

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

Joseph Moss, *Georgia State University*

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has faced declining and flattening television ratings since their most world recognizable basketball star, Michael Jordan, retired for a second time in 1998. Yet, when the NBA's broadcast rights were set to expire in 2014, the NBA's deal with the Walt Disney Company and Turner Broadcasting Company was the largest single percentage increase from previous deal to a new deal out of the four major sports leagues in America. This begs to ask the question, should academics investigate alternative avenues to understand the inverse relationship between the increasing value of sports rights deals and flattening television ratings? I argue yes. One alternative is to examine the visuality of the gameplay. As student of rhetoric, I am specifically interested in looking at how changes to the rules of the game impact the game's visuality and how these changes affect viewers.

Unlike the majority of television shows, a sports game is a live event that happens to be televised. The league is responsible for the live event, and a broadcast company is responsible in televising the live event. The partnership between sports leagues and broadcast companies is similar to Albert Moran's concept of television formats as a pie and crust model, where the crust is the format, and the filling is the culturally, tailored content. With sports, the broadcast networks supply the crust, and the league handles the pie filling. The strict delineation of responsibility, along with the transparency sports leagues must provide to enact any

rule change, assigns agency and allows for the possibility to explore the impact rule changes have on the game's visuality.

No other professional sports league in America has used rule changes to anticipate the shift to a more global television landscape than the NBA. Since the NBA's merger with the ABA in 1977, implemented rule changes have transformed the visual nature and flow of the game to resemble European football. By adapting both its television content and the game's rules and schedule, the NBA is looking to increase the appeal of the league to a growing, global television audience, therefore hoping to establish the NBA game as both universal content, while not imposing an American cultural imperialism onto a global audience. While the majority of universal content is often considered to be generic and easily digestible, most of the NBA's rule changes have made the game more free flowing and reliant on coordination and skill. Rule changes such as the adoption of the three-point line, the limiting of the use of one's hand while playing defense, and the adoption of post-game reviews to identify and punish flopping. Some rule changes can be prescient. NBA teams did not initially embrace the three-point-line when first introduced. Instead, the slam-dunk grew in popularity. However, Chinese basketball officials viewed the slam-dunk "as a self-aggrandizing flourish that detracted from team unity and subjected opponents to an unnecessary loss of face."ⁱ Chinese basketball officials knew that their players "would never match the speed of the Americans or the size of the Eastern Europeans," so "they tried to spawn a nation of gunners."ⁱⁱ Although at the time, the NBA's focus on the slam-dunk was at complete odds with Chinese culture, the rise of advanced statistics has shown the importance of

shooting and has made NBA teams embrace the three-point-line as a necessary piece of strategy. In the last 17 years, the league average for attempted three-point-shots has risen from 13.2 attempts per game to 22.4 attempts per game, an increase of almost 70%. While the slam-dunk is a sublime visual display of the limits of human athleticism, shooting is much more relatable act to a normal viewer. While many kids dream of being able to slam dunk, most kids will relate more to the visual of a player hitting a last second shot to win the game.

Sports leagues will continue to partner with broadcast companies to televise games, as taking on the responsibility to broadcast the games would prove to be an expensive and unnecessary risk to implement. Sports leagues will continue to grow their fan base in new markets as the steady increase and growth of on-demand highlights as an alternative to stay up-to-date reduces television ratings, increases the fan base worldwide for both advertising and licensing deals. Sports still remains one of the more viewed types of content, meaning broadcast companies can still rely on sports to provide a steady and consistent audience, while also leveraging the league's brand to appeal to advertisers and audiences in both national and international markets.

ⁱ Larmer, *Operation Yao Ming: The Chinese Sports Empire, American Big Business, and the Making of an NBA Super Star*, 143.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.