CHAPTER 5

Cricket (Sports) and the Digital Dispensation


From Five-day to One-day to 20/20

On July 2, 2003, it was revealed that the West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) had sold the rights for televised series with the West Indies cricket team to Dubai-based Ten Sports. Previous rights holders were ESPN Star Sports and Sky Broadcasting. During the 1990s, the sport of cricket began to take its place as a satellite phenomenon. In the past, it was experienced primarily live at the cricketing ovals around the world, and then radio relay became a primary source for its dissemination. Although there is significant archival video footage that dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, it is only really in the 1980s that cricket and television found a harmonious union. The diehard purists of the sport will say that the five-day version is real cricket. This version drove the sport up until the 1980s, when the more entertaining one-day version began to emerge. Kerry Packer’s revolutionary World Series one-day innovation (where each team bowled and batted for fifty six-ball overs) was partly responsible for the refocusing of this game as a spectator’s phenomenon. There were those people who found the five-day version of the game too protracted and at times lacking in entertainment. These people, who were not locked into the technical and traditional discourse of the purists, would often take leave of the five-day game until critical moments of play. By 2007, twenty-twenty (20/20) cricket (where each team bowled and batted for twenty overs), was beginning to threaten all other forms of the sport in terms of spectacle, use of technology, and income generation. The first 20/20 World Cup competition was staged in South Africa in September of 2007.
On December 16, 1999 (during the launch of the 2000 Busta Cup season in the Caribbean), the West Indies Cricket chief marketing executive Chris Dehring made the point that West Indies cricket in the 1970s and 1980s suffered because the “technology for televising and radio was not around.”2 His statement hints at the ability of television and technologies to act as a catalyst for popularizing the sport at home. He was not the first to present this argument. Others have made this point long before. But fewer enthusiasts mention the equally potentially dangerous outcomes augured by the popularizing of cricket through television and newer mediums.

Of course, the introduction of the one-day variety of the game back in the 1970s brought new life to the sport. But more so, it brought new audiences to experience a sport that was considered by some to be struggling and in need of a higher profile in relation to other world sports. In Europe, as elsewhere, soccer and other mass appeal popular sports have always captured the imagination, interest, and financial input of a wide audience. In the book *Sports Culture*, Ellis Cashmore considers how from the 1960s, fans were “accustomed to television and expected the kinds of visuals that only television could provide.”3 Cricket did not evolve with the same televised visual flair. In many respects, the advances made in other television sports prefigured and inspired the revolution that took place a little later in cricket production and dissemination. I would also contend that the United States’s NBA and NFL, and their baseball league were catalysts that precipitated the interface between television and cricket. After all, the filming within these leagues set production standards for other sports enterprises throughout the world. This gives the impression that the revolution in one-day cricket came about purely as a result of technology. This is not absolutely the case, though I would contend it begins to explain the revolution that has taken and is taking place in cricket. I am not given to an unmitigated belief in technological determinism, because I feel that social and spiritual determinism also play a role in the evolution of human society.

Packer brought the restrictive circle, white ball, night cricket, and colored clothing to the sport. These were integral in repositioning the sport in the consciousness of its audiences. The introduction of these new features also meant that cricket could be transformed by external interests and for the sake of the spectacle. Cricket has always been a centrally controlled game. Rules are made by a governing body that comprises the playing members of the International Cricket Council (ICC). Despite the claim of offering full democracy for all member territories, it is widely felt in some quarters that some test-playing nations have more influence than