

# Transmedia Social Platforms: Livestreaming and Transmedia Sports

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## Abstract

Social media are now well established as backchannels for the discussion of live sporting events (from world cup finals to local matches), and pose some critical questions for sporting bodies: on the one hand, they offer an opportunity to attract and engage fans and thus grow the sport, but on the other they also undermine central message control and broadcast arrangements. FIFA and IOC have both attempted to ban photos and livestreams posted from sporting arenas, while NFL, NHL, and others have recently offered some full-match livestreaming directly via Twitter, and other sports have worked with providers like SnappyTV to post instant video replays on social media. But such innovation is often hampered by existing media partnerships: interestingly, it is niche sports that emerge as comparatively more at liberty to explore innovative transmedia models, while leading sports like football are locked into restrictive broadcast deals that – at least for now – preclude secondary transmission via social media.

## Introduction

Contemporary social media platforms provide clearly circumscribed media spaces in their own right; we speak of being “on Facebook” or “in the Twittersphere”, for instance. At the same time, however, they are also densely interconnected with other parts of the broader media ecology, and enable rich transmedia experience and engagement. Since the mass adoption of currently leading social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* in the mid to late 2000s, media producers from many conventional media channels, as well as social media users themselves, have actively pursued the creation and further enhancement of such transmedia relationships; in doing so, they have sometimes worked in unison, and at other times clashed over their vision of what shape an engaging transmedia experience around a shared media text might take, and of which stakeholders might be in control of it.

Such transmedia practices have developed around a wide range of media texts, from the news through fiction content to live events. Of particular interest has been the role of social media in “connecting” audiences for live television, “amplifying” their collective voice, and harnessing their input in creative ways (Harrington, Highfield and Bruns 2013, 405). In this chapter, however, we seek to move beyond a view of social media as a mere complement to the primacy of television, and examine on how transmediatization can produce distinct experiences and provide specific narrative contributions. Of particular note is how these forces collide in productive or challenging ways within the domain of live sports: a leading site of transmedia experiences (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

The liveness of the central text positions the sporting event especially well for further engagement by sporting fans through social media: platforms like *Twitter* and (somewhat less strongly so) *Facebook* are themselves fast-moving, near-live media spaces, and are therefore well suited to sports fans seeking to follow and/or comment an unfolding sporting event in real time. Further, the lightweight, mobile nature of modern social media clients makes it possible for fans to engage with social media even as they are watching the event on television, via Webstream, or even in the stadium. But this has also encouraged the evolution of sport

consumption from limited top-down models in the broadcast era to more open communication models in the digital era, now characterized by an abundance of information sources and distribution methods for sporting content (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Rein, Kotler, and Shields 2006, 42), and this transformation has created a range of – as yet only partially resolved – tensions between the various stakeholders in any one sporting event. In this chapter, we show that niche sports, unencumbered by binding commercial and marketing arrangements, have at times been able to negotiate these tensions more proactively than their far better resourced mainstream counterparts.

## The Trouble with Transmedia Sports

Frictions between sporting organizations' corporate interests and fans' expressions of engagement have become especially evident in the context of large-scale, mainstream sporting events such as the Olympic Games. As television networks incur substantial costs to secure exclusive broadcast rights to the Olympics and similar events, they (as well as the sporting organizations granting those rights) have aggressively employed copyright laws in order to protect these commercial agreements, and to ensure that the content they have licensed is not available through unauthorized distributors (Boyle and Haynes 2009, 38). However, this is exceptionally difficult in digital spaces, as fans and other media outlets now have the ability to share images and video from an event through a multitude of digital platforms. Thus, for sports organizations and television networks, attempting to control the dissemination of content that (potentially) infringes on broadcast rights is almost impossible without taking a heavy-handed approach (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

For example, during the London 2012 Olympics, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) sought to prohibit ticket holders from sharing any images or videos taken at Olympic events on social media (Biggs 2012). Essentially, this meant that fans were not allowed to share personal photos or videos of the Games through their own social media accounts to document their Olympic experience – a restriction that many found understandably aggravating. In response to the backlash from sporting fans, the IOC relaxed these restrictions slightly, allowing event-goers to share *images* from the Games on social media; however, under current regulations, the IOC still prohibits ticket holders from sharing *video* content (Canton 2016). Given the multitude of fan content created at such major events, however, neither version of these rules appears particularly enforceable.

Similar tensions have also emerged in football, primarily at the FIFA World Cup and in the English Premier League (EPL) (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Statt 2014; Williams 2014): during the 2014 World Cup, many fans adopted the practice of sharing highlight-style video content on *Vine* after a goal was scored (Statt 2014). Owned by Twitter, Inc., *Vine* allowed users to easily create and upload six-second looping videos; many football fans created such content both by recording match events live in the stadium and by capturing replays at home from their television or computer screens. In response to this practice, organizing body FIFA and rights holders ESPN and Univision issued a number of takedown notices, while *Vine* suspended some of the offending accounts (Statt 2014). Following the *Vine* experience at the World Cup, the EPL subsequently similarly warned fans not to create and share short match videos online, explaining that the EPL was actively working to “curtail this kind of activity” (qtd. in Williams 2014).

The US-based National Football League (NFL) has extended this approach even further, policing the transmedia activities of ordinary fans as well as of teams and their players. In 2016, it introduced a strict video-sharing policy aimed at protecting the exclusive rights of its broadcast partners: the League prohibited teams from using platforms such as *Facebook Live* and *Periscope* to share live content during a game (from kick-off to one hour after the game finishes), creating and sharing any of their own highlights content, or turning any live video content into animated GIFs (Liptak 2016; Rovell 2016). Teams that violate this video-sharing policy face fines of \$25,000 for the first offence, \$50,000 for the second, and \$100,000 for any further violations (Liptak 2016; Rovell 2016). The NFL created the video sharing policy to “maintain control of what is disseminated” by teams on social media (Rovell 2016) and “ensure viewers go through official NFL channels for video content”

(Liptak 2016). In other words, in this case the organizing body is protecting rights holders from the unauthorized use of content even by the social media channels operated by teams legitimately participating in the League.

While IOC, FIFA, EPL, and NFL put these measures in place to protect their commercial interests and prevent fans (and teams) from distributing content from a venue or an official broadcast, it is hard to see how these organizations would be able to effectively restrict such widespread fan practices. Given the multitude of tools and platforms available to fans to create, share, or repurpose brand content, as well as the sheer number of fans who now engage in sharing content, successful enforcement would require substantial staffing and resources. Further, because of the liveness of sporting events, these crowdsourced alternatives to instant replay videos are likely to be watched mainly within hours or days of the event itself, by fans catching up with any sports developments they might have missed at the time – there is therefore also a need for organizations to respond to such possible infringements very rapidly. At the same time, however, such aggressive enforcement of commercial arrangements through blanket content restrictions and drastic retaliatory measures is also indicative of a “brand guardian” mindset (Christodoulides 2009, 141) which is highly likely to alienate a fan community that considers itself of equal importance to the official sporting bodies in guarding the integrity of the sporting code (McCarthy et al. 2014, 183).

## Transmedia Opportunities for Niche Sports

As we have noted, tensions around such spontaneous fan-driven activities, which implicitly seek to enhance the transmediality of live sporting events by accompanying the official, largely commercial live and broadcast media texts of the event with additional crowdsourced coverage, are especially prominent around major sporting events, tournaments, and leagues. This is unsurprising as many of the licensing arrangements governing the coverage and marketing of such events are long-standing and remain rooted in good part in a pre-digital broadcast mindset that positions the television coverage of the event as the undisputed core text, usually also creating distinct licenses for different geographical broadcast territories. This approach is no longer especially well suited to audiencing practices that are increasingly incorporating alternative forms of live and timeshifted viewing (through broadband and mobile streaming) and assume comparable accessibility regardless of the geographic location of the viewer. Major sporting rights licensors including FIFA and the IOC continue to struggle to adjust their rights-granting approaches to such new audience engagement patterns; by contrast, our research has found that it is often smaller, niche sports that have been able to convert the disadvantage of their lack of established, lucrative broadcast contracts into a comparative advantage by exploring innovative new transmedia sports experience models.

Our observations here build especially on a major study of official social media communications activities around a comparatively niche sporting event in 2015: the Netball World Cup (Vann, forthcoming), held in – and won by – Australia. Netball is played in fully professional annual leagues only in Australia and New Zealand, while teams elsewhere in the world are semi-professional or amateur. Even in its heartlands, the sport has traditionally received only limited mainstream media attention – in part this has resulted also from persistent media discrimination due to its status as a sport that is largely played by women only. However, this comparative lack of media interest also results in the potential for a relatively more flexible engagement with fans who seek to generate their own transmedia coverage of the sporting event, as well as a more proactive approach to enhancing the event experience with additional transmedia content produced by the event organizers themselves.

The Netball World Cup (NWC) had a limited domestic broadcast partnership with Australian pay-TV provider Foxtel, but no live broadcast arrangements in many other countries participating in the tournament; this not only freed it from the restrictions experienced by major events including the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup, but indeed created an intrinsic need to explore approaches to providing at least some basic updates to fans in these otherwise unserved territories. Drawing on its partnership with Foxtel and the support of Twitter Australia, the NWC team therefore drew on the Twitter-owned *SnappyTV* tool to capture instant video replays from the Fox Sports broadcast stream and distribute them on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Additionally, the NWC team

also used Twitter, Inc.'s livestreaming tool *Periscope* to broadcast some post-match press conferences and other ancillary content from the tournament. Unlike the major sporting events discussed above, the NWC refrained from restricting netball fans from sharing their own coverage; rather, it sought to provide these fans with professionally produced, readily shareable content whose distribution would enhance the visibility and accessibility of the tournament even in the absence of substantial mainstream media coverage.

This approach shows an evolution beyond the blanket social media bans issued by FIFA and the IOC, and their media licensees. Mainstream media organizations pay significantly less for the broadcast rights to a niche event, but in turn also gain less power to restrict alternative, transmedia coverage. Ironically, niche sport events can therefore actually benefit from their lower ranking in the sports market: they retain at least some freedom to experiment with new forms of coverage, and to allow their fans to do the same. The NWC's broadcast partners did still restrict the social media team from creating its own livestreams (via platforms such as *Periscope*) of the live matches, but they allowed the team to share clips captured directly from the broadcast stream via *SnappyTV*. Further, the ban on streaming only applied to live games or immediate post-match content, and not to further livestreams designed to enhance fans' transmedia experience of the event. The central advantage of *SnappyTV* was its ability to offer accessibility to the event through broadcast-style content, compensate for the lack of easily accessible free-to-air coverage. The NWC team expected that a substantial number of fans would rely on its social media coverage to experience the event, as these fans could not access the event through mainstream media channels; its decision to use *SnappyTV* meant that fans could access content sourced from the pay-TV broadcast stream with only minimal time delays. Such short clips of the game could not replace a full broadcast, of course, but still offered fans a connection to the key moments in the Netball World Cup matches, and an opportunity to express their own fandom by sharing and commenting on the clips.

## Niche Sports as Trailblazers of Innovation

The lack of funding and resources that niche sports commonly experience means that they are unable to fully utilize the technological opportunities available in a thoroughly converged transmedia environment – but it also compels them to find smart, agile, and innovative solutions that deliver benefits even in under conditions of scarcity. Better established and resourced sporting codes, in turn, may be less agile and innovative due to their being locked into longer-term media partnership arrangements, but are also likely to gradually adapt the novel approaches that have been tried and tested successfully by minor sports. Indeed, in spite of the restrictive, broadcast-centric policies still embraced by some major global sporting events and leagues, there are signs that a shift in the balance between broadcast and digital media has begun to occur. Most centrally, a number of sporting codes are now experimenting much more openly with a variety of approaches to livestreaming their events to an undefined, global audience – a model that previously had been shunned as directly interfering with established territorial broadcast licensing arrangements.

As a result, many sports leagues, tournaments, and events have now created their own dedicated Web platforms and/or smartphone apps to stream live content. Additionally, a range of livestreaming platforms, including *Periscope*, *Facebook Live*, *YouTube Live*, and embedded livestreaming directly on *Twitter* (an integration of *Periscope* into the platform itself), entered the market in 2015 and 2016. Sports-specific livestreaming apps may therefore be a transitional phenomenon to widespread streaming on social media, in fact: with such apps, greater barriers of access continue to exist, whereas streaming on social media is more straightforward and often free. Consequently, livestreaming as an embedded transmedia experience on social media platforms is emerging as a legitimate option for sport organizations seeking to broadcast to an international audience. Fully developed, this model would reverse the conventional relationship between the sports broadcast as the central media text, and social media second-screening as an ancillary practice: here, instead, the social media environment becomes the central platform of sports engagement, within which live and archived streams can be accessed on demand.

In its continuing efforts to broaden its appeal to more diverse audiences, Twitter, Inc. has been exploring these possibilities particularly aggressively. The NFL streamed 10 games (out of 256) of its 2016 season on

*Twitter*, in addition to live broadcasts on CBS, NBC, and the NFL Network (Stelter 2016). These games did not attract an especially large audience, however, with the initial games attracting some 243,000 viewers, compared to 15.4 million watching the game via simulcast on subscription-based services offered by CBS or the NFL Network (Wagner 2016b). Reportedly, sponsors regarded these viewing numbers as underwhelming: one advertising executive revealed that sponsors were “seeing a significant under-delivery from Twitter for our spots ... . The problem is people aren’t watching full games” (qtd. in Sloane 2016, para. 3). This indicates two realities of the broader transmedia sport landscape. First, mainstream sporting organizations are beginning to use digital media platforms to broadcast live content, and fans are watching via these platforms; but second, consumption via television remains dominant for these mainstream sports, in spite of the increasing availability and accessibility of digital streaming options.

Nonetheless, Twitter, Inc. has struck similar agreements in the US to livestream Major League Baseball (one game per week), the National Hockey League (one game per week), and the Professional Golfers’ Association Tour (70 hours of coverage; Collins 2017; Wagner 2016c). Meanwhile, Twitter Australia partnered with the Victoria Racing Club to livestream the nation’s major horse racing event, the Melbourne Cup, as a simulcast with free-to-air television broadcaster Seven and its own streaming platform, *PLUS7* (Harley 2016; C-Scott 2016). While horse racing is not typically a mainstream sport, the Melbourne Cup carnival certainly enters a mainstream space. The event attracts mainstream media attention, a significant number of television viewers – 1,986,000 in 2016 (Knox 2016) – and substantial commercial sponsorship; Twitter Australia’s involvement is therefore a sign of a broader strategy to showcase sports livestreaming on the platform. Elsewhere, *Twitter* has also livestreamed content from around the grounds at Wimbledon, featuring interviews, analysis, match replays and highlights segments, but not live match coverage (Wagner 2016a). Similarly, the NBA has announced that it would “double the amount of digital content it creates for Twitter ... with more in-game highlights, behind-the-scenes shots, footage of player arrivals and livestreams of news conferences and interviews” (Koh 2016, para. 5).

The continued dominance of broadcast television as the medium of choice for leading sports, and the easy accessibility of such broadcasts at least for domestic (as compared to international) audiences, however, means that although such major events might provide useful showcases for new approaches, their audience engagement patterns across different media platforms are unlikely to change dramatically within a short period of time. Rather, niche and minor sports will most probably reap more immediate benefits from these new opportunities: “unlike the major leagues, these sports generally don’t have media rights that include TV broadcasts, nor the big budgets and sponsorship deals” (C-Scott 2016, para. 11). Indeed, there is historical precedent for media transformation based on technological change creating greater opportunities especially for niche sports: in 1989, the European cable channel Eurosport was launched to accommodate the increasing amount of sport content acquired by the European Broadcasting Union’s (EBU) member nations (Eurosport 2017b). On their own domestic channels, the national public broadcasters that constitute the EBU did not have the capacity to broadcast all of the sports content for which they had acquired the rights; thus, the pan-European dedicated sport channel of Eurosport was born.

The sports broadcast on Eurosport are typically not considered mainstream throughout many countries in Europe. Eurosport’s current broadcasting program includes tennis (Australian Open, US Open), cycling, winter sports (e.g. alpine skiing, biathlon, and ski jumping), snooker, the FIFA Women’s World Cup, the UEFA European U-19 Championships, motorsports, weightlifting, and even the Australian Football League and US Major League Soccer (Eurosport 2017a). Eurosport’s strategy was to obtain rights to a larger number of less mainstream sports throughout Europe, to avoid the intense competition with local national broadcasters for rights of mainstream sports (Collins 1998). While the sports included in the channel’s program may only have small audiences in individual countries, across the European market as a whole Eurosport’s broadcast schedule was attractive to advertisers and sponsors. Therefore, its programming schedule provides access to a number of lower-cost, less mainstream sports, made possible due to technological changes that have fostered the globalized distribution of sport content.

Social media and digital streaming platforms may present similar opportunities for the distribution of niche sporting content. In a crowded sporting market, sports organizations – especially those representing niche sports

– can now turn to new media technologies such as livestreaming on social media to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of sports programming. The confluence of niche sports needing media space, and the new media technologies providing that space, creates the chance for new sports communication models to emerge. While not all niche sport organizations will be willing or able to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by these digital channels, and may instead or in addition continue to pursue the (for now) greater accessibility and reach of mainstream television networks, the growth in livestreaming points to an evolution of transmedia sport experiences as innovative alternative models become more prominent.

## Innovation Pressure from Fan Communities

Meanwhile, if such opportunities for a reconfiguration of sports coverage are not addressed by the sporting organizations themselves, it is likely that fans – who themselves have access to increasingly powerful devices and platforms for the (unauthorized) live coverage of sporting events – will continue to take matters into their own hands, and exert considerable pressure on sporting bodies to innovate. Unilateral action by fans is especially likely where fans feel that sporting organizations are not acting in the best interests of the sport, are failing to provide adequate coverage of their sporting events, or are making it unreasonably difficult or expensive for fans to access the sports they follow.

A well-publicized conflict between boxing fans and Australian pay-TV provider Foxtel provides a timely reminder of the amplified transmedia tensions caused by the increased televisual capacity of social media platforms: on 4 February 2017, Foxtel aired a fight between Australian boxing rivals Anthony Mundine and Danny Green on the pay-per-view channel *Main Event*. To view the fight, fans needed an existing subscription to Foxtel to access the channel as well as pay an additional A\$59.95 to watch the bout (Harris 2017). Given the limited availability of Foxtel in regional and rural areas of Australia, Brisbane-based Foxtel subscriber Darren Sharpe decided to rebroadcast the Foxtel feed of the event via *Facebook Live* in order to enable his friends in regional areas to watch the fight with him (Brennan and Buttigieg 2017; Harris 2017). The feed went viral well beyond Sharpe’s friends, however: eventually more than 150,000 viewers tuned in to Sharpe’s *Facebook Live* stream rather than the official broadcast (Harris 2017), presumably in order to avoid the significant access fees charged by Foxtel.

Halfway through the broadcast, Foxtel contacted Sharpe and ordered him to terminate the stream, or face legal action. Reports have stated that other fans streaming the event on *Facebook Live* had their Foxtel services cut off all together (Brennan and Buttigieg 2017). The next day, Foxtel released a statement threatening legal action against all viewers who streamed the event on *Facebook Live* (Brennan and Buttigieg 2017; Harris 2017). Much as has happened with unauthorized download services for music and movies, such entirely punitive responses by rightsholders are unlikely to stop circumventive actions by fans, however; already, there is a broad range of long-established sites that – in analogy to torrent sites like *The Pirate Bay* – provide up-to-date lists of current and upcoming unauthorized fan broadcasts of live sports (Bruns 2008). The legal prosecution of individual fan rebroadcasters is likely only to drive others engaging in the same practice further underground, rather than to stamp out the practice itself. Much as the use of unauthorized music and movie download and streaming services has gradually declined as authorized services such as *Spotify* and *Netflix* became available, so will the fan-led rebroadcasting of sporting events be able to be addressed only as more sensible, official online sports streaming solutions enter the market. *Twitter* and *Facebook Live* may have a role to play in this context, but entirely new operators – the *Netflix* equivalent to Eurosports – might also emerge.

Indeed, it is possible that growth in the digital streaming space will not be driven by the usual players in sports broadcasting, but instead by side entrants into the market. In Australia, for example, Internet service providers have made a play for exclusive streaming rights in order to enhance the competitive standing of their services. In late 2015, broadband and mobile network provider Optus announced that it had secured rights to stream the EPL (commencing with the 2016/2017 EPL season) live through both its own app and digital television service, *Fetch TV*, for the following three years (Siracusa 2015). Until then, Foxtel had held the rights to the EPL in Australia (as the foundation rights holders for the competition), and broadcast the league as part of its pay-

TV sports package (Siracusa 2015). Optus's move to secure exclusive coverage of the EPL in Australia is the first time we have seen an Australian Internet service provider break into traditional TV's monopoly over sports coverage; it is now Optus that is sub-licensing one EPL match per round to free-to-air public broadcaster SBS (Special Broadcasting Service 2016), as well as delayed coverage of 12 matches to Foxtel's *Fox Sports* (Bradford 2016). This represents a previously inconceivable shift in the sports media landscape. In a similar situation in Germany, the exclusive domestic rights to the 2017 Men's Handball World Championship were acquired by a banking company, Deutsche Kreditbank (a long-term commercial partner of Germany's Handball Bundesliga), from international broadcaster beIN Sports. The bank then streamed the entire event on its Website, drawing on *YouTube* as its technical partner (Krieger 2017).

## Outlook: Towards Live Sports' Netflix Moment?

As more such novel partnership arrangements become available and are trialed in individual events and tournaments, some sports organizations may eventually turn away from conventional television broadcasting altogether, and towards what is known as stand-alone or "over-the-top" online broadcast. It remains unlikely, for now, that mainstream sports would take this route, as their lucrative broadcast contracts provide them with a strong incentive to protect the status quo. However, the proportionally more significant role of social media in the communication of niche sports, and the comparative freedom from long-term broadcast and sponsor partnership obligations, may lead to further changes especially in the distribution of niche sports content. While broadcast licensees still fervently guard the content generated from their big-ticket sports programming, they give niche sports more freedom to stream live or near-live content on a variety of social media platforms. In turn, many niche sports organizations cannot rely on mainstream television networks to provide access to their events and competitions, so they have a pressing incentive to use digital and social media platforms to overcome such challenges. In netball, for instance, niche events such as the Netball Europe U21 Championship and the Australian Men's and Mixed National Association Championship have already been livestreamed on *YouTube*, the organizations' Websites, *Facebook Live*, and the fan-run Website *Netball Scoop*.

Livestreaming of sports on social media and dedicated sites and apps remains in an experimental stage, and no consensus on best practice for digital streaming has yet emerged in the industry. However, with a growing number of attempts by emerging stakeholders, challenging the dominance of mainstream broadcasters, to reconfigure the top-down distribution of live sports content for the transmedia environment, combined with an increasing amount of bottom-up livestreaming by fans and niche sports organizations, the possibility exists for completely new transmedia sports models to emerge. New approaches to sports broadcasting may prove as disruptive as *Spotify* has been to the music listening practices, or as *Netflix* has been to the consumption of television drama. However, sports come with their own sets of conventions, fan needs, organizational structures, and commercial considerations, and further longitudinal studies are needed to chart the ways in which these elements evolve and rearrange themselves as livestreaming on digital and social media platforms assumes greater importance, and to study the implications of such shifts for the sports media industry.

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