

Missing in Action: Quality TV and Canonization

"Quality Sports TV"?

Branden Buehler, University of Southern California

In the rare instances in which “quality” and sports television have been linked together, the “quality” in question has tended to be of a very particular variety – a reflective, cinematic kind that hardly resembles the bulk of programming that might be classified as sports television. For both those inside and outside of academia, the embodiment of such “quality sports TV” has been the sports documentary, primarily of the sort produced by NFL Films, HBO and ESPN. That this type of programming is so far removed from most sports television is, of course, no coincidence, for these documentaries are marketed as being distinctly unlike most sports television in the traditional sense, thus allowing HBO one more excuse to trot out its “not TV” slogan. However, the exclusive pairing of prestige with the sports documentary overlooks other ways sports fans and journalists discuss “quality,” particularly in regards to both live coverage of sporting events and the shoulder programming that surrounds these events.

One recent discussion that illuminates the numerous factors that can enter into these alternative formulations of “quality sports TV” has involved soccer television rights. Over the last decade, ESPN has earned increasing numbers of plaudits for its soccer broadcasts – including its coverage of both the 2010 and 2014 editions of the World Cup. However, in 2018 FOX will take over the US World Cup rights from ESPN, thus triggering a certain amount of anxiety within the media and amongst soccer fans. As *Sports Illustrated*'s Grant Wahl commented, there is a heavy fear that FOX will be unable to match the “smart, high-quality coverage” provided by ESPN. What exactly does this “quality” entail, though? Contrasting the discourses surrounding the two networks, it appears to be a “quality” quite different than the cinematic “quality” associated with sports documentaries. Instead, it is a “quality” primarily consisting of what might be termed “attention” and “authenticity.”

In terms of “attention,” ESPN has been consistently commended for throwing many resources behind its soccer properties – hiring numerous high-profile analysts, building lavish sets and surrounding games with hours upon hours of shoulder programming. FOX, on the other hand, has been chastised for its history of threadbare soccer coverage, with the now-defunct FOX Soccer Channel having become particularly notorious for low-production values. “Authenticity,” meanwhile, largely involves attempts by ESPN to serve diehard fans rather than novices. Through the early 2000s, ESPN was often criticized for its attempt to treat soccer as a novelty, employing American announcers either unable or unwilling to discuss the sport with much depth. Over time, though, the network made a decision to cater to educated fans and began filling its airtime with skilled, knowledgeable broadcasters from abroad. This new trend in hiring has not just included veteran play-by-play announcers, but also unique studio personalities; indeed, the most widely praised commentators from the 2014 World Cup may have been Premier League manager Roberto Martinez, credited for sophisticated tactical discussions, and the quirky British duo Roger Bennett and Michael Davies,

whose irreverence proved so popular that they were recently wooed away to NBCSN. FOX, meanwhile, has already drawn scorn for its decision to lead its 2018 World Cup coverage with play-by-play announcer Gus Johnson, an American best known for calling basketball and football games – thus reminding fans of ESPN's failed attempts to cater to casual viewers.

Undoubtedly, one reason that these alternative notions of “quality sports TV” are overlooked in discussions of television “quality” – and a major reason why sports television tends to get ignored, more generally – involves a lack of access. This is not necessarily an intuitive argument, for televised sports are relatively ubiquitous on both major networks and a wide variety of cable channels. However, live sports coverage, including related shoulder programming, is still very much ephemeral in an age where so much media has become instantly and permanently accessible. Most of the soccer coverage mentioned above, for example, is now unavailable to viewers. If you wanted to re-visit ESPN's acclaimed *World Cup Tonight*, a nightly World Cup discussion show, you would be out of luck. Academics studying sports television, then, will not only find it much easier to study sports documentaries like ESPN's *30 for 30* films because they conform to traditional notions of television “quality,” but also because they are relatively easy to access using services like Netflix. The only solution for scholars interested in live sporting events as well as pregame and postgame programming, then, is to create their own recordings – thus presenting hurdles both technical and organizational, as I can attest given the many hours of draft television I've accumulated. This continuing reliance on private collections, seemingly a decreasing necessity for many in media studies, means that most sports television, like *World Cup Tonight*, will forever be confined to personal canons. Public canons, meanwhile, will continue to be dominated by content like the *30 for 30* documentaries – thus keeping the discussion of “quality sports TV” one-dimensional.