

# Independent Sports Television in the Networked Era

Branden Buehler

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## Abstract

As the rise of internet distribution has transformed television, precipitating the continued expansion and fracturing of the medium, sports television has not been excluded. In analyzing the effects of internet distribution on sports television, this article specifically examines how internet distribution has fostered the emergence of independent sports television producers and distributors operating outside the traditional sports television system. Using the sport of Ultimate frisbee (Ultimate) as a case study, the article first argues that the new streaming companies that have emerged around that sport have largely modeled their streams on legacy sports television, but have also looked to adapt the conventions of traditional sports television to the specificities of the sport. Second, the article suggests that a particular area of concern for these independent streaming companies has been representation, as these companies have sought to offer a more progressive form of sports television.

## **Independent Sports Television in the Networked Era**

A wave of technological developments over the last few decades, including, perhaps most significantly, internet distribution, have dramatically altered the television medium. However, while sports television remains a cultural and financial behemoth, the full ramifications of internet distribution within the realm of sports television remain unclear. In detailing the rise of internet distribution and related changes, including evolving industrial practices and consumption patterns, media scholars have largely minimized how these changes have affected sports television (see, for example, Lotz 2014, 2017). Meanwhile, scholars of sport interested in television's transformations have largely focused on how internet distribution has unfolded within the realms of major sports, primarily involving men's professional leagues (see, for instance, Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Hutchins et al. 2019). Existing accounts fail, then, to fully address how the rise of internet distribution has re-shaped, for instance, the terrain of amateur sports and alternative sports.

Such gaps in mind, this article examines the significant role internet distribution has had in shaping a broader spectrum of sports television – analyzing how internet distribution has entailed significant changes for how sports television is produced and distributed outside of mainstream spaces and, accordingly, how internet distribution has also entailed new ways of thinking about the norms and practices of the genre. As a way into these issues, the article uses the sport of Ultimate frisbee (Ultimate) as a case study. First, the article examines the contours of the Ultimate streaming landscape, documenting how the sport's streaming video companies, in operating outside legacy television infrastructures, have had room to both emulate and depart from the conventions of legacy sports television. Second, the article specifically focuses on the representational practices of these streaming video companies, suggesting that while the

companies attempt to align their goals with the sport's progressive ethos, in the process consciously addressing the inequities prevalent in mainstream sports television, they nonetheless remain enmeshed in commercial structures that influence the shape of their final products.

### **Sports Television in Transition**

The television medium has evolved in several different directions over the last few decades. As Amanda Lotz (2014) details, until the mid-1980s, television remained largely rooted in what she terms the “network era.” This period of television, she writes, was marked by certain conventions, many originating in radio, such as tightly controlled linear schedules and a limited selection of programming. In the 1980s, though, television went through what Lotz calls the “multi-channel transition.” Significantly, new technologies introduced during this period, including videocassette recorders and cable systems, “expanded viewers’ choice and control” (Lotz 2014, 12). As Lotz further documents, television has continued to evolve since the “multi-channel transition,” entering into a “post-network era” that has seen viewers’ choice and control continue to expand. Thanks to new technological innovations like broadband internet and mobile computing devices, Lotz (2014, 49) argues that viewers are more than ever exercising control “over how, when, and where to view” television programming. Audiences, then, have increasingly fragmented as they become unbound to the dictates of the linear programming schedule and the traditional television set. More recently, Lotz (2017) has further elaborated on the importance of internet distribution, suggesting that television is increasingly centered around streaming services, such as Netflix and Hulu, she terms “portals.”

Sports television is largely missing from Lotz’s influential accounts of television’s evolution into the “post-network” era, but it would also be unfair to say it is completely absent.

Rather, sports television, particularly live event coverage, mostly exists as an exception for Lotz – a realm of television that is notable primarily for defying many of the large-scale changes that have re-made much of the rest of television. Indeed, she argues that as the shift to the post-network era “has become more profound, the exceptionality of live sporting events has become inescapable” (Lotz 2014, 13). She continues, “Live sports ... resist all of the ways the technologies and distribution opportunities of the post-network era enable audiences to disrupt prized content from residual viewing norms and economic strategies” (Lotz 2014, 13). In other words, she finds sports television notable for continuing to be bound by time constraints, and, as such, continuing to be associated with norms characteristic of the network era, such as linear scheduling and traditional advertising support. Given this framing, sports television is also unsurprisingly deemphasized in Lotz’s recent discussions of “portals.” Indeed, as Hutchins et al. (2019, 979) note, “Lotz is unapologetically quiet about sport” in this most recent work, preferring instead to focus on services that highlight the developing practices of “time shifting, self-curation, and à la carte access” (Lotz 2017, 17).

Addressing sports television’s relative absence from scholarly treatments of television’s recent evolutions, including Lotz’s accounts, Hutchins and Rowe (2012) have extensively explored how developments like broadband internet and mobile devices are also having dramatic implications on sports television. According to Hutchins and Rowe (2012, 4), new media technologies have birthed a “new media sport order.” “The Internet, Web, and digital media technologies,” they argue, “represent the most far-reaching ensemble of changes to the media sport cultural complex since the introduction of television” (Hutchins and Rowe 2012, 9). They cite, for instance, the ways that digital media technologies have facilitated a new “digital plentitude” spurred on by “lower barriers of access and cost” (Hutchins and Rowe 2012, 9) that

have allowed for the production and distribution of ever more sports content. More recently, Hutchins et al. (2019, 988) have also specifically addressed how Lotz's "portal" framework applies to sports television, suggesting, for example, that streaming services like DAZN and Amazon Prime Video are both progressing beyond the norms of the broadcast era – facilitating, for instance, multi-screen consumption – while simultaneously integrating and updating certain other broadcast era logics, as in the continuing emphasis on liveness.

While the aforementioned scholars have provided impressively thorough accounts of television's recent evolutions, their accounts have largely excluded how internet distribution has facilitated the tremendous growth of content outside of traditional industrial contexts and, in turn, invited new understandings of the medium. This is a gap that Lotz acknowledges. Such content, she argues, has generated distinctive enough norms and practices for it to exist beyond the scope of her projects. Hutchins and Rowe, meanwhile, appear to view the growth of non-traditional sports content, such as content generated by users and amateurs, as secondary to the maneuverings of large corporate entities. Their work not only focuses on high-profile industrial entities like traditional commercial broadcasters, but also explicitly suggests that non-traditional content has had a relatively marginal impact on the broader sports media landscape. In *Sports Beyond Television*, they write, "Dedicated amateurs are welcome to play and contribute their energies, but the number of people watching online and live is small at best because the skill and competition on display pales in comparison to top-flight sport" (Hutchins and Rowe 2012, 22). Later in the work they similarly note there is an increasing amount of sports content available, but add that "it is misleading to conclude on this basis that sports followers are accessing unfamiliar content in large quantities, or suddenly watching sports that have historically struggled for resources and attention" (Hutchins and Rowe 2012, 69). Hutchins and Rowe, then,

certainly acknowledge the growth of non-traditional content, but primarily use that growth to draw attention to how digital media technologies have failed to disrupt the “stratification” that has long defined sports television, with powerful, highly-resourced entities continuing to shape – and reap the financial benefits – of internet distribution.

While Hutchins and Rowe may be correct to note that the number of sports fans streaming non-traditional content pales in comparison to those continuing to watch major sports telecasts, there is much more to be said about how the growth of non-traditional content has changed the dynamics of sports television – facilitating a surge in independent sports television content produced and distributed outside of the traditional sports television structures and, in turn, fostering new ways for sports content producers and distributors to engage with audiences. As a way into this terrain, there are several scholars who have specifically focused on the growing importance of non-traditional television content. In *Social Media Entertainment*, Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) study the growing industry of media producers using social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Vimeo. The growth of this “new screen ecology” of “Social Media Entertainment,” they suggest, has represented a relatively radical break from established media, with creators, for instance, using platforms like YouTube to share “significantly different content” (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 4), such as vlogs, and to develop new types of business models.

In *Open TV*, meanwhile, Aymar Jean Christian (2018, 8) extensively examines independent web television, focusing on “series produced and distributed wholly independently of legacy distributors.” In an observation that could also be applied to critical studies of sports television, Christian (2018, 13) writes that “scholars have underestimated the value” of independent web television because “it has far less cultural and economic capital than legacy

TV.” He summarizes, “Most of media studies, particularly television studies, still privileges projects from corporate distributors as a basis for theory” (Christian 2018, 7). Continuing, he argues, “This is untenable in a networked economy where independent agents are constantly organizing” (Christian 2018, 7). Indeed, speaking to the importance of these changing conditions, Christian returns to Lotz’s framework to argue that television has now entered a district “networked era” in which producers and distributors are increasingly able to operate outside of the traditional television development systems. Setting out to correct the lack of scholarly treatments of television beyond traditional corporate structures, Christian not only details the history of independent web television, tracing its origins back to the cybersoaps of the 1990s, but also outlines how independent web television has both borrowed from and challenged the norms and practices of legacy television production, distribution, and representation.

Such scholarship highlights the potential value in further examining sports television being created outside of the purview of the corporate behemoths that typically dominate the space. Cunningham and Craig, for instance, explore the progressive potential of Social Media Entertainment, noting that Social Media Entertainment has seen increased visibility and influence for groups underrepresented in established media. They argue, “[Social Media Entertainment] is a far more diverse and open cultural space than traditional media” (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 191). Meanwhile, throughout *Open TV*, Christian (2018, 24) posits that “television’s indie web producers are innovators taking risks in a creative market whose vast inequalities and new technologies encourage value creation outside of it.” Writing about representation, for instance, Christian suggests independent web television has been able to offer innovations in representing historically underrepresented people by addressing its viewers primarily as communities rather than as consumers. As he argues, this changed focus means that

series can feature stories that “ring true to the realities or fantasies” (Christian 2018, 104) of particular communities. Sports television, much like the serialized television Christian examines, is a place where “vast inequalities and new technologies” have encouraged entrepreneurs, athletes, fans, and others to wade into independent television production and distribution. The question remains, though, whether the growth in this new independent sports television content is spurring on the sorts of innovations that Cunningham and Craig have found in analyzing Social Media Entertainment and that Christian has found in examining independent web series.

Independent sports television is, much like independent television more broadly, a vast and crowded space. Christian (2018, 169) notes television programming has grown “too vast to be contained,” with online programming, in particular, multiplying “exponentially.” Similarly, sports television programming is, as Hutchins and Rowe (2009) note, a space of “digital plentitude.” Legacy television distributors like ESPN have vastly grown their offerings, using both cable outlets and online streaming services to present ever more programming. Indeed, speaking to Ramon Lobato’s (2018, 5) contention that internet distribution “adds new complexity to the existing geography of distribution,” ESPN subscribers can log onto ESPN’s internet services and immediately access a deep library of programming with origins that span the globe. But it is not just legacy distributors moving online that has caused an explosion in sports programming. For example, new sports-oriented portals with venture capital funding like FloSports have attempted to service niches that have been relatively neglected within the realm of sports television, like high school sports, while a number of social media accounts devoted to sports, such as House of Highlights, have made waves by using platforms like Instagram to emphasize short-form content. Most significant for the purposes of this paper, though, has been the way a range of users outside of the major corporate sports structures have flocked to video



streaming services, particularly YouTube, to distribute everything from streams of live events to game highlights to detailed tactical analyses.

Because independent sports television is such a vast and crowded space, it would be difficult for this article to properly investigate the full spectrum of content constantly being made available. That in mind, the next section of this article will focus solely on Ultimate, a niche sport that has been historically been of little concern for major sports broadcasters. As this case study shows, independent sports television, much like the independent web television Christian (2018, 4) examines, has been a space that has fostered “innovation and diversity,” with producers borrowing a number of practices from legacy television, but also pushing production, distribution, and representation in new directions.

## **The Ultimate Case Study**

### *Production and Distribution*

Combining a flying disc with gameplay elements largely borrowed from American football, the sport of Ultimate has a relatively brief history. Started in the late 1960s by a group of high schoolers in New Jersey, Ultimate lacks the longer trajectory of most modern team sports. Nonetheless, Ultimate has found a toehold in the wider sporting landscape. Ultimate not only has a growing presence in the United States, with its organizing body, USA Ultimate (USAU), counting over 60,000 members in 2018, but it also has an increasing global presence (USA Ultimate n.d. -b). The sport’s international organizing body, the World Flying Disc Federation (WFDF), includes associations from over 80 member nations and, relatedly, there are a variety of international Ultimate events, including both continental championships and world championships.

Throughout Ultimate's history, there have been concerted efforts to use media – particularly television – to develop a wider audience for the sport. Tony Leonardo (2011) documents, for instance, how in the 1980s club teams like New York, New York “sought to bring Ultimate mainstream” by appearing on television. New York, New York featured, for instance, in a 1989 episode of ESPN's *Amazing Games*, a documentary series profiling minor sports from across the world, including elephant soccer and land sailing. As the inclusion in this series indicates, attempts to “bring Ultimate mainstream” using television were constrained by the fact that the sport was largely viewed as a novelty rather than as a legitimate subject for coverage. Such a status began to change, though, in the ensuing decades as the sport's popularity continued to grow, its organizing bodies continued to push for legitimacy, and, significantly, as legacy sports television broadcasters sought to fill ever more programming space across a growing number of cable and online outlets. USAU's college championships, for example, began making their way onto cable television in 2003, while its club events have followed more recently.

While Ultimate is no longer a complete outlier within the realm of legacy sports television, Hamish Crocket (2016a, 264) observes that Ultimate continues to have “only a marginal presence within mainstream media.” Indeed, the recent presence of USAU events on ESPN outlets is largely a result of USAU's financial prioritization of mainstream visibility, with the organization subsidizing production costs and not garnering rights fees (Eisenhood, 2020b). Notably, though, Ultimate, like other alternative sports, is also surrounded by “specialist subcultural media” (Wheaton and Beal, 2003, 157) specifically aimed at the sport's players and fans. As Crocket suggests, then, what has been more significant for the sport than its occasional appearances on mainstream outlets is the introduction of digital media tools that have allowed

fans and entrepreneurs within the sport's community to create and distribute video content untethered from the larger sports television industry. To that point, Crocket documents the important place of the now-defunct company Ultivillage, which in the 2000s filmed major tournaments and distributed the video primarily via DVDs. As Crocket (2016a, 264) notes, "Many of these DVDs were widely circulated and gained cult status." More recently, however, coverage of the sport has moved away from analog media and instead shifted exclusively towards internet distribution – a development which has further lowered barriers of cost and access. Fans and players, for instance, have begun using platforms like Facebook Watch, Periscope and YouTube to livestream games and share highlight videos.

However, despite the increasing use of streaming platforms by a growing number of individuals and organizations, the Ultimate video landscape has come to be dominated by a small handful of streaming companies in recent years. Perhaps the most popular and prolific producer and distributor of Ultimate video content, particularly within the United States, has been Ultiworld. Founded by Ultimate player Charlie Eisenhood in 2012, Ultiworld attempts to act as a central hub for a variety of Ultimate content. It does not, then, just produce and distribute video coverage of major Ultimate events, but also plays host to several podcasts as well as a wide array of written content, including tactical analyses, tournament recaps, and training advice columns. The Australia-based Ulti.TV, helmed by Ultimate enthusiast Mike Palmer, has also been quite prolific since it launched in 2010, producing and distributing many Ultimate events both in Australiasia and Europe. These streaming companies work closely in tandem with a range of Ultimate partners, including the sport's national and international governing bodies, semi-professional leagues, and college and club tournament organizers. For instance, although USAU hires the ESPN-approved vendor CVM Productions to produce games that will be end up on

ESPN outlets, it has also regularly teamed with Ultiworld to stream games for several of its major tournaments. Similarly, USAU has also previously teamed with Fulcrum Media, an Ultimate-oriented production company which has also regularly worked with a variety of Ultimate youth organizations and semi-professional Ultimate leagues like the American Ultimate Disc League (AUDL) and the Premier Ultimate League (PUL). Ulti.TV, meanwhile, has had been paid to produce games by several governing bodies in Australasia and Europe.

Although Ultiworld, Ulti.TV, and Fulcrum Media all operate in a similar space and work with similar partners, their business models vary – a variation that reflects both the newness and the uncertainty of the independent streaming landscape. Ulti.TV and Fulcrum Media primarily work as production companies for-hire – charging governing bodies, leagues, and other Ultimate organizations fees to both produce and distribute their competitions. As these streaming companies emphasize, though, the fees are hardly sizable. Luke Johnson (2020), co-owner of Fulcrum Media, comments, “Everyone’s got limited budgets.” Ultiworld, on the other hand, will often make arrangements with its partners to offer free live streams of major games, but largely relies on a subscription model in which the company charges users for access to an assortment of its multimedia content, including collections of archived game footage. While Ultiworld markets its subscriptions widely across the Ultimate community, a primary target of the subscriptions appears to be high-level teams and players who want to both watch and study games in which they and their competitors have played. This subscription model allows the company appealing flexibility. It can offer, for instance, governing bodies – with their “limited” media budgets – the enticing ability to stream their competitions relatively cheaply, as Ultiworld’s subscription base helps to both subsidize that content for the governing body and monetize it for Ultiworld.

In examining how independent sports television production is exemplified by companies like Ultiworld, Ulti.TV and Fulcrum Media, several parallels emerge with Christian's observations regarding independent web series. As Christian (2018, 99) writes, independent web television production notably allows for "creative autonomy and flexibility." That is to say, with independent producers able to leverage the open distribution of the internet to develop "new projects without corporate intermediaries" (Christian 2018, 63), they have additional room for creativity. Much the same could be said of companies like Ultiworld and Ulti.TV. Working outside the constraints of legacy sports institutions, these companies are, of course, able not only to produce more Ultimate content than legacy sports television producers would demand, but also to produce that content in ways that would be hard to imagine within the confines of major broadcasters. For example, Palmer (2020) points to Ulti.TV's use of humor and inside jokes that only "hardcore ultimate people" would be particularly appreciative of and that "you probably never do if you're working for ESPN," mentioning, for instance, farcical montages of player celebrations.

The ability to properly serve Ultimate enthusiasts recurs in conversations with Ultimate-oriented producers. As they emphasize, because Ultimate remains a such a marginal presence within legacy sports television, telecasts of Ultimate events on legacy outlets like ESPNU are often meant to serve multiple audiences, catering not just to Ultimate diehards, but also to viewers who might be new to the sport. Such telecasts, then, occasionally labor to introduce the sport to newcomers, explaining, for instance, sport-specific terminology like "hammers" and "stalls." However, the live streams produced by companies like Ultiworld and Ulti.TV are freed from such necessities, and are thus able, like independent web series, to offer more "specific" content, whether that might mean diving deep into the sport's history or extensively examining a

team's tactics. For example, Eisenhood (2020a) mentions Ultiworld's unique ability to employ "expert" commentators and to weave more complex narratives into a telecast. "Our rich knowledge of the sport allows us to tell good stories about why the game matters," he says, further noting the company's "depth of expertise in the sport" allows it "go beyond just the basics" in talking about, for instance, how teams and players have developed over the course of a college or club season.

However, while Ultiworld's independence allows it room to cater more specifically to savvy Ultimate fans, it would also be a mistake to assume that Ultiworld's streams represent a total break from the norms and practices of legacy sports television production. To that point, Christian (2018, 67) observes that independent television producers, while contributing "meaningfully new or provocative production practices," have frequently borrowed a variety of elements from legacy television, including, for instance, serialized storytelling. As he suggests, these sorts of familiar elements help make independent television comprehensible to potential audiences. Similarly, while Ultiworld, Ulti.TV, and Fulcrum Media all strive to innovate in how they cover Ultimate, they also all draw on any number of standard sports television conventions. Ultiworld's live streams typically use, for instance, a familiar elevated camera situated at mid-field, slow motion replay inserts, lower-third informational graphics, and commentary teams that balance play-by-play and color responsibilities. Meanwhile, Johnson (2020) mentions not only stylistic parallels with mainstream sports television, but also narrative ones. He notes, for example, that his company's productions – much like those of mainstream sports television – are designed around "star" players so as to make games as intelligible as possible. Although the Ultimate streaming companies work with limited resources that prohibit the use of, for example, the expensive zoom lenses that are standard within mainstream sports television, the Ultimate

producers all mention being able to replicate many of the hallmarks of sports television despite their lean budgets. Indeed, for a streamer like Palmer (2020), the ability to “hack” together cheap production setups that can replicate the look and feel of traditional sports television is a major point of pride. In sum, for independent producers, the goal has not been to radically reinvent sports television, but rather to adapt familiar conventions to Ultimate.

It would seem, too, that Ultimate is not the only niche sport in which a new wave of producers has leaned on familiar conventions from earlier and more professionalized forms of media. Paul Gilchrist and Belinda Wheaton (2013, 167, 173) note, for instance, that while digital media tools have “revolutionized” the production and distribution of content in sports like climbing and surfing, “stylistic conventions” from older forms of media, such as magazines, linger. Such aesthetic continuity, they suggest, is logical. Speaking to the case of parkour, they argue that participants inevitably consume “other media products and narratives,” and that these other texts “inform their own products and representations” (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2013, 177). Similarly, independent television producers in the Ultimate world are steeped in legacy sports television. To that point, Eisenhood (2020a), Johnson (2020), and Palmer (2020) all mention watching large amounts of mainstream sports television and, moreover, of both closely studying those telecasts and using those telecasts as models. Eisenhood, for example, references the influence of National Football League (NFL) telecasts, Johnson mentions National Basketball Association (NBA) telecasts, and Palmer points to telecasts of the Australian Football League (AFL) and the World Cup.

While independent television producers have great freedom in how they choose to either mirror or deviate from established televisual production norms, as Christian (2018, 76) notes, a significant tradeoff that independent television producers make in exchange for that autonomy is

a lack of “support and security.” That is to say, although independent television producers can use their independent status to innovate, experimenting, for instance, with unconventional storytelling, most work without anything resembling a safety net, including benefits like health insurance and workers’ compensation. Christian (2018, 68) summarizes, “Precarity ... structures and defines” independent television production. Similarly, while Ultiworld, Ulti.TV, and Fulcrum Media are free to produce Ultimate telecasts that satisfy fans in ways legacy television might struggle to, they operate without the institutional resources of legacy television. To that point, Johnson (2020) comments, “There are very few of us that could actually make a living off of this.” He mentions, then, a dream of having a budget large enough to hire staffers full-time, allowing Ultimate streaming to be “their profession and not have to be something just as a part time gig.” Relatedly, both Johnson (2020) and Palmer (2020) note the razor-thin margins on which their companies operate, with Palmer also highlighting the risk of burnout. “It’s a pretty tough gig,” Palmer says, “so not many people do it.” The precarity highlights that Ultimate streaming companies are largely operating out of their enthusiasm for the sport. Palmer remarks, “I just want to grow Ultimate.”

### *The Politics of Representation*

The previous section has highlighted how the independent status of Ultimate streaming companies allows for a large degree of creative freedom. A related question is what that autonomy may mean for the cultural politics of independent sports television. For Christian, some of the most significant innovations to come along with the rise of independent web television have been in the area of representational politics. As he explains, television broadcasters and advertisers have long viewed audiences primarily as potential consumers. As



such, a number of communities have been perceived as “‘too niche’ – of too little value – for television” (Christian 2018, 108). This partially explains why these communities have been historically underrepresented and, more recently, seen themselves subject to “diluted” representations that gloss over “differences and nuances within communities” (Christian 2018, 115). While Christian (2018, 105) notes that independent web television creators are not immune to market pressures, he argues that independent web television producers and distributors have, quite significantly, innovated “how to sincerely represent communities underrepresented by legacy distributors” by “addressing people as communities first and markets second.” As he explains, “Because indie producers release stories directly to fans, they are more accountable to communities and understand that TV narratives must ring true those they represent” (Christian 2018, 109). Success for such shows, then, “is rooted in how sincerely – and entertainingly – producers address the personal, cultural, social, and political realities and fantasies of the communities they represent” (Christian 2018, 110).

Sports television has not existed outside of the problematic representational dynamics rampant throughout television. For instance, Travis Vogan (2017) has drawn on the work of media scholar Herman Gray to detail how sports television programming in the 1970s largely adopted as “assimilationist perspective” that denied the existence of systemic racism. Moreover, Vogan suggests these racial politics have a legacy that continues to the present day, with sports television continuing to avoid and suppress anything that might be deemed racially divisive. Independent sports television, though, much like independent web television, holds the promise of challenging the representational practices of legacy television. As in the case independent web television, independent sports television creators release their content directly to viewers and, as such, “are more accountable to communities” (Christian 2018, 109) – spurring the potential that

they will produce content that will attend to “specificities” of their communities and move beyond the representational norms of legacy sports television. As the case of Ultimate shows, though, while independent sports television may certainly have the ability to fulfill some of this potential, it, like independent web television, also remains beholden to “dominant frames and practices” (Christian 2018, 155) that inform its representational practices.

Analyzing the representational politics of independent Ultimate telecasts first requires further consideration of the sport’s history and culture. Significantly, that background shapes how the streaming companies understand Ultimate and its viewers and, accordingly, how they choose to cover the sport. Throughout its relatively short existence, Ultimate has maintained a reputation as a sport of idealists pushing against traditional sporting customs. While, as Crockett observes (2016b), the sport is not without internal tensions about the desirability and the substance of that reputation, as Lindsay Pattison (2011, iii) argues, the sport largely “prides itself on a (real or imagined) difference from mainstream sporting convention.” This is perhaps most visibly embodied in a commitment to self-officiating, with refs having historically been eschewed. Instead, players call their own fouls and settle rules disputes by themselves. Indeed, Ultimate has long emphasized the importance of the “Spirit of the Game,” a philosophy that explicitly discourages “‘win-at-all-costs’ behavior” (USA Ultimate n.d. -a).

Ultimate, though, has not only long highlighted its abnormal dedication to “fair play” and “mutual respect,” but has also long promoted itself as an uncommonly inclusive sport, particularly in regard to gender. As Pattison (2011, 16) explains, “Sport is normally a site of gender segregation ... Few competitive sports allow women and men to play together and sport scholars point out that organized sport is an institution that emphasizes the differences and obscures the similarities between the male and female body.” Unusually, though, Ultimate “puts

men and women in close proximity” (Pattison 2011, 16). As she details, Ultimate – whether played recreationally in pickup games or competitively in organized leagues – is often grouped into gender-integrated “mixed” teams. Indeed, there are mixed divisions at the highest levels of the sport, including at international tournaments. Moreover, as Pattison (2011, 17) further points out, “unlike many other sports, there is no difference in the rules” between the various divisions of the sport, including men’s, women’s, and mixed.

In recent years, however, many of Ultimate’s core, idealistic tenants have been subject to new pressures, particularly in North America. A major development has been the introduction of multiple semi-professional leagues, first the AUDL in 2012, and then the now-defunct Major League Ultimate (MLU) in 2013. Both leagues not only adjusted the sport’s rules – modifying, for example, field dimensions and the length of games – but also introduced referees, in the process sparking debates about the place of self-officiating within the sport. Just as significantly, though, the rise of these semi-professional leagues has sparked vigorous debates about the commitment of organizers, players, and fans to gender equity, as the leagues have primarily revolved around men’s play. Reflecting the growing uproar over this situation, many of the sport’s most prominent athletes – including a number of its highest-profile men’s players – organized a boycott of the AUDL in 2018, calling for “equal representation at the highest, most visible levels of our sport – including professional play” (Organizers of the AUDL Boycott). The subsequent years then saw the launch of two new leagues, the East Coast-based PUL and the West Coast-based Western Ultimate League (WUL), that arrived with similar missions to work toward equity in the sport by spotlighting women and nonbinary players.

Notably, though, it is not just the professionalization of the sport that has caused segments of the Ultimate community to take stock of the sport’s commitment to its original

ideals, for the sport has also been deeply affected by the growing amount of streaming video coverage. As in the case of professionalization, the increasing coverage has triggered questions about the sport's ethos. For example, some players and fans have suggested the sport should be altered in order to optimize the product for video coverage, perhaps by adding referees and deemphasizing self-officiating. As Matthew Hodgson (2013) summarized in an article for Ultiworld's website, "More than ever, there has been discussion of how best to broadcast Ultimate, not just play the game. Do you need referees?" As he detailed, for many the answer has been "yes," even if it that might mean veering away from the sport's counterculture roots.

Ultimate's increasing media presence has also led to questions about the sport's commitment to gender equity. To some degree, these questions stem from the rise of the semi-professional leagues, as the fact that these leagues have heavily skewed toward men has also caused coverage of the sport to skew in that same direction. Indeed, one reason why the PUL and WUL have emphasized the need for their teams to provide streaming coverage is to counteract this imbalance. As Eileen Murray (2020), the owner and general manager of PUL team New York Gridlock says, a primary goal for the team's live streams has been to increase the visibility of women and nonbinary Ultimate players. However, the questions about gender equity extend beyond the semi-professional leagues and have touched on everything from coverage of international events to high school tournaments. In 2016, for instance, many high-level club players criticized USAU's arrangements with ESPN, with the players highlighting that ESPN outlets both broadcast more men's games and gave those games preferable timeslots. In a group statement, the players criticized the USAU for regressing "in its approach to gender equity by preferencing coverage of the men's division over both the mixed and women's divisions" (Gender Equity Action Group). Subsequently, when USAU agreed to a new contract with ESPN

in 2017, it stipulated equal coverage for all divisions in both college and club competitions (Eisenhood 2017). Similar arrangements have also been made with the governing body's independent streaming partners.

Speaking to Christian's suggestion that independent television producers are accountable to their communities, the Ultimate streaming producers all allude to the sport's history and culture and, in particular, principles of equity. Accordingly, as Christian writes in the case of independent web series, Ultimate streaming companies have pushed to challenge the typical representational norms of sports television. On a basic level, the companies have been mindful of the division of coverage. As scholars like Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Michael Musto (2015) have documented, sports television has long been dominated by men's sports. In fact, in studying news broadcasts and ESPN's highlight show *SportsCenter*, Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015, 280) found "a deepening dearth of coverage of women's sports," with women's sports receiving a decreasingly small fraction of the attention of men's sports. Partially as a result of the aforementioned activism that has pushed governing bodies to emphasize equitable coverage, the Ultimate streaming landscape is more balanced. As Eisenhood (2020a) comments of Ultiworld, then, "Our media coverage is very close to even and that's obviously a massive departure from traditional sports media." He continues, "We spend just as much time and energy thinking about the storylines and covering the women's division as we do covering the men's."

Independent Ultimate producers have also challenged sports television representational norms in how they cover the sport. For example, as scholars have detailed, sports television is not just dominated by men's sports, but also by men's voices given a continued lack of women play-by-play announcers and color commentators (Messner et al. 2000). The Ultimate streaming

companies, however, mention their efforts to be more diverse than legacy broadcasters. As Eisenhood (2020a) comments, “We’re very conscious of who is broadcasting the game.” Similarly, Murray (2020) mentions working alongside her streaming partners – Johnson and Eisenhood – to “identify and recruit” women, nonbinary people, and people of color to commentate her team’s games. Additionally, Ultimate streamers mention the importance of off-screen representation and, accordingly, of working to diversify their coverage behind-the-scenes. Johnson (2020) is particularly emphatic on this point, observing that mainstream sports telecasts are largely crewed by white men. He highlights, then, the diversity of his regular Ultimate crew and details how he and his business partner have prioritized equity and inclusion in hiring production staff.

While the streaming companies all express their commitments to a progressive ethos, they have not been fully exempted from scrutiny. In 2017, for example, Ultiworld’s online news outlet was criticized for its decision to only provide coverage of the boys’ division of a high school tournament (Oldershaw 2017). Eisenhood commented at the time, “We made a call based on limited resources” (quoted in Oldershaw 2017). Eisenhood’s comment speaks to the related pressures of Ultimate streamers to weigh their sparse financial resources when deciding what games to stream and how to stream them. As Christian (2018, 110) observes of independent web series, “Independent television is not independent of the market.” Johnson (2020) and Palmer (2020) suggest that subscription models may be particularly susceptible to financial pressures – Johnson highlighting the potential complications of appealing to subscribers who might be primarily interested in watching themselves and their competitors, and Palmer pointing out that YouTube metrics indicate that the viewership of the sport leans heavily toward men. To those points, Eisenhood (2020a) acknowledges that while Ultiworld has a long-term goal to get to

“50/50” video coverage of men’s and women’s Ultimate and that the company spends “so much time and energy working to cover everything in an equal fashion,” the company does “film a little bit more men’s coverage during the [American] college season than women’s—about 60/40 most years.” And, as he explains, its subscription model plays a significant role in that split. He mentions, for instance, that more men’s teams than women’s teams have signed up for subscription packages that include video coverage of their games. He also notes that, more broadly, “men’s coverage gets more views than mixed coverage, which gets more views than women’s coverage.” Continuing, he adds, “When we are worrying about whether we are getting subscribers, we have to think about that.” According to Eisenhood, the company’s choices are inevitably bound to the fact that “there are more men that play Ultimate,” which he links to the fact that 69% of USAU members are men. Palmer summarizes, “The commercial reality is different than the ideal reality that we’d like to push as Ultimate players.”

## **Conclusion**

In many ways, Ultimate streaming represents the revolutionary potential of internet distribution for sports television. Ultimate streamers can, for instance, show up to one of the sport’s tournaments in small numbers – Ultiworld and Ulti.TV occasionally even stream as one-person operations – and immediately begin broadcasting around the world. And Palmer (2020) emphasizes that Ultimate streams do indeed have global appeal. His company’s stream of the mixed final of the 2019 European Ultimate Championships, for instance, pulled thousands of viewers from dozens of countries across the world. While other scholars of sport might note that these audience numbers pale in comparison to the millions of viewers that tune into legacy sports telecasts, the ability of streamers like Ulti.TV to bring the sport directly to fans represents a

dramatic departure for how the sport is consumed. Moreover, the radical potential of streaming is also evidenced in how exactly the sport is being covered. While Ultimate streaming companies look to legacy sports television in crafting their productions, they have also not been completely bound to the traditional norms of sports television. Significantly, then, that has meant being able to rethink not just the aesthetic features of sports television, but also how the genre approaches race and gender both on- and off-screen. However, as the Ultimate case study also illuminates, independent streamers do not exist outside commercial structures and, accordingly, must navigate financial pressures that may complicate any progressive desires.

Although the sport of Ultimate continues to have a relatively limited media footprint, it presents a rich case study of the ripple effects of sports television's transition to the networked era. To that point, as streaming technology continues to become more and more accessible, it is unlikely that Ultimate will be the only sport to foster a new network of independent streaming companies operating outside of legacy distribution mechanisms. Indeed, there appear to be comparable streaming companies devoted to sports like disc golf, lacrosse, and pickleball. While it might be improbable that the streaming companies focused on these sports completely mirror the ones committed solely to Ultimate – the Ultimate ones being very much shaped by that sport's specific history and culture – the Ultimate case study reveals broader lessons about sports television in the networked era. Most significantly, it makes clear that as sports television continues to fracture and expand as a result of internet distribution, a focus on legacy producers and distributors will be decreasingly able to capture the growing complexity of everything from what sports television looks like to who consumes it to how it exists in relationship to the sporting communities it televises.



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