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COVID and Sport: In conversation with David Rowe

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This interview was conducted in October 2020 with the pandemic having moved its first wave and beginning second wave in northern hemisphere. The various codes had moved through a season of disruptions with the AFL Grand Final being played in Brisbane. As indicated in the exchange, this was thought to be unthinkable given the history of the code and its contract with the MCG. This piece reflects both the sense of that historical moment with the impact of the pandemic on sport in Australia and on what David Rowe has called, 'the media sports cultural complex'.

The effects of the pandemic continue to be felt in sport at all levels. These include periodic lockdowns impeding community sport activity, and rescheduling and relocating major national sport events, such as the first rugby league State of Origin match in 2021 being played in Townsville, North Queensland rather than Melbourne after another COVID-19 outbreak. At the global level, the determination by the International Olympic Committee to hold the pandemic-postponed 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and Paralympics in July-August 2021 in the face of a fourth COVID wave and widespread local opposition caused considerable controversy. Australia, a nation with some of the world's strictest inward and outward border controls on grounds of protecting its population from COVID-19, was nonetheless committed to sending a contingent of athletes to a country struggling to contain the virus. As debate about whether the Tokyo Games should be cancelled raged, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics came into view as, perhaps, the first post-pandemic Games, although one that might be subject to diplomatic boycotts on grounds of human rights. The pandemic has also hovered over successive rounds of media sport

rights negotiations, as sport organisations with depleted funds seek financial restoration and broadcasters try to repair their COVID-afflicted balance sheets, while new players, especially providers of Over-the-Top (OTT) services, make inroads into mediated sport.

HC: So, David just give us a quick introduction as to your background in the area of communications and media and sociology of sport.

DR: Yeah okay, so I did a PhD in sociology back in the UK and it was on popular music – the post – punk era, and so obviously I was connected to the media in that way. I got interested in the journalistic side of the coverage of popular culture in general, and then I kind of stumbled sideways into sport and media, and over the last few decades it has become my main game.

Largely, I think there seemed to be a greater hunger for new work in sport than in the popular music and rock music fields, which I think was more established at that point. That's been my interest – as a sociologist of culture, who's worked in media studies and cultural studies in an interdisciplinary way.

HC: So what's interesting to me of course is that the engagement with sport on its own is, in the past academic context a marginalised area, but maybe undersold in some instances within academia. I thought the idea of working in that area was interesting because of its lack of exposure within the academic framework. But then, when you combine it with media, you have a really potent kind of power there because of the imbrication of sport and media and its growth, especially in that latter half of the 20th century.

I'm just curious how that came together – with music, I can see the organic connection to media there; did sport just happen because you were thinking it would be an interesting dimension of media to look at, or were there other motivations that brought you to it?

DR: I guess it was a little bit of both. I was a real music freak and less so a sports aficionado, but I did like sport. And my first monograph was called *Popular Cultures, Rock Music, Sport and the Politics of Pleasure* (1995), because having done my thesis on music, I could see increasingly the connections to sport. They have a lot in common, obviously live performance, for example, and audiences and all that.

And then because I was teaching media, and the news media in particular, they sort of came together in some way. So, I eventually came to the position that media and sport are inseparable, they are interpenetrated. I have a concept I've framed, I've patented, the media sports cultural complex, which is my way of trying to explain or describe the way that sport and media converged as two great institutions of modernity that have needed each other.

And that's become really clear to me – it's become even clearer during the pandemic, where not only was there no sport, but there was no mediation of sport for a period – live mediation – and that has caused a lot of us to reflect.

HC: That's a great segue into the theme of the issue in which this interview will feature. The idea of this issue is premised on COVID and COVID related problems. So, to frame up the theme again – and I like very much the connection you've made between sport and art, because we could do another interview on the COVID impact on artistic production and artistic practice.

But it's a very interesting point of contact between sport and art, and that idea of live performance and what COVID has done to destroy the fabric, if you like, of these practices that depend on and engage with a live audience.

So I began with Raymond Williams' three pronged definition of ideology: ideology as a belief system, the Marxist inversion of ideology as false consciousness, in which we get false notions of how people are brought into their various belief systems. The third aspect of his triadic definition of ideology was ideology as a system of representation. And so here I thought was an ideal way to frame up the mediation of a pandemic theme and in this instance, the idea of the points of contact between sport and media and the way COVID has impacted on that relationship.

If you could start with a brief introduction to how you see the most salient kinds of impact COVID has had on the mediation of sport.

DR: Sure, happy to do that, but I'll just make one quick point about Raymond Williams, who was, as you may know, a TV critic himself. And he wrote a very good essay on sport actually, on television, called *There's Always the Sport* (1989). He was looking at British television at the time, but he wasn't much taken with it. He said that one of the really good reasons to have a television is to watch live sport, so Raymond Williams was onto sport early on.

What the pandemic has done, I think, is reveal to us a whole series of facets, characteristics, of the relationship between sport and its mediation. But if you think about this as a coming together of media and sport in the live spectacle, then the sudden withdrawal of that – it was kind of… I say it was sudden, but it was perhaps, in a couple of different ways. You might recall a strange period in the early part of the pandemic when there was live sport happening, but there were no crowds, so it was kind of a completely different audience experience; viewer experience.

Then it went to kind of black screen for a while and there was no live sport at all, either physically or mediated, and then it came back, with no crowds.

And then bit by bit there was a change, because people really found the crowd-less live mediated sport experience pretty deadly—most people, I think. Then there were a whole series of techniques brought into to try and simulate the existence of the crowd. And that ranged from, you know, digitally sampling previous matches, sports contests and then trying to connect them, match them, indeed, to what was happening on screen.

There were cardboard cut-outs of people in the crowd with the faces sometimes of famous people, like the notorious Dominic Cummings from British politics. In some cases, there were experiments with the use of Zoom, as we are talking

now. You and I could be projected onto giant screens in a stadium, as a goal is scored, going Yay! Celebrating, etc.

So, that really opened up the whole topic for me, with one of the questions being, what is the role of the crowd in the television sports spectacle? It seems to me that, it's not a particularly novel insight, but it was emphasised at this moment, that the crowd—the paying spectators—are kind of like extras, they're actors; they pay for privilege, interestingly, but without them, the spectacle for the home viewer is much diminished.

And I could even use, perhaps a little pretentiously, the idea of the crowd as a Greek chorus in the theatre, where they're kind of participating in the way which used to happen in classic theatre, where the chorus would pass moral or ethical judgement on what was happening on the stage.

HC: So the salient point here is that the way in which the audience gets excluded in the live broadcast, brings a silence that weighs heavily on what the spectator at home watching on the television gets from the experience itself.

A couple of questions proceed out of that. Do you think that this is really as special as those early sports broadcasts, in which one didn't have any sense of an audience, but from which you could hear audibly what was being said by players and coaches? – I recall a commentator who wanted to take recordings of those early matches and thought that they should be archived at the National Film and Sound Archives because they were so unusual as recordings of contemporary sport.

Is this significant, in terms of the historical moment, or is this something that we'll just kind of forget fairly quickly as we move back once normal services resumed?

DR: I think ultimately, people will want the big spectacle back. You know, the noisy, carnivalesque experience. But it has been quite fascinating, as you say, to kind of pare it down, to hear the sounds of say bodies colliding in rugby league – that's quite scary in some ways.

And I've actually written about that previously when I've talked about violence in sport, and the way that I think many of us who are in the audience don't actually really think that these are real –ultimately these are real people, with real bodies slamming into others and causing each other damage. Sport is almost like a video game and this mode of viewing has certainly taken away from that, because you do get the sense that these are real human beings here, with all their flaws because a big problem as you indicated is the swearing – the abuse that goes on, that goes on in the crowd too, when there's a crowd there, but certainly between the players, certainly in male contact sport.

There are, I think real elements of interest in getting up that close and personal, and it reminded me of an excellent film about the retired French footballer now, coach Zinedine Zidane – a film called *Zinedine Zidane; A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) – which does actually use some of those techniques. One of the things that I remember of that film, which I think has something like 23 cameras just tracking Zidane with directional microphones and all that, and you can hear the

padding of his feet, you know, going across the grass – thump, thump, thump. And other players – thump, thump, thump, thump. And a bit of ambient noise and that sort of thing, and then in comes, talking of art before, the dreamy music of the Glaswegian electro rock band Mogwai. That film also plays on this idea of actuality sound – *cinema verité*, which we've talked about before in terms of the film about wrestling, *La Lutte* (1961), which you alerted me to, which I didn't know about, and thank you – I've been watching it, and have really enjoyed that aspect of it.

However, so that kind of experience I don't think is what most people want from the sport spectacle much of the time, partly because not everybody is that glued to it – they're kind of wandering by, other people are watching it, they're channel surfing, you know, they're kind of drawn in to the spectacle. Are you going to be drawn into the sound of a couple of people in an empty stadium swearing at each other, or are you going to be drawn in by the movement, and the sound of the crowd, the colour and other things? That was a rhetorical question, but my answer is, I think most people will be more attracted to the spectacle than to the pared down version.

HC: Are you aware of any research with regards to what's happened to the televised versions of, say, our major codes like the NRL and the AFL at this point in time? Are the ratings close to where they should be, or are they way down or are they even in excess of where they were?

DR: The only research we've got are ratings at this stage, and so I did have a look around what's happening around the world in baseball, for example, in the States; basketball, association football – called soccer here – and the Australian games, AFL, A-League, and NRL. I think that this has tended to be, very broadly, in a global sense, a spike – an immediate spike in viewing – big in some cases… 100 to 200 per cent increases, like really big in some sports, like in Major League Baseball, I think also in – I know your favourite sport of ice hockey, I noticed big increases there in ice hockey too. For a period – and then it's been noted that in the NRL, in rugby league in Australia, it's dropped off bit by bit, and I think that's kind of to be expected. So people – even people who didn't like it that much, or thought they didn't and kind of missed it but – many of the people, not everyone, did miss the sport – that is, live sport on television a bit.

People had kind of built up a bit of a deficit. I think once that binge impulse was over, people have been a bit more selective; are they interested in a game? Is it going well or is it a blowout, an uneven contest? Does it really matter – is there something better on Netflix to watch, or Hulu or Stan?

I think the evidence at the moment is there is a big surge, and then while it is still early days in some parts of the world, but showing a bit of a levelling off. Now it might then go back up again as you get to the so-called business end of the season, when you've got finals and that kind of thing. But at the moment it's been very positive, and given that in particular, free-to-air television and to a lesser degree subscription television are deeply dependent on live sport, they were desperate to get it back on, just as the sports were desperate to get back into action, given that the media are their major paymaster.

HC: So I guess it exposed that particular point pretty explicitly, that is, how dependent these sports codes were on television and the television deals. We don't often hear about these over the years, but this experience tends to drive that relationship home, that the sort of cultural economy of this particular part of our lives is entirely exemplified there. They're so wrapped up together that they can't exist without one another, or at least sport can't exist without this television subsidy beginning to play its role in such an emphatic way.

I'm getting a sense, just to allude to the last part of what you said, now heading into the finals, is this going to be a situation where fans will think, oh yeah, the finals, you know, they're going to get really kind of interested and ramped up again?

But is this going to be a kind of a *faux*, furphy type experience? Is it really the finals, whether its AFL or NRL? Is it going to be the finals as we knew the finals?

DR: Interesting point, and just before that, I think one of the facets of contemporary sport that has come out is certainly just how many games sportspeople play. Of course, much driven by television. I mean, interestingly there are rather less so in major Australian sports, you know, AFL, NRL and A-League, the men's sport and we should also add leading women's sports such as netball. They don't play huge numbers of games compared to European footballers, baseballers, basketballers, ice hockey players and so on … so that's one thing that's come through, so they're long seasons, there's lots of games, and lots of competitions and it's gruelling for the players.

Now what's happened is that the seasons have been concertinaed, so the pressure on the players is greater, even for those who play a comparatively small number of games, they're doing it in a hurry.

And then there's the question, well, in a curtailed season, in AFL, you know, shorter matches, they've lopped a bit off the quarters; will it be regarded as not a valid – an inauthentic win if you win.

My answer to that would be, people will really care about it because of the psychology, the mass psychology of the sport fan. If you're a fan, then it's my team and you always want them to win and people are always making excuses when they lose for why they should have won, and they were robbed and it was the ref's fault or whatever.

But people will really want to win. Now most of them, of course, can't win. And so, they're more likely to disparage the quality of the competition, ironically, when they're out of it. So, my prediction is that the winners will say this is not only comparable to other wins, but given the adversity, this is an even greater achievement of our wonderful team. And all the others will say, oh well, not really, you know. You didn't play as many games and will tend to disparage it, but that is in the mass psychology of fandom, which is to 'big-up' your own team and disparage the others.

HC: Yeah, well certainly one of the issues that came up for me as I mentioned in my note, Montreal Canadians were languishing in like 10th or 11th in their division. They knocked off the Pittsburgh Penguins in four matches out of five

and there they are now in the play-offs.

And I was delighted for a moment, and then I thought ... hmm ... how did this happen? I mean the Penguins were so much more talented than this particular version of the Montreal team.

Anyway, this is all beside the point, but I just found myself divided, if you like, between my genetically oriented feelings for my team, on the one hand, and my real understanding of the current situation, which is that this is not business as usual at all.

This is an anomalous situation, and I couldn't really feel – well, we'll see what happens. It's early days, but that genetic disposition may take over.

DR: Sure, if I could just jump in there, I've written about this quite a lot, I call it the split discourse of sport. And so, if you think about when people, especially when they're selling an Olympic Games, they go back to the Olympic ideals, so it's not about the winning, it's the taking part. It's ennobling, it's honest and open competition, and may the best person win and all that. That's the noble discourse of sport.

The other side is, my team right or wrong, I don't care how we win, as long as we win. I don't mind winning ugly, I don't really care, famous scenes of Maradona and the 'Hand of God', one might recall as an English person, you know. But Maradona didn't think he'd done anything wrong. Famously he scored a goal with his hand rather than his foot or head, which is supposed to be not the way to do it.

But – and that is that kind of clash, and it's happened to me, just while we're on the sports trivia, my own hometown team in the UK, Plymouth Argyle, they're going up from the fourth to the third tier of football in England, and they have been promoted on a curtailed season. So, what happened – this is I think important given the pandemic – what happened is that British football has the Premier League, which everybody knows about, all that money from the Middle East and the United States, television stations and all that. And then the Championship, which is the one beneath it, that has fairly big clubs. And they just had what's called the richest sports contest in the world. The richest sports contest was the play-off for two of the two Championship teams, to go from the Championship to the Premier League. And that single contest was apparently worth, I think it's 300 million pounds or more – double that in dollars. That is what you get by having one season in the Premier League.

Then you go down to League One and League Two. And they had to curtail their season. When the lockdown came, they couldn't afford to re-start the season. So, the season's gone. And the reason is that they couldn't afford without crowds to open the stadium, and they couldn't afford the COVID-19 testing that was required.

These are not rich clubs, they couldn't afford it. My team happened to be in the promotion position when they curtailed the season. So, thank you pandemic, my team was promoted.

Was I uneasy about it? Initially, yes. I wanted to see them play out the season and win, that was the noble side of me, the Apollonian side.

HC: The Dionysian, right.

DR: The Dionysian, pleasure, give me pleasure! The other side of myself said great, we've been promoted! And the season's gone, let's talk about next season, which is about to start. So, we've had a similar experience.

HC: Right, okay. To switch tracks have you noticed any particular kind of way in which individuals on these teams have now changed in their demeanour with regards to when they are interviewed, after a game, or have been asked to say something about their experiences under COVID. Have – the profiles of individual players – their comportment or their behaviour, has that shifted in your mind?

DR: Yeah that's a good question, and because the return, in particular in Australia with rugby league, as we've discussed, the last to stop playing, the first to restart, and then a whole series of controversies around the construction of the bubble. Everyone, you know, this is only allowed because they were in a bubble and then people keep breaking out of the bubble, including the most experienced and high profile coach in the NRL, Wayne Bennett, at a restaurant Grappa in Norton Street, Leichhardt, which I've actually been to – just thought I'd throw that in.

And it's actually not the kind of restaurant that you go to if you want a quiet meal, I think one would tend to be noticed, an upmarket Italian.

I think those players and the sportspeople have had to be a bit humble. There are quite a few people, some of whom are sports fans, who actually don't think they should be playing because of the danger that they're posing to themselves and to others.

So, they've had to kind of pull back a bit, and also they have been very careful that they don't, for example, complain about someone's misbehaviour and then find themselves caught, you know, going for a haircut in a barber shop run by a bikie gang, which has happened to one of the Brisbane Broncos players recently.

So, I think demeanour has been important here, one could say certainly in the richer male sports, a certain arrogance has marked the behaviour and conduct of many of the players, some at least. And I think they've had to be careful about that, because they have been given the right to ply their trade in a kind of setting where others have not been allowed to do that.

I think one of the ways they've got around that is by representing themselves as an essential service, that for the psychological health of the nation, they had to be out there doing their thing. There has been a bit of a side of that.

HC: Yes, I've been interested to see the way individuals have responded to particularly the queries by journalists, you know, as to their particular sense of the situation as a whole. The version of the way in which they have to deal with

their isolation from family, other issues that have come up – for their own mental health situations that are now able to be talked about more openly than would have been the case maybe 10 or 15 years ago.

So, I'm getting a sense that they are more than the sportspeople than they have been, say, even in sense of when they were allowed to expand a little bit beyond that identity, now it's even more the case because of the unusual situation that they're in, and the way in which they can be more human, if you like, around some of these issues. This is apart from those that revert to type and do what NRL players traditionally do which is get into a scandal of some kind, and that goes on.

I've noticed that also, apart from your allusion to the Netflix television shows, like the one about Michael Jordan and the other one you mentioned about the French player, it seems to be that there's also this predilection for sport individuals to try to find other gigs.

Have you been onto that at all, been witness to our sporting identities actually opening up and doing other things, making themselves available for different kinds of opportunities to I guess expand their options in a situation where their options I guess are narrowing and more limited?

DR: Well, I think there's always been this impulse to expand the range of their activities, and that goes to being in the media themselves, I've done work on this before, something which actually gets professional sports journalists quite annoyed, which is the ghosted or heavily edited opinion piece by a leading footballer or an ex-player moving into the media without any prior training or experience. There's the whole area of, obviously, advertising and branding around that. There's setting up your own foundation and doing charity work, there's been that too.

This has been a particular time where there's been pressure on professional sportspeople to, as you say, humanise themselves, and you know, this catch-cry, 'we're all in this together', kind of thing.

And to admit, if they are having, say, personal problems or psychological issues with loneliness and that kind of thing, and there has been – it's certainly been tough. If you're in the NBA, currently you're kind of trapped in Disneyland, in a bubble, which I don't know, maybe a lot of kids would quite like to be trapped in that. But these bubbles have emerged and as we've said, people have been breaking out. The New Zealand Warriors team, for example, have had to leave New Zealand and they don't know when they're going to get back.

One thing that did occur to me, though, thinking about this issue, just going back to the idea of the certain psychological fragility that might arise from being isolated or away from home – Steve Redhead, the late Steve Redhead, who's written quite a lot around rock and sport culture, has this idea of accelerated culture. If you think about the acceleration of sport culture within living memory, Australian cricket teams used to get on a liner in order to go to Europe to play in an Ashes series or another direction. People would travel by boat, and they

would be away for months from their families, because in those days it was uncommon to bring their family with them, before the time of jet travel, that kind of thing.

One of the things I suppose we've got used to in this period, increasingly, is the idea of gender roles changing a bit, we've mostly talked about male sport here because women's sport has taken a very long time to really make a dent on male sport. Ironically, or bitterly ironically, it was doing so just as the pandemic hit, and there has been a sense that women's sport has been more disposable than men's, because it doesn't make as much money, it doesn't have the big crowds, that kind of thing. But in the old days, professional sportspeople were overwhelmingly men, and there were away from, could be, at the international level, away from their family for months.

This is something that's happened in a sport like AFL, which I think is an interesting development, a sport that has been heavily concentrated in Melbourne, particularly in Victoria, with obviously it's become a national sport, but it did start off as the Victorian Football League, and became national, obviously, with a strong following in Western Australia and in South Australia, to a lesser degree in Queensland and New South Wales. I would say, if you're an AFL footballer playing for a Melbourne team, you've got used to sleeping in your own bed quite a lot. So, it's been quite a shock for those players to be taken out of their usual environment.

HC: Not to mention that, possibly for the first time ever, the Grand Final will be played not in Melbourne, not at the MCG.

DR: Almost certainly, yeah, yeah, and of course all the other shiny new stadia paid for out of the public purse are interested. Is it going to be Brisbane, is it going to be Adelaide, or is it going to be Perth? They've all got nice shiny new stadia just waiting – or even Sydney.

HC: That would have been unthinkable, I think, even there was a point where there was some challenging the idea that maybe the Final could be somewhere other than the MCG, and it was shot down in flames very, very quickly.

DR: I think the current contract for the Grand Final goes out to the middle of this century, so …

HC: Yeah, well I was going to track back just to the individuals again, and is it a little bit odd that of all people to become someone with a degree of moral upstanding, that Nick Kyrgios could actually tell someone else the right way to live and behave?

DR: Ah well yes, now one of the things we're getting into here, obviously because it's a media journal, is what's the kind of media standing of someone like Nick Kyrgios. I mean clearly everybody knows him, or most people know who he is – he's a tennis player and you know, he gets in trouble every now and again – that's what most people would know.

And the only reason they would know this if they're not tennis fans – because real tennis fans are a minority of the population, quite a small minority, the dyed-in-the-wool ones. But we all know Nick Kyrgios because he appears in the sports news – well the TV news, the newspapers – because sport is always in the news in some way.

Now you have both the kind of traditional media, legacy media, as well as online and social and mobile, so there are lots of places to find out what Nick Kyrgios thinks or doesn't think, or what he's done or hasn't done. So, the idea that someone like Nick Kyrgios, who in the world of sport which likes to create characters who are good and bad, you know, the good guys and the bad guys. And Nick Kyrgios has very much put himself as the kind of 'bad boy'.

I've written about Dennis Rodman, you know, the NBA basketballer who you might recall was doing a bit of outsourced diplomacy in North Korea. But the bad boy characters – people kind of quite like this, going back to our argument around sport as a form of drama or melodrama; we like noble characters, we like rise and fall, we like bad people – all that. Well in the case of Nick Kyrgios, normally the 'bad guy' he's, as people said, has taken this opportunity of the pandemic to berate others such as Novak Djokovic, the leading current player for, you know, not taking the pandemic seriously, and so on.

So, someone like Nick Kyrgios can become a kind of moral entrepreneur in the terms of Howard Becker or Stanley Cohen; using this moment to gain some kind of moral high ground, which is quite an achievement.

HC: Yeah I thought that was extraordinary, and if I understood the way the media kind of treated it, it was like they could express some degree of reflection of Kyrgios' new found moral turpitude, if that's what it is.

DR: Well it's the opposite – he already had the moral turpitude, the bad stuff, now he's elevated, now he's saintly.

HC: He's kind of reverted, and I think there was this expression of that reversion at the same time as a degree of shock on the part of the media to find that it could, in fact, happen at all. But I guess it's the extreme nature of pandemics too, where black is white, and things can invert and revert to very different things than they once were.

DR: Sorry – if I could just jump in there, because if you think about – we're also talking about the role of the sports journalist here, of the commentariat, which is important. So why do we care what they think about Nick Kyrgios, that kind of thing, because – and Umberto Eco wrote about this in *Travels in Hyperreality*, you know, this whole idea of sports discourse – talk about sport, sport squared, talk about talk about talk about sport, and sport cubed, and so on …. So, one of the connections we've talked a lot about live sport here, is actually only the kind of tip of the pyramid of the media sports cultural complex I talk about. The live sport is just the odd moment. But around it, you have to fill space, media space. The largest sports organisation in Australia as we speak is run by the AFL – AFL Media has more sports journalists and sports media people than any other organisation.

HC: That is substantial.

DR: It's got itself into trouble, you might know, a story recently where something that was said about the pandemic, about a member, the wife of a leading AFL player, Trent Cotchin. She, Brooke Cotchin, was supposed to be in lockdown, breached lockdown, went to a beauty salon. A journalist, we were told, working for AFL Media, which is supposed to be independent of the organisation, re-tweeted something about it, and got in trouble, was stood down. Then had to be reinstated, including support from the woman, Mrs Cotchin, who said that she didn't think he should have been stood down either.

So one of the areas, importantly, here – there's a pandemic side to this, but again, here is yet another example of the pandemic revealing something about contemporary sports culture. In this case, it is revealing that people and organisations who call themselves journalists and part of the news media, are actually run or owned by sport itself, are not independent or autonomous. They can be compromised.

HC: That's a great point, and I did become aware of the controversy, but I hadn't had time to analyse it or to think it through those prisms of the organisational aspects of how these media organisations do link into their masters, if you like. And how the fault lines of dependence and independence get revealed in these little critical moments that can occur. That is a really good example of that, and highlights the dilemma around these organisations and the way in which they want to influence their media representations for their larger publics.

Then again, the pandemic reminds me of that traditional exercise you do in theatre, where you're asked to improvise and given a limp, you know, or a hand that doesn't work or something, you know, is meant to bring out your character in a particular way. Well, the pandemic seems to be that added thing that kind of begins to disturb quite significantly. We know and feel its disturbance more generally, across everything, but then to home in on this particular kind of example of sport and media, begins to create these fault lines where perhaps these things would have slid under the carpet, as it were, and not been noticed nearly as much.

DR: Well I think that's a really important point about the pandemic. It hasn't caused any of these fault lines, it's exposed them, I think that's the key thing. In so many ways, it's like a giant example of game theory, you know. If you were gaming, you would say okay, you know, the worst is going to happen. All of the things that, by the way, people were supposed to do around pandemics and didn't do, which you know, we're supposed to have – I read many years ago, I used to teach a subject on technology and social change, and I used to use Laurie Garrett's book *The Coming Plague* (1995), which makes quite clear that the world has to be ready for something like COVID-19 … and clearly wasn't.

And certainly, global sport, which should have been gaming a problem like this, certainly didn't. So, there is a whole issue, I think, around here that, what has the pandemic taught us? It's taught us a lot about the interdependency of media and sport.

It's taught us one thing, which is that neither organisation has kind of deep pockets, or has made provision for the so-called rainy day. It seems to me that it was a bit like we suddenly discovered that major sports with billion-dollar budgets were actually on payday loans. The payday loan was the next tranche of media rights money they were going to get, and once that was stopped, then that became a problem. So, it's really taught us all kinds of things or emphasised things that we either suspected or knew already, it's really opened things up for scrutiny.

HC: Well that's a great note to end on. Thanks!

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