

Sports Television and the Continuing Search for Alternative Programming

Branden Buehler

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Abstract

The American sports television industry has scrambled to adjust to the loss of live sporting events in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic – a scramble clearly evidenced in programming schedules suddenly filled with replays of older event telecasts. However, rather than focus on the apparent novelty of this type of substitute coronavirus programming, this article instead argues that the loss of live sporting events represents the amplification of a problem television networks have already been grappling with for years: how to fill an ever greater number of outlets with sufficient year-round programming given a finite amount of live events. That in mind, this article proposes that many of the programming strategies that networks have turned to in the midst of the pandemic, including the expanded coverage of transactions (e.g. coverage of NFL free agency) and the increased scheduling of documentaries (e.g. *The Last Dance*), have been familiar extensions of previously established alternative programming solutions.

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The American sports television industry has been deeply affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Like the rest of the American television industry, for instance, sports television has had to adapt to a decline in television advertising, with many brands adjusting to economic turbulence by pulling back on marketing budgets. The most visible effects of the pandemic, however, have manifested in networks' programming schedules. With almost all live sporting events cancelled, networks have searched for alternative programming that might replace the many hours that would previously have been devoted to both live games and related coverage, including shoulder programming like pre- and post-game shows. Indeed, this search for replacement programming has been so visible that it has become the topic of popular humor, with *The Onion* ("ESPN Execs," 2020) jokingly suggesting ESPN would resort to airing blood sports and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (Colbert et al., 2020) jesting ESPN would turn to programs like "Solitary Hill Rolling" and "Old Man Hide-and-Seek."

These sorts of jokes suggest that sports television is for the first time confronting the quandary of what to do without live sporting events. While it is certainly true that the pandemic represents an unprecedented situation, networks have long faced the challenge of finding programming to accompany their live sports holdings. That in mind, this article briefly historicizes several key moments in the continuing search for alternative programming and, in the process, identifies a few of the primary strategies that networks have employed in complementing their live event programming, such as the broadcasting of documentaries and event replays. Building on this historicization, the article then argues that the approaches that networks have taken in replacing their live event coverage in the wake of coronavirus, rather than being completely novel, instead represent relatively familiar programming strategies.

An Abbreviated History of Alternative Programming

Alternative sports television programming has a long history – a long history that underscores the fact that networks have continually confronted hurdles in filling their schedules. A notable early chapter in this history came with the creation of ABC's *Wide World of Sports* in 1961. As Travis Vogan (2018) recounts, the popular series was born when ABC's desire for spring and summer sports programming ran up against Major League Baseball's (MLB) restrictive blackout rules that prevented baseball telecasts from being broadcast in the league's markets. As a solution, the network turned towards "comparatively fringe sports that ABC could deliver to all affiliates no matter their location" (p. 33). The first season of the program, for instance, featured events like the World Hydroplane Championships. Vogan notes the fringe nature of these events played to networks' advantage. "The competitions' generally marginal profile," he writes, "ensured inexpensive broadcast rights and permitted ABC to air featured events retrospectively without most viewers being aware of, or likely even caring about, their results" (p. 33). As Vogan goes on to document, *Wide World of Sports* was soon expanded into a year-long program, with the show helping ABC compensate for the temporary loss of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football rights. Notably, too, ABC was not the only network to make use of the anthology format. For example, *CBS Sports Spectacular* also aired throughout this period, featuring events like the Army-Navy lacrosse game and a United States-Japan gymnastics competition (Brooks & Marsh, 2009).

Although the creation of anthology series like *Wide World of Sports* demonstrates that alternative programming strategies began in the network era, the need for alternative programming only increased with the expansion of cable television starting in the late 1970s. This need was particularly pressing in the earliest days of the multi-channel transition. While the

new cable networks would eventually compete for many of the same sporting rights as the major broadcast networks, they could not initially count on filling their schedules with live sporting events, particularly the most valuable sporting events. For example, when ESPN first launched in 1979, it lacked both the budget and cachet to land the rights to desired properties like National Football League (NFL) games (Vogan, 2015). Indeed, in the early 1980s, promotional material for ESPN carried shades of *Wide World of Sports*, as the network primarily lauded the network's ability to bring audiences the "best in sports programming" through minor events like "Horse Show Jumping" and "Pro Celebrity Golf" ("Programming", ca. 1981).

Beyond the inclusion of these sorts of fringe competitions, however, one can spot other alternative programming strategies in the early ESPN promotional materials. For example, the network also touted its numerous "studio specials" ("Programming", ca. 1981). Significantly, studio shows are relatively inexpensive to produce, as networks can re-use both facilities and talent (Battaglio, 2016; Guthrie, 2013). Unsurprisingly, then, networks have continued to rely on studio programming to fill their programming schedules over the past few decades. To that point, upon their respective launches, NBA TV, the NFL Network, and the MLB Network each dealt with a lack of live game telecasts by constructing a programming schedule built around studio shows (Kunz, 2020). For example, when the MLB Network launched in 2009, its signature studio show, *MLB Tonight*, "started at 5:00 pm Eastern time on most nights and stayed on until the end of West Coast night games some eight hours later" (Kunz, 2020, p. 87). Of course, though, studio shows also maintain a key role in the schedules of networks that do have sizable portfolios of live event rights across a number of different sports, as exemplified by the growing place of debate shows on the schedules of networks like ESPN and FS1 (Serazio, 2019; Tussey, 2020). As sports media reporter John Ourand (2016) noted in the mid-2010s as the rights fees for

live sporting events continued to escalate, “judicious” networks will sometimes even prefer to “produce cheaper studio programming over carrying live sporting events” (para. 5).

Returning to the early ESPN promotional materials, it is also notable that the network promoted itself “as televising *live* what used to be considered avant-garde in the industry” (“Programming”, ca. 1981), including events like the NFL player draft and the Baseball Hall of Fame inductions. As the “avant-garde” phrasing highlights, the broadcasting of an event like the NFL draft – featuring no live sporting action – was in some ways an even more unconventional alternative programming strategy than the turn towards minor competitions. In fact, when ESPN first broached the possibility of televising the league’s draft selection process in 1979, the league voted unanimously against the idea, “fearing no one would watch” (Freeman, 2001, p. 102). The draft – at that point – was considered a relatively insignificant blip on the league’s calendar, attracting little media attention. As Thomas Oates (2004) suggests, “The idea of an obscure cable channel taking what was then a mid-week event that barely merited a mention in the next day’s newspaper must have seemed hardly worth the trouble” (p. 60). By the next year, however, the network had convinced the league to let it carry the event and over the ensuing decades it has remained a staple of ESPN’s portfolio even as the network has acquired the rights to ever more high-profile properties (Oates, 2009). Indeed, the draft has become one of the premier events on the television calendar, having come to generate audience ratings rivaling those of prominent live events, including National Basketball Association (NBA) playoff games (Rosenthal, 2018).

The growth in status of the NFL draft is a particularly notable trend because the event’s elevation is more broadly indicative the increasing importance of transactional sports television as an alternative programming strategy. As the NFL draft telecast became an increasingly popular television event, other leagues, most notably the NBA, also worked with broadcasters to

turn their annual player drafts into television programming. In addition, networks have increasingly oriented studio programming around other transactions, particularly leagues' free agency periods and trade deadlines. Relatedly, too, a number of networks have begun producing programs based around the virtual transactions of fantasy sports. Crucially, the focus on transactions has helped solve a problem that plagues all sports television outlets, but particularly those devoted to single sports: off-seasons. As popular, for instance, as the NFL might be, its season lasts less than half the year. Player transactions, then, have helped generate content when leagues are on break. Notably, too, transactional programming, like other forms of studio television, is relatively cheap to produce.

As cable television continued to expand and fracture over the course of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with more and more sports channels launching and, accordingly, more and more entities competing for live event rights, networks continued to devise other ways to fill their programming schedules. To that point, ESPN itself mushroomed during this period, with ESPN2 debuting in 1993, followed by ESPNNews in 1996, ESPN Classic in 1997, ESPN Deportes in 2004, and ESPNU in 2005. This explosion of outlets necessitated new programming strategies. Vogan (2015) details, for instance, the important role that archives came to play in filling ESPN's schedules. ESPN Classic, for instance, not only replayed events from ESPN's and ABC's expansive libraries – a programming strategy that ensured low operating costs – but also turned to those libraries for other related content. To that point, Vogan highlights the program *Cheap Seats*, which featured comedians Jason and Randy Sklar humorously commenting on older programs from the ESPN and ABC archives – *Wide World of Sports* included. Other new networks also turned to archival footage. For example, when the NFL Network launched in 2003, “101 of its 168 hours per week came from the vaults of NFL Films” (Kunz, 2020, p. 87).

The turn towards historical footage for sources of alternative programming is also evidenced in the surge of documentary production over the past few decades. ESPN, for instance, launched the *SportsCentury* documentary series in 2001. As Vogan (2015) notes, ESPN not only viewed the series as helping to refine the company's brand, but also saw it as creating evergreen content that could be usefully plugged in across the company's many programming schedules. He quotes former ESPN President Steve Bornstein, who commented of *SportsCentury*, "You own the property and you can recirculate it, reuse it, and slice it and dice it. That's smart business" (as cited in Vogan, 2015, p. 61). Similarly, ESPN's next documentary series, *30 for 30*, has also been seen as versatile alternative programming, with ESPN executive Connor Schell describing the films as "evergreen stories that ESPN can broadcast on multiple platforms for years to come" (as cited in Vogan, 2015, p. 140). Bearing that out, Vogan notes that *30 for 30* documentaries have frequently appeared across ESPN's many outlets. ESPN, for instance, regularly broadcasts *30 for 30* documentaries touching on college athletics. ESPN, too, has hardly been alone in looking towards documentaries as alternative programming able to flesh out programming schedules. For example, in the wake of the success of the *SportsCentury* series, the NFL Network launched the documentary series *America's Game: The Super Bowl Champions*, while the Big Ten Network launched the documentary series *Big Ten Icons*. As Vogan suggests, "The NFL Network and Big Ten Network use these series to build a supply of productions" both to cross-promote their other programming and to "serve as filler" (p. 68).

Across the sports television landscape, both national and regional broadcasters face the unending challenge of filling their schedules with sports-related programming. Inevitably, then, the short account above leaves out many of the alternative programming approaches that networks have employed. Nonetheless, what this condensed history makes clear is that sports

television has long been more than just live events and that networks have continually strategized about how to conceive of sports television beyond these events.

Alternative Programming in the Time of Coronavirus

As live sporting events disappeared from networks' schedules in the wake of the coronavirus, networks have found themselves turning towards many of the same strategies they have previously relied on to fill their many hours of programming needs. In the clearest echoes of the joking suggestions from *The Onion* and *The Late Show*, one strategy has entailed airing fringe sports, with ESPN occasionally broadcasting marathons of obscure events like the National Stone Skipping Competition and the US Open Ultimate Championships under the banner of "The Ocho" (a meta-reference to the film *Dodgeball*'s earlier jokes about ESPN's desperation for programming as it expanded its cable presence). This turn towards minor sports recalls ABC's use of *Wide World of Sports* in multiple ways. For one, such events are appealing because their rights are relatively inexpensive. To that point, USA Ultimate, the governing body of ultimate in the United States and the organizer of the US Open Ultimate Championships, does not collect rights fees from ESPN. The organization, prioritizing the sport's visibility, instead splits production costs with the network and then shares sponsorship and advertising revenues (Eisenhood, 2020). Perhaps more significant – particularly in the wake of the coronavirus – is that these events do not depend on liveness. Much as in the case of *Wide World*, viewers can watch these minor events without knowing, or potentially caring, about the final results.

Another familiar strategy that networks have leaned on is an emphasis on studio shows. Although the production norms for many of these shows may have shifted, with talent often broadcasting remotely from their homes, networks have continued to fill their schedules with

news shows and debate shows attempting to generate hours of discussion out of subjects like the timelines for return for various sports and speculative arguments (as exemplified by a debate on FS1's *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* about whether Michael Jordan would “dominate if he played in today's NBA”). Relatedly, transactional television has also had a large role to play during the coronavirus pandemic. In the weeks immediately following event cancellations, NFL free agency and the NFL draft dominated large swaths of sports television schedules. In addition, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) draft in April generated extra coverage and near-record ratings (Valenzuela, 2020), while the MLB draft in June was broadcast in prime-time across multiple networks – ESPN and the MLB Network – for the first time in that event's history (Healey, 2020). Just as networks have valued this sort of programming during leagues' off-seasons for its ability to provide discussion points without necessitating live games, this transactional content has proven to be valuable during this current moment for similar reasons.

Networks have also turned to event replays as an alternative programming solution. This has been a particularly popular strategy for league-owned channels, as the leagues – rather than their broadcast partners – tend to control most replay rights (McCarthy, 2020). Much as Vogan writes of ESPN Classic, the operating costs entailed in the re-airing of older events are presumably quite low. In addition, networks have also turned to documentaries to fill their schedules, with ESPN notably placing Michael Jordan documentary series *The Last Dance* and several *30 for 30* films into a regular Sunday primetime spot. The use of documentaries during the coronavirus pandemic has borne out ESPN executives' earlier arguments about documentaries serving as particularly versatile content. Programmers have not only been able to place older documentaries across their schedules, but newer documentaries have also been used

to cross-promote and supplement other programs. *The Last Dance*, for instance, was spun off into related shoulder programming, including a number of after-show specials.

Soon after live event cancellations began in March, ESPN executive Burke Magnus, argued that the network's adaptation to the coronavirus pandemic would build on the "experience we've had programming over the years" (as cited in Krulewitz, 2020, para. 10). As the aforementioned points indicate, the subsequent weeks have largely confirmed Magnus's prediction. ESPN, as well as other networks, have addressed the loss of live sporting events by turning to the same alternative programming strategies they have long used to complement their live sports holdings. While for many viewers, it has undoubtedly been bizarre to see so many documentaries and event replays across sports television, for networks, the turn towards these sorts of stopgaps has represented a return to tried-and-true strategies.

Assessing Alternative Programming

In the months since the coronavirus set off the waves of event cancellations that redefined the sports landscape, networks have undoubtedly tried some novel approaches to fill the holes in their schedules. Perhaps most notably, networks have committed to esports in new ways. To some degree, networks have already dabbled in esports, as evidenced by Turner's efforts with ELEAGUE and ABC/ESPN's recently expired broadcast deal with Blizzard's Overwatch League, but such efforts aside, esports have continued to be largely associated with online streaming platforms like Twitch (Champlin, 2019; Taylor, 2018). In the wake of coronavirus, however, networks have increasingly relied on esports to fill their schedules. Networks have not only established new deals with existing esports competitions, but also experimented with esports telecasts featuring competitions amongst professional athletes, as in the "NHL Player

Gaming Challenge” telecasts on NBCSN. Furthermore, networks have also begun dipping their toes into a possible future in which fans might also take part in these competitions and thus become “immersed e-participants” (Sturm, in press, p. 12), as exemplified by a collaboration between ESPN and Peloton for a televised “All-Star Ride.” Several of these experiments, particularly the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) “iRacing Pro Invitational” telecasts on Fox/FS1, have proven to be relative ratings successes (Arnold, 2020).

What this article underscores, however, is that as unprecedented as the coronavirus pandemic might be, the sort of novelty exemplified by experiments like these esports telecasts is not fully representative. Rather, networks have largely relied on familiar alternative programming strategies. In this way, the coronavirus has served as a clarifying moment that sheds extra light on sports television programming strategies and, in the process, illuminates several facts about the sports television landscape. For one, it demonstrates that networks have long searched after programming to accompany their live sports holdings – even back to the network era of television. For another, it highlights that even though this search dates back decades, the need for alternative programming has only grown with the explosion of sports television outlets over the past several decades. Indeed, for sports television outlets largely associated with single leagues or sports, like NBA TV, the challenge of filling a schedule without live games is an annual dilemma that stretches for months. To that point, the programming schedule of an outlet like the NFL Network is not currently too dissimilar from what it might look like in a more typical summer.

Moreover, in bringing additional awareness to networks’ programming schedules and the search for alternative programming, the coronavirus pandemic brings extra attention to what gets defined as worthy of television – and, accordingly, what does not. Significantly, women’s sports

have long been largely absent from television (Cooky et al., 2015). The history of alternative programming demonstrates that networks have mainly addressed the limited pool of men's live sporting event rights not by accompanying those telecasts with women's live sporting events, but rather by expanding their coverage of men's sports, as exemplified by the growth in transactional television and the preponderance of documentaries about men's sports (Antunovic & Linden, in press). And just as the coronavirus has seen networks lean on familiar alternative programming strategies, it has also seen them continue to skew towards men's sports. Studio shows, for instance, have continued to focus on men's sports throughout the pandemic and event replays have largely been of men's sports.

Finally, the need for alternative sports programming during the pandemic has reinforced that alternative programming has long been primarily designed as an accompaniment. While there might be a temptation to read networks' recent maneuverings as indicative of future programming trends – signaling, for instance, a larger place for event replays – it is more likely that networks will return such programming to its complementary status as soon as possible. To that point, alternative programming has, with a few notable exceptions such as *The Last Dance*, struggled to garner significant ratings numbers. These struggles, in turn, have contributed to questions about the value of sports television, whether cable subscribers will be further incentivized to “cut the cord,” and relatedly, whether cable companies should be issuing refunds or lowering their rates in response to the absence of live sporting events (Larson & Palmeri, 2020). As New York State Attorney General Letitia James (2020) argued in a letter to cable providers, “Sports channels showing solely reruns and sports video game simulations ... is not what customers bargained for” (para. 5) before further referring to this sort of programming as “the ghost” of the service for which subscribers had signed up. While such language may gloss

over the fact – emphasized in this article – that alternative programming has long played a key role in sports television, it is also undoubtedly true that alternative programming is meant to be just that: an alternative to the implicit primacy of live event coverage.

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