



Long Live Sport

Toward an Interdisciplinary Approach to Liveness and Televised Sporting Events

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In the current media landscape, which is apparently dominated by new consumption habits, both the concept of liveness and the category of live sport broadcasting seem to challenge the same scenario. While the conceptualization of liveness still represents a central topic in the latest academic research on television and digital platforms,² the combination of liveness and sport broadcasts requires a more in-depth study, highlighting new paradoxes of scholarly interest. The aim of this doctoral thesis is to explore a reconfiguration of liveness within a specific case of media events: sport competitions and tournaments. This has been enriched by the ongoing growth of over-the-top and so-called 'sports-oriented' streaming platforms (e.g., Dazn). At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic — and its huge effects on the experience of live cultural events, including sports — has played a central role on rethinking the same concept of liveness due to social limitations of face-to-face meetings.

The research question of the thesis is structured around two main issues: the relation between media and sport events, in view of constructions and claims of liveness, and how this same construction can be historicized in a wider interpretive framework. The same concept of liveness here becomes a sort of 'interdisciplinary vector': the best practices of institutions and

media industries are connected to aesthetic and linguistic trends of cultural products, including sport contents. As such, the methodology follows an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary scheme, resulting in a convergence between two main areas of studies. Sport sociology — including what has been called 'sport media studies'³ — is put in relation to the field of television studies, digital media studies and platform studies. Due to the severe restrictions imposed by the pandemic on a possible field observation, this doctoral thesis consists foremost of desk research. Analyses of official guidelines, best practices and interviews with insiders and experts — from TV directors to IT developers and engineers — are undertaken thanks to sector journals on the field of media and sport contents.

The first part of the doctoral thesis consists in an investigation of the state of the art and academic debates on the concept of liveness within a wider frame: from performance and music studies to media and television studies. Deconstructing the myth of a 'natural' TV liveness, the quality of televisual live broadcast emerges as something ideological, rhetorical and at the same time 'naturalized'. Following van Es's recent theorization,⁴ the same concept of liveness is best understood as a socio-technical construction reconfigured by institutions, technologies, and

audience/users. Following this perspective, liveness defines both a field of tension between live events, on one hand, and media devices that reproduce them, on the other, alongside a request for social connection beyond the *hic et nunc* of live performances.

However, the connection between liveness and sport media has required a rethinking of these same concepts. First, the thesis identifies some stable or synchronic coordinates — such as immediacy, presence, and social sharing — as essential mechanisms involved in the construction and claim of a possible liveness of the sports event. Second, a systemic perspective on liveness is integrated by the historicization of live sports broadcasts through a *long durée* pattern of study. Third, the conceptualization of sport media is updated to the most recent perspective of 'sport and mediatization',⁵ shifting the analysis from a media-centric approach to a more media-centred one. Within this theoretical framework, both 'unstable accelerations' and 'nostalgic persistence' have been detected in the field of tension around liveness and televised sporting events.

The main research on the history of live sports broadcast is approached systematically, too. Best practices involved in the production of a televised sports text are bound together with a study of the economic forces that regulate and make possible watching matches on TV, or not. At the same time, the evolution of technologies and media devices also considers audience and user habits, including informal channels of consumption of media contents. Dating back to the early twentieth century, a first glimpse of liveness is apparent in the rise of live scoreboards located in theatres and public squares. From the first years of television to the advent of pay-per-view, the liveness of a televised sporting event appears as something constantly constructed and 'naturalized' at the same time. In this sense, the quality of liveness seems to define the first proto-televisual experiments of live sport broadcasts, as well as more recent live streaming OTTs, placing all of

these in the same timeline.

The last section of the project deals with the specific case of elite football within the Italian media landscapes. Here a single football match — treated as sort of 'expanded spectacle' — is constantly re-shaped by large screens in or outside of stadiums, for instance in public spaces and pubs. In the meanwhile, the recent embracing of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) further confirms the tangled overlap between live performance — including sports — and its mediatization. Focusing on the most recent live streaming of football matches, the thesis recognises new challenges and objects of inquiry — from IT infrastructures to production values and social network interactions. The qualities of immediacy, presence and social sharing are now constantly reshaped by as many outcomes: from issues involving the infrastructures of content delivery networks (CDNs) to live game statistics on second screens — such as smartphone and tablets — or live video chat rooms employed by football fans and users.

A first perspective from this research reveals the multi-layered influence of new technologies and media devices on the very nature of contemporary sports — especially the 'sport-spectacle'. The arrival of Covid-19 somewhat accelerated new habits of connection between remote fans and audiences, including the video-presence of the latter inside stadiums and sports arenas too. At the same time, social distancing facilitated an almost unexpected desire to return to live spectators, and their *hic et nunc* presence on the stands of sports arena. Indeed, contemporary sport event is at centre of this field of tension between 'unstable accelerations' and 'nostalgic persistence' around the same concept of liveness.

A further and significant standpoint of this doctoral thesis comprehends the importance of sports competitions on different media devices. Defusing a rhetoric of disruption, the project highlights not only mutations and transformations of technologies and users' habits, but also remarks on traces of continuity and unexpected returns. Older patterns of watching sport matches

live on TV or in public spaces cohabit alongside sports simulation videogames on live streaming platforms like Twitch. Not by chance, a sort of *fil rouge* is represented by the notion of liveness as socio-technical construction. On this path, the (old) medium of television still appears a perfect companion of the sporting event and its intrinsic social request to be seen 'now' and 'together' by an audience that is as heterogenous as possible.

Notes

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² Among others: Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture – 2nd Edition* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008) and Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live: An Enquiry into the Human Situation* (London: Polity Press, 2014).

³ *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. by Lawrence A. Wenner (London, New York: Sage, 1989). See also: Brett Hutchins and David Rowe, *Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Media Sport* (London, New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴ Karin van Es, *The Future of Live* (London: Polity Press, 2016).

⁵ Kirsten Frandsen, *Sport and Mediatization* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020).