

Response for Televised Sports and Its Contexts Roundtable
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It is intriguing to examine televised sports, by locating them in the context of the abundance of reality entertainment in today's media. That is, to inquire into the ways in which sports programming represents, commodifies, and manufactures reality and realness, and how it defines the value and significance of sports in relation to reality and realness. In fact, sporting competitions, many of which originate in the 18th and 19th centuries, have a similar structural characteristic to that of contemporary reality game shows. Like many reality game shows, sporting competitions, as Norbert Elias suggests, realize the simulation of real-life conflicts between human beings (or human beings and nature) in highly manufactured environments and produce unscripted (that is, "real") dramas. However, they have an obvious difference as well. While sporting competitions have basically been supposed to produce "disciplined" modern subjects who are able to behave themselves and observe the gentlemanly code of conduct, contemporary reality game shows feature the spectacle of people who are (in a sense) disciplined to make scenes and display their egos in front of the camera to make good television.

In today's media landscape where the growing emphasis on market values often dissolves "modern" values for the sake of creating spectacle, some of the contemporary televised sports may well have a great affinity with reality television. In fact, we have witnessed the emergence of a new sport/televised spectacle that has gained mainstream recognition via its marriage with reality television: Mixed Martial Arts, a fighting sport that is better known by the name of its leading organization, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) based in the U.S.

The history of the UFC can be seen as a series of struggles looking for proper ways of dealing with reality and realness, and a proper distance to “sports” as understood by society. At its inception in the early 90s, the UFC, as a novel pay-per-view entertainment, claimed to have a strong imaginary connection with the reality of the external world, since it was meant to realize the closest approximation to unarmed one-on-one real-life fights, containing only a minimum amount of regulation. However, Senator John McCain almost immediately started the campaign against the UFC and jeopardized its existence; it was considered by society too brutal and too close to real-life fights to be televised as a respectable and authentic sport. After Mixed Martial Arts was sanctioned by the New Jersey athletic commission in 2000, the UFC kept on losing money for several more years. As it became a legitimate sport with many regulations, Mixed Martial Arts’ imaginary connection to real-life fights waned.

In 2005, the UFC found a new way to deal with reality and realness when it launched the reality television *series The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF) on Spike TV, which features up-and coming fighters’ communal life and their competition to get a six figure contract with the UFC. The artificial environment manufactured by TUF produces “real-life” feuds between fighters, and presents larger-than-life ultimate fighters as relatable, everyday, and in this sense, “real” figures. Via the marriage with a reality game show, the UFC has reintroduced realness as hype, compensating for the waning of its imaginary connection to real-life fights.

A more important achievement of the TUF-UFC nexus is that, in the tricky task of establishing the UFC as a respectable sport via a medium that is essentially a spectacle of people disrespecting each other, it has symbolically elevated the status of the UFC from the simulation of real-life fights to the ultimate reality. That is, if the

competition in reality game show offers the simulation of real-life jobs, then in the TUF-UFC nexus, it is the latter (the UFC) that occupies the position of real-life jobs, the position of reality. Here, the UFC constructs itself as the premier organization in the real world of fighting sport that all the fighters should aim for, yet only a few can reach. This dream yet real world of fighting (which is also a televisual construction) is further authorized by the fact that the UFC promotes a state-sanctioned legitimate professional sport. Being a legitimate sport, combined with the fact that it is the largest organization in the U.S., functions as a guarantee of the UFC's authenticity in the real world.

Mixed Martial Arts is a new, and the only sport so far that made it mainstream via the usage of reality television. Since then, we have seen several (not-so-successful) attempts to utilize reality show formats to promote sports. How does the emergence of the new sports-reality television alliance possibly influence the representation and manufacturing of reality and realness in other televised mainstream and non-mainstream sports? If there are any influences, do they bring about changes in the "respectable" values of sports in society, or they just reconfirm existing values?