

SPORTS MEDIA INSIGHT

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In the first of four articles Jon Higton, drawing on his 25 years of sports broadcasting experience, discusses his take on some recent developments in the industry.

Where Now for BBC and Sport?

24 September 2015

The announcements that Eurosport has acquired European rights for the Olympic Games (<http://tiny.cc/va0h3x>) starting in 2018 for most territories and 2022 for the UK (and France) and, in the event such rights are available to be sub-licensed, that ITV will bid competitively for them means the BBC may not broadcast the Olympics from 2022 (<http://tiny.cc/0kmp3x>). This asks a number of questions, not least in regard to the position of the BBC and sport.

The BBC is a great British institution, renowned throughout the World as a broadcaster and programme maker. Its unique structure (independent but funded via a statutory licence fee and with no adverts or sponsorship permitted on its UK services) enables it to be free of many of the restraints that bind and restrict commercial broadcasters. Advertisers do not dictate its programme schedules or influence its content. Could any other broadcaster have produced a programme which frequently criticised the products of major advertisers in the way that Top Gear became famous for? The BBC can choose to commission and broadcast programmes because it believes in them not just because they are ratings winners – think Monty Python and Blackadder and its public service ethos is behind some of the greatest serious television series made anywhere by anyone.

The BBC is not perfect. Like any huge institution its structure, bureaucracy and other foibles are easy meat for critics looking to attack it whether for their own commercial/political motives or to fill column inches.

For many of us the BBC, with ITV, was our introduction to watching top level sport. In its heyday the BBC covered not just Olympic Games and major football championships but showcased cricket, boxing, horseracing and, through shows like Grandstand and Sports Night, a host of other sports. The coverage may not have been risky and, by today's standards, much was no doubt fairly primitive, but the BBC was a major force in both the UK and in the EBU (the European Broadcasting Union – the association of national broadcasters (public service and commercial) from countries throughout Europe).

It is of course entirely the BBC's decision how it allocates its resources but in a world where sport remains an "appointment to view", providing nearly the only strand of programming that is best consumed live by its audiences rather than on-demand at a time of the viewers choosing, some of the recent news has been both surprising and, to old sports fans, sad. The BBC has successfully renewed its contracts for both Wimbledon until 2020 and Match of the Day for a further three years, albeit reportedly at considerable cost, but the news that it will lose the right to broadcast the Open Golf Championship live (<http://tiny.cc/bb0h3x>) and that it could not afford to acquire the Six Nations rights exclusively (it has had to share with ITV (<http://tiny.cc/xb0h3x>)) mark the passing of an era. We are told that the BBC cannot compete for top sports rights but this is surely not the whole story. Clearly it can compete, viz Match of the Day and Wimbledon, and clearly it still has resources although, in the context of on-going discussions regarding, inter alia, the BBC's Charter renewal and

the licence fee, there is a good deal of uncertainty as to how extensive such recourses will be. What it is really saying is that in its editorial judgement these events/sports do not merit the scale of resources required to keep the rights. The news regarding Eurosport securing the rights to the Olympic Games appears to be another blow, albeit one that will not land for sometime to come, and one which BBC may be able to mitigate by sub-licensing rights from Eurosport if the opportunity arises and it outbids ITV (who would be bidding to cover their first Olympics since 1988). No doubt unless the resources are made available, pressure will also mount on the alliance with ITV which has secured FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship rights to date.

Longer term might BBC Sport ally itself with BT or another pay broadcaster, providing a free to air audience and window for events, via highlights or otherwise, while the pay channel does the heavy financial lifting? Will sport cease to be part of the BBC public service broadcasting remit altogether?

The trials of the BBC bring another issue into focus, that of “Listed Events” (which includes the Olympic Games in Category A). These are the sports events of such national importance that regulations seek to protect them for mainstream free to air terrestrial viewing. The regulations are already out of date – for instance they distinguish between two categories of channels on the basis of audience reach: (a) BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV 1, Channel 4 and Five; and (b) everyone else, which makes little sense nowadays. The DCMS’ (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) review of free-to-air (“FTA”) listed events, “the Davies Report” published in November 2009, provided a review of the arrangements and was a step towards revision. However, further action was shelved by the outgoing Labour government of the time.

As the Davies Report pointed out there is no obligation on the BBC to bid for the rights (or to bid at market rates) for any of the events on the list. The main commercial FTA broadcasters (ITV, Channel 4 and Five) may not consider the sports or events meet their particular editorial needs. If the BBC is editorially unwilling or financially unable to allocate its resources to such sports events this further undermines the purpose of the list. How does it “protect” an event for the public to put it on such a list, deterring pay TV competition for the rights, if there is no competition or even interest amongst FTA broadcasters for the rights? Depressed values for media rights could actually harm the event that was of such importance it needed protection on the list. The major sports are not run by idiots. Sports are extremely aware of the need to engage with their fans and of the benefits FTA television can deliver in producing the widest audience without the need for outdated regulations. Wholesale revision is needed such that, if such regulations are to exist at all, they recognise that the World has changed. One suggestion in the Davies Report was that if pay/subscription channels simply transmitted the particular events unencrypted across all platforms there would be no need for a list protecting the events for broadcasters who always broadcast FTA. If this approach was adopted and Eurosport chose to follow that course to meet its obligations to secure FTA coverage (200 hours for summer games and 100 hours for winter), BBC (and ITV) may not even have the opportunity to bid for such rights. What place the BBC will play in the sports media landscape is not clear and it will be interesting to see how things develop and how, if at all, the “Listed Events” evolve.

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