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Can I see that again?: A Media Effects Tetrad Analysis of Instant Replay

Introduction

Touchdown! You whoop at the TV as your favorite NFL player dives into the endzone, pushing through the intimidating defensive line. Seconds later, the play is called into question, slowed down, reversed and you see that he did not quite make it over that yellow line etched into the turf. The referee reverses the call, the touchdown is no good and the points are taken off the digital scoreboard that sits in the corner of your screen. You disappointedly sink back into your couch. Instant replay has been a part of professional sports since the early 1960's. Now, close calls can be run back and be determined with more accuracy and fairness. Officials can now instantly playback a part of the broadcast, narrowing in on and slowing down a particular incident. Instant replay has made a vast difference on how sporting events are called and determined.

The creation of instant replay is credited to director Tony Verna, a 30-year old director who originally pushed for it to become part of the game. He drew upon a lot of early technology related to radio and rudimentary video equipment that later got co-opted by CBS production in game broadcasting (Hintz, 2022). Even though the idea came to be back in the 1960's, it really did not get adopted by sports leagues until the mid-1980's, when the technology was more reliable, effective and cost-efficient (The History of Instant Replay, 2022). The implementation

of the technology of instant replay into sports have forever influenced the way these professional games are watched and officiated. By utilizing Marshall McLuhan's Tetrad model, this paper will delve into how the use of instant replay technology enhances, retrieves, obsolesces and flips aspects of communication and media in the professional sports environment.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan was a respected philosopher and thinker who has contributed many novel ideas to the media communication scape. He is very well-known for not only assessing the content of the medium called into question, but also its overall characteristics' impact on society. His famous phrase "the medium is the message" describes his outlook and approach when it comes to analysis of media and society (McLuhan, 1988). New technologies and media influence at the societal level, rippling in more ways than may be readily evident and obvious to a mere observer.

To assess these effects that a piece of media may have on society, McLuhan came up with the Tetrad model. This is a method of analysis by which these effects can be evaluated using four primary categories including enhancement, retrieval, obsolescence and reversal. McLuhan believes that the medium being assessed should be looked at in relation with its greater environment and qualities, rather than isolated. First looking at enhancement, it looks at what the particular piece improves or betters. Retrieval considers what concept is recovered or brought back by employment of the medium. Obsolescence looks at what is made irrelevant by a piece of media, or no longer necessary due to its introduction. Finally, the fourth piece of the tetrad is reversal, which thinks about what would happen in extreme cases when it is pushed to its fullest potential, typically reversing or overpowering the positive original characteristics (McLuhan, 1988). Each of these qualities of the medium exists as either figure or ground qualities. McLuhan

describes figure qualities as areas of attention, and ground as inattention. Ground qualities are what is pre-established and serves as context. It is an old landscape before the medium was introduced. Enhancement and retrieval are figure qualities whereas obsolescence and reversal are ground qualities (McLuhan, 1988). According to McLuhan, this model can be utilized to analyze effects that a piece of media has on society.

Enhancement

One of the primary benefits of instant replay technology is that it enhances accuracy of officiating, and therefore works to guarantee fairness and justice. This establishes a higher quality of game and a more respected officiating standard. Instant replay allows for more accurate calls. By being able to slow down and rewatch crucial plays, referees can more easily decipher what is in or out, illegal or legal and complete or incomplete. In an age where technology has pervaded our society, people are used to getting everything right, right away (Rosenberg, 2016). Fans are no longer as forgiving and championships mean more. To avoid ridicule, an undisputable computer-generated replay minimizes any need for a judgment call or a split-second decision. The accuracy helps minimize human error. This also aids in making any professional sporting event more fair and just for each time. There is a consistent standard applied to both teams—each call is not contingent on where the referee is or what he/she did or did not see. It also eliminates the element of potential bias in referees, because the replay footage is indisputable and holds them accountable to their calls. They will not blatantly make one call in favor of a team if they know the cameras may prove them otherwise. Instant replay provides enhanced accuracy, fairness and accountability to professional sports.

Retrieval

Instant replay in sporting events retrieves reliability and trustworthiness in game officiating. As mentioned above, society now is used to a certain standard of efficiency. Fans know when something is close and know when technology is able to distinguish these miniscule nuances better than the human eye. If instant replay was never introduced, sports fans would likely protest this and doubt officials reliability. This is already evident today, as some plays are not not subject to instant replay in the NFL such as reviewable pass interference. There have been contentious occurrences in games where instant replay was not allowed due to this rule, and fans have absolutely attacked the league via social media for being stuck in the past and not implementing this technology in all areas of the game (Orr, 2019). This is just one example of how technology restores fans' trust in the game, and that the officiating is as accurate and reliable as it can be. Instant replay in professional sports provides an element of reliability and trustworthiness necessary to engage and enjoy this type of media.

Obsolescence

The biggest element that instant replay eliminates is split-second decision making, judgment calls and human error. There is no longer a need to rely on the human eye that cannot look everywhere at once, instant replay captures the entire scene of gameplay and offers multiple perspectives. With instant replay readily available, referees are able to fall back on this as a means of determining calls and do not have to rely so heavily on their own ability. While the need for referees has not completely disappeared, there is talk about games one day being completely officiated by AI systems or replay technologies. Eliminating human error out of the game is one of the biggest benefits of being able to rewatch plays, but it is also one of the most contested reasons for *not* implementing instant replay systems. Many argue that the spontaneity, unpredictability and controversy that make sporting events so exciting is actually diminished

with the introduction of instant replay technologies (Hintz, 2022). Instant replay in professional sports has obsoleted split-second decision making and human error in game officiation.

Flip

What seems to simply offer accuracy and precision in game rulings, can flip to over-analysis, quantification and over-correction. By reviewing a singular play countless times on the jumbotron of a sold-out stadium, there is a certain element of enthusiasm lost. The excitement of the touchdown is completely diminished when they reverse the call, or fans' hearts deflate when they see a player miss home plate by a quarter of an inch from a different angle. Each play is scrutinized and reduced to exact data. Instant replay inadvertently creates a standard of perfection and technicality that contradicts the spontaneity and unpredictability that many fans adore about the game. In a way, it defeats the purpose of live spectatorship and witnessing big games in real time (Cummins & Hahn, 2013). Instant replay removes a certain “human element” from the game, by reducing the live clashing of teams to simply reviewable content. Instant replay in professional sports can diminish the impact of sporting events by lessening excitement and over-analyzing each play.

Evaluation

Instant replay technology has created a unique viewer consumption experience that varies greatly from how we consumed sports media just a couple of decades ago. There are always proponents and opposition to mediums such as these. The NFL has grappled with how much of these technologies to implement over the years and has been met with mixed reactions, “they have to consider both those who want the NFL to resemble its wholesome, leather-helmet salad days, before the tech started creeping in... and those who wouldn’t care if the entire thing turned into a pyrotechnic *Fortnite* battle royale” (Orr, 2019). It is a tricky balance of adhering to the

original intent and tradition of the game and taking advantage of available technologies. I believe that instant replay, despite its cons, has improved the accuracy of officiating. More accurate play calls implement a higher standard fairness. I think that this improves most professional sports by eliminating/minimizing the role that individual interpretation and human error plays.

Conclusion

Instant replay technology has allowed referees to rewatch and slow down controversial plays in order to make errorless calls. By utilizing Marshall McLuhan's Tetrad model, this paper expanded upon how the use of instant replay technology enhances, retrieves, obsolesces and flips aspects of communication and media in the professional sports environment. Instant replay provides enhanced accuracy, fairness and accountability to professional sports; it also retrieves an element of reliability and trustworthiness necessary to engage and enjoy this type of media. Along with this, instant replay has obsolesced split-second decision making and human error in game officiation. It can also be seen how these replay technologies, at their extremes, can diminish the impact of sporting events by lessening excitement with excessive over-analysis of each play. The implementation of the technology of instant replay into sports have forever impacted the way these professional games are watched and officiated.

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