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Review: Digital Media Sport: Technology, Power and Culture in the Network Society. Edited by Brett Hutchins and David Rowe. Craig Stark

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Review

Digital Media Sport: Technology, Power and Culture in the Network Society. Edited by Brett Hutchins and David Rowe. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, xvi + 273p. (hardback) ISBN 978 0 415 51751 5. US List.

Historically, it seems many communications scholars have forgotten about or have not considered the political, cultural, and economic impacts of sports and media in society. Although there have been recent contributions to the field¹, the study of sports and media is still emerging. *Digital Media Sport: Technology, Power and Culture in the Network Society*, edited by Brett Hutchins and David Rowe, is a collected volume of research that adds to this growing area of study by examining the use and impact of social media by sports fans and audiences. The book is part of the Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies Series, and it contains fifteen chapters that examine the intricacies between various media technologies, sports, and the fans who enjoy them.

As the book's title suggests, the specific audience focus is on the "network society"—individuals and groups who use the Internet in a variety of ways to enrich their experiences with various topics (in this case, sports). An appealing facet of the book is its focus on global perspectives and experiences. Speaking as a part-time sports fan, I admit that I focus solely on American sports, much to the chagrin of academic colleagues (and sports fans) from other countries. This book will certainly help sports fans and academics who have not considered international perspectives.

The book is divided into three sections: "Evolving Technologies, Platforms and Markets," "Users, Audiences and Identities," and "Content Ecologies, Social Software and Games." While each section provides a wealth of information, three chapters (one from each section) especially stand out.

From the first section, Ethan Tussey's chapter on workplace use of Major League Baseball's (MLB) online properties demonstrates how access to online content is still controlled by traditional media regulations. Tussey details the emergence and growth of MLB Advanced Media (MLBAM) during the 2000s, which included a website (MLB.TV) and an online mobile app (At Bat). With these ventures, MLB actively pursued the niche audience that enjoyed baseball, but could not attend games during the workweek. Additionally, MLB marketed these products to working fans who no longer lived in their favorite team's local market. Both the website and the app were created to enhance the "true baseball fan's" experience; fans could use these services to watch the local broadcasts of their team's road (or "out-of-market" games during their workday.) In an effort to maintain control over its product, however, MLB continued to enforce blackout restrictions for local, *in-market* television broadcasts – restrictions that limit home telecasts only to that team's contracted local broadcaster(s). This made the website and the app practically useless for home team fans. As a result, MLBAM gives the "true baseball fan" the illusion of online "choice," while, in reality, those choices are restricted by MLB's traditional media rules. It is important to note that MLBAM was created to compliment and enhance televised broadcasts of MLB games, not

to directly compete with them. By adhering to traditional media rules, however, MLBAM simply reinforces MLB's long-held control over its content.

In the second section, Andy Ruddock's chapter highlights the creation of the "Yarraside," a vocal, seemingly grassroots fan group of the Australian Football League's Melbourne Heart soccer club. "Seemingly" is used because Ruddock observed the creation of team and fan "traditions" via an online thread posted on the website bigfooty.com for a team that did not exist until 2008. These traditions (how Yarraside members should behave at games, what they should wear, etc.) seemed to emerge organically from the efforts of ordinary fans; however, these fans became opinion leaders through their social media use and their team passion (one fan, "Liverpool Red" became the team's unofficial online spokesperson). Ruddock emphasizes the importance of access to online and social media, and his chapter is a reminder of how the use of social media has become a focal point for the development of group and individual identity.

A highlight of section three is Haiqing Yu's chapter describing a combination of statism and corporatism that influenced blogging during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. According to Yu, the Chinese government viewed the Olympics as an opportunity to establish its presence as a global economic leader. To maintain this image, the government enlisted its largest media networks and several transnational corporations. The government and its allied corporate assistants created a system of dependency that practically forced bloggers and independent media outlets to rely on larger, mainstream media sources for information. While this arrangement provided material to several social media providers such as Sohu.com and QQ.com, some mid-sized online outlets and traditional media outlets in rural areas relied, instead, on citizen input directly from the Olympic venues. Yu cites the case of the *Jinan Times* newspaper, which used a smaller social media platform in China and relied on individual citizens to provide Olympics coverage without sending any reporters to Beijing. Dissenting or unflattering comments about the Olympics online, however, were either ignored by Chinese media or covered cautiously by international media. In addition, access to social media was limited to citizens in outlying regional areas. Addressing the issue of media conglomeration in China, which helped create this strange mix of capitalism and authoritarianism, Yu states, "media conglomeration has turned out to be effective in ensuring the party-state's continued control of media resources at the cost of social equity" (195). Western critical communication scholars will find this symbiotic relationship between corporate media and state interests familiar.

The book provides several other topics that highlight and explore the use of digital media by sports fans. These include the use of social media in lifestyle sport (individual sports such as walking, surfing, and skateboarding), how social media is changing the sports journalism experience for the fan, identity creation through the use of fantasy sports leagues, and gender roles and expectations in social media fan sites.

Perhaps the book's biggest weakness for critical media scholars is a lack of discussion of issues regarding sports management, labor, and social media. One topic particularly lacking is the relationship between fans and team and league owners when it comes to athletes' use of social media. Athletes regularly land themselves in hot water with fans and owners when

commenting on sensitive issues using social media. As a result, athletes may tend to remain silent regarding certain topics in order to avoid scrutiny. Conversely, one rarely learns about league collective bargaining agreements or players union activities via social media. If a reader or scholar is looking for research centered on social media use by athletes/labor, this may not be the best book to consult. That should not be a death knell for this volume, however. The title is primarily focused on the audience's relationship with sports and social media, which is a good place to start. Arguably, it is difficult to understand athletes' social media use without first considering how fans are using it.

This book is recommended as a resource for any critical media scholar interested in the field of social media studies, mass communications effects, audience analysis, and sports media. It could be used as a source in upper-level undergraduate courses, as well as graduate courses focusing on the cultural and social effects of sports media. It may also provide a beneficial insight for those who are not sports fans (or are part-time sports fans like me), but who are trying to understand more about the global phenomenon of sports and how their audiences are created in an emerging media environment.

Notes

1. Critical communication scholars may wish to examine Andrew C. Billings and Marie Hardin (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014) and Andrew C. Billings (ed.) *Sports Media: Transformation, Integration, Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

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