



Assessing the sociology of sport: On media, advertising and the commodification of culture

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Steven J Jackson¹

University of Otago, New Zealand

Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, a key scholar in developing meshed understandings of sport, media, globalization and nation, Steven Jackson, considers inquiry on media, advertising and the commodification of culture within the sociology of sport. By virtue of focus on the notion of a 'sport/media complex', key early works on media and sport posed the ongoing need to understand the relationships, complexities and contradictions in the life of cultural commodities associated with sport. In focusing on the 'sport media promotional culture nexus', understandings of advertising as a pivotal link between production and consumption are central to broader questions about sport, including the roles of global media, mega-events and corporate nationalism as they relate to both identity formations and politics. Future research on sport, advertising and commodification will play an important role in understanding how consumer capitalism has transformed citizenship and how effective responses to both sport and media in an increasingly globalized context may be mobilized in the larger struggle for social justice and human rights.

Keywords

advertising, commodification, media, promotional culture, sustainability

Reflections on the trajectory of the sociology of sport

Despite some early disciplinary discrimination against sport media studies within both sport studies and media studies (Wenner, 2006), during the mid to late 1980s two distinct, but significant works – Goldlust's (1987) *Playing for Keeps: Sport, the Media and Society* and Wenner's (1989) edited collection *Media, Sports and Society* – forged through to provide important foundations for future scholarship within the sociology of sport. Goldlust offers the first comprehensive examination of the historical

Corresponding author:

Steven J Jackson, University of Otago, 46 Union Street, Dunedin 9015, New Zealand.

Email: steve.jackson@otago.ac.nz

development of the sports–media relationship with a focus on how television ‘acted as an important catalyst in bringing about radical changes to the structure, organisation and future direction of...sports’ (1987: vii). In turn, Wenner’s anthology helped establish a framework and agenda for future research that continues to influence the field. One essay in particular, Sut Jhally’s cultural studies analysis of sport, media and capitalism is arguably one of the most significant, yet overlooked, pieces of scholarship in the field. According to Jhally, ‘as soon as we concentrate specifically on the subject of sports in capitalism it becomes apparent that we can talk *only* about a *sports/media complex*’ (cited in Wenner, 1989: 77). An extension of his earlier article, ‘Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sport/Media Complex’ (1984), Jhally’s Marxist-informed analysis was one of the first to acknowledge and undertake a conceptual mapping of the relationships between ideology, economy and culture that are central to the sports media complex and its subsequent adaptations: the *transactional model* of media, sports and society (Wenner, 1989), the *media/sport production complex* (Maguire, 1993) and the *media sports cultural complex* (Rowe, 1999), all of which implicitly or explicitly recognize the importance of relational models. To this end, Jhally (1984, 1989) advocated the use of Marx’s ‘circuit of capital’ model, and its subsequent ‘circuit of culture’ variations (cf. Du Gay et al., 1997; Johnson, 1986/1987) in order to understand the relationships, complexities and contradictions associated with key *moments* in the life of cultural commodities: production, representation, consumption and regulation. Critical analysis of the relationships between these interrelated moments, and the context within which they are located, is essential because it is difficult, if not impossible, to see how one impacts on the others when studied in isolation. Pertinent to this essay, such relational analyses acknowledge the central role of advertising and promotional culture in the commodification of everyday life, including our experiences and identities.

This essay focuses on advertising as an integral fixture within the sports media complex and more specifically the *sport media promotional culture nexus* (Jackson, 2013; Jackson and Andrews, 2012). The central argument is that any critical analysis of media sport must, first and foremost, delineate the uniqueness and appeal of sport as a cultural commodity within promotional culture (Wernick, 1991). Amongst its distinctive features, ‘sport’ translates well across cultural and linguistic contexts; features real people demonstrating the limits of the human body; celebrates competition, achievement, efficiency, meritocracy and technology; and is associated with positive images of health and nationhood. In combination, these characteristics make sport ‘a powerful vehicle for transnational corporations and their allied advertising and promotional armatures’ (Jackson and Andrews, 2005: 8). Acknowledging the uniqueness of sport is necessary in order to understand how and why it is configured, and plays a role in configuring, global consumer capitalism – a process that not only commodifies culture but also transforms our sense of identity and citizenship. Furthermore, as this essay will later discuss, and as hyperbolic as it may sound, the production, promotion and consumption of sport, in conjunction with other commodities, is contributing to a wider depletion of resources that poses a threat to the sustainability and very future of our planet (Jhally, 2000).

Assessing the challenges of the sociology of sport

Arguably, the sociology of sport has never been in a more ideal and strategic position to contribute to the parent discipline and to a wider public sociology that could impact on public debate and social policy in order to make a real difference in people's lives. Yet, the field has not yet reached its full potential and this is due to a range of both external and internal forces. Externally, the field increasingly operates within a neoliberal, market-driven context where knowledge is a commodity and only knowledge that translates into economic returns is valued. Internally, the sociology of sport has often been complicit in its own marginalization. Firstly, through its linguistic exclusivity both in terms of the dominance of English as the operational language of academia but also in terms of its often elitist use of ivory tower discourse, which is inaccessible even to some within the academy. Secondly, our field has been complicit in its rather laissez-faire approaches to theory and methods and, at times, its obsession with identity politics. Clearly, scholars engaged in the critical analysis of sport media, advertising and promotional culture cannot confront or fix the aforementioned problems in isolation. Nevertheless, they need to be aware of the issues and must play their role in addressing them. To this end, the socio-cultural significance of advertising as both an economic and cultural field should not be underestimated – it is a fundamental driver of an unprecedented form of consumer capitalism that has firmly established itself as the dominant paradigm of our times.

Central to any understanding of advertising and promotional culture and its impact on contemporary sport is locating its historical origins. It is no coincidence that the advertising industry emerged at a particular conjunctural moment when new technologies enabled the overproduction, and therefore oversupply, of consumer products. Consequently advertising quickly assumed a 'pivotal position between production and consumption' (Leslie, 1995: 402), functioning to stimulate consumer demand leading to a fundamental transformation in economic systems. Since then, scholarly attempts to characterize advertising have variously described it as a form of myth making (Barthes, 1972); a cultural industry (Lash and Urry, 1994); a sphere of ideology (Goldman, 1992; Williamson, 1978); and the official art of capitalism (Harvey, 1990). With specific reference to sport, advertising and promotional culture there has been a steadily developing body of literature over the past 20 years. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to acknowledge the breadth and depth of this research, readers are directed to some of the following broader projects for critical analyses of the role of advertising and promotional culture in reproducing power relations related to global media, sport mega-events and corporate nationalism (Amis and Cornwell, 2005; Horne, 2006; Maguire, 1999; Raney and Bryant, 2006; Sage, 2010; Scherer and Jackson, 2010, 2013; Silk et al., 2005); identity politics linked to race, gender, sexuality, social class, disability and national identity (Goldman and Papson, 1996; Jackson and Andrews, 2005; Wenner, 2002; Wenner and Jackson, 2009); and a limited range of studies examining advertising and the politics of sport, health and social policy (cf. Blum, 1991; Cody and Jackson, 2014; Crompton, 1993; Gee, 2014; Palmer, 2014). Collectively, these broad categories of research can be linked to the circuit of culture model which, as previously noted, includes production, representation, consumption and regulation. To date, the vast majority of sport-related

analysis has focused on representation and identity politics and, while this remains important, it is essential that we examine sport advertising and promotional culture as they operate throughout the entire circuit of culture. Arguably, without heeding the advice of Jhally (and others) to interrogate the interrelationships between ideology, economy and culture, we risk overlooking the complicities and complexities of sport as it is incorporated within promotional culture. Moreover, we will be less able to both identify and resist the interrelated structures and processes of power that continue to shape contemporary consumer culture.

Future directions for the sociology of sport: on media, advertising and the commodification of culture

Sociology of sport research has an important role to play with respect to interrogating advertising and promotional culture as fundamental drivers of a consumer capitalist paradigm. Such is the hegemony of this paradigm that Lewis (2013: 8) suggests that: 'Consumer capitalism appears to have created a cultural system that makes it difficult to conceive other models of human progress'. This is where utilization of one of the many relational models of the 'circuit of culture' (cf. Du Gay et al., 1997) offers huge potential. Use of such models provides a constant reminder of the powerful intersections of history, politics and economics that influence contemporary sport and its allied promotional culture. Likewise, they encourage us to explore the ways in which global media articulate consumption and identity and the potential crises of citizenship and sustainability that some scholars are predicting.

With respect to identity and the transformation of citizenship, Henry Giroux (2000: 19) asserts that: 'As culture becomes increasingly commercialized, the only type of citizenship that adult society offers to children is that of consumerism'. One only needs to consider the comments of James McNeal, a pioneer consultant on children's marketing, for confirmation of Giroux's concerns: 'The consumer embryo begins to develop during the first year of existence. Children begin their journey in infancy, and they certainly deserve consideration as consumers at that time' (cited in Barbaro et al., 2008). This may help explain why it is so difficult to challenge consumer capitalism's colonization of culture and to envision any alternatives. Unfortunately, concurrent with the transformation of identity from citizen to consumer, experts continue to caution of the consequences of ignoring issues of sustainability. While a plethora of documentaries, books and conferences alert us to the threat of climate change, Sut Jhally's documentary *Advertising and the End of the World* (1998), which advanced his earlier paper *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse* (2000), was the first to make clear links between capitalism's overproduction and overconsumption, advertising and the inevitability of resource scarcity, conflict and potential environmental disaster, all of which threaten humanity. These are grandiose, perhaps overwhelming, concerns and one might question their relevance within the sociology of sport. However, while the sociology of sport may be one small academic subdiscipline, it has its role to play in the collective effort to critique, challenge and resist the hegemony of consumer capitalism and the role of media, advertising and promotional culture in sustaining it. To this end, and in the spirit of C Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), we need to link

biography and history not only by *translating personal troubles into public issues* but also by *translating the complexity of global issues* so that they are made relevant within local contexts. Within the sociology of sport, and more specifically sport media studies, this requires us to: (1) map global media ownership patterns to understand how sport is being commodified within and across a range of media platforms; (2) critically examine global sport organizations (IOC, FIFA) and sport mega-events, to track vested political and economic interests that, as witnessed at the 2014 Men's World Cup, were so strong that FIFA and its major sponsor, Anheuser-Busch (Budweiser), forced the Brazilian government to change its alcohol laws; (3) be more proactive in reviewing and evaluating the limitations of a predominantly 'self-regulatory' system of advertising that effectively makes the state complicit in protecting the rights and interests of corporations above consumers; (4) highlight and explain the direct links between global sportswear companies like Nike, their celebrity athlete sponsorship salaries and the exploitation of labour; and, (5) continue to analyse how various identities (national, gender, race, sexuality and (dis)ability) are represented within contemporary media as part of the larger struggle for social justice and human rights.

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1. Author is also a Visiting Professor at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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