

# Journalism, Gender, Feminist Theory and News Reporting on the Australian Football League

## Abstract

This article reports on a review of selected theory and practice in sports journalism to determine if the prominence of female journalists reporting the news of a major sporting movement, and industry, the Australian Football League (AFL) could be attributed to a feminist response to the traditional domination of male values in the sports media complex.

The article reviews selected literature to establish that, on the evidence presented, male values have traditionally dominated the news. It then considers feminist theory and alternative feminist responses to the domination of male values in the newsroom. Consideration is also given to Australian research on the 'seriousness' of sports news and its coverage (or lack thereof) of more 'feminine' news values including human interest stories, stories about culture and those on serious social issues. Interviews with a select group of female journalists who write about the AFL for *The*

*Age* newspaper in Melbourne are recounted, with a focus on the journalists' work experiences.

The article concludes by drawing together the research findings to demonstrate that, although feminine news values are represented in only a small proportion of AFL news stories, there is evidence to suggest they are afforded a high degree of presentational prominence which reflects the needs and expectations of a female audience. It shows that female journalists do play a meaningful role in the AFL media and that, given the evidence presented, a feminist response to the traditional domination of male values in the sports media complex could indeed be applicable, and taking place.

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## Introduction

This article considers selected theory and practice in sports journalism, in Australia and overseas, to determine if the prominence of female journalists reporting the news of the Australian Football League (AFL), could be attributed to a feminist response to the traditional domination of male values in the sports media complex. It aims to answer this question by firstly, considering a view held by some that traditionally, male hegemony and male values have dominated the newsroom and specifically, the sports departments of the newsroom. A large body of mainly American literature (and empirical evidence) is available on this subject, some of which is reviewed and considered in this article. The purpose of the literature review is to establish that, on the evidence presented, and accepting that American newsrooms are representative of western newsrooms generally, male values have traditionally dominated the news.

Attention is given to feminist theory and the media. Three feminist responses to the domination of male values in the newsroom are considered – the liberal feminist, Marxist feminist and radical feminist responses. Each of the three categories of feminist media theory responds differently to a generally shared objective, which is to change the male-dominated structure of media organisations, to encourage the media to pay greater attention to women's issues and values, and to portray women in a more positive and respectful light.

The article then looks at some Australian research on the 'seriousness' of sports news and its coverage (or lack thereof) of 'feminine' news themes or values. This will draw on the literature and will include human interest stories, stories about culture and those on serious social issues. Both secondary and primary research results are used to demonstrate findings in this regard. Interviews with a select few female journalists who write news stories and feature articles on the AFL for *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne are recounted, with a focus on the journalists' experiences working in the sports department of the newsroom. The aim is to demonstrate to what extent 'feminine' news values are present but nevertheless under-represented in the sports news and more specifically, the AFL news.

The relevance of the research question is tested by considering the extent of the female audience for AFL news. In other words, should a domination of male values (and limited coverage of feminine news values) in the AFL media complex matter? Is there a female audience which could expect to want AFL news reported by females and from a female perspective? The latest statistics from the Australian Football League and other sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) are drawn upon to answer this important question before conclusions are drawn with respect to journalism, gender, feminist theory and news reporting on the AFL.

## The 'Symbolic Annihilation' of Women in the Newsroom

Hardin and Shain (2005) posit that sport has long been criticised for perpetuating or reinforcing male hegemony. That is, the 'natural' idea that men are more apt for and deserving of dominance in sport and (consequently) culture.

The frequent absence from and trivialisation of women in mass media, has been labelled 'symbolic annihilation', describing a public agenda that reports mainly men's activities, interests and experiences (Everbach, 2006). When female journalists enter male-dominated newsrooms, they become indoctrinated to accept 'masculine' news values as professional standards. In this schema, masculine news topics include politics, crime, finance and sports. 'Feminine' news values on the other hand include human interest stories, consumer news, culture and social policy (Everbach and Flournoy, 2007).

Some mass media scholars suggest female journalists view news differently from male journalists, and since women increased their newsroom presence in the 1970s, they have changed some definitions of news. As reported by Everbach and Flournoy (2007), research in the United States has shown that women's greater numbers in newsrooms coincided with an increase in stories addressing social problems, personalities and human interest.

However, as Everbach points out, the changing newsroom culture, meaning overall shared values, beliefs and expectations, has seen a slow struggle with

male interests continuing to dominate news values and shape workplace culture in the newsroom.

Everbach (2006) and Hardin and Shain (2005) infer that the ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women in the sports media complex is at least partially a function of the biases of the ‘gatekeepers’ of news, most of whom are middle-aged white males. As Everbach points out, “those who hold the reins of legitimised power have greater access to the mass media than other groups and therefore, are more likely to be quoted” (Everbach, 2006).

A 2005 study by Columbia University in the US found that 86% of stories on the front page of a newspaper’s sport section contained at least one male source. Only 14% cited a woman. The study found that, across all mediums – print, radio, television and online – the news of the day still largely comes from a male perspective (Project for Excellence in Journalism, Columbia University, 2005).

### **Alternative Feminist Responses to the Symbolic Annihilation of Women in the Newsroom**

Feminism is a belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes, and a movement organised around the conviction that biological sex should not be the pre-determinant factor shaping a person’s social identity or socio-political or economic rights.

Feminists overall maintain that the domination of male values in the newsroom (and therefore, in what is reported as ‘news’) can only be addressed by responding to the ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women (Everbach, 2006). This article considers three feminist responses – the liberal feminist response, the Marxist feminist response and the radical feminist response.

#### *The Liberal Feminist Response*

According to the liberal feminist movement, all people are created equal. Opportunity for women is limited by social constructs and stereotypes. The liberal feminist views liberation for women as the freedom to determine their

own social role and to compete with men on terms that are as equal as possible (Kensinger, 1997).

Liberal feminism emphasises the limitation of women’s life opportunities because of socialisation and social stereotypes. Liberal feminists strive to gain equality for women by entering male-dominated professional and social fields and obtaining the power roles traditionally held by men. Liberal feminism advocates that women and men are more alike than different and that women should take their place alongside men in society’s institutions (Hardin and Shain, 2005).

Liberal feminists assert that more women working in the sports media would lead to better coverage of female sports and of news stories that are of interest to a female audience, that is, stories addressing social problems, personalities and human interest (Hardin and Shain, 2005). Liberal feminists contend that employing more women in the sports news room will lead to greater coverage of stories of interest to women, and from a female perspective.

#### *The Marxist Feminist Response*

The Marxist feminist school of thought suggests that the primary source of female oppression is the capitalist economic system and the inferior position of women linked to the family structure within that system. While Marx did not specifically analyse women’s oppression, his work is considered to provide powerful tools that offer ways to get to the structure underlying women’s oppression (Laibman, 2005).

Marxist feminists believe that women’s subordination and oppression is caused by their economic dependence in the family and in the workforce. They suggest that women’s subjugation as unpaid domestic labourers and reproducers of the labour force (i.e. baby-makers) is necessary to maintain capitalist modes of production. “Capitalism relies upon the traditional structure of monogamy and the nuclear family to fulfil its economic potential” (Rafter and Nataliza, 1981). Marxist feminists argue that women must have equal participation in the economic production process and they should be paid for their domestic labour.

*The Radical Feminist Response*

Radical feminists believe that patriarchy, that is, the innate desire for men to dominate women, is responsible for the oppression of women. They argue that character differences arising from women's biology make women inherently different (and superior) to men.

During the third wave of feminism during the 1990s, many women were questioning the liberal feminist premise that women could have successful careers and families as many men do (Everbach and Flournoy, 2007). During the third wave of feminism, radical (or cultural) feminists argued that women were a separate cultural group from men, with different values and practices. As noted by Everbach and Flournoy, radical feminists argue that "women have their own 'standpoint' in a patriarchal society that emphasises male needs, desires and accomplishments". Furthermore, radical feminists contend that in the male-dominated world of journalism, women's needs often conflict with the demands of the newsroom.

Radical feminists do not seek equality within patriarchal power structures (as do liberal feminists) but instead aim to create separate women's-only communities and social spaces to shelter and nurture women's feminine traits.

According to Hardin and Shain (2005), radical and cultural feminists reason that a liberal feminist approach to addressing the domination of male values in the sports media complex ("add women and stir") is doomed for failure. Such an approach does not address the dominance of male values but instead assumes that women should aspire to patriarchal values such as competition, aggression and individualism. The Marxist feminist response is also considered to be inferior (by radical and liberal feminists alike) because the 'un-Marxist' practices of various states under Stalinist socialism have essentially failed to liberate women (Ferrier, C., 1991).

Radical feminists argue that the dominant system in the sports media complex devalues the female approach to the subject. Thus, they contend, the sports media complex as we know it must be 'overthrown' or dismantled.

**'Feminine' News Values and the 'Seriousness' of AFL News**

It is considered by some in the journalism industry that sports journalism is the 'toy department' of the news media. Sports journalism is not part of the 'serious news' because it is dedicated to fun and entertainment rather than the important functions of the 'fourth estate'. As a result it lacks the prestige of other fields of the news media like politics and finance.

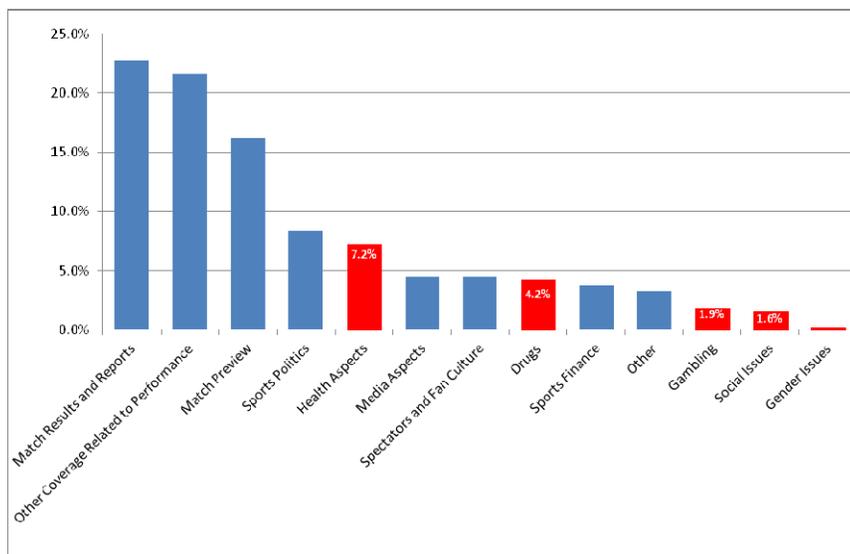
The 'toy department' jibe was considered by Rowe (2007) in an article which drew on data from the Australian component of the 2005 International Sports Press Survey (Schultz-Jorgensen). The survey looked at sports journalism's concerns with problems and social issues and the range of sources that it uses. Rowe, in assessing the Australian component of the 2005 International Sports Press Survey, found that only a small proportion of articles provided challenging, critical, socially responsible sports journalism (including 'feminine' news themes and interests).

Rowe asked the question, to what extent can sports journalism be adjudged to be engaged in the investigation, analysis and critique that is the most legitimate purpose of news culture, as well as to provide information and entertainment? In other words, is sports journalism concerned with 'seriousness' and 'quality' or is it predominantly focussed on 'superficiality' and 'trivia'?

Rowe looked at a mix of sports articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and compared that to an Australian average as represented by four newspapers, being the SMH, *The Australian*, *The Herald Sun* and the *West Australian*. A total of 1,131 articles were considered across the four newspapers. Figure 1 illustrates the findings of the survey of Australian newspapers as reported by Rowe. It shows that only a small proportion of sports news stories were concerned with 'hard' social / cultural issues, the majority being focussed on:

- Match results and reports (23%);
- Other coverage related to performance (22%); and
- Match previews (16%).

**Figure 1** Articles by Category (%) in the Sports Pages of Selected Australian Newspapers\*, 2005



\* Selected newspapers include the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Herald Sun* and *The West Australian*

Source: International Sports Press Survey (2005) in Rowe, D. (2007)

A short study was carried out by this author, following Rowe. After 60 AFL news articles in *The Age* were observed over the course of one week, it was revealed that, as in Rowe's findings, the majority of articles were concerned with:

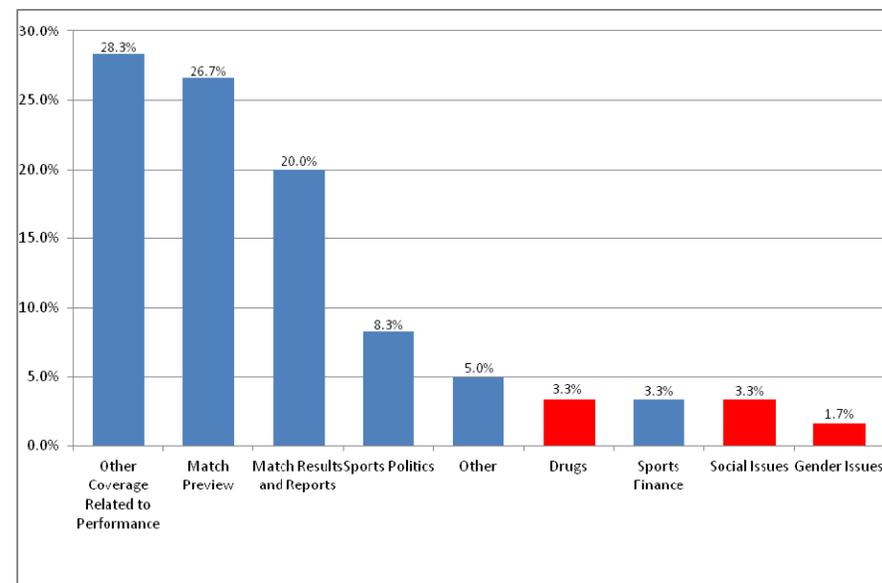
- Other coverage related to performance (e.g. individual player or team performance and expectations) (28%);
- Match previews (27%); and
- Match results and reports (20%).

Rowe concludes that most sports journalism concentrates on anticipating, describing and reflecting on sports events, largely avoiding problematic

social issues. A limited assessment of AFL news reporting in *The Age* over the course of a week supports this finding. Only 8% of articles in *The Age* covered important social / cultural issues, i.e. drugs, Indigenous issues and gender issues. That is despite the widely acknowledged presence of such issues in the sports news agenda. However, articles on important social issues were afforded a high degree of what Rowe calls 'presentational prominence'.

An example is provided by an article from the Thursday 8th April 2010 edition of *The Age* which features Indigenous Essendon footballer Andrew Lovett-Murray. This was the lead article and featured as the main spread in the Thursday sport section. While the article, by Martin Flanagan (a male), looked at Lovett-Murray's development as an on-field leader at Essendon, it drew important parallels with his life experiences as an Indigenous Australian, touching on a range of subjects including Indigenous history and the impact of white settlement in Australia, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, Indigenous culture, Indigenous health and education.

**Figure 2** AFL Articles by Category (%) in the Sports Pages of *The Age*, April 8 to 12, 2010\*



\* Only AFL-related stories were considered. No other Australian Rules Football Leagues (such as the VFL, QAFL, Victorian Amateurs, suburban leagues, etc.) were considered, nor were any other sports.

Source: *The Age*, April 8 – 12, 2010 with interpretations by S. Lennon, April 2010

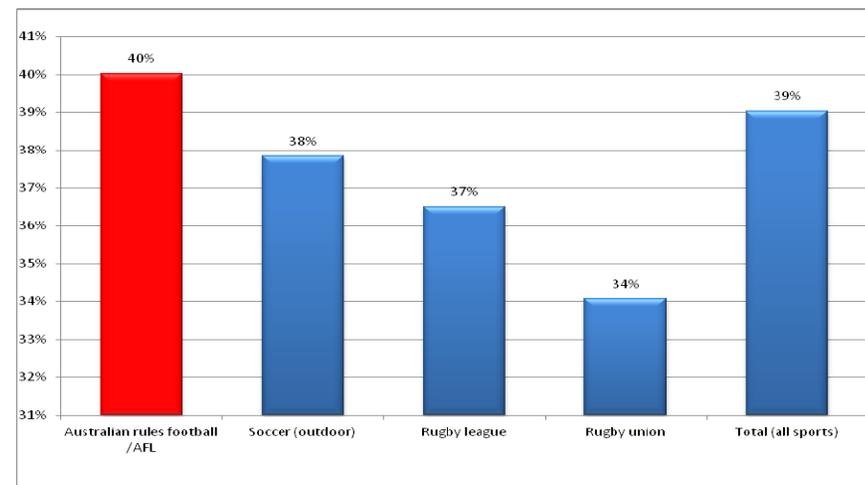
A question arising then is, if news reporting of the AFL is dominated by male values and a male perspective, should it matter? In other words, is there a female audience that is looking for AFL news reporting from a female perspective, covering 'feminine' news values?

#### What Women Want - Is there a Female Audience for AFL News?

The question of whether or not there is a female audience for AFL news can, at least in part be answered by data on the participation of women as spectators of the game in general. While no data is readily available on the audience for AFL news stories in print or other news media, data is available on female attendance at AFL matches, the female television audience for AFL matches and the number of female AFL club members.

Data from the Sports Attendance Survey of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) shows that, compared to other football codes, Australian Rules football compares very favourably to other codes in terms of the proportion of attendees at events who are female. Figure 3 shows that females account for 40% of spectators at Australian Rules Football events compared to 38% for soccer, 37% for rugby league and 34% for rugby union. When all categories of sporting events are considered (i.e. all sports in addition to football codes), female attendance at Australian Rules Football games as a percentage of total attendance marginally exceeds the average of 39% for all sports.

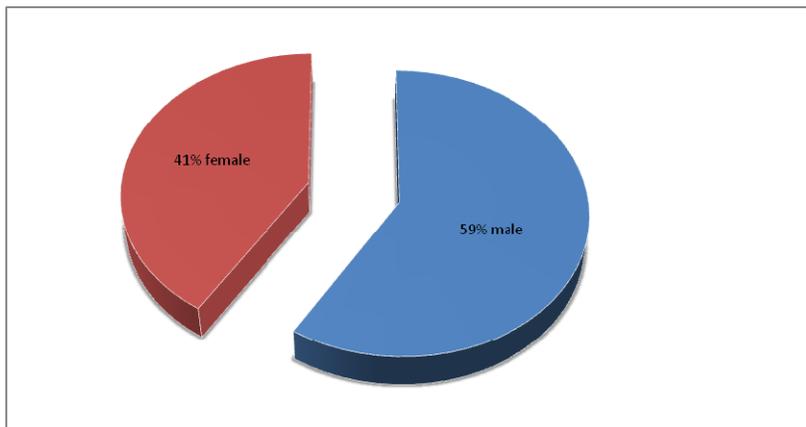
**Figure 3** *Female Attendance at Sporting Events by Major Football Code as a % of Total Attendance by Code, Australia, 2005/06*



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 (cat. no. 4174.0)

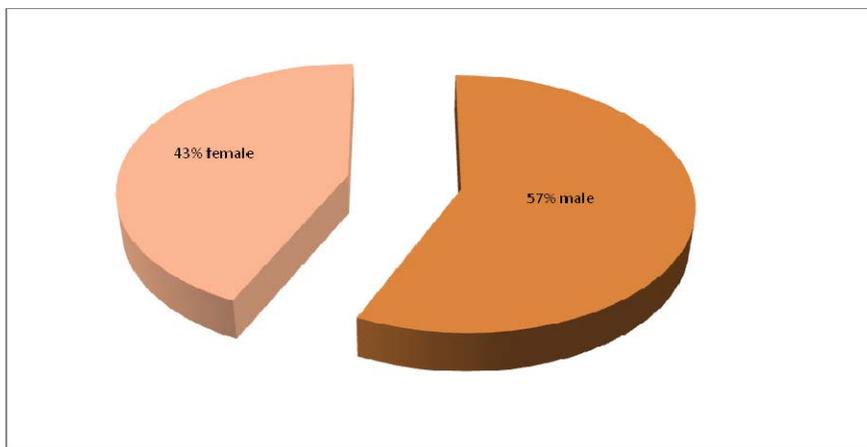
AFL data shows that: 41% of AFL match day attendees are female; 43% of the AFL television audience is female; and 40% of AFL club members are female (Australian Football League, 2009).

**Figure 4** *AFL Game Day Attendance by Sex, 2009*



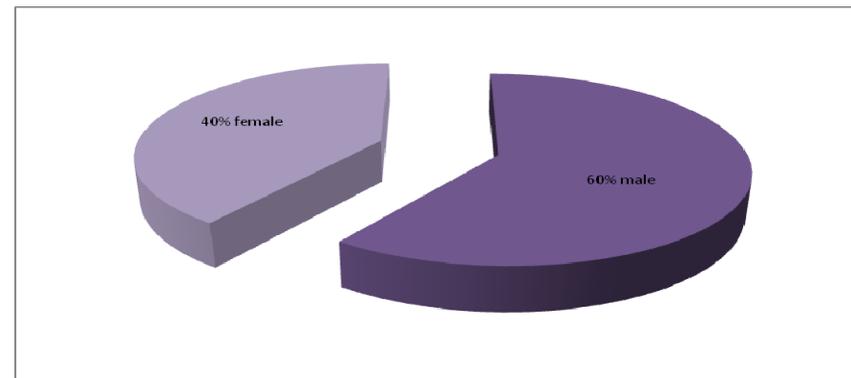
Source: Australian Football League, 2009

**Figure 5** AFL Television Audience by Sex, 2009



Source: Australian Football League, 2009

**Figure 6** AFL Club Membership Numbers by Sex, 2009



Source: Australian Football League, 2009

It could be assumed that such a healthy number of female spectators at AFL matches (and at amateur Australian Rules football matches), plus the high proportion of AFL club members who are female, would support a consumer demand for football news from a female perspective.

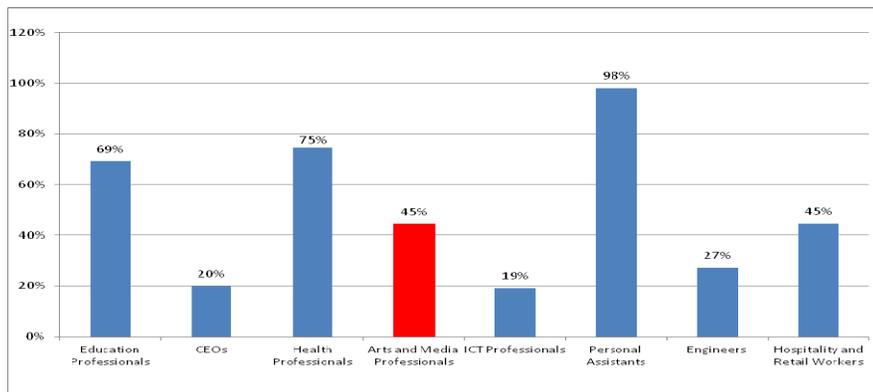
### Women Kicking Goals – the Reflections of Female Journalists at ‘*The Age*’ Newspaper

At face value, it would appear that the number of females reporting the AFL news today is far greater than that of two decades ago. *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne (which is the heartland of Australian Rules football) employs a number of female staff who report on the AFL and sport in general and its chief football writer is a female. The other major metropolitan newspaper in Melbourne, the *Herald Sun*, also employs a number of female journalists who report on the AFL.

The greater prominence of female journalists in the AFL is spreading to other mediums too. In 2009, AFL fans witnessed the first AFL match telecast (on Channel 10 and One HD) to be called by a female, Kelli Underwood. ABS data on employment by occupation from the latest Census shows that, compared to selected other major occupational categories, females account

for a significant share (45%) of arts and media professionals, including journalists (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7** Females as a % of Total Employment, Selected Occupational Categories, Australia, 2006



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2006

However, there is plenty of evidence in the print media, online and on talk-back radio to suggest that not everyone in the game accepts the greater involvement of women in the AFL and in particular, AFL reporting. For example, prominent Fox Sports AFL commentator Danny Frawley has suggested (while calling a match) that female journalists should “get home and wash the dishes” (Wilson, R. 2007). Nevertheless, there is enough anecdotal evidence (from reading and viewing AFL news on a regular basis) to suggest that a biased and demeaning view towards female AFL journalists is not a common one (or at least, it is not a view commonly expressed).

Two female journalists from *The Age*, Emma Quayle and Linda Pearce, were interviewed by this author in 2010 to discuss their experiences reporting AFL news. While both Melbourne metropolitan newspapers (*The Age* and the *Herald Sun*) offer extensive AFL news coverage, *The Age* is considered more likely to offer a greater diversity of AFL news stories, including coverage of cultural issues, social issues and human interest stories (the feminine news

themes). A preliminary scan of both Melbourne metropolitan newspapers also showed *The Age* to have more female journalists reporting AFL news. Of the 24 reporters/writers/editors working in the sports department of *The Age*, six (25%) were female (www.theage.com.au, viewed 27th May 2010).

Each journalist interviewed spoke about a range of topics including: length of time working as a sports journalist covering AFL news; their thoughts on whether or not there has been a notable change in the participation of women as journalists reporting AFL news; and expectations regarding the evolving role of female journalists in AFL news reporting in future.

The journalists who were interviewed summarised their experiences working in what is often perceived to be a male dominated industry (Emma Quayle, personal correspondence, 25th March 2010; Linda Pearce, personal correspondence, 12th April 2010). Both said there are more female reporters working in print than other mediums. There were no real barriers to entry to the sports journalism industry, but as a female reporter, each felt that it took them longer than their male counterparts to get people’s confidence, including football players, coaching staff and colleagues in their industry. Both considered that they were well-mentored as young journalists, by senior male and female journalists alike.

Both said the sports newsroom is a far more welcoming environment for women than it used to be, say 20 years ago. Both cited the chief football writer at *The Age*, Caroline Wilson as being a ‘trailblazer’ and role model for many other young female journalists. In 1982, at The Herald newspaper in Melbourne, Wilson became the first woman to cover Australian Rules Football. There was a certain degree of tokenism associated with the employment of female sports reporters early on (in the 1980s and early 1990s) but today female journalists are far more prevalent (and prominent).

Both journalists interviewed said the role of women reporting AFL news, as commentators on the game and as well as in other roles in the AFL (administrators and trainers for example) will increase in the foreseeable future. Both consider that the principal reason for the acceptance of female journalists in the AFL community has been general social and/or cultural change that has gradually taken place over the last 20 to 30 years.

Both journalists also spoke of the important role that the AFL Board and Executive play through its policies and programs promoting the involvement of women in the AFL. An example can be found on a page on the AFL's web site called 'Women and Girls Making a Mark', which is designed to highlight and celebrate the significant role women and girls play in Australian Rules football. The AFL states its commitment to providing information and pathways for women and girls to be involved in the game of Australian Rules football. Its website includes profiles of women in the AFL, to celebrate the achievements of high profile women contributing to the success of Australian football. It also includes information on the League's Respect and Responsibility policy, which represents the AFL's "commitment to addressing violence against women and to work towards creating safe, supportive and inclusive environments for women and girls across the football industry as well as the broader community" ([www.afl.com.au/respect](http://www.afl.com.au/respect)).

Based on the research, it is considered that such a supportive governance framework as that provided by the AFL for women has positive ramifications for the role of female journalists in the game, today and in future.

## Conclusion

In determining whether or not the level of prominence of female journalists reporting the news of the AFL can be attributed to a feminist response to the traditional domination of male values in the sports media complex, a number of considerations are made. Reporting on sporting events is the primary role of sports journalism (it is what people want and expect). The AFL is no different. This does not discount the opportunity for sports journalists to engage in quality journalism and news writing on the subject of the AFL. 'Feminine' news subjects (social, cultural and human interest stories) are covered in the AFL news. These stories often have significant 'presentational prominence' and they are often written by females.

Serious AFL journalism is evident with a number of prominent articles offering critical and insightful analysis of an assortment of matters, including social and cultural issues (the 'feminine' news topics) as they intertwine with

Australian Rules football. Female journalists are active, accomplished and generally accepted members of the AFL fraternity. The standing of women in the AFL media has not required a social or cultural upheaval. It has resulted from gradual social 'evolution' rather than a 'revolution'.

Although feminine news values are represented in only a small proportion of AFL news stories, there is evidence to suggest they are afforded a level of prominence reflecting the needs and expectations of a female audience (and an interested AFL news audience generally). It shows that female journalists do play a meaningful role in the AFL media and that, given the evidence presented, a feminist response to the traditional domination of male values in the sports media complex could indeed be applied. With this adaptability, considering the prominent role of female journalists in the AFL; of the three strands of feminist theory referred to, the liberal feminist response is the most applicable here. However considering such indicators as the overall dominance of "masculine" forms of news coverage, it appears that despite the gains made over the last few decades, there may still be some way to go.

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[www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), viewed May 27, 2010

### Interviews

Emma Quayle, March 25, 2010

Linda Pearce, April 12, 2010

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Sasha Lennon, originally from Melbourne, has a keen interest in Australian Rules football (AFL), and is a regular contributor to *The Footy Almanac*, an annual publication which gives a game-by-game account of the AFL season written by the fans. He is also published in *Footy Town*, a collection of football stories from around Australia. He is working on a series of magazine features, specifically about former AFL players and their reflections on ups and downs of a football career -- including 'missing out' on the ultimate prize of an AFL Premiership. Sasha Lennon has completed (2013) a Master of Journalism degree at the Queensland University of Technology, in Brisbane.