



LAYOFFS AND FINANCIAL DESPERATION SIGNAL THE NEW NORMAL IN SPORTS MEDIA COULD BE UGLY

Source: The Globe and Mail

Date: 06/07/2020

It's still going to be a while before the NBA and the NHL are back on our TVs (and a lot longer than that before they're back in our arenas), but here's how you know a sense of normality is beginning to return to the world of sports: After months of playing nice during the pandemic-induced pause, frenemies TSN and Sportsnet are back to their hardball tactics.

On Friday, Sportsnet announced it had snatched popular play-by-play man Chris Cuthbert away from its archrival, and that he would be on air whenever its hockey broadcasts start up again. Twisting the knife, the network's official news release put these words in the mouth of its new employee: "Sportsnet owns the No. 1 sports property in the country, and I've always felt there is something special about broadcasting hockey games on Saturday nights."

If that chest-thumping makes you nostalgic for the long-ago days of, say, early March, hold on to that feeling. Because it may be the only thing that remains. Sports media may be in the midst of a blindsiding and it just doesn't know it yet.

The news about Cuthbert came a few days after the data bureau Media Technology Monitor released a poll of Canadians suggesting subscriptions to sports-focused streaming services in Canada such as TSN GO, Sportsnet NOW and DAZN had fallen by 57 per cent since March, to 6 per cent of respondents from 14 per cent.

It also came as word was breaking that The Athletic, a much-hyped sports-news website that launched a subscription-only business model in 2017, was permanently laying off about 8 per cent of its staff, 46 people, and instituting a companywide pay cut of at least 10 per cent until the end of the year.

The Athletic is admired among sports hacks for giving them a lifeline after many newspapers began cutting back on coverage. It is also known for its very Silicon Valley-style hubris. In an October, 2017 interview with The New York Times, co-founder and chief executive officer Alex Mather said he looked forward to local papers "continuously bleed[ing] until we are the last ones standing," adding the company's plan was to "suck [local papers] dry of their best talent at every moment. We will make business extremely difficult for them."

He subsequently apologized, but even so his pride may have been misplaced. Backed by hundreds of millions of venture-capital dollars, The Athletic expanded furiously over the past few years, growing to an estimated 430 writers across North America and Britain, where it launched last year by hiring away dozens of soccer scribes from papers such as The Telegraph, The Times and The Guardian.

And it began to score some impressive journalistic triumphs, including the scoop about the Houston Astros sign-stealing scandal. Here in Canada, senior writer Dan Robson won the National Newspaper Award for a collection of empathetic features about former NHL players.

When the pandemic hit, even as subscriptions stalled, those writers kept churning out stuff. Last Monday, as protests against anti-Black police brutality mushroomed across the United States, nine Black writers and editors offered up firsthand accounts of living with racism in the U.S.

By the end of the week, two of them were among those laid off.