Chapter 15: Media

# 15.1. New media: Consuming sports 24/7

People now have access to sports content 24/7 on television, smartphones, tablets, and any device with an Internet connection. This means that a person’s identity as a fan can be reaffirmed at anytime, anywhere.

Additionally, sports talk radio and the personalities on ESPN and other sport-related cable and satellite television programs have created narratives, often extreme in their language and content, designed to boost audience ratings. Programs solicit text messages and on-air participation by listeners and viewers. This new media structure has had an important impact on fans and how they express their identities.

Before the 1980s fans had relatively limited access to games, teams, and athletes. Most games were not televised so people had limited opportunities to express and reaffirm their fan identities. They either attended a game for 2-3 hours now and then or listened to radio broadcasts. Radio and television commentary focused on the action and was designed to mythologize players in positive ways, even when many players had few positive attributes to glorify. Even those who read sports stories in newspapers and talked about sports with friends did not spend more than a few hours a week in settings where their fan identity was primary in their lives.

This remained the case even when more and more games were televised. But today, an increasing number of people, mostly males, consume sports content and use new media to express their fan identities regularly in the course of a day or week. This new type of fan may spend thousands of dollars each year on season tickets or hundreds on media packages that provide access to multiple live events in different sports all year long. Stadiums have added Wi-Fi for those attending games so they can track other sports events and results and communicate with friends about them.

Media companies and other formal and informal groups sponsor fantasy leagues that may occupy hours of a fan’s time each week. Sports talk radio and televised talk and sports news programs provide information about players, teams, coaches, managers, team owners, and referees – information that was not available or not broadcast in the past.

The narratives on these programs go far beyond the commentaries that fans heard in the past. Today they are full of critical comments that focus on the personal traits of anyone connected with sports leagues and teams. The extreme content and tone of these comments push the boundaries of what people define as appropriate and acceptable when they talk sports or attend games and shout comments at anyone connected with the action on the field or court.

Fans can also follow athletes by way of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and blogs. This eliminates the mainstream media filter and provides them with information that comes directly from athletes. As one NBA player explains “You now get to know and see what type of person the athlete is. It’s like you’re living, basically, through their eyes, watching through their eyes.” Is this so?

It is important to remember that athletes have been advised to post or tweet information that is consistent with the profile and persona they want to project to the public. In many cases, this focuses on nurturing their brand, that is, their commercial worth. Forgetting this can lead to trouble as athletes discover when they tweet things that are offensive or inappropriate in the eyes of their teammates, coaches, university administrators, team owners, and the general public. Therefore, most athletes are careful to present themselves in particular ways. As another NBA player explains, “I just want to show people my different sides – an angry side on the court and a funny side, laid back when I’m off the court.”

Knowledge about players and their personal lives can add depth and importance to a person’s identity as a fan. Fans in the past sought autographs from athletes, but today it is more important to have an athlete respond personally to a tweet. This makes a fan’s connection with the athlete public and contributes to the fan’s status and identity. Fans can also use knowledge about players in negative ways – for example, to harass opponents during games and to express their dissatisfaction when players on their favored teams don’t play well.

There have long been sports fans, but in media-saturated societies such as the US, they can actively and publicly BE fans for a greater proportion of their lives than any fans in the past. As a result, they are more likely to regularly express themselves as fans – more often in extreme ways – and to seek reaffirmation of their fan identities through the media that provides them access to sports, sports news, and sports talk 24-hours a day every day of the year. Given these changes, we need more research on the social and community implications of this 24/7 fan identity. How does it alter social relationships, definitions of community, and the expression of personal agency?

# 15.2. Putting media to use: The NFL as a marketing machine

The NFL, a registered non-profit organization, wants to increase its revenues from the current $17 billion in 2020 to $25 billion by 2027. To do this, the executives at the league offices know that they must recruit fans, especially new young fans, and defuse negative publicity created by the reports about the dangers of playing football. This is a tall order, but the league is dedicating many millions of dollars to accomplishing these tasks. A quick trip to [www.nflrush.com](http://www.nflrush.com) (and the NFL Rush Gameday app) shows how serious the NFL is about recruiting young fans.

The NFL social influence campaign to promote youth football participation is a masterful response to the changing media landscape and its impact on sports media sponsorship patterns. It also is consistent with long-term trends that may eventually lead to an NFL network as the dominant channel through which people will consume NFL football in the US and possibly the world.

Marketing experts have known for decades that their success requires that they produce messages that effectively foster a commitment to a brand as early as possible in a consumer’s life. Some corporations have tried to do this through the schools, but there is growing parental and teacher resistance to this strategy in the case of drink machines in hallways, logos on buses and school walls, and branded fast food in cafeterias.

The nflrush.com site contains a colorful array of links to attractive messages about the wonders of football and the joys of being a fan of a team, especially “your” local team. Young people are encouraged to get their peers involved and make money for their schools. There are links to cartoons with attractive characters delivering pro football and pro-NFL messages while they engage in entertaining action sequences.

The link to the “NFL Rush Gameday” contains cartoons about NFL games, the draft, players, and teams. Football players are the action heroes who come to the aid of children and their families. And they are engaging heroes linking directly with the cartoon children.

The site puts young people at the center of NFL generated experiences. Videos of games to be played with friends can be uploaded, others can be played online. NFL players can be met in interactional settings. The young people can become sportscasters and record their calls for the greatest plays in NFL history. They can learn the rules of football, watch animated shows and related programming specifically designed for children seeking exciting entertainment.

The potential payoff of this strategy is mind-boggling in Gramscian terms: establishing “outposts” in the heads of elementary school children so that NFL messages can be delivered through them long into the future. If it works, it will be a significant coup by the league to boost profits and defuse future objections to playing football.

The campaign appeal to parents is consistent with neoliberal definitions of parental moral worth. As the parents’ page for the campaign states: *Let your child's teacher, school administrator or PTO/PTA leader know about this program so* ***you can be a super parent***[emphasis added] *and your child's school can have a chance to be an* ***NFL PLAY 60 Super School****!*

Of course, the people at the marketing company hired for this project know that as school budgets have been decimated by neoliberal policy approaches to public education, teachers may be eager to join the NFL RUSH. This campaign takes the cynical but effective announcement, “Let’s hear it for ***your*** Atlanta Falcons” to new and more lofty heights. To paraphrase Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist who wrote from a jail when Italy was controlled by a fascist government (1928-1937): “It’s difficult to fight an enemy that has outposts in your head” – or the heads of your children and students.

The biggest challenge to the NFL is the growing information about football-related concussions, head trauma, and brain damage. An early attempt to counter this information was the “Together We Make Football” campaign. People were told they could win a trip to Super Bowl XLVIII by sending in their stories of “Why You Love Football.”

As thousands of stories came in and people were asked to read them and vote for the best ones. Five winners were picked and made the focus of high-definition, high emotion short videos about the way football had changed their lives. The winners’ stories became a part of a longer video entitled, *Football America: Our Stories*.

There was special attention given to mothers in these stories. The marketing company knew that without a mother’s permission, boys would not be allowed or encouraged to play football, so coopting mothers was a crucial goal.

Mothers were also a focus in millions of dollars of commercials during recent seasons. One beautifully shot segment showed boys at football practice with their mothers watching from the sidelines. Coaches were treating the boys gently. There were no sounds of helmets banging against each other, no coaches yelling for the boys to “man up!” and certainly no on-the-field injury breaks.

The boys received heartwarming positive feedback from coaches as they learned skills and demonstrated them for their moms. And in the end, one mother takes the hand of her son, puts his helmet in her other hand, and together they walk into the sunset – apparently going home to have a Coke and meal from McDonalds or Burger King – whatever the official junk food of the NFL was during that year.

The result according to the NFL marketing team: “Thousands of you sent stories telling us why you love football in a contest to win a trip to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. We chose ten finalists. You voted for the five winners. Watch the winning stories in 'Football America: Our Stories'.”

Other commercials stressed the new “Heads Up” tackling techniques being taught to young players across the nation (even if they weren’t). USA Football, never a close partner with the NFL in the past, was now the NFL’s favorite youth sports organization, and they never missed an opportunity to stress its focus on football player safety.

The networks also jumped on this bandwagon and included promos for Heads Up Tackling and the commitment to Football Player Safety. But this is not surprising after they have signed multibillion-dollar contracts with the NFL and use football games as the centerpiece of their programming. There’s no reason to expose inherent weaknesses in the golden goose that pays good salaries to network announcers, even if they claim to be news journalists.

This is only the beginning. After PBS began to track the number of concussions by week and by season, the NFL created strategies to keep those data private. Even the announcers today have been instructed to downplay injuries and never talk about the personal danger of head hits. Such hits are discussed only when they involve a penalty. The NFL goal of sanitizing the brutal body contact and inevitable head trauma so that parents have less motivation for keeping their sons off the field.

# 15.3. Live by the tweet, die by the tweet: Learning to use new media

When professional athletes make mistakes that cause their team to lose, they now receive nasty tweets and demeaning Instagram messages. New media provide fans with direct, unfiltered access to high profile athletes. This creates the illusion of closeness among fans. When the athletes perform well, fans are supportive. But when they fail to meet expectations, many fans are quick to express their displeasure and the illusion of positive connections disappears in an instant.

When Twitter was introduced, athletes were eager to see what people were tweeting about them. But the tweets were not always favorable. When athletes did not meet expectations, fans often attacked them in personally demeaning ways. Although most of the players said that this didn’t bother them, many comments were not so easily dismissed or forgotten.

It might be hypothesized that negative tweets, even when they are personal, elevate the significance of an athlete’s sport and the status associated with participation. People would not tweet negative things unless you and your sport are a major focus of their attention. In this sense, even negative tweets were an indication of personal significance in that they were the object of fans’ attention. But this creates a challenge: how can this negative feedback be converted into a source of motivation while not allowing it to harm one’s sense of self as a player and a person?

This identifies the positive and negative components of this form of social media. On the one hand, athletes can use it to control information communicated about themselves to others, thereby becoming the author of their narratives. On the other hand, they cannot control the information they receive in return, some of which may be demeaning and hurtful.

Of course, messages can be deleted, followers can be blocked, and athletes can engage their critics and hope to win them over by providing acceptable accounts for their actions. Marketing and public relations professionals describe this as part of the process of creating and maintaining your brand in a network that transcends personal, face-to-face relationships. In sociological terms, it constitutes a new context for self-presentation – one in which athletes have opportunities to create their narratives and respond directly to those who question it.

Most athletes likely prefer this over a process in which they depend on journalists to create their narratives and represent their responses to critics and detractors. Eliminating this middle person provides an advantage, but only if athletes have the personal awareness and skills needed to construct a positive narrative and articulate it in a way that is received positively by most followers.

Most of us in education would say that this gives athletes a good reason to take seriously their writing and other courses in which they learn how to construct engaging, cohesive, and purposeful narratives. The other alternative is to make so much money that you can hire a publicist to tweet on your behalf and then tell you who you are in the eyes of your followers so you can present a persona consistent with what fans expect.

Of course, athlete-fan connections established through social media are virtual. Mostly, they are based on superficial exchanges that do little or nothing to build interpersonal awareness and reciprocity in relationships.

Athletes often tweet expressions of their commercial personas rather than their heartfelt feelings and may have “ghost tweeters” to do it for them. Fans tweet short expressive messages meant to position them inside the aura of an athlete’s celebrity. But tweets seldom lead to a meaningful relationship characterized by mutual concerns about well-being.

The illusion of closeness that comes with Twitter and other virtual exchanges often leads fans to expect that their athlete-heroes will always meet their expectations. When they don’t, the athlete’s celebrity aura is tainted and fans no longer benefit from the feeling of being a part of it. Instead of realizing that their relationship with the athlete was a baseless fantasy, they blame the athlete for the disappointment they feel. When this occurs, they express their disappointment in extreme terms with no fear of consequences as they might experience if the relationship was based on meaningful exchanges.

Over time, we shall see if Twitter and other social media are more likely to humanize or dehumanize those who use them and the conditions under which one or the other of these outcomes is most likely to occur.

Twitter and other social media will be increasingly infused with commercial culture. They will be used as indicators of commodity status rather than indicators of meaningful social connections. This is why athletes attend workshops and seminars on how to use them to create a commercial brand without getting into trouble. But this usually means that self-presentation occurs in one-dimensional terms that limit the meaningfulness of communication.

# 15.4. Virtual sports: Play safe, stay home

Debating whether virtual sports are real sports is a useless exercise. Virtual sports are growing at a significant rate and have begun to alter the sports landscape in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

Building on the ideas of Mike Atkinson, a sociology of sport scholar at the University of Toronto, **virtual sports** are *challenging activities that involve embodied or computer-generated athletes that are placed in simulated sport spaces*. They include home-based, arcade, and other simulated games or challenges involving physical skills. These games and challenges are increasingly interactive and may even be used to train athletes in traditional or “real” sports.

Virtual sports have grown in popularity as other sports have become increasingly commercialized, exclusive, and out of the immediate control of participants. They also offer participants opportunities to engage in extreme actions, violate rules, and revise challenges over time. Plus, extreme actions occur in settings that are safe and controlled in terms of physical danger.

Part of the fascination with virtual sports is that they can be accessed at home or local facilities. Virtual sports can also be played with competitors/opponents worldwide. There are few if any special constraints. This adds a unique social dimension to the participation experience.

An exciting feature of virtual sports is that they are constantly emerging, incorporating new technologies, and taking new forms. For example, the use of GoPro cameras now provides images that can be used to create simulated experiences in bounded environments. This enables a person on a stationary bike to race alongside a Tour de France rider as they travel along the “actual” course. Racecar simulations offer a similar experience.

Now that technology enables sensory data to be captured from professional athletes, it will soon be possible for virtual athletes to put on clothing that will transmit to their virtual peers some of those feelings and stresses to their bodies. Virtual mountain bikers could then feel wind, rain, mud, and even forms of anxiety or fear experienced by a particular professional rider. Vertigo experienced in ski jumping, sky diving, and bungee jumping could be re-created in safe, simulated environments.

Playing golf on the Augusta National course where the Masters is played each year is also virtually possible. Special virtual reality headgear can provide a 360-degree view of the course and its surrounding, golf shots can be simulated to match the locations where a virtual ball has been hit. For the right price, a virtual golfer might be able to play in the same twosome as a virtual Tiger Woods and interact with him through the round.

It did not take long for virtual sports to morph into esports. The World Cyber Games, based in South Korea, have for two decades provided global competitions between esports athletes. The World Gaming Network provides a platform enabling EA Sports to simulate numerous sports with virtual bodies representing athletes in a particular league.

GamerSaloon.com puts virtual athletes in touch with peers worldwide and enables them to compete for money and prizes. So does Major League Gaming (MLG), a professional esports organization operates an online broadcast network for professional-level competitive gaming. The MLG Pro Circuit is an esports league in North America, and MLG Play provides an online gaming tournament system with millions of registered users worldwide.

Esports attract players looking for challenges, sociability, competition, excitement, status, and prizes – all in the confines of home. Concussions are nonexistent, no ligaments are torn, no bruises or broken are suffered. But there are emerging forms of esports that require physical exertion and a range of physical skills to play. But they can be adjusted to fit the abilities of virtual athletes.

This means that virtual sports are controllable so that virtual athletes can seek flow experiences by adjusting the demands of the activity. Not having coaches who scream, shout, blow whistles, and demand that athletes run laps when they make mistakes is a bonus.

Virtual sports (i.e., playing online games) can also be streamed through Twitch, a platform for “social video for gamers.” This makes it possible for spectators to watch esports athletes play games. Founded in 2011, Twitch is now owned by Amazon (purchased for $1 billion). As of February 2020, Twitch has 140 million unique viewers, 15 million active daily users, and 3 million monthly broadcasters (https://videogamesstats.com/twitch-stats-facts/). The gamers who play feel like celebrity athletes and those who watch them pick up tips on gaming strategies, or they see and evaluate games they may want to buy.

As people watch the gamers and broadcasters provide entertaining commentary esports have become very “media-sport-like.” Highly skilled gamers have become global celebrities, spectators buy tickets to watch them in person at packed stadiums with large screens show their competitive abilities. Of course, these events are packaged by promoters and/or game manufacturers that take a cut of profits before paying the gamers. Again, this sounds much like sports! The possibilities for research on virtual sports are nearly endless.

Atkinson, Michael. 2007. Virtual Sports. In George Ritzer, ed., *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (pp. 5208-5211). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing

# 15.5. The stronger women get, the more men watch football: A prediction from 1990

Mariah Burton Nelson is a former athlete at Stanford and professional basketball player, a noted author and public speaker, and a widely respected voice in discussions about Title IX and why it has been resisted so vehemently by many men. At the same time, her voice has been defined by many as contentious and radical.

In 1994, Nelson published a book titled, *The stronger women get, the more men love football*. Her thesis was that as women graduated from college and entered the workforce in record numbers, took jobs previously held by men, and brought home paychecks that gave them independence and power, men experienced a “crisis of masculinity.” She noted that as some men slowly adjusted to this, others retreated to realms where traditional masculinity was safe from the emerging power and influence of women. And the safest place many men could find was football – an activity that they could use as a weapon in the struggle to maintain male power and privilege.

Many people thought that Nelson’s hypothesis about football was pure feminist folly. However, it led others to think about the role of football in the changing gender order of the 1990s. A comparison of the 1989-90 and 2019 data support her hypothesis (Table 1). Of course, NFL attendance is related to many factors and we cannot tell the extent to which gender dynamics are at work. It appears that Nelson’s critics have some explaining to do.

**Table 1. Comparison of the 1989 & 2019 data on the popularity of the NFL**

| **Indicator** | **1989-90** | **2019-20** |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Number of teams** | 28 | 32 |  |
| **Annual league revenue** | $975 million | 17.0 billion |  |
| **Overall attendance** | 13.6million | 17.0million |  |
| **Ave game attendance** | 60,829 | 66,151 |  |
| **Ave ticket price** | $40 | $112 |  |
| **Ave player salary** | $344,000 | $2.7 million |  |
| **Salary cap/team** | $34.6million (1994) | $188.2 million |  |
| **Guaranteed TV money** | $468million | $12 billion |  |
| **TV Super Bowl viewers** | 75 million | 103 million |  |
| **Super Bowl 30-second ad** | $675,000 | $5.2 million |  |

Of course, this trend of emphasizing football, mixed martial arts (the fastest growing televised sport in the United States), and other collision sports is not only related to gender relations. But for those who define masculinity and manhood in terms of the ability to kick ass and physically dominate others, including women, they are a refuge for reaffirmation in a culture where others have moved in the opposite direction.

Despite the title of Nelson’s book, she also acknowledged that there are women who cling to orthodox gender ideology to the point that they too are attracted to football and other collision sports in which men’s physical domination of others is glorified and described as part of a “warrior culture” that has long been viewed with awe in the United States and many other societies.

# 15.6. People who don’t watch sports on TV subsidize those who do.

A key aspect of the sports–media marriage in the United States is that it is financially supported by people who don’t follow sports or watch them on television. Of course, this also is true in other countries, but their systems are organized in different ways. To understand how it works in the US, it helps to know the steps taken to bring sports from the playing field to television and selected other media devices. Here are the steps involved:

1. Team owners in a league or other sport sponsoring organization (universities, college conferences, NCAA, IOC, LPGA, UFC, and so on) negotiate the sale of the rights to broadcast their events to media companies, such as NBC, CBS, ESPN, and Fox, including all their regional sports network affiliates.
2. The media companies then negotiate with the cable and satellite companies—the media providers—that sell content to subscribers like you and me. When they agree on a price for each channel (such as ESPN, NBC, ESPN2, MSNBC, Bravo, TNT, etc.), the cable and satellite companies charge their subscribers fees that cover their costs and provide them with profits.
3. The cable and satellite companies then cleverly bundle their channels in various combinations so their subscribers pay for the channels that provide sports programming even if they don’t watch sports.

So far, this system has provided ever-increasing amounts of money to the popular men’s sports leagues, big-time college football and men’s basketball programs, and the international governing bodies that own the men’s soccer World Cup (FIFA), the Olympics (IOC), and other major sports events, such as the Masters golf tournament and Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC). This system has been successful largely because subscribers don’t know how much they are paying for each channel they receive in their channel bundles.

However, as cable and satellite fees increase, this information is becoming more public and a few people are learning that elite sports programming is far more expensive than other types of programming. For example, cable and satellite providers in 2019 paid $18.55 per month to the 17 channels that present sports programming, but they charged their subscribers only $13.30 per month for this programming. The $5.25 monthly loss, or $63 per year, was covered/hidden by raising the subscription amount charged for channels that do not present sports. This means that a subscriber who does not watch sports is paying $18.55 per month to subsidize those who watch sports. This amounts to $223 per year!

But wait, it’s worse than that. There are about 130 million households in the U.S. and roughly 90 million of them pay cable or satellite subscriptions. But at least half of them, or about 45 million, rarely or never watch sports. This means that those 45 million subscribers subsidize those who are regular viewers of sports programming. If that subsidy is $18.55 per month or $223 per year, this amounts to a sports viewer subsidy of about $10 billion per year!

The details underlying this subsidy are complex. An increasing number of people, many of whom who don’t view sports, now seek low cost “skinny bundles” of channels that do not include ESPN and other sports exclusive channels. Those who don’t seek skinny bundles often become cable cutters and subscribe to streaming sites, such as Hulu, Netflix, and a growing collection of others. As this occurs, the cable and satellite providers are forced to raise monthly fees for their subscribers. Part of this increase is also due to the high and continually escalating broadcasting rights fees paid by providers for sports programming.

All sports programming is not equal, however. Channels such as Outside Television, Outdoor Channel, and Sportsman Channel are paid 5-7-cents per subscriber per month – about 72-cents per year for each of those channels. However, in 2019 ESPN charged $9.06 per subscriber per month or $109 per year. Similarly, ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC demanded higher payments from cable and satellite providers because the cost of rights to sports programming is so high.

As the number of subscribers to ESPN dropped, it made major cuts their staff to lower expenses. As a result, they provide much less investigative journalism today and much more hype to promote their high-cost sports programming. As of 2019, the annual rights fees for all sports in the U.S. amounted to $22.4 billion, and ESPN accounted for over $5 billion of that amount, including about $2 billion to the NFL and $1.4 billion to the NBA annually.

As long as viewers and sponsors are attracted to live sports, sports organizations with high ratings for their games and events will expect higher rights fees. They will be successful as long as cable and satellite providers are allowed to bundle sports channels in their subscription packages. This is why Comcast NBC Universal, DIRECTV, DISH, and Time Warner Cable send high profile athletes with their lobbyists when they go to Congress. Legislators are more likely to make decisions favoring these companies when they can shake hands with athletes, be photographed with them, and obtain their autographs.

Unsurprisingly, Congress has done nothing to restrict channel bundling, which continues to inflate revenues for certain sports. Legislators like sports and they don’t want to do anything that might create a backlash among sports fans who vote. If “channel bundling” were declared illegal and sports fans had to pay the full cost of all sports channels, it would have a significant negative impact on revenues going to cable and satellite providers, media companies, and sports organizations. The income of professional leagues, the NCAA, and Division I universities would decline and the media-sports landscape in the United States would change. For this reason, channel bundling will continue unless there is organized public resistance from people who don’t watch sports on television.

People who object to bundling high-cost sports channels with other channels preferred by viewers who do not watch sports say that ESPN should play by the rules of the free market, but neither sports fans nor the people who control sports agree. They may publicly praise free-market capitalism, but they don’t want a free market to interfere with massive subsidies for their sports-related pleasure and profits.

The marriage between sports and the media will certainly face challenges in the future. Cable cutting and steaming continue, especially among young people. It will be interesting to see how these marriage partners adjust as the media landscape changes around them. A divorce is not likely, but there may be several affairs that will influence their relationship.