Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Television Coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics

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SELECTIVE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND NATIONALITY IN AMERICAN TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE 2000 SUMMER OLYMPICS

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Abstract
Past research of American Olympic telecasts has suggested that gender, ethnic, and national biases may hide within prime-time network telecasts. Analysis of host and reporter commentary in the 2000 Sydney Olympics confirmed that men athletes, Whites, and Americans continued to be the most-mentioned and most-positively portrayed in the television coverage, yielding more than their fair share of coverage. Analysis of gendered coverage showed that men were characterized as being more athletic and more committed than women athletes, and, in addition, men received over half of all airtime and of all mentions of athletes. Analyses of ethnicity showed that White athletes were portrayed as succeeding because of commitment, whereas Black athletes succeeded because of innate athletic skills. Analyses of nationalism found that the most-mentioned athletes and half of all athletes mentioned were American participants. Such differential treatment has significant implications for the development of American viewers’ self-identity, particularly for children and teenagers.

Key words • ethnicity • gender • nationality • Olympics • race

The perceived pinnacle of mediated sport research lies in analyses of the Olympic telecasts (Daddario, 1994; Izod, 1996; McAllister, 1997; Tuggle, 1997). However, the athletic component of the Olympics is often secondary to the nationalist pride people feel toward the competition. In each country, people feel a vested interest in their own Olympic team; they tend to see these athletes as representing a microcosm of their society (see Sabo et al., 1996). Australian viewers tuned in to watch folk hero Cathy Freeman in track and field; gymnast Alexei Nemov’s immense popularity likely resulted in ratings spikes in his native country of Russia. In sum, the Olympics is an athletic event often watched for non-athletic reasons, such as pride in country or familiarity with native athletes.

Although the ratings were lower than for some previous Games, the overall average for the 17 nights of the American coverage of Sydney 2000 was 13.8, making NBC the clear first-place network every night (Wolfley, 2000). Because
an Olympics provides extended nightly coverage (usually 17 consecutive televised days), large audiences (nightly telecasts routinely get top ratings) and diverse viewership (women watch even more than men), the telecasts offer special opportunities for analysis of the way networks cover sports programming (Carter, 1996; Gardner, 1996). As has long been known, each country’s Olympic network slants coverage toward native athletes to yield increased ratings (Larson and Riverburgh, 1991). Given that dozens of events occur simultaneously, network producers must choose who and/or what to show. As a result of the shortage of time, the majority Olympic events are never aired. Viewers’ perceptions of such characteristics as gender, ethnicity, and nationality are shaped by television’s selection, narration, and description of the events (Brummett and Duncan, 1990; Halbert and Latimer, 1994; MacNeill, 1996). The blackout of boxing within NBC’s prime-time coverage, despite the fact that the US had several gold-medal winners, hints at NBC’s agenda in its portrayal of the recent Games — an agenda that went beyond emphasis on American participants and USA medal winners. This can result in disproportionate, even biased, representations of gender (Eastman and Billings, 1999; Higgs and Weiller, 1994), ethnicity (Eastman and Billings, 2001; Sabo et al., 1996), and nationality (Larson and Riverburgh, 1991; Real and Mechikoff, 1992). The audience’s understandings about their own and others’ gender, ethnicity, and nationality can be altered through television’s manipulations, especially when similar practices are repeated over long periods of time. While television’s purposes are wholly commercial, not social or purposefully malevolent, such selectivity can have impacts on perceptions of identity that may or may not be socially desirable. This study addresses how NBC characterized people of differing identities during this dramatic spectacle because recognition of such media influences may be key to interpreting changing and resistant social attitudes.

Considering that many analyses have already been conducted of gender fairness in previous Olympics (Eastman and Billings, 1999; Higgs and Weiller, 1994; Toohey, 1997; Tuggle and Owen, 1999), one might prematurely argue that such analysis of still another Olympic telecast is no longer warranted. However, no sports and media study has ever empirically examined the three identity variables of gender, ethnicity, and nationalism simultaneously. It is possible that interactions occur that might alter an audience’s perceptions. Sabo et al. (1996) studied ethnicity and nationalism within international televised sports, but omitted gender; Eastman and Billings (2001) looked at mentions of gender and race but not nationality within televised college basketball coverage; Tuggle and Owen (1999) examined gender but not race or nationality within the 1998 Olympic telecast. The 2000 Olympics provided a unique opportunity for exploring all three variables simultaneously, and two key factors made study of the 2000 Olympic Games unusually significant.

First, the calendar timing of the Sydney Games strayed markedly from that of prior recent Olympics. Megasporting events are known for attracting light television viewers (appointment viewers) who tune in because of the specialness of the event. Because the Games aired during the last two weeks of September, NBC reached an unusual audience, probably consisting of heavy viewers awaiting the fall season premieres who might not have watched the Games had they been
scheduled in mid-summer. Light viewers often consumed less of this Olympics than they might have in the summer because they had conflicting obligations, such as school and work (Martzke, 2000).

Second, because Australia is a predominantly English-speaking country with a strong Northern European heritage, Americans found the local culture, architecture, environment, and so on relatively familiar, and thus they identified more readily than they did with, say, with Seoul or Nagano. Because of such characteristics of audience and venue, the 2000 Olympics were ripe for investigation of the biases occurring in television’s portrayals of the athletes.

**Gender in Televised Sport**

The most prevalent form of gendered sport research of American telecasts has used analyses of raw *clock time* — comparing the minutes in a given telecast devoted to men’s and women’s sports. Within American Olympic telecasts, Higgs and Weiler (1994) analyzed the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics, and found that 56 percent of all clock time was devoted to men’s sports, with the remaining 44 percent devoted to women athletes. Eastman and Billings (1999) found identical proportions for the 1994 Lillehammer Games. Tuggle and Owen (1999) found that the gap between men and women athletes in the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics had closed slightly to a 53/47 percent split. However, for the most recent 1998 Nagano Olympics, Eastman and Billings (1999) showed that the gap had widened to an even larger difference than in any of the previous studies (60 percent men, 40 percent women). Researchers have also turned to other characteristics of American telecasts, such as the percentage of men and women athletes who won medals (or gold medals) as used in Eastman and Billings (1999). Because prime-time coverage is a wholly selected subset of the Games, decisions about who and what to cover are largely under the network’s control, and the amount of time devoted to each gender group becomes a conscious network decision. It is important to illuminate what is selected because it conveys a message to viewers (Gerbner and Gross, 1976).

Another method of analysis of the gender variable in previous studies was to total the number of times each athlete’s name is spoken by a commentator, a convenient surrogate for salience in the telecast. Eastman and Billings (1999) compared top-ten lists of the most-mentioned athletes within American coverage of the 1994, 1996, and 1998 Games. While they did find some women ranking highly in 1994 (because of Bonnie Blair and the Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding duel), less than half the names in top-ten lists have referred to women athletes and rarely have women been among the very most-mentioned athletes. In the 1996 Atlanta Games, the supposed ‘Year of the Women’, four gymnasts were the only women mentioned in the top ten. Additionally, Eastman and Billings found that, whereas network hosts were likely to balance mentions of athletes by gender, onsite reporters, on the whole, mentioned men athletes far more often than women athletes — by as much as a 2:1 ratio. In fact, the researchers found evidence of articulated NBC policy calling for balanced coverage by gender in 1996, as well as evidence of the systematic undermining of that policy.
Still another approach not previously used is to analyze the gender (and nationality) of the faces appearing in the telecast. Such an analysis can confirm or contradict the results from the analysis of name mentions. Faces are especially powerful images that remain in long-term memory and have social potency beyond auditory information. Beyond clock time, athlete-name mentions, and visual depictions, many stereotypical comments about men and women athletes have been uncovered in previous studies of televised sport. Duncan and Brummett (1987) conducted a content analysis of the 1986 men’s and women’s United States college basketball national championships, and they found that commentators often trivialized the role of women athletes. Halbert and Latimer (1994) analyzed an exhibition tennis match between Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors and discovered that, in several salient descriptive categories, the depiction of Navratilova was much less favorable than that of Connors. Messner et al. (1993) found overarching bias against women athletes in all sports commentary, particularly noting that women are often demeaningly referred to as ‘girls’, either overtly or by implication. Additionally, Eastman and Billings (1999) analyzed the 1994, 1996, and 1998 Olympic telecasts, and found there were significantly more comments about the attractiveness of women than men athletes, a surprise to no one, and that comments about physicality, such as the strength of men athletes, were twice as frequent as comparable comments about women athletes. These scholars also analyzed references to age and inexperience, finding that the lack of experience or ‘youth factor’ was used by commentators four times more frequently as the reason for failure for women athletes than it was alleged of men athletes.1 Billings (in press) found a wealth of comments pertaining to the age of professional women tennis players, but notes that these women are often in their teens, perhaps warranting such references.

Ethnicity in Televised Sport

While no Olympic researcher has quantified the proportions of athletes by their apparent ethnicity, several researchers have addressed qualitative questions of race and ethnicity in mediated sport as a whole (Davis and Harris, 1998). Many stereotypes have been described, including that of (1) the perceived superiority of White athletes in measures of intelligence and work ethic (Birrell, 1989; McCarthy and Jones, 1997); (2) the presumed athleticism on the part of Black athletes (‘born athletes’), in contrast to the presumption of hard work by White athletes (Jackson, 1989; Staples and Jones, 1985; Whannel, 1992); and (3) identification of White athletes as born leaders of team sports (i.e. ‘natural’ point guards in basketball or quarterbacks in football; Wonsek, 1992). Dewar (1993) argued that these stereotypes often are used as ways of explaining White athletes’ lack of success in certain sports.2 Entine (2000) takes a different tack, noting that exceptional physical ability (an attribute of the usual Black stereotype) and intellectual superiority (attributed to Whites in stereotypes) have historically been linked together as the key positive attributes of strong athletes, and that there is no scientific support for the belief that athleticism and intelligence are not
inherently linked. He goes on to point out that the ‘dumb jock’ stereotype has only recently emerged within sports telecasts and modern social beliefs.

Sabo et al. (1996) studied ethnicity within seven international athletic events, actually finding very little bias against Black athletes, but identifying many biases in the depiction of Asian and Latino-Hispanic athletes. Most recently, Eastman and Billings (2001) examined ethnicity as it related to on-air coverage of athletes in 66 American college basketball games. Comparison of men’s and women’s games showed that some of the same stereotypes cited by previous researchers prevailed (Blacks as naturally athletic, quick, and powerful; Whites as intelligent and hard-working). Additionally, they found that commentators applied these stereotypes consistently within both men’s and women’s games. In light of changing attitudes toward college sports and the rise of women’s pro leagues, the researchers noted the need for analysis of more sporting venues to see if these stereotypes persist in other recent sports telecasts.

Nationality in Televised Sport

The relationship between nationality and the coverage of individual Olympic athletes has remained virtually unexamined by scholars. Real and Mechikoff (1992) analyzed aspects of nationalism within fandom and mythic identification, and Sabo et al. (1996) identified many specific instances of nationalistic bias within 340 hours of television coverage of seven international athletic events. They referred to national bias within sports telecasts as the ‘fly in the ointment’ for televised international sports (p. 19). When Eastman and Billings (1999) reported the top-ten most-mentioned athletes in several Olympic telecasts to US audiences, they found the expected American bias in that 19 of the 30 athletes (63 percent) on top-ten lists were American. What was more surprising was that 37 percent of the athletes given starring roles by the US media were not Americans.

Larson and Riverburgh (1991) compared three national telecasts of the 1988 Seoul Olympics Opening Ceremony, finding differential bias in the coverage in Australia, the United States, and Great Britain, with all telecasts focusing the most attention on athletes from their home nation. Larson and Riverburgh’s study provides a springboard for analysis of nationality within the 2000 Olympics. Considering that the Sydney Games included headline stories about the American immigrant status of gold-medal-winning swimmer Lenny Krayzelburg (Sandomir, 2000), about Australian Aborigine sprinter Cathy Freeman (Rhoden, 2000), and about the cockiness and grandstanding of American nationals within the Olympic village and even on the medal podium, the Summer Olympics appeared ripe for analysis of the degree of home country favoritism in television coverage.

Hypotheses

Several measures were included in the analysis in order to match previous tracking of the degree of gender parity in Olympic network coverage. This seemed
important because recent social changes may have led to more balance in host
and venue reporters’ commentary than was evident in analyses of earlier
Olympics. Measures of ethnicity were included in this analysis to follow-up on
previous studies showing marked differentiation in attributed abilities and
personality characteristics for athletes appearing to be White-skinned or Black-
skinned (Dewar, 1993; Eastman and Billings, 2001). A third variable, nationality,
was included to determine whether accusations of unjustified favoritism by the
television networks for American athletes over champions of other countries
were merited. Nationality was coded dichotomously as ’American’ or ‘other’ to
provide an exploratory assessment of national bias since no empirical studies
have examined this variable. Seven hypotheses were formulated to guide analy-
sis of network commentary in the Sydney Olympics:

**Hypothesis 1:** Comments by NBC commentators regarding the gender of the
athletes will reflect sexist stereotypes.

**Hypothesis 2:** Comments by NBC commentators regarding the ethnicity of
the athletes will reflect ethnic stereotypes.

**Hypothesis 3:** Men and women athletes will receive the same amount of clock
time within NBC’s prime-time Olympic coverage, irrespective
of ethnicity or nationality.

**Hypothesis 4:** The majority of the top-ten most-mentioned athletes will be
males, Whites, and Americans.

**Hypothesis 5:** The majority of host and reporter/announcer mentions of ath-
letes will be of males, Whites, and Americans.

**Hypothesis 6:** Host commentators will be significantly more successful than
on-site reporters in achieving gender, ethnic, and national bal-
ance in mentions of athletes by name.

**Hypothesis 7:** The majority of the faces of speakers within the Olympic tele-
cast will be male and White.

**Method**

A total of 54 hours of prime-time Olympic coverage was videotaped for this
analysis. The 54-hour sample represents 100 percent of NBC’s coverage over 17
Olympic evenings (15 Sept.—1 Oct.) within the traditional hours of prime time
(8–11 p.m., Monday through Saturday, 7–11 p.m. Sunday). While NBC aired as
many as 22 daily hours of Sydney coverage on two different networks (NBC and
MSNBC), broadcast network prime-time coverage emphasizes what the host
network has predetermined to be the most popular events that would garner the
highest ratings. Additionally, the prime-time telecasts are the hours used to deter-
mine NBC’s overall Olympic rating and are the most appropriate subset of the
total coverage for analysis and comparison to previous Games.

In the analyses of mentions and stereotyping, only discourse by network-
employed individuals was analyzed for proportions of descriptors and of athlete
names and sports. Those network employees included host commentators
(largely Bob Costas), on-site reporters (such as roving reporter Jim Gray), special
assignment reporters (including Jeremy Shaap and other narrators in preproduced
profiles), color commentators (such as Cheryl Miller and Bud Collins), and all play-by-play announcers for individual and team sports ranging from track-and-field to swimming to basketball. The focus was on the on-air speech of NBC employees because it was presumably largely scripted and closely supervised by NBC editors and producers. Network employees could always be redirected and refocused, whereas guests who were not in NBC’s employ could speak more freely. Thus, remarks from athletes, coaches, and family members were excluded from the database of descriptors and name mentions because it was the network’s bias or lack of bias in its mediation of the Games that was of most interest. In cases in which an NBC employee was interviewing a non-NBC employee, only half of the conversation was included in the analysis. For instance, when Bob Costas interviewed US sprinter Maurice Greene, only Costas’s comments were included in the database.

In contrast, in the analysis of the visuals, all shots of faces of athletes, coaches, guests, or audience members were included if they spoke, whereas the faces of the network employees were excluded. The latter were relatively small in number, but counting their repeated appearances would have overwhelmed the numerical results. It can be presumed that viewers might identify themselves with audience and participant faces. The gender and presumed ethnicity of only those who said something (however brief) was analyzed in order to focus on the most salient Olympic facial images and exclude mass audience and team shots.

Thus, four methods of coding were applied to the videotapes. First, in the analysis of athlete descriptions, 31 student coders were trained to locate and write out all adjectival descriptors and descriptive phrases applied to individual athletes for each night of the Olympics. While students were not informed of specific research hypotheses, they were briefed on the focus of the study and were familiar with prior research indicating sportscaster bias. In addition, for each descriptor (adjective, adverb, adjectival phrase, and adverbial phrase), coders recorded (1) the gender of the athlete (man or woman), (2) the ethnicity of the athlete (Black, White, or other), (3) the nationality of the athlete (American or other), (4) the gender of the announcer, (5) the word-for-word descriptor or descriptive phrase, (6) the name of the sport being discussed, and (7) the gender of the sport being discussed (if any). Researchers conducted two hours of detailed in-class instruction and practice in identifying descriptors and descriptive phrases by means of multiple rewindings and replayed videotaped text. Using the Eastman and Billings (1999) taxonomy for coding sports descriptors, a student and one researcher recoded three hours of Olympics coverage from the tapes (approximately 5 percent of the overall sample). Using Holsti’s (1969) formula (2 times the N of agreement divided by the total decisions made by the two coders), results exceeded 95 percent reliability.

While ethnicity and nationality could not be subdivided by clock time, a second type of coding determined (to the minute) the amount of time devoted to men’s and women’s events. Using stopwatches and VCR time-counters, five student coders measured and then totaled clock time by gender and sport. Commercials and studio commentary were omitted from the analysis. Three randomly selected hours were coded a second time, with intercoder reliability exceeding 98 percent.
A third type of coding also focused on network commentary. Using a pre-tested six-page coding packet, a different set of 20 student coders recorded (1) the name of every athlete spoken by an NBC employee, (2) the name of every sport spoken by an NBC employee, (3) the gender of the athlete or sport being mentioned (man or woman), (4) the ethnicity of the athlete or sport being mentioned (White, Black, Asian, or other), (5) the nationality of the athlete or sport being mentioned (American or other), (5) the position of the NBC employee (i.e. host, reporter), and (6) the type of video containing the athlete or sport being mentioned (i.e. host commentary, play-by-play, profile, or promotion). Researchers conducted three hours of detailed in-class instruction and practice in identifying names (and sports) by means of multiple rew windings and replayed videotaped text. Virtually all student coders reported that the processes were easy to understand. All tapes were coded twice. A random 50 percent of the athlete mentions and 50 percent of the sport mentions were compared to measure reliability. Using Holsti’s formula, intercoder reliability was 96 percent for mentions of the names of athletes \((N = 4446)\) decisions and 86 percent for mentions of sports \((N = 934)\). Because the reliability for mentions of proper names was substantially higher, and because mentions of athletes can reveal all three characteristics of interest in this study (gender, ethnicity, and nationality), whereas mentions of sports lack any ethnicity, most analyses focus on the athlete portion of the data. A top-ten most-mentioned athlete list was constructed using these same results.

The fourth type of coding focused on the visuals. Using the same videotapes, another set of 20 coders recorded (1) the apparent gender (man or woman) and (2) the presumed ethnicity (White, Black, Asian, other) of each face of a speaker, provided the person appeared for a minimum of two seconds on screen. All tapes were coded twice and half of the tapes (8) were coded a third time and best matches were retained. Comparison showed 99 percent correspondence in the totals for each gender and ethnic group. For all four methods, statistical analysis of quantitative data used cross-tabulations and chi-square calculations.

One research issue when discerning television representations was how to determine fair representation. For instance, in respect to gender, Mayo (1996) and Suk (1998) reported that women athletes have typically constituted only 35 percent of the overall number of Olympics participants. One could prematurely argue that if women were shown 35 percent of the time on television, fairness has been achieved. However, because American telecasts almost exclusively cover medal rounds and there are the same number of men’s and women’s final events offered in the Olympics, that expectation for previous studies (and for the current study) is more logically set to 50 percent. The desirable proportions by ethnicity have been harder to determine because of mixed individual backgrounds and participation by myriad countries; yet preliminary analysis found that the number of Olympic participants with the appearance of being largely White or Black was about equal. Thus, for the purposes of this study, an equal number of Whites and Blacks can be expected to be shown within prime-time American coverage. Finally, fairness in the coverage of nationality might be measured in many ways. One is to relate the proportions shown on television to the percentage of medals won by a given country. Since Americans won 11 percent of the medals at Sydney, an initial expectation might be that 11 percent of the television coverage...
should be devoted to American teams and athletes. However, a ‘home team’ effect has historically made such a proportion much larger. Yet, the degree to which American telecasts focused on American teams and athletes has not been examined in previous research about the Olympics, making the 11 percent figure the best possible expectation level.

Results

A grand total of 12,802 descriptors, mentions and visuals were coded and categorized from the prime-time videotapes of the 2000 Sydney Games. When compared to previous Olympic analyses, the size of this database exceeds that in previous telecasts.

Descriptors

Of the Sydney grand total, 2548 coded items were adjectival descriptors and descriptive phrases. Within this subset, 50 percent (1285) were explanations for the success or failure of an athlete, 12 percent (297) were descriptions of personality and physicality, and 38 percent (966) were coded as neutral/other. Table 1 reports the gender and ethnic breakdown of the explanations for success and failure.

Table 1 reveals significant gender and ethnic differences. First, in comments regarding athletic success, men were more likely than women have their success attributed to athletic skill ($\chi^2 = 6.68, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$) and commitment ($\chi^2 = 4.36, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .04$). Conversely, men athletes were much more likely than women athletes to be perceived as failing because of lack of concentration ($\chi^2 = 12.76, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$). Ethnically, athletes appearing to be Black were more likely than athletes appearing to be White to be characterized as winning because of superior athletic skill ($\chi^2 = 12.13, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$). In contrast, a White athlete was more likely than a Black athlete to be said to succeed because of superior commitment ($\chi^2 = 9.82, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$).

Table 2 reports differences for these same two forms of identity for personality and physicality. Most of the descriptions in Table 2 remained remarkably balanced when subdivided by gender and ethnicity, yet two significant findings were uncovered. First, there were more descriptions of men’s size and parts of the body than there were for women ($\chi^2 = 5.55, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .02$). Second, White athletes were more likely than Black athletes to be dubbed modest or introverted ($\chi^2 = 9.76, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$). The four gender and three ethnic differences reported in the first two tables show that remarks by NBC commentators were imbued with some forms of sexist and ethnic stereotypes, albeit not by overwhelming margins and not always the same ones that appeared in earlier studies. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were both confirmed.

Clock Time

Hypothesis 3 referred to the amount of clock time devoted to men’s and women’s athletics, positing that the coverage would split evenly between the genders. Table 3 reports the amount of clock time (in minutes) devoted to each sport.
Table 1  Descriptive explanations of success/failure used by NBC employees in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th></th>
<th>ETHNICITY</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>Ratio S:F</td>
<td>Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic skill</td>
<td>391a</td>
<td>322b</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composure</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>78b</td>
<td>54b</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* $\chi^2 = 6.68$, d.f. = 1, $p = .01$.
\* $\chi^2 = 4.36$, d.f. = 1, $p = .04$.
\* $\chi^2 = 12.76$, d.f. = 1, $p = .01$.
\* $\chi^2 = 12.13$, d.f. = 1, $p = .01$.
\* $\chi^2 = 9.82$, d.f. = 1, $p = .01$. 

\footnote{a} \footnote{b} \footnote{c} \footnote{d} \footnote{e}
As Table 3 shows, the ratio of 53 percent for men’s sports to 47 percent for women’s sports embodied a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 6.01, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01$) between the amount of time devoted to each gender group, a small step backward from the statistically equal 51:49 ratio in the Atlanta Olympics, yet a step forward...
from the quite different 60:40 ratio for the Winter Games in Nagano. Additionally, many more men’s sports were covered in prime time: a total of 18 men’s sports and 10 women’s sports were given some form of coverage by NBC. Consistent with past findings for Summer Games, the bulk of women’s sport coverage was devoted to the three sports of gymnastics, swimming, and track-and-field. These three sports constituted 73 percent of all the coverage of women’s sports. Consequently, Hypothesis 3 was rejected, as the equity in clock time by gender that was achieved in previous Olympic telecasts was not achieved by NBC in 2000.

Most-Mentioned Athletes

Table 4 lists the top-ten most-mentioned athletes within NBC’s telecast. There are several ways to evaluate the data presented in Table 4. First, gender balance actually was achieved within the top ten as the list was composed of five men and five women. Second, the ethnicity of the top-ten veered only slightly toward White athletes, with six of the top ten being of this ethnicity. Third, seven of the top-ten most-mentioned athletes were American. A useful way of looking at this finding for nationality is to consider who should have been mentioned most often. Since 12 individual athletes won at least four medals in Sydney, these 12 might have appropriately been mentioned most frequently. However, only four of the 12 (33 percent) athletes who won at least four medals at the Games were American. Thus, the favoritism for US athletes indicates increased salience beyond what should be expected. On the other hand, the United States won more gold medals than nationals of any other country. Hypothesis 4 was only partially confirmed, as marked gender bias was not found in the list, but some modest bias toward Whites and Americans did appear.

Athlete and Sport Mentions

Two hypotheses pertained to athlete and sport mentions. Altogether, a total of 9345 mentions of athletes and sports were analyzed: 7344 were mentions of athletes, and 2001 were mentions of sports. Table 5 reports the distribution of the 7344 athlete mentions by NBC source.

As Table 5 indicates, the mentions skewed toward men (4082 or 55 percent), Whites (4041 or 55 percent) and Americans (3766 or 51 percent), supporting Hypothesis 5, which anticipated the greater salience of all three of these identity groups. However, in no case was the favoritism overwhelming: Women’s mentions occupied 45 percent of the gendered database (after removing ‘ungendered’ comments), non-Whites were mentioned in 45 percent of the ethnically classified database, and non-Americans were represented in 49 percent of the nationality-classified database.

When addressing the breakdown by source, results show that reporters, narrators, and promos carried most of the bias against women athletes, as in previous Olympic analyses. Hosts provided the most balanced gender coverage, and reporters the least balanced. In contrast, all sources of NBC’s coverage, including hosts, were tilted in favor of White athletes. Finally, for nationality, American
athletes received significantly more mentions from hosts and female reporters and in promos and opening ceremony commentary, but interestingly, on-site reporters exhibited no favoritism for American men athletes.

Table 6 reports the distribution of the 2001 sport mentions across these same source categories. Sports could not be broken down by ethnicity because of mixed participation, but Table 6 shows significant differences in the quantity of sport mentions for the other two forms of identity — gender and nationality. Specifically, male dominance occurred for sports mentions and came from disproportionate mentions by hosts, reporters, and profiles \( \chi^2 = 97.92, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01 \). Only in network promos was gender balance achieved. Regarding nationality, interestingly, foreign sports significantly dominated the mentions \( \chi^2 = 62.32, \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01 \). This difference was found within host commentary and female reporter mentions, but was most obvious in male reporter mentions.

These results caused Hypothesis 6 to be rejected. This hypothesis claimed that hosts (because of increased scripting and presumed network policy) would be more successful in achieving gender, ethnic, and national equity in mentions of athletes by name and in mentions of sports. However, with the exception of balanced athlete mentions by gender, hosts contributed to these identity differences as much as other NBC-controlled sources.

**Visuals**

A total of 909 visuals of speakers were coded for gender and ethnic analysis. Male speakers were shown more frequently than women, constituting 58 percent (527 visuals) of the total sample, a significant difference \( \chi^2 = 23.1; \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01 \). Additionally, White speakers represented the overwhelming majority of all visuals (671 or 74 percent), while Black speakers (184 or 20 percent), Asian speakers (43 or 5 percent) and other/don’t know (6 or 1 percent) were shown in substantially smaller amounts \( \chi^2 = 103.1; \text{d.f.} = 1, p = .01 \). Thus, Hypothesis 7 was confirmed, as the majority of visual speakers were, not surprisingly, male and White.

### Table 4  Top ten most-mentioned athletes in the 2000 Olympics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>N of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>3. Lenny Krayzelberg</td>
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<td>4. Michael Johnson</td>
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<td>5. Alexi Nemov</td>
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<td>6. Maurice Greene</td>
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<td>7. Jenny Thompson</td>
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<td>8. Blaine Wilson</td>
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<td>9. Svetlana Khorkina</td>
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<td>10. Brooke Bennett</td>
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<td>W</td>
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### Table 5. Sources and distribution of mentions of athletes by name in the 2000 Olympics

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>N per night</th>
<th>% per night</th>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Reporters M</th>
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<th>Profiles</th>
<th>Promos</th>
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<td>55</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>3248^b</td>
<td>3248^b</td>
<td>99^c</td>
<td>162^e</td>
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<td>189</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>2351^c</td>
<td>241^c</td>
<td>424^c</td>
<td>121^d</td>
<td>76^f</td>
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<td>5647</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>187</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19^h</td>
<td>409^j</td>
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<td>7^o</td>
<td>1^p</td>
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<td>275^t</td>
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<td>94^n</td>
<td>107^r</td>
<td>42^v</td>
<td>21^w</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>7344</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>5647</td>
<td>340</td>
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<td>American</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>432</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>5647</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>76</td>
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\* χ² = 103.27; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 143.71; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 59.31; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 5.94; d.f. = 1; p = .02.
\* χ² = 6.55; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 2.756.88; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 311.76; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 42.89; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 55.66; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 1,358.21; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 286.63; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 84.48; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 30.22; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 50.11; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 8.13; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 112.41; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 46.55; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 83.12; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 22.33; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 25.74; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
\* χ² = 20.84; d.f. = 1; p = .01.
Table 6  Sources and distribution of mentions of athletes by sport in the 2000 Olympics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>N per night</th>
<th>% per night</th>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Reporters</th>
<th>Profiles</th>
<th>Promos</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100</td>
<td>406</td>
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<td>1223</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* $\chi^2 = 97.92; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 5.52; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .02.$
\* $\chi^2 = 144.23; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 14.10; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 16.29; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 62.32; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 4.25; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .04.$
\* $\chi^2 = 97.20; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
\* $\chi^2 = 16.29; \text{ d.f.} = 1; p = .01.$
Finally, Table 7 compiles the results of all forms of analysis into an easily digestible format. As shown in Table 7, one overarching finding appears: at every level of analysis, male athletes and White athletes constituted the majority of NBC’s Sydney Olympic coverage.

Discussion

Three primary conclusions can be drawn from the results, each representing a broad category of mediated identity. With regard to gender, women athletes were viewed as having less athletic skill and less commitment to their sports than were men athletes. However, men athletes were evaluated by commentators as failing because of lack of concentration. This finding about women athletes is entirely consistent with the results of prior American Olympic analyses. The second finding about men athletes is new to this study, but was largely the result of the poor performance of the American men’s basketball team. Despite winning the gold medal, Dream Team III was loudly criticized for lack of focus and enthusiasm, because of its near-losses in several games. Nevertheless, in terms of clock time, men had significantly greater overall coverage than women in these Games. Part of this could be explained by the absence of a theme such as the ‘Year of the Women’, that NBC employed in 1996, but for whatever reason the near-equal proportions found in 1996 became a statistically significant difference in 2000, despite greater public and media interest in women’s sports in the United States in the intervening years.

Still, the tendency toward gender equity and great variety in athletes and sports found among most-discussed athletes and sports was encouraging, especially considering that only women gymnasts made the top-ten list in the previous Summer Games. Finally, the analysis of mentions by gender yielded results consistent with prior Olympic analyses, once again finding that, while hosts were successful in mentioning men and women equally, other sources of the NBC broadcast lacked gender equity. Future research needs to address in more detail...
detail the likely relationship between heavy scripting (presumably for the host) and spontaneous play-by-play and color commentary (exhibited by venue announcers).

With regard to ethnicity, the findings for athletes were disheartening. Perhaps the most stereotypical results were in the descriptive categories, which found that Blacks were consistently identified as physically superior, while Whites were stereotyped as successful because of their perceived stronger commitment. Researchers have pinpointed these stereotypes for decades; their continued prevalence in 21st-century sports journalism remains disturbing, especially when embodied in the very pinnacle of idealistic announcing, the Olympics. The descriptive finding that Whites were seen as more modest than Blacks may have stemmed partially from the 4 × 100 medal ceremony after which the all-Black men’s relay team was widely denounced for displaying hubris when accepting their gold medals. In the findings regarding the top-ten athletes, Blacks were outnumbered by Whites 6 to 4, but Black athletes did rank highly (Marian Jones at no. 1, Cathy Freeman at no. 2, and Michael Johnson at no. 4), representing a reasonable distribution. Finally, on the negative side, analysis of athlete mentions indicated huge ethnic differences. Whites had over 1200 more mentions than Blacks and this bias remained consistent within all realms of the NBC telecast, indicating how strongly such favoritism is embedded within the social network of American society and perpetuated by the media.

With regard to nationalistic bias the results showed that while American athletes did win more medals than any other country (97) and this was an American broadcast, the comparative quantities of name mentions show consistent bias in this measure of identity, while in reality only 11 percent of the medal winners were from the United States. Not surprisingly, the top-ten athletes most-mentioned in the telecast were predominantly American, while half of all athlete mentions on NBC’s version of the Games were American. The finding that foreign sports were mentioned more frequently than American sports might be seen as one small aspect in which more fairness in coverage was attained — except for the likelihood that foreign sports were frequently referred to because commentators did not always know off-hand the names of foreign athletes, instead relegating them to such categories as ‘Chinese divers’ and ‘Romanian gymnasts’. Because these sports mentions were likely the result of decreased athlete-specific mentions, it should be concluded that all forms of analysis yielded strong nationalistic bias toward Americans. Perhaps NBC was merely giving the public what it wanted by slanting its coverage toward US athletes. Regardless, the mediated Olympics presented a skewed version of reality as a result of policy or production choices.

Several small surprises were uncovered in this analysis of NBC’s 2000 Olympic coverage. Analyses of descriptors, mentions, and visuals showed definite favoritism for men athletes, Whites, and Americans, in some cases in greater proportions than in preceding Olympic coverage. Such findings indicate increased salience for segments of certain identity groups and low or diminished salience for other groups in network prime-time coverage. Thus, mediation by NBC manipulated what the audiences heard and saw and consequently influenced the way American audiences viewed these Olympics and perhaps influenced, by
repetition over time, their views of themselves and other people. Television, after all, tells viewers what and who are important (agenda-setting function) and, by contrast, what and who are unimportant to society.

The Olympic viewing audience reflects a wide array of demographic groups. Many more types of viewers tune in because of the megasporting status of the Games than to other forms of television. Among the most impressionable viewers are children and teens, often gaining their first exposure to other countries and non-professional sports when watching Olympic telecasts. Lacking a larger frame of reference, the identity stereotypes embedded within the television coverage can readily become this young audience’s perception of reality, setting expectations about gender, ethnicity, and national similarities and differences. In sports coverage, it is patently important to uncover why embedded stereotypes persist. With repetition over time, differential treatment creates a differential reality that shapes the children and teens who tune in. Moreover, such perceptions unconsciously get transferred from sports to other arenas, such as business, education, and politics. For such reasons, the fact that a decade of Olympic telecasts has consistently skewed toward White American males underscores the need for media policies and practices that foster gender, race, and national equity. Impressionable youths are watching the telecasts; it is important for the next generation of Americans to receive a balanced and accurate impression of the Games and their participants. Although differential treatment may exist intentionally (for increased ratings and profits) or unintentionally (because of more familiarity with athletes who are male, White, and American), the potential for influencing Americans’ views of the world, its peoples, and its nation is clear, and the negative effects on domestic as well as international societal and political roles should receive intense scrutiny for policy-makers and be addressed in future research.

While some progress toward gender, ethnic, and national fairness emerged, in comparison to studies of past Olympic telecasts, until many of the negative aspects of descriptive stereotypes and unwarranted favoritism in clock time and commentary disappear, the televised version of the Olympics remains produced fiction, rather than a reflection of reality.

Notes

1. Eastman and Billings (2001) found a wealth of comments pertaining to the age of professional women tennis players, but note that these women are often in their teens, perhaps warranting such references.
2. The use of the generic terms ‘White’ and ‘Black’ are used throughout the article for classification purposes only. Because the exact ethnicity of each athlete would be impossible to determine, these two categories were used to clarify the ethnic backgrounds the athletes appear to have based on skin color.
3. Because of language, on-camera speakers would necessarily need to be biased toward English-language users.
4. See Eastman et al. (1996) where Lillehammer host Greg Gumbel is quoted as saying that seemingly spontaneous remarks are largely scripted and read from teleprompters during an Olympics.
5. The United States won 97 total medals, compared to 88 for Russia, 59 for China, 58 for Australia, and 57 for Germany.
References


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Susan Tyler Eastman, Indiana University.

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