An Analysis of Live Sport Audience Fragmentation between Broadcast Television and Online Streaming Services

The privatisation and deregulation of broadcasters has enabled an increasingly digitised multi-channeling growth of subscribtion television. This growth has more recently become more digitised as emphasis towards a global audience has arose due to the technological advancements of online streaming services of Netflix, Amazon and Disney+. But one of television’s historical stalwarts to this transition, live sport, now seems to be targetted by these multi-national corporations as they seek to complete their domination of terrestrial television. Noticible in their recent steps into television’s live sports broadcasts by supplying all live statistics in the recent RBS Six Nations Rugby Championship,[[1]](#footnote-9173) and Formula 1 Grand Prixs.[[2]](#footnote-21764)

Live sport has always warranted large audiences due to the value it brings to consumers, its overall popularity in society and its real-time action is what grips consumers attentions. Traditionally this has always been broadcast on television as rival broadcasters would fight for the rights to show a certain sport/league/event. However, with the emergence of online streaming services in recent years this has led to audiences now becoming more tailored towards a bespoke viewing experience, further differentiating individuals from one another. Live sport has always been a stalwart to broadcast television, often seen a unifier of diverse groups of people to some degree as it enables a collective simultaneous viewing experience, which is now a rarity. Scheduling requirements of live sport and its subsequent programme limitations of live coverage (commentary, punditry, allocated time for advertisers) coupled with traditional audience viewing habits and fan rituals, television’s simplicity to view live sport is widely known and part of society.

Nonetheless, live television sport has adapted to online efficiently, translating its same programme characteristics, but in moving beyond the linearity of a single broadcast text to a viewer. Streaming services offer a more extensive and customisable set of goods via the Internet.[[3]](#footnote-6851) Through the increasingly splintered audience in society today (due to online media and streaming services) has made watching multiple live sports simultaneously accessible on different screens, switching between different events on the same device rapidly as they develop, and accessing integrated live statistics, interactive features, and online marketplaces during live mediated play accessible.

By introducing new online media into traditional television media, broadcasters may have inadvertently signed their metaphorical death warrant as they create a link for global powerhouses like Amazon to enter into the discussion of live sports rights. Introducing a new dominant “infrastructural and/or economic model” of the Internet as a “worldwide distribution infrastructure” for audio-visual content.[[4]](#footnote-6964)Something which Amazon have already begun to capitalise on as they have secured the rights to broadcast all live tennis championships and twenty Premier League games per season exclusively to their streaming platform. By doing so Amazon are now accessing all the data from consumers of the sport and redistributing it into updated content of their own, essentially creating their own online “vortex” via their platform.[[5]](#footnote-19339) This is already clear on Amazon Prime Video with the successful sports documentary series *All or Nothing*, which has documented teams like Tottenham Hotspur, the New Zealand All Blacks and the Los Angeles Rams. Netflix’s Formula 1 series *Drive to Survive* has resulted in a mass following of the sport globally, introducing the sport to new audiences and engaging them through storylines and affiliations with drivers and teams. In 2020, there was a 77% increase in viewership of live Formula 1 between 16 to 35 year olds, and in 2021 both Sky Sports and ESPN recorded new viewership highs during their broadcasts on the Bahrain Grand Prix to their respective English and American audiences, the latter being particularly surprising due to their traditional disinterest in the sport.[[6]](#footnote-29964)

This documentary may eventually be viewed as the trail-blazer in proving the affects that quality docuseries can have on the growth of a particular sport. It may be the catalyst for online streaming services to plunge deeper into the sports broadcasting industry by looking to acquire exclusive television rights to broadcast a sport. This will in turn enrich both their revenue but also their already organised vortex by keeping viewers engaged in their platform for longer, simultaneously further ingraining the individual user into their respective algorithms, thus collecting vast amounts of user data to leverage to advertisers. There is no coincidence that Michael Jordan’s brand *Jordan* saw its revenue grow more than 50% in China following Netflix’s showing of the Chicago Bulls documentary *The Last Dance.[[7]](#footnote-14407)*

The value of live sport is the collective experience of the event. However, The rise of live streaming services, like Amazon Prime Video purchasing sports broadcasting rights, is part of a wider ‘platformisation’ of television.[[8]](#footnote-11589) The datafication of live sport on streaming platforms provides much more detailed and concise numbers than its television counterpart. These data technologies can now track and log information from users regarding, individual's location and exact time spent watching. For example, the opening night of Amazon Prime Video’s coverage of NFL Thursday Night Football in 2017 highlights this trend. Familiar ratings figures for regional and national audiences gave way to an ‘average worldwide audience’ of 372,000 that watched for ‘at least 30 seconds’ in 187 countries and territories. Subscribers watched for ‘an average of 55 minutes’ and approximately 1.6million viewers ‘initiated a stream.’[[9]](#footnote-25129)

Online media has transformed the ways audiences are constructed and marketed to, resulting in several myriads of audiences, also known as fragmented audiences. This transition has involved an abandonment of traditional ways of audience measurement through ratings systems based on the number of people that have been exposed to a certain content. In its place has introduced these online platforms that's methods of measurement are far more advanced and detailed in their studies and in turn more effective in knowing their audiences. Their methods are entered around audience information systems that collect individual's data online and categories them into an algorithm that will suggest content based off the individual's behaviour online. The result is the individual's confinement within these systems through the mining of data in which has been called a “monitored embrace.”[[10]](#footnote-12326) Online streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and more recently Disney+ have redefined how we consume entertainment through on-demand options and skillfully designed recommendations for each of us. These systems of information have proven revolutionary in every area of entertainment bar one, live sports broadcasting. However, that is not to say it will not be.

Technology has allowed for a larger quantity of content being produced and distributed at the same time, resulting in a competition of audience’s attention. Traditionally live sport has been a mainstay of broadcast television due to its ability to attract a “guaranteed audience,” an increasingly rare accomplishment in the last two decades. Which is why broadcasters invest so heavily int acquiring live sports broadcasting rights, even at a loss in order to attract viewers to their station and more importantly their brand.[[11]](#footnote-29958) Live sport’s ability to gather people from differing backgrounds and encourage a communal viewing experience that depends on the content being watched simultaneously is why it warrants such high prices, as it is one of the last examples of “appointment television.”[[12]](#footnote-29568) It is also why it is not suitable for the on-demand element of ‘Big Tech' streaming companies. Live sporting content is perishable in value, meaning once the live event has finished and the outcome has been established, the value of the excitement as the game progresses in real-time is lost and replaced with a mere statistic, which is far less engaging for people. Therefore, the potential use of recorded sporting events made accessible to users of online streaming services would prove wasteful and ineffective in theory.

Television has experienced its own fragmentation of live sports audiences in the last twenty- five years, with the introduction of subscription-based channels offering exclusive access to watch sporting events.[[13]](#footnote-23090) This added exclusivity fragmented the traditional audience, and capitalised on those willing to make the jump to their service by providing added channels and programmes pre and post live sporting event. This added content created is what is called a “vortex,”￼whereby the whereby the actual event is prolonged before

actual event is prolonged before and after in order to generate greater engagement with their respective audience, keeping them watching for longer thus consuming more advertisements. However, this strategy which was once successful is now a curse as revenue from advertisers for television advertisements has decreased rapidly due to the internet. Nowadays, people are more likely to interact with their phone once ad breaks occur which is detrimental to advertisers as their audience has partial engagement to the television. Watching television in 2021 is now a multi-screen experience known as “second screening.”￼[[14]](#footnote-18385)Whilst watching television, it is common to be interacting on social media simultaneously, with 87% of consumers interacting with both their television and their mobile phone.[[15]](#footnote-5242)Many programmes now are embracing this new user experience by encouraging them to interact through *Tweets*

for example, as often portrayed on BT Sport's *Premier League Tonight* programme.[[16]](#footnote-15040) This

sort of media convergence is what is attracting Big Tech into the broadcasting sphere of live sport.

**Conclusion**

Live sport content is being consumed via an increasing number of avenues, as the smartphones, smart-televisions, tablets, and more increase in society. These technologies have made streaming content more accessible at any time and in any place for users. However, obstacles are still present for these global multi-national companies if they are to completely displace television as the predominant provider of sports content. The changing of technology from satellite to WI-FI has proven to be difficult transition as problems such as “buffering, service interruptions, bandwidth limitations, programme crashes, over-loaded servers video compression problems and drained batteries” have a regular and almost inevitable experience of streaming high-quality live content.[[17]](#footnote-26349) These problems will continue to hamper the development of streaming services until they can be solved. In contrast, the infrastructures of broadcast television – free-toair, cable and satellite – have developed an enviable record of accomplishment of robustness in the delivery of live sport over several decades, with transmission interruptions, pixelated screens and audio problems being comparatively infrequent occurrences. Whether this problem remains as technology progresses is becoming increasingly unlikely.

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