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RESEARCHING MEDIA EVENTS

1. Objective
How do media events organize public life, culturally and physically?

2. Case study

3. Model paradigm
Participant observation.

4. Key method
A three-step participant observation method provides a structure for presenting media events as ‘public dramas’.

5. Significance
Participant observation of media events provides an accessible method for explaining how global media processes affect the places where we live.

Figure 8  Researching media events
OBJECTIVE: DEVELOPING OBSERVATIONAL METHODS FOR ANALYSING MEDIA IN ACTION

This chapter explains how the relationship between culture and economy can be mapped by observing sport events in action, using participant observation techniques. The broader purpose is to show how theoretically informed field research can examine how media help to create meaningful social spaces. The presence of media affects how places are understood and managed. The production of ‘media spaces’ in turn creates opportunities to perform identities. Two consequences follow. First, media places become stages for social conflict. Second, they attract flows of human movement bearing all manner of economic and environmental effects. Global sporting contests are vivid examples of this process in action, as events that enact relationship between economy, media, culture and identity.

As a case study, the chapter explores how the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) turned a stadium in Melbourne, Australia, into an arena for a battle over gender in November 2015. Celebrity athlete Ronda Rousey’s fight with Holly Holm was not just another contest that just happened to be staged in Australia; it was a gendered drama deliberately staged at a key node in a competitive global sport economy. Melbourne’s Etihad stadium was a sophisticated media place ideally suited to an event that aspired to change perceptions about women athletes. The fight animated the relationship between culture and economy. It was an exhilarating confirmation that sport turns on money, power, identity work and globalization. Much as the fighters and the UFC were relative newcomers to the global sport scene, they deserved attention for their keen appreciation of sport as an organized technological and economic activity that enervates the relationship between media representation and space.

Informed by these insights, the chapter then explains how participant observation explains why the Rousey fight was a landmark in the history of gendered media sport. Participant observation is a method for researching cultural ‘scenes’ – places where people interact in meaningful ways. It provides a structured method for investigating media events – occasions that demonstrate media’s power to organize people, places and times. Here, attention is paid to how a press conference for Rousey’s fight became a moment in the articulation of sport, place, gender and national identity, using a variety of strategically selected research materials to arrange observation of the event itself.

Finally, the chapter comments on what researching this sporting media event says about the significance of research about media places, and methods for conducting such studies. Ultimately, studies of media spaces allow us to appreciate the relationship between two kinds of communication: representation and movement. This connection is especially useful in appreciating media as a catalyst in consumer culture.

In summary, this chapter:

- Explains geographical media effects.
- Uses sport to relate media meanings to the management of space and identity.
- Maps a method for observing media places in action.
CASE STUDY: RONDA ROUSEY: SPACE, TRAVEL AND THE MEDIA SPORT STAR

Public angle: Ronda Rousey comes Down Under

When Ronda Rousey and Holly Holm fought before 56,214 fans in Melbourne in November 2015, they set a world record for Dana White’s Ultimate Fighting Championship (Doyle, 2015). The fight was a sensation. The previously undefeated, popularly feted Rousey lost to a short, sharp savage salvo of punches, elbows and a cruelly accurate roundhouse kick to the neck. Much as the outcome damaged the reputation of its best known star, the fight cemented the UFC’s reputation as an innovative, mobile form of media sport that revelled in upsetting gender stereotypes.

Spectacular as the contest was, perhaps it is more remarkable that two months before their fight, Rousey and Holm held a press conference at the Etihad Stadium venue on a gloomy winter Wednesday afternoon that drew an extraordinary 5,000 spectators. Rousey arrived as arguably the most famous female athlete in the world. Pipping Serena Williams as the ESPN Women’s Athlete of the Year 2015 had witnessed Rousey’s arrival as the ‘David Beckham’ of the UFC: the fighter recognized by people who knew little about martial arts. She had appeared on the Ellen Degeneres Show, and had a cameo in the movie Entourage (2015). Her autobiography, published in the same year (Rousey, 2015), detailed a heartbreaking journey from childhood tragedy to sporting excellence. Rousey had a story to tell, and she didn’t shirk in telling it. She was especially blunt on how her body confronted gender stereotypes, famously quipping: ‘just because my body was developed for a purpose other than fucking millionaires doesn’t mean it’s masculine. I think it’s femininely badass as fuck because there’s not a single muscle on my body that isn’t for a purpose, because I’m not a do-nothing bitch’. Before a cheering crowd, Rousey explained why Australia was the ideal location for the biggest fight in the history of women’s martial arts. Australia was a perfect home for gender-breaking pugilism as a nation of tough people who like a good fight. But why would so many show up to hear predictable pre-fight puff drawing on well-worn national stereotypes, especially when most presumably had other things to do (work, school)? What was it about the athlete, her sport and the arena that gave people licence to take a break from normal midweek routines?

Rousey, Holm and the fans who attended on that day revelled in breaking rules. Parents in the crowd boasted of taking their kids out of school, and the fighters basked in levels of attention rarely enjoyed by women athletes. At the same time, this ‘rebellion’ was highly organized by an innovative sporting organization skilled in mining the interconnected resources of sport, media, entertainment and celebrity. As such, it is worth considering how observation of events like this, informed by sociological views on why sport is a key ingredient in media and consumer cultures, offer useful insights into the relationship between economy and culture.
Scholarly context: Media sport studies

Understanding how sport attracts public attention is a handy way of showing how media industries integrate consumption and cultural participation. Spectacular media events play key roles in development of social meanings and values. The analysis of how this happens is the core business of critical media sport studies. Serendipitously, this project started with the analysis of a controversial martial art.

When famous French semiotician Roland Barthes explained the political weight of popular culture in *Mythologies* (1972), he included an essay on professional wrestling. Barthes found wrestling to be wonderfully ironic. It entertained audiences by willfully eschewing notions of unpredictability and fair play, thus raising fascinating questions about what sport is for: Other pugilistic pastimes, such as boxing and Judo, are premised on the idea that no one can predict the outcome of a contest of skill between matched opponents. Here, when the knockout blow is delivered, all attention switches to the victor, leaving the vanquished opponent to their bloodied humiliation. That seems natural. Not so in wrestling. Unfair fights lead to predictable outcomes where most of the attention is paid to wounded losers – eyes linger on bodies as they roll around the floor in agony, frequently as victims of egregious fouls conducted in plain sight. Poor justice, great entertainment and an indicator that to be popular, sport has to be about much more than skill and athleticism. Barthes admired the audacity of this unsporting sport. The fact that this ‘aberration’ went on to become a global triumph thanks to the WWF indicates that he was on to something; that understanding sport as spectacular drama above all else is the key to appreciating why it matters as the exemplar of culture in action *par excellence*. This is the essential idea behind the emergence of critical media sport studies.

Critical research on media sport has advanced Barthes’ ideas by connecting the production of values through the staging of events to matters of justice raised by consumer culture. As David Rowe (2004a, 3) explains, media sport:

> occupies vast tracts of electronic, print and cyber media space; directly and indirectly generates a diverse range of goods and services ... and is strategically used by the political apparatus in the name of the people.

These are the characteristics of Rowe’s ‘media sport cultural complex’. This ‘complex’ folded elite athletics into the mechanism of globalization, defined as ‘the enhanced flows of people, capital, ideas and technologies around the world’ (Rowe, 2004b, 11). This transformation was achieved through the ingenious integration of ‘personnel, services, products and texts which combine in the creation of the broad and dynamic field of contemporary sports culture’ (Rowe, 2004a, xx). The connection with Barthes is this: wrestling was popular because it was meaningful and emotionally absorbing, and this has little to do
Chapter 3: DOING MEDIA RESEARCH

with fairness and skill. For Rowe, this is why sport and media industries have become powerful allies in advancing global consumer culture.

The political gravity of media sport entertainment is underlined by the sustainability challenges prompted by mega-events like the Olympics and Football World Cup. Such occasions strain already overburdened urban environments. Rio de Janeiro's residents protested at the price paid by the city's poor as Brazil geared up for the World Cup and the Olympics (Schimmel, 2015). Such events create environmental challenges and exploit local cheap labour (Young, 2015). Brazilian tensions dragged global sporting events into debates around security and terror, locating such occasions as sources of anger, injustice and fear as much as pleasure (Jackson, 2015). The important point to note here is not that media are simply there to cover such tournaments, but that their arrangements as live spectacles suitable for global screen audiences become a driving force in their arrangement (Rowe, 2004a). Consequently, the mediation of sport creates an opportunity to explore how inclusion and equity function in a global consumer culture, since sporting events are occasions where tensions about the distribution of economic resources connect with the things that people care about – their identities and pleasures (Wenner, 2015).

All of this places studies of media sport squarely within the media studies tradition of viewing popular culture as the setting for social conflict and change. Often media sport reproduces power inequalities based on race, nation and gender (Wenner, 2015). On the other hand, the need to find new audience markets through sport also creates new identity. New media sports like snowboarding, skydiving and surfing show audiences women athletes who defy masculinist prejudices (Sisjord, 2015). According to Wheaton (2015), these extreme sports have come to matter because they offer alternative identities by being athletic in different ways, and they have shown the ability to find new media sporting audiences to satisfy the global television market. A quick example illustrates her argument. In 2014, Australian snowboarder Belle Brockhoff, while competing at the Sochi Olympics, criticized Vladimir Putin's stand on sexual politics. The world heard about this courageous act not simply because Brockhoff was an exceptional snowboarder who also happened to be gay, but because snowboarding had become a bright new feature of the Olympic brand.

The media staging of sport also determines how people interact with events through their own movements and performances. Sport helps media industries break new viewing markets by multiplying ways to engage with contests, teams and athletes (Hutchins and Rowe, 2013). For the same reason, it has also pioneered methods for synthesizing social and consumer identities. The foundation of this 'achievement' is constituted by the sheer ubiquity of sport in the media, which renders it as an easy topic of everyday sociality. The plethora of information about athletes, teams and likely outcomes of forthcoming competitions attracts people who wish to showcase their expertise in front of their peers (Rowe, 2015). Internet fan communities are obvious places where this can be seen in action, as fans try to win prestige by demonstrating their
superior knowledge. Often, these discussions mutate into weighty discussions on race, gender and justice (e.g. Ruddock, 2005, 2013b, 2016; Millward, 2008; Cleland, 2014).

These developments can go in many directions. Some studies, for example, find that these fan practices end up shoring up the idea that sport is ‘a man’s game’ (e.g. Ruddock, 2005; Palmer, 2009; Rowe, Ruddock and Hutchins, 2010). Wenner (2015) agreed, but argued that the real issue is how fan actions solder identity to consumption. Ubiquitous screens, global tournaments, celebritization and the explosion of sport commodities ensure that ‘media sport coverage and sport anchored advertising have worked to align our fanship identities with our consumer identities. The hypercommodification that has infused our relations with both sport and media is now foundational’ (Wenner, 2015, 631).

What this means is that the analysis of sporting events, as media spectacles that create meaningful places and identities, has to be premised on a clear identification of how that event addresses key academic themes, and how a specific method lends a unique perspective on how that event linked economy and culture. Bearing this in mind, there are four solid reasons why UFC193 was a mediated sporting event that was worth paying more attention to: the political economy or urban development, the formation of identities in relation to political economy, gender as a special example of this process in action, and how the nature of sporting competition is affected by mediated consumer culture. The next question is: What methods show these processes in action?

KEY PARADIGM: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation: A three-step approach

Media sport literature conceives a close relationship among economy, culture and spectator experience. But what methods show that these arguments have some kind of relationship to how real people experience real sport events? One option is participant observation. Participant observation involves watching culture in action, as it happens. The goal is to ‘share firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people’ (Van Maanen, 1988, 3). This can be done in a variety of ways, ranging from simple observation of events to more involved methods that include other techniques, such as interviewing. In *Tales of the Field* (1988), Van Maanen portrayed participant observation as a method based on the idea that culture is a thing that can be observed in action when people interact. This is because apparently mundane scenes from everyday life are ‘rule’-governed events, structured by unspoken but widely shared understandings. Another way to say this is that ‘macro' social forces matter most when they percolate all the way down to face-to-face interaction, and therefore observation of the small scenes of social life
underline why the big questions matter. At face value, this suits the goals of critical media sport studies, which seek to understand how sporting events conjure consumer-based identities into action when people are gathered around a specific event.

An obvious challenge in this method is that it hinges on one person’s account of what happened. Van Maanen argued that this could be compensated for by telling readers as much as possible about the research process. This, in his view, was a matter of differentiating between three different kinds of ‘stories’ that the participant observer tells. The first thing to do is to embrace the reality that participant observation is not an objective science, by engaging with ‘confessional’ tales. Confessional tales deal with the challenges posed by situations where ‘findings’ are intimately affected by the research process, rather than simply being dictated by the events that one observes. Hence, being ‘confessional’ means reporting in as much detail as possible on the factors that affect how one goes about research – from choosing a setting to methods for recording and interpreting data.

This sets the ground for the next stage: the production of ‘realist’ tales. Realist tales involve describing the events that one observes. Conventionally, this was done through the production of field notes, observations written down either during or as soon as possible after the event being observed.

The third kind of tale moves participant observation into analysis proper. ‘Impressionist tales’ are told by sifting through observations to find dramatic moments where the rule- and conflict-based nature of social life is manifested most vividly. The notion of observation has to be tempered against the fact that what one is often doing is testing out existing academic ideas about how life works; that is, you go into a scene looking for things that are especially relevant to a field of study. With Rousey, for example, the fact that gender identity is such a point of interest in critical media sport research, and the fact that gender was used as a major marketing tool in the fight, means that it makes sense to search for moments where gender erupts as an idea that affects how people related to the fight.

Being confessional means asking by what criteria one is to identify ‘dramatic’ moments for impressionist tales. One way to do this is to historicize the events that are observed, showing how they are related to sustained social formations. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) call this ‘casing the joint’, using documents and archives about the place of study as a way of sensitizing oneself to what this ‘event’ might be about in terms of history and culture. For Rousey’s fight, this could be done because both the stadium and the UFC were both sports innovations that understood that they were cogs in a global media sport cultural complex. Hence, foregrounding the participant observation in historical research, using newspaper archives to explain how Etihad and the UFC came to be and why they mattered to Melbourne and the World of Sport in general, provides a vital context that explains why the press conference and the fight were worth paying attention to, and speak to matters beyond the ‘particulars’ of that event.
Preparing for participant observation: Using archives to case map the terrain

**Understanding the stadium**

The challenge is to make a persuasive case that the Rousey/Holm press conference somehow dramatized conflicts around identity that result from the popularization of sport as a form of global entertainment. In terms of conflict and entertainment, it’s tempting to think that much of the appeal of the fight derived from the UFC’s audacity in using the home of Aussie Rules Football to showcase the quality and appeal of women’s martial arts. However, a closer look at the history of the stadium and the Australian Football League (AFL) shows this to be far less of a contradiction than we might think, and in the end this affects how we should interpret what happened in the press conference.

The Etihad Stadium began life as the Docklands Stadium in the mid-1990s. The arena was explicitly designed to boost Melbourne through an urban planning strategy that would allow the city to establish itself as a key destination in the Australian and world sporting map. The new stadium was intended to showcase Melbourne and the Australian Rules Football League as key components in Australia’s global economic ambitions. To be sure, the AFL lobbied hard to make itself the ‘grand jewel’ in the new venture (Linnell, 1997), but it was only too aware that this could only be achieved by literally moving with the times, relocating its operations and learning to share with competitors in the media sport market. Initially, the game attracted pride of place as the only vehicle that could promise a quick return for expensive investment in a pricey property market. That is, although the hope was that the stadium would serve as a lucrative hub for all manner of sport and music events, the Australian game was needed to make it happen (Davidson, 1997).

Looking at stories about the development of the stadium, a tale emerges where the AFL’s ‘story’ moves from Melbournian suburbs to the city as a whole, and thence to the world. Here the identity of neighbourhood and city relied on the management of local economy and infrastructure with the goal of tapping into the local benefits of global media sport culture. For AFL clubs, claiming the right to play at the new stadium was a method for associating their franchise with the fan base of very particular suburbs of Melbourne with their own identities. In terms of mobility, being in Docklands was really about being elsewhere and giving fans a reason to travel from where they were to where they could be represented. Being in Docklands was a way to perform local identities to the rest of Melbourne, Australia and the world (Linnell, 1996). At the same time, it also created marketing pressures. Teams that shared the stadium were obliged to sell at least 40,000 tickets during designated ‘home’ games or face a fine (McMahon, 2009).

Economic managements also emerged as a consideration in terms of how stadia and franchises were to cooperate in managing Melbourne’s value as an entertainment hub characterized by business synchronicities. For example,
management of Melbourne’s more famous, iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground welcomed Docklands as a partner that would help the city bid for multi-stage international media sport events. This is why the Rousey event succeeded his history of the AFL accepting the benefits it would reap by seeking synergies with the global sport media market (Linnell, 1997).

Media were key to infrastructural arrangements that would attract spectators to the ground, promoting the comfort and ease that it offered. Fans could travel from distant suburbs to a train station just a few hundred metres from the ground, and could enjoy the short promenade across a newly constructed pedestrian bridge. After their stroll, they could enjoy the game in a stadium free from fears of inclement weather or poor vision. In-seat TV screens were floated (Watkins, 1998), and a roof was installed to shelter crowds from the rain. Media muscle in managing the spectacle in the stadium was demonstrated in 2014, when local news station Channel 7 lobbied to have the stadium roof closed for all games, no matter the weather or time of day, since this made for a better screen experience (Murnane, 2014). In this way, Etihad’s existence as a screened space became key to its physical management.

Significantly, athletes accepted the need to accede to audience experience. Because the pitch was laid over a concrete underground car park, AFL players quickly complained of injuries and longer recovery times inflicted by the playing surface. As one player put it, ‘You would rather play at the MCG, you would rather play in Tassie, than at Telstra Dome. Cosmetically it might look good but it is still hard to play. Players are resigned to it, and clubs are adjusting’ (Gleeson, 2006, 2).

All of this rather underlines the point that the social significance of sport is best demonstrated by regarding it as entertainment above all else. That players accepted painful playing surfaces spoke to this truth: Etihad was the hub of a sporting city where fans, players, clubs, sporting organizations, planners and politicians benefitted from the skilful blending of athletics, urban regeneration, tourism and global marketing. Guest sports helped the costs of expensive local investments. So athletes like Rousey and organizations like the UFC were welcome to pitch for the pitch, and therefore Etihad’s history goes a long way to explaining why the Rousey fight attracted such attention, and why the press conference attracted so many people. Etihad is a major, easily accessible landmark in a city that has cultivated a sophisticated tourism and leisure market. When we add the UFC’s role as a pioneer in global media sport, then it becomes even easier to see how the press conference became an event in itself.

Understanding the UFC
Analysis from the media industry trade press depicts the UFC as an ideal ‘fit’ for Etihad as the epitome of media sport. The organization has taken mixed martial arts from ridicule to respect, thanks to an understanding of what makes for successful entertainment. In a nutshell, the UFC’s appearance in Melbourne
underscored its canny understanding that live media events worked by spinning entertaining stories to diverse audiences, many of whom usually had little interest in sport. While sports like soccer are prone to grumble about how media erode the authenticity of the game, the UFC accepted the necessity of changing its game to suit alternative locations, publics and media platforms. Unlike sports with claims to lives before media, the UFC embraced its status as a child of convergence – an authentically mediatized sport, if you will. When it comes to space, the UFC's flexibility is reflected in a willingness to migrate across locations and screens. It has become adept at transforming sport places into UFC ones. As such, its Etihad event stands out from other occasions – AFL games, for example – as an instructive case study in what sport tells us about the politics of media and space.

Several themes picked up by the trade press support these interpretations. First, much of the UFC's significance can be attributed to the determination of its celebrity CEO, Dana White, to recreate the excitement that surrounded live television boxing during the 1970s and 1980s. Muhammad Ali became history's most famous boxer partly because his landmark bouts were broadcast live to huge international television audiences. Consequently, where many sports have concentrated on pursuing 'after television' opportunities (Hutchins and Rowe, 2013), White claimed that his ambition to secure the UFC as a broadcast television sport would signal its arrival as a true sport (Grossman, 2011).

To achieve this goal, White transformed the image of the UFC from an ultra-violent novelty to a television-friendly entertainment genre. When the franchise emerged from the mixed martial arts scene in the 1990s, it was beset by myriad legal and marketing problems (Maher, 2010). White responded by toning down UFC violence while amplifying its capacity to tell interesting stories about human characters. When the UFC made its prime time television debut on the Fox Network in 2011, it was with a one-hour show that featured just one minute of fighting – a headline heavyweight bout that lasted less than a round (Grossman, 2011). White's comments on what he most feared for the show were instructive. His biggest fear was that the bout would be 'a three-round war with one guy against the fence and he's cut and blood squirting all over the mat' (cited in Grossman, 2011, 14). In the same report, White noted the need to 'tone down the testosterone' (cited in Grossman, 2011, 14) in favour of story-driven content that would attract advertisers.

The UFC's commercial promise for television broadcasters was proven though its success in live pay-per-view events, and all of the corporate sponsorship that came with it (Miller, 2013). By 2012, UFC Fox broadcasts attracted commercial endorsements from the alcohol, movie and gaming industries (Lafayette, 2012b). At this point, the reason why Fox had fought off interest from other television companies to secure UFC rights became clear: The brand was a vital tool in NewsCorp's digital television strategy, playing an essential role in the 'rebranding' of cable station 'Fuel TV', which aspired to capture the 18–34 male market (Lafayette, 2011).
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The UFC has become a global sport because it understands that to do this you have to provide media content (Miller, 2013). It is now appreciated as a leading ‘water carrier’ for television interests (2013) because it has used its ownership of media content to integrate various television and streaming platforms, such as Xbox, PS3, Amazon, Facebook, YouTube and Apple iOS (2013).

Its willingness to ‘travel’ across media interests is matched by an enthusiasm for physically expanding into international markets. It has regional offices in Europe, Asia and South America, and an international chain of health clubs, including a branch in Sydney (Miller, 2013). The competition’s embrace of media has put it on a par with the Superbowl as a world media event (Grossman, 2011). This can also be explained by White’s appreciation of how social media and celebrity can recreate an earlier age of the superstar martial artists. According to the UFC, the advantage that his sport has over American football and baseball is its capacity to function as a personality-driven phenomenon, where people become attached to people, not teams. To this end, its athletes are encouraged to brand themselves through social media (Schrager, 2012). This is why the UFC is distinct from other sports as a child of mediatization. Where other sports have viewed the autonomy that social media affords athletes with suspicion, Dana White welcomes it as part of the show.

Putting all of these ideas together provides a justification for choosing the press conference for showcasing what media sport theory says about media, place and identity. The UFC sells itself as a sporting narrative driven by personalities. These narratives drive the pleasure of live events, carried across screens. The events themselves are often short. White prefers them this way. The real skill, White seems to realize, lies in building anticipation through writing detailed stories about athletes. In this sense, one can argue that the real work of the UFC is done before anyone enters its hexagon. This is why thousands of people arrived at Rousey’s press conference, and this is why we can say that in many respects, what they saw was the real show, the place where Rousey and White appeared to explain why people should want to come to the November fight. Rousey was the ideal figurehead for an organization that was only too happy to change its game to suit the needs of global entertainment, as a person with a compelling personal story combined with the appeal of a gender identity breaker for a sport that was keen to embrace audiences who had traditionally taken little interest in martial arts. These ideas were confirmed by the drama of what happened on an otherwise drab midweek afternoon.

KEY METHOD: OBSERVING MEDIA EVENTS

Reprising the method, fieldwork was intended to recreate the experience of a media event by using an ordered approach to data gathering. This order distinguished three kinds of stories: the confessional, the descriptive and the impressionist. Essentially, this involves using ordinary observation to precede a carefully considered, analytically and theoretically informed account of how the press conference dramatized dynamics that media sport scholars have been writing about for some time.
A confessional account

Confession wise, pragmatic issues in research management affected the choice of case study and methodological approach to the same. I adopted a passive observation approach by visiting a press conference, where I spoke to no one and concentrated on the public comments, made for public consumption, by media professionals – Dana White, Rousey and her UFC peers, and journalists. Why this approach?

There was more at play here than the theoretical justification for the approach. Decisions were made based on the financial and administrative difficulties of researching media cultures where fascinating case studies appear in an instant. So here’s the ‘confession’. This book needed a chapter on media and sport. It needed to talk about the construction of media sport events. Given the importance of gender in media power, I was just as keen to write about female athletes. So, when the most famous woman athlete in the world shows up at a place that is a 15-minute train ride from your house, you can’t ignore that.

Except that you can’t just go. What about funding? Fight tickets cost $459 for good seats, and there was no time to apply for a grant. So the press conference solved that problem – it was free. But what was the press conference, as an event, and how did that affect the permissions I needed to study it? Its status as a ‘live’ thing involving other human beings carried ethical considerations. Once again, time was of the essence. With no time to apply for ethics clearance, I had to discover a way to observe ethically. So I contacted my university ethics office. The press conference, I argued, was a public performance. From an ethics perspective, it was equivalent to a film, or a speech, or a newspaper article – an event where the person who speaks claims no right to privacy. We agreed that no ethics requirements were necessary as long as I limited my work to the professional staging of the event and the verbal exchanges between journalists and UFC personnel. That is, no talking to the fans in attendance. These restrictions affected the focus of the following account, and explain the focus on the ‘pure’ observation of performers only. This focus also explains how the impressionist tale of ‘gender drama’ was developed.

A realist account

Let’s move on to the descriptive aspect of the project. From media sport theory and local stories about what Etihad leisure represented as a leisure experience, it seemed best to start note-taking with a description of the journey to the stadium. This was harder than it sounds because it meant thinking about a journey that I’d taken many times. Usually, like most people, I spend most of my time on public transport trying not to think about where I am. Paying closer attention, it appeared that the ease of movement to the stadium expresses how smoothly it has blended into Melbourne’s transport network and consumer culture, in such a way that it is quite a peculiar sporting place.

Describing the journey, the strangest thing about Etihad is that public transport users don’t know they are there until they are almost at its gates. Alighting
at Spencer Street Station, travellers are carried to a pedestrian walkway via escalators, at the top of which stands a new shopping mall with retail outlets and chain eateries. Turning left, they know from the signs that they are headed in the right direction, with their final destination standing just a few hundred metres away. But the only thing that they can see, directly ahead, is the black-glassed head office of the National Australian Bank. The ‘presence’ of a premier stadium in a premier sporting city is hardly awe-inspiring.

It’s also worth noting, then, that the first thing you would have seen on that Wednesday, as you walked around the bank, were three red three-metre-high letters: UFC. Women clad in UFC-branded lycra handed out flyers, but they, and the letters, were all I could see at first. Suddenly my eye was drawn to a queue – it too had been obscured by the National Australian Bank, but as I walked and looked, I soon realized that the line of fans stretched for about 400 metres. It was later reported that a staggering 6,000 people had registered for the event on a nondescript Wednesday afternoon (Oates, 2015).

I took my place at the back of the queue. It was soon moving, as the crowd was ushered through turnstiles and security. As we entered Gate 3, we were quickly moved past a UFC tableau that had been set up for fan selfies. Ushers made it clear that it was for after the show. We were in the bowels of Etihad now, on the first of its three levels, the pitch-side seats that represent the most expensive tickets for the AFL and soccer matches that usually dominate. The crowd was corralled into a roped-off section on the pitch’s half-way line. Fifty metres before us was the stage, which was set against a backdrop of pictures of the four women who would fight in November: Holly Holm, Joanna Jedrzejczyk, Valerie Letourneau and Ronda Rousey. It was 15 minutes before the combatants entered. Meanwhile, we were left to contemplate the fighters’ skills, as videos of their bouts played on televisions next to the stage and on the enormous screens that are a permanent fixture in the upper tiers of the stadium. On the night, that will be the best view that fans will get of the action in the ring. We can tell because a real UFC octagon had been set up next to the stage. It’s small, and will be barely visible from the ‘cheap seats’. While everyone was waiting, local martial artists and journalists posed for photographs in the ring-to-be.

The fights on the screens were ferocious. Jedrzejczyk’s opponent flinched in pain as the Polish champion rained endless jabs, crosses and hooks onto her bloodied nose. Letourneau’s foe had a terribly damaged left eye. It was almost completely closed and there was a huge welt over her brow. It looked like a fractured eye socket to me, and I was amazed when a doctor waved the battle on after a quick, gloveless examination. I’ve watched boxing for years, but this made me wince.

Then the show was on, as the journalists were seated and Dana White took to the stage. For a guy who knows how to put on a show, he was pretty casually dressed – jeans, black t-shirt, shaved head, hulking frame. He looked like a retired boxer. Then he introduced each fighter, in this order: Letourneau, Jedrzejczyk, Holm and Rousey. The dress was smart casual. All were in tight jeans. Letourneau, Holm and Rousey wore six-inch heels. Their hair was long
and down, in contrast to the tight bunching they wear during fights. Holm's hair reached to her waist. Unlike the other fighters, she eschewed a jacket on this chilly afternoon, and was wearing a sleeveless top that displayed enviously developed biceps and triceps. She looked like she was ready to fight that day. Jedrzejczyk bucked the trend a little. She wore wedges not heels, her hair was plaited and she wore an overcoat. In a genre where gender was high on the agenda, these details were worth mentioning, even if their significance was open to debate.

**An Impressionist account**

And then it was on, and at this point I switched to the impressionist approach, since developments enacted a drama that labelled this 'media event' as a story about gender. The press gallery included journalists from UFC partners, such as Fox Sport. But that didn't mean everyone was on the same page. The floor was opened to questions. The first three questions were directed at Dana White. Perhaps that was understandable. He had been widely credited as the author of the UFC's remarkable success. But it seemed rather odd that reporters weren't champing at the bit to talk to Rousey. It was hard to imagine the same thing happening to Mike Tyson, so perhaps White's analogy had its limits. When the fourth question was directed at Rousey, it was to ask how she felt about her appearance in the *Entourage* movie and being name-checked by Beyoncé.

Then an odd question was directed at Holly Holm, given Rousey's popularity: 'How does it feel to be the one who has to kill Bambi?' A puzzled Holm managed an answer. All of the other fighters seemed resigned to the fact that the show was about Rousey, but the ignoring of all of them, and the likening of a fearsome martial artist to a baby deer on ice, marked this event as different. Which indeed it was. This was going to be the most lucrative, most watched women's martial arts event of all time. Much as there was a determination to present this as a martial arts event (White tells us that Rousey demanded to be introduced as champion, not women's champion), the fact is that it was an event featuring a main cast of women. Rousey knew this, with her 'Do Nothing Bitch' comments, and the content and structure of the questions had a gendered tone: talk to the men first, liken Rousey to a creature who needs protection (albeit a male one).

But the gender issue really exploded when another journalist asked Rousey for her opinion on poor pay in women's professional soccer. The question was drowned out by boos from the crowd. Some fans got to their feet. A man yelled 'resign' at the reporter. Rousey restored order with a measured response. Whatever the sport, women would be paid the same as men when they could sell the same tickets for the same prices. If she sold out Etihad, she would have proved her status as an elite global athlete, regardless of her gender. That was why she was in Australia. Aussies were a tough bunch who liked a good fight, regardless of who was throwing the punches. That was why Melbourne was such a natural setting for the change that she was trying to bring. It was quite clear: her battle to be recognized as a truly great athlete by fighting through
gender barriers had landed in Australia for a reason. In these comments, Rousey sold the fight as an occasion that would work because it brought the gender battle to the place where it had the best chance of a fair fight. Where else than the land of the ‘fair go’ that the nation’s tourist industry had promoted so enthusiastically over the last generation?

Things simmered down after that, the fighters faced off against one another, and the mood was lightened as fans were invited down to take pictures with Rousey, who later walked into the crowd to happily pose for selfies. The question that remained was this: How could we explain why the most heated moment in a press conference for martial artists was not the traditional sparking point, where opponents face off, but in a question from a female reporter about pay in women’s sports? In what way could this dramatic moment be connected to the location of Rousey and the UFC in the growth of media sport as an arena that combines sport, leisure, pleasure and media?

Returning to the opening ideas of the chapter, one can say that the flow of 6,000 people to the event had an impact on the conflict that erupted around gender during this event. The drama was produced not by the question, but by the reaction of the large crowd. Spectators were attracted by a smart media event hosted by a savvy sport in a cleverly designed stadium that was easy to access as part of a day out. If the ferocity of the reaction might have been unanticipated, the fact that gender emerged as a controversial issue was not surprising, given Rousey and the UFC confront gender questions head on in their efforts to take the leading edge in the global sports market. By placing this moment in the context of research on Etihad Stadium, the UFC and decades of work on the evolution of media sport as a form of entertainment, it is possible to make the argument that the Rousey conference dramatized media sport contests as places where identity conflicts are part and parcel of live social experiences.

**SIGNIFICANCE: MEDIA EVENTS DRAMATIZING GLOBAL MEDIA PROCESSES RIGHT BEFORE OUR EYES**

The point of studying popular culture is to show how important issues about identity and power come to life. These are moments where sociological forces are seen in action. The goal here is modest; it is simply to show that when controversies about things like gender crop up in the course of entertainment, as it did in the Rousey press conference, this reflects how popular culture is organized, performed and received. When it comes to sport, the economic role of mediated contests as drivers of tourism and urban regeneration make these complex, weighty matters indeed. At the same time they are possible to decipher, and research-based participant observation is a useful tool in this regard, not least because we all have access to media events.

The Rousey/Holm fight linked popular culture research to the matter of how media influence the economic management of geography. Recall, this was the
basic question that motivated Innis (2008): the idea that culture involved a particular arrangement of physical resources that favoured some interests with others. We can see how this applied to Rousey by considering geographer David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), a highly influential analysis of how cultures make sense of the relationship between space, time and identity. Harvey extended Innis’s ideas to consider how the management of space implicated people’s bodies into politics, as a final destination where ‘forces of repression, socialization, disciplining, and punishing are inflicted’ (1990, 215). These forces mean we ‘must either submit to authority ... or carve out particular spaces of resistance and freedom’ (1990, 213). The co-determination of space and bodies ‘become an essential ideological ingredient to social reproduction’ (1990, 217).

Ronda Rousey certainly translated Harvey’s thesis into a kinetic language that everyone could read. Rousey’s press conference showed this process in action as the fighters fought to win acceptance as athletes, above everything else, by trying to tell a different story about gender. Well before the fight, Rousey had openly acknowledged the challenge that her body posed to gender stereotypes: the notion that she could be sexy without directing her look at that goal above all else. Such comments recognize that there is a difference in how men and women are treated as athletes; male martial artists are never asked how their fighting prowess and chiselled muscles complicate their sexuality. Plus, the competitive edge of the event was enhanced by the added challenge of proving that Rousey could draw a bigger crowd than UFC men. In a very real way, Rousey’s physical presence in Melbourne became a catalyst for a debate on sport, gender and even Australia, the land of the ‘fair go’.

Participant observation, using differentiated voices of description and analysis, was one way to explain how Rousey, the UFC and Etihad Stadium summoned debates about gender and media. An important part of the process, though, was in finding an explanation for what brought each entity together before 6,000 people. Had the crowd been smaller, and less ferocious in its reaction to the question about gender and pay, the moment would have been less dramatic. We have asked why so many people would show up, but perhaps it’s better to ask how they could. Part of the reason, surely, is the appeal of the UFC and Rousey, but much is also about the fact that Etihad was designed as an accommodating place for athletes and audiences alike – a reachable landmark in a global sporting and entertainment economy.

As such, the event presented an opportunity to explore how media sport plays a role in the construction of place and identity. Given research, it was a fair bet that Rousey’s appearance would be the site of some kind of gendered ‘drama’. Further, theoretically informed participant observation provided a method for explaining why it is more than coincidence that a question about gender, sport and pay would have become a matter of controversy. The lesson is that an understanding of how participant observation can be used as a way of illustrating the connection between media, place and power vastly expands research opportunities since, in a mediatized world, we all have access to such events.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The role of media in making meaningful places is a key theme tying media research to the question of how economy and culture are related.
- Research on sport has done much to explain how the staging of contests integrates media industries’ economic management identities.
- Theoretically informed participant observation is a useful tool in explaining how such events work.
- The UFC is a valuable case study in how gendered bodies become involved in the media-driven management of space.