Global Media Journal
Australian Edition

ISSN 1835-2340

Volume 15 Issue 1 2021

Stimulation and Simulation: Mediated Sport in a Pandemic

David Rowe
Emeritus Professor of Cultural Research, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University

This article is an amended and extended version of 'And the winner is… Television: spectacle and sport in a pandemic', *Open Forum* (19 September, 2020), https://www.openforum.com.au/and-the-winner-istelevision-spectacle-and-sport-in-a-pandemic/. It is now over twice the length of the *Open Forum* piece and includes some further reading and viewing, and is offered only to this journal.

Abstract

COVID-19 demanded a reconsideration of a popular practice: mediated sport viewing. This article reflects on the history of the relationship between sport and media before turning to the crisis created by the most recent pandemic, in particular the cancellation of live sport events and the denial of entry to co-present spectators. It examines the role of streamed sports documentaries and the techniques used to simulate crucial physical sport crowd attendance, including the introduction of virtual fans. Such practices, it is noted, invoked the postmodern theory of Jean Baudrillard, as concepts like simulacrum and hyperreality infiltrated the news media. The use of processed crowd sounds deriving from sport video games in live sport broadcasts accelerated the developing linkage between e-sport and physical sport in paradoxical attempts to salvage the mediated experience of the 'real'. The article concludes that Covid-19 stimulated an urgent reflection on the relationship between sport, media and cultural citizenship, in particular on capacities for re-setting the

course of the relationship between sport fandom, spectatorship and representation. The pandemic, it is argued, had an important bearing on the enduring problematic in mediated sport: who controls the gaze and what are the consequences for the watcher and the watched?

Essay

While wishing a plague on the plague, COVID-19 has been useful in one respect. In suddenly stopping normal service, it has forced us to reconsider what once counted as normality. This reconsideration includes everything from long-distance commuting to communal dining, but one popular practice that has provoked an intensive rethink is TV sport viewing.

Not long before the metaphorical lights went out, ironic comments about the excessive availability of sport were quite common. Comedians Roy and HG's dictum that 'too much sport is barely enough' was, in fact, accepted sport-media industry and sport fan wisdom. Sport going off-air produced instant tales of psychological distress and laments that the withdrawal of live sport action was creating a vacuum in everyday lives. The 'plug-in drug', especially, had cultivated a habit that was for many hard to shake.

It was not always thus. In the first half of the 20th century when public service broadcasters were pioneering sport television in most countries, some commercial TV executives didn't think that it would catch on. Sports contests were, unlike drama or light entertainment, too unpredictable. Uneven matches, they thought, would be the equivalent of a murder mystery with a spoiler halfway through the program.

Some leaders of sport organisations were no less cautious. What if live sport on television meant that fans would put their feet up and watch at home rather than suffer the inconvenience of paying for a spectacle with inferior sightlines?

That problem was quickly solved by trading sport audiences. Real-time outcome uncertainty was an advantage and dedicated fans would watch whatever the score. Live sport could sit in the schedule with plenty of content to fill broadcast space around it.

Television gave sport its biggest source of revenue by paying inflated prices for broadcast rights in return for drawing people to the screen at an appointed time for exposure to advertising. Charging a subscription for the privilege to watch premium sport followed.

Sport fans at the stadium still got the unique atmosphere and bragging rights for being there, plus big screens so they wouldn't miss watching from home or in the pub too much. TV viewers got their own home studio screens and speakers so that they could simulate attendance, and paid directly or indirectly for entry at the 'electronic turnstile'.

The outcome was increasingly slick coverage of sport events that acquired epic dimensions, a riot of movement and noise that could attract the attention even of channel-surfing viewers disconnected from sport. That big splash of sights and sounds projected its own importance and immediacy.

Everybody was happy, apart from the fans excluded by rising ticket prices and high subscriptions for premium live sport. And some old-school sport lovers who resented their favourite games paying TV's piper by changing their rules, uniforms and game times to suit it.

But then came COVID-19, first meaning crowd-free contests and then blank sport screens. Sport fans engaged in a desperate search for a lively experience beyond endless replays of classic moments in sport history. The Belarusian Premier League instantly acquired a global audience, as a perverse reward for the ex-Soviet republic's refusal to acknowledge a problem with this 'little flu'. Documentaries like 'The Last Dance' about basketball demi-god Michael Jordan, and 'Sunderland 'Til I Die' about a failing English football team, helped fill the sport viewing void on TV streaming services.

When live sport began to return to screens across the world, it was greeted by empty stadia or drastically reduced crowds. Colourful, noisy sport spectacles became soulless contests played mostly in silence apart from player and coach swearing, the raw thud of collisions between bodies in contact sports, and some ambient noise. Cardboard cut-outs of spectators with pasted on faces in the stands produced spot-the-celebrity jokes. Giant Zoom screens of fans at home reminded many professionals of the now-daily work routines from they were trying to escape by watching sport on TV.

Enter the technical wizardry of the people who shape TV sport sound. If the sport crowd was absent it had to be invented, if depleted it needed to be enhanced. Digital samples of spectator sounds – mostly minus the abuse – were matched as much as possible to what was happening live in the stadium. The sound mixer cranked up and compressed the noise here, softened and diffused it there. Multiple cameras panned and cut away, zoomed in and out in sync with the sampled sounds. All with the aim of simulation and stimulation in recreating memories of the pre-pandemic live TV sport experience.

Without such artifice which was already well advanced before the pandemic, two-dimensional screen representations would be exposed, paradoxically, as inauthentic. For the television sport viewer, the pandemic provided a salient lesson in media literacy. We have been reminded, if we ever knew in the first place, that live TV sport is a confection, that it is as highly produced as any BBC, HBO or Netflix drama. It is a spectacle in which fans are acting out the drama, and so deeply dependent on the Greek chorus that constantly calls those on stage to account for their actions. Except in this case the chorus is organised into competing teams and calls to conscience and ethics often drowned out by the urge to win by any means.

The pandemic has reinforced for the sport fans who turn up at the stadium the importance of their roles as screen actors who pay to be seen. And those who watch from afar now appreciate just how much they are in the hands of editors and technical operators to make it all feel real.

It is not sport that has been the winner, but television.

Further Reading

Graakjær, N. J. (2020). Sounds of soccer on-screen: A critical re-evaluation of the role of spectator sounds, *Journal of Popular Television*, *8*(2),143-58.

Majumdar, B. and Naha, S. (2020). Live sport during the COVID-19 crisis: Fans as creative broadcasters, *Sport in Society*, *23*(7), 1091-99.

Rowe, D. (2011). *Global media sport: flows, forms and futures*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Rowe, D. (2020). Subjecting pandemic sport to a sociological procedure, *Journal of Sociology*, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320941284.

Sturm, D. (2020). From idyllic past-time to spectacle of accelerated intensity: Televisual technologies in contemporary cricket, *Sport in Society*, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1834535.

Further Viewing

Al Jazeera (2020, 26 September) *Sports TV: Faking spectators & spectacles*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AlD63s26sQ&feature=youtu.be&t=827

About the author

David Rowe is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Research in the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS). In 2015, David was awarded the WSU Vice-Chancellor's Excellence in Research (Researcher of the Year) Award. His research ranges across Western Sydney and both national and global contexts, and registers in policy development, media communication, public debate, and advancement of internationally oriented, interdisciplinary knowledge. His research looks at transformations in contemporary cultural life, in particular, in relation to sport, media, urban leisure, artistic practice and the politics of the public sphere.

Email: d.rowe@westernsydney.edu.au