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Television Sport in the Age of Screens and Content.

Television transforms football, but not in circumstances of its own choosing.

David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football*, (London: Penguin), 2007,
775.

Sport is of course one of the very best things about television: I would keep my set for it alone.

Raymond Williams, As We See Others, *The Listener*, 1 August, 1968.

The World Cup in Brazil promises to be truly memorable. The BBC is delighted to be showing this great selection of games and our audiences will be able to join in not only live on BBC One but on radio and online where our very extensive coverage will deliver the first truly digital World Cup.

Philip Bernie, BBC Head of TV Sport, *BBC Press Release*, 10 December, 2013.

INTRODUCTION

As the staging of the FIFA World Cup returns to Brazil for the first time since 1950, much has changed in the sporting and media industries. The drives of internationalization and technological innovation have shaped the wider political and economic environment within which sports and its relationship with television have evolved. As Brazil stages the 2014 FIFA World Cup and as a result becomes the centre of the media universe for the duration of that

tournament, I want to simply offer some reflections on the continuities as well as the changes that characterize the media sports nexus.

As the journalist and writer Martin Kelner noted in his history of sport on television in the UK:

Let's be honest, very few of us get to attend a World Cup or an Olympics. I have never been to either, nor to the European Athletics championships, the Open golf, Six Nations rugby union, the Commonwealth Games or even the world Professional Darts Championship [] My memories – in common with almost everyone else's – of the greatest moments in sport come filtered through the cathode ray tube, and its flatter, more technologically elaborate successors (Kelner 2012, 16).

At the core of both sports and television is narrative. The way these stories are delivered, and are made sense of by audiences in the digital age, variously reflect, reinforce and construct a range of identities around class, gender, ethnicity and cultural and national identities. These operate both within particular cultural contexts and are also enacted at symbolic local, national and international levels. And while Kelner's position hints at perhaps a previous age of how television interacted with sport and its audience it also reminds us that the history of television and sport is one characterized by innovation, change, disruption, dispute and ultimately the recognition that television has needed sporting content, and that elite sport has become financially and symbolically dependent on television. Yet as the quote from the BBC's Head of TV Sport at the top of this article highlights, sport still remains important to an organization such as the BBC. For a medium whose demise and death has long been predicated in the internet age, television remains a remarkably resilient cultural form and one still central to sporting popular culture.

Screens and Content

As noted elsewhere (Boyle 2010) while sport remains organized play, the architecture and infrastructure that now facilitates, supports and mediates what is in essence an invention of a 19th century age of imperialism, is deeply embedded in the political, economic and cultural life of a digital 21st century Europe. Discussion of old and new media is largely redundant in the digital age. While even the term digital media is becoming superfluous, we simply have a media environment with various platforms, screens and the content on those screens.

We still require a roadmap to find their way around the content we want, or think we want (or have not yet discovered that we want). As a result, big media brands such as the BBC remain important, and sports content and sports journalism remains a central component of this increasingly demand-led media environment which has the television screen at its core and various other screens enhancing our ability to be always connected.

Television as both an industry and platform remains an integral aspect of the business model of many elite sports, and a sport such as football in particular. The success of the UEFA Champions League format initially introduced in 1992 and revamped at various points since then has by 2014 become one of the premier sports events in the world in terms of its influence within football, its world wide popularity and its commercial value. While UEFA and other media partners are developing the online, mobile and general screen experience for fans all the time, the core value that it offers via television means that this medium remains at the core of its business model and generates the crucial commercial value which makes it such a valuable sporting commodity.

It is also worth noting the often unintended consequences of television's involvement with sporting cultures. Returning to Brazil and Latin America for example, David Goldblatt has noted how:

Television has reconnected Latin American football to the wider global game and to the global economy in new ways. In Europe television money generated the revenues to allow the leading clubs to buy the very best talent from all over Latin America. Global coverage of football has hastened the process by making Latin American football and its players more accessible to potential buyers (Goldblatt 2007, 781).

As a result of the power of television finance to reshape the footballing industry, the UEFA Champions League, populated with Latin American footballing talent is as popular as the Copa Libertadores in that part of the world. Thus as television sport researchers, we do well not to limit our gaze to the myriad of screens which carry sporting content, but continue to attempt to understand the broader context within which television gets created, distributed and consumed.

As Brazil stages the first, for the BBC, 'truly digital' World Cup, to follow its digital Olympic coverage of the 2012 London Games note how the event will simply overpower other areas of television beyond sport. The television and online news agenda will be reshaped by the event, while social media will feed into news and sporting agendas as they offer the potential to both disrupt traditional narratives of the World Cup as well as being used to reinforce particular discourses. We have recognized for some time that the domestic political and cultural framing of international events allows a high degree of variation in terms of coverage (Boyle Blain and O'Donnell 1993).

In 2014 the digital broadcasting market in the UK had become characterized by an increasingly fragmented audience for television with both free-to-air and pay-TV digital channels competing for viewers. Broadcasters are using a range of media platforms such as the Web, and on-demand technologies such as the BBC iPlayer, to capture and retain audience share. Yet in the UK over the last decade or so audiences are actually watching more television (on larger screens than ever) but less of this viewing is collective, or taking place at the same time. Average daily viewing of television for a UK viewer in 2002 was 3.73 hours per day, by 2012 despite all the other digital diversions available this had risen to 4.01hours (BARB 2013).

Against this backdrop the premium nature of live sports events as ‘event television’ continues to develop. In an age when technological change, in part unleashed through a lighter regulatory framework, is restructuring how people watch and think about television, the ability of sports at major events to pull together fragmented audiences remains compelling, even if they disagree over what they appear to be watching, and are engaging in second or even third screen activity and conversations.

In an age of change, various television and media business models move in and out of fashion, so it could be a subscription model that dominates thinking, then an advertising model, then perhaps both at the same time. For other sectors such as music the model may be to give away the content for free and let people decide what they should pay and instead focus on generating revenues from the live performance. However, what may work for the music industry cannot simply be transplanted onto the sports market or the television sector as the rules around media consumption are often different.

Thus for some niche sports the rise of the web as a stable robust distribution platform will create new opportunities but these may be of limited in their scope and scale. In the UK, a sport such as darts is forging close links with the betting industry and creating events delivered via the web at times to facilitate the maximum opportunity to place bets on the outcome of games and matches, an example of the 'long tail' of sports distribution perhaps? However in the footballing world, I would argue that the 'blockbuster' model of cultural distribution, of which the 2014 FIFA World Cup is an excellent example, appears to still be the powerhouse mechanism for generating serious revenue for elite sports and rights holders.

Indeed the mobility of screen content, as well as the growing links between television, gambling and sport are also areas that should be more rigorously investigated by television sports researchers. As online and in-game betting continues to grow, so too does the advertising revenues from these companies that commercial television secures when televising sport. While this gambling may be legal, the illegal side of sports betting and corruption threatens the television image of many sports in manner not apparently envisaged by the custodians of professional sport. As sports marketing researcher Simon Chadwick has noted:

Corruption in sport is not a new phenomenon; however, it appears that rapid changes in the industry, most notably the commercialization of sport and a resultant influx of revenues seem to have exacerbated the problem. The seriousness of the matter has been further compounded by the intense scrutiny that sport organizations are exposed to (especially following the emergence of social media), by growing economic inequalities in sport (which incentives poorly rewarded athletes to fix contests or accept bribes), and by often weak approaches among sport organizations to issues of governance and risk management (Chadwick 2014, 2).

Thus television and the international dimension of its reach through sports coverage in the digital age offers more possible unintended impacts on the broader society and culture within which it operates and television researchers should be alive to this as a growing research issue.

The importance that mobility continues to play in shaping our domestic, business and sporting patterns of media consumption is of course significant. This more nomadic pattern of media usage also raises issues for rights holders as we create a the world of witnesses that see digital images from sports events are increasingly sent around the globe not by professional accredited photographers, but by fans. While the fixation among rights holders to maximize their revenue means that the policing of media events is also becoming increasingly important.

Future Issues

The 2014 World Cup in Brazil offers an opportune moment to reflect on the continuities as well as the changes that characterize television's relationship with the global game of football. The dazzle of screens can at times lead us to become too technologically determinist in linking technology and social change. It is worth emphasizing that it is the interaction of technology and its social usage and context that drives change, often in very unpredictable ways.

The television screen is not going away, and will remain at the centre of the networked media sporting environment for some time yet. The watching of mediated sports remains, as the cultural critic Raymond Williams noted over 40 years, one of the very best things about television. Sports fans will always use different media for differing reasons and situations, many of the online and mobile media services will remain add-ons for some time to come with regard to live sports watching. In reality we are in period of ongoing evolution rather than revolution and events such as the World Cup remind us this as we connect the narratives of previous

tournaments and histories will engaging with technology that facilitates our access to an event that most of us will not attend in person. Attempting to understand the nature of the relationship between a sporting cultural form, television and its digital hinterland and the audience and forms of collective identity formation remains an intriguing and compelling research environment, even after all these World Cups.

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