

Mojca Doupona Topič*
Frane Erčulj

THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S AND MEN'S BASKETBALL IN SLOVENIA

OBSEG IN KAKOVOST MEDIJSKEGA POROČANJA O ŽENSKI IN MOŠKI KOŠARKI V SLOVENIJI

Abstract

The study aimed to analyse the media coverage of women's and men's basketball in Slovenia and establish the quantity and quality of the media coverage of women's basketball compared to men's. The study was made on a sample of 81 basketball experts. The study also analysed the quantity and quality of the media coverage of performances of two basketball clubs (women's ŽKK Merkur and men's KK Pivovarna Laško) in the Večer daily newspaper. Most of the respondents participating in this study (39.5%) follow women's basketball in the newspaper, on television (28.4%) and on the Internet (28.4%). Three-quarters of the respondents assess the media coverage of women's basketball in Slovenia as 'poor' or even 'very poor' and no less than 91.4% believe that the media should report about women's basketball more frequently. According to the majority of respondents (43.2%), the main reason for the insufficient coverage of women's basketball by different media establishments is the unattractiveness of the women's game, while slightly fewer of them (39.5%) believe that the reason lies in poor results. These findings were corroborated by the analysis of the coverage given by the Večer daily newspaper. The quality and quantity of media coverage, i.e. published articles, of the men's KK Pivovarna Laško team strongly exceeded that of their female counterparts.

Key words: women's basketball, media coverage

Faculty of Sport, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Corresponding author:**

Faculty of Sport, University of Ljubljana, Gortanova 22,
SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
Tel.: +386 (0)1 5207766
Fax: +386 (0)1 5207750
E-mail: mojca.doupona@fsp.uni-lj.si

Izvleček

Namen raziskave je bil analizirati medijsko spremljanje ženske košarke v Sloveniji in ugotoviti obseg in kakovost medijskega poročanja o ženski košarki v primerjavi z moško. Raziskava je bila narejena na vzorcu 81-ih oseb. Vzorec je zajemal igralke in igralce nekaterih košarkarskih klubov iz prve ženske in moške SKL, člane uprav teh klubov, košarkarske sodnike in tudi nekaj bivših igralcev in igralcev. V raziskavi tudi analiziramo obseg in kakovost poročanja o nastopanju dveh košarkarskih klubov (ženske ekipe ŽKK Merkur in moške ekipe Pivovarna Laško) v dnevnem časopisu Večer. Največ anketirancev, ki smo jih zajeli v raziskavo spremlja žensko košarko preko časopisa (39,5%), televizije (28,4%) in interneta (28,4%). Tri četrtine anketirancev ocenjuje medijsko spremljanje ženske košarke v Sloveniji kot slabo ali celo zelo slabo in kar 91,4% jih je mnenja, da bi žensko košarko mediji morali bolj spremljati. Poglavitni vzrok za slabo spremljanje ženske košarke s strani različnih medijev, največ anketirancev (43,2%) vidi v neatraktivni igri, le nekaj manj (39,5%) pa jih meni, da je to zaradi slabih rezultatov. Predhodne ugotovitve potrjujejo tudi analiza poročanja dnevnega časopisa Večer. Kvaliteta in kvantiteta poročanja t.j. objavljenih prispevkov je močno na strani moške ekipe KK Pivovarna Laško.

Gljučne besede: ženska košarka, medijsko spremljanje

INTRODUCTION

These days the image of sport depends more than ever on the media's perception of sport, not only as an activity but also in terms of the growing number of famous athletes. Sports attract and fascinate millions of spectators all around the world. Media establishments strive for maximum ratings and, consequently, maximum earnings. Sport is one of the domains exploited for this purpose. Attractive and popular sports which can capture the attention of a large number of people and produce the most recognisable and admired athletes are in the forefront.

It is only natural that those sports and athletes which fail to achieve visible results are not given their full due and the media only report on them rarely or never at all. In Slovenia, one such sport is women's basketball which receives almost no media attention. However, with their exceptionally strong results in the most important international competitions Slovenian female basketball players represent their country very well and thus alongside their male counterparts. Their presence in the media is, nevertheless, very small compared to men's teams. Although in the past few years Slovenian female basketball players have not scored such visible results as their male counterparts, they should still receive more media coverage. Owing to the above, the focus of the study is the subordinate position of women's sport in the media.

Women's sports, in particular team sports, are insufficiently covered by the mass media. Female athletes receive media attention mainly in individual sports or those which are traditionally considered women's sports such as tennis, swimming, gymnastics and synchronised swimming. The media presents women athletes in accordance with cultural stereotypes, associating a woman with frailty, sentimentality and dependence on others. Women are also characterised by their personal status in life.

Media establishments strive for maximum ratings and it is therefore clear that those sports and athletes which fail to achieve visible results receive less media coverage. Studies conducted in many countries reveal that both the electronic and printed media generally focus more attention on male athletes, while their reporting on women's sport achievements is unequal and trivial (Kinkema, Harris and Janet, 2001; Duncan and Hasbrook, 2002; Doupona Topič, 2004). Women's sports, including basketball, receive insufficient coverage in the mass media (Jančič, 2005; Doupona Topič, Durak and Erčulj, 2006).

The media coverage of women is one of the main subjects of analysis and a point of criticism in women's sport in the literature as well. Despite the growing number of women engaging in sport, North American sport media have made almost no progress in terms of the quality and quantity of reporting on women's sport achievements. A closer look at the results shows that not much has changed in this area over the last 25 years. Namely, the findings of Rintala and Birrell (1984, 237) are still relevant, suggesting that women's sport receives only 15% of newspaper coverage while the figure for magazine coverage is even lower at about 10%. Moreover, Boutilier and SanGiovani (1983) prove that this problem has a broader scope than a mere quantitative undervaluation.

In terms of both the quantity of reporting on women's sport and the quality of it, the media collectively undervalue women on a symbolic level (Gerbner, 1978). On one hand, by trivialising women's sport with titles such as 'The Battle of the Genders' and, on the other hand, by drawing attention to gender-dependent characteristics the media continue to put on stage a performance showing that men live in a world where women are strangers.

The dominant philosophy in sport journalism is to cover events which interest the broader public. According to Anderson (1984), this philosophy in North America hardly ever includes women's sport. Rintala and Birrel established that the quantity of reports on women's sports and the accompanying events depends on the balance between social responsibility and economic rationality. The main obstacle to improving the media coverage of women's sport is not the newsrooms but the world of sport itself. As a rule, journalists do not understand that women's sport is caught up in the sport structure. The predominance of male commercial sports affects the journalist's judgment of what is worth reporting on and what not. Even though it is possible that the structure of newspaper sport staff and their working routine will change, no changes will actually take place until the rest of the sport world also changes (Theberge & Cronk, 1994).

At the beginning of the 1990s Messner, Duncan and Jensen (1993) conducted a study on how much space was allocated to women's basketball in US daily newspapers. The study results were surprising: the ratio between articles on male athletes and those on female athletes was 23:1. The space allocated to male athletes in the media was 28.8 times larger than that allocated to female athletes. The study established that 92.3 percent of all sport photographs showed male athletes.

In the last two decades experts have been ever more interested in the question of female participation in sports and physical activities. Numerous researches show that gender inequality in sport is still a persistent problem. The perception of sport today is not universal – it is divided into female and male sports. The direct comparison of female and male results bolsters the assumption that female sports are less appreciated than male sports. In sport, there is a considerable difference in the ideological differences between the sexes, which is evident from the descriptions of events – as if that goes without saying – as neutral facts. “Female sport is a phenomenon of secondary importance in society. It is nice and valuable but it definitely cannot be compared to the importance of male athletes' achievements. They cannot be judged equally, although the female and male parameters are constantly compared” (Doupona Topič, 2004).

The media exerts a great influence on how society views sporting achievements. The mode and frequency of reports on male athletes plays an important role. Many researchers (Duncan, Messner, Kane, Lensky etc.) claim that female athletes are frequently overlooked and that they represent a mechanism that keeps sports part of man's world.

Women's basketball in Slovenia

In Slovenia, basketball boasts a long tradition and is played by both men and women. However, top results are mainly achieved by the men's national basketball team and men's clubs. With women's basketball the results and the organisation are ranked lower. Most women's basketball clubs and teams have been encountering financial difficulties. Basketball halls are nearly empty during women's matches and it is more than obvious that the media pays less attention to women's basketball than men's.

As mentioned, basketball is one of the most popular sports in Slovenia. Conversations about this sport mainly revolve around men's basketball. Women's basketball is only followed by those who are directly connected with it. In Slovenia, basketball has achieved a commendable level of development since, despite the smallness of the country, there are many Slovenian players who play for large European clubs and some of them represent their country's colours by playing in the NBA.

Men's and women's basketball cannot be compared in terms of the number of clubs in Slovenia, nor in terms of their quality. In the face of a shortage of quality opponents, men's (Goodyear) and women's (Trocal) international leagues were established on the territory of former Yugoslavia. The competitions in the Goodyear (renamed NLB) and Trocal (renamed WABL) leagues represent comparable international competitions in which Slovenian male and female basketball clubs take part. In the period of this study, the Trocal league encompassed the women's teams Merkur Celje and Postaja Center Maribor, whereas the men's teams Olimpija, Slovan, Pivovarna Laško and Helios competed in the Goodyear league. The relative similarity of the two competitions enables a comparison between the reporting made by Slovenian newspapers and specialised sport newspapers about the achievements of clubs in both competitions. This study is limited to the achievements of the women's basketball club ŽKK Merkur and the men's basketball club KK Pivovarna Laško. The former is the top women's basketball team in Slovenia, whereas the latter was ranked second in the Men's National Championship. Both teams come from the same geographical area.

In view of the above, we aimed to establish the quantity and quality of the media coverage of women's and men's basketball in Slovenia as well as to investigate how the professional community follows and evaluates women's basketball in the media.

METHOD

Participants

The investigation of the following and evaluation of basketball was based on a survey conducted among 81 basketball experts (male and female players, referees and members of the management of Slovenian basketball clubs). In addition, this article delves into articles on the achievements of two clubs (the women's club ŽKK Merkur and the men's club KK Pivovarna Laško) published in the *Večer* newspaper, which is a leading printed medium in the region. Both of these clubs take part in similar competitions – the international league and, in the 2003/2004 season, they played in the territory of former Yugoslavia (the Goodyear men's league and the Trocal women's league).

Instruments and procedure

The sample of variables includes the position of women's basketball and media presentations of women's basketball. The quality of an article was assessed based on the following: the size of the article in terms of a character (word) count and the size of the photograph (expressed in cubic centimetres) published alongside the article. The following criteria were also taken into account: accuracy, factuality, balance and comprehensibility. To allow for a more objective comparison, only articles published after a match were considered.

The data so acquired were analysed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Quality of articles

Journalistic quality cannot be defined objectively as its meaning always varies with time and place and is based on subjective criteria. However, media quality criteria depend on many factors: the society, the targeted group, the medium employed, the journalist, the topicality, the genre

and the functions that the medium must or wishes to fulfil (Erjavec and Volčič, 1999). Clearly, it is very important how and by what means the author of an article tries to visually attract the reader's attention. The articles dealing with matches in the Goodyear and Trocal leagues in the 2003/2004 season can be defined as reports. Those articles dealing with women's basketball are mainly regular reports where the authors refrain from assessing and evaluating but only convey information about what happened and how. In contrast to women's basketball, there are some commentaries about men's basketball where the authors assess, evaluate and comment on the matches.

Based on the fact that there are more commentaries in men's basketball where authors express their opinions and provide a background to events, it can be concluded that the articles on men's basketball are higher in quality as they inform the reader more comprehensively and hence more qualitatively about the course of a match. Among articles about matches played by the ŽKK Merkur women's club, commentaries were only found when Slovenian derbies were involved. The formulation of the forwarded information concerns the journalist's competence to present an event in such a way as to match the contents of the message with the actual situation, taking into account the subject, conclusions and dependent variables (society, targeted public, medium, functions, journalist's self-reflection and the topicality/periodicalness of the genre). To achieve this, the journalist applies the following criteria: accuracy, variability, transparency, factuality, balance and comprehensibility (Erjavec and Volčič, 1999).

As regards accuracy, the articles describing ŽKK Merkur's achievements are written correctly and the same applies to the articles about KK Pivovarna Laško's matches in the Goodyear league. By definition, accuracy is the requirement to present an event in an unbiased manner.

A different situation is found with variability. The requirement for variability mainly implies that the journalist must present all relevant information and opinions about a certain event by answering the following questions: who, what, where, when, how and why. If this statement is viewed in the context of a comparison of the quality of the articles on women's and men's basketball, it can be concluded that both types of articles are lacking in-depth analyses. Despite the above, in the articles dealing with the men's basketball the question of 'why' is to some extent answered by the coach's statement after a match, which is usually not published in the articles about women's basketball. The journalists resume the coaches' post-match statements correctly in their articles. Transparency, i.e. an unequivocal statement of the information sources and data allowing for the identification and authentication of the source, the participants and their opinions, is very important and so is a clear denotation of subjective evaluations made by the journalist and their communication partners (Erjavec and Volčič, 1999). The criterion of 'factuality' requires journalists to clearly distinguish between an opinion and mere information about an event. The public finds it difficult to draw a line between evaluative and the empirical statements, which is why journalists should do their best not to mix facts and judgements, at least at the explicit level. An examination of the articles included in our sample showed that factuality is problematic in the articles on both the men's and women's basketball. 34 percent of the articles about the Pivovarna Laško basketball club were written by a journalist who is also a PR representative of this club. The author of 69 percent of the articles about ŽKK Merkur is a journalist who is also a PR representative of the Merkur women's basketball club. Moreover, he edits the club's bulletin.

The criterion of balance requires that all social constructs are offered an equal potential possibility to publish their views in the media. The criterion of balance underlines the equality of representation or non-bias towards individual views which are relevant in representing the actual situation. As regards balance, the media can only be reproached for the space it allocates to women’s basketball because a comparison with men’s basketball reveals that such space is not at all balanced.

The last criterion which influences the quality of a journalistic contribution is the right choice of words in view of the subject and genre of the communication. This includes optimal comprehensibility, consideration of the language level of the targeted public, formal correctness at the level of grammar and language standards as well as a balance between language simplification and professionalisation. The articles dealing with matches played by the female players of Merkur and the male players of Pivovarna Laško basketball clubs in the 2003/2004 season are comprehensible; however, the vocabulary in the articles on the men’s basketball is richer.

Quantity of the contributions

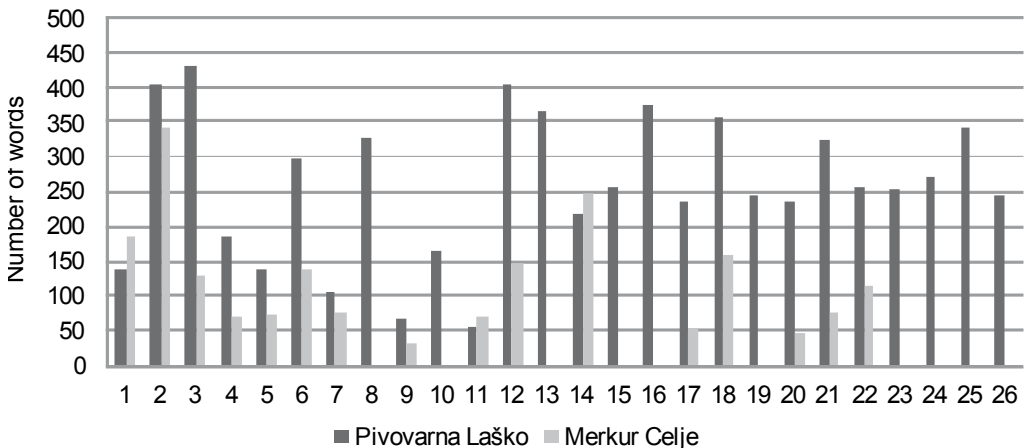


Figure 1: The 2003/2004 season in the Večer newspaper

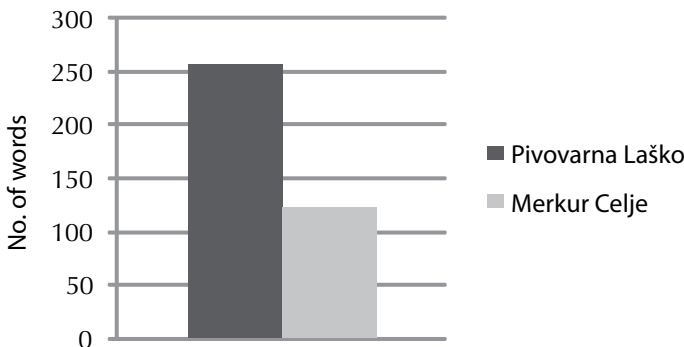


Figure 2: Average number of words per article

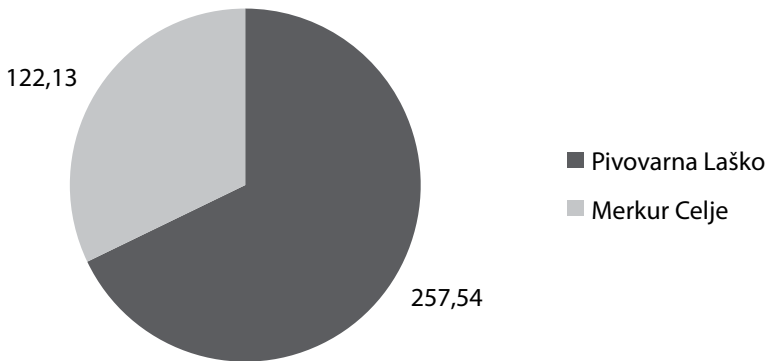


Figure 3: Average number of words by round – share

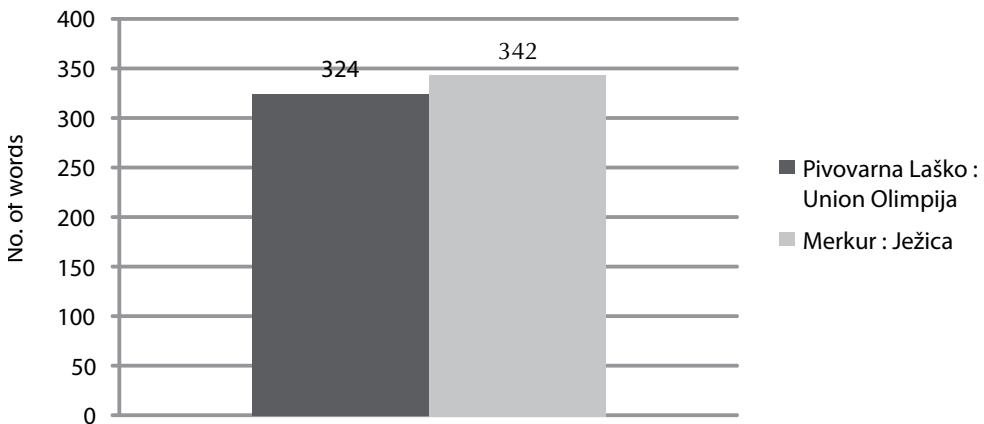


Figure 4: Articles about derbies

The Figures show that the men's basketball receives more media coverage. It is interesting that, in contrast to men's basketball, the articles on women's basketball are not published regularly and periodically. *Večer* has a column in which reports on the previous round of the Goodyear league are published each Monday, whereas throughout the season the column features reports on all basketball competitions played by Slovenian clubs. Women's basketball also has its own column where reports of the previous round of the Trocal league are published; yet it is obvious that not all competition venues are included.

Publication of photographs

We also investigated the presence and composition of any photographs accompanying articles on the women's basketball matches and established that, in the 2003/2004 period, not even one photograph of the Trocal league competition was published.

However, the articles on men's basketball were accompanied by photographs. The *Večer* newspaper habitually publishes articles on the Goodyear league within one column which is accompanied by a photograph of one of the domestic venues.

The following of women's basketball

Of the total of 81 respondents, the vast majority (85.2%) follow women's basketball regularly and only a small part (14.8%) periodically. Of the 25 male respondents, 19 follow women's basketball regularly, whereas among the 56 female respondents the respective figure is 50.

This is not surprising given that the respondents were mainly selected on the basis of their knowledge of women's basketball. All of them are actively engaged in basketball or have engaged in it in the past.

Almost forty percent of the basketball experts follow women's basketball in the newspaper, 28.4 percent on television and the Internet, 2.5 percent over the radio and only 1.2 percent via teletext.

About three-quarters of the respondents assess the media coverage of women's basketball in Slovenia as 'poor' or even 'very poor', while one-fifth evaluates it as 'medium'. The share of respondents who assessed the media coverage of women's basketball as 'good' or 'very good' is negligible.

Answers to the question 'What in your opinion is the reason for the poorer media coverage of women's basketball?' vary by gender. Men mostly think that the main reason for the insufficient media coverage of women's basketball in Slovenia is the poor results. According to women, the reason lies in the unattractiveness of the game.

Up to 91.4 percent of the respondents believe that the media should cover women's basketball much more.

DISCUSSION

The study results substantiated our assumption that the media in Slovenia dedicate less attention to women's basketball than men's. It should be noted though that this study investigates only the coverage given by one daily newspaper and that the sample consists of only two club teams. It must also be emphasised that the teams under scrutiny are comparable in terms of their competitive performance at the national and international levels. For a number of years now the women's team has won the national championship title, whereas the men's team has ranked between second and fourth places. Even though the study analysed the coverage by only one newspaper, a similar picture would probably be seen in other printed media whereas, in our opinion, the favouritism towards men's basketball is even more evident in the electronic media. This is also confirmed by statements by the coaches of both analysed teams, who are both experienced and renowned basketball experts. Both were also coaching the senior national basketball teams. The former (B. Zrinski) coached the senior men's and women's national teams and is therefore a competent judge. The latter (A. Pipan) has been coaching the men's national basketball team for many years now. Zrinski answered the question 'Are you satisfied with the printed media's coverage of your club and Slovenian basketball in general' as follows: *'I can say that, as far as the local level is concerned, we are relatively well covered, but at the national level and at the level of the Trocal league I think that the media coverage is substantially insufficient. A thing which speaks for itself is that newspapers report on women's matches in the Slovenian national league only on Tuesday' (authors' note: one day later than for the men's league)*. The above statement made by the coach of the women's basketball team led us to conclude that he was satisfied with the coverage

of the analysed newspaper, as this is the leading local newspaper. It is clear that the problem of the insufficient coverage by the printed media is more serious at the national level. The coach of the men's team, A. Pipan, pointed out the importance of the results or performance in reporting by the media and reprimanded the national TV broadcaster: *'Currently, we are appearing in all media, however, it all depends on our achievements. If we score successes we receive more coverage, if we fail, the coverage decreases which, in my opinion, is quite normal. However, it is true that in Slovenia the flagship club Olimpija receives the greatest media coverage. Slovenian basketball has found a place in some of the media and is inexistent in some others; what I have in mind here is the poor coverage given by the national television. Otherwise, it appears in the newspaper proportionately to its results.'* As both respondents are also the coaches of the senior national team, they were also asked to assess the media coverage of the national team's performances and to compare the media's reporting on club and national team basketball. The coach of the women's national team was very critical: *'The fact which speaks for itself is that at the press conference convened before the last preliminaries for the European Championship, when we were guests in Škofja Loka, only five reporters attended the press conference organised by the women's national team, whereas the one held by the men's national basketball team was attended by nearly fifty of them. This clearly shows that also at the level of the national team, the media coverage is substantially less than the women's national team deserves'* (B. Zrinski). On the contrary, the coach of the men's national team assessed the media coverage quite positively: *'It is difficult to compare because the club plays matches on a regular basis, one to two a week, whereas the national team works hard for one month and a half each year and at that time much is said and written about the national team. People love basketball anyway, and those media representatives who cover basketball do their best in the given period'* (A. Pipan). Both respondents were also asked to assess the media coverage of women's basketball compared to that of men's. As regards the media coverage of women's basketball, B. Zrinski pointed out the role of the Basketball Federation of Slovenia, the Association of Women's Basketball Clubs and the clubs themselves: *'The responsibility for the fact that women's basketball is insufficiently covered by the media should be borne by the Basketball Federation and, in particular, by the Association of Women's Basketball Clubs as they do not do enough in this area. Also those clubs which would like to promote themselves in different ways are not open-handedly supported by the Basketball Federation of Slovenia. For example, a year ago we applied to organise the final tournament of the Women's Basketball Cup and, despite the fact that we offered live broadcasting by Television Celje and Maribor-based NET TV, we were rejected. That is what makes us small compared to other sports.'* A. Pipan argues that the insufficient media coverage of women's basketball is due to the poor results: *'Those who engage in women's basketball will probably say that women's basketball is subordinate to men's. Women's basketball is not that attractive to the media, the results in Slovenia are not that high – it is in fact the results of the club that attract media attention.'* Of course, one can ask oneself if it is really only the results that attract the media's attention and if – despite the slightly poorer results of women's basketball compared to men's – the former does not deserve more media coverage.

Over the past few years women's basketball in Slovenia has practically disappeared from television. That includes both the national and commercial TV networks. In newspapers, the national championship is insufficiently covered and articles on the Trocal league are uncommon. Articles published on women's basketball are clearly shorter than those on men's basketball and they are often published with a few days' delay when they are no longer topical. Press conferences on women's national team basketball are only attended by a few journalists and reporters. For

example, only five reporters went to the press conference convened before the preliminaries for the Women's European Championship, while that held by the men's national basketball team was attended by nearly 50 press representatives.

Since the Basketball Federation of Slovenia and the Association of Women's Basketball Clubs are well aware of the insufficient media coverage of women's basketball, they try to intercede with the editorial boards of certain media establishments to turn this trend around. They strive to find more room for women's basketball in the most widely read daily newspapers and in the *Ekipa* daily sport newspaper. The most visited website 'Prosti met' plans to start publishing commentaries on all matches of the Slovenian senior women's teams (the Trocal league and the premier women's basketball league). Women's basketball is expected to receive more attention on the redesigned website of the Basketball Federation of Slovenia, while the teletext of the Televizija Slovenija television network will continue only publishing the results of matches. From a distance, which results from the delay in writing this article, one could say that progress has mainly been observed in the web media while the newspapers and television stations dedicate very little space to women's basketball.

It is understandable that this underprivileged status of women's basketball in Slovenia is also reflected in the results which, unfortunately, receive insufficient public attention to boost the media coverage of women's basketball. Various possibilities and methods for increasing the appearance of female basketball players in the media should be considered. More attention should be paid to public and media relations (particularly in the local environment), along with the promotion, advertising and announcement of matches. All of the above, combined with some other marketing approaches, could fuel public and media attention to this sport, improve the conditions for the marketing of basketball and possibilities to attract sponsors and help generate the much needed financial resources for women's basketball.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, D. A. (1994). *Contemporary sports reporting*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- Boutilier, M.A., & SanGiovani, L. (1983) *The sporting woman*. Chicago, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Doupona Topič, M. (2004). *Ženske in šport [Women and Sport]*. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Sport.
- Doupona Topič, M., Pajer, S., & Erčulj, F. (2006). Kako izboljšati položaj ženske košarke v Sloveniji [How to improve the status of women's basketball in Slovenia]. *Šport*, 54(4), 40-43.
- Duncan, M.C., & Hasbrook, C.A. (2002). Denial of power in televised women's sports. In S. Scraton, A. Flintoff (Eds.), *Gender and Sport. A reader* (pp. 83-94). London and New York: Routledge.
- Erjavec, K. & Volčič, Z. (1999). *Odraščanje z mediji [Growing-up with the media]*. Ljubljana: Zveza prijateljev mladine.
- Gerbner, G. (1978). The dynamics of cultural resistance. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media* (pp. 450-451). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jančič, J. (2005). *Primerjava tiskanih medijev poročanja o ženski in moški košarki [A comparison of printed media reports' on female and male basketball]*. Diploma thesis, Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Sport.

Kinkema M. K., Harris J.C.. (2001). *Mediasport studies: Key Research and emerging issues*.

Messner, M.A., Duncan, M.C., & Jensen, K. (1993). Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports. *Gender and Society*, 7, 121-137.

Rintala, J., & Birrell, S. (1984). Fair treatment for the active female: a content analysis of Young Athlete magazine. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1(3), 231-250.

Theberge, N. & Cronk, A. (1994). Work Routine in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women's Sport. In S. Birrell, & C.L. Cole (Eds.), *Women, sport, and culture* (pp. 280-287). Leeds: Human Kinetics.