discussion from the complete 12-month data collection period will be presented at the conference.