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## What experts hope to learn from Yahoo's streamed NFL game

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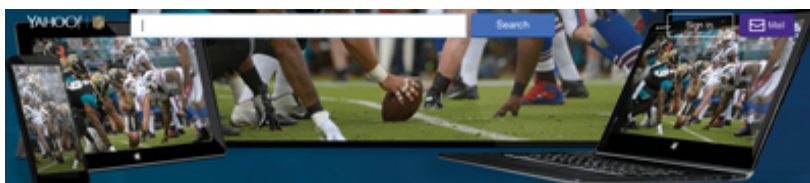


SPORTS  
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JOHN OURAND

For the past several years, I would ask the NFL's top media executive Brian Rolapp about the idea of the league selling a full season package of games to a tech company like Google or Apple or Yahoo. His answer remained the same and started with the premise that the Internet was not prepared to handle an audience of more than 20 million users yet.

But that changed in June when Yahoo paid a reported \$15 million for the rights to stream an NFL game exclusively, for free, on Yahoo.com. NFL executives have little doubt that Yahoo will be able to handle the traffic for this game.

And that's what makes Sunday's Bills-Jaguars game so interesting. A non-marquee game in an odd time slot, 9:30 a.m. ET, almost certainly will not command the size of audience the NFL is used to seeing on Sunday afternoon. But it's certainly a step toward having these types of tech companies bid for the NFL's media packages in 2021-22, when the league's current deals expire.



Yahoo will carry Sunday's Bills-Jaguars game from London exclusively, streaming it to devices around the world.

ESPN set a record when it logged 3.5 million live, unique online viewers for the U.S.-Belgium World Cup match in 2014. I wouldn't be surprised to see Yahoo eclipse that mark. Neither would a panel of top sports media consultants and analysts that I polled. These seven executives will be taking note of Sunday's game with an eye on 2021-22, of course. But so many other components to this game exist. Will the audience be younger and more international? Will viewing patterns be different online?

I asked them what they wanted to learn from the Yahoo game. Here are their responses:

## Lee Berke, president and CEO of LHB Sports, Entertainment & Media

The importance of Yahoo's NFL game boils down to two words: digital backbone. Will Yahoo or any other Internet platform be able to seamlessly handle the OTT distribution of an NFL game to millions of individual users? It may not be perfect at the start, but Yahoo's game hopefully should demonstrate that, eventually, the Internet will have the digital backbone to meet the needs of fans, sponsors and the league. If so, the game will be the first step toward the potential OTT distribution of one or more full-season exclusive packages of marquee games, and by the early 2020s, multiple OTT distributors may be bidding for NFL content alongside the league's traditional partners.



"I want to know how user behavior differs from a traditional network telecast."

**Ed Desser**  
Desser Sports Media

Photo by: MARC BRYAN-BROWN

## Ed Desser, president, Desser Sports Media

I want to know how user behavior differs from a traditional network telecast. What is the audience size in comparison to the expected TV rating for such a game? How does the average time viewing compare? Will the demographics be different and younger? How will viewers interact with the telecast? What devices will they use (mobile vs. TV vs. desktop)? Will there be major technical glitches or user confusion? Who will advertise/sponsor? How will Yahoo monetize its investment in the game? The answers will help to determine the suitability of Internet distribution for the NFL and other national live sports events in the future, subject, of course, to an attractive

business model.

## Jason Kint, CEO, Digital Content Next

I'm most interested in just how big the audience will be. Yes, this game is a terrible matchup. Yes, this game is at a horrible time of day for a U.S. audience. Yes, there are close to 100 other NFL games being streamed this year. Here is what most people may miss. This game is only available online. We learned in the early days of March Madness on Demand that the largest numbers by a significant margin came when television wasn't available. By taking away the TV broadcast for this game, the NFL has juiced massive online demand for this game. Plus add in the international distribution on top of this. My



"I'm most interested in just how big the audience will be."

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Digital Content Next

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

take is this will result in a massive audience

— arguably the largest online sports audience in history when factoring in just how bad the football game will be. Is it worth it?

### **Leslie Gittess, CEO and founder, Blue Sky Media NYC**

I love that the NFL is dipping their toe in the over-the-top market. The NFL is a leader, so when they make a shift or change, others watch, listen and follow. If I was part of the team at Yahoo, I would be looking at overall audience numbers, how many people access the stream and for how long. These viewer habits will impact the NFL's next round of media deals — surely with some of the tech powerhouses (Apple, Google, Twitter, Facebook and Yahoo, etc.) entering the bidding for the Thursday night package. If Yahoo sees viewers in the 15-20 million range, then I would say we will have a seismic shift — and if I were Twitter, Facebook or anyone with a big checkbook and a dream to grow, I would be the first one at the door. They wouldn't be the first media company to grow their business based on the NFL.

### **Doug Perlman, founder and CEO, Sports Media Advisors**

While I'll be interested in the viewership metrics and quality of the experience, I have little doubt that the numbers will be significant and that the offering will be well-received by consumers. I'm most interested in anything that would suggest that Yahoo could be a consistent bidder for premium sports rights. Among other things, it would be interesting to do an analysis of the direct and indirect economic benefit to Yahoo. In every major negotiation "digital" bidders are considered and discussed, but it would be great if Yahoo's experience prompted them, and potentially others, to enter the market.

### **Neal Pilson, founder and president, Pilson Communications**

Obviously, I will be interested in the number of people who watch a portion of the game on their device. The real question in my mind is, "What is the financial model?" Is the NFL looking to create a business-to-consumer revenue stream of directly streaming games to consumers, thus cutting out the networks? Is that sustainable? Frankly, I don't see it becoming a serious source of revenue for the NFL any time soon. It's not a very attractive game — Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m. I wouldn't stay home to watch that game on my electronic device. I don't see it as a pilot project for a serious business plan based on that one game. Ultimately, the networks will want to carry these kinds of games as part of their package. I chalk it up as interesting but not terribly significant.

### **Kenneth Shropshire, director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative**

I am generally curious just to see the delivery of an NFL game via this platform while keeping an eye out on social media for the real-time buzz. It will be interesting to take in the first impressions of the format by viewers. The big questions beyond that for me will be who watched and why? Regarding the who, are there any surprises in the viewing demographic, particularly with regard to age? I'm also curious about



"I'm also curious about any significant presence of international viewership."

**Kenneth Shropshire**  
**Wharton Sports Business Initiative**

Photo by: TOMMY LEONARDI

any significant presence of international viewership. In the why, beyond the curious one-off visitor or rabid fans of one team or the other, did any other large cluster of unique viewers tune in?

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