

Women's Sports Coverage in Israel: Perception Versus Reality

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With a focus on the question of public interest, the study investigated editing considerations of women's sports coverage in written daily newspapers in Israel. To examine sports readers' views regarding the coverage of women in sports sections, and to compare them with the views of sports editorial boards, a representative survey was conducted among male and female readers of sports columns and among male and female sports writers responsible for coverage. The research findings indicate a lack of connection between the various ends of the media process. Although sports editors of the 3 biggest dailies in Israel claim that there is little interest in women's sports among sports column readers, the study found that public interest in women's sports is far from insignificant. In fact, newspaper consumers who read the sports column would like to see more extensive coverage of women's sports.

Keywords: gender, journalism, public interest

Sports are a broad economic and cultural phenomenon with an impact on all levels of society. Today sports take a central place in the social life of most societies around the world. Nevertheless, sports at the start of the second decade of the 21st century are still perceived, perhaps more than any other social institution, as a body that gives preference to men and refuses to accept women as an integral part of its institutions (Bernstein & Galily, 2008).

The media, whether only a reflection of social reality or a helping hand in its formation, give little coverage to women's sports, regarding them as secondary and marginal. Many studies that have examined and described women's status in sports in general, and in the sports media in particular, have found that the position of women as a subject of coverage in newspaper sports columns has remained trivial. The commonly accepted explanation for this has been readers' lack of interest in the subject. The coverage of women's sports in the few articles that are published focuses on personal and stereotypical aspects of female athletes, which only perpetuates their disadvantaged situation. Moreover, unlike the general feminization trend in the press, only the print sports press has remained under the complete control of male writers and editors (e.g., Knoppers & Elling, 2004).

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The aim of this study was to examine editing considerations in regard to sports coverage of women in daily newspaper sports sections in Israel's written press, by means of in-depth interviews conducted with sports column editors of the leading dailies, focusing on public interest in the subject. To examine sports readers' views regarding the coverage of women athletes in sports sections, and to compare them with the views accepted on sports editorial boards, a representative survey was conducted among male and female readers of sports sections, on the one hand, and among male and female sports writers responsible for coverage, on the other. Thus, we could then ascertain whether claims made by the written media regarding the lack of public interest in women's sports in Israel indeed characterize the sports-reading public's views and whether sports writers and their readers see eye to eye on the issue.

This study is based on the view that editors and journalists are the gatekeepers of the press, and it examines the impact of the media in shaping gender reality in the field of sports in Israel.

Sports as a Social Institution

Sports, which have always been perceived by many as a field of entertainment, or at most an economic factor, have turned in recent years into one of the most important mechanisms in human society and have become a highly significant social agent (Ben-Porat, 2006). Many studies have examined this issue and have found that sports serve a wide range of functions. They are an important educational tool, a central social agent, a significant instrument for social mobility, and an essential institution in the political arena (e.g., Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Lidor & Fejgin, 2004; Sorek, 2006a). Indicative of the strength of the sports institution is the fact that four out of the five largest international super-state organizations are sports organizations (for the sake of illustration, the UN is the one non-sport institution of the five; Galily, 2003). Economic interest in and surrounding sports is another major indication of sports' growing status in society. The astronomical salaries of sports stars, the sky-high price for the rights to broadcast sports events, and the meteoric development of sports tourism are only a few illustrations of this phenomenon.

A central discussion regarding the relations between sports and society, on one dimension, focuses on the question of whether sports eliminate discrimination between teams and identities or, on the contrary, heighten it. On another dimension, the issue of political power has come under focus, some arguing that sports are a sophisticated tool for oppression by those in power (Sorek, 2006b). Neo-Marxist approaches are identified with statements describing sports as a central arena for securing the control by the powerful (Brohm, 1975). The central argument is that sports have a political role: to create on one hand the illusion of false unity and, on the other, to develop a sense of equal opportunity and the chance for upward mobility on the social-status scale. Many believe that with the help of sports they can drastically change their economic level and their social position, although reality has proven otherwise (e.g., Eitzen, 1999). However, among researchers who praise the contribution of sports to enhancing many elements of social and political life, as well as those who criticize it by exposing sports' "genuine" functions, there is complete agreement regarding the tremendous impact sports have on all levels of

the population. If the substantial size of sports institutions and organizations is compounded, the criticism against the clear second place that women take in the world of sports can be better understood.

Women in the World of Sports

Discussion of the place women have in the world of sports is another important aspect of the dialogue on power relations in sports. Although sports blur local, ethnic, and national identities, they build and unify the male culture yet categorically leave women out (Burstyn, 1999). Because identities are shaped and modified in diverse social institutions and dialogues (Hall, 1996), sports have been associated with the shaping and building of gender identities. Since the foundation of modern sports, women have served a secondary role to the dominance of men, as in many other fields (Bernstein, 2002; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994). Sports and physical activity, perhaps more than any other social institution, have stood at the crux of prejudice in terms of women's abilities to engage in a field considered appropriate only for men. The main justification has always focused around women's physical weakness and concern for their health (Bernstein, 1997; Lemmer, 2000). Arguments in this vein range from concern for women's general weakness including an obsessive concern with their fertility to the danger of their developing male physical attributes (Ben-Porat, 2008). Such opinions commonly had their sources in male physicians who were unable to discriminate between medical facts and culture formation and thus contributed to maintaining the patriarchal social structure. Accordingly, women's participation in official competitions and international sports organizations was late to come. Female athletes were pushed to the margins as part of the process of maintaining male control in society (Bernstein, 2003; Diskin, 2002). Evidence of this can be found in the scanty budgets and secondary remunerations granted to women in sports. Today, an increase in the number of female athletes participating in competitive sports is apparent throughout the world (Darom, 2002). The most significant progress in women's participation in competitive sports and sports organizations in recent years has taken place in the United States. The main motive for change in the United States, besides the spread of feminism and general open-mindedness regarding the status and role of women, has been an amendment in the law known as Title IX, which has changed the face of American sports by means of redistributing financial resources (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). As a result of this law, the budgets for women's sports in educational institutions have grown tremendously and opened the door for many women to participate.

Women's Sports in Israel

The condition of women's sports in Israel, in terms of their representation and participation, is less developed than in the Western world. Ironically, the first significant achievements in Israeli sports were attained by female athletes—Esther Roth-Shachamorov, who was the first Israeli to reach the Olympic finals (Montreal 1976), and the judoka Yael Arad, who was Israel's first athlete to win an Olympic

medal (Barcelona 1992), as well as the standing of three female Israeli athletes (i.e., Shachar Pe'er, Anna Samashnova, and Tzipi Ovezler) in the ranks of the top 100 tennis players in the world. Nevertheless, there are still no balanced budgets for men and women in Israeli sports, and the representation of women in Israeli sports institutions remains unequal. Although many women engage in popular sports, and the number of women who engage in competitive sports accounts for 15% of all athletes, their representation among decision makers in sports management and unions accounts for less than 10% (Bernstein, 2002). Even in sports where the participation rate of girls and women is similar to that of boys and men (swimming, e.g.—some 44% of registrants are women) or higher (gymnastics, e.g.—some 82% are women), there is minimal representation or none at all in their management (Pilz-Burnstein, 2002). In the branch of swimming, for example, half the registrants today are women, but there are only three women on the 11-member board. A higher percentage of participants in gymnastics on apparatus (60%) and artistic gymnastics (100%) are women, yet there is only one female representative on the 11-member gymnastics board. The lack of female athletic role models in Israel is one of the major claims made by the media (Darom, 2002).

During the years 1993–1998, four government committees dealt with the issue of sports in the country, and all came to the same conclusion, that women's sports deserved greater attention. The committees presented a clear picture regarding budget distribution in sports and called for equal representation of women in sports institutions (Pilz-Burnstein, 2002). Although most of the committees' recommendations were not implemented, in 1994 one of the conclusions was executed when a Women's Sports Department was established in the Sports Administration. Among the department's aims were the recruitment of women in key positions in sports organizations, a balance in resource distribution to male and female sports, and the encouragement of athletic activity among women of all socioeconomic levels (Goldman, 2001). These institutional decisions were not acted on and the situation did not change; as a result a women's group with members from different fields was established: The Association for the Advancement of Women's Sports in Israel.

In 2004, an unprecedented Israeli Supreme Court ruling decreed that local authorities around the country must budget the cities' women's teams in the various sports branches at a rate of 150% in comparison with men's counterpart teams (Libio, 2004). This court ruling, in fact, adopts the American principle, although in effect it is not anchored by legislation or implemented in practice. It is important to note that the American law (Title IX) has been criticized for its responsibility in the closing of many sports departments in the United States that were unable to carry the burden of equal budgeting. Therefore, some argue that implementing the Supreme Court ruling in Israel will hinder local authorities' functioning and will force them to close entire sports clubs that serve significant economic, social, and political aims. In 2005, the government even drafted the National Program for Women's Sports in Israel, with the aim of developing women's sports in Israel and advancing gender equality. Eighty million New Israeli shekels, to be spread over 8 years, were allotted to realize the program's objectives (Trabelsi-Hadad, 2005). Two years later, no use had been made of the money and the program has yet to be realized.

The Media and Public Opinion

The development of mass communication since the mid-20th century has been accompanied by mounting research interest in the media's function and impact. The assumption has been that the media have the means to influence consumers' perception of reality. Some have argued, on one hand, that the media have a significant role in shaping public opinion, while on the other hand, the accepted claim has been that the media are no more than the mouthpiece of public opinion (Lavie, 2001). In the past 3 decades research conducted on the impact of the media has focused on agenda-setting theory and framing theory (Coleman & Banning, 2006), which to a large extent complement each other. Many studies (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972) have repeatedly validated the media's dominant role in shaping agenda. By giving extensive and prominent coverage to a certain subject, the media prioritize it in comparison with other subjects (Hayes, 2008). The media can thereby shape public discussion and set its limits by highlighting certain issues for the public (e.g., Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Media prominence is a function of the locus of the news item within the news sequence, its size or length, and the visual or affective components that catch consumers' attention (Muschert & Carr, 2006). The common assumption shared by readers and editors alike is that there is a link between the sequence and placement of news items and the amount of significance accorded to them.

The next step, in the same line of thinking, describes the impact on the public agenda. The media influence the standards to which publicly elected officials are examined and judged by the public (e.g., Kiouisis & Wu, 2008). This claim is emphasized by a process known in the sports arena as "priming." The wide coverage men's sports receive creates standards among public opinion that dictate that "real" sports are sports that emphasize physical contact and muscles. Thus, entire sports branches, usually artistic and aesthetic ones to which women have been directed in the first place, are "disqualified" (Bernstein, 2003; Daddario, 1997; Weiller, Higgs, & Greenleaf, 2004). However, beyond media coverage and the prominence given, or not given, to certain subjects or fields, how the media choose to emphasize certain words and create images is just as significant when shaping entire media frameworks (Entman, 2004). Such frameworks create a version of reality that triggers public dialogue and consequently public opinion. In this context, a clear distinction can be discerned between the framing that characterizes how women in the media are portrayed in general, and in the sports press in particular, and the accepted framing in regard to men.

Organizational Processes

The production of media content involves complex organizational activity, for which a wide range of professionals, who differ from one another on a large scale of variables, is responsible (Goren, 1993). Because professionals who work in media organizations influence what and how events are presented in the media, there is a great deal of interest in examining the factors that influence their decisions. The basic assumption is that there is a constant gap between the number of events the organization would like to report on and its actual capacity to do so. The considerations and criteria by which an event turns newsworthy must therefore be investigated. One direction focuses on the power of news editors to serve as the

gatekeepers who filter out news items, thereby determining their significance (Shoemaker, 1991). The filter conducted by the gatekeepers is influenced by the baggage of values that editors have accumulated throughout their personal experience, as well as by organizational norms, among others. Studies (e.g., Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2006) have shown that a major consideration of editors and journalists when deciding on a subject to cover is their assessment of public opinion or reader interest. Scholars (e.g., Hardin, 2005) have noted that a great deal of homogeneity is found among journalists' positions on various issues, which is indicative of the social and organizational processes that characterize the organization.

The feminization of media professions is one of the salient changes that have taken place in the structure of media organizations. Nevertheless, the significant increase in women members of the media does not apply to key positions in the field of communications. Major editorial and management positions have remained substantially under male control (Lavie, 2000). Among all the popular fields of coverage, the smallest number of women writers can be found in sports (Skwar, 1999). The number decreases to none when it comes to sports section editors. With that, studies indicate that if more women were involved in editorial positions, the subjects covered would not necessarily change accordingly (Shain, 1997).

The Image of Women in the Media

A significant amount of feminist criticism directed at the media is attributed to Betty Friedan's writings (e.g., Friedan, 1963). The meager representation of women in the media, with the emphasis on their domestic and sexual roles, has run parallel to media research in the West for decades (e.g., Bernstein, 1997). Most researchers (e.g., Bernstein, 2003) regard the media as a reflection of reality but point out and give emphasis to its role in reinforcing gaps and perceptions. Studies (e.g., Goodich-Abraham, 2000; Tuchman, 1978) that have examined the amount and time dedicated to women and their roles and form of presentation in the media have all found that the place of women has remained marginal in relation to the dominance of men. When the issue of the portrayal of women in the media is raised, several characteristics are repeatedly found: absence of women in comparison with the amount and time the media dedicate to men; emphasis on certain functions women are able to perform, or to which they are obligated—usually in the private sphere; and personal attributes that emphasize women's emotional and dependent qualities (Lemish, 2002). Expression of this can be found in all possible media contents (Bernstein, 1997), although publicity is undoubtedly the central arena for them (Gunter, 1995).

Studies that have focused on the image of women in the media and the implications of their contents on targeted audiences have emphasized the role of the media in framing and shaping gender identity (Tuchman, 1978). Problematic social phenomena such as sexual violence and eating disorders are almost always connected to the media and the manner that they present the sexes and relations between them (Gunter, 1995). Scholars (e.g., Huston et al., 1992) have noted that with the passage of time, this clear trend has slightly diminished in a few branches of the media. For example, women's portrayal in the press has become more significant, and more women are studying communications, a field they will later work in (e.g., Caspi & Limor, 1999; Lavie & Limor, 2003).

The Presentation of Women in Sports Media Sport experience and the “team spirit” that forms around watching sport, which are often portrayed as a complex social ceremony, have in most cases limited the range of enjoyment to a clearly male experience. Despite the increasing presence of women in the stands during big sport events, male dominance in sports stadiums during regular local-league sports competitions is still apparent. The atmosphere on the fields, the physical and verbal violence, and the dilapidated infrastructure in many of the older sports stadiums account for only part of the explanation, which is mainly related to wider culture and education aspects. To illustrate, football and basketball sports clubs and national leagues in Israel tend to market and sell membership and game tickets on the basis of father-and-son package deals, in a formal and subsidized format. The sports-broadcasting production process, the accompanying content, and commercials around them only strengthen the male constitution of the sports spectatorship experience (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). The fact that most sports fans watch games via the media does not change the overall picture in any significant way. The basic perception is that sports broadcasts are intended for male spectatorship, and this is the rationale underlying the cable-television-viewing package selection in Israel, which for a long time included a sports cable package called “the men’s package.”

In general, the literature indicates a certain improvement in the treatment and amount of women’s sports coverage in recent years. Nonetheless, it is still characterized by chauvinistic elements and does not reflect the increase and achievements in women’s sports. The accepted explanation for the phenomenon has been the lack of interest in women’s sports that the editors, or gatekeepers, ascribe to readers of the sports section. In a study conducted by Hardin (2005) on newspaper sports editorial boards in the southeast United States, 89% of editors were convinced that they had succeeded in meeting the interests of their readers in terms of women’s sports, but less than half the editors had used formal methodologies to examine reader interest.

In recent years many studies (e.g., Vincent, 2004; Von Der Lippe, 2002) on the field of women’s sports have focused on major sports events, mainly the Olympics (e.g., Bishop, 2003; Daddario, 1997; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Weiller et al., 2004). Like other media research, studies have focused on two directives—the first, the amount of time and space the media dedicate to women’s sports, and the second, the attitude toward women in sports. Most research attention has concentrated on American television. In terms of the extent of coverage, in the televised press a decrease in the gap between the amount of time dedicated to men’s sports and women’s sports coverage can be noted, as was the case in the last Olympic Games (Eastman & Billings, 1999). In Israel, Weingarten examined sports newspapers on a random week and found that women’s sports coverage amounted to 1% of the entire sports section of the daily *Ha’aretz*. In the dailies *Yediot Aharonot* and *Ma’ariv*, the numbers were even lower. Libio (2004) investigated photographs that appeared in the sports section and their contexts and found that *Ha’aretz* presented the most balanced picture, in terms of the connection between pictures of female athletes and nonathletes. As for coverage content, when broadcast contents are examined, several characteristics emerge that often undermine the importance of the increasing percentage of space and time in women’s sports coverage. First, there is a tendency in the media to focus on sports that are traditionally considered female (the “softer,” less physical sports branches; e.g., Jones et al., 1999). Moreover, a condescending tone is consistently taken by writers, who treat female athletes as

if they were children (Sabo & Curry Jansen, 1992). Other familiar phenomena are related to the media's treatment of female athletes as sexual objects (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994) and the emphasis placed on physical appearance (Jones et al., 1999). It is clear that the attempt to evaluate sports coverage of major events creates a certain illusion in regard to the real attitude of society and the media establishment toward women who engage in sports, as it is expressed in today's everyday reality. Another aspect is that during these top athletic events, additional editorial considerations are raised and emphasized, such as pride and nationalism (Harif, 2003), which change and slightly alter the face of the coverage.

Procedure

The meager coverage characterizing women's sports in the newspapers' sports sections raises, among other questions, the issue of public opinion on the subject. The aim of this study was to examine the relation between readers' positions on women's sports coverage and its extent in the written press in Israel and the positions of sports journalists and editors responsible for the structure of the sports section and its contents. To examine the perceptions of these two groups, we conducted a survey among a representative sample of the adult Jewish population in Israel (age 18 and above).¹ The sample included 302 sports section readers of varying age and gender. The survey participants were asked to rate the importance they award to women's sports and the interest they find in the sports section in general and in articles on women's sports in particular. In addition, they were asked to evaluate the space dedicated to women's sports in the sports section and their level of satisfaction with it. A filter question was given to the panel that discriminated between sports section readers and nonreaders, so that the sample in fact represents the adult Jewish sports section reader population in Israel. The survey findings were compared with the previously mentioned parallel survey that was conducted among 44 male and female sports journalists of the written press, in relation to the same questions.

The three central questions in the questionnaire attempted to examine the interest readers and writers find in women's sports, whether there is sufficient coverage of women's sports, and whether they would like to see wider coverage of women's sports in the newspaper. Besides demographic data, respondents were asked to answer questions regarding their reading habits and the extent of their interest and involvement in sports. The basic assumption was that the newspaper, being a commercial enterprise, would aim to meet its readers' demands as much as possible. We therefore hypothesized that a link would be found between the extent of coverage and the editorial board's assessment of the readers' interest on the same subject. Another hypothesis was that writers would tend to cover subjects in which they find an interest more than other subjects, and for this reason the position of journalists was examined.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with sports section editors of the three top dailies in Israel.² Besides information regarding policy on coverage of women's sports, the editors were asked questions on the methods they employed to gather information about their readers' preferences in terms of women's sports coverage. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of editorial considerations taken in sports sections of the daily press in Israel, with an emphasis on women's sports.

Hypotheses on Sports Section Readers' Interest in Women's Sports

The central assumption was that sports section readers would exhibit a positive attitude to women's sports. The growing presence of women in the world of sports, the extensive media coverage of women's sports in major sports events, female athletes' impressive achievements in a great number of sports branches, and the social and economic status of female superathletes who have made their mark in the sports arena have all laid the foundation for a positive attitude toward the field among sports section readers. We formed the following hypotheses:

1. Differences between men and women and their interest in women's sports would be identified. It was assumed that women's position would be more positive than men's position on the issue.

Professional occupation in sports would be directly related to the extent of interest in women's sports, with the assumption that those who engage in sports have greater exposure to women's efforts and professional qualities in the world of sports.

2. Readers' positions in relation to writers' positions: The inferior coverage women's sports receive in the written press is indicative of journalists' personal interest in the field. Sports writers' gender hegemony in the written press generates, for the most part, a closed male organizational atmosphere that feeds on itself and asserts journalists' attitudes to women's sports. The exclusive overlap between journalists and fans in the stadiums, especially in soccer, strengthens those positions held by journalists. The fact that most sports fans do not come to sports events in stadiums can widen the gap between readers and writers. Accordingly, it could be expected that sports writers' attitudes would be less favorable to women's sports than those of readers.

Female sports journalists' interest in women's sports would be less positive than female sports section readers, as part of their adoption of the editorial board's male code system.

Male sports journalists would express more satisfaction with the present coverage of women's sports in the sports section than readers would.

Sports section readers would ask to see more extensive coverage of women's sports than sports journalists would.

Findings

A gender distribution of sports section readers' attitudes toward women's sports coverage revealed that women had a mean score of 3.67 and men had a mean score of 3.26. The hypothesis that gender differences would be found among sports section readers of the written press in Israel, and their interest in women's sports, was tested using a *t* test for independent variables. The hypothesis was confirmed ($t = -2.236, p < .05$). The mean positive attitude toward women's sports coverage among women was significantly higher than men's ($SD = 1.53$ and 1.39 , respectively). However, it should be emphasized that both men and women who read the sports section expressed a positive attitude.

The positive attitude that was found to be more salient among women can be explained by the general perception of the female sisterhood shared by women. This bond ascribes to women a sense of identification with other women's struggles as part of a social group suffering from discrimination. It may also be that the difference expresses the participants' social willfulness; women understand they are expected to exhibit sisterhood, or at least empathy, toward discrimination against other women.

The hypothesis that there would be differences in the interest in women's sports as a result of athletic activity in formal frameworks (in the past or present) was tested using a *t* test. The hypothesis was confirmed ($t = 3.906, p < .01$) with an average score of 3.18 for those who had never formally engaged in sports and 3.88 for those who had. The results revealed that readers who were or had been active in formal sport frameworks had a significantly more positive attitude toward women's sports than those who have never formally engaged in sports ($SD = 1.5$ and 1.4 , respectively). The basic assumption is that engagement in a sports activity, in an unmediated form, can increase exposure to women's sports. Therefore, people who engage in sports activities can appreciate athletic qualities that characterize female sports, such as competitiveness and ambitiousness, that may not receive sufficient attention from the media.

An additional and separate test on the attitude to basic interest in women's sports was conducted by dividing the men and women who were engaged in formal sports frameworks. Significant differences were found among the women ($t = 2.972, p < .01$), with score of 3.43 for those who had never formally engaged in sports and 4.58 for those who had. The results indicate that women who engaged, or had engaged in the past, in sports within a formal sports association framework expressed greater interest in women's sports. A positive attitude, although lower, was also prominent among the group that did not engage, nor had engaged in the past, in sports ($SD = 1.67$ and 1.41 , respectively). To a large extent this finding reinforces the interview findings regarding sports journalism characteristics. Female journalists who were athletes in the past stated their commitment to women's sports, unlike other models who expressed the need for greater qualifications.

Differences along the same lines were found among men, when comparing between men who engaged, or had engaged in the past, in sports and those who did not or had never ($t = 3.127, p < .01$). The mean attitude on interest in women's sports was higher among men who engaged in sports ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.39$) than among those who did not ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.35$). It is important to note and emphasize that the mean in both groups lies in the upper half of the scale (1–5).

A test of attitude toward women's sports and its coverage was conducted among a sample of sports journalists. The aim was to measure precisely journalists' attitudes regarding interest in women's sports, based on the same variables tested among readers. Data analysis indicated clear differences in the main attitude held by the sample of readers and the sample of journalists. In other instances, similar tendencies can be identified, yet without significant differences. For example, readers had a mean score of 3.38 when asked about their interest in women's sports. This compared with the 3.09 average for journalists. Therefore, readers expressed a more positive attitude than sports journalists. Journalists' mean attitude indicates neutrality, and readers' attitude indicates a more positive attitude toward women's sports. A comparison between the attitudes of the sports section reader sample and

the sports journalist sample toward women’s sports was conducted using a *t* test for independent variables. An insignificant tendency attesting to a more positive attitude among the reading public, as opposed to journalists’ attitudes, was found. Therefore, the hypothesis was only partially confirmed. These results indicate the mean of the reader sample, 3.38 (1.44), as opposed to the mean of the journalist sample, 3.09 (1.20), *p* n.s., *t* = 1.352. It is possible that the lack of significant findings was a result of the sample size.

The mean attitude toward interest in women’s sports, according to professional distribution (journalists and readers) and according to gender distribution in each group, is presented in Figure 1. The figure indicates that in both samples, the position supporting more extensive coverage of women’s sports received a higher mean average among women than among men. The group of nonjournalist women showed the highest average. In contrast, the group of male journalists showed the lowest average and was the only group whose average position was negative in regard to the question on women’s sports coverage. It is worthwhile to note that the mean scores of all the groups taken together indicated a positive attitude, which is a score above the median on the 1–5 scale. Although significant differences were not found, the mean score of the male journalists group was salient, because it was the only one found at the lower half of the scale. In fact, it is this group that influences and shapes coverage.

To answer the question on satisfaction with women’s sports coverage as it is currently presented in sports sections, participants were divided by gender in the journalist and reader samples, which were examined separately by means of a *t* test for independent variables. Significant differences were found between men and women and between groups. Table 1 illustrates that the journalist group demonstrated the highest score in satisfaction in regard to women’s sports coverage in the sports section. On the other end of the scale lie the female readers, who expressed

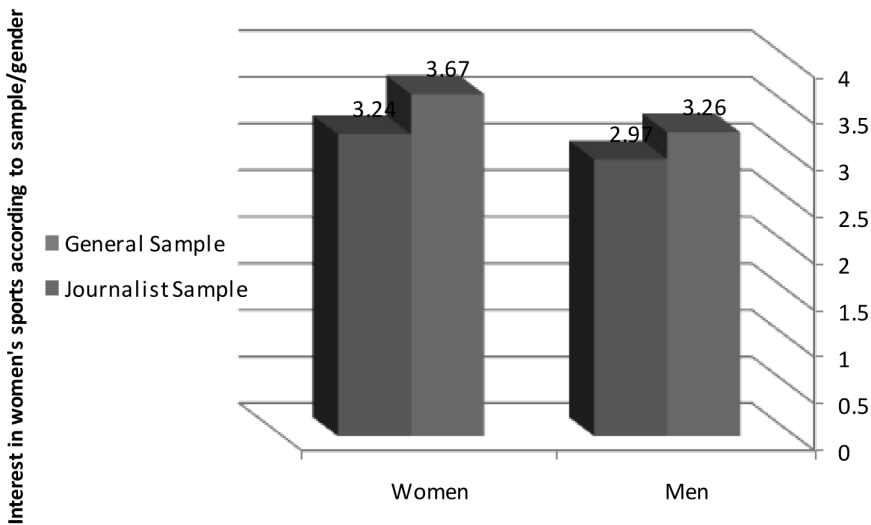


Figure 1 — Interest in women’s sports according to sample and gender.

significant misgivings regarding current women's sports coverage. Significant differences were also found between journalists and readers.

The research hypothesis was confirmed. Journalists are convinced of the lack of public interest in women's sports but readily admit to their meager coverage, believe they are meeting public demand, and, accordingly, express satisfaction with how the sports section addresses the issue. Among sports section readers a neutral mean attitude was found. This is not in contradiction to the positive attitudes expressed toward women's sports. Acceptance of the sports section as is, in terms of gender, could be related to various other mechanisms such as acceptance and internalization of the routine after so many years of limited coverage of women's sports. Another possible explanation is related to readers' sense of trust in journalists' judgment as taking into account a wide variety of considerations and data when determining coverage content. It is likely that the common perception that women's sports do not interest readers can also be found among the reading public. Therefore, although they themselves may find an interest in women's sports, they will not express complete lack of satisfaction with the sports section. The assumption that not many people find an interest in the subject apparently justifies the limited amount of coverage allocated to it.

Sports section readers and sports journalists were also asked about their desire to see more extensive coverage of women's sports. To answer this question, participants were again divided by gender and examined separately in the reader sample and the journalist sample by means of a *t* test for independent samples. The findings, as can be seen in Table 2, indicate significant differences between readers and journalists and between the men and women in each group.

Table 1 Scores of Satisfaction With Current Women's Sports Coverage in the Newspaper

Gender	Group				<i>t</i>
	Readers		Journalists		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Male	3.04 (<i>n</i> = 217)	1.36	3.81 (<i>n</i> = 37)	1.39	-3.243**
Female	2.79 (<i>n</i> = 85)	1.14	4.15 (<i>n</i> = 7)	0.99	-2.819**

***p* < .01.

Table 2 Scores of the Desire to See More Extensive Coverage of Women's Sports in the Newspaper

Gender	Group				<i>t</i>
	Readers		Journalists		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Male	3.35 (<i>n</i> = 217)	1.55	2.86 (<i>n</i> = 37)	1.40	-2.022*
Female	3.94 (<i>n</i> = 85)	1.57	2.46 (<i>n</i> = 7)	1.12	-2.663*

**p* < .05.

The research hypothesis was confirmed. It can be seen that readers, men as well as women, are interested in more extensive coverage of women's sports, unlike journalists, who are not interested in changing the status quo.

In general, an analysis of the attitudes survey demonstrates that unlike sports journalists' and editors' assessment, sports section readers have a significant interest in women's sports and would even prefer to see more extensive coverage of them. News producers, in effect, are expressing their personal opinion when they claim there is a lack of interest in women's sports in the newspaper. The position of women sports journalists is especially salient, because it is the most extreme in regard to satisfaction with current women's sports coverage in the newspaper and in the desire to extend existing coverage. This is in complete opposition to women readers' attitudes, who when answering the three questions (interest, satisfaction, and desire to increase coverage) presented a highly positive attitude to women's sports.

Discussion and Conclusions

It appears that editors' confidence in their knowledge of public opinion, as the survey indicates, does not stand the test of reality. This challenges their position as mere gatekeepers, as well as the media's position as a pure reflection of reality. In fact, editors' claims, and their resultant actions, reinforce opinions accepted by editorial boards more than reader preference does. The outcome is a vicious cycle that reconstructs and reproduces the "facts" regarding public interest in women's sports and the desire for wider coverage. On a different level, gender relations are shaped and primarily maintained (Acker, 1990). Knoppers and Elling (2004) combined the two ideas and claimed that public opinion and public desire can serve as a cover for conservative decision making that aims to preserve the hegemony. The two main findings of the survey point to significant differences between men and women and between journalists and readers in regard to women's sports coverage. From a professional aspect, we found that there is a significant difference between the positions of sports readers and sports writers in terms of their desire to see wider coverage of the subject in the press. Male and female readers alike expressed a greater desire than sports journalists for wider coverage of women's sports in the sports section. It is difficult to answer whether sports journalists formulate an opinion only after they arrive at the newspaper or whether the reverse is true and people with certain views end up at certain newspapers (out of consideration of a friendly work environment, ability to realize their visions, acceptance requirements, etc.).

The socialization process in an organization is complex, and new employees internalize gender misrepresentations in the new framework as part of the learning process at different stages (Lavie & Limor, 2003). The results of the current study lead to the conclusion that it is not attraction to sports (whether as a fan or as an athlete), with which sports writers are naturally identified, that is the factor influencing writers' attitudes toward women's sports but, rather, their work environment. However, the research data among sports section readers indicate that there is a positive link between readers' interest in women's sports and their athletic background. Those among the readers who reported that they had engaged in sports in the past or still engaged in sports (were registered at an organized sports union) showed more of an interest in women's sports than those who did not.

It can be argued, then, that in the triangular relationship between sports, society, and the media, sports media sharpen the distinction between gender identities in the way they treat women's sports and public opinion on the issue. The sense of confidence editors have that they are familiar with their reading public fails to be substantiated in reality, and in fact the newspaper reading public appears to be more of an "imagined community" model for journalists. The feeling that recurred in the interviews with editors, who declared they were familiar with the members of society and shared the same interests with them, to a certain extent is suggestive of the model developed by Anderson (1991) on national experience. However, unlike Anderson's description, by which unification around a national idea creates a sense of familiarity among members of the community, community consciousness is reduced to a small group of journalists, which then reflects on their work. Sports editors, in the name of the community and concern for its collective will, deal as little as possible with women's sports. The immediate significance derived from this sense of community and alleged familiarity of its members elucidates once again the fact that sports section editors of the written press in Israel have never empirically examined their readers' preferences in terms of gender. In most cases, sports section editorial boards have never examined their readers' preferences in other fields either, out of a sense of confidence in their familiarity with the community and understanding of its preferences.

On the surface, this incompatibility in the media flow process is surprising, especially when taking into account today's advanced commercial and marketing environment. A newspaper, as a commercial venture, should naturally be interested in increasing its exposure and, as a result, its income. It is therefore necessary to examine how such a disconnect is acceptable and why it does not harm the ongoing management of the newspaper. The first explanation is related to the fact that the sports section of the written dailies is only a part of the entire newspaper. Although the sports section in the written daily is a primary source of attraction for many newspaper readers (Rowe, 2007), it is not sold separately and its success as a separate product has not been substantiated. Although sports section editors are unaware of the findings, they assumed that the newspapers verified the general satisfaction of the readers with the newspaper as a whole, and with its separate sections. With that, it is difficult to assume that such a survey, if in fact one takes place, could concentrate on such focused questions. It should be emphasized that there is no contradiction between general satisfaction with the section and the desire to see more extensive coverage of women's sports. Women's sports account for only one area in a wide range of branches covered by the sports media, so the question of satisfaction depends on the relative importance with which the subject is regarded.

A second explanation is related to fanaticism in sports, the sports consumer culture, and the sports media within it. The common perception relates to sports enthusiasm in terms of addiction, which is almost uncontrollable (Gerdy, 2002). In most cases fans do not abandon the objects of their enthusiasm, even after disappointments and losses by the objects of their admiration. One expression of such boundless enthusiasm is the fans' obsessive consumption of information. In the same line of thought, it can be assumed that sports media consumers will continue to consume media contents even if they do not cover all their areas of interest, especially in light of the absence of an alternative. Content analysis of the sports section reveals the relative similarity between newspapers in regard to

women's sports coverage, so in this sense, sports fans cannot find a different arena for the subject. A third explanation, related to the first two, focuses on dominant perceptions toward women's sports. The question in regard to women's sports coverage barely touches the surface. When the question is raised, many voices express astonishment with the media's meager attention to the area, yet in general the subject is not taken into consideration as a central issue in the sports journalism work routine, or among the section's readers. Editors and many female journalists who were interviewed for the current study claimed, in response to the questions presented on the issue, that they "have never thought about it before" or "have never considered the matter until now." The cultural constructs in the field and in the media, which have expressed great respect for female athletes, have nevertheless prevented women's sports from becoming an integral part of the sports world. Accordingly, women's sports have not been perceived as either a central subject in the sports media or deserving of examination by journalists, editors, or readers in regard to their representation in the sports section.

The significant role the sports section plays in the male sports world places male sports branches and athletes at the center of interest among journalists. Similar to the media's "priming" process, the extensive preoccupation with men's sports also becomes the criterion for journalistic judgments according to which the quality of sports and the amount of interest in them are measured. In our discussions with sports section editors, the argument was raised that women who engage in sports tend to regard women's sports as their entire world and in accordance expect the media and the public to adopt a similar line of thinking. In the same vein, it can be claimed that journalists and editors alike, because of their almost exclusive preoccupation with men's sports, are captives of the concept dictating that "real" sports can be taken into account only if they apply within the range that the (male sports) field permits.

Either way, a widthwise survey of media flow, from the written press's sports section editorial boards to the section's readers, indicates a process of *constructing* reality on the basis of an *imagined* understanding of it. Sports section editors are convinced that in their coverage, from all gender aspects, they reflect reality and meet the demands of their readers. The fact that they function this way without any empirical examination of their readers' preferences is problematic in and of itself. Our findings indicate a disconnect between editorial boards' and media consumers' real desires and make the question of newspaper writers and editors as perpetrators of the existing situation more complex.

The gap between editors' assessment of their reading public and the public's actual perceptions spreads beyond the sports section. Media research in other areas has found a disconnect between editors' and readers' positions (Balas, 2003). However, the sense of confidence manifested by sports editors, even after public-interest data were presented to them, strengthens the communal sense that characterizes sports media. The central explanation to communal commentary apparently derives from the constant and physical contact between the sports fan community and journalists. Sports events occur frequently and on a regular basis and attract mass audiences to the stadiums. Team fans tend to return to the stadiums week after week (often by means of purchasing subscription tickets), and thus they create the illusion of a closed community that is familiar and predictable, with distinctive ceremonies and characteristics. In the alienated Western reality of our times, sports events have

remained an almost abnormal expression of the existence of a tangible and constant public space where differences and social gaps are blurred. The intensive presence in the stadiums and continuous contact with fans can give a false sense of familiarity with sports fans and their opinions. In fact, most sports fans do not come to the stadiums and prefer to act out their support through an intermediary, by means of the media (Beit-Levi, 2007). "Familiarity" with sports fans, which occurs mainly in the soccer stadium, does not reflect the wide range of existing voices and in fact only reinforces dominant perceptions regarding sports fans.

As for the gender composition of the survey, it appears that women, more than men, are not satisfied with the current coverage of women's sports in the sports section and would therefore like the newspapers to take a more active role in this field. Again, most scored in the upper half of the scale. That is, both men and women asked to see more coverage of women in the sports section. Differences lie, of course, in the measures. It is reasonable to assume that the differences lie in women's desire to be equal in the world of media and sports, as in other areas, where their presence has been inadequate for many years. Because the history of women's journey to athletic achievements has involved social and legal struggles, it may be that the elements of female identification with the struggles of the athletes have had a weighing influence on their position as expressed in the survey.

Because the survey was directed only at newspaper sports section readers, it may be that women who were filtered out at the selection question do not read the sports section because of the significant gender bias in it. In effect, the percentage of women who would like to see more extensive coverage of women's sports may be even greater than could be expressed in this sample.

A comparison of the professional group with the gender group revealed that within the female population there are significant differences regarding the wish to see more extensive coverage of women's sports in the newspaper. Women who read the sports section stated that they wanted the newspaper to provide significantly more space for women's sports, much more significantly than women involved in sports journalism. The immediate explanation for this finding is naturally related to the fact that the women reporters belong to the profession of sports journalism, and thus the distribution is similar to that between the journalists and readers. Moreover, this finding emphasizes the internalization of male values characterizing newspaper sports editorial boards by the few women who work in the field. An additional expression of the male nature of control of sports section editorial boards is the clear job distribution apparent in sports section editorial boards. According to the sports section editors, no more than four women work as sports writers at the three biggest daily newspapers in Israel. For the most part, the rest of the women can be found in various production positions. This job distribution is characteristic of other forms of media. Although a greater number of women can be found in them, they are often directed to clearly defined positions.

The research findings highlight the working environment as a significant factor in shaping attitudes toward women's sports. Among the male and female populations alike, the working environment has served as a type of barrier to moderate journalists' attitudes toward women's sports. In regard to questions about women's sports coverage, male and female journalists revealed negative attitudes, as opposed to male and female readers of the section. Beyond the disconnect between the organization and its target audience, the significance of the data is that sports journalism

creates a perception of reality and then projects values that delineate and delimit local identities on its employees and thus reinforces the existing power structures. Research focusing on the link between organizational components and gender aspects discriminates between organizational, professional, and gender identities. Although organizational identity expresses joint agreement between members of the organization regarding the essence and singularity of the organization (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998), with a framework of beliefs, values, and feelings constructed in various contexts and in a dynamic form (De Bruin, 2000), professional identity offers a wider framework. Professional identity is perceived as an all-encompassing moral, almost ideological, system that sprawls in a superorganizational form over many organizations under a professional umbrella. Thus, for example, professional media identity includes rules and practices in a cross-border fashion that apply to all of its organizations. The central rules of ethics and the persistence not to disclose sources illustrate this idea (Weaver, 1998). Professional identity, in fact, dictates standardization of journalistic writing, which naturally affects news content.

This is also one of the popular explanations of the considerable similarity in appearance and content of news stories. Findings of the current study can be examined in light of the claim made by Dutch media researcher Lisbet Van Zoonen, who argues that gender identity, like professional identity, is one of the components that make up general organizational identity, which creates a larger organizational atmosphere from all its parts (Van Zoonen, 1998). On the one hand gaps between writers and readers regarding women's sports can be easily discerned and accordingly ascribe to organizational identity much of the weight in adopting such a position on the subject. On the other hand, it is apparent that gender identity remains dominant, especially in defining attitudes. On questions regarding women's sports coverage, women, as readers and writers, positioned themselves on both ends of the scale. That is, both male and female sports section readers expressed the most positive attitudes toward women's sports, but female sports journalists held the least positive ones. This can be explained with what is called in feminist literature "Queen Bee." Women who have reached personal achievements in male systems, according to this theory, tend to avoid identification with women do not offer them assistance (Kamir, 2002). The desire to remain the only woman in the male arena is salient in most female sports journalists' perceptions. The fact that media products do not express gender differences intensifies the organizational atmosphere as a general ideational framework, which is in fact based on male perceptions and values. Realization of the organizational atmosphere can be expressed by an internalization of the values of its employees, whether in the recruitment and training processes or in the work routine, in formal or informal ways. The testimonies given in this study regarding recruitment and decision making in media organizations can indeed explain how the dominant male atmosphere is spread within sports systems.

On the basis of the study's findings, we can safely assume that women who adopt male perceptions to begin with make up the central core of female sports journalists. In accordance, many women who do not perceive reality from the same point of view do not see integrating themselves into sports media as a viable option. Herein lies the "Catch-22" of the link between organizational structure and the news product. The significance of a program for feminization processes can be accepted only when women with a set of values different from that of the organizational atmosphere integrate into the field, though the former avoid such

integration, mainly because of existing value gaps. This difficulty characterizes all areas of the media, although it is validated in sports journalism. It is not enough that women have entered this field of journalism. The problem is that the barriers set before women, even when transparent, are extremely high, because male values are so deeply entrenched in sports in general and in the sports media in particular as part of the physiological differences related to sports.

Summary

The study's findings point to an interesting picture that indicates a disconnect between the two ends of the communications process. Although sports section editors at the three biggest daily newspapers in Israel claim there is little public interest in women's sports, this study found that the public shows considerable interest in women's sports and would even like to have more extensive coverage of them in the newspapers. Even when differences between men and women were found in the extent of interest and public desire to see greater coverage of women's sports, scores still ranged in the upper half of the scale. That is, interest and desire to read about women's sports were greater than is currently accepted in the dailies. Significant differences were found between readers' positions and those of journalists on the same questions.

To a certain extent, we can conclude that the editors and journalists, or gatekeepers, who should be concerned about their readers' interest, have in fact locked the gate to open-mindedness regarding changes in public opinion. Experience in the professional world allows the gatekeepers to talk in terms of reflecting reality, without verifying facts or noticing that they are partners in shaping reality and reproducing gender relations in the sports world in general and in sports media in particular. The manner in which professional values have been engrained in the psyche of women who work in sports journalism is an indication of this situation. Women asked to see an increase in the women's sports coverage in the newspaper more than men. However, the gap between women and men among the newspaper readers was greater than the gap between women and men in the sports journalist group. This finding means that women in the newspaper system tend to identify with their profession more than with their gender.

Women's attempt to position themselves as a natural part of the sports world involves breaking a vicious cycle and requires a financial and education investment and striving for achievement and exposure. It appears that breaking the vicious cycle through the sports media will be extremely difficult as long as the gatekeepers continue to hold on to unverified truths.

Notes

1. The study was conducted by Panels Research, the Panels Ltd.'s research institute, which specializes in Internet surveys for the largest economy and media companies in the market. It was responsible for the 2009 election polls for Channel 2.
2. After the refusal of one of the dailies' sports editors to be interviewed, we conducted an interview with the assistant editor. All three editors asked to remain anonymous. Therefore, an editor mentioned in the study refers to one of the two daily sports column editors or the assistant editor of the third daily.

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