

Review

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FROM LINEAR HABITS TO NON-LINEAR CONSUMPTION OF SPORTS CONTENTS

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Abstract: The development of digital technology and new media has influenced the creation of viewer and listener habits. Although the emergence of digital services and online media predicted the decrease in interest in traditional electronic media and linear programme following, it did not happen. Time has proved that linear television has not become out-of-date, but its rich history and unique appeal of direct broadcasting and TV spectacles can still mobilise worldwide audience that has never been greater. Namely, parallel to the development of digital services linear contents presence has continued to increase as well. The aim of this paper is the analysis of apparent forms in the placement of sports contents through linear programmes, along with the analysis of digital services and, therefore, the movement of viewers/listeners, i.e. the analysis of the relation between user needs and new user habits. Sports podcasts on digital platforms are gaining more and more popularity because they overcome numerous limitations imposed by televisions and online contents consumption. Beside all that, the viewers in Serbia currently have at their disposal more than thirty domestic TV channels, and all of them have their own audience.

Keywords: sports TV channels, direct broadcast, sports podcasts, user habits, delayed watching

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Introduction

The largest global streaming platform Netflix broke the record on November 15th 2024, when the box match between Mike Tyson and Jake Paul simultaneously was viewed by 65 million viewers worldwide via their smart devices. This, as they called it, „the most awaited for“ match between legendary Mike Tyson and the youtuber who has taken up boxing professionally, was a technical challenge for the digital platform that has 282,7 million of registered users worldwide. The interest in the long awaited for and once even cancelled match, mobilised the viewers in different time zones so as to watch the live broadcast from AT&T Stadium in Arlington in the American Federal State of Texas. This “mega event” was distributed owing to the global operator Joe Hand Promotions, apart from Netflix subscribers and in over six thousand restaurants and bars in the United States of America. This has broken the record in the half a century long history of this company which distributes sports broadcasts for viewing in public spaces.

This and similar live broadcasts, attracting the attention of dozens of millions of viewers worldwide, make the part of the new business model. Actually, the largest video streaming platform in the world in the first half of 2022 marked the drop of the number of subscribers, as well as a drop of its revenues, hence the live sports event broadcast presents the new business model to attract new users and activate the “dormant” ones. Judging by the effects, the other equally important tool is advertising, via which come remarkable 50 per cent of the newly registered users within the last two years, since it was put in use. (Netflix)

Subscribers of this SVoD (Subscribe Video on Demand) service have confirmed the global trend that beside non-linear contents consumption which is available at every moment, at any place and via any smart device, the power of live sports event broadcast still remains to be the greatest magnet for the audience.

Albeit the development of the Internet and digital technology has fully responded to the needs of our contemporary viewer audience, certain habits do not seem to change and especially not when it comes down to sports. Due to digital technology that has brought live sports event broadcast to perfection, live TV spectacle and the need for its consumption has stimulated the advancement of broadcast industry and specialised sports TV channels alike. On the other hand, delayed programme contents watching, adjusted to daily routines, is on the side of interactive services, which are the product of the new media. That is the origin of attractive non-linear services: VoD - video on demand, AoD – audio on demand, SVoD, SAoD – services on demand with subscription, EPG – electronic programme guide – for delayed linear contents watching in the programme schedule (Catch up). Video streaming platforms, as well as OTT (Over The Top) digital platforms (on which most of the mentioned services are present, one of

such being OTT platform RTS Planeta), apart from television formats, offer special programme audio-visual contents produced exclusively for online consumers. One of the formats expanding since its conception in 2004 is podcast. This non-linear content attracts the growing attention and up to a point complicates the understanding of examining the viewing habits of the younger population from the point of keeping the attention span, which has drastically decreased under the influence of social networks, while, on the other hand, it can last for several hours in the case of a chosen podcast.

„Watching traditional TV channels has almost disappeared among the younger viewers, where 90% of the young between 18 and 24 favour their preferred streaming service. The viewers aged 16 to 24 on average spend only 53 minutes a day watching a traditional TV show – which is the two-third drop in the last decade – and seven times fewer than among those who are 65 or above. Those above the age of 65 still spend a third of their awake day, almost six hours, watching TV emission, which is somewhat more than a decade ago.“(Fatemi, 2022) The time spent by online audience on the Internet, according to the latest global report, goes in favour of viewing video contents on social networks and video streams, in total more than 330 minutes, whereas listening to podcasts daily lasts 49 minutes. (Kemp, 2024)

Live and delayed spectacle

From their day one of their market life and linear emission, traditional media have had their stronghold in entertainment programmes and, particularly, sports contents. The first live sports broadcast in the world was the broadcast of a box match on the American radio station KDKA, on April 11th, 1921. On April 7th, 1929 the listeners of Radio Belgrade had the live opportunity to follow the first sports broadcast of the football match BSK – Yugoslavia. The initiative stemmed from Bora Jovanović, the sports editor of “Politika”. The match was live commented on by reporter Rade Stoilo-vić, a renowned Belgrade lawyer. This broadcast, which took place only two weeks after the beginning of regular radio programme emitting, presented at that moment one-of-a-kind technical and technological achievement that radio enthusiasts managed to accomplish after almost five years of gradual mastering broadcast techniques, contents creation, and programme broadcast through service information, news, commercials and live concerts starting with the first experimental broadcast on October 1st, 1924. At that time, there were few radio receivers, so neighbours and friends used to gather around those rare radio devices only to listen to the lively re-porters, one of them later on being Radivoje Raća Marković, one of the legends of sports radio journalism. Thanks to digital technology and, in this case OTT platform RTS Planeta, contents consumers can hear the broadcasts of sports events from the history of Radio Belgrade Sports Editorial Office, just like the broadcasts that were done in cooperation with Radio Zagreb

- one such was, for example, the live commenting of the match Yugoslavia against Paraguay, held at the World Championship in Sweden in 1958, which Radivoje Rača Marković and Mladen Delić together commented on.²

British public media service commenced its regular broadcast in 1936 and the very next year it offered the viewers the first broadcasts of sports events, starting with the box match between England and Ireland, broadcast on February 4th, 1937, then ensued the final of Football Association Challenge Cup on April 30th, 1938. "The Wembley match was between Preston North End and Huddersfield. With fewer than 10,000 TV sets in the country at the time and 93,000 present spectators, more people saw the match at the stadium than at home. However, that was the starting point of what today television production is all about, the thing that broadcasters are fighting for today and that are worth millions of pounds to the teams." (BBC)

The first live broadcast of a sports match in the USA was followed in 1946 by 150,000 viewers via 5,000 TV sets in the country. NBC media network broadcast the box match between Joe Louis and Billy Conn from the Yankee Stadium.

The history of sports TV broadcasts in the region started quite soon after the beginning of TV programme broadcasting. "The first live broadcast in Yugoslavia was conducted by TV Zagreb in 1959. That was the broadcast of the match Yugoslavia – Italy 4:1, and the commentator was legendary sports journalist Mladen Delić. The first reportage van arrived in Belgrade in 1961, it was the black-and-white RCA with four cameras. It was in that same year that TV Belgrade carried out a live broadcast for the very first time: the viewers could see on their small screens the eternal derby between Zvezda and Partizan." (Ćitić, 2023)

Beside the fact that sport fans would definitely adore to watch delayed TV broadcasts (catch up), the restraining circumstances are licenced rights for the placement of the TV contents on digital platforms for watching on demand. Alternatively, sports programmes of the other sorts are available, such as documentary, educational, scientific and even drama contents have been inspired by real sports events from the history of sport and legendary sportspersons. Viewer habits concerning watching these TV formats on demand are on the side of drama movie and series programmes, hence, for illustration, the most watched contents on RTS Planete are drama series Montevideo, Bog Te Video, whereas on Netflix streaming platform, according to the statistics for the first half of 2024, among the sports contents with the most viewings, of remarkable 12 million, had documentary Netflix series Formula 1: Drive to Survive.(Netflix, 19.9.2024).

² Available at: <https://rtsplaneta.rs/en/video/183502/listing/1053/radivoje-raca-markovic-i-mladen-delic-jugoslavija-paragvaj-3-3>

“With the development of television, the conditions of sports event broadcasting have been changing. Technology development has simultaneously influenced the changes in sports, so sports event broadcasts have evolved over time - towards realising greater potentials of the sport itself and towards the profits of larger TV houses. (Ratković, Penezić, 2024:109)

As far as the interest of online viewers is concerned, it is significantly greater in live broadcasts of sports events streamed on digital platforms or available within the frame of linear TV channel streams, rather than in TV shows on demand. The global historic record achieved by the live stream of Mike Tyson and Jake Paul box match can be outdone only by a similar global sports mega event on a digital platform of the same or similar capacity.

Traditionally, the most attractive sports broadcasts globally are live sports broadcasts of football matches, especially the matches of World Football Championships. This event is available via all ways of distribution – terrestrial, cable, IPTV, DTH and via the Internet. Thus, according to FIFA data, the WFC final in Qatar 2022 was watched live on TV by 1,5 billion viewers worldwide. Nevertheless, considerable attention in the report was dedicated to the consumers who followed the WFC in Qatar via social networks and digital platforms. “Almost six billion engagements on social media, with 262 billion of cumulative reach on all platforms.” (Inside FIFA, 2023)

Non-linear is also interactive

„New media are interactive. Unlike the old media, where the order of presentation was unchangeable, the user now can enter the interactions with the media stuff. In that procedure, the user can choose what elements to demonstrate, what path to follow and in that way they every time create a unique work. That is how the user becomes the co-author of the work itself.” (Manović, 2015:97) One of the main trump cards of digital media that has been the major threat to linear traditional media since its very beginning is the interactivity. The use of this service functionality allows the user to plan and save the time, to view the missed contents, to ask from the platform to be informed when certain contents would be available, to create one's own “watch” list, which is called differently on different platforms, from “viewing list”, “favourite contents” and “my contents” to “favourites”. Apart from the possibility to create one's own choice, non-linear contents consumption opens the possibility of so-called binge-watching. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word binge in English represents the opportunity to exaggerate in some activity. In that sense, the expression binge-watching has become domesticated owing to the new consumption needs and habits. Entire seasons of TV shows, documentary series and other thematically related contents are being binge-watched. This necessity has been recognised by digital plat-

forms, so their promotional activities get based on the call for bingeing the favourite contents. For example, when inviting to binge-watch 19 new sports documentaries and documentary series, Netflix claims: „when it comes to watching great sports documentaries, the season never ends“.

Judging by the global annual research of digital trends in 2023, 1 out of 3 Internet users aged 16 to 64 currently pays the subscription of movie or TV streaming every month. As a result of that, as they state, it will be interesting to find out if the initiation of the new level of subscription supported by advertisements has a significant influence on the streaming share in total TV time. The research has also shown that “conventional” TV, i.e. broadcast and TV channels, still make more than half of total world TV time. Following TV contents via streaming platforms in 2023 was 45,3%, which is 3% more if compared to 2022, while in 2013 it was 25,7%. Meanwhile, GVI data reveal that more than 9 out of 10 Internet users able to work in major world economies have already started to follow TV and movie content streams via the Internet, so that there is not much space left for the degree of adopting the new ways of contents reception to continue to grow. According to this research, 90,9% of the world population aged 16 to 64 are already following the streams on the Internet. In the USA that percentage goes as high as 97,9%, while it is the lowest in Japan - 60,9%. (Kemp, 2023)

Response to public user needs

The revolution on media market caused by contemporary information-communication systems has had the consequence of adapting the traditional media to the new “online” market, as well as the appearance of active contents consumers. The information and media product have become merchandise, consumerism has ruled over where the media observe their viewers, the audience, auditorium as their contents consumers and the target group for the placement of commercials. The new consumerism imposes new habits, along with the new potential market for advertisers, which crucially influences media business models, particularly in sports. Beside allowing linear programme contents viewing, they don't miss the opportunity to make the programme available, both delayed and on demand, which poses some additional expense for the licence buyer of, for example, some sports broadcast, but it is a relevant trump card in the digital age for collecting some extra income, meeting the needs of user conformism to make the contents accessible at any moment at every place, as a chance to attract new, younger audience, which, according to the statistics, mark the decrease in watching TV programmes, even sports contents: “67% of Generation Z, born in the last decade of the 20th century, prefer watching sports on a mobile device, claiming accessibility as the main reason. This is compared to 54% of Millennials, born in the 1980s and early 1990s, and only 23% of Generation X, which mark the majority

of those who are currently in the decision-making positions“. (Sport and Bussines, 2023) When it comes to Generation Z, being the one most oriented towards mobile smart devices, only 1% of the examinees is ready to view sports broadcast on TV at a local bar. They are the most keen ones on short video clips associated with sports on social networks, as well as on “behind the screen” contents on the lives of sportspersons, which they follow non-linearly on demand. As for live broadcasts, it is positive that 80% of those participating in the research conducted throughout the USA and Great Britain have said that they have watched sports three or more times every week, so they are still engaged, only via various sorts of media. (Sport and Bussines, 2023)

The younger audience is ready to follow live e-sports rather than traditional sports. “More than 6 out of every 10 Internet users watching e-sports are between 16 and 35 years of age. The average age of traditional sports fans is 50, while it is 26 for e-sports. The fans of e-sports are dominantly male, though the female audience has been growing as well“. (Alivia, 2021) According to the Twitch platform, offering live e-sports contents, during the year of 2020, they marked the trillionth minute of the viewed contents, which is as much as 78% more than for the previous year.

The young, especially Generation Z, to whom Internet tools are closer than paper and pen, and even TV screens, which are perceived by them as some conservative products, it is a challenge to draw and motivate so as to follow media contents, to which they are otherwise exposed about 7 hours per day. Apart from being selective, demanding and exclusively satisfying their own current interest, they are not particularly sentimental and loyal, so they cannot be trusted for sure as the future target group on which the survival of television will at some point depend on. Their personalised needs are mostly followed and the favours are mostly being done to them. The audience is no longer being waited for to come in front of the TV screen, but it is being “targeted” with the help of the contents on social networks. The attention is “caught” via the Internet, especially through the applications and platforms that have gained global availability and popularity, such as YouTube and TikTok. One of the main aims of big media systems is to attract, keep and take care of future TV viewers who are focused on what they want. Furthermore, it is a challenge to attract and keep the entire TV audience, other than the elderly population, who belong to the group of loyal TV audience.

“The second screen” problem

Back in the early 2010s, media theorists recognised the new phenomenon with the media contents consumers, the so-called media multitasking, or divided user attention span in the multiplatform era. The environment of information pandemic, backed up by technical-technological possibilities, has brought rise to the need of TV contents consumers to get additional information, which are not available in following linear

programmes. It has become a frequent phenomenon to search for the additional information on the phone while some content is on-going. In fact, hand in hand with the emergence of digital television and the possibility for traditional television to become interactive, they created the fundamentals for the so-called connected terrestrial television or HbbTV. This service presented the revolutionary solution for the hitherto programme followed via TV antenna, but now digitally broadcast, with the basic linear offer to get the possibility of access to non-linear contents. This endeavour was an attempt for the viewer to be kept close to the TV screen. In 2014, there were around 70% viewers following TV programme while simultaneously being engaged on “the second screen”, i.e. a smart device, mainly their mobile phone. “Instead of being resigned and accepting that 70% of people simultaneously watch television and send e-mails or search the Internet, why shouldn't these two screens be joined into an inseparable pair and on the other screen (since television has come up with the whole game, it is clear that TV set in the system is called the main screen) some complementary contents could be shown or it could offer the use of the other screen for the activities connected with what is going on on the main screen.” (Todorović Luj, 2014:143) For example, pressing the red button on the remote controller while watching a live sports event broadcast, the viewers can be provided with the available statistics about the players, club, national team, championship and other interesting curiosities, such as the links towards the Internet addresses thematically related to the linear programme.

The original problem regarding the synchronisation of two screens has lost its race to the progressive development of online offer. The expansion of the Internet offer, online media, platforms and applications has not decreased the statistics of “the second screen” and dispersed attention. On the contrary, according to the 2019 data, the attention of TV audience is divided at 77% viewers, more precisely - 83% aged 18 to 34, 85% from 35 to 54 and 66% inside the population of those older than 55. (MNTN Research, 2019)

According to the research conducted in the USA in 2022, almost half of the viewers (49%) use two or three screens while watching football and 69% use the other screen — usually a mobile device or a laptop — after seeing an advertisement to find out more pieces of information about the product or service that have stirred their interest. As given in the research, these data point at the existence of opportunities for brands and agencies to improve the engagement of consumers and to return the investments in the business by advertising on different screens. “When viewers want to discover more about a product or service advertised on TV, 34% of them use the other screen to explore the web location or brand application, 30% of them use the search engine and 19% visit the e-commerce site. Some individuals use two screens (30%) or three and more screens (19%) while watching football in order to use social networks simultaneously (45%), watch another match (39%) or to check statistics and points (34%)”. (Advocado, 2022)

For a decade, media theorists have been proclaiming the approach that it is no longer sufficient for the audience just to be present on certain channel “but it is necessary to be preoccupied, involved, actively engaged, to have their attention maintained, or to allow them to split the attention simultaneously to more platforms, in the manner that such distractedness be the process easily controlled, guided and managed by media producers. It seems to be certain that the emotional aspect is a relevant part of media multitasking – media contents consumer must be emotionally involved, the connection with the contents must be strong, motivation to follow the contents and complement it with the engagement on some other platform must be high. (Martinoli, 2013)

Conclusion

Having considered the predominance of live TV spectacle being increasingly more present through the rich TV offer of live sports event broadcasts on general and specialised sports TV channels, as well as the rich online offer, the answer to the long-standing trend of TV audience “drainage” to the Internet or dividing their attention during their following linear TV programmes with online contents, partly lies within the reigns of personalised offer. A step towards fulfilling user needs in terms of new TV channels is the formation of a specialised programme offer, so the audience purposefully will go to the TV channels which offer the contents they are interested in. This satisfies the fundamental need of segmented TV audience. Certainly, the most attractive sports events that the majority of audience is interested in ought to be available to the entire audience through the basic programme offer. “Speaking of contemporary television and the benefits it brings in terms of the possibilities of optimising the consumption of its contents, such as watching on demand, delayed watching, contents filtering, the impression is that traditional models still prevail, at least when it comes down to sports. Namely, from the point of view of live sports event broadcast, which probably present the essential link between the world of media and sports, broadcast, or watching live events, in the foreseeable future definitely will not get a possible surrogate in the mentioned new models of following TV contents or in any other digital simulation.”(Ratković, Penezić, 2024:110)

On the other side, access in the online environment should be focused on personalisation. “In the post-industrial environment every citizen can construct their own lifestyle and “opt for” their ideology from the vast, though not infinite number of offers. In lieu of pushing the same items/information to the mass audience, marketing experts are now trying to target individual persons, and the logic of the new media technology reflects that new social logic. Every visitor of a web-location automatically receives their location version that was momentarily created from the data base.” (Manović, 2015:83) The algorithms on social networks and in digital advertising at large recognise the advantages of precise targeting the audience. Moreover, the management of digital

platforms has recognised this trend with the consumers, so the use of artificial intelligence is more and more available through the tool for targeted personalised recommendation of contents, so-called recommendation engine.

Traditional media still cherish the hope that they have succeeded in catching up with the new media and that they will survive on the complex multimedia market. With the offer of their TV channels through digital streaming platforms for live and delayed watching, they have increased their chances and this modality of programme distribution makes them available on smart TV sets as well. It sounds encouraging that, according to the annual 2023 report of the Statistical Office, 97,3% of households in Serbia possess a TV set.

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