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A 'cannibalised' cricket event? Mediatisation, innovation and The Hundred

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ABSTRACT

Attending and consuming events are integral to many peoples' leisure lives. However, as the literature attests, events represent significant sites of contestation over who does and does not belong. This paper explores such contestation in the notoriously elitist and traditionally exclusionary sport of cricket, and specifically *The Hundred;* the most recent attempt to democratise the sport by appealing to a more demographically diverse spectator base. It uniquely blends extensive semi-structured interviews with stakeholders ($n = 33$), and a synthesised theoretical framework of mediatisation, media events and digital leisure studies, to argue that the apparent success of The Hundred in attracting and including new audiences has been enabled by incorporating elements of media spectacle. We therefore, use The Hundred to further delineate the processes described in the extant literature, and extend analysis of the 'digital turn', by drawing attention to the tensions between the speed and trajectory of these developments and the constraints imposed by cricket's history. We illustrate how digital and analogue leisure remain highly interdependent, and argue that the ongoing contestation of game forms championed by different cricket stakeholders makes it improbable that The Hundred can achieve its twin goals of being economically viable, while increasing the popularity and, ultimately survival, of other cricket formats.

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Introduction

Attending and consuming events – sporting or otherwise – are integral to many peoples' leisure lives. However, as the leisure and event studies literatures attest, events represent significant sites of contestation over who does and does not belong (Ng et al., 2022). Cricket, the focus of this paper, is undoubtedly one of the world's most elitist and exclusive sports (Fletcher et al., 2021). It is not our intention to provide a history of the game's evolution and how this informs contemporary exclusions. Rather, in this paper, we present the first critical examination of *The Hundred*, a brand-new, short-form tournament which has been designed, specifically, to democratise the sport by appealing to a more diverse spectator base. Here, we interrogate The Hundred as a mediatised spectacle in the digital leisure age.

The Hundred[1] was launched by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in August 2021. It is a novel, short, countdown format of cricket, which comprises of each batting team facing 100 balls. As the most recent attempt to innovate this most traditional of sports, The Hundred

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accelerates the move towards shorter (and thus, quicker) cricket events, previously spearheaded by Twenty20 (T20); the world's most popular, and undoubtedly transformative format on the global cricketing landscape. The Hundred was envisioned as a city-based franchise tournament, similar to the Indian Premier League (IPL), Big Bash League (BBL) in Australia, and others around the world. The event consisted of eight city-based (though not necessarily city-signified) franchise teams: Birmingham Phoenix, London Spirit, Manchester Originals, Northern Superchargers, Oval Invincibles, Southern Brave, Trent Rockets, and Welsh Fire. Each franchise fielded both men's and women's teams and was hosted by a County Club with an existing international venue. The franchises are overseen by the ECB, which stipulates a centrally-allocated pot of money for players and coaches. The squads for each team were selected via a televised draft. For the men, 2021 squads consisted of 15 players; 14 players split across six salary bands (£125,000, £100,000, £75,000, £60,000, £50,000 and £40,000), and a wildcard pick (£30,000). Teams were permitted a maximum of three overseas players. The initial budget for each men's franchise was £1 million, but due to the financial pressures brought about by COVID-19, this was reduced to £800,000. For the women, teams could choose up to three centrally contracted England players and 12 others across seven salary bands (£15,000, £12,000, £9,000, £7,200, £6,000, £4.800 and £3,600). Prize money (£600,000) was distributed equally among the men's and women's tournaments, but the salary discrepancies were heavily criticised. As an illustration, in 2021, the lowest paid male players earned 60% more than the highest paid female players (Roller, 2021). Salaries for the 2022 tournaments were increased by 25%. This was especially welcomed by advocates of the women's game, though clearly, a significant gender pay gap persisted.

Despite the unquestioned commercial success of shorter form cricket in recent years, concerns were raised about The Hundred. Fundamentally, critics asked whether it was different and innovative enough to attract the new audiences cricket covets? Conversely, was it too different? And how would it integrate into the existing cricket calendar of events? There were concerns about the impact of The Hundred on the existing county cricket structure, both economically and in terms of player development. For instance, in both 2021 and 2022, The Hundred and county cricket's one day tournament – Royal London Cup – overlapped, meaning that, in many cases, the Counties were deprived of both their best players and share of the spectator market. The ECB has acknowledged this impact and, as a result of the most recent broadcasting deal (worth around £1.2 billion), distributes approximately £1.3 million annually to each County Club (Wisden, 2019). Post-COVID -19, such financial liquidity has been essential to the game's survival. Responding to concerns raised by the Cricket Supporter's Association, the ECB's Director of Strategy, Vikram Banerjee, wrote:

> However much we love all the different formats of the game, the reality is that research shows cricket is seen, by large parts of the population, as too slow, too long, and too complicated. The Hundred is designed specifically to broaden cricket's appeal and secure its long-term sustainability. (Banerjee, 2021: no page, original emphasis)

The Hundred, following the precedent of the IPL, was accompanied by the UK's first cricket event App which included match data, a cricket-based game, and fantasy league options. In line with other COVID-19 developments, ticketing became entirely digital. However, arguably one of the tournament's most significant achievements was the joint television deal with both Sky and the BBC. In both 2021 and 2022, all matches were televised on Sky Sports, 18 of which (10 men's and 8 women's) were also shown live, free-to-air on the BBC. The tournament was the first time live cricket was available on television for free since 2005. Branded as 'match-days', most fixtures are double-headers, featuring both women's and men's matches, with live musical performances during intervals. Significantly, the 2021 tournament opened with a women's match between the Oval Invincibles and Manchester Originals. Over 7000 spectators attended (Burley, 2021). Moreover, while in 2021 it was customary for the men's contests to 'headline' match-days, by being played during the more lucrative 6-9 pm slot, in 2022 the running order was often flipped in an attempt to promote the spectacle of the women's tournament.

The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of this new, innovative sports event, as perceived by a range of stakeholders. We argue that the processes delineated in the existing (theoretical) discussions of mediatisation, media ritual and digital leisure explain the apparent success of The Hundred in attracting new audiences and creating a more inclusive and demographically diverse following. However, by evoking the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders we demonstrate how The Hundred captures the on-going contestation between traditions and innovation and the resultant synergy between analogue and digital leisure forms. Consequently we argue that it is improbable that The Hundred can achieve all of its strategic goals; specifically to be economically viable in itself and to transfer – or better 'infect' - other forms of cricket with this popularity. The next two sections detail our theoretical framework against the backdrop of cricket's mediatisation.

Commercialisation and mediatisation of cricket

As the digital revolution continues apace, emergent technologies and means of communication have presented new challenges and opportunities for sport and, by association, leisure studies (Lawrence & Crawford, 2022). Indeed, according to Silk et al. (2016) the 'digital turn' raises important questions, not least about the ways in which leisure practices, including sport, are inflected with power relations, and shaped by sociocultural contexts, cultures and experiences. Silk et al., go on to suggest that to understand leisure in this moment necessitates understanding digital culture and the ways in which digital forms, structures and platforms have shifted leisure practices (p.721). Redhead (2016) referred to this conjunctural moment as 'digital leisure studies'; a notion that has gathered some traction among leisure scholars (Carnicelli et al., 2017) and further adapted by others – e.g. digital football cultures (Lawrence & Crawford, 2022; Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2022) and virtual leisure (Reed et al., 2022; Sturm, 2020).

The intensity of sport's commodification and commercialisation over the past three decades has resulted in sporting organisations and governing bodies becoming inextricably tied to the global media industry and corporate economy. This means that cricket events have become increasingly reliant on sponsorship and the sale of broadcast/digital rights (Frandsen, 2020; Lawrence & Crawford, 2019; Malcolm & Fletcher, 2017; Stoney & Fletcher, 2021; Sturm, 2020, 2021). The emergence of new, shorter cricket events, such as The Hundred, needs to be understood in light of the synergy between commercial and media-related developments. Since codification (mid-1700s) cricket has undergone a number of incarnations in the name of progress and modernisation. But cricket is a fundamentally traditional sport which was 'born nostalgic' (Malcolm, 2013). Consequently, it would take until the 1960s for the game's administrators to make major concessions to foster a more accessible and entertaining consumer sport (Wright, 1994). Cricket became one of the few sports in the world to offer the spectator multiple, co-existing and hierarchically equivalent game formats with which to fill their leisure time. There is Test match cricket, spread over five days, played with a red ball, and regarded as the supreme physical and mental challenge by most aficionados; the One-Day International (ODI), which offers the opportunity to see a full game, including aspects of the strategy of the longer format, but taking just one day; and the spectacle of T20 (and other variants, including The Hundred), which features a result in approximately three hours.

The speed of cultural change has been contingent on prevailing definitions of leisure and culture and the conflicting demands of different stakeholders. While Test cricket has remained relatively fixed, it is widely considered that the commercialisation of cricket experienced a step change in 1963 with the introduction of the first one-day competition in England and Wales (Wright, 1994). Various iterations of the one-day format have come and gone since. Kerry Packer's 'World Series Cricket' was the earliest sustained attempt to turn cricket into a mediatised spectacle (Cashman, 2011). This competition introduced the use of coloured clothes (better for distinguishing between teams than the traditional 'whites') and the use of floodlights (and a white ball) to better accommodate spectators' work and leisure commitments. Packer's events were heavily resisted and widely

denigrated by cricket's authorities, but very successfully grew cricket's television viewership (Sturm, 2021). Consequently, Packer's innovations stimulated further pursuit of a commercially lucrative formula. In New Zealand, for example, 'Action Cricket' was played in 1992–93. This 20-overs format allowed two games to take place on the same day. Subsequently 'Cricket Max' (1996–2003), a three-hour format where teams would twice bat for 10 overs was introduced to fill a Friday night television slot that would attract new audiences (Voerman, 2016). Similarly, in Australia, 'Super Eights' (1996–97) reduced teams from eleven to eight players. A hybrid 'Cricket Super Max Eights' also met with limited success (Sturm, 2015).

However, it was again in England that the next major format innovation occurred, with the introduction in 2003 of what many now see as the game's greatest potential for future growth, T20. Such was the immediate commercial success of T20 that domestic-based and internationally resonant T20 competitions were established. Of all such competitions, the IPL has had the greatest commercial and cultural impact. Annually generating double the revenue of a single men's Cricket World Cup, the IPL has been cited as further evidence of the shifting power relations that underpin the 'post-Westernisation' of cricket (Rumford, 2011; also see Dowse & Fletcher, 2018). The IPL stimulated additional variants of these shorter games; most recently, in 2017, the Abu Dhabi T10 League. These shorter formats, the sale of broadcasting rights, and the intensive marketing and globalisation of the game, have established cricket as a 'mediasport' (Fletcher & Malcolm, 2017).

While it is not uncommon for sports to adapt to suit the needs of television, sponsors and other stakeholders (Frandsen, 2020; Sturm, 2020, 2021), the extent to which cricket has changed to suit commercial interests – changing rules, playing at night and fundamentally restructuring competitions – is unparalleled. While many commentaries on these developments exist (Axford & Huggins, 2011; Fletcher & Malcolm, 2017; Sturm, 2015), this is the first study to empirically explore how different stakeholders from within the game respond to cricket's mediatisation.

Mediatised rituals: cricket as media event, spectacle and experience

Shorter-format cricket events, such as The Hundred and T20 ostensibly operate as media events, with much of their value – as they move towards entertainment and spectacle – derived from their packaging as a mass consumed media product. The notion of media events was first traced by Dayan and Katz (1992) as a recurrent series of ritual-like events that comprised 'contests, conquests and coronations' (inclusive of sport and leisure). Subsequent revisions have reconsidered media events as potentially either disruptive and sites of planned/unplanned protests (e.g. Spracklen & Lamond, 2016), or the domain of the more mundane, commercial and everyday workings of popular culture reproduced through traditional, digital and social media (Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016). The overtly mediatised nature of most contemporary sports events means that often they are re-conceptualised as a set of mediatised experiences for in situ and remote consumers (McGillivray et al., 2021; Sturm, 2020).

Kellner (2003) posits that there has been a significant temporal and cultural shift from media events to media spectacles. Such events, while laden with myths and rituals, are increasingly usurped by and reshaped through the media as spectacles. Kellner is also cognisant of the convergence of media, technologies, entertainment and commercialisation required to continually reproduce the event as spectacle. Therefore, these media transformations predominantly comprise the spectacular, seductive and sensationalised when representing events, using dazzling representations and multiple displays to amplify the projection and circulation of images. Numerous authors have also analysed the mediatisation of sport events, particularly in terms of how sport has been both integrated with and transformed through, the spectacle (Frandsen, 2020; Wenner & Billings, 2017).

The scale of innovations in cricket – in large part a response to the game's existing complexity – have made the sport a notable site for analysis, particularly the spectacular displays of technology, commerce and celebrity that recast cricket events as global media spectacles (Fletcher & Malcolm,

2017; Majumdar & Naha, 2020; Sturm, 2015). For example, Axford and Huggins (2011) observed that cricket has developed towards a simulacrum of the sport, with the IPL providing 'a hyper-compressed and ephemeral spectacle' (p.1336) through its 'made-for-television' format. Similarly, Raj and Sreekumar (2016) posit that the IPL operates both as a media event and as a Bollywood spectacle due to the lavish displays of glamour, celebrity, action, drama, costumes and dance extravaganzas. In turn, the IPL has constructed the stylistic template that most subsequent competitions have attempted to emulate, replicate and reproduce (Sturm, 2015). For example, the Australian BBL prioritised technological innovations and an entertainment focus via its media coverage, producing a high-intensity and arguably hyper-real spectacle of cricket that infuses, embeds, interlaces and enhances the game through often visible technologies, such as drones, spidercam, segways, roving cameras and players wearing microphones and/or helmet cams (Sturm, 2021). Yet the overt nature of these practices seemingly both disrupts and enhances the presentation of cricket as a set of mediatised experiences. Under these conditions, sport is reduced to a series of animated and graphic renderings for forensic dissection of officiating adjudications and for appraisals of the technical acumen of the players (Skey et al., 2018).

Strategically, the constant evolution of mediatised processes caters to a range of significant stakeholders in the game: to entice and retain (television) viewership for administrators and broadcasters, to improve access and officiating processes for umpires, and to permit the increased encroachment of commerce for corporations and sponsors. Yet ironically, for a sport so radically shaped by media-related developments, conservative viewpoints remain very powerful. For many traditionalists, the opportunities made possible by ever-shorter formats are accompanied by a series of threats to the essence and/or enjoyment of the game, and result in unresolved tensions between different formats (Axford & Huggins, 2011; Fletcher & Malcolm, 2017; Malcolm & Fletcher, 2017; Rumford & Wagg, 2010). Indeed, when the concept of playing T20 Internationals was first discussed, the phrase used by wary cricket administrators was 'cannibalisation': the fear that T20 cricket would eat up other formats. Cognisant of this body of resistance, the launch of The Hundred on the BBC utilised the reassuring catchphrase 'It's like cricket, but shorter' (John, 2021). In just five words, this seemingly innocent catchphrase successfully captured the game's long-standing tensions between continuity and change.

Methods

In order to address the research questions, we sought to engage with as many different stakeholders and audiences of cricket as possible. We were not only concerned with what fans had to say (as is customary), but also those in positions of power who are ultimately responsible for shaping and managing policy, as well as those with a responsibility for live events, former players and commentators. To that end, we interviewed 33 people, consisting variously of: former Presidents of the game's oldest institution and guardian of the game's laws and traditions, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), former Senior Officials for the ECB, senior leaders of County Clubs, current cricket broadcasters/journalists, the Head of Commercial Partnerships at a major venue, Stadium Managers for three County Clubs, a former governing body Media and Communications Officer, a current member of The Hundred's marketing team, two former England Team Managers, a former England Team Liaison Officer, a former England international player (men's), current The Hundred players (1 male, 1 female), Event Managers, Hospitality Managers at international venues, cricket development officers, and fans. Interviewees were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. As well-established cricket researchers, we have accumulated a significant network within the sport, some of whom agreed to be interviewed. There were certain areas of this work where our networks did not extend into – particularly governance levels of the sport. In these instances, we again utilised our networks to introduce us to key individuals who, in turn, provided further opportunities. Finally, where relevant, we utilised social media – principally

Twitter and LinkedIn – to connect with specific individuals who would fill emerging knowledge gaps.

We were especially interested in their views on the formats of cricket, and their mediatisation, event innovation, and the future of the game. Data for this paper were collected between 2019–2022. This relatively longitudinal approach ensured that our data have captured the views of participants who were anticipating the first season of The Hundred, were able to reflect on the first season, and were planning for the 2022 event. During this period, we have also crossed the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews ($n = 21$) conducted prior to the pandemic were undertaken face-to-face. Remaining interviews ($n = 12$) were conducted over Skype, Zoom, Teams or WhatsApp. Interviews lasted between 20–76 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes. Analysing thematically provided rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts of the qualitative dataset. Initially, the first author read and re-read interview transcripts, noting interesting features (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, initial codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organising codes into themes. These were reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset. Analysis identified three over-arching themes that related to the strategic goals and potential pitfalls for The Hundred: 1) shorter formats have introduced a new audience to cricket; 2) shorter formats are more accessible and inclusive; and 3) tensions between event innovation and existing game formats. These will now be discussed in turn.

Findings

New audiences

When the ECB first discussed the idea of T20 cricket, it stemmed from a concern of a crisis in County cricket in terms of the declining number of people playing and watching the game, and audience demographics that were fairly homogenously white, male, middle class, over 50 years old and ageing. Taken together, this audience had become somewhat of a metaphor for the drab and uninspiring – pale, male and stale – brand of cricket the men's England cricket team especially, had been accused of playing. The late Mike Marqusee (1994) described cricket as experiencing a 'malaise' which was compounded by England's subsequent performance in the 1999 men's World Cup. Billed as a 'carnival of cricket' and designed to appeal to and be a celebration of, Britain's ethnic diversity, England failed to advance from the group stages. T20 was, therefore, designed as a response to a cricketing nation in crisis.

This saviour narrative was frequently relayed by interviewees and reflects continued concerns about the economic viability of cricket in England. In particular, respondents referred to the ambition and role of shorter formats to shed the slow, boring and inaccessible image of the game and subsequently both draw spectators into stadiums and diversify audience demographics (see Fletcher et al., 2022; Fletcher, 2019). A cricket writer we interviewed reflected on regular stereotypes of the sport's lack of appeal among the younger generation:

> If I went up to some of my football mates and said "right, do you want to go to a cricket match?" the first thing they'd say is "why would I want to stand around and watch old men play cricket for five days?" Well, "a week" they'd normally say, "and then watch them stop four times for them to have a three course meal". That's the image that cricket has painted unfortunately.

It was widely argued that broader social changes in our work and leisure lives have impacted peoples' viewing habits and consequently cricket needed to adapt to a mediatised culture, emphasising speed and immediate gratification. These respondents spoke of the imperative for cricket to adapt to consumer demand and the commercial value of appealing to a broader fan base:

> The human race has less time now to play and watch sport and cricket in particular. Because we have less time the nature of the games have changed . . . This is all to make it more fun, to make it quicker and to incorporate more people. To keep it popular . . . all of the formats have evolved. (former President of the MCC)

> Peoples' viewing habits are changing and therefore peoples' ability to sit and watch eight hours of Test cricket - unless you are a die-hard - are decreasing . . . It means that cricket, like other sports, has had to adjust to the changing world and to create a format that allows people to have something that is much shorter and much more easy to digest. (Stadium Manager)

Respondents commonly referred to the draw of the 'razzmatazz' of The Hundred and T20 which stems from their mediatisation:

> For TV and as something for people to come to watch, fantastic. T20, you know . . . is good and entertaining, this [The Hundred] took it up a level. You know, you've got a DJ stage, live bands, it felt like a real "I wanna be part of that". I had lots of friends saying "I'm gonna go there after work" . . . , So, I think as a product it has worked really well. (Director of Women's Cricket, County Club)

Likewise, a member of The Hundred's marketing team referred to the importance of creating a positive, holistic experience which, like most of the more popular television productions, consisted of variety rather than simply the main event. In other words, The Hundred was aiming to appeal to audiences that did not necessarily like cricket:

> It's the event experience itself . . . Through the music acts, we're making cricket a huge entertainment event that people are coming along to. Yeah, they're coming to watch the cricket, gosh yeah, we want people to come and watch the cricket, but there's a lot of other stuff going on that we can excite and inspire people with.

Fans in particular cited the sociable and casual atmosphere at The Hundred and T20 which, in turn, was regularly contrasted with the atmosphere at Test matches. Interviewees concurred with the architects of these sports events and believed that these features were especially appealing to young fans, families, and those who are less familiar with the nuances of the sport:

> I personally prefer shorter versions of the game because you can go with your friends . . . I like the social side of it. I go with friends or family and have a few drinks and it is a lot more interactive I would say. It is fun for everyone; even those that don't know much about cricket. It's a lot of fun. (Female fan in her 20s)

Taken together, The Hundred and other shorter formats were considered to promote a more inclusive and accessible event with greater appeal to a more diverse cricketing audience, notably those who may be new to cricket.

More inclusive and accessible

Participants regularly referred to the appeal of The Hundred and other shorter formats to those people less familiar with cricket. There were a number of factors believed to contribute to this. Cricket is regularly criticised for its exclusivity. Lord's Cricket Ground in London was recently criticised after thousands of tickets went unsold for a Test match between England and New Zealand. The majority of adult tickets cost more than £100 per day (Bloom & Hoult, 2022). The comparatively lower price to attend The Hundred and T20 was cited as attracting more families and a younger demographic:

> I think it represents value for money. Ticket prices are brilliant in comparison to a Test match. If you wanted to take a family of four to a Test match it would cost you £400 before you've even bought a sandwich. Whereas for The Hundred you can get a family here for less than £50. (Head of Commercial Partnerships, major venue)

Marketing of The Hundred, specifically the importance of creating an inclusive narrative around the event, was also cited:

> There was key messaging around The Hundred. From the get-go, it was marketed as being for everyone and that was something that they were really great at communicating. The Hundred is for everyone and I think

> that they really got that across, and I don't really think that I have seen any other sports tournament really, sort of, go so hard on trying to ensure that everybody knows that this is for them. (TV presenter)

Moreover, The Hundred involved a series of changes to rules by which cricket has traditionally been staged. For example, the format dispensed with the longstanding, imperial measurement-inspired 6-ball over, in favour of the decimally more friendly format of overs consisting of either five or ten consecutive deliveries – known as a 'set'. The Hundred was further designed to deconstruct this complexity of traditional forms of cricket through the (non-)use of cricket jargon, so often the butt of jokes among those unfamiliar with the game (Watson, 2010):

> One of the biggest barriers to cricket is the complexity of the lingo and I just think it's great and brave of the ECB and The Hundred to change that and say "We need to change that because we need to appeal to a different audience"; a new audience to help the game grow. (Member of The Hundred marketing team)

The new format also included timeouts and a simplified scorecard. The introduction of countdown scoring was thought to be particularly successful from an inclusivity perspective, as illustrated in the following reflections:

> They were pitching it to your non-cricket fans. I think if you go to a football game tomorrow and you've never been before, you understand you've scored one and it's almost quite simple. Cricket is an awkward game to understand if you don't know anything about it. (Cricket Development Officer)

> It's easier for your non-traditional cricket fans to follow. As an example close to home, my mother doesn't really watch cricket, but she said she perfectly understood what was happening in The Hundred. You've got 50 balls left and you've got to score 60 runs. It's a lot easier rather than having 34.2 overs to go and having to work out what's happening. It was a lot clearer. (Director of Women's Cricket for County Club)

Referring to how The Hundred was presented on TV, another interviewee said:

> The graphics meant that it was really, really, easy to follow. You know how many balls have gone, how many runs had been gotten. So actually, I think for any novice it was easier to keep up with the game. This is from someone who knows a bit about cricket. For me, for a novice it seemed like it was a really good entry point to kind of simplify everything. (TV presenter)

Opinions significantly diverged around the issue of the degree of innovation and the extent to which the game's traditions had been affected. Despite expressions of anxiety about the level of innovation in some aspects of the media, a number of interviewees argued that The Hundred still 'felt' like cricket:

> If you were to turn up not knowing it was a Hundred game you'd still think "they're playing cricket". It's not too different but there are enough changes there to attract new people . . . It's still the same game, more or less. A ball's being bowled, hit it. (Director of Women's Cricket, County Club)

But for others, The Hundred was representative of a slippery slope to cricket's 'dumbing down'. This cricket writer for instance, referred to the suggestion that cricket needed simplifying as 'childish' and 'insulting':

> I'm happy to listen to new fans and hear their views, but I don't have a problem with cricket being sort of slightly intricate. I don't think there's ever been a problem before with overs, wickets, balls, run outs and I think that's part of its charm. Rugby's a complicated game but no one's saying "get rid of conversions, scrums and try's" or anything like that are they? I think it's all kind of childish and insulting really to say "I don't understand what an over is" and things like that. They're just pandering to people by doing this stuff. I mean, they'll either get it or they won't and there's people who want to get it or they don't want to get it. People say "Oh, well, cricket's too complicated" and they don't understand it. Well, they haven't really tried have they?

Such a view was reinforced by this journalist who lamented the tone of live television commentary:

> It's the definition of forced fun isn't it? You've got people like the commentators saying "OMG, the atmosphere is amazing" etc. etc. without allowing us to think that for ourselves . . . I enjoyed it because there was cricket on the TV, but what I didn't enjoy was being told I was supposed to enjoy it rather than just enjoying it off my own back.

There is no doubting the commercial benefits of shorter forms of cricket such as The Hundred, and on initial evidence, it does appear to have made cricket events (or any other leisure activity) more accessible to new audiences. However, clearly, there remains a body of concern about what the global strength and popularity of these shorter formats indicate about leisure and social change more generally. Test matches have been identified as especially vulnerable to the appeal and commercial value of T20 (Fletcher & Malcolm, 2017; Rumford & Wagg, 2010) and the response has been to debate the potential solutions and refinements to safeguard the game's traditions (see Wigmore, 2019). Inevitably this requires new sports events to integrate into cricket's existing calendar of events, a topic we explore in the next section.

Tensions between event innovation and existing formats

Following the culmination of the 2021 The Hundred competition, Tom Harrison, the ECB CEO insisted that the long-term project was to 'migrate' new audiences gained from the first season of The Hundred to other formats and particularly Test matches (Charlesworth, 2021). A senior official of the ECB provided a similar portrayal of both the synergy of the different forms of the game and the sense that The Hundred served a broader purpose:

> Test cricket is really the traditional format of the game . . . That is the format of the game that matters the most to the game and the viewers of the game and it's the one that we have to protect the most. If you think of cricket as a great big oak tree. Test cricket is the trunk of the tree. Then you have your branches which have been developed over the last few decades. Now you have your fruit, which people are salivating over and demanding more and more of. This is your T20-type cricket.

Similarly, a member of The Hundred's marketing team shared their vision of how The Hundred will encourage audiences into other formats:

> We want a journey from them being complete cricket newbies coming to The Hundred which is like your entry level product and then we want them to come to the rest of our portfolio. So it's almost like a journey that maybe through the years they evolve into a different fan and they evolve into a cricket fan of all formats. We're not trying to say, "come to The Hundred, don't come to anything else". The ambition of The Hundred is to engage and excite a new audience, but then to bring them into the game that we all love and that, you know, we can share all formats with.

In contrast to this ambition and optimism, others argued that the expectations on The Hundred – to be both the financially most profitable form of the game, and to make all other forms individually more profitable – were unrealistic. This cricket writer for example, observed that the overarching narrative around The Hundred (simplicity, fast-pace and innovation) meant that it was unlikely to convert audiences into a broader engagement with cricket. He argued that as many of the inspiring features of The Hundred were indeed unique to The Hundred, it would be hard for other forms of cricket to attract these new audiences:

> If I was new to the game, I would struggle to understand why people would then go watch a four day county game.

Others questioned whether it was realistic to expect The Hundred to contribute to the development of other formats. For another cricket writer, the primary responsibility of The Hundred was to itself, and building the base of cricket spectators, and that did not necessarily benefit other forms of the game:

> I don't think you're going to get the next generation of red ball fans from watching The Hundred . . . But unfortunately, I think to some degree that's the way both sport and society are going. People generally don't want to or have the time to watch five days of cricket, whereas they can go and watch a game of cricket for 2 or 3 hours and be really happy with that. I get the point that maybe The Hundred is not going to stir other formats, . . . but ultimately, I don't think it's The Hundred's obligation to get more fans into cricket.

Others were more pessimistic, suggesting that Test cricket and domestic four-day cricket are under direct threat of being cannibalised. For this former player and current journalist, greater investment in The Hundred and T20 tournaments had *exacerbated* uneven development:

> Test match cricket doesn't really receive anything like the commercial support and certainly the commercial exposure that it ought to. People should be promoting the longer format of the game rather than T20 which sells out anyway. [Test match] crowds outside England, India and Australia are very disappointing. So that is a problem. They need to start promoting the hell out of the game.

It was, however, universally agreed that the extensive free to air television coverage was a significant positive to come from The Hundred. Interviewees agreed that having cricket available on the TV for free was vital for the growth of the game, and the women's game especially. However, there was also a view that the addition of The Hundred to an already crowded cricket calendar could contribute to audience fatigue. This was articulated most strongly by stakeholders involved in event delivery. This Event Manager reflected on the challenges she had experienced trying to fill stadiums:

> I think that there is too much cricket at the moment. There is so much cricket all the time . . . but all over the world stadiums aren't full. You turn the TV on and are guaranteed to be watching cricket . . . we need to be cautious not to offer too many matches; too many choices to our audience.

The preferred model of event-hosting expressed in the interviews was for competitions like The Hundred to be the season's centre-piece and given a specific space in the calendar so that spectators have something to look forward to. According to this Stadium Manager, the timing of The Hundred is consistent with the success of the BBL in Australia:

> One of the reasons why it [BBL] has been so successful is that they have scheduled it over the long summer holiday, so starting in early December and going through to mid-January at the time where all the school kids are on holiday. So, it is the perfect vehicle for people to go and watch cricket.

It should however be noted that changes to the 2020/21 BBL format (an elongated season which extended outside of school holidays, plus additional presentational 'gimmicks') saw the BBL's popularity fade (Wigmore, 2020). Wigmore observes how these changes essentially witnessed the 'Big Bash cannibalise itself' (para.17). This points to the fundamental need to see event development as a process rather than as a staccato movement between different formats.

Discussion

References to the traditions of cricket being under threat are commonplace and longstanding. However, all formats remain distinctively 'cricket'. It is still a bat and (hard) ball contest between two teams of eleven. The colour of the ball may change (red, white and pink) and the traditional cricket 'whites' are only worn during the longest formats, but cricket venues retain a unique aesthetic. Such rootedness is important in an era when nostalgia is an increasingly pervasive social norm, affecting sport, leisure and tourism more than many areas of social life (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005), and integral to cricket in particular (Malcolm, 2013). Consequently, each new iteration of cricket generates new and unresolved tensions.

The Hundred has certainly attracted a new, younger audience. Of the 16.1 million people who watched The Hundred in 2021, 57% were reported to have never watched cricket before (Easton, 2021). The men's and women's finals drew respective TV audiences of 2.4 million and 1.4 million, while the tournament's opening match was the most watched women's cricket match (across both international and domestic) in the UK on record. While viewers declined by around 20% to 14.2 million the following year (ECB, 2022), The Hundred continued to take cricket to new audiences, with more women (28%), children (22%), and families (41%) attending than in 2021. The second instalment also set a new global record for total attendance at a women's cricket competition, record crowds at every venue and the domestic attendance record broken twice. Of the Sky and BBC TV audience, 42% had not watched any other ECB cricket events in 2022 prior to The

Hundred, resulting in 5.9 million new viewers. Women (31%) and children (14%) made up a significant share of this TV audience.

As these figures suggest, the links between mediatisation and media events remain paramount. Anstead and O'laughlin (2011) argue that it is important to recognise that 'cricket occurs within and is inflected through a thoroughly mediatised set of practices. The "cricket community" of fans, players, journalists and administrators around the world is held together by media' (p. 1340). Hence, Anstead and O'laughlin (2011) posit that, due to specific mediatised logics, functions, spaces and effects, cricket tournaments like The Hundred and T20 are fundamentally media events, and if The Hundred does supersede T20 (in England at least) it will be a consequence of the interdependence of game innovation and wider media exposure. However, through the assemblage of media, sport and culture, tournaments have a disruptive logic that both interrupts leisure routines, and functions to bring disparate and dispersed cricketing communities together, forged through mediatised spaces of production, representation and consumption. The convergence of these processes makes the flow-on effects such as affective bonds, identification and collectivism possible, and creates the potential for larger and more inclusive audience engagement.

Reinforcing Frandsen's (2020) summation of mediatisation, such developments have the hallmarks of the waves of subtle and overt change that mediatisation typically brings to sport events. Many of these new practices, processes and relationships are transformative, with economic imperatives forcing cricket to engage with broader societal changes, including the need/desire for greater inclusivity and diversity (Dashper et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2021; Powis & Velija, 2021). Simply stated, traditional forms of the game have become both economically untenable and socially unviable in contemporary, democratic and increasingly populist Western Europe.

In seeking to respond to contemporary developments, The Hundred extends cricket's long-standing interdependence with the media and successfully harnesses mediatisation processes to enhance the game's commercialisation. Collectively, with contemporary cricket embedding media technologies as core elements within the sport itself, alongside the constant experimentation, engagement with and pioneering of technological innovations, cricket can be seen to be a forerunner among sports events transitioning to media spectacles. Yet, as cricket pushes the envelope for innovations that cater to audience fascination (Sturm, 2021), and continual refinements seek to augment, enhance and further commercialise cricket's mediated developments, spectacle and mass appeal, events such as The Hundred exacerbate existing tensions within the game. For example, the necessity to launch joint male and female franchises together acts as a counterpoint to the logic of change. Co-aligned competitions ultimately double the duration of any individual event, and thus thwart attempts to appeal to a new audience by compressing the spectacle.

The elements of mediatisation evident in The Hundred also affords some novel insights into this contemporary digital leisure studies 'moment'. Fundamentally, it is commonly accepted that a pronounced shift from traditional analogue media broadcasts to an accelerated proliferation of digital technologies, transformations, and hyper-digitalised experiences have underpinned, shaped, and necessitated a new lexicon under the umbrella of digital leisure scholarship (Carnicelli et al., 2017; Lawrence, 2023; Redhead, 2015; Silk et al., 2016). For example, The Hundred arguably points to some of the neoliberal promises and pitfalls that Silk et al. (2016) identify within digital leisure and the resultant conflicting digitalised and datafied identities on offer. The Hundred seemingly promotes a rhetoric of inclusivity far removed from the traditions, conservatism, and hegemonic forms of white masculinity that often abound in cricket (Fletcher, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014, 2015; Malcolm, 2013), while also promulgating an imaginary digitalised 'access for all' that hints at an abundance of idealised (digital) leisure opportunities that can be played, enjoyed, consumed and engaged in.

Additionally, notions of claustropolitanism point to a foreclosure rather than opening up of opportunities within digital leisure studies. For example, building on Redhead's (2015, 2016)

notions of accelerated culture, Lawrence and Crawford (2022) assert that we are experiencing an 'intense claustrophobia' (p. 63) within our digital leisure engagements, such that:

> In stark opposition to the notion that digital technologies arouse our social and cultural worlds into a state of cosmopolitan extravaganza, delighting us with the unending possibilities of transnational fandom, consumption and mobility, artificial forms of intelligence are perpetually monitoring online activities and algorithmically foreclosing us with narrow, targeted content, information, opinions, products and people designed to perpetuate and reproduce our biases, with ever greater speed and efficiency. (p. 63)

Many of these elements are observable within the innovations that mark The Hundred as a distinct leisure event. In reality, tropes that hint at agential and aspirational possibilities for all are seemingly just recycled, and delimiting, suppressing and (re-)producing datafied digital leisure realms.

Nevertheless, affective traces also resonate and persist within these socio-technological assemblages that point to the interconnected mobilisation of identities, communities, networks and screened interfaces – however illusory or arbitrary they may first appear (Reed et al., 2022). Hence, affective assemblages also materialise in realms such as fandom, interaction, inclusivity, prosumption and sensory mediatised engagements with The Hundred. For example, English cricket fandom operates within a framework of provincialism (in the naming and location of teams) and nationalism (in being an English cricket innovation), via cosmopolitanism (inclusion of international players) and as a globalised form (competing with the IPL). While oscillating on a spectrum these can range from the ephemeral to the enduring that simultaneously makes the cricketing format both matter and potentially meaningless (Sturm, 2015, 2021). Such wide-ranging yet affective occurrences are availed by creating an innovative game and platform with undoubted international appeal, that has emerged as a key part of a global cricketing calendar, while affording affective renderings of a hyperreal and hyper compressed sporting format laced with the elements of mediatisation traced earlier (Frandsen, 2020). It is not coincidental that the main tangible, long term commercial innovations in cricket (the 'one-day' game, T20 and potentially now The Hundred) were first 'rubber stamped' with the cultural capital of English innovations.

Like other contemporary sports that straddle this new digital turn (Lawrence & Crawford, 2019, 2022; Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2022), The Hundred is created to be precisely consumed as a digital leisure experience and as a multifaceted, affective assemblage of media entertainment. Hence, constant evocations of experiencing 'being there' (often authenticated by digital accessibility, notifications, connections, and networking) saturate both the in-situ and online experience. Moreover, an exuberant sensory stream of razzmatazz, hype and excess via entertainment-laced renderings affronts, indulges, intoxicates, overloads and overwhelms its audiences – simultaneously presented for and packaged as live, digital and virtual experiences to account for 'all' leisure consumers. Therefore, an intense, accelerated and holistic mediatisation pervades the presentation of The Hundred as a hyper-compressed and fast paced version of cricket that purports to be inclusive and innovative, while offering an easily consumable (if not an ultimately disposable) version of media entertainment for national and transnational audiences as both traditional broadcast media and as a digital leisure experience.

Conclusion

As much as The Hundred creates cricket in a new guise, undergirded by associated consumeristic impulses, practices and spaces as an in situ and digitalised form of leisure (Spracklen, 2015), it remains buttressed by a persistent link to the traditional mechanisms of commercialisation and commodification for cricket (i.e. shortening and simplifying the game). Non-digital drivers of change – such as the seeming significance of the return of English cricket's traditional broadcaster, the BBC – also remain crucial. This novel leisure event acquires some resonance from its association with the long-cherished myths and rituals of the game (Kellner, 2003), which in turn helps ameliorate the tensions in the cricketing community created or exacerbated by mediatised

innovation. For example, the switch to a subscription service such as Netflix would be very controversial and would have the potential to split cricket's various stakeholders. However, precisely how empowering or illusory such idealised depictions or opportunities for inclusive interactions really are remains questionable. Moreover, we are reminded that such 'neoliberal' digital leisure affordances predominantly circulate within more complex assemblages, modalities and power relations that can belie their aspirational or inclusive overtures (Silk et al., 2016).

These developments also present a series of challenges to contemporary cricket, its events, its variety of platforms, and spectators' leisure time via the processes of mediatisation. The Hundred marks English crickets' first attempts to produce content for digital apps, devices and social media users alongside its traditional television viewership (Skey et al., 2018), but it has done so whilst also explicitly justifying these new commercial opportunities as a basis to grow and sustain the format of the game cherished by traditionalists. While the hegemonic powers of cricket have perhaps become more accepting of the culture of 'post-Western' cricketing development (Rumford, 2011), the mediatised, global and commercialised processes that increasingly blur non-nation-based cricket events, circuits and franchises and give such events greater prominence in the global cricket calendar, remain disputed and resisted. Consequently, The Hundred illustrates the contestation which underpins leisure events and demonstrates that mediatisation and the digital turn ultimately creates new fissures. The strength of, and nostalgia for, the historical traditions of the game amplify these tensions in a way that may be distinct to cricket, but are logically present across cultural forms.

Despite the widely expressed commitment, there is little evidence that The Hundred will sustain audiences across the game's various formats, but this remains to be established through further research. We are yet to understand how consumers qualitatively engaged with The Hundred as a broadcast, or as an App. Will the male and female competitions remain linked? Will any cross-format transference occur? Will the ECB sell off their prime asset to a new owner with an exclusively digital media link? In short, will The Hundred ultimately lead to cannibalisation, contagious growth or re-entrenchment of divisions? History, however, tells us that one of the most potentially enduring outcomes of developing The Hundred could be the reinforcement of nostalgia for traditional and an (imagined) sense of leisure in an otherwise mediatised and digital age.

Note

1. (www.thehundred.com).

Disclosure statement

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