

# What to anticipate in sports media's digital transition game

By Ed Desser and John Kosner

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**T**en years ago, cord cutting was not a thing. Subs were still growing, Netflix was mostly DVDs by mail, Amazon was a retailer (there was no “TNF” streaming package), Disney was just Disney, Fox hadn’t launched FS1/FS2 or sold its RSNs, and Instagram didn’t exist. With this kind of industry change, what should we expect a decade from now?

Sports betting is not only legal in many states, but gambling via mobile devices is pervasive. The result: Betting volume and users have exploded. Placing a sports bet is as easy as ordering an Uber, integrated into apps that sports fans already use regularly. As a result, many have at least a \$5-\$10 wager on the day’s events.

Taking advantage of this new demand, sports media platforms (some now owned by tech companies) are distributing an ever-increasing number of events from all over the globe, in multiple languages and with increasing customization (choose your announcers, pick your statistical overlays from official league advanced data). The model is triple-revenue stream — either pay TV or DTC with advertising — plus a cut of “the action!”

Enabling this boom in coverage for all but the biggest events, sports networks have embraced autonomous live-game production, moved the “TV truck” into the cloud, crowdsourced announcers and rediscovered live international events and once-niche sports that can be scheduled outside of prime time, creating 24/7 availability.



Sports is now available to fans “Live Live,” via 6G and 1-gigabyte pipes in sub-second latency, dramatically improving today’s non-synchronous experience. Social media already enabled the “virtual” sports bar, but now we can watch a synchronized feed with our friends around the globe simultaneously, placing prop bets and participating in chats and polls.

You needn’t turn on your TV to experience all this. Just put on some AR (Augmented Reality) glasses. Transform a wall into the biggest of big screens. At an event, the glasses offer an unlimited selection of information and services— from the venue and worldwide for an immersive experience.

Indeed, all of us — fans, teams and players — are now content-producing platforms, placing bets, choosing our experiences, transacting in multiple ways. Everyone sports a digital avatar, themed by team, league, city or player affinity. Twitch and YouTube have transformed today’s player fan clubs by offering IRL (In Real Life) live feeds from virtually every elite athlete on Earth. Everything is available for a micropayment or a subscription, similar to video games today.

The impact of gaming will be felt everywhere. Fans will expect more frequent software upgrades similar to the meta changes in esports. Today’s offseason “competition committee” rules changes will be moth-balled, as major leagues adopt swifter in-season rules changes to address fan and player feedback. The biggest changes: faster games and an emphasis on real-time information, especially involving highlights.

Nearly all sports (except Olympics, NCAA Tournament) come to market re-thought and re-structured for a new world where rights holders will be anxious to grow revenue while simultaneously serving the now thirtysomething “Nevers” who still don’t buy traditional TV, giving rise to a hybrid (linear and streaming) model. Today’s pay TV bundle becomes even more sports-centric, with fewer households paying significantly higher fees for major league programming. Smaller sports have moved to OTT, combining direct access to small thriving communities, merchandise and events, likely on a platform designed and managed by a tech giant. What technology gives, it also takes away, as everyone struggles to find solutions to rampant digital piracy.



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Rights grants for the biggest sports have become global, favoring the planet's two most popular ones, international football (aka soccer) and basketball. We expect esports to grow, with its biggest events televised, but most of its distribution is not via TV. In the U.S., NFL and college football will remain major factors, in part because of their popularity with bettors.

Ironically, the busy, graphic-heavy scroll of today's sports TV networks will become pristine, fully immersive viewer experiences. No more crawls, pop-up "toast" or "elevators," and burn-ins. Tomorrow's TV experience transforms the viewer to "being there." If in need of scores or stats, fans can easily add them locally or via a second (or third) screen, without cluttering and distracting from the vivid 16K viewing experience.

Unlimited bandwidth will facilitate virtual channels, replacing traditional linear ones. The experience will be more like a multiplex theater: No longer will an event be truncated or joined in progress. Every event will be shown complete and integrated with its related pregame or postgame show. Overtime won't abridge the next live event. Fans will be better served, provided personalized curated viewing and funneled to the next event just like an auto-start video clip.

Not quite nirvana, but close: Tomorrow's sports experience will be vastly improved, integrated, enriched and customized in these ways and many more. The changes are already starting, and we can't wait!

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