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The mediated *live* experience and the spatial reconfiguration of the sport act**

Abstract

The media-sport relation of interdependency has influenced both the commodity value of sport actors and events, as well as the mere sport experience. The present study focuses on the reconfiguration process of the spectatorship experience through media, addressing two of its central dimensions: the *emotional* and *physical* one.

Along with the wide accessibility to sport events and a progressive grow of audiences, media provided a *mediated live experience* that ended up competing with the *genuine live experience*. Strongly related and dependent on the technological changes and the dynamics of the globalization process, media went beyond simply transmitting the sport event, engaging in a process of redefining it. In doing so, they generated a de-territorialized *laboratory sport experience*, “hotting-up” the spectatorship experience and minimizing the perceptual constrains. This, in turn, ended up by making this media-sport hyperreality more appealing than the genuine live experience of sport acts.

In addressing the spatial reconfiguration of the spectatorship experience, I have built up a new model in order to better respond to the primacy of connectivity over the space-dependent experience of sport acts: the *scattering model* of sport spectatorship. Moreover, I discuss the mixture of the private and public zones as a strategic way of maximizing the accessibility and customization of sport media-products, inside the wider process of sport commodification.

Keywords: mediated live experience, scattering model of spectatorship, sport commodification, the hotting-up paradox of sport spectatorship

1. Introduction

Our sport consumption and social imaginary is dominated by sport as media product, as most of our sport experiences are, *de facto*, mediated ones. Both sport events and actors gain their public visibility and consideration by firstly escalating the media agenda. Sport and media are “inextricably linked together in a symbiotic relationship” (Valgeirsson & Snyder, 1986, p. 131), sharing the market orientation and public dependency. Today, the reciprocity of this

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** This paper was possible with the financial support of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134650 with the title “Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowships for young researchers in the fields of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences and Sociology”.

relationship seems to work as a taken for granted condition. But, which is the subject and which is the object of influence?

The dynamics of sport-media relationship can be narrowed down to three main stages: the short exploratory *period of "probation"*, when media turned to sport from a *witness* position, the spectacular *reformative period*, when media's social centrality was also reproduced in relation to sport, generating substantial changes inside this social field and, finally, *the overlapping period* that brings out a circular mechanism of influence between sport and media. This is how sport and media have become both subject and object for the other one's influence, making it hard to isolate a clear one-way causality relationship.

The sport-media dyad reflects not only the medium-content relation between the two, but also a more complex relation between two interdependent social fields. As the stages of the relationship between sport and media have already shown, media can take either a *witness* or a *developer* position towards sport dynamics, depending on what role they chose to favor.

The *witness* approach highlights the process of transposing the sport acts through media, focusing on their instrumental role in building up the chronological record of sport events and actors. Media become the *eyes* and *memory* of sport's social saga, as "the history of sport has been to a large extent both dominated and documented by the mass media" (Boyle, & Haynes, 2009, p.1).

In terms of media's *developer* position, what matters is not the mimetic process beyond the media product, but rather media's engagement in redefining the actual sport referent (event or actor). Thus, in gaining their centrality inside the world of sport, media have also *transformed that world* (Whannel, 1992, p.3), using television as their most powerful tool.

It must be noted that, in discussing the sport-media relationship, a television-centric perspective has been favored, due to the clear dominance of television as component of the complicated "media sport cultural complex" (Rowe, 2004). The popularity of the sport-television mix covers both *rational exigencies*, providing the maximum level of accessibility and authenticity and the minimum effort from the sport consumers' part, as well as *emotional exigencies*, creating a close copy of the genuine sport experience and recreating its spectacular aura.

This sport-media relationship will be further analyzed from a *representational perspective*, laying stress on how the interdependency between the two social fields influences the mechanisms and the content of the social imaginary attached to sport experiences, actors and settings. The *premise* that works as an anchor for the entire study is that *media exerts a structuring effect upon the social field of sport*, making it subject to a continuous reconfiguration process.

Referring to the television symbolic power in and outside the media field, Bourdieu saw "all the cultural production fields as been tied down by the compelling structural force of the media field" (Bourdieu, 1996, p.64). Sport, as field of cultural production, is thus vulnerable to this *structuring effect* of media, working as a colonization field for the symbolic imperialism of media. However, despite their centrality, media themselves cannot escape the rebound structuring effects of the social field of sport, the reciprocity of this relationship being covered throughout this study.

Globalization and technological advances provide the main triggers for change when it comes to sport and media relationship. Both *emotional* and *psychical coordinates* of sport experiences become subject to this continuous process of reconfiguration. Even though these structuring effects can be found on different levels of the sport experiences, there are two components where their impact produces radical changes and even new forms of sport experiences: the mediated *live* experience of sport events and the *spatial* reconfiguration of the

spectatorship experience. Thus, the focus of the study will be on these structuring effects that sport and media nexus has on the *spectatorship experience*.

2. Hybridization of sport live experience

If for a long period media were perceived as providing us with an alternative to actually attending a sport event, we can now approach media more like a *competitor* to that experience. Watching a game on TV or on internet is no longer a second-best way to take part in the competition, but rather a matter of *consumption choice*. Media-sport experience has become a distinct product from the real sport event attendance. Although place, time and money constrains attached to attending a sport event remain important factors, choosing the media live experience over the genuine one it is now mainly about the consumers' preference for this type of experience.

We are now facing a time when media do more than simply providing access to sport events; they actually go one step forward and *redefine* them. But what more can media *live* experience offer compared to the actual presence at a sport event? Why choosing one over the other? Do they end up influencing one another?

The first aspect that I want to insist on is the *mediated live experience* of sport events. Before the rise of this *eclectic experience* of "live", but still mediated experience of sport events, you would either go to the stadium to watch the game or wouldn't watch it at all. The presence in the arena was the only thing that defined the sport audience. Now, when the actual presence to the sport event and access to the sport event are no longer the same thing, media has moved the focus from bringing fans to sport events to bringing the sport events to fans. Nevertheless, media did not stop at being just a vehicle that provides fans all over the world with access to sport events; they used technology to provide more.

Because "technological innovation eventually enabled a naturalistic perfection that enhanced the value and appeal of televised events" (Whannel, 2009, p.206) they started gaining ground over the genuine live attendance to a sport competition. On TV you get to see the athlete's grimace, his small tattoo on the ankle or you get to understand what he is complaining about by reading his lips; all of these with a simple *close-up*. You can enjoy panoramic views over the stadium, multiple angles perspective of an action or even multiple replays of it. Slow motion or fast draft, high or low volume, suddenly your mediated live experience becomes richer than the genuine one. When actually present in the arena you seem to miss this sense of *clarity* and *focus* and may find yourself thinking that the genuine live experience is actually less accurate than the mediated one.

Media managed to create a feeling of *omnipresence* and *omniscience* when it comes to live broadcasting of sport events. The technological arsenal gives the viewer some sort of accessibility power or privilege over the viewers from the arena. The *hyperreality* built on these technological grounds alter the live experience itself, because what we are facing is more than "live". Inside this wide "live" framing, media end up creating a detailed *anatomy* of the sport event and thus, "televisual experience of live sport is, for many, superior to the experience obtained by viewing in person" (Whannel, 2009, p.205).

Going beyond our natural limits of perception, media provide us with the tools for an instant scan of every action. This is how media create a *laboratory live experience* meant to leave

no room for ambiguity or unknown. But, what lies behind this magnetism for mediated live experience?

The mediated live experience provides the viewer with a sense of *power* and *control*. Throughout media's artifices, he is encouraged and also assisted with the means to see more and better, extending his *perceptual*, but also his *cognitive engagement* in the sport event. However, all of these are done in a friendly and non-invasive way. People do nothing but watch what media provides them and, little by little, this repeated form of mediated live experience begins to generate *performative effects*, modifying expectations and consumption practices associated with live sport experiences.

Based on this process of redefining the spectatorship experience, *hybrid forms* of live experiences emerge inside the social field of sport. The mediated experience is brought into the field, as part of the genuine live show. The big screens on the stadium come to fulfill the audience need for clarity and detail, compensating for the perceptual limits of the actual presence in the arena. Moreover, they enhance the spectacularity of the sport show, making it a more appealing entertaining experience. Whatever action you have missed, you can now see it on the big flat screen that hangs above the field.

Moreover, the portability which defines this technological era provides you the means for a *multilayered live experience*: what you can see on the field, what you can see on the big screens above the field and what you can see on your own phone or PC tablet. The "spectacular mosaic experiences" (Krawczyk, 1996, p.429) provided by sport events is thus a resourceful platform for today's omni-channel consumers who are highly connected to both the real, as well as the virtual arenas. This hybridization process of mediated and genuine live experience of sport events is a product that emerged from the sport-media-technology conjugated actions and brings out emergent sport-related markets.

If mediated experience of sport events open this "*better than live*" experiences, redefining and enriching our perceptual and cognitive capacities, why do people still want to be present in the arena? What do media fail to cover throughout their opulent *hiperreality* offer?

When the biggest part of a sport event's audience is built on *distant publics* that enjoy the mediated live experience of spectatorship, the ones who choose to come to the stadium become a select minority. While mediated live experience is merely about *rational aspects* regarding accessibility, comfort or accuracy, genuine live experience is built on *emotional grounds*. It is all about the feeling that only the actual presence in the arena can provide: the authenticity and the intensity of the sport show, the tension and the thrilling evolution of the competition. Whatever you lose in terms of frame by frame course of action, you gain in terms of emotional engagement in the overall performance.

Even media uses this promise of emotional richness in their promotional campaigns, offering VIP tickets to sport events that they are going to broadcast. Therefore, media underline and contribute to maintaining this *aura of uniqueness* attached to the genuine live experience. To be present at a sport event becomes a status' indicator of either your loyalty to your favorite team/athlete or your desire to embrace the highest emotional intensity of spectatorship. Hard core fan or authentic emotion seeker, the genuine live experience is meant to stress out your *distinctiveness* when it comes to sport spectatorship. Although technology managed to alter the classic live experience on the stadium, introducing collateral mediated experiences that can easily coexist with the live performance, *de facto*, it did not diminished the emotional richness and authenticity of this genuine experience of the sport event.

A second approach upon the spectatorship experience can be built on the *hot-cool* media continuum (McLuhan, 1964). While Birrell and Loy discuss the duality of sport as content and sport as medium, they raise the question of “the coolness or diffusion of television as a medium, relative to the medium of the event itself” (Birrell & Loy, 1979, p.11). The overlapping of these two types of medium generates a different spectatorship experience in terms of informational, emotional and perspective parameters. Therefore, in trying to identify what are the effects of translating the live sport event as a cool medium into a hotter medium, Birrell and Loy conclude that television brings a higher degree of focus and information to the detriment of social integration. This comes to sustain the rationality attached to the mediated live experience that we have already mentioned in discussing the distinctiveness of mediated versus genuine live experience of sport performances.

Validating Birrell and Loy’s forecast regarding the increasingly *diffuse media experiences* offered by the media of the future (Birrell & Loy, 1979, p.11), today technology provides us with a wide set of tools that are meant to bring the mediated spectatorship experience closer to the genuine live one in terms of diffusion. The permanent mixture of panoramic views, split screen frames, close-ups, instant replay, slow motion, additional information and statistics generates a rather diffuse overall experience. Although the intension was to gain in accuracy by increasing the degree of focus upon the diffused sport world, the recurrent use and inter-spersion of such media techniques (i.e. stop action, isolated camera, instant replay, slow motion, ball trajectory) creates an overwhelming perceptual experience. The rebound effect of cumulating individual segments of focused action is that we end up with an overall *diffuse experience* of the sport event. It is the mere *fragmentation* of the mediated sport experience that amplifies its diffusion.

As for the *integration dimension*, that, according to Birrell and Loy, mediated spectatorship experience lack of, time has minimized this gap between the mediated and the genuine life experience by creating some *hybrid forms of distant participation*. People are now encouraged to send their messages to their favorite athletes, to comment the game in real time evolution and to share their opinions with other viewers through on-line posts or SMS’s. Media provides these alternative ways of interaction in order to connect the distant publics to the integrative aspects of the genuine live experience. The digital landscape provide a new and enriched fandom experience (Pegoraro, 2013), enabling a higher sport participatory consumption (Rowe, 2011).

Although there is still no technological trick that media can use to substitute the integrative sensory experience of the genuine live event, the media has overpasses the “studio sport” phase that Birrell and Loy saw as the result of the extreme high information/low interaction orientation (Birrell & Loy, 1979, p.15). The gap between the informational and the integrative dimensions of mediated sport experiences has been considerably reduces, as all media and technological conjugated efforts have been directed towards providing a *more integrative sensory experience* of the sport act and a higher connectivity between sport actors/events and spectators.

3. ‘*Hotting-up*’ the sport spectatorship experience

Another aspect that needs to be discussed when addressing the effects of translating the genuine live experience of a sport event into a mediated one is what can be called *the para-*

dox of hotting-up the spectatorship experience. Even though media try to recreate the genuine live feeling of attending to a sport event, the use of additional information and the visual laboratory of scanning every action to its finest details have a reverse effect, *hotting-up* the spectatorship experience.

The search for *accuracy* and *informational richness* have brought media to a point where sport performance can be translated in numbers, where statistic laws leave little room for surprise and improvisation. When a handball player has scored, you can instantly see his profile (height, weight, efficiency percentage, penalties number). The same goes for tennis games, during which you are provided with instant replays that highlight the ball trajectory; you can see the percentage of first service points won, the number of total aces or the total double faults made. Everything seems to be correlated with a number and a statistic history that allows you to get access to a wider image of the players' evolution. Mediated sport experiences are no longer just about that particular event or instant action during the game, but rather about a bigger picture that they have to be integrated into.

We are facing an interesting *positivist approach* of the sport act and media create and fuel this need for *measurability*. Inside the entertainment industry of sport shows, this statistic dimension of sport performance becomes a resourceful asset in terms of market value, as it brings credibility and accuracy to the media product. Hence, people are given interpretation guidelines to help them understand and analyze sport performances. With *these friendly-scientific arguments*, every viewer gains informational power in decoding the visual content of a sport event.

In line with Birrell and Loy observation regarding the fact that "when the information gained from one medium conflicts with that offered by another, the spectator relies more heavily upon the sense most attuned to hotter messages" (Birrell & Loy, 1979, p.16), media turns to statistics in order to settle the *interpretation scheme* of the sport performance. And what can be "hotter" than mathematics?

However, media keeps statistic to the simplest form so that it could be easily understood and accepted by the public, "as sport has a mass international audience, and appeals to all classes" (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003, p. 275). Moreover, it uses sportscasters to soften down the statistic discourse by integrating it into a narrative frame or even explicitly interpreting the numbers. The mediated sport experience becomes hence a mixture of entertainment and popular science, focus intensions, but diffusion effects, providing a hotter, yet richer spectatorship experience than the genuine live one.

All in all, the mediated live experience can be understood as a *dynamic collage experience*, overlapping images and numbers, real time action and statistic history, panoramic and close-up views, emotional and rational content. This *oxymoronic media construct* is meant to provide us a *better than live* experience of sport events.

In order to keep up with the endless need of the public for always be given *more* and *better* media products, media are involved in a permanent search of technological opportunities and means to overcome the perceptual and emotional constrains of mediated sport events.

Nevertheless, the increase in complexity does not implicitly increase the similarity between the mediate and the genuine live experience, but rather generates *hybrid forms of spectatorship experience*. Time and space are manipulated and fragmentized so that they mach the hiperreality construct of the mediated sport event. It is all about using the sport event as an input for the corollary media construct, because media do not limit to providing access to the sport event, but end up redefining it and building up a new type of experience. There is

hence no surprise that most sport events are actually impressive media events, acting as “high holydays of mass communication” (Dayan & Kats, 1992:1) that manage to enrich our spectatorship experience.

4. Spatial coordinates of the spectatorship experience

Along with redefining the sport events in terms of emotional experiences, media have also altered their spatial coordinates. Going beyond the spatial constraints of sport events’ accessibility, media has generated a *spatial reconfiguration* of the spectatorship experience. How can we map these new spectatorship loci? Which are the hosting spaces that provided the spectatorship expansion process?

In addressing these aspects, I will introduce the *scattering model of spectatorship* as a potential conceptual response to the spatial reconfiguration of sport accessibility and I will discuss an inherent effect of this spatial reconfiguration: the overlapping process between the *public* and the *private* space in relation to the spectatorship experience.

4.1. The *scattering model* of spectatorship

When broadcasting offered us an alternative to going to the stadium in order to take part in a sport event, it did not only change the emotional experience of spectatorship, but it also redefined the spatial dimension of this experience. Spectatorship and sport in general are no longer *space-dependent* as “fan experiences became defined by patterns of de-territorialized consumption that altered the polarity of longstanding [...] place/identity relations.” (Ruddock, Hutchins & Rowe, 2010, p. 328). You can now watch your favorite game miles away, from another town, country or continent, at home or in a bar, on TV or on your phone.

Media provides a wide set of *alternative spectatorship loci*, connected by the sport event itself as a referent. From the static perspective upon the sport event as one-place gathering, media brought *mobility* and “multiplication of place” (Ruddock, Hutchins & Rowe, 2010, p. 328). To say that sport events bring people together in the same place is nowadays a clear understatement, because the *concentration model* of the stadium crowd spectatorship has been replaced by the *scattering model* of the network spectatorship. Sport has aligned itself to the overall dynamics of the “network society” (Castells, 2010). Place is no longer a constrain in defining spectatorship. But how does this *scattering model* of the network spectatorship work? How does it reconfigure the spatial component of sport acts?

Using solely the spatial criteria, we can redefine the spectatorship on a *concentric circles representation* (Figure 1), starting with the maximum proximity of being in the arena and placing spectators’ position on different physical distance from the sport event location. However, this is rather a mechanic perspective. In terms of *relative distance* towards the sport events, we can redefine spatiality in a *binary system*: ‘presence’ or ‘non-presence’ at the sport event. Therefore, whether you watch the game from Italy, Spain, Russia, Nigeria, Australia, Brazil or USA your distance towards it is the same, if the game is hosted somewhere in Germany for example. Broadcasting minimized and leveled down the distances towards the sport event. Besides the actual presence in the arenas, it made the mediated spectatorship experience be the same in terms of perceived distance towards the sport act.

Figure 1. Levels of spectatorship proximity towards sport events (random example).

Spectators all over the world became equal when it comes to sport event proximity and “media turned this enormous mass of people from various countries, of various convictions, different nationalities and cultures into one *world stadium*” (Milshteyn & Molchanov, 1976, p.71). Embracing the opportunities provided by media, the audiences have overcome the space-dependency constraints and, along with this spatial reconfiguration of sport event in terms of public visibility and accessibility, it redefined the spectatorship experience itself.

4.2. Mixing up public and private

Increasing sport actors’ *accessibility* and *spectacularity* meant also redefining the line between public and private on both directions on the sport actors – public axis. On one hand, sport actors’ celebrity status brought along media’s chase for unrevealing those aspects that go beyond sport performance itself. People became interested not only in sport actors’ achievements on the field, but also in their performances outside it. As any other public figure, the sport actor found himself object to the overall *tabloidization approach* embraced by media.

Little by little news about sport achievements and game evolution left room for news about sport actors’ lovers, parties, disputes, their food and music preferences or the ‘dirty’ details of their divorce. Today athletes’ wives, ex-girlfriends, drivers or hair dressers become public figure themselves and hope for gaining their own celebrity ‘free pass’ under the spotlights. Media found sport actors’ private life to be a resourceful input for adding more drama and fussiness to the sport performance on the field. This is why, in trying to bring the backstage to the forefront and to increase the proximity towards sport actors, media had to permute what was meant to be private into public issue, as in this celebrity-saturated world “everyone seems to be involved in either producing or consuming celebrities” (Rein, Kotler & Stoller, 1997).

In terms of media coverage and attractiveness, news regarding sport actors’ private life end up competing with those regarding their public performances on the sport field. Moreover, private issues become the input for sport *pseudo-events*, which are “made for and by

media” (Sartori, 2005, p.65). Product of this Big Brother chasing of sport actors outside the sport field, sport pseudo-events are built on converting private aspects into public debates. Athletes getting drunk, coaches’ refusing paternity tests or going for a shopping session draw as much public attention as a sport performance itself. It is not the sport actor who gets to decide where the line between his private and his public life is, but rather it is up to media to decide to what extent this private-public reconversion can go.

On the other hand, if we were to focus on the audiences, the public-private interplay is strongly related to the consumption practices and, most of all, to the *consumption location* of sport acts. By ending the place-dependent accessibility to sport events and sport actors, bringing them from the stadium to any room with a radio, TV or internet connection, media converted a public experience into a private one.

Most of us take part in the sport events from our armchair, surrounded by our own decorum and enjoying our home comfort. Media provides us with alternative ways of taking part in the sport event, from “communal viewing” (Whannel, 2009, p.206) in bars or public squares, to peer viewing, family viewing or individual viewing in your own house, which, in turn, generate the emergence of multiple *identity* and *consumption spaces*.

From public to private, from social to personal, media facilitated the emergence of these continuum of sport performance experience for the audience. However, this meant entering the private zone and bringing “the immediacy and uncertainty from the public domain to the domestic sphere” (Whannel, 2009, p.206), creating what can be called the *comfort-zone audience*. The intensity and the collective synchronizing effect of being present in the sport arena are replaced by a sense of control and relaxation, as the *comfort-zone* viewer adapts and integrates the sport events into his private space and routine. In other words, using a sport analogy, instead of being a visitor, *comfort-zone* viewer becomes the host and enjoys the home field advantage.

Although for both sport actors and audiences the borders between public and private become dynamic and blurry, the process of media mixing them up works contrariwise. While for sport actors’ private aspects of their life outside the sport field are converted into public one, for *comfort-zone* audiences what was supposed to be a public experience is converted into a private one. If media go for *disclosure* in digging up into sport actors’ private life, taking a proactive role, when it comes to bringing the sport event into our homes, media act as means of concealment, making that public event integral part of a domestic order.

5. Conclusion

The media-sport relation of interdependency has influenced not only the commodity value of sport actors and events, but also the mere sport experience, redefining its emotional and physical coordinates. Along with the wide accessibility to sport events and a progressive grow of audiences, media provided a *mediated live experience* that ended up competing with the *genuine live experience*.

Strongly related and dependent on the technological changes and the dynamics of the globalization process, media went beyond simply transmitting the sport event, engaging in a process of redefining it. In doing so, they generated a deterritorialized *laboratory sport experience*, minimizing the perceptual constraints and making this hyperreality more appealing than the genuine live experience *per se*. *Hotting-up the spectatorship experience* by giving it

a rather positivist orientation, media assist the distant spectator in decoding and interpreting the sport event, promoting a form of *product-instructions* model of sport experiences.

The *scattering model* of sport spectatorship was developed in order to better respond to the primacy of connectivity over the space-dependent experience of sport acts. The new spatial coordinates of the spectatorship experience bring out another dimension of this wider hybridization process that sport has been subject to: the mixture of the private and public zones, which subscribes to the same consumer oriented frame, acting towards *maximizing the accessibility* and *customization* of sport products. Besides its commercial value, spatial reconfiguration brings out new *identity spaces*, which go beyond their instrumental role as alternative consumption contexts.

All of the above aspects regarding the relationship between sport and media attest to the fact that they should be approached in terms of *unit*, rather than *juxtaposition*. The on-going hybridization process between the two social fields has been so intense, that we have reached a point when we cannot analyze sport dynamics outside this wider frame of the sport-media interdependence. The whole sport experience, for both sport actors and audiences, has been reconfigured to reflect the dynamics of this relationship and points to the centrality of media within the social field of sport. However, the rise and dynamics of the digital world challenges the incremental evolution of the media-sport relation, redefining the whole sport experience and sport event concept.

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