

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

“The NFL and Live-Streaming: The Future of Digital Sports Rights “

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While there remain questions about an impending sports bubble, social media companies are the latest to join the increasing competition for digital sports rights. Twitter's recent announcement that the company won the rights to stream Thursday night NFL games points to the development of another tier of sporting rights purchasing and signals an impending social media rights battleground. In addition to the deal that the NFL made with CBS and NBC for the television rights to broadcast games, Twitter struck a deal with the NFL to live-stream ten Thursday night games on the Twitter platform. Twitter is seeking to further integrate live-tweeting and live-streaming together in the same place. Twitter wants audiences to watch and tweet so they can further monetize the space and capitalize on live-viewing, which pushes the platforms value to advertisers and marketers. Twitter also wants to further cement the social practice of live-tweeting as a part of viewership amongst audiences. The NFL has successfully diversified its revenue streams, and the company is covered as more fans migrate into digital spaces or want increased access to content as a result of the ubiquity and always-on lifestyle afforded through mobile and smartphone technology.

Digital streaming rights aren't going to disappear or be devalued any time soon. Digital and mobile companies such as Facebook and reportedly Amazon and Verizon were all interested in landing the NFL streaming rights. While the television deals currently dwarf the digital deals (CBS and NBC split ten games with the NFL, five each,

for 45 million dollars per game, whereas Twitter's deal is just in the millions per game), this doesn't mean that these rights aren't extremely important for the future, especially as ESPN and other corporations prepare for a media landscape that has to deal with further cord-cutting and bundles unraveling. In fact, digital rights could become extremely lucrative for Internet companies with regards to the overall branding of companies within the digital media landscape and to advertisers and marketers within the spaces.

In the case of the 2016 Rio Olympics and their accompanying NBC coverage, you see a completely different approach to digital sports rights and their translation into social media. This is part of the difficulty that traditional media organizations have in transitioning content from the televisual sphere into coverage that traverses multiple mediated platforms and comes in a variety of lengths and forms. With help from the IOC, the 2016 Olympics has struggled to dominate media coverage on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, part of a larger slip in relevance, especially amongst millennial viewers of broadcast television. The IOC has gone so far as to ban all unauthorized GIFs and has vigorously policed social media to remove any infringing content. This ban of short form content, which would attract and draw in the elusive millennial viewing demographic, has kept the Olympics from trending in a similar fashion to other major media sporting events and spectacles. Contradictorily, while the IOC is banning GIFs, NBC and the Olympics are spending an inordinate amount of money trying to reach out to younger viewers (complete with a Ryan Seacrest social media opening ceremony and "youth" as a value-added criteria for new Olympic sports in 2020). Arguably Snapchat and its user generated short form clips have generated the most social media buzz and penetration.

Twitter and other social media companies are already redefining modes of sports media consumption and circulation through social media. Twitter has struck other deals with the NBA and ESPN to post highlights as ancillary coverage embedded within sports audiences social networks. However, rights for streaming entire games moves Twitter and the social media industry squarely into the realm of distribution. This continues the migration of sports in the digital sphere, challenging traditional hierarchies, and further solidifies the coalescing of sports and social media.