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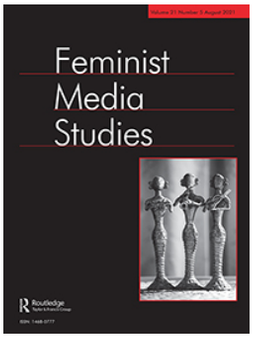

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(Anti-)feminism and cisgenderism in sports media

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore how anti-feminist and cisgenderist media logics are intertwined, particularly in the context of sports media. We examine these issues through focused analysis of a recent case reported in 2018–2019 predominantly in the British media. The sequential unfolding of media events surrounding Martina Navratilova's intervention into the debate about trans inclusion in the female sporting category is explored with regard to key markers in the case study: @Martina intervenes; Self-censorship and loss of control; Legitimisation by status; Legitimisation by history; and Privileging and disciplining women in the media. As a prominent feminist and lesbian activist who asserted cisgenderist arguments on this topic, the events of the Navratilova case study show how feminist voices are complexly fragmented. Moreover, we demonstrate too how feminist perspectives are controlled by a media system that uses them in the substantiation of cisgenderist projects of discrediting trans athletes and actors.

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Introduction

Cisgenderism and feminism are complexly linked in the media. Despite the existence of trans-inclusive feminisms (Emi Koyama 2003; Susan Stryker 2007) there are also historical (Janice Raymond, 1979) and contemporary (Sheila Jeffreys 2014) trans-exclusionary feminist schools of thought. This trans-exclusionary branch of feminism is visible in popular culture. For example, cisgender authors J.K. Rowling (Jenny Gross 2020) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Mia Fischer 2017) have recently expressed cisgenderist opinions, denying and denigrating trans women's identities, in the name of (cis) women's rights. The discrimination enacted by such trans-exclusionary feminist positions is clear to those of us committed to trans-inclusive feminist projects. At the same time, such projects also require that we consider the way that such trans-exclusionary feminist voices are (re) deployed across media as part of broader sexist *and* cisgenderist ideologies.

The media system has an inimical record of engagement with feminist movements. Liesbet van Zoonen (1992) noted the media's legitimisation of liberal forms of feminism was typically part of a broader denunciation of more radical feminist voices. More

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recently, it has been highlighted that feminism is often depicted as rife with intergenerational in-fighting (Alison Winch, Jo Littler, and Jessalynn Keller 2016) as part of a typical narrative of feminist disunity—that "feminists are at each other again—hurray" (Winch, Littler, and Keller 2016).

Such disunifying narratives have increasingly been mediated around significant events for trans movements. For instance, the coverage of the UK government's consultations on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA)—the legal framework through which people can officially change their gender—was refracted through feminist schools of thought. The consultations were initiated after reports found that many trans people were unable or unwilling to access the framework as it stands. *The Guardian* reported of the consultations that, "[s]upporting the updated Gender Recognition Act is a necessity for anyone who calls themselves a feminist (Ellie O'Hagan 2018). Conversely, another article reported that "'gender critical' feminists [are] worried that the notion of what it means to be a woman is being transformed to the detriment of women's rights" (Kenan Malik 2018). Such coverage represents both trans issues and feminism simultaneously—the former as contentious, and the latter as fractious. This, in large part, stems from divergent conceptions of gender within feminist movements—something that feminists have drawn attention to. Davina Cooper (2019) describes these differing conceptions as "gender as identity diversity" and "gender as sex-based domination" (1). "Gender as sex-based domination" approaches are characterised by the dismissal of gender on the grounds "that gender has become overly aligned with a voluntarist and stereotypical approach to identity that ignored the 'real' biological, unchosen sex-basis of women's oppression" (7). "Gender as identity diversity" refers to "perspectives that treat gender as a core stable part of personhood alongside more experimental, critically intersectional, and fluid approaches to gender" (7).

This division is preyed upon by a media system with trans-exclusionary or "gender as sex-based domination" feminist voices utilised by anti-feminist media actors in the expression of both sexist and cisgenderist discourses. Indeed, the relationship between trans-exclusionary feminism and anti-feminist actors is noted by transfeminists. For example, Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent (2020) explore how trans-exclusionary feminism's attempts to reassert biological definitions of womanhood, "effectively echo the demands of far-right, anti-feminist actors" (682). In this article, we will examine these intertwined (anti-)feminist and cisgenderist practices by way of a case study, which took place against the backdrop of the aforementioned GRA consultations. On the December 18 2018 Martina Navratilova intervened on Twitter in the issue of trans-inclusion in the women's sporting category. This became fodder for an article in *The Sunday Times*, authored by Navratilova in February 2019, as well as a documentary which aired in June 2019, presented by the tennis legend. Additionally, a great deal of media and user-generated content was generated around these events. We examine here how Navratilova's interventions into the debate around trans-inclusion in the women's sporting category (which were highly cisgenderist in nature) were mediated across a media system in anti-feminist ways which made controlled feminist visibility *part* of cisgenderist media practices.

We use the term "cisgenderism" to refer to "the ideology that delegitimises people's own designations of their genders and bodies" (Gavriel Ansara and Peter Hegarty 2014, 260). Cisgenderism is enacted through some common practices including "objectifying

biological language" (Gavriel Ansara 2015) which is "[u]sing language that describes another person in terms of their assumed physical characteristics" (Ansara 2015, 15) and "misgendering", which is "[c]haracterising a person's gender(s) or non-gender in a way that is inconsistent with their own understanding of their gender" (Ansara 2015, 15). Additionally, narratives of "gender fraud" (Alex Sharpe 2017) are also typical in cisgenderist expressions. Such practices are abundant in media and popular culture (Thomas Billard 2016; Jack Halberstam 2005; John Sloop 2004). Pertinently to our case study which takes place within sports media and communication, similar practices are replete within sporting contexts. Sex-testing and gender verification tests are built upon the disciplining of non-normatively sexed and gendered athletes (Cheryl Cooky and Shari Dworkin 2013), (hetero)sexist assumptions about women's athleticism (Lenskyj 1994), medicalised understandings of identity (Sheila Cavanagh and Heather Sykes 2006; Mia Fischer and Jennifer McClearen 2020) and suspicion of Eastern and developing country women (Lindsay Pieper 2014). Consequently, cisgenderist discursive resources and practices are potently played out in sporting contexts.

Our use of the concept of cisgenderism as a framework for understanding the events of the case study rather than transphobia is built on an understanding of prejudice as a collective, ideological practice rather than an individualised attitude (Michael Billig 1991). Just as some feminist scholars have moved away from the term "homophobia" towards terms such as "heterosexism" due to the former's inadequate conceptualisation of the systemic nature of prejudice faced by lesbian and gay people (Ansara and Hegarty 2012; Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins 1993), similar critiques have been levelled against "transphobia." The term "transphobia" "addresses fear of trans-identified individuals instead of capturing the critically central and evidently flawed assumptions that underlie the pervasive cultural system of prejudice and discrimination directed toward the transgender community" (Erica Lennon and Brian Mistler 2014, 63). Cisgenderism, alternatively, foregrounds discrimination of trans people as "a prejudicial ideology, rather than an individual attitude" (Ansara and Hegarty 2012, 141). Damien Riggs (2014) notes a similar critique in his conceptualisation of "mundane transphobia." In this instance, Riggs keeps the term "transphobia" to draw attention to "how marginalising speech, hate speech and murder sit on the same continuum" (159). In the following analysis, we concur with Riggs' position but use the term "cisgenderism" to add to the growing body of literature using the term (Ansara 2015; Ansara and Hegarty 2014; Sonja Ellis, Damien Riggs, and Elizabeth Peel 2020; Elizabeth Peel and Hannah Newman 2020).

Materials

The modern media system is comprised of "interaction[s] among older and newer media logics" (Andrew Chadwick 2013, 4). It is necessary, therefore, in approaching this case study to have a relatively inclusive conception of the media system. That is, one that considers both traditional and media platforms and user-generated media such as social media, online forums, and content sharing platforms, as the ways that information flows across and between these distinct, but connected, parts of the media

system. Furthermore, from a trans-inclusive feminist perspective—our own position—it is necessary to consider how these information flows interact with (cis)gendered power relations.

Tracing the events of the case study as they flowed across the media system required a degree of flexibility and a number of data collection techniques. This meant drawing from newspapers, television, Twitter and online articles as well as forums. The de facto timespan of the case study was taken to start with Navratilova's tweet on the December 18 2018 and end with a documentary that she made which aired on BBC1 on June 26 2019. We chose this timespan because although the debate around trans-inclusion in the women's sporting category continues, media explicitly related to Navratilova's intervention were most frequent between the initial tweet and the BBC documentary. As such, these two mediated interventions acted as natural bookends to these specific events inside a broader polemic around trans-inclusivity. Navratilova's initial intervention, as well as much of the later events, occurred on Twitter. Our analysis focuses on Martina Navratilova's account (@Martina), responses to her tweets within the time parameters, and on the #TransWomenAthleteDispute—a hashtag that developed in relation to the documentary that aired of the same name. We obtained the documentary, *The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova* (aired June 26 2019), through Box of Broadcasts.

We also completed searches on Box of Broadcasts, as well as YouTube, using the search terms "Navratilova" and "transgender" for the case study time span. We limited our data to videos that aired on UK television, or were uploaded by the UK media actors BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. In particular, this search brought back a segment from ITV's *Good Morning Britain (GMB)* (aired March 4 2019) in which they discussed the events and the surrounding topic at length and uploaded the 12-minute clip onto the official *GMB* YouTube channel. We obtained newspaper articles through NexisUK using the search terms "Navratilova" and "transgender" between December 2018 and June 2019. The search was limited to UK national newspapers—online and print editions. This brought back 134 articles, which varied in the extent to which they engaged with Navratilova's interventions. We paid particular to articles that dealt with Navratilova's interventions as the primary content.

Finally, we searched Google, again using the search terms "Navratilova" and "transgender", for any materials not revealed by the previous platform searches. For example, this search brought back a thread in the forum Mumsnet, which explicitly discussed the *GMB* debate. Our materials were, therefore, collected inclusively across different media platforms and our approach was a flexible and pragmatic one (within the chosen time-frame) but with key "anchor points" namely the initiating tweet and key television coverage. Cognisant of the "hybridity" concept, using these various sources foregrounded the way that events are mediated across, and between, different platforms.

Methods

The data was analysed using discursive psychology. Discursive psychology is concerned with how discourses are used to achieve social actions (Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 1998). Discursive psychology examines how subject positions are constituted through communicative events. That is, it is a method

which seeks "to emphasize the highly occasioned and situated nature of subject positions" (Wetherell 1998, 394). In other words, a fine-grained analysis of the text, the language and the rhetorical devices used, is germane to how social identities are constructed and positioned relative to each other. In this article, we pay close attention to how transgender identities are constructed in the media materials, as well as how feminism is constructed in the process. Discursive psychology is also explicit in combining this fine-grained, textual analysis with broader ideological concerns. As Wetherell (1998) describes it, "a complete rather than merely 'technical' analysis of this material is necessary to consider the forms of institutionalized intelligibility . . . which comprise members' methods" (394). In other words, discursive psychology examines how broader ideological currents are constituted in situated communicative events. In this article, this means our analysis examines how feminist voices are utilised in the media to produce cisgenderist narratives.

Case study context

Martina Navratilova is an established feminist and lesbian activist and "has shown social activism against the status quo for decades" (Kristi Tredway 2020, 90). Despite defecting from Czechoslovakia in 1975 and gaining US citizenship in 1985, Nancy Spencer (2003) has shown how Navratilova "never lost the 'foreign association that linked her with communism'" (19). Coupled with her athletic and aggressive playing style, Navratilova was subjected to discourses of female masculinity and communist suspicion, which marked her female-ness as "other." Navratilova was also known for playing against, and hiring as her coach, Renee Richards, who was somewhat ostracised from tennis due to her trans identity (Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole 1990). Navratilova protested on court at the 2020 Australian Open in support of renaming the Margaret Court Arena—Court being a tennis legend but also an outspoken homophobe and transphobe (Kevin Mitchell 2020). Against this backdrop of LGBTIQ+ support, Navratilova's opposition to trans-inclusion in women's sport, represents somewhat of a divergence. It is also germane that Navratilova's activism has not been as recognised in many sections of the media as it has been in the context of this case study about trans-inclusivity. Consequently, the mediation of her trans-exclusionary views in a media environment that has not typically celebrated her activist history represent important incidents of sexist and cisgenderist intertwinement through the controlled visibility of trans-exclusionary feminist voices, such as Navratilova's, in broader cisgenderist agendas.

Results and discussion

In the analysis that follows, we explore the different manifestations of cisgenderism in the Navratilova case as they sequentially unfolded. We are also concerned with how feminism and Navratilova's feminist status are (re)constructed in relation to trans-inclusion. Indeed, the case study demonstrates how a well-established feminist figure can be given more of a media platform following cisgenderist comments. Furthermore, we will trace how this cisgenderist sentiment is utilised in different ways as the events unfolded across the

media landscape shaped by the following five key markers in the case study: @Martina intervenes; Self-censorship and loss of control; Legitimisation by status; Legitimisation by history; Privileging and disciplining women in the media.

@Martina intervenes

On the December 18 2018, Martina Navratilova responded to a Twitter user who asked her about a BBC Sport article (Alistair Magowan 2018) that reported on trans cyclist Rachel McKinnon's win at the Masters Track Cycling World Championship. Martina's tweet defended the rigidity of the women's sporting category against self-declared gender identities. In so doing, she invokes trans-exclusionary, "gender as sex-based domination" positions, harbouring cisgenderist sentiments. The tweet read:

> Clearly that can't be right. You can't just proclaim yourself a female and be able tocompete against women. There must be some standards, and having a penis andcompeting as a woman would not fit that standard . . . (@Martina, December 18 2018).

Stating that, "You can't just proclaim yourself a female . . ." Navratilova presents trans identities as simply a proclamation. Contrasting this as Navratilova does with "having a penis", trans identity expression is made incongruous with (imagined) genital configuration. Additionally, this assertion employs "objectifying biological language" (Ansara and Hegarty 2014). Where Navratilova states, "having a penis and competing as a woman would not fit that standard", she reduces the multiple facets of bodily and gendered identities to genital configuration. The destabilising effect that the trans identity might have on the rigidity of the category woman is assuaged by the use of the genitals as a simplistic synecdoche that collapses social and bodily identities together. In so doing, the complex cultural, psychological, hormonal, chromosomal and physiological facets that play into one's gender identity—as well as the ways that these factors impact upon sporting performance—are removed from the argument.

Cisgenderist expressions continue with trans athletes also contrasted with other women in the sporting category, which further destabilised the trans identity in relation to the women that they might compete against. In so doing, those women (presumably cisgender women) are naturalised as the only authentic expressions of female-ness. Consequently, the trans athlete identity is trivialised as a surface-level expression, as just something that someone says, and cisgender women athletes are stabilised as natural and normal. Furthermore, this stabilisation secures the rigidity of the category women, simultaneously rejecting any movement into it.

In her initial intervention then, Navratilova defends the immutability of the women's sporting category deploying trans-exclusionary or "gender as sex-based domination" arguments. No doubt a concern for (cis) women's rights that Navratilova has played a significant role in realising in elite sports underpinned her intervention. However, cisgenderist notions are also apparent in her tweet. As we now go on to discuss, it becomes clear that as the events flow across the media system, Navratilova's "gender as sex-based domination" feminism is made important as non-/ anti-feminist actors latch on to this cisgenderism.

Self-censorship and loss of control

Exemplifying Frederick Attenborough's (2016) notion that, in the media, "people can lose control over their own descriptive vehicles, whilst all the while appearing to their respective audiences as if still in control of them" (229) Navratilova's tweet became a discursive resource in other actors' bricolages, despite her attempts to self-censor and delete her tweet. Through sexist and anti-feminist practices of controlling women's voices in the media, the mediation of Navratilova's tweet represented a simultaneous augmentation *and* loss of control of her voice.

Following challenges to her cisgenderism, including from Rachel McKinnon, Navratilova deleted her original tweet three days later, stating:

> I am sorry if I said anything anywhere near transphobic – certainly I meant no harm. I will educate myself better on this issue but in the meantime I will be quiet about it. (@Martina, December 21 2018)

This, however, did not expunge Navratilova's statement or end its mediation. Symptomatic of a media system which disciplines feminist voices, for example, through the disavowal of radical feminism (van Zoonen 1992) or "younger" gender fluid forms of feminism (Winch, Littler, and Keller 2016), Twitter users took control of Navratilova's statement, tweeting quotes of the original, now deleted tweet. The disciplining of women's voices is substantive in online environments, with harassment disproportionately directed at women (Danielle Citron 2014; Becky Gardiner 2016), a trend which is exacerbated in male dominated media sectors, such as sports (Gardiner 2016). Whilst not all of the mediation of Navratilova's comments explicitly manifest as harassment, the loss of control of Navratilova's statements is similarly rooted in the trend of disciplining women's voices in the media—especially sports media. For example, one user tweeted:

> If Martina can't, then I say: Clearly that can't be right. You can't just proclaim yourself a female and be able to compete against women. There must be some standards, and having a penis and competing as a woman would not fit that standard . . . (@Nytecz, December 28 2018)

Through the statement "If Martina can't, then I say . . ." Navratilova's deletion is presented as a form of censorship that this user is helping to overcome. There is no clear reason why Navratilova's original statement should be more highly valued at this point than her deletion of that statement. Consequently, whilst it is presented as the augmentation of Navratilova's censored voice, this user actually restricts Navratilova's power to self-censor. Despite the explicit control of the communicative act by the user in their phrase "If Martina can't, then I say . . ." the statement is still attributed to Navratilova. Thus, Navratilova does not have control over the statement but is still positioned as the speaker—that is, she is disempowered but still responsible.

Navratilova's celebrity status was similarly attacked in anti-feminist ways, simultaneously reasserting cisgenderist ideas. This sentiment was expressed in one tweet, which read:

> Really? did you give up that easily, like you said. This just can't be right, you can't just proclaim yourself as a female and now play against other females. This is where you see how you celebrities just say what you're allowed to say. Nothing genuine, original. (@Lyktstolpe2, December 25 2018)

In this case, the user constructs Navratilova's deletion as an attempt to protect her celebrity status from accusations of political incorrectness. Consequently, anti-trans feminism is constructed as genuine and truthful, whilst Navratilova's deletion of her tweet is read as a display of disingenuous alliance with trans-inclusivity.

This "Really? . . ." tweet displays a complex relationship between anti-feminist and cisgenderist beliefs in the media system. Ire is directed towards Navratilova for trying to control and delete her statement. However, this anger is articulated as a defence of women and women's sport. In fact, in stating "did you just give up that easily" implies that a proper defence of women and women's sport has not been mounted. Instead, Navratilova has sought to protect her own celebrity status by pandering to what she is "allowed to say" and deleting her tweet—a deletion that is described as "nothing genuine." In so doing, this user construes anti-trans sentiment as legitimate defence of women's sport, and trans-inclusivity as a disingenuous brand of feminism. Consequently, the cisgenderism in Navratilova's statement acts as a node which other actors clasp onto and control with.

These events demonstrate the murky nature of utterance ownership in the media, particularly for feminist actors on social media platforms, where information flows are immediate and disparate. However, this reaction was not confined to social media. Press coverage similarly repurposed Navratilova's statement. This press coverage, which initially was mostly picked up by right-wing publications, drew on Navratilova's feminist identity. For example, *The Mail Online*, described Navratilova as "a former Wimbledon champion and LGBT campaigner" (Daily Mail 2018). *The Times*, wrote, "[w]omen rallied to support Navratilova on social media" (Lucy Bannerman and Gabriella Swerling 2018) locating Navratilova within feminist debates across traditional and user-generated social media. Thus, Navratilova's feminist credentials were drawn upon by the press to generate "category entitlement" (Sally Wiggins 2017)—that is, the right to speak with authority on a topic. This was, in fact, made explicit in *The Times*, where it was written, "so most people would agree that Martina Navratilova has more than earned the right to discuss fairness in women's sport" (Bannerman and Swerling 2018).

However, such feminist clarion calls cannot be accepted uncritically expressed as they are by media actors with a history of disregarding and dislocating feminist voices. Instead, Navratilova's feminist history is part of a substantiation of cisgenderist ideological positions. Something evidenced by the *Express Online's* linking of their article headlined, "Navratilova sparks transgender fury: 'Having a penis and competing as a woman is not on'" (Laura O'Callaghan 2018), to another headlined, "Trans Group Gets £500,000 Public Cash to Tell YOU How to Think About Gender Fluidity" (Carly Read 2018) as a related article. Consequently, Navratilova's sport-specific cisgenderist expression, an admittedly limited mitigation, is attached to a right-wing publication's non-sporting, aggressively anti-trans agenda. Whilst these actors drew upon Navratilova's feminist history to substantiate their cisgenderist claims, these actors, who do not have a history of active feminist support, fragmented Navratilova's words, building a cisgenderist coalition without taking on any responsibility for women's rights outside of the trans debate.

It is significant that the mediated reformulation of Navratilova's statement across traditional and user-generated media platforms simultaneously augmented and disempowered Navratilova. Although her voice was ostensibly amplified, this amplification represented a loss of control, with Navratilova's statement reinterpreted by various actors

for cisgenderist projects that did not necessarily coincide with Navratilova's. That is not ignore the discriminatory nature of Navratilova's position, but rather to highlight how Navratilova's feminist credentials were often (re)deployed, hollowed out of any serious engagement with sex or gender discrimination but latched onto cisgenderism. Following Navratilova's next intervention, an article she wrote in *The Sunday Times* the following year, this practice was amplified particularly in relation to Navratilova's lesbian activism. We explore this in the next section.

Legitimisation by status

On the February 17 2019, Navratilova penned an article in *The Sunday Times*, "Rules on trans athletes reward cheats and punish the innocent" (Martina Navratilova 2019), which explicitly drew on the Twitter confrontation with McKinnon and reasserted many of the cisgenderist discourses from Navratilova's initial tweet. It also expressed a complex relationship between sexuality rights and trans rights in media discourses with Navratilova invoking her own experience of lesbian discrimination to establish the validity of her cisgenderism—something which, at times, became a resource in the ensuing reporting on Navratilova's article.

The Times, which has an ambivalent relationship with feminism at best (Jonathan Dean 2010), tends not to publish lengthy articles penned by feminist actors. The cost of feminist visibility appears to be alignment with ideological underpinnings which are rarely, if ever, feminist—in this case, cisgenderism and opposition to trans-inclusive feminisms. This does not negate that Navratilova authored the words, but their presentation in a wider bricolage of cisgenderist media is the doing of mainstream media actors. Indeed, Navratilova's lesbian feminist identity, in the context of a media environment with a history of hostility towards feminist and lesbian movements, is used to bolster the cisgenderist rhetoric of the traditional media.

Picking up from Navratilova's Twitter exchange in a rather ironic way given the "war" which was precipitated by her original tweet, Navratilova wrote, "Ever the peace maker, I promised to keep quiet on the subject until I had properly researched it." Her use of the extreme case formulation "ever" (Anita Pomerantz 1986) here too works to act as a—less than fully successful—disclaimer for what she subsequently continues to write:

> Well, now I've done that and, if anything, my views have strengthened. To put the argument at its most basic: a man can decide to be female, take hormones if required by whatever sporting organisation is concerned, win everything in sight and perhaps earn a small fortune, and then reverse his decision and go back to making babies if he so desires. It's insane and it's cheating. I am happy to address a transgender woman in whatever form she prefers, but I would not be happy to compete against her. It would not be fair. (Navratilova 2019)

The similarities of Navratilova's position with her original tweet are stark. The assertion that "a man can decide to be a female" echoes her original tweet, "You can't just proclaim yourself a female." Both assertions construct the trans identity as a proclamation, made by a man, who simply enacts a female character. This misgendering invokes prominent "gender as sex-based domination" feminist positions (Jeffreys 2014) insofar as it trivialises the trans identity as an impersonation performed by someone who is "really" male.

In the same article, Navratilova condemns the "vilification, ostracism and the awful human inclination to identify anyone who is different and start a witch hunt" drawing on her own experience of these practices stating, "I had problems of that kind myself when I came out as gay in 1981, and it hurt, terribly." Thus, Navratilova positions her experience of homophobic discrimination as experiential knowledge discrimination. However, Navratilova's opposition to trans women's inclusion on the premise that that they might "reverse his decision and go back to making babies" reifies heteronormative paradigms of sexuality and kinship to misgender trans women as really men. That is, the presumed capability of trans women to reproduce in the male role is used as proof of a "real" male identity, whilst to not birth children is to be not wholly female.

This line of argument exemplifies the complex relationship between sexuality activism and trans activism. Lesbian activists, such as Navratilova, have challenged heteronormative assumptions about kinship including a rejection of traditional kinship as well as elucidating the multiple ways in which families can be cultivated (Corinne Hayden 1995). Despite these challenges, Navratilova applies heteronormative assumptions about reproduction to trans athletes as proof of trans women's male identity. Thus, hard fought battles in one context do not necessarily translate to others—in this context, heteronormativity, so damaging to lesbian lives, underpins Navratilova's discriminatory position towards trans women athletes.

Other publications deployed Navratilova's use of lesbian history as category entitlement and legitimisation of cisgenderism. *The Daily Star*, for example, reported on Navratilova's article stating, "Lesbian tennis hero Martina Navratilova blasts trans athletes as 'cheats'" (Jerry Lawton 2019). Navratilova's identity summed up here in three words "Lesbian tennis hero" foregrounds her sexuality. The headline not only foregrounds this, but also ambiguously attaches her heroic status to both her sexuality and her tennis exploits. With homophobia in the British tabloid press, particularly right-wing publication like the *Daily Star*, being resurgent in recent years (Michael Lovelock 2018), this valorised image of Navratilova's activism must be understood as a cisgenderist rhetorical device. That is, Navratilova's history of lesbian activism is used to give credibility to cisgenderist portrayals of trans athletes. As we unpack in the next section, these cisgenderist portrayals typically used sport-specific articulations of cheating discourses.

Legitimisation by history

In sport, fears around cheating are closely linked to Western suspicion of the global East (Pieper 2014). In particular, suspicion of Soviet athletes during the Cold War largely precipitated the development of both drug-testing and sex-testing or gender verification procedures (Jörg Krieger, Lindsay Pieper, and Ian Ritchie 2019). In large part, these Western anxieties manifested in mistrust of the legitimacy of women athletes from the Soviet Bloc as either doped or gender fraudulent competitors—something which, despite evidence of systemic doping, has also been showed to be largely an imagined history in the West (Vanessa Heggie 2010). Consequently, anxieties around cheating in sport are replete with cisgenderist discourses with non-normative sex and gender identities wrapped in discourses of deviancy and gender fraud common in society writ large

(Billard 2016; Halberstam 2005; Sharpe 2017; Sloop 2004). In particular, for example, is the common expression of a misunderstanding that transitioning provides similar benefits to doping (Sarah Teetzel 2006).

It is notable that Navratilova herself was (mis)represented through discourses of suspicion around her association with the Eastern Bloc and her powerful and aggressive playing-style (Spencer 2003; Tredway 2020). Consequently, that her cisgenderist expression of gender fraud narratives in relation to trans-inclusion precipitated other media actors to "other" trans athletes through an analogous positioning with historical sporting anxieties over the Cold War East represents an important entanglement of sexist and cisgenderist discourses in the media.

A segment on ITV's morning news and debate show, *GMB* (aired March 4 2019), exemplified this deployment of (imagined) sexist and cisgenderist sporting political histories in the expression of, and justification for, trans-exclusion in women's sport. Debate participant, India Willoughby, articulates this well-established intermeshing of gender and global relations:

> I think if you look at the 1970s when you had states such as the East Germans when women were fed testosterone, they were forced, effectively forced, into sex change. This is a possibility – it could happen. (India Willoughby)

Willoughby describes a situation where women are forcibly physically altered in the pursuit of national sporting achievements. Apart from the opposite being the case for trans women in international sport, that is, they will have reduced their testosterone, the analogy predicates the protection of (cis) women upon the exclusion of trans athletes.

Sharron, Davies, another participant in the *GMB* debate, also articulates this narrative, drawing upon her experiential knowledge of East German doping:

> Now I, as you say, competed in the 80s when I was with the East German system. It was a different process but the same end result – you stood on the block knowing that you just could not beat this person next to you no matter how hard you train and that's why I've come out and said what I've said to support Martina, as has Paula [Radcliffe], you know, as has Nicola Adams. (Sharron Davies)

Davies' statement draws upon East-West global relations by positioning trans athletes in the women's sporting category as "a different process but the same end result" as doped East German athletes in the 1980s. Drawing upon common misrepresentations of transitioning as akin doping (Teetzel 2006) and building on historic anxieties over athletic Eastern women, the trans-cis binary is grafted onto the well-established East-West binary. As a result, trans athletes are further intertwined with ideas about deviancy and cheating while cis-athletes become embodiments of ostensibly Western values of fairness. More fundamentally, this intermeshing of discursive binaries delineates trans-cis boundaries along an us-them logic, establishing trans identities as "other" and potentially harmful to the cisgender norm.

As noted above, the salience here of the "othering" of Eastern women in the West stems not just from the established nature of such a discourse in women's sport, but from the media's othering of Czechoslovakian-born Navratilova as foreign, aggressive and

masculine (Spencer 2003; Tredway 2020). This is germane because Navratilova's supporters in this instance draw upon sexist East-West discourses that were used to discredit Navratilova in the past.

Davies goes on to invoke a number of prominent women athletes who have come out in support of Navratilova's statement. Davies positions the history of cheating in the Soviet Bloc as the impetus for this support when she states, "that's why I've come out and said what I've said to support Martina, as has Paula, you know, as has Nicola Adams." The invocation of other prominent British women athletes—across tennis, swimming, running and boxing—compounds the representation of feminism in the context of Britain and sport as opposed to trans inclusion by positioning prominent women athletes as resistant to trans inclusion. Female participants, as well as female actors invoked in the debate, are all positioned in anti-trans ways, implying legitimate feminism, or at least women's voices, are opposed to trans-inclusion on the basis of an imagined history of non-Western attacks on women's sport.

Consequently, opposition to trans-inclusion based on nationalistic invocations of historic Cold war anxieties is turned into a prerequisite for feminist visibility in the media. The same is not true for the men involved in the *GMB* debate with Piers Morgan and Professor Ellis Cashmore, holding opposing views—Cashmore supports trans-inclusion whilst Morgan is opposed to it. Thus, when it comes to media visibility in the trans debate, men are not required to draw upon historical legitimising discourses in the same way that women are. Consequently, anti-feminist and sexist principles are intertwined with cisgenderist agendas in mainstream media information flows. However, this is not to say that "gender as sex-based domination" feminist voices are simply victimised and should not be challenged for their trans-exclusionary discrimination. But it is to note the complex intermeshing of anti-feminist and sexist practices with cisgenderist agendas in the media system. Additionally, "gender as sex-based domination" feminist discourses are privileged in the mediation of the debate around trans-inclusion in women's sport—albeit in controlled ways. This is visibly played out in the privileging and disciplining of different feminist voices and arguments across the media system, as we explore in the next section.

Privileging and disciplining women in the media

The privileging and disciplining of women in the media, and the interaction of these practices with cisgenderism, is clear in online reaction to both the *GMB* debate and the documentary *The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova*. In particular, it is apparent that women engaged in the debate are often criticised through sexist discourses, when they do not express trans-exclusionary opinions.

In a thread on Mumsnet, Susana Reid, host on *GMB* with Morgan, was disciplined for not expressing trans-exclusionary views. For example, one comment read:

> Yes, Susanna Reid started the discussion by saying she was afraid to talk about it in case she got the terminology wrong. Piers said he wasn't, and that being shouted down for using the wrong terminology was a way of being bullied into silence – to paraphrase. She didn't say anything else. Sticks in my craw that a man can speak up (glad he did) but his female colleague was more worried about being woke than speaking up about the issue. (Sarcelle, March 4 2019)

Feminist thinking is deployed sparingly here. Morgan is positioned as articulating legitimate feminist concern while Reid is positioned with a concern for being "woke." The concept of being woke is strongly associated with younger, progressive intersectional feminist movements—however, often critics (Piers Morgan 2021) apply the term pejoratively. Although it may just as easily have been the result of Morgan's overbearing character, Reid's silence is read as conveying a disingenuous indulging of trans-inclusive feminist views. Morgan, who is known for brash reactionary commentary with no history of support for feminist movements (in fact, quite the opposite), is positioned as the voice of feminism amongst the hosts.

This unequal distribution of feminist integrity, with Reid chastised and Morgan applauded, in user-generated online media, was far from isolated. One Mumsnet user condemned Reid's feminist identity stating, "Susanna Reid reckons she's a feminist. She's just a pouty mute" (overtheirishsea, March 4 2019). Another similarly wrote of Reid, "We know what she wants to say, but she is waiting for a man to speak for her. It is time for her to stick her head above the parapet. Well done to those who have" (WrathoftheWorstKlop, March 4 2019). This comment also implicitly praises Morgan, who was one of those who have stuck their "head above the parapet." Indeed, this particular war-invoking metaphor is one that Morgan himself used to praise Navratilova during the debate:

> I completely salute Martina Navratilova for putting her head above the parapet. She's been instantly shot down; she's been fired from charitable causes in America because of this being accused of being transphobic despite being one of the biggest supporters of transgender people imaginable. (Piers Morgan)

Consequently, there is a metaphorical allyship produced across the media system between various cisgenderist statements framed as concerns for women's rights. In other words, Morgan is positioned as part of a coalition between the various cisgenderist, "gender as sex-based domination" feminist statements—those of Navratilova and Davies. Morgan himself is praised, sometimes reluctantly, for example, one user wrote "I don't like Piers but I'm glad he's got the bit between his teeth on the trans issue" (overtheirishsea, March 4 2019). Similarly, another wrote, "I thought Sharon and Piers were really good" (CallingDannyBoy, March 4 2019), whilst another user commented, "Not a huge fan but I think sometimes it takes the Piers Morgan approach to seriously discuss this" (SnuggyBuggy, March 4 2019). Thus, in this user-generated media, cisgenderism and feminism were often intertwined to such an extent that simply the articulation of a cisgenderist argument, on this topic, can be enough for an anti-feminist actor, such as Piers Morgan, to be presented as part of a feminist interdiscursivity. Similarly, Reid's lack of explicit articulation is enough to condemn her as a bad feminist.

A similar disciplining of women in the media occurred in response to the documentary, *The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova*. The documentary itself has been criticised for cisgenderist practices such as Navratilova's refusal to use the term "cis." Abby Barras (2019) describes this as a privileged "desire to control and dominate the language" (7). The trending #TransWomenAthleteDispute allowed for Twitter users to virtually congregate. Amongst the varied voices were concurrently cisgenderist and anti-feminist ones. For example, sexist rhetorical devices were often deployed to discredit female actors in the documentary who spoke of anything other than outright trans-exclusion. Dr Patel stated:

> I'd hope that female athletes would understand the struggle that those transgender athletes are now going through because it's a similar to struggle to what the female athletes went through. (Dr Seema Patel).

A user responded to this, tweeting, "Oh ok, female athletes have to be understanding blah blah blah [while their sports are being destroyed]" (@sueveneer, June 26 2019). The dismissive "blah blah blah" rejects Dr Patel's knowledge on the subject. Furthermore, she is presented as ignorant or uncaring about (cis) women's sports supposedly being destroyed by trans women. In a media system which is prone to attacking women who speak out, particularly about sports, this dismissal of Dr Patel's expertise is steeped in historic and ongoing sexist practices of disciplining, dismissing and controlling women's voices. As with the Mumsnet comments about Susanna Reid discussed above, this comment presents women who do not explicitly denounce trans-inclusivity as not really feminists.

Another user commented on Dr Patel in more explicitly sexist ways when they wrote:

> I almost threw my laptop at the TV there. That woman from Nottingham Trent university, was coming out with total left-wing bullshit. I'm sure she thinks there are fairies at the bottom of the garden @Martina #TransWomenAthleteDispute (@BeaumontDND, 2019)

This angry response from a Twitter user reflects the ire regularly directed towards women who speak out publicly. In line with this delegitimisation of women in public discourse, this user discredits Dr Patel's expertise as "total left-wing bullshit" and akin to believing that "there are fairies at the bottom of the garden." That is, a well-informed female academic's comments are portrayed as politically biased opinions—opinions that are based on fairy tales. Thus, this user @BeaumontDND exemplifies a trend of employing anti-feminist practices and disciplining women in the media system ostensibly in the name of protecting women's sport.

The privileging and disciplining of women's voices in the media is telling of who has what kind of access to the media system. For example, Twitter and other online platforms can be important sites of resistance for trans and gender non-conforming people. In an opening voice over Navratilova cites the "public spat" between herself and McKinnon, concluding that the debate is "not best suited to being discussed on social media." Describing these previous interactions as a "public spat" and arguing that social media is not the right medium for the debate delegitimises the platforms that trans women have more of an access to than traditional ones like the BBC. The ability to engage in argumentation as McKinnon and Navratilova did demonstrates the importance of social media access for marginalised groups, in this case enhancing the visibility of trans communities. As a famous, cisgender women Navratilova exercises her privileged access to traditional media platforms and controls the medium through which the discussion occurs.

Whilst the documentary exemplifies the privilege of some cisgender women to access media that trans women evidently cannot, it also demonstrates that these cisgender women need to have considerable celebrity, often sporting, status such as Navratilova or Davies. Furthermore, their contributions are limited to cisgenderist ones, rather than the rich complexity of feminisms' broader concerns. In addition, cisgender women who do not speak explicitly of trans-exclusion are disciplined through traditional anti-feminist, sexist practices of castigation and disregarding their voices ostensibly in the name of protecting women. In so doing, anti-feminist practices become a component in cisgenderist media mechanisms. Thus,

whilst some cisgender women are able to access (at a cost) traditional media platforms, trans and other non-cisgender women are barred except as guests on media platforms that are edited and produced largely by cis men and may be presented by cis women.

Conclusion

The events of this case study have exemplified the complex relationship between (anti-) feminism and cisgenderism in sports media. That is, "gender as sex-based domination" feminist voices and non- or anti-feminist media actors function in a type of cisgenderist alliance founded on trans-exclusionary ideas. This is apparent in the mediation and coverage of Navratilova's discriminatory Tweet and her ensuing access to national newspapers and television broadcasters—a privilege not afforded to trans women.

At the same time, the visibility of "gender as sex-based domination" feminist voices is produced through a typically sexist media system. Consequently, similar discursive resources are deployed in sexist and cisgenderist ways. This is apparent in the expression of gender fraud and doping arguments used to discredit both trans women athletes and, historically, women, such as Navratilova, from Eastern Bloc countries. Similarly, the deployment of heterosexist arguments articulated by Navratilova herself in trans-exclusionary arguments but also against lesbian and heterosexual women athletes for not adhering to heteronormative expressions exemplifies the intermeshing of sexist and cisgenderist discourse. More fundamentally, the visibility of this brand of trans-exclusionary feminism is controlled by non- and anti-feminist media actors who use limited visibility to justify cisgenderist arguments without taking on any responsibility for women's rights more broadly.

Ultimately, trans women athletes suffer from this complex process of feminist (dis) empowerment. Whilst trans-exclusive feminists may lose control of their descriptive vehicles, they are still responsible for them in the first place and access certain privileged spaces as a result of their expression. Trans women athletes, however, simply experience delegitimisation. Spaces that they do have access to, such as Twitter, can be delegitimised as media spaces as was apparent in the Navratilova's statements during the BBC documentary. Furthermore, by making trans-exclusion a part of feminist visibility in the media, feminist and women actors who challenge or simply do not explicitly express such views are ignored or, where they are able to access the media system, are heavily attacked and disciplined as a result.

The events in this case study, then, raise important questions about how to understand and challenge trans-discrimination in sports media as feminists. At the same time as challenging trans-exclusionary feminists, a trans-feminist project needs to pay attention to the role of anti-feminism across the media system which makes cisgenderism a part of feminist visibility—that is, in sport media, trans-exclusionary views are made prerequisite for feminist media access. Indeed, cisgenderism is made a tool of the ongoing sexist and anti-feminist media practices and, concurrently, sexist tools of omitting or disciplining women's voices in sports media are used to discredit trans-inclusive arguments made by women and feminists.

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