

Calm down... It's just a woman talking football: Critical Feminism and Football Pundits

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Abstract

As the biggest sport in the UK, football pundits often are easy targets for ridicule (Hurrey, 2014), and for women intruding into this male domain, their involvement most definitely comes with difficulties. Birrell (2000: 61) highlights that critical feminist analyses have focused on the reproduction of gender relations, valorisation of male characteristics and evidence of male privilege through sport and sports media. From this perspective, it has been said that women breaking into the sport media are exposing themselves to unsavoury treatment (Etling & Young, 2007; Schultz & Sheffer, 2007), and are often considered less credible and less competent than men (Grubb & Billiot, 2010).

Using discourses on female pundits from both print and social media, this chapter will first outline a critical feminist approach to researching women in football. To then consider the narratives around the increasing visibility of women as football pundits, and their continuing presence in a male dominated profession, two case studies will be presented. These case studies present: a) discussions about women's involvement as football pundits on social media, and b) the media representations of women football pundits, before concluding on how critical feminist theory can be useful in research of this type.

Introduction

It has long been documented by feminist scholars investigating women in football that their involvement has been fragmented and rooted in discrimination. That being said, in the England the sport is increasingly significant for women. The formation of a formal semi-professional league in 2011 in the Football Association (FA) Women's Super League (WSL), which later fully professionalised in 2018, has contributed to growing numbers of girls participating, and women working in the sport (Culvin and Bowes, 2022). However, although there is increasing involvement of women within football in multiple ways, arguably the sport remains a bastion of male dominance. Often, disparities in media coverage between men's and women's football is a stark reminder of the gendered hierarchies that exist in the sport (Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2019). However, much like participation rates and professional opportunities, there has been talk of a 'new age' of media coverage of women's football (Petty and Pope, 2019), which has included the emergence of women working in the sport media as pundits and commentators.

The increasing visibility of women involved in football within the sport media has occurred, yet it remains to be seen whether women *working* in the sport media are part of this change. Whilst still vastly underrepresented in the sports media generally (Franks and O'Neil, 2016), women have been commentating on football since 2007, with trailblazer Jacqui Oatley featuring on Match of the Day, the first female commentator since the programmes launch in 1964. It has also taken time for women to feature more regularly as pundits during television coverage of matches, with former England international Eniola Aluko the first to feature in 2014. When both Aluko and her ex-England teammate Alex Scott featured on England's World Cup 2018 coverage, they were thrust into the media spotlight. They have since become prominent figures in the media, working on both men's and women's football whilst simultaneously paving the way for other women to do the same. However, their inclusion as pundits has provoked debates about the legitimacy of their involvement, discussions rooted in sexist discourse.

It is well known that there are increasing numbers of women who are taking part in, engaging with, and consuming sport (Parry et al, 2021), yet the media coverage of women in sport continues to be problematic. Bruce's (2013; 2015) work draws together key findings on

feminist sport media analyses, highlighting the subordinate and highly gendered nature of women's inclusion. More recent research on media representations of sportswomen has paid attention to technological changes in the media, incorporating online and new media analyses alongside traditional television and print media research. This body of work continues to highlight that sport is often presented as a male domain in both traditional and new, online spaces (LaVoi and Calhoun, 2014).

There is an emerging body of work that critically analyses the media coverage of women in football, centring primarily on analyses of women playing the sport. For example, Woodward (2019) explains that the women's game is much less visible than the men's game, given the historical and socio-cultural roots of both the sport, and the sport media, as male dominated spaces. The relatively limited research on the media coverage of women's football centres on the international scene. This research evidences that the initial boom in media interest around women's football was seen at the 1999 FIFA WWC, after it was hosted in and won by the USA (Ravel and Gareau, 2016). In the specific context of the England, research has shown that there has generally been a lack of media coverage of women's football (Pope, 2018). However, research on media coverage of the England national team at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, concluded an improved media representation of women's football (Petty and Pope, 2019). Attributing this beneficial change to a number of recent developments in women's sport, Petty and Pope (2019) put forward that we had entered a 'new age' of media coverage for women in football.

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Using discourses on female pundits from both print and social media, this chapter will first outline a critical feminist approach to research women in football. To then consider the narratives around the increasing visibility of women as football pundits, and their continuing presence in a male dominated profession, two case studies will be presented. These case

studies present: a) discussions about women's involvement as football pundits on social media, and b) the media representations of women football pundits, before concluding on how critical feminist theory can be useful in research of this type.

Critical Feminism

Critical feminism as a theoretical approach exists within a myriad of different feminisms. Feminist research has long indicated that football has been, and remains, a male-dominated institution in most contexts. Most of this research takes a feminist standpoint, which exposes patriarchal notions that set up the male as the norm, and the female as "the other", as we see in football (Bachman et al., 2018). In football, this privileging of men and men's activities can result in the reproduction of institutionalised practices and gendered roles, where women are marginalised and/or excluded. Considering this broad socio-historical and political context of a patriarchal society, a feminist perspective is adopted in this chapter. As Bachman et al. (2018, p. 3) note, there is no amalgamated perspective labelled 'feminist theory', feminist approaches have some common elements: 'attention to the status of women in society, the nature of gender, and the interpretation of the condition of being a woman as a basic differentiating label organizing different individual's lives'.

One such feminist approach has been termed critical feminism, an enmeshing of feminism with critical perspectives. Critical theories aim to identify the prevailing structures, practices and institutions that perpetuate and maintain disadvantage, inequality and/or oppression (Wood, 2015). When critical theories and feminist theories intersect, the focus is then to 'identify, critique, and seek to change inequities and discrimination, particularly those that are based on sex and gender' (Wood, 2015, p. 206). Critical feminist perspectives thus begin with the assumption that society is organised in a patriarchal way, where gender is socially constructed and culturally defined to serve the needs and interests of powerful groups of society (in this way, men, and specifically white, middle-class men).

In relation to sport, Birrell (2000: 61) highlights that critical feminist analyses have focused on the reproduction of gender relations, valorisation of male characteristics and evidence of male privilege through sport and sports media. In practice, feminists have drawn attention to the ways in which sport was made by men for men, with women's history in sport fractured and fragmented. Indeed, Scraton and Flintoff (2013: 106) comment that 'questions of inequality remain on the agenda for gender and sport'. Equality of opportunity between

the genders has been a central argument by feminists in their quest to gain resources for girls and women in sport, a perspective which has been accused of oversimplifying women's multiple and diversified identities.

Bachman et al. (2018, p. 1) highlight that 'media and their messages—including access to the production of these messages—have long been a key concern of feminist scholars', where the 'struggle over meanings and values of what it means to be a woman and what the category of gender entails' is as relevant today as it ever has been. Recent work on feminism and sports media has drawn attention to the multiple, complex and fragmented nature of feminisms (e.g. Bruce, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2017). As Wood (2015) explains, critical feminists are specifically interested in how power is deployed and resisted, including informal kinds of power such as media portrayals, and everyday practices that reproduce and sustain inequity. Sport is one such avenue when gender inequality persists (Bowes et al., 2021), and the sport media is an example of where critical feminism can be used to pay attention to the marginalisation and exclusion of women.

Twitter Responses to Women Football Pundits

Our first case study focused on the discussion of women football pundits on social media networking site Twitter during the 2019 Women's World Cup. Talia, Trunfio and Marozzo (2015) state that analysis of social media data can be used to understand the behaviour of people and the dynamics of public opinions. Relevant tweets were compiled using the Twitter search tool, using the following search criteria: 'football pundits', 'female football pundits', 'Alex Scott pundit', 'pundit women football world cup', totalling 53 different tweets and associated replies. This occurred during the time frame of the 2019 Women's World Cup: Friday 7 June to Sunday 7 July. As per the Twitter terms of service, by posting content on public profiles users grant access to use, copy, and reproduce that content. However, as users have not provided informed consent, all Twitter user handles have been replaced with numbers, except for verified users, and minor changes made, to protect anonymity (Williams et al., 2017). The tweets about women football pundits collected were thematically analysed using a critical feminist perspective into three dominant themes: overt sexism, challenging equality, and support for women pundits.

Overt Sexism

One of the dominant themes in the discussions of women football pundits was that of overt sexism and/or sexist abuse, which often positions women in a subordinate position. The inclusion of women as football pundits prompted scrutiny and disapproval. Some users disagreed with their involvement, and others likened women pundits as a tokenistic move by media companies:

Female football pundits. No. Just no. #gohome (User 17)

TV companies indulging in 'tokenism' by using female football pundits (User 29)

One example of overt sexism came in the obvious discussion of stereotypical gendered roles of women, problematising women's involvement in the male sphere of football (and punditry, specifically) and highlighting how gender is socially constructed and reinforced:

When you watch the Women's World Cup, the female pundit gives her opinion... I am still waiting for her to finish off with... 'And then just pop it in the oven for 30 minutes' (User 52)

Alongside this obvious gendering of women working as football pundits, there were examples of the sexualisation of women. For one user, this was due to women's (unexpected) knowledge of the sport, for another, it was in marked contrast to women's involvement in football:

I find female football pundits who know the offside rule to be strangely alluring #isthatsexist (User 19)

Female football pundits are a disgrace. Take your clothes off or get off my screen #furious (User 18)

For one pundit, Alex Scott, online sexist abuse occurred 'every single day', and it is a clear issue for women involved in the profession. Given the increasing significance of social media usage, it appears women are exposed in new ways to sexist and/or sexualised views (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Challenging Equality?

During the 2019 Women's World Cup, the selection of an all-women panel on the 9th June for England's game against Scotland sparked a 'reverse sexism' equality debate on social media. The

initial tweet that sparked a magnitude of responses came from public figure Rebekah Vardy, the wife of former England men's footballer Jamie Vardy, who asked: 'Umm what happened to equality?'

Twitter user's responses centred on towards the BBC for broadcasting such 'inequality', as critics argued that an all women panel of pundits was sexist towards men:

Tell me why for men's football we have at least one female pundit however today, for the women's world cup game, all pundits were female and not one male in sight #imnotsexist (User 39)

First game of the women's world cup and not one male pundit, yet with the men's game there are both male and female pundits? Equality my arse. (User 49)

It is OK to have female pundits on the world cup; then male pundits do not get a look in when it is the women's world cup. I am not being sexist to anyone, but it is wrong when we are in the society of equality (User 46)

Alongside this debate was the notion of 'tokenism', when women are included on panels for the male game:

4 women pundits on the women's world cup coverage, 2 more on Sky Sports. Where is the token man pundit?? Like we must watch the female token pundit when we watch the premier league (User 48)

This incident highlighted some of the challenge's women face working in the sport media, and how difficult it can be to shift perceptions. However, as one user noted

A panel full of female football pundits is not discrimination, it is a breakthrough #WomensWorldCup2019 (User 15)

Clearly, this kind of narrative downplays the institutionalised sexism that women working in football have had to overcome. The 'reverse sexism' narrative is rooted in post-feminist sensibilities, and challenges to feminist thinking that frames feminism as 'out to get men' (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016). However, a critical feminist approach contests these ideas as ignorant to the institutionally gendered challenges women have faced in society, especially in the sport media

landscape, with Garcia-Favaro and Gill (2016) referring to narrative such as this as 'post-feminist sexism'.

Support for Women Pundits:

While there were clear issues with sexist abuse towards women as pundits, and challenges to women's increased presence as pundits, this also prompted significant levels of support by twitter users:

Just because we have vaginas does not mean we know fuck all about football (User 9)

I am sorry lads, but football is our national sport and women are entitled to enjoy it too
#WorldCup (User 7)

Opinions such as this complement the clear increase in coverage of female sports, and the increasing presence of women working in sport, such as pundits. This is often perceived as a positive movement for women and women's football:

My daughter is a bit too young for football but how is it that as she grows up she will be in the generation where having female commentators and pundits is the norm
#WorldCup (User 10)

This idea of advocates for equality in football is also supported by Premier League Tonight presenter, Jake Humphrey, who took to social media when voicing his opinions on female football pundits and the sexist abuse they receive online, stating: 'any form of discrimination is wrong. Football is for everyone; it should be empowering our daughters as well as our sons'. This overt support for women as pundits, and the challenges to obvious power inequalities within football and the mediatisation of football, demonstrate the importance of critical feminist thought in highlighting gendered issues.

In summary, our first case study utilised a critical feminist lens in analysing social media communication about women football pundits. This has revealed some of the challenge's women football pundits face, demonstrating a double-edged sword where sexism was rife, but also challenged. What was evident is the initial responses to women as football pundits highlighted

the gendered hierarchy of football. There was clear abuse directed at women based on their gender, and expected gendered stereotypes, and the implication that football remains a male-dominated culture. When that idea was challenged – with the all-female panel – the outrage was tangible. The discussion of ‘reverse sexism’ highlights a lack of awareness of institutionalised sexism in the sport, and the challenges that women have had to overcome. However, there was clearly a wealth of support for women as football pundits, seemingly rooted in an awareness of the marginalisation of women in football, and as football pundits.

Print Media Representations of Women Football Pundits

Despite a shift in audiences interacting with online media platforms, print media is still a prominent media source (Velija & Silvani, 2020). In our second case study, print media data on women as football pundits was collected using Nexis database, using UK print media sources. The timeframe of the search was between the year 2018 and 2021, using the keywords: ‘women football pundits’, ‘female football pundits’, as well as focusing on leading women football pundits during this period: ‘Jacqui Oatley’, ‘Karen Carney’ and ‘Alex Scott’. In total, 47 newspaper articles within the set timeframe were identified. As with case study 1, the data set was thematically analysed using a critical feminist lens. Dominant themes identified were positive descriptors, narratives of change and challenging sexism.

Positive Descriptors

Using a critical feminist lens and drawing on a wealth of work regarding women in the sport media (e.g Bruce, 2013; 2015), it was expected that the media representation of women football pundits would be problematic. However, the print media coverage was distinctly positive about the emerging involvement of women working as football pundits within football media, with the following headline proclaiming:

Female pundits set for star roles as BBC and ITV battle for World Cup ratings (The Observer, 10 June 2018)

Writing about the all-woman pundit team for the England versus Scotland Women’s World Cup game, the positive narrative manifested into a call for equality via leveling the playing field:

It’s high time we had level playing field; Talented all-female World Cup presenting team even the score for football fan Jean (Sunday Mail, 16 June 2019)

For some of the leading women, such as Alex Scott, the media were conscious to highlight how much she deserved, or has earned her place in football media:

Alex Scott deserves her place alongside football's male pundits (The Times, 12 August 2018)

THE WORLD AT HER FEET; In her early years at Arsenal Alex Scott did the laundry for the men's team to make ends meet. Now she's one of the football's star pundits (Sunday Times, 18 October 2020)

The women were framed as capable, with the following descriptors used to describe women working as football pundits: 'exceptionally informed' (The Independent, 16 January 2020), 'Scott's commenting success has soared' (The Mail, 20 December 2018), 'well-informed' (Daily Mail, 30 December 2020) and 'respected' (The Guardian, 30 December, 2020). This is a notable shift in the ways in which women in sport have typically been written about by the print media, moving away from the previous research studies suggesting that women in the sport media are often feminised and sexualised (Bruce, 2013; 2015).

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

In light of the first theme, which highlighted the positive discussions in the print media of women football pundits, women's involvement in football in this way was described as a significant moment for women in sport. It was evident throughout the dataset that women in punditry, like Jacqui Oatley, were trailblazers. This supports Schmidt's (2018) recent research that the media are giving significant coverage to advocates of social issues:

'Jacqui took a bullet for us': the women with key World Cup reporting roles; There will be more women than ever before broadcasting to British homes from Russia (The Guardian, 14 June 2018)

However, this 'breaking' of the glass ceiling was not something that was reported lightly, with stories of women pundits challenging the sexist cultures of sport and navigating sexist abuse in a variety of forms:

No, the world isn't ending, it's just a women hosting Sunday Supplement; The hugely experienced and pedigreed Jacqui Oatley is the new host of Sunday Supplement and

the sexist reaction to the announcement from Sky Sports was as pathetic as it was expected (The Independent, 15 January 2020)

‘Breaking glass ceiling wasn’t without pitfalls’; Women now play a prominent role on the front line of TV coverage, but as Sally Jones, the first female sports reporter on BBC Breakfast News, recalls it was a tough battle to break down the gates to male-dominated world. (The Daily Telegraph. 16 May 2019)

At this stage, whilst we can acknowledge the significance of the print media’s positive reporting of women football pundits, it is also important to see how the media adopt a critical feminist stance in highlighting the gendered inequalities women face, and the gendered hierarchy that has persisted in the sport media.

Challenging Sexism

Leading on from the following theme, in which breaking the glass ceiling for women football pundits often meant confronting sexism, the print media were open to presenting issues related to sexism and sexist abuse of women football pundits.

From breast-grabbing to ‘hottest fan’ galleries, is this World Cup the most sexist?; Female presenters, pundits and fans are on our screens in unprecedented numbers. It looks as if the sport has progressed – but the rate of sexual harassment and assault tells a disturbing story (The Guardian, 2 July 2018)

For one notable sports media figure, Clare Balding, the abuse received on social media when reporting on football was enough to prevent her continued employment in this space:

‘VILE ABUSE’ BBC star Claire Balding refuses to cover men’s football over ‘vile abuse’ on ‘toxic’ social media (The Sun, 29 November 2020)

A specific feature of the print media dataset was the focus on Karen Carney, who received a barrage of abuse for her comments about Leeds United in 2020. The newspapers were quick to condemn the sexist abuse she received on social media, as well as the reaction of the club itself:

Club's irresponsible action opened the door to sexist trolls: Leeds should have known better than to single out a female pundit who would be attacked for her gender (The Daily Telegraph, 31 December 2020)

The abuse received by Carney was undeniable. In public messages seen by the Guardian, Carney was called a "silly bitch", a "stupid slag" and "twat of the week" and was told to "get back in the kitchen", or to "put your mic down and get yourself home there's dishes to wash and clothes to iron". Other users wrote they were "sick of this shit women pundits", while another quipped "women's lives matter but come on, women and football? Get kettle on love!" (The Irish Times, 21 January 2020)

The media reports also suggested that Leeds United should be:

bringing in representatives from Women in Football and educating their staff, coaches, owner and seemingly alien world of sexist abuse (The Guardian, 2020).

In this way, the media are advocating for women, challenging dominant belief systems about women's role as football pundits, and reprimanding sexist 'trolls' on social media, like the users seen in our first case study.

In sum, our second case study provides a critical feminist analysis of the representation of women in sport media, in particular women football pundits. Unlike Fink's (2015) findings that women in the sport media are rarely noted by their success, the women football pundits in this study are praised for their skillset and supported by the media in this way. It is reported that more women are breaking through the glass-ceiling into traditionally male held roles within football, such as punditry. The majority of the findings within the study reflected the positive representation of female football pundit by the media, against a backdrop of sexist problems.

Conclusion: Researching football pundits using critical feminist theory

As we enter 'the new age of media coverage' of women's football, there is an increasing visibility of women working in the football media. This chapter highlights how critical feminist approaches can be used to help understand the presentations of women football pundits in traditional media

and online media spaces. Drawing on both case studies here, the focus is very much on the double-edged sword of media involvement for women football pundits, in which there is an increasing acceptance of, and support for them working in a culture that is inherently and institutionally sexist, gendered and hierarchical.

Our first case study highlights how the gendered hierarchy of football plays out in online spaces in discussions of women working in the game. It is evident from the data collected that the perceptions of female football pundits are both problematic, but also supportive. The support is seemingly cognisant of the perpetual subordination of women within football, and of the power imbalances between women and men in sport hierarchies. However, there are concerns at the accessibility of women pundits on social media, as they navigate through targeted sexism and sexist abuse from football fans. Our second case study evidences the significance of the print media in challenging the inherently sexist sport media institution. In this chapter, we have seen a snapshot of how journalists can frame women pundits as worthwhile of their place in the gendered cultures of football. Again, whilst it is apparent that the power in football rests in men's hands, the push back from print media journalists is encouraging.

Currently, we are still at the stage where gender seems a significant aspect of a football pundits' identity, in the sense of how they experience the sport media workplace. It could be suggested that the discussions of women pundits – both in print and online - is out of the *uniqueness* of women in the role of pundit, emphasising the gendered nature of the profession. Alex Scott, an ex-England footballer turned football pundit suggests that:

It's going to get to the stage where I am not regarded as a female pundit. I don't want to be regarded as a female pundit, I'm a pundit (Wrack, 2019).

Until that is the case, critical feminist approaches, alongside other feminist theories, will continue to be a useful lens to understand women's experience in football. As Bachman et al. (2018, p. 18) state, 'feminist theory is a broad theoretical perspective, one that serves as connective tissue binding raw data and observation with critical thought about gender and identities'. However, feminism has at times been called out for its narrowness and white centrism, and contemporary, intersectional feminist theory can enable a more nuanced consideration of subordination and dominance that goes beyond gender. Future analyses of women in punditry would benefit from a diverse range of feminist perspectives (Thorpe et al., 2017).

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