Why Sport Matters:
New Challenges in the Digital Age

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Summary

1. Introduction

Sport has always mattered to the media (Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Brookes, 2002; Rowe, 2004). In the digital age of media, we have moved from an age of scarcity to potential abundance of media content delivered through a range of platforms (television, computer, mobile phone). Throughout Europe the twin drivers of digital switch-over and high speed broadband are facilitating substantive, if uneven, change across the media landscape. We are entering an age where to talk of 'old' or 'new' or indeed 'digital' media will become redundant. There will simply be media and content delivered to screens (or increasingly pulled down by users onto those screens) wherever they may be located.

At the core of this article is a broader argument about the nature of continuity and change in contemporary culture. From a media industries perspective, the dominant paradigms that have shaped the media landscape for decades are being challenged and re-structured as we move from an analogue environment to a digital age characterized by the increasing convergence of technologies. This is having a profound impact on how media content is produced, distributed and consumed. However, this process is one characterized by strong elements of continuity in patterns of media usage and consumption as well as dramatic change.

For example, television remains a central element of popular culture and sports content a key component in its mix, as it has done for over fifty years, but its place in media consumption is also changing. Over the coming years the key shift regarding sports content will be to think about the relationship between screens (big, small, portable, flexible, in the home, in the office, in the car, at the airport), the types of content that appears on these screens (sport, news, drama, information), the process by which content gets onto the these screens (pulled down, scheduled, time shifted) and how –and if– we pay for this content (license fee, pay-as-you-go, subscription, advertising). Driving this process is a mixture of factors from technological change, through to explicitly political and economic impulses. In any case, technological development always takes place within particular political and economic frames of reference.

At the core of the relationship between the media and sport are three key factors that are shaping its development. These are: the marketization of the media (and sport); the evolution of a digital landscape and the globalization of labour, economy and aspects of cultural practice and identity. The marketization of media and sport, and indeed the internationalization of sports and media cultures are in themselves not new. You could also substitute the term technology, for digitalization and again argue that this has always been a central component of the historical relationship between the media and sport. However its is the scale, scope and pace of which these differing forces are impacting on the sports and media industries which has become increasingly significant.

2. The Digital Age of Television

Digital technology is viewed as central to the economic well being of any country in the 21st century. Technologies once viewed as discrete and unconnected such as your computer, television set and telephone are now a part of a converging media landscape that blurs the lines about how we use these technologies.

It is possible to watch television on your computer or your latest mobile phone and send emails through your television and download music across the web. At the core of digitization is the notion of the extension of choice, as the technology allows vastly increased amounts of information to be sent and received.

2012 is not just the year of the London Olympic Games, it will be the year Britain goes digital and will switch off the analogue signal, through which currently 40% of homes in Britain receive television. This will be the year of the first truly Digital Olympic Games, yet television will remain an important element in this changing environment. Public Service Broadcasters such as the BBC have thus embraced the digital age as a way of ensuring that it remains as viable and relevant in an era of increased competition and a fragmenting audience.

Despite this, it appears that it is the commercial imperative that remains one of the key drivers of the digital television age. Media content (or as they used to be called, television programmes) increasingly must have a cross media dimension to allow revenues to be

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maximized. Programmes such as ITV's *X Factor* and the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* all utilize the ability of the audience to interact through either their digital television (all press the red button now) or by texting on their mobiles. These are what are called 'event' television; those must see programmes that can't be time shifted. Live sport also falls into this category; it has become one of the few content areas of the digital landscape that doesn't work if time shifted. That is why live football remains such compelling television content and has retained and enhanced its commercial value over the last ten years.

We have seen the impact of interactivity on coverage of reality type programmes and sports coverage (the BBC's coverage of Wimbledon, which allows you to choose which match you wish to follow being a good example) predictions abound about the impact of interactive technology on other areas of television output such as popular drama (select your own ending to a dramatic storyline for example). While Sky plus and other video on demand technology increasingly allows you to shape your own television schedule.

Fujitsu in Japan have just launched a computer/TV hybrid piece of hardware, which can store almost 500 hours of television on its hard disc. What we think television is for and how we use it is dramatically changing as the commercial drive to make money from the digital age intensifies.

Yet against this backdrop of huge technological change we should not be blinded by the range of technological hardware on display. It's the social role and usage of technology that remains crucial in determining its impact. Who controls it, and for what purpose will shape the role that television continues to play politically, culturally and economically.

About 40% of homes in UK don't have digital television, while access to the internet appears to have stalled at about 60%. These figures suggest a form of digital divide, of those who have access to this landscape and those who financially or culturally may be cut adrift. The importance of being addressed as digital citizens (with rights and entitlements) and not simply as consumers is a major challenge for public service broadcasters in the 21st century.

Digitalisation opens up a range of possibilities for how we might want to use the ability to communicate and build and strengthen communities and television, with its unique power to move and mobilize people, remains a key element of that aspiration.

To withdraw from this process and leave unbridled commercial forces to set the agenda over the next decade or so, would be to both misunderstand the continued cultural importance of television in society and the long history that technological innovation has always played in shaping television's story.

As mentioned earlier, 2012 promises to be a big year as Britain goes digital and London stages the 2012 games. It will also be a big year for the BBC – the Olympic broadcaster.

3. The BBC – The Olympic Broadcaster

The BBC whose budget for sport has struggled to match the inflated prices being negotiated for live sport (in particular football), has found their sports portfolio shrinking year-on-year. However, since the announcement in July 2005 that the Olympic Games would go to London in 2012 the economic, political and cultural position of sport in the UK was transformed. Big sporting events are important for media organisations to prove their worth, whether it be to advertisers, subscribers or, in the BBC's case, their credentials as a public service broadcaster.

When the Games were last held in London in 1948 the 'age of austerity' did not prevent the BBC from spending £250,000 on hosting the worlds broadcasters, showcasing the new technology of television and wholeheartedly immersing itself in the ideology that hosting the Olympics was important for British prestige. Fast forward to the Beijing Games of 2008, and the BBC's role in championing Olympianism was as strong as ever and its technological innovation in the delivery of the Games was an undoubted opportunity to showcase its position in the digital media landscape. The Beijing Games in 2008 were available in HDTV for the first time, the BBC's iPlayer launched in 2007 was used to enable multiple live and on demand video streams, and its coverage encouraged interactive participation by its audience at every turn.

Given the huge investment of resources in the coverage of major sporting events like the Olympics, broadcasters are always eager to release positive figures reflecting high ratings and audience share. Roger Mosey, the BBC's then Director of Sport, was in an ebullient mood as the 2008 Games came to a close:

> "In the same way that Team GB has massively exceeded expectations, so have the audience figures. We predicted 30 million and privately hoped for about 35 million, so to get to 40 million even before the closing ceremony is terrific".
> (Conlan, 2008)

In an age of diminishing audiences for individual channels the figures were truly remarkable.

But the significance of equating the performance of the broadcaster to the athletes themselves makes all too apparent the pressure felt by the BBC to maintain its prestige in the coverage of the Games. The remarks hin
t at some of the wider pressures connected with the performance of the BBC in its coverage of sport. As a public service broadcaster it must transmit a range of programming to suit various audiences, as well as showcase those events like the Olympics that have broad national appeal. The problem for the BBC, noted above, is that budgets for sport are limited so when it covers sport the pressure is on to both draw a 'national' audience and maintain its historic position 'the home of sport'. Arguably the former is increasingly difficult in a diverse multichannel environment and the latter mantle of a leader in sports coverage has been significantly undermined by the growth and power of Sky Sports.

The BBC's television coverage of the Beijing Games had peaked at 7 million viewers on the second Thursday, and on the final Saturday took a very respectable 42% share of the UK audience. When equated with audiences for sport in the 1970s and 80s the Beijing Games does not compare favorably. But in the new media age the mainstream television coverage is only the partial story of its overall coverage. The BBC has attempted to respond to the challenges of multichannel competition and dominant niche sports channels through its development of new web-based, interactive, High Definition (HD) and on-demand services that provide far more depth to the coverage of individual events than ever before. The BBC

introduced six live feeds via its website and a range of 'catch up' opportunities via its iPlayer with 400,000 users downloading the 100 metres final in one day alone. The different modes of delivery do have some interesting consequences for the viewing experience.

The standard television format of linking to events from an anchor and panelists in the studio get short-circuited when coverage is delivered online, on-demand. In the online viewing experience the events stand-alone and editorializing is by design of the web developer not the television producer. Although certain events are prioritized –invariably around British achievements and medalists– there is no framing of the event by the studio. It is almost a pure outside broadcast, in an old fashioned sense of television being there to capture the moment.

The BBC's HD coverage was mesmerizing in its depth and colour, but remained experimental in 2008. While the BBC broadcast more than 300 hours of the Olympics on its dedicated HD channel the number of households watching the service remained relatively small. Although more than 40% of British households had HD-Ready television sets in 2008, only an approximate ten percent could actually watch HDTV services. This was largely because of cost, as HD channels via the various television platforms, in most cases came with an additional charge. This fracturing and bifurcation of audiences is an increasingly familiar pattern of sports viewing in the 21st Century. Even where viewers are watching the same sporting event their experiences of how they watch, where they watch and the technologies used may be incredibly varied.

The ideological battle the BBC faces in continuing to innovate in its television coverage of sport is a reflection of its wider institutional problems of justifying its existence and public funding during an economic recession in a highly liberalized, market-driven, media environment. Many of the BBC's competitors, in television but especially in the online world, point to the relatively low level of commercial risk the BBC takes as it innovates in its coverage. Such subsidy is viewed as anti-competitive and drowning out new enterprise. The BBC's brand ensures it commands a prominent place in the minds of audiences and web users in the UK and increasingly globally. However without such a commitment to innovation in sports coverage the availability of quality of sports programming, news and myriad services would be diminished, leaving certain social groups excluded from premium televised sport. Sport as a

national shared experience would also suffer. This is not an argument that suggests things should stay the same rather a sentiment that comes through strongly in the following statement from Mosey:

"Given this richness of our history – and we're enormously proud of it – there's an easy trap of thinking that the BBC is what the marketers call a 'heritage brand'. A fantastic past - and plenty of glories in which it can luxuriate. But that is a fundamental misreading in my view of what the BBC is about – both in its past and in the future. The point about the people who launched all these wonderful new services is that they were pioneers not traditionalists."

(Mosey, 2007a)

The pioneering spirit of the BBC Sports department is perhaps one of its most enduring features.

Its new media coverage of the 2008 Games enabled multiple and novel ways in which the Games and its cast of characters could be communicated. Television coverage was supplemented by blogs from producers and BBC journalists. There was more exposure and time given over to the variety of sports on show enabling the varied stories of the Games to be revealed. There were behind-the-scenes views of the Games itself, including some of the more contentious moments of the event. For instance, the arrest of the ITN journalist John Ray who went to cover one of the several protests against Chinese rule in Tibet was captured by a BBC crew and promptly put online as evidence of the overbearing surveillance that surrounded the Games in Beijing. In these ways and more, the mediation of the Olympic Games by the BBC opened up new vistas from which to experience the Games and to identify with athletes and nations.

Roger Mosey is now BBC Director of London 2012, co-coordinating the Corporation's engagement with the Games across the genres of news, sport and current affairs and its media platforms. For Mosey the London Games are crucial for the BBC. He argued:

"People have that the BBC or conventional media might be obsolete by the time you get into a digital age. What we have in 2012 is the biggest event in our lifetimes at the very point when the UK goes fully digital, and therefore we believe that what we would like to show both the viability of some conventional broadcast models and the viability of the BBC in terms of digital media. Ultimately we would argue that you need public service broadcasting as much if not more in the digital age as you did in the analogue age".
(Interview with author, 16 September, 2009)

At the core of this is the BBC's web presence. The 2008 Olympic Games saw more video streaming on the first day of Beijing than during the whole of the Athens Games. It went from 2.6 million videos streams in 2004 to 38 million video streams in Beijing four years later. This will grow in London 2012, as will HD take up in the run up to the games. The BBC will also have every Olympic event available live through its interactive web based service for the first time.

However Mosey is clear the BBC's coverage is also about continuity as well as embracing new possibilities. Regarding the role of social networking for example he notes:

"Broadly speaking we think we know what the hardware will be like in 2012. With social networking because things spring up and can just take over in a very short time we don't know the exact shape of that. I think it is probably fair to say in the Olympics that our messages boards and our blogs and our interactivity will be as they are now. I don't see them massively impacting on the prime BBC1 coverage because at the moment it appears the audience demand really is to see the Athletics and hear from commentators such as Michael Johnston. They don't particularly want endless people reading out emails and Twitter messages".
(Interview with author, 16 September, 2009).

So the BBC's strategy sees television remaining the prime Olympic channel, with online services offering content to particular fans to engage with coverage and also follow niche sports. The BBC is also keen to capture some of the 2012 Games in 3D, for while they

understand that people may not have this technology at home, in the future it may become an increasingly mass technology.

4. The age of Screens and Content

Sports, as well as other facets of our daily lives, are set to be dramatically affected by the growing importance of the Internet, video gaming and other multimedia applications, placing more control in the hands of the consumer who may choose from a vast array of services through many-to-many communication. However, the rampant optimism that drives the promotional strategies of large computer-based corporations, is only heard and acted upon by a small technological élite.

In analysing the rapidly expanding 'online' services for the sports fan, we must guard critically against any oversimplified linear approach to technological change in media sport and its promise to empower its audience. While the interactive possibilities of the World Wide Web of sport are exciting, it is also true that any deeper understanding of media technologies of sport requires a concern for social, economic, political and cultural processes in order to appreciate the complex ways in which power is structured and manipulated.

5. Conclusion: Emerging Trends and Issues

There are also more radical innovations in the coverage of sport that compete with the main players in the economic and political success of sport on the Internet. Fan websites have evolved with the nature and character of the web itself. Fans are now the authors of their own websites, blogs, discussion forums, online commentaries, social networking sites, podcasts and digital video productions distributed via YouTube. All these developments serve to reveal the passions that surround sport in new and creative ways.

This process means that there is wider coverage of different sports from increasingly different perspectives. Where football dominates mainstream media, particularly press coverage of sport, online media sport provides a communicative space for sports that struggle to get exposure on television or by sports journalists. One particular dimension of this explosion is

the use of YouTube by either governing bodies of sport, sports clubs and sports fans to distribute audio-visual coverage of sporting events. In 2006 the National Hockey League in the US was one of the first governing bodies of sport to launch its own YouTube channel. The channel enabled the NHL to bypass traditional television outlets, giving more direct editorial control of how the sport is produced and analysed as well as opening up other revenue streams through advertising and subscription.

One problem of these 'official' channels is the lack of critical comment or investigative journalism. When editorial control goes in-house this is always likely to be the outcome. However, YouTube offers an antidote to the official views from sport. The proliferation of digital cameras and mobile phones with video capturing has led to a new phenomenon of 'home-made' videos being posted on the web along with the rise of twitter comment from fans and players alike. The ease of use, malleability and global distribution of material means that biographical accounts of 'going to the match' are populate the web via YouTube. The view from the stadium may not offer any real insight into the action on the field of play, but they do reveal the social experience of many who watch live sport.

Governing bodies of sport are conscious of these developments and in some cases have banned the use of mobile phones and cameras at sporting venues in attempts to control the images that emerge from sport. Again, digital rights management of sports media and the policing of official, licensed coverage of sport has become big business. Company's like Net Result or Soccer Dataco, who are contracted by governing bodies of sport and sports broadcasters like BSkyB, lay vigil on the web to trace any copyright infringement of televised sports images on the web. Unsuspecting fans who copy copyrighted material - such as fixture lists - and distribute the images or information via the web receive curt and rapid legal writs if they do not desist. However, as the music industry has discovered keeping a lid on the mass disobedience of copyright is no easy undertaking. Live feeds of BSkyB's coverage of the Premier League frequently appear on the Internet.

The power play over the ownership of sports rights on the web has also led to more formal industrial disputes between sports rights holders and mainstream media. In what amounts to an economic and legal enclosure of sports information and images, sports governing bodies

have exploited their production of fixture lists, rights of access for photographers and any secondary uses of audio-visual material. The cost of licenses to these informational goods has at times led to deadlocked negotiations and all out boycotts. In 2007 prior to the Rugby World Cup, *The Guardian, The Times, The Sun* and French sports daily *L'Equipe* joined international news agency Reuters in limiting coverage over a rights dispute with the International Rugby Board. The dispute centred on licensing rules that limited the number of images newspapers could place on their websites.

The press, led by News International titles threatened a boycott claiming the license was restricting freedom of the press. The boycott of images was an attempt to upset the tournament sponsors who were paying high prices to gain high exposure of their brands across various media. As the tournament in France dawned the IRB eventually brokered a farer deal, but the episode confirmed the complexities of rights associated with sport and how the arrival of the web makes distinctions between traditional media harder to decipher.

Other emerging areas see the growing importance of digitizing archive material and in some cases deriving value from it; sport on mobile phones will not go away, although making money from it remains a challenge. Companies such as Eurosport are keen to use developments such as Apple iPhone App to drive users to their content, building a long term business model for paid content in an age when the digital natives are used to 'free' online content is another challenge.

Media technology will continue to develop apace. We are moving to an age were debates about old and new media are becoming outdated and the new paradigm is one that places the relationship between content and screens at its core.

If the media ecology is driven solely by marketisation this will impact on sports, keen to take the money and run. European media regulators struggle to strike a balance between the commercial and cultural role of broadcasting and media in society and ask what should be the continued role of public service broadcasting? Where do notions of the public good fit into media and political discourse? How de we combat 'market failure' in media content provision?

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In the same context, sports should also reflect on their relationship with the range of diverse stakeholders who sustain the industries, both financially and also culturally and continually ask the question: in the digital age, who is sport for?

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