

16th June 2006

Committee Secretary,
Senate References Committee: Environment, Communications, Information Technology and
the Arts,
Department of the Senate,
PO Box 6100,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600,
Australia

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am currently undertaking research for my university honours project titled 'Chicks that Kick: an Investigation into Australian Women's Specialist Sports Journalism and Dirt Bike Magazine Production'.

I am conducting this project because I believe current Australian Dirt Bike magazines do not adequately address or cater for women riders or supporters.

My study is investigating exactly what women would like in a dirt bike magazine. I will be assessing areas like preferred types of stories, effective writing styles, favoured brands and equipment, and the types of images women find appealing.

This submission will address section C.v. of the inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia's – 'Terms of Reference'. Specifically it will discuss the following:

1. Findings from an analysis of current dirt bike magazines outlining the depiction of women, including the language used, position of content, number of female contributors and so on.
2. Findings of female reader attitudes to these magazines.
3. Findings thus far about what women want in a niche market publication.
4. Recommendations based on these findings.

Please keep in mind that, while these findings are as accurate as possible at this time, my project is only 40% complete at this stage. My final thesis is due for submission in November 2006.

Should you require any further information in the future, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kelly-anne Parkes
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School of Arts and Social Sciences
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June 16, 2006

*Submission to the Senate Committee for Environment,
Communications, Information Technology and the
Arts*

***Inquiry into Women in Sport and Recreation in
Australia***

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1. Introduction

A number of studies have uncovered a gender imbalance in the sports print media (Chambers, Steiner & Flemming 2004, Gauntlett 2002, Marx Ferrree, Lorber, & Hess 1999, Theberge 1991, Wenner 1998 etc). The needs of women in sport have been highlighted in government reports from the 1980s (see *Australian Sports Commission and Office of the Status of Women report*, 1985). However, these studies focus largely on team and athletic sports, while motor sports are further marginalised. My Honours research project will advance these findings, drawing gender discourse into the relatively unmapped area of women and dirt bike magazines.

There is little existing empirical information on this subject and, in a study of this scale, a female dirt bike riding population cannot be determined at this stage. Female representation in current dirt bike magazines is very sketchy in relation to women readers/riders. This may be indicative of how useful women find these magazines. The dearth of female representations seems contrary to the fact that the significance of the sport for women was recently highlighted in the first trials and motocross riding training camp offered for women at the Australian Institute for Sport in April this year. This study supports the argument that making the sport more accessible to women will encourage their involvement in a male dominated field. In addition, this project offers female riders a way to locate themselves within an identifiable female riding community. Increased and improved representation practices in sport magazines will assist with such self-identification.

Dirt Bike riding provides women with an outlet in which to challenge themselves, as one participant stated, "I love it because it makes me push myself, it's a personal challenge. Every time I ride I get better, every time I finish a ride the buzz and my smile remains for days." (Participant # 8, 2006). Dirt Bike riding is also a family oriented sport, as is exemplified by 38% of my study's survey participants being introduced to the sport through their family. My study has indicated that a great number of families actively participate in bike clubs and recreational weekend trail rides. Notwithstanding, it is also important to men that their partners become involved (Elliot, 2006). This is further demonstrated by 53% of participants claiming that fathers, brothers or partners were instrumental in encouraging their initial participation in the sport.

2. Methodology

My research project draws on a complex amalgamation of disciplines and as such is exemplary of what Richardson refers to as a *Crystalline* qualitative enquiry (2000, p.934). I intend to fuse this approach with quantitative analysis; a technique that will augment this study's empirical value and provide a strong platform from which to refine my understanding of the reader identification.

2.1 Textual Analysis

A textual analysis has been conducted on four recent copies of four popular Australian magazines bought or read by the survey participants. These are, *Australasian Dirt Bike Magazine*, *Dirt Action*, *Trail Bike Adventure Magazine* and *Free Rider MX*. It must be kept in mind that 53% of participants got into the sport via a male influence and being a male dominated activity many women ride with partners or other males. Therefore, as one magazine editor stated, we can assume that the majority of women readers view these magazines after their partners have purchased them (Wigan, 2006).

Due to the aforementioned inability to ascertain a female dirt bike riding population, this study will not be viewing female content in strictly proportional terms. Instead it will focus on general tendencies.

The criteria used for this analysis was adapted from three of the four distinct areas of gender difference in sports media coverage found in the Australian Sports Commission's seminal report, *An Illusionary Image: A report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia 1996*. These were the language used to refer to women, the content positioning and photographic coverage (Phillips, 1996 p. 8-9).

My findings were that the four issues of *Australasian Dirt Bike* (ADB) featured a woman as a bike reviewer and two interviews with women, one in which the interviewee was compared to male's in the sport (ADB #314, p.67). A woman was also present in a trail ride. While she was referred to as a competitive sportspeople in the text, and two images included her, however one caption trivialised her presence, referring to the riding group as "the boys" (ADB 321 p.84). 1.4% of ADB's total images were of women as sports people, and only 0.7% conveyed models or sexualised images.

Dirt Action magazine (DA) featured two columns, written by a professional women's motocross rider. These were made less significant however, by their positioning at the back of the magazine and image captions such as, "How fast can a 17yr old girl be?" (DA # 83, p.150). In addition, the majority of the images of women in the magazine were of models (4.5%). The images of women as sportspeople (1%) conveyed subjects in posed positions rather than in sports action shots.

The four issues of *Free Rider MX* (FRMX) magazine contained two references to female riders; one on a letters page (FRMX #31, p.30) and another by a male interviewee (FRMX # 36 p.40). Apart from this women were generally conveyed in partner support roles or as models.

Trail Bike Adventure Magazine proved to be the most accessible to women, with 8.4% of content conveying women as sportspeople. The images were generally action shots; one magazine also featured a poster of women riding and only 0.5% of the total images were sexualised. A number of articles also featured women-only rides and women's novice experiences. The language used generally referred to women as competitive sportspeople; however, it also stressed weakness and femininity at times. This is exemplified in one caption that accompanied a photograph of a women riding through mud, "things could have turned to poo pretty quick with one wrong move. Imagine the look of her pretty pink, white and blue gear if it did (TBAM #7 p.90)."

Chambers, Steiner & Fleming argue that the "hyper-heterosexual (and) masculinist" tones in sports media are symptomatic of an ascendancy of male journalists (Chambers et al. 2004 p.113). This may also be the case as each magazine had at most one to three women on the editorial staff and sometimes no female contributors in a team of up to twenty.

2.2 Survey

A sample of 60 women riders between the ages of 18 and 54 was taken. The participants resided in various urban, city and country areas in Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and South Australia. The informants were sourced via an article on the Northern Rivers (NSW) news website, *Galah*; a post on the dirt bike forum, *Dirt Bike World*; organised Endurance, Motocross, Trail and Trials events; via an advertisement in the local newspaper and through snowball sampling.

The sample questions were modelled on two existing dirt bike magazine surveys and appropriate quantitative research texts. The survey consisted of 22 mixed open-ended, closed, pre-coded,

dichotomous and multiple choice questions. The survey aimed to identify quantitative market data on women riders' including, occupation, age, preferred stories and content, riding habits and views on current dirt bike magazines.

The survey results have found that women are mostly dissatisfied the gender imbalance in Australian Dirt bike magazines, with 64% voluntarily claiming that women's content is either unrealistic or insufficient. A number of women also commented on the sexualised content of some dirt bike magazines, "I don't ride my bike in a bikini" (Participant # 39 2006), while others expressed that they'd like to see more women contributors, more female apparel, and event details and more family focussed content.

2.3 Focus Groups

The results of the survey will be extended in focus groups. In the interests of time economy and clarity, in-depth structured questions and added prompt questions will be used (Dick 2000). There will be three groups, each conducted in different geographical areas. Group A and Group B will sample six riders of varying skill levels and riding interests. These will be held in Melbourne and Townsville, north Queensland. Group C will consist of six women aged between the age of 19 to 47 and will be comprised of two road riders, two spectators and two aspiring riders. This session will be held at Lismore, NSW.

I plan to discuss the proposed publication template content with the focus groups, including design elements, copy, and product advertising. I also plan to discuss current dirt bike magazine content and deliberate on the comments received in interviews and feedback thus far. In addition, a number of texts have argued that women communicate differently to men and therefore have different needs (Coates 1986, Rider 2005, Roman et al 1994, Wodak 1997 etc). I plan to further test this hypothesis in the focus groups.

2.4 Interviews

To date I have conducted a range of interviews with academics, event organisers, women riders, industry workers, politicians and potential women riders. I plan to continue to conduct these interviews where necessary. I am using structured questions via email and semi structured and unstructured questions via phone and in person.

3. Expected Outcomes

I expect to determine a women's preference in dirt bike magazine content and to subsequently create a template that exemplifies these findings. This will be a potential resource for magazine publishers.

4. Recommendations for further research

My study is limited due to the nature of an Honours project. However further areas of future research may include the following:

- A study that attempts to determine the female riding population. This will assess the future possibility of a growth in women riders. Ideally data will be drawn drawing from Motorcycling Australia licence figures, bike shops sales, club and association figures, monitoring growth in forum membership numbers and so on.

- Studies of participants under the age of 18, given that numbers of participants appear to have increased. This study could explore the feasibility of an occasional biking lift-out, or independent publication that does not favour boys. This could be seen to promote a gender neutral attitude to the sport from a young age.

5. Recommendations for Committee.

- That the Committee supports research that gives due attention to the role models offered in media. Kane notes that (1988, pp. 88-89) ‘the mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in modern culture.’ Appropriate role models need to be in place for women to reach their full potential in this sport. Accurate applicable representations can encourage more riders, while objectification of women cannot.
- That the Committee support empirical research determining female participation in the range of dirt bike riding sporting activities.

I appreciate the opportunity to lodge this submission and hope that this report gives an insight into the current media representation of women and dirt bike riding.

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