

Convergent Sport Culture: Mediating the Game

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Authority and Authorship in Constructing the Sports Narrative

The last century has brought a radical decentralizing of expertise and authority in the coverage of sports. Before television, narratives of sporting events were published following the game by a single author, usually a journalist. These writers were able to craft stories that could highlight the exploits of Red Grange as “the Galloping Ghost,” Babe Ruth as the “Sultan of Swat,” and “Joltin’ Joe” Dimaggio. In their reportage of a game, sportswriters were able to distill entire games into a narrative that focused readers’ attention onto singular moments and particular athletes.

With the advent of television, however, the construction of the story of the game underwent an important shift. While expertise continued to reside with the broadcasters, how these experts framed the narrative had to change because a much greater audience was serving as direct witnesses to the event. Accordingly, broadcasters spent more effort on setting up a narrative to “explain” the game in advance of the actual playing – hence, the advent of the pregame show. During the broadcast of the actual game, experts such as John Madden or Tim McCarver could then follow up on this setup by emphasizing certain elements of the game during the action. Finally, following the end of the game, broadcasters were then able to focus viewers’ attention on particular plays or athletes as the highlights that determined the outcome, thereby again shaping how viewers thought about the game, whether they were direct witnesses or whether they simply caught the highlights on the news or on SportsCenter.

Now, however, with information accessible through the internet and with individuals’ ability to self-publish through multiple platforms, we can locate numerous conflicting narratives, or even hypernarratives, that situate events and athletes in multiple contexts at the same time. Sports coverage is no longer the sole domain of anointed “experts.” Because new and social media allows anyone to “authorize” a sports narrative, we have entered a new era in which members of the media, and even fans themselves, compete to frame sporting events synchronously with the games.

One example of this complex dynamic would be Bill Simmons’ liveblogging of the NBA championship series, in which he sat courtside and commented on the games in progress. Commenters to his blog were both reading his liveblogging and watching television coverage, and their comments were a mix of comments about the game, about Simmons’ comments, and about the television coverage. But what was perhaps most noteworthy was the jockeying that took place between Simmons, commenters, and television broadcasters. As the series continued, the television broadcasters seemed to acknowledge more and more what was occurring in the liveblogging, so that the “experts” lost their central control of the framing of the series. A dialogue emerged, in other words, between broadcasters and viewers in which they all attempted to frame the game within a rubric of their own making and to get other readers and/or viewers to acquiesce to the authority of their narrative.

What does this add up to? With the advent of convergent media, expertise in sports no longer resides solely with the individuals in control of the broadcast. Viewers and readers have more and more influence in how the story of the game plays out. Moreover, that story is emerging more and more in real time, synchronously, which means that the ability to frame our understanding of the game is less susceptible to the type of mythmaking that led to the legends of Ruth, Grange, Mantle, DiMaggio and others.