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COMMENTARY



COVID-19 and the solidification of media's power in football

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ABSTRACT

This commentary offers a short analysis of the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the relationship between football, and in particular the English Premier League, and the media. The commentary focuses on the symbiotic yet antagonistic relationship between the two over the years, and the potential shift in the power balance that can be expected due to the banning of live audiences from stadia because of COVID-19. As it is discussed, COVID-19 and the banning of matchday audiences could have possibly solidified media's power in football, making it the only means through which live football can reach its fans. This commentary raises attention on the evolvement of the relationship between media and football, while inviting further discussion on what the future holds once fans are allowed back in stadia.

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As it has been repeatedly argued, the role that media hold in professional football is one of significant importance, not only due to the considerable amount of money they inject to the sport, but also due to the powerful position they maintain as a broadcaster of live football to audiences around the world (Manoli, 2017). Media's powerful position can be better highlighted when examining leagues such as the English Premier League (EPL), the top tier of English and Welsh football, and arguably the highest earning and most commercialised football league in Europe (Deloitte, 2020). As research on EPL football's unique relationship with the media has illustrated (Manoli & Kenyon, 2018), media's role has been established and further developed since the EPL's founding in 1992, alongside the in-stadium attendance or in-person live consumption of football. However, with the recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the

subsequent ban of live audiences in stadia when the EPL resumed on 17 June 2020 (Law, 2020), a question can be raised on this relationship and the future role that media can play in football. If media was already considered to be a powerful intermediate between football and its fans, how powerful will they become in a post COVID-19 era of no in-stadium audience? This short commentary seeks to reflect and encourage discussion on media's already powerful role in football, while considering the potential impact of post COVID-19 live football broadcasting.

EPL and the media

Reports on the income sources of European football leagues underline the importance that broadcasting rights have had on the financial prosperity and development of professional football over the years (Deloitte, 2018, 2019,

2020). While the numbers differ within European football, the importance of media income in a number of leagues (e.g. Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Turkey, Portugal, Belgium) is also evident by the fact that broadcasting rights still account for the lion's share of their revenue (Deloitte, 2020). In the case of the EPL, Deloitte state that broadcasting rights represent 59% of the clubs' overall income, remaining consistently the biggest source of revenue for the league.

The relationship, however, between the EPL and the media extends beyond this simple financial exchange. Media's interest and investment in EPL since its creation in 1992 has developed into a symbiotic relationship between the two, allowing both to grow substantially over the years. As Manoli (2014) and Manoli and Kenyon (2018) argue, media's investment in their relationship with football and in turn football's reciprocity and partnership with the media have allowed them to re-position themselves in the football ecosystem. As such, they can no longer be considered a simple intermediary between football and its fans, but instead viewed as a key supplier to football, helping it to extend its reach and brand to its current and potential consumers, as Figure 1 shows.

This way of consuming football through the media has grown alongside the already existing and arguably very popular in-person live consumption of football, matchday attendance. Unfortunately, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures taken to control it called for all live matches to be stopped (Clarkson et al., 2020; Parnell et al., 2020), halting both the in-person and the televised consumption of live EPL football for 100 days. Following the EPL's "Project Restart", playing football matches resumed on June 17th (Aarons, 2020), with live football allowed to return to fans' lives through broadcasting, without nevertheless the option to attend matches in person (Mohr et al., 2020). While this decision is not to be questioned due to its

scientific backing (World Health Organisation, 2020), the result of football's return during the COVID-19 pandemic only on fans' screens raises a wider question not only on how fan engagement and football consumption will be in the near future (Mohr et al., 2020), but also on what role the media will assume in the meantime.

Taking the depiction of the unique relationship between football and the media into consideration (see Figure 1), football during COVID-19 appears to have eliminated the direct relationship between football and its fans in terms of the consumption of live matches. As a result, the media appear to be not only a convenient additional option to matchday attendance, but instead the only and thus necessary intermediate that can bring live football to its fans, as illustrated in Figure 2. This change in the way in which live football can reach its fans could be expected to alter the power relations between football and the media, potentially tilting the scale back in favour of the media. This would, in turn, suggest that the previous trend of an increasing decline of media's power due to the proliferation of media sources, alongside the emergence of new potential broadcasters brought by rapid technological advances (Manoli, 2017), could not only stop, but instead reverse, potentially bringing media in the driver's seat.

While football is searching for new ways in which they can reach their fans, the importance that EPL place on fans' consumption of live football through broadcasters can be also seen in the creation of the Broadcast Enhancement Advisory Group, whose role is to identify and propose ways in which fans can better engage and enjoy live football through TV broadcast (Law, 2020). By focusing on the only way in which fans can consume their live matches, the EPL is essentially protecting their product and ensuring that fans and potential fans continue to engage with it, until things return to normal and matchday experiences can

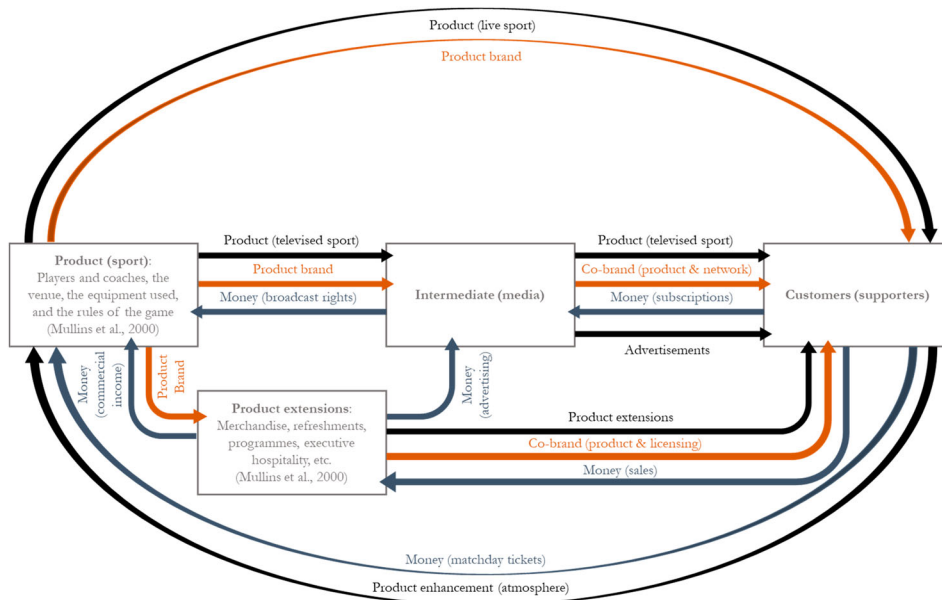


Figure 1. Football's unique marketing/media relationship (Manoli & Kenyon, 2018, p. 94).

resume. Nevertheless, it could also be an indication of an acceptance on behalf of the EPL that media is the only means through which football can truly spread to its existing and potential customers, acknowledging in a way the shift of balance in their power relations.

Despite the numerous efforts that EPL clubs have made in engaging with their fans directly through the creative use of social media (Premier League, 2020), COVID-19 measures appear to have resulted in the solidification of the power of media in EPL football, as the only means to bring live football to the world. While it is worth examining whether this power will remain once normal matchday activities resume, indications suggest that in-person attendance might not restart for the foreseeable future (MacInnes, 2020), potentially crystallising the current power balance.

A similar symbiotic yet antagonistic relationship to the one between the media and the EPL appears to exist in a number of football leagues world-wide, suggesting that this sensitive power balance between football and the media might be shifting on a wider scale. With

a number of football leagues restarting post COVID-19 without fan attendance (e.g. in Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece, etc. – BBC, 2020), it is worth examining how the wider relations of football with the media will develop, as well as what football's response to media's increasing power will be.

The implications of a potential continuation of the measure of no live audiences in matches could have the following implications managerially. Taking into consideration that the EPL and a number of other European football leagues sell their broadcasting rights collectively due to the financial benefits associated with it (Flint et al., 2014), it is expected that they currently have little to no power to fundamentally evade this predicament. As such, they cannot use their live football content and would instead need to rely on non-live content to engage with their fans. This non-live content could be broadcasted through a club's or a league's own channels, such as social media and TV channels, in order to ensure their continuous direct engagement with their fans. Consequently, a further emphasis on their own

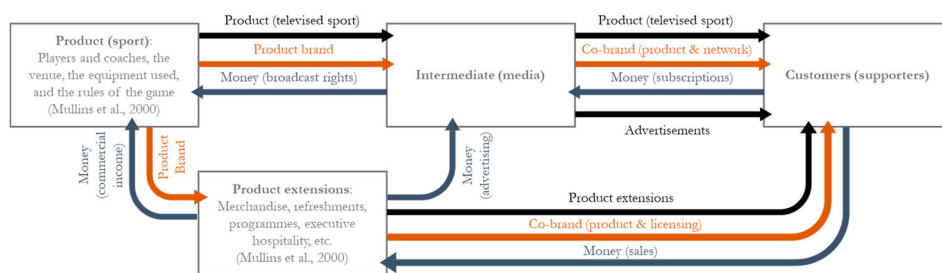


Figure 2. Football's post COVID-19 marketing/media relationship (adapted from Manoli & Kenyon, 2018, p. 94).

media channels is to be expected in the football clubs and leagues involved, with potentially new and creative ways adopted to capture and maintain their fans' attention (e.g. club documentaries). Financially, we could also expect this shift of power balance to be reflected in the next negotiation of broadcasting rights, with the media potentially requesting lower prices for the rights and slightly higher subscription prices from their customers, thus possibly monetising their power in the sport ecosystem. Both the clubs' response to the new power balance and the ways in which media use it are worth exploring further, while future research could also examine how this can be reflected in the ways in which fans engage with football in the future.

Concluding remarks

Taking all the above into consideration, the symbiotic yet at times antagonistic relationship between the EPL (and wider football) and the media is worth keeping an eye out for in order to better observe how it develops in post COVID-19 football. Apart from the expected income differences that will be noted due to the complete lack of matchday revenue for each club's final matches, making broadcast revenue significantly important for their success and even survival (KPMG, 2020), banning live audiences for the near future, solidifies media as the only and thus necessary means of broadcasting live football during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting further the

powerful position they now hold in the sport ecosystem. It is thus worth observing and further researching whether and how this power balance will shift once more when normal matchday activities resume after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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