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Live sport during the COVID-19 Crisis: Fans as creative broadcasters

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Abstract

The hiatus in stadium spectatorship due to the COVID-19 pandemic presents us with a unique opportunity to rethink the way sport fans participate in the making of live events. Some sport leagues have resumed, with others to follow, but the stadium experience has profoundly changed as fans cannot gather in the galleries until the spread of coronavirus is arrested. How can sport broadcasters continue to engage fans and mitigate the problem of the empty stadium? We argue that creative harnessing of user-generated content and integration of online and offline fandom can help broadcasters present sport in a much more attractive manner during and after the pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19, sport fan, broadcast strategy, technology, sport stadium

The resumption of sport in mid-2020

In March 2020, sport came to a standstill as most countries restricted public gatherings and closed all non-essential industries indefinitely to prevent the spread of coronavirus. With fear and apprehensions raging worldwide, sport, understandably took a backseat. In Italy, one of the worst hit countries in the world, Serie A team doctors strongly opposed the return of football 'too soon' (Corsini et. al. 2020). When Giovanni Rezza, head of infectious diseases at Italy's National Institute of Health, warned against the proposed May restart of Italian football, he was supported by a few clubs and criticized by others. In particular, the Lazio spokesman said Rezza, a Roma fan, wanted the season scrapped so that their Derby della Capitale rival did not top the league (AFP 2020). It is desirable that sport bodies treat athletes as part of a community rather than a commodity before asking them to return to sport. Protecting athletes' health and minimizing the chance of athletes infecting their community should be the priority (Mann et.al. 2020). However, there is an anxiety that the decision to resume sport leagues across the world will consider the political and commercial aspects of sport before public health.

Barring a few table tennis and volleyball games in Russia and Ukraine, there has been little live sport to watch since March till the South Korean K-League and KBO League returned to empty stadiums in the first week of May (King 2020). Germany's Bundesliga resumed behind closed doors in mid-May. The matches presented a strange sight. A handful of masked journalists and security personnel milled around. Some players did not huddle for celebrations. Some flouted social distancing rules and hugged. Everything they said could be heard on television. Most tellingly, some Bundesliga players continued the tradition of going around the stadium for the conventional postgame thanks, as if fans were there (Oltermann 2020). It is the new reality each player is trying to come to terms with while doing their best to recognize the absent presence of fans.

Sport is likely to return on a wider scale in June-July as various countries have started easing their lockdown regulations. On 17 May, the Government of India announced reopening of stadiums and sport facilities. This means athletes will now be able to practice (Chaudhury 2020). It marks a change in mindset, which might soon prompt a resumption of tournaments albeit in empty stadiums. Russia announced that foreign athletes and coaches will now be allowed to return to the country and join work after a medical test and two-week quarantine. The country's football league will resume on 21 June (Tass 2020). Except in a handful of the least affected countries, fans will probably not be able to attend a stadium event before the middle of 2021, which is a conservative estimate. Tokyo 2020, now to be held in 2021, may well mark the reentry of fans in stadiums if the virus spread is considerably slowed down and a therapy or a vaccine is found by then (Yip 2020).

There is a chance that the Indian Premier League might return in October-November as the WorldT20 in Australia set to be postponed (Chakraborty 2020). Senior officials in Cricket Australia do not wish to aggravate the risk by holding the event. They would rather host the lucrative Indian tour, expected to fetch 300 million USD to Cricket Australia. The logic is clear – Australia is hesitant in welcoming for teams from 16 countries. If there are 75 members per team including players, support staff and touring media, it will mean 1200 people coming into the country not to forget the broadcast professionals essential in an event like the world cup. A bilateral competition with India is preferable with only 100 people needed to come into the country. Sensing a possible postponement of the world cup, the BCCI has started working on the idea of organizing the IPL in this window if the virus situation in India is under control. A domestic tournament is easier to organize as it can take place in a city that has multiple stadiums and many hotels close to each of them. The question is: will the IPL, and sports in general, be the same without loud and colorful fans in the stands?

Coping with a gallery without fans

The absence of fans from the venue has meant great difficulty for sport broadcasters in capturing the emotional resonance of sport. Fans make a stadium come alive with their antics and emotions. They are committed to teams, individual athletes, and stadiums in a way that gives them a social identity. Cricket fans like the famous Sudhir Chaudhary and Chaudhry Abdul Jalil, and many others, derive their identities from stadium presence. Countless other nameless fans put on a social performance of their passion in unique ways. They are part of a massive consumption-oriented community. Their participation makes a sports event more intense and enjoyable as both a moment in history and a marketable product. Sport, it is universally accepted, means little without its fans.

The fans of Borussia Mönchengladbach, fully aware of the importance of their presence in the galleries, have been ordering cardboard cut outs of their likeness to be placed on the seats. "When players go through the tunnel and you see those supporters in the tribunes, you have the feeling someone is watching you," remarked Markus Aretz, head of media and communications for Borussia Mönchengladbach. He added, "It's a good feeling for the players. It's fun. It's a statement by the fans that they want to be with the team. It's a statement for us: the fans are part of the game." (Gregory 2020). The Korean football club FC Seoul made headlines and were asked to pay a huge fine for renting female sex dolls to fill the gallery (McCurry 2020). Sports organizations should think carefully before taking any measure in replicating fandom in the stadium.

Star India boss Uday Shankar said in an interview that the company is thinking of new ways to recreate the drama of fandom in the stadium (Dwivedi 2020). Star is mulling over

installation of screens and speakers that will replicate the visual and sound effect of a full gallery. A vicarious videoscape is far from ideal. How can one render a breathless hush that often says more than a roar? But technology will give players a sense of continuity and consistency that is preferable to an unsettling silence. It will not be worse than placing inflatable dolls or mannequins on the stands.

Creativity over rules

The other opportunity that broadcast partners are actively seeking in enriching fan experience in the COVID-19 sports world is to make live broadcast far more creative than it currently is. A very senior broadcast professional speaking on the matter suggested to us, “At the moment the rules dictate broadcast. It was fine when things were routine. Things are very different now with no fans in the stadium. In today’s scenario creativity should dictate broadcast and not just rules. For example, if we are able to place cameras in the dressing room and capture real time emotion of players like you have seen in documentaries like *The Test* broadcast becomes that much more exciting and meaningful. Players are aware of Anti-Corruption norms and there is no reason to believe the presence of cameras in the dressing room will impact the sport adversely”, he concluded.

Other options being mulled at the moment is the use of Spidercam to interview a player real time. In cricket, if a batsman scores a century or a bowler picks a five-wicket haul, broadcasters want permission to interview the performer real time using a spider cam. It will capture emotions real time and make broadcast far more interesting and interactive. “We will not be insensitive. If a batsman is out for a low score, we will obviously not want to interview him as he walks back to the pavilion. However, if he has scored a hundred, he will surely want to share his feelings as he enters the dressing room”, he says.

Going a step further, broadcasters want to make these interviews bi- or multilingual to appeal to a wider cross section of fans. For example, if Son Heung-min playing for Tottenham Hotspurs does something stellar, he can be interviewed in Korean to add to the excitement of the interview. He would not only be speaking to a national and international fan base but he would be additionally talking to his own people in their own language making them active consumers of the spectacle.

For any of the above to come to fruition, governing bodies will need to relax rules and show more adaptability to the present situation.

Making the household the new gallery

We believe that the COVID-19 outbreak has given broadcasters an opportunity to change their formulaic approach to sport. For the people who will watch sport on television, broadcasters should consider the possibility of showing videos of fans at home at appropriate moments during the telecast. The fans on the couch will replace the fans in the stands who are conventionally shown on TV. The camera can no longer cut to a screaming fan in the crowd. But television and streaming devices can still show the emotions of fans – tensed in anticipation, anxious at their team faltering, or despaired when one’s favourite player fails to perform.

The broadcaster will not need to install cameras in selected households to show fan emotions. Anyone anywhere with a smartphone and an internet data package can record, send, or live stream their reactions. A large number of fans are digital citizens now, who generate and share

content over the internet, transforming sport marketing in the process (Pegoraro 2013). They can use a mobile app to send the video directly to the channel. The channel will sort the videos, select a few, and assemble them with the video feed of the match. They already do so for text messages and tweets, which they often play out on screen as questions. Experts are then asked to answer these questions to make coverage interactive. Now the text will be replaced by a face, and at one go the fans at home will start to feel more engaged as a part of the action. This might not be real-time as a video response to a moment in play will take tens of seconds to be captured, sent, edited and broadcast when the action replay of that specific moment is on. Not ideal, but better than no fan atmosphere. In any case the broadcaster shows a replay multiple times and such reactions and replays can be simulated to give a real time feel. This will work best for sports like cricket and baseball, which allow many pauses between moments in play.

This disruption has the capacity of transforming sport broadcast from a placeless stream of video information to a heightened interactive experience. Potentially tens of thousands of people across time zones simultaneously tune in to watch a mega sport event on various devices. Live sport on television has been a significant context for collective fan experiences and rituals, complementing and sometimes replacing the stadium experience. Streaming services have undermined the primacy of television as the source of live sport outside the stadium (Hutchins, Li, Rowe 2019). The producers of television sport have tested technological innovations such as Spidercam, Segway, drone footage, and placing camera on umpires, and planting audio devices for live chats with players during play (Sturm 2015). Fans have steadily become interactive participants in mediatized sport through the use of digital platforms and apps. These innovations are undoubtedly embedded within a corporate culture of promoting consumerism, but they have helped increase fan engagement. Fans will be enfranchised to a greater extent if they are able to participate as live spectators from their networked devices.

More power to fans

So far broadcast has focused mainly on the stadium. While the game is on, the channel hardly ever shows fans far out of the stadium or in other cities, let alone in different countries. Fans unable to travel or afford the cost of tickets are excluded from the ambit of broadcast. The nature of their engagement with the coverage produced by the broadcaster is mostly passive, for they can rarely dictate how the broadcast is constructed. If the fan is given more agency and control over how they perform their fandom and are presented on screen, it will not only enrich sports broadcasting, but also draw fans more actively to the process of event-making.

While watching on television the India versus Pakistan game in Manchester during the 2019 ICC Men's World Cup, did we get to see what a fan in Kolkata or Karachi was doing, or how they celebrated Rohit Sharma's century or were agonized when Bhuvneshwar Kumar limped off the ground? We came to know about this from live commentary on websites and apps, and live chats has allowed us to be involved with sport in a virtual manner. The suggested disruption has the ability to merge the offline and online domains of fandom and increase the extent of the fan's involvement and knowledge of their community. It can cut through the top-down circuit of power in broadcasting by increasing the common people's access to sport.

Fans have relied on the press for information on sport since the late eighteenth century. They have been consuming radio commentary from the 1920s. Sports pages and radio shows became popular with writers and commentators assuming cult status. In the chain of technological change, the ground or court then became compressed into a television set. A decade earlier television made way for the digital and now it is the age of the smart phone.

Democratization of fandom is a logical corollary. Beaming fan experiences directly on to the video screen can engage fans more actively and flatten many inequalities in fandom. Such democratization, we argue, will lead to a level playing field in fandom negating economic and other inequalities, which have always influenced sports viewing.

By showing clips made by fans located anywhere from Mumbai to Montreal, the broadcaster will be able to exhibit the global nature of fandom. The stadium fans they usually show are of a certain ilk: mostly male, draped in garish costumes, face painted, and usually from the same region. Such broadcasting has failed to represent the diversity of fandom. The new technology can display fans who speak many different languages, and give us a peek into their social, cultural and economic milieu. It can show fans in a variety of moods – a schoolkid watching sport secretly, a father explaining sport to his young daughter, diasporic fans awake at odd hours for sport, a terminally ill person smiling as he watches a special performance, office colleagues following the action over lunch, the military celebrating a win in a remote garrison – images that connect humanity in a way seldom fully revealed in the stadium. It will unite the global world of fandom in a manner never done before and with technology available, this is no longer a task too far. Two decades earlier, it would be considered impossible in the absence of broadband and well entrenched mobile technology. Today fans in remote villages consume sport on mobile and that is what explains the success of platforms like Hotstar in India. It has allowed a degree of democratization of fan experience and by making the household a gallery of sorts the broadcaster can considerably enhance the process.

Nationalism and Globalism

The visual of fan support for a national team or athlete can instill a sense of collegiality and nationalism. Indians singing their national anthem from their homes across the world before the start of a match is certain to increase fellow-feeling. It is only fair to argue that such a thing will add to the marketability of sport. Within minutes a product can have a truly global reach and the advertiser who is spending top dollar will be getting much better value for money. To further illustrate the point with an example: an Indian corporate who has business interests in the UK or US will find it far more appealing to invest in a contest that showcases Indian fans in both these countries. They are often the end consumer and it makes real business sense to tap into these communities. Indian companies invest in instadia hoardings for matches played in the UK or Australia because the audience that consumes the broadcast is global. That is why we see Dawat Basmati rice, MDH masala or Hero cycle advertisements on the perimeter boards in cricket grounds around the world. Within seconds the brand can reach out to a wider audience thanks to live television broadcast. Now if the audience base is widened tenfold by tapping into newer enclaves from across the globe, the economic potential of sport is sure to get a fillip.

Also important is the fact that there are occasions when only a handful of fans from one particular country are present in a stadium. The Olympics continue to be the best example for India. When Abhinav Bindra won his gold medal in shooting at the 2008 Beijing games, there were at best 15 Indian fans in the stands. And of the 15, half would have been media representatives. The television coverage of the medal podium rendered a bleak background with little celebration. However, interspersed with visuals of Indian fans shouting their hearts out from their homes, the same material could have become an iconic representation of how sport stirs emotions. For the Chinese spectators in Beijing, Bindra's win was of limited significance because they were not able to make sense of what a solitary individual gold medal meant to the medal-starved sport fans in India. China have won 224 gold medals since 1984, while India have won one in 96 years if one takes hockey out. It was difficult for a non-Indian,

in general, to understand how coveted the medal was for India. In future mega-events, by cutting to Indian fans celebrating the feat in their homes in India and abroad, the broadcaster will be able to tap into nationalist sentiments in real time rather than having to stick to conventional stadium shots which have little sentimental meaning.

The same technology will also help generate internationalism in a way that conventional programming has not been able to do. A match taking place in Manchester will no longer be just about the fans present in Old Trafford. Technology will enable one to see what the people in other places in the UK, the US, or the UAE, for example, are doing. It will be about framing emotions of people from across the world who have been left out of the ambit of sport broadcasting. The reactions of supporters of both teams or players will be shared on the screen for the sake of a diverse audience. It can only bring people of two or more nations closer, demonstrating how similar their emotions and instincts are. Supporters of a team will also be able to see the ebb and flow in their opponent's emotions, which are not too dissimilar to theirs. Global co-operation is a dire need in the wake of the pandemic and sport needs to step up and play a role. While sport is inherently nationalist, at the essence of a global sports contest like the Olympics or a world cup is the notion of global solidarity. Nowhere can this be more visible than in fandom. This is precisely why the Olympic Games is considered a global melting pot and by a democratization of coverage, we can articulate and exploit this phenomenon far better.

Enhancing the fan experience

Fans can use their fertile imagination in making incredible videos that display their complex attachment with sport. The broadcaster will always select the parts to be shown, filtering out inappropriate content in particular, so fans will not have final authority over the end product. Mediation is essential to rule out sabotage. However, the channel will need to ensure operating with cultural pluralism, with no social, in-group or self-serving bias in selection of content. This will highlight and empower people who have been traditionally underrepresented on television sport shows. A wide variety of people, including pregnant women, and disabled and poor persons who would not otherwise be a part of the event, could find their voice in this way. Consider Sudhir Gautam for example. Had it not been for Sachin Tendulkar, Sudhir would never be able to travel to cricket contests across the world, leave along waving the national flag and play his conch. While Sudhir found a patron in Tendulkar, there is little doubt there are thousands like him who continue to be deprived. By enhancing the fan experience, the broadcaster will give them the voice they have always craved for. When India won the ICC Men's World Cup in 2011, Tendulkar called Sudhir to the dressing room and handed over the world cup trophy to him in an attempt at inclusion. "I couldn't reach out to every Indian fan. Sudhir for me was the representative of the billion plus Indians who had supported us. The trophy belonged to each one of them. By giving it to Sudhir I tried to reach out to every single one of them", said Tendulkar (Tendulkar, Majumdar 2014).

When public gathering regulations will finally be eased, possibly in a few months, a few people might get together to recreate a sense of the stadium community. Their collective discussions and chants will increase the charm of spectatorship and bring the coverage closer to the stadium experience. The broadcaster must ensure rejection of any video that shows groups flouting the existing physical distancing rules. Restaurants have already been opened to public in some countries. Diners watching sport and commiserating with one another in a controlled environment, where movements are easily monitored, can be good media content. Their emotions can be captured by a live recording camera, with the diners' consent, and sent

directly to the channel for their use. As we have claimed earlier, every household or every diner is now a virtual gallery and should make for interesting television content.

A further innovation could be opening a chatroom for all fans to engage in a discussion about the match that will be shown in a corner of the video screen. Online chatrooms are known to bring the worst partisans to discussions. Sport fans use them to shape the understanding of the events in accordance with their ideological position. The chats often use derogatory and prejudiced remarks that cross all levels of civility (Farrington et. al. 2015). Sometimes moderators ban people or delete comments to keep the chat clean. If chatrooms are enabled on a live telecast, the moderators will certainly have to work hard filtering content. The end result – a clean and lively global fan chat – however, promises to be an excellent platform for fans of all countries to share opinion and enhance the match experience. Needless to say, broadcasters have often played on jingoism to sell content and such efforts have often found takers with advertisers. The Mauka Mauka campaign on Star Sports will forever remain a classic example and is still referred to by Indian and Pakistani fans alike. The fans will need to be more responsible, digitally literate, and get rid of attitudes such as hypermasculinity and racism that cause problems.

The innovations outlined above can give broadcasters a policy for increasing the access fans have to the stadium spectacle irrespective of their location and creating the prized ‘being there’ sentiment. The ‘intertextual and interactive nature of sport prosumption’ (Andrews and Ritzer 2018) has led to the generation of massive content by fans. Though they will no longer be able to influence what happens on the pitch through their pageantry of sight and sound, the prosumer (or productive consumer) will still be able to coproduce the mediated sport content. They will engage more with sport if the top-down, broadcaster-generated content that is given to the fan for consumption is changed into a format that gives them more voice in matters of sport. The change will also redress the concern that stadium fans are a profitable source of free labour, who pay instead of being paid for the content they help develop.

Broadcasters can work out the technical details of such a solution to spice up coverage of live sport. A lot of planning needs to go into this. Fandom has become atomized than before as many people now prefer to watch sport on personal devices rather than in a communal setting. A large number of fans, especially young children and women, still view sport with family members or friends (Gantz 2012). What if fans flout social distancing norms and crowd communal watching spaces in the hope of having their faces shown on television? How quickly can the channel select a few clips out of the thousands sent to them every second? If the channel wants to display fan messages and chats alongside the match, how will hostile comments, so common in fan conversations, be moderated in real time? Will the channel prefer ostentatious displays of emotion to a studied and measured reaction? There are many more logistical questions. But, if successful, it could herald a new age of fandom and most importantly open up newer markets across the world.

Afterthoughts

So far, sport television has remained within their comfort zones knowing that a full stadium was at the core of a broadcast. With thousands crammed inside a stadium, they had a ready atmosphere for broadcast. COVID-19 spread has caused a disruption. The hiatus has given us an excellent opportunity to rethink and transform sporting experience. By empowering fans and democratizing fandom, the innovations outlined here can help spectator sport emerge stronger out of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an expanded scope and a larger playing field. If the experiment in fan engagement is successful, it can help broadcasters cut across distance

barriers, show greater gender sensitivity, and exploit untapped fan enclaves. Local displays of emotion will intersect with global cultural imaginaries and dimensions of sport. Even when fans return to stadiums, the process can continue. New social identities will be forged, and sport will have a larger than ever base of committed and engaged fans. It is essential that sports start to adopt to the emerging scenario and does so as soon as possible. Challenging existing paradigms of fandom and evolving new ones can be the way forward and can well end up making sport far more inclusive and empowering.

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