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

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Digital platforms are reshaping how people consume sports. Professional leagues now have their own dedicated streaming applications, and NFL Game Pass, NBA League Pass, and MLB.TV all offer ways to access major sports outside TV's traditional broadcast paradigm. However, streaming's rise does not always or inevitably come at television's expense: in this response, I'm going to talk about how digital platforms can reinforce investment in the television industry even as they expand viewing beyond the TV screen.

College basketball is a useful example in this regard. There are two main sets of rights at play here: those to regular season games, which are sold by conferences, and those to the annual championship tournament, which are sold by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). These latter rights cover the three week tournament period known as March Madness, an event that draws big audiences and so big money. For example, in 2010 Turner Broadcasting and CBS Sports signed a $10.8 billion deal for exclusive broadcast and streaming rights to all March Madness games through 2024. What I find interesting here is the coupling of TV and digital platforms, so that the same commercial entities are responsible for both. This is a complementary imagining of broadcast and streaming rather than an adversarial one: CBS and Turner benefit from the ratings games draw on TBS, CBS, TNT, and TruTV, but also from the millions of viewers who stream them through the March Madness Live online platform (www.ncaa.com/march-madness-live). Thus there is little incentive to channel viewers into one mode of consumption: what matters is that people are watching somewhere, and so the same games appear in multiple places rather than being exclusively sold for one kind of transmission.

This complementarity is clear in the design of streaming platform March Madness Live. Because it is an event app – subject to high traffic during the NCAA tournament but otherwise dormant – it can be tinkered with and relaunched each year, reimagined on the basis of different assumptions. Thus, over the past five years it has served as a testing ground for sports video's possible futures. In 2011, the first year of the NCAA-CBS-Turner partnership, its content was free to all online users. In 2012, a one-time payment of $3.99 unlocked access to all tournament games. 2013 marked a switch to Turner's TV Everywhere infrastructure, which routs access to games through sign-in with a cable or satellite provider. Here we see three diverse imaginings of how sports might move into digital realms: free to all, pay per view, free with cable subscription. At least for now, the last option reigns, and March Madness Live continues to tie online and mobile streaming to a TV subscription. This explicit linking of digital platforms to economic investment in television suggests that sports may remain connected to television even as other methods of watching arise.

This past year, the NCAA tournament title game earned record low ratings on TV. An average of 17.8 million viewers tuned into the final between UNC and Villanova, a number down 37 percent from the previous year's 28.3 million. The drop is due in part to the move from network to cable coverage (from CBS to Turner's channels), but, to return to the question posed for this roundtable, it also seems like a warning sign that the "sports rights bubble" might soon burst. And yet, CBS and Turner extended their rights deal within the week, promising $8.8 billion to secure March Madness for streaming and broadcast through 2032. Perhaps they are imagining that a record 3.4 million streaming views balances out the broadcast drop, and perhaps we as academics should follow that lead. In an environment where massive media conglomerates have investments in multiple technologies, we should pay attention to where industry interests unite disparate forms.