**On the ball | The EFL streaming service brings the away fan home**

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The English Football League’s (EFL) announcement that it will be offering a live streaming service for international fans of the competition is a smart move and one that will resonate across an array of its stakeholders.

While the new coverage will bring additional measurable reach and scale to the competition, that is not the driving rationale. This deal is primarily about delivering to, and importantly monetising, a group of super-fans who until now have been pretty much untapped. These fans are the ones who are demonstrably passionate about their club and they want a stronger, weekly connection to its fortunes. Yet their lack of proximity to their team means that for the vast majority of the season, the live matchday experience of these fans has historically relied on a low-fi combination of audio streams and text updates. They want, and are willing to pay for, more.

Of course the service provides a mismatch for those fans in the UK who can’t watch every game on TV. But the league will argue that those fans are already well served (and monetised). They can watch some live games on TV of course, but availability of tickets is rarely a problem for fans craving the live matchday experience. Nevertheless, the league and its clubs will be very wary of the potential risk of cannibalisation from fans illegally streaming content back to the UK.

The EFL announcement comes in a week that Twitter announced its own pivot further into live content provision, with a set of sports and entertainments deals including MLB, NFL, WNBA, Live Nation and others. Whilst both the EFL’s and Twitter’s over the top (OTT) models provide a means for rights holders to increase the availability of their content, by opening up its live coverage *via its own platform* the EFL gets a double whammy. It gives international fans a legal and paid for means to practice their fanship, whilst at the same time identifying those individuals really clearly to the league and their clubs.

It is the combination of direct revenues plus ownership of fan data that the league is betting will give them the advantage as the service rolls out. For the EFL, live games and highlights on this platform will surely be just the start. If lessons from other rights owners (WWE, NFL, NBA etc.) who have followed a similar path are to be learned then the EFL will discover that the appetite of these super-fans for more content, tailored content, is mammoth.

And with a more engaged fan comes more direct and indirect revenue opportunities.

Directly, future content offerings and reflected pricing options that deliver to the super-fans’ hunger are the natural next step. Indirectly, the league’s and teams’ commercial partners, at least those with some relevance to international audiences, will also look at this announcement with some interest. Those that are buying on the basis of reach and exposure will certainly not mind the additional coverage, incremental as it is. But for those brands looking to engage more deeply, the identification of and access to a set of fans hungry for engaging content is significant.

Neither will this opportunity have been lost on the EFL’s own commercial team. They will now be focusing on the league’s appeal outside its English heartland and they will be increasingly emboldened to strike deals with relevant sponsors with a wish to be part of EFL’s desired international growth.

Alongside fans and commercial partners, a third group of impacted stakeholders are Pay-TV broadcasters. In recent years Pay-TV broadcasters have paid increasingly sizeable fees for the very best content. This has provided the bedrock to launch a panoply of supporting channels with airtime to fill and an audience base to reach; attracted by often exclusive access to the crown jewels: Champions League, Formula 1, English Premier League etc. Without sufficient competition from terrestrial broadcasters willing to create space in their schedules, secondary rights holders and even secondary content of the premium rights holders have settled for coverage on these platforms as the best option available to get coverage of their events into the market.

The trend to OTT options as exhibited by this latest move by EFL will put additional pressure on this model. What used to be a simple choice between airing on a high-numbered, Pay-TV sports channel or not at all, has now been opened up with the options of OTT self-distribution or OTT distribution with another partner, be that the likes of Twitter, Yahoo and Amazon. Furthermore, both of these newer options are far less encumbered by limits of geography.

If rights holders perceive they can achieve greater long term value by distributing themselves and owning their own data, the pressure will be on Pay-TV broadcasters to adjust. This may be to offer more for the rights or otherwise lose channels and their associated advertising revenue, or even to develop their offering; being a closer partner to rights holders by sharing data, providing cross promotion from their own linear to online channels and even sharing responsibility for advertising revenues.

Whichever way it goes, I am certain that the number of sports fans left un-monetised will continue to shrink.