

Andrew C. Billings. *Olympic Media: Inside the Biggest Show on Television*. London: Routledge. 2009. 184pp.

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This book examines the sports-mediated portrayal of nationalism, gender, and ethnicity by investigating the production of NBC's Olympic telecast between 1996 and 2006. Known as the Olympic network, NBC (the National Broadcasting Company) has secured multiple broadcasting rights for the Olympics for the American viewership since the 1988 Seoul games. Billings examines how NBC producers negotiate between accurate coverage and ratings and argues that the biases toward American, male, and white athletes in NBC's Olympic coverage result from its drive for better ratings in order to attract more advertisers. In terms of data and methodology, the book is based on qualitative interviews with major producers (Chapter 2) and sports telecasters (Chapter 3) at NBC, content analyses of prime-time programs (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), and media surveys of viewers' attitudes (Chapter 7).

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the production decisions and strategies of NBC producers and sportscasters. Decisions about which events to include or exclude are largely driven by the viewership. The Olympics is the only sporting event for which more than half of the viewers are women, and therefore sports that traditionally appeal less to women, such as boxing, are always excluded from the prime-time coverage. 'Story telling' is a key strategy of the Olympic telecast to attract viewers. In addition to reporting what happens in the field, the producers also incorporate personal stories of athletes and discuss how they have overcome difficulties—to give the audience a spectacle with drama, tension, and entertainment.

Chapter 4 focuses on the media representation of nationalism. The understanding of 'nationalism' here is strictly confined to the exposure of American versus foreign athletes in NBC's Olympic telecast. For example, the author uses clock-time and the number of mentions and descriptions of athletes by sportscasters as quantifiable measures of nationalistic tendencies. The content analysis shows that U.S. athletes receive more coverage than foreign athletes, and they are more likely to be assessed with

subjective remarks about, for example, their concentration, courage, and commitment, while foreign athletes tend to be assessed in objective terms and portrayed as 'machine-like' entities without emotions.

In Chapter 5, the author examines the language used by telecasters in the construction of sporting masculinities and femininities. The content analysis shows that male athletes have more overall media exposure than female athletes, and the imbalance is more visible for winter Olympics. The author argues that production decision making is a gendered process, as only 'sex-appropriate sports' are selected for prime-time broadcasting, such as figure skating, gymnastics, swimming, diving, beach volleyball, and track and field. Female athletes are often commented about with regard to their heterosexual attractiveness, while male athletes are discussed in terms of their skills and courage.

The depiction of ethnic and racial stereotypes permeates NBC's Olympic telecast. Chapter 6 tackles the issue of ethnicity. For example, white athletes are spoken of as having excellent concentration in comparison with black athletes, and Asian athletes are more likely to be portrayed as competing under immense pressure. The author notes that compared to nationalism and gender, ethnicity is often not explicitly discussed by sportscasters unless it can help make a good story that can capture viewers' attention. One such example is the case of speed skater Shani Davis, who was among the first black athletes to win a gold medal at the Torino winter Olympics in 2006. NBC and other media networks competed to produce stories about how Davis, growing up in racially segregated Chicago, overcame difficulties and succeeded.

Although the book has a number of interesting findings as reviewed above, the shortcomings of the book are quite visible. First, nationalism, gender, and ethnicity—the three themes of the book—are narrowly defined and discussed in a superficial manner. For example, gender disparity is measured by the length of coverage time for each gender, counts of mentions, and the frequency of certain words used by sportscasters to describe female and male athletes. In the discussion on ethnicity, the author writes, 'This study cannot uncover why there are apparently ethnically based references to athletes in Olympic sportscasts' (137). The book could benefit from a more nuanced and broader understanding of the construction of gender, ethnic, and national identities that go

beyond the quantitative analysis presented. Second, although the book is focused on NBC's coverage of the Olympics, it would have been helpful to include a discussion of how the fragmented media landscape—the Internet, satellite television, and other TV networks—has reshaped public attitudes about the Olympic portrayal of gender, race, and nationality. 'American public viewers' are far from a homogeneous group—immigrants, foreign nationals, and hardcore fans of particular sports can easily bypass NBC and view their favorite programs on the Internet or through other sources. A full understanding of the sports-mediated construction of gender, ethnicity, and national identity is not possible without taking into account the current democratization of the media.

The book will be of interest to researchers and students in studies of sports media and the Olympics. The extensive bibliography at the end is a good starting point for students to embark on research on gender, ethnicity, nationalism, and the intersections of these issues as mediated through sports representations.

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