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# Delivering the male—and more

## Fandom and media sport

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Sport and the media have long exercised anxious minds keen to control unruly populations. A millennium ago, John of Salisbury warned that juggling, mime, and acting had negative impacts on “unoccupied minds ... pampered by the solace of some pleasure ... to their greater harm” (quoted in Zyvatkauskas 2007: 18). A few centuries later, Edward Said was equally concerned by such temptations:

Consciousness of sports, with its scores and history and technique and all the rest of it, is at the level of sophistication that is almost terrifying ... investment is being made in those things that distract you from realities that are too complicated.

(Said 1993: 23)

Umberto Eco explained this through the concept of sport cubed: The meaning of a sports event is multiplied, first by media coverage of it *per se*, then by coverage of that coverage. The effect is to distract audiences from social issues because they dwell on sporting gossip (Eco 1987: 162–4).

These venerable critiques are scientized when the psy-function (psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, and psycho-pharmacology) joins the party, for example querying the impact of television coverage on viewers lest it affect the alleged capacity of sport to release individual tension and facilitate social cohesion, or diminish the quality of semen in young men due to the amount of time they lie around watching sport rather than playing it (Bernhardt *et al.* 1998; Gaskins *et al.* 2013).

Gender is profoundly implicated in these assumptions. For instance, when Janet Jackson’s breast was momentarily exposed during the 2004 US National Football League (NFL) Super Bowl broadcast, it stimulated bizarre, even hysterical, media, public, and regulatory responses (Wenner 2004). The satirical paper *The Onion* cleverly mocked these anxious accounts of effects on audiences via a *faux* study of US youth: “No one who lived through that day is likely to forget the horror, said noted child therapist Dr. Eli Wasserbaum” (“U.S. Children Still Traumatized ... ” 2005). Six years later, international football (soccer) stars Didier Drogba and Cristiano Ronaldo were featured on a *Vanity Fair* cover, attired only in underpants. Their

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appearance did not engage such moral panics, marking a trend that forms the backdrop to this chapter (“Don’t Call It Soccer! ... ” 2010).

Who is the implied spectator to the *bourgeois* media’s coverage of sport, given that newsrooms are largely male run, and coverage of sport focuses predominantly on men, but women viewers, readers, and listeners are active, numerous—and have been so from the first? After examining this contradictory story, I hone in on the rise, fall, and televisualization of football hooligans and wrestling fans. Their stories represent breach moments, occasions when cultures recalibrate because of changes to the economy of gender.

### The backdrop

The vast majority of scholarship on this topic is beholden to the psy-function, whose authors identify and measure activities inside people’s heads in order to explain gender, spectatorship, and sport. They are particularly fascinated with relaxation, relief, arousal, aggression, entertainment, and identification—aged Aristotelian categories about drama that are newly invigorated with the marvel of modern, scientific labeling. A personal favorite is the “Sport Fan Motivation Scale.” Such research typically finds that men watch more media sport than women, are more animated by it, and likelier to define themselves through it (Sloan 1989; Tang and Cooper 2012; Trail and James 2001; Wann 1995). This is deemed to occur because media sport offers shared experiences without profound intimacy (Arehart-Treichel 2012). Such *nostra* generally extrapolate from English-speaking studies undertaken in the Global North to essentialize spectatorship via an account of male sports fans as immature or at least biologically driven, their conduct determined by testosterone levels that shift with team success and failure on TV (Bernhardt *et al.* 1998).

Historical sociologist Norbert Elias borrows these *psy-données*, investigating changes in time and space that occurred when imperialist adventurers began the globalization of sport (Elias 1978; Elias and Dunning 1986). Elias’s idea of a civilizing impulse deriving from that history is problematic, but his work has nevertheless stimulated some interesting microsociology. His followers have shown that the contemporary sporting body sends gendered messages via the media about discipline, mirroring, dominance, and communication (Maguire 1993). The disciplined sports body is remodeled through diet and training. The mirroring body functions as a machine of desire, encouraging mimetic conduct via the purchase of commodities. The dominant body exercises power through physical force. The communicative body is an expressive totality, balletic and beautiful, wracked and wrecked.

Investments in such bodies by the media help explain, and in turn are illuminated by, breach moments when sporting fantasies go wrong. Consider the fury unleashed on an Australian Olympic rower who engaged in a form of anti-nationalistic refusal by ceasing to perform towards the end of an event. The media accused her of being “un-Australian.” Another example is the public grief and anger that erupt when the seemingly pure, meritocratic sporting body is shown to depend on illicit chemical and medical regimes. In each case, sporting journalism reacts with incredulity rather than penitence at its complicity with reactionary nationalism or industrialized

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competitiveness (Australian Crime Commission 2013; Lowden 2013; McKay and Roderick 2010).

### Alternative forms of thought

I depart from these orthodoxies, by focusing on political economy rather than psychological interiority. In place of a preoccupation with consciousness, I concentrate on the overt, public, and contested construction and conduct of spectatorship by corporations, governments, and supporters. The governing assumption is that there is no “real” response to be found among audiences, only incarnations of such responses by interested parties, be they academia, capital, the state, or fandom (Miller 2009).

For marketers in the Global North, young, affluent men are the most desirable media spectators. By contrast with other segments of the population, they watch little television, have protean preferences for brands, and earn sizeable incomes. They often love TV sport, which makes their interest in it disproportionately influential on programming (Commission on the Future of Women’s Sport 2010: 7). For example, the US cable and satellite network Fox Soccer targets men aged 18–34 with annual household incomes of US\$75,000 and above (“Fox Soccer ... ” 2008).<sup>1</sup> The station boasts that three-quarters of its audience is male and half own their own homes.<sup>2</sup> Commercials provide textual hints about the network’s plan for matching viewers to advertisers: its advertisements concentrate remorselessly on regaining and sustaining hair growth and erections, losing and hiding pimples and pounds, and becoming and adoring soldiers and sailors.

For an even more chauvinistic instance, we might consider coverage of the US Armed Forces Bowl, a college American football event sponsored by a helicopter manufacturer. The Bowl is designed to create goodwill towards corporate welfare through broad-brush suburbanite homologies constructed between sport, nation, and *matériel* (bombs, guns, and military transport). The contest is televised—and owned—by ESPN, Disney’s sports channel, a network available in 194 countries and 15 languages. It features military recruiters preying on young spectators and showcases the “Great American Patriot Award” (Butterworth and Moskal 2009; Miller 2010).<sup>3</sup> Such events manufacture ideological links between nationalism and state violence, interpellating male audiences as sacrificial sons of glory. Unsurprisingly, studies of US TV sports fans indicate high levels of support for imperialist warmongering among white men (Stempel 2006).

Sometimes athletes’ social and private lives become as important as their professional qualities, providing audiences with stereotypes of success, power, and beauty: “una imagen; pero no una imagen natural” (an image; but an unnatural one) that has been transmogrified “del icono ideográfico en icono normativo” (from an ideographic icon into a normative one) (Bueno 2002: 2). Sponsors pay sizeable sums to associate their products with such celebrities. By 2005, these endorsements were estimated at over \$1 billion in the US, based on a wager about fan interest in athletes’ lifestyles that contractually favors reliability and decency but finds those qualities hard to separate from surprise headlines and excess. Such investment assumes that

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audiences seek to replicate stars' fetishized qualities by purchasing commodities associated with them. Marketing mavens call this "associative learning" (Thrall *et al.* 2008; Till *et al.* 2008). The tabloid media subsidize such transmogrifications because they are equally interested in celebrating and condemning stars, as official photo shoots of big heterosexual weddings are gradually displaced on magazine covers by unauthorized *paparazzi* shots of big masculine waistlines.

Clearly, the gendering of media audiences has to do with business strategies. These are subject to change as corporations target different demographic groups at different times, and the genre is becoming more inclusive in certain ways by contrast with its hyper-masculinist past. In Canada in the early 1990s, the beer company that owned the Sports Network (TSN) adopted "We deliver the male" as its cable TV motto. As late as 1998, an advertisement for ESPN promised "More tackles, less tatus" (TSN quoted in Sparks 1992: 330, 334; "There's Life Outside Sports ... " 1998). Women spectators felt excluded from TV's "discourse of [Australian] football" because their pleasurable voyeurism was not of interest to broadcasters (Poynton and Hartley 1990: 144). But commercial and cultural changes have exerted tremendous pressure on the gender normativity of sport, weakening the seemingly rock-solid maleness at its core, thanks to the weight of numbers.

Female US spectators have long tuned into the Olympics in large numbers. For example, the 1992 Winter Games drew 57 percent of its TV audience from women. Women's figure skating out-rated that year's men's baseball World Series and National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball championship game. The women's technical skating program at the 1994 Winter Games drew the fourth-highest ratings of any program in US history, while the 1998 National Basketball Association play-offs attracted more women to Game Seven of the Bulls-Pacers series than *Veronica's Closet* or *ER*. Every major professional men's league in the US has a women's media marketing plan, and male spectatorship of TV sport in the US is in decline, as more and more viewers turn to the History and Discovery channels. The perennial savior of network sportscasters, the NFL, saw 1998-9 and 1999-2000 ratings for *Monday Night Football* at record lows—and one-third of its audience was female. In 1999, more men aged 18-34 watched professional women's softball on ESPN2 than Arena football, the National Hockey League, or Major League Soccer. The NFL suffered a 13 percent decrease in TV ratings in the five seasons from 1997 and Disney exiled *Monday Night Football* from its broadcast network ABC to ESPN in 2006. The code increasingly relied on female viewers. By 2012, they made up 40 percent its audience (Miller 2001, 2010; Oates 2012; Wenner and Gantz 1998).

NBC initiated "a female-inclusive sports subgenre" at the 1992 Summer Games, offering "private-life" histories of selected contestants, which may have had an effect on female audience numbers. In 1996, 50 percent of the US Olympic audience was adult women and 35 percent men, with women's gymnastics one of the most popular events and male boxing and wrestling edged out of prime-time (though there remained a disproportionate address of men's sport). The network reported an increase of 26 percent in the number of women viewers aged 25-54 by comparison with the 1992 Games (Miller 2001). Nevertheless, female athletes continue to be depicted in US media coverage in passive roles by contrast with men (Buysse and Wolter 2013).

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Something new is happening, as evidenced in the photograph of Drogba and Ronaldo's underwear. A further clue comes from ABC's coverage of Super Bowl 2000, which featured Giants cornerback Jason Sehorn in uniform pants during a pre-game show and reporter Meredith Vieira remarking that the sport is "all about the butt." This is not to say that the objectification of the male body is universally welcome or relevant, but it certainly compromises the hitherto powerful assumption of male spectatorship to sport (Nelson 2002; Weissman 2010).

Women currently comprise half of ESPN's US viewers (McBride 2011) and TSN, which undertook to "deliver the male" 20 years ago, now promises that "Sponsorship programs on TSN.ca can be tailored to your target audience."<sup>4</sup> The failure of *Sports Illustrated for Women*, published from 2000 to 2002, was attributed to the first George W. Bush recession, which affected advertising budgets. In 2010, ESPN launched espnW, a website targeting female fans that followed on a thrice-yearly magazine for women (Hueter 2010).<sup>5</sup> *The Onion* grotesquely but tellingly satirized stereotypical reactions to this development by suggesting the site would concentrate on

Highlights that feature an explanation of the rules, what's happening, and who everyone is ... Team-by-team sensitivity ratings ... Message boards where a bunch of chicks can dyke it out like crazy ... Community feature where site users can discuss goings-on, share stories, and then secretly trash on each other in private chats ... [and] Somewhat less male-on-male eroticism.

("Features of the New espnW.com" 2010)

Television and web coverage of the 2012 Olympics attracted 80 percent of the US population, without significant social divisions, other than those following online, which was largely the province of the young (one billion worldwide). Already, well over half the US population connected with broadband uses it to follow sport. But a comparatively high proportion of women prefer sport on TV. Male fans appear to favor cell phones and tablets to laptops or desktops (Burst Media 2012; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012).

In 1995, more women than men in the UK watched Wimbledon tennis on television, and the numbers were nearly equal for boxing. By 2009, the million people viewing England's Football Association Women's Cup Final out-rated numerous men's cricket, rugby, and football fixtures and the British Women's Open Golf drew larger audiences than the men's Ryder Cup contest between the US and Europe. Meanwhile, the vast majority of people watching women's sport on UK TV were men (Commission on the Future of Women's Sport 2010: 6–8; Miller 2001).

Gender distinctions and inequalities remain at play. The hyper-masculinity characteristic of newsrooms and the biases of sporting departments remain divisive issues in the gendered world of sports. In the US, there are 48 male sportscasters for every female and 94 percent of sports editors are men, as are 90 percent of their assistants. The corollaries of journalistic inattention to female fans are clear (Adams and Tuggle 2004; Schreiber 2012). Their Australian media counterparts also continue to discriminate: in 2008–9, 9 percent of non-news TV was dedicated to women's sport. The figure was 86 percent for men's (Australian Sports Commission 2009: v).

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## Case studies

The psy-function and sociological accounts mentioned earlier have encountered some problems since the 1970s with their assumptions about sport as a means of safely expressing social tensions, thereby minimizing political conflict. Over the last 40 years, live football, for example, has frequently been a crucible of nationalistic, racist, misogynistic, and hyper-masculinist conduct by fans, in part responding to spiraling unemployment, a compromised welfare state, and emergent immigration and inter-ethnic issues that became tinderboxes with the arrival of people from former colonies (in small numbers) to deindustrializing European metropolises and the movement to cities of the poorest segments of Latin American society. In the UK, some football grounds became places to enact these tensions through white male heterosexual violence. Counter-measures have included all-seat stadia, individual profiling, life bans, Interpol information exchange, high ticket prices, checks on alcohol, separation of rival fans, ground security, fining or banning clubs for poor crowd control, and scheduling matches between local teams at lunch time to reduce drunkenness beforehand. The media were dual sites for playing out and resolving this gendered audience problem. Initially they provided sites for pundits and politicians to deride football fans as male monsters. Then, as new media technologies, most importantly satellite, came into play, proprietors corralled male audiences who had been priced out of buying tickets to games by purchasing the rights to show football on TV. More and more matches became available to watch, but in pubs and homes rather than in person (Pope 2011).

Liz Moor (2007) claims these developments should not be regarded as simply excluding people on a class basis through commodification. They have also stimulated new forms of gendered spectatorship, as pubs and sports bars have become crucial sites for collective, deterritorialized viewing (Eastman and Land 1997; Wenner 1998; for an historical view, see McCarthy 1995). A visit to a Dominican-targeted bar in Washington Heights during summer may see immigrant men viewing baseball games involving their countrymen on various televisions, while a Santa Monica British-style pub may offer football and rugby union on different walls at the same time, and a Clerkenwell gastro pub may provide one television set dedicated to La Liga and another to the Barclays Premier League (Cooper 1999).

Such viewing practices can be understood as intercultural. Néstor García Canclini (2004) demonstrates that mobile texts must be understood through three lenses: globalization also deglobalizes, in that it is not only about mobility and exchange, but also disconnectedness and exclusion; minorities frequently emerge transnationally, due to migration by people who continue to communicate, work, and consume through their languages of origin; but demographic minorities within sovereign states may not form permanent cultural minorities on their adopted terrain. Mobile subject positions of this kind are ambivalently received by the psy-function. On the one hand, public viewing is welcomed because it may diminish domestic struggles over economic and social deprivation. Conversely, it might reduce industrial productivity (Gantz 2012). The discourse is remorselessly tied to a conservative ethos of community, which signifies obedience and productivity.

Hooligans and dawdlers are not the only sports spectators who provoke mistrust. In the US, the capitalist crisis that crystallized in the late 1970s found expression in

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the controlled chaos of televised wrestling, which occupies a liminal status between sport and scripted entertainment. It is an exemplary site for the evaluation of male bodies reshaped by training, medication, and display—and for the derision of fans by the psy-function. Wrestling has long had a special place in the gendering of audiences in a way that seems to compromise its status as a sport, even though it handily indexes social change. Consider the now rather antique stories below. They come from the archive of Mass Observation, a strange blend of British Surrealism and questionnaire empiricism that gathered a vast array of data about ordinary life during the late 1930s and early 1940s. They illustrate that the sexualized gaze was alive in the earliest moments of media wrestling:

No other sport has such fine husky specimens of manhood as wrestling. I find it such a change to see real he men after the spineless and insipid men one meets ordinarily—"A woman," 1938

I love it because it brings back to me, I am 67 years of age, my young days when men were men and not the namby pamby, simpering, artificial, hair curling variety—"A man," 1938

(quoted in Mass-Observation 1939: 133)

After great success with women viewers of 1940s and 1950s French and US television, wrestling lost its place on commercial networks, a victim of their decision to privilege male spectators' greater disposable incomes. The US reintroduced the sport on cable in the 1980s, when deregulation enabled genre-based channels and encouraged lawless forms of representation; sport morphed into fiction (Geurens 1989; Sammond 2005). Wrestling's return involved a new address to women and revised rules. Quick falls, tightly circumscribed moves, and rigorous refereeing were forsaken. In their stead came a circus-like activity, dominated by absurd persons in silly costumes adopting exotic personae and acrobatic displays (Mazer 1998). Utopic cultural critics celebrated this as carnivalesque play with a gendered hierarchy that engaged mock hysteria among fans (Fiske 1987; Sammond 2005; Schimmel *et al.* 2007). But the psy-function worried that the genre's lawlessness had a deleterious effect on young audiences, encouraging wanton disobedience (Waxmonsky and Beresin 2001).

Both these cases urge us towards political-economic rather than conventional engagements with the idea of media audiences. Each case study illustrates the imperative to comprehend institutional aspects of manufacturing audiences in place of psy-function orthodoxy.

## Conclusion

In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings baseball team song addressed the female gaze:

The ladies want to know  
Who are those gallant men in  
Stockings red.

(quoted in Schreier 1989: 104)

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The Reds were on the money. Whether the sporting body is exposed in its bloodied, bowed, and beaten form or its triumphant, tall, and talented one, anxieties and hopes about audiences are never far away.

A century and a half on from Cincinnati gallantry, the internet has seen an efflorescence of women's sporting sites that both express female desire as per early baseball spectators and provide alternative perspectives. Sites run by and for women fans are impressive in their blend of organic interest and professional whimsy. *HerGameLife*, for instance, has over 200 female bloggers (Maria 2012).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the internet is no more a utopia than its elderly and middle-aged media equivalents: for instance, in December 2012, Google offered 409,000 hits for "Soccer is gay," an anti-queer US cliché about anything that escapes popular ken.<sup>7</sup> Many such sites attack the sexuality of football's players and followers (Mercado 2008), although they also include *The Onion's* parody of soccer coming out that mocks such attitudes, playing with gender.<sup>8</sup>

The above facts have resulted neither in gender equality in media coverage of sport nor in the valuation of men and women as subjects and objects of the gaze. Despite many women's fascination for sport, and repeated evidence that women's sport appeals to viewers across social categories, the resources dedicated by the international *bourgeois* media to such tastes remain largely structured in patriarchal dominance, privileging men as performers, commentators, sponsors, and spectators (Commission on the Future of Women's Sport 2010; Bruce 2013; López Díaz with Gallo Suárez 2011; Talleu 2011).

Sport and gender jumble together in a complex and protean weave of contradictory commodification. They cannot be kept apart and lead unstable lives: cheek by capital: torso by Totti, boot by Beckham. The paradox of sport, its simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning quality and profound capacity to allegorize, is most obvious, dangerous, and transformative regarding gender. With the advent of consumer capitalism and postmodern culture, the body has become an increasingly visible locus of desire. It's not just women who are objects of this gaze and suffer physical harm due to social expectations, and not just men who inspect the bodies of others for foibles, follicles, and fun.

These shifts are intimately connected to the fact that across the past three decades sport has become an international capitalist project. New pressures accompany the spoils. As part of the desire to address media spectators and capture their attention for advertisers, the body has become an object of lyrical rhapsody and gendered money. It is up for grabs as a sexual icon. Sculpted features, chiseled waistlines, well-appointed curves, dreamy eyes, administered hair, and an air of casual threat are the currency of the day. Like beauty and fitness of all kinds, stars will fade and the media will identify new names, new bodies, new Eros, new Euros. Drogba and Ronaldo in underwear will be shunted into the shadows, but someone will take up what they leave behind.

## Notes

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- 1 Fox also undertakes surveillance of viewers on the web: <http://surveys.researchresults.com/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll>.
- 2 See [http://www.cvadsales.com/network\\_fox\\_soccer.html](http://www.cvadsales.com/network_fox_soccer.html).



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- 3 See <http://www.armedforcesbowl.com/military/great-american-patriot-award/>.
- 4 See [http://www.tsn.ca/contact/#advertising\\_contact](http://www.tsn.ca/contact/#advertising_contact).
- 5 See <http://espn.go.com/espnw/>.
- 6 See <http://www.hergamelife.com/about-her-game-life/>.
- 7 See <http://www.google.com.mx/search?q=%22soccer+is+gay%22&oq=%22soccer+is+gay%22&sugexp=chrome,mod=3&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.
- 8 See norms <http://www.theonion.com/video/soccer-officially-announces-it-is-gay,17603/>.

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