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ESPN Contends With Its Fracturing Business Model

by

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Honors Thesis

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May 2025

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May 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Part I- ESPN and the decline of cable	6
ESPN's start as a cable network	6
The current state of cable and rise of streaming	9
The end of media blackouts	15
Part II- ESPN and the internet age	17
The rise of social media	17
Competition from digitally-native sites	24
Online commentary versus ESPN	29
Part III- Shifts in media during the last decade	43
Shifts in the TV industry	43
How Younger Generations Consume Media	46
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	52

Introduction

On September 7, 1979, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) went on the air for the first time. At 7:00 p.m., the network's first and eventual flagship program, SportsCenter, made its first appearance. "In the coming weeks and months we'll be filling you in on the pulse of sporting activity not only around the country, but around the world,"¹ host George Grande said. "If it takes an interview, we'll do it. If it takes play-by-play, we'll do it. If it takes commentary, we'll do that too."² The idea for the network was conceived by its first chairman, Bill Rasmussen, a former radio executive, and his son Scott, feeling the need for "An around-the-clock sports network via satellite."³

SportsCenter filled a niche that had been untapped in both cable and broadcast television. It presented real-time sports news, updates, and highlights that fans would normally have to find out through reading their local newspaper. "You didn't know the results. And if you knew the results, you weren't able to have access to the highlights, so you tuned into *SportsCenter*," former SportsCenter anchor Dan Patrick said.⁴ The hosts of SportsCenter also added to the show's appeal. Through the likes of Stuart Scott, Kenny Mayne, and Bob Ley, "The ESPN show (SportsCenter) is that rare venue in which sports presenters borrow intelligently and innovatively

¹. Mancini TV Classics, "1979 - ESPN Launch / First Day: SportsCenter with Commercials - NEW! Improved Closed Captioning!," YouTube, March 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0ed1dkqHZY>.

². Mancini TV Classics, "1979 - ESPN Launch / First Day: SportsCenter with Commercials

³. "ESPN Milestones," ESPN Press Room U.S., January 16, 2024, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/espn-milestones/>.

⁴. Jesse Pantuosco, "SportsCenter's Fight for Survival: Can ESPN's Flagship Survive the Digital Age?," Awful Announcing, August 2, 2023, <https://awfulannouncing.com/espn/can-sportscenter-survive-digital-age.html>.

from literature, politics, and most important, popular culture, with a special predilection toward the world of hip-hop.”⁵

The promise of ESPN from its early days was its access to live sports, broadcasting events that national audiences otherwise might not have access to. It also meant that leagues could grow audiences nationally. Before September 7, 1979, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) granted ESPN exclusive rights to televise events. This was ESPN’s first exclusive media rights deal, which gave the network legitimacy, as it attempted to find consistent programming. College athletics were particularly important due to how quickly they were growing. In 1977, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) inked a \$118 million deal with the NCAA to broadcast college football through the 1981 season.⁶ ESPN, following suit, proved that they were ahead of the curve in their acquisition of live sports rights.

For much of ESPN’s early history, the network televised more obscure sporting events, much different from the contracts that ESPN possesses with major leagues such as the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB). However, it was their broadcast of the 1987 America’s Cup, the longest running sailing competition, that helped propel the network forward. The network’s coverage of the competition reached 1.4 million homes, achieved a 3.4 rating⁷, and “was a valuable learning experience for ESPN in delivering niche sports programming. It

⁵. Grant Farred, “Cool as the Other Side of the Pillow,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 24, no. 2 (May 2000): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723500242002>.

⁶. Amira Rose Davis, “Sporting Revolutions: The 1970s and the Making of Modern College Athletics: Modern American History,” Cambridge Core, November 4, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-american-history/article/sporting-revolutions-the-1970s-and-the-making-of-modern-college-athletics/B5313E4DE27C728C9B5206B0EFBED E61>.

⁷. Dave Nagle, “ESPN, Inc.: 1987 in Review,” ESPN Press Room U.S., January 2, 1988, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/1988/01/1987-marks-espn-biggest-year-yet/#:~:text=Live%20coverage%20of%20America's%20Cup,peaked%20with%20a%2027%20share>.

helped drive interest in the network and proved it could provide content that fans couldn't get on broadcast television.”⁸

ESPN's coverage of the America's Cup and its success coincided with a cable TV surge that defined the 1980s. Cable networks numbered only four in 1978, but by 1984, the number had grown to 48.⁹ The number of homes that ESPN reached went from over 7 million in 1980¹⁰ to over 54 million by the end of 1989, a 609% increase from the start of the decade.¹¹ This trend was echoed by ESPN receiving the NFL's first cable contract in 1987 and reaching a deal with MLB in 1990.¹² Cable subscriptions would continue to grow for ESPN until their peak in 2011 at 100.1 million cable subscribers.¹³

Over the past decade, however, ESPN has been on a precipitous decline both monetarily and influentially. With the advent of streaming, cord-cutting has begun to plague cable stalwarts such as ESPN. In January 2024, Nielsen reported that streaming held a 42.6% share of TV viewership, dwarfing cable's 24.4% share. Disney Streaming, a conglomeration of ESPN+,

⁸. Olivia Coryell, “America's Cup: Parallel to ESPN's Evolution for More than Four Decades,” ESPN Front Row, October 17, 2024, <https://www.espnfrontrow.com/2024/10/americas-cup-parallel-to-espns-evolution-for-more-than-four-decades/>.

⁹. Dominic Toto, “Job Growth in Television: Cable versus Broadcast, 1958-99,” Monthly Labor Review 123, no. 8 (August 2000): 10.

¹⁰. Dave Nagle, “ESPN, Inc.: 1980 in Review,” ESPN Press Room U.S., January 2, 1981, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/1981/01/expanded-programming-household-growth-highlight-espns-first-full-year/>.

¹¹. Dave Nagle, “ESPN, Inc.: 1989 in Review,” ESPN Press Room U.S., January 2, 1990, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/1990/01/1989-a-year-of-memories-and-milestones/#:~:text=1989%3A%20A%20YEAR%20OF%20MEMORIES,of%20the%20network's%2010th%20anniversary.>

¹². “ESPN Milestones,” ESPN Press Room U.S., January 16, 2024, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/espn-milestones/>.

¹³. Dave Nagle, “ESPN, Inc.: 2011 in Review,” ESPN Press Room U.S., January 6, 2012, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2012/01/espn-inc-2011-in-review/#:~:text=ESPN's%202011%20was%20highlighted%20by,with%20its%20largest%20distributor%2C%20Comcast>

Disney+, Hulu, accounts for 4.7% share of all TV.¹⁴ ESPN's once mighty 110 million-subscriber figure has dwindled to 67 million¹⁵ while subscribers for ESPN+ have remained between 24.3 million and 26 million since quarter four of 2022.¹⁶ Due to a shift into the internet age, ESPN's flagship news program, SportsCenter is seeing a dip in viewership because of the obsolete nature of its mission. News, highlights, and scores are now at every fan's fingertips, so watching an hour long program to get a recap on all the day's events is not the most efficient way to consume news.

The pervasive trend of cord-cutting coincides with persistent and ongoing layoffs at ESPN. The self-proclaimed "worldwide leader in sports" has seen a slew of on-air talent laid off along with other behind-the-camera crew members. "Given the current environment, ESPN has determined it necessary to identify some additional cost savings in the area of public-facing commentator salaries, and that process has begun," a June 2023 ESPN press release notes.¹⁷ In 2023 and 2024, ESPN laid off notable on-air talent such as prolific writer Zach Lowe, college football commentator and former NFL player Robert Griffin III, NBA analysts Jalen Rose and

¹⁴. "The Gauge: Traditional TV Gets a Boost from Football and News in January 2025," Nielsen, February 18, 2025, <https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2025/the-gauge-traditional-tv-gets-a-boost-from-football-and-news-in-january-2025/>.

¹⁵. Ben Strauss, "ESPN's Strategy to Survive Cable's Demise with Streaming - The Washington Post," The Washington Post, September 10, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2024/09/10/espn-streaming-sports-rights/>.

¹⁶. "Number of ESPN+ Subscribers in the U.S. 2024 | Statista," Statista, February 13, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1054451/espn-plus-subscriber-us/>.

¹⁷. ESPN Press Room, "ESPN Statement on Public-Facing Commentator Exercise," ESPN Press Room U.S., July 6, 2023, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2023/06/espn-statement-on-public-facing-commentator-exercise/>.

Jeff Van Gundy, as well as Max Kellerman, who originally appeared on ESPN's popular First Take program with notable ESPN analyst Stephen A. Smith.¹⁸

These layoffs have been a looming shadow over the network for years. "In late April 2017...(ESPN) laid off more than 100 well-known employees, including long-time reporters, analysts, and commentators (Harris, 2017). This was the second major round of layoffs for ESPN in a short period of time, as the company had previously laid off approximately 300 personnel in late 2015."¹⁹

Due to these ongoing issues at ESPN, the network has returned to its original lifeblood: the acquisition of live sporting events and contracts with major leagues. Still, ESPN has experienced difficulties in this respect, with MLB recently opting out of their TV rights contract with ESPN. The 7-year deal, worth \$550 million per season and set to run until the conclusion of the 2028 season, will end abruptly at the conclusion of the 2025 season with both sides agreeing to opt-out of the deal's final three years.²⁰ Similarly, The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), whose exclusive media rights deal with ESPN runs through 2025, could be looking for a potential \$1 billion per year media rights deal that could be with multiple networks or streaming services.²¹

¹⁸. Tom Tapp, "ESPN Layoffs: Zach Lowe Joins the List of on-Air Talent Who Have Been Let Go," *Deadline*, September 30, 2024, <https://deadline.com/2024/09/espn-layoffs-list-talent-fired-1235428485/>.

¹⁹. Galen Clavio and Ryan Vooris, "ESPN and the Hostile Media Effect," *Communication & Sport* 6, no. 6 (November 16, 2017): 728-29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517739835>.

²⁰. "ESPN, MLB to End Broadcast Partnership after 2025 Season," ESPN, February 21, 2025, https://africa.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/43943678/espn-mlb-end-broadcast-partnership-2025-season.

²¹. Trent Reinsmith, "Report: UFC Looks for \$1 Billion a Year for New Broadcast Rights Deal," *Forbes*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/trentreinsmith/2025/01/12/report-ufc-looks-for-1-billion-a-year-for-new-broadcast-rights-deal/>.

Once one of the most revered and untouchable brands in television is now at a crossroads. The network is failing to adapt to the digital age, and as such, is losing ground to streaming services and independent media. ESPN's recent struggles can be attributed to cord-cutting becoming a more prominent trend, as well as predominantly new generations getting their sports content from streaming services and online creators. Still, ESPN continues to survive due to their purchase of large contracts with major North American sports leagues. In the following thesis, I will discuss how ESPN is failing to adapt to the internet age as cable viewership continues to decline. I will look into how different media outlets and independent content creators on social media are taking a sizable chunk of ESPN's audience as a new generation of sports fans looks elsewhere to get their news and entertainment.

Part I- ESPN and the decline of cable

ESPN's start as a cable network

As mentioned earlier, cable TV has seen a steady decline for the past decade. The number of total cable TV subscribers has fallen from 96.3 million in 2017 to 68.7 million in 2024.²² ESPN, being one of the largest cable networks in the U.S., has around 67 million subscribers²³, but this remains a far cry from their dominance during the early and mid-2010s. Though ESPN commands a large audience compared to other channels, the companies' finances are still marked

²². Thomas Reese, "Cable TV Statistics (2025) - Viewership & Subscribers," evoca.tv, January 4, 2025, <https://evoca.tv/cable-tv-statistics/#:~:text=The%20United%20States-,As%20of%202025%2C%2068.7%20million%20people%20in%20the%20United%20States,States%20had%20a%20cable%20connection.>

²³. Strauss, "ESPN's Strategy to Survive Cable's Demise with Streaming."

by decline. In 2024, ESPN averaged 1.6 million primetime viewers, the second highest of any cable network. However, this still represents a 2% decrease from the previous year.²⁴

ESPN became a stalwart in cable television because it was there from the beginning. While the first cable system was established in 1948, the industry did not pick up steam until a string of deregulatory measures during the Richard Nixon administration were enacted in the early 1970s.²⁵ “In 1972 the FCC issued standards for the number of broadcast station signals that should be available in a community... the FCC also limited the franchise fees that municipalities could charge cable operators to three percent of revenue, and fixed the length of franchise agreements at fifteen years, reducing uncertainty for cable operators when bidding for new franchises or renegotiating the renewal of existing franchises.”²⁶ Early cable systems began to appear in major American cities shortly afterwards. By facilitating the movement of cable systems into major cities, the U.S. government also opened the door for a large sect of sports fans to watch their local teams.

The help of major American cities was exemplified through the inception of the NCAA Big East basketball conference and their early deal with ESPN. The Big East struck an eight-game, local syndication deal with ESPN for their inaugural 1979-1980 season.²⁷ This deal allowed ESPN to tap into big markets in the Northeast with a steadily rising conference. They

²⁴. Michael Schneider, “Most-Watched Television Networks: Ranking 2024’s Winners and Losers,” *Variety*, December 27, 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/most-watched-channels-2024-tv-network-ratings-1236259845/>.

²⁵. Thomas R. Eisenmann, “The U.S. Cable Television Industry, 1948–1995: Managerial Capitalism in Eclipse: Business History Review,” *Cambridge Core*, December 13, 2011, 4-9, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/business-history-review/article/abs/the-us-cable-television-industry-19481995-managerial-capitalism-in-eclipse/B290C0A6319B1F1BDB37751343DE03CC>.

²⁶. Eisenmann, “The U.S. Cable Television Industry, 1948–1995: Managerial Capitalism in Eclipse: Business History Review,” 9.

²⁷. Edelman, Ezra. *Requiem for the Big East*. 2014; Bristol, CT: ESPN Films. ESPN+, 13:15-13:26.

weren't just broadcasting live NCAA sports, but premier live NCAA sports. "I remember even as a basketball fan, that being a big deal. I could lie on my couch and watch a big time college basketball game in the Northeast. I could never do that before,"²⁸ Bill Reynolds, a former columnist for the Providence Journal said. Because the conference included schools such as Boston College, St. John's, Villanova, and Georgetown, ESPN found itself catering to large markets such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. As Athletic writer Ken Pomeroy put it, "Big Monday on ESPN was appointment viewing."²⁹ ESPN had devised its business model around live sports and updates. The large markets that watched the Big East identified around their teams and were eager to watch high-level basketball from other cities. The network was able to capitalize on this and provide sports that otherwise would not be shown on big broadcast networks.

Nearly a decade later, ESPN would repeat this success with a major league deal. ESPN cut a deal with the NFL in 1987 to show eight Sunday Night Football games during the 1987-1988 season, and, if successful, would repeat through the 1989-1990 season. The network paid \$153 million over three years.³⁰ ESPN noted that this deal was its most successful at the time, garnering an average of 6.4 million viewers in 1989.³¹ This was ESPN's first contract with a major North American professional sports league. Because it went so well, the NFL would ultimately agree to terms on a second broadcast deal afterward. The deal also included a provision that "a local over-the-air station in the visiting market also shows the games so that

²⁸. Edelman, *Requiem for the Big East*, 14:10-14:20.

²⁹. Ken Pomeroy, "Kenpom: Comparing the Eras in Big East Basketball," The New York Times, February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/231793/2018/02/06/kenpom-comparing-the-eras-in-big-east-basketball/>.

³⁰. "ESPN, NFL Agree to Four-Year Deal," The Washington Post, February 28, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1990/03/01/espn-nfl-agree-to-four-year-deal/379859c4-8437-4a0d-8d3d-31e4f654f4a8>.

³¹. "ESPN, NFL Agree to Four-Year Deal," The Washington Post.

noncable homes are protected.”³² Later, this paper will discuss how this idea of protection would all but be abandoned in the current era of media blackouts. ESPN’s inclination to protect non-cable homes offers an inverse to ESPN+’s strategy of blacking out local or national sports to encourage viewers to keep their cable subscription that often has ESPN included.

ESPN’s deal with the NFL showed just how lucrative exclusive games on ESPN could be for both the network and the league. It was a success that other sports leagues would soon chase. A year before renewing their deal with the NFL in 1990, to the tune of \$450 million over four years for 35 total games,³³ ESPN struck a deal with MLB worth \$400 million for four years, which gave ESPN the rights to broadcast 175 games each season.³⁴ In the 1990s, MLB had reached new financial peaks, which saw player salaries and ticket prices more than double from 1988 to 1991.³⁵ In 1990, MLB more than doubled its television revenue from the year before, partly thanks to revenues from ESPN.³⁶ This success set the stage, along with the network’s deals with the NFL, for similarly large media rights deals for cable television.

ESPN’s broadcast deals with professional leagues go to show that the network’s dominant cable presence was built largely off the back of live sports. But as live sporting events migrate elsewhere, viewership is leaving with it.

The current state of cable and rise of streaming

Before the increase in cord-cutting, ESPN’s exclusive rights mattered less because customers still had to pay exorbitant amounts for cable packages. This meant that ESPN, one of the most in-demand cable networks, still commanded their share from cable companies because

³². “ESPN, NFL Agree to Four-Year Deal,” The Washington Post.

³³. “ESPN, NFL Agree to Four-Year Deal,” The Washington Post.

³⁴. Larry Stewart, “ESPN Gets Cable Rights to Baseball, Starting in 1990,” Los Angeles Times, January 6, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-01-06-sp-212-story.html>.

³⁵. Michael J. Haupert, “The Economic History of Major League Baseball,” EHnet, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-history-of-major-league-baseball/>.

³⁶. Haupert, “The Economic History of Major League Baseball.”

customers were still paying for the network in their package, even if they went elsewhere for certain live sports. Now, to avoid the cost of cable packages, consumers are going to other places to get their sports fix.

Spectrum, the largest telecommunications company in the U.S. (not including the DirecTV and Dish proposed merger)³⁷ charges \$115 per month for their cheapest cable package that includes ESPN.³⁸ For DirecTV's cheapest package to include ESPN, consumers pay \$90 for just over 90 channels.³⁹ On Dish's website, the package that they marked as "Best Value" offers over 240 channels for \$112 per month.⁴⁰ Still, as media consultant Brad Adgate noted on the golden age of cable in 2013, "the average TV household had over 189 channels (although they watched only 17 of them)."⁴¹

Conversely, streaming has continued to take the reins as a more affordable or desirable alternative, especially for younger TV viewers. YouTubeTV includes ESPN, ESPN2, and ESPNU and can be purchased with Max, Paramount+ with ShowTime and Starz for \$113 per month.⁴² Similarly, Hulu with live TV can be purchased with Disney+ and ESPN+ included for

³⁷. "Largest Pay TV Providers in the U.S. by Subscribers 2024 | Statista," Statista, October 2, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/251793/pay-tv-providers-with-the-largest-number-of-subscribers-in-the-us/>.

³⁸. Charter Communications, "Spectrum TV Plans - Shop Cable TV Plans & Packages," Spectrum TV Plans - Shop Cable TV Plans & Packages, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.spectrum.com/cable-tv/plans>.

³⁹. "DIRECTV TV Packages Via Satellite or Internet," DIRECTV, accessed March 2, 2025, https://www.directv.com/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=paidsearch&utm_campaign=dtvspackages&utm_content=package58700008154681109&utm_audience=prospect.

⁴⁰. "Shop Dish Satellite TV Packages - Compare Packages & Prices," DISH, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.dish.com/packages>.

⁴¹. Brad Adgate, "The Rise and Fall of Cable Television," Forbes, November 9, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2020/11/02/the-rise-and-fall-of-cable-television/>.

⁴². "YouTube TV - Watch & DVR Live Sports, Shows & News," YouTube, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://tv.youtube.com/welcome/>.

\$88 per month.⁴³ As demographics shift, it makes more sense for younger sports fans, who generally stream and binge TV outside of watching ESPN's content, to purchase a streaming service as opposed to a cable subscription. As mentioned earlier, most people only watch a handful of channels in their cable plan, so it makes little sense to pay exorbitant prices for packages with the main selling point being their large variety of channels. The relative affordability of streaming services for a generation that is just now entering the work force were also a reason for this shift.⁴⁴

One of the major effects of cord-cutting is the advent of streaming options introduced by individual leagues that directly compete with ESPN. The market for live coverage has been diversified to such an extent that ESPN is not only competing with other cable networks, or streaming services, but the leagues themselves for media rights and content. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the appeals of SportsCenter was that it brought real-time highlights and updates for high profile, out-of-market games. Now, these games can be viewed live in their entirety. NBA League Pass, which includes all out-of-market NBA games for \$17 per month or \$50 per season.⁴⁵ The NFL's streaming services, NFL Sunday Ticket, which includes coverage of all out-of-market Sunday afternoon games and NFL Redzone is exclusive to YouTube TV for \$378 over the course of a season.⁴⁶ Previously, Sunday Ticket was offered by DirecTV at a \$300 price point, which proved to be too high for most subscribers, as only 2 million DirecTV

⁴³. "Plans and Prices," Hulu help, December 13, 2024, <https://help.hulu.com/article/hulu-how-much-does-hulu-cost>.

⁴⁴. Hun Kim et al., "Examining the Use, Perception, and Motivation of Cord-Cutting: A Consumer Segment Approach," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (August 25, 2020): 126–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699020946442>.

⁴⁵. "Stream the Rest of the Season at a Lower Price," NBA League Pass | Experience Live NBA Games Anytime, Anywhere | NBA.com, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.nba.com/league-pass-purchase>.

⁴⁶. "The Exclusive Home of NFL Sunday Ticket - Youtube & Youtube TV," YouTube, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://tv.youtube.com/learn/nflsundayticket/>.

customers purchased the package out of the 5 million needed for the company to break even.⁴⁷ In 2022, Google-owned YouTube TV agreed to a deal with the sports package worth \$2 billion per year over seven years.⁴⁸ The agreement affords fans the opportunity to pair coverage of in-market games on YouTube TV with all Sunday NFL games, much as they would with a cable service, but at a more economical price. Finally, MLB offers all out-of-market games and MLB Network on their streaming service, MLB.TV, for \$150 per season.⁴⁹ Out of the big four North American sports leagues, the NHL is the only one that ESPN has exclusive rights to broadcast, which they exercise by offering all out-of-market NHL games on ESPN+.⁵⁰ The NHL originally offered its out-of-market games through their own streaming package, NHL.TV, which cost \$150 annually as opposed to ESPN's \$60 annual cost.⁵¹ ESPN and the NHL's media rights deal was centered around streaming, with over 1,100 games offered on ESPN+ over the course of each season. As The New York Times's Kevin Draper noted, marquee games would be shown on traditional TV,

⁴⁷. Alex Sherman, "Amazon Likely Front-Runner for Multiyear NFL Sunday Ticket Deal, Sources Say," CNBC, September 10, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/10/amazon-likely-front-runner-for-multi-year-nfl-sunday-ticket-deal-sources.html>.

⁴⁸. Nathaniel Meyersohn, "NFL Sunday Ticket Is Leaving DIRECTV and Heading to YouTube TV | CNN Business," CNN, December 22, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/media/youtube-nfl-sunday-ticket/index.html#:~:text=NFL%20Sunday%20Ticket%20launched%20in,sports%20deals%20in%20recent%20years>.

⁴⁹. "MLB.TV out-of-Market Packages: Buy MLB.TV," MLB.com, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.mlb.com/live-stream-games/subscribe/sny/1?mlbkw=ds-g-p81548448318&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwp8--BhBREiwAj7og1-p2UCZWs3HWPw3tTqeThs9bLLAaZg8D--wiNhawCu7hk_A1UuZhBBoC2oUQAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds&adobe_mc_sdid=SDID%3D7A7070B0CB79630F-46A926A7CF55BB11%7CMCORGID%3DA65F776A5245B01B0A490D44%40AdobeOrg%7CTS%3D1741978556&adobe_mc_ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

⁵⁰. "How to Watch & Stream NHL Games," Official Site of the National Hockey League, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://www.nhl.com/info/how-to-watch-and-stream-nhl-games>.

⁵¹. Kevin Draper, "N.H.L. Returns to ESPN in a 7-Year Deal with an Emphasis on Streaming," The New York Times, March 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/sports/hockey/hockey-nhl-espn-disney.html>.

but the deal was structured so there would be enough content on ESPN+ to entice people to subscribe.⁵²

Major League Soccer (MLS), although a smaller professional league in the U.S., reached a 10-year, \$2.5 billion deal with Apple TV+ in 2022.⁵³ The deal saw the creation of MLS Season Pass: an Apple TV+ add-on that offers every match throughout the season, Leagues Cup, and playoffs with no regional blackouts, costing \$79.00 per season for Apple TV+ subscribers.⁵⁴ MLS's media rights deal was executed to avoid fragmenting their viewership, and could lead to more leagues cutting deals exclusively with streaming services if it continues to pay dividends.⁵⁵

Another trend that has led to an increase in cord-cutting, which is exemplified by the aforementioned MLS-Apple TV+ deal, is the shift away from blackout rules that favored cable networks such as ESPN. Media blackouts- which prohibited customers in a particular region from viewing games- were implemented to incentivize sports fans to buy tickets to live events.⁵⁶ The big four North American sports leagues (NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB) were allowed to enact such policies due to their exemption from the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and the passage of the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 (SBA).⁵⁷ This act allowed the big four leagues to pool the broadcasting rights of all their teams into contracts with networks such as ESPN, and these

⁵². Draper, "N.H.L. Returns to ESPN in a 7-Year Deal with an Emphasis on Streaming."

⁵³. "Major League Soccer and Apple TV Agree 10-Year Deal," ESPN, June 14, 2022, https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37629338/major-league-soccer-apple-tv-agree-10-year-deal.

⁵⁴. "MLS Season Pass on Apple TV," MLS, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.mlssoccer.com/season-pass/en#:~:text=MLS%20is%20Back!&text=PRICING%3A%20%2414.99%2Fmonth%20or%20%2499.00,for%20a%20full%20season%20subscription>.

⁵⁵. Alexandra Canal, "Major League Soccer: Apple Deal 'Set the Bar at a Different Level,'" Yahoo! Finance, February 26, 2024, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/major-league-soccer-apple-deal-set-the-bar-at-a-different-level-182845906.html>.

⁵⁶. Josh Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts: A Harbinger of Change in Rapidly Evolving Media Landscape," *Houston Business and Tax Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (2018): 207-208.

⁵⁷. Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts," 209.

networks could decide where games were broadcast, and where they would not be, as CBS did in 1961.⁵⁸ In 1973, a revision was added to the SBA that prohibited the blackout of locally-broadcast sporting events if the game was broadcast elsewhere.⁵⁹ These blackout policies limited viewing options and increased prices, forcing consumers to pay cable prices that were “outpacing the standard rate of inflation.”⁶⁰ Additionally, complaints brought against the NHL, MLB, and their respective broadcasters in 2012 alleged the defendants violated the Sherman Act by “eliminating competition through exclusive territories protected by anticompetitive blackouts.”⁶¹ In separate settlements, the NHL and MLB began to offer single-team packages through their internet subscription packages (GameCenter Live and MLB.TV, respectively) at reduced rates.⁶² This represents a first step toward breaking down ESPN and cable’s hold on live sports. These settlements not only lead the way to chipping away at blackout rules, but these agreements made streaming more practical and affordable for consumers that were paying large sums for cable packages, or could not watch their teams. Still, sports have been a persistent barrier in the move toward cord cutting. Because live sports are such an ingrained part of cable TV, fans who hope to watch their favorite teams are forced to pay for a pricey cable package instead of shifting to more affordable options. ESPN, in addition to other legacy networks, constantly pays the exorbitant fee that comes with obtaining media rights, and keeps live sports on live TV.

⁵⁸. Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts," 209-210.

⁵⁹. Catherine C. Gropper and Benjamin C. Anderson, “Sellout, Blackout, or Get Out: The Impacts of the 2012 Policy Change on TV Blackouts and Attendance,” *NFL Journal of Sports Economics*, 19(4), 2016.

⁶⁰. Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts," 204.

⁶¹. Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts," 210.

⁶². Mathews, "Sports Broadcasting Blackouts," 210.

The end of media blackouts

Policies within the past decade and a half have eroded previous provisions as the media landscape continues to change. In 2012, the NFL sought to adjust a nearly 40-year blackout policy when the league offered their franchises the option to continue with the existing policy, sales of 100% of stadium capacity, or adopt the new policy and set an attendance threshold between 85% and 100% of capacity.”⁶³ This change in policy did not have an effect on the probability of a blackout, especially because only four teams publicly disclosed that they would be changing their threshold.⁶⁴ It was likely for this reason that in 2014, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) completely did away with their nearly 40-year long sports blackout policy. The FCC reasoned that, because the NFL’s main source of revenue comes from broadcast TV, as opposed to ticket sales as it was prior, the blackout policy was outdated.⁶⁵ The FCC also noted that the NFL was unlikely to move their games from broadcast networks to satellite and cable pay TV, so the commission believed that “the sports blackout rules are no longer needed to ensure that sports programming is widely available to television viewers.”⁶⁶ The FCC was correct in its assessment that the NFL would not move their games away from traditional broadcast TV. However, with the advent of streaming services that also carry NFL games, viewers continue to move away from cable packages for the affordability, because they remain unaffected by these provisions regarding media blackouts. Additionally, leagues are moving to over-the-top streaming services as opposed to cable because using online distribution channels allows them to sell content directly to consumers and reach unserved markets.⁶⁷

⁶³. Gropper and Anderson, “Sellout, Blackout, or Get Out.”

⁶⁴. Gropper and Anderson, “Sellout, Blackout, or Get Out,” 2-22.

⁶⁵. Janice Wise, “FCC Eliminates Sports Blackout Rules,” Federal Communications Commission, September 30, 2014, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-329649A1.pdf>.

⁶⁶. Wise, “FCC Eliminates Sports Blackout Rules,”

⁶⁷. Mathews, “Sports Broadcasting Blackouts,” 220.

This trend is especially apparent in the NFL's deal with Amazon Prime, worth \$1 billion per year, to stream Thursday Night Football games from 2022-2033.⁶⁸ In 2024, Netflix paid the NFL \$150 million for the exclusive rights to two high-profile Christmas Day games.⁶⁹ Netflix also retains the rights to stream at least one game on Christmas Day in 2025 and 2025.⁷⁰ However, because Netflix's test run performed so well, averaging over 24 million viewers between both games and beating out the Peacock-streamed, Chiefs-Dolphins wild card playoff game from January 2024⁷¹, the NFL might be inclined to stream both games on Netflix for the remainder of the deal. In addition to the NFL, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) signed a deal with Netflix that grants the streaming service exclusive rights to broadcast the next two Women's World Cups in the U.S., with another streaming service, DAZN, which will air the tournament worldwide.⁷² The trend of not only the NFL, but also FIFA jumping to streaming services, especially services not tied to legacy cable or broadcast networks, demonstrates that the FCC was right about the effect of eliminating its blackout rules. As cable viewership continues to wane, consumers should expect more leagues to reach agreements with Netflix and other platforms, as early forays yield promising results.

⁶⁸. Alex Sherman and Jabari Young, "NFL Finalizes New 11-Year Media Rights Deal, Amazon Gets Exclusive Thursday Night Rights," CNBC, March 18, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/18/nfl-media-rights-deal-2023-2033-amazon-gets-exclusive-thursday-night.html>.

⁶⁹. Derek Saul, "Netflix Set for \$150 Million NFL Christmas Test as Stock Heads to Best Year since 2015," Forbes, December 25, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2024/12/25/netflix-set-for-150-million-nfl-christmas-test-as-stock-heads-to-best-year-since-2015/>.

⁷⁰. Nicole Sperling, "Netflix and the N.F.L. Sign a Three-Season Deal," The New York Times, May 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/15/business/media/netflix-nfl-live.html>.

⁷¹. Dan Shanoff, "Takeaways from Netflix's NFL Christmas Ratings Door-Buster: The Streaming Giant Could Be Here to Stay," The New York Times, December 27, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6021736/2024/12/27/netflix-nfl-christmas-ratings-takeaways/>.

⁷². Jeff Rueter, "Netflix's FIFA Women's World Cup Deal Feels like a Page out of the Pay-to-Play Book: Rueter," The New York Times, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6015933/2024/12/23/fifa-netflix-womens-world-cup-broadcast-rights/>.

Despite blackouts on live sporting events being largely done away with, ESPN+ still maintains this policy. Though the streaming service has a plethora of out-of-market NHL games offered on ESPN+, blackout policies enstated by the streaming service prevent hockey fans from watching their local team, as well as other locally broadcasted content.⁷³ These blackouts are used to protect cable channels by incentivizing in-market viewers to purchase the packages these channels are included in.

Throughout ESPN's history, live sporting events have anchored the network. As previously mentioned, it was ESPN's rights deals with the NCAA, NFL, and MLB that propelled the network to the forefront of sports media. Today, as live sports prove an issue to the advance of cord cutting, cable channels like ESPN remain afloat. However, recent trends such as MLS moving to Apple TV+ and Netflix's entrance into the arena of live sports suggest that cable's hold might be weakening. As we will see in the next section, ESPN's commentary is not exactly motivating viewers to stay tuned into the cable network in the increasingly fragmented sports talk landscape.

Part II- ESPN and the internet age

The rise of social media

In recent times, ESPN's market share has receded due to the advent of the internet age. The rise of social media sites allows news and highlights to be shared instantaneously, which contributes to the destruction of SportsCenter's niche. Through the internet, the market for sports

⁷³. What is a blackout? how is my location determined if the event is blacked out? – ESPN fan support, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://support.espn.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003816892-What-is-a-Blackout-How-is-my-location-determined-if-the-event-is-black-out>.

content has been diversified to such an extent that not only are fans and other journalists taking advantage of new media options, athletes themselves are hopping into the content creation space. Digitally-native outlets such as The Player's Tribune, Bleacher Report, and The Athletic adapted quickly to the changes taking place in sports media. Overall, sports media has become diversified in unexpected ways to break up ESPN's market dominance.

As online devices become the preeminent way that people get their news, fans can get news and highlights faster than ever. According to a 2024 survey from the Pew Research Center, 57% of U.S. adults said they often get their news from a smartphone, computer, or tablet, compared to 33% that said they often get their news from TV.⁷⁴ This figure also does not include the next generation of sports fans who are already growing up with the proliferation of online news and will be more likely to use these technologies to get their news.

Since ESPN's first broadcast in 1979, SportsCenter was the network's flagship program. SportsCenter's creation filled a gap in the media landscape. It gave real-time news and updates that fans would otherwise have to wait until the following day to read about in their local paper. Not only was SportsCenter useful to fans who wanted a recap of the activity in their favorite leagues, the show's blend of "live event coverage, serious journalism, irreverent commentary, frat-house gags, trivia, nostalgia and a never-ending stream of highlights,"⁷⁵ made it unlike anything else on TV. ESPN's team of anchors helped change the way sports were talked about. Through the use of hyperbole and metaphors in their discussions, SportsCenter anchors such as Dan Patrick, Stuart Scott, and Chris Berman changed the way that sports are talked about.⁷⁶ Whether it was Patrick to emphatically declare an athlete was "en fuego," or Scott to assess that

⁷⁴. "News Platform Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, September 17, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>.

⁷⁵. Farred, "Cool as the Other Side of the Pillow," 100.

⁷⁶. Farred, "Cool as the Other Side of the Pillow," 112.

a play is “as cool as the other side of the pillow,” SportsCenter anchors put their own spin on the news and highlights that gripped viewers.⁷⁷ However, the prevalence of social media sites and other forms of new media demonstrate that SportsCenter’s monopolization on breaking news is coming to an end.

An example comes in the form of the social media site, X. X represents a chief competitor to SportsCenter’s model, as it allows for news and videos to be shared in real-time, even faster than ESPN’s flagship program. In a 2016 article in the *Journal of Communication and Sport*, X (then Twitter) was said to account for “95% of public social media conversations about current televised events happening.”⁷⁸ Due to this new instantaneous model of interaction, the discussions that would be had on SportsCenter about a particular event are already happening in real time. As award winning sports journalist for Nashville’s WKRN-TV, Joe Dublin, noted back in 2011, “Now with Twitter and Facebook, nobody’s waiting around until 6:30 [p.m.] to watch sports. The landscape has changed. I get (Tennessee) Titans information and any other information I want on my phone in five minutes.”⁷⁹ Despite the perception of ESPN executive Norby Williamson, simply returning SportsCenter to its roots of sports news and highlights will not solve the issue of persistent cord-cutting. Williamson said that SportsCenter needed to cut back on the hot takes and debate-style format and treat viewers to more exciting plays and quick-hitting updates.⁸⁰ While he is correct that the constant injection of commentary was not

⁷⁷. Farred, “Cool as the Other Side of the Pillow,” 111.

⁷⁸. Jan Boehmer, “Does the Game Really Change? How Students Consume Mediated Sports in the Age of Social Media,” *Communication & Sport* 4, no. 4 (July 24, 2016): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479515595500>.

⁷⁹. Kevin Hull and Norman P. Lewis, “Why Twitter Displaces Broadcast Sports Media: A Model,” *International Journal of Sport Communication* 7, no. 1 (March 2014): 16. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2013-0093>.

⁸⁰. Ben Strauss, “ESPN Wants to Make ‘Sportscenter’ Great Again - the Washington Post,” *The Washington Post*, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/12/05/espn-wants-make-sportscenter-great-again/>.

overkill for SportsCenter, Williamson failed to understand that fans were already going elsewhere for highlights. Now that highlights and news are available on-demand through social media sites, SportsCenter is no longer the most effective way to get updates. Through the use of commentary, ESPN attempted to capitalize on what made SportsCenter so engaging when Patrick and others were hosting, but it was clear their audience did not find this compelling.

Not only is social media so effective at disseminating news because of the speed content can be posted, but also due to the interaction it affords users. As media researchers Norman P. Lewis Ph. D. and Kevin Hull Ph. D. noted, “individuals are more likely to interact with people who are similar to themselves or who have common interests.”⁸¹ This is especially significant for sports media because allegiances to teams, cities, players, and leagues are the foundations of a viewers fandom. Thus, social media provides this space to develop communities between like-minded fans. The teams, leagues, and storylines of interest might not get national coverage, so it is more likely that the large userbases on X, Instagram, or Tik Tok would have room for these discussions. Similarly, the relationship between athletes and fans was largely one-sided. Fans could only form connections with these athletes through watching them on television, whether that was during a game or in an interview. Now, fans have the real possibility of interacting with athletes as they become more transparent and active on social media, allowing the pair to form a greater relationship through online means than they ever could in an interview.⁸² Phoenix Suns forward Kevin Durant has provided countless examples of this through his spats with NBA fans on X. One of the more recent examples included Durant responding to fans on X while playing in the 2024 summer Olympics in Paris. In response to a fan that criticized NBA players for having a problem with debates about the legacies of current players,

⁸¹. Hull and Lewis, “Why Twitter Displaces Broadcast Sports Media,” 25.

⁸². Hull and Lewis, “Why Twitter Displaces Broadcast Sports Media,” 24-25.

Durant responded “That’s what yall do, yall clowns. Use players to push these corny agendas yall got. This a brotherhood fam, u not apart of. It’s a problem now cuz social media got u clowns walkin around wit your chest out like u mean something. YOU DONT!!! YOUR TAKES DONT MATTER.”⁸³ Though Durant snapped that the opinions of fans didn’t matter, his frequent responses to them, as well as the responses of others, show that they matter more than ever. X is increasingly giving visibility to these fans and making their conversations with athletes more newsworthy than those with media personalities. Instead of sitting back and listening to others report on the news, fans now are part of the conversation, and play a greater role in the meaning-making process through their interactions between one another, as well as athletes in some cases.

X, other social media, and the internet also help fans get content related to their favorite sports and teams that ESPN might overlook. With sites like YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, and X, the barriers to entry are low enough that anyone can post about anything, so fans are now afforded the opportunity to create their own content. This trend is referred to as “mass amateurization,” or the development of new media to threaten the relative monopoly of professionals and traditional media sites- ESPN included.⁸⁴ Through the trend of mass amateurization, fans do not have to rely on ESPN to get information about their favorite teams or leagues, which could be uncovered. The NHL is a prime example. In an analysis of 579 highlights from January 19 to April 28, 2013 on ESPN’s Top 10 Plays segment- which recaps the top 10 plays of the day from Monday to Thursday and throughout the week on Sunday- the NHL

⁸³. Kevin Durant (@KDTrey5), “That’s what yall do, yall clowns. Use players to push these corny agendas yall got. This a brotherhood fam, u not apart of. It’s a problem now cuz social media”, Twitter, August 9, 2024, 8:04 a.m., <https://x.com/KDTrey5/status/1821880234238488646>

⁸⁴. Andrew McKinney, “Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry,” (dissertation, City University of New York ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2018), 18.

only accounted for 84 clips or 14.5% of the highlights.⁸⁵ This study took place when ESPN did not have the NHL's media rights. However, in 2022, the second year of ESPN's latest media rights deal with the NHL, the network only upped their coverage to 110 clips from February 1 to May 16, 2022.⁸⁶ This lack of coverage would initially put NHL fans out of luck, but due to the trend of mass amateurization, fans that previously struggled to find content about the sport are not only overwhelmed by hockey content, but can create their own content.

One of these content creators is Shannon Skanes, better known on YouTube as "The Hockey Guy." Skanes puts out multiple videos a day discussing NHL news, rumors, and the matchups taking place that night. Skanes's demeanor is very monotone. He rarely includes clips, opting to stand in front of a whiteboard with notes written on it. However, the British Columbia native, has amassed over 300,000 subscribers and 250 million views across all of his videos.⁸⁷ "There are a lot of fanbases out there who want to hear their teams talked about in the larger conversation and so I try to be even-handed on the channel," Skanes said in a Forbes article.⁸⁸ Skanes's success demonstrates that hockey fans do not need flashiness or high production value in their coverage. There is simply not enough space in a limited cable TV schedule to touch on everything in the increasingly crowded market for professional sports. However, mass

⁸⁵. Jeremy Saks and Molly Yanity, "The Not-so-Neutral Zone?: ESPN, Agenda Setting, and the National Hockey League," *Journal of Sports Media* 11, no. 1 (2016): 88-90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2016.0007>.

⁸⁶. Jeremy Saks and Molly Yanity, "SportsCenter's 'Top 10 Plays' Still Dunks on the National Hockey League," *Journal of Sports Media* 18, no. 2 (September 2023): 51-52, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2023.a945468>.

⁸⁷. Rob Salkowitz, "YouTube's Hockey Guy Keeps the Ice Tilted His Way with Wry NHL Takes," *Forbes*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2024/12/18/youtubes-hockey-guy-keeps-the-ice-tilted-his-way-with-wry-nhl-takes/>.

⁸⁸. Salkowitz, "YouTube's Hockey Guy Keeps the Ice Tilted His Way with Wry NHL Takes."

media, a desire of athletes for a long time, which will be discussed later in this paper's analysis of *The Athletic*.

Competition from digitally-native sites

The advent of the internet age and diversification of sports media has led to the creation of digitally-native sites such as Bleacher Report, *The Athletic*, and *The Player's Tribune*, all of which have a better understanding and more conducive business models for today's media landscape. These new media platforms directly challenge the hegemony of ESPN, and its website, ESPN.com.

Bleacher Report appeared at a time when ESPN.com was largely focused on national coverage, and coverage of local teams was largely consolidated to traditional print outlets. As such, Bleacher Report sought to provide the "breadth of an ESPN with the team and region specific coverage of local news."⁹³ Bleacher Report mixed this initiative with an informal style that blended sports and pop culture at a time when gatekeeping was a mark of sports writing. When Bleacher Report started in 2006, the outlet embraced its status as an outsider weblog (blog). At the time, digitally-native bloggers like Bill Simmons, "The Boston Sports Guy" thrived by setting "themselves apart from the professional journalists whose objectivity and authority they saw as granted from and beholden to the leagues themselves."⁹⁴ Simmons in particular laced his long-winded pieces with his persona as a Boston sports "homer" and 80s pop culture references, which made for more personal and entertaining writing than was seen in traditional sports media. It was in this environment that Bleacher Report found its way into. As former Bleacher Report president Rory Brown noted in a 2016 interview with *Forbes*, "We're

⁹³. McKinney, "Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry," 19.

⁹⁴. McKinney, "Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry," 27.

always trying to find the white space – new, different and compelling things that will appeal to a generation of sports fans that didn't watch SportsCenter waiting for highlights every night; people who consume everything on mobile and might be interested in the intersection between sports and music as opposed to purely what happens on the field.”⁹⁵ In its early days, Bleacher Report fielded heavy criticism for its rampant use of slideshow and listicles and the search engine optimization (SEO) gaming associated with publishing this type of content. However, these articles, along with Bleacher Report's current use of quick-hitting news and highlights, were perfect for the new era of sports media as the internet age set in. It provided a unique take on sports reporting that catered to younger sports fans.

Another aspect of Bleacher Report that made it so successful was its mission to “cover as many teams as possible with as little paid staff as possible.”⁹⁶ As noted earlier, reporting on specific teams was largely left to traditional print media outlets. But as sports journalism transitioned to the internet, Bleacher Report sought to provide localized coverage on a digitally-native platform. With the trend of mass amateurization becoming more prevalent, Bleacher Report started by crowdsourcing labor from an oversaturated labor market.⁹⁷ The blog structure coupled with the advent of crowdsourcing labor allowed Bleacher Report to develop a strong localized coverage network that was bolstered by a sense of community within each fandom which allowed “writers to build prominence within their own niches.”⁹⁸ This business model subverted ESPN's nationalized coverage by providing content on undercovered teams that

⁹⁵. Aaron Kwittken, “How Bleacher Report Went from Blog to Brand,” *Forbes*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/aaronkwittken/2016/03/10/how-bleacher-report-went-from-blog-to-brand/?sh=96cc54929f1f>.

⁹⁶. McKinney, “Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry,” 27-28.

⁹⁷. McKinney, “Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry,” 38-39.

⁹⁸. McKinney, “Making It Pay to Be a Fan: The Political Economy of Digital Sports Fandom and the Sports Media Industry,” 39.

fostered a community within their respective fanbases. It also capitalized on a rising demand for digital sports news that would help to break down the model of local coverage from regional print outlets. The success of this business model led to CNN's more than \$175 million acquisition of Bleacher Report in 2012.⁹⁹

In a similar vein to Bleacher Report's reporting of local news, Another digitally-native site, The Athletic, developed an organizational structure to accomplish the same mission. Dissimilar to Bleacher Report, however, The Athletic offers more longform and intricate pieces. This style appeals more to diehard fans and "statheads," filling a niche for more intellectual sports content in the wake of ESPN's move toward shocking hot takes and unsubstantive analysis that relies more on narrative. Still, The Athletic attempts to offer broad coverage through the implementation of almost 50 verticals in North America.¹⁰⁰ These verticals include a team of 5-10 writers, columnists, and editors to cover a specific city or region's teams.¹⁰¹ Through the use of verticals, The Athletic forgoes the cost of renting a physical newsroom, but still provides the structure of working at a smaller news organization.¹⁰²

The multiple arms of The Athletic and specific beats allow the outlet to hire local writers familiar with their respective communities. This practice is effective not only because the writers have rapport with their core audience of local readers, but also because they also have rapport with the athletes they will be covering, as well as a litany of sources and contacts already

⁹⁹. Jeff Bercovici, "Turner Buys Bleacher Report, Next-Gen Sports Site, for \$175M-Plus," *Forbes*, August 6, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2012/08/06/turner-buys-bleacher-report-next-gen-sports-site-for-175m-plus/>.

¹⁰⁰. Patrick Ferrucci and Gregory Perreault, "Local Is Now National: *The Athletic* as a Model for Online Local News," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 7 (August 17, 2022): 4219–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221117748>.

¹⁰¹. Ferrucci and Perreault, "Local Is Now National: *The Athletic* as a Model for Online Local News."

¹⁰². Ferrucci and Perreault, "Local Is Now National: *The Athletic* as a Model for Online Local News."

on-hand.¹⁰³ Thus, these writers do not need to waste time getting acclimated to a new beat because they have already done reporting in a city or region familiar to them. The success of this model comes at a time when ESPN is letting go of well-known, veteran writers to cut costs. In September 2024, ESPN laid off senior NBA writer Zach Lowe,¹⁰⁴ which was only the most recent case of The Worldwide Leader losing one of its most respected writers. While ESPN loses writers with time and credibility, The Athletic makes it a priority to have them on staff- chipping away at ESPN.com's authority and hegemony in the process.

Through this business model, The Athletic is able to cover a wide range of teams and regions despite being a large national organization, and affords reporters the intimacy of a smaller newsroom to produce work catered to a specific region while having the resources of a large media outlet, which ESPN and other traditional sports media giants were slow to explore. Though local sports reporting was previously the work of each respective local print outlet, "*The Athletic's* model presents a captivating case in that *The Athletic* manages to introduce a model that allowed the local sports subfield to adapt effectively after the disruption."¹⁰⁵

The diversification of the media landscape to include athletes can be seen in the creation of The Player's Tribune. The Player's Tribune is a digitally-native platform that gives athletes the opportunity to speak directly to fans through their own articles. It offers these athletes the ability to control how they are portrayed, circumventing the journalists that they so often mistrust to tell their stories.¹⁰⁶ With the popularization of new media, athletes not only have the

¹⁰³. Ferrucci and Perreault, "Local Is Now National: *The Athletic* as a Model for Online Local News."

¹⁰⁴. Tapp, "ESPN Layoffs: Zach Lowe Joins the List of on-Air Talent Who Have Been Let Go,"

¹⁰⁵. Ferrucci and Perreault, "Local Is Now National: *The Athletic* as a Model for Online Local News."

¹⁰⁶. David Schwartz and Travis Vogan, "The Players' Tribune: Self- Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media," *Journal of Sports Media*, July 12, 2017, 59 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/664337>.

opportunity to cultivate a stronger relationship with the fans who are eager for content, but also control the way they are presented as the capacity for professional journalists to gatekeep entry into the field continues to erode.¹⁰⁷ As noted earlier, this happened during the 2020 NBA Playoffs, but *The Player's Tribune* allows for more sentimental storytelling,¹⁰⁸ which might not be found on traditional sports TV. In *The Player's Tribune's* first issue, then-Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson detailed how he used to bully people when he was younger and sometimes used physical violence.¹⁰⁹ While the story “might be misconstrued if relayed to an unscrupulous journalist. *The Players' Tribune* offers a provocative but safe place from which he can make this apparently precarious statement.”¹¹⁰ Overall, *The Player's Tribune* fits uniquely into a changing media landscape, as it not only offers fans a more unfiltered view of their favorite athletes that they might not get through traditional media, but also affords athletes the opportunity to become content creators in their own right without having to go through gatekeepers in the field of journalism. In an age where athletes have become accustomed to espousing their thoughts on social media without the worry of journalists depicting them in a different light or misinterpreting their words, ESPN's near-monopoly is beginning to fracture. With the advent of digitally native sites and the diversification of the media market, ESPN is losing a share of its audience to fans who can find the type of content they are searching for elsewhere, and get more intimate coverage of the athletes they follow.

¹⁰⁷. Schwartz and Vogan, “The Players’ Tribune: Self- Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media,” 51.

¹⁰⁸. Schwartz and Vogan, “The Players’ Tribune: Self- Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media,” 53.

¹⁰⁹. Schwartz and Vogan, “The Players’ Tribune: Self- Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media,” 53.

¹¹⁰. Schwartz and Vogan, “The Players’ Tribune: Self- Branding and Boundary Work in Digital Sports Media,” 53.

Online commentary versus ESPN

The internet has also given space for content creators to not only share highlights, challenging SportsCenter's hegemony in that field, it also provides a space for anyone to give their commentary, opinions, and hot takes-commentary that goes against the consensus meant to attract attention- on the respective sports they cover. As ESPN recognized SportsCenter's waning dominance in respect to sharing highlights and news, ESPN pivoted its strategy to emphasizing commentary and hot takes.

As mentioned earlier, ESPN executive Norby Williamson aimed to pivot SportsCenter away from commentary and hot takes, saying the network "miscalculated a little bit"¹¹¹ with the direction the show was headed in when it was hosted by Jemele Hill and Michael Smith. "The perception became that you could just roll a talent out there and it doesn't matter what he or she is saying — that the content didn't matter,"¹¹² Williamson said. ESPN initially aimed to reposition itself after the advent of social media sites that could produce news quicker than SportsCenter. However, this hot take-centered style did not acquire as much traction as ESPN believed it would, forcing SportsCenter to revert back to its old format. Despite this, ESPN still suffers from an overreliance on hot takes and commentary, which aside from being easily replicable by other creators, is also turning audiences away.

This style of programming which emphasizes commentary, debate, and hot takes is likely a derivative of political columns and sports talk radio that commodified "outrage discourse," or "a particular form of . . . discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g., anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial

¹¹¹. Strauss, "ESPN Wants to Make 'Sportscenter' Great Again."

¹¹². Strauss, "ESPN Wants to Make 'Sportscenter' Great Again."

truths about opponents.”¹¹³ It was then easy to apply this outrage discourse model of commentary to sports TV due to the strong allegiances fans hold with their favorite teams and players and natural inclination to defend them.

Viewers are left to question the authenticity of what these commentators are saying, and are left to watch programming filled with subjective takes, lack of insightful commentary, and the insistence from these personalities that they are bigger than the sport and athletes they are covering. The most salient example of this is ESPN personality Stephen A. Smith. Smith, who signed a five-year contract with ESPN worth at least \$100 million in March 2025,¹¹⁴ is one of the network's most prevalent and polarizing figures. He is a figure on the popular ESPN morning debate program: *First Take*, and appears regularly on other basketball programs, the Monday Night Football pregame show, and NBA pregame shows. Though he intends to be less “omnipresent”¹¹⁵ on the network, viewers have been historically displeased with his constant presence on many of ESPN’s programs. Stephen A. Smith has become bigger than the ESPN brand, which is not only exhibited by his contract, but was put bluntly by *The Ringer*’s Brian Curtis. When discussing the cancellation of ESPN’s popular program, *Around the Horn*, Curtis noted that “these shows just don’t have a place at that network anymore... There’s room for Stephen A. [Smith], there’s room for [Pat] McAfee, but other than (Pardon The Interruption), which may be grandfathered in until Tony [Kornheiser] and Mike [Wilbon] don’t want to do it

¹¹³. Taylor M. Henry, “From the *Tribune* to the Tube: The Development of Sports Punditry on Cable Television,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 87 (March 2021): 50, <https://doi.org/10.7560/vlt8705>.

¹¹⁴. Andrew Marchand, “Stephen A. Smith, ESPN Agree to \$100M Contract That Lets Him Talk More about Politics: Sources,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6181819/2025/03/06/stephen-a-smith-contract-espn-first-take/>.

¹¹⁵. Marchand, “Stephen A. Smith, ESPN Agree to \$100M Contract That Lets Him Talk More about Politics: Sources

anymore, I just don't think ESPN is interested in that kind of show."¹¹⁶ Curtis believes that ESPN's reliance on personalities and dramatic, debate format shows has inspired the casting aside of shows that are rooted more in analysis.

Smith has cultivated a brand through his vibrant personality, verbose, emotional commentary, and hot takes. This has made him a widely popular figure in the sports commentary space, but has acquired him the ire of some sports fans and athletes alike. He has earned criticism for his hot takes, which rely heavily on narrative and opinion rather than facts and statistics. In the strong words of Phil Mushnick, a New York Post columnist since 1982, Smith "broadcasts fabrications as facts,"¹¹⁷ and is "a boastful empty fraud."¹¹⁸ To a similar tune, former Fox Sports and ESPN columnist Jason Whitlock said, "(Smith) knows virtually nothing about any other sport other than the tiny, tiny bit he knows about basketball...Stephen A. Smith made his name befriending Allen Iverson and breaking some new Allen Iverson-related news, and a handful of NBA story-related news, but they put him out there as this great opinionist. He doesn't have great opinions, he doesn't know what he's talking about."¹¹⁹

While this is harsh criticism, these words relay a general displeasure with the hot take culture ESPN programs have embraced for nearly a decade. Due to the increased reliance on hot takes, viewers are looking elsewhere to find more intelligent commentary. Shannon Skanes, "The

¹¹⁶. Brandon Contes, "Media Insider Says ESPN Has 'no Room' for 'around the Horn,'" Awful Announcing, March 6, 2025, <https://awfulannouncing.com/espn/bryan-curtis-around-the-horn.html>.

¹¹⁷. Phil Mushnick, "Stephen A. Smith Being Wrong All the Time Won't Stop Weak ESPN from Caving to Contract Demands," New York Post, June 22, 2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/06/22/sports/stephen-a-smith-always-being-wrong-wont-prevent-new-espn-deal/>.

¹¹⁸. Mushnick, "Stephen A. Smith Being Wrong All the Time Won't Stop Weak ESPN from Caving to Contract Demands,"

¹¹⁹. Wil Leitner, "Jason Whitlock Calls Stephen A. Smith an 'industry Plant' with a Bogus Past," FOX Sports Radio, January 12, 2024, <https://foxsportsradio.iheart.com/content/2024-01-11-jason-whitlock-calls-stephen-a-smith-an-industry-plant-with-a-bogus-past/>.

Hockey Guy” has been an outlet for hockey fans to receive insight on the game. Skanes doesn’t rely on the dramatic, ranting style of someone like Smith, but has grown an audience through levelheaded analysis and statistics. Skanes’s success shows the dominance of outrage discourses is receding as fans become tired of the trend of unrealistic and possibly unauthentic hot takes created just to drive ratings or online engagement.

Smith’s lack of knowledge in certain areas and disinterest to learn about leagues outside the NBA and NFL has also earned him criticism as he attempts to inject his commentary on baseball and hockey into his shows. Smith made headlines in the summer of 2023 when he asserted that then-Los Angeles Angels pitcher Shohei Ohtani did not deserve a \$500 million contract because he is not big enough to draw Angels fans to games.¹²⁰ Ohtani became one of the most popular players in baseball directly after his arrival from Japan’s Nippon Professional Baseball, and became the first player since Babe Ruth to bat on his off-days from pitching. While taking calls from fans on “The Stephen A. Smith Show,” he told a caller who debated his remarks to “shut the hell up,”¹²¹ and “ I just don’t get to watch anything other than the New York Yankees, which is my hometown team, because a lot of the time I’m preoccupied with other sports.”¹²² Smith’s lack of care and understanding insults baseball fans that watch ESPN, because it demonstrates that the biggest personality on The Worldwide Leader in Sports heavily prioritizes some sports over others. Why should baseball fans keep watching if a person that ESPN relies so much on said directly to them that baseball is barely on his radar?

¹²⁰. Kevin Sweeney, “Fans Crushed Stephen A. Smith for His Rant about Shohei Ohtani’s Worth in MLB Free Agency,” SI, September 20, 2023, <https://www.si.com/mlb/2023/09/20/angels-shohei-ohtani-mlb-free-agency-stephen-a-smith-bad-rant>.

¹²¹. Sam Neumann, “Stephen A. Smith Wants Baseball Fans to ‘Shut the Hell Up,’” Awful Announcing, September 21, 2023, <https://awfulannouncing.com/mlb/stephen-a-smith-baseball-community-shohei-ohtani.html>.

¹²². Neumann, “Stephen A. Smith Wants Baseball Fans to ‘Shut the Hell Up,’”

ESPN's practice of handing out exorbitant deals to a select group of on-air personalities also severely inhibits the network. The development of the television "personality system" is largely derived from the concept of a movie star, where instead of representing "the spectacular, the inaccessible, the imaginary, presenting the cinematic universe as 'larger than life', the personality system is cultivated almost exclusively as 'part of life.'"¹²³ The personality thus serves as an identity within an ever-changing news cycle. While events come and go, the personality is always there to explain these events and place them within a larger framework¹²⁴ which allows the audience to develop a pseudo relationship and relate to them. It makes sense then that networks would pay exorbitant amounts to keep these personalities on.

Though Stephen A. Smith's \$100 million deal is largely seen as an outlier, it underscores a wider trend mentioned earlier about individual personalities becoming even bigger than ESPN. In 2023, ESPN agreed to a five-year, \$85 million deal with Pat McAfee.¹²⁵ McAfee, a former NFL punter and host of *The Pat McAfee Show*, took the wildly successful program to ESPN after starting as an independent creator on YouTube. The success of *The Pat McAfee Show* can be attributed not only to his compelling storytelling, stemming from his NFL experience, but also to his loud commentary and unfiltered opinions and language. This makes the former NFL Pro Bowler distinct from other personalities on the network, who often have a shorter leash when it comes to what they can get away with on-air.

¹²³. John Langer, "Television's 'Personality System,'" *Media, Culture & Society* 3, no. 4 (October 1981): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344378100300405>.

¹²⁴. Langer, "Television's 'Personality System,'" 357.

¹²⁵. Andrew Marchand, "Pat McAfee Opens up about His \$85 Million ESPN Leap," *New York Post*, May 31, 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/05/31/pat-mcafee-opens-up-about-his-85-million-espn-leap/>.

Smith and McAfee, through their status as ESPN's premier and highest paid personalities¹²⁶, have likely been the catalysts for the network's recent layoff of a slew of notable on-air personalities. Since June 30, 2023, ESPN parted ways with popular college football analyst Robert Griffin III, NBA commentators Jalen Rose and Jeff Van Gundy, NHL and Smith's former partner on First Take Max Kellerman.¹²⁷ The network did not go further than explain these cuts by stating the need to find "additional cost savings in the area of public-facing commentator salaries."¹²⁸ While these cuts were due to a variety of competing factors, the cost of keeping on Smith and McAfee was likely one of them. Through the diversification of the media landscape, the most popular on-air personalities will likely become more dispersed across the field, especially as the cost of talent continues to rise, making consolidation even more difficult.

Smith and McAfee's deals and place at the helm of ESPN's programming prove that the pair are becoming bigger than the network. As put by Alice Marwick in her book, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, "Self-branding has become popular at a time when brand creation is championed as a solution to all sorts of business problems, such as a lack of competitiveness, a failure to stay up-to-date, and ineffective communication."¹²⁹ Smith and McAfee have cultivated personal brands for themselves based on their personalities with the help of ESPN, but with the added side effect that the two are consistently allowed more freedom in what they can say, do, and report on, which often sees

¹²⁶. Matt Yoder, "Who Are the Highest-Paid Personalities in Sports Media?," Awful Announcing, March 7, 2025,

[https://awfulannouncing.com/lists/highest-paid-personalities-sports-media.html#:~:text=6\)%20Pat%20McAfee%2C%20ESPN%20%E2%80%93,overall%20number%20is%20even%20higher.](https://awfulannouncing.com/lists/highest-paid-personalities-sports-media.html#:~:text=6)%20Pat%20McAfee%2C%20ESPN%20%E2%80%93,overall%20number%20is%20even%20higher.)

¹²⁷. Tapp, "ESPN Layoffs: Zach Lowe Joins the List of on-Air Talent Who Have Been Let Go."

¹²⁸. ESPN Press Room, "ESPN Statement on Public-Facing Commentator Exercise,"

¹²⁹. Marwick, Alice E. "SELF-BRANDING: The (Safe for Work) Self." In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, 164. Yale University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkzxr.7>.

them become the story instead of reporting on it. On an episode of The Pat McAfee Show in January 2024, McAfee called former ESPN executive Norby Williamson a “rat” and accused him of attempting to “sabotage” his program by leaking false information to the media.¹³⁰ This rant would make headlines, and shortly after, Williamson would depart ESPN after a 40-year stint at the network.¹³¹

In a similar vein, Smith became part of a large story after a confrontation with Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James after a game during the 2024-25 NBA season. James berated Smith for comments he made on his show, First Take, where he said James’s son, Los Angeles Lakers guard Bronny James, was only “in the NBA because of his dad.”¹³² This confrontation offered Smith a slew of content for First Take, with Smith noting that if James put his hands on him he “would have immediately swung on him.”¹³³ James would respond publicly on an episode of The Pat McAfee Show where he said Smith was “on a Taylor Swift tour run right now,” with his continual discussion on the situation, and that Smith would be “happy as hell” that James was on McAfee’s show talking about him.¹³⁴ These instances showcase that ESPN’s two biggest personalities are becoming much bigger than the network itself. They dominate the news cycle with headlines about themselves rather than the players they are meant to cover and, in McAfee’s case, have led to organizational shakeups. Viewers are left to move elsewhere to get content from creators not big enough to require coverage of themselves, and thus, do not fall victim to what Smith and McAfee have.

¹³⁰. Jon Passantino and Oliver Darcy, “ESPN Executive Targeted by Host Pat McAfee Departs Network | CNN Business,” CNN, April 5, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/media/espn-executive-norby-williamson-departs-network/index.html>.

¹³¹. Passantino and Darcy, “ESPN Executive Targeted by Host Pat McAfee Departs Network”

¹³². Manish Pandey, “Lebron James and Stephen A. Smith: What’s The Beef About?,” BBC News, March 27, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yr16n5zg8o>.

¹³³. Pandey, “Lebron James and Stephen A. Smith: What’s The Beef About?”

¹³⁴. Pandey, “Lebron James and Stephen A. Smith: What’s The Beef About?”

Online commentary has started to eat into ESPN's viewership. While ESPN relies on Smith and McAfee to provide the bulk of their most interesting commentary, other creators on social media platforms are developing content that is more in-touch with the conversations of sports fans. Barstool Sports ("Barstool") is the most successful example of this phenomenon. Barstool is not short on personalities- from its controversial founder Dave Portnoy, to former NFL head coach Jon Gruden, and outspoken former NHL enforcer Paul Bissonnette- however, the site reflects the changing sports commentary scene. Barstool was initially based in Boston, but as it expanded to other major cities it localized itself in each new market (much like The Athletic) by inviting athletes for in-depth interviews.¹³⁵ Barstool's style of content allowed it "to cement a reputation as a site where male sports fans could consume 'authentic sports talk,' which was code for listening to how men supposedly "really talk" when with their bros."¹³⁶ This contrasted heavily with ESPN, who at the time, was receiving criticism from conservative commentators for having a "liberal bias in their recent coverage of social issues within and related to sport."¹³⁷ Barstool provided an athlete for young, sometimes conservative-leaning, sports fans to find coverage and commentary from people who talked about sports like them. By February 2023, Barstool was valued at \$606 million.¹³⁸

Barstool's personalities borrow elements in their commentary from ESPN, but differ in a few distinct ways. Barstool's personalities are often as controversial and out-spoken as Smith and

¹³⁵. Kyle Kusz and Matthew R. Hodler, "'Saturdays Are for the Boys': Barstool Sports and the Cultural Politics of White Fratriarchy in Contemporary America," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 40, no. 1 (March 1, 2023): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0075>.

¹³⁶. Kusz and Hodler, "'Saturdays Are for the Boys': Barstool Sports and the Cultural Politics of White Fratriarchy in Contemporary America," 97.

¹³⁷. Galen Clavio and Ryan Vooris, "ESPN and the Hostile Media Effect," *Communication & Sport* 6, no. 6 (November 16, 2017): 728, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517739835>.

¹³⁸. Rohan Goswami, "Penn Entertainment Sells Barstool Sports Back to Founder Dave Portnoy," CNBC, August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/08/08/penn-sells-barstool-back-to-dave-portnoy-for-non-compete-covenants.html>.

McAfee, a strategy that has garnered them attention in the same manner it has for ESPN's commentators. Barstool's founder Dave Portnoy is the most preeminent case study of this. Since his founding of Barstool in 2003, Portnoy has brought attention (and business) to the brand by linking it to his contentious personality. Portnoy was arrested after staging a sit-in at the NFL's headquarters to protest the league's ruling in Deflategate¹³⁹ (an incident where the New England Patriots used underinflated footballs during a 2014 playoff game against the Indianapolis Colts), received pushback for comments he made in 2019 when he remarked that he would fire any Barstool employees who attempted to unionize¹⁴⁰, and found himself the subject of a Business Insider exposé published in 2021 which levied sexual assault allegations against Portnoy.¹⁴¹

These repeated controversies have made Portnoy a polarizing figure in sports media, but they have also made him wildly popular. These headlines have put eyes on Portnoy's content, which blends sports and popular culture in ways that ESPN has rarely been able to execute successfully. Portnoy's most popular content is his One Bite Pizza Reviews, where he travels around the U.S. reviewing pizza from different cities and assigning them ratings. Portnoy's reviews, posted to his YouTube channel with more than 1.4 million subscribers, can catapult a

¹³⁹. Nik DeCosta-Klipa, "Barstool Sports Employees Arrested during Sit-in at NFL Offices," Boston.com, May 12, 2015, <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2015/05/12/barstool-sports-employees-arrested-during-sit-in-at-nfl-offices/>.

¹⁴⁰. Aimee Picchi, "Barstool Sports' Founder Says He'll Fire Unionizing Workers--Labor Officials Say 'No Way,'" CBS News, August 14, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/barstool-sports-dave-portnoy-says-hell-fire-unionizing-workers-labor-officials-say-no-way/>.

¹⁴¹. Danielle Cohen and Olivia Truffaut-Wong, "Dave Portnoy Has Dropped His Lawsuit against Insider," The Cut, February 3, 2023, <https://www.thecut.com/2023/02/women-say-sex-with-dave-portnoy-was-violent-and-humiliating.html>.

restaurant into instant fame.¹⁴² Portnoy's honest, "meandering"¹⁴³ reviews are full of the humor and over-sincerity for a rather trivial subject that viewers have come to expect from Barstool video, but Portnoy's content resonates with people in a way that other media outlets have failed to capture. In viewers' minds, it represents a "real person"¹⁴⁴ discussing a topic that everyone understands. Portnoy's confrontational personality is not lost in these reviews either, as his show often turns into "pugnacious spectacles of grievance that can have as much in common with reality TV as with restaurant reviewing,"¹⁴⁵ with Portnoy engaging in spats with passers-by. Portnoy's adjoining of pop culture and sports debates makes Barstool personalities far more versatile, and does not earn them the same scorn for their takes. Because they do not present as experts, and instead are regular people, any take they have on a subject is understood more as a conversation that a viewer would have with a friend as opposed to a lecture.

Barstool podcasts such as Spittin' Chiclets, Pardon My Take, and Bussin' With The Boys, are laced with a comedic style and pop culture references, much like SportsCenter was at its peak. The former athletes on feature on these shows combine their expertise and past experiences to not only provide insightful commentary, but also regale their audiences with stories from their time playing in their respective leagues. Spittin' Chiclets, hosted by former NHLers Paul Bissonnette, Ryan Whitney, and Keith Yandle offer their commentary on not just professional hockey news, but college and international contests as well. The podcast not only emphasizes their expertise on the sport (having a combined 1,792 NHL games between the three) but also relies on their comedic style and hockey lingo which immerses listeners into their commentary

¹⁴². Kevin Draper and Amelia Nierenberg, "The Pizza Influencer with a Private Jet and a 'Troll Army'," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/03/dining/barstool-dave-portnoy-pizza.html>.

¹⁴³. Draper and Amelia Nierenberg, "The Pizza Influencer with a Private Jet and a 'Troll Army.'"

¹⁴⁴. Draper and Amelia Nierenberg, "The Pizza Influencer with a Private Jet and a 'Troll Army.'"

¹⁴⁵. Draper and Amelia Nierenberg, "The Pizza Influencer with a Private Jet and a 'Troll Army.'"

and adds a layer of authenticity. During the show's preview of the first round Stanley Cup playoff series between the Florida Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning, Yandle remarked that it is "crucial" that Tampa Bay wins one of the first two games of the series while Florida's alternate captain Aaron Ekblad sits out with a suspension.¹⁴⁶ In the same line of commentary, Yandle notes that it is going to be tough to beat Florida because they have "rats," or hockey jargon for a player that plays a physical style and instigates members of the other team through a mix of scrappy play and trash talk. "When you're playing in the playoffs, (Bissonnette), you need some rats...Imagine them all out there together: you have (Tampa Bay forward Nikita) Kucherov buzzing around, wanting to sauce these things around, boom! Hit."¹⁴⁷ This combination of straight-laced, earnest commentary and comedy is what makes Spittin' Chiclets the biggest hockey podcast.¹⁴⁸ The NHL, and hockey as a whole, is generally undercovered by ESPN and other major TV networks, which makes the presence of a podcast like Spittin' Chiclets, where hockey is not only discussed, but discussed in a way that hockey fans resonate with because it sounds like conversations they have with other fans, makes it very successful.

While Barstool opts to mobilize controversy and utilize pop culture commentary to provide an alternative to ESPN, they are not the only ones doing this. Bill Simmons's digitally-native sports, pop culture website and podcast company serves a similar function, but focuses on providing quality news and content, which contrasts with Barstool's brash style. Similar to Barstool, however, The Ringer is also inextricably tied to its vocal founder, Bill Simmons. Simmons began his career as Boston sports columnist with a pension for a "personal

¹⁴⁶. Paul Bissonnette, Ryan Whitney, and Keith Yandle, "TIM STUTZLE + SURPRISE GUEST JOIN FOR PLAYOFF PREVIEWS - Episode 555," April 18, 2025, Spittin' Chiclets, 29:15-29:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQAJJKGiMrY>.

¹⁴⁷. Bissonnette, Whitney, and Yandle, "TIM STUTZLE + SURPRISE GUEST JOIN FOR PLAYOFF PREVIEWS - Episode 555," 30:01-30:42.

¹⁴⁸. "Apple Podcasts Charts - Hockey Podcasts - United States," Rephonic, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://rephonic.com/charts/apple/united-states/sports-hockey>.

style of sports writing that draws on frequent references to movies, television sitcoms, music, video games, even his friends and wife,”¹⁴⁹ which offered a stark contrast to sports reporting at the time. Simmons went on to work at ESPN and was the subject of a messy termination after comments he made about NFL commissioner Roger Goodell.¹⁵⁰ Simmons and Portnoy draw many comparisons, as their personalities are both linked to the identity of their respective companies, but while Portnoy will always be the “Pizza Review Guy,” Simmons will always be “The Sports Guy,” whose involved analysis is one of the most attractive aspects of *The Ringer* to sports fans.

Simmons started *The Ringer* shortly after his departure from ESPN in 2016, picking up right where he left off. As put by Medium’s Jeff Swystun, “*The Bill Simmons Podcast* is a must-listen for sports enthusiasts. He does his research, provides insights, and holds his ground.”¹⁵¹ Simmons’s in-depth analysis is not only characteristic of his sports podcasts, but also with his pop culture podcast, *The Rewatchables*, where Simmons reviews 1980s movies with a rotating group of guests. Regardless of the podcast, Simmons mixes sports and pop culture, bringing both audiences to his site simultaneously and capitalizing on the overlap in fans. Simmons’s success is exemplified by his sale of *The Ringer* to Spotify for more than \$200 million in 2020, which *Forbes*’s Ariel Shapiro noted, made him “Podcasting’s First Big-Money

¹⁴⁹. Warren St. John, “That Sports Guy Thrives Online,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2005,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/fashion/sundaystyles/that-sports-guy-thrives-online.html>.

¹⁵⁰. Andy Nesbitt, Bill Simmons on his 14 years at ESPN: “I f----- killed it for those guys,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 19, 2023,

<https://www.si.com/nba/2023/10/19/bill-simmons-espn-comments-killed-it-for-those-guys>.

¹⁵¹. Jeff Swystun, “The Podcast King: Bill Simmons Has a Voice and Reach,” *Medium*, June 17, 2024,

<https://jeffswystun.medium.com/the-podcast-king-bill-simmons-has-a-voice-and-reach-3c9631eec323>.

Superstar,”¹⁵² a trend later followed and exacerbated by podcasters Joe Rogan, Alex Cooper, and others.

The Ringer’s multifaceted, nuanced type of content that attracts both sports and pop culture fans fills a gap that ESPN as the “Worldwide Leader in Sports” cannot replicate. While Barstool and the Ringer continue to provide new, witty commentary, ESPN is maligned for being too repetitive and uninteresting.

This criticism can be seen in ESPN’s college football broadcasts, which have earned disapproval from fans for often applying the same commentary to different teams and offering nothing new across different broadcasts or seasons.¹⁵³ As author Ben Mathis-Lilley mocked in a New York Times article adapted from his book: *The Hot Seat: A Year of Outrage, Pride, and Occasional Games of College Football*, “The announcers have just begun a discussion of your team’s head coach, and his alleged inability to win ‘big games,’ which is indistinguishable from identical discussions held by other announcers in each of the team’s nine previous contests.”¹⁵⁴

Overall, Barstool and other new media are better equipped than ESPN, due to their demographic appeal, style of content, and infrastructure, to discuss college football. College football viewership is heavily skewed toward the 18-34 age demographic, which accounted for 43% of ESPN’s college football viewership in 2023.¹⁵⁵ This demographic is also much more

¹⁵². Ariel Shapiro, “Spotify Sale Mints the Ringer’s Bill Simmons as Podcasting’s First Big-Money Superstar,” *Forbes*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielshapiro/2020/06/04/spotify-sale-mints-the-ringers-bill-simmons-as-podcastings-first-big-money-superstar/>.

¹⁵³. Ben Mathis-Lilley, “Does watching college football on TV have to be so miserable?” - *The New York Times*, August 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/27/business/college-football-tv-espn.html>.

¹⁵⁴. Mathis-Lilley, “Does watching college football on TV have to be so miserable?”

¹⁵⁵. Amanda Brooks, “ABC Is College Football’s Most-Watched Network, Highlighted by Year-over-Year Growth and Significant Demographic Gains,” *ESPN Press Room U.S.*, October 4, 2024, <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2024/10/abc-is-college-footballs-most-watched-network-highlighted-by-year-over-year-growth-and-significant-demographic-gains/>.

likely to find their sports content online, as noted by an Edison Research study which stated that “85% of Gen Z sports podcast listeners use social media to find out about sports podcasts while 83% of Millennials do the same.”¹⁵⁶ Due to this, as ESPN’s commentary on college football increasingly becomes the subject of criticism, fans turn their attention to other outlets- Barstool being chief among them.

Thus, Barstool’s style of content, which is much more nuanced, focused, and geared toward this younger college football-watching audience, is in direct competition to ESPN’s. For example, on an episode of the Barstool podcast, Pardon My Take, host Dan “Big Cat” Katz asked NFL analyst Todd McShay about wide receivers in the 2024 draft who were not highly rated but had the potential to perform well in the NFL.¹⁵⁷ While discussions of underrated prospects is not foreign to ESPN, these more niche discussions such as this are what draw fans to Barstool. While some viewers feel apathetic toward ESPN’s constant discussion of the most popular players and tired narratives, they are now finding content that better suits hard core college football fans- this hard core nature pervades a sport that is so heavily based on allegiance to a school.

ESPN’s monopoly on commentary is being gradually eroded by the advent of digitally native organizations and independent creators. As sports fans increasingly turn to the internet for their information and commentary, organizations like Bleacher Report, The Athletic, and The Player’s Tribune continue to eat into ESPN’s stranglehold on producing sports news and

¹⁵⁶. Younger Sports Fans Are More Likely to Engage with Sports Audio, Edison Research, October 29, 2024, <https://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Press-Release-Sports-Audio-Report-Demographics-at-Play.pdf>.

¹⁵⁷. Dan Katz and Eric Sollenberger, “HANK IS FEELING HIMSELF AFTER CELTICS GAME 1 + TODD MCSHAY SHARES STORIES ABOUT MEL KIPER” April 22, 2024, Pardon My Take, 1:53:07-1:56:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y52Xfku2IAQ>

generating discussions. Now that even sports fans have the ability to create their own content that resonates more with other fans, ESPN is having a tough time competing, especially with the exorbitant costs they expend to keep Smith and McAfee on the network. Opinion television is easily replicable and relatively cheap, but ESPN spends so much on personalities that it inhibits the network in a way that Barstool, for example, does not.

Part III- Shifts in media during the last decade

Shifts in the TV Industry

With cord-cutting becoming the persistent problem facing cable TV, the industry faces a trend of bleeding subscribers that has been taking place since 2010. In 2010, there were 105 million cable subscriptions in the U.S., but by 2024, that number was cut to 66.1 million.¹⁵⁸ This is particularly concerning for ESPN, as the bulk of the network's revenue comes from affiliate fees, or the payment made from cable providers to a network for the license to show their programming. Additionally, ESPN's affiliate fee is one of the highest for a cable network, at around \$8.81 per month when averaged across all providers.¹⁵⁹

This trend is becoming more pronounced by the year. According to Nielsen, cable TV's 28.3% share of viewership across all platforms in March 2024 has decreased to 24% in March 2025.¹⁶⁰ Despite the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament returning to cable networks, cable's

¹⁵⁸. "IBISWorld - Industry Market Research, Reports, and Statistics," IBISWorld Industry Reports, August 22, 2024, <https://www.ibisworld.com/us/bed/number-of-cable-tv-subscriptions/4625/>.

¹⁵⁹. Kevin Draper and Brooks Barnes, "How ESPN Went from Disney's Financial Engine to Its Problem," The New York Times, August 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/business/media/espn-disney.html>.

¹⁶⁰. "The Gauge: March Madness Lifts Cable, Streaming Competition Grows as Seasonal Trends Take Effect," Nielsen, April 15, 2025,

share of viewership did not return to the levels it accomplished the year prior, as streaming increased from 38.5% in March 2024 to 43.8% in March 2025.¹⁶¹ Cord-cutting has become so pronounced that some streaming services are becoming more prominent live TV providers. YouTube TV's estimated 8.7 million subscribers is greater than Dish's 5.6 million subscribers.¹⁶² To a lesser extent, Hulu + Live TV's 4.6 million subscribers outpaces both Verizon Fios and Altice.¹⁶³ More concerning for traditional pay TV companies, a recent piece by MoffetNathanson founder and researcher Michael Nathanson projected that YouTube TV would pass Disney in revenue at the end of 2025 and noted that "YouTube has the potential to become the central aggregator for all things professional video, positioning itself to capture a share of the \$85 billion consumer Pay TV market."¹⁶⁴

Aside from YouTube TV, other streaming services are making strides in their subscriber count as cable companies' dwindle. From the end of 2021 to the end of 2024, NBCUniversal's Peacock, which has exclusive U.S. broadcast rights to English Premier League soccer matches, as well as some NFL regular season and playoff games, saw its subscribers increase from 9 million to 36 million.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, Netflix saw its North American subscribers increase from just

<https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2025/the-gauge-march-madness-lifts-cable-streaming-competition-grows-as-seasonal-trends-take-effect/>.

¹⁶¹. "The Gauge: March Madness Lifts Cable, Streaming Competition Grows as Seasonal Trends Take Effect."

¹⁶². Colin Dixon, "US Homes with a Paid Live TV Subscription Fell 7% Again in 2024," nScreenMedia, March 5, 2025, <https://nscreenmedia.com/2024-pay-tv-vmvdp-homes/>.

¹⁶³. Dixon, "US Homes with a Paid Live TV Subscription Fell 7% Again in 2024."

¹⁶⁴. Alex Weprin, "YouTube May Now Be Worth \$550B and Its Revenue Could Soon Surpass Disney," The Hollywood Reporter, March 31, 2025, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/youtube-value-revenue-1236176556/>.

¹⁶⁵. Julia Stoll, "Peacock's User Numbers in the U.S. 2024," Statista, February 4, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1246902/number-sign-ups-peacock-united-states/>.

over 75 million to just under 90 million in this time span.¹⁶⁶ Hulu, which offers games from the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB, gained 25.1 million subscribers since Disney launched the Disney+, Hulu + Live TV, ESPN+ bundle in Quarter 4 of 2019.¹⁶⁷

Hulu's growth has out-paced ESPN+'s in the same time frame, with the ladder amassing 21.4 million new subscribers since Quarter 4 of 2019.¹⁶⁸ ESPN+ is also being left behind in Nielsen's viewership metrics. Between March 2024 and December 2024, Disney+ averaged 2.06% of all TV viewership while Hulu averaged 2.73%.¹⁶⁹ For the next three months Nielsen would aggregate Disney+, Hulu, and ESPN+ into one bundle for the metric. The average of this statistic from January 2025 to March 2025 would come out to 4.83%,¹⁷⁰ meaning if the averages of Disney+ and Hulu stayed consistent, ESPN+ would account for .04% of all TV viewership. While streaming and cable do not constitute a one-to-one comparison, ESPN's place as the second-most viewed cable network of 2024¹⁷¹ should mean its supplementary streaming service, which is already bundled with two of the most-viewed streaming services, is claiming a greater share of the viewership itself. As ESPN uses its streaming service to seemingly make its move into the new age of TV, it continues to see slow progress and lags behind others. ESPN cannot compete with the breadth of content, in sports or otherwise, that other streaming service offers.

¹⁶⁶. Julia Stoll, "U.S.: Quarterly Netflix Paid Subscribers Count 2024," Statista, January 31, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250937/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-in-the-us/>.

¹⁶⁷. Julia Stoll, "Hulu: Paying Subscribers by Quarter U.S. 2025," Statista, March 11, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/258014/number-of-hulus-paying-subscribers/>.

¹⁶⁸. Julia Stoll, "Number of ESPN+ Subscribers in the U.S. 2025," Statista, February 13, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1054451/espn-plus-subscriber-us/>.

¹⁶⁹. "The Gauge: March Madness Lifts Cable, Streaming Competition Grows as Seasonal Trends Take Effect."

¹⁷⁰. "The Gauge: March Madness Lifts Cable, Streaming Competition Grows as Seasonal Trends Take Effect."

¹⁷¹. Michael Schneider, "Most-Watched Television Networks: Ranking 2024's Winners and Losers," Variety, December 27, 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/most-watched-channels-2024-tv-network-ratings-1236259845/>.

This mirrors how social media platforms like Barstool and The Ringer have found a way to blend sports and pop culture to create outlets that attract more than just sports fans. In its current state ESPN+ attracts offers “‘complementary’ product (in its bundle with Disney+ and Hulu), something attractive mostly to die-hard sports fans.”¹⁷²

As exhibited by the previous two paragraphs, ESPN does not only have to contend with cable’s persistent decline, but competition from other streaming services against its own. For cable viewers, ESPN is the sports channel, but for those who rely on streaming services for their television, it is rarely on their radar- as indicated by viewership statistics. This trend will continue to be exacerbated as younger generations turn to streaming and social media for their content.

How Younger Generations Consume Media

ESPN’s place as The Worldwide Leader in Sports continues to be compromised by the fact that younger generations, particularly Generation Z (those born between the late 1990s and early 2000s), get the vast majority of their sports news from online outlets or social media. This shift not only diverts viewers away from ESPN’s cable news programs, but forces the network to contend with an increasingly diversified online media landscape for viewers.

In a 2021 Pew Research Center study, Elisa Shearer noted that just over half of American adults prefer to get their news from digital platforms, while a third prefer TV.¹⁷³ Additionally, 71% of 18-29 year-old respondents indicated that they often get their news from a smartphone,

¹⁷². Draper and Barnes, “How ESPN Went from Disney’s Financial Engine to Its Problem,”

¹⁷³. Elisa Shearer, “More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices,” Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

tablet, or computer, with 67% of 30-49 year-old respondents noting the same.¹⁷⁴ Conversely, in a 2022 study performed by the American Press Institute, 39% of Gen Zers and 43% of younger millennials noted receiving news from traditional news outlets daily.¹⁷⁵ In the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024, the trend is becoming even more apparent. The 18-24 year-olds surveyed 79% of respondents noted getting their news from online sources compared to the 42% getting their news from TV.¹⁷⁶ Interestingly, for the 34-45 year old demographic, 79% reported getting their news online, compared to the 39% that reported getting their news from TV.¹⁷⁷

Statistics for ESPN's website are hard to come by, but in February 2025, ESPN.com was reported to have the most page views of U.S. sports news websites, more than 473 million, almost 400 more than the next highest site.¹⁷⁸ However, online news does not account for a substantial portion of the company's revenue, especially compared to affiliate fees, advertising, and subscription fees related to ESPN+. ¹⁷⁹ Thus, as social media news begins to overtake online news in recent years, with 18% of U.S. adult reporting that they get their news from social media compared to 23% saying they get their news online in 2024 (the former rising 7% and the latter falling 3% since 2020),¹⁸⁰ ESPN looks to direct this traffic back to their broadcasts.

¹⁷⁴. Shearer, "More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices."

¹⁷⁵. "The News Consumption Habits of 16- to 40-Year-Olds," American Press Institute, August 19, 2024, <https://americanpressinstitute.org/the-news-consumption-habits-of-16-to-40-year-olds/>.

¹⁷⁶. Nic Newman et al., "Digital News Report 2024," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024>.

¹⁷⁷. Newman et al., "Digital News Report 2024."

¹⁷⁸. "Top Sports Websites in United States - March 2025 Most Visited & Popular Rankings," Semrush, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.semrush.com/website/top/united-states/sports/#:~:text=As%20of%20February%2025%2C%20espn.com%20records%2076.71M%20visits>.

¹⁷⁹. "The Walt Disney Company Form 10-Q For the Fiscal Quarter Ended March 29, 2025," Edgar Entity Landing Page, May 7, 2025, <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1744489/000174448925000084/0001744489-25-000084-index.htm>.

¹⁸⁰. "News Platform Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, September 17, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/#:~:text=News%20>

The use of social media is becoming more integral to sports fandom due to the communal aspect and intense loyalties inherent to sports as a whole. The communities that fans of specific or opposing teams and players cultivate makes social media a breeding ground for interaction and discussion. This trend is especially prevalent while a sporting event is going on. In a study conducted by Deloitte Insights, researchers found that “Around half of Gen Z fans say they have used social media—either to read comments and opinions from others or to interact with others—while watching live events from home.”¹⁸¹ A different study conducted by X Marketing and Neuro-Insight noted a 31% increase in engagement during a live sporting event.¹⁸² Social media has become supplementary to the television viewing experience that allows fans to have the conversations that they would normally get on TV the next day, in real time. In a study on X usage during the 2019 NBA finals, featuring the Golden State Warriors and Toronto Raptors, it was found that over the course of the six-game series, more posts were made during the games themselves than in the time before or after each game.¹⁸³ During games, X usage peaked at around 30,000 posts per 10 minutes. In the 24 hours following the game, the peak would decline

across%20digital%20platforms,-There%20are%20several&text=News%20websites%20or%20apps%20are,and%205%25%20who%20prefer%20podcasts.

¹⁸¹. Pete Giorgio et al., “2023 Sports Fan Insights: The Beginning of the Immersive Sports Era,” Deloitte Insights, November 12, 2024, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/media-and-entertainment/immersive-sports-fandom.html>.

¹⁸². Greg Murphy, “Twitter Changes the Live TV Sports Viewing Experience,” X for Business, January 18, 2018, https://marketing.x.com/en_apac/insights/twitter-changes-the-live-tv-sports-viewing-experience#:~:text=1%20Twitter%20makes%20live%20sporting,curated%20sports%20timeline%20can%20produce.

¹⁸³. Xi Gong and Yong Wang, “Exploring Dynamics of Sports Fan Behavior Using Social Media Big Data - A Case Study of the 2019 National Basketball Association Finals,” *Applied Geography* 129 (April 2021): 102438, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2021.102438>.

to around 10,000 posts per 10 minutes,¹⁸⁴ with the exception of the final game of the series, where the in-game peak would hold for two hours after because of “The trophy presentation ceremony after Game 6 and the massive championship celebrations by Raptors’ fans.”¹⁸⁵

Conversations surrounding sporting events and news increasingly happen between fans as opposed to being moderated by journalists and reporters before and after the contests. The increased diversification of media also ensures that no one user is able to control the conversation surrounding a topic. X sees 586 million monthly users, Tik Tok tops that with 1.59 billion monthly users, and Instagram further tops that figure with 2 billion monthly users.¹⁸⁶ While obviously not all of these users are using these platforms to get sports news and content, it underscores the sheer amount of individuals and media companies disseminating information and content. Due to the fact that ESPN’s revenue comes primarily from its TV content, and the increased user base on social media platforms, these sites represent a chance for ESPN to direct sports fans to their broadcasts. However, the declining nature of cable and plethora of content online means that ESPN has to fight for engagement on an expanding front and is losing engagement on their primary source of revenue. The sheer amount of users and content on these sites has fractured the media landscape so much that ESPN can no longer keep its hegemony as “The Worldwide Leader.” This is especially true due to how quickly information is disseminated on social media. Every debate on a topic that could be had is being had on social media due to the fact that there are no constraints on air-time or worries about network censorship.

¹⁸⁴. Gong and Wang, “Exploring Dynamics of Sports Fan Behavior Using Social Media Big Data - A Case Study of the 2019 National Basketball Association Finals,” 5.

¹⁸⁵. Gong and Wang, “Exploring Dynamics of Sports Fan Behavior Using Social Media Big Data - A Case Study of the 2019 National Basketball Association Finals,” 4.

¹⁸⁶. Fabio Duarte, “X (Formerly Twitter) User Age, Gender, & Demographic Stats (2025),” Exploding Topics, April 24, 2025, <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/x-user-stats#stats>.

Additionally, conversations that ESPN commentators would have after games are now happening during the games due to social media's use as a supplement to live broadcasts.

Conclusion

The changing media landscape has left ESPN in a vulnerable position that was previously foreign to the Worldwide Leader. The precipitous decline of cable, coupled with the advent of the internet and media's subsequent diversification because of it, has forced ESPN to quickly adapt. Traditionally, cable was ESPN's chief money-maker- the steep affiliate fee paid to the network put it in a class matched only by a few other legacy companies. However, with cable's receding nature, ESPN has to pivot to a new streaming-based world.

ESPN has attempted to compete with its streaming service ESPN+, but with competition from YouTube TV, Hulu, Max, and others, ESPN+ is off to a comparatively slow start. It attracts mostly die-hard fans, which results in it accounting for a smaller share of the pie than the other aforementioned streaming services. The media market has become so diversified that independent creators and upstart media companies native to social media are now posing a threat that they previously could not have in the golden age of cable. Sites such as Barstool and The Ringer are also more nimble, and can adapt to the ever-changing market in ways that ESPN has been slow to accomplish. Their blend of sports and pop culture breeds competitors that fill gaps that structure if ESPN, with its self-branded identity as "The Worldwide Leader in Sports," has trouble to fill. The diversification that new media allows for also invites teams and athletes to take part in content creation. The accounts run by teams and players allows for more intimate

content tailored to their specific fan bases. ESPN's nationwide status prevents it from going too into depth about all sports, leagues, teams, and players.

Even media outlets that produce more traditional, written content, such as *The Athletic* and *The Player's Tribune*, are more equipped for modern media, as their structures allow for more in-depth coverage about a wider range of topics. Bleacher Report- one of the first successful sports media startups- paired this type of structure with nuanced reporting- with pop culture and online video content.

Though ESPN's business model is currently under duress, live sports media rights are sustaining the networks' success. Until live sports shift entirely to streaming sites that package and produce games on their own, ESPN still has the capital, infrastructure, and know-how to broadcast live sports events. Similarly, cable networks will continue to be the leading broadcasters of live sports, which is likely the leading factor to prevent most Americans from cord-cutting to begin with. Currently, ESPN has exclusive rights to the NHL¹⁸⁷ and the UFC,¹⁸⁸ and has billion-dollar deals with the NBA,¹⁸⁹ and the NFL, which includes the NFL's marquee Monday Night Football slate.¹⁹⁰ ESPN, with its massive capital, almost annually pays exorbitant amounts for live sports rights. The network can continue this practice for now because of sports' role as a live event and a stalwart program in the cable industry. However, as streaming progresses, and if streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Netflix prove their ability to reliably broadcast sports, ESPN's role as the Worldwide Leader will continue to fracture- leading the most salient part of its business model to break apart, as the rest has.

¹⁸⁷. Draper, "N.H.L. Returns to ESPN in a 7-Year Deal with an Emphasis on Streaming."

¹⁸⁸. Katz, Brandon. "The UFC Is Looking for a Giant Media Rights Deal: 3 Top Contenders."

¹⁸⁹. Reynolds and Reedy. "NBA Agrees to Terms on a Record 11-Year, \$76 Billion Media Rights Deal, AP Source Says."

¹⁹⁰. Rumsey, "ESPN Paying for Record Amount of Primetime NFL Games."

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