

## II. "Sometimes, ESPN Seems Ubiquitous"

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ESPN, the self-proclaimed "Worldwide Leader in Sports," is why I do not have cable. It is not that I object to its programming, which one critic lambastes for being "saturated with glibness" and "irreverence founded on ignorance, a shallow, simplistic, delusional sense of participation in the events being described."<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, much of ESPN's programming is noteworthy for its journalistic insight and rigor, which is partly why the network has won 29 Emmy Awards. As Michael Freeman, argues, "ESPN has taken sports television to a new plane, putting out a better product than all but a handful of its print sports cousins."<sup>2</sup> Nor am I bothered by ESPN's incessant self-promotion. The network's "This Is *SportsCenter*" advertising campaign is one of the most clever and amusing in recent memory.<sup>3</sup> No, the reason I do not have cable is that, for many people (mostly men), and I am one of them, ESPN is highly addictive, a kind of media narcotic. ESPN airs 4,900 hours of live or original sports programming annually, and another 4,200 hours on ESPN2.<sup>4</sup> It frightens me to think about how many of these hours I would watch if I had cable. I am aware that few other people feel the need to deny themselves cable to live productive lives. After all, over 76 million households subscribe to ESPN. Someone in approximately four million of those homes watches *SportsCenter* daily. And as many of you know, it is not uncommon for viewers to watch *the same episode* of *SportsCenter* multiple times.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously the Entertainment and Sport Programming Network is extraordinarily successful at what it does: provide fans with around-the-clock sports events, news, highlights, and analysis. The brainchild of Bill Rasmussen, the former public relations director for the New England Whalers, who initially just wanted to create a sports network for the Whalers and University of Connecticut athletic teams, ESPN has grown into a multimedia kingdom since it was founded in 1979.<sup>6</sup> Today, writes Jim Shea of the *Hartford Courant*, the Disney-owned company includes:

ESPN International, a separate, 20-network operation, broadcasting to 150 million households in 180 countries in 21 languages; ESPN Classic, featuring games, heroes, and moments from sports history, seen in more than 20 million homes; ESPNNews, a continuous run of news, highlights, scores, analysis, and live press conferences; ESPNRadio, which provides twenty-four-hour-a-day programming to more than 650 affiliates, including 80 stations that carry the network 24 hours a day; ESPN.com, the most popular sports site on the Web; *ESPN: The Magazine*, a twice-monthly, ten- by twelve-inch glossy with a circulation of 850,000 that may be poised to challenge the venerable *Sports Illustrated*; ESPNZone, a budding chain of sports-themed restaurants; and ESPN Enterprises, a division given the full-time responsibility of developing new products and businesses using the ESPN brand.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years to the day after it first aired, ESPN launched ESPN Extra, a pay-per-view service, and ESPNNow, which provides sports news and schedules.<sup>8</sup> In a word, ESPN is an empire, vast and powerful, seemingly ever-growing.

The details of how ESPN became such a prominent (some argue dominant) part of the sport world is a story best told by Michael Freeman in *ESPN: The Uncensored History*. “Few television success stories are as inspiring as ESPN’s. In the end, its shrewd, joyous, and sometimes tormented history is the story of the transformation of a tiny cable network into a major player in American sports journalism.”<sup>9</sup> An engaging exposé, *ESPN: The Uncensored History* reveals the behind-the-scenes machinations and examines the institutional culture that has made ESPN one of the most valuable jewels in Disney’s crown—the network is worth more than \$15 billion—and “the most influential sports news vehicle in the world.”<sup>10</sup> What this book does not do well, however, is put ESPN’s rise in the broader cultural and historical context of globalization and the already well-established sport/media complex.

Many scholars, including several contributors to Lawrence A. Wenner’s 1998 anthology *Mediasport*, have noted that the production and consumption of mass media sport historically has been linked to broader trends and dynamics.<sup>11</sup> During the last twenty years, no trend or dynamic has been more pronounced than what geographer David Harvey describes as the “emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation.”<sup>12</sup> Whether referred to as “the new global capitalism,” “postmodern capitalism,” or some other catch phrase, a potent combination of aggressive multinational corporations, ever-developing telecommunication systems, marketing and distribution networks, and technologies has altered our social world, including the world of sport. ESPN has contributed to and been a beneficiary of these and other interconnected social, economic, and political developments. Indeed, ESPN is emblematic of the contemporary sports/media complex: continuously expanding and diversifying, searching for new markets, reporting (and crafting) the most recent sound bites and highlights. In this latter respect, ESPN is exemplary. Few other media institutions “reduce reality to the knowable,” to use John Fiske’s apt phrase, via sound bites and highlights as effectively as ESPN’s *SportsCenter*.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, it is easy to criticize the ways in which ESPN represents sports. ESPN can be glib and sardonic, it frequently fails to ask tough questions, and—as one would expect—it contributes to the sportsworld status quo. ESPN’s *SportsCenter* is not PBS’s *The News Hour*. Occasionally, however, ESPN does provide viewers with more than just the latest scores and news. It sometimes breaks important stories, conducts valuable interviews, and produces special shows. Last year, for example, ESPN’s *SportsCentury* project featured more than 80 hours of programming chronicling twentieth-century sports, albeit with a decidedly American emphasis.<sup>14</sup> *SportsCentury* included thirty-second “Classic Moments” that recapped some of the more memorable sports events from that day in history, and six *SportsCenter of the Decade* episodes—the first covered the years 1900–49, the remaining five focused on each decade thereafter; and shows on the “greatest” coaches, games, dynasties, and influential people of the century, as determined by a 48-member panel of journalists, broadcasters, and administrators (comprised almost exclusively of white men). Most notably, *SportsCentury* featured individual, thirty-minute shows on the fifty “greatest” athletes of the century, broadcasted in ascending order. Clearly *SportsCentury* was a massive undertaking. All told, ESPN interviewed more than 700 people (mostly athletes and journalists), and edited hundreds of hours of action and news footage and 20,000 photographs. Truth be told, I did not see much of *SportsCentury*, for obvious reasons. What I saw, though, was impressive: well written and researched, thoughtful, and

balanced, especially considering it was a commercial and not a scholarly project. Moreover, *SportsCentury* was critically acclaimed (the *New York Times* said it was “brilliant”) and won a Peabody Award for broadcasting excellence.<sup>15</sup> Yes, it treated its subjects in nearly reverential terms and, in typical American fashion, celebrated rugged individualism and the work ethic. But *SportsCentury* was nonetheless compelling public history, simultaneously entertaining and educational—though less educational than it might have been, had its producers been more critically alert and broadened their scope to include more non-American subjects.

When one surveys the contemporary sporting world, it is hard to ignore ESPN. Shea argues that

By virtue of its omnipresence, its audience size, its content, its credibility, its popularity, ESPN is the king of sports television. It has become the most dominant force in the history of sports broadcasting, an interconnected colossus of multimedia synergy, which now routinely influences and alters the way sports are viewed, covered, and even played.<sup>16</sup>

Shea may overstate the case: ESPN’s influence can be overestimated. ESPN obviously did not create the contemporary world of sport single-handedly. It did not create the seemingly indiscriminate desire on the part of many people (again, mostly men) for mass mediated sports, though it certainly stokes that desire. Further, those who hold ESPN, and television in general, responsible for the many problems plaguing sports tend to ignore the sport-media complex’s long history. Newspapers and radio and television networks used sport to fill print space and air time long before ESPN.

Still, Shea has a point: ESPN is undoubtedly a major player in the sportsworld, a culturally significant institution. Sometimes, ESPN seems ubiquitous. ABC regularly promotes ESPN programming. There are two ESPN-affiliated sport-radio stations in my hometown. Once a month, ESPN offers me “huge introductory savings” on a subscription to *ESPN: The Magazine*. Recently, I saw a young man wearing a T-shirt that read, “ESPN, Man’s Best Friend.” Then again, perhaps by denying myself cable, I am being hypersensitive to ESPN’s cultural pervasiveness. No matter. To some sports fans—an entire generation of them, in fact—ESPN has always been “The Worldwide Leader in Sports.” They have no recollection of pre-ESPN sport culture. They do not remember when the struggling network regularly broadcast Australian rules football, high school sports, and tractor pulls. On the contrary, for many sports fans, ESPN as we now know it is as taken for granted as microwave ovens, answering machines, and e-mail: it is a staple of postmodern daily life.

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  2. Michael Freeman, *ESPN: The Uncensored History* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing, 2000), 4.
  3. Mike Rubin, “The Straw That Stirs the Shtick,” *New York Times Magazine* (18 Oct. 1998): 102-03.
  4. Jim Shea, “The King: How ESPN Changes Everything,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan.-Feb. 2000: 45.
  5. Freeman, *ESPN: The Uncensored History*, 5-6. For more on “SportsCenter” and its contribution to American popular culture, see Grant Farred, “Cool as the Other Side of the Pillow: How ESPN’s SportsCenter Has Changed Television Sports Talk,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 24(2): 96-117 (May 2000).

6. Richard Sandomir, "At ESPN, the Revolution Was Televised," *New York Times*, 7 Sep. 1999.
7. Shea, "The King," 45.
8. Sandomir, "At ESPN, the Revolution Was Televised."
9. Freeman, *ESPN: The Uncensored History*, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *Mediaport* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
12. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), vii.
13. John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989), 150. For more on ESPN and the construction of its highlights, see Michael Hiestand, "The Lowdown on Highlights," *USA Today*, 20 May 1998.
14. Leonard Shapiro, "ESPN's 'SportsCentury' Goes Back-Back-Back," *Washington Post*, 22 Jan. 1999.
15. Sandomir, "At ESPN, the Revolution Was Televised;" "ESPN Honored," *Miami Herald*, 2 Apr. 2000.
16. Shea, "The King," 45.