



[THE VCR AND THE TIVO BOX – RECLAIMING TECHNOLOGY](#) by Christine Geraghty

[THE ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE IS IRRELEVANT](#) by Toby Miller

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Sixty years ago, television's first great theorist, [Dallas Smythe, described sport](#) as 'a representation of the human condition,' an 'image of skillful use of trained bodies ... or gross sex aggression ... competing for survival without the benefit of accepted law ... a form of folk-drama ... a sardonic morality story, or perhaps a means of reassuring cynical viewers that life is fixed from the start'. Therein lay its mass appeal.

We could write a history of TV technology articulated around this topic. The first network broadcast in the US was a 1945 football game with President Harry S Truman in the stadium, binding together sport, politics, and corporate power in a symbolic whirl that presaged the central role of sport in the emergent TV system. In Canada, the stimulus to establishing television came from the fact that people were already viewing sport from across the border. In the UK, the first slow-motion replay in 1962 came during coverage of the Grand National horse race. The 1970 World Cup of men's football in Mexico was the first major event carried via satellite in color. Color television enabled snooker to become a TV sport—in black and white, it had been too difficult to distinguish the balls being potted. And a boxing bout between Frank Bruno and Mike Tyson [inaugurated pay-per-view in 1996](#) .

[As Garry Whannel explains](#), technological change made televised sport increasingly [manageable and increasingly spectacular](#). An initial model that replicated the view from a grandstand seat changed in light of the capacity to flit around, above, and outside stadia. This and other refinements took place over half a century via such innovations as parabolic reflector microphones, mobile cameras, color, video recording and editing, caption generation, computer-aided design and drafting, video amplifiers to adjust the framing of an existing shot, international switching grids, chalkboards, and cameras in stumps, nets, helmets, and dirigibles.

The story is not just about technical innovation, of course. It is also to do with public-sector creativity being seized upon by private-sector mimesis. Many sports have been built up by state broadcasters, then exploited by capitalist companies too thick and indolent to innovate themselves. This happened with basketball in the US, which was pioneered on television by San Francisco's public station; cricket and rugby union around the world (developed as spectator sports by public networks in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand); and football across Europe.

Earlier this month, the [English Premier League of men's football announced](#) that two companies, BT and Sky, will spend US\$7.9 billion between them for the right to televise matches over three seasons, starting in 2016-17. That's 70% more than the existing rate. It puts the League's TV value ahead of Major League Baseball, comparable to the National Basketball Association, and behind only the National Football League in domestic rights deals—this in a country with a population a fifth of the size of the US. It's bigger than all three when foreign territories are added (an additional \$4.3 billion).

[The New York Times says](#) the new deal happened because 'sports programming is one of the few remaining television categories to consistently attract large audiences'. That's not true.

In the week that all this was being squared away, [sport's share of television viewing in the UK](#) was

6.23%; well behind hobbies, news, documentaries, and other genres. Last month, Sky Sports 1 had 0.99% of the TV audience. All its channels combined, from drama to news to football to cricket and so on, commanded, if that's the right word, a total of 8.3%. [For its part, BT Sport secured](#) 0.39% of viewers.

Twenty years ago, [Rupert Murdoch said](#) his companies 'use sports as a 'battering ram'' to obtain subscribers to cable/satellite. Today, a struggle is underway between competing capitalist interests to obtain consumer subscriptions for broadband and telephony via that strategy.

In the last two auctions for TV rights to the Premier League, his UK firm Sky's principal rival for broadband and telephony customers, BT, started up an entire television network dedicated to sports, mainly football, in order to secure these subscriptions. The result has been an extraordinary wholesale price increase for TV coverage, as [evidenced by this handy graph from the Grauniad](#).

Here's a clue to the real story, [as told to you by BT](#):

As a BT broadband customer, you can add BT Sport to your Sky service for free.

Switch your broadband to BT and you'll enjoy BT Sport on Sky digital satellite service for free – worth £162.

Don't want to switch your broadband? No problem. You can get BT Sport on your Sky service for just £13.50 a month.

Despite sport's importance in television history, this isn't about gigantic ratings. [It's a contest between wealthy corporations](#) set on decimating the other's core business: broadband and telephony subscriptions. TV is the signifier, not the referent.

When capital competes, the bodies of footballers and viewers are even less relevant than appears to be the case. Their meeting points on Saturday and Sunday afternoons are proxies for investors and executives looking for consumers to use wifi and smart phones *their way*.

Capitalism really is crazy.



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