

Investigating a Neoliberal Approach to Management & Digital Television Distribution: A Political Economy of the CrossFit Games

Peter Arne Johnson

This case study explores how a development on the fringes of the sports-media complex necessitates a critical political economy framework and concerns not only television but also ownership structures outside of “big media.” Specifically, it investigates the relationship between fitness giant CrossFit Inc. and its legacy distribution partners and the industry trends that led it to abandon dominant media in 2019, when it provided a free, open-source feed of its annual CrossFit Games to independent producers. Combining discourse analysis with a multi-level institutional perspective, this essay suggests that critical political economy is not an empty, top-down framework but is instead a holistic approach that meaningfully considers issues of culture and praxis. By demonstrating how an obscure private corporation with an idiosyncratic libertarian CEO wrestled control from incumbent media, this case study considers how non-mainstream financing structures may affect the production and consumption of cultural products. On a structural level, it also problematizes the totalizing notion of media conglomeration.

Keywords: political economy, ownership, sports-media complex, digital distribution, television, CrossFit, the CrossFit Games.

The histories of media systems are typically characterized by oscillations between technological disruption and stasis, with vertically integrated media conglomerates eventually harnessing the power of technologies to control production and distribution. However, on the fringes of the mainstream, equally profit-driven companies operate under a separate set of logics than these synergistic global conglomerates. Adopting a critical political economy (CPE) framework, this case study investigates how a development on the fringes of the sports-media complex—CrossFit Inc.’s open-source broadcast of the 2019 CrossFit Games—has critical implications for both media ownership and television, beyond just sports. Despite its claims about the global parity and democratization of the sport, CrossFit’s disintermediation efforts reflect an attempt to regain digital distribution rights from institutional media and realize a broader corporate strategy of international market penetration. These conclusions suggest that CPE and media industry studies should consider the private ownership structures of non-incumbent media interests, such as CrossFit, and how a company may simultaneously disrupt the industry status quo and ambivalently enable other new entrants to perpetuate their brands without mediation. Moreover, this case study suggests that political economy remains a vital and multiperspectived framework that can not only dissect CrossFit’s structural role in the ever-changing, yet historically monolithic, sports-media complex but can also identify how corporate strategies affect issues relating to consumption and culture, including viewer autonomy and the accessibility of content for fans and viewers, particularly those outside the United States.

Literature Review & Methodology: The Case for Critical Political Economy

Political economy is a complex and eclectic field with multiple strands of scholarship that diverge and overlap, some of which are critical (i.e., radical political economy) and some of which are not (i.e., neoliberal economics). Although political economy “defies a single definition” (Pickard 2013, 307), as a critical framework, it provides a historical analysis of capitalism that can identify how “different ways of organising and financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content and the ways in which this is consumed and used” (Hardy 2014, 7). Vincent Mosco (2014) has also identified the four defining characteristics of CPE as an interest in historical change, “social totality,” moral philosophy, and praxis (1:39). Political economists like Robert McChesney (2013) have emphasized Mosco’s last point—praxis—arguing that policy prescriptions and digital activism are just as necessary as critical theory. Still, there is a paucity of literature that advocates for other forms of praxis, such as industrial intervention or “media governance.” Phillip Napoli (2015) has defined “media governance” as a “broader, more inclusive concept than media regulation or media policy” that affects “many of the stakeholders invested in the performance of the individuals, organizations, and institutions that provide Internet access, content, and services” (753). Further broadening this concept to “corporate governance,” praxis such as this is a valuable form of intervention in the digital media era because it can identify material issues with specific corporate actions and the changes that private entities and other stakeholders can enact to benefit consumers.

In terms of understanding corporate logic in the media industries, David Hesmondhalgh’s (2013) approach to “cultural industries” is also useful in understanding the tensions present when corporations try to commodify culture. Seemingly departing from the economic determinism of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1972), Hesmondhalgh argues that media industries are ultimately “complex, ambivalent and contested” (46). Indeed, the complex and

ambivalent environment in which CrossFit, its brand partners, and incumbent television distributors operated reflects how media enterprises are merely trying to maintain their survival by 1) maximizing audiences and 2) minimizing the risk inherent in the production of intangible goods like film and television content. Put another way, corporations are not scheming to maintain stratified class structures or take over the world from a penthouse boardroom; instead, corporate strategies remain *ambivalent* processes that can be positive or negative for consumers. In terms of methodology, this case study draws from the “multiperspectival” approach of Eileen Meehan (1986, 394). She argues that any single scope (e.g., micro, macro, or midlevel) is insufficient by itself and instead combines three distinct approaches: instrumentalism, which explores how *individuals* interact on behalf of organizations; institutionalism, which analyzes how *organizations* strive to “control as much of the environment as possible” (398); and finally structuralism, which assesses how organizations within and across *industries* “mesh” or “grind” together (401). For this specific case study, instrumental and institutional analysis are somewhat the same, as Greg Glassman was the sole owner and CEO of CrossFit in 2019. Therefore, many of the strategic pivots of CrossFit were reflective of Glassman’s politically-motivated, frequently erratic, management decisions, which include abruptly firing his media team and a significant portion of his staff (LoFranco 2018d), cutting ties with Facebook after citing that it was run by “utopian socialists” in an official press release (CrossFit 2019), and making racist comments about police violence against black Americans (Rosman 2020a). Although this case study may at first appear to be an “organization-level” analysis (Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar 2020, 67), it ultimately is a multilayered approach that looks at the words and actions of individual CrossFit employees and the broader industry dynamics of sports media and digital distribution.

In addition to a multiperspectived methodology, this political economic analysis addresses how “power operates through language and culture” (Pickard 2013, 310) by identifying how CrossFit discursively deployed marketing and public relations to control “the narrative” and maintain power amid digital change. As there is limited scholarship on CrossFit, let alone the CrossFit Games, this case study relies on mainstream news articles and popular CrossFit news sites, which serve as valuable sources of information and are cultural artifacts in their own right. While these artifacts do not guarantee accuracy (Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko 1993), few alternative data sources are available. As CrossFit HQ is privately-held, has no federal corporate filings, and is notably protective of its brand (LoFranco 2018c; LoFranco 2019b), there are also limited opportunities for interviews or ethnographic observation at the corporate level. As Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko (1993) point out, political economists should use varied sources and systematically interrogate data to counteract any bias within one particular reference to, in this case, understand how CrossFit and CrossFit blogs manipulate language in an attempt to control market outcomes.

This case study also places CPE scholarship in conversation with two areas of media industry studies scholarship to provide a more holistic and historically grounded perspective: the sports-media complex and conglomeration in the post-network era. Because of sports media’s indebtedness to the formats and distribution logics of television (Jhally 1984; McChesney 1989), the CrossFit Games should be contextualized within television history specifically. Further, given this essay’s concern with ownership and corporate governance, it is valuable to place this case study in conversation with literature on media conglomeration and consider the consequences of CrossFit’s unique ownership structure. Although the political economy of

communication certainly precedes “critical media industries studies” (CMIS), and the conflicts between the two are well documented (Wasko and Meehan 2013), there is still substantial overlap between these “parallel” fields. Although this brief review papers over decades of similar debate between cultural studies and CPE (see: Garnham 1995; Grossberg 1995; Meehan 1999), CPE and CMIS both critically consider issues of economics and institutions, as well as texts and audiences, and are cumulatively concerned with both structure *and* agency within media industries. Therefore, just as cooperation between cultural studies and CPE is “essential if we are to fully appreciate the complex phenomena collapsed into the term media” (Meehan 1999, 13), so too is the cooperation between CPE and CMIS necessary.

The Sports-Media Complex

The power of the “sports/media complex” (Jhally 1984) has seemingly remained in the hands of a few dominant sports and media companies, even in the face of technological disruption and competition from low-margin alternatives. Although digital threats are certainly destabilizing incumbent players, *live* sports seemingly provide incumbent broadcasters with a competitive advantage over new time-shifting digital entrants, suggesting that the sports-media complex is in the process of “evolution rather than revolution” (Boyle 2014, 750). Tom Evens, Petros Iosifidis, and Paul Smith (2013) maintain that the sports-media complex still provides a “win-win” for sports organizations and media conglomerates. However, over time, sports leagues and individual teams have become increasingly reliant on multiple revenue streams from media industries, particularly television licensing fees (14). As a result, power has tipped back to incumbent media (25–26). However, looking beyond the confines of the “traditional” sports-media complex, where licensing deals are not as vital, the power dynamics are not as clear. Skeptical that the media have the upper hand, Brett Hutchins and David Rowe (2009) suggest that sports media will move into an era of “digital plentitude” where power will shift to sports organizations due to fewer barriers to entry and lower fixed costs to distribute content in the digital environment (356). CrossFit’s decision to provide an open-source broadcast for the CrossFit Games seemingly corroborated this trend toward digital plentitude, as it would theoretically lead to the “user-generated content” that Hutchins and Rowe identify (256–366). However, as the CrossFit Games’ most viewed broadcasts suggest, sometimes neither content owners nor incumbent media gain the upper hand during times of digital disruption; instead, new entrants with divergent commercial interests harness content for their benefit.

Indeed, there are now new players in the sports-media complex whose primary motivation is not solely maximizing licensing profit or advertising revenue, which has upended the advantage held by incumbent distributors. For example, the retail giant Amazon has disrupted traditional sports by establishing long-term distribution agreements with the National Football League, ATP Tennis, and the Premier League (Lindholm 2019, 100). Johan Lindholm (2019) has argued that these licensing agreements do not even need to turn a profit for Amazon, as they are part of the company’s broader corporate strategies: “driving consumers to [Amazon’s] whole range of services” and collecting valuable data on consumers (101). Similar to CrossFit’s open-source model, Amazon’s ambivalence toward licensing profit demonstrates how the power dynamics of the sports-media complex are in flux; at the same time, this does not necessarily indicate that cyberspace has provided some breakthrough for democracy.

Big Media & Disintermediation in the Post-Network Era

In addition to the sports-media complex, scholarship on media conglomeration complements a political economy framework by shedding light on how a few media corporations have consolidated in the television industry, at least temporarily. Although Amanda Lotz (2014) argues that conglomerate-owned television broadcasters are no longer the only content “gatekeepers” (275), she admits that “finding audiences becomes far more complicated in the contemporary cluttered content space, and those who can marshal vast promotional budgets maintain the status of gatekeepers” (276). Put another way, neoliberal economic structures ensure that corporations with deep pockets—not fans or viewers—remain in power, regardless of digital plenitude. While Lotz is optimistic that these few conglomerates will not ultimately return to their previous dominance, she is skeptical that the autonomy and choice present in today’s digital landscape “will shift power to the viewers” (275).

Another digital media trend relevant to CrossFit’s open-source broadcast is disintermediation, which occurs when content owners eliminate the middlemen between production and consumption. Michael Strangelove (2015) outlines how the dominating forces of media—a few vertically integrated conglomerates—have tried to hold onto power in the face of piracy and digital disintermediation by enacting restrictions like territorialization and content scarcity (184). According to Strangelove, there is no significant indication that digital threats will destroy incumbent power (175). Instead, as they have done in the past, dominant media interests will manipulate new technologies and leverage their near-monopoly to retain power (205). As he focuses on the problematics of large media corporations, Strangelove overlooks the disintermediation of non-incumbent organizations like CrossFit. Also, sports content is distinct from other audiovisual products in that its underlying intellectual property is owned by sports organizations that exist (for now) outside of the vertically integrated media oligopoly. In other words, the media cartel merely “borrows” sports content via temporary licensing deals. This dynamic presents a more significant risk for incumbent media, as they could easily be cut out of the distribution equation under the right conditions and perhaps by the right emerging corporation who pushes aside traditional distributors like ESPN or CBS to disintermediate. Indeed, new entrants like CrossFit may mediate risk and maximize profit during times of disruption, ultimately upending traditional distribution structures.

Case Study: The 2019 CrossFit Games

Although CrossFit has gained popularity over the past decade and has a core base of fervent fans, it remains somewhat unknown as a professional sport. It has also had difficulty separating CrossFit as a consumable workout regime from CrossFit as a competitive sport (LoFranco 2018a). On the direct-to-consumer side of the business, CrossFit promotes itself as a “lifestyle” with two core components: exercise and diet (CrossFit, n.d.). According to CrossFit co-founder, Greg Glassman, the workout component is only effective if individuals also follow a proper diet of “meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar” and “keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat” (CrossFit, n.d.). In other words, customers need to “buy into” the entire CrossFit lifestyle—and its services—to see results.

Distinct from its diet and exercise component, the CrossFit Games is a four-day competition

where top athletes compete in a series of events that test their physical strength, cardiovascular ability, and gymnastics skills. Each year before the Games, nearly 500,000 CrossFitters compete in an “open” five-week qualifying process—termed the “CrossFit Open”—which provides *all* CrossFitters, young and old, with the chance to go to the CrossFit Games. This “open-source” approach to Games qualification engenders a simultaneity and community that further entrenches CrossFitters as both fans and consumers. Following a new qualifying process in 2019 (Marquez 2019), the competitors who ranked in the upper echelons of the CrossFit Open went on to compete for the title of “Fittest Man” or “Fittest Woman” at the Games. This new process also eliminated an additional step in the qualifying process previously run by CrossFit HQ: CrossFit regionals. As the sport continued to grow and regionals became more expensive to oversee, Glassman decided to further lean into CrossFit’s “free market” approach to management by allowing brand partners to run a select number of “sanctionals” whereby competitors could qualify for the Games outside of the CrossFit Open (LoFranco 2018b).

Although CrossFit may have less brand awareness than an entity like the MLB or NBA, it is by no means a “mom and pop” operation. According to a 2015 estimate by Forbes, CrossFit’s affiliates and ancillary products and services earn over \$4 billion in annual revenue, with CrossFit HQ earning approximately \$100 million per year in profit (Ozarian 2015). (As a privately owned company with one owner at the time of the 2019 Games, much of CrossFit’s financial history and performance remains speculative.) Although CrossFit has a global network of over 15,000 individual locations, CrossFit Inc. does not physically own these local gyms. Instead, “affiliates” are independently owned and kick up an annual \$3,000 fee to brandish the CrossFit name (CrossFit, n.d.). Interested customers can join one of these affiliated CrossFit gyms—also termed “boxes”—where they engage in group fitness workouts that are varied daily by local coaches and can be “adapted for people of any age and level of fitness” (CrossFit, n.d.). While CrossFit grew exponentially in the first half of the 2010s, the company has tried—to varying levels of success (Hay 2020)—to appeal to older customers and a more global audience since its saturation of the 18–35 age market in the U.S. Regardless of its profitability, when a multi-billion-dollar enterprise like CrossFit forgoes mainstream distribution, sizable licensing deals, and national notoriety—in favor of a seemingly non-monetized broadcast—the political economy framework provides the means to investigate that organization’s motivations and understand the complex processes that occur at the individual, institutional, and industrial level.

The Distribution of the CrossFit Games: 2007–2018

While Glassman created the CrossFit “philosophy” in 2000, the first CrossFit Games did not occur until 2007, and, at that time, there were only 70 competitors and 150 fans in attendance (Castro 2010). Beyond handheld video recordings of the events, CrossFit also did not distribute the Games widely. However, by 2011, the sport had grown in popularity, and CrossFit inked a multi-year deal not only with Reebok to sponsor the Games but also with ESPN to televise it (Imbo, n.d.). By 2015, ESPN recognized the popularity of the sport when viewership increased by approximately 350,000. CrossFit was then able to successfully renegotiate its multi-year deal, wherein CrossFit required ESPN to broadcast over nine live hours of CrossFit Games content between ESPN and ESPN2 (Imbo, n.d.). Additionally, as 30% more viewers watched the Games online via ESPN’s digital platform WatchESPN, CrossFit closely held onto digital rights during the 2015 negotiation process (Imbo, n.d.). At first, the ESPN-CrossFit partnership was likely a

mutually beneficial arrangement, with ESPN accessing relatively cheap content and CrossFit gaining brand awareness nationally.

Despite the highly publicized relationship between ESPN and CrossFit, CrossFit pivoted in 2017 and partnered with CBS (Imbo, n.d.). Although digital viewing options increased in 2017, the number of live hours on traditional television substantially decreased (CrossFit Games 2017). Despite this decrease in “traditional” distribution hours, the Games made a noticeable rhetorical shift toward digital viewing. For the first time, individuals could watch the entire CrossFit Games live through CrossFit’s website or YouTube page (CrossFit Games 2017). CrossFit advertisements for the 2017 Games even subtly downplayed CBS’s role, focusing instead on CrossFit’s live broadcasts and the functionality of its mobile app (CrossFit Games, 2017). Former commentator and longtime CrossFit employee Rory McKernan even noted in a 2017 promotional video that “in the past, we’ve had caveats to [digital viewing] like geo-blocking and things like that ... but this is for free, for everyone” (CrossFit Games 2017). Perhaps unknowingly revealing the organization’s internal conversations, McKernan indicated that CrossFit was becoming increasingly disillusioned with ESPN and CBS’s digital restrictions. Whereas conglomerates like CBS or ESPN/Disney see content scarcity and geo-blocking as an opportunity to maintain control over distribution, an organization like CrossFit sees *traditional* distribution as the threat to its core mission of reaching more individuals and increasing global affiliates. Indeed, in its 2017 renegotiations with CBS Sports for the 2018 season, CrossFit continued to fight for the digital rights to stream the events live on Facebook and its website (Hogan Ketchum 2017). Overall, CrossFit’s restrained and minimally publicized partnership with CBS in 2017 and 2018 was the beginning of its turn against mainstream distribution.

The 2019 CrossFit Games: An Open-Source Broadcast

Shortly before the 2019 Games, CrossFit published a press release outlining its decision to pursue a new “organic” distribution model for the upcoming Games (PR Newswire 2019). Instead of partnering with a major network like CBS or ESPN or starting an owned and operated media network, CrossFit would provide an open-source feed to an “expansive network of amateur and professional partners” (PR Newswire 2019). In addition to watching the Games via these third party feeds, viewers could also watch via CrossFit’s website, free of paywalls and geo-blocking. While CrossFit would produce the feed’s main visual elements in-house, independent outlets could add “personalized narration, commentary, and graphics while operating remotely” (PR Newswire 2019). This open-source model seemed to tap into Hutchins and Rowe’s (2012) “participatory democracy,” where sports fans enact change on behalf of their favorite team or sport (111). It also aligns with the *laissez-faire* approach that Glassman applied to other areas of his organization (i.e., the CrossFit Open and its hands-off affiliation process). However, Glassman’s neoliberal approach to management did not necessarily result in a participatory democracy, nor is it the same as fans running a sports team themselves. As McChesney (2013) has suggested in his discussions of policy, free-market structures—regardless of whether they are micro (corporate policy) or macro (government policy)—do not necessarily result in democracy or parity for consumers. Indeed, even though CrossFit positioned the open-source model as democratic and participatory, viewership for the Games was ultimately concentrated to a few corporations (LoFranco 2019a). In its press release, CrossFit provided several justifications for its move away from traditional sports broadcasting, all of which warrant

further investigation by contextualizing the broader political economy of CrossFit.

Claim #1: Global Parity

With its increased focus on international athletes, CrossFit stated that the open-source model provided the opportunity to distribute the Games in more languages and more countries than ever before. Whereas previous broadcasts were only in English, the 2019 Games would broadcast in “Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Arabic, Hebrew, English, Danish, and Icelandic” (PR Newswire 2019). While this may seem altruistic and counter-hegemonic, spreading free content and the philosophy of health to the world, this move was likely part of CrossFit’s broader strategy to penetrate an untapped international market after stagnant growth in the U.S. since 2015 (Henderson 2018). This rhetoric is also consistent with the new format of the 2019 Games. Instead of just selecting the top 40 competitors globally, regardless of nationality, the new qualification process allowed any individual competitor who won the CrossFit Open for his or her respective country to compete at the Games (Marquez 2019). As a result, there were substantially more competitors at the 2019 Games: 129 female and 141 male athletes, representing 114 countries (CrossFit Games, n.d.). To emphasize this global branding play, each competitor came into the stadium on day one sporting their national flag, much like the Olympics’ opening ceremony.

However, this was ultimately performative because nearly half of the field was eliminated after just one event. As a result, most non-U.S. “national champions” did not have the opportunity to compete further; this was the first year that the Games included such a drastic elimination, let alone after one event, and was primarily to the detriment of international athletes. Effectively, CrossFit feigned transnational parity to drive global awareness for CrossFit but cared little for genuinely involving international athletes. Additionally, by the time the field was down to its final twenty competitors on day three, all athletes were white and predominantly from North American or European nations (CrossFit Games, n.d.). In a neoliberal sentiment that is commonplace for the fitness world, the director of programming for the Games, Dave Castro, deferred responsibility by saying that these athletes simply needed to “be better” and should “come back more prepared next year to excel at anything that’s thrown at [them]” (Kleyn 2019).

Claim #2: Personalized Content

CrossFit’s press release contextualized and justified its open-source decision using broader post-convergence discourses of niche programming and viewer autonomy. As CrossFit’s cloud-based production partner said, “the live sports broadcast industry is undergoing a transformation enabled by new cloud-based technology and fueled by digital-savvy audiences that expect personalized authentic content” (PR Newswire 2019). However, as Lotz (2014) articulates, a multiplicity of online viewing options does not necessarily mean that “viewers now control the process, or that a democratization of the medium has occurred” (276). In reality, approximately 78% of the estimated 11.6 million live views of the 2019 Games came from the broadcasts of just three companies: Morning Chalk Up, a CrossFit-oriented online news outlet, accumulated 1.55 million streams at the immediate conclusion of the Games; CrossFit.com racked up 2.41 million views; and Rogue Fitness, a manufacturer of fitness equipment and CrossFit’s most prominent brand partner after Reebok, led the pack with 5.07 million views (LoFranco 2019a).

These viewership numbers suggest that the open-source broadcast was anything but personalized and niche.

The way in which these broadcasting models quickly took shape is hardly new in the history of commercial media structures. Indeed, the single-sponsorship broadcasts of Rogue and Morning Chalk Up are reiterations of the early advertising structures of television and radio in the first half of the 20th century—a time when content decisions were driven by maximizing corporate partnerships, not by user demands or the public interest (Meyers 2009). For example, the Rogue Fitness feed included announcers who were Rogue employees, sported Rogue shirts, and frequently reminded viewers that they were “watching the CrossFit Games presented by Rogue Fitness,” not to mention it included frequent breaks that consisted exclusively of Rogue commercials that starred CrossFit athletes (Rogue Fitness 2019). In addition to threatening legacy distributors like ESPN and CBS, CrossFit’s disintermediation resulted in this digital environment that was hardly a participatory democracy. Instead, it returned “to some of the strategies of the radio era, such as product placement and single sponsorship” (Meyers 2009, 77). Although this historical comparison between radio/television and the Internet may seem nebulous, it can provide insight into where the financing structures of “new media” are heading. CrossFit’s process for selecting who would be an open-source partner was also unclear. According to CrossFit’s website, “if you’re interested in broadcasting on top of the world feed and covering the CrossFit Games, connect with us here or email press@crossfitgames.com,” but no further details were provided (CrossFit Games 2019). There is no guarantee that there was no exchange of capital with a corporate sponsor for some level of distribution exclusivity or access. In other words, CrossFit could have easily struck a deal, explicitly or implicitly, with a company like Rogue, who was a top corporate sponsor for the Games and provides equipment to CrossFit affiliates globally. This lack of visibility into the open-source feed and the concentration of viewership fail to prove CrossFit’s claim of “personalized authentic content.”

Claim #3: Community First

According to CrossFit, the move to the open-source model reflects the company’s underlying ethos of community and health. As stated in its press release, “CrossFit is a community-first organization, and returning broadcasting rights to the community aligns with CrossFit’s approach to business” (PR Newswire 2019). On the surface, CrossFit’s rejection of traditional broadcasting and its enticing licensing contracts should be championed as a “win” for fans. Indeed, the open-source strategy mirrors CrossFit’s democratic, hands-off relationship with affiliates, who are provided with CrossFit’s intellectual property and can do what they want with it. At the time of the 2019 Games, Glassman also owned CrossFit outright and was seemingly not beholden to any parent organization or cross-industry interests (Ozanian 2015), so perhaps these claims of community and parity were genuine. Indeed, the short-term gains from stable licensing contracts, which would have been attractive to Wall Street and institutional investors, were not a priority for CrossFit. However, this again does not indicate a “community-first” orientation or a democratization of the sport. CrossFit was still ultimately pursuing its self-interest with this open-source play: to grow its international affiliates and strengthen brand partnerships. Although it may be enticing to think that private ownership and free-market logics, even at the micro-level, engender community and parity, these are ultimately platitudes, as CrossFit’s empty promises around personalization and globalization suggest.

Unlike mainstream sports, CrossFit is also part of a broader, commodified enterprise and much of its revenue comes from non-media efforts, such as affiliate fees, product licensing, and training courses; therefore, commercial incentives other than maximizing licensing fees are at the core of its corporate thinking (Powers and Greenwell 2017, 531–536). Glassman also publicly stated that he wanted to “deemphasize” the Games in 2019 and instead focus on affiliates and its mission of health (LoFranco 2018b). In truth, this “deemphasis” was likely tied to Glassman’s desire to focus on more profitable areas like product licensing, affiliate fees, and training seminars. Just as Glassman built a company that avoided risky, capital-intensive assets and bloated corporate teams, CrossFit may have seen traditional television distribution and the commodification of cultural products as inherently risky, so the open-source move was an attempt to deemphasize this sector of the business and instead focus on more controllable revenue streams. This strategy aligns with Hesmondhalgh’s (2013) theory that corporate decision making is tied not only to maximizing audiences but also to minimizing the risk inherent in cultural production.

CrossFit’s obfuscation and deceitful practices also speak to the danger of large privately owned corporations with one—or very few—controlling partners and perhaps to the importance of an autonomous board of directors for growing corporations. Not only did CrossFit’s ownership structure lead to misleading marketing rhetoric, but this lack of accountability also resulted in a hostile work environment for female CrossFit employees and allowed Glassman to make inappropriate remarks about COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd (Rosman 2020a), including those that led to his departure from CrossFit in 2020. Although a board of directors is an imperfect mechanism and there is something to be said for the problematic interlocking of board of directors at large conglomerates, a board at least provides the type of oversight that ensures accountability and consensus-based decision making. Also, if Glassman truly believed in empowering CrossFit affiliates by letting them run their businesses (LoFranco 2018b), he could have more systematically involved affiliate owners in the strategic decision making of the company and provided a more democratic platform for the “community” to engage.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether Glassman and CrossFit were deceitful or just ambivalent, the open-source broadcast of the 2019 Games opened up this popular event to an exclusive group of commercial interests—not just amateurs and fans—who leveraged content however they wanted and oriented viewers as consumers of their products. A discursive and institutional political economic review suggests that CrossFit’s contradictory, seemingly ambivalent, corporate strategies that valued free-market ideology over collective decision making ultimately disregarded independent producers, international athletes, and affiliate owners, thereby muddying its outwardly altruistic message of community, health, and consumer parity. By disintermediating and providing a live feed of the 2019 Games, CrossFit simultaneously disrupted the traditional sports-media complex and enabled other commercial interests to thrive. Therefore, both Strangelove (2015) and Evens, Iosifidis, and Smith (2013) overstate the extent to which power will return to incumbent media interests. At the same time, Hutchins and Rowe (2009) are not completely precise in assuming that power will return to sports organizations in the post-network era, as they overlook the complex power grab that can occur in the online environment and the role of privately owned

organizations like CrossFit and Rogue.

Although one of the defining characteristics of CPE is turning critique into action, this case study suggests that CPE can more broadly consider media governance as a form of praxis. In addition to specific policy prescriptions or digital activism, CPE can also engage in *corporate* reform. In other words, it can offer solutions that identify the positive changes possible from *within* organizations (e.g., the value of a Board of Directors versus sole ownership for a large corporation like CrossFit, engaging with affiliate owners). This is not to say that companies are inherently altruistic and would automatically implement changes if scolded for pursuing their self-interests. Instead, as this case study demonstrates, corporate strategists must recognize that the public is not only more attuned to cultural issues but is also more literate in empty corporate rhetoric—as Glassman’s ousting and the responses to his racist remarks in 2020 suggest (Rosman 2020b). By treating customers/viewers as educated adults, implementing genuine parity between independent and branded broadcasters by promoting amateur feeds, and engaging affiliates in the corporate decision-making process, CrossFit could have accrued valuable cultural capital with its customers and partners without forgoing monetization. For an organization that has had difficulty bridging the gap between its consumer brand and its sport’s brand, CrossFit also missed an opportunity to provide its fervent fans with an outlet to meaningfully create their own content. While beyond the scope of this analysis, there are many practical strategies CrossFit—under new leadership in 2020 (Rosman 2020b)—can implement that actually deliver on its promises of health and community. The aim of this case study and its focus on non-normative ownership structures has been to open up the conversation within political economy and media industry studies regarding institutional governance and the investigation of the *microeconomics* of media industries.

Although this short assessment only scratches the surface of praxis, future critical work should also turn to history to identify future solutions that align corporate interest with the public interest. Victor Pickard (2013) sees the history of media as a series of “deferred alternatives” that can “inspire future reform efforts” (308). Future scholarship could, for example, explore how public access producers and independent broadcasters of early television provide us with deferred alternatives that can serve as the playbook for independent production in the digital era. As this case study suggests, the political economy of the 2019 Games echoed the early structures of radio and television’s company-sponsored programming. Here, the value is not just in a “deferred alternative,” but in an alternative that we should opt to defer. By taking medium specificity seriously, media history can show us how capitalist structures like this persist and reinvent themselves over time. In this case, it can help us trace Rogue’s unintentional recreation of an old economic logic. Although further contextualization of the sponsorship model is beyond this article’s scope, it offers another starting point for using history and comparative historical analysis to inform media governance and praxis. Ultimately, without intervention, corporate commercial structures risk becoming calcified, just as they once were on radio and television.

Despite the global reach of CrossFit and its popularity, there is a surprising absence of research on CrossFit and its cultural artifacts. Future research could, for example, more thoroughly examine the activities and agency of individual producers and viewers of open-source feeds like CrossFit’s to better understand the tensions between production and consumption at the instrumental level. Whether it is interrogating CrossFit and the fitness industry’s neoliberal and

masculinized ideologies, the “fandom” of the CrossFit community, or even the organizational cultures of CrossFit employees and athletes, both CrossFit and the CrossFit Games are rich subjects that warrant further examination from both media studies and political economic scholarship.

Reference List

- Boyle, Raymond. 2014. “Television Sport in the Age of Screens and Content.” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 8 (December): 746–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414529167>.
- Castro, Dave. 2010. “The History of the CrossFit Games.” *CrossFit Journal*, July 14, 2010. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2010/07/games-history.tpl>.
- CrossFit. 2019. “CrossFit Inc. Suspends Use of Facebook and Associated Properties.” May 23, 2019. <https://www.crossfit.com/battles/crossfit-suspends-facebook-instagram>.
- CrossFit. n.d. “What is CrossFit.” Accessed December 5, 2019. <https://www.crossfit.com/what-is-crossfit>.
- CrossFit Games. 2017. “Update Show: How to Watch the 2017 Games.” YouTube Video, 2:24. <https://youtu.be/N11o6srWc1s>.
- . 2019. “2019 CrossFit Games World Feed.” Last modified June 20, 2019. <https://games.crossfit.com/article/2019-crossfit-games-world-feed/games>.
- . n.d. “Leaderboard Games 2019.” Accessed August 1, 2020. <https://games.crossfit.com/leaderboard/games/2019?division=2&sort=0>.
- Evens, Tom, Petros Iosifidis, and Paul Smith. 2013. *The Political Economy of Television Sports Rights*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited.
- Garnham, Nicholas. 1995. “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (March): 62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039509366919>.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. 1995. “Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anybody Else Bored with This Debate?” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12, no. 1 (March): 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039509366920>.
- Hay, Mark. 2020. “Why CrossFit Is Going After Your Grandpa: An inside look at the hardcore fitness brand's audacious pivot to senior citizens.” *Men’s Health*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.menshealth.com/fitness/a30896172/crossfit-senior-citizens-fitness-video-ads/>.
- Henderson, Scott. 2018. “CrossFit’s Explosive Affiliate Growth by the Numbers.” *Morning Chalk Up*, October 23, 2018. <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/10/23/crossfits-explosive-affiliate-growth-by-the-numbers/>.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *The Cultural Industries*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Herbert, Daniel, Amanda D. Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar. 2020. *Media Industry Studies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hogan Ketchum, Karen. 2017. “CrossFit Games Expand Pursuit of ‘Fittest on Earth’ With New Network Partner, New Venue.” *Sports Video Group News*, August 4, 2017. <https://www.sportsvideo.org/2017/08/04/crossfit-games-expand-pursuit-for-fittest-on-earth-with-new-network-partner-new-venue/>.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. [1947] 1972. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Hutchins, Brett, and David Rowe. 2009. “From Broadcast Scarcity to Digital Plenitude: The Changing Dynamics of the Media Sport Content Economy.” *Television & New Media* 10, no. 4 (April): 354–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476409334016>.
- . 2012. *Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Media Sport*. London: Routledge.

- Jhally, Sut. 1984. "The spectacle of accumulation: Material and cultural factors in the evolution of the sports/media complex." *Insurgent Sociologist* 12, no. 3 (July): 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089692058401200304>.
- Kleyn, Brittney. 2019. "Sprints Cutting to the Core of CrossFit." *Morning Chalk Up*, August 19, 2019. <https://morningchalkup.com/2019/08/19/sprints-cutting-to-the-core-of-crossfit/>.
- Imbo, William. n.d. "ESPN & the CrossFit Games: How It All Started & What It Means Now (+ the 2015 TV Schedule)." *BoxLife*. Accessed December 5, 2019. <https://boxlifemagazine.com/espn-the-crossfit-games-how-it-all-started-what-it-means-now-the-2015-tv-schedule/>.
- Lindholm, Johan. 2019. "The Netflix-ication of sports broadcasting." *The International Sports Law Journal* 18, nos. 3–4 (March): 99–101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-019-00145-8>.
- LoFranco, Justin. 2018a. "CrossFit Games Layoffs Signal Big Changes to Come." *Morning Chalk Up*, August 20, 2018. <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/08/20/crossfit-games-layoffs-signal-big-changes-to-come/>.
- . 2018b. "How Greg Glassman is Reshaping the CrossFit Games." *Morning Chalk Up*, August 23, 2018. <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/08/23/how-greg-glassman-is-reshaping-the-crossfit-games/>.
- . 2018c. "CrossFit and Reebok Settle Legal Dispute." *Morning Chalk Up*, August 29, 2018. <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/08/29/crossfit-and-reebok-settle-legal-dispute/>.
- . 2018d. "CrossFit HQ Lays Off More Games Staff." *Morning Chalk Up*, October 15, 2018. <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/10/15/crossfit-hq-lays-off-more-games-staff/>.
- . 2019a. "CrossFit Games Racks Up 11.6M Views on YouTube, Facebook." *Morning Chalk Up*, August 27, 2019. <https://morningchalkup.com/2019/08/27/crossfit-games-racks-up-11-6m-views-on-youtube-facebook/>.
- . 2019b. "Judge Awards Nearly \$4 Million to CrossFit in Legal Fees." *Morning Chalk Up*, December 4, 2019. <https://morningchalkup.com/2019/12/04/judge-awards-nearly-4-million-to-crossfit-in-legal-fees/>.
- Lotz, Amanda D. 2014. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. 2nd ed. New York: NYU Press.
- Marquez, Tommy. 2019. "The 2019 CrossFit Games Rulebook Has Arrived. Here's What You Need to Know." *Morning Chalk Up*, January 7, 2019. <https://morningchalkup.com/2019/01/07/the-2019-crossfit-games-rulebook-has-arrived-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>.
- McChesney, Robert W. 1989. "Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States." In *Media, Sports, and Society*, edited by Lawrence A. Wenner, 49–69. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- . 2013. *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*. New York: New Press.
- Meehan, Eileen R. 1986. "Critical Theorizing on Broadcast History." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 30, no. 4 (Fall): 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838158609386633>.
- . 1999. "Commodity, Culture, Common Sense: Media Research and Paradigm Dialogue." *Journal of Media Economics* 12 (2): 149–163. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327736me1202_6.
- Meehan, Eileen R., Vincent Mosco, and Janet Wasko. 1993. "Rethinking Political Economy: Change and Continuity." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December): 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01310.x>.
- Meyers, Cynthia B. 2009. "From Sponsorship to Spots: Advertising and the Development of Electronic Media." In *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, 69–80. West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mosco, Vincent. 2014. "Political Economic Theory and Research: Conceptual Foundations and Current Trends." In *The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory*, edited by Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler, 37–55. 2 vols. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Napoli, Phillip. 2015. "Social media and the public interest: Governance of news platforms in the realm of individual and algorithmic gatekeepers." *Telecommunications Policy* 39, no. 9 (October): 751–760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2014.12.003>

- Ozanian, Mike. 2015. "How CrossFit Became A \$4 Billion Brand." *Fortune*, February 25, 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikeozanian/2015/02/25/how-crossfit-became-a-4-billion-brand/#7c68062c1f96>.
- Pickard, Victor. 2013. "Being Critical: Contesting Power within the Misinformation Society." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10, nos. 2–3 (June–September): 306–311. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2013.812590>.
- Powers, Devon, and DM Greenwell. 2016. "Branded fitness: Exercise and promotional culture." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (November): 523–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540515623606>.
- PR Newswire. 2019. "CrossFit Announces Open-Source Broadcast Of 2019 Games." Last modified July 23, 2019. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/crossfit-announces-open-source-broadcast-of-2019-games-300889580.html>.
- Rogue Fitness. 2019. "Rogue Official Live Stream – Day 3 Full – 2019 Reebok CrossFit Games." Video, 7:55:58. <https://www.roguefitness.com/theindex/video/rogue-official-live-stream-day-3-full-2019-reebok-crossfit-games>.
- Rosman, Katherine. 2020a. "CrossFit Owner Fostered Sexist Company Culture, Workers Say." *The New York Times*, June 20, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/20/style/greg-glassman-crossfit-sexism.html>
- . 2020b. "Greg Glassman, Embattled Owner of CrossFit, to Sell His Company." *The New York Times*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/style/crossfit-sold-greg-glassman.html>.
- Strangelove, Michael. 2015. *Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wasko, Janet, and Eileen R. Meehan. 2013. "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes? Political Economy and New Approaches to Studying Media Industries and Cultural Products." *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring): 150–157. doi:10.1353/cj.2013.0028.

Peter Arne Johnson (pjjohnso@bu.edu) is pursuing an M.F.A. in Film & Television Studies at Boston University.