

# Game on for a digital revolution in sport stadiums

October 3 2014, by Carmine Sellitto

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Fans already like to use their smartphones to take pictures and video and share online. Credit: Flickr/Serdar Kilic, CC BY-ND

It's the middle of finals season with tens of thousands of fans turning out at stadiums to cheer their teams to victory. Many fans at these and other sporting events already turn to digital technology by using their smartphone to track results and share their experience with others.

But currently at many venues, when so many thousands of people

simultaneously try to use mobile devices, connectivity is limited due to high volume of requests. What is needed is a new generation of technologies to address this infrastructure issue.

This new frontier for information communication [technology](#) in sport is one which could fundamentally change our experience as spectators of [professional sport](#) – the digital revolutions in our [sports stadiums](#).

## **Our love of stadiums**

The sports stadium has traditionally provided a sense of place allowing spectators to watch sport live, but also to "feel" the contest through cheering and jeering en masse in a sea of moving colours.

The stadium provides the physical structure that collectively encapsulates the emotive and fervent feelings of the crowd. This is particularly heightened at large events such as an AFL or NRL grand final, or World Cup cricket match.

Given the central importance of the stadium fan environment, stadium managers worldwide are eagerly pursuing new technologies that could potentially enhance the game-day experience, particularly from a comfort and convenience perspective.

These newly implemented technologies will tap into people's use of mobile apps and social networks and are expected to provide sport fans with a freely available media-rich experience.

In the US, professional sport bodies in baseball ([MLB](#)), football ([NFL](#)) and basketball ([NBA](#)) are all upgrading their primary stadiums with free high-speed Wi-Fi services in order to accommodate the expectations of fans.

The modern day sports fan expects to be constantly connected at a game — whether it be to instantly review a particular team play, upload images or videos they have taken, or check background statistics about players and teams.

## **Crowd control**

Newly introduced technologies also provide benefits for stadium management allowing them to directly improve the game-day fan experience.

For instance, through the introduction of new mobile-based applications, the NFL's Miami Dolphins can in real-time monitor and [redirect fans](#) to gates with shorter lines improving fan entry times to the stadium.

The operators of SAP Arena in Mannheim use a management app to monitor, in real-time, food and beverage purchases on game day—giving them insight into fan consumption behaviour.

The owners of the [San Francisco 49ers](#) have recently opened their high-tech stadium in California allowing fans to use mobile devices to order food and drinks directly from their seats, as well as being able to receive specific promotional offers.

Recent announcements by the management of several Australian-based stadium operators to introduce high-speed Wi-Fi and internet protocol television ([IPTV](#)) will allow them to better manage their venues.

One of the [early adopters of stadium technology](#) has been the Sydney Cricket Ground ([SCG](#)) where it has been able to control various management and spectator-based activities in certain sections of the venue.

The further rollout of the technology to Alliance Stadium (adjacent to the SCG) next year will potentially allow fans to be offered seat upgrades and food/drink vouchers as they arrive at the ground via their mobile devices.

Another stadium to recently announced plans to [adopt high connectivity technology](#) is Etihad Stadium, where some 1,000 Wi-Fi hubs and 1,600 IPTVs are to be installed in time for the start of 2015 AFL season.

The newly introduced technology will provide services similar to that encountered at the SCG allowing in-seat ordering of food, and real-time information on transportation and parking conditions.

The inclusion of IPTV will potentially provide high quality audio-visuals to be available around the stadium, more so than the current situation. This will not only enhance the spectator secondary viewing environment, but potentially allows venue management to provide opportunities for third-party advertising, sponsorship and targeted messaging.

## **What does it all mean?**

Many people now rely on their smartphone for doing things encountered in their lives. Arguably, the ability for them to continue to be fully digitally connected at large [sporting events](#) should be viewed as technology creep, rather than further technology invasion.

Some sport fans in the US have been leaving games early after being frustrated by not being able to fully use their [mobile devices](#). Clearly, US professional sport bodies, in upgrading stadiums are recognising the expectations of current and future sport spectators—something that is being emulated in other parts of the world and now in Australia.

It has been suggested that an important reason that stadium management

should be enhancing venue connectivity is to [entice fans away from their big screen TVs](#) at home and get them to the game.

The digitised [stadium](#) could potentially be the first step in enticing those home viewers back to the game-day arena. Fans will have a seamless digital experience, where mobile-enabled activities are not restricted as they might now be at a venue.

Indeed, increased technologies in stadiums will become an expected norm for fans.

For venue operators, they will be well positioned to capture relevant data about fans to better understand game-day attendance and their in-venue purchasing behaviour. This could potentially deliver them savings and efficiencies through real-time mobile communication with game-day attendees.

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