

# The Show Must Go On: The Strategy and Spectacle of Dana White's Efforts to Promote UFC 249 During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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While most professional sports quickly postponed their seasons due to COVID-19, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) took a decidedly contrarian approach as president Dana White continued to promote UFC 249 until pressure forced its cancellation on April 9, 2020. Drawing from work on sport and spectacle and the media as well as sport management scholarship on crisis management, the authors provide a commentary on the mediated spectacle of White's (eventually successful) efforts to promote UFC 249 during the pandemic. Drawing from numerous media sources, they discuss how White sought to control the public narrative in several key ways. The authors further explore how White decried the seriousness of the pandemic while centralizing the UFC's place in the U.S. sporting landscape. Finally, the authors discuss how White's efforts might both help and hinder the UFC as a mainstream sports promotion.

**Keywords:** athlete labor, COVID-19, media, MMA, sport journalism

Long after other professional leagues suspended live events due to public health guidelines related to COVID-19, mixed martial arts (MMA) impresario and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) president and chief executive officer Dana White continued to brazenly promote UFC 249, scheduled to take place on April 18, 2020. In spite of relocating the event from the Barclays Center in New York City to Native American tribal land in California in an attempt to circumvent restrictive health regulations, on April 9—just 9 days before the scheduled program—White announced that the event was canceled, due in no small part to corporate and political pressure (Bieler, 2020). Despite this significant business setback and against a backdrop of fiery and defiant media interviews, White and the UFC immediately began mapping out a path to hosting the event sooner rather than later, pledging to lead the way for sporting organizations, and, indeed, the United

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States, to open again. After teasing a plan to introduce a “Fight Island” where the UFC could presumably host events unfettered by cumbersome regulations, the promotion was able to ink a deal to host the rescheduled fan-less event in a state with a sympathetic governor at VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena in Jacksonville, FL, on May 9, 2020.

Drawing from work in cultural and media studies on sport and spectacle (Butryn, Masucci, & Johnson, *in press*) as well as sport management scholarship on crisis management (Kellison, Bass, Lovich, & Bunds, 2015; Sato, Ko, & Kellison, 2018), we provide a commentary on the mediated spectacle of White’s efforts to promote UFC 249 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using over 100 mainstream and MMA media sources, we discuss how White’s rhetorical strategies became increasingly adversarial toward the press (Cheng, 2017) and how he intentionally controlled the public narrative via a strategic, selective, and ultimately savvy reliance on hand-picked, often uncritical outlets (Boyle, 2017). We further explore how White decried the seriousness of the pandemic, proposing radical yet creative alternatives to traditional sports programming, while eventually adapting to the dominant national discourse. Finally, following Kalman-Lamb (2018) and others, we examine how, in its efforts to continue business as usual, the UFC’s approach to communicating its aims might both help and hinder its longstanding reputation as a mainstream yet still somewhat rogue sports promotion.

## The Rocky Road to UFC 249: A Brief Chronology of Rage, Resilience, and (Partial) Redemption

With the COVID-19 virus rapidly spreading across the globe, by early February nearly every professional sporting organization, starting with the National Basketball Association, was quick to postpone its season and publicly advocate for players, personnel, and fans to self-isolate and follow public health guidelines being established by state and federal governments. In spite of these sport leagues’ decisions, the UFC chose to thumb their noses at social distancing recommendations designed to reduce infection rates and continued to pursue hosting live events. Indeed, on March 14, 2020, after other professional sports organizations had shuttered their doors, the UFC hosted a live event in Brasilia, Brazil, in an empty arena, save for a skeleton crew. The event was trumpeted by Dana White, as *the* sports event to bring the populace out of the void created by the global pandemic, famously stating that he did not “give a sh\*t about the coronavirus” (Singh, 2020, para. 6).

The decision to move forward with the event was controversial in itself, because while the fighters had already arrived for the event, the local government was moving to shut businesses down. As one staff writer for wrestling and combat sport analyst Dave Meltzer’s *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* wrote:

The Brazilian government made the call to ban all social gatherings, which would have made it easy for the company to cancel the show. The fighters still wanted to fight, knowing that was the only way they would have gotten paid, and they were already just a few days away from doing so. (Frederick, 2020, para. 209)

After a 3-week hiatus, Dana White boasted that their upcoming premiere event, UFC 249 (a much-anticipated lightweight bout between the undefeated champion Khabib Nurmagomedov and former interim belt holder Tony Ferguson) would still occur on April 18, 2020, at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, NY. However, citing complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the governing body of the state of New York declined to sanction the fight. Interestingly, only a day removed from a group phone conversation between U.S. President Donald Trump and the commissioners of major sport leagues, which included Dana White, the UFC announced they had secured another venue and began advertising that UFC 249 would take place at an undisclosed location, which was later confirmed to be the Tachi Palace Casino Resort in Lemoore, California, on Native American territory (Draper, 2020a).

While a number of factors caused major alterations to the card and in spite of the rapidly changing landscape of restrictions due to COVID-19, White steadfastly proclaimed that UFC 249 would be available via pay-per-view (PPV) on the originally scheduled date. The UFC reassured the public that they would be adhering to health and safety guidelines established by local and federal officials, although they offered little in the way of specifics at the time. Indeed, White was holding the particulars of the plan close to his chest in order to prevent members of the media—or the “creeps,” as he called them—from knowing any details, because, as he explained, journalists were conspiring against him and the UFC in their bid to host an MMA event in the era of the coronavirus (Holland, 2020a).

While we address White’s at times tense relationship with the media later in this paper, it is worth noting that between late March and early May he became increasingly vocal in his disdain for the MMA and mainstream media. Indeed, in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, White claimed that while some other leagues were justified in shutting down, “a lot of them were caving to the media [in closing down]. They didn’t want any bad press. You’re telling me people couldn’t go out and golf with no crowds? *C’mon*. That’s ridiculous. They caved to the media pressure” (Bishop, 2020, para. 19).

In addition to temporarily securing the site in California, White also shared another piece of “classified” news with the typically supportive Yahoo! Sports reporter, Kevin Iole. He told Iole that the organization had procured an island, now dubbed “Fight Island,” where they were currently building the infrastructure to host UFC events by June, presumably with less athletic commission oversight (Okamoto, 2020). The desire to proceed with live events while touting the seemingly nonsensical creation of an island in international waters, thus assuring that the UFC would be essentially pandemic-proof, illustrates White’s keen sense of timing and understanding of the strict regulations coming down the pike (Bishop, 2020).

As the date approached for UFC 249, the event at Tachi Palace was ultimately canceled due to increasing media scrutiny and pressure from corporate and government officials (Zirin, 2020). As White described it, he got direct calls from his bosses, which would have included executives from Endeavor and their parent company, Disney. The final straw was pressure from California Governor Gavin Newsom and California State Senator Dianne Feinstein that was apparently directed at the executives of those companies. Not to be deterred, White vowed that the event would still happen somewhere, and he went back to the drawing board to secure a new plan (Bieler, 2020).

It did not take long to learn that UFC 249 would be hosted in Florida, where the MMA governing body and state legislatures were unsurprisingly permissive. This was evidenced by Governor Ron De Santis' enthusiastic support for sanctioning events that did not feature a live audience and his declaration that, despite the pandemic, sports would be considered an essential service (Bianchi, 2020). Additionally, the state had been working hand in glove with World Wrestling Entertainment to host both live and taped events in the state, leaving Florida as, one journalist opined, "the post-pandemic sports capital of the nation" (Bianchi, 2020, para. 3). In his desire to control the narrative, White released the information on his timeline and through his preferred media outlets. Once again, the venue, date, fight card, and health protocols were kept secretive and were selectively and partially released to the public. Eventually, it was announced that UFC 249 would take place in Jacksonville, Florida, on May 9, 2020. Not only would fans be able to tune in to this event, it turns out that the UFC had secured the venue for three separate MMA shows over an 8-day period.

President Trump, who has a long personal and business history with Dana White and who in March named the promoter to his task force to reanimate sporting events across the country, featured in the opening moments of UFC 249. Trump had pretaped a message that ESPN—the broadcaster for the evening—had peppered throughout the production. His specific message was the following:

I want to congratulate (UFC President) Dana White and the UFC. They're going to have a big match. We love it. We think it's important. Get the sports leagues back. Let's play. Do the social distancing and whatever else you have to do. We need sports. We want our sports back. (McLaughlin, 2020, para. 3)

In an interview with TMZ prior to the event, when asked if Trump looked at the event as a blueprint for reopening the country, White proclaimed, "absolutely." He continued by saying, "His [Trump's] whole philosophy was let's get sports back first, figure out how to do that safely. Then let's start figuring out how do you get people back in the office? How do you get people in cubicles? And, then how do you get kids back in school?" (Owens, 2020, para. 4).

While it is beyond the scope of this commentary to provide a thorough analysis of UFC 249 and the events that followed, suffice it to say that, despite bringing in no live gate money and prior to some startling revelations that we discuss later in the paper, White was predictably upbeat and worked hard to frame the UFC as having set the tone for other sports organizations to return.

## Press Conference Spectacles and Friendly Media

According to Kellner (2016), media spectacles are mediated constructions that "present events that disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart-phones, and other new media and communication technologies" (p. 3). Part of media spectacles involves a performance and the audience, whether it be media members attending a postevent press conference or viewers watching at home. Of course, the performance, regardless of the arena (including sport), may be totally

spontaneous or carefully orchestrated and may be characterized by heartfelt authenticity or transparent emotion (Kellner, 2016).

As numerous scholars and journalists have noted, the rise of President Trump was at least in part due his purposeful framing of himself as a celebrity and master of the spectacle over the course of decades through the successful branding of his casinos, reality television shows, and other endeavors (Butryn et al., in press). Of course, media spectacles are arguably more common than ever, in part because media companies are well aware that they can, if used correctly, act as powerful conveyors of messages that attract viewers or clicks.

For Dana White, a shrewd understanding of the interplay between being the UFC president and media spectacle has been one of his keys to success, albeit with numerous controversies. Indeed, it is important to point out how far removed from the carefully worded press releases and traditional buttoned-down demeanor of virtually every other professional sports league figurehead White really is. His communication style is, in one sense, perfectly appropriate for a once marginalized sport that the late Senator John McCain famously dubbed “human cockfighting.” For comparison, World Wrestling Entertainment owner and chief executive officer Vince McMahon, another Trump ally, also moved forward with its own empty-arena Wrestlemania event, but with little public comment from McMahon himself. In contrast, from the start, White took on a dismissive tone regarding the coronavirus and its implications. This was prominently on display during a YouTube interview with Yahoo! Sports in late March:

It’s like hiding from cancer. You can’t hide from this thing. If you are a high-risk person, this thing’s going to get you. What’s gonna happen next flu season? This thing’s just gonna disappear? No, it’s gonna come back just like the flu. If the coronavirus is what’s gonna get me, let’s do it. Bring it. I’m ready corona, come get me. (Iole, 2020)

But we argue that while White’s rhetoric seemed to indicate a willingness to take on all comers, he was anything but willing to tolerate mainstream and MMA website reporters who questioned his motives during COVID-19. Following the collapse of his attempt to run UFC 249 on indigenous territory in California, White began to rely on a select cadre of trusted media members who essentially became (and in a couple cases already were) his *de facto* mouthpieces.

Importantly, White’s attempt to use friendly media sources is merely an amplified version of a larger trend among sport organizations in the United States and globally. As Sherwood, Nicholson, and Marjoribanks (2017) point out, “sports organisations are now attempting to compete as media organisations in their own right, delivering their own news direct to their publics” (p. 514). In addition, they argue that as sport organizations increasingly use their own digital platforms to communicate directly with fans, they are increasingly less reliant on mainstream journalists. Those journalists, in turn, are now almost desperate for primary sources (athletes) who are often intentionally corralled behind agents and organizations. Journalists are thus put in a situation in which they must make inroads with individual athletes, lest they be scooped by the organization that they are reporting on. However, while Sherwood et al. (2017) found that most (Australian) sports organizations still supported traditional media sources as the primary means of

getting out their message to stakeholders, White clearly sought to not only control the flow of information but also to mold the information to his liking.

## **The Labor of the Octagon: Fighters, Fans, and Folly**

We end this commentary with the question of who benefits from using sport to kick-start the economy, and who might ultimately be harmed in the process of ensuring that the show does indeed go on. Surely the first several weeks that followed the cessation of live sporting competitions illustrated the meaningfulness of events like UFC PPVs and televised programming to the lives of many people. However, far removed from the financial health of the UFC that was in part predicated on opening up is the health and welfare of those on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic, including athletes, event staff, and others who are obligated to put their own safety at risk in order to entertain fans and fulfill the UFC's business obligations. Of course, while numerous sources noted that UFC fighters were given the choice to stay home during events, clearly few of the athletes felt that sitting out these (ostensibly risky) events was a viable option professionally or financially.

Kalman-Lamb (2018) argues that the society of the spectacle benefits capitalism because it places distance between people, especially fans and other stakeholders and, in the process, creates a sense of disconnection between us. In this case, the fans are free to cheer as the announcers, doctors, camera operators, and, of course, the fighters, labor in potentially unsafe settings. As Kalman-Lamb states,

Other people become objects to be consumed for (fleeting) personal gratification. Nowhere is this truer than in professional sport, where most spectators interact with players only through their television screens, or, at best, from dozens of meters away in colossal stadiums. (p. 168)

Indeed, sitting in one's living room without any current means of directly experiencing UFC fighters, while consuming media sources reporting on athletes enthusiastically clamoring to fight in empty arenas or on Fight Island, it almost seems reasonable to simply cheer them on.

The UFC's willingness to put out a product, while communicating through most of March and April in a manner that was dismissive of the broader public health threat, relates directly to what Kalman-Lamb (2018) calls a "necessary sacrifice." While sport fans and sport journalists in the United States have almost unanimously voiced their deep yearning for sport, Kalman-Lamb argues that what is often not addressed is the willingness of the athletes to believe that the sport community is actually worth the risk. He argues that because fans want to know that the athletes are dedicated to pleasing the fans, athletes often internalize a belief system that, while certainly tied in many ways with hegemonic masculinity, also connects with their desire to give back by putting on a show. Indeed, with a handful of exceptions, there were virtually no news articles that contained quotes from fighters who expressed any form of doubt about fighting during the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown. In fact, many of the fighters who were quoted in news articles and interviews almost seemed to be in a competition to see who wanted to fight the most, pandemic be damned.



However, for a number of reasons, it is important to not take the apparent eagerness of the fighters at face value. First, while the fighters may believe that they play a key role in upholding the “imagined community of fandom” by providing the spectacle of the UFC to the fans, research clearly shows that professional athletes carry this burden in ways that often have profoundly negative long-term consequences (Kalman-Lamb, 2018, p. 8). So while White continually repeated the mantra of “fighters wanna fight,” he obviously did not communicate that a desire to fight during COVID-19 was not some sort of badge of honor but rather a desire to play a role for fans and the organization that could very well contribute to future physical and emotional problems. Second, we cannot uncritically accept the fighters’ statements regarding their desire to fight at any costs because they know that the president of the organization is listening. The open hostility of the UFC toward the unionization of fighters means that they understand that expressing concern about one’s working conditions is not in their best interest. As laborers, there is a tacit understanding that to remain in the good graces of the company, one must continue to step up and perform while remaining publicly silent about the potentially exploitative and unhealthy conditions of one’s work environment. As Draper (2020b) noted, even the handful of fighters who have spoken out against the UFC’s labor practices have most often done so near the end of their careers or after they have left the organization. Draper added:

UFC fighters do not receive regular salaries; they are paid only when they enter the octagon. And because White controls when they will compete in the future, as well as fight-night bonuses, fighters could fear they are risking their careers by speaking up if they do not believe it is safe to compete. (para. 30)

## Epilogue: What if the Media Cannot Be the Message?

Ultimately, on Saturday May 9, the UFC live event was broadcast on PPV with early indications that the event was indeed a success. However, as White and the UFC were forced to do numerous times throughout the weeks leading up to the event, unexpected media revelations forced the company to once again address whether or not the singular desire to go forward with this and subsequent events were putting fighters, referees, commentators, support staff, and the media reporting on the event at risk.

Clearly White’s desire for mainstream success is akin to the big-three U.S. sports, but without the public scrutiny. To be one of the central sports organizations on par with the National Football League, National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball, one has to negotiate the mainstream media in ways that are not as adversarial and, perhaps, to be more diplomatic to media sources that may rightfully critique the organization. In a media interview after the event, White stayed true to his playbook. Consistent with his statements before the event calling on MMA journalists to “report on the fights,” as opposed to the chaotic spectacle that White himself served as ringleader for, he dismissed the increasingly critical commentary regarding his organization, the attempt to run live events during a global pandemic, and any notion that he was putting fighters health at risk. This is disconcerting on a number of levels, particularly given that one fighter (Ronaldo “Jacare” Souza) and two of his cornermen tested positive for COVID-19 before the event began. While the organization hailed this as a success and proof that the test

screening system worked, the fact that fighters and other event staff were in close contact with each other, often without protective gear, reveals that many people were already placed in harm's way (Holland, 2020b).

The calculated silencing of media critique (Zidan, 2020a, 2020b) in the wake of the positive test results took an unprecedented turn after the event, when it was revealed that the organization required both fighters and the media to sign a liability waiver that included a "nondisparagement" clause, whereby the UFC "may revoke all or any part of any prize monies or awards won" by a fighter on the card if they "defame or disparage" the promotion for its safety precautions "or otherwise" (Raimondi, 2020, para. 2–3). Further it was revealed that the liability waiver included the "assumption of risk" and holds the UFC harmless if fighters (or media representatives) test positive for the coronavirus.

With no live sports to cover, the UFC was seemingly able to force otherwise responsible, independent journalists to comply with these problematic and highly unusual demands. White himself shockingly noted this in an interview, where he essentially claimed that the journalists had no choice and attacked a *New York Times* writer specifically, in part over their detailed account of the leaked COVID-19 protocols for the event and the UFC's failure to follow through on several of them. In a subsequent press conference, when asked about the story, White predictably unleashed a verbal attack when he excoriated the reporter by thundering, "F\*ck that guy. F\*ck that guy" and finally summarizing his disdain for the critical reporting by dismissively stating, "I don't care what this guy thinks or what he has to say, what he writes. Good for him, he's pulling traffic" (Segura, 2020, para. 7).

This type of debased communication from the head of a mainstream global sport organization, as we have argued, is without precedent, especially in its almost total disregard for potentially negative fan reactions. Sport management researchers have consistently found that sport organizations generally seek to mitigate the negative effects of various types of athlete scandals, in part via shifting their rhetoric and overall messaging (Kellison et al., 2015; Sato et al., 2018). While not an athlete-related scandal, the story of an organization putting on a live event and having multiple stakeholders test positive for the coronavirus, while simultaneously attempting to muzzle athletes and media members, could certainly be considered scandalous. As we have noted throughout this paper, however, White has been nothing if not consistent in his communication strategy.

In the end, the nearly 2-month odyssey to put on UFC 249 ended with some controversy, to be sure, but also with an unexpected (by media sources, at least) success, with estimates from the *Sports Business Journal* indicating over 700,000 PPV buys on ESPN+ (Impey, 2020), an extraordinary number given the situation, and the surreal visual of an empty arena combined with the almost eerie lack of any crowd noise. For over 20 years, Dana White had waited for an opportunity to showcase the UFC as a mainstream sport. Despite his at times abrasive tone, dustups with members of the media, and the aforementioned revelations after the event, White was able to claim a victory of sorts; positioning himself and the UFC at the vanguard of bringing live sport back to event-hungry fans. As he stated, "We can share what we learned here, doing three events, with other sports leagues, who are reaching out to us and asking" (Campbell, 2020, para. 6). Future research should continue to examine the communication strategies of leagues as more sports move forward with plans to begin their seasons and analyze how various



stakeholders, including the athletes, fans, and low-wage workers, make sense of returning to work during and after COVID-19.

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