A new sporting horizon: a content analysis of Super Netball newspaper coverage

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A new sporting horizon: a content analysis of Super Netball newspaper coverage

Abstract

A new professional netball competition in 2017 was part of a long-awaited boost for women’s sport in Australia. Netball has a significant footprint across the country, being the nation’s largest female participation team sport, and the national team is the reigning world champion. However, the sport has traditionally been under-represented in both sports media and academic research. The new league was scheduled on free-to-air television after a landmark broadcast deal and the rise in media coverage reflected the growing commercial and public interest in female sport. As an example of this changing environment, it is important to examine what the coverage of women’s netball involves. This descriptive study utilises a content analysis to explore the newspaper sports reporting of the first season of the Super Netball League. Specifically, it measures the amount and tone of coverage, the types of stories, and descriptions employed in articles, including mentions of men’s sport. Data has been collected from 703 articles from 15,335 stories in newspaper sports sections of nine national, metropolitan and regional publications. While newspaper coverage of netball was comparable with other sports in terms of professionalism and content, there was still only a small amount of stories.

Keywords: women’s sport, netball, sports media, sports journalism, content analysis

The inaugural season for the Suncorp Super Netball League in Australia was part of a changing landscape for women’s sport in 2017. Netball, which has been played competitively since the early 1900s (Burroughs & Nauright, 2000), is the nation’s largest female participation team sport (Netball Australia, 2016; Vann, Woodward & Bruns, 2015), with up to 1.2 million participants (AusPlay Survey 2016; Pippos, 2017). Australia is also successful at an international level, with the national team the reigning World Cup champion. Despite
the popularity of sports such as netball, there has been a great disparity in the amount of broadcast coverage and media reporting on women’s sport, both in Australia and overseas (French, 2013; Jones, 2005; Phillips, 1997; Lumby et al., 2010). While national championship matches were contested as far back as 1928, netball has been largely absent from broadcast coverage, which began on the ABC with the Mobil Super League in 1991 and continued until 2006 (Netball Australia, 2018; Taylor, 2001b). The ANZ Championship, which began in 2007 and involved domestic franchises from Australia and New Zealand, was broadcast predominantly on subscription television. In 2017, the Suncorp Super Netball League started in Australia, with a new deal in which Nine paid for the free-to-air rights and Telstra TV televised the remaining matches online. Netball Australia chief executive Kate Palmer described the deal as “the most significant broadcasting rights agreement in the history of Australian women’s sport” (Super Netball, 2016).

The new competition ensured female professional athletes were provided with a stage to display skills that had often been pushed to the background in media – or shut off completely (see Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013; Jones, 2005; Phillips, 1997; McLachlan, 2016; Taylor, 2001a). Eight teams, including three new franchises, were in the competition, which was won by Sunshine Coast Lightning. In this new environment – which was occurring at the same time as the inaugural Australian Football League Women’s competition and slightly more established female cricket and soccer tournaments – stadiums were sold out and matches were shown live in prime time, including on free-to-air television and online streams, and commented on across social media. Television figures averaged 447,000 for the grand final coverage on Nine (2017), which stated more than 4.7 million people watched matches across the season. Crowd figures averaged 4200 for the regular rounds (Delahunty, 2017). While newspapers have experienced falling circulation, netball coverage in these media outlets was also visible, reflecting the growing commercial and public interest in
female sport. Newspapers were attracting more than 7.5 million print readers per week in Australia in 2017 (Roy Morgan 2018a), including older readers (see Watkins et al., 2017). Further, many print stories are also included on the newspapers’ online publications, increasing their cross-platform reach to more than 15 million people a week (Roy Morgan 2018a). These figures highlight the continued importance of scholarship into a women’s sport such as netball in these publications.

In this media environment, it is therefore relevant to examine what the coverage of women’s sport involves, through the reporting of the 2017 Super Netball season. Did the newspaper articles reflect the professionalism of the sport (Caple, Greenwood & Lumby, 2011; Lumby, Caple & Greenwood, 2010; Sherwood et al., 2017)? Or did they contain the historically dismissive and patronising elements that have been a feature of women’s sports coverage (Fink, 1998, 2015; Senate Inquiry, 2006; Kane, Lavoi & Fink, 2013)? Utilising a content analysis of nine Australian newspapers, this descriptive pilot study examines the reporting of netball, including a specific focus on the inaugural Super Netball season in 2017, to provide insight into women’s sport, as well as suggestions for future sports reporting. A total of 703 articles were collected from 15,335 stories in the newspaper sports sections to provide an understanding of the amount, prominence and tone of coverage, the types of stories, and descriptions employed. The results also allow for comparisons with traditional, male-dominated media coverage. Crucially, this study builds on previous scholarship into women’s sport by examining a complete season of a single female sport, providing an updated analysis of coverage in this section of the media. As a result, this study provides a valuable contribution to scholarship in women’s sport and netball.
Media coverage of women’s sport

Netball has often been neglected in both media coverage and academic research. McLachlan (2016) states that despite its popularity and recognition as the national sport for Australian females (see Pippos, 2017), it is a silent game in the country’s sporting history. While McLachlan outlines how netball has not received significant scholarly attention, recent work has been undertaken on the sport’s social media coverage (see Vann, 2014; Vann et al., 2015). Similar themes are evident in historical media coverage of netball – and women’s sport in general. Cooky et al. (2013) note that long-standing trends in research on gender in sports media include the lack of coverage of women’s sport in comparison with men’s sport, and the lack of respectful, serious coverage. In Australia, for example, it has been found that horse racing received more airtime in television news than female sport, highlighting the marginal status of women in sports coverage (Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010; North, 2012). Historically, scholars have also recognised the struggle to gain greater – or even regular – media coverage of women’s sport (Burroughs & Nauright, 2000; Phillips, 1997; Taylor, 2001a).

North (2012) outlines how various studies, typically using content analysis, have found that women’s sports are under-represented in the sports media and largely framed as less exciting and less newsworthy than men’s sports. In journalism, news values can be employed to determine whether a story is of interest to the audience (see Brighton & Foy, 2007; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). Previous research into women’s sport has reflected the newsroom perception that it is not considered newsworthy, or less worthy than male sport (see Jones, 2005). In an international content analysis, Schultz-Jorgensen (2005) concluded that men’s sports were the focus in 86% of sports coverage. Scholarship into newspaper reporting of women’s sport in Australia reveals an increase from 2% in 1980 to 10.7% in 1996 (Phillips, 1997). Paterson and Matzelle (2014) found coverage of women’s sport in print in Australia was between 5%
and 7% of total coverage in 2013 and 2014. Importantly, Sherry, Osborne and Nicholson (2016) noted women’s sport in Australia was still under-represented, with a decline in the proportion of coverage from 1996 until 2015 across all media platforms. Coverage of female sport has been found to appear in the middle of the week, when there is less men’s sport, and in less prominent positions (Phillips, 1997; Senate Inquiry, 2006). However, many of these findings are dated, particularly in a media environment experiencing expansion in social and online media. This means further scholarship into female sport in traditional forms of media remains relevant in order to investigate whether the situation has changed.

The figures for female sport in Australia are in contrast to print reporting of rugby league, Australian rules football and horse racing. In separate studies, each of these sports was shown to gain at least 10% of newspaper sports coverage in the nation (English, 2014; Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005; see also Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010). These amounts occur despite the prominence of women’s sport increasing, including in netball (Netball Australia, 2016; Pippos, 2017). More recently in Australia it has been found by Sherwood et al. (2017) that coverage of women’s sport has been more readily accepted in newspaper newsrooms. They argue this is because it is a routinized and newsworthy part of sports journalism that is of interest to readers. Further, they outline how reporters have been assigned specifically to the rounds of women’s sports. Earlier research in Australia found a considerably smaller number of journalists reported on women’s sports (Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010). In Australian sports newsrooms, female journalists represented less than 12% of respondents in two large-scale studies (Henningham, 1995; Nicholson, Zion & Lowden, 2011). Hardin (2013: 242) is one of many to note the lack of progress in diversifying sports media, concluding women have “not been able to reach critical mass in any area” of sports journalism or sports information. These factors contribute to the importance of examining the
amount and types of stories – and who is reporting them – during the first season of the Super Netball competition.

While the proportion of sports content focusing on women has been low, research has also examined what is included in the coverage when it appears. Fink (1998) states reporting on women’s sport can involve the media focusing not on a woman’s athletic skills, but on her as a wife, mother, or feminine role model. A Senate Inquiry (2006: 97-104) in Australia noted the entrenched sexism and lack of balance in media coverage of sport. A submission from ACTSport argues netball is easy for the media to report on because “it epitomises the ultimate in the feminine, non-threatening aspects of sport” in that it is “played by women, for women” wearing skirts. Fink (2015) and Kane et al. (2013) have recognised the continued coverage of femininity and different treatment of women’s sport in the media that is considerably different to men’s sport, which often focus on aspects of tactics, analysis, or injuries. However, Lumby et al. (2010) have found the tone of reports about women and their sports in Australia has improved. They also state there has been a movement away from reporting on non-sport related issues, such as family, or focus on a women’s roles other than an as athlete. When non-sport related issues were reported, they considered it to be for the benefit of increasing female interest in sport. Caple et al. (2011) conclude the Australian media are accustomed to presenting women’s sport in a professional and favourable tone, which links with the earlier comments of Sherwood et al. (2017) in relation to coverage being routinized in sports newsrooms. However, Fink (2015) argues both female athletes and women’s sport in general have a long way to go to gain equal treatment from the sport media.

In netball-focused research, Vann (2014; Vann et al., 2015) examined the sport, and the ANZ Championship specifically, in relation to sports organisations and audience usage of social media. Vann et al. (2015) found through a Twitter study that these micro-blogging activities could supplement coverage in mainstream media. Vann (2014) concludes social media is a
positive influence in a sport often overlooked by traditional media, and has created changes in the way the sport has been consumed. However, while social media is an important factor in contemporary coverage and the broader media ecology of sport, including through increasing exposure, it has not replaced traditional media, such as newspapers, which continue to have significant numbers of readers across their platforms (Roy Morgan 2018a, b). Vann (2014) also notes the promotional platform of social media when it is used by organisations. This approach to producing social media content – including by journalists – is different to the independent or detached reporting applied by traditional media such as newspapers when covering sport (see English, 2017). While Vann’s work has examined social media, sports organisations and audiences, it did not examine journalistic content on netball.

In this environment, it is therefore valuable to examine newspaper coverage during the first season of the Super Netball competition through content produced by print sports journalists. As a result, this pilot study advances the broad scholarship on women’s sport by providing a unique overview of reporting on netball, which was part of major changes in the female sporting landscape in Australia in 2017. In examining the amount, prominence and tone of content published in newspaper sports sections, it follows French’s (2013) call for further research into women’s sport and provides critical findings for industry and scholarship into the state of newspaper reporting of a major women’s sport. Crucially, this study examines a sporting event that has not been analysed previously in this way, and contributes to an area that has often been over-looked (see McLachlan, 2016).
Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the inaugural Super Netball season was reported across the sports sections of Australian newspapers. The following research questions were considered:

RQ1. How much netball coverage appeared in the sports sections of the newspapers during the Super Netball season?

RQ2. How prominent was the Super Netball coverage in the newspaper sports sections?

RQ3. What did the stories about the Super Netball season include in relation to content, tone and comparisons with men’s sport?

To answer these questions a content analysis was utilised, examining stories in the sports sections of nine Australian newspapers. Krippendorff (2004) notes the importance of content analysis as an empirically grounded method that suits an exploratory process, and it is therefore a suitable method in this project. Eight newspapers were based in the areas in which a Super Netball team was located, while The Australian was included as the only national broadsheet with a devoted sports section. The newspapers were: The Australian; The Courier-Mail; The Daily Telegraph; the Herald Sun; The Advertiser; Sunshine Coast Daily; The Age; The Sydney Morning Herald; and The West Australian. Six of the titles are owned by News Corp Australia publications, two by Fairfax Media, and one by Seven West Media. Selecting newspaper sports sections provided a crucial base for like-for-like comparisons across a single medium. This approach also allowed for a broader range of publications to be included in the analysis than if the study examined television or radio media. Television broadcasts – and associated online streaming – are produced using a pool of commentators and media coverage outside the company paying the broadcast rights – in this case Nine – is
minimal. Radio coverage is also extremely limited, especially in comparison with print media. As French (2013) notes, newspapers remain important to society despite changes in technology that have led to more media platforms. While newspaper circulations have been falling, the metropolitan papers in the study have a combined average weekday readership of 3,751,000, and a combined Saturday readership of 4,133,000 (Roy Morgan, 2018b). The articles in the newspapers often appear online, further increasing the reach of the news across platforms (see Roy Morgan, 2018a).

The data collection began on February 14, 2017 and finished on June 24, 2017. In starting in the week before the competition’s first game, and concluding a week after the grand final, the sample covered the entire first season of Super Netball. The data was collected through online editions and archives of each paper, as well as being cross-checked with the Australia and New Zealand Newsstream database. Only stories mentioning netball were collected in relation to RQ1, while articles mentioning Super Netball were included to answer RQ2 and RQ3. To qualify as an article for analysis, each story required a headline and at least one sentence of text. Only stories appearing in the sports pages of each publication were included. Items about sports betting that mentioned the league were excluded from the sample. Stories were coded and analysed using SPSS, with each article examined across 25 categories. These included elements such as story headline, news organisation, word count, byline, gender of byline and type of article. Mentions of non-sporting elements, men’s sport, dismissive phrasing, tactical analysis and injuries were also coded. Two coders were employed in the coding, with one coding every article and the other 32% of the sample. A Kappa inter-coder reliability test was conducted on the variables of non-sporting elements, comparison with men’s sport, and dismissive phrasing, ranging from full agreement to $k = .968$, $p < .0001$.

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, it examined only one season of Super Netball newspaper coverage, and did not include other media. To ensure equivalent analysis,
the study focused on the publishing across Monday to Saturday of the nine print titles. These publications had either related titles on Sunday, or no publication. With many games occurring on a Saturday, this meant that stories on these fixtures were not collected unless the contest was reported in the Monday edition of the paper. The analysis did not include articles that appeared in the news, feature or lifestyle sections of the publications. It also did not include images accompanying the text.

**Results**

In order to answer RQ1, stories about netball were counted in the sports sections of the nine newspapers. The total number of articles in these sports sections was also counted. In total, there were 703 stories about netball out of 15,335 articles (Table 1). There were some notable differences in the amounts of coverage, particularly at the upper and lower levels. *The Australian*, the country’s national broadsheet, had the smallest number (22 articles) and lowest percentage (0.99%) of total stories among all the publications. The majority of publications published between 1.8% and 3% of their sports stories about netball in their coverage. The two publications with the highest proportion of coverage were *The Courier-Mail* and *Sunshine Coast Daily*. Both Queensland-based publications had a local team (Sunshine Coast Lightning) in the final, as well as the Queensland Firebirds, who finished fifth. *The Courier-Mail* had the highest percentage of stories among the metropolitan titles, with 3.26%, ahead of *The Age*. The *Sunshine Coast Daily*, the only regional publication in the sample, had both the highest number of stories (140) and the highest proportion of stories about netball (6.79%) in the study.

***Insert Table 1 around here ***
Prominence of netball articles

To examine the results in relation to the prominence of stories in RQ2, only articles that mentioned Super Netball were included. This sample included 700 items across the nine publications. Firstly, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the total coverage to outline each organisation’s publishing approach to Super Netball articles. The Australian provided the smallest amounts, with 22 stories, or 3.1% of the sample (Table 2). Seven of the publications were between 8.4% and 13.6%. The Sunshine Coast Daily, which provided one in five stories in the study, was the only title to publish more than 100 items about the competition across the 112 days of the data collection.

To establish the prominence of the stories, each article was analysed to determine whether it appeared on the back pages of the publications. A word count was also determined. This approach provided an indication of how each publication covered the competition, and the amount of space dedicated to netball. Interestingly, only three of the media outlets placed netball on the back pages during the study. The Sunshine Coast Daily published stories and images on the back page on 40 days during the season, while The Age included four items and The Australian one. The average word count of the 700 stories focusing on Super Netball was 385. In individual publications, there were shorter stories than the mean in The Courier-Mail (311 words), The Daily Telegraph (314), The West Australian (316) and Sunshine Coast Daily (323). The Australian produced the longest stories at 586 words, slightly above The Age (582).

***Insert Table 2 around here ***
Content of the stories

The content of the story can help to gauge whether the reporting of Super Netball was treated in a professional way (Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010; Sherwood et al., 2017) or whether dismissive or non-sporting aspects were employed (Fink, 1998, 2015; Kane et al., 2013; Senate Inquiry, 2006). In order to answer RQ3, each of the stories were analysed across themes that included type of story, non-sporting elements, comparison with men’s sport, dismissive phrasing, and reporting on tactics, analysis and injuries.

When the types of stories were analysed, match-related items – either previews or reviews – dominated the sample. Sport’s routines lean heavily towards these types of stories (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005), and this was clear in relation to Super Netball coverage, with 72.7% of articles focused on games. News stories were the next most popular (12.6%), followed by opinion (9.7%). Features appeared in very small amounts (2.3%). Stories were bylined by staff reporters 83% of the time. This reflects that the Super Netball season was covered as a specific round by journalists, with predominantly one staff member from each publication producing most of the stories (for example, Rebecca Williams at the Herald Sun). It is an example of the league being treated as a legitimate sport by the sports sections. Non-bylined stories appeared 12.1% of the time, while articles from news agencies were credited in 4.9% of cases. In the 581 stories including staff bylines, where the gender of the author was clear, there were more stories written by males (308, or 53%) than females (270, or 46.5%), along with three articles with both male and female contributors.

Non-sporting elements

There were 126 stories (or 18% of the sample) that included descriptions of non-sporting elements (see Table 3). Items mentioning pay often involved coverage of the strike threats that occurred during the season, while beauty descriptions, other work, lifestyle, marriage and
family elements were also coded. The largest element of non-sporting aspects was in stories including descriptions of motherhood. This occurred particularly with the returns of Renae Ingles and Bec Bulley, and the season-long absence of Laura Geitz. Motherhood was mentioned in 41 stories, or 32.5% of articles including non-sporting elements. Male reporters mentioned motherhood on 18 occasions compared with 15 when females were writing. Family elements included, for example, sisters Madi Robinson and Kelsey Browne playing each other, or athletes such as Jamie-Lee Price being the daughter of former Australia rugby league player Steve. These family-style mentions occurred on 29 occasions.

In individual publications, The Advertiser (28) and Sunshine Coast Daily (27) had the most inclusions of non-sporting elements in their stories. The Advertiser mentioned motherhood in 10 articles and family in another seven, including in reporting around the return of Renae Ingles from having twins. All of the publications contained stories with descriptions of motherhood. The Daily Telegraph had the second most with six, while The Age had five, and the Sunshine Coast Daily and The Courier-Mail four each. The Sydney Morning Herald provided the smallest number of mentions with two, while The Australian and the Herald Sun each had three. In Sunshine Coast Daily, family (10) and lifestyle (6) elements were the most mentioned, reflecting the novelty of the new team base, the isolation of players who have moved to the area, and Kelsey Brown being Madi Robinson’s sister.

***Insert Table 3 around here***

Sixty-five of the 700 stories (9.3%) mentioned men’s sport in some way (see Table 3). However, this did not include simple descriptions of the clubs Collingwood, Lightning and Giants being owned or operated by AFL or rugby league teams. A more detailed description was necessary to be included in this category, such as this from The Courier-Mail (February 20): “The new girls on the block in Super Netball also emphatically reinforced to big brother,
the Melbourne Storm, why the NRL powerhouse got involved in women's sport.” There were notable differences between the publications in their mentions of men’s sport in the netball stories. In the Herald Sun, The Courier-Mail, Sunshine Coast Daily and The West Australian this occurred in less than 7% of articles. In contrast, the remainder of the publications did so on more than 11% of occasions, with The Australian the highest at 22.7%.

On 13 occasions, stories were coded as including dismissive phrasing. This included, for example, a description in a story about Geitz that described “fellow blonde bookend Caitlin Bassett” (The Courier-Mail, June 17), and Sharni Layton’s shouting being “likened to a foghorn and a duck honk” (The Daily Telegraph, March 4). Another example said netballers “finally get a gig on free-to-air TV and get heavyweight sporting clubs like Melbourne Storm and Collingwood involved and behold we have a revolution” (The Australian, April 22). This type of reporting occurred on five occasions in The Courier-Mail, three times in The Daily Telegraph and twice in The Advertiser, which are News Corp Australia tabloid titles. On nine occasions, this phrasing appeared in stories with a male byline, compared with three with a female byline (in the final case the byline was not clear).

Injuries and tactical analysis

Regular sports reporting includes emphasis on aspects such as tactics and analysis, as well as reporting on issues such as injuries. While there were small aspects of dismissive phrasing in the coverage, there was a much greater focus on match-related topics. Stories including reporting on tactics or descriptions of analysis occurred in more than 60% of the sample (Table 4). This ranged from 52.9% in The Daily Telegraph to 76.2% in The Age. In injury reporting, 135 stories (or 19.3%) included these types of descriptions. This element peaked in The Age at 23.8% of its stories, and was at its lowest in The Australian (9.1%).

*** Insert Table 4 around here ***
Discussion

The results of this study into netball coverage across the Super Netball season reveal a range of important findings in relation to the amount, prominence and content of newspaper articles. In response to RQ1, less than 5% of total sports coverage was devoted to netball across the nine publications. All but two included netball in less than 3% of its sports coverage. This study only examined one female sport, which makes it impossible to compare with the total amounts of female sport evident in previous research, which range from 5% to 10% between 1996 and 2014 (Paterson & Matzelle, 2014; Phillips, 1997). However, these results reflect a low level of coverage for a sport being followed heavily in other media. While other sports were not the focus in this aspect of the content analysis, it was clear that in the collection period male sports dominated (see Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005). The overall proportion of netball coverage was also considerably less than previous newspaper research into horse racing content (English, 2014; Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005). The Australian newspaper stands out for its lack of reporting, publishing slightly more than a story a week. Space restrictions are an issue in print, but the results highlight the sport was not being highly prioritised or seen as particularly newsworthy (see Brighton & Foy, 2007; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; Jones, 2005). This was evident in there being no report in The Australian about the grand final, which occurred on a Saturday night, in the next edition the following Monday. In contrast, the Sunshine Coast Daily was the only publication to average more than a story a day. It was the sole regional publication in the sample and had extra interest in the competition, with the Lightning being the first fully professional team in the region, and having instant success. Success has been found to be a newsworthy element in sports journalism (see Sherwood et al. 2017), and this was evident in relation to the amount of reporting on the Lightning, including by its “home” publication. Less coverage was evident in the metropolitan newspapers, highlighting the struggle which netball has had traditionally to gain regular coverage (see...
Stories were most likely to occur on Saturdays and Mondays, when matches were either being previewed or reviewed, but there were often days during the week of no coverage. This was in contrast to Phillips (1997), who found more reporting during these periods when men’s sport was not being played (see also Senate, 2006). The absence of consistent women’s coverage during the week offers space for netball organisations to work with media, as Sherwood et al. (2017) have highlighted, to provide more content, or feature-story opportunities, to fill these gaps. It is also an opportunity for media organisations to provide greater variety in their coverage rather than focusing, for example, on mid-week training sessions across the male football codes.

One of the most striking aspects of this study was the relatively small amounts of content that appeared about a professional sport when promotion of women’s sport was also being boosted through the AFL Women’s competition, the Women’s Big Bash League, and the W League. A major factor in the reporting of netball during this study is that it occurred at peak time for the sport, encompassing the entire season of Super Netball. Therefore, it can be argued that coverage over the rest of the year, when there are intermittent international fixtures, would be considerably less. The time-frame of this sample highlights that the amount of coverage for netball in this period is as good as it gets for Australia’s most popular women’s team sport.

Previous research has pointed to women’s sport, and sports such as netball, struggling to gain consistent media coverage (Burroughs & Nauright, 2000; Phillips, 1997; Taylor, 2001a; Vann, 2014; Vann et al., 2015). The results in relation to RQ2 support these findings. Further, it has been found that when stories have been published they have often been in less prominent positions (Phillips, 1997; Senate Inquiry, 2006). The Super Netball coverage was rarely considered newsworthy enough by the metropolitan and national newspapers to appear on the back page. During a season that included the introduction of new franchises linked
with established sports organisations, threats over strike action, ground-breaking pay and working conditions for female athletes, and the competition being won by a team in its first season, netball made the back page on five occasions in these publications. Often stories were included deep within the sports sections, particularly on weekends when men’s sport would dominate the most prominent positions. The exception was the regional title the *Sunshine Coast Daily*, which published stories about its home team on the back page around one in three days. Aspects such as page design, space and news selection based on regional or sporting preferences can influence the content and positioning of items. However, it was evident that the female national game of netball (McLachlan, 2016; Pippos, 2017) was not a high priority in terms of story placement or news values, and there was a continued preference for men’s sports such as rugby league, AFL, rugby union and cricket. These findings support Fink (2015) in that a major women’s sport is not treated in the media in an equal – or even a comparable – way to men’s sport, and contributes to coverage which can often be viewed as marginal or under-represented (see Caple et al., 2011; French, 2013; Jones, 2005; Lumby et al., 2010; North, 2012; Sherry et al., 2016).

The average word counts of the stories also indicate priorities toward the amount of space and news values devoted to netball coverage. While word counts of non-netball sports stories were not measured, the amounts included in netball articles were often small (30.1% of items were less than 300 words). Also, large numbers of stories did not equate to them being long, highlighting a quality versus quantity issue. The *Sunshine Coast Daily* had the most articles but the length was still below the average (323 words); *The Courier-Mail* was the third-most regular publisher, with 90 stories across the sample, but at an average of 314 words. In contrast, *The Australian* had the highest average story length, but published the fewest articles. This indicates that netball is being treated as a sport that deserves some coverage, but not one that requires detailed, sustained, daily reporting, especially in comparison with
traditional men’s sports. It can be argued that a sport that has a fully professional league and boasts the 2015 World Cup champions deserves more prominent coverage in newspapers. The differences found in this study confirm a lack of balance in coverage remains (see Senate Inquiry, 2006).

The content of the Super Netball stories was predominantly focused on sports coverage and sporting issues. Further, in response to RQ3, it was almost always published in a tone considered respectful and professional, but often included comparisons with men’s sport. In terms of the types of stories, match-related items dominated, which is consistent with broader sporting coverage (see Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005). Articles were usually bylined, and journalists at the nine newspapers were in most cases reporting on their specific round (see Sherwood et al., 2017), highlighting that the competition was being treated seriously by the news organisations. An important finding is the amount of stories written by female journalists. While bylined reports by male journalists were in the majority, 46.5% of stories were by females, including regular columns by Lightning goal shooter Caitlin Bassett (Sunshine Coast Daily), and Liz Ellis (The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald). These figures are significantly higher than previous research that found females make up less than 12% of Australian sports newsrooms, and 8% of bylined journalists in the sports pages (Henningham, 1995; Nicholson et al., 2011; Horky & Nieland, 2013). These studies include sports coverage by female reporters in all sports, including those dominated by male teams. The results in relation to netball in this study reflect the importance of female journalists reporting on netball which, as Ellis (in Senate Inquiry, 2006) highlights, can include the possibility of increased knowledge about the sport. These findings suggest that in this sport progress is being made in diversifying sports journalism (see Hardin, 2013).
Examination of non-sporting elements in stories is important as it can influence the attitude of reporting, and associated social attitude to women, both in sport and society more generally. Non-sporting elements were featured in almost one in five stories, and were most often related to motherhood, followed by family elements. The issue of motherhood in elite sport can be a topical social issue, and netball is a leading example in players returning after maternity leave. However, the tone of coverage can depend on whether mentioning motherhood is central to the story, or if it is highlighting trivial or more feminine attributes.

In this sample, stories mentioning motherhood occurred predominantly in ways that focused on athletes and were relevant, such as players returning to the game after having children, or there being maternity conditions in the new pay deal. Lumby et al. (2010) have noted a movement away from including non-sporting issues, but when they are mentioned it is for increasing female interest in the sport. While non-sporting elements were employed in stories, the motherhood, family or lifestyle elements were generally not dismissive in tone, highlighting a professional reporting approach (see Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010).

The reporting of this issue did not appear to be patronising or disrespectful, and was predominantly newsworthy. For example, the headline “New mum Geitz wrestles with return thoughts” (Daily Telegraph, May 8) outlining the “agonising” decision of Queensland Firebirds captain Laura Geitz on whether she should return to the game, or Liz Ellis’s story mentioning Bec Bulley having a coach who understands the demands of being a new mum. However, the headline “Diamond berths will be there for mums” (Daily Telegraph, April 7) was an example of Fink’s (1998) conclusion that the media can focus on feminine roles instead of sporting ones. It is also worth noting that headlines and descriptions like this are rarely used in describing sportmen as “Dads”.

Almost one in 10 stories mentioned men’s sport, which highlights there are still steps required before the sport can stand alone in the view of newspaper sports sections. The
owners of three of the franchises were linked with Australian Football League or rugby league teams, which created opportunities for cross-sport coverage (for example, the Lightning captain Geva Mentor swapping ideas with Melbourne Storm leader Cameron Smith [The Courier-Mail, May 15]). However, basic mentions, such as the Storm-owned Lightning, were not included in this part of the analysis. Cooky et al. (2013) have outlined the lack of respectful and serious reporting on women’s sport in comparison with men’s sport. While men’s sport was mentioned in many stories, the coverage of netball was overwhelmingly respectful – both in stories mentioning men’s sport, and throughout the overall sample. There were 13 stories that included dismissive phrasing. While it can be argued this is too many, it indicates in this study the reporting of Super Netball was predominantly serious and respectful, and reflects improved reporting of women in sport (see Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010; Sherwood et al., 2017). Instead of traditional aspects of dismissive reporting of women, there was a greater focus across the coverage on reporting the sports journalism staples of tactics and analysis, which occurred in a majority of reports, and injuries. However, while the coverage is in line with other sports in terms of professionalism and appropriateness, it is clear from the results in this study that there needs to be more stories about netball during the season to reflect the importance of such a newsworthy sport.

Conclusion

The changing landscape of women’s sport in Australia in 2017 helped to expand the horizons of netball in the nation. This included greater media coverage with regular free-to-air and online broadcasts, but the space devoted to the sport was more inconsistent in the newspapers in this pilot study. Stories about the Super Netball season were covered predominantly like other sports, with a focus on tactics, analysis and injuries, and written almost always in a professional way. However, there remains a need for print newsrooms to pay greater attention
to a sport that has such a large footprint across the country, especially with the broad reach of the media outlets’ cross-platform publishing in newspaper and digital spaces, and the importance of print titles to society (French, 2013; Roy Morgan, 2018a; Watkins et al., 2017). This was a key conclusion from RQ1, with netball comprising less than 5% of total sports coverage during its peak season. While netball was reported by all of the newspapers at times, there was an overall lack of prominence, quantity, and story length. This finding, in relation to RQ2, highlights the need for newsrooms to provide more space to netball, which was achieving high television audiences and strong regular crowds, but rarely appeared on the publications’ back pages. Importantly, when coverage was included, it was professional in tone and rarely dismissive, which highlights improved conditions for reporting on netball, and women’s sport more broadly. This was important in addressing RQ3. Through the content analysis, it was evident newsrooms had assigned journalists to the netball round (see Sherwood et al., 2017) and were more interested in tactics and analysis than non-sporting elements. Female athletes were reported upon for their successes or failures, and the non-sporting issues were not related to poor behaviour, which often occurs with men’s sports, but topics that contain broader social interest and – often – importance. Factors such as motherhood and family were mentioned, but mostly in a way consistent with gaining interest from readers to increase attention to female sports, rather than in the dismissive tone occurring in media previously (see Fink, 1998, 2015; Kane et al., 2013; Lumby et al., 2010). There was often a tendency for journalists to compare women’s sport to men’s, which is something newsrooms should consider abandoning as women’s sport continues to expand across, for example, netball, cricket, AFL and soccer. There are also opportunities for newsrooms and sports organisations to work more closely during mid-week, when there is often an absence of netball stories. The majority of articles focused on previewing or reviewing matches, providing room to expand the limited feature content present in the data.
This study reveals promising signs of change in the women’s sport media environment in Australia (see also Sherwood et al., 2017). However, it is still essential to note female athletes and their competitions remain in the minority in terms of newspaper sports coverage, which is consistent with previous media research (see Caple et al., 2011; Cooky et al., 2013; Jones, 2005; Lumby et al., 2010; Phillips, 1997). There is still considerable work to be done by sports media and sports organisations – across national, metropolitan and regional levels – if women are to receive more representative recognition for sporting achievements. In netball, there are commendable approaches being applied to reporting in a professional way, but the sport is lacking in both the quantity and regular quality of coverage. This reflects the difficult situation of women’s sport in general in media (see Caple et al., 2011; Lumby et al., 2010; North, 2012). If a successful female sport with a professional league and expanding commercial and public interests is struggling to gain consistent media exposure, the situation is even more limited for other sports without this base profile.

There are limitations in this pilot study that need to be acknowledged. It examined one sport across one season and was restricted to newspaper coverage in the sports sections of nine publications. It is also important to note the broader media ecology in which newspapers, despite their importance to society (French, 2013), have less impact due to falling circulations, and the rise of online platforms including streaming services and social media (see Vann 2014; Vann et al. 2015). Further, the study only analysed text-based elements in articles. As a result, there are various options for further research in netball – and women’s sport more broadly – particularly in the expanding professional sports environment in Australia. In addition to more detailed analysis across a broader range of sports, media and publications, research can investigative whether the gender of journalists and commentators provides more insightful and informative coverage (see Ellis in Senate Inquiry, 2006). It would also be valuable to examine whether women’s sports were reported as professionally
in non-sporting sections of news publications where there could be less of an attempt to discuss strategy, and a greater focus on lifestyle and non-sporting roles. Finally, scholarship can also analyse the impact of the expansion of professional female sports in areas of sponsorship, membership, community and health, such as participation, volunteering and promoting healthy lifestyles.

References


Tables 1-4 – A new sporting horizon: a content analysis of Super Netball newspaper coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Netball stories</th>
<th>Total stories in sports section</th>
<th>% of total stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2218</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3727</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3555</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3382</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Australian</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2453</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>3267</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>2867</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Courier-Mail</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2757</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine Coast Daily</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>2063</td>
<td>6.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>15,335</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Netball stories in the sports sections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Stories</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
<th>Average word count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Australian</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Courier-Mail</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine Coast Daily</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Super Netball stories and word counts by publication
Does the story mention non-sporting elements | % of organisation’s newspaper stories | Does the story mention men’s sport | % of organisation’s newspaper stories | Total stories by newspaper
---|---|---|---|---
**Herald Sun** | 8 | 11.4 | 2 | 2.9 | 70
**The Courier-Mail** | 14 | 15.6 | 4 | 4.4 | 90
**Sunshine Coast Daily** | 27 | 19.3 | 8 | 5.7 | 140
**The West Australian** | 6 | 10.2 | 4 | 6.8 | 59
**The Daily Telegraph** | 16 | 23.5 | 8 | 11.8 | 68
**The Advertiser** | 28 | 29.5 | 12 | 12.6 | 95
**The Age** | 14 | 16.7 | 11 | 13.1 | 84
**The Sydney Morning Herald** | 7 | 9.7 | 11 | 15.3 | 72
**The Australian** | 6 | 27.3 | 5 | 22.7 | 22
**Total** | 126 | 18.0 | 65 | 9.3 | 700

Table 3: Mentions of non-sporting elements and men’s sport.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stories mentioning tactics or analysis</th>
<th>% of newspaper stories</th>
<th>Stories mentioning injuries</th>
<th>% of newspaper stories</th>
<th>Total stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
**The Australian** | 12 | 54.5 | 2 | 9.1 | 22
**The West Australian** | 36 | 61.0 | 7 | 11.9 | 59
**The Daily Telegraph** | 36 | 52.9 | 11 | 16.2 | 68
**Herald Sun** | 44 | 62.9 | 16 | 22.9 | 70
**The Sydney Morning Herald** | 48 | 66.7 | 16 | 22.2 | 72
**The Age** | 64 | 76.2 | 20 | 23.8 | 84
**The Courier-Mail** | 52 | 57.8 | 17 | 18.9 | 90
**The Advertiser** | 54 | 56.8 | 19 | 20.0 | 95
**Sunshine Coast Daily** | 94 | 67.1 | 27 | 19.3 | 140
**Total** | 440 | 62.9 | 135 | 19.3 | 700

Table 4: Mentions of tactics and analysis, and injuries.