International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Framing the Athlete: Media's Role in Translating Sports Science to Society

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 17(01), 1042-1050

Publication history: Received on 10 September 2025; revised on 25 October 2025; accepted on 27 October 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.17.1.2844

Abstract

The media has emerged as a critical intermediary between sports science research and public understanding. It shapes public perceptions, influences participation behaviours, and frames scientific knowledge in ways that affect both policy and practice. This theoretical paper explores the role of media in sports science communication, drawing on agenda-setting, framing, diffusion of innovations, and mediatisation theories. These frameworks explain how media constructs narratives, facilitates knowledge translation, and impacts research visibility. While media provides opportunities for broad dissemination and engagement, ethical challenges persist in the forms of bias, commercialisation, and oversimplification of scientific findings. This paper critically investigates the role of the media in shaping public understanding and communication of sports science. Media outlets are examined as pivotal agents that both bridge academic research and public discourse, while simultaneously commanding influence over how sports science issues, such as concussion protocols and doping, are translated and prioritized. The analysis is structured through the lens of agenda-setting, framing, diffusion of innovations, and mediatisation theories, highlighting media's complex functions in knowledge translation and public. The paper synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature, noting how sports media can both cultivate unity and perpetuate biases, including gender, racial, and commercial influences.

Keywords: Sports Science; Media; Agenda-Setting; Framing; Mediatisation; Communication

1. Introduction

The media plays a central role in shaping public understanding of sports science, influencing both the perception and application of scientific knowledge in sport. Its function ranges from disseminating research findings and promoting athlete health to sensationalising controversies and perpetuating myths. This duality highlights the need for a critical examination of how media engages with sports science.

One of the primary roles of the media is as a bridge between academic sports science and public consumption. Media outlets can facilitate the translation of complex research into accessible content, promoting awareness of issues such as concussion protocols, doping, injury prevention, and performance enhancement (Fuss et al., 2012). For example, coverage of sports-related concussions in contact sports has contributed significantly to policy reform and public awareness, particularly in the NFL and rugby (Khurana and Kaye, 2012).

Performance science professionals are now fully integrated as part of the backroom staff in modern sport organisations to support the optimisation of strategies relevant to aspects of athlete performance management, talent identification and medical service provision (Bartlett and Drust 2021). Like other industries, sport is currently undergoing a significant transformation, which has led to substantial growth of resources, expertise, and data generation (Robertson 2020). The role of media in sports science has become, therefore, even more prominent for capturing translations of sports psychology, biochemistry, sports medicine and rehabilitation, endocrinology, sports nutrition, sports

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performance analysis, and biomechanics and to some extent provide raw data sources or existing data analysis outcomes into actionable insights to address the practical demands of different stakeholders within the modern sports organisations (Bartlett and Drust, 2021).

The media is at the forefront of amplifying sports around the world being it cricket, football, hockey, rugby and so forth. In addition the media's sport news encourages unity and diversity in the world and unites people from different races, ethnicities and language (Deveci et al 2023). According to this viewpoint, the phenomenon of sports has been ingrained in contemporary society, and sports media plays a key role in boosting its appeal and reaching large audiences. However, it is clear that sports media play a part in raising athletes' profile in addition to popularizing sports.

In the realm of sports, the media's function extends beyond merely disseminating information; it also involves cultivating a favourable perception of athletics and sportsmanship. However, sports can also suffer from negative media attention. While mass media plays a significant role in raising public awareness in the context of health, it is equally crucial to comprehend how it may foster the growth of sports as a constructive force (Perdana et al, 2024).

Sports' future Information is closely related to the enhancement of sports and media. Therefore, it may be argued that the media plays a major role in the development of sports and the adoption of sports by society (Durmaz, 2023). Specifically, the obvious advancements in technology have resulted in the growth of a mutually advantageous partnership between sports and media.

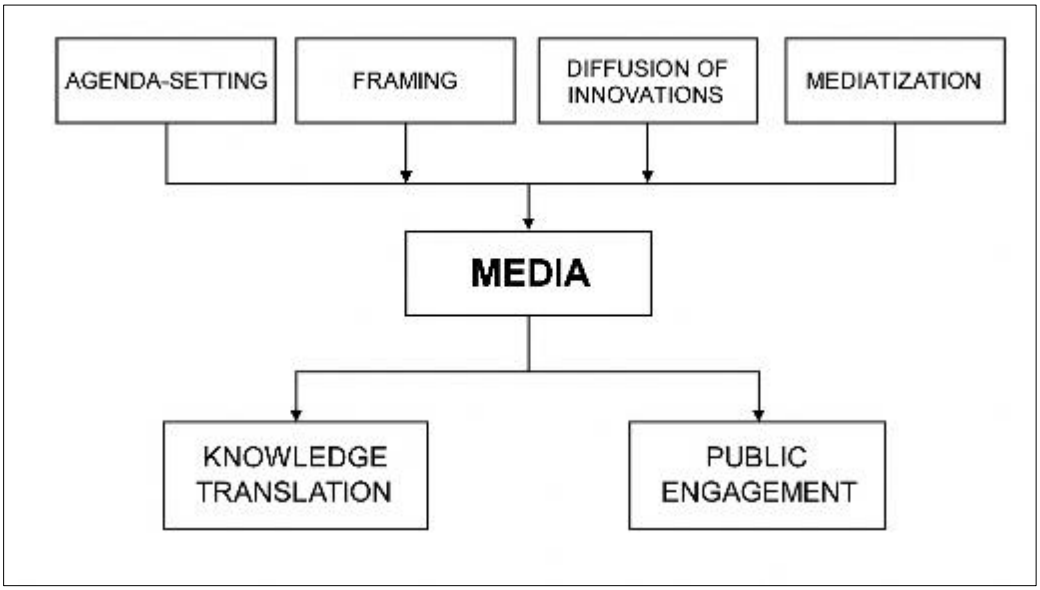

Figure 1 The Role of the Media in Sports Science: A Theoretical Examination

A conceptual model in Figure 1 situates media at the centre of sports science communication, influenced by four key theoretical mechanisms—agenda-setting, framing, diffusion of innovations, and mediatisation—and highlights its dual function in knowledge translation and public engagement.

Critically, this model effectively recognizes the multifaceted nature of media's role. The integration of agenda-setting theory acknowledges how media prioritizes particular sports science topics, guiding public and institutional attention (Wanta and Alkazemi, 2017). Framing theory is correctly emphasized as media not only selects topics but constructs the meaning of sports science issues, influencing societal interpretations and responses (Entman, 1993).

The inclusion of diffusion of innovations theory highlights how media facilitates the spread and adoption of new scientific practices and technologies in sport, echoing Rogers' (2003) principles that media act as a key agent in accelerating innovation acceptance. Mediatisation theory further adds depth by accounting for the broader cultural shift wherein media logic shapes not just content but also institutional and social processes in sports science (Hepp et al., 2015).

By linking these theories to media's functions in knowledge translation and public engagement, the model captures both the cognitive (informing, educating) and affective (involving, motivating) dimensions of media impact (Besley et al.,

2016). However, the model could be strengthened by explicitly incorporating the role of commercial and ideological influences that mediate media framing and agenda, as critical theory stresses power imbalances affecting whose knowledge is amplified or marginalized (Boyle and Haynes, 2009).

Moreover, the model's linear flow may oversimplify the complex, reciprocal interactions between media, sports organizations, and publics, missing nuances like feedback loops and the active role of audiences in co-constructing knowledge via digital platforms (Sanderson, 2011). Include such dynamics would reflect contemporary sports media ecosystems more accurately.

In summary, Figure 1 offers a valuable theoretical scaffold for understanding media's central role in sports science communication but would benefit from greater attention to power structures and non-linear communicative flows to fully capture the complexities influencing how sports science is mediated in society.

2. Media Influence on the Communication and Perception of Sports Science

Over the past two decades, the media from traditional broadcasting to social platforms has transformed how sports science research is communicated and perceived. This literature review synthesizes empirical findings and theoretical debates on media's influence in shaping public understanding, behavioural outcomes, and scientific knowledge within the domain of sports science.

Sports science is concerned with enhancing sports performance through the application of scientific methods and principles (Stone, Sands, and Stone, 2004). In a roundtable discussion among sports scientists from different countries conducted in 2010. Hoffman (2010) defined sport science as the study of maximising competitive athletic performance. In agreement with Stone et al. (2004), Sewell et al. (2012) consolidate the understanding that sports science is a discipline that applies scientific principles and techniques to enhance sporting performance.

However, media representations of sports science are not always accurate or balanced. Studies by Mallia et al (2020), Deveci et al (2023), and Rojas-Torriios, et al (2023) have shown that sports journalism often oversimplifies or misrepresents scientific findings to fit narrative formats or attract readership, sometimes leading to misinformation (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2007). This is especially evident in reporting around performance-enhancing drugs, where moral panic can overshadow nuanced scientific debate (Dimeo, 2007). For example, Lance Armstrong's doping scandal: Media coverage focused on the sensational aspects of Armstrong's downfall rather than exploring the complexities of performance enhancing drugs (PED) use in professional cycling; Russian doping scandal: Media coverage highlighted the state-sponsored nature of the doping program, fuelling moral outrage rather than delving into the systemic issues that enabled PED use, and the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative (BALCO) scandal: Media reports emphasized the involvement of high-profile athletes like Barry Bonds and Marion Jones, creating a narrative of "cheating" rather than examining the broader issues of PED use in sports. These examples illustrate how media representations can create a moral panic, overshadowing nuanced scientific debate about PED use in sports.

Furthermore, commercial interests often shape how sports science is reported. Media partnerships with sporting organisations can lead to selective reporting that favours dominant commercial narratives while suppressing critical voices (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012). For instance, injury data or research on athlete welfare may be underreported during major sporting events due to sponsor sensitivities.

Digital and social media platforms have also transformed how sports science is communicated. Athletes, scientists, and fans now directly share and interpret information, by passing traditional journalistic gatekeepers (Sanderson, 2011). While this democratisation increases engagement, it also raises concerns about the spread of pseudoscience, as influencers without scientific expertise may promote unverified performance or recovery methods (Pope et al., 2015). The growth of social media, and the resources available within, as well as the expansion of the grey literature (e.g., literature that is unpublished or published in non-commercial forms, such as blogs, policy statements, lectures, and audio-visual media), appears to have taken precedent as the resources of choice amongst many practitioners seeking to develop their knowledge. Whilst these resources undoubtedly have the potential to enhance the dissemination of good evidence (e.g., knowledge, understanding and application generated from rigorous, scientific research), they also pose a threat to the propagation of an appropriately informed evidence-base for practice. The website **www.sportsandscience.de** is dedicated to translating evidence-based knowledge that is regularly generated in scientific studies into short and digestible information through, for example videos and blogs, and provides opportunities for knowledge reuse and contribution (Sperlich and Wicker, 2020). Consequently, sport researchers and applied practitioners must carefully consider how their work, via media, reaches and impacts the desired end-user to ensure that good evidence filters quickly into coaching practice.

Despite these challenges, sports scientists themselves are increasingly engaging with the media to enhance science communication. Platforms such as *The Conversation* or science podcasts allow for more accurate, peer-led dissemination of knowledge, though uptake remains uneven (Sherwin, et al., 2021). Media training for sports scientists is thus a recommended intervention to improve the quality of sports science communication (Besley et al., 2016). This is also sports science training for media practitioners, thus a recommended intervention to improve the quality of sports science journalism.

A comprehensive meta-analysis of previous studies shows that the media and sports research is expanding and there is integration of media technology in covering the growth of sporting activities as well as the education of sports science in the world (Hafiar et al, 2025). The scope of studies has recently increased as highlighted by Hafiar et al (2025) study that exposes the growth of scholarly work that deals with media and sport science and the study noted the significant growth since 2013 and a peak in 2022 with 37 articles published. The rising interests in sports science and media reflects the ever-changing evolution of sports science and media technologies in the 21st century.

It is important to acknowledge in this paper that some studies (Raut, 2022) focused mainly on the economic side of sports coverage on the media. For instance in his study, he argues that through the purchase of broadcasting rights by businesses and the sponsorship of televised sports, media coverage brings in money. Thus, media companies may ignore sports science programmes but rather focus on the sport itself that generates revenue for companies. Nonetheless, Raut (2022) believes that watching sports on television can teach audiences strategies, tactics and rules and increase wider engagement of the public. Television in particular can be a good way the audience can learn about sport science as slow motions and repeats can expose how injuries happen and how to avoid injuries (Raut, 2022). However, there is also unbiased coverage of sports, for example in India cricket dominates television whilst other sports particularly women sports are neglected (Raut, 2022). This can have a negative effect on the audience as excessive coverage of one sport can saturates audiences.

As Kumar (2018) argues that the media has turned sports into a commodity promoting capitalism and spectacle as it creates unbalanced power dynamics and commercial dominates the natural structure of the sport. When media demands take precedence over physiological considerations, athletes' workload, injury risk, and burnout become ethical concerns from a sports science standpoint.

Nonetheless, Kumar (2018) further argues that the media are an educational and coaching platform, “media technologies (replays, slow-motion, multiple camera angles) provide a coaching aid, helping athletes and coaches study techniques and improve performance” (Kumar, 2018: 137). This aligns with the objectives of sports science such as skill development and performance analysis. Media organisations do have the power to change broadcasting scheduling and these changes can directly affect athletes’ performance and recovery which is a sport science concern (Kumar, 2018). However, there is a benefit that the media brings to the audience, public perceptions of fitness, training, and health are influenced by the media's portrayal of athletes' accomplishments and creation of role models. This indirectly advances sports science by promoting athletic engagement and raising awareness of the advantages of physical activity (Kumar, 2018).

3. Applying Media Theories to Sports Science Communication: Framing, Agenda-Setting, and Opinion Leadership

Beyond just disseminating information, the media has a significant influence in shaping how society perceives, values, and discusses scientific knowledge in the field of sports science. The media not only chooses which sports science concerns are made public, but also shapes how they are perceived, according to media theories like agenda-setting and framing (Wanta and Alkazemi, 2017). Media coverage of sports science frequently prioritizes topics that are either less contentious or more accessible, such as drug scandals, concussion protocols, athlete nutrition, and biomechanics, over more complex or specialized issues. This selective emphasis reflects the application of agenda-setting and framing theories, wherein media organizations choose topics that are likely to garner public interest, facilitate narrative coherence, or align with prevailing societal concerns (Mataruna, 2022). By amplifying coverage of these topics, the media not only increases public awareness but also shapes perceptions of which aspects of sports science are deemed most significant, potentially at the expense of more nuanced or underrepresented areas of research. This selective focus shapes which concerns are viewed as urgent or troublesome by the public, sporting organisations, and policymakers, making some topics more salient in the public eye (Mataruna, 2022).

The media also shapes how scientific issues are framed as medical issues, ethical transgressions, or institutional obligations. For instance, doping may be presented as a matter of personal ethics or structural failure in sports, while concussion reporting may be presented as a health and safety emergency necessitating regulatory action (Mataruna,

2022). In turn, these frameworks influence how audiences talk about the problems and the kinds of remedies they believe are acceptable.

By acknowledging that media power is frequently mediated through opinion leaders, the two-step flow model introduces even another level of complexity. Athletes, coaches, pundits, and medical experts commonly serve as middlemen, interpreting scientific results and presenting them in ways that are easier to understand. This model emphasises how public interest in sports science depends on the authority and credibility of these interpreters, who filter complex information through institutional, social, and cultural lenses, in addition to direct exposure to media content (Hunt and Gruszczynski, 2023). Opinion leaders thereby mediate how audiences receive, trust, or question sports science knowledge, making its circulation relational and multi-layered.

The two-step flow model is used in sports science to describe the dissemination of scientific data on subjects including mental health, injury prevention, and nutrition. New research findings may be covered by media outlets, but the general audience typically learns about them from opinion leaders including coaches, athletes, sports journalists, and medical experts. These people influence public perception and behaviour by interpreting, contextualising, and communicating scientific knowledge to their audiences.

Opinion leaders like team doctors and athletic trainers have been essential in educating athletes and the general public about the dangers of concussions and how to manage them since there has been a surge in media coverage of concussion-related sports injuries. Under their direction, sports regulations and procedures have changed to better safeguard the health of athletes. Media outlets frequently use fitness influencers, nutritionists, and sports coaches to inform the public about the advantages of particular diets or supplements. By influencing athletes' and fitness fanatics' eating patterns and training schedules, these opinion leaders assist in converting scientific knowledge into useful guidance. Opinion leaders like sports psychologists and former athletes have boosted media conversations regarding the mental health issues that athletes experience. Within the sports community, their professional perspectives and personal experiences aid in promoting mental health and lowering stigma.

Alongside these traditional theories, the uses and gratifications theory emphasises how audiences actively seek out sports science-related content to meet their social and personal requirements. As part of larger initiatives of self-improvement, identity creation, and community belonging, amateur athletes, fitness enthusiasts, and sports fans frequently interact with media stories on diet, training, recuperation, or injury prevention. In this way, audiences can benefit personally from scientific knowledge through media coverage of sports science, which fulfils affective and social as well as informational purposes.

Cultivation theory also highlights the cumulative impact of recurrent representations of sports science-related topics in the media. Recurring depictions of athletes battling with injuries could normalise taking risks and support the idea that suffering is a necessary part of being a great athlete. On the other hand, persistent media attention to mental health, concussion awareness, or athlete welfare may influence public perceptions to value safety, recuperation, and long-term health. Therefore, cultivation theory focuses on how, with prolonged exposure, the media can either normalise or question cultural narratives about science and sport.

Examples from real-world situations highlight these dynamics. In the National Football League (NFL), the media's portrayal of head injuries has changed over time, moving from considering them as commonplace parts of the game to portraying them as a severe public health emergency with long-term neurological effects. Due to criticism from investigative journalism and documentaries, the NFL changed its policies regarding concussions and made investments in independent medical research. Similar to this, doping has always been presented as both a systemic governance problem and an individual moral failing in international coverage of Olympic doping scandals, from Ben Johnson in 1988 to the Russian state-sponsored doping scandal in the 2010s. This has led to debates about fairness in sport and stricter anti-doping laws. Sports psychology has gained mainstream media attention in recent years due to the high-profile cases of athletes like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, who openly discussed the mental health strains of elite competition. This coverage has not only validated mental health as a crucial aspect of sports science but also questioned long-standing cultural norms that athletes must put performance before their own health.

However, it is crucial to recognise the institutional and commercial forces that influence media practices in order to comprehend the function of the media in sports science. Instead of a dedication to impartial scientific reporting, the media's emphasis on sensational or scandalous subjects—like doping controversies—often reflects their desire for viewer attention and financial gain. Complex scientific discussions may be distorted, oversimplified, or exaggerated as a result. Furthermore, there may be conflicts of interest when certain issues (like the long-term health effects of injuries) are underreported to preserve the commercial image of sports leagues or athletes due to the close ties between media

outlets, athletic organisations, and corporate sponsors. These relationships bring up significant issues about the media's function as a gatekeeper whose political and economic inclinations influence the public's awareness of scientific information in addition to its position as an educator.

When combined, these critical viewpoints and theoretical approaches show that the media actively creates meaning, mediates credibility, and shapes cultural values in addition to serving as a neutral conduit for sports science information. Through agenda-setting, framing, audience engagement, mediation by opinion leaders, and long-term cultivation—filtered through institutional power and commercialisation pressures—media representations impact the legitimisation, contestation, and integration of scientific knowledge in sport into larger social understandings.

3.1. Disseminating Sport Science via Social Media

Impellizzeri (2018) argued that platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer enormous dissemination potential, but researchers must navigate risks such as misinformation, oversimplification, and the erosion of scientific nuance (Impellizzeri, 2018). Empirical evidence supports these claims: Williams (2011) documented that a Facebook fan page directing users to applied sports science content generated high engagement—users stayed nearly five minutes per session and accessed one to two articles per visit (Williams, 2011).

Moreover, broader studies of scholarly communication have found that altmetrics, which track tweets, blog posts, and shares, capture dimensions of research influence distinct from traditional citations (Haustein et al., 2013; Haustein et al., 2015). Twitter has been identified as an informal arena for idea exchange and early public engagement with emerging scientific research (Darling et al., 2013).

3.2. Media Portrayal and Ethical Concerns

Media coverage of sports science often reflects systemic bias, especially gender bias. Women's and disabled athletes receive markedly less attention, and portrayals often rely on narratives that overshadow their athletic identity (Musto et al., 2017). Concussion science provides another cautionary example: journalistic platforms have sometimes amplified conflicted scientific voices, eroding public trust when scientific integrity is compromised (Mannix et al., 2016;).

3.3. Biases in Media Translation of Sports Science

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of sports science, acting as the primary conduit through which complex scientific knowledge about athletic performance is communicated to society. However, this translation process is often fraught with biases that influence how athletes are framed and how science is interpreted, with significant implications for public perception and the social construction of sport.

A critical theoretical perspective on this phenomenon draws on the concept of media framing, which refers to the selective presentation and emphasis of information to construct particular narratives (Entman, 1993). In the context of sports science, media framing can simplify or distort scientific findings to fit prevailing cultural and commercial imperatives, often privileging dramatic or marketable aspects over nuanced understanding (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). This framing not only affects how athletes are portrayed but also how society perceives the role of science in sport.

One salient issue is the presence of gender and racial biases in sports media coverage. Research indicates that female athletes are frequently underrepresented or depicted in stereotypical ways that undermine their athleticism and scientific achievements (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum, 2013; Bruce, 2016). Similarly, racialised framing of athletes, particularly Black athletes, can reinforce limiting stereotypes that overshadow their scientific or technical prowess, thus mediating the social meaning attributed to their performances (Boyle, 2017). These biases in media translation shape societal expectations and contribute to unequal recognition of sports science's role in athlete development.

Moreover, cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and selection bias impact the communication of sports science through media. Media outlets and audiences often favour information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or narratives, which can lead to the oversimplification or misinterpretation of complex scientific data (Kerr and McHugh, 2025). This selective reporting diminishes the diversity and depth of sports science communicated to the public, reinforcing dominant discourses that may privilege natural talent over scientifically informed training regimens (Smith and Johnson, 2024).

Critical theory also draws attention to the power dynamics inherent in this translation process. The media, as an ideological apparatus, not only disseminates sports science but also shapes societal norms and values relating to health, performance, and identity in sports (Gramsci, 1971; Althusser, 1971). By framing athletes through the lens of

entertainment or commercialization, media narratives often marginalize the critical and emancipatory potential of sports science, limiting its ability to challenge prevailing inequalities and promote athlete well-being.

Media biases significantly shape the translation of sports science to society, framing athletes in ways that reflect and reinforce broader social power relations. A critical theoretical approach highlights the need for more reflective and equitable media practices that recognize the complexities of sports science and promote inclusive representations of athletes. Such efforts would enable sports science to fulfil its potential as a transformative force within society, fostering a more informed and just sporting culture.

4. Strategies for Critical Media Literacy and Improved Science Communication

Critical media literacy is an essential strategy for counteracting biases and enhancing the accurate translation of sports science through the media. It involves educating both media practitioners and consumers to critically engage with sports media content, questioning whose interests are served, what narratives dominate, and how power relations shape representation (Smith and Maher, 2024). By fostering analytical skills, critical media literacy enables audiences to decode media frames and recognize when scientific complexity is reduced or distorted.

Media professionals can be trained to adopt more reflexive reporting practices that transparently communicate the limitations and nuances of sports science research while balancing entertainment demands (Lucidi et al., 2020). Interventions aimed at sports science students and journalists have shown positive effects in reducing uncritical acceptance of media messages, especially regarding controversial topics like doping or biomechanical claims (Lucidi et al., 2020). Such training encourages the presentation of diverse and equitable athlete portrayals, countering gender, racial, and other forms of bias.

Additionally, promoting advocacy and collaboration across stakeholders—including athletes, scientists, journalists, and audiences—can democratize sports media narratives. Athletes leveraging their media platforms to advocate for scientific literacy and inclusive representations serve as role models for media literacy in action (Fortuna, 2015). Educators can integrate media literacy into sports curricula to empower young fans and future professionals to critically navigate sports media ecosystems.

While critical media literacy is not a panacea and struggles against entrenched commercial and ideological structures, it offers practical pathways toward a more informed public and equitable sports discourse. Combining media literacy education with conscientious media production practices has the potential to foster healthier societal understandings of sports science, athlete identity, and sport itself.

5. Conclusion

The media serves as a critical intermediary in translating sports science to society, wielding considerable influence over public understanding, athlete representation, and the societal value placed on scientific knowledge in sport. This essay has demonstrated that while media can facilitate the dissemination of important sports science findings, enhance awareness and drive policy changes, it also embodies inherent biases and power dynamics that shape and sometimes distort such communication. Gender, racial, confirmation, and commercial biases intersect with framing and agenda-setting practices, impacting the accuracy, inclusivity, and ethical dimensions of how sports science is portrayed. Recognizing these challenges through critical theoretical frameworks underscores the necessity for media literacy initiatives and reflexive journalistic practices that promote transparency, diversity, and scientific integrity. In doing so, the media can better fulfil its educational and societal role, empower audiences and support the progressive evolution of sport as both a scientific endeavour and a cultural institution. Ultimately, fostering a more equitable and informed sports media landscape holds profound implications for athlete well-being, public health, and the ethical development of sports science in society.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest concerning this study.

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