

Olympics are the closest to coverage parity female athletes get

By Sarah Laskow, Columbia Journalism Review

For every Olympics since 1994's Lillehammer Games, Andy Billings has broken down how much time the primetime broadcast spends covering male athletes and female athletes. Usually, men get significantly more of the clock time. But this year, when Billings, who directs the University of Alabama's sports communications program, and his collaborators ran an initial data-crunch on the first week of the Sochi Olympics, NBC's coverage was looking more equitable. Through the Friday night of Valentine's Day, NBC spent 47.6 percent its time covering men and 37.6 percent of its time covering women, with the remainder going to pair sports, like ice dancing.

That counts as an improvement. "It's a 10-percent gap favoring male athletes, which is smaller than normal," said Billings, late last week. (Researchers like Billings focus on NBC's primetime coverage because it reaches the most people—averaging 22.5 million per night, according to the Washington Post.) At the last winter Olympics, in Vancouver, the gap was 20 percent. And, at that point in the Games, women's figure skating hadn't even started yet.

By the end of the two weeks, the gap had narrowed even further: Men got 45.4 percent of clock time, women 41.4 percent, and pairs 13.2 percent.

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