

EBU Lessons from Lockdown: Exploring Sport Broadcasting

Transcript:

[Glen Killane, Director of Eurovision Sport] – Welcome to our series of discussions with EBU Members, Lessons from Lockdown. Today, we focus on an area that has been completely wiped out by COVID-19, sport.

So how have media organizations across EBU been dealing with the challenges the pandemic has presented? What lessons have they learned and how can we all plan for a return to sport with the virus still an ever-present danger?

Join us as we speak to three EBU Members, who talk about their experience of COVID-19. I'm joined by BBC Director of Sport, Barbara Slater, Panu Pokkinen who is YLE's Director of Sports and Events and Dávid Székely, who is Director of Sport for M4 Sport in MTVA in Hungary. You're all very, very welcome.

I'm gonna start with Barbara. Ladies first, on this occasion. Barbara, it's an unprecedented time. You know, what would your advice be as to the challenges people faced over the last number of months?

[Barbara Slater] – As you say, it's unprecedented, it was unexpected. Actually, it happened incredibly quickly in a way when we now look back in hindsight. I remember we had a Six Nations, one of the big concluding weekends, and, we were pushed to go even as late as the Friday. And we absolutely understood and completely supported the decision in the end to cancel that match.

So we've been through a whole number of different phases, I think, of this. One was the immediate aftermath. We've got a number of staff, I think, there was that in management and that sudden change and making sure that staff were informed, they were communicated with, they knew what we expected of them. And suddenly we were in lockdown and that presented again a whole new set of challenges. And at the moment and pretty much from lockdown we've had, about the BBC, about 7 to 8% only of our staff in the buildings. Obviously we've still kept programming like all our news services and our sports news services going. And I think it's been a remarkable transition to suddenly see thousands of staff working very effectively from home. We live, don't we, in an age of technology that has allowed us to continue to work in a way with extraordinary adaptability and speed. I think that's been one of the great takeaways is just how adaptable people can be when they're put in this challenging situation. And I just would want to be extremely complimentary of the way that, even without the live sport, we've had to still move and there's been a huge volume of sports news that we've needed to cover, and we've sort of shifted gear from live sport production into replacement programming production. In many ways, this has been one of our busiest periods.

[Glen Killane] – Panu, to you next, from a challenge point of view, that whole challenge of the schedule, that's gotta be a huge challenge for all broadcasters at this time. And as Barbara said, it was such a sudden kind of lockdown situation, where sport was just completely cancelled. How has YLE dealt with that?

[Panu Pokkinen] – I agree everything Barbara told. And it's affected the same ways on our side as well. And I would take another angle on the challenge is that it has mainly challenged how we manage, how we lead and how we keep up the resilience with all

our employees. And that's another perspective to the whole problem and to the whole situation. When we don't know at the moment where we are now, what happens in few months and at the same time you need to do something, do more. The people, the audiences want more content than ever because they are more at home. They have more time to spend in front of TV or their web services. At the same time we lose basically all the content we have planned within the sports. And, in Finland especially, first time we qualified for the football Euros and this was supposed to be in Yle, this was supposed to be, the summer of events. We created a new unit which was supposed to launch new kind of big events to be present among people among tens of thousands of people all around Finland, while we are having this the first time experience from the UEFA competitions and all of a sudden, all this disappeared. That's why we had to keep dealing with the mental side as well, not only with our employees but also with the audiences. We've been waiting that for so long. You probably can imagine, but that's the first time in football in Finland, and the Olympics after that. But that's the situation where we started. Huge, huge transition.

[Glen Killane] – Dàvid, you're running a sports channel. How on earth do you cope with the loss of content when your only commodity is sport? I mean I don't want to lessen the impact on BBC or for Yle but schedulers cope in terms of putting in other things like movies or repeats. For a sports channel, how do you cope with that?

[Dàvid Székely] – I won't forget ever the two days when everything cancelled or postponed at the beginning of March or in the middle of March. The first idea was to rerun the 2016 UEFA Euro because that was a very interesting tournament for Hungary because Hungary qualified after more than 40 years to a big football championship. So basically we had an agreement with C11 to rerun all the games with the same day schedule. With that, we gained some time. We found a lot of things in our archives, and then we had an agreement with the IOC as well. We discovered services that we were able to rerun the Olympics from 1992. So that was the first idea.

The second was to show somehow, earlier Formula races instead of the live races. And after a few discussions with Form, and Liberty Media, we also had the green light for it. So basically we changed everything. We didn't even have any live logo, but we had some kind of good content. It's not the same as it would have been in 2020 with the Hungarian Grand, the partenza for the Giro d'Italia, for the Swimming European Championships, the Euros, the Olympics, but at least we were able to show something different. For example, we had a game against Brazil, a football game in 1986 and we have beaten Brazil 3-0 that game. And, for a lot of our viewers it was a great memory and a huge event so we changed to being an archive, a classic sport channel, until these days.

[Glen Killane] – Barbara, have you noticed a significant shift in audience behaviour over this time? Or is it pretty solid at your work?

[Barbara Slater] – I think we have seen generally a tremendous boost in audiences. As has been said, people have been at home, they've been looking for content. So I think what's been interesting is the very high peak audiences you would get for live, obviously we've not seen those, but we have seen a steady appetite for the replacement programming. People love sport, of course they want it live, but we've done a number of programmes that have actually been incredibly successful. So our Match of the Day, which has been an absolute staple of Saturday night, has been featuring a big discussion program, the Match of the Day Top 10, where our pundits have been debating and discussing. It was actually a podcast, commissioned as a podcast, but we've been able to visualise it. It's been very popular. And

similarly we've been doing Match of their Day, which is speaking to pundits and picking their highlight matches.

The other thing I think we've been really interested by has been the volume of sports news, there just seem to be so many stories. And as the whole crisis has evolved, and the impact of COVID-19 on sport has been a multitude of things. And so again, our web services, although the audience is down, it has given us an opportunity to tell those stories, but maybe more than that, to experiment a bit with surround sound content, some of the human interest stories, some fun quizzes, all sorts of, a multitude of things, actually people I think have really enjoyed. So I think some of our production teams have been incredibly inventive in the way that this has almost forced them to think slightly differently about some of the things that we produce.

[Glen Killane] – Same question to you Panu, you have Areena, the Areena online space, is there more of a shift towards that in Finland over this period?

[Panu Pokkinen] – Yle has found its audiences both from TV, which is doing much better than it was doing before, but especially in Yle Areena, and in Areena, we've been even before Netflix, all the time, but now we are the number one also under 45 years old. So, Areena kind of got the leap and took the first place there. So, we have succeeded in company level quite well, but what we did within sports, we had a different approach, compared to BBC. For example, we took a few steps backwards, and took the whole picture and kind of looked at the production or, how do you call it, the convention. Where are we aiming when we produce sports? We are aiming to create shared experiences or common moments for Finns. And so we kind of put out our sports crew to think, to take a bit wider perspective on content. And that's how we started to create the new story within the sports and events.

So we have used our resources in four directions. The first one is, of course it's news. We sorted, the sports news, but we've been backing the domestic news side. Our anchors, journalists, I would say that 20 to 25% of our journalists are used in our news department, which has been really good. And the sports news are, they are in a different form. It's less results of course, because there is no results at the moment. But we have kind of reinvented the sports journalism and that has been really good. But I have to admit that we've being challenged by the cultural elite that we should give up all the sports news minutes for example, to culture or to economics or whatsoever. We've been having this debate, not within our company, but within the society. But the ratings in sports news are better than ever, so people are actually lacking also something else and they are desiring the sports stories. The news was the first part.

The second part is, of course, when we were supposed to have the summer of events, we were preparing for that. One fourth of our employees need to take insight to the next year. It's not going to be only the summer of events. It's going to be a year of events which starts from the Nordic Skiing World Championships in February, hopefully, and continues until the Winter Olympics in Beijing '22, so it's not only one summer. We are having a huge year next year and that needs to be prepared pretty well.

The third part is, we actually took this asset development project within sports, we've been experimenting a lot of different kinds of content, and we focused on interaction, and we have learnt quite a lot from that how we interact with people. I have a few examples, some works

better, some others doesn't. But that's kind of what we need to be prepared when we develop and try to create something new.

And the fourth one is, of course, it's the core, it's the sport, we started immediately with federations to create how we can, if we need to prepare to the world where we can't have the sports competitions as it was used to be. So we started to create hybrid events. You can call us that, what if we had an athletics event, which is held in two different cities or two different towns, or I think probably everyone is doing the same in every country. But that was the fourth one.

[Glen Killane] – Thank you, Panu. Dàvid, obviously the big story last weekend was the return of the Bundesliga. I understand the Hungarian football is back next weekend. From a production point of view and from a staff and a health and safety point of view, how are you preparing for that?

[Dàvid Székely] – Yes, we will have the first live football game on Saturday, but we already had two friendly games as a preparation, and it was a very good lesson for us, and for the broadcaster as well. We had a really huge discussion with the Hungarian Football Federation to have everything in place. And yes, we have very strict rules to be able to broadcast the matches. For example, we changed the camera positions. We won't be next to the field because everyone who is on the field or next to the field and can be in interaction with the players needs to have a negative test from the previous 24 to 36 hours. So it's very strict and thanks to Danielle from the Federation, we have a very good system to produce these tests, but this is very important. We don't, we cannot go back into our studio yet. We are hoping that we will be able to go back in the middle of June, but until then, we will have a crew on site, and we'll do the pre- and post-match segment from there. But from very far off the field of play of course.

So we have really strict rules, but, from the first two friendly games, it was, it was pretty good. And advancing, which is in my opinion better than in the Bundesliga, is that the Federation and the clubs have a plan to give a football atmosphere, thanks to the speakers. So we will have a loop from the previous games. And without the spectators, the fans, we still have some kind of a football atmosphere which is much closer to the real football even, and feelings than without any spectators and any noise.

[Glen Killane] – Yeah, it was certainly very eerie when you're watching a football game with nobody in the stand. Two questions on that production piece and as you begin to emerge from the crisis, how are BBC preparing for that? And then secondly, kind of a little bit about what, like what Panu mentioned, we're facing this huge pressure on production for '21 and '22. It's a massive ask for all broadcasters in terms of production resources, et cetera. So, kind of a twofold question. Firstly, production, how are you going to emerge what measures are you taking and how are you planning for the big crescendo in '21, '22?

[Barbara Slater] – So firstly on production, many, many similarities to what's been said. You know strict rules, lots and lots of liaison with the governing bodies because we are having to rethink how things will be done. Again, echoing some of the comments, this is a time for development as well and we're certainly looking in a greater way to remote production than we have in the past. And we are working with partners up here at the BBC base in Salford, our partners over in our studio operation and looking at how to run galleries and those operational spaces safely and many different approaches to that. So very, very strict

protocols with staff safety, the number one concern. It's changing rapidly. We don't know, it might be a question of a number of steps forward and then steps back. So we also have plans where we can continue to do things as we're doing.

I think what's been interesting has been the audience understanding and acceptance that programmes will look and feel differently and therefore we're finding that in a programme where we have to have guests Zoomed in rather than be physically present, it's still working incredibly well. Our audience understand that and we're certainly getting no complaints or any feedback that says they are enjoying those programmes less. That's fine for lockdown. I wonder how much that appetite will change as life returns slightly more to normal. So staff safety is our paramount concern. Plenty of contingencies. So we can be adaptable and change what we do, but it isn't going to look and feel the same and production will be affected. We probably won't have as many cameras in grounds, as you say, they may be positioned differently. Maybe there'll be limited presentation and commentary, but we're not going to have the army of reporters and things necessarily that we would have done in the past and there is the change to the events themselves. They will look and feel very, very different. But I think we're all excited about the prospect of the return of live sport. And the secret, I think to doing it well will be to work in very close partnerships and all be pulling in the same direction.

And that is another thing that I think has come shining through this whole experience. There's been a kind of spirit of collaboration. People being incredibly understanding and frankly reacting and adapting with enormous speed and flexibility in doing things differently. I mean, we did, and I know it's not sport, but there was a VE day celebration that we did here in the UK and the plans were sort of being changed, from a massively complex, outside broadcast in a matter of days and still produced a programme of absolute excellence. So it's testing for us in this broadcasting industry, but I think we're showing tremendous resilience and adaptability and I think it will be a slow journey, won't it? With some sports, it may happen more quickly than others. We're really hopeful that the World Snooker Championships, a sport very popular here in the UK, is going to fall in the Olympic window this summer, 200 hours of live sport. And we do feel that it's a sport where actually, with maybe lighting, if there can't be a crowd, we're still going to get pretty close to the experience that we would have had. And I think different sports will respond in different ways. Are we going to see the return of partial crowds if not full crowds? It will be step by step and different sports will do things in different places in different ways. And I think, broadcasters will react to that and fingers crossed as we start to come through this and we look ahead as you were saying, what an extraordinary run of events, it just means the build-up and the anticipation has gone on all the longer, I mean '21 should be a fantastic year with the Euros and the Olympics and many other events as well. And then what of course has happened to some events that were going to be in '21 are now in '22. So, for example, the women's European Football Championships hosted in the UK is now moved to '22 as has the World Athletic Championships. So it's as if we now have two bumper years of sport, and yes, it's going to be challenging and put a strain on things, but I think there will be things that we will do during this period that we will carry forward and will leave a lasting legacy and change maybe to the way we do some broadcasts.

[Glen Killane] – Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I just have two more questions for you all. I'm gonna ask them at the same time and then go around the table if you like, the virtual table.

The first one is what kind of sports market on the business side of things do you see emerging from the crisis?

And the second one is what's your one key takeout from this whole experience? What would be your one piece of absolutely golden advice to other Members of things that you learned from? I'm gonna start with Panu, and then work my way around.

[Panu Pokkinen] – I think the sports market will survive because the audiences need sports. And I think the sports audiences are even, they are quite adaptable to different situations. Now we can see that the sports is not just the game or the results. It's more like emotions, how you can, what's the feeling behind the sports. We need to learn, if the stands are empty, we need to learn how to create the emotions, how we can show when your own team scores goals, how they reflect. And we can build that new kind of TV production. Or the crowds are shouting and cheering, we can use hybrid TVs. So we can kind of get the interaction on those. So I think that the sports market will survive. Okay, it's not easy and it's a long road, but at the moment it seems that it doesn't have effect on sports media business, but on sports clubs and sports business, others, it has huge impacts, but I think that we'll overcome in a few years because the audiences, the people need sports.

My key takeaway, I think that what we have learned is that we need to prepare more for plan Bs. We, we kind of, it was a default that when we acquire a sports rights, we get the sports, what we have acquired, but the next two seasons we think now that it's going to be amazing, huge, '21 and '22, but we don't know what happens. So we need to prepare at the same time for not only plan Bs, but plan Cs and plan Ds in different kinds of scenarios. That's the key takeaway. To be able to do that, we need to focus more on how we manage it. It's a question of leadership management and processes. So it's been a huge challenge for the department or the unit, how to lead and manage the whole kind of structure. We need to be much more agile.

[Glen Killane] – Thanks Panu. Dàvid, your view on what's going to happen with the sport market and your key takeaway?

[Dàvid Székely] – The takeaway, I would start with that. I think we will read every contract draft differently in the future than before. That's for sure, because now we have to find a lot of solutions. When we don't have the good answer, the exact answer, they will figure it out, I'm sure in the case. I think the most important thing is to be even more up-to-date of the technical side and possibilities. So what can we do, remote system or every other thing. What we can do for a better coverage, even with less people for example. It can be interesting. And I think that, for example, if we are talking about EBU, that we have a very strict system, and a very good base. I think the companies like EBU, can be one of the winner of this situation and this pandemic because a lot of business models will have huge issues in the near future, in my opinion, in the sport business side.

[Glen Killane] – And finally to Barbara, your key takeaway and your view of what the market will look in the future.

[Barbara Slater] – Indeed, and I would echo some of what's already been said about sport's enduring appeal. If you ask people maybe what they have missed in this lockdown, sport would be high on the list for many. It is that real life drama. It's that entertainment, it's that allegiance to your club. It is an essential part of kind of, of life, those shared experiences that sport brings, and they've been missed. And therefore I think sport will come through this. There may be some consolidation. I think it probably has shown that there are some events that are fragile. And it will certainly hit some areas harder than others, perhaps the middle

tier, that is more finely balanced kind of commercially. I think the prime events will remain the prime events, and I think they will return back maybe stronger than ever because people will appreciate them all the more. So I think sport collectively will, but I think that there will be areas definitely that will struggle just because of the aftermath, and how finely they are balanced.

Then I think the big takeaway has been how quickly people have adapted to such a changed working environment and we all strive to evolve and change our businesses to keep relevant with audiences. They change, the way they consume media changes, et cetera. And I think it says to me that maybe change, which is challenging, actually can be done at speed and remarkably effectively. We've been forced to change because of circumstance, but it just shows what can be achieved when you are in that situation.

So that is a takeout for me, is maybe we can be more ambitious with the speed at which we do things because we've proved through this that we can do it.

[Glen Killane] – Barbara, Panu and David, thank you very much for your time today, I really, really appreciate it.