

The Past, Present, and Future of TV: Sports, Right(s)?

Adam Rugg, *University of Iowa*

It seems inevitable that the cost of television sporting rights will go down in the near future. Financial problems at ESPN, exacerbated by their existing rights obligations and budget pressures from Disney, will lessen the network's ability to compete on high-ticket items. Further, the launches/rebrandings of NBCSN and Fox Sports, which were both accompanied by ambitious "tentpole" purchases of sports rights, has passed. While the future of televised sports will most likely look much like it does now, the future of streaming sports is more uncertain. This uncertainty is currently defined by the tensions between the lingering inertia of the television broadcast model, the ambitious content desires of digital media companies, and the in-house distribution models already tentatively deployed by various sporting leagues. Current sports streaming rights are often fragmented across all three of these models. A good example of this is the NFL. In the U.S., the NFL traditionally bundles streaming rights with television rights (see Direct TV, ESPN, and NBC). However, the league has recently begun entering into "streaming only" deals (Yahoo's broadcast of an NFL game in London in 2015) as well as separating out television and streaming rights (Twitter's deal to stream NFL Thursday Night Football, which will also air on CBS/NBC). Outside the U.S, the NFL even runs its own streaming distribution platform called "NFL Game Pass" where users can pay a couple hundred dollars to live stream every game (U.S. streaming rights are owned by Direct TV). Other leagues' streaming rights are also fragmented. While the NBA and MLB both offer their own streaming packages to fans in the U.S., these packages exclude nationally televised games, which are all streamed by the broadcasters who own the television rights.

Intertwined within this uncertainty of distribution is the question of accessibility. Sports has long been at least partially conceptualized as a "public good." While this concept has more weight in places such as the UK than it does in the US, major U.S. sporting events often air on network TV, which is accessible for free with a TV and an antenna. There have been some gestures that owners of sports streaming rights may continue this, such as with the free online streaming of the Super Bowl each year. Further, watching NFL Thursday Night Football on Twitter next year will only require a free Twitter account, while Yahoo's broadcast last year of an NFL game in London contained no restrictions to access. However, as digital content exclusivity becomes an increasingly important mode of differentiation among hardware providers and streaming services, I have concern that streaming sporting rights may soon become hoarded by cash-rich companies looking to pull away from competitors. Rumors have abounded for years that Apple, Google, and Netflix may soon begin bidding for sporting rights, presumably to offer them exclusively to their paying customers. If scenarios such as these play out, the digital consumption of sports may be less of an idyllic playground of content for consumers and more of a gated community.

Thus, the future of sports and television in the digital age is representative of broader questions in our evolving media landscape. It is not just a question of who owns which rights and what platforms garner the most viewers, but ones of how media consumption will be shaped moving forward, whether there will still be a place in digital infrastructures for the free consumption of media (or even non-conditional access to paid media). In terms of sports, I worry about the continued degradation of sports as public good. Will sporting leagues and owners of streaming rights carve out digital equivalent of over-the-air broadcasts? Or will the transition of

sports to the digital realm eventually transpose sports into another hoarded pawn in the intensifying content wars of digital media companies? Unexpectedly, could it be the television networks themselves that may provide the best chance for a more equitable sports streaming future?