

Prize fight over live-streamed sport will go on long after the final bell sounds

Written by David Rowe, Professor of Cultural Research, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University



Nearly 300,000 people tuned into two live streams on Facebook of the Anthony Mundine-Danny Green fight. AAP/David Mariuz

When a Brisbane boxing fan who paid \$59.95 for “live and exclusive” viewing of last Friday’s Danny Green v Anthony Mundine boxing match [streamed it off his TV](#) through a smartphone and Facebook Live, he landed quite a blow beneath Foxtel’s belt. An estimated 300,000 [tuned in](#) via this and another unauthorised stream.

This is the latest skirmish over premium live sport in Australia. Foxtel’s high-priced oligopolistic control over Australian pay TV has again clashed with the demands of sport fans and the increasingly sophisticated capture and relay technologies available to them.

In a constantly changing TV sport environment, pay-TV providers have many more bruising bouts ahead of them – unless they let go of their conventional model of TV-based subscription and move to multiple platforms.

Foxtel scores an own goal

The curious feature of [Foxtel’s response](#) to this purported act of mass piracy is the surprise at its occurrence, and its ham-fistedness. The [national coverage](#) accorded to Foxtel’s open threat to sue the [“two ordinary blokes”](#) who streamed the Mundine-Green fight achieved twin outcomes.

First, it elevated the profile of the two men, Brett Hevers and Darren Sharpe, who have become unlikely symbols of online resistance against perceived corporate greed.

As half-owner of Foxtel, News Corp Australia’s flagrant [use of its news media syndication](#) to canvass five-year jail terms and \$60,000 fines for the live-streamers was a self-administered

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punch by Goliath in his contest with David.

Foxtel's decision to charge so much for access to the fight contrasts with [Hevers's claim](#) that \$10 would have been a fairer amount to pay. This is especially the case as pay-per-view subscribers would already have incurred the cost of ongoing subscriptions to be in a position to watch it.

Second, that Facebook Live and similar services can be used to bypass restrictions on subscription-based television content has now been advertised in headlines across Australia. A previously low-profile part of the [informal media economy](#) is now common knowledge.

Almost the [exact same scenario](#) unfolded in the US just two years earlier during HBO and Showtime's live pay-per-view coverage of the blockbuster fight between Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao. The only difference was the brand of the smartphone app used to circumvent the control of broadcast rights holders over access to the fight. The Twitter-owned Periscope service was the live-streaming app of choice among users on that occasion.

At least HBO and Showtime had the good sense to [limit their public statements](#) on the use of Periscope during the fight.

Foxtel's errors are compounded by Facebook's efforts to build a clear association between sport consumption and its Live service in the minds of millions of users. A reported US\$4.4 million [has been paid](#) to popular athletes, teams and sports media companies around the world to create video content for Facebook Live.

The combination of Foxtel, Hevers, Sharpe and [300,000 viewers on Facebook](#) during the Green-Mundine fight has added to this push. The stage could be set for a knock 'em down, drag 'em out corporate tussle between Facebook and Foxtel.

Can Foxtel keep up?

Despite these missteps, it would be a mistake to assume that Foxtel is powerless against

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so-called digital disruptors.

Increased marketing of the Foxtel Play streaming service, particularly following the recent closure of Presto, and the offer of a bundled broadband service to new subscribers are indicative of an evolving business model designed to deliver content across multiple screens.

Actions are also being taken to counter rising competition from operators in the telecommunications sector.

When Optus [seized the rights](#) to the English Premier League from Foxtel for its mobile and broadband platforms, Foxtel contracted with beIN Sports to carry some premium European football and games on delay, and other material from the channels of six leading English Premier League clubs – at [no extra cost](#) to its subscribers.

So, Foxtel isn't averse to giving away sport content when it suits its commercial interests. In this case, it did it to prevent the churning of paying customers to other services.

Rumbles like the one over the Mundine-Green live stream will no doubt proliferate. This technical knockout comes as Foxtel and other sport content owners transition from a service originally based on a big TV in the living room or the pub to a multiplicity of anytime, anywhere viewing platforms.

These owners won't just have to deal with the spread of the NBN. They also must appreciate that the use of digital media technology is at least as much about capturing and uploading mobile content – say from the stands of a football stadium or the seats surrounding a boxing ring – as it is about receiving an expensive one-way communication provided by someone else.

Finally, there were other, non-pugilistic sport viewing opportunities on Australian TV last Friday night. People might have watched the A-League football match between Brisbane Roar and Sydney FC on free-to-air SBS.

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Or, of greater historical significance, they could have resisted the dubious pleasure of paying \$59.95 to watch [Eddie McGuire](#) host the boxing in favour of witnessing – without charge – the opening match of the AFL women's league between his Collingwood team and Carlton on Seven.

Women's sport is on the rise on free-to-air TV. Anti-siphoning laws continue to prevent many of the major sports events in Australia from becoming the [exclusive property of subscription TV](#). And then there is the constant, rapid development of disruptive technologies and services.

All together, this means the pay-TV sector needs to adapt quickly in appealing to subscribers whose attention now moves freely between different screens.

David Rowe has received funding from the Australian Research Council to support research relating to this article: Struggling for Possession: The Control and Use of Online Media Sport (with Brett Hutchins, DP0877777); 'A Nation of "Good Sports"? Cultural Citizenship and Sport in Contemporary Australia' (DP130104502), and 'Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics' (with Tony Bennett et al, DP140101970).

Brett Hutchins has received funding from the Australian Research Council to support research relating to this article: The Mobile Media Sport Moment: Investigating the Pivotal Role of Sport in Mobile Media Content, Markets and Technologies (FT130100506; <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mobilemediasport/>) , and Struggling for Possession: The Control and Use of Online Media Sport (with David Rowe, DP0877777).

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