

# From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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# ESPN

## Live Sports, Documentary Prestige, and On-Demand Culture

**Travis Vogan**

In 2010, News Corp. CEO Rupert Murdoch proclaimed “[c]ontent is not king, it is the emperor of all things digital” (Szalai 2010). And as content goes, live sports television proves particularly powerful: “Sports absolutely overpowers film and everything else in the entertainment genre,” Murdoch remarked (Milliken 1996). Live sports remain a scarce commodity within a plentiful digital media ecosystem (Hutchins and Rowe 2009). Sporting event broadcasts are sold on an exclusive basis, garner predictable ratings, and maintain status as appointment viewing in an industry increasingly organized around on-demand content. They continue to be one of the few types of programming consumers expect to view in real time—an exceptional status in on-demand culture that boosts sports’ value to media outlets and advertisers.

In this light, no entity in contemporary sports media is more imperial than the Walt Disney Company’s ESPN, which *Forbes* rates as the world’s most valuable media property (Badenhausen 2014). The organization based in Bristol, Connecticut, holds rights to carry marquee sports content across television, radio, print, and digital platforms. It also owns at least part of 26 TV networks outside of the United States, which provide 61 countries with programming tailored to their sporting preferences. As former ESPN chairperson Steve Bornstein gloated, “The sun never sets on the ESPN empire” (Hiestand 1997). Bornstein’s successor George Bodenheimer (2005) added that the company works to “deliver a fully branded experience at every touch point.”

ESPN’s power, however, cannot be reduced to a function of its content, platforms, and expansive reach. The organization carefully brands itself as an industrial and cultural authority—an effort that crystallized with its 1998 implementation of the motto “The Worldwide Leader in Sports.” ESPN reinforces this self-aggrandizing slogan by participating in a variety of activities that bill it as an exceptionally artful site of sports media—a context otherwise identified more with transmitting event coverage than creating content that educates or inspires. To that end, ESPN produces documentaries,

curates film festivals, publishes books, and employs Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists. Though none of these activities generates anywhere near the revenue its live event programming gathers, they drive “a shrewd effort to distinguish ESPN from other sports media outlets, compete for market share, expand its demographic reach, promote its content, and even cut costs” (Vogan 2015, 4).

The deregulated media industry’s amenability to corporate media conglomerates like Disney further aids ESPN’s status and value. As of 2016, Disney leveraged ESPN’s popularity to charge cable operators \$6.55 monthly per subscriber to carry the channel. TNT was the next most costly channel at \$1.58 per month. Moreover, Disney uses ESPN as the centerpiece of its cable bundle of channels, which constrains operators to carry less popular Disney properties like Freeform in order to have ESPN. Faced with the alternative of not carrying cable TV’s most popular channel, operators pay the exorbitant fees for ESPN and pass the rising costs along to subscribers.

But ESPN’s dominance is being threatened by the swelling number of consumers opting to abandon the traditional cable subscriptions that furnish the bulk of its income for smaller packages or digital streaming services. ESPN has adjusted to this new environment by developing its own streaming service for existing subscribers in 2010, WatchESPN, which expanded into a mobile application the following year. Beyond adapting to these industrial and technological transformations, ESPN reasserts its self-styled “Worldwide Leader” status in on-demand culture by stressing the singular value of the live sports it carries across platforms and by accompanying this event coverage with acclaimed documentaries geared toward the “binge-able” consumption that characterizes digital streaming services.

## **BECOMING “THE WORLDWIDE LEADER IN SPORTS”**

ESPN was the first all-sports cable network when it launched on September 9, 1979. The company began as Bill Rasmussen’s effort to provide a cable service focusing on Connecticut-area sports. While developing the idea, Rasmussen and his partners reserved space on RCA’s SATCOM1 satellite for distribution and quickly realized it would be just as easy to transmit content nationwide as it would to serve Connecticut—a feature that made the venture enticing to sports organizations, advertisers, and investors. As a result, Getty Oil’s division of diversified operations purchased an 85% interest in the fledgling outlet and financed ESPN’s development.

Getty rightly wagered that cable operators would view ESPN as a “major lift” network that would draw subscribers to the still-nascent medium and help to sell more lucrative premium channels like HBO. In particular, it promised to attract moneyed men, a traditionally elusive demographic that advertisers would pay a premium to reach. Budweiser recognized this potential and signed a \$1.38 million deal—the largest contract in the history of cable TV up to that point—to become ESPN’s exclusive beer (Vogan 2015, 17–18).

ESPN steadily established partnerships with well-known sports organizations and used its live event and news coverage to grow a loyal audience of sports junkies. By 1983 it surpassed TBS as the United States’ most popular cable network. Cable operators no

longer dared sell their packages without including the all sports channel. Despite its rising prominence, however, ESPN lost money. The advertising it sold could not keep pace with the rights fees necessary to acquire popular sports. The cable channel audaciously leveraged its renown by demanding that cable operators pay it 10 cents monthly per subscriber. ESPN was the first outlet to adopt the arrangement, which gave it an additional revenue stream and became standard practice throughout the industry (26).

ESPN's rising prominence motivated ABC—then the dominant voice in network sports television—to purchase a majority stake in the cable channel in 1984. ESPN's relationship to ABC gave it the resources and credibility to secure rights to telecast higher profile sports. Most notably, ESPN became the first cable network to which the NFL awarded a contract in 1987. Its bulging portfolio of partnerships helped ESPN become the first cable network to achieve 50% penetration in television households. When Disney purchased ABC's parent company Capital Cities Communications in 1996—the second largest corporate media takeover ever—CEO Michael Eisner called ESPN “the crown jewel” of the \$19 billion acquisition and identified it as a “magic name” with brand recognition comparable to Coca-Cola (Carter and Sandomir 1995). The new Disney property placed greater emphasis on manicuring this “magic” brand and expanding it into offshoot channels, radio, print, and even a chain of ESPN Sport-Zone sports bars (most of which have shuttered).

ESPN paired these far-reaching brand extensions with an investment in practices meant to enhance its respectability. It began to produce documentaries, for example, to borrow the genre's reputation as an edifying variety of television (Curtin 1995). The media outlet earned each of its Peabody Awards—accolades not limited to sports TV that demonstrate the media outlet's ability to garner acclaim beyond it—for its documentaries. ESPN permanently invested in the symbolically powerful genre by creating ESPN Films in 2008. The subsidiary markets its documentaries as uniquely cinematic TV productions driven by the artistic visions of the participating filmmakers it recruits—common strategies network and cable TV outlets use to bill content as exceptional (Caldwell 1995; Newman and Levine 2011; Vogan 2015). Beyond the prestige they cultivate, ESPN Films' documentaries cost less than live sports, can be scheduled flexibly to promote event coverage, and remain “evergreen” productions that can be used in perpetuity across ESPN's steadily expanding slate of channels. They work to secure ESPN's industrial authority and cultural prominence in sports media while complementing the live content that draws its biggest audiences and largest advertising rates.

As ESPN solidified its industrial dominance, the United States' major networks launched their own sports-themed cable channels: a group that includes CBS Sports Network (2011), NBC Sports Network (2012), and Fox Sports 1 (2013). Scrambling to maintain its splintering market share, ESPN began spending wildly to lock down long-term contracts. Between 2011 and 2012, it pledged \$15 billion to the NFL, \$12.6 billion to the National Basketball Association, \$5.6 billion to Major League Baseball, \$5.6 billion to the NCAA for its College Football Playoffs, \$1.5 billion to the NCAA's PAC-12 Conference, and \$480 million to the Wimbledon tennis tournament (Ourand 2011). ESPN planned to absorb these colossal expenses by relying on its tried and true strategy of increasing subscriber fees, which it raised by nearly 40% between 2011 and

2015—from \$4.69 to \$6.55. The rapid escalation in the amount ESPN paid to secure rights and the prices it demanded from cable operators provoked *SportsBusiness Journal's* John Ourand (2011) to ponder whether a perilous bubble in the sports media market was emerging.

This bubble did not exactly burst, but mounting numbers of consumers—dissatisfied with the rising fees—began opting out of traditional cable packages in favor of less expensive streaming services and smaller, “skinny” cable packages that did not include ESPN. In a January 2012 discussion at the Citigroup Global Entertainment, Media and Telecommunications Conference, Disney CFO Jay Rasulo dismissed these shifts as passing fads. “I can’t imagine that any of them,” Rasulo said of cable operators, “are going to want to move their business model towards a series of skinnied-down packages. It doesn’t make sense economically for them and the response to these skinnied-down packages has been historically extremely limited” (2012). But ESPN lost 7% of its subscribers between 2011 and 2015, a decline company president John Skipper eventually attributed to such smaller packages (Sharma and Ramachandran 2016). He maintained, however, that those subscribers ESPN lost did not watch sports and that the network’s overall viewership and ad rates remained unaffected.

Despite Skipper’s hopeful prognosis, a January 2016 poll conducted by BTIG Research found that 56% of cable subscribers would rather eliminate ESPN and ESPN2 from their cable packages than pay \$8 per month for the channels. It also revealed that only 6% of those consumers would pay \$20 a month for a standalone over-the-top (OTT) package that consisted of ESPN and ESPN2 (Wilcox 2016). The results bluntly suggested that ESPN’s traditional business model is passé and that its powerful status as an anchor driving cable subscriptions has waned.

ESPN made a variety of modifications to compensate for its sustained and projected losses, which ranged from closing down the boutique website Grantland.com in October 2015 to laying off 300 employees that same month. In a memo he penned to ESPN employees after the layoffs, Skipper (2015) suggested ESPN was planning to adapt to the industrial and technological developments that threatened to leave it behind:

These ongoing initiatives include: Constant and relentless innovation, including integrating emerging technology into all aspects of our business; Enhancing our sales and marketing efforts with new tools and techniques that generate greater data, personalization and customization for our advertisers; Integrating our distribution efforts to better serve current and future distribution partners with our industry leading networks and services.

ESPN placed greater emphasis on WatchESPN’s streaming and mobile capabilities and joined the OTT online service Sling TV in early 2015, which bundles the sports network with a small handful of other channels. Sling charges subscribers lower monthly rates than traditional cable packages while gathering ESPN similarly disproportionate fees compared to other cable channels. Yet ESPN lacked the distinction in this new environment that it enjoyed in traditional cable TV and, as Skipper’s dispatch suggests, the channel clamored to reassert its diminishing supremacy. It did so in part by

emphasizing the different but complementary qualities of liveness and prestige that its sports coverage and documentaries furnish.

## “QUEUE”

ESPN emphasized the extraordinary value of its live content amid these changes with a promotional spot titled “Queue” that debuted on May 5, 2016. The promo begins with a woman sitting on a couch listlessly surfing through the menu of a streaming service as the passage “Movies can wait, because movies aren’t real” appears in the foreground. “So your streaming algorithm thinks you’ll like this film about a diamond heist,” the woman says in an irritated voiceover as she continues searching with little faith that the service will recommend items relevant to her preferences. In her boredom, she glances outside to see a group of children playing basketball. The scene sparks an epiphany that brings her apathetic surfing to a halt. “But unlike you,” she continues, “it [the algorithm] didn’t just think, ‘Duh, the [Golden State] Warriors game is on.’” She promptly flips to ESPN’s live NBA coverage. “Maybe my diamonds can wait,” she says. “After all, they’re safe in a vault.” The promo ends with her chuckling “silly algorithm” as she pulls on a blanket with the likeness of Warriors coach Steve Kerr on it and contentedly nestles into the couch to watch the game. Her frustrated search for fulfilling content, “Queue” suggests, is over.

The heavy-handed promotion indicates that ESPN possesses something that most streaming services do not: live sports. Unlike the diamond heist film—which can be consumed whenever—ESPN’s live event coverage will severely diminish in value after the game concludes. It harbors an ephemeral vitality that cannot be entombed within a streaming service’s vault. “Queue” indicates that ESPN’s live event coverage is impervious to and stands apart from the on-demand culture to which streaming services cater. It reinforces the long-standing myth of liveness as television’s ontological essence to brand ESPN’s coverage as uniquely authentic TV during a moment when the medium is in flux (Feuer 1982).

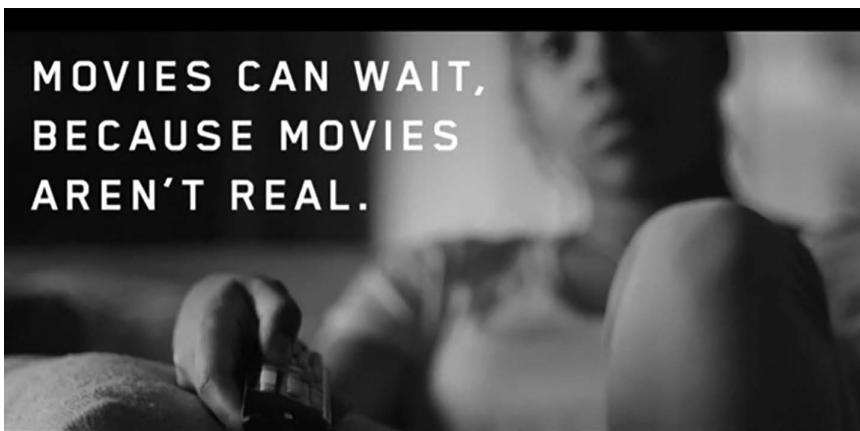


FIGURE 10.1 ESPN’s “Queue” campaign emphasizes the value of its live content.

Along these lines, “Queue” also distinguishes ESPN’s live coverage as more human than the content that streaming algorithms recommend. The Warriors game has a clear connection to the woman’s identity. It connects to facets of her interests that exceed the algorithm’s “silly” attempts to predict who she is and what she will enjoy.

As the promo fades to black, a row of icons depicting a mobile phone, television, computer, and headphones emerges and then melds into ESPN’s logo to highlight the media outlet’s multiplatform identity. But “Queue” makes clear that live television coverage of major sports like the NBA remains ESPN’s key point of distinction. Moreover, the promo’s decision to feature a woman demonstrates ESPN’s efforts to expand its demographic range beyond the male sports fans it traditionally courts as its subscriber base shrinks.

### **O. J.: Made in America**

Though “Queue” works to differentiate ESPN within on-demand culture through underscoring its live sports, the network’s competitors in the sports genre all offer similar content and delivery options for subscribers. ESPN extended its efforts to assert its exceptional status one month after “Queue” with the debut of ESPN Films’ 7.5-hour, five-part documentary, *O. J.: Made in America*. Directed by Ezra Edelman and marketed as a “documentary event,” the production chronicles the rise and fall of football player O. J. Simpson through examining his playing career, celebrity status, murder trial, controversial acquittal, and eventual conviction and incarceration for a 2007 robbery. *Made in America* eschews the format of a straightforward biographical profile in favor of exploring the links between Simpson’s role as one of the United States’ first crossover African American athletes and the history of race relations in Los Angeles, where he played college football during the late 1960s at University of Southern California, lived after his career in the NFL, and stood trial for murder. Edelman probes Simpson’s complex status as an African American celebrity whose success resulted in part from his willingness to divorce himself from the African American community and appease mainstream white culture. “I’m not black, I’m O. J.,” Simpson would reportedly say when asked about his racial identity. *Made in America* highlights how Los Angeles’ African American community suffered poverty, racism, and rampant police brutality as Simpson enjoyed fame and wealth in the same city. It then investigates the irony of how Simpson’s identity—as black, not O. J.—informed the racially polarized public reaction to his murder charges and acquittal.

ESPN Films executive producer Connor Schell trumpeted *Made in America* as “the most ambitious undertaking ESPN Films has embarked upon” (Montgomery 2016). Edelman claims the documentary’s unusual length was necessary given his wide-ranging approach. “I was interested in the 30 years before the murders, the city, race and identity, and the juxtaposition with O. J.’s story. This is a big American studies paper,” he remarked. “This touches on everything in our culture” (Roston 2016). The documentary, Edelman asserts, approaches Simpson’s story as an interdisciplinary research project that tends to the multifarious nexus of culture and power. For instance, the first installment combines footage of Simpson’s triumphs while at USC with images of the racial



and political turmoil occurring within and beyond Los Angeles at the time. The scene underscores USC's and Simpson's distance from and even indifference to this unrest. By extension, it critiques mainstream sport culture's frequent lack of social consciousness.

Edelman explains that *Made in America* was inspired by Ken Burns's sweeping historical documentaries and the 2004 French series *The Staircase*, which explores the case of a North Carolina novelist accused of murdering his wife (Roston 2016). The production also premiered shortly after HBO's *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (2015) and Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015)—popular and acclaimed long-form documentary projects that explore mysterious and controversial murder cases. Like these documentaries, *Made in America* garnered nearly universal praise after its debut—often from arts and culture commentators who seldom pay attention to ESPN's programming. *Rolling Stone* called it a “major cultural event,” *Wired* dubbed it “infinitely absorbing,” and *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott claimed the documentary “has the grandeur and authority of the best long-form nonfiction. If it were a book, it could sit on the shelf alongside *The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer and the great biographical works of Robert Caro” (Sheffield 2016; Rafferty 2016; Scott 2016). These practices and discourses separate *Made in America* from run-of-the-mill sports TV and assert ESPN's membership in the diverse but respectable cultural traditions Ken Burns, HBO, and Norman Mailer represent.

ESPN further constructed *Made in America's* outstanding artfulness by premiering it at the Sundance Film Festival—a practice it has adopted with other ESPN Films documentaries to build buzz before their television debut and expose them to audiences who might not typically watch sports TV (Vogan 2015, 124–5). It also gave *Made in America* a one-week theatrical run in Los Angeles and New York to satisfy the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' minimum requirements for Academy Award consideration in hopes that the documentary would be nominated for an Oscar. Ultimately, the film was not just nominated but also won the best documentary feature award—a first for ESPN that took its efforts to build respectability to new heights.

But aside from cultivating prestige, ESPN designed *Made in America* to be watched on-demand through WatchESPN. “As we were thinking about the compelling nature of this content, it became more and more clear that there might be people who may want to sit down and watch the whole thing,” explained ESPN senior vice president Lori LeBas. After debuting the first segment on ABC in prime-time, ESPN simultaneously released the subsequent four parts online through WatchESPN before they aired on TV. “This is about helping people understand that, yes [WatchESPN is] about being able to see games in a portable way if you're not at home,” LeBas remarked. “But it's also a way to sit back and consume content in a more binge-able fashion the way you might with other services” (Battaglio 2016). In particular, ESPN adopted the binge-able model Netflix and Amazon use for their original series. It advertises WatchESPN as a service that both offers access to the live event coverage that cannot wait and includes a vault of original content that can be consumed anytime. However, *Made in America's* premier at Sundance and Academy Award prestige situate the production as a more artful and cinematic documentary than the binge-worthy television series it otherwise resembles. With *Made in America* and its other documentaries, then, ESPN participates in

on-demand culture while positioning its content as exceptional in that context. The documentaries augment ESPN's live content and suggest the media outlet harbors a degree of quality that competing sports media streaming services—which do not invest in binge-able and renowned documentaries like *Made in America*—lack.

## CONCLUSION

As sports media scholar Raymond Boyle (2014, 747) points out, “TV remains a remarkably resilient cultural form and is the one still central to sporting popular culture.” Nearly 40 years after its launch, ESPN is also quite durable. While live sports remain ESPN's cornerstone, the media outlet participates in and even drives television's reinvention beyond the medium's traditional barriers. It does so in ways that reinforce its industrial and cultural primacy amid this change and persuade consumers that it is worth the relatively steep—and continually increasing—subscriber fees required to access it. As “Queue” markets ESPN's live event programming as more immediate and exciting than typical on-demand content, *Made in America* situates ESPN's original documentaries as uniquely artful on-demand viewing. These practices illustrate the self-named Worldwide Leader's recent efforts to stabilize and even grow its imperial status within a rapidly shifting sports media landscape. They also demonstrate the complementary cultural and industrial roles live sports and documentary play in this setting.

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