

Emerging Discourses: eSports

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In my mind, the single biggest effect eSports will have on traditional sports is the emergence of a new platform owner in the broadcasting ecosystem — Amazon. Through Twitch, an online service that allows users to easily stream live video footage, Amazon has established a functional monopoly over live online broadcasting. eSports have been critical to the success of Twitch, with third-party broadcasts of *Counter Strike* and *League of Legends* tournaments regularly attracting millions of concurrent viewers.

However, Twitch's dominance is also due in part to Amazon's ability to spend vast quantities of capital. Over the last two years, Amazon has begun purchasing exclusive broadcasting rights for major eSports events and leagues, such as the slickly-produced Overwatch League and the newly formed NBA 2K League. These leagues have a continuity and longevity that most other eSport events lack and Amazon has ensured that Twitch will be the only place for fans of these e-sports to stream matches online. Considering that this is a company worth over \$800 billion, it's hardly a surprise that even heavyweight competitors, such as Google and Valve, have been incapable of preventing Amazon from buying its way into a platform monopoly.

But what does this have to do with traditional sports? Amazon, like any profit-driven business, has been searching for more opportunities to expand its fledgling live-broadcast empire, and professional sports seem to be the next target in their sights. As they have with eSports, Amazon has begun using its vast spending power to secure online broadcasting rights for a number of different sports leagues, including the NFL's Thursday Night Football games and the NBA's G League. Twitch has also added multiple 24/7 sports channels, one of which — the recently launched Stadium — is the result of an official partnership with the NHL, the PGA Tour, and other established broadcasters and leagues. Now, Twitch users can access over 250 live sporting events a year without ever turning on their cable TV.

From the perspective of professional sports leagues, these first few forays onto Twitch are a means of hedging their bets. As audience demographics continue to shift and fewer young people subscribe to cable packages, sports leagues have been trying to find new ways to broadcast games while still making a profit. Twitch represents a viable potential alternative to traditional cable, as Amazon has the resources to compete for broadcasting deals with networks like Fox and CBS. Additionally, Twitch offers a benefit that cable networks lack — millions of young viewers already using the platform, ready and willing to engage with live competitive events.

But even if all the major leagues never end up jumping ship from cable to Twitch, the threat posed by Amazon to the sports broadcasting status-quo has already made an impact. Sports are one of the few remaining pillars of the collapsing cable empire, allowing networks to boost ratings across all programming and justify raising subscriber fees, so established networks are unlikely to let a newcomer like Amazon take that away without a fight. CBS has already launched its own stand-alone streaming service to secure online broadcasting rights for Sunday NFL games and I would not be surprised if other cable networks

quickly followed suit. One way or another, the future of sports broadcasting lies in online streaming — the only question is which platform owners will come out ahead, and which will be left in the dust.

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