

NCAA March Madness: An Investigation of Gender Coverage in *USA Today* During the NCAA Basketball Tournaments

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In today's economic environment, the United States newspaper industry has realized a severe period of decline in terms of circulation and overall consumer interest (Sullivan-Getty, 2009). While several major newspapers ceased existence in 2008, the *USA Today* remained the most popular American newspaper with a daily circulation well over 2.2 million (Sutel, 2008). However, with recent changes in consumer travel, the newspaper is expected to lose its position as the top U.S. daily following a 17% drop in circulation from April to September (Vanacore, 2009). With this in mind, it is critical that the *USA Today* identifies business strategies that will allow it to increase its circulation in years to come. In particular, it is more important than ever that the newspaper is aware of the content being delivered to consumers to ensure that it is delivering a highly competitive product. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate the coverage during the men's and women's NCAA Basketball Championships to determine whether the newspaper is providing content to maximize its potential reach with sport consumers.

The examination of past NCAA Basketball Championship media coverage, both men's and women's, has shown that the men's tournament garners far more media coverage than the women's tournament (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Blinde, Greendorfer, & Sankner, 1991; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Messner, Duncan, and Jensen, 1993; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1996). While several studies have examined the coverage from an equity standpoint (NCAA participation),

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there has been no research to date that has examined the *USA Today* NCAA Basketball Championship coverage from a consumption standpoint (NCAA attendance and revenues). Thus, the current study is unique because it allows researchers to determine whether the amount of coverage afforded to men's and women's teams is statistically significant when in direct comparison with consumption and equity standpoints.

Economic Theory

To remain financially viable in today's competitive marketplace, the *USA Today* must make decisions to maximize its economic efficiency. From a broad standpoint, the study of economics is defined as the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2004). Within this framework, businesses must operate with a thorough understanding of scarcity as they attempt to deliver a product that meets the wants and needs of their targeted consumers (Eschenfelder & Li, 2007). In essence, as a competitive environment increases its intensity, a business entity must focus on delivering a high quality product that captures the minds and hearts of consumers with limited disposable income (Porter, 1998). When businesses are unable to meet this critical objective, they often lose market share within their respective field, and as a result they can be forced out of business by more aggressive competitors (Porter, 1998; Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2004). Thus, this study of economics is highly valuable for companies such as the *USA Today* who are looking to increase readership and market share among consumers all across the United States.

Literature Review

The current investigation of *USA Today* expands literature on gender coverage allocated in sport media outlets (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Cunningham et al., 2004; Kane, 1988; Pedersen, 2002). While the extent of inequities have varied, the underlying trend in past content analysis research is that women are significantly underrepresented in sport-related publications when in comparison with men (Eaglesman, Pedersen, & Wharton, 2009; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Huffman, Tuggle, & Rosengard, 2004). Further, in addition to illustrating the overall gender coverage allocations (Bryant, 1980, Miller, 1975; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999), scholars have also outlined the unique gender inequities facing female athletes when focusing on the coverage afforded to men's and women's similar sport teams (Cooper, 2008; Cunningham & Sagas, 2002). The related literature is discussed in depth in the following sections to guide this research.

Overall Gender Coverage

In a pioneer content analysis, Bryant (1980) provided insight into the overall gender inequities when reporting that women received only 6% of the coverage in the *Denver Post* and 2.75% of the coverage in the *Rocky Mountain News*. In a similar study, Duncan, Messner, and Williams (1991) reinforced the previous research on gender inequalities when demonstrating that females were outnumbered by males

23–1 in article coverage within the top four daily sports sections (*USA Today*, *Boston Globe*, *Orange County Register*, and *Dallas Morning News*) named by the Associated Press Sport's Editors. Furthermore, the authors concluded that females received only 3.2% of all front-page storylines.

In the 1990s, scholars further illustrated the unique challenges facing women when investigating the coverage provided to athletes in international publications (Matheson & Flatten, 1996; Theberge, 1991; Crossman, Hyslop, & Guthrie, 1994; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). During an examination of six national and Sunday newspapers (*Express*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Mail*, *Mirror*, and *Telegraph*) during an eleven-year period, Matheson and Flatten (1996) reported that women were significantly underrepresented when in comparison with men. Further, the results also confirmed that women actually received declining levels of coverage through the eleven-year period. Similarly, in a follow-up study, Urquhart and Crossman (1999) showed that men received four times more article coverage and three times more photograph coverage than women within major foreign newspaper outlets.

In recent years, scholars have also identified the importance of analyzing the gender coverage being provided in media outlets with an NCAA affiliation (Cooper, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2004; Wann, Schrader, Allison, & McGeorge, 1998). In an examination of campus newspapers, Wann (1998) illustrated the challenge facing female athletes when demonstrating that women received significantly less coverage than men when in direct comparison with NCAA athletic participation rates and coinciding university enrollment rates. Further, in a similar investigation, Huffman et al. (2004) echoed similar concerns when reporting that women received only 27.3% of the coverage in campus newspaper publications.

In addition to the examination of campus newspapers, researchers have also added depth to the literature when focusing on the gender coverage in NCAA media outlets. While investigating the *NCAA News*, Shifflet and Revelle (1994) provided insight into gender coverage within the media outlet when revealing that women received 29% of the article coverage and 34% of the photograph coverage within the publication. Similarly, in a follow-up study of the *NCAA News*, Cunningham et al. (2004) demonstrated slightly more favorable gender allocations when reporting that women received 42.4% of the article and 39.7% of the photograph coverage within the publication.

Individual Sport Team Gender Coverage

In addition to the illustration of the overall gender coverage, scholars have also focused on the identification of the gender coverage provided to men's and women's individual similar sport teams (Baroffio-Bota & Banet-Weiser, 2006; Cooper, 2008; Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2000). In a pioneer analysis of intercollegiate athletic websites, Sagas et al. (2000) demonstrated that women's softball teams were not equitably represented on athletic websites when in comparison with men's baseball teams. Similarly, despite demonstrating minimal differences in coverage provided to men's and women's basketball teams, Cunningham & Sagas (2002) confirmed that women's softball teams were again underrepresented on department websites when in comparison with the coverage provided to men's baseball teams. Americans' interest in female athletes has focused more on individual athletes in traditionally feminine sports such as figure skating

and gymnastics than in team sports such as basketball and softball (Baroffio-Bota & Banet-Weiser, 2006).

NCAA March Madness Gender Coverage

In addition to sport team gender coverage, research has also attempted to add depth to the literature when investigating the allocations provided to men's and women's teams during the NCAA Basketball Tournaments (Blinde, Greendorfer, & Sankner; 1991; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Messner, Duncan, and Jensen, 1993). While scholars have focused on gender coverage provided throughout the entire March Madness event, recent research has emphasized the importance of examining the gender coverage differences during the Final Four and Championships games (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1996). In an early content analysis of the 1993 NCAA Basketball Final Four, Messner et al. (1996) determined that the men's event was framed as a historic event and the women's event was framed as a nonevent. Similarly, Hallmark and Armstrong (2002) demonstrated that men received different coverage benefits in production when in comparison with women (e.g., techniques—camera angles, cutaways). A recent study by Kian, Vincent, and Mondello (2008) on the media coverage of the men's and women's NCAA basketball tournaments in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *ESPN Internet*, and *CBS Sportsline* found that language used by these media outlets portrayed women's teams as "the other" (p. 235), constantly comparing women's teams to men's. A similar study found that both *USA Today* and *The New York Times* devoted the majority of their coverage of the NCAA basketball tournaments to the men's teams (Kian, 2008). Women's basketball is marginalized whereas men's basketball is framed as the norm (Kian, 2008).

The purpose of the research is to build upon past content analysis gender research by examining the coverage provided to men's and women's basketball teams in *USA Today* during the NCAA Basketball Championships. In addition to focusing on the Final Four and Championship coverage (Messner et al., 1996; Hallmark and Armstrong, 1999), the current research attempts to add depth to the literature by investigating gender coverage during the bracket release and Sweet 16/Elite 8 "highlight" issues¹. Further, the research also offers a necessary perspective when analyzing the data from both equity (NCAA participation) and consumption (NCAA attendance/revenue) standpoints. Thus, the examination of "highlight" events from varying standpoints offers a comprehensive breakdown of the gender coverage during the NCAA Basketball Tournaments. Upon review of related literature, the following hypotheses were created to guide the research:

- (1) Women will receive significantly less overall and prime unit of measurement coverage than men during the NCAA Basketball Tournaments when compared with coinciding equity and financial standpoints.
- (2) Women will receive significantly less overall and prime unit of measurement coverage than men during the individual [2A, 2B, 2C] "highlight" issues included NCAA Basketball Tournaments when compared with coinciding equity and financial standards.
 - 2A) Bracket release
 - 2B) Sweet 16/Elite 8
 - 2C) Final Four/Championship Event

Methodology

The current research was a content analysis of gender coverage provided in the *USA Today* during the men's and women's NCAA Basketball Tournaments. The collection of the data started with the bracket release issue released one day before the tournament and it concluded with the Championship issue released one day following the tournament championships ($N = 25$). Within the sampling frame, data were collected on a daily basis from Monday through Friday. Due to the nature of the *USA Today*, data were only collected five times a week because of the fact that the newspaper publishes one weekend edition released on Friday. Thus, because the newspaper features five editions per week, the research included a newspaper that meets the criteria of a mass-market newspaper as defined by the *Working Press of the Nation: Newspaper Directory* (2002).

Data Collection

The data collection process involved the analysis of gender coverage featured in *USA Today* during the NCAA Basketball Tournaments. The collection of the data for the study started with the bracket release issue on March 13, 2006, and the research concluded with the Championship issue on April 5, 2006. To accurately assess gender coverage, the study used article and photograph units of measurement during the data collection process. Further, within each unit of measurement, the location measure was used to examine the coverage appearing in prime location. The prime location coverage was characterized as coverage that appeared on the front cover of the sport's page, and it was included as a measure to segment the coverage opportunities provided within the publication. Similar to Malec's (1994) study, the team measure included only the unit of measurement coverage provided directly to each specific team, and did not include "combined" or "neither" categories.

Building on the previous coding procedures, the research implemented training sessions to ensure that each of the two coders were familiar with the data collection protocol. Following the training sessions, the research used intercoder reliability testing to ensure that each of the coders was providing similar responses. Overall, the independent examination of five newspaper issues (20.0% of sample) revealed that the percent of chance agreement and Adjusted Scott's Pi values were both acceptable for content analysis research (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Thus, the results demonstrated that the coders were providing highly similar results, and as a result the remaining newspapers were split evenly between the two coders for data collection.

Data Analysis

The data analysis implemented within the study involved the use of the Chi Square statistical analysis. As explained by Riffe et al. (2005), the Chi Square analysis is the most common statistical method used in content analysis research because it allows for the comparison with an independent standard. To help identify the different constraints facing *USA Today*, the following NCAA Basketball Tournament independent standards were included within the data analysis: (1) team participation rates, (2) athlete participation rates, (3) team revenues rates, and (4) team attendance rates (see Table 1). The NCAA Basketball Tournament athlete and participation rates were included as base equity standards for women participating in the tournament.

Table 1 NCAA Equity and Consumption Independent Standards (Chi Square Comparisons)

	NCAA team participation	NCAA athlete participation	NCAA team revenues	NCAA team attendance
Men's Basketball	50.0%	50.0%	70.0%	79.0%
Women's Basketball	50.0%	50.0%	30.0%	21.0%

In addition, the NCAA Basketball Tournament revenue (NCAA Analysis, 2006) and attendance (NCAA Men's, 2006; NCAA Women's, 2006) rates were included as potential factors that influence *USA Today's* coverage decisions. Each of the independent standards offers varying coverage expectations when examining gender coverage differences in the publication.

Results

The data analysis revealed that *USA Today* dedicated 21,069 square inches of coverage to the men's and women's basketball teams during the 2005–06 NCAA Basketball Tournaments. In addition to the identification of the overall coverage allocations, the results of the study also demonstrated that the following “highlight” events received the highest exposure rates during the tournament: Bracket release issues (5,141 square inches), Sweet 16/Elite Eight issues (3,914 square inches), Final Four/Championship issues (3,454 square inches). In the following sections, the overall and “highlight” event coverage results are presented based on four different independent standards to illustrate the gender coverage provided in the *USA Today* during the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

Hypothesis 1: Overall Coverage

In Hypothesis 1, it was predicted that women's basketball teams would receive significantly less overall coverage than men's basketball teams when in comparison with the independent standards included in the study. As shown in Table 2, the overall coverage allocations included in the Chi Square tests ranged from 21.0% to 31.7%. When in comparison with the equity independent standards (NCAA Tournament athlete and team participation rates), the results illustrated that women's teams received significantly less overall coverage than men's teams within each of the four coverage areas analyzed during the study: Overall article ($\chi^2 = 4962.02$, $p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 1684.04$, $p < .001$), sports page cover article ($\chi^2 = 257.12$, $p < .001$), and sports page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 162.17$, $p < .001$).

In addition to the comparison with the equity standards, the research also examined gender coverage from a consumption standpoint (NCAA Tournament team revenue and attendance rates). Similar to the equity comparisons, when focusing on the team revenue allocations, the Chi Square tests revealed that the women's basketball teams were significantly underrepresented in comparison the men's basketball teams within the following three coverage areas: Overall article

Table 2 Overall Coverage Allocations During the NCAA Basketball Tournament

	Overall Coverage		Sports Page Cover	
	Article	Photograph	Article	Photograph
Men's Basketball	79.0%	75.8%	74.7%	68.3%
Women's Basketball	21.0%	24.2%	25.3%	31.7%

($\chi^2 = 568.24, p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 102.15, p < .001$), and sport's page cover article ($\chi^2 = 11.32, p < .001$). In contrast, the use of attendance as an independent standard refuted Hypothesis 1 when showing that men's teams received significantly less overall coverage than women's teams within the overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 38.19, p < .001$), sports page cover article ($\chi^2 = 11.61, p < .001$), and sports page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 82.01, p < .001$) coverage areas.

Hypothesis 2: Highlight Event Coverage

Bracket Release Issues. In hypothesis 2, it was proposed that women's basketball teams would receive significantly less "highlight" coverage than men's basketball teams when in comparison with the independent standards featured in the research. Similar to the overall coverage allocations, while the coverage allocations provided to the women's teams varied slightly (see Table 3), the Chi Square equity comparisons again revealed that women received significantly less coverage than men in each of the coverage areas: Overall article ($\chi^2 = 1041.23, p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 586.57, p < .001$), sports page cover article ($\chi^2 = 83.52, p < .001$), and sports page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 38.08, p < .001$). The gender coverage percentages for the Bracket Release issues are provided in Table 3.

The examination of the bracket release coverage from a revenue standpoint supported the notion of women's underrepresentation presented in Hypothesis 2. In comparison with the NCAA Tournament revenue allocations provided in Table 1, women's teams were underrepresented in comparison with men's teams within the overall article ($\chi^2 = 59.86, p < .001$) and overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 132.30, p < .001$) coverage areas. There were no differences between teams in the bracket release coverage provided on the sports page front coverage. In contrast, the Chi Square attendance comparisons again confirmed that the men's teams received significantly less coverage than the women's teams within the overall article ($\chi^2 = 27.63, p < .001$) and sports page cover photograph coverage areas ($\chi^2 = 12.02, p < .001$).

Sweet 16/Elite Eight Issues. As illustrated in Table 4, the coverage allocations for women's teams during the Sweet 16/Elite Eight ranged from 14.6% to 30.2%. Similar to the bracket release issues, the analysis of the coverage allocations from the equity standpoints demonstrated that women's basketball teams were underrepresented in comparison with men's basketball teams within each coverage areas featured in the research: Overall article ($\chi^2 = 1471.62, p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 340.51, p < .001$), sport's page cover article ($\chi^2 = 49.33, p < .001$), and sport's page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 38.08, p < .001$).

Table 3 Bracket Release Coverage Allocations During the NCAA Basketball Tournament

	Total Coverage		Sports Page Cover	
	Article	Photograph	Article	Photograph
Men's Basketball	75.6%	85.4%	77.7%	69.8%
Women's Basketball	24.4%	14.6%	22.3%	30.2%

Further analysis of the gender coverage allocations from a consumption standpoint illustrated the unique challenges facing women in sport media outlets. Based on the NCAA Tournament revenue figures, the Chi Square tests revealed that women's basketball teams received significantly less coverage than the men's teams within the overall article ($\chi^2 = 332.76, p < .001$) and sport's page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 40.71, p < .001$) coverage areas. Furthermore, in contrast to the bracket release issues, the data illustrated highly similar gender coverage allocations between men's and women's teams when in comparison with the attendance independent standard. While women were underrepresented in overall article coverage ($\chi^2 = 73.64, p < .001$), the results revealed that men were underrepresented in sports page cover photograph content ($\chi^2 = 12.02, p < .001$). There were no differences in the overall photograph and sports page cover article coverage areas.

Final Four/Championship Issues. The coverage allocations provided to the women's teams during the Final Four/Championship issues ranged from 25.2% to 45.3% (see Table 5). Similar to the previous two "highlight" events, when comparing the Final Four/Championship gender allocations to the NCAA Tournament equity standards, the results again showed that women's basketball teams received significantly less coverage than men's basketball teams within three of the four coverage areas featured in the research: Overall article ($\chi^2 = 588.79, p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 87.68, p < .001$), and sports page cover article ($\chi^2 = 36.61, p < .001$). There were no differences in the sports page cover photograph coverage provided to men's and women's teams.

The analysis of the coverage allocations from a consumption standpoint demonstrated mixed results for men's and women's basketball teams. From a revenue standpoint, the Chi Square comparisons illustrated that women were underrepresented in overall article coverage ($\chi^2 = 26.32, p < .001$) and that men were underrepresented in the overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 16.17, p < .001$) and sports page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 31.76, p < .001$) coverage areas. While the Chi Square values varied from a revenue standpoint, attendance comparisons clearly illustrated that men's basketball teams received significantly less coverage than women's teams within each of the coverage areas: Overall article ($\chi^2 = 25.17, p < .001$), overall photograph ($\chi^2 = 136.40, p < .001$), sports page cover article ($\chi^2 = 15.85, p < .001$), and sports page cover photograph ($\chi^2 = 96.58, p < .001$).

Table 4 Sweet 16/Elite Eight Coverage Allocations During the NCAA Basketball Tournament

	Total Coverage		Sports Page Cover	
	Article	Photograph	Article	Photograph
Men's Basketball	85.4%	79.3%	80.5%	69.8%
Women's Basketball	14.6%	20.7%	19.5%	30.2%

Table 5 Final Four/Championship Coverage Allocations During the NCAA Basketball Tournament

	Total Coverage		Sports Page Cover	
	Article	Photograph	Article	Photograph
Men's Basketball	74.8%	64.4%	68.9%	54.7%
Women's Basketball	25.2%	35.6%	31.1%	45.3%

Discussion

While the results of this study were described in detail in the previous section, some areas merit further discussion. First, the findings revealed statistically significant differences in coverage based on three perspectives—participation, revenue, and attendance. In terms of participation, or equity, the findings in this study were very similar to those of past researchers (Cunningham et al., 2004; Sagas et al., 2000). There were no instances in which men were found to receive significantly less coverage in *USA Today*, but there were several instances in which women were found to receive statistically significant less amounts of coverage. Thus, from an equity standpoint, this supports previous research findings comparing coverage of male and female athletes.

When viewing the results from a revenue-based perspective, the findings were somewhat similar to those of the participation-based perspective. Interestingly, the overall data supported the notion that women were significantly underrepresented in *USA Today* coverage when in comparison with coinciding NCAA Basketball Tournament revenues. With an economic framework in mind, these findings are intriguing because they indicate that the *USA Today* could be miscalculating the amount of coverage that they should be providing to women's teams during the tournaments. With this in mind, the attendance comparisons were also calculated to provide further insights into the coverage allocations afforded when focusing on consumption standards.

In addition to the previous findings, the analysis of the coverage from an attendance standpoint illustrated a new paradigm for future content analysis research on

independent media outlets. In contrast to the equity and revenue comparisons, the investigation of the coverage based on consumer attendance revealed that men's teams were actually significantly underrepresented when in comparison with the women's teams. With the heavy emphasis on profit maximization within independent media outlets, this finding is of particular interest because it indicates that the *USA Today* could be missing out on potential readership and related consumer interest by not providing enough coverage to the men's teams during the tournament.

The Bottom Line

With the varying outcomes between revenue and attendance comparisons, the findings within the research warrant further discussion within the framework of the current study. Due to the nature of circulation within the newspaper industry, it would seem that the attendance comparisons provide the most accurate standard for comparison among independent media outlets. Thus, the coinciding data within the current research would seem to support the notion that men's teams need additional newspaper coverage during the NCAA Basketball Championships in order for the *USA Today* to maximize their consumer interest. While this finding seems straightforward when focusing on a media outlet such as the *USA Today*, it is in direct contrast with past studies that have focused on gender coverage inequalities during March Madness.

Moving beyond the fundamental coverage differences, the research also sheds light onto gender biases prevalent in college athletic settings. Based on the findings, the data seems to indicate that media outlets are not solely to blame for the gender biases that are present within athletic environments. Instead, there is the potential that there are existing consumer biases toward the men's basketball event that the *USA Today* must oblige to remain financially viable in today's competitive entertainment industry. Thus, in essence, the newspaper must provide extensive coverage to the men's NCAA Basketball Championship so that they can maintain and build a higher circulation rate throughout the United States as other major dailies go out of business.

Conclusions

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of studying gendered media coverage from more than one standpoint. Had this study strictly viewed gendered media coverage from an equity standpoint, it would appear that all coverage was skewed in favor of men's NCAA basketball teams. By including the consumption standpoint, it was evident that the men's teams were in fact underrepresented in several categories based on the NCAA Basketball Championship attendance figures. As previously mentioned, this is an important paradigm to consider because of the importance of profit maximization within U.S. daily newspapers. Thus, when focusing on independent, profit maximizing media outlets such as the *USA Today*, it is important to at least consider consumption standpoints when examining gender coverage.

The current study provides great practical applications for sport managers in college athletics all across the United States. In addition to the previously discussed

consumption applications, the equity perspective findings also illustrate the need for NCAA athletic departments, sports information directors, and sport public relations professionals to focus on developing stronger relationships with media outlets, particularly sports editors, to ensure that the women's tournament receives equitable coverage in the future. Doing so can potentially increase the exposure of women's sports on a local and regional scale, and as a result the consumer interest can improve steadily in future years.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to note the limitations within the current study to guide future content analysis research. Since the research examined one newspaper, *USA Today*, the findings cannot be generalized to other sport media outlets, and therefore the results are only applicable to *USA Today* during the time period of the study. To gain a broader view of print media coverage of the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments, future research should focus on multiple outlets. Further, because the decision making process of editors and journalists at *USA Today* is unknown, future studies could benefit from understanding the reasons why these print employees grant more coverage to certain athletes and teams.

Another limitation of the research is that it focused solely on the gender coverage at the annual men's and women's NCAA Basketball Championship. Thus, it would be extremely useful for scholars to examine this type of research over an extended time period to determine whether the trends continue or change. Similarly, because the study focused solely on the *USA Today* coverage, the sport literature could benefit a great deal if similar protocol was used to examine gender coverage in a variety of different print and Internet-based media outlets.

Notes

1. The "highlight" events were characterized as the high profile issues due to the fact that they contained the highest amount of event coverage during the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

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