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# N.F.L. Stands by Its Push to Connect to Fans Digitally

By KEN BELSON OCT. 19, 2014

The N.F.L. media machine rolls on, Mark Cuban be damned.

Earlier this year, Mr. Cuban, the maverick owner of the Dallas Mavericks, said that the N.F.L. was saturating the airwaves and the Internet and was in danger of crumbling in a decade.

The league has shrugged off his criticism. Naysayers have made similar points in years past and been proved wrong. Despite grim news about domestic abuse, concussions and other issues that have embarrassed the league, television ratings for N.F.L. games have risen, not dipped, this season.

Besides, there is money to be made.

This month, the N.F.L. renewed its rights deal with DirecTV, which will pay an average of \$1.5 billion a year from 2015 to 2022 to continue carrying the NFL Sunday Ticket package of out-of-market games, a 50 percent jump compared with the current deal, which expires this season.

Forever thirsty, the N.F.L. has also pushed further into the next frontier, mobile video. In August, the league unveiled NFL Now, which provides game highlights, fantasy updates, news and classic footage to tablets, smartphones and Xbox One game consoles. The content is free, though users can pay \$1.99 monthly to skip some advertisements.

“Our view is we know that’s where the world is going, so we made sure we had the property rights to populate a new video service,” said Brian

Rolapp, executive vice president for media for the N.F.L. “This is our direct way to talk to fans and for fans to talk to us.”

The league said NFL Now had been visited more than nine million times since its launch in August, but declined to say whether that was more or less than it had expected. The league also did not say how much time visitors had spent on NFL Now.

According to the league, people with wireless devices like tablets and smartphones have made up 55 percent of the visits to NFL Now, while those using connected devices like the Xbox have consumed 45 percent of the minutes spent on the service. Fans using NFL Now with connected devices watch nearly twice the number of videos and spend three times as much time per visit as those who access the service from wireless devices, the league said. That suggests that fans on wired devices are spending more time digging into NFL Now’s library of documentaries, shows and other long-form content than those using wireless devices.

“It’s a bit of blend,” said Perkins Miller, the league’s chief digital officer. “On Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays, people use NFL Now as a second screen. On Tuesdays through Fridays, people are flipping over to Apple TV and Xbox for long-form content.”

However they watch, NFL Now raises compelling questions about the league’s push to provide content directly to fans and compete with the television networks and cable and satellite providers that pay the league billions of dollars in rights fees. NFL Now reuses highlights of games broadcast by CBS, Fox and other networks as well as news conferences and interviews produced by the 32 teams and the more than 100 million feet of film in the NFL Films library.

“There’s a careful balancing act that is necessary,” said Ed Desser, a former N.B.A. executive who is a sports media consultant. “On the one hand, leagues have been exceptionally successful about getting guaranteed rights fees. On the flip side, the leagues create more content than all the Hollywood studios combined. The trick is not to siphon too much value out of the pot being purchased by your rights holders.”

While NFL Now is aimed at hard-core fans and fantasy football players, the league has tried to include something for everyone. The service includes news updates, game highlights and “Can’t-Miss” play compilations. Fans with more time can view episodes of “A Football Life” or “Hard Knocks,” or documentaries on Super Bowl champion teams. The service also includes exclusive reality shows like “Finding Giants,” which follows the scouting department of the Giants. NFL Now can also be personalized so fans will be fed videos of their favorite teams.

Whether the service will make money is a separate question. The N.F.L. declined to say how many fans had chosen to pay \$1.99 a month for the premium version. But Jonathan Kraft, the son of the New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft and co-chairman of the league’s digital media committee, said NFL Now would be “self-sustaining very quickly,” partly because it is produced at the NFL Network studios in Los Angeles, a move that has helped keep costs down.

The longer-term benefits of NFL Now are just emerging. In time, the N.F.L. could use the service to distribute live programming or lure fantasy football fans away from ESPN or Yahoo Sports. And because users can customize NFL Now, the league can learn what users like and sell advertisements that target their interests.

**“You have to experiment and see what the audience embraces,” Mr. Desser said. “Anything that enhances the experience of N.F.L. football is good for your brand.”**

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