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While studying sports as a distinct genre and/or a site of social (racial, gendered, political, etc.) struggle are useful approaches, alone, neither one can adequately grasp the significance of sports to television. Historically, sports have been central to American television networks' corporate and civic identities. But since sports do not fit within the fictional narrative paradigm nor seem to be considered as "serious" nonfictional programming on par with news or political coverage, are often produced and distributed at the local or regional levels instead of or in addition to national level, frequently occupy marginal locations on the television schedule (e.g. weekend days and nights) rather than in prestigious prime time slots (*Monday Night Football* and the recent innovation of *Sunday Night Football* notwithstanding), and are typically ephemeral programming without a significant "shelf life," they have consistently fallen between the cracks of academic study. Thus their centrality and omnipresence have oddly translated into a kind of marginalized status, especially within U.S. media studies. Media scholars must recognize sports' unique industrial function as both a motivation for and showcase of technological innovation and as perhaps the single most legitimating property for a network to possess.

Comprehending sports' function within the media system effectively requires a careful analysis of both the representational strategies within televised sports content and the industrial position sports occupy. Representationally, on the one hand, sports are undeniably "real": the narratives surrounding sports suggest that these activities reveal an innate and underlying individual character; that individuals can unite to work toward common goals regardless of racial, ethnic, class, or gender identity; and that athletic performances are transparent, not manipulated, and genuine. Sports depend upon an uncomplicated, internally referential logic: they are simply means by which humans can test the limits of their own capabilities. And that same logic suggests that the visibility and popularity of White, Black, Latino, and multiracial athletes on the basketball court, baseball field, or football gridiron – or the Paralympics – illustrates the nondiscriminatory character of sports. On the other hand, sports are by definition manufactured and "artificial": their rules may be altered; the natural-seeming performances are the end result of years, and often decades, of intense practice and dedication; and the pools of available talent are limited rather than infinite. Moreover, the means by which media – particularly television – convey sports necessarily structures what is and can be "visible" and "audible," what aspects of sports and of athletes are important or unimportant. Finally, the narratives surrounding sports and athletes in media discourse are so reliant on binaries (winning or losing, "us" or "them," "good" or "bad") that they may further discourage innovative, non-binary possibilities.

Focusing solely on representational strategies cannot be done at the expense of assessing sports' other functions, however. In the "post-broadcasting" age, sports have become especially essential for network identity, organizational coherence, and financial solvency. For instance, Fox solidified its status as a stable fourth network by acquiring the NFL rights formerly held by CBS in 1993. NBC's loss of NFL rights in the late 1990s prompted sincere questions about the network's viability – though NBC's fortunes were buoyed by its multibillion-dollar, multiyear investment in Olympic "eggs" nested underneath the peacock logo (which hatched nicely during the Beijing Games). ABC and CBS also rely on sports, particularly football and basketball, to stand out on the increasingly crowded cable television landscape. And UPN and The WB (now merged into the CW) may have failed to make the leap to major-network status in part because they lack significant sports properties. Finally, while sports are not necessarily profitable in and of themselves – the astronomical rights fees for major sports properties are difficult but not impossible to recoup – their particular appeal to young men and the prestige they confer upon a network's brand indirectly generate network stability: not only do major television networks rely on sports to retain affiliates, but they also use sports to "prove" to advertisers that they are serious players within the industry.

The salience of sports is even more pronounced when considering video games, the on-line environment, fantasy sports, and tendencies toward convergence in the multimedia landscape. This may be most evident in the collaboration between ESPN (a Disney property) and video game publisher Electronic Arts to create technology "that would allow ESPN commentators to interact live with realistic-looking, three-dimensional virtual players" – which an ESPN executive said was vital for the network's desire to "remain relevant" (Barnes 2008). This suggests the continued intersection of representational strategies and industrial utility: new technologies are employed in a bid to attract untapped audiences (e.g. those who prefer to play their Wii than watch sports) to mainstream sportscasts; the sports for which these expensive technologies will and will not be employed reflects the priorities of media industries and mainstream culture; and the choice of which physiological characteristics of those "realistic-looking, three-dimensional virtual players" to emphasize or downplay – and thus to make "real" – underscores the reliance on superficial and visible markers of identity at the expense of complexity.

Television scholars, and media scholars generally, must probe beyond this superficial stasis – beyond what is easily visible – to understand the complex representations and narratives manifest in sports content, as well as their multifaceted function within the media industry.

*Works Cited*

Barnes, Brooks. "At ESPN, Play-by-Play Goes Virtual." *The New York Times*, 5 September 2008.