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Hoop Streams:
The Rise of the NBA, Multiplatform Television, and Sports as Media Content,
1982 to 2015

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Media Studies

by

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June 2019

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The Rise of the NBA, Multiplatform Television, and Sports as Media Content, 1982 to 2015

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by

Steven Secular

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ABSTRACT

Hoop Streams:
The Rise of the NBA, Multiplatform Television, and Sports as Media Content, 1982 to 2015

by

Steven J. Secular

Hoop Streams seeks to examine the mediatization and marketization of sport since the 1980s, by charting the evolution of the National Basketball Association from a small-time administrative organization into a multi-faceted global media empire. The NBA illuminates the transformation of sport into multiplatform media content and sports leagues into modern media conglomerates. In order to obtain the fullest possible accounting of the NBA's history and decision-making, *Hoop Streams* draws on archival news sources and original interviews. Where possible, the dissertation also uses telecasts and promotional materials to illustrate the application of the league's various media strategies. Ultimately, the NBA's evolution reflects the ongoing commercialization of culture, as reciprocal cross-cultural flows are increasingly leveraged in service of greater profits. The transnational expansion and vertical integration of the NBA thus reflects historical shifts within the media industries, as the league capitalizes on the media strategies of larger conglomerates in Disney and Time Warner. Eventually, the NBA comes to privilege an inclusive internationalism over its status as an American pastime. This strategy is encouraged by the emergence of a streaming media environment, which allows for a more global and simultaneous address than ever before. Similarly to Netflix and HBO, the NBA demonstrates the drive for media content that can reach a maximum number of countries within a single platform. *Hoop Streams* thus helps to establish and survey a global and integrated sports-media industry.

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Introduction: The NBA as Media Institution

On November 29, 2012, the San Antonio Spurs of the National Basketball Association (NBA) gave four of the team's top stars the night off. After playing five games in eight nights, the decision was not unusual for head coach Gregg Popovich or for the league more widely. The problem was that this game, against LeBron James and the Miami Heat, was to be nationally televised on TNT. The NBA's commissioner David Stern, fined the team \$250,000, arguing that the Spurs had rested their players "in manner contrary to the best interests of the NBA...Under these circumstances, I have concluded that the Spurs did a disservice to the league and our fans."¹ One week later, as pundits took opposing sides across ESPN and national news networks, cultural critic Chuck Klosterman drew a broader question from the controversy: "What is the central purpose of pro sports, and how much of that purpose is solely tied to entertainment?"² Stern's actions highlighted the extent to which the NBA privileged its media value above and beyond its investment in competitive and meaningful play. The lesson that television came first for the NBA, if not for all American pro sports, was an uncomfortable truth for many sports fans. The sanctity of the game seemed to disappear. But the fines against the Spurs were not the first time this was clear, nor would they be the last. Since at least 1984, when David Stern became the NBA's commissioner, pro basketball has prioritized television. Since then, the NBA has acted as a media company first and a basketball league second.

Formed in 1946, when the Basketball Association of America (BAA) merged with

¹ Sam Borden, "Basketball Players' Night Off Makes a Stand for Sitting Out," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2012, A1.

² Chuck Klosterman, *X: A Highly Specific, Defiantly Incomplete History of the Early 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 178.

the National Basketball League (NBL), the NBA comes of age in the mid to late 1980s, having transformed from a professional sports organization into a media industrial entity under the direction of David Stern, who served as the league's commissioner from 1984 to 2014. *Hoop Streams* chronicles the causes and consequences of this evolution of the NBA, beginning with the inception of NBA Entertainment (NBAE) in 1982, a dual production house and archive for game footage, to the NBA's status as a global media empire in 2015, with the aid of a unique and robust digital media infrastructure.

Ahead of the 2014-15 season, the National Basketball Association signed a nine-year extension with its television and streaming partners, Turner and ABC/ESPN, to the tune of \$24 billion. ESPN agreed to pay \$1.4 billion per year, while Turner pays out \$1.2 billion.³ At last, the NBA's TV revenue has begun to close in on that of the National Football League, whose most recent TV contract in 2011 netted them \$27 billion.⁴ In the post-network, multi-platform era of television, the business of sports has served to propel the business of television proper. In 2016, U.S. viewers collectively watched 31 billion hours of live sports, leading to higher and higher prices for sports channels on cable and satellite distributors. In 2016, pay TV customers paid \$18.37 per month for sports programming alone, forty-percent of the total bill, up from only \$2.85 in 2001.⁵ This dissertation project will chart the trajectory between these points, as the NBA and its peers transform from primarily administrative organizations into multi-billion-dollar media enterprises.

The production of NBA games, across media platforms and across national borders, now requires the coordination of thousands of employees within a variety of departments,

³ Mike Prada, "NBA to Announce 9-Year, \$24 Billion TV Deal with ESPN, Turner," *SB Nation*, October 5, 2014.

⁴ Kurt Badenhausen, "The NFL Signs TV Deals Worth \$27 Billion," *Forbes*, December 14, 2011.

⁵ Meg James, "The Rise of Sports TV Costs and Why Your Cable Bill Keeps Going Up," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2016.

sub-departments, and development groups. Some work in New Jersey, some in the Manhattan office, some travel between them, and some are stationed as far away as England, Mexico, China, and South Africa. The NBA operates as a genuinely global conglomerate, every bit as robust and integrated as its partners in Turner and Disney. This becomes especially clear by the close of the 2014-2015 season, the subject of Chapter Four, as the NBA advances its international streaming platform and local franchises like the Milwaukee Bucks and Sacramento Kings become global distributors in their own right.

In a report prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers, on the “Global Entertainment and Media” outlook for 2018 to 2022, PwC cited the NBA alongside Netflix and Amazon, as comparable “giants” that are “converging on global markets.” In addition to Netflix and Amazon, the report also included the NBA’s League Pass OTT service in the same conversation as HBO Now, Hulu, and CBS All Access.⁶ Victoria E. Johnson has similarly described sports leagues and conferences as “fully-fledged media institutions of the post-network era.”⁷ This introduction establishes the NBA as one such media institution of the contemporary media economy. Subsequent chapters will trace the history of this industrial evolution, beginning in 1982, before returning to the post-network era to examine how the NBA’s current status as a global media empire.

This dissertation thus highlights the integrated “marketization” and “mediatization” of sport. These interrelated processes, exemplified and driven by the NBA since the 1980s, leads to the current global state of the sports media industry, wherein leagues function as media conglomerates and sport itself functions as media content first and foremost. The case

⁶ Ennel van Eeden and Wilson Chow, “Perspectives from the Global Entertainment & Media Outlook, 2018-2022,” *PricewaterhouseCoopers*, June 2018, 10, 16.

⁷ Victoria E. Johnson, “Everything New is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era,” in *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 133.

of the NBA explains how and why such a shift has occurred. I follow from David Hesmondalgh's definition of "marketization," which he prefers to terms like deregulation or liberalization, as marketization reflects "the process by which market exchange increasingly came to permeate the cultural industries and related sectors."⁸ Marketization best describes the transition of sports leagues from public and primarily administrative bodies into multi-national, multi-department integrated media institutions, while addressing both the regulatory and cultural dimensions of the process.

"Mediatization" has been used in various capacities, but emerges from political communication scholarship. The "mediatization of politics" thesis, as succinctly defined by Terry Flew, proposes that "the changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are increasingly dependent upon media and conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception."⁹ This term most appropriately describes the NBA's similar efforts to manipulate basketball as media programming and its tendency to cater primarily to media interests in its directives, as demonstrated in Commissioner Stern's fines against the San Antonio Spurs. I argue that the mediatization of sport begins in earnest in the 1980s, concurrent with the rise of cable and satellite television, as NBA Entertainment begins to package basketball in qualitatively different ways than had been done before, such as by NFL Films and ABC's *Monday Night Football*. As other leagues follow in the NBA's footsteps, the NBA thus carries sports television into the cable era, and later, the multi-platform era. With the advent of internet distribution, the process of mediatization has only intensified and accelerated, as will be charted through the dissertation.

⁸ David Hesmondalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd Ed (Los Angeles and London: Sage Publications, 2013), 128.

⁹ Terry Flew, "The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate," *Media Theory* 1.1 (2017): 51.

The mediatization argument is reminiscent of a great deal of sports media scholarship from the mid-to-late 1980s, which came to see media's influence as corrupting of sport, or at its most neutral, as a mutually beneficial commercial partnership. Writing about 'new' media in the late 1980s, Bernard Miège argued that "some sporting events are now not only produced *for* television but *in function of* television re-transmission," citing major tennis tournaments, the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and the FIFA World Cup as examples that "are as much audiovisual entertainment as they are live sporting events."¹⁰ Around the same time, John Goldlust also argues of sport's relationship with media that "television must produce a form of entertainment that ensures a maximization of the sale of commercial time and therefore the staging of the sports event is increasingly susceptible to changes in structure and form that television professionals assess will be most favorable to this end."¹¹ The interests of sports and media executives are aligned in their pursuit of profit. In this capacity, Robert McChesney is perhaps most fundamental in outlining what he terms the "symbiosis" of sport and the mass media, in which "media attention fans the flames of interest in sport and increased interest in sport warrants further media attention."¹² Sut Jhally terms this process the "sports/media complex," though he is skeptical of the idea that "before the influence of the media there was something that was pure sports."¹³

This "complex" is profoundly reflected in the concept of mediatization, which captures the increasing tendency of sport to prioritize to media interests. Sports and media move beyond symbiosis, as sports league become media companies in their own right. The

¹⁰ Bernard Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (New York: International General, 1989), 144.

¹¹ John Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps: Sport, the Media, and Society* (Melbourne: Longman Chesire, 1987), 145.

¹² Robert McChesney, "Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States," in *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 49.

¹³ Sut Jhally, "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex." In *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 80.

commercial ambitions of both entities, which were formerly separate but aligned, have become even more deeply integrated and even synonymous in some respects. While the media industry might surpass sport in its interests, sport now *is* media. This dissertation advances and updates this scholarship, placing it in conversation with the subsequent years of media industry research. The mutual forces of marketization and mediatization will be charted through the dissertation, which chronicles the NBA as both the driver and exemplar of this process.

Previous scholars have highlighted the NBA as exemplary in these respects. Douglas Kellner has described the NBA as the “ideal TV sport,” perfectly suited to “the era of MTV and ESPN,” given its pace, action, and attention to spectacle. “Professional basketball,” Kellner argues, “has emerged during the [Michael] Jordan era as the game that best symbolizes the contemporary sports/entertainment colossus.”¹⁴ David L. Andrews has also proposed the NBA as a similarly exemplary global colossus, which has “seamlessly blurred the boundaries between sport, media, and entertainment sectors,” as a result of the “the league's ability to create multi-platform popular media spectacles.”¹⁵ As early as the 1980s, the NBA was well on its way to functioning as a media entity first and foremost, with basketball as but a secondary concern. Years later, by the start of the 2017-18 season, internal research on TV viewer behavior had even resulted in the NBA cutting the number of timeouts per game, as the league found that viewers often changed channels and never returned. While the execution of the mandate had to be worked out in collaboration with the “Basketball Operations” department, the decision followed from the demands of its media

¹⁴ Douglas Kellner, “The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance?” in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. David L. Andrews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 66-67.

¹⁵ David L. Andrews, *Sport-Commerce-Culture: Essays on Sport in Late-Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 9.

presentation.¹⁶ The NBA thus highlights the extent to which sport today primarily functions as media content.

In this capacity, the NBA offers a case study of much like Ramon Lobato's recent comprehensive study of Netflix in the global media landscape, *Netflix Nations* (2019). In the book, Lobato describes his goal as examining "how Netflix morphed from a national media company to an international one," and subsequently, "what this case means for existing debates about global television on the one hand and digital distribution on the other."¹⁷ My own undertaking is quite similar, examining instead the NBA, the sports media component of the same industrial transformation, and the inherent tensions between U.S.-originated content and the global marketplace. In articulating the NBA as a successful media producer-distributor in its own right, I hope to contribute to our further understanding of American sports leagues as comparable to such global producer-distributors as Netflix.

The NBA, like Netflix, provides a globally available media property. Ultimately, Lobato highlights how Netflix's international rollout and catalog system allows its content to remain simultaneously local and global. Netflix shifts our conception of cross-border media flows, he explains, in "the fact that it can effortlessly combine the local and the global *within the one platform* and constitute itself as many different products simultaneously."¹⁸ The NBA, in the simultaneity of its own international platform and the purposeful transformation of the sport to accommodate new global audiences, offers further evidence of this phenomenon beyond the case of Netflix. Framed by the mutual processes of marketization and mediatization, this dissertation examines the historical motives and mechanics that encourage and enable this contemporary media ecosystem.

¹⁶ Danny Meiseles (President of Content, NBA), in discussion with the author, September 22, 2017.

¹⁷ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), x.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

The NBA, as I will demonstrate, was a crucial driver of the global multiplatform possibilities of sports media. While the NFL first exploited the possibilities of broadcast television in the 1960s and 1970s, the fledgling NBA was better positioned to capitalize on new opportunities in cable and satellite in the 1980s, given the league's lower overhead costs and revenue. The NBA had little to lose by experimenting with emergent media. During the 1980s, the creation of NBA Entertainment and NBA International thus accelerates the transformation of sport into multi-platform media content. Concurrent with a period of global deregulation, the 1990s sees the NBA consolidating control over its various properties, launching new divisions, and opening overseas offices. This centralization allowed the league to take fuller advantage of new direct-to-consumer distribution opportunities and become a more global institution. In 1994, the NBA launched League Pass, a subscription-based satellite service via DirecTV; in 1999, the league became the first to own and operate their own cable channel, NBA TV; and in 2007, they were the first to see the opportunity in packaging together their broadcast and digital streaming rights, as part of their contract extension with Turner and ESPN. Mark Lazarus, who worked with the NBA in his capacity as president of the Turner Entertainment Group, notes that more than any other sports league, the NBA has understood their product as media content.¹⁹ Not only is this significant in understanding the large-scale influence of the NBA on the sports media industry, but it allows us to consider NBA programming alongside scholarship of TV programming and digital distribution.

Through this dissertation, I hope to more fully integrate sports into our accounting and understanding of the media industries. As sport is transformed into media content, the NBA hastens and exemplifies the subsequent transformation of sports leagues from solely

¹⁹ Mark Lazarus, in discussion with the author, April 18, 2017.

administrative organizations into vertically integrated media conglomerates. As internet distribution advances and allows for more reliable direct-to-consumer distribution on a global scale, the 2000s sees the NBA prioritize a global audience over its domestic one, laying the groundwork for the programming strategies of the next decade, as reflected in Netflix especially. Finally, the 2014-15 season serves as the pinnacle of the NBA's status as a global media empire, given the developments over the previous thirty years, and demonstrates the ongoing ascendance of streaming media distribution over cable. The NBA is a fully functional global media institution for the post-network era of television. The history presented here thus helps to explain our global multiplatform media economy, the internationalization of media content, and the role of sports in this evolution.

Global Television: History and Theory

In Timothy Havens's periodization of the globalization of television, he differentiates between the widespread international exchange of programming from 1957 to 1972, "as nation after nation introduced television broadcasting," and a second wave from 1985 to the present (as of 2006), which grew from the worldwide explosion of commercial broadcasters and "the spread of cable and satellite channels around the world."²⁰ As the demand for television programming increased in the 1980s, the major Hollywood distributors were ideally positioned to succeed, given their vast programming libraries. Havens describes how the dream of U.S. producers in the 1960s had been "a world in which domestically tailored programming would find general entertainment audiences both at home and abroad," a fully efficient global ecosystem that could overcome national differences.²¹ Through an

²⁰ Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 17, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

examination of the NBA and sports television, I demonstrate how this global vision was fulfilled with the aid of a privatized media environment and increasingly advanced distribution technologies, from satellite and cable to streaming.

Various scholars have examined the deregulatory atmosphere that gave rise to the globalized commercial television industry. David Hesmondalgh's choice of "marketization," as noted earlier, highlights "the process by which market exchange increasingly came to permeate the cultural industries and related sectors." In contrast to Havens's two distinct periods, Hesmondalgh describes various overlapping waves, including the marketization of television in "advanced industrial states" from 1985 through 1995, which saw "the pulling apart of public service television," and another wave from 1992 that sees the "convergence of the cultural industries with telecommunications and information technology."²² Jennifer Holt, who further explores these trends in her examination of the construction of transnational entertainment empires in the 1980s through the 1990s, argues that a combination of neoliberal policy and new communications technology resulted in "a great acceleration of global commerce."²³ These trends overlap with the rise of the NBA, which took advantage of these opportunities for self-distribution during the 1980s and 1990s to become a true media conglomerate in and of itself.

Jeremy Bourdon and Michael Curtin, moreover, both highlight the historical specificity of the global television paradigm that benefitted the NBA. Bourdon reconciles the national and international significance of the medium by charting the commercialization of public broadcasters and the influence of the U.S. model. Bourdon's key intervention is that commercial interests have surpassed the earlier nation-building aspirations of television.

²² David Hesmondalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 128, 137, 151.

²³ Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 10.

“Commercial television is less busy building the nation than formatting it to the needs of the market,” he notes.²⁴ Michael Curtin, too, examines the ways in which networks of television distribution have expanded beyond national borders. For Curtin, various “media capitals” around the world operate as “switching points.” Defined as “particular cities that have become centers for the finance, production, and distribution of television programs,” these capitals “do not necessarily correspond to the geography, interests, or policies of particular nation-states.”²⁵ Bourdon and Curtin offer a fundamental framework for understanding the NBA, which maintains a global network of satellite offices that serve the commercial interests of the league first and foremost, irrespective of their geography. An emphasis on media capitals, therefore, allows us to see the “web of relations” that exists across local, regional, and global levels – to grasp the “temporal dynamism and spatial complexity of a global media environment.”²⁶ These overlapping relations are useful for conceiving of the NBA’s global-local programming choices and institutional dynamics.

These cultural and media flows are made manifest within the television format trade. Tasha Oren and Sharan Shahaf perhaps most neatly capture the importance of television formats in seeking to study globalization: “Global television formats, embedded as they are in local and global industrial, economical, textual, cultural and regulatory practices and constraints emerge as an extremely compelling focal point for the highly contextualized study of television as a global system.”²⁷ Formats offer a viewpoint that is simultaneously historical, industrial, and theoretical. The format, as conceptualized by Albert Moran, offers

²⁴ Jeremy Bourdon, “Is TV a Global Medium? A Historical View,” in *Global Currents: Media and Technology Now*, eds. Tasha Oren and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 106.

²⁵ Michael Curtin, “Media Capitals: Cultural Geographies of Global TV,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 272.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁷ Tasha Oren and Sharan Shahaf. “Television Formats—A Global Framework for TV Studies,” in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders*, eds. Oren and Shahaf. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.

insight into the various loci of control and power – between the format ‘devisor,’ the producer, and the broadcaster across national and international lines. While the format functions as “a core or a structuring center,” it is also an ongoing and never-complete process, in which knowledge from subsequent iterations are absorbed into the “format package” to the benefit of the copyright holder.²⁸ This also offers a productive frame for approaching the NBA television format and the multi-directionality of influences as the sport globalizes over time. The reciprocal ‘absorption’ of knowledge is reflected in the NBA’s changing style of play, such as the growing popularity of the “Euro-step,” and in its greater incorporation of signifiers from soccer, which have helped the sport to better address international audiences.²⁹

Especially pertinent, then, is Paul S.N. Lee’s concept of “amoebic” media, a process of cultural adaptation that is reminiscent of the TV format, yet is both broader and more specific. Lee’s work, which focuses on the case of Hong Kong, proposes four useful models for understanding the adaptation of foreign cultures: the parrot, the amoeba, the coral, and the butterfly. The amoeba, specifically, describes programs that retain the same basic content across localities, but change in their outward packaging, “like an amoeba which appears different in form but remains the same in substance.”³⁰ These are often superficial changes, such as a game show or talk show that becomes localized through its hosts. It is thus a concept that offers a meaningful foundation to explain the nature of sports television. When Michael Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung, and Albert Moran specifically categorized sports as a

²⁸ Albert Moran with Justin Malbon, *Understanding the Global TV Format* (Portland, OR: Intellect, 2006), 65.

²⁹ The Euro-step is specific move popularized by European players that entered the NBA in the early 2000s and which is now commonplace throughout the league. For more: Jonathan Abrams, “NBA Imports Euro Step and Other Moves of a Global Game,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2010.

³⁰ Paul S.N. Lee, “The Absorption and Indigenization of Foreign Media Cultures,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 1.2 (1991): 65.

globally distributed TV format, they cited Lee's conception of the amoeba in order to describe its particular method of "repackaging" content.³¹ Similarly, Tony Schirato has explored the interrelationship between formats and televised sport, arguing that "formats invariably mold sport" by the "logics, imperatives, narratives, and technologies of television."³² This project demonstrates how NBA programming ultimately abides the amoebic logic proposed by Lee, in service of a more inclusive international address during the 2000s. The concept of the "amoeba" is a useful framework for comprehending the nuances of sports television as format, which speaks beyond TV formats to a broader process of cultural adaptation.

In many ways, the internationalism of amoebic formats is reflected and further explored in Marwan Kraidy's concept of hybridity. For Kraidy, hybridity refers primarily to culture, but usefully "retains residual meanings related to the three interconnected realms of race, language, and ethnicity."³³ Proposing an alternative framework of "transculturalism," Kraidy draws attention to the difference between the "corporate transculturalism" that seeks to use hybridity as a corporate marketing tool and the "critical transculturalism" that retains a more progressive political potential. *Hoop Streams* charts the development of NBA media content as a particularly "amoebic" and flexible format, which engages cultural hybridity for primarily commercial pursuits. This is not to claim a complete absence of more authentic expression, but it is certainly not the central objective. Kraidy's conceptualization is useful in

³¹ Michael Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung, and Albert Moran, *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination* (Aberdeen and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 74.

³² Tony Schirato, "Television Formats and Contemporary Sport," in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders*, eds. Tasha Oren and Sharan Shahaf (New York: Routledge, 2012), 56-58.

³³ Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1.

integrating intentionality into cultural globalization without slipping into straightforward imperialism.

This tension, between local cultural expression and transnational corporate cultures, has been further explored in the work of Silvio Waisbord and Michele Hilmes. Waisbord recognizes a multiplicity of local voices in the television format trade, but he warns that such instances may not be diverse in any meaningful sense and are moreover shaped by profit-driven motivations. While formats “cannot be seen simply as transmission belts for Western values,” as they remain “essentially open,” Waisbord notes that “formats are not entirely malleable,” since “copyright holders ultimately determine what changes can be incorporated.”³⁴ Like others, he characterizes the TV format at the center of a relationship between national belonging and international corporate interests, characterizing cultural flows as more multidirectional and complex than straightforward cultural domination. Similarly, Michele Hilmes emphasizes the productive aspects of these global flows, arguing that “sweeping invocations of ‘Americanization’ or globalization tend to obscure the ways that cultural influence works, and always has worked, across lines of many different kinds...”³⁵ The case of the NBA demonstrates, however, that while flows may be more reciprocal, they may continue to serve the interests of the more dominant party.

The concept of imperialism, then, is crucial to the examination that follows. For John Tomlinson, imperialism is necessarily a “purposeful project,” which is “the *intended* spread of a social system from one center of power across the global.”³⁶ Others, like Daya Kishan

³⁴ Silvio Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” *Television New Media* 5.4 (November 2004): 371, 380.

³⁵ Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (London: Routledge, 2011), 310.

³⁶ John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Continuum, 1991), 175.

Thussu, offer more flexible conceptualizations. While Thussu acknowledges the productive potential of “contra-flows” from the global South to the North, he argues that “the American hegemony of global media cultures” is ultimately strengthened by the paradigm, since the localization of media content can “effectively legitimize the ideological imperatives of a free-market capitalism.”³⁷ This conception leaves room for both a clear-cut intentionality and the lack thereof, emphasizing instead a more systemic imperialism. For Thomas Lamarre, the television format trade, as one such system, “discovers compatibility, convertibility, or equivalency between national culture,” and seeks to transform the local into the regional.³⁸ I will demonstrate, through the case of the NBA and its relationship with overseas basketball leagues and talent, that the local has been made increasingly global.

As part of this shift towards *global*-ization, in lieu of *local*-ization, Tanner Mirrlees has argued that U.S. transnational media companies “are de-Americanizing the content of TV shows and films so that they may more easily capture and control global, national, and trans-local lifestyle markets,” rather than those that explicitly “promote one-dimensional or homogeneous images of ‘the American Way of Life’ to the U.S. and to the wider world.”³⁹ The NBA’s arc of globalization reflects this process, as the league’s programming has taken a more international address in order to be distributed or adapted more easily in multiple markets.

Ramon Lobato, in his examination of Netflix, suggests that scholars use “*both/and*” rather than *either/or* thinking” to conceive of global-local media dynamics, as “audiences do

³⁷ Daya Kishan Thussu, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 23, 28.

³⁸ Thomas Lamarre, “Regional TV: Affective Media Geographies.” *Asiascape: Digital Asia 2* (2015): 94, 109.

³⁹ Tanner Mirrlees, *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 207.

not choose between the local and the global but combine both in their everyday lives.”⁴⁰ As I will demonstrate, however, the NBA seeks to convert and absorb national basketball cultures into the mediatized American iteration of basketball, much like a TV format evolves with each successive version of itself, to the benefit of the copyright holder. The NBA, as a globally present institution, seeks to minimize the difference between itself and local offerings, through similar actions of self-modification and institutional control. This will become more evident in Chapter Four, in the NBA’s equity investment in the Brazilian professional league, Liga Nacional de Basquete. *Hoop Streams* thus interrogates the relationship between American media and imperialism, as basketball transforms from a leading American cultural export into an international import, thus obscuring the influence of commercialism behind a veil of inclusion and social progress. I argue that this transition, which is enabled and encouraged by the integrated forces of marketization and mediatization, ultimately serves the wider distribution of American media and the further capitalization of overseas markets.

Sports Television: History and Theory

As a commercial media institution, sport occupies a unique position. Sports media involves the convergence of a live performed event, its mediation and the representational strategies thereof, and the perceptions of both in-person spectators and home viewers. While sports television may be shaped by decisions at the executive level, the contest’s producers remain dependent on the improvisational nature of the game action and on the programming decisions of the live event personnel. Understanding this relationship, as well as its transformation over time, is thus essential to the study of sports media.

⁴⁰ Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 160.

Margaret Morse outlines perhaps the most central questions to sports media scholarship. She is interested in “the formal differences” between live sport and mediated sport, “the significant features of sport as a genre on television,” whether the disparity between the live event and media event has “brought any significance changes in the spectator’s psychic experiences of sport,” and if “the ideological or social function of sport changed through the convergence of two cultural models—sport and television.”⁴¹ Her inquiry effectively highlights the tension between performance, production, and reception.

Morse argues that the performance of sport becomes significantly modified by its mediation. She describes how “the constant use of extremely long lenses both narrows the angle of view and flattens space” and “the convention of instant replay shows the same play two or three times from different angles and points of view.” The TV mediation of sport, then, exists in a realm unto itself, with a distinct spatiality and temporality that is no longer purely representational. Instead, television emphasized “only points of action and body contact, to the detriment of the ‘overall geometry of the game.’”⁴² While television encourages a greater disparity between what the in-person audience and the home audience experience, the home viewer gains something in the trade-off. They are bestowed a closer eye to the action, to the nuances of the performance, even though they lose a sense of the total picture. This tension is fundamental to conceiving of the ongoing mediatization of sport, as the NBA comes to function primarily a media company and increasingly programs and manipulates basketball as media content.

Morse is less interested than others, however, in the industrial context of sports television that gives rise to these tensions. Robert McChesney is perhaps most fundamental

⁴¹ Margaret Morse, “Sport on Television: Replay and Display.” In *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches - An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983), 46.

⁴² *Ibid.* 48.

in outlining what he terms the “symbiosis” of sport and the mass media, in which “media attention fans the flames of interest in sport and increased interest in sport warrants further media attention.” He argues, moreover, that this relationship “has been distinctly shaped by the emerging contours of American capitalism since the 1830s” and that, ultimately, “the shapes of both sport *and* the mass media have been permanently changed.”⁴³ This symbiosis is also supported by sports sociologist John Goldlust, who further notes that the U.S. was especially fertile for a larger-scale commercialization of sport, given “a strong ethic supporting economic development through free entrepreneurial activity” and the process of rapid industrial expansion, mass migration, and urban growth that followed the Civil War.⁴⁴

Goldlust is concerned primarily with how and why sport obeys the logics of “good television.”⁴⁵ While there is a degree of independence for sports leagues, since the conclusion of events remains open-ended, power ultimately lies with the interests of television. He compares the production of sports to an independently produced TV series: “For as long as particular shows maintain their rating power, they establish a sound bargaining position for contractual renewal and increased remuneration for all concerned with the production.”⁴⁶ Though there exists a push-pull of power between the sports and TV industries, the situation encourages both parties to accommodate the interests of ‘good television,’ which is inclined to extract as much profit as possible from the performers and from the audience. Encouraged by new media technologies and the commercial possibilities of sports on TV, the sports and television industries become ever more interrelated. As noted earlier, this is reflected also in

⁴³ McChesney, “Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States,” 49, 51, 65.

⁴⁴ Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps*, 46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

Sut Jhally's conception of the "sports/media complex."⁴⁷ In the intervening years, this relationship has only intensified.

In Victoria E. Johnson's work on the state of sports media in the multi-platform era, she argues that sport "epitomizes a paradox," in that it remains "the most quintessential network-era programming" in its mass appeal and resonance, yet it is also "particularly well suited to new business practices, media outlets, and modes of viewer involvement that are enabled by the distribution flexibility and technologies characteristic of the post-network era." Johnson also argues, history, that the NFL has been "foundational" in "shaping the business of televised sport."⁴⁸ Travis Vogan notes the same in his study of NFL Films, arguing that the division helped the league to "manufacture an image that sets the gridiron game apart from other sports and...[distinguish] itself from other sports organizations."⁴⁹ While the NFL's impact on sports television is indisputable, as a result of both NFL Films and its work with ABC on *Monday Night Football* beginning in 1970, the NFL continues to most profoundly exemplify the practices of the network era of television. The NBA, which ascended during the period of cable television, direct-broadcast satellite, and internet distribution, more powerfully exhibits the paradox at the heart of the global multi-platform era, in the league's ability to "engage *both* a broad(cast) audience and increasingly narrower niches within that audience."⁵⁰ The NBA has more effectively demonstrated and perpetuated the sports industry's investment in flexible distribution on a global scale, as the league grows at a far faster rate than its contemporaries. In 2017, NFL revenue sat at \$17 billion, a seven-

⁴⁷ Sut Jhally, "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex," 80.

⁴⁸ Johnson, "Everything New is Old Again," 115-116.

⁴⁹ Travis Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 2.

⁵⁰ Victoria E. Johnson, "Historicizing TV Networking: Broadcasting, Cable, and the Case of ESPN," in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 61.

percent increase over the previous year. The NBA's revenue, while admittedly smaller at \$7.4 billion, was a staggering 25-percent increase from 2016.⁵¹ The NBA, as I will demonstrate, is a media conglomerate for a multi-platform, post-network era.

Despite these advancements, for many years, the sporting event itself remained the primary source of profit for pro sports organizations. Like Margaret Morse's interest in the tension between the live and mediated event, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz offer a deeper inquiry into the production of what they term the "media event," the "high holidays of mass communication" that "demand and receive focused attention."⁵² Crucially, Dayan and Katz describe the production of the media event as involving three particular 'partners,' whose interests may or may not coincide: "the organizers of the event who bring its elements together and propose its historicity; the broadcasters who re-produce the events by recombining its elements; and the audience, on the spot and at home, who take the event to heart." Dayan and Katz describe these collaborations as a "contract," in which "each side undertakes to give something to the others in order to get something in return."⁵³ The audience, which is included in the "frame" of the TV event and observed by the at-home viewer, thus has a large degree of leverage in this relationship. For this reason, sports organizations like the NBA seek to capitalize on audience participation and the event's framing to more effectively reach international audiences. The color coordination of fan "costuming," via T-shirts handed out pre-game, for example, is designed to create a cohesive 'look' for the event and is in keeping with the arena/event as a mechanism of control.

⁵¹ David Z. Morris, "NFL vs. NBA: Which Will Be America's Biggest Sport 10 Years From Now?" *Fortune*, May 26, 2018.

⁵² Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1, 4-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 54.

The relationship between spectator and the stadium space, and the convergence of at-home and in-person viewing modes, is further taken up by Greg Siegel. Delving more specifically into the modern sports stadium, Siegel traces the genealogy of the late 1990s “stadium boom,” which found an increasing number of cities either renovating old sports venues or building entirely new ones. These new venues were designed as “complete entertainment environments,” responding to a supposed “crisis” that “the sporting event in itself is thought to be insufficiently entertaining in an era of richly diversified, highly mediatized leisure consumption.”⁵⁴ This modern “Disneyfied” stadium shifts the experience of in-person spectatorship, aligning it with home viewing and even shopping. This proliferation of screens functions as an “incentive to programmed participation,” which ultimately offers the event organizers a way to better guarantee the audience’s adherence to the script of the event narrative – through commands to cheer, make noise, or direct one’s attention to a particular area.⁵⁵ This is an important framework for understanding the NBA’s strategies for globalization, many of which focus on the arena space, given its increasingly global and simultaneous distribution via DBS packages and later streaming platforms.

Scholars have most frequently approached this globalization of sport in the context of cultural flows, which often reflect the integrated forces of marketization and mediatization, in essence if not in name. Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe are interested in the effects of corporatized sport and what the process of commercialization means for culture as it grows transnationally. “The move towards a global sports complex is as much about commodification and alienation as it is to do with a utopian internationalism,”

⁵⁴ Greg Siegel, “Disneyfication, the Stadium, and the Politics of Ambiance.” In *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*, eds. Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 303-304.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

they argue.⁵⁶ Their ambivalence is also reflected in the work of Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, who discuss the influence of corporate sponsorships and note how “the lexicon of sports language has been transformed by the discourse of advertising and marketing.” In combination with sports’ “visibility and focus on symbols, winning, competition, partisan fans,” they argue, few other cultural forms are as “representative of a national identity.”⁵⁷ I would argue, additionally, that such universals are precisely what make sports programming so flexible and easily adaptable across national boundaries.

Sohail Daulatzai argues as much in his article on the NBA, Islam, and global popular culture. Most broadly, he examines how sport’s position in the global cultural landscape emerges from the synergistic relationships between multinational corporations and international marketing conglomerates, which seek to reach diasporic publics. This speaks especially to the NBA’s global success, as “a cultural expression of the marginalized in American society—namely, African Americans” that has moreover been commodified through “systems of production and distribution firmly rooted in Western capitalism.”⁵⁸ While the global status of sport can indeed demonstrate a kind of utopian internationalism, as Miller et al. note, sport still remains bound up in capitalism and the commodification process. “Like literature, film, or any other cultural form, the NBA must be viewed as a mediated expression that can, and often does, reproduce dominant Western discourses,” Daulatzai argues.⁵⁹ Similarly to Marwan Kraidy’s differentiation between corporate and critical

⁵⁶ Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe, *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 4.

⁵⁷ Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, the Media, and Popular Culture*, 2nd Ed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 44, 144.

⁵⁸ Soheil Daulatzai, “View the World From American Eyes: Ball, Islam, and Dissent in Post-Race America,” in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 198

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

transculturalism, basketball's Western values are increasingly downplayed in favor of a multicultural and utopian discourse that can be more easily sold on an international scale.

An understanding of global television formats can thus help us to better explain the internationalization of sport, which is often packaged and distributed according to the tenets of the format trade. A greater understanding of sport, moreover, can help us to explain the globalization of television proper, as sport remains one of the most significant and widely consumed forms of entertainment around the world. The case of the NBA offers vital information for a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between sports, media, and globalization on both a cultural and industrial level.

Methodology

Following Victoria E. Johnson's call for greater attention to the media operations of sports leagues, this project follows the models of industry sociology exhibited by Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* (1983) and John Thornton Caldwell's *Production Culture* (2008). Jennifer Holt's *Empires of Entertainment* (2011) and Michael Curtin's *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience* (2007), moreover, serve as models for integrating industrial accounts with their historiographical context, both of which engage executive testimony in order to reframe and enrich historical work on media conglomeration and globalization. While sports media, too, is deeply involved in these processes, as I will demonstrate, no comparable project exists that combines testimonies from its executives and producers with historical accounts. This study of the NBA intends to correct this absence in order to illuminate the global aspirations and machinations of the sports media industry.

As a methodological framework, therefore, the field of media industry studies is most crucial. Though the field is expansive and features multiple approaches, I follow from Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren's conception in *Media Industry Studies: History, Theory, and Method*. While acknowledging the flexibility of the field, they understand it as an integration of "political economy's interest in ownership, regulation, and production with cultural studies' interest in texts, discourses, audiences, and consumption." The "challenge," moreover, is to provide a sophisticated-enough interdisciplinary model that can "acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of media texts" and the consumption of those texts.⁶⁰ It is not enough to combine political economy and cultural studies frameworks; one must remain attentive to the nuances and complexities of the medium.

In their call for a "critical media industry studies," Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic address the same concern as Holt and Perren by arguing for an examination of "the micropolitics of institutional operation and production practices." The crucial "missing link" between political economy and cultural studies, they argue, is "the way in which institutional discourses are internalized and acted upon by cultural workers." In other words, they seek to parse out the tensions between creative workers and corporate institutions, and to unpack how artistic, social, and financial forces work through the text and through labor "within actual practice."⁶¹ This approach to media industry studies thus incorporates the larger forces of ownership and regulation, while remaining attentive to the complexities, contradictions, and discourses of specific media, per Holt and Perren's provocation.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, "Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" In *Media Industry Studies: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Holt and Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 8-9.

⁶¹ Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2 (2009): 238, 246, 249.

This speaks to a “production culture” approach to the media industries, following John Thornton Caldwell’s work, as well as Timothy Havens’s interest in what he terms “media industry sociology.” Caldwell suggests an approach that can incorporate “the cooked, skewed, or unreliable” industry trades.” One must properly balance these sources against “local production work-worlds”, which Caldwell defines as “the material and human conditions of production work itself.”⁶² Havens’s approach to sociology similarly takes a material, bottom-up perspective of cultural production, yet “seeks to connect these descriptions to broader historical and social trends and theoretical concerns.”⁶³ This speaks to a tradition of media industry ethnography, following from Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time* (1983) and Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley’s *The Producer’s Medium: Conversation with Creators of American TV* (1983), and including more recent work in Caldwell’s own *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008) and Miranda Banks’s *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (2015).

These works, and their extensive use of interviews and site research, serve as models for my own efforts to better grasp and more effectively interrogate industrial practices, power hierarchies, and day-to-day operations. In *Inside Prime Time*, Gitlin explains of his method, “I tried to make sense of...discrepancies, evasions, and blind-spots,” as “many special pleadings add up to an industry’s view of itself.”⁶⁴ I intend to offer the same for the sports media industry, as exemplified by the National Basketball Association. The NBA, as a media

⁶² John Thornton Caldwell, “Cultures of Production: Studying Industry’s Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures,” in *Media Industry Studies: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Holt and Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 210.

⁶³ Timothy Havens, “Media Industry Sociology: Mainstream, Critical, and Cultural Perspectives,” in *Media Sociology: A Reappraisal*, ed. Silvio Waisbord (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 100.

⁶⁴ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1983), 14.

industrial entity, has its own producers, writers, editors, and actors that operate in much the same way as the media workers explored by industry sociologists and ethnographers. Sports media scholars, like John Goldlust and Sut Jhally, make such a comparison. Jhally highlights how the “directors, producers, camera operators, editors, and commentators are inserted between the live event and the home audience.”⁶⁵ The NBA, with the help of its TV partners, has been especially adept at developing its star players as TV stars proper. The league’s many producers, directors, writers, marketers, and players (as actors) all work to contribute to the form of basketball’s mediation. Thus the interrogation of media industrial practices, and the examination of how “institutional discourses are internalized and acted upon by cultural workers,” offers a particularly appropriate framework for approaching both the NBA and sports media more widely.

This undertaking is thus deeply aligned with the approach taken by Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson in *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (2014), which utilizes interviews to contribute “big-picture strategic thinking” from studio executives, perspectives from “innovative enterprises” that are “operating outside of the global conglomerate,” and “insights from creative talent.”⁶⁶ My own use of ethnographic research encompasses both interviews and site visits. Interviews included people from various backgrounds and occupations, at various levels of management, with the intention of offering a wide range of perspectives on the NBA’s history and its operations. These interviews can be grouped as follows: current and former NBA executives, NBA event and production personnel, team executives and personnel, executives from NBA partners (including Turner, ESPN, and Starwave), and the

⁶⁵ Jhally, “Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex,” 82.

⁶⁶ Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson, *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press: 2014), 15.

sportswriters that covered the NBA's ascent. The lengths of these interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to two hours and were conducted both in person and over the telephone, as noted in the appendix. There are 28 in total that contributed to this dissertation.

The site visits included the NBA's production and distribution headquarters in Secaucus, New Jersey. Here, the league houses its digitized archival material, dated as far back as 1982, with films and physical media dated considerably earlier. It serves as one of two colocation centers (or "colos") through which all of the NBA's video passes, along a nationwide fiber-optic cable system purchased from Zayo Group.⁶⁷ Site visits also included the facilities of two of the NBA's partners in distribution and technology – NeuLion, which oversees the NBA's international streaming platform from their Technical Operations Center in Plainview, New York, and longtime cable partner ESPN, which oversees many of the league's most significant games, including the NBA Finals, from their Bristol, Connecticut headquarters. Additionally, I visited Golden 1 Center, home of the Sacramento Kings franchise, to better understand the league's integration of national and international media distribution from the perspective of an exemplary team in that area.

Following Caldwell's call for "cross-checking" industry "disclosures," I situated such ethnographic information alongside historical trade publications and news sources.⁶⁸ These materials helped build a chronology of events that could be further interrogated by alternative ethnographic sources. Among the historical materials useful to my own project were articles and features from *Variety*, *Broadcasting*, *Broadcasting & Cable*, *Back Stage*, *The New York*

⁶⁷ The other colo is Turner's "Techwood" campus in Atlanta, Georgia, from which Turner operates the NBA's domestic League Pass streaming service.

⁶⁸ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

Times, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *Sports Illustrated*, in addition to more contemporary news sources from *ESPN*, *Vice*, *Wired*, and *Forbes*.

I also tracked the historical transformation of the sport's media strategies, where possible, through NBA archival footage and promotional materials. Game telecasts are available officially through their League Pass streaming package as "Hardwood Classics," and more unofficially through user uploads on YouTube, where I was also able to gather various NBA promotional spots. The text itself offers primary insight into the representational strategies of the league, which includes their invocation of international cultures in order to more effectively market the league on a global scale. As part of the text, one can observe changes in fan practices and fan costuming, such as the popularity of color coordination, in order to make basketball spectatorship more reminiscent of soccer fandom. In his book *Ball Don't Lie!*, Yago Colás describes his own methodology as first employing "literary analysis to identify the key elements of the myth in question" and then drawing on "existing historical and sociological research to situate this myth in and against the overlapping contexts, in basketball and society, in which it emerged."⁶⁹ This project is, essentially, the inverse – I undertake new industrial, sociological, and historical research, in combination with preexisting critical approaches to sports and media texts, such as those employed by Colás, in order to stage a full account of the NBA as a global (and globalizing) media institution.

⁶⁹ Yago Colás, *Ball Don't Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016), 12.

Chapter Breakdown

This introduction has sought to establish the NBA as a global media institution. This historical evolution is explained by the integrated process of mediatization and marketization, which reflects the NBA's transformation of basketball into media content and itself into a media conglomerate. The NBA, an exemplar and driver of this transition through its global ambitions, helps to facilitate the global multiplatform state of the sports media industry. A survey of prior scholarship on the historical development of global television thus helps stage this inquiry, as the NBA benefits from the international deregulation of the TV industry and the localization strategies of the TV format trade. Scholarship on sports television, moreover, has historically expressed ambivalence about the sports-television relationship, wherein the interests of TV are seen as dominating the interests of sports alone. This provides a fundamental framework for charting the NBA's particular relationship with television, as it evolves from 1982 through the 2014-15 season. The dissertation begins with the NBA's 1982 creation of its in-house production division, NBA Entertainment, which is reminiscent of NFL Films but sought to be broader in its media ambitions. The dissertation closes with the 2014-15 season, a culmination of the league's media efforts, in which the NBA signs its most massive media rights contract yet and opens the Replay Center at its Secaucus, New Jersey headquarters, the new home of an international in-house video exchange.

Chapter One charts the transformation of sport into media content, from 1982 to 1990, which is initiated by the creation of NBA Entertainment and culminates in the league's unique agreement with NBC, which allowed NBAE to produce programs and promotional materials for the network and collaborate on ad sales. During this period, the NBA's actions reflect their increasing willingness to manipulate and market the sport in ways that

emphasized its status as TV programming first and foremost. Following a new arrangement with broadcast partner CBS in 1986, which allowed the NBA to reacquire its own international media rights, the NBA began to self-produce its own international game edits for overseas distribution. This opportunity substantially boosted the league's confidence in its ability to maintain control over its own media, culminating the NBA's leaving CBS for NBC, who had promised NBA Entertainment greater responsibilities in network production and promotion. At NBC, the NBA is promoted on the "Must See TV" programming block alongside *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, reflecting the new status of basketball as commensurate media content. This strategy was later reflected in FOX's programming strategy for the NFL beginning in 1993, which similarly framed sport within the "larger world of entertainment."⁷⁰

As sport comes to function more like a TV program, Chapter Two charts the transformation of sports league from primarily administrative bodies into vertically integrated media conglomerates. The NBA, as a result of the in-house production and distribution efforts of the previous decade, is especially well positioned for this moment. The period from 1990 to 2002 sees the NBA opening a number of regional satellite offices to assist in media localization efforts and help coordinate the international media rollout of the league. While these decisions began before the 1992 Summer Olympics and the gold medal win by the "Dream Team," which was comprised of Michael Jordan and various NBA greats, the success in Barcelona accelerates the NBA's global plans. As the league expands its institutional reach, the advent of direct-to-consumer media distribution opens new opportunities for the self-distribution of NBA products. NBA.com is launched in 1995 and NBA.com TV, the first league-owned cable channel, is launched in 1999. This chapter

⁷⁰ Bryan Curtis, "The Great NFL Heist: How Fox Paid for and Changed Football Forever," *The Ringer*, December 13, 2018.

examines the NBA's increasing conglomeration, alongside the deregulation of the media industry, and how this further motivates the league to invest in home satellite and internet distribution. By the close of this era, the NBA has established itself as a full-fledged media institution.

Chapter Three reflects a newfound attention to the *global* sports audience over the domestic audience, following the advancement of digital communications technologies and the newfound conglomeration of sports leagues. During this period, from 2002 to 2007, the NBA increasingly imports and emphasizes international stars, creating a media product that can be effectively received in the maximum number of nations. In following the logic of the TV format, which seeks compatibility and efficiency between markets, the sport of basketball functions more than ever before as a television program. This is afforded by the continued expansion of NBA.com and the creation of a League Pass streaming platform, both of which allow for a more simultaneous global address. In 2007, the NBA decided to shift its domestic streaming operations to Turner Entertainment, which allowed the league to more fully focus on its global expansion efforts. This chapter thus interrogates the nature of internationalism and reciprocal cultural flows in a multiplatform media economy. Just as television formats often absorb subsequent iterations into their system of knowledge, so too has the NBA absorbed international cultures into its telecasts in order to offer a more seamless global product.

Chapter Four surveys the state of the NBA during the 2014-15 season, which offers the culmination of the league as a global media empire for the "post-network" era of television. Following the transformation of sport into media content and sports leagues into media conglomerates, and the privileging of a global address over the domestic audience, the

more widespread adoption of digital platforms has allowed the self-sufficiency of emergent media companies, such as the NBA, Netflix, and Amazon, to succeed beyond the scope of the legacy media conglomerates. At the start of the 2014 season, the NBA extended its domestic arrangement with Turner and ABC/ESPN for \$24 billion over nine years, triple the previous annual rate and reflective of the media value that the NBA had cultivated and leveraged.⁷¹ While the NBA benefits from the spending power of its media partners, the expansion of direct-to-consumer distribution technologies has also enabled the league to become a successful global media institution in its own right. This is evident in the 2014 opening of the Replay Center in Secaucus, New Jersey, which is connected by fiber-optic cables to all twenty-nine of the NBA's arenas, providing a more robust distribution infrastructure under the league's control. The NBA is assisted in its international efforts by NeuLion, a streaming intermediary firm, which offers further insight into the infrastructures of streaming television beyond sport. The case of Brazil, moreover, where both the NBA and Netflix have heavily invested as a potentially major media market, affirms the NBA's status and capabilities as a genuine global media empire. This chapter concludes with the Sacramento Kings, who demonstrate how ever-smaller institutions can operate as global media companies in the post-network era, through the strategic use of streaming and social media platforms.

⁷¹ SI Wire, "NBA Announces 9-Year TV Deal with ESPN, Turner Sports," *Sports Illustrated*, October 5, 2014.

I. America's Game: NBA Entertainment and the Rise of Sports as Media Content, 1982 – 1990

A man hustles down 32nd Street in Manhattan. A lean figure at 6 foot, 6 inches, he stands above the passersby that surround him. He ducks into a nondescript office building. Recently retired, the job is a different one than usual. The man is Walter Szczerbiak, former EuroLeague, Spanish League, and FIBA International champion. He is here, at the offices of NBA Entertainment, to record Spanish-language commentary for a handful of NBA broadcasts that have been condensed for foreign distribution. From an announcers' suite the size of a phone booth, the voiceover recorded by Szczerbiak will be heard on the NBA's weekly games throughout Latin America. The work conducted here at the NBA Entertainment offices would next pass into the hands of the newly created NBA International division, which was tasked with securing the league's media distribution outside of the United States.

The creation of NBA Entertainment (NBAE) in 1982 accelerates the widespread mediatization of basketball and sets the league on a path towards its contemporary status as a global media institution. While inspired by the success of NFL Films, NBAE was conceived by future commissioner David Stern as being “something bigger and broader” in its responsibilities, including film, television, and promotional materials. “Entertainment sounded right, if a little too pretentious,” Stern explained in 2015, “but when you don't have much, you might as well flaunt what you want to have.”¹ Beginning in 1982, NBA Entertainment became the league's production outfit and video archive, a crucial storehouse

¹ Sports Video Group, “SVG Summit: Keynote Conversation with Dick Ebersol and David Stern.” YouTube, 41:34. Post June 1, 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6zAFPu74sU>>

for all game materials that would enable the NBA's foray into international satellite distribution during this period. While the NFL created a framework for sports on television in the broadcast era, the NBA's aggressive and in-house approach to media production and distribution built the foundation for sports as media content in an eventual multi-platform ecosystem. This chapter thus proposes NBA Entertainment, and later NBA International, as drivers in the ongoing mediatization of sport. When the NBA leaves CBS for NBC in 1990, the network offers the league greater control over NBA programming, a unique arrangement and one that results from the success of NBAE.

During this period, Bernard Miège and other scholars began to reflect on the sports and media relationship as one in which sport increasingly operated in service of media interests. "Some sporting events are now not only produced *for* television but *in function of* television re-transmission," Miège argued.² A decade later, Douglas Kellner pinpointed basketball as the "ideal TV sport," due to its fast pace and emphasis on action and spectacle. As demonstrated in the chapter that follows, NBA Entertainment played a major role in cultivating basketball's status as media content, a process best described as "mediatization." While the term emerges from the field of political communication, mediatization most accurately captures the ways in which sport and its institutions become "increasingly dependent upon media and conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception."³ This chapter examines the NBA as both an exemplar and driver of sport's mediatization from 1982 to 1990.

The NBA and NBAE, admittedly, were following the lead of other sports media pioneers, including NFL Films, ABC Sports, and Ted Turner, who is especially significant

² Bernard Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (New York: International General, 1989), 144.

³ Terry Flew, "The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate," *Media Theory* 1.1 (2017): 51.

here given his ownership of the Atlanta Hawks basketball team. As Jennifer Holt has noted, Turner played a fundamental role in foreseeing media ownership in terms of content, as he had “envisioned the Atlanta Braves and Atlanta Hawks as programming inventory for WTBS” when he purchased both in 1976.⁴ While CBS had earlier owned the New York Yankees, from 1964 to 1973, Ted Turner was “the first network owner to maintain all of the broadcast rights for his own team,” which served as a blueprint “for how to successfully cultivate corporate synergy.”⁵ While the roots of sport’s mediatization may pre-date the creation of NBA Entertainment in 1982, the division plays a significant role in advancing the media potential of sport above and beyond its status as cultural pastime. By the end of this period, sport comes to function primarily as media content, as the league evolves from a primarily administration entity into “a far-flung entertainment and media conglomerate,” per commissioner David Stern.⁶

This chapter relies on a range of interviews with key individuals who were at the NBA during this time, as well as archival news materials to help craft a chronology of events. Press sources include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Variety*, *Adweek*, and *Advertising Age*, among others. In combination, these offer a comprehensive look at the National Basketball Association at a transformative moment for itself and for the state of sports media more broadly. After examining the NBA’s media history leading up to and including the foundation of NBA Entertainment, the league reaches a pivotal moment when it renegotiates with incumbent broadcast partner CBS in December 1985, in a deal that allowed the NBA to take back control over its international media distribution. In the short

⁴ Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ David Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

term, the move created additional responsibilities for NBAE, eventually resulting in the establishment of a partner division in NBA International. The league's newfound international freedom results in its increasing tendency to function as a media company selling a television program called "basketball." This narrative concludes with the NBA's leaving CBS for NBC in 1990, which offered the league the greatest continued freedom in the production, promotion, and distribution of basketball as media content. Ultimately, this period establishes the mediatization of sport, which subsequently enables the transformation of sports leagues from administration bodies into media conglomerates during the 1990s.

Putting Out Fires: The Birth of NBA Entertainment

The NFL's historical trajectory served as an important model for the NBA's own media ambitions. By the late 1960s, with the help of CBS and NBC, the NFL had become a "major spectacle" on television and begun to overtake the popularity of baseball.⁷ Due to both networks' reluctance, however, to disrupt their Monday night sitcom and variety programming, ABC was able to win the *Monday Night Football* in 1970, at \$8 million for 13 games. ABC eventually parlayed their NFL rights and *Wide World of Sports* into total network success by the mid-1970s, finally supplanting CBS and NBC and sparking a major sports-rights bidding war, primarily over the baseball, pro football, and college football rights. In 1977, the NFL negotiated a four-year, \$656 million deal (between the three networks), six times the value of their 1964 deal with NBC/CBS. According to sports historian Benjamin Rader, "for the first time in NFL history, television income exceeded gate receipts as a source of team income." This gap only intensified in 1982, when the NFL netted

⁷ Benjamin Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 94.

a 5-year, \$2 billion deal.⁸ The NBA had its sights set on the same outcome, parlaying the game's media value into overall success.

To this point, the NBA's path had been quite different. After the 1946 merger between the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League, forming the NBA as it is known today, the league received its first major television deal in 1965, when a still-desperate ABC sports department took a flier on the league.⁹ By 1969, after steady increases in attendance and TV viewership, Tom Tolnay of *Back Stage* speculated that the NBA could be on the verge of "big-time money," given the mutual benefit to the league and ABC. Sunday afternoon games during the 1967-68 season averaged an 8.2 rating and 27 percent share.¹⁰ In 1969, *Broadcasting* ran a feature on the "sport TV pie," with a great deal dedicated to the rise of basketball under their contract with ABC – ratings growth, attendance growth, and sold-out advertising.¹¹ An unnamed network official speculated their contract could rise by millions the following year, and it did: in 1970, the NBA signed a three-year, \$16 million contract with the network.¹²

In 1973, however, the NBA left for CBS, infuriating ABC Sports president Boone Arledge, with whom the league had made a handshake agreement to stay. In March 1973, ABC took legal action against the league, alleging that they acted in bad faith.¹³ By August, the network had lost, allowing the NBA to stay with CBS and affirming their three-year, \$27 million agreement. In his decision, New York county Supreme Court Justice Hyman Korn framed the issue as one of control: "the provisions for greater NBA control...though

⁸ Ibid., 113, 101, 121-122.

⁹ Ibid., 125.

¹⁰ Tom Tolnay, "Pro Basketball on Verge of Tapping In TV \$\$," *Back Stage*, April 18, 1969, 2-3.

¹¹ Hazel Hardy, "The Many Slices of the Sports TV Pie," *Broadcasting*, December 1, 1969, 46-7.

¹² "ABC's Arledge Places \$16-Mil Bet on Pro Basketball in 3-Year Deal," *Variety*, Feb 18, 1970, 1.

¹³ "ABC Goes to Court to Get Back NBA Rights," *Broadcasting*, March 12, 1973, 61.

unfavorable from a network's standpoint are certainly beneficial to the teams. Surely, a party may not be faulted for obtaining for itself every contractual advantage it can."¹⁴ The NBA's desire to maximize control over its own media production and distribution would dictate its actions for decades to come, including the creation of NBAE and the league's eventual departure for NBC.

In 1982, then executive vice president David Stern devised and officially launched NBA Entertainment. The league had been looking for a way to take back some control of their own promotion and imaging from CBS, a relationship that had grown somewhat tense. Following CBS's infamously tape-delayed 1980 Finals between the Philadelphia 76ers and Los Angeles Lakers, led by rookie Magic Johnson, *Newsweek* called the league "the sorriest mess in sports."¹⁵ The deciding sixth game of the series aired on a delay at 11:30 pm eastern time in every major city but Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle, as CBS affiliates opted instead to air reruns of *The Incredible Hulk*, *Dukes of Hazzard*, and *Dallas* during May sweeps, given the lack of interest in the NBA at the time.¹⁶ In a June 1981 feature in the *Washington Post* on the future of sports television, multiple network executives put the blame squarely on CBS for their mishandling of pro basketball. Arthur Watson, president of NBC Sports, criticized the network for "not giving exposure to the balance of the league" and instead "on a few select teams." Taking a more defensive posture, CBS Sports' own president Van Gordan Sauter admitted that while professional basketball "is a very

¹⁴ "ABC Loses Basketball Suit," *Broadcasting*, August 6, 1973, 23

¹⁵ Qtd. in Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 48.

¹⁶ Bill Simmons, *The Book of Basketball* (New York: Ballantine Books), 138.

viable television sport,” the “sport itself has some identity problems that need to be corrected.”¹⁷

The NBA felt that its partner had done much to exacerbate these issues, which had worsened after an exposé in the *Los Angeles Times*. The report had proposed that up to 75 percent of NBA players were using cocaine, tying the drug’s popularity to the “sudden wealth” of its “young players, many from unstable families in inner-city ghettos.”¹⁸ The league at the time, sportswriters Harvey Araton and Filip Bondy note, “just happened to be roughly 75 percent black.”¹⁹ As controversy continued to swell over the racial makeup of the league, CBS stoked the flames. As late as April 1983, after a fight between Sonny “Tree” Rollins and Danny Ainge, CBS kept replaying close ups of the fight and depicting Rollins as the unprovoked aggressor. Rollins explained later, “CBS made it look like the big black guy jumped on the little white guys... We [the Hawks] sent [CBS] the tape showing what happened, and they didn’t use it. Nobody saw him with a clenched fist, taking a swing.”²⁰ The similarities to Kermit Washington’s infamous punch to Rudy Tomjanovich in 1977, in which Tomjanovich was almost killed, were not lost on viewers.²¹ CBS’s lack of confidence and their problematic use of the NBA broadcast rights, by criticizing the NBA’s imaging while reinforcing those stereotypes, was not lost on the league itself.²²

¹⁷ “Video Vision: Network Sports Executives Assess the Future,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1981, E4.

¹⁸ Chris Cobbs, “Widespread Cocaine Use by Players Alarms NBA,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1980.

¹⁹ Harvey Araton and Filip Bondy, *The Selling of the Green: The Financial Rise and Moral Decline of the Boston Celtics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

²¹ During an on-court skirmish between several players, Washington punched Tomjanovich as he ran towards the fight, hitting Tomjanovich so hard that his skull fractured and began to leak spinal fluid (Chris Cobbs, “The Punch: Tomjanovich and Washington Both Still Feel the Pain From That Terrible Moment,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1985).

²² Another example is the infamous fight between Larry Bird and Julius Erving at the Boston Garden on November 9, 1984. CBS kept airing slow motion replays of Erving punching Bird while Charles Barkley and Moses Malone held Bird from behind. The moment is now immortalized on YouTube. TeamTriplicity, “Dr J and Larry Bird Fight,” YouTube, 0:37. Post June 6, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rpx_vXr1u0>.

While made worse by CBS's approach to NBA telecasts – the delayed, infrequent air times and a camera that lingered on melees – the problems extended beyond the network. Rick Welts, hired in June 1982 as the director of national promotions, recalls, “I’d call advertising agencies, and to get a return call was remarkable if you had NBA attached to your name.” As a result, David Stern, tasked with overseeing business and legal operations, understood that the NBA needed to “put out the fires.”²³ The development of NBA Entertainment, which would help to promote the league in-house and on its own terms, became a key component of that strategy. To begin, Stern sent a memo to then commissioner Larry O’Brien requesting three-quarter-inch Panasonic VCRs for each of the teams, at a cost of \$132,500, so that they could record all of the games and FedEx the tapes to the league office, creating a library of materials for the league’s own use.²⁴ As the league’s archive began to grow, these tapes became crucial to the NBA’s media production and promotional efforts.

In Travis Vogan’s examination of NFL Films, he argues that “football’s meaning is pliable” and that through their production division, “the NFL has developed various strategies to manufacture an image that sets the gridiron game apart from other sports and that distinguishes itself from other sports organizations.”²⁵ In taking inspiration from NFL Films, the NBA’s own ‘entertainment’ division sought to do the same for basketball, distinguishing the sport and reframing its meaning. The creation of NBAE allowed the league to take charge of its own promotional materials and to change the conversation by “focusing on the players, their talents on the court, their talents off the court, their sense of

²³ John Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist: The Relationship and Broadcast Strategies of the NBA and Television Networks* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001), 99.

²⁴ Sports Video Group, “SVG Summit.”

²⁵ Travis Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 2.

personality.”²⁶ NBAE enabled the league to reimagine itself as a television program, emphasize its characters and its narrative elements in order to minimize the negative cultural connotations that had emerged. Steve Sabol, former president of NFL Films, describes the football subsidiary as made up of “historians, storytellers, [and] mythmakers.”²⁷ The same is true of NBA Entertainment.

Following David Stern’s original mandate to go beyond the scope of film, however, NBAE’s additional promotional responsibilities also extensively shaped its mythmaking and storytelling efforts. The NBA’s plan at the time “was to utilize television as a key resource in changing the perception of the league and creating a new message,” according to John Fortunato, an NBA scholar. NBA Entertainment was fundamental in providing supplementary programming that could “support NBA games through telling stories and personalizing players,” Fortunato notes. NBAE helped to put out the fires, in other words, by educating fans on what the sport could be at its best and in highlighting the personalities of the players themselves. Adam Silver, president of NBAE beginning in the late 1990s and later NBA commissioner, reflects on the division’s mission as enhancing “the value of NBA game programming,” which remains “the largest revenue source.”²⁸

The success of NBAE, however, was enabled by broader industrial changes, such as the global deregulation of television and the ascendance of cable and satellite as viable distribution technologies. Jennifer Holt has described the dominance of neoliberal policy in the 1980s and its placement of “great faith in market solutions to economic and social problems.” These policies, in combination with new communications technologies, led to “a great acceleration of global commerce.” Thus, for Holt, the 1980s sees the emergence of

²⁶ Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 99.

²⁷ Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 4.

²⁸ Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 99, 140, 142.

“transformative interconnected forces” in globalization, deregulation, and market concentration.²⁹ This marketization, in turn, leads to changes in the packaging and marketing of TV programming, as reflected in the new commercial imperative of international television and considerably narrower audiences of cable television. Joseph Turow describes the transition, through the 1990s, towards “segment-making media,” which encouraged “a fractured population of self-indulgent, frenetic, and suspicious individuals” that could be blended into “a soup of geographical and psychological profiles.”³⁰ Aided by computers and databases, advertisers increasingly moved away from demographics and focused instead on these “lifestyles.” During the 1980s, new cable channels such as Nickelodeon and MTV serve as ideal examples of “lifestyle-segmentation in action,” in gearing their programming and branding towards children and teens. By 1993, when the NFL leaves CBS for FOX, it was partly because they “feared its broadcasts on CBS were skewing too old,” much like the NBA’s departure for NBC around the same time.³¹

In this new media ecosystem, with more flexible media forms and a mass proliferation of channels, content distributors and content owners alike sought to cultivate audiences that were oriented around such “lifestyles.” John Caldwell has described the resultant “visual sophistication” and “program individuation” that dominated the programming of the period. “Advertising teaches television in more ways than one,” Caldwell argues. “It is a hungry proving ground for new televisual production technologies; it is a leaky cache of creative personnel that denarrativizes television; it is an omnipresent

²⁹ Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 10.

³⁰ Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3-4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34, 72-73, 79.

aesthetic farm-system for primetime.”³² Sport television, as a highly aesthetic and flexible form, lent itself to these qualities. NBA Entertainment’s own promotional campaigns, which reflected MTV and the televisual style of cable programming more so than the broadcast networks, allowed the league to successfully market itself as young, hip, and cosmopolitan.

That Championship Feeling, on the Philadelphia 76ers’ 1983 Finals win, was the first major straight-to-video documentary produced by NBAE. Featuring popular music like Irene Cara’s “What a Feeling,” and taking advantage of the league’s improved archive of game footage and highlights, the video was a step forward for NBA productions and the crystallization of their own style, distinct from the guts-and-glory mythological style of NFL Films.³³ The video reflected the populist leanings of Paul Gilbert and Don Sperling, who had been hired away from CNN, and Ed Desser, who understood the need to “do something different and create some programming that would be...better promotion for the league.”³⁴ The NBA effectively captured the burgeoning televisuality of cable aesthetics.



Figure 1.1: In *That Championship Feeling*, the brightly colored and digitized graphics are more reflective of cable programming than the historical register of NFL Films.³⁵

³² John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 84, 88, 100.

³³ Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 181.

³⁴ Shawn Fury, “How NBA Entertainment Helped Save the League and Spread a Renaissance,” *Vice*, June 15, 2016.

³⁵ Santiago73, “Philadelphia 76ers 1983 – That Championship Feeling.” YouTube, 59:58. Post April 12, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk0WJT7RdYc>>.

While broadcast television had frequently relegated sports to the weekend, the expansion of cable channels and their demand for programming also opened more favorable opportunities for NBAE and pro basketball. “Sports television was basically Saturday and Sunday afternoons on those networks,” recalls Ed Desser, the NBA’s director of broadcasting at the time, though ABC had found success on Monday nights with its marquee NFL and MLB telecasts. “Sports media wasn’t the thing,” Desser adds, besides for “startup things,” which included a nascent ESPN airing “third-rate college football games and college basketball out of a trailer parked out in a field in Connecticut.”³⁶ Though cable remained the “minor league” to broadcast television for majority of the decade, the medium would reach 55.6 percent of U.S. households with televisions by 1989.³⁷ Over this same time period, broadcast television’s grip began to loosen, as the three major networks saw their average rating decline from 50 in 1981 to 33.9 in 1991.³⁸ The NBA hoped that an increased presence on cable would be the solution to their troubles with CBS. “Cable is going to need programming, and sports are the obvious solution,” said Rod Thorn in 1981, the general manager of the Chicago Bulls and later the NBA’s president of basketball operations.³⁹

In 1982, as the NBA’s ratings on CBS continued to stagnate, the league signed two two-year agreements with both ESPN and USA Network for forty regular season games and ten playoff games each, with ESPN’s package airing on Sunday nights and USA’s on Thursday nights.⁴⁰ Less than a year after the foundation of NBAE, the 1983 All-Star Game became the first program to feature NBA-produced promotional materials, with a commercial

³⁶ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

³⁷ Bill Carter, “With America Well Wired, Cable Industry is Changing,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1989.

³⁸ Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 15.

³⁹ Steve Hershey, “Cable TV: Medium’s Message May Be Solvency for NBA,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1981, D4.

⁴⁰ Steve Hershey, “Utah-Denver Merger Denied; NBA Signs Cable Contracts,” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 1982, M2.

using the league's most explosive highlights and concluding with a new slogan, "NBA action...it's Fan-tastic."⁴¹ Reflecting the newfound opportunities available for sports on cable, NBAE soon afterwards signed a deal with USA Network for the production of thirty halftime features for the season to come. USA would also air the NBA draft and the NBA awards luncheon, co-produced by NBAE and ProServ, the premier sports management firm at the time.⁴² NBA Entertainment had thus found an ideal match in cable television, which offered the league greater programming flexibility and promotional opportunities than CBS and the broadcast networks. At the same time, by archiving league content for later use or licensing, NBA Entertainment and its video library provided a crucial in-house media infrastructure that would enable the league to become an integrated global media company.

With the NBA on the upswing entering the 1983-84 season, Larry O'Brien announced his resignation as commissioner, effective the following February. O'Brien recommended that the board consider David Stern for the job, the person for whom he had specifically created the position of executive vice president of operations in 1980. On November 15, 1983, Stern was officially voted the league's fourth commissioner, a position he would hold for the next thirty years.⁴³ Already evident in his creation of NBA Entertainment, Stern's taking office would greatly accelerate the league's investment in media production and distribution, as well as its overall conception of basketball as valuable media content.

⁴¹ Terry Lyons, "30 Years of NBA Success: Started in a CBS Sports Truck in '83," *Huffington Post*, April 16, 2014.

⁴² "Sports Served Up," *Broadcasting*, June 20, 1983, 10.

⁴³ Gary Kale, *United Press International*, November 15, 1983.

The “Less is More” Strategy

The 1984 All-Star Game in Denver was a turning point for the NBA in many respects. The last one for Larry O’Brien and the first overseen by Stern, it was also the first true All-Star Weekend, featuring Saturday events in addition to Sunday’s game. “David Stern had already made it quite clear to us that one of his objectives was to get back in touch with what he felt was a neglected history,” recalled Rick Welts in 1990. “And (outgoing commissioner) Larry O’Brien wanted assurance that we wouldn’t embarrass the league.”⁴⁴ In order to do so, they staged a slam-dunk contest to honor the Denver Nuggets’ roots in the American Basketball Association and a “Legends Classic” old-timers game.⁴⁵

The inclusion of the events also further validated the operations of NBA Entertainment, its primary history-building outfit, which could package and promote the highlights of old ABA dunk contests and the retired legends that were set to play. Like NFL’s imperative as a myth-making institution, NBA Entertainment’s work at All-Star Weekend reinforced a shared NBA-ABA heritage, following the 1976 merger of the leagues, and helped to mythologize the NBA brand. Yago Colás has argued, “If basketball is our world, then the NBA is its superpower. And if the myth of creation is the cosmogony of that world, the NBA’s myth of foundation is the origin myth of that world’s preeminent nation.”⁴⁶ The 1984 All-Star weekend thus helped to frame the NBA as the whole of basketball, like the league’s future efforts would reflect on a more global scale. Following the All-Star events,

⁴⁴ Tom D’Angelo, “Not Just a Game, It’s An Extravaganza,” *Palm Beach Post*, February 9, 1990, 1C.

⁴⁵ The American Basketball Association was a competing professional basketball league from 1967 to 1976, at which point the two leagues merged under the NBA name.

⁴⁶ Yago Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016), 45.

Stern officially became commissioner and appointed Russ Granik to the executive vice president role as the league's second-in-command.⁴⁷

The NBA's TV fortunes continued to grow. The 1984 NBA Finals saw the first of three playoff battles between Magic Johnson's Los Angeles Lakers and Larry Bird's Boston Celtics, in which Bird obtained his revenge after losing to Magic Johnson's Michigan State team in the famous 1979 NCAA Championship game. The growing popularity of college basketball, in fact, had aided in the rise of the pro game. As a result of Magic and Bird, who "turned the [college] game into an event," the NCAA came to function like "a public relations agency marketing the future NBA talent pool via televised network and cable games."⁴⁸ The NCAA parlayed the newfound visibility into massive new TV contracts for itself. CBS paid \$48 million for the rights to the NCAA tournament in 1981, and by 1985, the price had risen to \$96 million over three years.⁴⁹ NBA executives were happy to benefit from the television promotion, given that the decade began with NBA postseason games airing on a time delay, if at all. "I had a warm smile the first time I heard Dick Vitale say about some kid, 'He's a definite lottery player,'" recalls David Stern. "I knew it was happening. All of a sudden, they were being defined in their greatness by whether they were going to be in the NBA draft lottery."⁵⁰ The NBA's cultural standing had significantly improved.

With Magic and Bird now in the NBA, and the further growth of cable television, the league aspired to comparable media success. At the 1984 meeting of the National Cable Television Association, David Stern and Ted Turner announced a new two-year, \$20 million deal to include 55 regular season games and 20 playoff games. With the agreement, TBS

⁴⁷ "O'Brien Steps Down," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1984, B15.

⁴⁸ Araton and Bondy, *The Selling of the Green*, 95-97.

⁴⁹ Mark Asher, "One NCAA Win in 1985 Worth \$147,600," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1984, D1.

⁵⁰ Araton and Bondy, *The Selling of the Green*, 97-98.

would become the NBA's *exclusive* cable partner, leaving behind ESPN and USA Network. Through the previous season, the NBA had aired 120 games across all three of the cable networks.⁵¹ In a press release, Stern described the league's philosophy as privileging scarcity: "In reducing the number of games to be carried exclusively on one cable network, we are increasing dramatically the attractiveness of NBA basketball to both the viewer and the advertising community."⁵² Stern began to refer to the TBS agreement as the "greatest cable contract" of any pro sports league, and credited CBS's dropping its coverage with forcing the league's hand into a more favorable overall position.⁵³

This approach would become known within the league office as "less is more." Ed Desser, director of broadcasting at the time, explains the strategy as "let's not overexpose ourselves, let's try to make each telecast special." The goal, given that the NBA was still "fighting for ratings" was to use more "measured" exposure to improve the ratings *average*. "What's a more attractive thing for a television network," Desser asks, "one game that gets a ten rating, or five games that get a two rating?"⁵⁴ Given the NBA's particular need to legitimize their product to sponsors, who wanted to see more substantial interest in the NBA in order to invest their resources, the answer at the time was the former. By the 1990s, as the NBA's media product improved, as marketing strategies concretized, and as the relationships between the league, the teams, and the players stabilized, then "it was time to accelerate our exposure."⁵⁵ The NBA's "less is more" approach over the majority the decade, which relied on artificial scarcity, helped the NBA to accrue greater cultural value and better demonstrate its worth to TV networks through steady ratings growth.

⁵¹ David Kelly, *United Press International*, June 6, 1984.

⁵² *PR Newswire*, June 6, 1984.

⁵³ Ian Love, "Commissioner Sites Rebirth in League," *United Press International*, October 19, 1985.

⁵⁴ Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

The strategy thus reflects the league's deepening conception of basketball as a television program first and foremost, as well as their willingness to manipulate its mediation in order to enhance its media value. By lessening the overall number of games, and increasing the number of prime time offerings on cable, the NBA and NBAE were able to maintain greater control over storylines and narratives, building suspense for particular match-ups and depicting players as characters in an ongoing soap opera. The NFL had successfully accomplished the same in its streamlined Sunday and Monday schedule. With *Monday Night Football*, Michael Oriard has explained, ABC Sports president Rooney Arledge "brought to televised football the idea that the show, not the game, was what mattered."⁵⁶ The NBA translated this approach into the era of cable TV.

The result of the reduced media exposure surpassed anyone's best expectations. By the mid-1980s, viewership for sports television began to decline – except for pro basketball. "Ratings for most major league sports have eroded in the last five years," wrote Amy Saltzman of *Adweek*, "and growing competition from national, regional and local cable outlets is likely to bring a continued decline." The NBA, which had reduced its broadcast coverage and invested in the burgeoning cable industry, was the only sport to have seen a ratings *increase* over the previous five years.⁵⁷ Indeed, since the ratings low of 6.7 in 1981, the NBA Finals saw an average rating of 14.7 from 1986 through 1990, with a high of 16.7 in 1987.⁵⁸ Ahead of the 1984-85 season, the *Washington Post* also spotlighted the NBA's success by capitalizing on a "big event atmosphere" as a result of fewer telecasts. "Not so

⁵⁶ Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2007), 16, 25.

⁵⁷ Amy Saltzman, "The Supply Side of TV Sports," *Adweek*, August 1984.

⁵⁸ TV By the Numbers, "NBA Finals TV Ratings, 1974-2008," *Zap2it*, May 22, 2009.

coincidentally,” wrote Anthony Cotton, “the league’s upswing in attitude has coincided with the first year of David Stern’s reign as NBA commissioner.”⁵⁹

Part of the league’s resurgence was, in fact, coincidental, timed perfectly with the popular rivalry between Bird and Magic, the high-flying theatrics of former ABA stars like Julius “Dr. J” Erving and George “The Iceman” Gervin, and the rookie class from the 1984 draft, which featured the likes of Michael Jordan, Hakeem Olajuwon, Charles Barkley, and John Stockton. But these developments were also fully capitalized upon by Stern and NBA Entertainment. By stockpiling archival footage and developing promotional campaigns in-house, the league was able to better define the identity of its own product, which the NBA felt it understood better and had a greater interest in than its network partner.

One of these marketing campaigns, the first fully overseen by the new commissioner, was titled “America’s Game.” One of the campaign’s commercials, scored to Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, featured highlights of last-second buzzer-beating baskets, with the sounds of cannon fire as the shots are launched from half court.⁶⁰ David Stern explained his inspiration to *Vice* in 2016: “I was becoming obsessed with the fact that America’s pastime was baseball, America’s passion was the NFL, but America’s game was basketball.”⁶¹ In addition to the promotional spots, which were punctuated by Portland play-by-play announcer declaring, “America’s Game – It’s fan-tastic,” the NBA developed a series of public service announcements to more positively imbricate the sport and its stars within the American social consciousness. As early as December 1983, Carlton Turner, drug czar to the Ronald Reagan administration, reached out to the soon-to-be NBA commissioner to seek the

⁵⁹ Anthony Cotton, “NBA: The Boredom is Over,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1984, E1.

⁶⁰ Retro Basketball Highlights, “America’s Game (NBA Action) Is Fanntastic!,” 0:30. Post December 27, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESepMHgyQIY>>.

⁶¹ Fury, “NBA Entertainment.”

league's support, which was still in the process of shedding its 'drug-infested' reputation following the *Los Angeles Times* exposé in 1980.⁶² By late 1984, as part of their "America's Game" ad campaign, NBA stars began to appear in national PSAs on drug abuse, the dangers of smoking, and "complex diseases."⁶³



Figure 1.2: From one of NBAE's "America's Game" promotional spots.⁶⁴

In turn, the league's relationship with CBS began to improve. Tommy Heinsohn, a former Boston Celtics forward, joined the network and was instrumental in teaching the production team about the nuances of the sport. Heinsohn "taught them what to look for," which allowed CBS personnel to "then figure out how to best translate it visually."⁶⁵ Ted Shaker, the network's executive producer of NBA broadcasts, agreed that the NBA's 'less is more' broadcast strategy had worked, that "there had been too many games on TV and thus "there were no special matchups." In conjunction, Shaker explains, the network's use of commentary and replays aimed at viewer education had helped fans to focus again on the

⁶² Memo, Patrick McKelvey to Carlton Turner, December 7, 1983, Box 43, Carlton E. Turner Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

⁶³ Cotton, "NBA: The Boredom is Over."

⁶⁴ Retro Basketball Highlights, "America's Game (NBA Action) Is Fanntastic!"

⁶⁵ Lyons, "30 Years of NBA Success"; Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 103.

games themselves, rather than the number of exterior issues, like “escalating salaries, drugs, free agents.”⁶⁶

Amanda D. Lotz has described a fundamental tension within television, which is simultaneously a “cultural institution” and a “cultural industry,” and thus operates as both a “social conduit” and a “commercial enterprise that primarily seeks to maximize profits.”⁶⁷ Sut Jhally has noted of sport, similarly, that while “sports have always been tied into a commodity sphere of one kind or another, their shape and organization [are] always dependent on their level of profitability.”⁶⁸ In the *mediatization* of sport, reflected in the expanding role of NBA Entertainment and the sport’s mediation, the duality of television finds an ideal counterpart in sport. The NBA’s increasing attention to its media distribution and marketing results in a further blurring between sport as social good and commodity, as the league’s promotional ambitions intertwine with its public outreach efforts, as in the “America’s Game” campaign. Robert McChesney has described a historical “symbiosis” between sports and mass media, in which “media attention fans the flames of interest in sport and increased interest in sport warrants further media attention.”⁶⁹ Mediatization further blurs these boundaries, as the interests of sport become nearly identical to the interests of television. Given cable’s expanding need for distinctive programming, the interests of television had begun to more deeply align with those of sport. The symbiotes become synonymous.

⁶⁶ Barry Wilner, *Associated Press*, April 17, 1986.

⁶⁷ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 37-38.

⁶⁸ Sut Jhally, “Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex.” In *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 80.

⁶⁹ Robert McChesney, “Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States,” in *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 49, 51, 65.

After one year on the job, in February 1985, Stern himself downplayed his role in the NBA's overall turnaround: "No fan has ever bought a ticket or watched a game on TV because of an owner, a general manager, or a commissioner. What is going to excite our fans are the great athletes and the breathtaking plays they make. It's my job to help provide a stage for that."⁷⁰ While the players indeed drove in the fans, Stern's administration worked to expand and alter the possibilities of that stage, by launching NBA Entertainment and investing in more flexible media distribution. The interests of the NBA, which desired a stronger media presence and stronger control over that output, had aligned with the evolving television industry, which required distinctive programming for an expanding number of channels.

David Stern's vision for America's Game, ultimately, lay beyond the shores of America. "We call it America's game," he explained, while preparing for the 1985 All-Star Game, "but it is an important Olympic sport. Its interest is international. We have an enormous opportunity to share the exploits of our athletes."⁷¹ In working to transforming basketball into a premier media product, and amassing greater capabilities as a media producer, the NBA next saw an opportunity in distributing its television program on a global scale, via new commercial satellite television operators.

America's Game Goes Global

While the NBA had continued to cultivate its domestic television value through NBA Entertainment, there were larger global basketball machinations at work. As the Los Angeles Lakers were wrapping up their victory in the 1985 Finals, a rematch against the Boston

⁷⁰ Associated Press, "David Stern, a Little Man Among Giants, Stands Tall," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1985, 1, 19.

⁷¹ Kent McDill, "NBA Now At Peak, Commissioner Says," *United Press International*, February 9, 1985.

Celtics, the league office received a conspicuous telex from China, gauging interest in staging an event with the Chinese national team. A few years following a 1982 visit to China by a group of NBA stars, including Alex English and Artis Gilmore, the Chinese team was eager to return the favor and train on the NBA's home turf. "Then it was much more entrepreneurial," explains Terry Lyons, who organized PR for the tour and would eventually become director of media relations. "It sounds like a good idea, can we figure out some way to pay for it?"⁷²

The details for what became a month-long, eight-city tour from September through October were worked out as the team was on their way to America. Featuring training sessions with legendary NBA coaches like the Boston Celtics' Red Auerbach and 1960 Olympic gold medalist Pete Newell, and scrimmages against NBA teams, including the New York Knicks, Indiana Pacers, and the Chicago Bulls and their prized rookie Michael Jordan, the visit also took the Chinese team on a tour of various landmarks. These conspicuously tended towards monuments to American capitalism and military might: Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange, the Intrepid Air and Space Museum, and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.⁷³ Billed as the "NBA China Friendship Tour," the tour served as a significant step forward in relations between the league and the Chinese government, which would prove crucial as the NBA expanded its pursuit of overseas television distribution.

By December 1985, the CBS broadcast rights were up for renegotiation. The league was in a strong bargaining position as a result of their "revolutionary" strategy of "less is more," which was managing to keep the league on the rise as all other league sports saw their

⁷² Terry Lyons, in discussion with the author, December 20, 2017.

⁷³ "Coming to America: A Look Back at Chinese National Team's First Visit to U.S., NBA in 1985," NBA.com, October 2004.

ratings decline.⁷⁴ *Sports Illustrated* had recently run its own feature on the sagging sports ratings, noting that “over the past three years...a kind of dry rot has set in for all major sports except pro basketball.”⁷⁵ With a reinvigorated relationship with CBS, and greater leverage at the negotiating table, the NBA landed a four-year, \$173 million contract, a significant improvement on their previous four-year, \$88 million deal.⁷⁶

Less reported on, however, was arguably the most significant feature of the new arrangement. CBS, previously, had overseen the international distribution of most major NBA events, paying the league around \$250,000 for the right to do so. In Italy, however, where the league retained its own TV rights, they generated close to \$200,000 in that single territory alone. “So we figured if we can’t make more than \$250,000, if we have all of the games and the territory of the entire world to do it, then there’s something wrong with us,” explains Ed Desser. “So we let the deal expire and spent the next several years developing an international business from scratch.”⁷⁷

Global media scholar Timothy Havens has noted how, during this time, the “vast programming libraries” of major Hollywood studios “made them uniquely capable of fulfilling the rapidly growing demand for programming worldwide.”⁷⁸ As of 1988, the U.S. would account for an estimated 75-percent of the world’s television export revenues, aided by the global proliferation of commercial operators. By that time in Western Europe, for instance, there were seventeen satellite-to-cable channels, of which eight were ad-supported

⁷⁴ William D. Murray, “NBA Pulls Out of Recession,” *United Press International*, November 1, 1986.

⁷⁵ William Taaffe, “A Decline in TV Ratings has Major Implications for the Sports World.” *Sports Illustrated*, February 11, 1985.

⁷⁶ “Basketball,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1985, B2.

⁷⁷ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

⁷⁸ Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 27

and required highly profitable programming.⁷⁹ As the global television marketplace became increasingly lucrative for American television producers, the NBA would be among them.

With the new CBS deal in effect following the 1985-86 season, the NBA began to more aggressively market itself and package its TV rights internationally. NBA Entertainment was central to this mission, providing in-house editing capabilities to create abbreviated one-hour versions of marquee games. “One of the first things that we did is created a one-hour cut-down version because most TV broadcasters couldn’t accommodate two-and-a-half hours,” explains Desser. This version of the games, designed specifically for a global television marketplace, would be sold in dozens of markets and become the NBA’s lead international program.⁸⁰ Soon thereafter, the NBA saw the potential in offering their own foreign-language voiceovers for the ‘Game of the Week’ programs, especially in Spanish, which could be sold on a syndicated basis to all of the countries of Latin America. To do so, they brought in Walter Szczerbiak, who had commentary experience and spoke Spanish fluently, having become a star for the Real Madrid team of the EuroLeague.

This was a significant step forward for NBA Entertainment, which served as an important conduit for the NBA’s international media growth by editing and translating the programming for overseas broadcasters. The NBA’s international pursuit, following the new CBS deal, was thus essential in the further transformation of basketball into media content and of the league itself into a functional media conglomerate. This growth was also aided by exhibition events like the China-Friendship Tour, which allowed the NBA to make inroads into national governments and broadcasts, and later by events like the World Basketball Open and the Atlanta Hawks’ tour of the Soviet Union, in which the NBA leveraged its

⁷⁹ Colin Hoskins and Stuart McFadyen, “The U.S. Competitive Advantage in the Global Television Market: Is it Sustainable in the New Broadcasting Environment?” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 16.2 (1991): 207-24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

diplomacy for greater TV exposure in the participating nations. Such events reflect the “boots on the ground” strategy of localization and market penetration that was typically pursued by international television distributors during this period, thus reinforcing the deepening affinity between sports and television.⁸¹ Eventually, as the number of events increased, the NBA would open a number of overseas offices to assist its international media efforts.

A new global frontier had emerged for the NBA. Following the NBA’s renegotiations with CBS and their newfound level of control over their own global distribution, the years 1986 and 1987 saw a substantial increase in the NBA’s international deal-making. “There is a very great interest throughout the world in basketball,” explained Stern, when asked about the possibility of expansion teams in Vancouver or Toronto or even Rome, “and in countries that are knowledgeable about basketball there is a great deal of interest in the NBA.”⁸² The league’s leaders set about developing an international distribution infrastructure – with help of NBA Entertainment, the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), and newly-established commercial television operators – that could properly cultivate and capitalize on this interest.

Italy had perhaps seen the greatest amount of attention from the NBA, predating the renegotiations with CBS. The country had been airing two games a week since at least February 1985.⁸³ By May 1986, Italian television carried games three through six of the NBA Finals between the Boston Celtics and Houston Rockets, at which point Boston won the series. Journalists from the country, as well as Spain and Israel, even flew to the United States to attend the games in person.⁸⁴ By November, as the NBA continued to expand its

⁸¹ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 114.

⁸² Love, “Commissioner Sites Rebirth in League.”

⁸³ McDill, “NBA Now at Peak.”

⁸⁴ William R. Barnard, *Associated Press*, May 29, 1986.

international agreements, their deal in Italy included 35 to 50 games, a comparable number to their cable package with TBS. While the NBA had not yet secured agreements in Spain and France, the league's reach had expanded to approximately 25 countries since their reacquisition of the international rights.⁸⁵

One such country was China, building on the relationship established with the NBA-China Friendship Tour in late 1985. In February 1987, David Stern travelled to China and met with the state-run China Central Television (CCTV) to work out a broadcast package. He offered to give away a package of NBA telecasts for free, a deal too good to refuse. When CCTV aired the 1987 All-Star Game, the NBA became "one of the first American media companies that was able to start broadcasting on Chinese television," per Aynne Kokas.⁸⁶ Their strategy, of course, was to grow the NBA's presence in China and better establish a market, which could eventually be parlayed into a more profitable arrangement. A year later, Stern would enact the same strategy in the Soviet Union, traveling with the Atlanta Hawks when they toured the country in July 1988. In both cases, the free packages eventually paid off in more lucrative and more extensive agreements.

⁸⁵ Murray, "NBA Pulls Out of Recession."

⁸⁶ Julia Greenberg, "What the NBA Knows About China that Silicon Valley Doesn't," *Wired*, June 1, 2016.



Figure 1.3: Commissioner David Stern during the NBA/China Friendship Tour (Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images)

The next major step for the NBA came from the World Basketball Open (WBO) in October 1987. A few years earlier, the league offices had been visited by Boris Stankovic, the Secretary General of FIBA and de facto patriarch of global pro basketball. Stankovic was there to encourage the NBA to pursue international competition, which had historically been reserved only for amateurs—NBA players’ primary occupation as basketball players excluded them from amateur status, unlike most EuroLeague players. The Secretary General had proposed a tournament that would feature an NBA team and a selection of FIBA teams as “a kind of first step” towards truly global basketball. Stern agreed and offered to host it.⁸⁷ The Milwaukee Bucks, as the league’s representatives, would face off in Milwaukee against the Soviet national team and the European champions, Tracer Milan of Italy.⁸⁸

As co-organizers, the NBA also went about looking for sponsors early in the process. McDonald's, which was planning a more aggressive marketing push into the Soviet Union,

⁸⁷ Jack McCallum, *Dream Team* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2012), 16.

⁸⁸ *Associated Press*, June 9, 1987.

quickly signed on as the title sponsor, making the tournament into the “keystone” of its efforts.⁸⁹ Thus the World Basketball Open became the McDonald's Open, a title that the tournament would hold through its final meeting in 1999. The NBA was also able to secure significant international broadcast arrangements, capitalizing on the attention of Italy and the Soviet Union. Globally, the tournament was aired live in Italy and on a tape-delayed basis in an additional twenty-five countries.⁹⁰ While CBS, the league's incumbent partner passed on the rights to the Open, the NBA came to an agreement with ABC to air the title game between the Bucks and the Soviet team and with TBS for the two preliminary games.⁹¹

The McDonald's Open was important for the league, not only for strengthening its relationship with FIBA and establishing a stronger presence in the international basketball landscape, but for evolving the NBA's approach to marketing and sponsorship through television. In order to ensure NBA sponsors received the most substantial benefits, the league purchased all of the commercial time from ABC and TBS for an undisclosed amount, offering their regular sponsors a minimum of three thirty-second spots that would air on an international basis. In doing so, wrote Michael Hiestand of *Adweek*, “the NBA will have moved beyond being a mere supplier to become a full-service marketer.”⁹² In increasingly conforming to the logics of a media company, rather than a sports league, the mediatization of basketball continued to accelerate.

Bernard Miège has argued that, over the course of the 1980s, it was no longer “so much the media which needed advertising to balance their budgets, but rather now it is advertising that rapidly needs new media, more flexible and diversified than those now

⁸⁹ Brian Moran, “Big Mac, NBA Court Soviets,” *Advertising Age*, June 1, 1987, 1.

⁹⁰ Michael Hiestand, “The NBA Hustles A New Event,” *Adweek*, October 12, 1987.

⁹¹ Moran, “Big Mac, NBA Court Soviets.”

⁹² Hiestand, “The NBA Hustles A New Event.”

available.”⁹³ Joseph Turow has similarly described the “close cooperation between advertisers and media firms,” which ultimately sought to “distill their media formats—their logo, values, interests, and sponsors—across as many technologies as possible.”⁹⁴ As an aspiring full-service marketer in itself, the NBA sought to globally promote its own brand while also assisting in the international circulation of its sponsors.

The NBA, with its specialized audience, thus continued to benefit from the flexibility of the burgeoning cable industry and its turn towards niche programming. Robert V. Bellamy refers to this as the “mutually beneficial relationship of the cable and sports institutions,” in which cable gains “a source of popular programming” and the sports organizations acquire a new distribution outlet, “weaning” themselves from the major broadcast networks.⁹⁵ By 1987, the year of the McDonald’s Open, cable had doubled its reach over the previous four years, “nourished by improved programming and by its physical expansion into half of all homes.”⁹⁶ Journalist Ken Auletta, who chronicled this development, saw the process as one of democratization: viewers were being given more options, as the low overheads of cable companies could be “satisfied with small, targeted audiences.” The advertising industry responded by “shifting from national advertising to targeted promotion budgets,” thus turning away from the mass market to “hundreds of demographically distinct markets.”⁹⁷ Sport offered the ideal conduit for these changes, as a genre of television that could reach mass and niche audiences alike. Sports television caters to the “ongoing interdependence of the broadcasting and cable industries,” explains Victoria E. Johnson, as the media industries

⁹³ Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production*, 158.

⁹⁴ Turow, *Breaking Up America*, 16, 114.

⁹⁵ Robert V. Bellamy, “Professional Sports Organizations: Media Strategies.” In *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 129.

⁹⁶ Ken Auletta, *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 282.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196, 282.

“strive to balance their portfolio of interests in order to engage *both* a broad(cast) audience and increasingly narrower niches within that audience.”⁹⁸

The NBA capitalized on these industrial changes by investing more heavily in the sport’s cable distribution and taking on greater advertising responsibilities. ABC was more than happy to oblige. Bob Iger, then vice president of programming for ABC Sports and later CEO of Disney, explained, “They opted to bear the risk. Since we had no programming scheduled for the time slot, it’s found money.”⁹⁹ By the NBA’s turning around and selling the time to sponsors like McDonald’s, moreover, it reduced those costs for the league and allowed the American brands to expand their international presence, capitalizing on the worldwide simultaneity of the event’s broadcasts. This strategy would continue to inform the NBA’s future media endeavors, including the League Pass satellite service that launched in 1994 and NBA.com in 1995. Silvio Waisbord describes, during this period, the “increasing homogenization of [television] systems on the principles of private ownership and profit goals.”¹⁰⁰ The NBA aided in the process by airing their programming transnationally, smoothing the process of commercialization and further opening overseas markets to sponsors such as McDonald’s, Nike, and Gatorade.

⁹⁸ Victoria E. Johnson, “Historicizing TV Networking: Broadcasting, Cable, and the Case of ESPN,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 58, 61.

⁹⁹ Hiestand, “The NBA Hustles A New Event.”

¹⁰⁰ Silvio Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” *Television New Media* 5.4 (November 2004): 360.



Figure 1.4: Keith Smart of the Milwaukee Bucks dribbles against Sarunas Marciulionis of the Soviet national team, as the NBA and visible McDonald's logo benefit from the transnational TV exposure (Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images).

At the McDonald's Open, the Milwaukee Bucks went on to defeat the Soviet national team 127-100 and take home the gold medal. "NBA players are much quicker," said Soviet guard Sarunas Marciulionis, "Playing against the NBA for the first time made us nervous in taking shots. We missed shots we normally make."¹⁰¹ Ultimately, the NBA had succeeded both on the court and off it, leveraging the competition for greater international exposure and greater control over its own media operations.

NBA International and NBA Entertainment 2.0

Following the success of the McDonald's Open, the league formed NBA International in late 1987.¹⁰² Tasked with providing and selling game feeds to its overseas broadcast partners, the league hoped to advance its global distribution and capitalize on the growing interest in its product. The foundation of NBAI, then, reflects the league's increasing perception of the sport as media content. The division worked in close cooperation with

¹⁰¹ Rick Gano, *Associated Press*, October 25, 1987.

¹⁰² Doug Smith, "Championship Series Hooks the World's Attention," *USA Today*, June 5, 1989, 5C.

NBAE, which continued to archive footage, and sometimes oversaw the advertising packages and foreign-language dubs, in the feeds that were being sold by NBAI.¹⁰³ The relationship was so close between the NBAE and NBAI, and the league office still such a small outfit, that Ed Desser came aboard and worked under the divisions simultaneously, as vice president and general manager of both. “At one period of time, I had three different business cards I was walking around with,” he remembers, “As there were new things to do, they just sort of got thrown on my plate.”¹⁰⁴ One of these was the formation of Television Ventures, which will be discussed in the chapter that follows.

In January 1988, the upstart NBA International sold 52 games to the Pan-European satellite service Super Channel, putting the league in around nine million homes across Finland, France, West Germany, East Germany, and the Netherlands. Through the Dallas-based International Broadcast Systems, which helped to engineer the agreement, the NBA also formed the “NBA South American Network” for its own satellite distribution, comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. IBS additionally helped to secure a 25-game deal with Imevision, the Mexican government-run TV station.¹⁰⁵ The international distribution of the NBA had doubled over the prior three years, since the league had taken back control from CBS. In addition to those above, the NBA had agreements for one to two weekly taped games with Bandeirantes in Brazil, Icelandic TV, Spain’s TVE, Great Britain’s BBC, and Berlusconi in Italy.¹⁰⁶ It would be at least another year before Major League Baseball, comparably international in its player

¹⁰³ Richard Tedesco, “Finding NBA Highlights is Easier With Computer,” *Electronic Media*, March 14, 1988, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ *Electronic Media*, January 4, 1988, 156.

¹⁰⁶ Marianne Paskowski, “U.K. Firm Backs Off From Showtime,” *Electronic Media*, April 28, 1989.

makeup and marketing, formed its own international division. By 1991, MLB reached only 61 countries on television, while the NBA had grown to reach 75.¹⁰⁷

NBA Entertainment, which aided NBA International in the increased deal making, also continued to expand its home video production, educating fans and improving the league's appeal. Among the "video yearbooks" produced by NBA Entertainment following the 1987 season were *The Drive For Five* on the Lakers' championship, *The Home of the Brave* on the Celtics' season as runners up, the Atlanta Hawks' *Basketball's Air Force*, and the Houston Rockets' *Hangin' Tough*.¹⁰⁸ Their video on Julius Erving's farewell season, *Dr. J's Basketball Stuff*, remained their best seller until 1989, when the Michael Jordan feature *Come Fly With Me* quickly sold 250,000 copies and went on to become the best-selling sports video of all time.¹⁰⁹ Given their success, NBA Entertainment had become "the challenger for video supremacy," led by Don Sperling, "its evangelical producer." While the sports video market still lagged overall, accounting for only \$100 million in sales within a \$4 billion industry, the NBAE production made significant inroads into a globalizing young fan base that idolized its new stars. "Those NBA Entertainment films were fodder for attracting young fans," explains nonplayerzealot, who runs a popular NBA-related YouTube channel. "It was a combination of limited access in those years for kids that liked and/or played basketball and the well-produced nature of those tapes..."¹¹⁰

Sperling was aided in his home video pursuits by an evolving NBA Entertainment, an "NBAE 2.0" of sorts, which had been redesigned and outfitted with a state-of-the-art

¹⁰⁷ Jay Weiner, "Baseball is Getting Worldly; Sport Starting to Catch Overseas," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 20, 1991, 6C.

¹⁰⁸ Martie Zad, "Show Time on NBA Videos," *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1987.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Breznik, "Cashing In On The Winning Image; Home Sports Videos Hotter Than Ever," *Electronic Media*, January 25, 1988; Fury, "NBA Entertainment."

¹¹⁰ Fury, "NBA Entertainment."

computer system. In its five years in operation, the division had amassed 40,000 videotapes, for which it maintained hand-written logs of significant plays. By 1988, editors were able to log the notable plays for each game into a computer, indicating the player, the type of play, and a one-line description, which even included the players' positioning on the floor and the direction of movement. In addition to the standard midcourt angle of most telecasts, NBAE also received the alternate lower angles that could be used for more intense replay close-ups. While the log process still took the same three hours per game, more footage could be logged and relocating it later became much more efficient, especially for highlights cross-listed between players. "It was hard to find the cross-references, from the editor's point of view," explains Sperling.¹¹¹ By producing, editing, and archiving game materials, NBAE both reinforced the sport's status as media content and provided a crucial internal infrastructure for the NBA's media operations, which would prove essential as the league continued to expand overseas.

The NBA's global efforts were also aided by the ongoing relaxation of regulations in countries that had previously prevented American programming from gaining dominance on government-run airwaves. Following "the rise of market-based political ideologies ushered in during the Reagan and Thatcher era," Michele Hilmes has explained, "public broadcasting systems were privatized and restructured to compete in the marketplace."¹¹² Given the greater demands for more commercially viable programming, and in coordination with the NBA's investments in a state-of-the-art media infrastructure defined by NBA Entertainment and NBA International, the league's worldwide television presence again doubled from late 1988 through 1989. "We were opportunistic," explains Ed Desser. "We took advantage of the

¹¹¹ Tedesco, "Finding NBA Highlights."

¹¹² Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (London: Routledge, 2011), 301.

technologies that developed. At the same time, internationally, there were more and more channels being launched around the world. Most places had only had one, two, three channels; that was it. So as they were launching new private networks, that created a demand for more programming...NBA programming had a brand name, and so we took advantage of that.”¹¹³ The NBA league office was thus empowered and emboldened to advance its international distribution.

As of 1988, sports accounted for 1,800 hours of broadcast television and 5,000 of cable television, excluding the hours of radio programming and local television.¹¹⁴ Despite persistent fears of a glut of sports on TV, NBA basketball continued to excel, especially the early and mid-round playoffs on TBS. The 1988 conference finals between the Boston Celtics and Detroit Pistons managed to hit ratings of 8.1 and 8.8, setting a new cable record for the NBA.¹¹⁵ Eastman and Meyer describe how, when accounting for production costs in conjunction with rights fees, basketball had easily become the most profitable sport. Cheaper to produce than football and baseball, basketball was estimated to cost \$512,000 to produce per hour in 1987, cheaper even than the average sitcom and dramatic series, at \$800,000 and \$900,000 per hour respectively. While basketball’s average rating of 6.2 in prime time slots sat below baseball’s 8.7 and football’s 17.2, it was cost-effective programming and its ratings continued to steadily improve.¹¹⁶ The *Washington Post* reported in September 1988 that sports programming had “turned the corner” as rights fees had leveled and the advertisers had

¹¹³ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Susan Tyler Eastman and Timothy P. Meyer, “Sports Programming: Scheduling, Costs, and Competition.” In *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 99.

¹¹⁵ Richard Tedesco, “NBA Playoffs Post Strong Cable, Broadcast Ratings,” *Electronic Media*, June 6, 1988, 4.

¹¹⁶ Eastman and Meyer, “Sports Programming,” 114-115.

slowly returned. The NBA, however, thanks to its more judicious scheduling, remained the only major sports organization to have improved its ratings over the prior five years.¹¹⁷

The league's pursuit of global success strategically encompassed both media distribution and exhibition events, in which the latter provided a stronger local presence that could be parlayed into a more successful media presence. In July of 1988, for instance, the Atlanta Hawks embarked on a nearly two-week exhibition tour of the Soviet Union, which saw the Ted Turner-owned Hawks compete against the Soviet national team in Tbilisi, Vilnius, and Moscow.¹¹⁸ Though depicted as a diplomatic endeavor, the tour enabled David Stern and the NBA to meet with Soviet officials regarding the league's television presence there. Turner Broadcasting System, which had arranged the tour, also sent its executive vice president Robert Wussler, hoping to lobby the Soviet government into allowing their athletes to play in the NBA.

No Soviet player had been granted permission by Soviet government to play professional basketball in the United States, due to the FIBA rules that would thereby prevent those players from competing for their country in international competition.¹¹⁹ This was arguably Turner's primary incentive. If the Hawks could acquire Soviet players, and TBS could promote Soviet players, then the channel could become far more successful in the Soviet Union, a potentially massive and emerging market for television. The NBA itself also stood to benefit from the exposure. Commissioner David Stern and TBS personnel would thus use the tour to negotiate television rights and the movement of players to the NBA.¹²⁰ Ultimately, Stern would make the same offer he had made to China's CCTV, offering the

¹¹⁷ Paul Farhi, "TV Sports Coverage Vaults to Profitability," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 1988.

¹¹⁸ *United Press International*, April 8, 1988.

¹¹⁹ Lindsay Gaze, "Courtside," *Sydney Herald*, May 24, 1988.

¹²⁰ Jack McCallum, "Rare Birds Sighted," *Sports Illustrated*, August 8, 1988.

Soviet TV and radio bureau, Gostelradio, a package of NBA games free-of-charge, banking on long-term market penetration over immediate profits. As basketball became increasingly defined by its mediation, the commercial interests of the NBA had proven more fundamental than any diplomatic endeavor.

A few months later, in October 1988, the Boston Celtics were set to travel to Madrid for the second McDonald's Open, the first joint venture between NBA and FIBA outside the United States. Like the first Open, TBS would televise the preliminary matchups while ABC covered the championship round. Globally, the tournament was expected to be televised in nearly sixty countries.¹²¹ The NBA, in conjunction with these exhibition events, continued to explode across international television screens. Spain and Italy, in particular, had grown into "basketball hotbeds," with regular TV highlights and newspaper coverage.¹²² In Italy, in fact, there was talk that the popularity of basketball was slowly overtaking that of soccer. Dan Peterson, an American expat and regular commentator for NBA games on the Italia-Uno network, explained, "basketball is more exciting, a more spectacular game and it's played indoors."¹²³

Greece, too, had continued to evolve as a major basketball market, especially after introducing commercial television. In fall 1988, the government finally launched an experimental state-run satellite service, which retransmitted from Sky Channel, Superchannel, CNN, MTV, RAI-1, RAI-2, TV5, and Spain's TVE.¹²⁴ Sports were now being broadcast during prime-time hours, with basketball and soccer becoming especially

¹²¹ Richard Lorant, *Associated Press*, October 8, 1988.

¹²² Larry Siddons, *Associated Press*, November 11, 1988.

¹²³ Piero Valsecchi, "Sports Booster Predicts Growing Popularity of Basketball," *Associated Press*, December 2, 1987.

¹²⁴ "Greek Satellite Experiment Launched To Test Response To Original Eurofare," *Variety*, May 10, 1989, 382.

successful.¹²⁵ Basketball counted as three of the top five programs for the month of January 1989, consistently netting between a 24 and 27 audience share.¹²⁶

By February, following the Atlanta Hawks' tour through the Soviet Union the previous summer, the same was becoming true there. The Soviet Union was set to begin bimonthly taped broadcasts of NBA games, using the condensed versions produced by NBA Entertainment. There would be fourteen games for the remainder of the season, filled in with six minutes of commercials from Coca-Cola and Mastercard.¹²⁷ Like the McDonald's sponsorship of the World Basketball Championships, American companies eagerly sought to penetrate the Soviet market. As an additional gesture, the NBA had invited Rimas Kurtinaitis, after winning the Lithuanian three-point contest, to participate in the NBA's competition at All-Star weekend. Not all of the players were thrilled, including Utah Jazz teammates Karl Malone and John Stockton. "If he comes over and wins, a lot of guys are guying to be teed off," said Malone.¹²⁸ While this would be the first and only time the NBA would make such a gesture, perhaps due to the negative response, the decision reflects the league's evolving effort to address a more global television audience by featuring foreign stars. This approach, which reflects the further transformation of basketball into a television program, crystallizes in the 2000s as streaming technology allows for an even wider and more reliable international address.

¹²⁵ B. Samantha Stenzel, "Greek Exhibs Fight To Survive As Admissions Fall Alarmingly," *Variety*, September 28, 1988, 28.

¹²⁶ "International Ratings," *Broadcast*, March 10, 1989, 26.

¹²⁷ David Aldridge, "Stern Adds Worldwide Concept," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1989, D4.

¹²⁸ Michael Wilbon, "Once a Long Shot, Soviet in 3-Point Contest Aid International NBA," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1989.



Figure 1.5: Graphic insert from the 1989 All-Star Three-Point Contest.¹²⁹

Taped NBA telecasts now reached over seventy countries, stretching as far as Hungary, Zambia, Nigeria, Luxembourg, and Greenland.¹³⁰ As the demand for American sports in Europe and Asia had continued to grow, the NBA, in particular, had “reaped the largest economic harvest.”¹³¹ The league had “jumped far ahead” of the NFL and MLB, and “slightly ahead” of the NHL. “It’s easy to see why,” noted Christine Brennan of the *Washington Post*. “Basketball is a very popular sport in many areas of Europe and the Americas. U.S. college players not quite good enough to play in the NBA go there. Italy, Spain and France have well-organized leagues.”¹³² This popularity was carefully cultivated by the NBA, which had helped to guide the international development of basketball. This was accomplished by its evolving in-house approach television operations, in conjunction with overseas exhibitions and training camps.

¹²⁹ José Ramón Sanchis, “Rimas Kurtinaitis 3 Point Contest All Star 1989,” YouTube, 2:34. Post February 25, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSxZUD3UHKs>>.

¹³⁰ Larry Eldridge, “Anatomy of a Sport’s Turnaround,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 1989, 14.

¹³¹ William D. Murray, “American Sports Prove Bonanza For Foreign Television,” *United Press International*, April 22, 1989

¹³² Christine Brennan, “U.S. Sports Are Breaking All Boundaries,” *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1989, B1.

While the NBA amassed greater international control, and found a niche where it could pull ahead of its American sport counterparts, international revenues still generally lagged behind domestic revenues. The NBA's total international rights netted them only \$4 million annually, against their \$400 million in domestic grosses. "The important thing," expressed Stern, "is that we've already laid the groundwork to take full advantage of any opportunities that come up."¹³³ This global groundwork would continue to evolve, hitting its next peak in 1992 with the Olympic "Dream Team." Stern compared the investment to the league's earlier investments in cable, via TBS, ESPN, and USA Network, which had helped to turn the league's fortunes around: "In 1979, the NBA got \$400,000 from network cable. In 1989, we'll get \$27 million. International opportunities, though embryonic, show just as much potential."¹³⁴

In June of 1989, seventy countries were set to carry the NBA Finals either live or on a tape-delayed basis. One of those was the Soviet Union, which was set to air the Finals for the first time ever. Five countries – Italy, Spain, Greece, Brazil, and Denmark – went so far as to send their own TV commentators to sit courtside for their live coverage.¹³⁵ The others would record voiceovers in their own home-country studios, a minor relinquishing of control back to the international broadcasters and away from NBAE.¹³⁶ At the same time, as NBA programming continued to explode, the prior eighteen months saw NBA International grow from a few part-time employees to seven full-time ones. Ed Desser, VP for international broadcasting, reflected on the newfound global success of the once fledgling organization,

¹³³ Murray, "American Sports Prove Bonanza."

¹³⁴ Brennan, "U.S. Sports."

¹³⁵ Rachel Shuster, "Brown: Utilizing Magic Key to Lakers' Success," *USA Today*, June 8, 1989, 3C.

¹³⁶ Doug Smith, "Championship Series."

“It's no longer true that the first thing you do in the morning is reach for the sports page. Now I look at the world news page, to see what's going on in the markets we're distributed in.”¹³⁷

Through the coordinated actions of NBAE and NBAI, basketball had become firmly established as a media product. This only intensified by the end of the year, when the league left longtime broadcast partner CBS for NBC, which had offered the NBA greater oversight and involvement in the network's media operations. *The NBA on NBC* presents the culmination of a nearly decade-long process of basketball's deepening mediatization.

The NBA on NBC

In late 1989, at a Greenwich, Connecticut country club, David Stern and the top NBA officials meet in secret with Dick Ebersol, recently hired to run NBC's sports department. In his first full day on the job, Ebersol had made it clear to Stern that he desperately sought the NBA rights. The network needed to make a splash, having lost the pro baseball rights the year before. Following six months of back-and-forth communication, Stern and Ebersol were prepared to make the move to NBC happen. The NBA “knew that there was a lot of money on the table” which CBS, their incumbent partner, was not prepared to offer.¹³⁸ For NBC, the NBA was worth as much as \$600 million over four years, beating out offers by both CBS and ABC.

The fact of a bidding war between networks was itself significant, and was actually inspired by Major League Baseball's leaving NBC for CBS. MLB Commissioner Peter Ueberroth and Bryan Burns, the league's head of broadcasting, had orchestrated a massive

¹³⁷ Shuster, “Utilizing Magic.”

¹³⁸ Sports Video Group, “SVG Summit.”

four-year \$1.1 billion deal.¹³⁹ “They created a term sheet and gave it to the network and then said, ‘that’s what the deal is, do you want to bid on it?’” explains John Kosner, the NBA’s director of broadcasting at the time.¹⁴⁰ This was completely different than how renegotiations had traditionally been carried out. Before then, the network president would offer a slight raise over their current rate, in exchange for some additional games. NBC was completely offended by the audacity of a league telling a network what to do, as CBS would be when the NBA did the same.

The NBA, having spent a decade cultivating its in-house media infrastructure, saw a valuable opportunity. John Kosner and Ed Desser, then vice president of international broadcasting, began crafting the NBA’s own version of the term sheet, which included a pregame studio show to be co-produced by NBA Entertainment. David Stern “half loved it and half thought we had lost our minds,” remembers Kosner, but he gave his approval and the NBA took the term sheet to the market. The incumbent, CBS, was predictably insulted by the entire approach: “They felt like this was arrogant and presumptuous and lack of appreciation for a longtime partner.”¹⁴¹

Dick Ebersol, though, saw it as the opportunity he had awaited. “One of the things they wanted, more than anything else in the world, was to have a direct voice with young fans,” he explains.¹⁴² Not only was NBC’s bid the largest financially, their offer guaranteed four seasons of an NBA-produced show to air on Saturday mornings, aimed at young viewers. To that point, ABC had been the network to beat, given the reputation of Warren Buffet, the Berkshire Hathaway CEO and part owner of ABC’s parent company Capital

¹³⁹ Joseph Durso, “A Billion-Dollar Bid By CBS Wins Rights To Baseball Games,” *The New York Times*, December, 15, 1988, A1.

¹⁴⁰ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sports Video Group, “SVG Summit.”

Cities.¹⁴³ In the end, it was NBC that stepped up. “In the final analysis, NBC was just the highest bidder and had the greatest plan for monetizing us on their network,” David Stern recalls.¹⁴⁴ Ed Desser, reflecting on the move from CBS to NBC, explains how the CBS deal had been a somewhat traditional sports rights deal. “Basically the network would say to the sports league, ‘well we know about television, you don’t; you’ll give us the rights, we’ll give you a pittance and you’ll thank us’ ...NBC came along and it was a fundamental flipping of that.”¹⁴⁵ The arrangement thus created a lasting impact on the nature of sports rights deals, the status of sports as media content, and the collaborative possibilities between a content producer like the NBA and a content distributor like NBC.

The NBA-NBC agreement was announced on November 13, 1989, and at \$600 million over four years, the deal was a 241% increase in the NBA’s deal with CBS. Through the use of weekend double-headers, the arrangement allowed for more games on television: twenty regular season games, the All-Star Game, and up to thirty postseason games.¹⁴⁶ Included in the deal was the previously noted Saturday morning “magazine show,” which Ebersol described at the time as “sort of an *Entertainment Tonight* for basketball fans.”¹⁴⁷ The show, set to begin a week before the season opener in October and continue until a week following the July draft, would include behind-the-scenes features and player spotlights “instead of the usual NBA highlight and strategy shows found on three cable networks.”¹⁴⁸

A few weeks after the NBC agreement, the NBA also announced a new deal with Turner for \$275 million over four years. In an innovative agreement between the partners, the

¹⁴³ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ David Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹⁴⁶ “Basketball Takes \$600 million bounce to NBC,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 13, 1989, 35-36.

¹⁴⁷ Larry Stewart, “NBC Gets NBA for Four Years, \$600 Million,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1989.

¹⁴⁸ Jim Benson, “NBC to Air New Basketball Show,” *Palm Beach Post*, November 22, 1989, 13D.

league had agreed to move its cable telecasts from TBS to TNT once the latter channel's household penetration reached a large enough number.¹⁴⁹ TNT would carry fifty regular season games and twenty-five playoff games per season. Terry McGuirk, president of Turner Sports, assured everyone that while the deal was not expected to turn a profit until later, they would not raise their rates on cable operators, which currently sat at 25-cents per subscriber.¹⁵⁰ TNT coverage was set to include the NBA draft, the All-Star Saturday festivities, and new half-hour postgame show, *Inside the NBA*.¹⁵¹ David Stern also noted that TNT and NBC would be included in discussions of international television coverage, as the league continues to expand.¹⁵² NBC, in fact, had already secured the rights to air the upcoming 1990 McDonald's Open in Barcelona, a trial run for the synergistic potential in the Olympics to come.¹⁵³

The NBA and NBC readied for the launch of their new NBA magazine show, now called *Inside Stuff*, which the network had guaranteed for the next four years. It would air out of the league's newly renovated, state-of-art 45,000-square-foot studio and production facility in Secaucus, New Jersey. From that studio, in addition to *Inside Stuff*, NBA Entertainment would also produce halftime features, ads and promos, and their usual slate of home videos.¹⁵⁴ Now more extensively intertwined, the NBA and NBC began to work more closely together on game presentation than the league ever had with CBS. John Kosner remembers going to lunch with Ed Desser and Tommy Roy, the NBC producer in charge of pro basketball: "Poor Tommy, we had like three pages, single-spaced, of stuff to go through

¹⁴⁹ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

¹⁵⁰ For comparison, ESPN's fee at the time was 32-cents per subscriber (John Lippman, "Cable Systems Try Something New on Pricing," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1990).

¹⁵¹ *Inside the NBA* continues to run on TNT as of the 2018-2019 NBA season, bringing the show to a near thirty-year run.

¹⁵² "TNT Keeps NBA for \$275 Million," *Broadcasting*, December 4, 1989, 40.

¹⁵³ Stewart, "NBC Gets NBA for Four Years, \$600 Million."

¹⁵⁴ E.M. Swift, "From Corned Beef to Caviar," *Sports Illustrated*, June 3, 1991.

with him, of stuff that we wanted them to do. It was crazy... We were kind of creating it as we went along.”¹⁵⁵

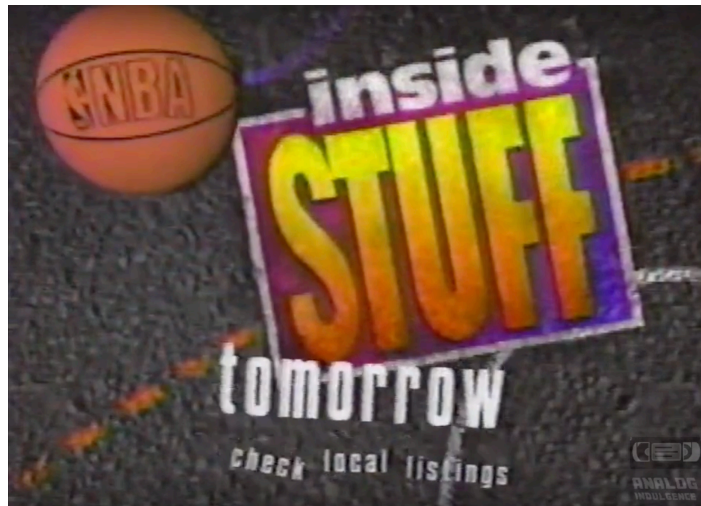


Figure 1.6: From a commercial for *Inside Stuff* from 1991, which promoted a “Family Feud” style game featuring players from the Philadelphia 76ers.¹⁵⁶

By November, the NBA and NBC were ready for their first telecast, featuring the New York Knicks’ Marv Albert as commentator, “long recognized as the premier basketball play-by-play announcer.”¹⁵⁷ Bob Costas was set to co-host the new pregame studio show that the NBA had required, alongside former LA Lakers coach and soon-to-be New York Knicks coach Pat Riley. Following the season opener between the Lakers and San Antonio Spurs, NBC broadcasts would give way to exclusive TNT broadcasts, before returning for the Christmas Day slate of games near the end of the NFL season.¹⁵⁸ While some basketball fans remained skeptical of the NBA’s level of control – Leonard Shapiro of *the Washington Post*

¹⁵⁵ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Analog Indulgence, “NBA Inside Stuff – Television Commercial – 1991,” YouTube, 0:30. Post December 7, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owm63iKCM3Q>>.

¹⁵⁷ Stan Isaacs, “NBC Ready for NBA,” *Newsday*, November 1, 1990, 147.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

referred to the new programming as “Inside Fluff” – the deal was already close to turning a profit for its partners.¹⁵⁹

The NBA’s latest media rights agreements were groundbreaking for the autonomy provided to a sports league, and thus reflective of the deepening symbiosis between the sports and television industries. For NBC, basketball functioned as a premier TV program and the NBA was accordingly treated as a genuine television production studio, transferring its show into the hands of the network for national distribution. The NBA spent the better part of the 1980s improving its media capabilities and creating an international media operation. Ultimately, NBC was able to trust the NBA’s media expertise in the production of *Inside Stuff* and the studio pregame show. With these newfound responsibilities, the subsequent decade would find the league expanding its scope and becoming a more vertically integrated conglomerate, due to new international opportunities and the advancement of direct-to-consumer distribution methods.

Conclusion

In April 1989, FIBA at last voted to admit professionals into the Olympics and other international tournaments.¹⁶⁰ The restrictions now lifted, international players could join the NBA without relinquishing the right to play for their home country in the Olympics. In October, Sarunas Marciulionis became the first Soviet player to sign, agreeing to a deal with the Golden State Warriors.¹⁶¹ Ailene Voisin, who was been reporting on the NBA for over forty years, refers to Marciulionis and the four other major foreign-born players to sign that

¹⁵⁹ Leonard Shapiro, “NBC Lets the NBA Toot Its Own Pregame Horn,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1991, E4.

¹⁶⁰ Associated Press, *New York Times*, April 8, 1989, 47.

¹⁶¹ Jan Hubbard, “Coming to America,” *Newsday*, October 1, 1989.

season – Vlade Divac, Drazen Petrovic, Alexander Volkov, and Zarko Paspali – as the ‘group of five.’ Their success “really triggered the whole first class of players, significant players, to really come into the league.”¹⁶² More and more players soon followed, like Arvydas Sabonis and Toni Kukoc. The “increasingly multinational NBA” was firmly underway.¹⁶³ By the 2016-17 season, international players had grown to account for a full twenty-five percent of all NBA rosters.¹⁶⁴

With a more fully internationalized product, the NBA began to set its sights higher and higher. “We want to make basketball the No. 1 sport in the world,” declared David Stern.¹⁶⁵ For the last Finals to air on CBS in June 1990, between the Detroit Pistons and the Portland Trail Blazers, the games were seen in 76 countries, the league’s most extensive distribution yet.¹⁶⁶ The NBA understood the potential in privileging a global media marketplace, the same as the Hollywood production studios. Michael Curtin, writing in 1997 on the “neo-network” era of television, highlights the relationship between globalization and fragmentation, between “mass cultural forms aimed at broad national or global markets” and “forms targeted at niche audiences.”¹⁶⁷ The NBA’s splitting its TV packages – across a mass broadcast audience, a niche cable audience, and an international audience – reflects their engagement with these tendencies. As commercial television grew and satellite technologies evolved, the demand for cheap content greatly aided U.S. suppliers, the NBA among them. As Silvio Waisbord has highlighted, “the fact that most systems shifted toward an

¹⁶² Ailene Voisin, in discussion with the author, February 25, 2018.

¹⁶³ Araton and Bondy, *The Selling of the Green*, 114.

¹⁶⁴ Official Release, “NBA Rosters Feature Record 113 International Players From 41 Countries,” *NBA.com*, October 25, 2016.

¹⁶⁵ Ira Kaufman, “NBA: What Will Next Decade Bring? NBA Looks to Greet The Next Decade With Growth,” *United Press International*, October 17, 1989.

¹⁶⁶ Bill Barnard, “NBA Finals Notebook,” *Associated Press*, June 4, 1990.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Curtin, “On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era.” In *Making and Selling Culture*, ed. Richard Ohmann (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 197.

‘American’ model of television gave a substantial advantage to the industry that had invented it.”¹⁶⁸ The NBA, with basketball as its media product, was thus able to benefit from this global ecosystem as much as any Hollywood producer-distributor.

As a consequence, the NBA had sought to consolidate and centralize its operations, taking on more production, distribution, and marketing responsibilities, and growing a league-owned archive of materials that could aid in that process. NBA Entertainment allowed the league to produce their own promotional materials and maintain control over their own brand, while also archiving the raw footage to be used for those productions. The NBA leveraged its savvy as a promoter and marketer to take on greater control of game presentation, stepping in when they felt CBS had not represented the product properly. As a media institution, the league reached new heights in 1986, when they renegotiated with CBS to regain their international rights. The league reached yet another in 1989, when NBC offered them the opportunity to produce supplementary and promotional content on the network.

By editing and dubbing the international versions of games to be sold to overseas broadcasters, the NBA came to excel during this period as a media company in its own right. While not quite a traditional “network,” as would be the case when they launched NBA.com TV in 1999 and became the first sports league with its own channel, the international groundwork laid by NBA Entertainment and NBA International would make the jump to self-distribution relatively effortless. The NBA, through the mutual efforts of NBA Entertainment, and NBA International, developed a global media product and relied on the flexibility of cable television to maximize their media control. The NBA, by investing in those new distribution technologies, was able to capitalize on a specialized audience and a

¹⁶⁸ Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” 361.

global reach. Ultimately, basketball comes to reflect the commercial imperatives of its mediation above and beyond its function as a competitive sport.

In early 1990, David Stern was named Sport Executive of the Decade by the *Associated Press*, which credited him with turning around the NBA from its historic lows in the first years of the 1980s. Since taking over the mantle of commissioner, the league's earnings quadrupled, game attendance increased by 31-percent, and the TV ratings continued to improve while other pro sports saw declines. As its international and media operations expanded, moreover, the number of league employees grew from only 25 staffers in 1983 to 160 by 1990.¹⁶⁹ "It was a time of extraordinary growth," recalls Stern, "We had been entrusted with an asset that nobody wanted, so there were almost no rules, and there was no specific path to follow. We made our rules as we went along."¹⁷⁰ The NBA had been ideally positioned to take advantage of an evolving media landscape in the 1980s, as a struggling league without any expectations. "There was very little to lose," notes Ed Desser. "This was a tiny little business. So it afforded the luxury of being able to take chances... It's not that hard to get 100 percent increases every year when you start with a number like zero or one."¹⁷¹ Stern parlayed the successes into a new five-year contract paying him \$3.5 million annually, plus \$10 million in bonuses, having leveraged the threat of his leaving to replace the recently retired Pete Rozelle at the NFL.¹⁷²

The period from 1982 through 1990, which sees the transformation of basketball into media content, provides a foundation for the NBA's eventual conglomeration and more extensive global success. This was accomplished by the production and promotional efforts

¹⁶⁹ Matthew Grimm, "The Big Rebound at the NBA," *Adweek*, February 19, 1990.

¹⁷⁰ David Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

¹⁷¹ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹⁷² Araton and Bondy, *The Selling of the Green*, 109-110.

of NBA Entertainment, the international television agreements secured by NBA International, and the groundwork of exhibition tours and training camps. While the NFL, through the creation of *Monday Night Football* and the success of NFL Films, had advanced the possibilities of sports on television in the broadcast era, the NBA's strategic use of cable television and global satellite distribution reflects the transformation of sport into modern media content, in its ability to address global, domestic, mass, and niche audiences across multiple distribution platforms.

In May 1989, David Stern outlined his global strategy as having five components: broadcasting, licensing, sponsorship, live games, and basketball clinics. "We are replicating what we've done in this country," Stern explained. "We are very much in the entertainment business. We're looking at a global marketplace. We have to. We are a global company."¹⁷³ Following the mediatization of sport during this era, as reflected most profoundly in the NBA's agreement with NBC, the subsequent chapter will examine the further evolution of sports leagues as media conglomerates.

¹⁷³ Brennan, "U.S. Sports."

II. Manifest Destiny: Media Conglomeration and the Billion-Dollar Business of Basketball, 1990 – 2002

“[Disney has] theme parks...and [the NBA has] theme parks. Only we call them arenas. They have characters: Mickey Mouse, Goofy. Our characters are named Magic and Michael. Disney sells apparel; we sell apparel. They make home videos; we make home videos.”
– David Stern, NBA commissioner, to *Sports Illustrated* (June 1991).¹

“Unless you are prepared to sit the entire year out, don’t f--k with David Stern. This is not a game. This is a billion-dollar business.” – David Falk, agent, on the 1998-99 NBA Lockout.²

Introduction

By the close of the 1990s, the NBA completes its transformation from a primarily administrative organization into a full-fledged media conglomerate. This is enabled by the industrial shifts, technological developments, and global media deregulation of the previous decade, which allowed basketball to function as media content and reach a more international television audience. Armed with many hours of lucrative live programming, the NBA leveraged its in-house production capabilities to take on additional media responsibilities. In 1983, the NBA’s annual revenue stood at \$140 million. By 1992, following its new agreement to leave broadcast partner CBS for NBC, the NBA’s revenue rose to \$1.1 billion.³ For the 2001-2002 season, their final one with NBC, the league’s revenue had more than doubled to \$2.6 billion.⁴ Sportswriter Jeff Coplon would term David Stern’s 1990s tenure the “Manifest Destiny Regime,” adding that the commissioner “grasped the root law of capitalism: grow or die.”⁵

¹ E.M. Swift, “From Corned Beef to Caviar,” *Sports Illustrated*, June 3, 1991.

² Thomas Golianopoulos, “‘It Was All About Money’: An Oral History of the 1998-99 NBA Lockout,” *The Ringer*, February 19, 2019.

³ Elizabeth Comte with Subrata N. Chakravarty, “How High Can David Stern Jump?” *Forbes*, June 7, 1993.

⁴ “Total NBA league revenue from 2001/02 to 2015/16 (in billion U.S. dollars),” *Forbes*, Accessed February 5, 2017.

⁵ Jeff Coplon, “Legends. Champions?” *New York Times*, April 21, 1996, 35.

During this period, as convergent media empires emerge from continued deregulation and more flexible distribution technologies, the NBA becomes increasingly self-sufficient in its own right. The launch of the “League Pass” satellite service in 1994 and NBA.com in 1995 serve as initial steps in the league becoming more deeply involved in its own distribution. This process arguably culminates in 1999, when the NBA becomes the first sports league with its own television channel. By the close of this period, then, the NBA operates as a genuine vertically integrated conglomerate, comparable to intuitions such as Disney and Time Warner, and helps instigate the shift towards the contemporary paradigm of transnational multiplatform media distribution.

This period thus reflects the increasing marketization of sports and media. David Hesmondalgh uses the concept to describe “the process by which market exchange increasingly came to permeate the cultural industries and related sectors,” following the “increasing size and conglomeration of cultural industry companies.”⁶ As sport transforms into media content during the previous decade, sport too comes to be defined by principles of market exchange and commercialism. From 1990 to 2002, basketball becomes a billion-dollar media business and the NBA becomes a key media conglomerate, as “part of a larger trend towards more and larger mergers and acquisitions in all industries.”⁷

In the 1990s, Hesmondalgh argues, Disney becomes the archetype of the cultural corporation because they seemed to best understand that “combining ownership of content and distribution...was the way forward,” which was the blueprint for media conglomerates during the 1990s and 2000s.⁸ NBA commissioner David Stern’s use of Disney as a specific

⁶ David Hesmondalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd Ed (Los Angeles and London: Sage Publications, 2013), 128, 187.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 199-201.

model for the NBA, as noted in the epigraph, is thus especially revealing of the NBA's overall commercial ambitions. Historian Walter LaFeber, in fact, uses the Michael Jordan-Nike-NBA triumvirate to track the advent of the modern transnational corporation, which "differed from their late-twentieth-century descendants in at least five respects," such as their use of foreign labor, the significance of technical knowledge over natural resources, the dependence of world markets, massive advertising campaigns, and more globally diffuse operations.⁹ While LaFeber identifies Nike as his exemplar of the modern corporation, the case can be made for the NBA as well, which began to expand its physical operations during this period into a series of regional offices around the world.

The NBA's increasingly transnational relationships reflect the development of Michael Curtin's conception of "media capitals," which he describes as "particular cities that have become centers for the finance, production, and distribution of television programs," and which "do not necessarily correspond to the geography, interests, or policies of particular nation-states."¹⁰ During the 1990s, the NBA both relies on and encourages these new "spatial and cultural relations" to create a global network of exchange via its own satellite offices and its partnerships with numerous national broadcasters.¹¹ Norman Dezin has noted how, during this period, "global (and regional) sports television linked each major continent, from Europe to Asia, to North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and beyond. The NBA and Michael [Jordan] were everywhere."¹² The transnational expansion and integration of the NBA thus reflects ongoing shifts within the media industries, as the league capitalizes on the

⁹ Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 55-57.

¹⁰ Michael Curtin, "Media Capitals: Cultural Geographies of Global TV," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 272.

¹¹ Michael Curtin, "Thinking Globally: From Media Imperialism to Media Capital," in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 110-111.

¹² Norman K. Denzin, "Representing Michael," in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. David L. Andrews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 6.

media strategies of larger conglomerates in Disney and Time Warner. While the NBA is unique in this conversation, being a sports league, the NBA is also unique *among* sports leagues, in how successfully it transformed itself into a transnational entertainment entity. This chapter offers insight into this process of media conglomeration and how it drives, and is driven by, larger forces of marketization.

The accelerated global proliferation of the NBA product is instrumental in highlighting the dynamics of American capitalism within the global media landscape during a significant transcultural moment. Michael Jordan, as a context-dependent “floating racial signifier,” helped to sell the NBA around the world.¹³ Depending on the geographic context, the NBA and its corporate sponsors, such as Nike, were able to shape depictions of Jordan to maximize the NBA’s appeal within any particular locality. Relatedly, Sohail Daulatzai describes how the NBA offers “a cultural expression of the marginalized in American society—namely, African Americans” that is globally commodified through “systems of production and distribution firmly rooted in Western capitalism.”¹⁴ In particular, the impact of the 1992 Olympics and the Dream Team’s gold medal victory thus goes beyond the NBA, as the sport of basketball became a central vehicle for the exportation of American culture during the remainder of the decade. “During the Jordan era,” Douglas Kellner has argued, basketball became “the game that best symbolizes the contemporary sports/entertainment colossus.”¹⁵

¹³ David L. Andrews, “The Fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness: Excavating a Floating Racial Signifier,” in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. Andrews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Sohail Daulatzai, “View the World From American Eyes: Ball, Islam, and Dissent in Post-Race America,” in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*, eds. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 198.

¹⁵ Douglas Kellner, “The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance?” in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. David L. Andrews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 66-68.

This chapter examines the rise of basketball as a billion-dollar business, following its mediatization during the 1980s, as sports leagues come to operate as media companies. Ultimately, this period explains the trajectory of the sports-media industry over the subsequent decades, as sport has heavily invested in digital media platforms and international audiences, both of which speak to leagues' operation as conglomerates and their efforts at media self-sufficiency. To tell this history, I have conducted extensive interviews with key personnel at the NBA, Turner, ESPN, and Starwave, the early internet start-up that helped launch both NBA.com and ESPN.com. As many of these individuals were employed at the executive level, these interviews are essential in articulating the significance of both particular corporate decisions and overall media strategies. In conjunction, archival news sources have helped to provide a clear narrative of events.

After surveying the NBA's newfound autonomy in its relationship with NBC, I will examine the creation of overseas satellite offices that signal the league's new perception of itself as a corporate entity. Following the success of the 1992 Olympic basketball team, the NBA continues to invest in these regional offices, which allowed for more effective market research and media localization. This material is essential to the NBA's further investment in flexible and direct-to-consumer media distribution, via direct broadcast satellite (DBS) and the internet, which provided the league with more extensive hands-on control than it had with cable TV. In conjunction, the NBA's media strategy evolves during this period, as the league begins to privilege "all-access programming" to fans in order to take advantage of the 24-hour nature of online platforms. These new endeavors enable the launch of a league-owned cable channel, NBA.com TV, in 1999. Just as the NBA leveraged its media capabilities upon leaving CBS for NBC in late 1989, the league does the same when it leaves NBC for ABC

and ESPN in 2001, maintaining its broadcast presence while doubling its cable partners alongside TNT. As in the 1980s, the programming flexibility of cable television allows the NBA to continue cultivating its abilities as a media institution, while also signaling the medium as a major competitor to broadcast television.

NBC, TNT, and NBA Television Ventures

The NBA signed its first deal with NBC in November 1989, for \$600 million over four years, a massive 241% increase over the league's previous deal with CBS. By the start of their first season, in the fall of 1990, the agreement had already nearly turned a profit for the network, owing to a unique promotional strategy on which the NBA had collaborated. Jim Burnett, of the advertising sales team at NBC, had already locked up \$368 million from four automotive companies and another \$140 million from Miller beer, totaling \$508 million towards the \$600 million rights deal.¹⁶

The strategy had involved increasing the number of ad units per game from eight to sixteen and selling exclusivities within by quarter. "So basically, if you were Mitsubishi, you'd have exclusivity of the first quarter in one game and then the next day you'd have exclusivity of the third quarter. It was a totally new model," explains John Kosner, the NBA's director of broadcasting at the time.¹⁷ Perhaps most importantly, the advertising strategy signaled the continued mediatization of basketball, as the sport was treated by both NBC and the NBA as a television program, who worked together in adapting the game's pacing to commercial breaks. As noted in the previous chapter, this overall media partnership was further reflected in the launch of both a studio pregame show and a Saturday morning

¹⁶ Stan Isaacs, "NBC Ready for NBA," *Newsday*, November 1, 1990, 147.

¹⁷ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

“magazine show” called *Inside Stuff*, as a “sort of an *Entertainment Tonight* for basketball fans.”¹⁸ Both programs would be produced by the NBA in collaboration with the network, out of the NBA’s new 45,000-square-foot studio and production facility in Secaucus, New Jersey.



Figure 2.1: *Inside Stuff* host Ahmad Rashad during a segment on the 1991 Chicago Bulls.¹⁹

As the NBA became more ambitious as a media producer-distributor, technological innovations persisted behind the scenes. In December 1990, NBA Entertainment signed a deal with the Satellite Information System Company, or SISCOM, to upgrade the management system for its video archive, improving the league’s production capabilities for *Inside Stuff*, home videos, and other promotional materials.²⁰ “It was a very early system, obviously, completely based on linear tapes,” recalls Steve Hellmuth, who was hired to oversee the transition and later became the NBA’s executive vice president of media operations and technology. “It was just a paper kind of logging system that put the information into a database, into an archive, but once you did a search, it would only point to

¹⁸ Larry Stewart, “NBC Gets NBA for Four Years, \$600 Million,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1989.

¹⁹ Bhawgwild, “1991 Chicago Bulls (NBA Inside Stuff),” YouTube, 5:40. Post July 9, 2018. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WxD2dpZ574>>.

²⁰ “SISCOM Announces NewsPro Sale to NBA Entertainment in New York,” *PR Newswire*, December 7, 1990.

the tapes on the shelf.”²¹ Though rudimentary, the system worked to smooth the production process and helped to lay the groundwork for the NBA’s eventual digital database.

As the capabilities of computers improved, and the possibilities of media distribution expanded, the NBA’s top executives understood that staying informed of the latest innovations would be essential to their continued success and their global aspirations. In February 1991, the NBA officially launched a new division, “Television Ventures,” which was tasked with exploring new modes for the delivery of games, including direct-broadcast satellite and fiber optics.²² “The mandate is to keep the NBA abreast of all developments in the alphabet soup of new technologies,” David Stern told *Electronic Media* soon after the division’s creation.²³ Ed Desser, of NBA Entertainment and NBA International, would relinquish his duties at NBAE in order to head the new division.²⁴ “The idea was, there’s new stuff coming, we want to be the guys who take full advantage of that,” explains Desser. “We need to understand it, and that means it’s important enough to have a senior person who is spending their time looking into it, thinking about it, doing deals with it.”²⁵

The NBA had already conducted some early media distribution experiments. NHK Enterprises had helped with a high-definition telecast of the All-Star Game in Japan, and telecommunications operator COMSAT had contributed to the possibilities of pay-per-view NBA programming.²⁶ “I would say a lot of this started with looking at digital signal compression technology,” recalls Desser, “And that was all about being able to stick more video in less bandwidth.” The NBA’s interest in HD and the possibilities of digital

²¹ Steve Hellmuth, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2018.

²² Thomas Tyrer, “NBA Unit to Explore New TV Options,” *Electronic Media*, February 18, 1991, 2.

²³ Thomas Tyrer, “Stern Readies NBA For Global Frontier,” *Electronic Media*, January 20, 1992, 40.

²⁴ Tyrer, “NBA Unit to Explore New TV Options.”

²⁵ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

²⁶ Norman Chad, “Get Ready for a Whole New Ballgame: Denver Does America,” *The Washington Post*, October 27, 1989, C3.

compression soon led it to the door of satellite operator DirecTV, which would aid in the launch of an NBA satellite service in 1994.

In the meantime, NBC and TNT were both more than happy with the results of the first round postseason coverage in 1991. For the first full weekend of games, the two networks aired 26 hours of basketball, via three consecutive nights of double-headers on TNT.²⁷ The strategy was a significant shift from the “less is more” approach that characterized the NBA on CBS, which had sought to decrease the league’s exposure lower in order to build anticipation. Now on NBC, the league was ready to *increase* their offerings and give fans as much basketball as possible, in what might be called a “more is more” approach. This only intensifies as new opportunities arise from the internet and home satellite distribution. By the 1995 postseason, every single playoff game was televised for the first time, creating approximately 200 hours of programming across NBC, TNT, and TBS.²⁸

Given the NBA’s increasing investment in national (and international) television, the league began to take issue with individual teams securing their own national television contracts, via the superstations, which were defined as “any commercial over-the-air television station whose broadcast signal is received outside of the local designated market area.”²⁹ The NBA felt that the Atlanta Hawks on TBS, the Chicago Bulls on WGN, and the New Jersey Nets on WOR not only damaged “national television revenue and exposure” but “hindered the ability of local teams to sell their games.”³⁰ As a result, the NBA reduced the number of games it allowed to air on superstations from 25 to 20 in 1990. While TBS and

²⁷ Steve Woodward, “Follow the Bouncing Ball on a Long, NBA Weekend,” *USA Today*, April 26, 1991, 3C.

²⁸ John Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist: The Relationship and Broadcast Strategies of the NBA and Television Networks* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001), 226-229.

²⁹ *Chicago Professional Sports Limited Partnership and WGN Continental Broadcasting Company v. NBA*, 1991, p. 1345.

³⁰ Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 54.

WOR acquiesced, WGN took the league to court in early 1991, challenging the organization on antitrust grounds. WGN won the lawsuit, which was upheld on appeal, allowing the station to quickly add an additional five games to its schedule.³¹

While “the entire WGN lawsuit on the surface amounted to a dispute over the broadcasting of five games,” NBA scholar John Fortunato argues that the lasting significance of the WGN situation is in “the message of the NBA's need for the proper exposure of the product, its games, and the need to protect the largest revenue source—national television money,” which had now risen to a combined \$875 million between its latest agreements with NBC and TNT.³² The league’s “willingness” to challenge teams and “to litigate to a great extent also sent a clear signal to all the other NBA teams who might attempt to challenge the league's national television contract structure,” according to Fortunato.³³ The NBA demanded control – over its national distribution partners and indeed over its own franchises. The league’s actions reflect its increasing perception of itself as a media conglomerate, which saw its subsidiaries as acting counter to the best interests of the parent company.

While cable, in general, continued to threaten broadcast viewership, NBC had continued to excel thanks to the NBA playoffs. For the last week of May, no other broadcast network made it into the top five highest-rated sports programs except for the NBA and its postseason programming, which held all of the spots, ranging from a 6.4 rating to a 12.6 rating for Game 1 of the 1991 Finals.³⁴ The network had also lucked into the perfect matchup for its first Finals, between the already-transcendent Magic Johnson of the LA Lakers and the

³¹ *Communications Daily*, January 28, 1991, 7.

³² Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 59; Richard Sandomir, “NBC and NBA Agree to \$750 Million Pact,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1993, D19.

³³ Fortunato, *The Ultimate Assist*, 59.

³⁴ Steve Woodward, “Success of NBA Games has NBC Brass Sky-High,” *USA Today*, June 7, 1991, 3C.

newly-ascending Michael Jordan, playing for his very first title with the Chicago Bulls.³⁵

John Freeman of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* described it as the “Dream Season” matchup that CBS had always longed for and just missed.³⁶ Around 24 million households watched as MJ and the Chicago Bulls defeated Magic Johnson and the “Showtime” Lakers in six games, the end of one era and the beginning of another. With an average rating of 15.8, it was the best rated Finals since the 16.7 achieved in 1987, when Magic defeated Larry Bird and put an end to the Boston Celtics dynasty.³⁷

As the second year of the *NBA on NBC* began, the network continued to benefit from its long-term ad agreements with Miller and eight automakers. As the marketplace continued to slump, the NBA deal had officially turned a profit for NBC. Turner, too, was already close to 75-percent sold out of its spots due to incumbent advertisers. Ratings, though, were sagging. While the 1991 Finals saw a 30-percent increase over the 1990 Finals on CBS, NBC’s regular season programming was down ten-percent and even its postseason ratings saw an eight-percent decline.³⁸ “Domestically, we’re tapped,” admitted Don Sperling, the director of NBA Entertainment. “Ratings have peaked. Attendance has peaked. The market here has peaked.”³⁹ Ultimately, the NBA’s solution would involve the further pursuit of a more transnational audience.

In the meantime, they continued to evolve their “more is more” strategy in the hopes of improving their domestic ratings. For the second postseason under the most recent TV agreements, cable coverage again increased. TNT was now permitted by the NBA to cut-in to

³⁵ Bill Lyon, “NBA Lucks Into an ‘Impossibly Glamorous Matchup’,” *The Toronto Star*, June 9, 1991, G5.

³⁶ John Freeman, “It’ll Be More Magic Moments For NBC,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 31, 1991, E8.

³⁷ TV By the Numbers, “NBA Finals TV Ratings, 1974-2008,” *Zap2it*, May 22, 2009.

³⁸ “Basketball Telecasts Adjust to Leaner Times,” *Broadcasting*, October 7, 1991, 37-38.

³⁹ Ailene Voisin, “NBA Takes Active Role in Dealing with AIDS Issue,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, December 3, 1991, F1.

various ongoing games of interest for two to three minute intervals, a small step towards offering full telecasts for every single playoff game. Don McGuire, senior vice president of Turner Sports, went so far to describe TNT as “the full-time NBA network.”⁴⁰ NBC similarly aired its first ever *triple*-header of games on Sunday night, which would become a hallmark of NBA coverage moving forward.⁴¹

For the June 1992 Finals, fans from 93 countries were able to tune in to watch Michael Jordan lead the Chicago Bulls over the Portland Trail Blazers in six games.⁴² Only two years earlier, that number had sat at 76.⁴³ NBC hoped to use the Finals to generate more excitement and anticipation for the upcoming Olympics in Barcelona, dedicating most of the network’s promotional time to the games and to “familiarize viewers with some of the lesser-known of the eleven NBA Olympians.”⁴⁴ Commissioner Stern, too, was readying the league for the upcoming events. Counter to revisionist histories that depict Stern and the NBA as more restrained about the entire enterprise, the commissioner told *Electronic Media*, “The basketball final in Barcelona, Spain, may well be one of the most viewed events in the history of television – on a global basis. The popularity of our players internationally will likely take off from that point.”⁴⁵ In the end, Stern was right.

The period following the NBA’s leaving CBS and TBS for NBC and TNT, and prior to the 1992 Summer Olympics, demonstrates the league’s further investment in its own mediation. During these years, the NBA’s particular approach reflects a growing perception of itself as a media company, given its greater production and promotional responsibilities

⁴⁰ Rudy Martzke, “TNT to Again Act as Sub For NBC During Playoffs,” *USA Today*, April 21, 1992, 3C.

⁴¹ David Wharton, “Amid L.A.’s Civil Strife in 1992, the Clippers Found a Way to Host a Crucial Playoff Game,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2017.

⁴² Mike Conklin and Steve Nidetz, “TV Turns Bullish on Pro Basketball,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1992.

⁴³ Bill Barnard, “NBA Finals Notebook,” *Associated Press*, June 4, 1990.

⁴⁴ Thomas Tyrer, “NBC Planning Olympic Effort for NBA Finals,” *Electronic Media*, June 1, 1992, 4.

⁴⁵ Tyrer, “Stern Readies NBA For Global Frontier.”

and the related renovations to its studio and archive. This perception is reflected in the NBA's wider strategic shift towards "more is more" programming, which sought to maximize the NBA's national television presence by taking advantage of its simultaneous broadcast and cable partnerships. The organization's multi-media strategy would only intensify as the NBA launched a league-controlled website and DBS service, signaling their arrival "in the realm of convergent media."⁴⁶ When the Chicago Bulls and WGN disrupted this paradigm via a separate national TV agreement, the NBA fought back against WGN in order to reinforce the league's role at the center of the sport's media production and distribution. While the NBA lost the case, the moment perhaps best captures the league's overall approach during this time, as it sought to increasingly centralize media operations and wrestle control away from its own franchises.

Bound for Gold: The 1992 Olympics

On September 21, 1991, the NBA's Olympic "Dream Team" was announced on NBC, hosted by Bob Costas from the new NBA Entertainment studios in Secaucus.⁴⁷ Following the NBA's collaborations with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) on the McDonald's Open, and the April 1989 vote that opened Olympic basketball to professional athletes, the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona would finally see NBA players on the proper international stage – to be televised domestically, of course, by NBC. From Secaucus, the team was introduced by USA Basketball President Dave Gavitt and Olympic head coach Chuck Daly, who had led the Detroit Pistons to their back-to-back championships in 1989 and 1990. One by one, the first ten players were made official – Magic Johnson, Michael

⁴⁶ Richard Tedesco, "Playing in the Big Time," *Broadcasting & Cable*, Dec 11, 2000, 106.

⁴⁷ Rudy Martzke, "Controversy Gives Selection of Olympic Team Intrigue," *USA Today*, September 20, 1991, 3C

Jordan, Charles Barkley, Larry Bird, Chris Mullin, John Stockton, Karl Malone, David Robinson, Scottie Pippen, and Patrick Ewing.⁴⁸

As a springboard for a more global NBA, and in anticipation of Olympic success, David Stern began to make plans for a series of overseas satellite offices. These would give the NBA a more tangible foothold in international territories. While the offices would grow in importance *following* Barcelona, their construction prior to the games reflects the NBA's evolving global strategy. In February 1992, during the commissioner's state-of-the-league address at All-Star Weekend, he told the press that offices would be opening in the next ninety days in Hong Kong, Barcelona, and Melbourne.⁴⁹ The mandate was "to build popularity of the game of basketball and by doing so build the awareness of the NBA," using league operators to observe and more deeply imbricate themselves in the fabric of local life.⁵⁰ The overtones of imperialism were not lost on the Australian press, which sought to assuage criticism. "Fear not," explained the *Herald Sun*, "There is no millionaire American coming to Australia to buy one of Melbourne's NBL clubs... All the NBA wants is office space in Melbourne."⁵¹

This move reflected the increasingly commonplace approach of international TV producers at this time. Jean Chalaby has examined the methods by which U.S.-based channels, such as Discovery, National Geographic, and Bloomberg, sought to localize their offerings for international markets during the 1980s and 1990s. To find success overseas, companies relied on local offices with local staff that were well acquainted with the local

⁴⁸ David Aldridge, "U.S. Basketball Team Ready To Perform a Professional Lesson," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1991, G3.

⁴⁹ John Harris, "NBA Top Man Looks Ahead," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 9, 1992, 2C.

⁵⁰ Luke Cyphers, "The NBA's Global Marketing Machine is Launching a Drive to the Pacific Rim," *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 1992, B11.

⁵¹ Michelangelo Rucci, "NBA is Coming to Spread the Word," *Herald Sun*, February 10, 1992.

media and cultural landscape.⁵² The establishment of the NBA's particular offices, whose personnel were tasked with similar market-priming responsibilities, reinforces the status of basketball as a global television program and the NBA as a global television company. At the same time, the NBA ran advertisements in *Variety* for its international programming. "The Global Appeal of NBA Television" reads the banner across the top of one such ad, which features Michael Jordan leaping upwards for a dunk, while a separate image of Magic Johnson drives towards the hoop. Colorful abstract lines around them indicate their motion.⁵³

Within the NBA's efforts to cultivate a strong local presence, one can distinguish the marketing strategy of this period as one of selling "America" to the rest of the world, which relied on colorful, youthful flourishes and American stars. This is opposed to the period that begins in 2002, as the NBA's talent base internationalizes and the league begins to sell itself as more inclusively global. During the period from 1990 to 2002, the NBC years, the NBA uses primarily American stars and American styling – in conjunction with the localization and distribution efforts of its new regional offices – to sell an American TV show called 'NBA basketball' around the world. Following the early editing and dubbing efforts of NBA Entertainment in the 1980s, which packaged the NBA for global distribution, the continued evolution of the division alongside NBC reinforces the NBA as sellable media content.

⁵² Jean K. Chalaby, "The Quiet Invention of a New Medium: Twenty Years of Transnational Television in Europe," in *Transnational Television Worldwide: Towards a New Media Order*, ed. Jean Chalaby (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 43-65.

⁵³ "The Global Appeal of NBA Television," *Variety*, February 2, 1992, 43.

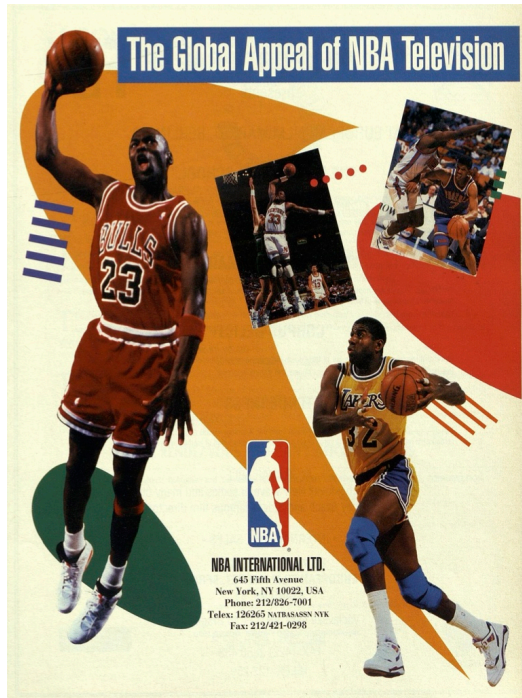


Figure 2.2: An advertisement placed by NBA International in *Variety* (February 2, 1992).

While the NBA prepared behind the scenes, the global impact of the 1992 Olympics on the popularity of basketball was immense. “You can’t really calibrate it, but you can imagine it,” reflects Donnie Nelson, who worked as an assistant with the Lithuanian team and has served as general manager of the Dallas Mavericks since 2005. “What effect did the Beatles coming to America have on music? It was the same kind of thing.”⁵⁴ Over the years, the NBA has conducted research on its own international players. “I can’t begin to tell you how many of them say they started watching basketball at the ‘92 Olympics,” says Kim Bohuny, who oversees the NBA’s international basketball operations.⁵⁵ Dirk Nowitzki of Germany, drafted into the NBA in 1998 by the Dallas Mavericks, confirms as much. While he had idolized Detlef Schrempf, a seven-year NBA veteran and the star of the German team, Nowitzki’s favorite player became the American Scottie Pippen. Many other future NBA

⁵⁴ Jack McCallum, *Dream Team* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2012), 313.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

stars have similar stories. Sportswriter Jack McCallum has called it “the start of a revolution.” He continues, “In Argentina, Manu Ginobili, a fifteen-year-old with a wild, almost primitive athleticism, was watching. In Spain, twelve-year-old Pau Gasol, who had designs on being a doctor, and ten-year-old Jose Calderon, a budding point guard, were watching.”⁵⁶ As these players increasingly enter the NBA in the decade that follows, they aid in the NBA’s ongoing media globalization, a key component of Chapter Three.

The Olympics also served as a significant success for NBA Properties, the league’s licensing and marketing division, which was “turning out all kinds of red-white-and-blue fiddle-faddle” like cups and calendars.⁵⁷ These products reflect the further marketization of basketball and the NBA’s further functioning as a multi-division corporation, similar to Disney, which could synergistically cross-promote merchandise and media properties. The merchandising would become a major point of contention throughout the Olympics, especially after USA Basketball President Dave Gavitt had convinced the athletes to give up their share of the revenue, which Larry Bird had recalled being told would be between \$600,000 and \$800,000.⁵⁸

This contributed to ongoing tensions as officials from the US Olympic Committee kept pushing players to sign basketballs by the hundreds. “It bothered me that business was wrapped around everything,” remembered Michael Jordan in 2011. “Sure, I was in business, but these were long-standing relationships I had with companies. They were contracts. All of a sudden I’m being asked to do a lot of stuff I wasn’t comfortable with.” Jordan began to feel that the relationship was unbalanced, that he had exponentially increased the value of the NBA, the US Olympic team, and the Chicago Bulls franchise, and that his contributions were

⁵⁶ Ibid., 312.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 157-159.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 160.

not being properly appreciated.⁵⁹ The NBA had become a (media) business first and a sport second. While this had begun during the previous decade, the commercialization of basketball was becoming increasingly visible at the Olympics. This was perhaps most infamously displayed when Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, who were both sponsored by Nike, refused to wear the Olympic jackets produced by sponsor Reebok. “I don't believe in endorsing my competition,” Jordan said at the time. “I feel very strongly about loyalty to my own company.”⁶⁰

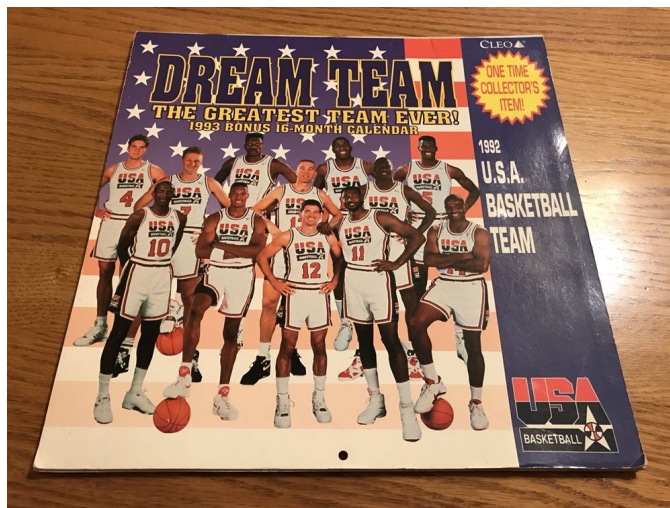


Figure 2.3: One of the 1992 Dream Team calendars produced by NBA Properties (Source: warlock2018, ebay.com)

The relationship between Michael Jordan, Nike, and the NBA, and the global possibilities and implications of their union, is worth interrogating more deeply. As Todd Boyd has noted, “if one is serious about discussing the NBA’s ascent into the stratosphere of popular culture, it seems that a great deal of that conversation must include a discussion of Jordan’s overwhelming influence in getting people to watch basketball who otherwise would

⁵⁹ Ibid., 160, 184-185, 187.

⁶⁰ David Anderson, “On Loyalty to Company, or Country?” *The New York Times*, August 2, 1992, 8.

have never been interested.”⁶¹ Many scholars, especially over the course of the 1990s, began by examining the complex relationship between Jordan and race, both within the U.S. and abroad. As Douglas Kellner notes, it is not so much that Jordan *transcends* race, as many have argued, but that he can be either positioned “to serve as a role model for American youth and as the white fantasy of the good African American” or “denigrated to embody negative connotations,” in order “to represent transgressive behavior and to project society’s sins onto African Americans.”⁶² David L. Andrews further develops this duality by conceptualizing Jordan’s “mediated racial identity” as a “floating racial signifier,” which is “neither stable, essential, nor consistent; it is dynamic, complex, and contradictory.”⁶³

In order to transform Jordan into an All-American icon, Andrews notes, “Jordan’s marketing directors realized he had to be packaged as a Reaganite racial replicant; a black version of a white cultural model.”⁶⁴ David Falk, Jordan’s agent at ProServ, explained his efforts to depict his client as maintaining “Norman Rockwell values, with a contemporary flair.”⁶⁵ Falk and Nike, in conjunction, thus attempted to emphasize “an identifiable, if superficial, personality” instead of Jordan’s physical prowess alone. However, as stories of Jordan’s gambling emerged during the 1991-1992 season, the more negative coverage also initiated “a new and seemingly profitable spinoff industry,” in which “Jordan’s new-found human frailties represented big business for the tabloid sections.”⁶⁶ Yet the strength of the All-American image persisted. When Jordan retired briefly before the 1993 season, in what amounted to a mere sixteen-month hiatus, he was still invoked *in absentia* to distinguish him

⁶¹ Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 87.

⁶² Douglas Kellner, “The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike,” 75, 77.

⁶³ Andrews, “The Fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness,” 108.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

⁶⁵ Qtd. in G. Castle, “Air to the Throne,” *Sport*, January 1991, 30.

⁶⁶ Andrews, “The Fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness,” 125, 132.

from the “youthful African American miscreants who now dominated the popular representation of the NBA,” per David L. Andrew’s analysis of NBA news coverage at the time, a subject that is explored in more detail in the chapter that follows. Jordan’s comeback, in March 1995, further “provided the popular media with a context for accenting the neo-Reaganite personal traits and characteristics that originally framed his mediated identity.”⁶⁷

Jordan, as the carefully cultivated All-American, thus provided both the NBA and Nike with an important foothold into nations around the world, as “the global awareness of the NBA intersected directly with the globalization of corporate America in the nineties.”⁶⁸ Through Jordan, both Nike and the NBA were able to appear as ideal global citizens, by frequently engaging “promotional discourses” that depicted them as “‘giving something back’ to American communities and even participating in that which ‘America’ sees as its most noble project, the globalization of democracy.”⁶⁹ Walter LaFeber frames these efforts as an example of American “soft power,” which refers “to the influence of U.S. culture and commerce, rather than to its military and political muscle.”⁷⁰ While soft power, as a term, has been used by advocates of America’s globalizing influence, critics point to replacement of local cultures and expression by American corporate interests.

These tensions manifested especially in discussions of the ongoing internationalization of television, as privatization continued into the 1990s and saw the further importation of American TV onto overseas airwaves. Much scholarship in the intervening years has run counter to these 1990s fears, highlighting the persistence and popularity of local programming over American imports. Kai Hafez notes how consumers in Asian,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142, 144.

⁶⁸ Denzin, “Representing Michael,” 6.

⁶⁹ C.L. Cole, “Nike’s America / America’s Michael Jordan,” in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. David L. Andrews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 72.

⁷⁰ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 109.

African, and Latin American countries have frequently purchased satellite television “not in order to receive Western programs but to watch new satellite channels based in their own country or the extended language area.”⁷¹ As satellite and digital technologies evolved by the late 1990s, Michele Hilmes similarly explains how “a new, permeable form of national culture became the norm, with immigrant populations able to tune into channels from home via satellite even as they switched between domestic and other imported offerings.”⁷²

While American capitalism, then, may be especially culpable in the “the actual *commodification* of culture,” argues John Tomlinson, the issue with cultural imperialism as an argument is that “it makes a leap of inference from the simple presence of cultural goods to the attribution of deeper cultural or ideological effects.”⁷³ Ramon Lobato has argued much the same in his study of Netflix, which continues to exist alongside local offerings. “The trick is to use *both/and* rather than *either/or* thinking,” Lobato explains. “Audiences do not choose between the local and the global but combine both in their everyday lives.”⁷⁴ At a minimum, then, the NBA can be said to contribute to the ongoing marketization of sport, which has Americanizing effects; the NBA plays a market-priming role. This is reflected in Daya Kishan Thussu’s conception of international television flows, which can “effectively legitimize the ideological imperatives of a free-market capitalism” and thus reinforce “the American hegemony of global media cultures.”⁷⁵

Michael Jordan, the NBA’s international mega-star, played a crucial role in the process of media globalization and the NBA’s market-priming efforts. On the day of the gold

⁷¹ Kai Hafez, *The Myth of Media Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 62.

⁷² Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (London: Routledge, 2011), 306.

⁷³ John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 85, 83-84.

⁷⁴ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 160.

⁷⁵ Daya Kishan Thussu, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 23, 28.

medal game in Barcelona, after he been playing cards until six am, Jordan spent the morning filming with NBA Entertainment, in what would become the *Michael Jordan: Air Time* video.⁷⁶ Only a few hours later, against the Croatian national team, Jordan would lead his teammates with 22 points, securing a gold medal victory. Fulfilling his All-American persona, Jordan had helped the NBA to promote its basketball supremacy on an international stage, while simultaneously serving as the figurehead for the programming efforts of NBA Entertainment. The impact of the Dream Team thus surpasses the NBA, as basketball became a central vehicle for the exportation of American culture during the remainder of the decade. The NBA was able to capitalize on the mediatized state of basketball, and on the flexible image of Michael Jordan, to sell the sport around the world. As the demand for NBA basketball grew, the league leveraged the production infrastructure of NBA Entertainment to sell more programming designed specifically for international audiences. Not only did they produce localized versions of *Inside Stuff*, but they began to produce additional highlight shows, like *NBA Jam* and *NBA Action*, that were designed and localized for non-U.S. markets. Featuring MTV-style graphics and American music, these shows reflect the development of a particular NBA brand that could help to further imbricate American basketball within local cultures, including Canada, Mexico, and Japan.

While the 1992 Olympics is a significant piece of this evolution, as LaFeber and others rightfully note, it is also important not to *overvalue* the contributions of the “Dream Team” itself to the NBA’s global prospects. Many effects that have been attributed to Barcelona alone were in progress prior to the Olympics, some for many years, such as the broader international television distribution of the NBA, the inclusion of international players, and the opening of international offices. The Olympics accelerated the NBA’s

⁷⁶ Jack McCallum, *Dream Team*, 286-287.

expected timeline of growth, opening up new markets and avenues of distribution, but it did not significantly alter their course. This is the importance of more fully studying and chronicling the history of the NBA as a media institution. In tracing their industrial development since 1982, with the foundation of NBA Entertainment, the impact of Michael Jordan and the Olympics is more accurately contextualized as but one major piece in a much longer and more complex trajectory.

Manifest Destiny

Following the success of the Olympics, the NBA and NBC reached a new four-year \$750 million extension, a 25-percent increase over the prior deal. More significantly, NBC agreed to share advertising revenues with the NBA, once the network reached a certain sales threshold, reported as \$1.06 billion. In a more rare move, NBC actually opened all their financial records to the NBA, so that the league could see the actual sales data and projections. From NBC's point of view, the NBA had been asking for more than their true value. The revenue sharing, noted *Broadcasting & Cable*, was the first of its kind between a league and a TV partner.⁷⁷ As a result of the partnership, "The NBA is getting much more involved in helping NBC's salespeople extract bigger bucks from advertisers."⁷⁸ In addition, *Inside Stuff* would become a year-round program, a major victory for NBA Entertainment and a further step towards legitimacy in the eyes of the broader television industry.⁷⁹ In securing more extensive advertising and production responsibilities, while sharing in the

⁷⁷ Steve McClellan, "NBC-NBA Deal: \$750 Million + Revenue Sharing," *Broadcasting & Cable*, May 3, 1993, 14.

⁷⁸ John Dempsey, "NBC & NBA Pave Way For Future Sports Deals," *Variety*, May 3, 1993, 25.

⁷⁹ Jon Lafayette, "NBC Sets Innovative NBA Deal," *Electronic Media*, May 3, 1993, 4.

network's revenues, the NBA was operating as a true media conglomerate more than ever before and perhaps more than any other pro sports organization.

The advertising and marketing expertise of the NBA and NBC had facilitated their agreement, becoming the only profitable sports rights deal on the books in 1993. As a result, the NBA was the only league to see an increase in their rights fees. Whereas today, when the media ecosystem and demand for live entertainment has driven those fees to exponential heights, that was not the case for most sports organizations in 1993. A week after the NBC-NBA extension, Major League Baseball proposed a deal with ABC and NBC for \$144 million per year, around half the value of its previous deal with CBS. Following the Olympics and the NBA's continued investments in global television, the media market was shrinking for all American sports but pro basketball. With the sales of licensed NBA products ballooning 103% in 1992, to \$260 million, David Stern's 'manifest destiny' vision of NBA conquest went unabated. "There are 250 million potential NBA fans in the U.S., and there are 5 billion outside the U.S.," he told *Forbes* in June 1993. "We like those numbers."⁸⁰

A week later, Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls won their third consecutive championship over the Phoenix Suns, the first "three-peat" since Bill Russell's 1960s Boston Celtics. While Jordan had climbed the mountain for a third straight year, he quickly crashed back down to earth. His relationship with Richard Esquinas, which included an alleged gambling debt of \$1 million, initiated an NBA investigation, though it would ultimately clear him.⁸¹ In July, Jordan's father was murdered in North Carolina. While the murder was entirely unrelated to his son's gambling habits, it did not stop the speculation.⁸² In October,

⁸⁰ Comte with Chakravarty, "How High Can David Stern Jump?"

⁸¹ William C. Rhoden, "The Issue Is Bigger Than Jordan," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1993.

⁸² Michael Janofsky, "Two Men Are Charged With Murder Of Jordan," *The New York Times*, August 16, 1993, C1.

he announced his retirement from basketball. "It's time for me to move on to something else," he told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "I know a lot of people are going to be shocked by this decision and probably won't understand. But I've talked it over with my family and friends, and most of all I'm at peace with myself."⁸³

Despite the setback of losing its most global and popular superstar, the NBA's expansion continued undeterred. A fourth office was opened in Geneva, which would serve as a European headquarters, while three different ownership groups began to bid on a possible Toronto franchise.⁸⁴ The NBA had also secured an extension with Turner Sports for \$350 million over four years, which would include 45 regulation season games and 35 playoff games on TNT, plus another 25 regular season games and 10 playoff games on TBS. Beginning with the 1994-1995 season, every NBA playoff game would see the air, across NBC, TNT, and TBS. Like the NBC deal, the new agreement included revenue sharing between the league and its partner.⁸⁵ *Broadcasting & Cable* even ran a cover story on the NBA's success story, featuring an image of a smiling David Stern holding a basketball. In the interview, the commissioner compares the NBA to Disney and the league's 27 franchises to 27 theme parks: "We very much think of ourselves as a global entertainment company." Though he acknowledged that, "we're still, in terms of the entertainment business, a relatively small player."⁸⁶

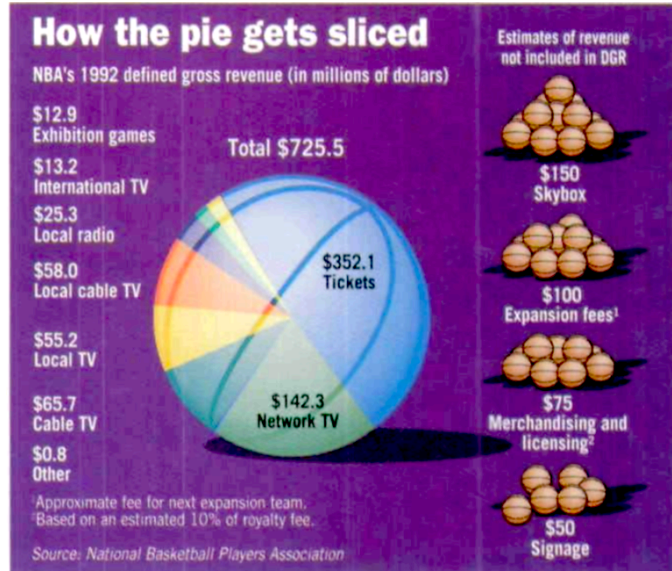
⁸³ Mike Downey, "Michael Jordan Plans to Retire," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 6, 1993.

⁸⁴ Michael Wilbon, "Morality, Popularity and Reality in the NBA," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1993, C1.

⁸⁵ Barry Layne, "NBA Scores \$350 Mil in 4-Year Turner Extension," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 22, 1993.

⁸⁶ Steve McClellan, "One-on-one with David Stern," *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 4, 1993, 44-46.

Figure 2.4: A story on David Stern in *Forbes* in 1993 features this chart of the NBA's 1992 gross revenue, which highlights the various income streams of the sports conglomerate (*Forbes*, June 7, 1993).



Over the course of the 1993-94 season, meanwhile, the NBA continued to grow its global presence. In February 1994, the Vancouver franchise was officially approved by the league, to be purchased by Arthur Griffiths. NBA Properties, the league's marketing arm, remained heavily involved in the development of the team. Researchers hit the streets of New York, focus-testing groups of young people with a selection of colors, logos, and names. The proposed "Vancouver Mounties" eventually became the Vancouver Grizzlies, joined in the league's Eastern Conference by the Toronto Raptors expansion team.⁸⁷ South of the United States border, the NBA also began to plan a series of exhibition games in Mexico City, which would help with the opening of a new regional office there.⁸⁸ Commissioner Stern had earlier made clear his intention to eventually open an NBA franchise in Mexico, which "would complete our North American agenda."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Robert Mason Lee, "Hoop-la! NBA Franchise Means Big Money," *The Vancouver Sun*, February 19, 1994, A1.

⁸⁸ An NBA office in Miami had formerly served as the Latin American headquarters. *Associated Press*, March 1, 1994.

⁸⁹ Steve McClellan, "One-on-one with David Stern."



Figure 2.5: A Canadian box of Frosted Flakes promotes the inaugural season of the Vancouver Grizzlies to young fans (Source: hockey02, ebay.com).

The regional offices became essential to the league’s expansion into markets beyond the United States, especially as international play became more commonplace. “Eventually it got to a point where it just was not humanly possible to be in two places at once,” explains Terry Lyons, who became vice president of international public relations in 1993. “We’re handing out rings in wherever, and the commissioner is there, and we’re running Japan games an hour after that.” The regional offices were able to take on more of the planning burden, by working closely with local interests, at which point the NBA could “bring in the troops for the event itself.”⁹⁰ As the league has continued to expand over the twenty years since, this has remained the trend. With more events, the various satellite offices have taken on more production and planning responsibilities, as the global responsibilities of NBA Entertainment have receded. Ultimately, the NBA functioned as a more globally diffuse organization, in much the same way as the “Disneys and Time Warners and Viacom and Paramounts and Sonys” that they had aspired to become.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Terry Lyons, in discussion with the author, December 20, 2017.

⁹¹ Steve McClellan, “One-on-one with David Stern.”

The post-Barcelona period was a key transitional moment for the league, hastening its transition into a full-fledged global entertainment conglomerate. Their physical operations expanded into a European headquarters in Geneva and a Latin American headquarters in Mexico City, in addition to the preexisting offices in Barcelona, Melbourne, and Hong Kong. The expansion of NBA play into Canada, via the Toronto Raptors and Vancouver Grizzlies, also served as an important league foothold north of the border. The satellite offices, as well as the new Canadian teams, had a two-fold purpose. They allowed for a further increase in international events and they deepened the NBA's market research and localization efforts. This local knowledge, in turn, incentivized new and aggressive media investments. Following the success of the Olympics, the league was determined to find the best method for reaching an emerging and disparate international fan-base. With the help of partners such as DirecTV and later Starwave, the TV Ventures division sought to capitalize on its heightened global visibility, ultimately resulting in a direct-to-consumer push that would include the "League Pass" satellite service in 1994 and NBA.com in 1995.

"More is More": A New Media Strategy for a Digital Age

In May 1991, in the midst of the NBA playoffs, HBO had made a seemingly minor proposal, announcing plans to "multiplex" its HBO and Cinemax channels. Programming would now be spread out over *several* channels, such as an east coast and west coast feed, in order to present subscribers with as much variety as possible without actually expanding their content holdings. While the test started small, in Texas and Kansas under the management of the TeleCable Corporation, various multiple-system cable operators (MSOs) expressed an

interest in participating in the experiment.⁹² Following a successful initial run, HBO continued its multiplex experiment, to the chagrin of other cable channels, including Showtime and Encore, which began to fear that subscribers would drop their channels in favor of a fuller HBO slate. Within a year, in fact, Nielsen ratings had shown HBO viewership up by as much as eighty-percent. John Billock, HBO executive VP of sales and marketing, refuted the concerns of competitors, explaining that “HBO has no hidden agenda. Multiplexing is not exclusive to HBO.”⁹³ Before long, other cable channels indeed began to take HBO up on their claim, including TBS/TNT, which would launch an NBA postseason multiplex. HBO’s strategy had provided further evidence that more total programming hours would be far more profitable for the NBA than a more selective slate of games.

The evolving ‘more is more’ strategy was a major shift from the ‘less is more’ approach that had brought the league ratings legitimacy in the 1980s. Instead of thinking about ‘cannibalization,’ John Kosner and Ed Desser combined their insights from the Broadcasting and TV Ventures departments and began to value *cumulative* ratings. “It was unheard of, prior to that time, for anyone to have multiple games on at the same time,” explains Desser. ““You’re going to cannibalize your own rating, that isn’t going to be a good idea.””⁹⁴ The NBA had an altogether different perspective, inspired by HBO’s success.⁹⁵ If a single game airing unopposed at 8 pm were to average a 3 rating, compared with two games head-to-head averaging 1.9 and 1.7 ratings, the cumulative rating would add up to a 3.6 rating versus a 3.0 rating—more people, in total, would be watching the games. “The idea of getting more games created more value and it all came back to that first premise: let’s put our

⁹² “Home Box Office Plans Multiplex Delivery of HBO and Cinemax,” *PR Newswire*, May 8, 1991.

⁹³ John Dempsey, “Multiplexing Sparks Multicriticisms,” *Variety*, May 5, 1992, 14.

⁹⁴ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

⁹⁵ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

most valuable stuff on television,” recalls John Kosner.⁹⁶ The introduction of the multiplex was thus a major step forward in the NBA’s overall media strategy, reflecting the subsequent introductions of a satellite service, a cable channel, and a website. The more NBA content on the air, the more consumers and viewers, the better—concerns of ratings cannibalization were an issue of the past. It was a media strategy ideally suited to the burgeoning digital age.

In April 1994, the NBA officially began its multiplex coverage of the playoffs, splitting games across TBS and TNT. While the idea originated with HBO, news coverage credited NBA and Turner with the invention. “Turner is calling this concept ‘multiplexing,’” reported the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, which also noted that the order came from the NBA league office and Turner had simply obliged them.⁹⁷ ‘Multiplex,’ reported the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, is “the name David Stern & Co. came up with” to air forty playoff games across the channels. As a consequence of the prior TV agreements, the next year’s playoffs would finally feature the entire NBA postseason on television, across NBC, TNT, and TBS.⁹⁸ By the close of 1996, led by the success of its NBA programming, TNT would finish first in the prime time cable ratings for the first time ever, surpassing USA Network’s 2.0 ratings average with a 2.1.⁹⁹

Direct-broadcast satellite, meanwhile, was becoming a more legitimate domestic competitor to cable, opening up possibilities for even fuller television coverage.¹⁰⁰ The NBA’s own satellite service had been years in the making, beginning with early research on

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Prentis Rogers, “TBS, TNT Give Fans Access to All Openers,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 1994, E2.

⁹⁸ Fritz Quindt, “So Many Playoffs, So Many Dilemmas,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, April 29, 1994, D2.

⁹⁹ Jim McConville, “TNT Says It’s Tops in Basic,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, December 16, 1996, 84.

¹⁰⁰ After launching in June 1994, DirecTV, for instance, would reach one million subscribers by November 1995, before expanding to seven million by 1999 and then 12.6 million by 2004. By 2005, overall DBS penetration had reached 17-percent of U.S. households. Staff, “DirecTV First 10 Years,” *Multichannel News*, Updated March 29, 2018); U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Direct Broadcast Satellite Subscribership Has Grown Rapidly, but Varies across Different Types of Markets*, GAO-05-257 (Washington, DC, 2005), 6-8.

the possibilities of digital compression for the delivery of games. “Digital signal compression was first applied to high definition TV signals to get them to fit into 6 megahertz bandwidth slots,” the standard bandwidth for television stations, recalled Ed Desser in May 2017. “But then there was this really interesting sort of side benefit, which was, ‘hey, if we can use this signal compression technology to take a big fat high definition channel and squeeze it into 6 megahertz, how many standard definition signals could we squeeze onto a satellite?’”¹⁰¹ From that discovery, the DBS satellite business was born and the NBA wanted in on it. At the same time, as providers such as DirecTV and Dish Network required a way to differentiate their products, sports exclusives provided the ideal partnership.

The NBA signed on with DirecTV in 1994, as did the NFL.¹⁰² For the 1994-95 season, the NFL’s “Sunday Ticket” service and the NBA’s “League Pass” service both debuted. The NFL package would provide subscribers with access to dozens of out-of-market games every Sunday. The NBA’s League Pass, on the other hand, offered customers access to more than 400 regular-season games – any games that were out-of-market and not already televised nationally. By January 1995, the NFL’s package had sold 200,000 residential subscriptions and 5,000 commercial ones. While the NBA’s numbers were not yet available, they were careful to temper expectations. “We don’t foresee this as being a mass-distribution vehicle,” Ed Desser explained to *Variety*, in his capacity as TV Ventures president. “It’s a supplement to other programming. Our expectations, frankly, are modest.”¹⁰³ Nonetheless, these new systems enabled both the NFL and NBA to take on more control of their own distribution, outside of the traditional broadcast or cable paradigm. By doing so, the launch

¹⁰¹ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹⁰² Joe Flint, “Sat Dish Christmas Wish,” *Variety*, December 20, 1994.

¹⁰³ Thomas Walsh, “Satellite Sports: Stealthy Sidebar?” *Variety*, January 16, 1995, 33, 36.

of both services reflects an ongoing transformation towards the leagues' functioning as media conglomerates.

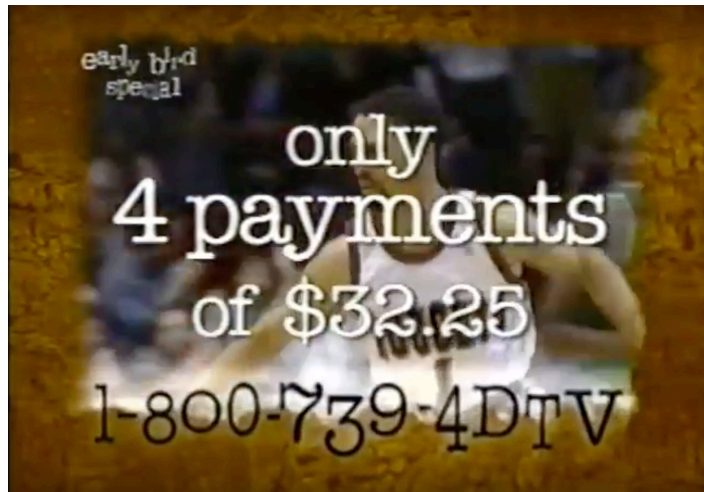


Figure 2.6: From a 1996 commercial for NBA League Pass.¹⁰⁴

The institution of these increasingly flexible distribution technologies, and their opportunities for 24-hour programming, thus reflects a transition towards a more contemporary post-network concept of *flow*. Victoria E. Johnson writes that the contemporary “multi-platform era” of television has been defined by “hybridity,” for which sports programming is particularly compatible, in that “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content.”¹⁰⁵ Bernard Miège’s own definition of “flow” accurately reflects these contemporary media viewing habits, as they exist “outside prime time or overlap and stretch prime time’s borders in unpredictable ways.” For Miège, flow entails “a continuous flow requiring daily contact,” “the development of audience loyalty,” and a “wide variety of consumption preferences.”¹⁰⁶ By

¹⁰⁴ Critical-Hit-Games, “NBA League Pass DirecTV Commercial – 1996,” YouTube, 1:00. Post April 2, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77jf_BiZQ3Q>.

¹⁰⁵ Victoria E. Johnson, “Everything New is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era.” In *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 116.

¹⁰⁶ Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production*, 123, 146.

reflecting these programming and consumption patterns, the establishment of League Pass, NBA.com, and later NBA TV, helped to ideally position the NBA for the multiplatform era to come. While the NFL and MLB, too, had comparable offerings or would shortly after the NBA, the league's especially aggressive approach to media set a precedent, as an aspiring global entertainment conglomerate, that other organizations would be forced to follow.

A year after the debut of the League Pass DBS service, the league debuted its web service, NBA.com. The site was developed in partnership with Starwave, an "intermediary" software company that would build and manage websites on behalf of clients, much like the streaming intermediary firms to be discussed in Chapter Four. Paul Allen, the Microsoft co-founder and owner of the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers, had founded the company in 1993. The choice of Starwave as partner, moreover, reflects an ongoing pattern in which the NBA often selects collaborators from within its ownership ranks, as they had done with Ted Turner's cable operations and as they would do again with Mark Cuban's connections in the streaming business. These alliances helped to minimize the loss of league control when turning to external parties. "It wasn't the *only* path forward," explains David Stern, on the choice of Starwave over building the operation in-house. "But we had a notion that had taken us far as well, that if we could find the best in class, or what we thought at the time we looked was the best in class, that partnerships were an important development that you had to learn to navigate."¹⁰⁷

Starwave sought to capitalize on content owners' eagerness to get online by leveraging its unique technological know-how to build clients' websites from the ground up. The idea for a sports service began with Mike Slade, who had spent eight years in product marketing at Microsoft and was hired by Allen to run Starwave as its CEO. Slade had fond

¹⁰⁷ David Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

memories of covering sports for a daily newspaper in college, one of the first papers to transition to an electronic publishing system. “In 1978, I had in front of me a screen with the entire AP sports wire on it,” recalled Slade in September 2017. “Years later, I was like, ‘how come I can’t have this, that was fun.’ To see every sports score and every stat, everything...I always wanted it again.” When Slade joined Starwave in 1993, his memory of the newswire was the one idea that really stuck: “I wanted to build an online sports section, the world’s biggest sports section basically.”¹⁰⁸ As a result, ESPN became their first and most important partner, fundamentally affecting the shape of the web to come.

Completed in April 1995, the finished ESPN online platform was able to host score updates, photos, and featured audio and video highlights. Just as intermediary companies with the appropriate know-how are now hired to build *streaming* platforms for their clients, Starwave was required to do the same for the ESPN website from scratch.¹⁰⁹ “We built all the tools – the technology to parse the data, and do the content management and the ad serving, and the load balancing,” explains Slade, describing features that are now commonplace in web building and hosting platforms like WordPress and SquareSpace. Tools were built for ESPNnet.SportZone.com, as it was then called, that allowed Starwave to analyze views and clicks. Starwave set cookies from the beginning to see who was coming, how often, and to which pages. Management could see, for instance, that traffic would peak on Monday morning when people at work could take advantage of high-speed connections at the office.

This accumulated knowledge was essential to pitching advertisers on the value of internet advertising dollars over TV, print, or radio. Mike Slade recalls, “The whole pitch

¹⁰⁸ Mike Slade, in discussion with the author, September 12, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ For more on these “transparent” intermediaries, see Joshua Braun, “Transparent Intermediaries: Building the Infrastructures of Connected Viewing,” in *Connected Viewing: Selling Streaming, and Sharing Media in the Digital Era*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 124-143.

then...wasn't 'this is a better presentation of your brand,' it was 'you'll get all this data and someday you'll be able to sell direct to these people.'"¹¹⁰ Starwave was able to parlay their data collection into extensive ad sales. *Ad Age* reported in October 1995 that Starwave had signed eight major sponsors to contracts totaling over \$1 million, including a \$300,000 deal with Levi Strauss and other smaller deals with AT&T, Microsoft, and Pizza Hut.¹¹¹ Starwave's partnership with ESPN also stipulated that ESPN be involved in any other sports endeavors, creating a three-way partnership with prospective clients, such as the NBA and the NFL, and splitting all of the advertising revenue three ways, much like the ongoing arrangement between the NBA and NBC for the league's broadcast advertising. The Starwave-ESPN platform thus remained under joint ownership of Starwave and ESPN while the NBA leased its content and brand for the NBA platform. When Starwave set about programming its additional websites, the company simply cloned much of the original ESPN site and re-skinned it, then worked in any unique requests made by their client. The NFL, for example, which signed up after the NBA, required a toolbar across the top of the page with all of the team logos, a feature that remained on the site until 2017.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Mike Slade, in discussion with the author, September 12, 2017.

¹¹¹ Debra Aho Williamson, "Score One for ESPN, Starwave," *Ad Age*, October 2, 1995.

¹¹² "Welcome to the New, Improved Home of the NFL," *NFL.com*, July 25, 2017.



Figure 2.7: NBA.com ahead of the 1996-97 season (Source: Wayback Machine).

The NBA website was launched November 3, 1995, for the start of the 1995-96 season. At the opening of Portland’s new Rose Garden Arena, Paul Allen addressed the new web venture, “We’re on the verge of some truly innovative changes that will make the sporting experience more engaging, more customized and more fun.” David Stern, as he had done with the NBA’s foray into international television, compared the website to the early investment in cable, which eventually became a more commonplace delivery system. The site would feature team pages, play spotlights, video clips, and real-time statistics, the last of which did not come easily at the time.¹¹³ “The real problem was more about, basically, real-time publishing, that you’re updating data all the time, the scoreboard would have to be up on time,” explains Mike Slade. “You’re basically doing thousands of different kinds of queries per minute or whatever on the same databases.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Paul Andrews, “NBA Junkies To Get Their Fill,” *Seattle Times*, October 23, 1995.

¹¹⁴ Mike Slade, in discussion with the author, September 12, 2017.

While reliable video streaming remained a few years away, Starwave and the NBA were highly interested in offering audio broadcasts of games on the website, which was aided by a partnership with Progressive Networks and their RealAudio technology.¹¹⁵ Geoff Reis, who oversaw the NBA project at Starwave, told *Broadcasting & Cable*, “We will be putting up fresh daily multimedia content [that] NBA fans from around the world will be able to access.”¹¹⁶ While global bandwidth capabilities were varied, the hope was that audio streaming would help to reach a dispersed international fan base. For the website’s first Finals, in June 1996, NBA.com carried live audio from the postgame news conferences and real-time photo stills from the games. “It’s a total companion to the fans following the finals,” said Jamie Rosenberg, the NBA manager of interactive programming. Thus far, the operation had been successful, receiving two million hits per day early in the playoffs, and rising to 2.5 million leading up to the Finals.¹¹⁷

Steve Hellmuth, who worked on the NBA website and serves as the league’s executive vice president of media operations and technology, explains that a sports website’s most important services are *schedule* and *scores*: “When can I watch and what’s the score?” News, features, and highlights offer further context, which can be useful in drawing more viewers to the actual games. “All of those things, to us, were engagement tools to get people to watch more TV, what we were really monetizing,” explains Hellmuth. “We did monetize on the website, to a certain degree, but more importantly it was a portal into the NBA, the same way social media is, to get you to video, where we really monetize.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Andrews, “NBA Junkies To Get Their Fill.”

¹¹⁶ Mark Berniker, “NBA Gets on Web With Starwave’s ESPN SportsZone,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 20, 1995, 69.

¹¹⁷ Richard Tedesco, “NBA Web Sites Warm Up For Finals,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 3, 1996, 65.

¹¹⁸ Steve Hellmuth, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2018.

Just as NBA Entertainment was originally created to do in the 1980s through commercials and home video releases, NBA.com was launched with the intention of creating additional value for telecasts. The strategy would also be the same for the NBA-owned cable channel to come, which began primarily as a ‘barker’ sales channel for the League Pass service. The “more is more” strategy that emerged over this period valued television as the league’s most important asset. Over the course of the decade, as a consequence, the league sought out new methods to draw as many viewers as possible to those telecasts, boosting ad revenues and increasing their leverage in subsequent rights negotiations. This was the ultimate purpose of League Pass, NBA.com, and later NBA.com TV.

The NBA’s efforts to maintain control over these burgeoning media operations were intensified by larger regulatory machinations. In February 1996, the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* officially went into effect, removing the barriers to ownership and operation across the communications business and instigating a series of massive corporate mergers. After the bill had passed the Senate, in June 1995, Disney came to an agreement to buy Cap Cities/ABC for \$19 billion, making it the largest entertainment company in the world.¹¹⁹ A month later, talks began to accelerate between Turner Broadcasting System and Time Warner, already a TBS part owner.¹²⁰ In September, Time Warner bought out the remaining shares of TBS for \$7.5 billion, creating the *new* largest media company in the world.¹²¹ The following February, the Telecom Act was signed into law and the mergers were all officially approved. Jennifer Holt explains the Act as “the ultimate deregulatory initiative to complete the structural convergence of the media industries that began during the 1980s,” in that it

¹¹⁹ Sallie Hofmeister and Jane Hall, “Disney to Buy Cap Cities/ABC for \$19 Billion, Vault to No. 1,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1995.

¹²⁰ Paul Farhi, “Time Warner, Turner Talking About Merger,” *The Washington Post*, August 31, 1995, B13.

¹²¹ Paul Farhi, “Time Warner, TBS Agree On \$7.5 Billion Merger; Deal to Create World’s Largest Media Company,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1995, A1.

allowed “broadcast, cable, and telephone companies to create convergent media empires with newly expanded boundaries.”¹²²

As entertainment empires emerged and the marketplace shifted, David Stern cast a careful eye, waiting for the right opportunity. “I just want to be standing with this big bundle of carefully protected rights and be ready to go,” he told *Ad Day*, at the start of the NBA’s 50th season in 1996. “With all the vertically integrated entertainment companies, some rights holders will want to sell bundled broadcast and digital rights, but that’s not something I want to do now. If interest rates are volatile, you don’t go long in bonds. And this is a very volatile communications technology marketplace.”¹²³ The NBA would in fact hold onto their digital rights for another decade, at which point they indeed bundled their broadcast rights, in a deal with longtime partner Turner. In the meantime, the NBA waited and assessed, building their digital assets for when the right time came.

After Disney purchased Cap Cities/ABC, and with it ESPN, the purchase of Starwave seemed an inevitability. In February 1997, talks began to accelerate. In April, Disney announced that it was purchasing 33-percent of Starwave for approximately \$100 million. Nearly a year to the day later, Disney exercised their option to buy out the remaining two-thirds of the company, folding Starwave’s operations into its Buena Vista Internet Group in order to expand Disney’s internet presence under a “common technology platform.”¹²⁴ Disney hoped to leapfrog competitors CBS, NBC, and Fox in the internet sports business.¹²⁵ Mike Slade had seen the move coming: “it was sort of obvious they were either going to

¹²² Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 165-166.

¹²³ Terry Lefton, “At Age 50, Stern Looks Ahead,” *Ad Day*, October 28, 1996, 34.

¹²⁴ “Disney Wishes on Starwave,” *CNN Money*, April 30, 1998.

¹²⁵ Michael Stroud, “Disney Reportedly in Talks to Buy Stake in Starwave,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, February 14, 1997, B2.

dump us, which was impossible, or buy us.” Starwave held too much leverage, as ESPN’s expert platform manager, to exist independent of Disney’s online operations and had to be brought in-house, whatever the cost. The relationship with the NBA, though, continued unaffected with the renamed ESPN Internet Ventures division. The NBA’s audio streaming operation had evolved into a \$19.95 audio-only League Pass, which was simply moved from ESPN.com to NBA.com for the start of the 1997 season.

After the dust settled from the post-Telecom Act merger mania, the NBA and NBC came to another extension for \$1.75 billion over four years, what would ultimately be their last agreement. With such a massive hike in fees, NBC was not expected to profit much, if at all. The last deal, however, had landed the network \$200 million after revenue sharing.¹²⁶ “We made money in the early years,” recalled Dick Ebersol in June 2015, in a joint interview with David Stern. “But we took away the profit on each negotiation,” Stern quickly added.¹²⁷ Combined with a new Turner agreement, the NBA was guaranteed \$2.64 billion through the 2002 season. With an influx of money the likes of which the NBA had never seen before, they formed an internal committee to study the “new economics” of the league and the implications for the upcoming labor agreement.¹²⁸

While the most extreme changes to the media landscape had occurred on the domestic front, the NBA’s primary motivation remained global. The introduction of League Pass and NBA.com were intended to reach far-flung and disparate audiences, even if the technologies required further development to reliably allow for international engagement. The NBA understood the potential in NBA.com for the greater control over the administration of their

¹²⁶ Steve McClellan, “NBA Not Quite a Loss Leader for NBC, Turner,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 17, 1997, 14.

¹²⁷ Sports Video Group, “Dick Ebersol and David Stern.”

¹²⁸ Steve Zipay, “NBA Plans to Study Its New Economics,” *Newsday*, November 12, 1997.

brand and greater direct-to-consumer access, which could be further parlayed into increased viewership and revenue. Following from Miège, the NBA's use of auxiliary delivery system worked to "stretch prime time's borders in unpredictable ways," through a continuous flow of daily contact.¹²⁹ What began with the TBS/TNT multiplex had cohered, over a few short years, into a more complete multi-platform strategy.

McNBA: The NBA as Format

As the NBA's interest in media technologies continued to accelerate, the league's global presence also grew to meet it. The original expansion into Canada, ahead of the 1995 season, served as a beachhead and a model for greater international expansion. The NBA had worked diligently to try to supplant the popularity of pro hockey and pro baseball, launching a show aimed at teens called *Dunk Street*. "The content is split roughly fifty-fifty split between stories produced in Canada and footage from the NBA's weekly international reel," explained Stuart Foxman of *Strategy*, a Canadian business magazine. The show had helped the league to gain a valuable foothold on young viewers. Forty percent of the *Dunk Street* audience was aged 18 years and up, coinciding with an NBA survey that found that basketball had become the second-most popular sport amongst 18 to 24 year olds, following only hockey. "When the NBA launched in Canada, Commissioner Stern had said that our goal was to be the number two sport globally," said Ken Derrett, managing director of NBA Canada. "As we are the number two sport in the U.S., coming in second behind hockey in Canada would be a significant accomplishment."¹³⁰

The Canada strategy, using localized TV programs in combination with marketing

¹²⁹ Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production*, 123, 146.

¹³⁰ Stuart Foxman, "The NBA in Canada: Celebrating Season II," *Strategy*, January 6, 1997, 31.

research conducted by local offices, reflected the model for NBA operations around the world. Like Canada's *Dunk Street*, Japan aired a different NBA-produced version of the same program titled *Fastbreak* while Mexico's was titled *Rafaga*. While *Dunk Street* emphasized features and personal spotlights, *Fastbreak* contained more highlights, based on audience feedback and demand. Albert Moran defines the TV format as "a core or a structuring center," or "that set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced."¹³¹ Formats, such as the NBA's offerings, are a process. They remain "less than fully matured, incomplete, ever ready to incorporate further elements" that will thus "add, cumulatively, to its system of knowledge."¹³² In addition to learning from the relative success or failure of the programs, these elements are acquired from the efforts of the various regional offices. Around the world, David Stern explains, NBA employees are deployed "on the ground, so that they can be part of the local scene and understand local television sponsorship, local licensing and retailing."¹³³ In this way, the NBA had been operating precisely as an international TV format producer.

Formats, as the manifestation of these localizations efforts, are thus inherently a kind of imperialist project. While operating in service of profit rather than conquest, formats function as an accumulation of knowledge that works to benefit the original copyright holder. Marcel Danesi has argued that global brands such as the NBA, "by co-opting local signification systems and blending them with more global ones," encourage individuals "to see themselves as members of local and global communities at once." The NBA's own involvement in this process, editing and translating the programming themselves for international broadcasters, thus works to blend U.S. and non-U.S. interests in such a way as

¹³¹ Albert Moran with Justin Malbon, *Understanding the Global TV Format* (Portland, OR: Intellect, 2006), 20.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 65, 30.

¹³³ Curt Schleier, "NBA Commissioner David Stern," *Investor's Business Daily*, March 11, 1999, A10.

to craft a more marketable “global identity.”¹³⁴ The NBA’s formatting of its global youth programming, featuring its usual American sponsors, demonstrates an uneasy alliance between the NBA’s earlier entrepreneurial efforts and a broader capitalist imperative to expand into new markets. The NBA’s ability to control international programming through its international offices allows for a much greater capacity for imperialistic behavior. Despite any dialogic cultural flows that may inform the NBA’s actions, the accrued information simply becomes marketing research, which is fed back into the formula for the commercial benefit of the NBA and its sponsors.



Figure 2.8: From an episode of *Dunk Street* on YTV.¹³⁵

As of April 1996, Stern’s “manifest-destiny regime” had brought the NBA from 35 countries in 1986, before the league reacquired its own international rights, to 175 countries and 45 languages for the 1996 playoffs.¹³⁶ Later that year, the commissioner was the keynote speaker at the International Council meeting of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. “Our game inspires local, regional, national and even international loyalty,” he told

¹³⁴ Marcel Danesi, *Brands* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 122.

¹³⁵ KeepItRetro, “YTV NBA Dunk Street,” YouTube, 8:26. Post March 23, 2019.

¹³⁶ Jeff Coplon, “Legends. Champions?” *New York Times*, April 21, 1996.

the audience. “We are truly egalitarian programming... The emerging lesson for us is that the power of TV has given us global fans, and this is no longer a local thing.”¹³⁷ The NBA took complete globality to be the sport’s ultimate horizon, with the National Basketball Association as the world’s league and David Stern as the world’s commissioner – a manifest-destiny regime.

The NBA’s global formatting efforts had also given way to a broader franchising of the NBA itself, a clear signal that the league fashioned itself as a conglomerate large enough for multiple subsidiaries. In June 1996, the NBA and NBC jointly announced the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), which would launch the following year under a five-year revenue-sharing agreement. Featuring eight teams, playing from June to August, NBC agreed to televise ten Saturday afternoon games while ESPN and ESPN2 would each televise a game per week.¹³⁸ The WNBA thus functioned as an adaption of the NBA *league* format, which demonstrated the NBA’s greater ambitions as a complete entertainment conglomerate as well as its continued perception of sport as media content.

A more experimental investment was for an NBA-operated *football* league in collaboration with Turner and NBC, who had both recently lost their NFL packages. While the NBA remained a somewhat silent partner, NBC and Turner announced the league in May 1998 at halftime of a Chicago Bulls playoff game with the NBA’s full approval. The new league would feature 10 to 12 teams and begin the following fall.¹³⁹ “When this new league begins it wouldn’t surprise me if some NBA owners are owners of these teams,” Stern coyly

¹³⁷ John Nelson, “NBA Takes Its Shot in a Global Market,” *Associated Press*, November 25, 1996.

¹³⁸ Rudy Martzke, “Women’s Pro League to Open with NBC on Board,” *USA Today*, June 28, 1996.

¹³⁹ Jeff Schultz and Len Pasquarelli, “The Proposed League: NFL’s a Tough League to Sack,” *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, May 29, 1998, 1E.

told the New York *Daily News*.¹⁴⁰ While the NBA's version of a football league was eventually aborted, given the already-full plate of the WNBA and labor negotiations, their initial involvement reflects a greater self-confidence in the NBA itself as format.¹⁴¹ If the NBA operational structure and media strategy could be translated and adapted into many different contexts, the international possibilities would become boundless. This culminates in late 2014, when the league becomes an equity investor and collaborator in Brazil's Liga Nacional de Basquete (LNB), the first formal partnership of this kind.¹⁴²

Some of the NBA franchising included copycat leagues beyond their control. In China, a Hong Kong promotions firm launched the Chinese National Basketball Alliance, or CNBA. Using the NBA initials, as well as NBA players in its advertising, the CNBA was quickly sued by the NBA Asia office. The Chinese sports governing body had originally given permission for the CNBA to compete with the more established Chinese Basketball League (CBL), but quickly rescinded their approval after angering the NBA and the CBL's backer, the American management company IMG.¹⁴³ Andy Jay, the COO of Spectrum, the CNBA's organizers and promoters, denied the accusation that he was copying the NBA: "Maybe we will benefit a little bit, but if you walked down the street and asked 100 people what the NBA was no one would know. It's not a household name in China." The CNBA nonetheless had used English names, 32 American players, and eight coaches. The NBA further clarified their stance, noting that their problem was not with the league itself, but the name alone. "We would support the development of basketball everywhere in the world.

¹⁴⁰ Bob Raissman, "The Check is in the Mail," *Daily News*, June 21, 1998, 91.

¹⁴¹ When the NBA pulled out, Turner followed and NBC eventually found another collaborator in the World Wrestling Federation's Vince McMahon, resulting in the XFL.

¹⁴² Official Release, "NBA and Brazil's LNB Announce Groundbreaking Partnership," *NBA.com*, December 14, 2014.

¹⁴³ "NBA Seeks to Block Use of Famous Name By Chinese League," *Agence France Presse*, December 13, 1996.

We've no problem with the league. Our problem is with the name," said Cheong Sau-ching, NBA Asia spokesperson.¹⁴⁴

At the same time, the CNBA name ultimately aids in the league's expansion. Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas have noted that such informally-produced instances "can extend market opportunities for brands, by making the brand visible in places where it might not otherwise be seen." Like bootlegged NBA tapes had helped the league in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the CNBA thus provided an important "market-priming role" for the NBA.¹⁴⁵ Following from Cheong Sau-ching, moreover, the development of NBA-caliber play only helped basketball succeed in those territories. This understanding results in the league becoming more proactive in international player development, launching a series of camps and later academies to train young athletes and prepare them for the NBA.

Following the success of the Dream Team, as well as fifteen years of media expansion, the NBA of the late 1990s had emerged into a multipurpose media conglomerate and franchise. They had transformed NBA into a localizable TV format and were in the process of transforming the league itself into a business format. These initiatives aimed to more fully connect a globalizing NBA fan base with its U.S. base of operations. More than 35-percent of traffic to NBA.com, for instance, had come from outside the United States since the site's launch in 1995. By October 1997, as the Chicago Bulls prepared for the McDonald's Open in Paris, the Bulls logo ranked among the ten most recognized corporate symbols in a survey of 25,000 teenagers from 41 countries.¹⁴⁶ The NBA, formerly a

¹⁴⁴ Emma Batha, "Rams Lock Horns with NBA," *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 1996, 8.

¹⁴⁵ During the Atlanta Hawks' 1988 tour of the Soviet Union, David Stern recalled fans cheering loudest for Spud Webb, who they had watched on videotapes pirated from Turkey (Kevin Scheitrum, "Opening the Curtain," *NBA.com*, September 2013); Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 151, 43.

¹⁴⁶ Mark Alesia, "Planet NBA League Cashes on Global Boom," *Chicago Daily Herald*, October 16, 1997.

professional sports organization with a global curiosity, had become an international entertainment conglomerate.

The Electronic Environment: Adam Silver and NBA.com TV

Since its foundation in 1982, NBA Entertainment had become a fundamental component of the league's overall growth, as the center of its production and the storehouse for all of its media and statistical information. When Adam Silver was promoted to President and COO of NBAE in December 1997, the move signaled a significant shift in the league's media strategy, which would thereafter more substantially integrate their media interests with the actual performance of the sport, further laying the groundwork for the global NBA media landscape to come.¹⁴⁷ Adam Silver's NBAE functions as distinct incarnation of the division, following its inception and its initial digitization in the early part of the decade.

The NBA's collaboration with Starwave also continued, as the February 1998 All-Star game featured an audio live-stream and near-real-time video highlights, using RealNetworks's streaming technology.¹⁴⁸ In April 1998, Disney bought out the remaining shares in Starwave, fully absorbing the company into ESPN Internet Ventures.¹⁴⁹ The NBA nonetheless extended their deal with ESPN, which would run NBA.com for another two years. The deal would continue the same revenue sharing that was part of the original agreement, as well as cross-promotion between the ESPN and NBA sites. Stephanie Scheer, the league's director of Internet Services, went so far as to proclaim that the NBA website was "becoming a viable business in and of itself," beyond its promotional value for the

¹⁴⁷ Jay Sherman, "NBA Ent. Goes to Hoop with Silver," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 2, 1997.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Tedesco, "NBA to Stream Live All-Star Audio," *Broadcasting & Cable*, February 2, 1998, 82.

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Peline, "Disney to Buy Starwave," *CNET*, April 20, 1998.

league.¹⁵⁰ While this would ultimately prove untrue as the dot-com bubble burst, the sentiment nonetheless indicates the significance of NBA.com within the league's broader media strategy at this time.

With the website more fully maturing, the 1998 Finals featured greater integration of the NBA Entertainment's television and web efforts. While listening to live audio streams, the "NBA.cam" service allowed users to take snapshots of NBA action by clicking on images from the game's eight different cameras, with the feeds updating every few seconds. In addition, video highlights would be made available on the website during halftime, in combination with shot-charts, statistics, and game commentaries from the players.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, at the Finals itself, NBA Entertainment worked to organize and corral representatives from the twenty countries there to cover the games in-person. "Tucked up in a corner of the Delta Center... is a small enclave that looks like something right out of the United Nations," wrote a reporter for the *Deseret News*. In addition to NBC's coverage, NBAE had control of its own specialized camera angles, which were quickly edited into a specialized international feed for the league's 93 international TV partners across 175 countries. The broadcasts were then completed with local commentaries, most commonly recorded in booths as the feeds arrived overseas from the United States.¹⁵² While NBAE worked to smoothly distribute the games themselves, other personnel were there to document everything on the court and behind-the-scenes, for home video releases or for the league's website. Adam Silver's tenure at NBAE would be one characterized by such access and intimacy.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Tedesco, "NBA Keeps Playing Ball with ESPN Online," *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 29, 1998, 76-77.

¹⁵¹ Richard Tedesco, "NBA.com Lets Fans Take Shots Online," *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 8, 1998, 53.

¹⁵² Scott D. Pierce, "Broadcasters Transmit Finals to 175 Countries," *Deseret News*, June 5, 1998.

In 1998, despite the highest-rated NBA Finals in history, in which the Chicago Bulls won a third consecutive title over the Utah Jazz, worries abound that NBC would soon lose money on the NBA arrangement.¹⁵³ To counteract the rising NBA costs, NBC raised their ad rates by as much as 50-percent over the previous year.¹⁵⁴ More threatening to the long-term health of the agreement, rumors began to swirl that Michael Jordan would retire following the 1998 season. In February, during NBC's pregame coverage of the All-Star Game, noted Jordan insider Ahmad Rashad offered his take on the situation, "For the first time, I believe him when he says he's going to quit."¹⁵⁵ As the looming possibility of a labor lockout gained more momentum, Jordan's retirement became increasingly certain. NBC noticeably began to promote Kobe Bryant, the 19-year-old Lakers star. "Promoting Kobe is no different than what we were doing promoting Michael in 1990," said Dick Ebersol. "Business goes on."¹⁵⁶

David Stern tried to downplay the growing unease, emphasizing the overall growth of the league. "We have to be able together to find a way to split this pie up, make the players even wealthier than they are, make our teams profitable, and find a way not to raise ticket prices at the rate that they've been raised," Stern told Lou Dobbs on *CNN Moneyline*.¹⁵⁷ By October, however, the necessary progress had not been made in labor negotiations between the owners and the players union. Stern and deputy commissioner Russ Granik announced that the first two weeks of the season would be cancelled. TNT/TBS would replace the games with "male-oriented action movies," while NBC had until Christmas before any lost games

¹⁵³ The Finals averaged an 18.8 rating and a 33 share, a number that no playoff series since has approached. The single-game high of 35.89 million viewers, however, was nearly matched by Game 7 of the 2016 Cavaliers-Warriors Finals, at 30.8 million (Richard Deitsch, "NBA Finals Game 7 Delivers Huge Audience for ABC," *Sports Illustrated*, June 20, 2016).

¹⁵⁴ Michael Stroud, "NBC Investing in NBA Futures," *Broadcasting & Cable*, June 22, 1998, 50.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Hiestand, "Jordan's Possible Retirement Permeates NBC Shows," *USA Today*, February 9, 1998.

¹⁵⁶ Stefan Fatsis, "NBA Bravely Plans for the Day When Michael Jordan Retires," *Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 1998.

¹⁵⁷ David Stern, "Is the NBA Hurt By Player Misconduct?" interviewed by Lou Dobbs. *CNN Moneyline*, February 3, 1998.

would begin to affect their schedule. The regional sports networks (RSNs) were in the most precarious position, given their sole focus on local sports teams; the networks could not reprogram in the same way as NBC or TNT and simply airing reruns of old games would not receive anywhere near the same viewership as live ones.¹⁵⁸ In December, the NBA cancelled its schedule through the All-Star game in February. NBC tried to dismiss any talk of an entire cancelled *season*, which only served to draw more attention to the possibility.¹⁵⁹

NBA Entertainment, meanwhile, had used the work stoppage to expand their production capabilities and improve their archival information. NBA.com launched an “NBA History” section with video clips, player bios, and season recaps. The site also began to stream chat sessions with former stars, such as Julius Erving, a significant step towards the same-day streaming highlights set to be available at the start of the season.¹⁶⁰ With a break from logging the massive influx of nightly game footage, moreover, NBAE employees were now free to catalog older footage from the pre-NBAE era of the 1970s, which could be added to the “oldies footage” packages that were being distributed to international markets. The improved archive would prove central to the upcoming “all-NBA channel” set to air in 1999 through DirecTV. “We’re not as busy as we’d like to be, but we’re not sitting around,” Adam Silver told the *New York Times*.¹⁶¹ While the lockout did much to hurt the credibility and profitability of the league – the NBA had been the only major sport without a strike-shortened season – the time off from basketball proved essential in cultivating central media operations that would distinguish the league for years to come.

¹⁵⁸ John Dempsey, “Basketball Abort,” *Variety*, October 14, 1998.

¹⁵⁹ Kent McDill, “Is NBA Really Thinking the Unthinkable?” *Chicago Daily Herald*, December 9, 1998.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Tedesco, “NBA.com Pushes Streaming, Nostalgia,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 2, 1998, 46.

¹⁶¹ Richard Sandomir, “‘Inside Stuff’ Succumbs to Old Stuff,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 1998, D3.

In January 1999, the lockout was officially ended. The schedule was expected to feature 40 to 45 games out of a possible 82, a number that ultimately rose to 50.¹⁶² As expected, Michael Jordan announced his retirement on January 13th. “Flying Man Jordan is Coming Back To Earth,” read the headline in the *Beijing Morning Post*, which went on to compare the news to hearing of a close relative’s death.¹⁶³ Most coverage imagined the worst-case scenario for the NBA, in losing the superstar that had defined the league at its absolute peak, in the midst of “attempting to assess the damage of a labor dispute that forced the cancellation of more than a third of the regular season.” With his second retirement in five years, Jordan refused to say definitively whether he played his last game. While the decision was “99.9 final,” he noted, “I never say never.”¹⁶⁴

Basketball returned in February, complete with a new slogan: “I *still* love this game!” The NBA had hoped to earn back the trust of the fans by acknowledging their mistakes. Terry Cummings, a forward on the Golden State Warriors, added, “What must happen in this league, as a result of the lockout, is for everyone to become more intimate with the fans. The owners, players and fans all need each other, and we’ve got to show it.”¹⁶⁵ This extended to the evolving production approach of NBA Entertainment. For the Spurs-Knicks Finals, NBAE filmed anything and everything, including the sights and sounds of Spurs star David Robinson’s ankles being taped on the sidelines, which was then stored in the NBAE archive. Under Adam Silver’s NBAE, which had since grown to 200 staffers, the driving philosophy had becoming access and intimacy. “The players and coaches understand it’s our job to

¹⁶² Harry Berkowitz and Steve Zipay, “Now, Only Time Will Tell; NBA Lockout May Have Cost League More Than Money,” *Newsday*, January 7, 1999.

¹⁶³ Stephen Wade, “Jordan Creates Global Splash,” *Associated Press*, January 13, 1999.

¹⁶⁴ Richard Justice, “Jordan Announces Retirement,” *The Washington Post*, January 14, 1999, D1.

¹⁶⁵ David DuPree and Tom Pedulla, “Fans Still Sold on NBA; Excited Crows Welcome Return of Game,” *USA Today*, January 8, 1999.

promote them, that we'll never use anything to harm them,” Silver told *USA Today*. “There’s film locked away in our vaults that will never see the light of day.” The eventual plan, he explained, would be to digitize the archive and make much of it available on NBA.com.¹⁶⁶ All of the footage that was amassed at the Finals, then, would become essential in distinguishing the NBA’s online offerings.

In the interim, the video library proved a key component of the NBA’s latest media endeavor – its own cable channel. Set to launch on DirecTV and digital cable for the start of the 1999-2000 season, “NBA.com TV” was the first league-owned, 24-hour network for any sports organization.¹⁶⁷ “It was another example of being opportunistic and seeing an opportunity in a growing world... taking advantage of the fact that sports leagues actually create more hours of programming every year than all the studios combined,” explained Ed Desser. “It’s a huge amount of content, so why shouldn’t a sports league have a network?”¹⁶⁸ At launch, NBA.com TV would not feature any complete live games, acting instead as a “barker” channel intended to drive sales of their League Pass DBS service. During the day, the channel would feature two-hour edits of classic games, reruns of features from *Inside Stuff*, and other assorted NBA Entertainment-produced content. At 7 pm ET each night, the channel would go “live” with a news show featuring the previous day’s highlights and a preview of upcoming games, leading eventually into live cut-ins and statistical updates from NBA.com. At 1 am, a fifteen-minute video package would air to sum up the night’s action.¹⁶⁹ “We see this as an opportunity to tap into the rich array of information available on NBA.com and the vast television programming from NBAE’s video and film library,” said

¹⁶⁶ Michael Hiestand, “Crews’ Inside Position Adds Spin,” *USA Today*, June 25, 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Ed Sherman, “NBA Trying to Morph Web Site Into Television,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 17, 1999.

¹⁶⁸ Ed Desser, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Tedesco, “NBA Cross-Media Fast Break,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 1, 1999, 65.

Adam Silver, NBA Entertainment president and COO.¹⁷⁰ “This is our Web site morphed into a television channel.”¹⁷¹



Figure 2.9: During the 2000 playoffs, NBA.com TV reflects the convergence of television and the web.¹⁷²

Operating out of the NBA’s Secaucus studio complex, where the league produced *Inside Stuff* and its other programming, the start-up costs for the network were estimated at \$10 million. DirecTV saw the addition of NBA.com TV as a further incentive to drive annual subscriptions of League Pass, which had thus far accumulated 150,000 DirecTV customers. In creating a more direct-to-consumer model, many industry analysts believed that the NBA was positioning itself away from traditional television distribution deals.¹⁷³ Richard Tedesco of *Broadcasting & Cable* highlighted the promise of a channel “without network intermediaries,” forecasting something like the streaming television paradigm to come.¹⁷⁴ Various NBA spokespeople, however, were quick to downplay the broader ambitions for

¹⁷⁰ Scott Hettrick, “NBA.comTV Will Tip Off Nov. 2,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 24, 1999.

¹⁷¹ Ed Sherman, “NBA Trying to Morph Web Site Into Television.”

¹⁷² LJE3, “NBA.com TV: 2000 NBA Playoffs Preview Video Package,” YouTube, 2:33. Post July 23, 2005. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KI1UXTVh4I>>.

¹⁷³ Richard Tedesco, “NBA Drives Direct to Fans,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 27, 1999, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Tedesco, “NBA Cross-Media Fast Break.”

NBA.com TV. “[NBA.com TV will] be in 3 million TV households. I don’t compare this to the cable universe of 70 million households,” explained Stern, comparing the endeavor instead to the league’s local markets. “...If it can get into 3 million homes, [NBA.com TV] will be a top 10 market for the NBA.”¹⁷⁵

The wider TV industry had offered the ideal environment for NBA.com TV, “a convergence of the Internet, television, and basketball,” per Commissioner Stern.¹⁷⁶ Over the previous few years, a web presence had come to be considered an essential asset for TV programmers, a major shift since its early days as mere curiosity. Geoff Reiss, who had overseen the launch of the NBA website and was serving as senior vice president at ESPN Internet Ventures, explained to *Broadcasting & Cable*, “ESPN is not a TV network. ESPN is sports and sports gets expressed on TV, radio, in print and on the Internet.”¹⁷⁷ By late 1999, as more and more content made its way online, certain problems had emerged. Disputes began to arise over sports rights, especially, as streaming audio and video highlights had become easier and more commonplace. TV and radio rights-holders said that their agreements allowed them to deliver webcasts, while the leagues argued that they did not. The NFL permitted only one-time simulcasts of highlights, but not complete games, which had found their way online regardless. When the NBA found any unsanctioned radio feeds, they had successfully petitioned those stations to stop. But the scope of the Internet makes it “difficult to police,” admitted Adam Silver.¹⁷⁸ Streaming technology nonetheless continued to evolve, given its immense promise. “The on-demand nature of Internet video,” read a *Broadcasting & Cable* special report, “is successfully competing with—and supplanting—

¹⁷⁵ Wayne Friedman, “New Campaign Injects Humor Into Game,” *Advertising Age*, November 1, 1999, 34.

¹⁷⁶ Ed Sherman, “NBA Trying to Morph Web Site Into Television.”

¹⁷⁷ “Programmers Pump Up Net,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, December 13, 1999, 3-4.

¹⁷⁸ Anick Jesdanun, “Disputes Over Rights Arise as Stations Turn to Web Broadcasts,” *Associated Press*, September 24, 1999.

TV and radio as a ready source for news clips...” Perhaps the ideal example of this “newly converged” media, notes the report, is “the satellite-delivered 24-hour NBA channel with ‘wraparound’ content from the NBA website.”¹⁷⁹

While working on the NBA.com TV project, NBA Entertainment had also managed to come to an agreement with a number of international TV providers for the distribution of games, including NTK in Kazakhstan, Melita Sports Channel in Malta, Anem TV Network in Serbia, and RTVM in Montenegro. The deal raised the presence of NBA programming to 205 countries in 42 languages.¹⁸⁰ The international success of NBA Entertainment, in addition to the success of League Pass and NBA.com TV, soon thereafter led to a corporate restructuring. NBA Properties, the promotional arm that had become an important marketer in its own right with the 1992 and 1996 Olympics, was merged into NBAE, which would all continue to be overseen by Adam Silver. The merging of the NBA’s media, marketing, and international operations into a single clearinghouse would subsequently lead to a merging of strategies. While the global distribution of the NBA in the 1990s was defined by Michael Jordan and Americanness, the localization efforts already in place would soon give way to a more reciprocal approach to NBA programming, defined by the importation of an inclusive internationalism into the United States.

By March 2000, the NBA made plans for “Phase II” of its NBA.com TV programming. They initiated talks with European leagues for the right to air on the NBA’s channel, as part of a push for more live offerings. At the same time, however, the league’s emphasis on television and ‘intimacy’ had begun to irritate certain coaches, who felt that wearing microphones during the course of games was an unnecessary distraction. When

¹⁷⁹ Richard Tedesco, “Back to the Future: Internet TV,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, January 31, 2000, 24-26.

¹⁸⁰ NBA Press Release, “USA: NBA Signs Up TV Deals in Kazakhstan, Malta, Yugoslavia,” *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, December 10, 1999.

Miami Heat coach Pat Riley refused to wear one, the NBA fined him \$100,000. Ahead of a marquee Raptors-Sonics game on NBC, the league office sent out memo demanding compliance. “The ‘electronic environment’ for experiencing sports is changing dramatically,” the memo read. “The increasing multitude and variety of entertainment products now available, together with the new technologies that can deliver them in new and more immediate ways, gives our fans more viewing options than ever before. If the league is going to remain strong we have to continue to set the standard among sports leagues for innovation and creativity.”¹⁸¹ The memo established a precedent that privileged television and the ‘electronic environment’ above all, later exemplified in 2012 by the NBA’s fining the San Antonio Spurs \$250,000 for resting their star players during a nationally televised game.¹⁸² The NBA catered to the interests of television, first and foremost.

¹⁸¹ Bob Raissman, “NBA Coaches’ Wires Crossed,” *Daily News*, March 12, 2000.

¹⁸² Ben Golliver, Spurs Fined \$250,000 For Resting Players,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 30, 2012.

The Big Ticket

Networks Pay Scalper Prices For Sports Rights

	Rights Fees (in millions)	Contract Year (year/total years)	Final Season of Contract
National Football League			
Fox	\$4,400	2/8	2005-2006
CBS	\$4,000	2/8	2005-2006
ABC	\$4,400	2/8	2005-2006
ESPN	\$4,800	2/8	2005-2006
Total	\$17,600		
National Basketball Association			
NBC	\$1,750	2/4	2001-2002
Turner	\$890	2/4	2001-2002
Total	\$2,640		
Major League Baseball			
Fox	\$575	4/5	2000
NBC	\$475	4/5	2000
ESPN	\$455	4/5	2000
FSN**	\$185	3/4	2000
Total	\$1,690		
National Hockey League			
Fox	\$350	1/5*	2003-2004
ABC	\$250	1/5*	2003-2004
Total	\$600		
NCAA College Football Championship			
ABC	\$700	2/7	2004
NCAA College Basketball Tournament			
CBS	\$1,725	5/8	2002
Olympics			
NBC	\$715		Summer 2000
NBC	\$555		Winter 2002
NBC	\$793		Summer 2004
NBC	\$613		Winter 2006
NBC	\$894		Summer 2008

* The first year of the NHL contract begins with the 1999-2000 season.** FoxSportsNet

Figure 2.10: As of 1999, given the lucrative NBC contract, the NBA's total television revenue had final overtaken that of Major League Baseball (*Broadcasting & Cable*, July 12, 1999).

Only a few days after the microphone incident, the *Washington Post* examined the ways in which “internet-enhanced television” was altering the sports media landscape. Many believed that the leagues themselves would soon broadcast their own games and post highlights to web “channels.” The NBA took the same diplomatic approach as before. “Right now, broadcasting is not our business—what we do is run a sports league,” offered NBAE president Adam Silver. “Of course, what that means five years from now could be completely different. The Internet and all this new technology is going to completely redefine everything.” The ‘internet broadcast rights,’ or streaming rights, had become a more valued commodity. While the NBA would continue holding onto their own until the market settled, NCAA set a precedent in 1999 when they sold the combined ‘March Madness’ rights – including broadcast, cable, satellite, radio, streaming, marketing, sponsorship, and merchandising – to CBS for \$6 billion over eleven

years.¹⁸³ In 2007, the NBA was finally ready to cash in and package together its own traditional TV rights and streaming rights. By then, the league had expanded its direct-to-consumer operations, having launched the “League Pass” broadband service and airing their own live games on the re-branded “NBA TV” cable channel. The “electronic environment” of sports television was set.

The 2000 Finals continued NBAE’s interest in Internet-TV convergence, featuring sixty video cameras, thirty still-photo cameras, and approximately eighteen microphones distributed among the coaches, referees, and the court itself. After being logged in Secaucus, the footage would be stored away for future use in NBAE’s multiple vaults, which then totaled around 180,000 tapes.¹⁸⁴ But the tapes had become unwieldy, given Adam Silver’s plans to someday feature games and select footage on the NBA website. As a result, the league signed a deal with Convera, a new company from Intel and Excalibur Technologies, which would immediately begin work on digitizing the NBA archive.¹⁸⁵ As part of the deal, the NBA received a 10-percent equity stake in Convera and installed David Stern on the Board of Directors.¹⁸⁶

By the start of the 2000-01 season, the NBA’s media convergence reached a new height with the launch of *The NBA Beat*, a studio show simulcast on NBA.com and NBA.com TV leading into their nightly coverage.¹⁸⁷ Reflecting an evolved media landscape, the league’s “TV Ventures” division had since become “TV and New Media Ventures.”

¹⁸³ Rachel Alexander, “Take Me Out to the Web Site,” *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2000, A1; Richard Sandomir, “CBS Will Pay \$6 billion for Men’s N.C.A.A. Tournament,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 1999, D5.

¹⁸⁴ Marcia C. Smith, “Cameras and Mics Help Market the NBA’s Stars and Stories,” *Orange County Register*, June 7, 2000.

¹⁸⁵ Chris Jenkins, “NBA Decides it Will Take it to the Net,” *USA Today*, September 19, 2000.

¹⁸⁶ “Intel and the National Basketball Association to Deliver Enhanced Interactive Programming,” *Business Wire*, September 13, 2000.

¹⁸⁷ “NBA Launches New Interactive Talk Show to be Simulcast on NBA.com TV and NBA.com,” *Business Wire*, October 24, 2000.

While broadcast distribution remained the primary emphasis for the NBA, given its scale, “streaming video” had become “a very good way of serving niche products to disparate and dispersed audiences,” noted Ed Desser in late 2000.¹⁸⁸ Given the league’s global ambition to become the main organization for the world’s second most popular sport, internet distribution appeared as a miraculous answer for the question of how to reach a global audience directly and simultaneously. In taking on more of these distribution responsibilities, between NBA.com, NBA League Pass, and NBA.com TV, the NBA had cemented its status as an integrated media conglomerate.

In January 2001, the league announced a partnership with RealNetworks to offer audio and video streams of NBA.com TV, the first partnership between a cable channel and an Internet subscription service.¹⁸⁹ In April, as a result of the deal, the NBA became the first pro sports league to stream a game telecast through the internet. They purposely selected the Sacramento Kings and Dallas Mavericks for the occasion, given both teams’ plethora of international stars and Mavericks owner Mark Cuban’s career in the streaming audio business. “As someone who was there at the birth of the webcasting industry, to be part of the first broadcast of an NBA game is very exciting,” Mark Cuban said in a statement. “The ability to watch an NBA game from almost any Internet-enabled device opens the NBA to fans worldwide. This is just the beginning and I’m proud that the NBA is on the forefront of the digital delivery of content and that the Mavs are a part of this watershed event.”¹⁹⁰

Though the NBA was the first to reach this particular benchmark, they were not the only ones preparing for the dawn of a new distribution paradigm. Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM or BAM), a division within Major League Baseball, had also

¹⁸⁸ Tedesco, “Playing in the Big Time.”

¹⁸⁹ “RealNetworks Teams with NBA.com on Video Deal,” *Brandweek*, January 29, 2001.

¹⁹⁰ “NBA To Webcast First-ever Live Game on NBA.com and REAL.com,” *Business Wire*, April 9, 2001.

been hard at work. Founded in June 2000, as a jointly owned subsidiary of all thirty MLB teams, BAM believed that a new digital economy could emerge with wider broadband adoption and improved streaming video technologies. “Baseball's grand online plans rely on fundamentally different economics than the old advertising-revenue model for the Web,” wrote Alan Schwarz of *Newsweek*, in an in-depth feature on BAM’s work as of late 2002. “MLB is attempting to wean Web users off the idea of free, mediocre content in favor of paying for premium, exclusive and personalized services.”¹⁹¹ Bob Bowman, who oversaw MLB.com as CEO of BAM, explained of their overall strategy at the time, “to be successful economically, subscription services have to be the engine... It's happening, and will continue to happen.”¹⁹² Indeed, this would ultimately prove accurate about the oncoming era of streaming television.

Prompted by the evolving capabilities of internet distribution, NBA action had “gone global,” the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, as local star Allen Iverson competed against the Los Angeles Lakers’ Shaq and Kobe tandem in the 2001 Finals. While this was certainly not new, the league’s Finals presence had successfully expanded to 750 million households across 205 countries. NBA Entertainment, “the once-modest operation” in charge of the international agreements, had “become a high-tech multimedia conglomerate.”¹⁹³ Through NBAE’s many different media and promotional arms, moreover, stars were able to become more global than ever before. “With things like the Internet,” said Heidi Ueberroth, NBAE vice president for global media, “the players are known as quickly around the world as they

¹⁹¹ Alan Schwarz, "Take Me Out to The Web Site!" *Newsweek*, October 14, 2002, 38.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Annette John-Hall, “NBA Entertainment Racking Up Wins Worldwide,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 15, 2001.

are known here.”¹⁹⁴ The simultaneity that Ueberroth describes would become a fundamental component of the NBA’s media strategy to come, which expanded on the possibilities of the “more is more” approach and its investment in the “electronic environment.”

Conclusion: Beyond Basketball

Despite the NBA’s innovations and investments in the latest and greatest media delivery systems, the domestic TV audience was dwindling following Michael Jordan’s retirement, dropping from a 4.3 average in 1998-99 to a 3.3 average for the 1999-2000 season. For the following 2000-01 season, NBC hoped to boost the numbers by cutting the number of Saturday games to four, down from ten, assuredly as ominous a sign of the times as when CBS did the same fifteen years earlier. The network also believed the NBA might be helped by cross-promotion with the new XFL football league, the endeavor led by the World Wrestling Federation’s Vince McMahon that had emerged out of the earlier NBC-Turner-NBA discussions.¹⁹⁵ As the NBA headed into another round of rights negotiations with NBC, ratings on the network had fallen by 38 percent over the course of their \$1.75 billion investment.¹⁹⁶ The work stoppage and Michael Jordan’s retirement had hurt, and fans had not taken to any of the new stars that the league attempted to promote. No amount of technological innovation, no amount of access and intimacy, could curb such a decline. It seemed the once prosperous NBC-NBA era was coming to a close.

In September, as the league inched closer to the start of the 2001-02 season, rumors began to circulate that Michael Jordan was getting ready to return to the NBA. After a pickup

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ John Demspey, “It’s an Air Ball for NBA,” *Variety*, November 6, 2000, 13, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Robert Siegel and Stefan Fatsis, “NBA’s Difficulties Renegotiating Television Contracts in the Wake of Decreased Viewership and a Soft Ad Market,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, February 9, 2001.

game in Chicago, he said his decision was ten days away: “I’m doing it for the love of the game. Nothing else. For the love the game.”¹⁹⁷ On September 25, Jordan officially announced his return, as a member of the Washington Wizards, for which he would have to sell his ownership stake in the team. NBC and TNT quickly set about reorganizing their schedules to accommodate more Wizards games, which had been entirely left off of the national slate.¹⁹⁸ Despite the attempt to recapture the old magic, an older MJ was still not enough to turn around the slumping NBC ratings, which would ultimately hold at a 2.9 average for the season, the same as the disappointing previous year. After losing \$100 million on the NBA during the previous season and projected to lose another \$200 million during the 2001-02 season, NBC decided to walk away from their longtime partner.¹⁹⁹

In January, the NBA officially announced its new deal with ABC/ESPN and Turner, totaling \$4.6 billion over six years. Not only would the league be more heavily investing in cable distribution, via ESPN, but the deal included an un-named new sports channel to be co-owned by Turner and the NBA. ESPN would receive twenty-four playoff games, including one of the Conference Finals, as well as the NBA draft and draft lottery. As broadcast partner, ABC would air fifteen regular season games, five early-round playoff games, and the NBA Finals. Turner, meanwhile, would take the All-Star Game from NBC, in addition to a massive increase in exclusive regular season and postseason coverage.²⁰⁰

The deal signaled the launch of a new era for the NBA and the wider sports media industry. When the NBA left NBC, their broadcast home for more than a decade, the joint

¹⁹⁷ Mike Wise, “Jordan’s Return More Likely as Drama Continues to Build,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2001.

¹⁹⁸ Steve Wyche, “Jordan Makes It Official: He’s a Wizard,” *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2001.

¹⁹⁹ Mike Penner, “NBC Exit Strategy Begins NBA Spin,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2001.

²⁰⁰ Jay Posner, “Disney-AOL In, NBC Out in New NBA TV Accord,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 23, 2002, D9.

move to ABC and ESPN, in addition to incumbent partner TNT, reinforced the further dominance of cable over broadcast television. The NBA's investments in the medium thus reflect an industry in transition. While the league still required the mass address that remained possible only on ABC, they also sought a more flexible schedule that only cable could provide. The new industrial implications were not lost on trade magazine analysts, who took the move as a broader indication that "sports television is definitely making its way from network TV to cable," though the NBA, in particular, was "unique in that the vast majority of the games will be on cable."²⁰¹ The \$2.2 billion from AOL Time Warner and the \$2.4 billion from Disney-ABC-ESPN, at roughly \$765 million annually, also offered a 25-percent raise over NBC's final deal at \$615 million per year.²⁰²

While the money was certainly an incentive for the NBA's transition to cable, so too was the opportunity for more extensive league control. Russ Granik, deputy commissioner, explains the relative inflexibility of broadcast TV, which would "wait until Sweeps were over in June before you'd see an NBA game on a weekday night... I think that was almost as important as dollars, was to try and get the games out there to more fans at more and more convenient times." In splitting the majority of the package between TNT and ESPN, "it gave us a lot more and better coverage of what were still to us important games," Granik notes.²⁰³ This new cable-centric strategy is reflected in the 2002 deals, wherein the number of regular-season games on broadcast television was reduced from 32 to 15. They were replaced by a greater number of primetime games on cable: TNT was set to air 52 games in primetime, in addition to the All-Star Weekend events and the first two rounds of the playoffs, while ESPN

²⁰¹ Jeffrey D. Zbar, "Ball's Bounce Goes ESPN, TNT's Way," *Advertising Age*, June 10, 2002, S12.

²⁰² Paula Bernstein and Justin Oppelaar, "NBA Scores \$4.6 Billion in Disney, AOL TW Deals," *Variety*, January 23, 2002, 6.

²⁰³ Russ Granik, in discussion with the author, March 22, 2018.

would air an additional 75 regular season games, the NBA Draft and a variety of postseason play, before handing off responsibilities to ABC for the Finals.²⁰⁴

The NBA's deepening investment in cable distribution over broadcast speaks to scholarship that describes the period that follows as the post-network era. Amanda D. Lotz periodizes television as consisting of the network era (1952 to mid-1980s), multi-channel transition (mid-1980s through mid-2000s), and post-network era (early 2000s onward), the last of which is defined by its nonlinearity and viewer control. This emerged out of the programming multiplicity and audience fragmentation of the multi-channel transition and intensified with the aid of advanced computing power. Lotz argues that the post-network era, with "new tools" and an audience "fractured among different channels and devices," is of a "profoundly different" nature than that of the network era.²⁰⁵ Over the next several years, the NBA's cultivation of internet distribution, in conjunction with its investments in cable, would allow the league to excel within the fractured media landscape that Lotz describes.

Alternative terms have served to emphasize different features at work in this evolution. Michael Curtin has used "neo-network era" to capture the concurrent network and post-network forces at work during the 1990s, which simultaneously pursued "mass cultural forms aimed at broad national or global markets" and more narrow "niche audiences."²⁰⁶

Victoria E. Johnson uses "multi-platform era" to emphasize the technological and experiential qualities of the post-network period. For Johnson, sports programming in particular occupies a similar role to Curtin's neo-network era, by exhibiting features of both network and post-network television: "[Sport] simultaneously maintains more network-era

²⁰⁴ "The National Basketball Association Signs Historic Six-Year Television Agreements with AOL Time Warner, ABC and ESPN," *Business Wire*, January 22, 2002.

²⁰⁵ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 25-28, 40.

²⁰⁶ Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era." In *Making and Selling Culture*, ed. Richard Ohmann (Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 190, 197.

norms than any other program form, while it is also particularly well suited to new business practices, media outlets, and modes of viewer involvement that are enabled by...the post-network era.”²⁰⁷ This conceptualization is reflected in the NBA’s actions leading up to 2002, which enabled the sports league to function as an integrated media conglomerate.

On the Turner side of the new TV agreements, the NBA’s level of input and control continued to expand. Mark Lazarus, president of Turner Entertainment and later NBC Chairman of Broadcasting & Sports, witnessed the media innovations and aggressiveness of the league firsthand. “I really do think that they think of themselves as a content company, not as a sports league,” he explains. “They really were the first sports league to see the value, I think, of controlling their content and having business not just in the rights-fee realm, but in distributing their own content and being able to generate revenue from that.”²⁰⁸ Lazarus’s confidence in the NBA’s media savvy led to the proposal of a new joint cable network that would feature programming beyond basketball, tentatively titled the All Sports Network, that would rely on Turner’s CNN and *Sports Illustrated* holdings, as well as possible rights deals with other pro sports leagues.²⁰⁹ The plan would ultimately fall through by July 2002, but the arrangement reflects the NBA’s growing media ambitions and the trust of its media partners in its ability to succeed. While the All-Sports Network never launched, AOL Time Warner chose instead to invest in the NBA’s own digital cable channel, renamed NBA TV from the unwieldy NBA.com TV, at \$45 million for a ten-percent stake.²¹⁰ In 2008, Turner would take control of the channel altogether, along with NBA League Pass and NBA.com.

²⁰⁷ Johnson, “Everything New is Old Again,” 115-116.

²⁰⁸ Mark Lazarus, in discussion with the author, April 18, 2017.

²⁰⁹ Rudy Martzke, “AOL, Turner Double-Team and Close In on NBA Deal,” *USA Today*, December 12, 2001.

²¹⁰ “NBA Concentrating on Cable Package,” *Associated Press*, July 11, 2002.

As the digital revolution was brewing in the background by the early 2000s, cable was more publicly ascending over broadcast television. As of the late 1990s, cable and new media still remained largely “ancillary” for advertisers, mattering more for their “upscale” or specified appeal.²¹¹ By the 2003-04 TV season, however, basic cable finally overtook network television in the percentage of households viewing in primetime, a gap that continued to grow in cable’s favor over the next several years.²¹² In adding more of its programming slate to cable, the NBA contributed to this transition by further enhancing the medium’s distinct offerings. Where once sports was a hallmark of network TV, as exemplified by *Monday Night Football* and *The Wide World of Sports*, the NBA helped lead the charge onto cable TV, where sports could fill more hours of the schedule at more favorable times. While CBS and NBC had relegated the NBA to weekend afternoons, as they had for most sports, ESPN and TNT could continue to air NBA games in primetime throughout the week. When *Monday Night Football* left ABC for ESPN following the 2005 season, it was part of a trend demonstrated earlier by the NBA.²¹³

Ultimately, the 1990s was the era of “Manifest Destiny” for the NBA, the execution of David Stern’s vision, in which the league planted flags around the world via new Canadian franchises and a number of overseas offices. At the start of the decade, Stern had considered the league to be “a relatively small player” in the entertainment business.²¹⁴ Following the launch of NBA.com TV and the latest round of multi-billion-dollar TV rights agreements, which offered the leaguer greater autonomy than ever before, the National Basketball

²¹¹ Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 50, 59.

²¹² “Where Did the Primetime Broadcast TV Audience Go?” *TV By the Numbers*, April 12, 2010.

²¹³ Leonard Shapiro and Mark Maske, “‘Monday Night Football’ Changes the Channel,” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2005, A01.

²¹⁴ Steve McClellan, “One-on-One with David Stern.”

Association emerged as a genuine global media conglomerate, expanding overseas in search of greater profit. The combination of League Pass, NBA.com, and NBA.com TV, moreover, began to offer the possibility of new kinds of programming – more direct and more simultaneous – that could reach all viewers with less need for localization, that could be more inclusively international. As the NBA began lose viewers domestically, the possibility became increasingly appealing. The close of this period, which culminates in the NBA’s leaving NBC for ABC/ESPN, thus heralds the wider industrial shift into a post-network and multi-platform era, the implications of which will be explored more deeply in the chapter that follows. Given these industrial and technological developments, the NBA works to cultivate a more global address, via streaming platforms, in order to more effectively appeal to an international audience. The NBA had become America’s league, playing America’s game on the global stage. Now, it would try to become the world’s league.

III. Games Without Frontiers: Sport and Internationalism in the Multiplatform Media Economy, 2002 – 2007

“Competition and conquest are words easily interchangeable, and the whole spirit of our present commercial crusade to the Eastward betrays itself in the fact that we cannot speak of it but in terms borrowed from the glossary of the warrior. It is a commercial ‘invasion,’ a trade ‘war,’ a ‘threatened attack’ on the part of America; business is ‘captured,’ opportunities are ‘seized,’ certain industries are ‘killed,’ certain former monopolies are ‘wrested away’... The difference is hardly of kind and scarcely of degree. It is a mere matter of names... So perhaps we have not lost the Frontier after all.” – Frank Norris, “The Frontier Gone at Last” (1902)¹

“There are 250 million potential NBA fans in the U.S., and there are 5 billion outside the U.S. We like those numbers.” –David Stern, NBA commissioner, to *Forbes* (1993)²

Introduction: Towards a Global Efficiency

Despite a windfall of TV revenue from the NBA’s latest media rights deals with ABC/ESPN and Turner, the period from 2002 to 2007 was defined by turbulence and transition. The NBA’s ratings on ABC, for instance, would decline every single year, from a 2.6 average during the initial 2002-03 season to a 2.0 average for the 2006-07 season.³

Controversies from the very end of the NBC era, which were associated with the emerging ‘hip hop generation’ of players, also carried over into the NBA’s new media partners. In a 2017 retrospective of the era, *Complex* described the early 2000s NBA as a period in which “fear, misunderstandings, and stereotypes were rampant.”⁴ Tensions reached a fever pitch during the Pistons-Pacers Brawl in Detroit in 2004, when a fight between players and fans erupted through the arena and culminated in criminal charges for ten people.

While the league had already internationalized considerably, I propose that the NBA utilized the further importation and marketing of global stars as a two-fold “solution” to their

¹ Frank Norris, “The Frontier Gone At Last,” in *Norris: Novels and Essays*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 1183-1190.

² Elizabeth Comte with Subrata N. Chakravarty, “How High Can David Stern Jump?” *Forbes*, June 7, 1993.

³ Paulsen, “ABC’s NBA Season is Lowest Rated Ever on Broadcast TV,” *Sports Media Watch*, April 14, 2017.

⁴ Jason Francis, “Why Did the NBA Flip-Flop on Hip-Hop?” *Complex*, June 27, 2017.

domestic tensions and international ambitions. The hip-hop generation, defined most clearly by Allen Iverson, was slowly replaced by a new international generation, led by Manu Ginobili, Dirk Nowitzki, and Yao Ming.⁵ In a 2003 survey of self-identified NBA fans, for instance, nearly 50-percent of respondents noted that the “influx of international players has increased their interest” in the league.⁶ By the 2003-04 season, 16.6-percent of all players on opening day rosters were identified as “international,” a number that jumped to 19-percent by 2005-06, eventually setting a new record of 21.3-percent for the start of the 2014-15 season.⁷

This internationalization was encouraged and enabled by the advancement of live-streaming technologies, which allowed for a more simultaneous and uniform global address. The 2000s sees a more widespread privileging of transnational audiences through transnational programming, rather than the exportation of American programming with localized flourishes, as was the case during the previous decade. Following the previous mediatization and marketization of sport, the NBA’s evolving approach to media production and distribution, which expanded the possibilities of sports programming in the early multiplatform era, is thus reflective of the broader media industry.

The NBA’s strategy demonstrates the drive for ‘global efficiency’ through global legibility. In Michael Curtin’s *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience*, Russell Wolff, then senior vice-president of programming at ESPN/Star, discusses the drive for “pan-regional efficiency” versus “local appeal.”⁸ While producers desired programming that could be successful in multiple regions, there remained local considerations that had to be met. This

⁵ Among the other players that came to define this post-Michael Jordan generation were Vince Carter, Kobe Bryant, Tracy McGrady, Rasheed Wallace, and Chris Webber.

⁶ Rick Horrow, “NBA at Finals Time: Sustaining Three Business Goals,” *Sportsline.com*, June 3, 2003.

⁷ Richard Lapchick with Angelica Guiao, “The 2015 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Basketball Association,” *Tidesport.org*, July 1, 2015.

⁸ Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 215.

remained the lesson for U.S.-based pan-regional channels, such as those by ESPN and MTV, which had experienced difficult launches in the late 1980s and 1990s. While MTV's initial strategy was that American popular music could serve as an "international language," ultimately the "one-channel-fits-all approach" proved a failure. Instead, they launched MTV Taiwan, India, Japan, Korea, etc. and introduced customized programming blocks to much greater success.⁹ This aligns with the NBA's previous approach, which had also relied on customized local programming, such as *Dunk Street* and other overseas versions of the NBA's *Inside Stuff* magazine show. The advancement of streaming and internet distribution, however, encouraged the league to invest in internationalization at the base level, using international players and signifiers to craft a more inclusive product that made localization efforts more seamless.

In this way, the NBA parallels a wider industrial shift back to pan-regional programming, as demonstrated by robust internet TV distributors in HBO and Netflix, the latter of which, according to Ramon Lobato, can "effortlessly combine the local and the global *within the one platform* and constitute itself as many different products simultaneously."¹⁰ The widespread growth of streaming platforms and their 'library' approach to programming has created new possibilities for international efficiencies. While Chuck Tryon, for instance, describes the efforts of Netflix to acquire "local content that appeals to international audiences," these acquisitions can co-exist with content directed towards other cultures.¹¹ Over-the-top (OTT) platforms are thus designed to be inclusive

⁹ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹ Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 47-48.

ones. The NBA, during this period, similarly cultivates an inclusive transnational product via an inclusive international platform.

As part of this approach, established by 2007, the NBA works to shed much of the “Americanness” that had historically undergirded its marketing. Through the NBA’s increasingly global address and de-Americanized form, these consistencies allow for greater legibility and equivalence across national boundaries and marketplaces. This is in keeping with concurrent analysis of the TV format trade and its risks of homogenization. Silvio Waisbord, writing in 2004, describes how “traces of national belonging are downplayed and even eradicated,” which results in “a pasteurized, transnational product detached from national cultures.”¹² Tanner Mirrlees, in his work on global entertainment conglomerates, similarly argues that U.S. transnational media companies “are de-Americanizing the content of TV shows and films so that they may more easily capture and control global, national, and trans-local lifestyle markets,” rather than those that explicitly “promote one-dimensional or homogeneous images of ‘the American Way of Life’ to the U.S. and to the wider world.”¹³ In this same way, the American NBA sought to minimize its own U.S. ties in order to appeal to overseas audiences as a more authentically global program.

The NBA’s media approach from 2002 through 2007 thus reflects qualities of “the amoeba,” described by Paul S.N. Lee in his analysis of imported media, as programming that maintains the same basic content across localities and changes only in form. The NBA’s use of local commentary teams, while promoting a collection of ‘international’ stars across multiple markets, reflects a desire for greater efficiency through these amoebic qualities. This

¹² Silvio Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” *Television New Media* 5.4 (November 2004): 368.

¹³ Tanner Mirrlees, *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 207.

is made easier by streaming video, with its transnational reach, which can more easily bring audiences together under a single platform. Taken further, then, the NBA and internationalized sport exhibit tendencies of Marwan Kraidy's concept of "corporate transculturalism," which "emphasizes cultural fluidity as a tool to make corporations more profitable."¹⁴ Through more fluid programming, in conjunction with more flexible direct-to-consumer distribution, the producers of American sports television are able to market their content as more authentically transnational. The inherent internationalism of athletic competition allowed sport to excel in this practice, and perhaps none more than the NBA, which had already worked at cultivating a strong global presence during the 1980s and 1990s.

This transition towards globally efficient programming was accomplished within telecasts and promotional materials, reflecting previous sports media scholarship that has examined the relationship between sports performance and its mediation. Following from Margaret Morse's inquiry into the "the electronic reshaping of the game," Bernard Miège argued that by the late 1980s, many "sporting events are now not only produced *for* television but *in function of* television re-transmission."¹⁵ Through the 1990s, under the direction of NBA Entertainment President Adam Silver, the NBA intensified its privileging of "the electronic environment," by adding more cameras and microphones in service of new online platforms.¹⁶ The advancement of these operations, from 2002 to 2007, encouraged the

¹⁴ Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 14, 95-96.

¹⁵ Margaret Morse, "Sport on Television: Replay and Display." In *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches - An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983), 54; Bernard Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (New York: International General, 1989), 144.

¹⁶ Bob Raissman, "NBA Coaches' Wires Crossed," *Daily News*, March 12, 2000.

league to expand farther overseas in search of greater profits, like the other entertainment conglomerates to which they had aspired.

Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay and David Rowe, moreover, have explored the global dynamics of sport that emerged by this period, arguing that as “economic, political, technological, and cultural changes have forged new relations of TV, sport, and nation... what constitutes a national game or a contest between representatives of local, regional, and national identities is subject to constant reformation.”¹⁷ As the boundaries between performance and mediation blur together, so too do national boundaries. As a media conglomerate, then, the NBA was well positioned to utilize the strategies of TV format producers and internationalized programming to gain a greater global foothold. By privileging international *performance*, the NBA was able to more effectively globalize its *media*. Globalization serves as the incentive for further digitization by the close of this era, and at the same time, digitization enables further globalization. This chapter thus illuminates the relationship between executive decision-making, the manifestation of such strategies within the telecasts, and the evolving digital infrastructures that allow those texts to circulate around the world.

This chapter, ultimately, highlights the ‘multi-platform-ification’ of sport from 2002 to 2007, a further step in its ongoing mediatization, which is established by 2007, the same year that Netflix and Hulu launched their streaming services and Apple debuted the first iPhone. By 2007, the NBA debuted its own standalone streaming service and began to further court global audiences through these expanded digital offerings, reflecting the influence of distribution technologies on programming strategies (and vice versa). A study of the NBA, as

¹⁷ Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay and David Rowe, *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 11.

presented here, can help scholars to more fully understand and contextualize the establishment of a multiplatform era of television, as it relates to more than just narrative programming. “The model is changing,” explained Ed Erhardt, president of customer marketing and sales at ESPN/ABC Sports, after the 2002 rights deals were signed. “It’s a multimedia sports fan out there... We’re beautifully set up to take advantage of that and provide advertisers access to all those multiple touch points.”¹⁸

This moment in the NBA’s own trajectory illuminates a key moment in the wider evolution of television, as the medium transitions from the neo-network era of the 1990s to the post-network era by the late 2000s. Sports programming helps to bridge this gap by retaining the mass address of the network era, while simultaneously offering a newfound level of flexibility favorable to the ongoing turn to multiplatform, direct-to-consumer distribution. The NBA is both a product of these larger industrial and technological machinations and an active contributor to their growth. The NBA understood that the Disney and AOL Time Warner partnerships could bring pro basketball into more homes, in more ways, in more countries than ever before. “The multiplatform aspect of what ABC, ESPN and Disney bring us includes animation, theme parks, stores, sports zones,” explained Gregg Winik, executive vice president at NBA Entertainment, ahead of the inaugural 2002-2003 season on ABC/ESPN. “We’re looking at animation, sitcoms, feature films. There’s also the direction of making our AOL and ESPN.com presence totally integrated.”¹⁹

As a result, the *Hollywood Reporter* joked that the NBA would have to change its NBC-era slogan, “I love this game,” to “I *live* this game,” if the “mighty multiplatform mushroom cloud of over-the-air, cable, Internet and entertainment products rains all over the

¹⁸ Jeffery D. Zbar, “Ball’s Bounce Goes ESPN, TNT’s Way,” *Advertising Age*, June 10, 2002.

¹⁹ “Booyah! ‘Eclectic’ NBA from ABC, ESPN,” *Hollywood Reporter*, October 25, 2002, 1.

globe as expected.”²⁰ By 2007, the mushroom cloud had indeed come to loom over the global media ecosystem, increasingly defined by names such as Netflix, Hulu, and Apple. In the NBA, AOL Time Warner and Disney had obtained the perfect programming to help power its global initiatives for years to come, and in its new media partners, the NBA had found the ideal distribution conduits to realize its global potential.

Generation Next: Hip-Hop and the New Internationalism

As the distribution of the NBA had continued to evolve, so too did its content, though not without conflict. Tensions between the NBA’s audience, press, and players, which had begun by the end of the league’s NBC run, spilled over into the first years of its ABC partnership. The hostility directed at the “young, black, rich, and famous,” to borrow the title of Todd Boyd’s book on the “hip hop invasion” within the NBA, recalled the same tensions that had plagued the league in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when media coverage blamed players’ youth and wealth on rampant drug abuse within the league.²¹ The coverage of the 1998 labor lockout had exacerbated the hostilities, which published accounts from fans that blamed selfish players for the lost games.²² In *Crashing the Borders* (2005), *New York Times* sportswriter Harvey Araton’s book on this particular moment in the league’s history, he notes that the “condemnations of the NBA’s hip-hop milieu were widespread,” as “watchwords like posse – evoking street-gang violence – crept into the dialogue” and “[sportswriters] railed against some black NBA players for confusing upscale basketball crowds with the

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

²² Gary Strauss, “NBA Impasse Sidelines Businesses,” *USA Today*, November 4, 1998; Jefferson Morley, “Fans May Be Locking Out Professional Basketball,” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1998, C01.

audiences for rap,” revealing the deep-seated bigotry of both the fans and the press in the process.²³

Fans and news media alike increasingly expressed a deep resentment of the successful black athletes that appeared on their television screens. When NBA commissioner David Stern was a guest on MSNBC’s *Hardball* during the 2000-01 season, host Chris Matthews aired without reservation his opinion that the NBA did not have “real gentlemen kind of guys by most standards,” but rather “guys that are closer to the streets.”²⁴ Allen Iverson, most famously of the Philadelphia 76ers, arguably took the brunt of racist fan and news media ire during this period. Other young and outspoken players also received their share of disapproval, especially as the NBA zealously searched for the “next Michael Jordan.” Fans looked for ways to undermine the comparison, as the NBA experimented alternately with Vince Carter, Tracy McGrady, Allen Iverson, and Kobe Bryant as the next transcendent international star. George Willis of the *New York Post* referred to them collectively as “Generation Next” ahead of the 2000 All-Star Game, which referred also to their global and digital potential. “Talk all you want about tattoos and corn rows,” writes Willis, implicitly referring to the press’s condemnation of the players’ personal style, but “the real of substance of this new group of players will come with their ability to market themselves digitally.”²⁵ Yet the vitriol directed at these young black stars, undermining any such opportunities, continued to dwell on their tattoos, cornrows, and relationship to hip-hop culture.

This was reflected especially in the coverage of Allen Iverson and his peers at the time. A columnist for the *Deseret News* of Salt Lake City, Utah notes that Iverson’s “tattoos

²³ Harvey Araton, *Crashing the Borders: How Basketball Won the World and Lost Its Soul at Home* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 16-17.

²⁴ Paulsen, “How They Did It,” *Sports Media Watch*, June 20, 2007.

²⁵ George Willis, “Generation Next Must Prove Itself,” *New York Post*, February 13, 2000, 101.

and attitude are not fresh” and accuses Alonzo Mourning of having “a chip on his shoulder the size of a BMW.”²⁶ The local *Palm Beach Post* similarly accused Iverson of “arrogance” and “selfishness.”²⁷ The *St. Petersburg Times* was more direct: “Allen Iverson is a thug... The 76ers star is part of the hip-hop culture that embraces the thug image. To people like him, being a thug is acceptable.”²⁸ Such language was more the rule than the exception. In 2004, after the ‘Malice at the Palace’ brawl between the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers, *The Detroit News* published an editorial calling the NBA “a haven for thugs,” which “keeps filling its rosters with players who ought to be filling cell blocks.”²⁹ Cultural critics and scholars alike have highlighted the use of “thug” as a loaded and racist epithet. NPR ran a story as recently as 2015 on the subject, titled “the Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word ‘Thug,’” in which comparative literature scholar John McWhorter notes, “the truth is that thug today is a nominally polite way of using the N-word...It is a sly way of saying there go those black people ruining things again.”³⁰ The same remained true in the early 2000s, as the press condemned the “thugs” that were ruining basketball.

While the NBA’s public statements remained critical of the “dreadful stereotyping by the media of what it is to be an NBA player,” in practice, the organization frequently took to minimizing the influence of hip-hop culture within the league.³¹ In a special holiday 1999-2000 issue of *Hoop* magazine, owned by the NBA, an infamous cover featuring Allen Iverson had his tattoos and diamond earring removed by airbrush. While NBA editorial downplayed the incident as an innocent accident, because the photo editor “thought the tattoo

²⁶ Doug Robinson, “NBA has Problems,” *Deseret News*, March 11, 2000.

²⁷ Greg Stoda, “Iverson’s Acts Alienate Fans, Team,” *Palm Beach Post*, March 17, 2000.

²⁸ Darrell Fry, “Save Your Thug Life For Home,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 2, 2001, 1C.

²⁹ “NBA Should Banish Thugs Like Ron Artest,” *Detroit News*, November 23, 2004, 10A.

³⁰ Melissa Black, “The Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word ‘Thug,’” *NPR.org*, April 30, 2015.

³¹ Mike Wise, “Stern Faces Problems On and Off the Court,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2001, D1.

looked like a bite,” David Stern told *The New York Times*, “I never understood why or how we did that. I wasn't consulted and it will never happen again.”³² While the intentionality of this particular event is murky, the NBA’s efforts to ‘airbrush’ out hip-hop culture manifested in other areas as well. A content editor on an NBA CD-ROM project in the 1990s described the instructions he had been given as, “Drop Dennis Rodman from the list of one hundred best players. No images of players fighting. No mentions of drug addiction. No backboard smashing in the product. No gangster aesthetic.”³³ The NBA was able to precisely curate its image off of the court, through league-controlled platforms like NBA.com and *Hoop* magazine. Following the Pistons-Pacers Brawl, the NBA took the public’s negative response as an opportunity to more fully control its *on-court* image as well, instituting a sideline dress code that very clearly targeted hip-hop aesthetics and attempted to whitewash the league’s image.

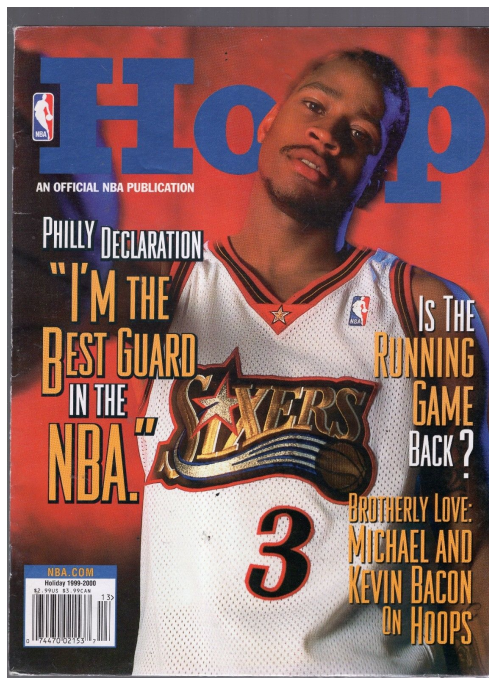


Figure 3.1: The infamous cover of *Hoop* magazine, an official NBA publication, which was altered to remove Allen Iverson’s tattoos.

³² “Tattoo Who? NBA Gets Heat For Altering Iverson Photo,” *Sports Business Daily*, May 8, 2000; Wise, “Stern Faces Problems On and Off the Court.”

³³ David Shields, *Black Planet: Facing Race During an NBA Season* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 21-22.

In many respects, then, the NBA's decisions in this chapter reflect a further consequence of sports' ongoing mediatization. With a fear of lost viewers and profits, the NBA listened to the most outspoken and biased members of the public, like a film or television studio might an audience at a test screening that had expressed a desire for a whiter cast of actors; the league would, in fact, conduct consumer focus groups led by a Republican political strategist.³⁴ William Rhoden of *The New York Times* highlighted as much in his 2006 book, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, in which he argues that the "NBA actively grooms as many non-black players as it can, players from Europe or Asia, players who don't bring along with them all the street baggage of black stars."³⁵ While some of these international stars were people of color, they did not have the same "street baggage," as Rhoden points out, and were also seen as playing and performing basketball "the right way," which emphasized passing, teamwork, and the "fundamentals" of the game.³⁶ Such fans desired players that were more reminiscent of the Larry Birds of yesteryear, however rosy their memories, and less like the Allen Iversons of the moment.

To a great extent, the actions here thus speak to Stuart Hall's analysis of the black athlete in "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" wherein he highlights the notion that "one black body" can simultaneously encapsulate "the extreme alternatives of heroism and villainy," which is reflective of the response to black NBA stars during this period, who could be simultaneously celebrated and condemned by fans and the press. Hall goes on to articulate "spectacle" as part of an imperialist project of translating "things" into "a fantasy visual

³⁴ Michael McCarthy, "Sports Leagues Seek Political Advice," *USA Today*, June 8, 2005.

³⁵ William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 67.

³⁶ In his book, Harvey Araton notes the "gradual breakdown across the 1990s of fundamental basketball skills," unfavorably comparing the era's stars to Magic Johnson and Larry Bird (Araton, *Crashing the Borders*, 121).

display of signs and symbols,” which speaks moreover to the NBA’s understanding of race as a superficial quality, its treatment of blackness as mere “image,” and the mediatized state of NBA basketball. Consequently, entities such as the NBA are able to successfully portray diversity and internationalism as “dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a liberal mish-mash of difference,” ultimately appropriating “difference into a spectacle in order to sell a product.”³⁷ This is an accurate description of the NBA’s approach through this period, which would ultimately utilize internationalism and inclusion in the name of global profit.

By 2001, with Allen Iverson in the midst of a run towards an NBA Finals appearance, some of the press’s hostility had abated, and he had come to be portrayed more as a hero than a villain. A plethora of articles now alternately praised Iverson’s growth, maturity, and leadership. “Pariah to Pitchman,” declared one such article in *The New York Times*.³⁸ Michael Wilbon of the *Washington Post*, and later ESPN, wrote on the “evolution” of Iverson. “Cynics will look at the cornrows and tattoos, the bling-bling and the stocking caps and say nothing has changed with him,” he wrote, invoking a multitude of stereotypes, “but in truth plenty has changed.”³⁹ Following the 2001 Finals, which saw Iverson’s Philadelphia 76ers lose in five games to Shaq and Kobe’s Los Angeles Lakers, AI had the NBA’s top selling jersey for the first time.⁴⁰ His marketing power seemed real and lasting. Harvey Araton of *The New York Times* nonetheless mocked the glut of articles on the newfound maturity of players like Iverson and Kobe Bryant, noting the uneasy hypocrisy of the criticism in the first place. “While young players were dissected like frogs in biology during an All-Star weekend inquisition in February,” Araton writes, “no one seemed to remember

³⁷ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 227-228, 240, 272-274.

³⁸ Richard Sandomir, “Pariah to Pitchman: The New Iverson,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2001.

³⁹ Michael Wilbon, “The Evolution of Allen Iverson,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2001, D01.

⁴⁰ “Iverson’s Jersey Climbs to No. 1,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, June 14, 2001, 3D.

Isiah Thomas and the great Jordan himself caught in serious gambling entanglements even as they carted home championship hardware.”⁴¹ The entire press narrative was askew, from the magnified attention to young players, to the exultation of past greats, to the latest manufactured redemption narratives.

While particular incidents continued to negatively define the NBA within a demonstrably biased press, there had simultaneously occurred a massive increase in the number of international players. In anticipation of the 2002 NBA Draft, featuring Yao Ming as the consensus top pick, the league launched a special NBA.com/China section written in simplified Chinese characters to better reach Chinese fans. “The NBA Draft has become an increasingly global event as more and more international players from all over the world have entered the draft and now play in the NBA,” said Brenda Spoonemore, vice president of interactive services for NBA Entertainment.⁴² While Yao Ming occupied the majority of headlines, the trend went beyond China: 29-percent of players drafted were born outside the United States. Many took this as a sign of a deficiency in American basketball ability. “Global Warning” read a headline in the *New York Daily News*. John Thompson, former Georgetown University head coach, who had been critical of the NBA’s goodwill towards Soviet athletes in the 1980s, had since grown critical of American athletes. “A lot of this is the result of the complacency and laziness of American players,” he said, reinforcing the stereotypes that had come to define the NBA’s Generation Next.⁴³ Kenny Smith, an analyst for TNT, had a simpler take on the matter: “This is a wake-up call.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Harvey Araton, “Gen X Helps Stern Look Clairvoyant,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2001, D1.

⁴² “NBA Website Launches Chinese Coverage on 2002 Draft,” *Xinhua General News Service*, June 19, 2002.

⁴³ Wayne Coffey, “Global Warning: NBA's Foreign Invasion Exposes Problems in Homeland Hoops,” *New York Daily News*, July 14, 2002.

⁴⁴ Christopher Lawler, “Foreign Players Set Trend,” *USA Today*, June 27, 2002.



Figure 3.2: Yao Ming on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* for their 2002-03 NBA season preview.

The internationalization continued into the 2003 draft. The Detroit Pistons selected Darko Milicic with the second overall pick, the first of another twenty international picks between both rounds. Many attributed the growth in international players to the worldwide visibility and success of the 1992 Olympic “Dream Team,” featuring the league’s top stars. This remains the NBA’s accepted narrative: young aspiring athletes watched players like Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Charles Barkley, and Magic Johnson and were inspired to attain comparable greatness. While this appears unimpeachably true, it is also significant that the NBA’s international growth reached new heights during the league’s racially charged domestic turbulence of the early 2000s. While one cannot attribute a clear or direct intentionality to the NBA’s importing a greater number of international players in order to alleviate the league’s “image” issues, there were nonetheless indisputable benefits: the NBA could appease its sponsors, a certain percentage of its domestic fan base, and its international viewers that were more likely to watch their hometown heroes.

In 2005, Sean Frederick Brown published a study on the widespread internationalization of American sport, arguing that sports identified as “American” were more likely to succeed, while those labeled as “foreign” were more likely to struggle, citing as evidence the declines in domestic viewership for pro basketball and baseball concurrent with their globalization.⁴⁵ This does not account, of course, for the NBA’s loss of Michael Jordan, the 1998 strike-shortened season, and the league’s greater investment in cable television over network television, though Brown acknowledged the latter two as possible contributing factors.⁴⁶

Crucially, the argument also underestimated the earlier global efforts of the NBA, which readied its audience for the more extensive importation of foreign-born players. Basketball fans had largely become accustomed to foreign-born stars, such as Dirk Nowitzki of Germany, Manu Ginobili of Argentina, Tony Parker of France, and Pau Gasol of Spain. English professor and NBA scholar Yago Colás has explained how Manu Ginobili, who joined the league for the landmark 2002-2003 season, even became an exemplar of the new NBA reality. Players like Ginobili served as “the greatest of the great white hopes” by embodying “a kind of dialectical synthesis of the racialized stylistic antithesis” between white players and black players. “This international game heals the ills of basketball and the racial conflicts of American society,” Colás argues, “but it does so via the white body of Manu Ginobili.”⁴⁷

International players came to represent the “proper values” of basketball by exhibiting a return to the pass-first, team-oriented “fundamentals” of the game. Whatever the

⁴⁵ Sean Frederick Brown, “Exceptionalist America: American Sports Fans’ Reaction to Internationalization.” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 22.6 (November 2005): 1107-1108.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1126.

⁴⁷ Yago Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016), 146.

basketball explanation for the public’s interest, though, the reality is that these new foreign-born stars were favored because they did not “bring along with them all the street baggage of black stars,” as sportswriter William Rhoden has noted.⁴⁸ The NBA nonetheless took advantage of the public’s international interest. While the NBA had already begun to control its *off-court* image by minimizing the presence of hip-hop signifiers wherever possible, the importation of international stars allowed the league to further modify its *on-court* product, which could aid in the league’s global media pursuits by televising global styles of basketball that would be more recognizable to overseas fans.



Figure 3.3: In *Sports Illustrated* (Feb. 21, 2005), an article cites the Pistons-Pacers brawl and “troublesome” players as reasons for fans’ growing disinterest in basketball, using an image of Darius Miles of the Portland Trail Blazers (left). The article’s counterpart (right) invokes the skill of emerging international players, including Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker, as reasons that fans should continue watching.

Following the “Malice at the Palace” brawl, on November 19, 2004, the NBA attained the means to police its players’ behavior and branding more than ever before. After a skirmish broke out between players Ron Artest and Ben Wallace, Artest retreated to the press table, when a fan threw a full cup of soda at him: “Artest bolted from the table and... touched off a riot that, as [Commissioner] Stern put it, broke ‘the social contract between players and

⁴⁸ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 67.

fans.”⁴⁹ Nine players were suspended without pay, and five players and five fans faced criminal assault charges.⁵⁰ Tensions between the players, the press, and the fans had reached crisis levels.

By May 2005, following the brawl, sales of league-licensed products had fallen by thirty-percent, while regular-season television ratings were down on all networks.⁵¹ Commissioner Stern hired Matthew Dowd, a business strategist and Republican Party consultant who had helped shape George W. Bush’s reelection campaign.⁵² Dowd was tasked with “broadening” the league’s appeal. The modus operandi became “image building.”⁵³ Ultimately, Dowd conducted two consumer focus groups composed of people that were admittedly not fans of the NBA, in order to determine how to get “casual viewers more excited” about the upcoming Finals.⁵⁴

In *After Artest*, David J. Leonard examines the ramifications of the brawl and the changing racial landscape of the league. In “highlighting the league’s blackness,” Leonard argues, “the Palace Brawl mandated the transformation of NBA policy regarding the governance of black bodies.” These new policies and “rhetorical campaigns” sought to “mediate these potentially harmful differences through demands for assimilation, disciplinarity, and conformity.”⁵⁵ The most significant of such campaigns was the controversial implementation of a business casual “dress code” for all players on the

⁴⁹ Araton, *Crashing the Borders*, 19.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Abrams, “The Malice at the Palace,” *Grantland*, March 20, 2012.

⁵¹ Araton, *Crashing the Borders*, 177.

⁵² Other pro sports leagues, too, had begun turning to political strategists for new image campaigns. The MLB, which had been mired in the congressional steroid hearings, hired Ari Fleisher, spokesperson for George W. Bush from 2001 to 2003. In 2002, The NFL’s San Diego Chargers hired former Bill Clinton advisor Mark Fabiani to oversee their push for a new stadium, given his knowledge of relevant city, state, and federal political infrastructures (Michael McCarthy, “Sports Leagues Seek Political Advice,” *USA Today*, June 8, 2005).

⁵³ Araton, *Crashing the Borders*, 175-176.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, “Sports Leagues Seek Political Advice.”

⁵⁵ David J. Leonard, *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 3, 16.

sidelines, announced at the start of the 2005-06 season. Banned articles of clothing included T-shirts, shorts, sneakers, sunglasses, chains, pendants, medallions, and headgear of any kind. LeBron James was among the few players to support the decision: “Sometimes you feel lazy on a flight and you don't want to put (dress) clothes on...But it's a job and we should look like we're going to work.”⁵⁶ Stephen A. Smith, former *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter and longtime ESPN commentator, defended the admittedly racially motivated decision as necessary. “Stern's only doing what teams want him to do since few have the guts to do it themselves,” Smith argued, “and he is doing what sponsors and advertisers have advised as being in the best interest of his business.”⁵⁷

While the NBA disputed that the dress code was the direct result of the Pistons-Pacers Brawl, many players and reporters drew the connection and remained highly critical of the decision as a clear effort to police young black men and their expressions of identity. “[Stern] surrendered to the almighty American stereotype, rather than get to the heart of more complex and vexing issues that are generational and racial,” wrote Harvey Araton in *the New York Times*.⁵⁸ Allen Iverson took the decision personally: “They're targeting my generation – the hip-hop generation.”⁵⁹ Yet the seeming arbitrariness of the code was not lost either. Jason Richardson, of the Golden State Warriors, highlighted the absurdity of privileging appearances over character. “You still wear a suit, you still could be a crook,” he said. “You see all what happened with Enron and Martha Stewart...A guy could come in with baggy jeans, a do-rag and have a Ph.D., and a person who comes in with a suit could be a three-time

⁵⁶ Brian Mahoney, “Stern defends new NBA dress code,” *Associated Press*, October 18, 2005.

⁵⁷ Stephen A. Smith, “An NBA dress code? It's a Necessary Evil,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 9, 2005.

⁵⁸ Harvey Araton, “The NBA's Latest Edict Already Looks Threadbare.”

⁵⁹ Mike Wise, “Opinions on the NBA's Dress Code Are Far From Uniform,” *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2005.

felon.”⁶⁰ Put most succinctly, “Brooks Brothers is not an emblem of moral fiber,” read one editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.⁶¹

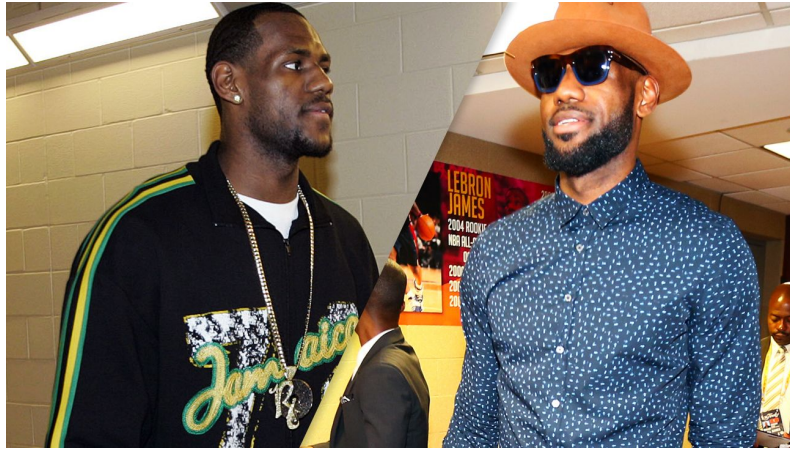


Figure 3.4: An ESPN feature examines the NBA dress code one decade later, comparing LeBron James before and after its implementation.⁶²

The 2005-06 season thus began with a new dress code and a new zero tolerance policy, which extended to both fans and players. During a preseason game, an Orlando Magic fan was banned from games for life after he called Dikembe Mutombo a “monkey.”⁶³ Sanctions could sometimes be indiscriminate. In January, Antonio McDyess was fined \$500,000 for leaving the bench during a game, a clear rule violation, in order to check on his pregnant wife in the stands.⁶⁴ The following season, as the NBA attempted to move past the lasting sting of the “Malice at the Palace,” the Denver Nuggets and New York Knicks engaged in a similar skirmish, which also spilled into the crowd, resulting in an NBA-record ten ejections.⁶⁵ In a statement, Stern made it clear that such behaviors would no longer be

⁶⁰ Cliff Brunt, “Pacers’ Jackson Says NBA Dress Code Attacks Blacks,” *Associated Press*, October 19, 2005.

⁶¹ “NBA Dress Code From Hip-Hop to (Hip)pocrisy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 2005.

⁶² Rachel Marcus, “The NBA Dress Code: 10 Years Later,” *ESPN*, October 28, 2015.

⁶³ Jim Litke, “Stern Refuses to Give Up Any More Ground,” *Associated Press*, November 1, 2006.

⁶⁴ John Hollinger, “NBA Suspends Davis, Sweeps Larger Issue Under Rug,” *The New York Sun*, January 20, 2006, 21.

⁶⁵ Bruce Arthur, “Latest Brawl an Ugly Mess for Stern to Clean Up,” *National Post*, December 18, 2006, S9.

tolerated.⁶⁶ Each franchise was fined \$500,000, while players received suspensions ranging anywhere from fifteen games to four. “The league came down with a sledgehammer, as if to obliterate even the possibility of such behavior in the future,” explained a ten-year retrospective of the Knicks-Nuggets brawl. “And indeed, there hasn’t been a fight anywhere near that size in the decade since.”⁶⁷ By the close of 2006 into 2007, the league was close to finding a new identity, removed from hip-hop and focused instead on business-casual internationalism.

The NBA’s programming strategy reflects Marwan Kraidy’s concept of “corporate transculturalism,” in which cultural hybridity merely serves “as an economic energy stream to be leveraged by transnational corporations and exploited by individual consumers.” Any genuine “progressive potential” is squandered by the strategic use of hybridity as a tool for economic gain.⁶⁸ The NBA, as one such corporation by this time, similarly sought to deploy more internationalized “content” in order to enrich itself on a global scale. Following the 2005 dress code, which enabled the league to dictate the appearance of its television star-athletes, the continued importation of international players also altered the style of American basketball to better reflect international basketball and better address international audiences.

In 2010, for example, sportswriter Jonathan Abrams chronicled some of the specific basketball moves that had followed foreign-born athletes into the league. Among them was the “Euro-step,” a particular kind of stagger-step drive towards the basket in which a player takes advantage of the permitted two steps without a dribble, that had since been adopted by American athletes. “Considering the well-established presence of foreign players in the

⁶⁶ “Nuggets-Knicks Suspensions,” *NBA.com*, December 18, 2006.

⁶⁷ Seth Rosenthal, “The Knicks-Nuggets Fight in 2006 was the NBA’s Last Brawl,” *SB Nation*, December 16, 2016.

⁶⁸ Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, 94.

NBA...and with the awakening sense that the best international players have become more clever and skillful than many American players, the mimicry becomes almost necessary,” Abrams explains.⁶⁹ This mimicry, of course, also created a product that could be more readily engaged across national borders. Overseas, NBA fans could better recognize in the NBA the kind of basketball being played within their home countries. At the same time, telecasts could highlight international players and their stories. The NBA began to prioritize its own multi-cultural globality, putting the league in an ideal position for the ongoing turn towards a global multiplatform media economy.

The flexibility of cable and streaming television, respectively, afforded the NBA greater scheduling control on linear TV and a more global address through digital platforms. In turn, the NBA continued to excel internationally. As of 2005, fifteen percent of the league’s broadcast revenues came from overseas.⁷⁰ By 2013, ten-percent of the NBA’s *overall* revenue came from its international operations, a seemingly small number, but one that topped both the NFL and MLB.⁷¹ As international players were slowly coming to define the league, bringing with them an altogether more global audience, the NBA’s gambit for global success was working. The league was living up to the “World” Basketball Association ambitions that commissioner David Stern had expressed a decade earlier.⁷²

Sports Television in the Multiplatform Media Economy

The simultaneous eradication of hip-hop and ascent of internationalism is reflected in NBA telecasts and promotional materials. It is thus essential to observe such an evolution in

⁶⁹ Jonathan Abrams, “NBA Imports Euro Step and Other Moves of a Global Game,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2010.

⁷⁰ Frank Fitzpatrick, “A Wide World of Sports Fans,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 17, 2005.

⁷¹ Mark Koba, “US Pro Teams Give ‘Away Game’ a Whole New Meaning,” *CNBC*, October 10, 2013.

⁷² Michelangelo Rucci, “NBA is Coming to Spread the Word,” *Herald Sun*, February 10, 1992.

practice, as the manifestation of the programming strategies described thus far. Ultimately, the international appeal of these changes instigated further investment in streaming technologies and over-the-top platforms, as examined later.

Victoria E. Johnson has described the relationship between ESPN and hip-hop during this same period, from 2001 to 2004, as an ideal case example of how sports programming helps the contemporary media industries “to balance their portfolio of interests” by engaging “*both* a broad(cast) audience and increasingly narrower niches within that audience.” In focusing on ESPN’s original productions, Johnson notes that “the language and aesthetic of hip hop” became a way to integrate and conjoin ESPN’s “multi-media universe.” This is also true of the *live* sports programming produced by both ABC and ESPN, as reflected in early NBA coverage on the networks. The advantage of hip-hop, Johnson argues, is that it shares in sports’ ideology of individualism, which could be invoked by ESPN’s original programming to instead “encourage and reward an investment in the status quo and corporate ideals.” Hip-hop and sport, in conjunction, thus provided an ideal conduit for the widespread promotion of “team and corporate sponsorship as commonsense structures of achievement and reward.”⁷³ As an example, after Allen Iverson had successfully flipped the news media narrative by winning the 2001 All-Star Game MVP and leading his team to the 2001 NBA Finals, many wrote on the new commercial and marketing opportunities now available to him.⁷⁴ Individual greatness, hip-hop, and corporate sponsorship functioned as an integrated promotional machine.

⁷³ Victoria E. Johnson, “Historicizing TV Networking: Broadcasting, Cable, and the case of ESPN,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 61-62, 64.

⁷⁴ Sandomir, “Pariah to Pitchman.”

Johnson describes how, ultimately, ESPN changed course in 2005 to target “more affluent and more suburban high-tech early adopters” through their programming.⁷⁵ The case of the NBA presented here offers further context for this shift, as the Pistons-Pacers Brawl in late 2004, with its implications of hip-hop culture run amok, had aired nationally on ESPN. Following “the Malice at the Palace,” and the press’s racist conflation of hip-hop, blackness, and violence, ABC and the NBA began a new strategy that walked back some of the initial populism of their media partnership, and especially any materials that recalled hip-hop. The tech-savvy suburbanite thus became a more prominent target for ESPN, as Johnson explains, just as the NBA itself sought to cultivate a more conservative identity in consultation with Republican strategist Matthew Dowd.

This new “clean-cut” and whitewashed NBA is evident in the evolution of its telecasts from its first season on ABC/ESPN through 2007. While NBC had used grand orchestral themes, ABC and ESPN began to use ‘pop’ music, including hip-hop, and more extensively emphasized star players. Following “Malice at the Palace,” however, the network and the league returned to the classical style of NBC (and CBS) in an effort to minimize the NBA’s relationship with hip-hop subcultures. This packaging, in conjunction with the player dress code initiated for the 2005-06 season, led to telecasts by 2007 that feel most reflective of the NBA’s current approach. In addition to a de-emphasis on hip-hop, this approach includes the ‘color blocking’ of in-arena fans, in ways reflective of soccer fandom, in order to speak more effectively to overseas fans. This strategy is established by the 2007 Finals, which featured an extensively international San Antonio Spurs defeating the Cleveland Cavaliers, in the first of another eight championship appearances by LeBron James.

⁷⁵ Johnson, “Historicizing TV Networking,” 61-62.

The 2001 All-Star Game on NBC, for instance, reflects the bias and ambivalence in the public's perception of Allen Iverson and the league's broader hip-hop culture. After opening with shots of Vince Carter, Chris Webber, Kobe Bryant, Tracy McGrady, Rasheed Wallace, Latrell Sprewell, and Kevin Garnett, the on-court styles of play, loose-fitting jerseys, and various "cultural markers of their upbringing in the urban ruins of the Reagan Revolution," per Yago Colás, seem to clash with the more traditional organ and orchestral themes played between breaks.⁷⁶ Before the start of the second quarter, moreover, NBC sideline reporter Lewis Johnson even calls the game "the ultimate playground experience." Later, after cutting to Kobe Bryant and Kevin Garnett mid-discussion, commentator Marv Albert condescends to them, sarcastically calling it a "high-level statistical conversation" to laughs from partner Doug Collins. "Kobe citing historical stats," Albert adds with incredulity.⁷⁷ This in keeping with the work of Colás, who argues that the NBA "sought to capitalize on the new markets this 'hip-hop invasion' helped it penetrate while simultaneously trafficking in the social and cultural stereotypes arising out of blackness."⁷⁸ By simultaneously extolling and undermining players, the NBC telecast is reflective of this tension, which offers further evidence for the "the extreme alternatives of heroism and villainy" that Stuart Hall has highlighted in visual representations of the black athlete.⁷⁹

The 2002 NBA Finals between the Los Angeles Lakers and New Jersey Nets, the last championship to appear on the network, offers further insight into NBC's approach to producing and promoting the league. As an introduction to Game Four, Bob Costas narrates a mini-documentary to celebrate the history of the event, framing the 2001 Lakers as a

⁷⁶ Colás, *Ball Don't Lie!*, 122.

⁷⁷ Alexmed2016, "Full 2001 NBA All Star Game 1080P," YouTube, 2:15:37. Post January 25, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr6NPQ2Pn5o>>.

⁷⁸ Colás, *Ball Don't Lie!*, 122.

⁷⁹ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 226.

‘dynasty’ comparable to the 1960s Boston Celtics and 1990s Chicago Bulls. “Now, the Los Angeles Lakers chase their piece of history,” Costas explains, as violins swell. The spot is reflective of the myth-making approach of NFL Films, rather than the NBA’s unique pop-centric strategy of the 1980s. For a series without the Bulls or Michael Jordan, the network spends a surprising amount of time invoking Jordan’s legacy, and the Celtics’ dynasties in the 1960s and 1980s, to sell the significance of the series. “Could [the Lakers] beat the Bulls?” asks Tom Tolbert on the pre-show, ignoring the opposing New Jersey Nets altogether.⁸⁰ The emphasis remains on history, mythology, and nostalgia.

The subsequent Finals between the Lakers and San Antonio Spurs, the first to be broadcast on ABC since 1973, represents a distinct change in the production and promotion of the NBA. In the introduction to Game Six, rather than the historical context of the previous Finals, ABC aired a montage set to Saliva’s “Raise Up” to promote different storylines within the series, which featured multiple highlights of Jack Nicholson yelling from his courtside Lakers seats. “Can San Antonio get it done in LA? Can the Lakers push the series back to Texas? Who will raise up?” asks the gravel-voiced narrator, before cutting to another fast-paced montage highlighting stars of Finals past. While ABC, too, was interested in cultivating the history of the league, the endeavor was secondary to the need for quick cuts and popular music.⁸¹

The same is reflected in the promotional spots for the following year’s 2004 Finals, which features Destiny’s Child performing a special NBA-specific spoken word opening. “No matter the game, there can only be one winner,” they declare in unison, before segueing

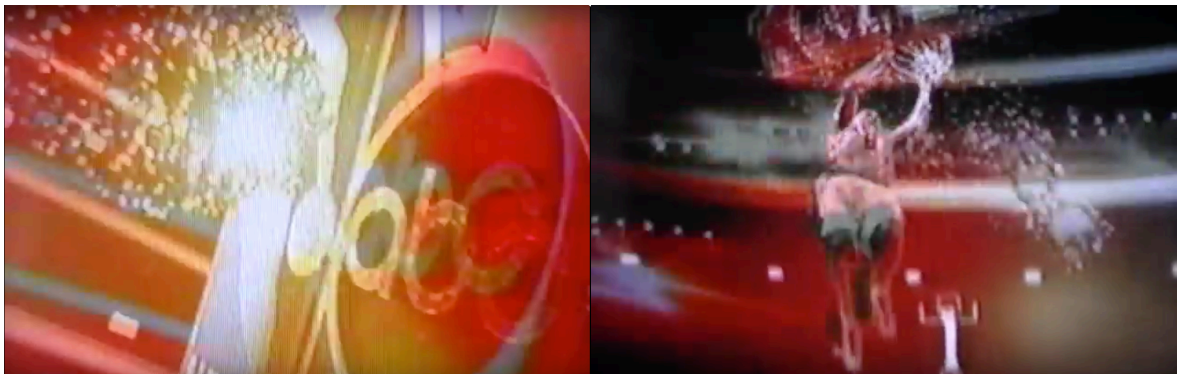
⁸⁰ Judau89, “NBA Finals 2002 Game 4 Intro,” YouTube, 10:09. Post July 19, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REoF_wAhBx4>

⁸¹ Jstevens888, “NBA on ABC 2003 Intro (Spurs/Lakers Game 6),” YouTube, 2:55. Post July 14, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bneb_UXUy7U>.

into LA Lakers and Detroit Pistons highlights set to “Lose My Breath.”⁸² In a similar spot promoting ABC’s regular season coverage in 2004, the network uses Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Get Enough,” set to a montage of dunks and passionate yelling, from Jason Kidd, Kevin Garnett, and once again Jack Nicholson, as well as key international players in Manu Ginobili and Dirk Nowitzki.⁸³ While NBC had privileged classicism and mythology, ABC’s more populist style emphasized hit songs, emotion, and star matchups and storylines (that could be cross-promoted with ESPN).



Figure 3.5: NBC’s emphasis on history and legacy (above) is in stark contrast to the colorful explosion effects of ABC’s NBA programming (below).



⁸² BeyonceAds, “Destiny’s Child – NBA Promo (2004) ABC ad,” YouTube, 1:16. Post December 18, 2009. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZtgT-rvazU>>.

⁸³ Jstevens888, “NBA on ABC 2004 Intro (with Justin Timberlake),” YouTube, 1:34. Post July 14, 2007. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCXBTqDdPIQ>>.

Following the Pistons-Pacers Brawl, however, the NBA's partners altered their approaches to downplay the league's relationship with hip-hop and promote the league's burgeoning internationalism. ESPN, for instance, aired a promotional spot for the 2005 Conference Finals featuring Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight."⁸⁴ While still emphasizing pop music and imaging, the use of Collins is an overture to an older demographic. The 2006 All-Star Game on TNT, moreover, feels like one of the first "modern" NBA telecasts, in its return to the classical style of NBC, while retaining a degree of irreverence. For the opening, a live orchestra plays the All-Stars into the building, who enter wearing matching red, white, and blue jackets and perform a synchronized dance routine. Following the first quarter, TNT airs a recap highlight package set to pop-punk music, reflecting the hip-hop-less state of the NBA soundtrack. At the same time, on the court, an up-tempo style was becoming clearer, led by Steve Nash and LeBron James, who went on to win the game's MVP award.⁸⁵ The feel of the sport had evolved considerably since the slower, more physical approach of the 2001 and 2002 Los Angeles Lakers. This athleticism, which was more reflective of international basketball, made easier the task of selling the NBA overseas.

By 2007, a new paradigm had been established, defined by international stars and styles of play, an NBA-sanctioned manner of dress, and the targeting of international audiences through in-arena and on-court practices. The 2007 Finals, the first to feature LeBron James, whose Cavaliers would lose to the San Antonio Spurs, featured an NBA-record nine international players on their rosters, including Manu Ginobili of Argentina and

⁸⁴ Bulls7123, "ABC Intro for 2005 Spurs-Suns NBA Game 5 Conference Final," YouTube, 00:59. Post May 31, 2007. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Zl-s0ewB2M>>.

⁸⁵ Alexmed2016, "Full 2006 NBA All Star Game 1080P," YouTube, 2:22:36. Post January 28, 2017. <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57yiE9xsDNo>>>.

Tony Parker of France.⁸⁶ Parker became the first European-born player to win NBA Finals MVP, following a season that saw Dirk Nowitzki of Germany become the first European to win regular season MVP.⁸⁷

While the league promoted these new global stars, they also took to modifying the in-arena *mise-en-scène*. During the 2007 Finals, for instance, fans in San Antonio were dressed in color-blocked white shirts to “white out” the arena, reminiscent of a passionate overseas soccer match.⁸⁸ *Sports Illustrated* took note of the phenomenon by 2013, using the soccer descriptor for the “sea of red” at Staples Center. In 2015, John Branch of *The New York Times* took this further, arguing, “with the proximity and visibility of fans surrounding a basketball court, NBA arenas...may represent the pinnacle, the near-perfect blend of allegiance, marketing and stagecraft.”⁸⁹ Though the origin of this level of coordination is contested – some give credit to college football, others to hockey – its reminiscence to “the soccer model” of fandom is not.⁹⁰



Figure 3.6: Game 1 of the 2007 Finals in San Antonio. The “white out” look, which has become increasingly commonplace at American sporting events, manipulates the arena space in a way that better addresses international television audiences.

⁸⁶ “2007 NBA Finals By the Numbers,” *NBA.com*, June 6, 2007.

⁸⁷ Michael Lee, “For Spurs, A Familiar Ring,” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2007.

⁸⁸ Swish NBA, “NBA.Finals.2007.06.07.G1.Cavaliers@Spurs HD,” YouTube, 1:24:14. Post October 12, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4hjqc_qAoo>.

⁸⁹ John Branch, “Fans’ Uniform Look is a Team Effort,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2015, B10.

⁹⁰ Chris Chase, “Dear Warriors Fans: You Look Ridiculous,” *USA Today*, June 5, 2015.

Richard Giulianotti discusses such fan behaviors in its U.K. soccer context. He describes the “social solidarity” of this sort of fandom, and its enhancement of a “collective consciousness.” By coordinating clothing or colors, a “display of visual solidarity,” the act becomes “one of the few means by which fans scattered across the world may continue to signify their deep allegiance to a local team.”⁹¹ Douglas Kellner and Hui Zhang expand on this in their discussion of global media spectacles. Sports fans, they argue, are “like a congregation and their cheers and boos are a form of liturgy.”⁹² As the NBA is broadcast globally, then, this visual solidarity becomes a spectacle through which faraway fans can connect. These behaviors work to intensify the perceived equivalence across markets. As Mike Chant, NBA senior director of team programming, explains, “If you can create an environment in-arena that is exciting, that translates well on TV.”⁹³ This approach allows NBA producers and writers to better target international fans by incorporating material in-arena.

Since 2007, this in-arena internationalization has been reflected in changes at the level of the uniforms, the “costuming” of the game. For the 2013-14 season, the league began to periodically use short-sleeved jerseys. Sal LaRocca, Vice President of Global Merchandising, cited the global marketplace as the incentive for the move and that the league tries “to stay ahead of the curve.”⁹⁴ This move was coupled with the decision to place corporate sponsor logos onto jerseys, which moved the look of the sport even closer to

⁹¹ Richard Giulianotti, “Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs: A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26.1 (2002): 37.

⁹² Douglas Kellner and Hui Zhang, “Sports, the Beijing Olympics, and Global Media Spectacles.” In *A Companion to Sport*, ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 448.

⁹³ Mike Chant, in discussion with the author, November 13, 2017.

⁹⁴ Jake O’Donnell, “The NBA’s Vice President of Global Merchandising Reached Out to Set the Record Straight About Short Sleeve Uniforms,” *SportsGrid*, January 24, 2014.

soccer. While this was no doubt driven by the potential for extra revenue, Adam Silver specifically referenced soccer in justifying the change. In 2014, he called the move “inevitable” and explained, “increasingly as we see Champion's League and English Premier League televised in the U.S., I think it’s going to become more acceptable and more commonplace for our fans as well.”⁹⁵ After the league officially announced the move for the 2017-18 season, Silver reiterated this point and also noted the possibility of foreign companies investing, in the hope of expanding the league’s growth overseas.⁹⁶ The two-fold move of short sleeves and corporate logos, therefore, is directly meant to facilitate a pan-regional legibility, one that follows the pace and demands of the global marketplace. There is an erasure of American signifiers, and in their place, the signifiers of soccer grow more prominent.

This trend is established by 2007, as streaming technology had sufficiently advanced to reliably reach a global audience, which was not possible in the early dot-com period of the mid-to-late 1990s. Streaming television expanded media markets and offered new direct-to-consumer opportunities for integrated content owner-distributors. Streaming has further encouraged particular production strategies that suit its strengths, as evident in the greater efforts to pack sports programming with more international stories. In conjunction, entities such as the NBA and ESPN, which had previously used hip-hop to promote their brand of commercialism, felt pressure to scale back on that identity to more effectively reach conservative America. Internationalism thus “solved” the two-fold “problem” of how to both appease racist domestic unease and more effectively program to overseas audiences.

⁹⁵ Michael McCarthy, “NBA’s Silver: Ads on Player Jerseys are ‘Inevitable’,” *Advertising Age*, March 19, 2014.

⁹⁶ Brian Mahoney, “NBA to begin selling jersey sponsorships in 2017-18,” *NBA.com*, April 15, 2016.

From 2001 through 2004, as Victoria E. Johnson highlights, hip-hop played a key role in ESPN's brand identity, often in collaboration with the NBA. Following the Pistons-Pacers brawl, however, which was pointed to as "evidence" of hip-hop's violence and social disorder, the NBA (in collaboration with its media partners), capitalized on its ongoing internationalization in order to better position itself within a global multiplatform media economy. As demonstrated by the NBA's telecasts and promotional materials, this internationalization was often accomplished through in-arena strategies. The NBA's drive for globally efficient programming, then, derived from the increasing alignment of the live event and its mediation.

The Internet TV Revolution

The NBA reinforces globalization and digitization as an integrated process. Following the more widespread importation of international athletes, and their promotion as the league's leading stars, the NBA accelerated its investment in digital distribution, in order to more directly reach overseas audiences. In July 2005, *USA Today* ran a feature that asked, "Can the future of TV be seen on the web?" Multiple media institutions, including ABC, ESPN, CBS, Fox News, and Major League Baseball, had come to develop more robust digital services, both of the ad-supported and subscription-based variety. While MLB's platform had evolved out of its internal Baseball Advanced Media group, the ABC/ESPN operation had its roots in the Starwave acquisition, as discussed in the previous chapter. Sports programming had become "the killer app for streaming to your computer," according to Michael Kelley of PricewaterhouseCoopers, given sport's volume and its global, out-of-

market appeal. As the technology continued to improve and become more accessible, an “internet TV revolution” seemed increasingly likely.⁹⁷

The NBA had fallen slightly behind MLB in terms of its streaming capabilities. Pro baseball had been regularly streaming games since 2003, and BAM itself had grown into a key intermediary in the digital distribution business, filling the role once occupied by Starwave. BAM had been hired to oversee the launch of streaming platforms for NCAA and Major League Soccer, whose live-streams would operate through MLB.com.⁹⁸ In 2005, the San Antonio Spurs’ victory over the Detroit Pistons became the first Finals to be live-streamed through NBA.com, while the league also began to experiment with pre-game podcasts and highlight packages for mobile phones. NBA executives framed these investments as especially important for international growth. More than half of traffic to NBA.com regularly came from outside the U.S., and during the NBA Finals, the highest concentration of users came from China. In order to better accommodate those fans, the league’s website featured live audio broadcasts in fifteen languages, including Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, French, German and Spanish.⁹⁹

By January 2006, the NBA had sufficiently readied their streaming video capabilities and announced the launch of League Pass Broadband, though it remained an added feature of its satellite and digital cable service. For a half-season price of \$109, League Pass Broadband offered up to forty regular season games a week on NBA.com.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the league continued to prepare for an eventual standalone service. “We’re doing a balancing act of national rights holders, local rights holders and League Pass rights holders,” explained

⁹⁷ David Lieberman, “Can the future of TV be seen on the Web?” *USA Today*, July 13, 2005.

⁹⁸ Richard Sandomir, “Baseball’s Web Site is Big Business,” *The New York Times*. April 2, 2006.

⁹⁹ LA Lorek, “High-Tech NBA Helps the World Tune in Video Via Cell Phones,” *Knight-Ridder Tribune*, June 11, 2005.

¹⁰⁰ “NBA Launches NBA League Pass Broadband on NBA.com,” *Business Wire*, January 23, 2006.

Gregg Winik, executive VP and executive producer of NBA Entertainment. “We just want to dabble in this for this year and see what we learn.”¹⁰¹ As discussed later, the problem would be solved one year later in a reorganization of the NBA’s linear and digital rights, which saw Turner take control of the domestic League Pass platform.



Figure 3.7: A user screenshot of NBA League Pass Broadband from 2008 (Robert Occhialini, *flickr*).

A few months later, in April 2006, longtime NBA Entertainment president Adam Silver, who had steered the league into the digital media age, was promoted to deputy commissioner. He would retain his NBAE duties, combining his responsibilities over NBA.com, NBA TV, and the league’s twelve international offices.¹⁰² Silver’s appointment was tied specifically to his global expertise, as Stern tasked him with expanding the league’s presence in Europe and Asia. “The challenge is to continue to bring NBA basketball to (international) markets, both in person through preseason games and through television,”

¹⁰¹ Jon Lafayette, “NBA Mulling Online-Only Sub Package,” *Television Week*, January 23, 2006.

¹⁰² Brian Mahoney, “NBA Entertainment Exec to Be League No. 2,” *Associated Press*, April 19, 2006.

Silver said.¹⁰³ As an overall media strategy, then, the global and digital were deeply integrated, as reflected in the programming of NBA.com and NBA TV, as well as the appointment of Adam Silver to the number two position in the league. This would only become more evident when Silver was announced as David Stern's replacement as commissioner in 2012, officially taking the job in February 2014.¹⁰⁴

The NBA's growing international cast had again become a prominent talking point for news media during the 2006 Finals, as Dirk Nowitzki led the Dallas Mavericks against the Miami Heat, who would go on to win the series. At the same time, one-fifth of all NBA players were now foreign-born.¹⁰⁵ The internationalization of the NBA justified the further expansion of international direct-to-consumer distribution, in order to cater to fans that wanted to see their own national stars. In October 2006, while the NBA's broadband League Pass platform went live in the United States, they announced additional plans for a separate service to be sold in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, featuring Chinese-language broadcasts for about ninety regular season and playoff games.¹⁰⁶ These moves were also tied to a revamped NBA.com, which now included ten national spotlight pages, in addition to its new webcast offerings.¹⁰⁷ While the NBA, ultimately, became the third pro sports league to launch a streaming video service, behind the BAM-created services for Major League Baseball and Major League Soccer, the NBA remained far ahead of other American sports in its aggressive international expansion.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Ian Begley, "Stern Picks Silver as Right-Hand Man," *New York Daily News*, April 20, 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Brian Windhorst, "David Stern Has Date For Retirement," *ESPN*, October 25, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ "American Basketball Comes Under Scrutiny," *Contra Costa Times*, June 11, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Anick Jesdanun "40 Live NBA Games Coming to the Internet," *Associated Press*, October 13, 2006.

¹⁰⁷ "NBA.com to Feature Full Season of Live Webcasts as Part of New Site Launch," *Business Wire*, October 16, 2006.

¹⁰⁸ R. Thomas Umstead, "NBA Takes It to the 'Net: 'League Pass' Subs Will Get Free Access to Game Streams," *Multichannel News*, October 16, 2006.

In order to further cultivate its relationship with China, the NBA launched a new NBA China subsidiary in September 2007, headed by Microsoft's former top executive in the country, Tim Chen, who was hired as "the point man for navigating governmental issues and boosting explosive NBA growth potential in the world's most populated nation."¹⁰⁹ As part of its responsibilities, NBA China would be charged with expanding TV rights, sponsorships, and digital distribution, and consulting with the Chinese Basketball Association on both marketing and infrastructure. By 2006, China had become the largest NBA market outside of the U.S., generating \$50 million annually of the NBA's total \$4 billion revenue. The NBA saw Nike's growth in the country, from \$8 million in 1994 to \$100 million by 2002, as an achievable goal. Unlike the tactics used by other imported pro sports in China, including the Manchester United and Chelsea soccer clubs, the NBA remained in China year-round, running clinics, games, and tours. "The NBA has proven they're part of the furniture, part of the landscape now," explained Chris Renner of Helios Partners, a sports marketing company in Beijing.¹¹⁰ The NBA, a successful media conglomerate with still greater global aspirations, was continuing to draw on the established localization strategies of larger transnational media companies, including its own media partners in Disney and Time Warner.

The NBA had sought to create a globally inclusive television program. While the league's interests in global media had been initiated by satellite distribution in the 1980s, their ambitions were vastly expanded and improved by the simultaneity of internet distribution in the 1990s and 2000s. During this era, modifications to the sport and its performance served to reflect international styles of play and improve transnational legibility, thus more effectively addressing the league's new global constituency. In *Inside Prime Time*

¹⁰⁹ "NBA to Form New China Operation," *Agence France Presse*, September 19, 2007.

¹¹⁰ Stephen Wade, "NBA Hopes to Take Great Leaps Forward in China with Latest Expansion," *Associated Press*, October 13, 2007.

(1983), Todd Gitlin describes how, “in network and advertiser parlance, ‘the market’ is still personified as a hypothetical anti-Semitic Midwesterner ready to switch channels at the first sign of Stein.”¹¹¹ Since this period from 2002 to 2007, the imagined audience has become an altogether more international one, which similarly wishes to see itself reflected. Rather than tailor particular programs, however, streaming platforms allow for integrated content owners, such as Netflix, Hulu, or HBO, to adjust their content libraries in total. Just as Netflix maintains a collection of content that can appeal simultaneously to a number of demographics, the NBA platform also features highlights and games that can address any particular locality. The drive for full global efficiency is thus accelerated by the advent of streaming television and OTT platforms. In a multiplatform media economy, the NBA, its partners, and its competitors have increasingly sought and privileged a global audience.

Conclusion: NBA Digital

The NBA’s international and digital value contributed to the outcome of the rights negotiations with Disney and Turner in late 2006. In October, the league began talks with its incumbent partners about contract extensions, as the current deals were set to expire after the 2007-08 season. Digital rights were the centerpiece of the discussions, as Turner Sports looked to expand a New Media division that oversaw the websites for pro golf and NASCAR.¹¹² The NBA’s recently launched League Pass broadband platform and the ongoing NBA TV digital cable channel were thus attractive potential properties, as the current deals did not allow either Turner or ABC/ESPN to stream any NBA content on their

¹¹¹ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 186.

¹¹² R. Thomas Umstead, "NBA Shoots for TV Deals by Year-End," *Multichannel News*, October 30, 2006.

own platforms.¹¹³ Despite the value in the NBA's digital offerings, the linear TV ratings had declined every single year through the 2006-07 season, from a 2.6 average during the league's first season on ABC (2002-03) down to a 2.0 average.¹¹⁴ TNT had also seen a nine-percent decline from the previous season and ESPN had not fared much better.¹¹⁵ While the partners had hoped for a postseason boost, the numbers never came. The 2007 Finals on ABC between the Spurs and Cavaliers dropped 28-percent from the previous year, itself one of the lowest rated Finals, to a 6.2 rating.¹¹⁶ John Hollinger of the *New York Sun*, and later analyst for ESPN and VP of basketball operations for the Memphis Grizzlies, credited the decline to poor matchups, an over-emphasis on cable, and promotion of stars at the expense of better teams.¹¹⁷

This attitude, however, did not take into account the increasingly fragmented post-network media landscape, which valued direct-to-consumer distribution more highly than ever before. Major League Baseball's BAM, for instance, which had continued to expand its streaming capabilities for itself and its various clients, had seen its annual revenue grow to \$400 million.¹¹⁸ Thus in June 2007, despite the NBA's sagging domestic ratings, the league successfully negotiated a new eight-year, \$7.4 billion rights deal with Disney and Time Warner, a 22-percent annual increase. Both partners gained the ability to simulcast live games on their digital platforms, while ESPN also obtained expanded global television coverage for ESPN International in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Oceania. George Bodenheimer, president of ESPN and ABC Sports, considered the agreement a

¹¹³ R. Thomas Umstead, "NBA, Nets Talk Renewal; ESPN, Turner Are Eyeing Television, Digital-Content Rights," *Multichannel News*, April 23, 2007.

¹¹⁴ Paulsen, "ABC's NBA Season is Lowest Rated Ever on Broadcast TV."

¹¹⁵ John Hollinger, "How the NBA Can Raise Its Dwindling Ratings," *The New York Sun*, June 20, 2007.

¹¹⁶ TV By the Numbers. "NBA Finals TV Ratings, 1974-2008." *Zap2it*, May 22, 2009.

¹¹⁷ Hollinger, "How the NBA Can Raise Its Dwindling Ratings."

¹¹⁸ Steven Levy, "Covering All the Online Bases," *Newsweek*, June 25, 2007.

“prototype for TV sports deals going forward,” given the expanded digital rights and a clause that bestowed digital rights to any future OTT platforms from the rights-holder. The digital discussions “kept our lawyers busy,” noted David Levy, president of Turner Sports.¹¹⁹ David Stern was finally ready to cash in the NBA’s digital rights after he had remained patient into the 21st century. By 2007, the “volatile communications technology marketplace” had settled sufficiently for Stern and the NBA to sell their “big bundle of carefully protected rights.”¹²⁰

The new agreement also allowed for lucrative multiplatform advertising potential, in which Disney or Time Warner could offer combined “across-the-board packages” of television, internet, and mobile commercial time tied to NBA content.¹²¹ Adam Silver, NBA deputy commissioner, described this possibility as a significant incentive. “We all agreed that these were rights that advertisers were demanding,” he explained, “And it made no sense to send them into the marketplace with one hand tied behind their backs.”¹²² John Kosner, former VP of broadcasting at the NBA, had since moved to ESPN to oversee their digital media endeavors and thus played a pivotal role in the 2007 negotiations, which had also included mobile distribution rights. “All of these things were logical extensions of a philosophy to use technology to expand the reach and service of the sport,” he reflected in 2017. “Mobile streaming was just the latest example... I mean the NBA is doing virtual reality now, you’ll see augmented reality... Those will all be viewed as ways to expand the reach of the sport, plus create new valuable categories that either the rights bidder will bid for

¹¹⁹ John Consoli. “NBA Cuts \$7.4 Bil., 8-year Rights Pact,” *Mediaweek*, June 27, 2007.

¹²⁰ Terry Lefton, “At Age 50, Stern Looks Ahead,” *Ad Day*, October 28, 1996, 34.

¹²¹ Dawn C. Chmielewski and Greg Johnson, “NBA Contract Takes Digital Leap Forward,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 2007.

¹²² Richard Sandomir, “NBA's Television Partners Get Expanded Digital Rights,” *The New York Times*. October 30, 2007.

or you can split up.”¹²³ This became especially evident in the NFL’s bifurcation of the *Thursday Night Football* rights between Amazon, Twitch, and Fox.¹²⁴

It was evident, too, in the NBA’s continued restructuring of its digital distribution following the initial 2007 agreement with Disney and Time Warner. Turner, hoping to expand its digital content holdings to fuel its new platforms, set its sights on NBA League Pass and NBA TV. After months of talks, a deal was announced in January 2008, which would see the formation of a new entity called NBA Digital. Turner would assume responsibility for operating and programming NBA TV, NBA.com, and NBA League Pass, though digital advertising would be sold jointly and NBA Entertainment would continue to produce content for the properties out of Secaucus. As part of the new deal, the NBA’s digital operations would also move from their New Jersey location to Turner’s campus in Atlanta. Turner’s David Levy called the venture “a new strategic business model and an innovative template for growth.”¹²⁵

The agreement was also a way for the two organizations to become more deeply integrated and essential to one another in a tumultuous media environment. Mark Lazarus, then president of Turner Entertainment Group, recalls, “The main strategic imperative was to just get further intertwined with the NBA, so that when the next set of rights came around, we would be in a stronger position to retain rights for television.”¹²⁶ David Stern, on the NBA side of the negotiations, felt similarly. The NBA was not in a position to undertake the level of infrastructural investments that Turner had already completed. “So it was a good

¹²³ John Kosner, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2017.

¹²⁴ Todd Spangler, “NFL Renews Amazon Streaming Deal for ‘Thursday Night Football’ for 2018-19 Seasons,” *Variety*, April 26, 2018.

¹²⁵ “Turner Broadcasting and the National Basketball Association Broaden Partnership with Digital Rights Agreement,” *Business Wire*, January 17, 2008.

¹²⁶ Mark Lazarus, in discussion with the author, April 6, 2018.

thing to both have that partnership and lay off those expenses to someone that had the expertise that they had,” Stern recalled in February 2018. “It also kept Turner and us melded at the hip, in a good way... We always, in some ways, went beyond just a mere television deal but were looking for a way to induce our partners to be extra interested in us and what we do...”¹²⁷ Turner obtained a more robust digital portfolio and the NBA gained the infrastructural reach and expertise that it required for its global media ambitions. In integrating their operations, they became inextricably linked operations, to the degree that any future dissolution is extremely unlikely. NBA Digital is “a real deep partnership that’s going to be hard for anyone to unwind over time,” notes Mark Lazarus, now Chairman of Sports & Broadcasting at NBC, who still works with the NBA tangentially through NBC’s regional sports networks.¹²⁸

Crucially, the NBA’s transfer of digital infrastructure and operational responsibility to Turner enabled the league to focus more fully on their global distribution. Steve Hellmuth, executive vice president of media operations and technology, notes that the majority of his duties now involve global operations. “That [agreement] has allowed us to focus one-thousand-percent on international up here at NBA Entertainment,” Hellmuth explains. “Every day I spend the vast majority of my time on international, because that’s where our revenues are growing very very rapidly, and that’s where our business really needs a lot of attention. So we have Turner doing all domestic and doing a great job and then we’re all focused on international.”¹²⁹

The 2008 deal that launched NBA Digital thus held massive implications for the future operation of the league, reminiscent of the NBA’s decision in 1986 to regain control of

¹²⁷ David Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

¹²⁸ Mark Lazarus, in discussion with the author, April 18, 2017.

¹²⁹ Steve Hellmuth, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2018.

their international satellite distribution. In foregoing some domestic oversight, the NBA could gain far greater international leverage, where revenues continued to expand without concerns of saturation. For the 2009-10 season, the NBA partnered with RayV, a digital intermediary service, to program an international-only League Pass service. For the 2010-11 season, the league revamped the platform in collaboration with NeuLion, the company that had recently programmed the NHL's service.¹³⁰ Internationally, the NBA could more effectively self-distribute, and thus earn greater profits, than in the domestic U.S. market, which remained carved up by major players in Fox Sports, ABC/ESPN, and NBC Sports. As with the 1986 CBS deal, which had enabled the NBA to focus more extensively on international distribution, the 2008 Turner deal allowed the NBA to reach a new level as a global media empire in its own right.

Exemplified by NBA Digital, a broader revolution in sports streaming had taken hold. The more widespread adoption of direct-to-consumer video services allowed the leagues “to crawl into crevices that weren't there before,” explained sports economist Andrew Zimbalist to the *Hollywood Reporter*. “They are creating an asset that hadn't existed in the pre-digital days.”¹³¹ The Turner-NBA partnership served as a model of this new paradigm, in Turner's assuming control of NBA's digital offerings and the emerging possibilities of cross-platform sponsorship. Other leagues, too, had made similar investments. The NFL's presentation at the 2008 TV upfronts, “Anytime, Anywhere, Any Screen,” promoted an integrated advertising package across cable, online, mobile, and print media. The NHL's own streaming platform, programmed and operated by BAM's competitor NeuLion ahead of the 2007-08 season, offered title sponsorship for its online-only programming, not unlike linear TV opportunities.

¹³⁰ Jason Dachman, “NeuLion Takes Over NBA League Pass International,” *Sports Video Group*, October 26, 2010.

¹³¹ Shahnaz Mahmud, “Whole New Ballgame for Ad Revenue,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 29, 2008.

As a result, explained Major League Soccer commissioner Don Garber, sports organizations were no longer as dependent “on their relationships with their broadcast partners for revenue generation.”¹³² This reflects a particularly key motive for the increasing shift towards streaming distribution, which offered content owners the greatest opportunity for centralization and control.

The industrial history of the NBA thus demonstrates the crucial role of sports in the broader distribution revolution, and in doing so, offers greater context for both the incentives and consequences of digitization and globalization. In *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (2014), Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson note that “the scramble to manage the digital future of film and television has sparked both turmoil and transformation, forcing industry leaders to reconsider established maxims about how screen media are created, circulated, and consumed.”¹³³ In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2014), Amanda D. Lotz frames the book “as a calling into existence and systematic explanation of the multi-channel transition period of the 1980s and 1990s,” which would offer context that “prepares us to be able to talk about and theorize a post-network era.”¹³⁴ This chapter, which chronicles the NBA’s extensive investments in cable and broadband distribution during this same era, offers additional context and explanation in the hopes of more fully understanding the television industry’s “turmoil and transformation.”

The NBA’s inclusive internationalism, which was both enabled and encouraged by its investments in digital and direct-to-consumer distribution, offers an alternative framework

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson, *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press: 2014), 1.

¹³⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2014), x.

that more fully integrates sports into our understanding of the multiplatform economy and its transnational media empires. Global and digital television are deeply intertwined: Disney, for instance, chose to house the ESPN+ streaming service that launched in 2018 within a shared direct-to-consumer and international group, or DTCI, and appointed Russell Wolff as general manager of the service, given his extensive global expertise.¹³⁵ As the NBA's own digital investments have intensified, so have its efforts towards a globally efficient "internationalism," as reflected in the growth of International League Pass and the league's greater investments in foreign basketball leagues and players. In the subsequent and final chapter, as streaming distribution steadily gains momentum over cable television, the post-network media ecosystem fuels the further expansion of the NBA as a global media empire, as well as the increasingly global media ambitions of individual teams, leaving behind almost all remnants of the NBA as a mere professional basketball league.

¹³⁵ Todd Spangler, "Disney Puts Longtime ESPN Exec Russell Wolff in Charge of ESPN+ Streaming Service," *Variety*, October 31, 2018.

IV. The House that Hoops Built: A Global Media Empire for a Post-Network Era, 2014 – 2015

“I think the NBA, the less it becomes about the game, I think at some point the NBA is going to have to look at itself in mirror and say, are we about basketball or are we about player movement and three screens and Twitter and all this stuff, or do we care about the game – do we care about the actual on-court product and people understanding it? ...It’s less about the game than ever before and it just trends more and more in that direction.” – Zach Lowe, ESPN basketball writer, on Bleacher Report’s *The Full 48* podcast, January 2019.¹

Introduction

By the 2014-15 season, as the NBA’s global digital strategy has cohered and solidified, new opportunities emerge that enable the organization to reach its greatest heights as a global media empire. As a multiplatform media paradigm is established by 2007, with the launches of Hulu, the iPhone, the Netflix streaming platform, and the NBA’s own standalone streaming service, the immediate years see the intensified pursuit of globally efficient television programming via the simultaneous global address of over-the-top platforms. From 2008 through 2013, the NBA continues its importation of international performers, a number that rises from 77 players for the start of the 2008-09 season to 92 for 2013-14.² A particularly meaningful moment for the international state of the NBA comes in 2011, when the German-born Dirk Nowitzki leads the Dallas Mavericks to the franchise’s first championship. Following that season, however, the NBA enters into a labor lockout that shortens the 2011-12 season from 82 games to 66, an event that is significant to the contours of the NBA’s mediatization and marketization, as examined later in this chapter. During this time, the NBA’s ratings on ABC also steadily recover from the events of Chapter Three, rising from a low of 2.0 in 2007 and peaking with a 3.3 during the strike-shortened 2011-12

¹ Zach Lowe, “Zach Lowe on tanking, Tom Thibodeau, and Trades,” interview with Howard Beck, *The Full 48*, January 10, 2019.

² “NBA Players From Around the World: 2008-09 Season,” *NBA.com*, February 19, 2009; “NBA Tips Off 2013-14 Season With Record International Player Presence,” *NBA.com*, October 29, 2013.

season.³ The period from 2008 to 2013, then, largely affirms the status quo of the NBA – as media content and media conglomerate – that is established at the close of Chapter Three.

This chapter, which follows the course of the 2014-15 season, illuminates the next iteration of the NBA and the global sports media industry. By the updated 2014 edition to Amanda D. Lotz’s *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, she identifies a post-network era that “remains unchanged and unchallenged by the last seven years.”⁴ The concept of the post-network “acknowledges the break from a dominant network-era experience,” Lotz explains, which extends beyond just viewer choice and nonlinearity, as the industry ultimately moves closer towards a media ecosystem “devoid of networks or channels as the distinct industrial entities they’ve served as thus far.”⁵ This chapter examines the new post-network paradigm by highlighting the entities that have amassed greater autonomy in a more diffuse global paradigm, including sports leagues, sports teams, and streaming intermediary companies, such as BAMTech and NeuLion. The NBA, as a media institution whose global ambitions far surpass the scope of basketball, is the house that hoops built.

While revenues from streaming television have continued to lag behind those produced by cable television, the gap between them has considerably narrowed since 2007. By the close of 2018, ESPN was down nearly 15 million cable and satellite subscribers from 2011, equating to an estimated \$1.44 billion in lost revenue.⁶ Streaming services, meanwhile, have excelled during this period. The combined number of worldwide streaming subscriptions, an estimated 613 million, finally jumped the 556 million global subscribers of

³ Paulsen, “ABC’s NBA Season is Lowest Rated Ever on Broadcast TV,” *Sports Media Watch*, April 14, 2017.

⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2014), ix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ Clay Travis, “ESPN Loses Two Million More Subscribers in Fiscal 2018,” *Outkick the Coverage*, November 23, 2018.

cable television.⁷ ESPN launched a standalone streaming service, ESPN+, hoping to capitalize on the trend and make up for lost revenue.⁸ Such streaming platforms now offer content owners the greatest degree of direct-to-consumer access and economic opportunity. As this chapter will demonstrate, the further acceleration of streaming has fueled the further marketization of sport, whose institutions have placed an even greater emphasis on commercial exchange given streaming's expanding opportunities for corporate growth.

The mediatization and marketization of the NBA, in particular, reach a peak during the 2014-15 season. It was the first full season to be overseen by new commissioner Adam Silver, after David Stern stepped down as the league's chief executive after thirty years in the role. Silver, whose tenure as president of NBA Entertainment had driven the league towards global multiplatform distribution in the late 1990s and 2000s, continued the expansionist "Manifest Destiny" ambition of Stern by capitalizing on post-network opportunities for transnational autonomy. Ahead of the season, the league leveraged its global and digital value in renewing its media rights agreements with ABC/ESPN and Turner for a combined \$24 billion over nine years, at last closing in on the NFL, which had secured \$27 billion over nine years in its previous 2011 negotiations.⁹ Simultaneously, the NBA officially opened the Replay Center at its Secaucus, New Jersey headquarters, through which all twenty-nine of the team's arenas were connected by fiber-optic cabling, facilitating a seamless shuttling of video across the United States and around the world. Though the NBA greatly benefitted from the influx of capital from Disney and Time Warner, the Secaucus-based infrastructure enabled the league to operate more than ever before as a fully self-sufficient media

⁷ Andrew Liptak, "The MPAA Says Streaming Video Has Surpassed Cable Subscriptions Worldwide," *The Verge*, March 21, 2019.

⁸ Anthony Ha, "ESPN Launches its Streaming Service ESPN+," *TechCrunch*, April 12, 2018.

⁹ SI Wire, "NBA Announces 9-Year TV Deal with ESPN, Turner Sports," *Sports Illustrated*, October 5, 2014; Kurt Badenhausen, "The NFL Signs TV Deals Worth \$27 Billion," *Forbes*, December 14, 2011.

institution, in controlling its own distribution pipelines, which it had purchased from Zayo Group, a fiber provider.¹⁰

To assist the NBA in its global streaming pursuits, the league partnered with NeuLion on its international-only service ahead of the 2010-11 season.¹¹ NeuLion is an example of a key player that has emerged in the post-network ecosystem: the streaming intermediary, a largely invisible entity that provides technological expertise and manages internet platforms, while the branding of the content owner receives top billing. League Pass remains the NBA's in name and in deed, while NeuLion manages its operation, likely receiving some combination of fees and subscription percentages as compensation.¹² Internationally, and with the aid of streaming distribution, the NBA maintains more control than ever over its own production and distribution. At the same time, the decision to keep a single intermediary service in charge of nearly all non-domestic markets has led to an intensification of the media strategies from before 2007, which relied on international signifiers to most efficiently address an inclusive global audience.

The NBA's international media interests manifest especially in the case of Brazil, which has been presented as a major frontier for integrated producer-distributors like the NBA and Netflix. While Netflix has installed web servers and technological infrastructure to prepare the nation for its own media initiatives, the NBA has similarly purchased a stake in the country's national basketball league and built training centers in order to more effectively cultivate both an NBA audience and a pipeline for future athletes (or NBA "cast" members).

¹⁰ Zayo Group is a company that specializes in 'dark fiber,' a business in which unused telecommunications fiber can be resold by network providers for private purposes. More on the NBA's arrangement with Zayo Group in Jonathan Vanian, "How the NBA Finals are Beamed Across the Globe without Hiccups," *Fortune*, June 16, 2015.

¹¹ Jason Dachman, "NeuLion Takes Over NBA League Pass International," *Sports Video Group*, October 26, 2010.

¹² While the NBA and NeuLion have not revealed the economics of their specific arrangement, a percentage of subscription revenue and various enablement fees is typical of intermediary services.

The case of Brazil demonstrates the evolution of the NBA's global distribution to this point and illuminates the future of the league as a global media empire.

The post-network media ecosystem has also enabled individual sports franchises, like the Sacramento Kings, to become global companies in their own right. While the Kings' global visibility is assisted by the distribution of its local broadcasts on NeuLion's League Pass, the organization has been among the few that most actively court global fans, alongside the Milwaukee Bucks and Golden State Warriors. The Kings' approach is in keeping with the wider entry of Silicon Valley capital into the NBA. Not coincidentally, the league's franchises that have most aggressively pursued global audiences and cutting-edge communications technologies hold ties to Silicon Valley institutions. In the NBA, the tech sector has found lucrative content to power its global initiatives, following ESPN's own use of the NBA to pursue "more affluent and more suburban high-tech early adopters."¹³ In Silicon Valley, the NBA has found an ideal partner to accelerate its global distribution plans with the aid of the industry's emergent media technologies.

The chapter relies on conversations with personnel from the NBA, NeuLion, and the Sacramento Kings, as well as visits to the headquarters of all three, in order to examine the marketization and mediatization of sport in the post-network era of television. Victoria E. Johnson's proposal that sports organizations have become "fully-fledged media institutions of the post-network era" is made especially apparent during the 2014-15 NBA season, which allows us to examine the causes and consequences of sports leagues like the NBA, and even

¹³ Victoria E. Johnson, "Historicizing TV Networking: Broadcasting, Cable, and the case of ESPN," in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 61-62.

teams like the Sacramento Kings, as genuine media conglomerates.¹⁴ After discussing the new streaming media power structure, as enabled by NeuLion and other digital intermediaries, this chapter examines the NBA's entry into Brazil and the league's affinities with Netflix. Finally, I examine the entry of Silicon Valley capital into the NBA and the Sacramento Kings' particular approach to distribution, which points towards the next stage of the global relationship between sports, media, and infrastructure.

The Hub and Spokes: Towards a Post-Network Paradigm

For the 2014-15 basketball season, the NBA opened its "Replay Center" in Secaucus, New Jersey. As part of the undertaking, all twenty-nine of its arenas became connected by fiber-optic cabling to that central hub. While this assisted the Replay Center in speeding-up gameplay reviews following difficult foul calls, the development also streamlined the NBA's media production, distribution, and archival process. During games, the NBA gained faster access to game footage that it could edit and post to social media platforms, and following games, the complete footage could be tagged and stored more quickly than ever before. The league office refers to this structure, based out of its Traffic Ops Center, which monitors the video feeds as they enter the building, as the "hub and spoke" model: Secaucus acts as the hub of the wheel, the wires act as the spokes that connect it to its franchises, and arenas are the tire that makes the entire enterprise spin onward. Far beyond basketball, the NBA operates as a robust producer and distributor of media content.

¹⁴ Victoria E. Johnson, "Everything New is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era," in *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 133.



Figure 4.1: Inside the NBA's Replay Center in Secaucus, New Jersey (Source: NBA).

The NBA's modern digital infrastructure involves multiple moving parts along the hub and spokes. National telecasts may travel outside to a production truck, where they are edited for an international package and then sent to one of the NBA's two colocation centers, or 'colos,' in Newark, New Jersey and Turner's "Techwood" campus in Atlanta, Georgia. Regardless, all feeds travel from the arenas to Secaucus via the high-speed arena network, or H-San, a ten-gigabyte network that allows the league to shuttle thirteen feeds of HD quality video at 200 megabytes per second. Each arena provides thirteen different camera angles, which arrive in the basement of the NBA headquarters and are subsequently encoded for distribution. These feeds can be sent within the building to the Replay Center for review, or externally to the colos, where they can be redistributed to international partners. This structure has streamlined access for global distributors, while limiting the amount of data that the NBA must house in Secaucus.

This infrastructure would facilitate the launch of the NBA Content Network, a global business-to-business video-on-demand service for the NBA's media partners, ahead of the

2016 season.¹⁵ Through the network, personnel from Turner, ESPN, MDeportes (Spain), Viasat Sport (Russia), CCTV (China), or even the NBA’s own franchises can sign into the system and request clips for broadcast or for the in-arena video board. Once the order is received and approved, the file is pulled from their StorageTek tape library, which features robotic arms that find and grab the required video and send it onward to its destination. Each tape features 4.5 terabytes of data, or about forty full games, of which hundreds line the walls of the silos. In all, there are about 25 petabytes of data in the NBA’s Video Library, which equates to approximately 25 million gigabytes. The library continues to grow with each season and about 25-percent of the league’s oldest filmed footage have not yet been digitized. The NBA’s content storage is a key component of its success as a self-distributor of media in the post-network era.

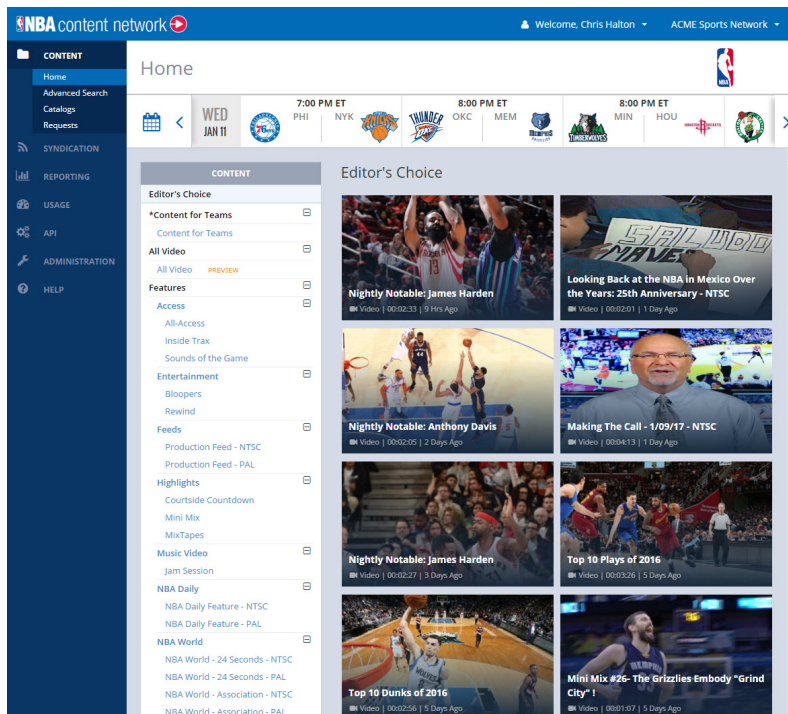


Figure 4.2: The NBA’s Content Network enables media partners to download content for their broadcasts an on-demand basis (Source: NBA).

¹⁵ Jason Dachman, “NBA Streamlines B2B Content Delivery With Cloud-Based NBA Content Network,” *Sports Video Group*, January 20, 2017.

In its duties as a media producer, moreover, the feeds from the H-San are also sent upstairs to the Game Distribution Center (or GDC), where NBA editors can look for highlights and package them together with multiple angles. This ‘multi-view’ content, which could include footage of Stephen Curry making impossible baskets from the tunnel, can be posted to Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms. It is also saved into a ‘bucket’ for later, so that it can be packaged with other highlights to fill commercial gaps in the NBA’s streaming platforms. For the international League Pass, the NBA quickly realized that fans in Germany, for instance, had no need for local commercials in Salt Lake City. Following the 2014-15 season, rather than continue to post generic slates that read simply “the game is in break,” the NBA began producing compilation videos such as “Top 10 LeBron James Dunks” or “Top 10 plays of November.” These are completed in the GDC and then sent to NeuLion, the company that manages the league’s international streaming platform.

While the NBA oversees much of the back-end infrastructure of its game distribution, it has left the front-end of streaming platforms to these “intermediary” firms. Turner, through its oversight of NBA Digital, has managed the NBA’s domestic streaming platform since 2008. NeuLion oversees International League Pass, which includes all other countries but fourteen. In China, League Pass is overseen by Tencent, which launched its version of the service in 2016.¹⁶ When most content owners seek to put their content online, they turn to these streaming intermediaries to program and manage their branded streaming platforms. HBO and ESPN, for example, lacking the appropriate infrastructures for their HBO Now and WatchESPN ventures, both turned to the same company: the Major League Baseball-owned

¹⁶ Malika Andrews, “NBA Fans in China Now Have Access to View Games on NBA League Pass,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 14, 2016.

BAMTech, the entity originally known as Baseball Advanced Media, which had previously launched the streaming platforms for Major League Soccer and the NCAA. In August 2016, BAMTech made headlines when Disney finally had enough of leasing the firm's services for its ESPN platform and purchased 33 percent of the company for \$1 billion. One year later, in August 2017, Disney bought another 42 percent for \$1.58 billion, valuing the company at \$3.75 billion.¹⁷ In the contemporary streaming media economy, the streaming intermediary has become immensely valuable.

Amanda D. Lotz describes how “internet distribution requires an entity to organize and deliver programming,” using the term “portal” for the “crucial intermediary services that collect, curate, and distribute television programming via internet distribution,” such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, and CBS All Access.¹⁸ These intermediaries, though, require additional intermediaries to program and manage this collection, curation, and distribution. Such companies are “transparent,” as Joshua Braun describes them, in that they minimize their own branding in service of their client. Though the HBO name is on the marquee of the HBO Now platform, for instance, BAMtech designed and operated it. Braun, in examining the “infrastructures that underlie” streaming video, notes that these intermediaries “increasingly enable, but also structure, the distribution of video online” and that they ultimately “stand to become just as essential to the media ecosystem as cable providers and broadcast affiliates before them.”¹⁹ This has become increasingly clear in the post-network

¹⁷ Sarah Perez, “BAMTech Valued at \$3.75 Billion Following Disney Deal,” *TechCrunch*, August 8, 2017.

¹⁸ Amanda D. Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor, MI: Maize Books, 2017), 8.

¹⁹ Joshua Braun, “Transparent Intermediaries: Building the Infrastructures of Connected Viewing,” in *Connected Viewing: Selling Streaming, and Sharing Media in the Digital Era*, eds. Holt and Sanson (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 125, 138.

era. If a content owner wants its content streaming around the world, it needs an intermediary to do that work.

Transparent intermediaries thus hold a fundamental position within the infrastructure of streaming video, enabling and delimiting the possibilities of how audiences view and engage with content. In doing so, these firms complicate how we conceive of content ownership and media flows, which now involve the contributions of additional parties in the process of production and distribution. Lotz explains that the growing strategy “in which the content rights holder distributes directly to the consumer...provides a far more efficient economic model.”²⁰ This is evident in the launches of NBA League Pass, HBO Now, CBS All Access, and ESPN+. Yet these portals require the work of specialists to operate them – to design and program their interface, encode the video, track and analyze audience behavior, set geo-restrictions, and oversee any problems with the finished front-end video. Sports programming, specifically, also requires the editing of highlight packages and condensed versions of games.

Over the last twenty years, since intermediary companies such as Starwave and AudioNet influenced the early development of global internet-distributed media, sport has remained their most reliable and most lucrative client. Sport has been uniquely positioned to succeed within a media environment that has great need of live and spontaneous content. Victoria E. Johnson notes how, especially following the 2007-08 Writers’ Guild strike, sports programming offered networks “a TiVo-proof, labor dispute-proof, and recession-proof, historically stable, ritually available package (characterized by sport's seasonal and calendar regularity).”²¹ In addition, sport can be relatively easily repackaged with local commentary

²⁰ Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 153.

²¹ Johnson, “Everything New is Old Again,” 114.

crews and local advertising, without modifying or adapting the content to the extent that one would a typical TV format.²²

Geography, moreover, is central to sports. This is both in an additive sense, whereby distributors must package content for a specific market, as well as a subtractive sense, in which regional blackouts prevent the airing of particular games in particular locations. A Knicks game, for instance, cannot be streamed in the New York market and nationally televised games (on TNT or ESPN) will not appear on League Pass if that channel is available in the area. In the era of internet-distributed television, this process is conducted by streaming intermediaries such as NeuLion, who will set those restrictions in the game's administrative tools once it is posted in their schedule. In a multiplatform post-network era, geolocation has grown into a central component of an intermediary's value, as firms emphasize their proprietary geolocation tools in pitches to prospective clients beyond sport. Joshua Braun differentiates between operations of *geofencing*, which allows clients like Hulu and Netflix to "easily restrict access to their content to audiences in the regions they specify" and of *geotargeting*, which can "provide different versions of their content catalogues and interfaces to users in different markets."²³ Sport has afforded these companies a level of experimentation and experience that has subsequently been put into use for other media owners, such as HBO or Univision.

²² Michael Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung and Albert Moran, *New Television, Globalization, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination* (Aberdeen and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 74.

²³ Braun, "Transparent Intermediaries," 126.

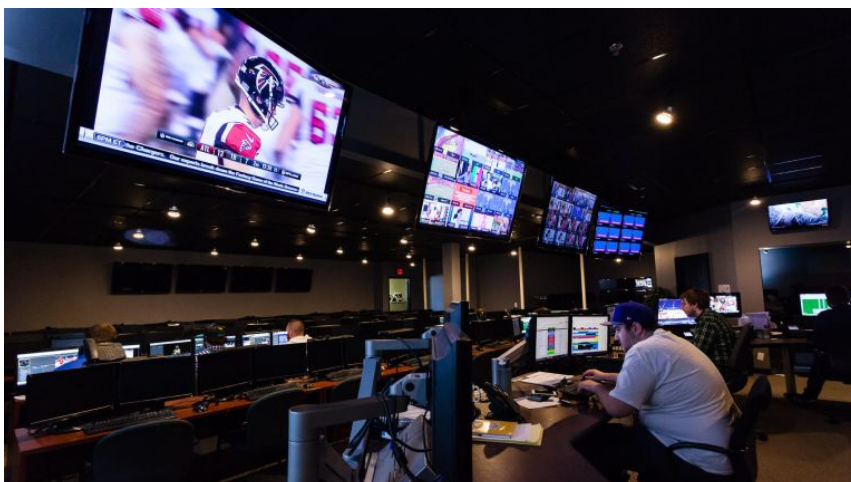


Figure 4.3: Inside NeuLion's operations center in Plainview, New York (Heather Walsh, *Newsday*).

Sports services have also widely adopted a single uniform, inclusive “international” platform, which is then differentiated for each market by language. This is more easily accomplished for sports programming, which can flexibly substitute a local announcer team and local commercial breaks, than for platforms like Netflix or HBO. By placing a single intermediary in charge of nearly all non-U.S. markets, moreover, this arrangement offers more oversight for the content owner and reduces the number of parties between the content provider and its central platform-managing intermediary. This paradigm is cost effective, then, if not particularly easy to manage. For that reason, NeuLion's process of localization is aided by satellite offices in many of the regions it oversees. NeuLion's office in China, for example, works with local clients and will relay the proper Chinese commercials to play during ad-breaks. In spite of these local markers, NBA's international League Pass remains an inclusive, globally efficient platform – there is a single shared platform for nearly all fans outside of the U.S.²⁴ With an international League Pass subscription, Spanish viewers can

²⁴ Fourteen countries are excluded from NeuLion's platform, including China, which uses a League Platform designed and operated by Tencent. Nonetheless, the intermediary paradigm remains intact (Official Release, “NBA, Tencent Announce China Digital Partnership,” *NBA.com*, January 29, 2015).

watch from the French feed or Portuguese fans can watch the Korean feed. This feature, however, is removed from the Turner-operated domestic platform.

Though the managers of international platforms aspire to genuine transnationality, allowing for engagement with various feeds across borders, platforms are still built on reinforcing borders through geolocation. Ramon Lobato articulates geoblocking as indicative of the contemporary global media ecosystem. In providing “an automated mechanism to enforce territorial licensing arrangements with rights-holders,” geoblocking “is a form of access control enacted at the level of content and platform regulation.”²⁵ Though international streaming platforms, like NBA League Pass and NFL Game Pass, are intended to be as uniform as possible across borders and market their own internationality, they remain dependent on the reinforcement of location-awareness and differentiation. The value of these international passes and the intermediaries that build them is in tracking viewer behaviors, tagged by location, in order to price their services more aggressively or to leverage the data to advertisers. The most measurable remains, as ever, the most marketable. In *The Informal Media Economy* (2015), Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas describe the incentive for market segmentation, which “enables media producers to price their goods according to local income levels, to control sequencing and to extract the greatest return from each market.”²⁶ Companies like NeuLion make this possible in programming, designing, and managing the platforms and their measurement tools; the differentiation is built into the system.

²⁵ Ramon Lobato, “Introduction: The New Video Geography,” in *Geoblocking and Global Video Cultures*, eds. Ramon Lobato and James Meese (Amsterdam: Institute of Networked Cultures, 2016), 10.

²⁶ Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 105.

While at the level of platform management, geotargeting allows for the closing (and also opening) of borders, there is a simultaneous valuation and reinforcement of content that will most efficiently flow through those borders. Transnational streaming providers such as Netflix and HBO have sought to acquire “local content that appeals to international audiences.”²⁷ The NBA, similarly, benefits from high-profile international players that can be highlighted in replays. At the level of the regional sports networks, whose broadcasts are circulated through the international streaming platforms, there have also greater efforts to address international fans. The Milwaukee Bucks, for example, have worked to more extensively feature Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo, which included airing a package produced by their Greek television partner that congratulated Antetokounmpo for making his first All-Star team in 2017.²⁸ This goes hand-in-hand with the efforts of the intermediary, which has designed a platform that addresses any and all international fans simultaneously.

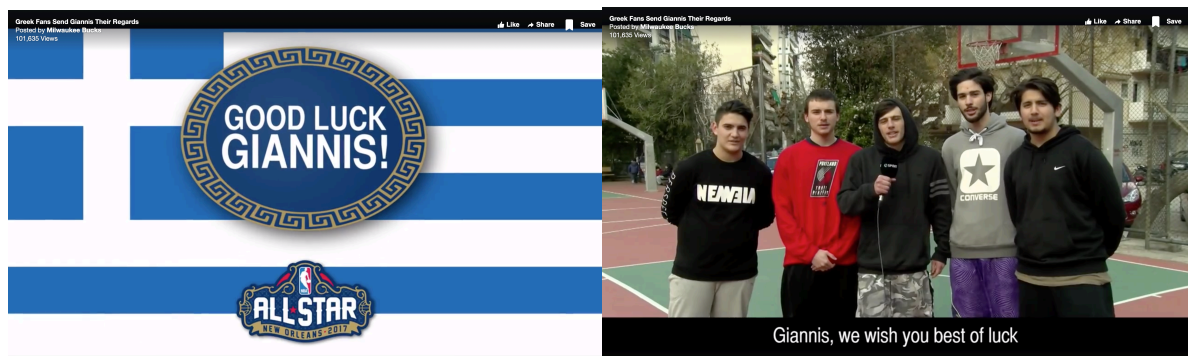


Figure 4.4: Greek basketball fans congratulate Giannis Antetokounmpo on making his first All-Star team, in a video that circulated across Greek linear television, the Bucks’ in-arena video board, NBA League Pass, and the Bucks’ Facebook page.²⁹

²⁷ Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 47-48.

²⁸ Mike Chant (Senior Director, Team Programming, NBA), in discussion with the author, November 13, 2017.

²⁹ Kerry Kolasa-Sikiaridi, “Greek Fans Send Giannis Antetokounmpo Best Wishes for the All-Star Game,” *Greek Reporter*, February 15, 2017.

Ramon Lobato has highlighted that Netflix is significant for its ability to “effortlessly combine the local and the global *within the one platform* and constitute itself as many different products simultaneously.”³⁰ For sports, this is possible within the same *program*. By the Bucks’ airing the package in-arena, it was broadcast worldwide through the NBA’s streaming platform. The NBA uses the international presence of NeuLion’s platform to feature players and marketing that will simultaneously address the most possible fans in the most possible countries. As streaming increasingly comes to dominate TV distribution and U.S.-based conglomerates seek international audiences over streaming platforms, there is a subsequent intensification of efforts to de-Americanize content for global distribution. The result is content that is international and inclusive, yet culturally vague.

Transnational flows, evidently, are not simply one-way or even straightforward in their directionality. The intermediary, moreover, demonstrates that no longer do these flows derive from a simple producer-distributor agreement, but a more complex arrangement in which these firms can significantly set the terms by which global audiences engage with media content online. A globally efficient product, created by the intermediary and the content owner in conjunction, encourages media producers to produce more transnationally appealing content. In the realm of global internet distribution, then, these intermediary firms function as collaborative rights holders, just as Turner or Fox Sports might provide for domestic linear television, while conceding greater control to the content owners. With NeuLion, the NBA obtains the most effective infrastructure to reach global consumers while maintaining control over production. With the NBA and other clients, NeuLion obtains the programming to fill its propriety platform, while receiving compensation through some

³⁰ Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 160-161.

combination of platform fees, device enablement fees, per-subscriber percentages, and revenue sharing.

Thus in trying to make sense of global media flows in the post-network era, streaming intermediaries offer scholars a perspective that is simultaneously industrial, cultural, and infrastructural. These firms oversee robust infrastructures of satellite and cabling that shuttle video around the world, while also editing together content that circulates through their platforms and making sure that the final front-end feed is properly calibrated to each region. At the same time, streaming intermediaries operate as partners to major media companies and conglomerates, who entrust them with their content, sometimes to such an extent that the client is ultimately compelled to purchase the intermediary outright. As television continues to globalize and digitize, it is not a matter of *if* or *when* the intermediaries become as essential to the media ecosystem as cable operators and broadcast affiliates before them; that time is here.

Streaming intermediaries have become highly in-demand for any conglomerate with greater aspirations of vertical integration, including the NBA as one such institution. As intermediary firms become more expensive to outsource, companies with enough capital to buy a preexisting one or build their own have sought to do so. NBC, for instance, launched Playmaker Media in May 2016 to service its own sports streaming operations, as well as clients from outside Comcast-NBCUniversal. Turner Broadcasting System similarly acquired a majority stake in iStreamPlanet to bolster its streaming capabilities after its contract with MLB Advanced Media expired following the 2016 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.³¹ In March 2018, Endeavor, the parent company of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)

³¹ John Ourand, "NBC Sports Enters Video Streaming Business with Playmaker," *SportsBusiness Journal*, May 23, 2016; SVG Staff, "Turner Acquires Majority Stake in iStreamPlanet," *Sports Video Group*, August 14, 2015.

and Professional Bull Riders, both clients of NeuLion, purchased the company for \$250 million. By taking control of NeuLion, Endeavor can bring the streaming operations of UFC in-house and offer direct-to-consumer services, while continuing to provide services to the NBA, NFL, and other NeuLion clients.³² Even Amazon, whose prestigious Web Services division has been hired to provide cloud services for clients as diverse as Netflix and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, found it necessary to purchase the Portland-based streaming intermediary Elemental Technologies for \$500 million in September 2015.³³ The absorption of Elemental into AWS has allowed Amazon to better compete with BAMTech, NeuLion, and iStreamPlanet in the business of streaming video encoding and transcoding. Disney's majority ownership of BAMTech, meanwhile, allows them to bring their streaming infrastructure in-house and avoid any further reliance on AWS for streaming needs.

The NBA's particular system, of a "hub and spokes" that stretches around the world, thus illuminates a post-network paradigm of media ownership beyond sport. As streaming has begun to overtake the dominance of cable, intermediary firms like NeuLion occupy an increasingly central position within major media conglomerates, offering a profound linkage between sport and the wider media industry. The simultaneous global address of an international streaming platform has also encouraged particular strategies of content production, as is evident in the example of the Milwaukee Bucks and later in the example of the Sacramento Kings. In the case of Brazil that follows, the NBA exhibits further affinities

³² Andrew Wallenstein, "Endeavor Buys Streaming Provider NeuLion for \$250 Million," *Variety*, March 26, 2018.

³³ Connie Loizos, "Amazon Acquires Elemental Technologies For a Reported \$500 Million in Cash," *TechCrunch*, September 3, 2015.

between itself and Netflix, and in doing so, reinforces the deepening status of sports leagues as media conglomerates and sport itself as a “leading multi-platform content application.”³⁴

Basketball without Borders: Brazil as Global Media Frontier

In December 2014, following the launch of the Replay Center and establishment of the NBA’s new in-house distribution network, a partnership was announced between the NBA and Brazil’s Liga Nacional de Basquete (LNB). While the NBA has long made deals in foreign markets, the deal with LNB is something new; it is not simply the NBA spreading its product to as large a consumer base as possible. Instead, the two leagues will work together, collaborating on “innovative marketing” and “enhanced game presentation” to increase fan engagement and improve business and player development.³⁵ The NBA receives an equity stake in LNB and will lend its money, personnel, and business acumen to facilitate the league’s growth, while LNB will provide the NBA with stronger ties to the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) and the still-expanding global basketball market. The deal continues “the NBA’s quest for global sporting dominance and potential interest in eventually unifying the sport at the highest level under one set of rules.”³⁶

Brazil is especially meaningful because of its history as a major market for soccer. More recently, though, soccer’s market power has been declining. In the 2018 World Cup, Brazil was eliminated in the quarterfinals, for the third time in the last four tournaments, by Belgium.³⁷ As Ewan MacKenna of *The New York Times* explains, “Brazil’s national team is

³⁴ Johnson, “Everything New is Old Again,” 126.

³⁵ Official Release, “NBA and Brazil’s LNB Announce Groundbreaking Partnership,” *NBA.com*, December 11, 2014.

³⁶ Zach Lowe, “What the NBA’s Partnership With Brazil Means,” *Grantland*, October 27, 2014.

³⁷ Chuck Culpepper and Jacob Bogage, “Belgium Leaves Brazil Reeling and Raving, Another World Cup Giant on the Side of the Road,” *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2018.

in many ways a shadow of its famous past,” which has not sat well with a fan base that favors winning. The dearth of talent, he goes on to argue, is caused by infrastructural troubles. With the last three presidents of the CBF brought up on corruption charges, there is no strong managerial voice to direct the future of the sport. Talent has suffered, star players look to leagues overseas, and in the end, the whole sport loses its luster.³⁸ At the same time that soccer faces infrastructural weakness, the NBA has stepped in to bolster Brazil’s basketball infrastructure, growing the sport’s cultural distinction and reshaping the game in its own image. Brazil has become the South American headquarters for the league’s Junior NBA program. Working with the local government’s sports secretary, Marco Antonio Cabral, the NBA announced plans to build a multi-sport complex in the Rocinha area of Rio de Janeiro, the country’s largest favela. The complex will offer youth programs to teach “the fundamentals of the sport while instilling core values” such as “teamwork, respect and sportsmanship.”³⁹

The NBA’s youth programs can be described as a pyramid. At the bottom, Junior NBA features 18 million participants in 53 countries under the age of fourteen. The NBA works with local basketball federations to train both players and coaches, working “hand-in-hand to provide opportunities for youth to participate and learn the game and have fun...”⁴⁰ As children advance, they work their way into the NBA’s more elite development programs, which includes the “Basketball Without Borders” summer camp and the NBA Academies, of which there are now three, in China, India, and Australia. In February 2015, the NBA also launched a special Basketball Without Borders Global Camp during All-Star Weekend,

³⁸ Ewan MacKenna, “Brazil’s Soccer Prowess Has Been Consumed by Years of Neglect,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2016.

³⁹ Donna Bowater, “Growing Basketball in Brazil’s Favelas,” *Vice*, December 22, 2015.

⁴⁰ Troy Justice, in discussion with the author, September 25, 2017.

featuring the consensus best players from the four camps that occurred during the previous summer. “We’re identifying at a young age the top prospects in the word,” explains Troy Justice, senior director of international basketball operations at the NBA. “All the NBA personnel, scouts, GMs, they’re all there in the gym watching these kids, getting a chance to scout them.”⁴¹ By any measure, then, the Global Camp and its broader international development pipeline have been an unqualified success for the NBA, cultivating a number of players that have kept the league’s global engine running.

Such developments, combined with soccer’s decline and the NBA’s input into Brazil’s own national league, LNB, have created a massive future there for the NBA. But it also leads to uncomfortable questions. On the one hand, the Brazilian endeavor provides “social benefits” for “a community as complicated and delicate as Rocinha.”⁴² On the other, the NBA cannot be considered a solely altruistic organization for the public good, as it also remains a for-profit media conglomerate. The relationship with Brazil’s government allows the NBA direct access to the school system to instruct children and inculcate them as consumers of an NBA-specific brand of basketball. The same was true in China, where the NBA agreed to a deal with the Ministry of Education to build a “fitness and basketball development curriculum in elementary, middle and high schools,” which aimed to “provide enhanced basketball training to at least 3 million students by 2017.”⁴³ One cannot discredit the genuine social good that the NBA has provided in these places, both currently and historically. Terry Lyons, former VP of international communications, recalls a visit to China in the late 1990s, during which the league worked with the U.S. state department to provide

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bowater, “Growing Basketball in Brazil’s Favelas.”

⁴³ Official Release, “Ministry of Education in China, NBA Join Forces,” *NBA.com*, October 17, 2014.

computers to a makeshift school for the children of migrant workers.⁴⁴ The NBA has used its reach and power for true charity. At the same time, the NBA benefits from these agreements by more effectively cultivating future fans and future athletes, in order to maintain the league’s global footprint. The commercial incentives cannot be disregarded.



Figure 4.5: At a Jr. NBA event in Vietnam, participants wear jerseys with NBA logos and hold signs promoting the League Pass streaming platform (Source: NBA).

These questions are also not unique to the NBA, which reflects a broader investment in the Brazilian market by foreign media interests. When Netflix, for instance, found that Brazil’s poor internet coverage was making its widespread adoption impossible, they began to install web servers around the country free-of-charge, and provided even more to local telecommunications firms, in order to create a high-speed broadband infrastructure that would allow the platform to succeed into the future.⁴⁵ Like Netflix, the NBA has improved Brazil’s basketball infrastructure, ostensibly for “free,” in order to benefit later. In this regard, Brazil is only the latest in a long line of examples in which Western media interests

⁴⁴ Terry Lyons, in discussion with the author, December 20, 2017.

⁴⁵ Lucas Shaw, “Netflix Wants the World to Binge-Watch,” *Bloomberg*, January 12, 2017.

have sought to cultivate what were perceived to be lucrative and unsaturated markets. In the 1980s, the NBA offered China and the Soviet Union free telecasts in order to grow its own brand. Ted Turner assisted in the USSR, in particular, as he had already established a presence there for TBS.

Turner continued to expand the presence of his properties in Russia into the 1990s, where he proceeded to wire the country for high-speed internet. Ailene Voisin, sent by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to cover the 1994 Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg, recalls the juxtaposition of a struggling country, in which people were forced to sell toilet paper on the street, having among the most developed internet infrastructures in the world. “Laptops were always sketchy around different cities and countries,” she remembers, but “we connected from St. Petersburg, it was a piece of cake. And that was all because Turner was broadcasting the games and needed to have state-of-the-art equipment over there.”⁴⁶ Over twenty years later, Turner’s strategy is evident in both Netflix’s and the NBA’s investments in Brazil: short-term financial sacrifice for long-term growth. When PricewaterhouseCoopers published their 2018-2022 outlook on global media, these actions illustrate why they considered the NBA to be every bit as powerful a global competitor as Netflix.⁴⁷

Thomas Lamarre, in his essay on media geographies, works through Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that distribution is not a neutral process but a productive one. Distribution produces “a complex set of social functions” that are “meaningful and valuable in themselves.” He cites the television format, specifically, as a distributive process that “discovers compatibility, convertibility, or equivalency between national culture,” and seeks

⁴⁶ Ailene Voisin, in discussion with the author, February 25, 2018.

⁴⁷ Ennel van Eeden and Wilson Chow, “Perspectives from the Global Entertainment & Media Outlook, 2018-2022,” *PricewaterhouseCoopers*, June 2018.

to transform the local into the regional.⁴⁸ This process, evidently, is not neutral. Formats are imbued with a drive to create regional efficiencies, often in the image of the place of origin. The NBA's distribution, which has similarly relied on the logic of the format to adopt and develop an inclusive global address, is also not neutral. It is imbued with a globalizing drive, attempting to convert local basketball cultures into an American game. By using a flexible and adaptable format, and by positioning the original American game as increasingly international, the National Basketball Association seeks a global distributive efficiency. This has been further enabled by the NBA's particular distribution infrastructure, including NeuLion's League Pass, which allows the league to "finish" its own format, rather than leaving it open for other parties to control.⁴⁹ The NBA has near-total management of its own image. As seen in the case of Brazil, moreover, the league often relies on local political infrastructure to expedite the image-building process, becoming more fully imbricated in the fabric of local life.

The NBA's success in Brazil, beginning in 2014, has since encouraged the league to push the strategy established with LNB even further. In February 2019, the NBA announced that it would launch its own twelve-team pan-African basketball league, in partnership with FIBA and former U.S. president Barack Obama, who will have an unidentified but "hands-on" role in the new league. "Combined with our other programs on the continent," announced NBA commissioner Adam Silver in a statement, "we are committed to using basketball as an economic engine to create new opportunities in sports, media and technology

⁴⁸ Thomas Lamarre, "Regional TV: Affective Media Geographies," *Asiascape: Digital Asia 2* (2015): 94, 109.

⁴⁹ Albert Moran, *TV Formats Worldwide: Localizing Global Programs* (Chicago: Intellect, 2009), 11.

across Africa.”⁵⁰ While the NBA remains a sports league in name, it is perhaps more importantly a media empire with worldwide cultural and political influence.

High Upside: Silicon Valley and the NBA

At the close of the 2014-15 season, the Golden State Warriors won their first championship since 1975 over the Cleveland Cavaliers, in what many considered to be a victory for Silicon Valley business principles. One year later, the *New York Times* ran an in-depth feature titled “What Happened When Venture Capitalists Took Over the Golden State Warriors.” Only a few weeks afterwards, *The Wall Street Journal* similarly declared “The Golden State Warriors Have Revolutionized Basketball,” as the team remained on pace to win 73 games, breaking the seemingly unbeatable record of 72 wins set by the Michael Jordan-era Chicago Bulls in 1996.⁵¹ “[Majority owner Joe] Lacob was not the first venture capitalist to buy a franchise,” Bruce Schoenfeld writes in *The New York Times*, “but he is the first to operate one according to what might be called Silicon Valley precepts: nimble management, open communication, integrating the wisdom of outside advisers and continuous re-evaluation of what companies do and how they do it.”⁵² The Warriors’ 2015 title symbolizes the deepening marriage between the NBA and Silicon Valley as two institutions with aligned media ambitions.⁵³

⁵⁰ Jeff Zillgitt, “NBA, FIBA Launching 12-Team League in Africa; Barack Obama to Have Hands-on Role,” *USA Today*, February 16, 2019.

⁵¹ Ben Cohen, “The Golden State Warriors Have Revolutionized Basketball,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2016.

⁵² Bruce Schoenfeld, “What Happened When Venture Capitalists Took Over the Golden State Warriors,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2016.

⁵³ In a similar vein, the more in-depth *Betaball: How Silicon Valley and Science Built One of the Greatest Basketball Teams in History* (2017) explains how the Warriors’ new ownership group placed “a greater emphasis...on finding technological solutions to lingering problems and using proprietary analytics to unearth latent advantages their employees already possessed.” Eric Malinowski, *Betaball* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 4.

As the ongoing digitization of the American sports industry helped to facilitate its deepening globalization, the lucrative possibilities of direct-to-consumer distribution also caught the attention of Silicon Valley capital. By “Silicon Valley,” I include the Bay Area CEOs, venture capital firms, and hedge fund managers, as well as their shared interests. This includes the web of relations and decision-making that favors a particular economic and cultural status quo. Thus I would also include the investors, perhaps not located directly in the San Francisco Bay Area, who have an interest (financial or otherwise) in what happens to Silicon Valley businesses. As an increasing number of venture capitalists from the Valley have bought their way into the NBA, the league has come to import (and invest in) an even greater number of ‘cutting-edge’ technologies, including virtual reality and video streaming platforms, which have further accelerated the NBA’s expansion into overseas markets.

The NBA, following its domestic turbulence circa the late 2000s, presented intriguing possibilities as a buy-low industry with global value. By August 2014, former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer purchased the Los Angeles Clippers franchise for an NBA record \$2 billion, far above the Forbes valuation at \$575 million the previous January. He told ESPN’s Ramona Shelbourne, “It’s not a cheap price, but when you’re used to looking at tech companies with huge risk, no earnings and huge multiples, this doesn’t look like the craziest thing I’ve ever acquired... There’s much less risk. There’s real earnings in this business. There’s real upside opportunity.”⁵⁴ Steve Ballmer was just the latest from the tech industry to see the business upside of the NBA—nearly half of all NBA teams now have majority owners with backgrounds in tech or investment management. These include Vivek Ranadive of the Sacramento Kings, Dan Gilbert of the Cleveland Cavaliers, Robert Pera of the

⁵⁴ Nick Schwartz, “Steve Ballmer explains why he paid \$2 billion for the Clippers,” *USA Today*, August 12, 2014.

Memphis Grizzlies, and Joe Lacob of the Golden State Warriors.⁵⁵

The relationship between the tech industry and the NBA at the ownership level is not an altogether new phenomenon. Ted Turner's purchase of the Atlanta Hawks in 1976 offered Turner content for his expanding "superstation" ambitions at WTCG, while offering the NBA an inside track on national television distribution. When Paul Allen bought the Portland Trail Blazers in 1988, Allen's connections to Microsoft and later Starwave aided the NBA's digital ambitions. Mark Cuban, who had built his career on internet-distributed sports radio, purchased the Dallas Mavericks in 2000 for its synergistic possibilities, not unlike a digital-era Ted Turner. In turn, the NBA relied on Cuban's streaming expertise when it live-streamed its first game in 2001 and when it finally launched its own broadband platform in 2006.⁵⁶

Yet it was in the aftermath of the NBA's moment of "crisis" following the Pistons-Pacers Brawl in late 2004, and the subsequent decline in TV ratings and merchandise sales, that the VCs of Silicon Valley were able to buy into the league en masse. The team owners' assertions of declining revenues grew into contentious negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement in the summer of 2011. David Stern declared that twenty-two of the league's thirty teams were losing money, while the NBA itself was expected to lose \$300 million, after losing another \$300 million the year before. The owners asked that the current revenue split, wherein players made 57 percent of the gross team revenue, be dropped to as low as 40 percent.⁵⁷ These claims, however, conveniently ignored the NBA's looming TV

⁵⁵ Mark McClusky, "Techies Are Trying to Turn the NBA Into the World's Biggest Sport," *Wired*, May 31, 2016.

⁵⁶ "NBA To Webcast First-ever Live Game on NBA.com and REAL.com," *Business Wire*, April 9, 2001.

⁵⁷ Michael Wilbon, "NBA Lockout Will Dwarf the NFL Strife," *ESPN*, July 1, 2011.

extension with ABC/ESPN and TNT, which was to total \$24 billion over nine years, an increase of \$17 billion over the previous deal signed in 2007.⁵⁸

In the end, after a league labor lockout and nearly two months of the season lost, the owners won – the revenue split was lowered to 51-49 in their favor.⁵⁹ This led to a massive scramble to buy any available franchise, largely by newly swayed venture capitalists. In 2011, before the lockout, Michael Jordan had purchased a controlling stake in the Charlotte Bobcats for less than \$200 million and the Philadelphia 76ers sold for only \$280 million. Following the new CBA, the Memphis Grizzlies, in a much smaller market than Philadelphia, sold to Robert Pera for \$377 million. Soon after, in May 2013, Vivek Ranadive purchased the Sacramento Kings for a then-record \$534 million, before being trumped by the sale of the Milwaukee Bucks for \$550 million to hedge fund managers Wesley Edens and Marc Lasry.⁶⁰

Valuations continued to skyrocket: in January 2014, *Forbes* valued the New York Knicks as the top team at \$1.4 billion, followed closely by the Los Angeles Lakers at \$1.35 billion, with the average NBA franchise valued at \$635 million.⁶¹ By 2016, following the latest TV contract, *Forbes*'s valuation of the New York Knicks more than doubled to \$3 billion, followed once again by the Los Angeles Lakers at \$2.7 billion. The average NBA franchise was now estimated to be worth \$1.25 billion.⁶² The NBA is a booming multi-billion-dollar business. Per Steve Ballmer's earlier assertion, an NBA franchise remains a low risk, high upside investment. Some investors saw this upside earlier on, when the NBA

⁵⁸ Mike Prada, "NBA to Announce 9-Year, \$24 Billion TV Deal with ESPN, Turner," *SB Nation*, October 5, 2014.

⁵⁹ Larry Coon, "Breaking Down Changes in New CBA," *ESPN*, November 28, 2011.

⁶⁰ Brian Windhorst, "No Teams For Sale as TV Deal Looms," *ESPN*, September 10, 2013; Kurt Badenhausen, "Record \$550 Million Milwaukee Bucks Sale," *Forbes*, April 17, 2014.

⁶¹ Kurt Badenhausen, "As Stern Says Goodbye, Knicks, Lakers Set Record," *Forbes*, January 22, 2014.

⁶² Kurt Badenhausen, "New York Knicks Head The NBA's Most Valuable Teams," *Forbes*, January 20, 2016.

was struggling in the early 2010s – Joe Lacob, for instance, bought the Golden State Warriors in 2010. Others, like Steve Ballmer and Robert Pera, entered the league later and at a much higher price.

As the NBA has continued to expand globally, these are prices that prospective owners are more than happy to pay. In joining up with the National Basketball Association, Silicon Valley has found the ideal platform for global dissemination of its various technologies. Aside from the corporate sponsorships – Nike, Adidas, Under Armour – that get passed along in the visual information of the broadcast, we have also witnessed the display and deployment of specifically Silicon Valley products in heretofore unseen ways. In addition to the Sacramento Kings’ investment in, and use of, virtual reality platform VOKE, the Kings conducted a start-up pitch competition with a \$10,000 grand prize and a \$5,000 investment by team owner Vivek Ranadive in all four finalists.⁶³ Additionally, Steve Ballmer’s purchase of the Clippers became an outlet to deploy his Microsoft products. In an interview with *Reuters* after taking over the team, Ballmer expressed his displeasure that the personnel had been using Apple iPads at practice and made plans to switch them all over to Microsoft Surfaces.⁶⁴ The interests of Silicon Valley executives and financiers are thus able to ‘piggy-back’ off of the NBA’s global broadcasts, benefitting from both direct investment in the NBA and from a now-expanded consumer base. The Warriors’ 2015 championship, and the glowing profiles that followed, represents the triumph of these interests.

⁶³ Fitz Tepper, “The Sacramento Kings Just Held the NBA’s First Startup Pitch Competition,” *TechCrunch*, April 7, 2016.

⁶⁴ Mary Milliken and Erci Kelsey, “At L.A. Clippers, Steve Ballmer Prizes Team Tested By Adversity,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2014.



Figure 4.6: Zoom signed a three-year deal with the Golden State Warriors in 2016, giving the team access to its video conferencing services in exchange for in-arena branding opportunities.⁶⁵

The NBA, of course, has its own capitalist intentions. In *Playing for Keeps*, John Goldlust addresses the relationship between sports and broadcast media: “The significance of a television contract for the potential profitability of sport as an entrepreneurial exercise has encouraged the growth of certain sports, and moved the ownership and administrative organizations further into the realm of big business operations.”⁶⁶ This is certainly true of the NBA, which landed back-to-back multi-billion dollar television contracts. The NBA itself now functions as a clear corporation with multiple divisions and satellite offices – NBA Communications, NBA Global Strategy, NBA Basketball Operations, NBA Legal. As sports leagues shift into big business operations, Goldlust continues, they “become a profitable avenue for speculation and investment entered into primarily as an entrepreneurial and marketing venture in which the sport event itself is the saleable product, sportsmen and sportswomen highly paid laborers, and sports spectators paying customers.”⁶⁷ The NBA, with

⁶⁵ Ari Levy, “How the Golden State Warriors Tap Silicon Valley Tech for that Extra Edge,” *CNBC*, February 13, 2017.

⁶⁶ John Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps: Sport, the Media, and Society* (Melbourne: Longman Chesire, 1987), 145

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

basketball as its saleable product, has enabled extensive entrepreneurial investment.

This is how the relationship between the National Basketball Association and Silicon Valley functions – Silicon Valley offers capital and technological know-how and the NBA offers paying customers and a global distribution system. The NBA benefits from this influx of capital and the potential to expand their distribution range, while Silicon Valley benefits from greater access to a global sports-watching public. The relationship has only deepened. In July 2016, the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA), the players’ labor union, announced a yearly Technology Summit in San Francisco to be led by Warriors forward Andre Iguodala. The Summit is intended to offer “networking opportunities with senior executives and influencers” and “workshops designed to identify opportunities for players to pursue both during and after their NBA careers.”⁶⁸ Moreover, after longtime NBA commissioner David Stern retired in 2014, he did not stay in the world of sports, nor did he stay very retired. In an October 2016 interview with Sam Amick of *USA Today*, Stern noted that he has been serving as an advisor to a venture capital firm and three startup businesses.⁶⁹ The NBA and Silicon Valley have transformed each other, perhaps irrevocably, and become a combined titan of tech, media, and business. As the NBA continues to seek global market dominance – league commissioner Adam Silver once told *Wired*, “We look at the delta between basketball and soccer and see an enormous upside” – perhaps there is no partner more suited to aid the NBA than the executives and venture capitalists of Silicon Valley.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ National Basketball Players Association. “NBPA to Hold Inaugural Technology Summit, Led By VP Andre Iguodala.” *NBPA.com*, July 5, 2016.

⁶⁹ Sam Amick, “Stern Q&A: Saving the Kings and Post-Retirement.” *USA Today*, October 3, 2016.

⁷⁰ McClusky, “Techies Are Trying to Turn the NBA Into the World’s Biggest Sport.”

NBA 3.0: The Sacramento Kings, Golden 1 Center, and the Global Sports Franchise

Following the 2014-15 season, the Sacramento Kings sold the naming rights to their upcoming state-of-the-art arena to Golden 1 Credit Union for an estimated \$120 million over twenty years.⁷¹ Golden 1 Center, which would officially open for the 2016-17 season, would feature its own data center, 900 miles of cabling, virtual reality capabilities, a 6,100 square foot 4k video display, and chatbots “to improve fan engagement” by using artificial intelligence to “understand what people need and want.”⁷² Comparably, Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, home of the NFL’s San Francisco 49ers, had arguably held the title of “highest-tech sports stadium” before Golden 1 Center. Opened in September 2014, Levi’s Stadium features 400 miles of cabling, 1,200 distributed antennae systems, 2,000 Sony TVs, and one Wi-Fi router for every 100 seats.⁷³ Golden 1 Center, in comparison, features a router for every *seventeen* seats.⁷⁴ The case of the Kings, though exceptional in its extremity, demonstrates the further mediatization of sport, the possibilities for sports teams as global media brands, and the future of sports spectatorship, especially as Steve Ballmer’s Los Angeles Clippers are set to open a similar “state-of-the-art” venue in the Inglewood area of Los Angeles.⁷⁵

In focusing on the case of the Sacramento Kings, as a pace setter for the wider sports media world, we can better understand the modern spectatorial experience of sports and its implications for global sports fandom. The Kings, through their massive video display, mobile app, and use of virtual reality, offer a newfound level of mediation within the stadium

⁷¹ Tony Bizjak, “Golden 1 Center is Name for New Downtown Sacramento Kings Arena,” *The Sacramento Bee*, June 16, 2015.

⁷² Taylor Soper, “Sacramento Kings Will Become First NBA Team to Use Chatbots,” *GeekWire*, June 1, 2016.

⁷³ Tim Bajarin, “Meet Levi’s Stadium,” *Time*, August 14, 2014.

⁷⁴ Sacramento Kings executive (public relations), in discussion with the author, May 29, 2018.

⁷⁵ Associated Press, “New LA Clippers arena approved by Inglewood City Council.” *NBA.com*, June 15, 2017.

space itself, converging two formerly distinct forms of spectatorship in live viewing and home viewing. This was part of a larger plan by Kings majority owner Vivek Ranadive, dubbed “NBA 3.0,” which seeks to “use technology and data to reboot the Kings” and “remake the league.”⁷⁶ Ranadive expands on NBA 3.0 in his own words, adding, “with technology you can expand social networks, you can give people an opportunity to participate and identify with [sports] in ways that haven’t been done before.”⁷⁷ With its NBA 3.0 directive, perhaps no franchise is more reflective of the Silicon Valley-ification of the NBA than the Sacramento Kings.

In a video walkthrough of the Kings’ Golden 1 Center, courtesy of CBS Sacramento, the arena’s massive 6,100 square foot 4K video display, the largest in North America, hovers above the arena floor, visible from the moment one enters the arena and from nearly every corner and corridor.⁷⁸ A similar feature, by KCRA, highlights the nearly one thousand miles of cable, operated on “enough electricity to power an entire city,” through a data center comparable to those owned by Amazon and Google.⁷⁹ Perhaps most striking is “mission control,” in which staff monitor user data from the Kings’ dedicated mobile app, and can point out the shortest concession and restroom lines. Through the app, fans can check this information, check player and game statistics, order food to be delivered, and even request the temperature be adjusted near their seats.⁸⁰ Golden 1 Center privileges its own highly mediatized environment above and beyond the live performance of basketball.

⁷⁶ Sam Riches, “This Man Wants To Make the NBA a Social Network—And Take It Global,” *Wired*, December 26, 2013.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ CBS Sacramento, “Golden 1 Center Opening Just A Week Away.” YouTube, 3:16. Posted September 27, 2016.

⁷⁹ KCRA News, “Kings Owner Vivek Ranadive Gives Exclusive Tour.” YouTube, 4:34. Posted September 27, 2016.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*



Figure 4.7: The Kings' Golden 1 Center features its own Tier 4 data center, the only one housed inside a professional sports arena (Source: Sacramento Kings).

Since the opening of Golden 1 Center, Ranadive and the Kings have also begun to experiment with virtual reality. For the start of the 2015-16 season, following an investment in VR company VOKE, which placed their “stereoscopic panoramic camera system” throughout the arena, the Kings began to offer virtual reality live-streams of select games.⁸¹ This was part of a larger NBA trend, as the league itself partnered with NextVR in 2015, and began to broadcast one game per week in virtual reality by the 2016-17 season.⁸² The Kings’ plans for VR, however, have gone beyond broadcasting to the actual in-person audience. Team minority owner Paul Jacobs, former CEO of mobile chipmaker Qualcomm, described tentative plans to offer virtual replays for fans that are present but far from the court: “Whether they're way up in the high seats or they're in a box but not sitting courtside, you still want to give them that courtside experience.” Jacobs also noted the possibility of offering specially priced tickets for a “movie-theater-like space inside the stadium with high-end VR headsets,” so that fans would “still be there to feel the roar of the crowd and be part

⁸¹ John Gaudiosi, “Why the Sacramento Kings are Investing in VR,” *Fortune*, October 28, 2015.

⁸² Official Release, “NBA Digital and NextVR to deliver one live game per week in virtual reality.” *NBA.com*, October 20, 2016.

of it but be watching in a slightly different way.”⁸³ While Golden 1 Center might offer an exceptional level of mediation of the spectatorial experience, it highlights increasingly viable paths for the deepening mediatization of sport.

The NBA, though, has been somewhat more ambivalent on those arena technologies that emphasize personalization over communal address. “Seventeen-to-twenty-thousand customized, individualized experiences on your phone does not make a good in-arena experience,” explains Mike Chant, senior director of team programming at the NBA, who serves as the main point of contact for the league’s franchises on both game presentation and overall team content. “What kind of content are you creating in-arena so that fans aren’t necessarily looking down at their phones during breaks, but instead, they’re all looking at whatever is happening on-court, or they’re all looking at whatever programming you have on the video board.”⁸⁴

This emphasis on community and a positive in-arena experience, at the local level, ultimately works to benefit the league on an international scale, as fans can more easily partake in the experience via NeuLion’s International League Pass, which uses team’s local broadcasts combined with various foreign-language commentary options. For the 2014-15 season, moreover, the league began to include its game-break and halftime entertainment on NeuLion’s platform, as part of a “continuous feed,” giving fans unprecedented access to the arena experience. If fans are having fun in-arena, their enjoyment comes across on television, now more than ever before. At the same time, Chant cautions, “I wouldn’t ask a team to do something in-arena, for the sake of an international League Pass thing, that I know wouldn’t

⁸³ Tom Simonite, “The Sacramento Kings’ New Stadium is Wired for Virtual Reality,” *MIT Technology Review*, June 20, 2016.

⁸⁴ Mike Chant, in discussion with the author, November 13, 2017.

make sense in-arena.” While the emphasis may not be on media to the detriment of the arena experience, often “the best experience in-arena will translate better on TV.”⁸⁵

Since the opening of Golden 1 Center, as a highly mediatized environment, the Sacramento Kings have been among the most aggressive of the NBA’s thirty franchises in their awareness of the global media potential of in-arena efforts. Ahead of the 2017-18 season, the team revealed two new alternative court designs, one in Hindi and one Mandarin, that would be used during select games aired in those nations.⁸⁶ The “global court” also features a redesigned Kings logo, which uses a more traditional lion logo than the standard Kings basketball design, in order to be more recognizable in India and other overseas nations. For the 2017-18 season, Nike released “city edition” jerseys for every NBA franchise, and the Kings’ version featured a version of their lion logo as well as a white “soccer-style” chest stripe.⁸⁷ While some Sacramento fans were critical of the look, the effort to better engage international Kings fans was evident.⁸⁸ The courts and jersey are then combined with various “international theme nights,” including a “Lunar New Year Celebration” and “Bollywood Night.” Throughout these events, the Kings rely on multiple social media platforms to more effectively address those fans, including the Chinese platform Weibo.⁸⁹ In 2014, when the Kings launched the first Hindi-language website in the NBA, the team’s president at the time,

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Demetrius Bell, “Sacramento Kings Bring International Flavor to the Alternative Court Design,” *Forbes*, September 15, 2017.

⁸⁷ Greg Wissinger, “The Kings ‘City’ Jersey Has Leaked and It’s Really Bad,” *Sactown Royalty*, December 14, 2017.

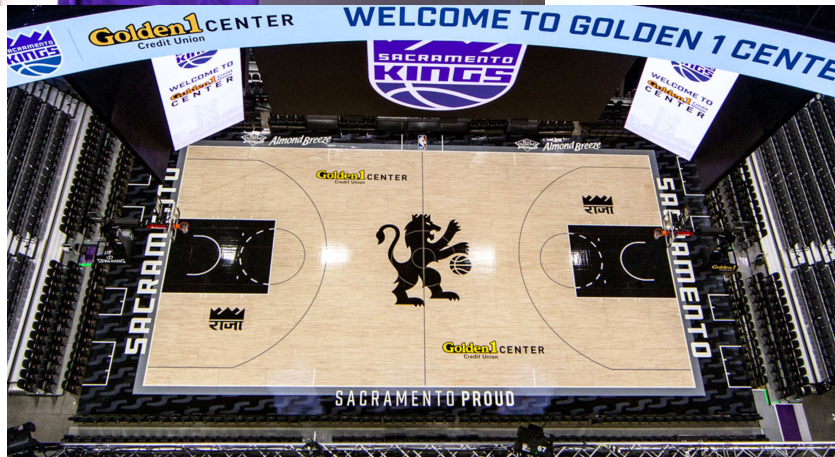
⁸⁸ Kevin Fippin, “Kings 2018 City Jerseys Revealed,” *Sactown Royalty*, November 7, 2018.

⁸⁹ Andrew Nicholson (Vice President of Digital & Content, Sacramento Kings), in discussion with the author, June 11, 2018.

Chris Granger, stated the organization’s goal “to become India’s home team.”⁹⁰ Since then, their cultivation of a global media ecosystem has continued to reflect this mission.



Figure 4.8: Former Kings center DeMarcus Cousins promotes a Hindi-language ‘shooting shirt’ for sale in the Kings’ online store c. 2014 (left). The Kings debut a new court with a redesigned lion emblem and small Hindi logos c. 2017 (below) (Source: Sacramento Kings).



While the Kings serve as exemplars of the global NBA franchise, others have also pursued their own international audiences. In addition to the aforementioned example of Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Milwaukee Bucks, the “city edition” jerseys of the Houston Rockets and Golden State Warriors both feature Chinese characters.⁹¹ Like the Kings, many teams also feature various international “heritage” nights that are broadcast overseas in the country of note. The New York Knicks held their first “French Heritage Night” against the Charlotte Hornets, in order to feature their own French player in Frank

⁹⁰ SI Wire, “Kings Launch First Hindi Website in NBA ‘to Become India’s Home Team,’” *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 2014.

⁹¹ Matt Young, “A Look at Every Team’s NBA ‘City’ Uniforms This Season,” *SF Gate*, November 18, 2018.

Ntilikina and the Hornets' Nicolas Batum and Tony Parker.⁹² While some teams have come along more slowly to the global media potential of live event programming, it is no surprise that the most aggressive teams, like the Kings, Bucks, and Warriors, all have ties to Silicon Valley and venture capital, and whose owners bought into the league specifically for its growing international value.

The Sacramento Kings, in privileging the globality of the in-arena experience, have been among the teams that have best taken advantage of this modern media ecosystem. Yet the Kings' efforts, as well as the NBA's, surpass media distribution alone. As one Kings executive explained to me, what helps them most overseas is actually being there. "We were the on the NBA China trip [in 2014]... We did the two back-to-back Mexico City games [in 2015]." But the team has even grander plans, he continues: "[Kings owner] Vivek wants to be the first team to play in India and I guarantee you, knowing him, it's going to happen."⁹³ Indeed in December 2018, the "NBA India Games" were officially announced, featuring the Sacramento Kings and Indiana Pacers, for the following October.⁹⁴ The Kings' ambitions thus reflect the broader global ambitions of the NBA itself, which continues to build regional offices, sign national distribution agreements with television operators and social media platforms, and establish stronger physical footholds in various overseas locations. In cultivating their global presence, both in partnership with the NBA and separate from it, the Kings exhibit the potential for emergent media institutions in the post-network era.

⁹² "Knicks Announce Schedule of Theme Nights for 2018-19 Season," *NBA.com*, August 28, 2018.

⁹³ Sacramento Kings Executive (public relations), in discussion with the author, May 29, 2018.

⁹⁴ Official Release, "Kings to Play First-Ever NBA Games in India," *NBA.com*, December 20, 2018.

Conclusion: The International House of Hoops

In November 2010, only a few months ahead of the labor negotiations that would ultimately stall and lead to the 2011 NBA lockout, commissioner David Stern appeared on *The Colbert Report*. “[Basketball] is one of [the United States’] leading cultural exports,” he told host Stephen Colbert. Stern went on to compare basketball’s global appeal to that of other American sports, conceding that “football is the most popular sport in America and what you Americans call soccer is the most popular sport in the rest of the world,” which served to emphasize the NBA’s room for further growth. “When you say ‘you Americans,’ are you not an American?” asked Colbert with incredulity. “I’m an internationalist,” offered Stern with a smile.⁹⁵

A punch-line and yet one with far greater meaning in the context of the NBA’s global ambitions over the entirety of Stern’s tenure as commissioner, from 1984 through 2014. The NBA’s product, like Stern himself, has aspired to internationalism. In conjunction with digital distribution technologies, in-house production and control, and a global talent development infrastructure, the NBA brand has evolved into an inclusive and global one. “It’s the ultimate compliment to our players, the world has watched the American players and adopted their game,” Stern added later in his interview with Colbert, “but the rest of the world is catching up.”⁹⁶ Which is true but incomplete, as the NBA either directly controls, or has a great deal of input, in the development of these players and their potential entry into the league. Passionate debate about American versus international play only helps the NBA overall, just like the rising popularity of college basketball in the 1980s helped to prepare audiences and market upcoming stars. Only in this case, the NBA has greater ownership over

⁹⁵ David Stern, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, November 15, 2010.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the development pipeline, via its *Junior NBA* and *Basketball without Borders* initiatives. The modern internationalism of the NBA, which grew from its media ambitions as early as the 1987 McDonald's Open and the 1988 Atlanta Hawks tour of the Soviet Union, continues to propel the NBA's international media distribution.

The "hub and spoke" model, in which the NBA's Secaucus, New Jersey "hub" is connected by fiber-optic "spokes" to all twenty-nine arenas, to international streaming partner NeuLion, to domestic streaming partner Turner, and to its own colocation center in Newark, New Jersey, enables the NBA to maximize its control over a vast and instantaneous global media ecosystem. Combined with the in-house production of live events, television programming, and web content, as well as the league's development of its 'on-air talent,' the NBA has emerged a genuine transnational media conglomerate. The contemporary post-network distribution apparatus of the NBA, in service of an increasingly internationalist media product, has allowed the league to come closer than ever before to its ambition to overtake soccer as the most popular sport in the world.

The NBA is often as secretive as Netflix in its metrics, with the league revealing only that the number of League Pass subscribers rose 40-percent during course of the 2014-15 season.⁹⁷ During the 2017-18 season, the number reportedly increased another 63-percent over the previous year.⁹⁸ But the league has excelled on social media, where numbers are more easily visible. By August 2018, the NBA had reached 30 million followers, which exceed the UEFA Champions League at 25.4 million followers, the English Premier League at 18.5 million, WWE at 15 million, the NFL at 11.7 million, and MLB at merely 4.5 million.

⁹⁷ Official Release, "Record 240 Million New Fans Join NBA on Social Media," *NBA.com*, April 16, 2015.

⁹⁸ Jon Lafayette, "NBA Season Sets Records for Subscriptions, Social," *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 12, 2018.

On Twitter, too, the NBA's 27.2 million followers pace the NFL's 24 million, and on Facebook, the NBA's 35.9 million followers are more than double the NFL's 16 million.⁹⁹

The NBA's success on social media is the result of its sustained investment in self-distribution, as its internal Game Distribution Center edits and posts highlights to these platforms at a rapid pace, fulfilling the original role of NBA.com in directing viewers to telecasts. "Back then most of this [archival] stuff was for highlight packages the next day, or for video tapes that would be produced at the end of the season, or for features that would be on an NBC *Game of the Week*," explains Steve Hellmuth, the NBA's executive vice president of media operations and technology. "But now all the logging and all the work that we do here is focused on turning stuff around immediately into social media channels, into the NBA app."¹⁰⁰ The NBA's success in the post-network era, as a post-network media conglomerate, is the result of a careful and sustained investment in digital platforms. Just as the NBA invested heavily in cable television in 2002, when the medium was ascending over broadcast television, the NBA's early investment in internet distribution has well-positioned the league for the media industry's transition towards a paradigm dominated by streaming video. While the league continues to benefit from both broadcast and cable, the NBA's investment in an in-house digital pipeline has prepared the league to succeed as its own self-sufficient media empire.

In January 2019, ESPN basketball writer Zach Lowe appeared on *The Full 48* podcast, which is produced by *Bleacher Report* and hosted by their sportswriter Howard Beck. "I think at some point the NBA is going to have to look at itself in mirror and say, are we about basketball or are we about player movement and three screens and Twitter and all

⁹⁹ Kevin Kinkead, "The NBA's Social Media Numbers are Staggering," *Crossing Broad*, August 9, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Steve Hellmuth, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2018.

this stuff, or do we care about the game – do we care about the actual on-court product and people understanding it?” Lowe posited, following a nighttime news cycle that saw viral video of Houston Rockets star James Harden being hit in the face by the ball. “It’s less about the game than ever before and it just trends more and more in that direction,” Lowe added.”¹⁰¹

Lowe’s sentiment reflects the expansion of the league’s media ambitions above and beyond their interest in the sport of basketball. There is irony, however, in its airing on *The Full 48* podcast, produced by *Bleacher Report*, which is owned by the NBA’s longtime cable and digital partner Turner Broadcasting System, one of the most significant contributors to the transformation of basketball into media content first and foremost. But these are not recent developments, as this dissertation has demonstrated. From the NBA’s early interest in cable and the medium’s opportunities for self-produced material, the league’s ambitions have exceeded that of sport alone. This was especially evident in their brief interest in expanding into professional football in collaboration with NBC and Turner, as noted in Chapter Two, and in the 2012 fines for the San Antonio Spurs resting their players during a nationally televised game. Basketball is not arbitrary, of course, but over time it has increasingly served primarily as fuel for the NBA’s broader global media ambitions.

The various components chronicled in this chapter – NeuLion, Brazil, Silicon Valley, and the Sacramento Kings – come together to illustrate the pinnacle of the NBA as a global media empire, as well as the broader global state of the sports media industry, within the post-network era. The ascent of streaming over cable has enabled content owners to self-distribute and become integrated media institutions in their own right, including the NBA’s

¹⁰¹ Zach Lowe, “Zach Lowe on tanking, Tom Thibodeau, and Trades,” interview with Howard Beck, *The Full 48*, January 10, 2019.

Sacramento Kings and Milwaukee Bucks, which have used digital distribution and social media to become global media properties. The league itself, ultimately, has benefited from this paradigm to become more global, more integrated, and more in control than ever before. NeuLion, in particular, demonstrates the essential role of intermediary firms within this streaming media ecosystem, by providing infrastructure and expertise without requiring direct control over branding or content. The institutions and individuals of Silicon Valley, meanwhile, have become increasingly embedded within the sports world to fuel their global commercial ambitions, as in the case of Brazil and other highly populated countries, which present new opportunities for the expansion of media markets. By the close of the 2014-15 season, these elements offer the culmination of the NBA's global media interests since the 1980s, as well as the wider evolution of the sports-media industry, which has seen the acceleration of sports as media content and sports leagues as media conglomerates. Through the post-network era, no entity has embodied the mediatization and marketization of sport more than the National Basketball Association, the media empire that hoops built.

Conclusion: The Global Sports Media Industry

“My job, and I think sometimes people misunderstand this... My job is to look at all the other competition outside of the NBA, and that’s where, my god, the world is changing so quickly... This notion that, sort of, the Pelicans are just competing against the Knicks or the Lakers or the Thunder, they’re competing against every other form of entertainment out there in the world. Especially for this young audience, they know that more than anyone, because they don’t even subscribe to pay-TV anymore or virtually where you have to go to find most of our games, so talk about the world changing quickly... That has to be my mind-set... It’s that we’re an entertainment product competing against an infinitesimal number of opportunities for people to do other things with their time.” – NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, in conversation with *The Ringer’s* Bill Simmons, May 2019.¹

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate the processes of mediatization and marketization, as the sports and media industries have become increasingly intertwined since the 1980s. As outlined in the introduction, there are quite a few scholars to theorize the historical relationship between sports and mass media, largely through the late 19th century and into the satellite television boom of the 1980s and 1990s. This dissertation has attempted to provide a richer understanding of the sports-media relationship as it has evolved globally and into the streaming era. While this symbiosis precedes 1982, the starting point of this dissertation, the period from 1982 through 2015 sees sport functioning as multiplatform media content above and beyond its status as a cultural pastime, largely through the efforts of the National Basketball Association, which used basketball to fuel a global media empire. The NBA has been especially effective as a global media producer and distributor, and as such, the organization is the ideal reflection of the sports industry’s evolution as the sports *media* industry.

In his examination of Netflix, Ramon Lobato differentiates between global and multinational media institutions. While Netflix promotes itself as a genuinely “global”

¹ 42 Analytics, “SSAC19: Who Says No?: A 1-on-1 with Adam Silver and Bill Simmons,” YouTube, 1:04:49. Post March 1, 2019.

service, the company's platform remains more accurately "multinational," in that "may best be understood as a series of national media services stitched together into a single platform."²

The streaming endeavors of sport, however, which most frequently rely on uniform international platforms across borders, indeed reflect the "wraparound" nature of a truly global enterprise. The NBA, the most aggressive and experimental sports organization in terms of global and multiplatform media distribution, thus provided the ideal object for examining the contemporary state of the sports-media relationship as well as its historical development.

Following the emergence of sport as modern media content in the 1980s, the 1990s sees the ascent of sports leagues as global media conglomerates. By the 2000s, as cable expands and streaming distribution becomes more reliable, sports media institutions are able to favor untapped global audiences over an established domestic audience. By 2015, the continued success of streaming platforms and the development of a post-network media ecosystem enable a league such as the NBA to become a fully integrated and transnational media empire, while also opening up global opportunities for individual sports franchises like the Sacramento Kings.

The NBA thus illuminates a fundamental dialectic between globalization and digitization, as new technologies facilitate a vaster distribution potential and in turn encourage a more substantial global address. In the early 2000s, the NBA more extensively turned to international audiences, with the aid of improved streaming video technologies, which allowed the league to reach new heights as an integrated media producer-distributor. Through its global success, the NBA also illuminates the relationship between sports programming and the broader media industries, in which the former has assisted the latter in

² Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 71.

its global and digital investments. While this is clear in the global appeal of sport via over-the-top platforms, it is also true that many of the most key historical players in streaming technology, such as Starwave and BAMTech, originated in sport before branching out to other media properties.

The first chapter demonstrates the inception of sports as modern media content, when future commissioner David Stern conceived of NBA Entertainment, an in-house production studio and archival outfit, through which basketball would become the content to fuel the league's much vaster media ambitions. By the league's producing its own dubbed edits of games for overseas distribution, NBAE alters the character of the relationship between sports leagues and television broadcasters. Ultimately, this chapter highlights the mediatization of sport, in conjunction with the broader interconnected forces of globalization and deregulation, as global opportunities in satellite and cable encourage the league to invest more heavily in their own media production and distribution. The NBA's early adoption of these technologies, on an international scale, result in the establishment of NBA basketball as a media property above and beyond its status as a sport.

As chronicled in Chapter Two, the establishment of NBA Entertainment as well as the international success of the 1992 Olympic basketball team, which featured NBA stars for the first time, facilitates the league's ascent as a full-fledged media conglomerate during the 1990s. The NBA's conglomeration, which saw the organization establish a number of corporate satellite offices around the world, was also aided by the development of the internet and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) as promising direct-to-consumer distribution technologies. The NBA was able to construct a transnational network of media circulation that maximized overseas market penetration and centralized league oversight. While the

NBA began to globalize in the 1980s, it is during the 1990s that the league establishes its on-court product as a flexible “television format” that can be adapted and modified depending on local taste, through the assistance of those local NBA offices. This chapter thus examines how and why sports leagues were able to succeed as media conglomerates in the early period of internet distribution, while deepening our understanding of the TV format to incorporate the particularities of sports programming.

As the global possibilities for direct-to-consumer distribution were expanded, so too was media companies’ desire for a more inclusive and international audience address. Chapter Three demonstrates the privileging of a global audience over a domestic one. While the NBA faced declining viewership in the United States, the league accelerated the importation of foreign-born athletes to enhance their global cultural value and more effectively address those overseas fans as equally and simultaneously as possible. This occurs concurrent to the widespread advancement and adoption of streaming video, which offers the ideal conduit for the NBA’s global ambitions. The NBA format thus evolves from the 1990s, which more heavily marketed the league’s Americanness, to primarily emphasize an international audience. This strategy presents evidence for the further marketization and mediatization of sport, which was increasingly motivated by the particular commercial imperatives and possibilities of market dominance facilitated by a multiplatform media ecosystem. Chapter Three provides further context, therefore, for the wider growth of streaming and OTT platforms and the interrelationship between direct-to-consumer distribution and the internationalization of media content.

Chapter Four offers a snapshot of the NBA and the sports media industry during the 2014-15 season, as a post-network era of television has become more fully established. The

global ascent of streaming has enabled new entities, many of them with ties to sports and to the NBA specifically, to rise to prominence within the wider media industry. NeuLion, which oversees the NBA's international-only iteration of its League Pass streaming platform, reflects the business's continued reliance on expert intermediary firms to manage such services, as they did with Starwave in the early days of internet distribution. NeuLion and perhaps its top competitor, BAMTech, have become as essential to the operation of streaming platforms as the cable operators before them. This contemporary paradigm, which allows for the simultaneous and seemingly frictionless distribution of media around the world, has enabled various institutions to become global brands in their own right, similarly to how the NBA once used satellite television to do the same. Every single game of every single team can now be watched live across nearly every continent. The Sacramento Kings, for instance, can thus aspire to become India's "home team," as their various efforts have reflected.

Silicon Valley capitalists and capital have played a key role in cultivating these possibilities, after investing the NBA en masse in the early 2010s following a labor lockout and a restructuring of player compensation that was more favorable to owners. Silicon Valley interests have pushed the globalization and digitization even further, as sports offers lucrative content to fuel their media platforms and technologies, while the NBA has benefited from the influx of capital. This partnership leads to uncomfortable questions, however, as the NBA expands deeper into markets in countries like Brazil, where it has also invested in local social programs and infrastructure. The altruism of these actions is complicated by the NBA's primarily commercial goals as a global entertainment conglomerate.

While the NBA originally served as an administrative organization that enacted the rules of American pro basketball and maintained the status quo of the game, it has grown considerably since 1982. As a result of the NBA's early investment in self-production via NBA Entertainment, direct-to-consumer distribution technologies in NBA.com and NBA TV, and their efforts to globalize the performance and packaging of the sport itself, the NBA has since emerged as a fully integrated global media empire. The NBA is now firmly engaged in the same conversation as Netflix and Amazon in their international streaming ambitions and global value. The U.S. sports industry generated over \$19 billion from media rights in 2017 alone, of which the NBA's annual \$2.67 billion is a significant proportion. As new competitors, like Amazon and DAZN, have entered the marketplace, this number is expected to rise to nearly \$24 billion by 2022.³ Digital platforms and services, moreover, reportedly make up more than half of the \$2 trillion in revenue for the entire global media industry.⁴ The sports leagues that have most aggressively pursued digital distribution, such as the NBA via League Pass and social media platforms, thus envision enormous room for growth over the coming years.

While the NBA has not yet taken the step of promoting other sports or media properties within their institutional network, the notion continues to seem plausible. This had been the plan, after all, for their aborted partnership with Turner Entertainment on a CNN/SI channel.⁵ While the NBA continues to entrust Facebook, Twitter, Tencent, Turner, and NeuLion to administer the various properties that they have been provided, the league could very easily take on those distribution responsibilities themselves, should the benefits ever

³ "At the Gate and Beyond: Outlook for the Sports Market in North America through 2022," *PricewaterhouseCoopers*, November 2018.

⁴ Ennel van Eeden and Wilson Chow, "Perspectives from the Global Entertainment & Media Outlook, 2018-2022," *PricewaterhouseCoopers*, June 2018.

⁵ Rudy Martzke, "AOL, Turner Double-Team and Close In on NBA Deal," *USA Today*, December 12, 2001.

outweigh the costs. As streaming revenues continue to rise while traditional linear television declines, it seems increasingly plausible that the NBA would intervene and take greater control over its own distribution. The NBA's own commissioner, Adam Silver, has expressed concern in the long-term viability of cable and the NBA's current approach: "From 2010 to 2018, among 18-to-34-year-olds—and that's our core audience, it's an incredibly attractive young audience—their viewership on pay TV is down almost 50 percent," he explained in May 2019 at the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics conference. "So I think we're going to have to figure this out with ESPN, and with now our new partners at AT&T and WarnerMedia, how the new world looks."⁶ As the league has come to function as a media empire in its right, with offices spanning the world and divisions with various responsibilities, the NBA is well-positioned to take on even greater distribution responsibilities and expand their capabilities as a media company beyond the scope of basketball or sport altogether.

By examining the NBA, this dissertation thus charts a narrative of sport's becoming media. The NBA accelerated and shaped this evolution, using basketball as TV programming to fuel its broader media ambitions. In doing so, the NBA illuminates the interrelationship between sports and media, as well as the dialectic between new media technologies and globalization. The NBA invested in satellite, cable, and internet distribution in order to expand their reach. Their expanded presence, and an altogether more global audience, ultimately altered how the NBA produced its content and to whom that content was primarily directed. The NBA evolved from an American sports league selling an American game, to a global media company selling an international television program.

As more and more cultures are incorporated into the NBA's product, however, they are flattened and modified in order to most effectively promote a particular corporate vision

⁶ 42 Analytics, "SSAC19: Who Says No?"

of the world. While this does not exclude the genuine dialogic possibilities between cultures, the NBA has demonstrated that the platform itself is fixed in favor of commercial gain. Some have argued that the persistence of language and local preferences, as in television formats, argue against the overwhelming force of homogenization. But as the NBA becomes imbricated in the fabric of local life, and increasingly defined and consumed as a local brand while remaining intimately tied to both the league's own corporate aims and those of its sponsors, such a paradigm only accelerates the commercialization of culture. As part of basketball's particular process of marketization, overseas basketball cultures have become transformed into the "NBA" and re-sold, like bacteria that absorb genetic material to become more resistant to antibiotics.⁷ Paul S.N. Lee has used the biological metaphor of the "amoeba" to describe the flexibility of imported and adapted media. Perhaps that moniker, ultimately, does not sufficiently capture the extent to which the drive for commercial gain is deeply ingrained in the entire enterprise, as Thomas Lamarre has noted in his examination of global television flows.⁸ The NBA has used its media distribution, in combination with local political influence, to install itself as one of the world's sports media superpowers.

Given the projected economic growth and deeper integration of the sports and media industries, scholars must remain attentive to the implications of their ongoing globalization and digitization, including the simultaneous address of streaming platforms, the effect of such possibilities on programming choices, the engagement with global media brands from local perspectives, and the growing interest of digital distributors such as Amazon and Twitter in sports programming. Sports-betting, too, appears primed to play a major role in the mutual growth of the sports and media industries, as the United States vacated the Supreme

⁷ For more on the science of bacteria and gene transfer: Andrew F. Read and Robert J. Woods, "Antibiotic Resistance Management," *Evol Med Public Health* 1 (2014): 147.

⁸ Thomas Lamarre, "Regional TV: Affective Media Geographies." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 2 (2015): 93-126.

Court ruling that had kept it banned and enabled legalization on a state-by-state basis.⁹ While sports leagues hope to be paid some percentage of the wagers on their games, the precise economics have yet to be worked out. Either way, this new wave of gambling is thought to result in an increase in television ratings, given the higher financial stakes of otherwise meaningless regular-season games, thus benefitting sports leagues through higher media rights fees.¹⁰

I hope that this dissertation demonstrates why scholars should approach these two businesses, sports and media, as part of a single integrated ecosystem with major transnational institutions that have stakes in both. Former NBA commissioner David Stern argued as much in early 2018, when he reflected on his responsibilities running the league from 1984 to 2014: “It’s really being the CEO of a far-flung entertainment and media conglomerate that has not just television relationships, for games and for other things, but for assisting the teams with respect to the sales of their tickets in their buildings and their game presentation, and presiding over a [consumer] products business that’s billions of dollars, and a sponsorship business...and all of that on a global basis.”¹¹ In examining the NBA’s institutional evolution over a twenty-three year period, as it transforms into a media conglomerate that sees basketball as multiplatform media content, I hope to have established a history that provides a foundation for further research on the global sports media industry.

⁹ Adam Liptak and Kevin Draper, “Supreme Court Ruling Favors Sports Betting,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2018.

¹⁰ David Bloom, “Broadcast TV is Betting Sports Gambling Will Revive Ratings,” *Forbes*, October 19, 2018.

¹¹ Stern, in discussion with the author, February 12, 2018.

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Appendix

List of Interviews

Harvey Araton, *New York Times* sports reporter and columnist, August 4, 2017: 69 minutes.

Manish Bahl, NeuLion Vice President of Service Delivery, July 21, 2017. Approx. 20 minutes.

Ira Berkow, former *New York Times* sports reporter and columnist, July 6, 2017: 21 minutes.

Kim Bohuny, NBA Senior Vice President of International Basketball Operations, September 22, 2017: 24 minutes.

Ruben Carbajal, NBA writer and script supervisor, October 20, 2017: 61 minutes.

Mike Chant, NBA Senior Director of Team Programming. November 13, 2017: 32 minutes.

Mojie Crigler, NBA writer and script coordinator, June 15, 2017: 53 minutes.

Ed Desser, former NBA President of Television & New Media Ventures, May 9, 2017: 49 minutes.

Robert Edelman, Professor of Russian History, UC San Diego, and translator for the 1988 Atlanta Hawks Soviet Union tour, August 17, 2017: 45 minutes.

Russ Granik, former NBA Deputy Commissioner, March 22, 2018: 44 minutes.

Chris Halton, NBA Senior Vice President of Media Distribution and Technology, July 26, 2017: 43 minutes.

Steve Hellmuth, NBA Executive Vice President of Media Operations and Technology, June 28, 2018: 40 minutes.

Matt Helvick, NeuLion Senior Engineer, July 21, 2017: 49 minutes.

Troy Justice, NBA Associate Vice President of International Basketball Operations, September 25, 2017: 30 minutes.

John Kosner, former NBA Director of Broadcasting and former ESPN Executive Vice President of Digital and Print Media, July 20, 2017: 63 minutes.

Craig Lazarus, ESPN Vice President of Original Content & Features, August 1, 2017: 90 minutes

Mark Lazarus, NBCUniversal Chairman of Broadcast, Cable, Sports and News, April 18, 2017: 24 minutes.

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Terry Lyons, former NBA Vice President of International Public Relations, December 20, 2017: 109 minutes.

Danny Meiseles, NBA President and Executive Producer of Content. September 22, 2017: 30 minutes.

Andrew Nicholson, Sacramento Kings Vice President of Digital and Content, June 11, 2018: Email.

Sacramento Kings Executive (name withheld by request), Public Relations, May 29, 2018: 48 minutes.

Matt Soldano, NeuLion Broadcast Operations Manager, July 21, 2017: 49 minutes.

Mike Slade, former Starwave CEO and strategic advisor to Apple CEO Steve Jobs, September 12, 2017: 26 minutes.

David Stern, former NBA Commissioner, February 12, 2018: 42 minutes.

Ailene Voisin, former *Sacramento Bee* sports columnist, February 25, 2018: 43 minutes.

Anne Wright, former NBA producer of live programming and entertainment, August 16, 2017: 75 minutes.

Joe Zappala, NBA Senior Manager of Digital Media Operations and Technical Services, July 26, 2017: 71 minutes.

Site Visits and Tours

ESPN Campus. Bristol, Connecticut. August 1, 2017.

Golden 1 Center. Sacramento, California. May 29, 2018.

NBA Entertainment. Secaucus, New Jersey. July 26, 2017.

NeuLion Technical Operations Center. Plainview, New York. July 21, 2017.