An Attention Economy Perspective of Professional Sports

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The core of the attention economy perspective rests on the assumption that, in the digital age, with a plethora of information produced every second, information gradually becomes less of a scarce resource than the human attention required to process said information (Simon, 1969; Davenport and Beck, 2001). Thus, content that can attract mass attention becomes increasingly valued by both traditional and new media platforms that sell attention to those craving it (Lanham, 2006). The most popular content includes TV series, movies, entertainment shows, and sporting contests, with the latter long-recognized for its ability to deliver large audiences (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012). Therefore, in the “marketplace of attention” (Webster, 2014), fierce competition for professional sports content has resulted in skyrocketing broadcasting rights fee paid by media providers. As Mason (1999) argued, the product the media buys from the professional sports leagues or teams is “not the uncertainty of game outcomes, but a programming option through which air time can be sold to advertisers” (Mason, 1999, pp. 410).

The following paper takes an attention economy perspective in order to discuss several changes to the relationship between professional sports, the media, and fans. The construction of the attention economy model of professional sports is based on a “dual product” market (Webster, 2014, pp. 60) where on one hand, the professional sports leagues and teams sell sports products and services directly to sports fans, gaining gate revenues (Mason, 1999); on the other hand, professional sports leagues and teams sell the attention of the fans to the media and sponsors alike, obtaining broadcast rights revenue and sponsorship income (Mason, 1999). This creates a dynamic environment where the demand from one side increases demand on the other, while simultaneously increasing the visibility of both.

This process has several implications for professional sports leagues, fans, and the media. First, in the age of the attention economy, various media platforms that constitute the “marketplace of attention” (Webster, 2014) form a kind of “attention bank” where public attention gets diverted, concentrated, and reallocated (Goldhaber 1997). In turn, this has implications for “stars”—who live where the spotlight goes and increasingly serve as a focal point in society (Goldhaber 1997). In the attention economy model of professional sports, the core product then shifts from “the uncertainty of game outcomes” (Mason, 1999) to “star players” or the “celebrity players”, as the significance of the uncertainty of game outcomes or even the game itself might be overshadowed by the athletes due to their ability to attract mass attention. The implication here is that in the age of attention economy, the players not only are “assets” who contribute to produce “the uncertainty of game outcomes” (Mason, 1999), they themselves emerge as a core product of the league or the team—the games themselves become a by-product. With this in mind, future research should explore the extent to which media demand is driven by the desire to showcase specific athletes rather than the games themselves, and the extent to which athletes are aware of their role in this demand.

A second implication relates to user agency (Dijck, 2009), or more precisely, sport fans’ agency. Traditionally, fans have been treated as passive consumers (e.g. Shilbury et al., 2009); according to an attention economy perspective, they are co-producers of the professional sports products. Fans are the source of the “currency” (Goldhaber 1997)—that is, the attention they generously give to their favorite sports is what drives the demand for sport from media providers. How long fans are willing to give attention, and to what extent they want to engage themselves in attentive activities ultimately determines the value of a particular program. With the coming of the age of new media and networked society (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, 2013), which is characterized by an open, fragmented and fraying market place of attention rife with autonomous agents producing their own forms of “contents” through differentiated platforms—whether they be Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or video game consoles (Webster, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013)—fans will enjoy an unprecedented level of agency which will enable them to direct their attention more fluidly across different media platforms. As the attention economy of the professional sports becomes more dynamic and unpredictable in the new digital age (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, 2013), research dedicated to strategies of
how to manage fans’ collective attention will be equally, if not more important as those of how to attract mass attention (Real, 2009).

Third, in the digital age of the network society, control of the content by the professional sports leagues or teams through partnering with a few exclusively selected mass media providers has become more complicated due to the unauthorized streaming of sports content throughout the internet, and the creation of related content by fans (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, 2013). Professional sports organizations have fought to exert control over the production and distribution of content (Milne, 2016), as well as the means of consumption of mediated content by fans (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). However, behaviors such as “live unicast” or “peer-to-peer streaming” are almost impossible to fully regulate and control (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, pp. 36), which leads to escalating tensions between the professional sports and the fans whose attention is the very foundation of demand for sports content (Gratton & Solberg, 2007; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). The alienation of the fans might cause devastating long-term consequences for those professional sports leagues (Zheng, 2017), as leagues try to restrict fans from developing their own content related to their favorite teams and players. From an attention economy perspective, which views attention as the ultimate currency (Goldhaber 1997), any fan behavior that can generate additional attention towards the game or the league itself should be considered beneficial. So at least in terms of the extent to which the broadest public attention can be concentrated, and the highest possibility of content exposure can be achieved, some of the behaviors that might have traditionally been deemed as intellectual property infringement must be exploited to the advantage of the professional sports leagues or teams alike. Future research should thus explore how leagues can partner with fans to develop new forms of sports related content that continues to grow the attention afforded to sports leagues and ultimately determines its value in the attention economy (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Kirton & David, 2013).

This paper introduces an attention economy perspective to not only better understand the nature of the relationship between sports leagues, the media, and fans, but also see the collaborative relationships between professional sports and its fans that have and should emerge as sport competes in an increasingly competitive market for attention.