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Summary Statement of Studies and/or Research:

Why do millions of people watch women play hockey during the Olympics and yet, when it comes to professional women's hockey, that audience dramatically decreases? In Canada, Olympic hockey is premiere primetime viewing. During the 2014 Winter Games, over 15 million Canadians watched the national men's hockey team battle for gold and a record-breaking 13.1 million tuned in to watch the women's final. While millions continued to watch men play hockey professionally in that year's NHL Stanley Cup, the professional women's equivalent, the CWHL Clarkson Cup, drew in an audience of only 40,000. Do viewers forget about women's hockey after the Olympics? It is poor marketing or lack of publicity or simply bad scheduling in non-primetime slots? Or, are viewers unable to accept women playing a game that has traditionally been constructed by the NHL and broadcasters to represent hyper-masculinized nationalism? How and why is Olympic women's hockey different?

Hockey is firmly snagged in the Canadian cultural fabric, as associated with national identity as Tim Hortons and maple syrup. However, there has been virtually no scholarship examining how the "encoded" messages of mediated hockey are "decoded". The hockey audience is a mystery. With no research, we know nothing of how audiences engage with hockey as a media text, how they accept, negotiate or reject these cultural messages. This significant academic gap is one that my research will begin to fill. I am conducting an audience reception study beginning with the broadcast of the Canadian women's hockey team in the 2018 Winter Olympics through to the CWHL Clarkson Cup final. I will investigate how Canadian audiences engage with women's hockey, their perceptions of female athletes, and their intentions to watch post-Olympics and why they did, or did not, follow through. Crucially, my research seeks to crack open the 'chicken and egg' argument around media coverage for women's sport. Private broadcasters and producers argue that the audience for women's sport is too small, the cost of production too great and the value of airtime minutes too high to take a risk without guaranteeing viewers for advertisers. Activists and athletes argue that the audience must be built through broadcaster investment, advocating an "if you show it they will watch" commitment. Who is this elusive audience for women's hockey and how can it grow?

My research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. I begin by gathering data with an online survey of audiences of the Canadian Women's Olympic Hockey Team. Next, I will hold a series of focus groups across the country to discuss hockey-watching habits in depth during the lead up to the Clarkson Cup final. I will also interview key executives from CBC and Sportsnet as well as Brenda Andress, the commissioner of the CWHL. What strategies do they deploy to increase ratings? How do they conceptualize their audience? Lastly, I will undertake a quantitative analysis of the amount and quality of broadcast coverage the Canadian Women's Olympic Hockey Team receives compared to the professional women's hockey league. Does women's hockey fail to maintain its viewership post-Olympics simply because there is less, and less valuable, broadcast time devoted to it? Can the decrease of viewers for women's hockey be attributed to ineffective, underfunded marketing? How does advertising influence broadcaster investment?

Our national women's hockey team is recognized as one of the best in the world. More and more girls are signing up for teams at their local rinks. And still, men's hockey continues to dominate our mediated and social spaces. Boys dream of growing up to join the NHL, but girls have no equivalent in terms of monetary and social stature. How can our national game exclude half of the population? I am seeking funding to support my doctoral research and writing that will seek to right this wrong. My findings will provide insight into how audiences engage with women's hockey and stand to inform the argument that public and private broadcasters should and must invest in more equitable media coverage for women's hockey in particular, and ultimately, in all women's sport.