

About the Zika virus, the Olympics and the decreasing importance of audience

 By [Walter Pike](#)

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Ask yourself what the purpose of the Olympic Games, the World Cup, the English Premier League is. Why do players get paid so much money to play a game? Games are for fun, for exercise, for the sport, aren't they?

Not so long ago the Olympics was a strictly amateur event. People with potential would even turn down prizes at golf days so as not to run the risk of disqualifying themselves from the Olympics, the amateur status was so valued. In fact, all the sponsorships, advertisements and marketing that are a standard part of contemporary big-money Olympic Games were thought to be insulting to the Olympic spirit not so very long ago. The Olympics were supposed to be about love of sport, not money.

The purpose of professional sport is to build audiences. The best playing the best is designed for only one reason, to encourage people to watch on TV. All so that marketers could interrupt them with advertising.

The advertising business has two main components: People who build audiences well and people who interrupt audiences well. There are also those who find existing audiences for people to interrupt. Outdoor companies find places, for example, where there is a lot of traffic, and interrupt them with billboards. But mostly it's audience creators and audience interrupters.

So what's the point, you may ask?

There's no need for professional sport to follow the ethos of amateur sport. It's not that the best man (or woman) should win or play within the spirit of the game, it's really how you build the biggest audience. Even the sport administrators often forget this. The most glaring example is technology used in umpiring or refereeing. Soccer had it right, although recently lost the plot. Goal-line technology and perfect decisions sanitise the game, perfect decisions give fewer things to talk about, less controversy hampers word of mouth, perfectly behaved competitors is not what's needed. Those of us of a certain age can remember Clive Rice walking onto the Newlands cricket ground to the sounds of 'Boo' and jeers from a packed-to-the-rafters stadium. That's what is needed, talkability, and shareability if you want to optimise audience size.

Amateur sport is where the ethos of sport should be maintained. That's where people in it for the love of the game are.

The golfers and other sportsmen pulling out of the Rio Olympics don't concern me. There will be other entertainers and Zika-free environments to find the stars at.



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The concept of audiences and interruption has spilled over into digital and social media as well. It's the business model, targeting algorithms that can deliver a precisely selected target market so that advertising can be sold to marketers.

But the internet offers different and more exciting opportunities for idea spreading. That's what we are really all about, spreading ideas. Smart marketers are starting to find these opportunities in networks, in the connections between social players and the position of social players in the community, in social capital or influence. Unlike in the broadcast world, online influence has nothing to do with audience, it has to do with position.

The Occupy Wall Street protesters told us that the revolution would not be televised. This is what they meant. Bernie Sanders faced a virtual mainstream media blackout but still became a serious contender in the US presidential race. The idea he was selling wasn't merely broadcast to the audience, it was shared in the network.

Are we at a media tipping point? Now that personal communications and computing devices are getting more and more ubiquitous and cheap, are we looking in the next few years at audiences becoming less and less important? Are people going to resist being interrupted and just switch off?

I think that we have passed that inflexion point. We just haven't noticed yet.

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