

## Sports Media and Celebrity Position Paper

One of the central tensions I've noticed in discussions of sports media has centered on how media institutions balance their representation of sport between entertainment and news coverage. ESPN, rightly, is often at the center of these discussions. It is a large holder of live television rights, has a robust network of reporters devoted to the internals of sport (injuries, hirings and firings, discipline, etc.), and also contains some vehicles for critical inquiry (most notably, *Outside the Lines*, and to a lesser extent, *Grantland*). More recently, these tensions have begun to come to a head, particularly when ESPN signed on to run the Longhorn network.

Yet, this conflict is not new to ESPN, which has long held a stake in the success of the sports for which it owns television rights. ESPN's investment in the Longhorn Network, then, is a relative pittance compared to its \$2 billion yearly payout for NFL rights. In fact, by my calculations, ESPN roughly spends in the area of \$4 Billion per year on live television rights and has more than \$30 billion contractually committed to various leagues/events (those numbers are a very rough calculation and exclude properties that do not disclose financial terms, such as the Masters and the WNBA). With such large investments in leagues, ESPN does everything it can to monetize those investments. In addition to promoting its games and highlighting it across its various platforms, ESPN has fully entered into the lucrative area of fantasy sports and other interactive games that rely on actual results. These games are increasingly being integrated into the main of ESPN television, in the form of entire shows such as *Fantasy Football Now* or in the heightened presence of Mathew Berry, ESPN's main fantasy football analyst, across many of ESPN's other television shows.

Getting to the point, ESPN has long been in the business of selling sports as entertainment. Its "news" division now either operates as a part of the entertainment experience or, in moments of overwhelming importance, nervously coexists with it as a vestige of the network's past. *SportsCenter*, recently described as the heartbeat of the network in a *Businessweek* profile earlier this year, has perhaps transformed the most, now unabashedly pushing ESPN properties and highlighting ordained "stars," such as Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin, who have cultural resonance but may lack more direct influence on their team or sport.

This state of affairs is not offered as an indictment. Bemoaning ESPN for its lack of continuous rigorous investigation into the underbelly of sport is misguided at best. Instead, we should realize that ESPN's conversion to a full-fledged entertainment network has opened up a space in the media landscape for someone else to do the dirty work. Currently, the top sources of critical sport inquiry are not on any television channel, but diffused across a number of print and text sources: *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Yahoo! Sports*, *Deadspin*, *Grantland* (owned by ESPN), and *The New Yorker*.

Further, ESPN's expansion into a multi-platform entertainment network has, besides restricting avenues of critical inquiry, opened up new ways of discussing, understanding, and interpreting sport. For example, as ESPN has continued to focus

on interpersonal relationships between players, coaches, and the league, the weight of players' voices, even those belonging to average players, has increased. Thus, media representation of controversial issues such as player safety and labor disputes are no longer dominated by league narratives, but also present counter-narratives from players as well. During both the player lockout and the referee lockout, for example, many players went to Twitter to lash out against the NFL. Many of these tweets were highlighted on ESPN programming and opened up discussions on the NFL's commitment to safety, the purpose of the league as a capitalistic enterprise, and broader notions of worker's rights.

The case of Jeremy Lin also illustrates the way these openings are not created for players and fans, but reporters and commentators as well. While many criticized ESPN (and the rest of sports media) for their excessive coverage, this coverage ended up resulting in a number of reflective, nuanced articles and features that delved into complicated matters regarding race, national identity, and stereotyping. In fact, these conversations operated almost solely in the meta layer of sports reporting, something only enabled by the modern ways in which sports is covered.