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Does Television Impact Attendance at
Eastern Illinois University Sporting Events
(TITLE)

BY

Gregory N. Powers

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Master of Arts in Speech Communication

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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YEAR

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Running Head: DOES TELEVISION IMPACT

Does Television Impact Attendance at
Eastern Illinois University Sporting Events

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Abstract

This study tested the relationship between Eastern Illinois University home football and basketball games on television and attendance at these events. Attendance during a ten-year period for both EIU football and basketball games was recorded and dates of these contests were researched to determine if the games were telecast. After categorizing the figures into eight groups, the four pairs were compared using a T-test. The study found televising EIU home football games had no significant impact on attendance at these contests. However, a significant difference was noted between EIU home basketball games televised and those not aired. Attendance actually increased when EIU home basketball games were televised. These mixed findings are quite comparable to other studies and popular wisdom, yet the basketball results yield a much more common philosophy within EIU's sports administration department.

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Does Television Impact Attendance at
Eastern Illinois University Sporting Events

Today's relationship between television and sport may best be described as mutually beneficial. In fact, Wenner (1989) illustrates the association linking media and sports as symbiotic. Both professional leagues and collegiate associations depend upon television to promote their product. Meanwhile, the medium's coverage creates not only an increase in circulation, but also generates enormous amounts of advertising revenue (Wenner, 1989). Others have similarly described the connection between sports and specifically, television. Ashmore (1990) notes this bond as a "love-hate affair", in that sport depends on the television industry for millions of dollars in rights fees, but this exposure creates worries about the impact of the broadcast on such areas as game attendance. As television continues to expand its coverage of sport, this relationship between televised sports and game attendance will continue to be an area of interest.

The question of television's impact on sports attendance is certainly not just a recent concern. In fact, Klatell and Marcus venture (1988) to say Marconi was an indirect contributor to sports broadcasting with his invention of radio, which later led to the development of television. While Klatell and Marcus may have made this comment in jest, one could truly argue this issue arose on May 17, 1939, with the broadcast of the first sporting event on experimental station W2XBS in New York (Stanley, 1995). The Ivy League baseball game between Columbia and Princeton was televised with one camera following the action, as legendary radio broadcaster Bill Stern called the action that day (Klatell and Marcus, 1988). The event was viewed by several hundred at the RCA pavilion (Mendes, 2002), thousands of guests at the World's Fair in Queens, and

several thousand television set owners in the area (Ashmore, 1990). Very few people could vision the importance of this date, as the link between sport and television was just beginning.

Three months following the first sports telecast, WNBC in New York televised the first college football contest between Fordham University and Waynesburg College (Brown, 1999). Other sporting events were featured shortly thereafter, including professional baseball and football games (Mendes, 2002). However, the growth of televised sports was not immediate. Very few people owned a television set and if they did, signals were very weak to reach any type of significant audience. World War II halted a considerable expansion of the industry in the early 1940's; therefore, television was not a great concern in regards to the impact on attendance.

But with the chance to air more sporting events, those in the broadcast industry witnessed a window of opportunity to increase the demand for television. Instead of airing sports as a means to boost advertising revenue, sports were broadcast to boost the medium's popularity (Stanley, 1995), a strategy that worked. While some argue television was deemed a menace to organized athletics from its inception (Television, 2001), this tactic actually illustrated the dependency television had on sport for the medium to survive in its infancy. In fact, postwar America's love of sports, specifically that of NCAA football, quickly generated interest in owning a television set (Brown, 1999). However, television's sole reliance on sport quickly faded, and soon after, the question of television's harm on sports attendance was raised.

While many sports organizations have often inquired about television's impact on game attendance, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has had arguably

the most chaotic relationship with the medium on this issue. Nearly nine years after the first televised sports broadcast, the issue of the effects of television on game attendance was discussed at the NCAA's 1948 convention (Brown, 1999). The NCAA feared televising football would negatively harm in-person attendance and alter the association's competitive balance (Pacey, 1985). This fear became a reality as a committee study uncovered data showing attendance in 1950 fell nearly 11.5 percent from the 1947-48 average, two years in which games were not televised (Brown, 1999). In addition, a study by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found television slightly impacted attendance at college football contests (Pacey, 1985). Moreover, NCAA basketball receipts fell nearly \$100 a game from 1948 to 1950. Thus, in 1952 the NCAA developed a plan to protect game attendance and maximize television exposure. Within the next few years attendance began to rise, as did the popularity of television. This plan regulated college exposure for NCAA members for more than 30 years. However, in 1984 the Supreme Court ruled the plan to be in violation of antitrust laws and reassigned television rights to individual schools, thus opening the gates for a massive increase in the number of televised collegiate contests for viewers to choose from.

The gluttony of televised sports was not only prevalent in college sports, but also within the professional ranks. A major ingredient in the explosion of televised sports was undoubtedly cable television. From basic cable to pay-per-view, numerous networks were attempting to stake their claim in the industry. While ESPN may be regarded as the father of the industry's emergence, numerous other cable outlets have tried to compete with this 24-hour giant, providing unprecedented opportunities for fans to tune in to their favorite team (Burton & Howard, 1999). Specifically, superstations such as WGN and TBS

telecast numerous games across the country and are perceived as an attendance threat to those cities where their respective team is playing (Ashmore, 1990). As both teams and leagues continue to partner with an increasing number of broadcast companies, the obvious outcome is an expansion of choices, especially for those with access to cable or satellite services (Wharton, 2002).

While it is quite evident more sports programming is available on free or cable television than ever before, there continues to be much speculation regarding the issue. NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue terms this expansion as a “wilderness of channels”, claiming it dilutes ratings and advertising revenue (Wharton, 2002). Many in the industry argue the numbers verify this argument. An article in the New York Times (Sports TV 2001) notes broadcast television ratings for baseball, basketball, football and hockey have been decreasing for more than a decade. While televised sports continue to garner large audiences as a whole, the audience is more and more fragmented among the abundance of options (Stanley, 1995).

To this point, the fan is the clear winner in the eruption of sports on television, but the question looms of any possible losers, a matter that is quickly becoming a major issue in the rapid expansion of televised sports. However, there is a consensus television is simply not the only reason for poor in-person attendance at sporting event. Other noted determinants include the uncertainty of the game’s outcome, team performance, game scheduling and environmental factors (Drea, 1995). In addition, soaring ticket prices have put games out of reach for many spectators. A report conducted by the Sports Marketing Group reveals nine out of ten Americans find it difficult to attend a professional sporting event because of ticket prices (Burton & Howard, 1999). One interesting theory on the

downturn in attendance figures hales from Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City, Utah. Athletic director Val Hale claims the school's student body has become more concerned with academics than athletics. Furthermore, Hale cites an "overexposure" to television, adding longtime ticket holders have given up their seats, but those spaces remain empty as fans are accustomed to watching the games on television (Lewis, 2002).

While a number of other factors may influence attendance at sporting events, there remains a genuine concern over the impact of television among those in the sporting industry. Consequently, the National Football League attempted to ensure television does not have an adverse affect on attendance through the implementation of a blackout policy. This league rule prohibits local television broadcasts of games that fail to sell out at least 72 hours before kickoff (Yerton, 2001). The strategy behind this policy was to encourage fans to attend games in person, rather than view them at home. In one rare study of this issue, Siegfried and Hinshaw (1979) discovered televised blackouts had no effect on fan attendance, but league officials predicted otherwise when employing the rule. The league stated that without blackouts, many ticket holders would stay at home; costing teams parking, concession and local radio revenue (Putsis and Sen, 2000). Nonetheless, money generated from these sources now pales in comparison to that of television revenue, and to this day there are both proponents and opponents to the rule. For instance, NFL spokesman Greg Aiello claims the policy has "stood the test of time and league attendance has been strong partly because of the policy." (Sherman, 2002) Notably, consultant Marc Ganis claims blackouts do indeed boost ticket sales, while also stating the team receives marketing benefits when games are televised (Yerton, 2001). New Orleans Saints team manager for ticket sales and services Mike Stanfield has a much

firmer opinion though, saying, “Everybody wins when the game’s on local TV,” (Yerton, 2001). The blackout issue was also a concern regionally for football fans in Illinois during the NFL's 2002-2003 campaign. Due to construction on Soldier Field, the Chicago Bears played all home games at Memorial Stadium on the campus of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Bears fans in Chicago were quite concerned of games not selling out in Champaign, as Chicago television stations penetrated the 75-mile blackout radius (Sherman, 2002). The opposition to blackouts has also spilled over into the Canadian Football League as the Toronto Argonauts attempt to implement the policy has been criticized severely (Menzies, 1998).

Whereas the NFL has controls in place to attempt to limit television viewing, other sports do not have this tool. Some numbers illustrate the possibility sports organizations and gate attendance figures are coming out on the short end of the stick. Attendance at Texas Rangers baseball games was down nearly 21 percent last year, while television ratings skyrocketed 45 percent (Ranger crowds, 2002). Further evidence substantiates this argument as Major League Baseball attendance was down six percent last year. Conversely, the NHL and NASCAR continue to witness extraordinary growth in attendance (Fisher, 2002), hence these numbers alone do not paint a clear picture of this subject.

Thus, there is a need to analyze more data. While there have been numerous studies of sports attendance by economists, a largely overlooked issue is the influence of television on the demand for tickets. The review of scholarly research concerning the impact of attendance on sporting events revealed very few have explored the issue. One

writer's search through evidence suggests television can cause an attendance drop, yet also heighten popular interest in sports themselves (Television, 2001).

Conflicting views of this matter in sports are not rare, as many have cited both positive and negative relationship with television. Representatives from non-traditional sports such as rodeo and rugby emphasize the need to garner television time to generate their fan base and profile (Getting A Sporting, 1999 and Seibert, 2000); notably the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association is trying vehemently to gain more television exposure (Stock, 2001). In addition, NHL executives are adamant about the positive nature of television on the industry. Edmonton Oilers' vice-president of marketing and communications Allan Watt asserts, "Television brings us new fans to our games because it stirs their interest to see our games live" (Casey, 2002). Likewise, Ottawa Senators' vice-president of broadcast services claims television allows for the promotion of games, while there is no apparent adverse impact on attendance (Casey, 2002). Furthermore, part of a study by Zhang and Pease (1997) indicates those who view more minor hockey league games on television attend more games in person, thus confirming the theory of the fore mentioned hockey executives.

However, that same study by Zhang and Pease (1997) also alluded to a finding that broadcasting a home game on public television would hurt attendance. Chandler (1988) cites in his work that televising a sport will simply not guarantee popularity. Moreover, studies of rodeo and rugby contradict previously mentioned theories. One such report discovered satellite television had a negative effect on 1993-94 attendance at English first division rugby league matches (Baimbridge, Cameron, and Dawson, 1995). Also, organizers of the Canadian Finals Rodeo believe televising the rodeo in 1999 and

2000 directly related to declining attendance (Stock, 2001). Meek (2002) even forewarns of a possibility to turn off the television to get back the crowds.

To this point, opinions and limited scholarly findings on the issue of television and attendance are mixed and the sport of college football is no exception. Since the Supreme Court's ruling in 1984 expanding college football's television exposure, attendance has actually increased substantially, contradicting the NCAA's stance. In 1983, attendance at collegiate games for 651 teams was nearly 36.3 million fans (Ashmore, 1990). However, last season's 44.5 million spectators for 617 teams was an NCAA record (NCAA, 2002). In a rare research-based study on the issue, Kaempfer and Pacey (1986) note a complementary relationship between telecasts and attendance, suggesting an increase in attendance because of television exposure.

While many administrators such as Kent State University sports information director Dale Gallagher are certain of television's benefits (Rosen, 1998), other officials from schools across the nation are not totally convinced. In the fall of 2002, University of Virginia athletic director Terry Holland turned down an offer to televise the Cavaliers one Saturday afternoon, citing a concern for a lack of attendance (Bogaczyk, 2000). Holland added the school had, "gone the extra mile to accommodate TV partners, but at some point you have to show appreciation for those who attend games" (Bogaczyk, 2000). One theory behind the University of Hawaii's disappointing 1999 attendance was a three hour delayed telecast of the games. Associate athletic director Jim Donovan believed the broadcast was partly to blame for the poor showings because of the close proximity to the original start time (Tsai, 1999). A recent report suggests telecasts do reduce college football attendance, and in turn negatively affect Division I-A football programs because

of a decline in attendance revenue (Fizel and Bennett, 1989). Additionally, the findings cited schools would not be worse off only if revenue gained from television coverage offsets the drop in attendance dollars.

While there are obviously differing opinions and results regarding this issue nationally, local unease of television's effect on attendance at collegiate sporting events has surfaced in recent years. During the 1993-94 school year, all Eastern Illinois University (EIU) home football and men's basketball games were televised live on WEIU-TV. In early 1994, Bob McBee was hired as EIU's athletic director and it was clear he was not a proponent of televising athletic events (Merda, 1999). Contests for the same two sports were televised on a tape-delay basis the following year, with no broadcasts during the 1995-96 seasons. The departure of McBee in 1996, led to the arrival of current EIU athletic director Rich McDuffie, an advocate of televising sports. EIU associate athletic director Dave Kidwell is also a firm believer of television's benefit for schools of EIU's size, stating he did not notice a difference during the time games were and were not aired (Merda, 1999).

To this point, there is obvious conflicting evidence surrounding the television-attendance issue. WEIU-TV has committed to a multi-year deal to air EIU home football and men's basketball games beginning with the 2003-2004 season (WEIU to produce, 2003), despite the fact EIU officials have yet to compile any significant scientific data on the issue. With the issue again surfacing, there is a need to study the matter further, leading to the purpose of this study: "Does televising EIU home football and men's basketball games have a significant impact on attendance at these events?"

Methodology

Using data from Eastern Illinois University's sports information department, dates and attendance figures were recorded for all EIU regular season home football games from 1992-2001 and home basketball games from 1993-2002. Issues of the *Charleston Times Courier's* sports section correlating to dates of the games were consulted to determine if the games were televised, as sports editor Brian Nielsen has consistently noted any television or radio broadcasts within his game preview.

EIU attendance figures at these games were arranged into four general categories: "Football games on television"; "Football games not on television"; "Basketball games on television"; and "Basketball games not on television." Home football games falling on EIU's homecoming or parent's weekend were then separated from the football group, as these are consistently the two highest attended dates of the season. Four additional categories were then added: "Football homecoming games on television"; "Football homecoming games not on television"; "Football parent's weekend games on television"; and "Football parent's weekend games not on television".

A majority of the telecasts were aired locally on WEIU-TV. The station could be viewed on UHF channel 51 or through the local cable system. In addition, a handful of basketball games were aired on Sportschannel. This channel was part of any basic cable system. Thus, with cable penetration nearly 80% (Ashmore, 1990), anyone wishing to view the games would be able to do so with little effort.

A T-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in attendance figures within the four pairs of categories. Means of game attendance totals

for category two were calculated and compared with category one, category four with category three, category six with category five, and category eight with category seven.

Results

During the ten-year period of 1992-2001, EIU played in 32 home football games that did not fall on homecoming or parent's weekend. Of that 32, seven were televised. The mean figure for those dates was 3,915.86. The mean score for the 25 games not televised was 4,561.36. The T-test concluded the probability level was greater than 0.05 ($t = -.7320$, $p = .47$), suggesting there was not a significant difference in attendance between these two categories. Ten times during the period EIU played a homecoming game with three televised ($x = 6,070$) and seven not televised ($x = 8,361$). The T-test for this pair again determined there was not a significant difference in attendance because of the probability level ($t = -2.234$, $p = .06$). There were also ten games played at home on parent's weekend during this period. Two of those games were televised ($x = 8,737$) and eight were not ($x = 9,844.38$). The T-test for these two categories revealed no significant difference in attendance ($t = -2.8057$, $p = .22$).

Finally, 119 EIU home basketball games were played from 1993-2002. In that time, 29 contests were televised ($x = 3,106.52$) and 90 were not ($x = 2,601.86$). Unlike the previous three comparisons, the T-test concluded there was a significant difference in attendance ($t = 2.0946$, $p = .038$). The difference actually noted home basketball games that were televised drew a significantly greater number of fans than those that were not broadcast.

Discussion

It has been noted in this study there are a number of factors that may impact attendance at sporting events. The purpose of this study was to determine if one independent variable, that being television, had any significant impact on attendance at EIU home football and basketball games. The results concluded televising EIU home football games has neither a positive or negative effect on attendance; yet also determined EIU home basketball games aired on television drew higher numbers, positively impacting attendance.

With the approximate 17% attendance jump for televised basketball games, one could hypothesize a number of different theories for the boost in EIU basketball attendance. One argument could be the media hype surrounding the contest increased the enthusiasm and stirred the interest of fans, a conclusion theorized by many within the literature review of this study. With no games televised nationally, and very few locally or regionally; fans rarely had an opportunity to cheer for their team on television. The televised contest may also influence more game promotion or advertising. One less plausible explanation may be the fans themselves want to be on television, and this is their rare opportunity to do so.

These findings could be perceived as good news from both an Eastern athletic administrator and fan's viewpoint. The results of this study look favorably upon the recent agreement between Eastern's athletic administration and WEIU-TV to televise all home basketball and football games, most notably for home basketball games. Furthermore, fans unable to attend games may have the opportunity to view more contests on television.

While the study did reveal conclusive findings, there were many limitations. The most obvious was the particularly low number of contests televised. Specifically, the sport of football provided very little data to work with. In addition, the homecoming and parent's weekend contests had to be separated because of the consistently higher attendance figures for these games. Thus, figures from even fewer of these contests were calculated.

This study only begins to allow for future studies of attendance at EIU sporting events. While it does conclude a significant difference in attendance at home basketball games televised, it does not bring to light or point out what those differences are. Also, the study does not deal with the looming issue of poor attendance overall, specifically within the student arena. While these are worthy areas of study at some future time, the question simply asked if there was an impact in attendance due to television and the results were mixed, depending upon the sport.

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Table 1

Eastern Illinois Home Football Attendance 1992-2001

Variable	Count	Mean
EIU Home Football Games on TV	7	3915.86
EIU Home Football Games not on TV	25	4561.36

t = -.7320

p = .47

Table 2

Eastern Illinois Home Football Attendance 1992-2001

Variable	Count	Mean
EIU Homecoming Football Games on TV	3	6070
EIU Homecoming Football Games not on TV	7	8361.86

t = -2.2340

p = .056

Table 3

Eastern Illinois Home Football Attendance 1992-2001

Variable	Count	Mean
EIU Parent's Weekend Football Games on TV	2	8737
EIU Parent's Weekend Football Games not on TV	8	9844.38

t = -1.3414

p = .22

Table 4

Eastern Illinois Home Football Attendance 1992-2001

Variable	Count	Mean
EIU Home Basketball Games on TV	29	3106.52
EIU Home Basketball Games not on TV	90	2601.86

t = 2.0946

p = .038