

Sports Media: A Modern Institution

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The contribution of sports to media is difficult to overstate. In terms of content, hundreds of television and radio programs and networks, magazines, videogames, and newspapers focus on sport, as do hundreds of thousands of Internet sites. The seemingly insatiable appetite for sports content long ago extended from game or event coverage to reviews, previews, and “inside” information. The consistently growing importance of sports also is demonstrated by the expanding amount of fantasy sports information, lifestyle content, and even fictional content related to sports.

The importance of sports as media content programming and software is further demonstrated by its key role in the diffusion of the newer media technologies. Just as sports broadcasts (primarily baseball and boxing) were used to market television sets in the 1950s, media sports are today a major selling point for digital and high-definition television (HDTV) receivers, as well as videogames (see Lomax, chap. 23) and broadband Internet service (see Real, chap. 10; Mahan & McDaniel, chap. 25; Lomax, chap. 23, this volume; and King, 2005).

Even nonfans can not help but notice how much media attention sports receive. Sports coverage consistently and increasingly appears both in its own specialized all-sports media (ESPN, *Sports Illustrated*, CBS Sportsline, et al.) and as an integral part of the news of the day. Unlike most other industries, sports capture the attention of the public on an ongoing basis.

At a macrolevel, sports and media have long been considered to be separate institutions in a symbiotic, if somewhat dysfunctional, relationship. Sports content allowed media to reach desirable and otherwise difficult-to-reach audiences, while the publicity and money from media helped sports to become consistently more profitable and culturally important (Bellamy, 1998; McChesney, 1989; Rowe, 1999). While this relationship endures, the importance of sports content to media has

reached the point where it makes less and less sense to discuss sports and media as separate institutions.

This chapter is about the evolution and present relationship of the sports and media industries but, more importantly, about the increasingly powerful media entertainment industry, and the importance of sports to that power and influence. Following Wenner (1998), I argue that "MediaSport" is now an institution of its own (although obviously with a variety of permutations), worthy of the scholarly pursuit. In addition to intrinsic MediaSport content, another area worthy of consideration is the influence of sport on nonsports media content. Television examples include the increasing value of live programming, *zap-proof* advertising, reality programs based on competition, and content that can be repurposed for other media outlets both domestically and globally. Newspapers devote more space to sports because sports and entertainment news, which often and increasingly overlap, are perceived in the industry as one of the key ways of attracting younger readers, a demographic segment that is increasingly difficult for newspapers to attract.

Magazines devoted to sports are increasingly common for the same reasons. Magazines, one of the better barometers of popular culture due to their ubiquity and diversity, have taken a lead role in promoting the intersection of sports and entertainment with such sports-as-entertainment titles as *ESPN*, *the Magazine*, as well as the many features on sports personalities in such nonsports celebrity titles as *People* and *Us*. Sports radio has been one of the most successful radio formats of the last 15 years and has joined conservative talk radio in leading to somewhat of a revival in the fortunes of AM radio. Both of the formats have thrived in large part on "guy talk," a format with topics said to be of interest to men. In short, there is now a nexus of sport and entertainment similar to that of popular music and movie and television performers that is an important part of media business and culture.

While both older and newer media inform much of the content of this chapter, the emphasis is on television. While recognizing the crucial role of earlier print and electronic mass media in the rising importance of sports, television's advent in the mid-twentieth century was, and remains, key to our understanding of MediaSport. The full blooming of the intersection and symbiosis of sports and media occurred with the development of television. Television continued and expanded the nationalization of sports begun by radio. Television was the major component of the "circuits of promotion" that made sporting events and personalities "newsworthy" (Whitson, 1998, pp. 57–72).

The centrality of television's role is not likely to radically change with the new technologies. Broadband Internet, for example, is offering an increasing amount of television content. Streaming or downloading video files from the Internet is becoming as common as downloading audio or print files. Mobile/cell telephones with live video capability are beginning to diffuse throughout the globe, which will expand television's already ubiquitous presence.

Play, games, and competitions have been part of the human experience virtually since the beginning of recorded history (see Scanlon, chap. 1, this volume). Long before the development of mass media, sports were an integral part in the lives of people and social groups all over the globe in this premodern era. In addition, the psychological hold of sports on humans is a very complex set of issues that have kept many scholars in sociology, kinesiology, psychology, and now leisure studies, business, and communication occupied for years (Coakley, 2003; Eitzen, 2001; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). However, sports as most individuals conceive them today are defined as something that you watch, listen to, read about,

and talk about rather than something you do. My intent here is not to disregard the hundreds of millions of people who participate in athletics of one sort or another. Rather, it is to argue that the position of *spectator* has long defined big time sports and is the essential linkage of media studies to sport.

RISE OF "BIG TIME" SPECTATOR SPORT

Big time sports are organized, professional (even in terms of amateur sports management), and content for media. They grew from relatively disorganized amateur roots parallel to and a component part of industrialization from the early to mid-nineteenth century. There obviously are far too many social effects of industrialization to discuss here. Suffice it to say that urbanization, the resultant dislocation and alienation of many people, the rapid movement to a cash economy, the spread of systemized education, and the shift in time perspective to one bound by defined work, sleep, and leisure/personal time were all essential elements in the rise of both mass media and spectator sports. Sports provided the new Penny Press with content that was interesting to readers at a time when larger circulation and advertising support were essential to the development of the modern newspaper.

A key side benefit of the increase in newspaper sports coverage, as McChesney (1989) explained, is that sports coverage is almost always much less controversial than coverage of political economic issues. Over time, sports became even more important in the consolidation of the industry and the consequent development of the concept of newspapers as a nonpartisan "objective" source of news. Sports and other entertainment and amusements (theatre, vaudeville, amusement parks, et al.) gained untold amounts of free publicity from the papers affirming and promoting their importance. The symbiosis between big time sports and the mass media was established from the very beginning of both institutions (see Wanta, chap. 6, this volume, for more on the present state of print coverage of sports). However, it would take the rise of electronic media to make spectator sports an important component of popular culture throughout the nation.

Broadcasting and Sport

The relationship of sports and radio goes back to the earliest days of commercial radio service with Pirates games on Pittsburgh's pioneering KDKA-AM in the early 1920s. Soon after, baseball, college football, and boxing became among the most popular radio events (see Bryant, chap. 2, and Owens, chap. 7, this volume, for more on the history and present status of radio sports). Sports were found to be a major factor in the selling of radio receivers, an attribute still relevant today in television and broadband. Major sponsors soon became heavily involved with sports sponsorships. In many local markets, a local brewery exploited the close relationship between the consumption of beer and the enjoyment of sports. As in the case of most other radio programming, mentions of the sponsor (e.g., "Ballantine Blasts") were commonly sprinkled throughout the radio broadcast.

At first, the marriage of television and big time sports was almost perfect. At a time when the major motion picture studios considered the new medium an adversary, sports events provided television networks and stations with some of its most successful programming. Although episodic series eventually replaced most sports from the prime time hours, sports filled an ever-increasing amount of weekend

airtime. Sports were ideal because of the action they provided, the male audience they attracted, the beer and razors that they sold, and their relatively low cost for the amount of programming they provided.

Big time sports and the Big 3 networks that dominated television for years were both oligopolies and cartels (Alexander, Owers, Carveth, Hollifield, & Greco, 2003; Bellamy, 1998). The barriers to entry were very high, innovation was limited, and collusive behavior was common. Both had legal protections and obligations as "special" types of businesses—sports leagues and organizations through court decisions that defined them as not "in commerce," and broadcasters through their federal licensing in "the public interest." However, by the 1960s there was little doubt but that television was the dominant partner in the marriage. A growing course of criticism about how television had or was destroying sport was often heard from the print media. The clout of sports, a result of years of cumulative media exposure, was such that legal action was taken to protect certain sports from the "alleged" dangers of television. The most important remains the *Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961* or SBA (P.L. 87-331, 75 Stat. 732). The SBA granted professional sports leagues an exemption from antitrust laws to pool their league members' broadcast rights for sale to television and radio. This was the culmination of the nationalization of sport that had been set in motion years earlier and led to the enormous and almost ever-increasing rights fees for big time sports telecasts.

Obviously, the 40-plus years since the SBA have seen enormous change in the television and other media industries. Sports leagues and organizations have not changed as radically as television in structure, although the changes they have undergone are almost all in reaction to the changes in television.

Attributes of MediaSport

A review of the attributes of sports to media (and particularly television) should do two things. First, it must reflect the inherent aspects of sporting events that make them such important and ubiquitous media content and programming. Second, the ongoing changes and challenges in the media industries must also be considered. Any number of scholars in a wide variety of disciplines have argued that we are now in a postmodern period in which traditional definitions and assumptions are now being contested (Kellner, 1995; Real, 1998; Schimmel, 2001). Certainly an argument can be made that the changes in the media industries of the last generation that now afford the user much more control (at a price), while countering the new user power with the development of a new and even more powerful oligopolistic industrial structure, is evidence of the postmodern condition (Bellamy & Walker, 1996).

Whatever the label we wish to place on the changes occurring within and between the media and sports industries, there is little doubt that there has been a large increase on the importance media entities place on sports or sports-influenced content. In many ways, sports are a *key exemplar* of the programming perceived as necessary to the continuing growth of television both domestically and around the world. Television's unparalleled ability to create interest for, popularize, and normalize whatever it emphasizes means that sports' importance to other media and to the public at large is certain to similarly increase.

The primary reasons for the sports as *key television exemplar* argument are these:

1. Sporting events typically are presented live with the attendant element of real-time suspense.
2. Unlike other "live" events, sports are regularly scheduled and continuing like other entertainment series, which makes them cost effective compared to many other forms of programming.
3. There are minimal barriers of language and literacy for sports viewers.
4. Even those who are not fans have a generally benign attitude toward sport. Very few people are sports haters/evaders, especially when viewing in groups.
5. Sports are so culturally ingrained that they can have direct and powerful media effects, such as civic or even national celebration, that most programming cannot. The connection to such celebration and emotion is highly desired by advertisers and programming outlets.
6. Sports telecasts offer many opportunities for zap-proof advertising.
7. Sports telecasts are widely regarded as an excellent forum for effective promotion of other television promotions.
8. The long-term marriage of television and sports is so well established that the industries are increasingly integrated in effect or in fact. Vertical integration (control of programming by the program outlet) is a key desire and strategy of the major media firms (Bellamy & Walker, 2005).

Media Differences and Sports Attributes

Before elaborating on the eight factors that make sports a key programming exemplar to television and, to some degree, other media, some of the differences between media need to be briefly considered. For example, broadcast television will have an increasingly problematic relationship with sports coverage. The dilution of network viewers coupled with the high cost of major sports rights fees and the increasing amounts of revenue realized from moving sports to cable/satellite channels all work against major sports remaining a network staple. The most recent NBA television contract, for example, de-emphasizes regular season network television broadcasts in favor of cable channels that can both give the league more prime time exposure ("Hoops TV," 2004). Only the NFL gets any substantive amount of regular season prime time coverage on broadcast television.

Already the major broadcast networks are starting to make up for their loss of big time sports by entering into low- or no-cost deals with new leagues and events. Examples of this include NBC's unsuccessful co-ownership of the XFL and the present deal (with no network ownership stake) with the Arena Football League and "extreme" action sports (Bellamy, 1998; Bellamy & Walker, 2005).

Of course, the cultural value of sports continues to prevent or at least delay the diversion of some major sport product to cable/satellite television. Such events as the NFL Conference Championship Games and Super Bowl, MLB's World Series, and major Olympic events are likely to remain on U.S. broadcast television for the next generation due to the serious political fallout and negative public relations reaction to any attempt to move them to a pay system. However, with approximately 85% of U.S. television households now paying for multichannel television via cable or satellite, the idea of paying for television is increasingly normalized in the population.

There are significant differences among big time sports that also need to be considered in any discussion of the sports and media. The NFL, for example, has

long been regarded as both the most television friendly and television savvy of sports leagues. Like its collegiate farm system, the NFL has the advantage of playing at a time when household viewing levels are increasing as fall replaces summer, and of playing on a field that is easy to cover with television equipment and that works with standard television's aspect ratio (and even better with wide-screen HDTV). The NFL also has the decided advantage of producing a limited amount of product (32 teams playing 16 game schedules) that enhances the value of each game. Although noted but usually ignored, NFL games are a major source of illegal gambling action, further enhancing its value as television programming. While other North American-based sports leagues and associations share some of the attributes of the NFL, none have all of them (Bellamy, 1998).

SPORTS AS EXEMPLAR

Despite the differences among sports and television distribution outlets, there are the attributes that most all sports share that have made them such a key programming software and content element. While I have already explained why the emphasis in the following discussion is on television, this should be taken by the reader to mean *all* forms of television. After all, whether delivered by an analog or digital broadcast signal, received via a wired or wireless broadband connection, or viewed from a stored disc (such as a DVD or videogame cartridge), the audience member is watching or using television. In addition, the reception level of television should not be limited to the traditional view of an individual or small group watching a relatively nonmobile and mainly noninteractive machine. Television refers to multiple modes of reception ranging from the person watching live game action via streaming video on her computer monitor to another person watching specifically archived highlights of a favorite player on his cell phone to the group watching a championship game on a large flat-screen HDTV monitor in a sports bar.

The Reality Factor

Most popular sports events on television, radio, or, increasingly, the Internet are live. Technical requirements and the difficulty of production and content control have relegated most other live programming to niche status. Note, however, that such exceptions as the Academy Awards consistently are among the highest-rated programs. Clearly, the audience likes live television and regards it as something "special."

In live television, the outcome can not be predicted with certainty or given away by another person or the media. Sport fulfills the public's desire for unpredictable excitement very nicely. Unlike news, which is often avoided except when there is a major breaking story, sports, even to the casual fans, are something new (i.e., no repeats except on ESPN Classic) and exciting.

Another important value of live presentation is that live television programming is well suited to the integration of promotional and advertising messages. Such messages are not only normalized in such live programming as sports (see "The Zap-Proof Factor," discussed later), but can be inserted, deleted, or altered during the telecast. In addition, live programming is less subject to time shifting than other programming forms. After all, after an event is over the value of seeing a

repeat of it is much reduced as the in-the-moment excitement has passed. The economic importance of this is that spot advertisements are much more likely to be seen in their entirety than is the case with time-shifted programs, where spots are commonly avoided (Bellamy & Walker, 1996; J. B. Chabin, personal communication, February 7, 2005; M. Danielski, personal communication, March 11, 2005).

The Regularly-Scheduled and Cost-Effective Factors

The many television award programs are further evidence of the popularity of live programming. The problem is that, no matter how many award shows are created and televised, they cannot be regularly scheduled in the same way as sports. Although the culmination of sports competition typically is a huge once-a-year or more infrequent event such as the Master's, the Olympic medal events, the Daytona 500, the Super Bowl, or the World Cup, sports provide television with hours and hours of regularly scheduled live programming. This is a vital part of sports appeal to television programmers for two major reasons.

First, television has the most costly and voracious appetite of any medium. With most every outlet now on a 24/7 schedule, the need for programming to fill so much time is an ever-present consideration. A regular season of the games of a league or a specific team or a season (such as NASCAR and the PGA) fills a lot of time that would otherwise have to be filled with other programming.

Second, sports, unlike many other types of programming, is cost efficient for television outlets. One example is the rise of multichannel cable- and satellite-delivered television and its early innovation of channels devoted to nothing but sports, including ESPN on the national level and the many regional sports networks [RSNs] that developed in most all the major metropolitan areas of the United States (Bellamy, 1993b). Although the popular press often features laments about the high cost of rights fees, television outlets consider the fees to be economically effective or they would not keep paying the ever-escalating cost.

Cost effectiveness relates at a more macrolevel with network prestige and legitimacy among the advertising and investment communities. A good example of this was CBS' loss of NFL rights to Fox in the early 1990s. Although there were other factors at work, including a national business slump, the loss of the rights was a proximate cause in CBS losing many major affiliates to Fox and in piling up losses in its stock value (Bellamy, 1998). Therefore, sports may indeed be worth the cost even if a profit can not be generated from the rights fees. Of course, the all-sports cable networks such as ESPN and its spin-offs and the various RSNs *must* have sports to have any marketplace credibility.

Sports on television are also cost effective because they are better than most any other programming genre at attracting a consistent audience of hard-to-reach (primarily young male) viewers that many advertisers covet. This is why advertisers are willing to pay increasing amounts of money at a time when the average ratings for most all television programming are decreasing (Bellamy, 1998).

The International Literacy Factor

Sports easily cross international and intercultural boundaries despite differences in language and both written and visual literacy. Even if one does not understand all the rules, strategy, and subtleties of ice hockey, for example, most everyone can

understand the basic point of the game from a telecast regardless of the language in which it is presented. Most sports have simple objectives that can be grasped easily because the sports, game and competition culture essentially is universal, and many "foreign" games have similarities to indigenous games. The globalization of sports and television is a way to enhance the value of the product already purchased for domestic distribution with little added cost.

Another media factor is the increasing influence of the Olympics and the World Cup in spreading an interest in particular sports to the rest of the world. The result is obvious when we see professional baseball in Asia, basketball and soccer in much of the world, and ice hockey in central and eastern Europe. This does not even include the continuing influence of the individual sports such as tennis, golf, and auto racing that have long been international and now can reach international media audiences.

Because many sports are already globalized and because others have the potential to become so, is it any surprise that the increasingly international media entertainment industry sees them as a key element in the extension of power and influence (Bellamy, 1993a; Bellamy & Chabin, 1999; M. Danielski, personal communication, March 11, 2005)? For example, the presence of Yao Ming has allowed the NBA to make inroads into the vast Chinese media market, while MLB has an increasing presence in both Central and South America and Asia due to the success of such stars as Sammy Sosa, Ichiro Suzuki, Edgar Renteria, and others ("Global NBA," 2004; "MLB International," 2004).

One of the few rivals to sports telecasts in the ability to cross global boundaries of language and literacy are action adventure programs and movies. The global popularity of Jackie Chan, Vin Diesel, and others, and such television series as *Xena*, *Hercules*, and so forth, is certainly not based on complex narratives. The appeal is more visceral and universally understood—good versus evil, right versus wrong, often violent conflict and action, and a lack of moral ambiguity. These values, of course, are part and parcel of the narratives found in sports coverage.

The Benign Viewer Factor

Can you think of anyone who hates mediated sports? I do not mean the people who criticize the announcers or the coverage, but someone who literally will leave the room during a telecast? While we may know people who dislike a certain type of sports or sports entertainment (boxing, professional wrestling, and cricket come to mind), rarely do we encounter a sports or a sports television hater.

Part of the reason is who we associate with, but another very important factor is the constant media attention that sports receive, which makes them not only acceptable but also expectable that one will know something about sports even if he or she is not a "die hard" fan. Sports are such an ingrained part of our daily lives and popular culture that to be ignorant of them is to be uncool or out of the loop. Consider for a moment how much of our day-to-day communication revolves around a sports star, a team, or events. Some knowledge of sport is one of the important currencies of interpersonal communication.

An example of this is the continuing popularity of sports bars (which in regard to health is an oxymoronic term at best) as a conduit for group interaction that presupposes and supports at least some level of interest in sports. Combine this with the vast availability of sports information available through media and it is easy to see why sports, at least in an abstract way, have become a relatively benign

cultural force even to nonfans and, obviously, something much more than that to many.

This “benign neglect at best” attitude translates into value for sports as television product. In a time when most all television viewers are armed with RCDs and many viewing options as well as myriad other entertainment options, programming that viewers strongly dislike is to be avoided at almost all costs. Sports as integrated into the larger world of entertainment have become an important part, rather than just a niche, of popular culture. They are difficult to avoid and even more difficult to completely ignore if one wants to fit in with society (Kellner, 1995; Whitson, 1998).

The concept of sports as popular culture is in many ways more relevant to the general mass entertainment broadcasters and cablecasters than the specialized niche or subniche cable and satellite networks. A football game is more profitable for CBS and its affiliates than, for example, a program on politics or international news because in part the much larger and more desirable audience that football attracts is a product of the fact that many people will watch a football or other sporting event even if their interest is relatively low because it is the “in” thing to do. On the other hand, a niche channel such as CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News Channel caters specifically to the relatively small audience that has a ravenous appetite for political and other news. Similarly, one of the ESPN networks or FOX Sports Net appeals to the more hardcore sports fan.

The Loyalty and Effects Factors

In current programming vocabulary, loyal viewers are referred to as *appointment viewers*. Such viewers are brand loyal and have increasing value in the increasingly diffuse television environment. As mentioned, sports telecasts have the ability to aggregate a consistent and highly valued audience out of groups that are not particularly attracted to other types of programming. Many sports fans, therefore, are appointment viewers with ever-increasing value.

In addition, sports telecasts can have strong audience effects that reinforce their popularity and strength as a television product. While the effects are not necessarily caused by television, extensive media coverage enhances them. Sometimes, as in the case of the disturbances that too often break out after the local team's championship victory, the effects are destructive. More common, however, are the celebrations of victory or even laments of defeat that result in increased media consumption to get the most information possible. These have increased the value of both pre, post, and review sports programs, Web sites, and publications.

The loyalty and celebratory effects factor also manifests itself in consumerism and the transference of loyalty from sports to sponsor (King, 2005; Schimmel, 2001). Sports fans are ready and willing consumers of team-licensed apparel, videos, and a seemingly never-ending slew of souvenirs and paraphernalia—a consumption pattern that spikes with televised and otherwise media-saturated events. Although there is some of this with other television programs, there is a large degree of difference between fans of *Friends* and fans of the Boston Red Sox. The former watch the program in syndicated repeats and on DVDs, may talk about the latest romantic situations of the characters or the actors who appear in the series, and may even buy a sweatshirt or a Central Perk coffee mug or get a Jennifer Aniston-inspired hair style. However, adults who did much more than this (i.e., decorating her or his apartments like Monica's, placing posters of the cast all over her or his homes) would be considered odd or, at least, juvenile. Contrast this with the many

adults who own and display sports memorabilia and spend enormous amounts of time and money in celebrating the Red Sox or another favorite team. While one could and should argue that the Red Sox are real and *Friends* is not, the fact remains that for most people at most times their favorite sports team or athlete is also in large part a creation and product of the media. After all, most of the fans that celebrated the Red Sox World Series victory of 2004 rarely, if ever, have met any of the players or have been to games regularly if at all.

One of the very few cultural products that can come close to the loyalty that sports engender in its fans is the attraction that adolescents have for their music idols. There are indeed many, many young people (primarily females) who decorate with and own any number of Avril Lavigne, Beck, and Kanye West products. For many other young people (primarily male), the equivalent is sports. The difference, of course, is that the appeal of sports is often not outgrown and is, in fact, not only tolerated but also encouraged and celebrated in adult society and in the media.

The Zap-Proof Factor

Perhaps the key importance of sports as television product are the opportunities provided for sponsors to reach their intended targets. Once again, this is an increasingly difficult task in a television world made up of millions of restless viewers armed with RCDs and other navigation devices such as personal or digital video recorders (PVRs/DVRs) or media-center computers. An increasing number of individuals now have the ability to design individual menus of programming. Any advertising message integrated with program content is *zap-proof* (Bellamy, 1998; Bellamy & Walker, 1996). The key concept is that it is impossible for the viewer to avoid advertising messages without missing part of the sports event.

Sports telecasts are, of course, loaded with such advertising and sponsorship opportunities. McAllister (1998) detailed the vast number of product mentions in a Tostitos Fiesta Bowl telecast. His point was that the integration of advertising into the telecast leads to both multiple audio sponsor mentions (virtually every time the bowl was mentioned) as well as video (the sponsor's logo on the playing field). This form of audience creation and targeting is common in most every sport telecast.

Consider the many advertising messages embedded in most any sports contest: the name of the venue, electronic and changeable billboards on or near the scoreboard and throughout the stadium or arena (including the playing surface), virtual advertising that appears on television but not at the venue, the on-air sponsor billboards (i.e., "this telecast is brought to you by..."), in-game features (review of the action/scoring recaps), after-game features ("Star of the Game"), uniform logos, Gatorade on the bench, and so forth. Although sports are not the only television programs with content/advertising integration (e.g., *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *The Apprentice*, and other "reality" programs that, like sports, are based on competition and a live element), they are *the* most common forum for the practice.

The practice of advertising integration is part of sports history and has long been accepted by sports viewers. We likely would be startled to watch (or even listen to) a sports event without nearly constant commercial exposure. Although the practice of advertising/content integration goes back to the very beginnings of commercial broadcasting, zap-proof advertising is critical to the present television industry. The increasingly restless audience can easily zap undesirable content. With research indicating that commercials are one of the major causes of zapping,

integrating advertising into the program content, as has long been the case with sports, is seen as critical to the long-term health of television advertising (Bellamy & Walker, 1996).

The Promotion Factor

Conventional wisdom about sports on television is that they are superb promotional platforms for other programs. Sports telecasts constantly promote other programs on the channel or network both aurally and visually. The virtual billboards behind home plate in World Series promoting the new fall season, the appearance of network celebrities in the broadcast booth promoting their series or movie, and the hype leading up to the Super Bowl are examples.

Conventional wisdom is often incorrect, and there is some evidence to suggest that this is the case here. Eastman and Otteson (1994), for example, found that sports are no more effective as a promotional platform than other programs. Although not conclusive, this calls into question one of the major justifications for escalating sports rights fees.

However, as long as sports continue to have the many attributes discussed in this chapter, there is little chance that the conventional wisdom will change. Sports telecasts, despite declining ratings on many television outlets, continue to attract a desirable and zap-proof advertising that may not be exposed to promotion in other ways. In addition, the value of sports to some television outlets is more than just their immediate ability to reap profitable advertising sales or even to be successful near-term promotional platforms. Brand identity is particularly important in a cluttered television environment in order to stand out from competing television and other media outlets. Being able to brand itself as "The Network of the Olympics" is seen as a way for NBC to distinguish itself from rivals at the same time it has abandoned many other major league sports. Fox, as mentioned previously, was able to brand itself as a legitimate "Big 4" network by leveraging its acquisition of the NFL, MLB, and, more recently, NASCAR (Bellamy, 1998; Bellamy & Traudt, 2000).

The Integration Factor

In the last decade there has been a shift in the way that the sports business and media business talk about one another for public consumption. Today, the symbiosis of the two industries is recognized and even celebrated as fact with all the talk of "partners" (Bellamy, 1998; Bellamy & Walker, 2005). In addition, sports leagues now refer to themselves as being in the media business via their partnerships and their own Web sites, publications, and even television channels (e.g., NBA-TV, the NFL Channel). The most celebrated sports executive today (NBA Commissioner David Stern) and perhaps of all time (the late NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle) are both regarded as media geniuses.

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this chapter, sports are an integral part of the media entertainment and leisure time industries. However, symbiosis works in various ways. Media corporations are also sports owners and, in the latest development, sports owners are now explicitly in the media business.

There are many reasons for large media firms to own professional sports teams. Vertical integration of media and sports guarantees programming with no costs outside the external exchange of rights fees. Thus, ownership integration of two cartels appears to be a "win-win" for the team and the media company. A good

example of how ownership of sports teams can benefit media outlets is Ted Turner's leveraging of his Atlanta Braves ("America's Team") as a key element of building his cable empire (now a unit of Time Warner). Sports made his weak UHF station attractive to cable systems around the country and gave him a steady and large (several hundred hours a year) source of programming he did not have to produce or pay rights fees to obtain. News Corporation's (i.e., Rupert Murdoch's) ownership of the Los Angeles Dodgers; AOL Time Warner's ownership of the Atlanta Braves, Hawks, and Thrashers; Disney's ownership of Anaheim's Angels and Mighty Ducks; and several other media/team co-ownerships were all unsuccessful attempts to replicate Turner's success (Bellamy & Walker, 2005).

The recent divestiture of sports team ownership from large media firms is not evidence of a decline in the importance of sports to media and media to sports. In fact, there appears to be a movement back to a traditional form of vertical integration where teams (producers) control the distribution and exhibition of their own product. New York's YES network is the exemplar of this trend. YES feeds millions of dollars of revenue into the coffers of the Yankees, Nets, and Devils. These teams do not have to share revenue with another company such as FOX (the dominant owner/operator of RSNs). Team owned RSNs presently are one of the major trends in the sports television business (Bellamy & Walker, 2005).

Team-owned television operations were originally created in the early days of multichannel television (late 1970s and early 1980s) and are based on models developed in the 1950s for some of the early pay-television schemes (Bellamy, 1993b; Bellamy & Walker, 2005). What is different now is that the technological infrastructure of satellites, cable, Internet, and, increasingly, broadband and digital transmission has now developed to offer realistic ways for sports teams to become their own producers, distributors, and exhibitors. This infrastructure makes it possible for teams to offer game coverage targeted to different types of viewers at different prices. Coverage can be in high or standard definition, with or without digital enhancements, in packages focusing on only one team or offering all the league games. With these pay enhancements, even a relatively small core of fans can generate huge amounts of new money for popular teams even as most fans continue to get their coverage through existing broadcast and cable channels.

CONCLUSIONS

Space obviously does not allow an analysis of all the components of the media/communication and sports nexus. One important component that does need to be mentioned is the public relations (PR) and marketing value of big time sports in civic culture. There are no generally accepted metrics to measure the monetary value of the publicity or brand equity that comes with being a "major league" city (Aaker, 1995). In fact, Noll and Zimbalist (1997) and Shropshire (1995) are among the economists who have argued that cities typically do not benefit from subsidizing sports franchises or major events. However, in an age of increasingly cluttered messages, having a city's name in the media from the exploits of sports teams must be regarded as having substantial value. In terms of wide circulation (i.e., the city name in most all sports media on a consistent and ongoing basis) and brand identity of cities (Kotler, 2002), there are few if any businesses that come close to generating the PR value of a professional major league sports franchise.

The ongoing integration of the once disparate media forms of television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet is another dynamic in the media sports nexus. New forms of value-added coverage (i.e., HDTV, interactive games, gambling, fantasy sports, inside info) have been developed and implemented to make the sports business-media outlet-consumer connection stronger.

One of the present mantras in the entertainment and information industries is "on hand and on demand" (J. B. Chabin, personal communication, February 7, 2005). This means that the consumer expects to have whatever content she or he wants whenever she wants and wherever he is located. To many people this means television on portable carry-along devices in addition to audio, phone services, and PDA functions. Content that reflects and defines popular culture is the most important content for such personal media devices. Sports increasingly is an integral part of our popular and mediated culture (King, 2005).

Sports have evolved from a business that had a series of highly beneficial relationships with the media business to one of the central components of the increasingly global media entertainment industry. This is due to the combination of attributes that sports offer media, and particularly television. A consistent, loyal, and lucrative audience less able to avoid advertising and promotional messages and tied into an emerging global popular cultural and consumer mainstream is one of enormous value to media. When that audience also consists of niches that can be aggregated into valuable commodities for advertisers and marketers throughout the globe, there is an even increased value to sports that most other media content cannot match.

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