

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

“Why hasn’t the bubble burst? The growing cost of English Premier League broadcasting rights”

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In this paper, I want to examine why the price of broadcasting rights for the English Premier League (PL) have continued to rise despite pressure from alternative (often online) broadcasting options. Rather than a decline, there has been a re-alignment of relationship between broadcasters and the Premier League to accommodate both changing audiences and the digital environment. We can safely say that the Premier League has, through its relationship with television, become a global phenomenon. While there are many reasons for the League’s success, I want to focus on its ability to build both a mass and a niche audience through its televisual and digital engagements. Before discussing why the League has succeeded, I think it would be helpful to get a sense of the value of its television deals. The current domestic English deal (which began in August) and runs until 2019 is worth £5.1 billion (Sky paid £4.2 billion for 126 games and BT paid £960 million for 42 games), which means the domestic cost per game for the two broadcasters is about £10 million pounds. This was an increase of over £2 billion over the last deal. In addition, overseas rights for the same period are worth more than £3 billion pounds including a six-year deal with NBC that is worth \$1 billion (US).

What has helped the league succeed is that it is both universal and national/local at the same time. What I mean by this is that production is shaped to suit the local audience in the country in which it is being shown while at the same time appealing to the universal experience of watching the game/loving English soccer. This can most readily be seen in how the games are produced for television. Using the US as an example, NBCSN, like other international broadcasters, uses the live feed from either Sky or BT (depending on who has the rights to that particular game). This often means that the colour and play-by-play commentary is the same live feed as the one that is being heard in England (and all English-speaking countries). As a result, the US audience is getting a universal experience in the sense that they are enjoying the game simultaneously with viewers around the world, which gives the League a sense of international importance. Yet NBCSN also employs a mix of local and English (to add an air of authenticity) to the pre-/post and half time show. The main anchor Rebecca Lowe, a veteran of English television, is joined by a rotating collection of former English players and American players (two of whom, Tim Howard and Geoff Cameron played in England). The presence of the American players helps to ground the coverage in the local, helping to initiate the American audience into soccer culture. The audience is hailed as both participating in a universal experience (the most popular league of the world’s most popular sport) and as being in the know (perhaps best exemplified by the NYT’s article about hipster PL fans in NYC). While this local-universal appeal is not without problems, it does allow the league flexibility in how it markets and presents itself within specific markets.

The digital environment helps to facilitate this local-universal appeal by allowing fans to connect to one another by heightening and sustaining the excitement around the league. Despite fears that the Internet would develop as a strong challenge to television rights, it might instead be a case of the Internet serving as an extension of television viewing. Globally, fans are able to connect through message boards, enhancing the experience of the game as universal. It can be powerful to imagine the number of people who are watching the game at the exact moment you are (whether it be early morning in the US or late afternoon in England). The Internet can also be a space for fans of English soccer to find each other and arrange to meet up to watch games live and on television together. This is evident in the growing number of US-based supporters clubs of English teams who often develop “home-bases” at local bars. Another example of this is NBCSN’s introduction of the Men in Blazers television show drawn from the popular soccer discussion podcast of the same name. The podcast and the show complement one another, offering a seamless experience across platforms. This can also be seen in the number of EPL teams who have developed Internet-based television stations (available via subscription) that broadcast youth matches, friendlies, practices, etc. This helps to create enthusiasm and calls non-English supporters in, rather than competing with the televised broadcast. As long as the Premier League’s audience continues to grow, the relationship between television and the league will continue to flourish.