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Sports and the Valorization of Technological Innovation. An Interview with Brett Hutchins

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“CAPITALISM + CULTURE x MEDIA”: SPORTS AND THE VALORIZATION OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION. AN INTERVIEW WITH BRETT HUTCHINS

Brett Hutchins
Markus Stauff

ABSTRACT: Sports history is inseparable from media history. This holds true across all kinds of different media: From the era of television to the advent of streaming, and from telegraphy to the era of mobile media and social media platforms, sports has developed in tandem with the evolution of various media forms. Few scholars have delved into this relationship as comprehensively and as consistently as Brett Hutchins who is Professor of Media and Communications in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Together with an extensive network of collaborators he critically examines how the capitalist media system harnesses, shapes and is shaped by sports – and who wins and who loses in this process. Next to a rich variety of compelling case studies, Hutchins’ work provides important conceptual insights for understanding the dynamics and characteristics of technological change in conjunction with sports.
KEYWORDS: Media Sport. Capitalism. Technology.

“CAPITALISMO + CULTURA x MÍDIA": ESPORTES E A VALORIZAÇÃO DA INOVAÇÃO TECNOLÓGICA. UMA ENTREVISTA COM BRETT HUTCHINS

RESUMO: A história do esporte é inseparável da história da mídia. Isto aplica-se a todos os tipos de meios de comunicação: Desde a era da televisão até ao advento do streaming, e do telégrafo até à era da comunicação móvel e das plataformas de mídias sociais, o esporte desenvolveu-se em conjunto com a evolução de vários formatos midiáticos. Poucos acadêmicos se debruçaram sobre esta relação de forma tão abrangente e consistente como Brett Hutchins, que é Professor de Media e Comunicação na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Monash em Melbourne, Austrália. Juntamente com uma vasta rede de colaboradores, Hutchins examina de forma crítica o modo como o sistema capitalista das mídias aproveita, molda e é moldado pelo esporte- e quem ganha e quem perde neste processo. Para além de uma grande variedade de estudos de caso convincentes, o trabalho de Hutchins fornece importantes perspectivas conceituais para a compreensão da dinâmica e das caraterísticas das mudanças tecnológicas em conjunto com o esporte.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mídias esportivas. Capitalismo. Tecnologia.

«CAPITALISMO + CULTURA x MEDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN": EL DEPORTE Y LA VALORIZACIÓN DE LA INNOVACIÓN TECNOLÓGICA. ENTREVISTA CON BRETT HUTCHINS

RESUMEN: La historia del deporte es inseparable de la historia de los medios de comunicación. Esto se aplica a todo tipo de medios: desde la era de la televisión hasta la llegada del streaming, y desde el telégrafo hasta la era de la comunicación móvil y las plataformas de medios sociales, el deporte se ha desarrollado a la par que la evolución de diversos formatos mediáticos. Pocos académicos han analizado esta relación de forma tan exhaustiva y coherente como Brett Hutchins, catedrático de Medios y Comunicación en la Facultad de Letras de la Universidad Monash de Melbourne (Australia). Junto con una amplia red de colaboradores, Hutchins examina críticamente cómo el sistema mediático capitalista aprovecha, moldea y es moldeado por el deporte, y quién gana y quién pierde en el proceso. Además de una amplia variedad de convincentes estudios de casos, el trabajo de Hutchins aporta importantes perspectivas conceptuales para comprender la dinámica y las características del cambio tecnológico en conjunción con el deporte.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Medios de comunicación deportivos. Capitalismo. Tecnología.

Media Studies and Sports

The following conversation took place in spring 2023 at Monash University. It was revised for readability. The exchange also resulted in an episode of Brett Hutchins' podcast MediaSport on related but slightly different topics (Hutchins, 2023). We want to thank Janine Mikosza for helpful feedback.

Markus Stauff: You have studied a wide range of technological advancements and their effects on the cultural role of sports since you started focusing on this subject about 20 years ago. Your research has covered topics like the commercialization of broadcasting, the growth of the internet, the increasing significance of mobile media, and surveillance technology. Before delving more into some of your findings, I would like to know more about your scholarly trajectory. When and why did you become interested in the relationship between sports and media innovation? When did you come to believe that sport is a relevant and timely issue for a media scholar?

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Brett Hutchins: It probably took root in 2005 when I was teaching an undergraduate unit called “New Media”, which was then a term that meant something – and very quickly no longer meant much. It was a survey style course to a very large number of students. This was at a point in the history of networked digital technologies when debates around the democratization of information and user empowerment, versus a more market- and security-oriented Internet, were very much alive. There was a series of decisions being made by governments, corporations, and users around the world at the time that were determining who and what the Internet was for. Almost two decades later, we discovered the answer was market concentration, mega-profits, surveillance, and the security state, and that the more celebratory accounts of user empowerment were proven wrong. It’s a sad realization.

Within that unit, there were lectures on the music industries (especially Napster), on surveillance, on news and journalism, on identity theft, and on the arts. But I struggled to find case studies in one of the most popular areas of media – sport. At that time, the only book that examined that relationship between sport and the Internet in a thorough way was probably Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes's *Football in the New Media Age* (Boyle and Haynes 2004). So, I started to develop work on sport, networked digital communications and the Internet. Every semi-popular television show seemed to have multiple people investigating it and its fan cultures. You then looked at some of the most popular sign-systems on the planet – religion, advertising, and sport – and by comparison, there was little going on in those areas at that time. Things have changed since.

I had been working on sport since I was a Masters’ student. For many of us, the question of why one chooses particular topics intersects with autobiography at some level. I come from a sporting family and played a lot of sport. I could see the growing importance of how sport, media and technology were interacting. I could see what fans were

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doing with computers and mobile phones. Additionally, I was trying to come up with new and interesting areas to talk through with students: where technological change comes from, how it works, where it leads to, and trying to engage them in how to "do history" in real time. Sports was a useful way of achieving this outcome. At the time, you could trace the rise of live streaming, the growth of sports blogging, and the ascendance of YouTube (Stauff 2009) – all these things that were happening.

MS: Next to filling a clear omission in media and cultural studies, what does a more consistent focus on sports add to our understanding of media change?

BH: At that time, sports media was often treated as a *reflection* of broader processes in the media and technology industries. I could see quite clearly that it was fast becoming a *driver* of these processes. If you looked closely, you could see traces of the Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) hyperbole seeping into the sports trade press, the influx of Silicon Valley companies signing early deals in the sports industry, and the acceleration of datafication in sport. A key reason for all this was the power and popularity of the live event. In an age of increasing time shifting and more flexible viewing practices, live sport maintained and magnified the significance of the live event, probably along with music. But in terms of global media events (e.g., the Olympics and Paralympics, FIFA World Cups), sport was a prime example.

My collaborators and I have traced the history of these developments across the Internet and social media (Hutchins 2011; Hutchins and Rowe 2009, 2012), blogging and gaming (Hutchins and Mikosza 2010; Hutchins et al. 2009), live streaming and mobile media (Hutchins, 2016a, 2019; Hutchins et al. 2019), and eSports and datafication (Hutchins 2008, Hutchins 2016b; Stauff 2018). I am writing about NFT's at the moment. What I've been trying to do all along is demonstrate who wins and who loses from processes of technological

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change in sport. Overall, the answer is that powerful corporations, leagues, and mega-events have managed to concentrate market power in quite extraordinary ways, even as screens, viewing options, platforms and consumer choice have proliferated in a similarly extraordinary way. Greater consumer choice has, perhaps counter-intuitively, led to the concentration of visibility and profits in global media sport.

When does Sport Matter? The Question of Sports Literacy

MS: Your research offers a broad variety of case studies on different sports and different countries. But you also seem to aim at claims about sports in general. How do you navigate that, methodologically: When can we make arguments about sports' contribution to the global media landscape and when do we need to pay attention to a particular case?

BH: The choice of case studies is something I probably torture myself over a fair bit, to be honest. I'm interested in *when* sport matters. I take it for granted that sport matters, but it doesn't mean it matters at all times and in the same ways. It's about trying to isolate and use case studies to show that in particular moments of time, in particular cultural contexts, in particular cross-cultural contexts, that sport plays a powerful role. For example, the history of the Olympics and the Football World Cup in the last 20 years makes you think about the way media conglomerates use sport to extend their reach regionally and globally, as well as the fact national, regional and global sports organizations now behave more like media organizations.

Methodologically, I've done hundreds of semi-structured in-depth interviews with people working at all levels of the sports, media and technology industries. With these I'm trying to understand how they think about change and how it works, and why they make particular decisions when faced with a range of options. I'm interested in how they think about how their industry and technology are changing, and how

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fan practices are changing. What are the issues they're struggling with? A question I ask is quite simple but productive: “What's the key challenge or issue that's keeping you up at night when you think about the next 5 to 10 years?”. It's opened some interesting conversations.

MS: What I find an especially helpful insight from this type of research is that sport does not only contribute to media change, but it also changes the established concepts of media and the awareness of media. Pretty early in *Sport Beyond Television*, the book you wrote together with David Rowe (Hutchins and Rowe 2012), you discussed, for example, how sport provokes a re-negotiation of what broadcasting actually is. In some of the texts that you published around the same time, I sense a certain ambivalence about the politics of such re-negotiations. In one co-authored article, you introduce the intriguing concept of “sports market literacy” (Scibilia and Hutchins 2011) to argue that fans often show growing awareness of how the organization of sports caters to a commercial logic. In another co-authored text, you analyze online debates between fans and their “culture of complaint” (Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins 2010). Here, you conclude that such debates naturalize the capitalist media system. So, I wonder if (or where) you see a potential of sport and sports fandom to create a critical awareness of the global media industry and the transforming media landscape. How does the “sports market literacy” relate to a naturalization of the capitalist media system? What is the relationship between naturalization and potential critical literacy?

BH: Think about the amount of time and energy fans, supporters, and followers spend following professional sports. There is such an enormous depth of understanding – intuitively and evidence based – of the reality of commodification occurring across the sports industry. Fans discuss: “Why is there a game at 6:00 o'clock on a Sunday night when fans don't want to go to a game?” Oh, it's television schedule or the needs of pay-television. “Why are they introducing two new teams into the competition?” Because the next media contract will be bigger

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because there's more content to sell to broadcasters and live streamers. There's an awareness that fans are all playing a role in the growth of the market. Fans know it's about eyeballs, data, television, subscriptions, contracts, and advertising. It's about sports to the extent they service commodifying and capitalist logics.

This also comes from my own personal history. I grew up in an environment where there wasn't a lot of education beyond high school. There was a deep skepticism of politicians and a disengagement from politics quite often. But I learned early that if I wanted to know what someone thought about racial politics, I would ask them their opinions about an Indigenous athlete. If I wanted to find out what they think about industrial relations, I'd ask them about the salary cap in football. If I wanted to know their thoughts on party politics, I'd ask them about the Prime Minister appearing at the Grand Final. [1] Those bigger social, cultural and political issues are accessible through sport, but, importantly, sport also contributes to and shapes them. And that is also clearly the case when it comes to the intersection of technology, media, and sport.

Sport is also playing an important role in the naturalization of media practices such as datafication and surveillance. An example is the piece I wrote with Mark Andrejevic about the Olympics and the spread of facial recognition surveillance technologies in stadiums (Hutchins and Andrejevcic 2021). It shows (yet again), you have the encroachment of commercial and technological systems into everyday lives under the cover of a popular sporting spectacle. This encroachment is partly made possible by the fact that sporting spectacle delivers a lot of enjoyment to fans and viewers.

My frustration is that this creates a foundation for sharp critique, but it doesn't necessarily lead to change. After many years of doing this

[1] The name of the championship game for both the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia.

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sort of work, I have moments where I wonder where the critique leads. Has it actually changed anything or has it simply added to an awareness that these things go on? In thinking about this, an important piece of analysis for me was on mediatization and the non-use of smartphones by spectators (Hutchins 2016), which is partly about how people seek to exercise agency in heavily determined media systems.

'Capitalism + Culture x Media'

MS: This is another aspect I find intriguing in your work. Sports, because of its focus on embodiment, authenticity and due to its long tradition, offers potentials for critical perspectives on both economic and technological developments. Yet often, this is a rather nostalgic mode of critique. Like: "Don't ruin our sports". And this mode of critique might be very limiting. I wonder: If there is critical potential and a certain media literacy, what are exactly the dynamics that let naturalization dominate? Is it connected to the emotional attachment? Are there characteristics of sports that contribute to naturalization other than its market dominance?

BH: I think there's a range of factors that serve to naturalize the current state of affairs, which can be crudely summarized in the formula, 'Capitalism + Culture x Media'. It's important to think about the power of habit, routine and social ritual. Sport has enormous symbolic and ritual power, especially when projected by powerful media technologies and systems under the conditions of late capitalism. There's a lot of work done by cultural anthropologists, not to mention the symbolic interactionists, around the power of symbols. Sport is one of the most powerful sign-systems on the planet – think of everything from the Olympic rings through to club crests, emblems, mascots, trophies and cups, titles, names and nicknames, flags, banners, scarves, colors, and so on.

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David Rowe has always been a wonderful collaborator and mentor for me. I read a lot of technology and sport trade press, so I have a habit of focusing on the features of new technologies. David continues to remind me about the power of the social settings and cultural fields in which technologies are located. This has helped me think more about the interpenetration of the social, cultural, and technological, which helps ground the analysis in more durable accounts of sport, media, and capitalism.

For instance, the evolution of modern sport lends itself to organizing space and time in ways that connect nicely with the demands of news media for regular content that's popular with advertisers and audiences. The power of this arrangement over time – particularly when you introduce electronic and broadcast media – embeds sport in people's daily lives and the ways they connect with others in the wider social world. Newer digital technologies both recall these established forms of social connection, but also significantly changes the patterns and scales through which these connections are established and routinised. The challenge is to analyze how these processes work in ways that are credible and critical.

The Valorization of Technological Innovation

MS: Sport offers a rich field for the application and display of technologies. This is an important insight from the article you co-wrote with Mark Andrejevic (Hutchins and Andrejevcic 2021). Because of the relevance of sport events and because of the size of the audience, it becomes a field for experimenting with facial recognition systems, with tracking systems and many more technological innovations. On top of that, many technologies become a visible and operational element of sports, like video assisted refereeing. Does this ostensive use of visual technology also add to the legitimization of surveillance technology?

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BH: That is a nice segue from the previous answer in that the social power and popularity of sport is what helps prepare the ground for the influx and integration of digital technology into everyday experiences. Sport offers a context in which there is a naturalized relationship between sport and technology that predates the digital era. Think about the role of sport in the rise of statistics in sports science, the development of statistical technologies and techniques in sport during the Cold War, and then the early days of fantasy baseball and sabermetrics.[2] These are popularized statistical systems that have a naturalized relationship with science through sport science, coaching, datafication and broadcasting. If you want to enter the stadium to experience and access the social and affective dimensions of sports, you unavoidably buy into the logics of the technologies, infrastructures, and processes that are waiting for you.

Facial recognition systems are present in some stadiums in this country (Australia), but you'd have to read the back of a ticket to know this is the case; that is, if anyone actually buys physical tickets anymore because it's all done on a smartphone, which is now a passport to social experiences. Mobile ticketing for sports events is simpler and easier, at least superficially. Although funnily enough, after talking to a ticketing manager for a stadium, it turns out a small number of spectators still take their mobile phone ticket to the ticket counter and ask for a print-out before they go through the gate. Nonetheless, sport has become a very powerful means to naturalize the influx – invasion might probably be too strong a term – of technology into everyday social experience. An example: FC Barcelona's home ground, Camp Nou, is an innovation hub. It's a sports stadium, but it has another function as a live laboratory for consumer technology innovation (in cooperation with the Global System for Mobile

[2] Sabermetrics has become the established term to describe the empirical, data-based analysis of baseball that was e.g., promoted by the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) in the early 1970s.

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Communications Association – GSMA), including the rollout of 5G and new camera technologies.

MS: And it might be an innovation hub, not just because there are so many people who need to get access – that would be very similar to the music industry – but also because sports constantly offer something that you want to get a better sense of by checking statistics or by reviewing highlights on your mobile phone. It's an applied experiment in a way.

BH: Yes. Because of its history, sport has a particular relationship to technology, the state, the market. It comes with a pre-given or a pre-established set of cultural and economic logics that make it seem quite a natural space to have these technologies present. Imagine if you entered a church or even the confessional and discovered there was facial recognition technology staring at you. What would the response from many people be in comparison?

MS: And everybody in the church was sitting there, looking at the highlights of the sermon.

BH: That's right. Imagine checking highlights of the last mass or the priest's last sermon while the current service is under way (laughs)! Yet, you tell people they're being surveilled in a stadium and many just shrug their shoulders and keep walking to their seats. I have done some research on surveillance with people in the Faculty of Engineering here [at Monash University] on the use of Wi-Fi tracking in a Melbourne railway station (Cabalquinto and Hutchins 2020). We surveyed 100 people on the station platforms in real time. The majority of respondents were either unsurprised or resigned to the fact they could be tracked. A small number of people were against it, or expressed surprise about the possibility of being monitored.

A railway platform is a context in which commuters need quick access to timetables and information about train delays. Again, screens are everywhere throughout the station. But the mode of user engagement in sport is different. A train station is not trying to address

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or entertain a massive cross-border audience and advertisers are seeking a different form of brand engagement. It relates to the popularity of the live sport event and the mass audience it regularly delivers, which is quite unique at this moment in our history.

MS: It would be interesting to compare these media situations. On the train station it is all about orderliness and punctuality while in the stadium it is all about unexpected, surprising events. Something is happening on the field that you cannot predict. These are two different set-ups for the deployment of technologies.

BH: That's a perceptive point because these technologies – much like social media – cue people to seek certain forms of content, images and experiences according to the particular social context. It's the unscripted drama of sport that makes certain complementary technologies so appealing. In reflecting on my own experience: my son and I are members of a football club here in Melbourne. We went to a game last week. Something happened on the field I couldn't make sense of because it happened at the other end of the ground. Our response was to open X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit on our smartphones to see what people watching the game on television were saying about the incident. Different types of media are symbiotic with live sporting experiences. They reinforce a particular model of sport that not only prioritizes the elite level, but also privileges a range of commercial platforms that become synonymous with how sport is experienced socially.

Sports as Media

MS: In relation to what we just discussed, I want to take up the concept of "sport as media" which you developed together with David Rowe in *Sport Beyond Television* (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Throughout your research you draw comparisons with the symbiotic development between sports and the mass press in the 19th century.

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Still, you determine a certain threshold with digitization by saying: Now it's appropriate to talk about "sport as media". Can you talk a bit about how sport becomes something that you would call a media assemblage on its own?

BH: It's important to understand that I have a polemic tendency in my writing and there's a degree of deliberate provocation in that term. I first coined that concept in an article on the World Cyber Games and e-sport (Hutchins 2008). If you think about mediatization in Bourdieusian terms, there's a media field and there's a sporting field. And if you go through history over many decades there are points where these fields interact, but the one doesn't necessarily come to completely overwhelm the logic of the other. A lot of my work is about how media comes to define the logic of the sporting field, which then in turn assumes its own institutionally grounded influence as digital media sport (Hutchins and Rowe 2013). And I think that the exponential impacts of the Internet, social media, mobile media, and so on sees a movement past a threshold. Sport as a set of social practices, as a set of technologies and industries, also comes to actively constitute media logic, to borrow Altheide and Snow's (1979) term.

If you were to approach it as an assemblage, it'd be something like the media sport assemblage. But that assemblage achieves a degree of solidity as media sport is naturalized over time. What we think of as sport then starts to feed back into other areas of culture. I credit David Rowe for his insights in this area. We've watched the sportization of reality television formats. Reality television borrows from sport, and you see it coming the other way too, but not with the same force. For reality tv, it's the live event, the unscripted drama, "the finale", and yes, the "grand final". I don't think that, prior to the decade between 2002 and 2010, it would have been legitimate to talk about sport as media in quite the same way.

An important question in all this is where we see evidence of "the social" continually coming back in. There are some interesting things

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happening in this area. Some fans are turning to the lower levels of sport. You can have a lot of similar experiences with much lower cost, without the surveillance, without the hyper commodification, and without the celebrity. It brings people closer to those playing the game and makes it easier to connect with in some ways. This draws attention to lower league football; the increasing visibility of disability sports; the quality of many second and third tier sports; and the rise of women's sport, which is wonderful to see. The attraction here is that there's something else on offer besides just another highly mediatized and commodified product and spectacle.

MS: … with the looming threat that when more people become interested, it might become commodified in the same way.

BH: That goes back to what we were talking about earlier: Where does the critique lead? Or does it turn out that we're mainly celebrating success and visibility in the marketplace, but with the addition of some welcome social justice and community dimensions. But this is where reading some history and theory is to be recommended, as it highlights the adaptability of capitalism as a system and its capacity to absorb emergent forms and practices. It's a very old lesson, but I feel like we always need to keep reminding ourselves of it.

MS: Maybe we can wrap up by you offering a glimpse on your latest research that deals with sustainability, climate change and sports?

BH: Libby Lester, Toby Miller, Simon Troon and I are in the third year of a project funded by the Australian Research Council on sport and the communication of environmental issues (Hutchins et al. 2021, 2023). Interestingly, there is a link to the technology and media work, because of the carbon footprint of stadium live events, television and live streaming technologies, as well as smartphone use and e-waste. Think about the energy consumption of the systems that make our media sport experiences possible, and there is certainly a link to

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sustainability and a transition to renewable energy generation. What would post-carbon media sport systems look like?

Like many people, I find climate change to be a psychologically taxing topic to contemplate – even though I'm one of the fortunate ones in terms of the differential impacts of climate change given my residence in the Global North. The poor suffer so much more. It's also politically frustrating because it's hard to see how systemic change can be delivered on a global scale.

But I'm trying to work out how the popularity of sport – that power of the spectacle, it's power to communicate – can also generate more positive, helpful messages around the need for climate action. Climate change is a threat to the planet and a threat to sport itself. The popular platform sports provide for carbon intensive industries and commercial actors is a problem; for example, the way the sports industries serve to legitimize fossil fuels by accepting sponsorships from mining and petroleum companies.

The critique is well and truly still there. But we're also trying to work out where those sources of hope might come from to create a livable future. It's interesting research that keeps me going in conjunction with the technology focused work.

MS: Thank you so much for your time and your thoughts!

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