

**Measuring attendance: issues and implications for  
estimating the impact of free-to-view sports events**

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# **Measuring attendance: Issues and implications for estimating the impact of free-to-view sports events**

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# **Measuring attendance: Issues and implications for estimating the impact of free-to-view sports events**

## **Abstract**

A feature of many non-elite sports events, especially those conducted in public places is that they are free-to-view. The article focuses on the methodological issue of estimating spectator attendance at free-to-view events and the consequences of this for impact evaluation. Using empirical data from three case studies, the article outlines various approaches to measuring attendance and discusses the key issues and implications for evaluating free-to-view sports events in the future.

## **Executive Summary**

Since the mid-1990s, literature on major sports events has grown considerably. This has enhanced knowledge and understanding of how events are organised and managed, marketed and ultimately measured in terms of their contribution to societal outcomes. However, previous research focuses on pay-to-view events, with free-to-view events receiving considerably less attention. The article focuses on estimating spectator attendance at free-to-view events, and the implications of this for evaluating impact. It is a methodological issue particularly relevant to non-elite events, as many are conducted in public places such as roads, parks, beaches and open waters and are consequently free-to-view. Measuring attendance accurately is significant for a number of reasons. It indicates the popularity of an event, which is of interest to organisers, funders and potential sponsors, but it is also considered a valuable performance indicator for some events. Moreover, it is an important factor in measuring economic, environmental and social impacts of events.

The article uses empirical data from a marathon event, a cycle road race and a motorsport event, to examine various approaches to measuring spectator attendance at free-to view events. For each event, a spectator survey was undertaken to establish patterns of spectator behaviour, and the article gives details on how this

was carried out and used together with other sources of information, to derive aggregate estimates of attendance.

The article suggests there are a number of considerations that researchers, event organisers and event funders need to take into account when measuring spectator attendance at free-to-view events. These include the sampling techniques used for the spectator surveys, which will be determined by factors such as the spatial layout and length of the course, access to spectator areas and existing local intelligence; repeat viewing within a single event, either at multiple locations or on multiple days, which is often a source of error within estimates of spectator attendance, and incidental or casual attendance, which can serve to inflate attendance figures. It also suggests that a major challenge in estimating spectator attendance can be reconciling the expectations of event organisers and balancing this with rigorous and robust measurement of spectator attendance, which can often produce estimates lower than anticipated.

The article concludes that despite the challenges outlined, robust measurement of attendance is fundamental to ensuring the reliability of event monitoring and evaluation. It argues that there is a need to move towards a more rigorous, empirically-based framework for measuring spectator attendance at free-to-view events, to provide organisers with a more reputable method for evaluating events, and to provide more credible information for use in marketing and for potential sponsors of free-to-view events in the future.

# 1 Introduction

Since the mid-1990s there has been a proliferation in major sports event evaluation. This evaluation has led to a greater understanding of the way that events are organised and managed, marketed and ultimately measured in terms of their contribution to economic, social and environmental outcomes. Furthermore, it has generated an evidence base increasingly used to rationalise and justify the bidding for and hosting of sports events. However, much of the growth in literature has focused on events that spectators pay-to-view (e.g. Collins, Jones and Munday, 2009; Gibson, Qi and Zhang, 2008; Jinxia and Mangan, 2008; Johnsen, Biegert, Muler and Elsasser, 2004; Lakshman, 2008; Porter and Fletcher, 2008; Rathke and Ulrich, 2008; Soderman, 2008; Solberg and Preuss, 2007; Sterken, 2006), with free-to-view events receiving considerably less attention.

The article focuses on the issue of measuring spectator numbers and attendance at free-to-view events and the implications of this for evaluating impact. It is a methodological issue that has received limited consideration in academic literature. Previous studies on the topic of attendance at sports events have focused on a range of issues, including factors affecting attendance (Funk, Filo, Beaton and Pritchard, 2009; Lambrecht, Kaefer and Ramenofsky 2009); spectator motives for attending (Sack, Singh and DiPaolo, 2009); attendance profiling (Graham, 1992); perceptions of event attendees (Dale, van Iwaarden, van der Wiele and Williams, 2005) predicting audience numbers (Chen, Stotlar and Lin, 2009) and evaluation of impacts associated with attendance (Wood, 2005). However, there appears to be a genuine gap in knowledge about the processes involved in estimating attendance figures at free-to-view sports events. It is a particularly significant issue for non-elite events, given they are often conducted in public spaces such as roads, parks, beaches and open waters and are consequently free-to-view.

Accurate measurement of attendance is significant for several reasons. It is often used as an indicator to assess the popularity or reach of an event for the purposes of public relations, sponsorship, financial monitoring or service level agreement

monitoring. Furthermore, some events use it as a pre-determined performance indicator, for example, certain events may have equity targets set for them such as the percentage of local people attending, or the level of engagement by other targeted groups such as children and young people. Fundamentally though, spectator attendance is a precursor to other measures linked to economic, environmental or social impacts of events, therefore evaluation of these impacts is ultimately dependent upon reliable and accurate measurement of the number of people attending.

Arguably, attendance measurement at ticketed or pay-to-view events is a relatively simple exercise, especially those that take place within the confines of a fixed venue such as a stadium, where there is a record of how many people can be accommodated. However, this is not always the case and measurement of spectators at pay-to-view events can also be problematic. For example, estimates of attendances at football matches are frequently based on the number of tickets sold (including season tickets), rather than reflecting how many people actually viewed the event:

Coca-Cola Championship club Charlton have admitted that they calculate match day attendances to include the number of season tickets sold - regardless of whether the holders actually turned up or not... (Daily Mail, 2008)

This is not an uncommon practice for estimating attendance and there are numerous other examples of football clubs calculating attendance on the number of tickets sold rather than those passing through the turnstiles. Moreover, there are examples of other pay-to-view events at which spectator attendance has also been somewhat exaggerated, including Formula 1 Grand Prix events and county cricket matches in England:

The official attendance for the Turkish Grand Prix a fortnight ago was said to be 20,000, which in itself is dismal. But it is now believed that figure has been exaggerated and that the true number of tickets sold was closer to 7,000 (Smith, 2009)

In January 2009, the England and Wales Cricket Board trumpeted the fact that over 550,000 had been to County Championship matches last summer. Wisden reveals the absurdity of that claim, which is built on erroneous figures – epitomised by a healthy crowd of almost 12,000 supposedly attending the Glamorgan v Worcestershire game in September. In reality the match saw not a single ball bowled. The true figure for Championship attendance would, in all probability, have been under half a million. At best, this was incompetence; at worst dishonest and deliberately misleading... (Wisden, 2009)

Given the errors associated with measuring attendances at ticketed events, the complexity of estimating credible crowd sizes at open access, free-to-view events where there are no ticket sales to draw upon, becomes even more apparent.

Using empirical data from a marathon event, a cycle road race and a motorsport event, the article examines a range of approaches used to measure attendance at free-to-view events. Drawing upon evidence from the three case studies presented, it discusses the methodological issues arising and the key considerations for estimating spectator attendance. It argues that robust measurement of attendance is fundamental to ensuring the reliability of event monitoring and evaluation. The article concludes by suggesting that despite the challenges highlighted, there is a need to move towards a more rigorous, empirically-based framework for measuring spectator attendance at free-to-view events, to provide managers, researchers, event organisers and policy makers with a more reputable method for evaluating events in the future.

## **2 Case studies and research**

This section presents empirical data from the three case studies listed in Table 1. The events were selected for the article because they are free-to-view, occurred in public places and covered large distances, all of which are factors that make the measurement of spectator attendance challenging. The events were also selected

because of their varied spatial layout and scale, which necessitates different approaches to attendance measurement. The data presented was collected and analysed by independent research consultants on behalf of event organisers or sponsors and in each case was gathered as part of an economic impact evaluation. For this reason, in order to maintain client confidentiality and given that much of the data presented is not available in the public domain, two of the events have been anonymised.

### **Insert Table 1**

For each event, a spectator survey was undertaken to establish patterns of spectator behaviour, including repeat or multiple viewing across the event, and to establish levels of viewing by 'casuals' within the overall attendance figures. Consideration of repeat viewing is particularly important at free-to-view events that take place in public places, because people can often watch the event from more than one vantage point. Therefore, by applying a repeat viewing factor to account for the movement of people from one location to another, it becomes possible to calculate the actual number of different people in attendance. Failure to do so can result in double counting of individuals. Another relevant consideration for estimating attendance at free-to-view events is to differentiate between 'event-specific' attendance and 'casual' attendance. This is because when an event is held outside the confines of a traditional venue (e.g. a stadium or arena) it is quite possible that people passing through the event location (e.g. town centre) are included in the attendance estimate. Discounting 'casual' attendance is also commonly recommended for the purpose of event economic impact evaluation to avoid double counting (see for example, Crompton 2001, 1995) and was considered a relevant issue for estimating spectator attendance.

The following case studies will detail the sampling techniques used for the spectator surveys and illustrate how this data was used together with other sources of information, to establish overall viewing figures.



## 2.1 *The London Marathon*

The London marathon involves both elite and non-elite participants, but is largely a mass participation, free-to-view running event. It is included as a case study within the article because it exemplifies the challenges faced by researchers and event organisers in trying to estimate crowd attendance at a very large participant and spectator event. The data presented was gathered as part of an economic impact evaluation in 2000 (Coleman, 2003), which is in the process of being repeated in 2010. While the data is taken from the event several years ago, the methodological challenges of trying to estimate spectator attendance, as demonstrated from this case study, remain relevant to the focus of this article and are complementary to the other two event examples included.

Estimating spectator attendance at the London Marathon is especially challenging due to the large numbers and disparate nature of spectators along the 26 mile route. Media reports suggested that there were up to one million people in London watching the event in 2000. However, for this to be the case there would have been crowds of six deep on either side of the route for the entire 26 miles, which was clearly not so, based on scrutiny of BBC television coverage and the primary research undertaken on the race day. Spectator attendance was derived using a combination of methods, including a spectator survey with 1005 spectators on race day; observations of crowd densities from the research team and detailed analyses of television footage including aerial footage and still photography.

A baseline estimate was initially derived by estimating crowd densities along the route, using the assumption that five spectators could stand side by side along a standard 2.5m crash barrier. Hence if the crowd was five deep on both sides of the road at a given point, this represents 50 spectators (i.e.  $5 \times 5 \times 2$ ). There were occasions along the route when densities achieved such levels, for example in 'honey spot' locations, which reflected historically popular landmarks and vantage points (e.g. Birdcage Walk, St James's Park, Tower Bridge, Cutty Sark and Canary Wharf). The analysis of the television coverage, still photography and

measurements of the crowd densities at given points along the route (recorded by researchers) resulted in an estimated baseline attendance figure of 480,000.

The 480,000 baseline estimate was adjusted using information derived from the spectator survey. Eight hundred and fifty five spectator surveys were administered at a series of 'honey spot' locations along the route. A smaller sample of 150 surveys was also conducted in the less popular areas along the route. Twenty researchers administered the surveys using random sampling techniques. The selection method used when interviewing a group of people was to ask the person with the next birthday to complete the questionnaire, as recommended in Sport England's 'Model Survey Package' (Sports Council, 1995). The data revealed that 5.8% of people were out in London but not specifically to attend the marathon (casuals) and the remainder watched the event from an average of 1.6 different locations along the route (the repeat viewing factor). The adjustments were applied on the basis that spectators may have just chanced upon the marathon and consequently their attendance was not a function of their intention to watch the race. Moreover, spectators were free to move around London and watch from more than one vantage point, which without the adjustment would overinflate the total number of different spectators and hence expenditure.

As demonstrated in Table 2, the application of these two adjustments resulted in 282,600 different people in London specifically to watch the race. This figure was presented to the police and they confirmed that it was in the right 'ballpark'.

## **Insert Table 2**

The London Marathon clearly illustrates the difficulty in accurately estimating spectator numbers at a very large open access event. While the attendance figure was derived using a range of methods, including primary research, 282,600 still represents a rudimentary, albeit informed, estimate of the total number of different spectators attending the event. However, it provides a baseline from which to work in the two examples of free-to-view events that now follow.

## 2.2 *Cycle road race*

The second case study was a non-elite cycling event held in the UK as part of the annual sporting calendar. Data was collected in 2005 and 2006 from two separate stages, both of which were one-day affairs. The first stage was a 192km linear route and the second was a 1.6km criterium (circular) stage located within a city. Each of these posed different methodological challenges in terms of estimating spectator attendance. For both stages, a spectator survey was undertaken, again to establish the proportion of spectators watching the event by chance and the amount of repeat viewing across the length of the course. The spectator survey was then used together with other sources of information to estimate total spectator attendance.

### 2.2.1 *Stage 1*

For Stage 1, the linear route, one of the key methodological challenges was the large distance covered by the event (192km). Spectator attendance was derived by identifying a series of honey spot locations around the course. Honey spots comprised the key areas of the race where it would be reasonable to expect large numbers of people to congregate, including the start, finish, sprints and climbs. These locations were identified as being the 'most exciting stages of the event' in the official event programme. In total, eight sites were identified covering approximately 7.5km of the course. The total number of people in each location was derived by a combination of methods such as hand held counters, analysis of television footage, police and marshals' estimates. The baseline attendance figure for spectators in the honey spots was estimated to be approximately 11,500.

In each of the honey spot locations, 423 spectator surveys were administered to derive information on spectator behaviour. Again, a challenge with this event was the course set up, which was designed specifically to allow spectators to watch the event from more than one location. The spectator surveys revealed that the average number of locations attended by each spectator was 1.12

(repeat viewing factor). The survey also found that 13% of spectators were in the honey spot locations by coincidence (casuals), which is not surprising since many of the honey spots were in the vicinity of ordinarily busy locations. Accordingly, as shown in Table 2, for Stage 1 the actual number of event specific spectators was adjusted to 8,933.

Whilst the honey spots were identified as the key viewing locations, these sites only accounted for 7.5km of a 192km route, therefore there was potential for people to watch the event along the other 184.5km of the route. Event organisers claimed that, in addition to the spectators in the honey spots, there was an additional 46,000 people who watched some part of the race along the route. This figure equates to an average of 250 people per km over 184km. However, without any credible evidence to support it, this estimate was considered overly ambitious and was refuted by the research team on the basis of their observations at the event and from analysis of the television coverage of areas other than the honey spots, which revealed very few spectators. The research team argued that since it was the honey spots that were designed to be the spectator vantage points, it would be unreasonable to expect the claimed audience turnout elsewhere. Furthermore, it was argued that since the race passed through the streets of busy towns and cities along the route there would inevitably be people going about their daily lives and that it would be inappropriate to consider these people as event-specific spectators. Thus, the research team concluded that the most justifiable number of different event specific spectators at Stage 1 of the cycle event was 8,933, which is the figure derived for the honey spot locations only. It was this figure that was subsequently used for estimating the economic impact attributable to the event, to avoid exaggerating the estimated impact.

### 2.2.2 Stage 2

Stage 2 of the cycle event took place in a tightly defined area of 1.6km circular circuit. In essence the whole of the circuit was considered to be a honey spot. The approach employed to estimate spectator numbers, as with the London

Marathon, was to use crash barriers along the circuit as a reference point. For the duration of Stage 2, researchers were at the event site taking measurements of crowd densities at various points around the circuit. The derivation of spectator numbers was underpinned by the following assumptions:

- Barriers were on both sides of the road for the entire 1.6km loop giving a total of 3.2km of barriers.
- Each barrier measured 2.5 metres and accommodates 5 people (side by side).
- 1.6km of roads require 640 barriers (1,600m / 2.5m) per side.

As shown in Table 3, the crowd densities varied by section of the loop. Using the assumptions stated and the observations of crowd densities around the route, the baseline estimate for the spectators along the circuit was 23,000. This is equivalent to a spectator depth of 3.59 people all the way round a 1.6km course on both sides of the road. In addition, television coverage of the race was used to verify crowd densities along the length of the circuit. The crowd measurements taken by the research team at the event site were found to be broadly consistent with the observations from television monitoring.

### **Insert Table 3**

A spectator survey of 595 people was carried out at various sections of the circuit. The survey found that the average number of locations attended by each spectator (repeat viewing factor) was 1.12. Furthermore, the survey revealed that for 8% of spectators the event was not their main reason for being in the area. Therefore, as shown in Table 2, the number of event specific spectators was estimated to be 18,913.

As with Stage 1, organisers claimed that Stage 2 also had additional spectators over and above the number estimated by the research team. This was supposedly based on police estimates, according to which the total crowds passing through the area

surrounding the event location was 60,000. The organisers did not acknowledge that the location of the event in the city centre would have had a considerable impact on this estimate and given the event took place at the weekend; it was highly likely that there were casual spectators. Consequently, the stance of the research team was to base their attendance figure and economic impact calculation on the defensible and more credible figure of 18,913 event specific spectators.

### 2.3 *Motorsport event*

The third and final case study was an international elite motor sport event held in the British Isles in 2009. A significant investment was made by public sector agencies to secure the event for the host area. Research was commissioned by the event sponsors to provide an indication of the return on their investment in economic impact terms on the host area. This involved undertaking interviews with the key groups attending the event, predominantly amongst spectators, in order to understand their attendance patterns and spending behaviour

Unlike the previous examples, the motorsport event took place over three days and was therefore conducive to repeat viewing over multiple days. Moreover, as shown in Table 4, each day of the event was split into several stages that spread across several kilometres. Each stage had a number of designated spectator viewing areas, so it was possible for spectators to view the event on more than one day as well as from more than one location or stage on the same day.

#### **Insert Table 4**

Rather than adopting the top-down approach used in the marathon and the road cycle race, of deriving spectator attendance by establishing a crude baseline attendance figure and adjusting this for factors such as repeat viewing and casual attendance, spectator attendance for the motorsport event was estimated using a bottom-up approach. This was partly due to the difficulty in estimating overall

viewing figures resulting from a paucity of local information and absence of alternative credible evidence. Estimates of spectator attendance were primarily generated using the spectator survey.

Again, a methodological challenge for this event were the large distances covered by the various stages, and subsequently choosing appropriate spectator locations to collect survey information. Organisers were asked to advise on the potential locations where large crowds were expected, but ultimately the survey locations chosen were those that complied with health and safety regulations, given the unpredictable nature of motorsport events and the potential for injury to competitors and spectators alike.

The spectator survey was used to derive a bottom-up estimate of spectator attendance. Based on 1,303 responses to the survey across 31 different spectator viewing areas, it was estimated that around one in four spectators had access to an official event programme (25.5%). According to official sources, there were 7,879 programme sales made during the event, consequently as shown in Table 5, it was estimated that 30,898 different spectators actually attended the event. Allowing for multiple days viewing (on average 2.46 days per person) and attendance at more than one location on the day of interview (on average 2.03 different locations per person), an aggregate baseline attendance figure of approximately 154,298 spectators was derived. This figure was triangulated with estimates of spectator attendance at the survey locations, which were derived based on observations from the research team and a sample of crowd size estimates provided by event marshals for their respective jurisdictions.

### **Insert Table 5**

A major challenge with estimating attendance at the motorsport event was trying to reconcile the estimates produced by the research team with those produced by the event organisers. Immediately following the event, organisers suggested that

spectator attendance for the event was approximately 270,000. This was higher than the corresponding figure released for the previous edition of the event (257,000). The official attendance figures were thought to be overstated for a number of reasons.

The methodology adopted by event organisers to estimate attendance in the main spectator locations was considered (by both the research team and event funders) to be highly unorthodox. In short, this was based on 'an assessment of the amount of damage to the grassed areas of fields from which people viewed the event and then applying an average of two people per square metre to derive an aggregate figure for each location'. However, such an approach is prone to error, as it assumes that the fields were packed to capacity (which they were not) and does not allow for the movement of people from one point to another in a given location.

The assumptions used by event organisers to derive spectator numbers away from the main viewing areas also seemed overly ambitious. For example, organisers estimated an additional 40% of spectators at other locations along the route on Day 1 and 50% on Day 2 and Day 3. Furthermore, their estimate for the final stage of the event made an allowance of 25% more spectators in "buildings etc.", which again serves to inflate crowd sizes. Evidence from monitoring of television coverage of the event revealed sporadic pockets of spectators at stage sections that were not promoted to be safe or viewer-friendly.

The weather conditions were significantly worse than at the previous edition of the event, which had a claimed attendance of 257,000. This was certainly the case on Day 1, so much so that two stages were subsequently cancelled. Furthermore, post-event consultations with more than 100 accommodation providers in the host area, by and large suggested that the event did not generate the anticipated effect on their business relative to the previous edition. Anecdotal evidence from marshals revealed that they too watched sections of the event days when they were not working. The treatment of marshals as spectators can lead to double counting of people attending the event.



Due to the reasons cited above, the research team had reason to believe that the official attendance figures were not credible and that using them would only artificially inflate the economic impact attributable to the motorsport event. Eventually, the research team and event sponsors (who were interested in finding out the real value of the event) made a collective decision to use the survey as the primary tool for estimating the audience figures and subsequent economic impact.

### **3 Methodological issues and key considerations for estimating spectator attendance**

The case studies presented have highlighted various approaches used to estimate spectator attendance at free-to-view events. The following discussion will now draw together the methodological issues raised and key points that need to be considered when measuring spectator attendance.

A key consideration for measuring spectator attendance is the methods used to derive estimates and the sources of information available. It was evident from the case studies presented that official estimates, whether they are from police sources, the media or event organisers are often inaccurate. For free-to-view events that take place within a venue or restricted area, the dimensions of spectator access should be used as an initial guide to spectator attendance. However, many free-to-view events such as those discussed, take place in public areas and therefore capacity constraints are generally not a limiting factor in terms of attendance. In such cases, other measures of reasonableness should be used as an initial guide for spectator numbers, for example, as for the marathon and the cycle road race, using variables such as crash barriers, depth of crowd and length of course as a reference point. Other methods, such as (aerial) photographic evidence and television footage also provide useful tools for estimating crowd densities, especially for those events that are remote or have

difficult to access areas, such as the motorsport event. Fundamentally though, the spectator survey was very important for estimating event specific attendance in each case study. Careful consideration therefore needs to be given to the sampling techniques used to collect survey data, which will be affected by factors such as the spatial layout of the event and length of the course, together with access to spectator areas and local intelligence.

A further methodological consideration is the issue of repeat viewing within a single event, either across a course or over multiple days. This is often a source of error within estimations of spectator attendance and was a key consideration for the three events discussed. Crowds at open access, free-to-view events are fluid. For events that take place over an extended distance, such as running, cycle and triathlon events, it is common practice for people to move around the course. Indeed many courses are designed to maximise viewing in this way. Consequently the significance attached to the repeat viewing cannot be emphasised enough, not least because without its consideration, double counting of spectator numbers and in turn, exaggerated benefits of other measures linked to attendance are inevitable. For example, at the London Marathon, without the application of the repeat viewing factor the expenditure attributable to spectators would have been exaggerated by c. £9.2m (Coleman, 2003). Repeat viewing across multiple days, if an event takes place on more than one day, is a further important factor to consider. It can be a significant source of error if not identified and can lead to discrepancies between official and other reported attendance figures, such as in the case of the motorsport event.

An additional methodological consideration for estimating spectator attendance at free-to-view events which take place in public places is estimating the proportion of casual spectators watching the event because they just happened to be in the area. This was an issue in the three case studies presented. There should be a clear differentiation made between the actual spectator attendance and the event specific attendance. Whereas this may not be relevant for some indicators, such as the popularity of the event, it is particularly pertinent for some types of event monitoring

and evaluation such as economic impact, where it is imperative to distinguish between people attending specifically for an event and 'casual' spectators to avoid exaggerating figures.

Finally, in the case of commissioned research, there is the methodological challenge of meeting client expectations and balancing this with the appropriate rigour in measurement. Once more this was an issue in all the case studies presented and remains a significant challenge to researchers undertaking evaluation studies that are linked with attendance measurement. Often event organisers overstate spectator attendance, as in the case of the cycle road race and the motorsport event, and a key challenge facing researchers is how to reconcile the differences between official figures and those derived as part of an impact evaluation study. It is important that estimates of spectator attendance are therefore supported by a transparent audit trail of how such figures are derived to ensure that they are able to stand up to scrutiny.

#### **4 Conclusions: Implications for future free-to-view event impact evaluation**

Measuring attendance at free-to-view sports events is not a straightforward process. While event organisers tend to have accurate records of accredited personnel, such as the number of participants and officials, it is frequently not the case for spectators, and attendance figures often represent little more than educated guess work, derived with limited academic rigour. This article presented empirical data from three case studies to examine various approaches to spectator measurement at free-to-view events, and suggested several methodological considerations for estimating spectator attendance in the future. While the issues raised within the article are relevant to free-to-view events in general, they are particularly pertinent to non-elite events, given they are commonly held in public places, with greater levels of casual viewing.

Despite the lack of attention afforded to attendance measurement within the academic literature, it is an important methodological consideration in its own right. Although exaggerating crowd sizes may be beneficial for public relations, marketing and the perceived success of an event to a host community, region or country, it compromises the reliability of any monitoring and evaluation that is based on estimates of attendance. For example, common forms of economic impact evaluation involve surveying a sample of event attendees, then aggregating the findings upwards to derive estimates for the population in attendance. Assuming that the sampling has been conducted in a robust manner, the greatest source of error is likely to be the figure used to multiply the findings from the sample upwards to the population as a whole. Research commissioned by UK Sport (2004, 2006) has shown that, for the most part, the key determinant of total economic impact is the number of spectators attending an event. There is a very high correlation ( $r = 0.90$ ) between the number of spectator admissions at an event and the economic impact attributable to that event (UK Sport, 2004). In this regard, a reliable estimate of the spectator attendance is critical to the accuracy of economic impact figures.

While exaggerating crowd sizes has the effect of overstating positives (e.g. economic impact), at the same time it can result in overstating the negatives (e.g. environmental impact) attributable to an event. Furthermore, other measures that are based on findings from a survey, such as the percentage of disadvantaged people attending the event, will be overstated if used subsequently to compute the absolute number of people from a particular group who attended an event. Thus, regardless of the rigour with which monitoring and evaluation data is collected, its true value is unreliable if attendance levels are inaccurate. The significance of accurate crowd estimates to meaningful evaluation cannot be overstated, especially at free-to-view, open access events. It has significant implications for measuring economic and environmental indicators and it is therefore vital that event organisers recognise the implications of misrepresenting the popularity of an event in terms of spectator numbers.

Accurate measurement of attendance is not only important for the monitoring and evaluation of various types of impact, but it is of great consequence to the marketing and sponsorship of free-to-view events. In marketing terms, reliable information on spectator attendance is important for targeting promotional materials. Furthermore, potential sponsors of free-to-view events are interested in both participant and spectator attendance, to evaluate the potential exposure and benefits that supporting an event might bring. Inaccurate information may impact on the ability of an event to sustain or secure funding in the future. Conversely, armed with accurate knowledge and information, appropriate strategies can be devised to grow an event and ensure sponsorship to help fund such events in the future is forthcoming.

This article was essentially written to stimulate thinking amongst academics and practitioners about measuring attendance at free-to-view sports events. While it illustrates various approaches used to estimate spectator numbers, it does not offer a single concrete solution for attendance measurement. Rather, it puts forward a series of methodological issues to be considered in order to move towards a more systematic approach to attendance measurement. Undoubtedly each and every event is unique, in terms of its spatial layout and spectator access points; however broad similarities can be drawn between certain types of events. Hopefully the suggestions put forward in this article will be of benefit to researchers and organisers of free-to-view events and contribute to the development of a more robust framework for measuring spectator attendance in the future.

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## Tables

**Table 1: Case study events**

| <i>Type of event</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Location</i> | <i>Year</i> |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Marathon             | Annual           | UK              | 2000        |
| Cycle road race      | Annual           | UK              | 2005/2006   |
| Motorsport           | Irregular        | British Isles   | 2009        |

**Table 2: Adjusted spectator numbers: Marathon and the cycle road race**

|                                      | <b>Marathon</b> | <b>Cycle (Stage 1)</b> | <b>Cycle (Stage 2)</b> | <b>Calculation</b> |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Total spectators (Baseline estimate) | 480,000         | 11,500                 | 23,000                 | a                  |
| Repeat viewing factor                | 1.60            | 1.12                   | 1.12                   | b                  |
| Actual spectators                    | 300,000         | 10,268                 | 20,536                 | c = a / b          |
| Main reason factor                   | 0.942           | 0.870                  | 0.921                  | d                  |
| Event Specific Spectators            | 282,600         | 8,933                  | 18,913                 | e = c x d          |

**Table 3: Crowd densities and spectator numbers: Cycle road race - Stage 2**

| <i>Section</i> | <i>Distance (Metres) (a)</i> | <i>No. Crash Barriers (b)</i> | <i>People Depth (c)</i> | <i>Spectators (d)</i> | <i>Side of road (e)</i> | <i>Total Spectators (f)</i> |
|----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Start / Finish | 400                          | 160                           | 5                       | 4,000                 | 2                       | 8,000                       |
| Location 1     | 150                          | 60                            | 4                       | 1,200                 | 2                       | 2,400                       |
| Location 2     | 375                          | 150                           | 3                       | 2,250                 | 2                       | 4,500                       |
| Location 3     | 550                          | 220                           | 3                       | 3,300                 | 2                       | 6,600                       |
| Location 4     | 125                          | 50                            | 3                       | 750                   | 2                       | 1,500                       |
| <b>Totals</b>  | <b>1,600</b>                 | <b>640</b>                    | <b>3.59</b>             | <b>11,500</b>         | <b>2</b>                | <b>23,000</b>               |

NB:  $b = a / 2.5$  (length of crash barrier);  $d = b \times c \times 5$  (number of people along crash barrier);  $f = d \times e$

**Table 4: Format of motorsport event**

| <i>Day of event</i> | <i>No. of stages</i> | <i>Total distance (km)</i> |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Day 1               | 8                    | 142.28                     |
| Day 2               | 6                    | 133.36                     |
| Day 3               | 5                    | 51.84                      |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>19</b>            | <b>327.48</b>              |

**Table 5: Derivation of spectator numbers – motorsport event**

|  |         |                           |
|--|---------|---------------------------|
| No. of official programmes sold during event                             | 7,879   | a                         |
| % of spectators who bought a programme                                   | 25.5%   | b                         |
| Actual spectators  | 30,898  | $c = a / b$               |
| Repeat viewing factor 1<br>(Avg. locations attended on day of interview) | 2.03    | d                         |
| Repeat viewing factor 2<br>(Avg. event days attended)                    | 2.46    | e                         |
| Total spectators (Baseline estimate)                                     | 154,298 | $f = c \times d \times e$ |