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**MacLean, Malcolm ORCID: 0000-0001-5750-4670 (2017) Book Review:  
ESPN: the making of a sports media empire by Travis Vogan, Urbana,  
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This is the author's version a review of Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of A Sports Media Empire* in *Sport in History* (forthcoming). It appears here in its pre-publication format in lieu of the publisher's version of record. Author: Malcolm MacLean

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Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of A Sports Media Empire* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2015). Pp. x + 242. £13.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-252-08122-4.

That most of us experience our sport in a mediated form is not all that new; that we experience through engagement with a sport-media complex is also not new (but newer); what is in flux, however, is the medium and means by which sport is mediated. For sport historians, these developments pose problems about sports' historicisation given its status as a heavily historicised popular cultural practice. In an unjustified and rather self-deprecating tone, Travis Vogan described this excellent analysis of a single sports news channel (a rather deprecating description of ESPN) as "a relatively straight forward and industrial analysis" (p vii): while this is true, it is also a long way from the truth. The book opens with such an analysis – the first chapter provides a mainly institutional exploration of ESPN's development and growth, highlighting its role in the growth of the sports-media sector as well as a sector innovator and its multi-platform mode of operation. In addition to these three characteristics, Vogan's exploration at the outset of *SportsCentre* as an iconic show anticipates a key analytical trope throughout the text: the tension between the network's 'frat-boy' dynamic and its aspirations to being a serious analyst of and player in the sports world. This trope opens up the key reasons Vogan's discussion has significance beyond ESPN's predominantly North American market (although in the contemporary media world this is barely still the case): the first is that although not explicit the analysis provides an important basis to consider the roles of newer networks such as Sky or Euro Sport, but more importantly Vogan opens up the exploration of sports media networks as historiographers of sport, drawing attention in this case to status-seeking associations that help legitimate that historiography.

The historiographical significance of ESPN is developed in two ways. In his discussion of *SportsCentury*, an eighteen month review of the North America's greatest sporting moments of the twentieth century, Vogan presents "ESPN as *the* [my emphasis] public historian of record for twentieth-century sport" (p55). In doing so, he draws attention to several ways in which this public historian role is legitimated. First, by pointing to the composition of the panel selecting the 100 best athletes, including well-respected journalists and sports writers (arguably sports public intellectuals), academics and leading figures in sports institutions. These three groups provide cultural credibility with a range of sports markets and audiences, and in doing so endorse both the athletes selected and ESPN's authority to do so. Secondly, Vogan identifies ESPN's expansionism, in particular its acquisition of the Classic Sports Network with its extensive archive and then restriction of access to that archive meaning that ESPN could then control where and how large tracts of sports historic film footage was being used.

Whereas *SportsCentury* may be seen as ESPN working in a magazine-style format that is becoming increasingly characteristic in the world of proliferating specialist or niche channels, the network's more venture into documentary film, notably through its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary-marking *30 for 30* series is

presented as a change in tone and style, becoming more 'serious'. Vogan presents this change as two-fold: first where *30 for 30* shows a shift away from previously intermittent documentaries with a series of high profile directors, and second as an auto-critique of the previously celebratory 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary programming. Vogan sees the emergence of *30 for 30* as coinciding with a significant elevation of the ESPN brand through its association with New York City's Tribeca Film Festival as well as the relative critical freedom given to the *30 for 30* (now the branding of ESPN's documentary work) directors. In this argument, there are three key factors emphasising ESPN's role as *the* public historian of sport: 1) the association with Tribeca grants considerable cultural credibility; 2) the documentary makers had access to the ESPN/ABC archives, so the network became marked as a film provider; and 3) *30 for 30* screenings were linked to other sports events and were therefore woven (fairly seamlessly) into ESPN viewing schedules. Vogan's critical eye extends beyond this reading of credibility-inducing discourses however, and beyond what might often be seen as the most obvious: not only, in his view, are women marginalised by the development of the intended-to-be-celebratory *9 for IX* series, but the critical potential of *30 for 30* as branding ESPN's documentary style is undermined by its institution-lauding, conventionally celebratory documentaries for its off-shoot covering the South Eastern Conference in college sport. Despite these shortcomings, Vogan's analysis demonstrates convincingly that ESPN's documentary series' shore up the channel's image as *the* media historian of sport.

The second principal strand running through the text is ESPN's multi-platform ventures such as its foray in youth oriented magazine publishing to challenge *Sports Illustrated* alongside web-based content. This multi-platform strategy was continued in the development of an entertainment division making game and talk shows, dramatic films and series alongside developments such as tie-in books. For Vogan, this entertainment division is a vital element of ESPN's role and profile in historicising sport as well as protecting and enhancing a market share. The third multi-platform component is the network's now defunct (but archived) *Grantland* division, designed to help 'literaturise' sport, to enhance ESPN's cultural capital and to extend its market share amongst middle-aged men with money: that *Grantland* appears to have been a loss leader makes it an important element of Vogan's argument that ESPN should be seen as a 'smart' sport brand.

Vogan has given us an excellent analysis of the current form of the sport-media complex, drawing on ESPN's dual form as popular: in his words "ESPN is pervasive ... [and] is utterly ordinary" (p2). It is this double popularity that makes the analysis so powerful. ESPN's ubiquity is not limited to North America: web-based technologies mean that it is increasingly a narrow-cast global brand, while its cultural cachet means that other networks seem to be seeking to replicate or remodel its practice. More specifically, Vogan's attention to industrial, commercial, cultural and film and television production techniques and issues makes this a methodologically significant text that, in addition to the two key themes identified at the outset of this piece, shows ESPN to be a key cultural player and marker of significance for both sport and journalism and cultural industries. Analysts of both those fields would be foolish to pass over both Vogan's analysis (so much more than "a relatively straight forward and industrial analysis") and the way in which he carried it out.

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