“A Huge Step Forward”?: Moving Towards Socially Just Public Spaces Through Women’s Cycling

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The first ever Paris-Roubaix women’s professional cycling race was included within the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) revised 2020 racing calendar. The inclusion drew praise from many in the cycling world as long overdue. As in other sports, female cyclists have fewer opportunities to compete and showcase their hard work and talents than men. Uniquely, cycling competitions use public spaces (e.g., roads and parks), creating a need to examine social justice within the sport.

Wilson et al., (2017) articulated that social justice is important since sport spaces are public spaces. In cycling this is relevant within the sport itself (Wilson et al., 2017) and the use of public spaces for competition. If these spaces are not socially just, they become exclusive to the detriment of marginalized and underrepresented communities, as exemplified by the differences between women’s and men’s cycling (Van Erp, 2019). Low and Iveson’s (2016) propositions--distributive justice, recognition, interactional justice and encounter, care and repair, and procedural justice--can be used to make public spaces more socially just.

Using these five propositions, our purpose was to explore the media’s narratives surrounding two women’s races (the announced women’s Paris-Roubaix and La Course, the women’s race associated with the Tour de France) as they relate to issues of social justice and public space. As Lewis and Weaver (2013) explained, “Framing addresses the way in which elements in a certain news story are presented” (p. 220), and the way that the author presents information has the ability to influence people’s perceptions and cause change (Buijt & Mason, 2010; Sanderson, Weathers, Grievous, Tehan & Warren, 2016). Media framing as a methodology, allowed us to examine the content of the media’s text to explore issues of social justice in cycling and public spaces. Data were collected globally from online media sources, including mainstream media (e.g. Reuters) and cycling specific media (e.g. Velonews) from 2014 to present. Media articles were located through keyword searches (e.g. women’s Paris-Roubaix, La Course) and copied into separate word documents forming a database of 88 articles; data collection is continuing as new articles are published.

Data analysis is ongoing, following the three stages of qualitative analysis outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020) and influenced by Edwards and Kulczycki (2018). First, all data is reviewed prior to analysis for familiarization, confirmation of article relevance, and removal of duplicated articles (Edwards & Kulczycki, 2018). Using the five propositions as codes (Miles et al., 2020), each author will independently analyze and debrief with the co-authors to further the interpretations about how social justice was presented within the media about the two events.

Preliminary findings include the procedural justice required to institute change, gender inclusive event space in the public space, recognition of women’s abilities, and distributive justice of access and opportunities. Importantly, we will discuss how these findings add to our knowledge of social justice in public sport spaces by examining them in a context where private organizations use public spaces. Implications for sport event organizers will also be considered.