Taking the global sport of Formula 1 (F1) motor racing as a sustained case study, Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry examines how the relationship between the sport and the media has evolved in this new digital environment. Starting with a map of the political economy of F1 and its complex commercial relationship with sponsors, investors, and the media, shows how new media owners have aimed to use social and digital media strategies to deepen the global reach of a television sport previously thought of by many as in decline.

Drawing on original interviews with key stakeholders across the media and sports industry, including journalists, broadcasters, and those working within F1, this book places the sport within its broader historical context, identifying the central role that the media, particularly television has played in its history, structure, and governance. This book also explores the range of media representations and key narratives that the sport offers and how its relationship with other television genres, such as the Netflix series Drive to Survive is impacting the nature of the sport and its audience.

As sport enters a new age of digital engagement, this investigation of the intense relationship between F1 and the creative industries shows us not just how the media are changing, but also that what we understand by the term “sport” is also being altered.

This is a penetrating case-study of media-sport relations in the context of major technical, cultural, and economic change. Drawing on a wide range of sources, Boyle and Haynes offer a hugely informative but also enjoyable account of the challenges and the opportunities surrounding Formula 1 as it undergoes inter-related shifts in the terms of its organization and in the scale and character of its media visibility. The authors get ‘inside’ their topic with clarity and depth.

— John Corner, Professor of Communications, University of Leeds

Formula 1 has witnessed a huge transformation in recent years. Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry successfully unpicks the way in which the changing global media landscape has both shaped and communicated the sport’s growth. Whether through the Netflix Effect or social media’s ability to turn any fan into a pundit, influencer or content creator, this book explores the complex factors impacting the way in which the narratives and storylines around Formula 1 are built. Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry makes essential reading for any student of global sports media or Formula 1. Uniquely, it explains the media revolution which has taken place in one of world most sophisticated sporting competitions.

— Mark Gallagher, Formula 1 Executive and Managing Director, Performance Insights

Raymond Boyle is Professor of Communications and Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow. He has written widely on sports, journalism and the media. He is Joint Managing Editor of the international journal Media, Culture and Society.

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Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry
Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes

Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry

Sport and the Media in the Platform Age
For Noelle, Lauren and Liam (RB)
For Susan, Alice and Adam (RH)
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INTRODUCTION: RE-INVENTING SPORT

Inside the world of Formula One, things are rarely as they seem.


Television: Back to the Future

Journalist Richard Williams spent a year, getting inside Formula 1 (F1) back in the mid 1990s. His analysis, suggested a sporting and business culture shrouded in secrecy and misdirection, with the media often complicit in this process. A quarter of a century later it remains a sporting culture that continues to intrigue and attract massive media attention. However, the relationship between the media and sport has never been one of equal partners. While both parties have often derived benefit from the marriage, over the years, one partner, television has come to dominate the media sport nexus. We’ve argued before about the various staging posts in this relationship, often as new waves of technological innovation disrupt established patterns of media production, distribution and consumption (Boyle & Haynes, 2004, 2009). In truth it is often only in retrospect that periods of relative stability in the media sport relationship appear and these moments often get reconstructed as some form of a ‘golden age’ of sport. They are often characterised as a more innocent time, with less media intrusion, often less commercially orientated and certainly less complex than the contemporary media sporting environment. Of course, such discourses, often deeply embedded in sporting narratives, offer only a partial insight into sports long relationship with various forms of media and commercial drivers and can obscure as much as they illuminate.

That we are living through a moment of profound change in the media landscape is beyond dispute and its impact is being felt well beyond sport. Dan McGolpin, a senior BBC executive and Controller of the corporation’s iPlayer platform argues that:

We are heading towards another era [one defined by the migration of viewers from broadcast television, via channels, to] internet-delivered television…That transition is taking a period of time, but that’s the journey we are on. (Harvey, 2022: 74)
It is a journey with profound implications for sport. What these are and how these are being played out across the production, distribution and consumption of a sport such as Formula One (F1) are at the core of this book.

As discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the media and television in particular has always played a central role in the transformation of elite sport. The nineteenth century, saw the creation of sporting heroes by the newspaper industry, while the immediacy of live commentary on radio helped create national media events, and then, most profoundly, the reshaping of sport by television since the 1950s and 1960s. Change in the media-sport relationship has been constant, with the erosion of strictly limited television and radio, for example in the UK, from the late 1980s, disrupting the established media sport relationships with the arrival of pay-TV. The arrival and growth of the internet in the 1990s and video sharing channels a decade later add further complexity and finally the arrival of the platform economy of more recent times that was supposed to kill linear television, but has in fact led to internet delivered television across multiple, often mobile devices.

Almost by stealth, something has happened to sport along the way through a combination of this whirlwind of media change (and the accompanying money flowing to the elite end of sport), and also, as we see throughout the book, major changes in the patterns of how the audience consume, engage and pay for media content. This transformative change is more evident in some sports than others. In the UK, football, in many ways has been at the leading edge of change and is the most high-profile chameleon in this respect. As Aaron Gourley, Editor of the trade *fcbusiness* magazine suggests:

> Clubs have transformed into sporting and business empires that stretch far beyond their local footprint. Many are complex, multi-functional, multi-national businesses which employ the very best people across performance and business. Many do not see themselves as sporting organisations anymore – they are entertainment operations where audience figures in Asia or the accumulative spend of a fan in the US counts. These clubs have a complex understanding of how people interact with them, how much they spend and their purchasing habits and brand desires that make them hugely valuable to potential sponsors. (Gourley, 2021: 11)

On this journey sport has shifted from being less popular cultural ritual to a more consumer-based media product, funded through a mixture of private equity, State backed owners, international sports franchise entrepreneurs and almost anyone but the original ‘legacy’ fans who are left to simply consume the live and mediated ‘product’. This shift, specifically in the UK from sport
as a cultural form to a media-based entertainment product is now raising issues around the governance of sport, the impact of ownership structures on competitive balance, and perhaps more fundamentally, who or what is sport for in the age of digital streaming.

The Sporting Reveal

Sometimes moments in media sport reveal more than they intend. Sport is driven by narratives. It is the stories in and around sport that make it such a compelling cultural form. In some sports, television and the media more generally, amplify pre-existing sporting narratives, often around success and failure. In others, it’s the media that have constructed (or indeed invented) the narratives and shape the form and structure of the sporting contest. But ultimately all sport is transformed by its engagement with the media that represents the sport often to millions of viewers unable to attend the event live. And the value of sport (to both fans and the media) is often in its liveliness, the way it can at a particular time create a moment of historical sporting significance that transcends the sport itself.

One such media moment was the conclusion of the Abu Dhabi F1 (Formula One) Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit, on the Sunday evening of 12 December 2021. Watched live by an audience of 108.8 million across over 200 countries worldwide (F1-2021 Global Fact Sheet). The final F1 Grand Prix of the 2021 season, drew a UK television viewership that accounted for 60% of the available TV audience, with 4.4 m watching on the free-to-air Channel 4, while 3 million watched across the subscription-based Sky Sports network. In the age of digital immersion, many (but not all) also took to social media to express their opinion and engage in the sports chatter that is such an integral part of the value of sport to the media and various platforms, as well as integral to the pleasure it offers to dedicated fans, by extending the conversation long after the event has finished.

This was the final F1 race that would decide who would become World Champion, with Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 team (Mercedes) driver Lewis Hamilton attempting to win an unprecedented eighth world title, while being pursued by the Red Bull Racing driver Max Verstappen who had to win this race to take his first ever world title. Ben Anderson, then Editor of GP Racing argues that this had been an F1 season unlike any in recent memory. He notes:
this was no ordinary season. This is an age of polarisation; divisions amplified and solidified by the toxic power of unfettered and irresponsible social media. As true in F1 as it is in life. Lewis Hamilton, Max Verstappen, Mercedes and Red Bull tore lumps out of each other — on track and off — creating an atmosphere of mutual distrust and resentment, which spilled beyond the paddock. (Anderson, 2022: 4)

In fact, the race was playing out as many had anticipated with Hamilton leading with a degree of comfort and seemingly progressing to the world title. All this changed with just six laps to go, when the driver Nicholas Latifi spun his Williams car into the barriers and forced the Safety car to be deployed. Verstappen pitted his Red Bull car for new tyres, while Hamilton remained out, concerned that if he pitted, he would concede his position on the track, with the strong possibility that the race would end under the auspices of the safety car.

What happened next became a major media controversy, resulting in the governing body of world motorsport and F1, the Federation Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA) launching an investigation into events (FIA, 2022) resulting in the demotion of the Race Director Michael Masi from his position. Masi, being openly lobbied by the team principals and their representatives, seemingly disregarded two elements of the FIA rulebook to allow the race to finish under what are called ‘green flag’ conditions. Masi, allowed just 5 cars to unlap themselves, thus allowing Verstappen to move immediately behind Hamilton, and then with only one lap remaining allowed the race to restart (technically it should have been restarted only at the end of the lap when the lapped cars had been allowed to move clear).

In short, we now had a one lap race off for the World Title, with the challenger’s car on new tyres and the evaporation of Hamilton’s substantial lead built up during the race. Verstappen duly passed Hamilton on the final lap and became World Champion. For many the decisions appeared at odds with notions of sporting integrity and were more designed to appease a television audience. As journalist Matthew Syed reflected:

It is hardly original to note that the climax to last season wasn’t a pure instance of sporting drama. No, this felt more like scripted entertainment: a race director under pressure from the overlords of the sport to ensure that the narrative reached a peak of dramatic tension. (Syed, 2022: 56)

The drama continued after the race with protests being lodged by Mercedes, with the stewards eventually throwing them out citing regulations that gave the race director ‘overriding authority’ over the safety car regulations. The
online social media reaction was extensive and vitriolic often breaking along supporter lines of Hamilton and Verstappen, with talk in the aftermath that Hamilton may step away from F1 following a lack of faith in the governance of the sport.

What this moment revealed is the growing tension between a sport being mediated by television, and one that is being scripted or reshaped directly for a television audience at the expense of traditional notions of sporting etiquette and integrity. One of the underpinning values of sport has always been its inherent unpredictability, although as money has flowed to the elite end of sport, this has increasingly eroded this one crucial element of sports appeal. Interestingly, unpredictability is one trait that private investors wish to avoid. Yet for sport it is the possibility that on any given day the underdog, might spring a surprise, that in part differentiates sport on television from scripted entertainment, where the outcome is ultimately predetermined.

The subsequent FIA (FIA, 2022) investigation, eventually published in March 2022, concluded that ‘human error’ was responsible for the decisions that led to the last lap race off for the world title. It made a number of recommendations including the restructuring of F1 race control. The suspicion remains that the pressure to increase the media profile of the sport and grow its digital online presence as it raises its profile and fan base through, for example the Netflix series Drive To Survive (see Chapter Five) may have played a part in this sporting moment. McLaren driver, Lando Norris was quoted as saying that the race climax had been ‘made for TV’, with teammate Daniel Riccardo adding that ‘I’m glad I wasn’t part of that’ (Benson, 2002). The fact that such suspicions arose around this event is indicative of the challenges faced by any sport that is increasingly pulled into the orbit of the demands of television, and these are amplified in a social media age, where opinion, information and conspiracy theories abound and help shape broader public perceptions and particular narratives. Hence, an interest in this tension between sporting integrity and the demands of being a media entertainment business runs through the book.

**F1: The Global Sport**

F1 is an international sport that offers ten construction teams the opportunity to provide 20 cars and drivers to take part in motorsport’s highest level single seater racing for an annual World Championship and Constructors
Championship. The formula in F1 comes from the agreed set of rules that must be adhered to by the cars involved in this top level of motorsport. The 2022 season ran from Spring to the year-end and took place across 22 Grand Prix races that were staged across the globe in cities in Europe, Asia, North and South America and Oceania. The competition has been running since 1950 (when initially there were only 7 races). At the centre sits the Grand Prix weekend, with the race itself the pinnacle after two days of practice and qualifying (to determine the starting position of the twenty cars on race day). It lasts usually around 2 hours and involves intense high speed racing with points allocated to the top ten place finishers of the race, with the top three drivers securing podium finishes.

However, F1 is more than a sport. It has become an international business, driven by marketing, high-end technological innovation, branding, car manufacturers, corporate advertising and is financially underwritten by international television. The construction teams, some such as Ferrari, McLaren, Aston Martin or Mercedes are direct car manufacturers, that have historically used their F1 involvement to showcase their brands, while offering a media space to promote various corporate partners willing to pay vast amounts of money to help sustain the teams, in return for global media exposure and evolving forms of various sponsorship activation. In short, F1 teams offer a global platform to investors to promote their brand and secure a return on their investment. Given the cost of running a contemporary F1 team, such sponsorship is an integral part of the business. For example, until the introduction of the budget cap in 2021 to a spend of around $145m, teams such as Mercedes might have spent close to $480m in previous seasons, in so doing they were outspending rival teams such as HaasF1 by almost four to one.

The drivers and the cars are the stars of the sporting narrative, yet they sit at the apex of a massive sporting, technological and commercial business operation unlike any other sport. Some F1 teams can be employing a workforce of up to 3000 across multiple sites and countries. A successful Constructors team such as Mercedes, eight times winners of the Constructors championship in the last decade or so, employ well over a 1000 people who rarely attend the actual Grand Prix events and work around the clock at their state-of-the-art technology centre based on a 60,000 m² site in Brackley, 70 mile north of London. These designers, engineers, operational managers and business support workers in areas such as finance, legal and IP are all part of the operation that underpins a modern F1 team on a scale that dwarfs other sporting global institutions such as say Manchester United or Real Madrid in football. In a
F1 team you will have organisational divisions such as a Management team, Commercial department, Research and Development, Technical division, Finance and administration, Marketing and PR and a Legal department.

As we discuss in Chapter Three, F1 as a sport and the running of an F1 team was not always such a complex, industrial and corporate finance driven business. The history of the sport has ebbed and flowed in terms of the development of teams and its attendant media coverage (Hamilton, 2021) while the corporate professionalisation and hyper commercialisation of the sport really begins in earnest in the 1980s with the growing influence of Bernie Ecclestone on the direction of the sport and the central role that global television exposure would offer to brands and businesses. More recent years have seen the expansion in both the number of Grand Prix races per season and the introduction of new city locations from China, to Russia and perhaps most controversially the Gulf States, where staging a Grand Prix, has become part of a wider political mobilisation of sport to both normalise and promote a city and State through an international media platform.

In this study then F1 offers a microcosm of many of the dominant trends that are re-shaping modern elite sport across the globe, and in so doing are forcing some to ask, what do we actually mean by sport? Is its integration into a modern media entertainment business model now so complete, that money and commercial opportunities solely drive the sport and its appetite to commodify all aspects of the industry and seek to monetise these? What role does it play in the promotion of ‘soft power’ associated with a state’s desire to alter its global reputation and reshape its economy? How will the rise of the platform as the dominant mode of content distribution change the nature of the relationships between stakeholders in the sports media network? And what of the fans, viewers, social media content creators and spectators of F1, how are they changing and evolving and what does their relationship with the sport tell us about the nature of modern sports fandom in platform age? To this there is an added interest in this study. In F1 we have to all intents and purposes a sport now controlled by a media corporation and while such patterns of ownership are growing among sports clubs, control of the commercial rights to an entire sport are unique and make F1 with its fusion of media and sporting interests a compelling case study.
F1 Changes: Liberty Media and New Racing

The recent changes introduced by F1 for the 2022 season, were driven by the change of ownership of the sport when it was secured by Liberty Media back in 2017 from CVC Capital who had secured the sport in 2005, from Bernie Ecclestone, allowing him to stay on as CEO. The new rules, the most significant since the 2014 introduction of the hybrid power units were to increase competition and make it easier for cars to overtake during races. In short, it was to improve the televisial spectacle of the sport. As Toto Wolff, the Mercedes team principal commented after the second ace of the 2022 series

The cars delivered on what F1 hoped for [from regulation changes this season]- great overtaking and providing a great show. F1 has achieved what they wanted to; spectacular racing, good overtaking and the grid has been shaken up. The midfield is extremely close, so overall I’m happy about the hype around F1. (Clancy, 2022)

The importance of the television spectacle for the sport is crucial. In the contemporary media environment, with access to multiple mobile platforms to access sports related content or what we might call supplementary on-demand sports content, the live television event remains central in F1.

Ironically, in many ways F1 is not the ideal sport for the medium of television. Operationally working on the minimum space, maximum action adage of television sports coverage, a F1 Grand Prix is a complex event to televise given the speed of the cars, and the physical scale and layout of the tracks. In addition, television does not reveal the struggles, nor the intense range of skills required by the modern driver, sitting deep within the car with only their branded helmet visible to the audience. Matt Bishop, then Chief Communications Officer of the Aston Martin F1 team reflects on how the sport has changed over the years:

I think that nature of man and machine against the circuit is still there, and the courage is still there and the skill is still there. It’s just very difficult to see. [Tennis on television you can see the agility and the brilliance and the inventiveness of the players, you can see every rippling sinew you can see that sweat drops you can see the look of hope or fear on their face or their desperation or ambition. In Formula One everybody’s covered in racing overalls and a helmet. Now you can’t even see their hands moving, you used to be able to see that. So, it is hard to see but it’s still going on. It’s the same athleticism updated and modernised. (Interview with Author, 11 July 2022)
Hence television and its codes and conventions have to work hard to communicate the speed, danger and athleticism involved in the sport, and as we see later in Chapter Four technology has aided this process, as has the building of pre and post-race coverage and extensive analysis in more recent years. This has occurred at a time when traditional television consumption is in decline, although television type content is being consumed across a range of platforms in what appears to be a changing video content ecosystem. As Robert Szabo-Rowe, the Senior Vice President of video production and distribution company The Switch argues:

The new era of live sports consumption sees short, snappy, on-demand highlights of a broad range of content take preference beyond just the main broadcast – including pre-game interviews, betting odd analysis, player and coach interviews and full post-show press conferences. This whole range of content which always begins life as live TV but has a much longer shelf life through social and video-on-demand platforms creates an exciting content continuum and a far richer media landscape for broadcasters and other rightsholders to capitalise on. (Szabo-Rowe, Broadcast, 26/8/22)

The live sports event remains central, with much of the traditional value in media rights still in the liveness of the sporting moment, but the streamer services and the social media platforms are now increasingly in the market for supplementary on-demand content generated around sports, such as any exclusive behind the scenes material, much of this content being curated by a new generation of social media influencers and content creators (see chapter Six). This is part of the backdrop to the focus of the book on F1 and the changing nature of sports media consumption.

This book is also about examining what feels like an important moment in the long history between sport and its mediation. Identifying such moments is notoriously difficult not least when you are in the middle of maelstrom. Barry Hearn, sports promoter, and someone who has both shaped and born witness to the evolution of sports relationship with the media over the last 40 years across sports from snooker to boxing, feels we are at such a moment. Reflecting on the pressure traditional Pay-Tv models of sport are under in the platform age from new players such as DAZN, an OTT video streaming service only launched in 2016, he argues:

Attitudes change, people change, and money certainty changes. Companies such as DAZN are able to muscle in on the market, pay more money to begin with to be disruptive while they create their own market, taking advantage of the fact youngsters no longer want to sit on the settee at home with Mum and Dad. They want to
watch wherever they want to be and on whatever device they choose. It all points to a whole new operation in terms of pay TV. Time will tell whether DANZ will be the ones to get it right, but my guess is they will and in so doing will become the Netflix of sport. (Hearn, 2022: 270)

Are we seeing sport move from a business to business (B2B) model to one characterised by a direct to consumers (D2C) paradigm? One key issue in the digital age of sport is access rights holders have to viewer/fan data. As Barr and Kretchmer (2022) remind us:

> While attracting subscribers with bundles of exclusive content is a key pillar of the streaming model, another key element of on-demand video services is accumulation and control of valuable data pertaining to audience viewing habits and personal interests. Here the global streaming brands hold considerable informational advantages over Channel 4 as a provider of a largely domestic offering for UK audiences. These troves of valuable data inform the commissioning strategy of streamers as well as driving algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. As such, this type of data is deemed commercially sensitive and not shared with external production companies, broadcasters or Ofcom. (Barr & Kretchmer, 2022)

During this maelstrom of media change, we argue it can be illuminating to try to take the long view of sport’s relationship with the media and technological change.

Before the take-over by Liberty Media, F1 operated a hybrid model of sports organisation. By this we mean its European origins were clear in its rather unstructured evolution with the numbers of teams and cars on the grid for example changing over time. There was of the course the FIA oversight through the implementation of the formula regulations, but these were constantly being renegotiated, and there were no cost limits on the spend of the teams involved. However, the semi-closed nature of the competition, and the rather unclear pathway for teams wishing to enter the sport at F1 level (with Bernie Ecclestone as the ultimate gatekeeper), was more akin to the North American sports model, which has always viewed and positioned sport as a business. And more than this, not just any business, but part of the entertainment business, free from wider social or cultural responsibilities.

We argue that the Liberty Media takeover has ended any confusion over the dominant model being developed by the sport. Unsurprisingly they have adopted the North American model, with its semi-closed competition (no relegation for finishing bottom of the constructor’s championship). They were also keen to offset the financial challenges that the sport had faced in previous