

have you seen sports ratings lately ? Just this week:

The NBA on TNT had its highest ratings in TWENTY SIX YEARS . Versus had its highest rated regular season NHL game EVER. The first game of the World Series was the highest rated in 5 years. The NFL was setting records on cable and achieving viewing levels not seen in TWENTY YEARS !. College Football ratings are killing it as well.

But wait there is more. TV viewing is up considerably in each of the last several years. We can even look at the box office for movies and the fact that the industry is seeing a theatrical revival.

The question is simple. Whats going on ?

The answer is simple as well.

The internet has trained us.

It has trained us to assign two distinct values to content that is available to us, regardless of media. The 1st variable is participation value. The 2nd variable is shelf life. The two variables go hand in hand.

Every type of content has some quotient of participation value. At the bottom of the spectrum are games/shows/movies/events that you watch or attend by yourself, and you have no interest in telling anyone about. Those shows have zero participation value. They could be Perry Mason reruns (happened to catch one while I was working out on the road) or shows you watch when you have nothing better to do.

At the top of the scale are games/shows/movies/events that potential viewers have predicted to have high participation value. These are events that we look forward to not only watching or attending, but that we plan in advance how we are going to extend our participation. We may plan on tweeting about it or posting a facebook update because we know our friends are there and we are bragging to each other, while at the same time showing off to friends who cant be there. Think going to the opening of Cowboys stadium, or going to a concert or opening night of a movie, or watching the big game.

Or we may plan on going online and participating in discussion forums or chats. Or we may be planning on posting comments on our favorite websites where others have shared interests. For others it may be some version of gaming, ala fantasy sports.

Sports of course have high affinity engagement, and because of the internet, they have increasing participation opportunities. You may watch a Magic game just to be able to tweet to Dwight Howard what you saw while watching the game. You may watch the Giants Eagles game because your fantasy teams are stacked with players from those teams and your league allows first come changes. Or you may just want to see how your guys did so you can text your friends in the league and give them a hard time, or take a hard time. Its very, very common for fans of MMA (mixed martial arts) to stay up to the wee hours to watch our Dream Fights from Japan on HDNet , all the while online discussing the fight and then arguing over the outcome with others doing the exact same thing.

The higher the participation value, the shorter the shelf life. The role of the internet for high participation games/shows/events is not to show them, its to enable the participation. The explosion of Social Networking and social networking enabled games and applications has strengthened this as the internet's role. Its improving TV ratings of shows with high participation value.

While some may think that combining the presentation of events/shows/etc and the participation into a single webpage makes sense. It doesn't. The internet has also trained us that if it can be shown on the internet, its probably not going to have a high participation value. Why ? Because the expectation is that if its on the internet, you can get to it any time you want it. Its out there waiting for you to stream or download at your pleasure. There is a long perceived shelf life. So there is no rush.

The latest U2 concert on Youtube is a perfect example. I thought that when I went to Akamai's status page the number of concurrent users would be in the millions. [As you can see from this link](#), it was about 1.15mm. Nothing to sneeze at, but that is for ALL of the streaming Akamai was doing at the time and its not dramatically more than a normal night for Akamai ([as I write this, the total on the akamai visualization page is 1.3mm](#), more than during the concert) . I shouldn't have been surprised. There was no reason to rush to watch it. Its available now and probably forever more on the net.

Compare this to live, competitive reality tv. The opportunity to watch a train wreck or to catch a spectacular performance, live , can easily trigger a high participation event. Think watching me on Dancing with the Stars hoping or expecting me to wipe out. You go in knowing and hoping and ready to let all your friends who werent watching know about it, and to talk about it with all your friends who are watching. So while the ratings may have fallen off some for these shows, one episode comparable to Marie Osmond fainting, which led to a huge surge in viewing on my DWTS season, or a Brett Favre last second touchdown or interception return, or even a movie that is a hugely positive surprise like Paranormal Activity, all have short shelf lives while creating the expectation among viewers that they are or could be high participation events.

Which brings us to our conclusion. The longer the shelf life, the more likely that there is a lower perceived participation value. Sure you may want to talk about your favorite TV show with others, but there is no rush. You can get to it when you get to it. More importantly, networks and production companies should work a lot harder at creating realtime participation around their content. If you can increase the value of participation, you increase the value of the show and the desire to watch the show at the same time as others. Which is exactly what is happening with sports in record numbers.

You cant stop people from recording shows on their DVRs, and you shouldnt try. But you should try to give them as many reasons as possible to take advantage of the increased entertainment value of participating with others. High participation equals high viewership. That is exactly what record ratings for sports are telling us.