Extending the Broadcast: Streaming Culture and the Problems of Digital Geographies

Benjamin Burroughs and Adam Rugg

This article examines the recent move by many television sports broadcasters of streaming their content online behind geographically restricted "geofences." Despite the increasing use of this distribution method, we argue that Internet users are increasingly bypassing geofences that center sports consumption within a nationalized television broadcasting framework through the use of VPN (virtual private network) technologies. Importantly, the geographic fluidity of the Internet often allows users to do this legally—producing meaningful ruptures in the logic that seeks to replicate the structures of mediation central to the television broadcast model within the space of the Internet. We argue that the streaming of sports content, then, should be understood and analyzed as an enforcement of corporate media strategies and reflection of telecommunication policy, as well as a cultural practice and tactic. Large transnational media corporations, typically the holders of popular sporting rights, attempt to bend digital sports content consumption to the broadcast models that they have historically employed. Yet, amidst this emerging model of digital broadcasting lie the problems of digital geography and the cultural practice of a streaming culture within the conditions of post-convergence. This practice often rejects the restrictions and stipulations of digital broadcasting in favor of a globetrotting, station-hopping exercise of content hunting.

It is, to me right now, at the tip of this convergence between what is the best of the south [Hollywood] and the best of the north [Silicon Valley]. I think you’re starting to see something very new, very original budding out of it. There is something great going on there ... Right now, to me, it is the wild, wild west. DreamWorks CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg, 2013

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DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2014.935854 ISSN: 0883-8151 print/1550-6878 online
During the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, much criticism was levied against NBC’s decision to tape delay its coverage of the competition. The hashtag #NBCFail trended across America and many news outlets ran articles about mounting viewer angst. Time Magazine TV critic James Poniewozik summed up much public sentiment when he tweeted, “NBC tape delay coverage is like the airlines: Its interest is in giving you the least satisfactory service you will still come back for” (de Morases, 2012). The response to NBC’s coverage was a bit ironic, considering that the network paid large sums of money (to the point of losing money on previous games) to be the exclusive broadcaster of the Olympics in part because it allowed the network to market itself as a “national channel,” a unifier. NBC hoped to leverage the Olympics’ unique status as “one of the last spaces in which the ‘nation’ remains a prominent figure in an increasingly fragmented, narrowcasted environment” (McNutt, 2013).

Yet rather than unify viewers, NBC’s coverage polarized them, with a number of viewers participating in an unexpected phenomenon: using VPN (virtual private network) services to change the “address” of their computer from America to the United Kingdom, allowing American viewers to circumvent NBC’s coverage and access the live (and more comprehensive) Internet streaming coverage of the BBC. Soon, how-to-guides were being spread widely across the Internet (including popular mainstream Web sites such as Lifehacker). While the news coverage continued to center mainly on NBC’s production choices and the anger they inspired in viewers, it was the audience’s ability to access the BBC’s coverage at all that was the real story. These acts of protest evinced significant shifts in the underlying relationship among Internet and television broadcasting models, media corporations, and mediated sporting rights.

The story of #NBCFail, Lifehacker, and VPNs is illustrative of the ways in which online sports streaming has destabilized what Hutchins and Rowe (2010) have called the “historically naturalized relationships among broadcast television networks, commercial media, and professional spectator sports.” In recent years this relationship has risen to the center of the global television marketplace, with television rights for premium sports programming dramatically increasing each year (up to $22.98 billion worldwide in 2013; Owen, 2014). Concomitant with this rise the leagues’ best athletes now become worldwide celebrities and many popular teams enjoy world fanbases. Despite this, however, domestic sporting leagues, international sporting competitions, and the television networks that carry them continue to embrace and produce the rhetoric of shared identity at the national level (Bairner, 2001; Billings, 2008; Rowe, 2003). These discourses have long reflected the ways in which broadcast rights for various sporting leagues and events around the world are sold and marketed. Like most television programming, sports rights are primarily sold on a nation-by-nation basis.

As leagues and events have increasingly begun to bundle online streaming rights with their television broadcast rights, the geographically bounded conceptions of televised sport consumption have increasingly been mapped onto Internet-based sports viewing through the use of geofences, or virtual perimeters that regulate access to
content by geographic location. In this article, however, we argue that Internet users are increasingly bypassing these geofences that center sports consumption within a nationalized television broadcasting framework. Importantly, the geographic fluidity of the Internet often allows users to do this legally—producing meaningful ruptures in the logic that seeks to replicate the structures of mediation of the television broadcast model within the space of the Internet. Importantly, by focusing on the legal subversion of these frameworks, we can better address the ruptures taking place in the digital media environment without having to attend to the stigma of piracy.

In order to accomplish this, we traverse a variety of academic disciplines, including sports studies, media studies, and geography. In so doing, we hope to avoid a simplified analysis that would merely bring to the foreground a single aspect of our object and instead construct a more complex representation of the ways a variety of nodes, histories, and relationships have produced the contemporary moment. As technology and mediation increasingly penetrate more aspects of life, a varied and dynamic methodological approach will be increasingly necessary to understand the cultural repercussions of networked streaming.

This article begins with a brief overview of contemporary broadcasting rights and television infrastructure and presents a challenge to the nominal categorization of streaming as piracy or simply “streaming theft” (in both industrial and academic texts). We then historicize streaming as a long-standing cultural practice used to extend the reach of media (oftentimes disrupting territorial and institutional logics). Finally, we present the use of VPNs to bypass geofences as a contemporary manifestation of this cultural lineage. The transition from broadcasting to digital technology opens a space for the re-contextualization of streaming as both a cultural and technological practice. We are attempting to build a more robust categorization of streaming in the digital era that doesn’t simply reduce the practice to the crude binary of legal/illegal. Rather we reach beyond the lens of piracy to begin to define streaming, paying particular attention to unsanctioned first party streaming (primarily the usage of VPNs to access geographically restricted content) as an emergent reconstitution of broadcasting in the digital age. The current industrial model for the conceptualization of sports (from league structure to its meditation) is done within a geographic framework that centers on the nation-state. However, the Internet, and streaming culture in particular, has subverted that framework, and pushed all aspects of sport, from fandom to consumption, from a geographically centered practice to a temporally centered practice.

The streaming of sports content, then, should be understood and analyzed as an enforcement of corporate media strategies and a reflection of telecommunication policy. Large transnational media corporations, typically the holders of popular sporting rights, attempt to bend digital sports content consumption to the broadcast models that they have historically employed (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Yet, amidst this emerging model of digital broadcasting lies the cultural practice of streaming and the problematics of digital geography, which often rejects the restrictions and stipulations of digital broadcasting in favor of a globe-trotting, station-hopping exercise of content hunting.
Global Television; National Infrastructure

The past few decades have seen the globalization of television industries across the world and the ensuing Web of global media networks they have spawned. However, despite the growth and increasing prominence of the largest members of these networks, corporations such as Time Warner, Disney, and News Corp., the global television system is not dictated by these most visible and sprawling of transnational corporations. As Amelia Arsenault and Manuel Castells (2008) have explained, "global media organizations are not truly global, as local media organizations are not truly local. What is global is the networked organization of media companies" (p. 711).

Indeed, the global media system is one of countless players, a byzantine Web of international, national, and local media corporations, stations, and government bodies. The volatility and unpredictability of these infrastructures generally resist any sort of easy imposition of the will of eager transnational media corporations onto national and pan-national media systems. As Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe (2001) have reminded, the terms "local" and "global" are too often "binarized" and made all-encompassing, creating analysis where "the plentitude of one becomes the lack of the other and vice-versa: a graceless zero-sum game between national and international, public and commercial" (p. 22).

Thus, despite the presence of multinational conglomerates, a coagulating network of pan-national infrastructures, and a sustained relationship between local operators and the international market, television still faces the consumer as a national enterprise. TV channels, viewing packages, cable and satellite systems, and program rights are often constructed and operated through the guise of the nation-state. While the ownership of channels and the content on them are reflective of a globalized industry, the performance of television, as well as the parameters of its consumption, often remain rigidly national.

Where the globalization of the television industries has its most impact, then, is on the back end in the production, procurement, and distribution of television content. As Silvio Waisbord (2004) has argued, globalization has unsettled the "past linkages" between the nation-state, flows of capital, geographic units, and the mechanics of content creation and distribution. No longer, he argues, do conflicts settle easily into the "national versus foreign" mold. Rather, as Arsenault and Castells further illustrated:

Global companies are leveraging partnerships and cross-investments with national, regional, and local companies to facilitate market expansion and vice versa. Regional players are actively importing global content and localizing it; and global media organizations are pursuing local partners in order to deliver customized content to audiences. Processes of localization and globalization work hand in hand to expand a global network of production and distribution. (p. 722)

This intricate network of media companies operating under similar practices and business models as well as the need for content that suits dominant national cultures...
has led to the rise of the television “format” as a lucrative model of television production. As Silvio argued, formats, which are shows that can be easily repurposed for different cultures (think of Who Wants to Be A Millionaire, Big Brother, or the Idol franchise) are “convenient instruments to leap over cultural boundaries” while also utilizing the dynamic media networks that span the globe. At the same time, the rise of television formats holds in it the perils and promise of globalization. It can allow for the performance and celebration of distinct cultures within a global system and demonstrate the “resilience of national cultures.” However, it can just as well amount to no more than “local camouflage,” on shows that fundamentally espouse the capitalist ideologies of the transnational corporations that traffic them (Selznick, 2008). For example, sports programming, which is an easily cross-cultural transferable product (when coming from afar) and an easy activator of localized meanings (when coming domestically) has emerged as a coveted and lucrative prize for national television operators within this system of television formatting.

Within this system, then, it makes sense that all major sporting television rights are still sold on a nation-by-nation basis. The World Cup, the Olympics, the major European soccer leagues, and all the American domestic leagues (of which three have Canadian teams) sell their television rights at the national level. Streaming rights are also typically distributed at the national level and are often bundled along with the TV rights. When this is the case, streaming on a device is often marketed as a “supplement” to the experience of watching on a television set. In practice, rather than replicating the television model, streaming has often acted in subservience to it, either for use as a second screen, or as an acceptable reprieve for when the viewer is away from their television. As the popularity of streaming content has increased (along with its disruptive potential), many rights holders have sought to prevent a rush of consumers replacing cable subscriptions with streaming subscriptions by moving toward an “authentication” model that allows for streaming once the viewer verifies their cable or satellite subscription. The NCAA College Basketball tournament is most indicative of this trend, gathering acclaim in 2012 for its decision to offer streaming access in America for $3.99 only to reverse course and require cable authentication in 2013 (Laird, 2013; NCAA, 2014).

Even within league-offered streaming services, such as MLB.tv, NBA League Pass, and NFL Sunday Ticket, television continues to stand supreme. Most explicitly, television blackouts are not only reproduced, but intensified. Home games within designated local markets are often blacked out as a concession to regional television sport networks. In areas located near multiple teams, this can often mean blacking out multiple teams. Nationally broadcast games are also frequently blacked out, as a concession to national television right holders (DIRECTV, n.d.; MLB, n.d.; NBA, n.d.). In this state, streaming becomes even more restricted by geography than television viewing.

Most league-offered streaming services will offer a full replay of a blacked out game within 24 hours of the event’s initial airing. However, for those who wish to watch the game without knowing the end result, this is hardly a comforting notion. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as the general timeliness of most
Internet content, make avoiding results or spoilers of major live events an extremely difficult task for dedicated fans (networks now regularly joke about “spoiler alerts” during Olympic coverage and other major sporting events). The Internet, and social media in particular, have replaced the temporal insularity of television with an omnipresent display of the current moment, allowing notable live events to escape out of the media industries’ dominance and control of time (as in the case of the 2012 Olympics). Even when television and sanctioned streaming services still operate under the impression of that dominance, unsanctioned streaming allows viewers to capture those escaped events.

**Streaming Culture Defined: The Politics of Piracy**

When streaming is invoked in both industrial and academic texts it is almost always through the lens of piracy (Gantz & Lewis, 2014; Mellis, 2007; Sterne, 2012). Reducing this cultural practice to nothing more than “streaming theft” fails to deal with the complexity of this emergent form of media consumption and resists its further definition. If we suspend this judgment and move streaming beyond the sole context of piracy we might think of streaming as a tactic. De Certeau’s (1984) strategies and tactics are a useful conceptual framework for understanding streaming as a cultural practice, a style, or poetics that tactically challenges the “proper” strategies of mass consumer and television culture. Streaming is wandering through the strategic “place” of copyright and broadcast rights. Streaming is the prerogative of the in-between and deterritorialized poaching. Streamers are “travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching across fields they did not write” (p. 174). Just as there is a “rhetoric of walking” we might think of a “style of use” for streamers traversing the geographies of nation-states and the global lands of copyright and license holders throughout the Internet.

Streaming as a technological process is nominally defined as multimedia that is continually delivered to a user (Larsen, 2007). Streaming is increasingly imperative to the smooth functioning of the Internet because it allows the user to view, listen to, or experience mediated content without downloading all of the files or information before use. With increased network bandwidth in the early 2000s, streaming has become integral not only to business practices but also to how we encounter and inhabit mediated culture. The technological capacities of streaming; networkable (as opposed to the predominant broadcast model of analogue media), compressible, dense, and manipulable/malleable, differentiate the discontinuous data of digitality from analogue media (Miller, 2011) and broadcasting. In this way streaming exists in-between orality and literacy and refers not to a particular medium but to the mode of delivery itself. “Streaming culture” (Burroughs, 2013) arises out of the conditions of post-convergence. Streaming is first a technological innovation that then becomes adopted and conjoined with audience practices. In the case of streaming, media industries are now attempting to intervene and re-articulate these audience practices but through the networked individual. We are in the midst of
a re-calibration between audiences and industry where flow becomes increasingly channeled through the networked individual. Streaming begins as a new technological capacity previously not possible because of bandwidth limitations, which then becomes adopted by audiences as a social practice and social circulation. This subsequently leads to media industries beginning to adapt and mesh analogue viewership with digital streaming. This movement is not exempt from the challenges, pitfalls, and anxieties of shifting media landscapes (Burroughs, 2013b).

In this article we have purposefully incorporated the vocabulary of sanctioned and unsanctioned rather than the crude binary of legal or illegal because this can still be a contested legal terrain and more complex than simply designating all of the social and cultural practices arising through streaming as “illegal.” We offer four different categories of streaming: sanctioned and unsanctioned first party streaming and sanctioned and unsanctioned third party streaming. The Motion Picture Association (2014), however, already rejected such nuance and defined streaming as a whole as a sub-category of “Content Theft” labeled “Streaming Theft.” The MPAA is well aware of the ubiquity of streaming as a larger cultural practice and the organization is trying to connect theft with streaming as we move toward further policy decisions on the legality of streaming:

Streaming refers to a form of online content theft that allows users to view unauthorized copyrighted motion picture and television content on demand, without downloading the illegal file. Users generally visit illegal Web sites that either host the streamed content or provide links to content hosted on other Web sites. Both hosting unauthorized content and linking to unauthorized content hosted on other Web sites is illegal. (para. 14)

Clearly the MPAA is trying to get ahead of the larger discursive struggle over copyright by tying streaming to earlier MPAA and RIAA battles over music and movie downloading. The familiar categorization of these practices as theft is repeated often and does the work of placing users in discursive proximity to lawbreakers, criminals, and pirates.

Jonathan Sterne (2012) in his exploration of the MP3 as a format pushes us to think of piracy not as external to the legitimacy of media industries but as an interstitial force that is better represented as a “subset of media industries” where piracy industries are an integral part of “media industries that sell blank media, conduits, and connectivity” (pp. 218–219). Sterne shows how piracy is not a small ship separate and siphoning from industry but a part of the boat itself. What are deemed pirate practices can often be the very groundwork for future markets and commerce. “The unsanctioned economy of file-sharing has been immensely valuable and value-generating for several legitimate software and hardware industries. British pirate radio extended the reach of the for-profit radio industry and a sector of the recording industry” (p. 219). Unsanctioned streaming needs to be understood in conjunction with sanctioned streaming as both a productive and disruptive media practice.

First party sanctioned streaming refers to the rights holder directly streaming their content to the audience with no intermediary. Examples might include HBOGo
or the Web sites of the American broadcasting networks. Within sports, all major American leagues (NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL) offer first party streaming packages (with various geographic restrictions). The names and logos of these sports streaming services, such as NFL Sunday Ticket and NHL Center Ice, often emphasize the physical markers of fandom—stadiums, tickets, ice, courts—and situate the package as offering the “best seat in the house,” turning the viewer’s house into any stadium in the country and producing geographic connections to the nation within digitality.

Third party sanctioned streaming is when content providers, which make a great deal of their money from controlling large libraries of content and the “windowing” or temporality within which they distribute this content, have licensing agreements with companies like Netflix, Hulu, or more specialized services like Crunchyroll for anime. Hulu’s corporate parents Disney, News Corp., and NBCUniversal originally created the service as a challenge to YouTube (Kim, 2012). In a recent Fast Company (Laporte, 2012) article, however, Hulu is cited as becoming so successful that its parent companies are now fretting or “shivering” about its disruptive innovation. A company like Hulu or Netflix is a different kind of challenge to the status quo of media industry practices as sanctioned third party streaming. Netflix does not exist in a legal gray area but is still reliant on content producers, needing to form a symbiotic relationship without losing too much ground to first party streamers who ultimately own the vast majority of the content libraries. This was the impetus for Netflix to try to replicate the HBO model by producing original programming to avoid becoming just another failed distribution technology. For now, third party streamers still offer an increasingly more lucrative content window benefitting both Netflix and content producers.

Third party unsanctioned streaming is the ubiquitous streaming of content such as movies and television through third party hosting Web sites. These Web sites are often divided into two types—those that host the streaming content and indexing sites that provide links to the hosting Web sites. This is done to try and protect each party by compartmentalizing each step (this raises complicated questions about cloud computing and copyright, for example). While it is difficult to firmly establish how prevalent “illegal” streaming has become (the industry doesn’t want the numbers widely known and the sites themselves don’t want to be targeted), MarkMonitor, an Internet research and security firm, estimates that the top three Web sites engaged in “digital piracy” receive “more than 21 billion visits per year” (MarkMonitor, 2011) and “traffic to illegal download sites has more than sextupled since 2009” (Pogue, 2012). In terms of sporting events, you can find pretty much any game you want domestic or international. Our understanding of these streaming communities is that they are not static entities but dynamic activators. These bricoleurs (Jenkins, 1992) are thriving because of their manipulation of the flow of media technology. Unsanctioned third party streaming is a reading practice that grants the user the flexibility to navigate and traverse the lexicon of popular culture.

Increasingly, rights holders are putting more of their content online, behind authentication systems that regulate access based on geographic location. While these
systems, called geofences, are successful enough in preventing casual out-of-area viewers from watching a program, there are many VPN services available that allow single users to easily, and legally, bypass geographic restrictions. Simply put, VPNs are a way in which private networks can be extended over public Internet infrastructure through the use of encryption and dedicated connections. In doing so, they "change" the location of any user to the location of the private network. Users can then leverage this ability to bypass geographic restrictions on content. We classify this "legal" tactic as unsanctioned first party streaming.

In this way the use of VPNs as legal pathways to content legitimates "illegal" streaming, but streamers are also blazing invisible pathways that legally transcend the geographic logics of the nation-state and construct deterritorialized space for consumption. VPNs may soon become vulnerable to intermediary routing services becoming regulated by territorial governments, but technology has long proven flexible enough to allow users to stay slightly ahead of copyright restrictions in a cycle of users tactics and institutional strategies. Streaming invites us to look at the in-between, the spaces and gaps of copyright. VPNs show how streaming as a cultural practice cannot be divested without disruption to the strategic logic of the law and copyright.

A Cultural Lineage of Sports Streaming

Sports streaming is often conceptualized as an entirely new phenomenon corresponding with technical capacity of bandwidth, but a history of sports streaming can be traced all the way back to the early usage of radio. Sports viewership has always been about liveness and the immediacy of sports, which draws audiences and advertisers. In 1926, newspapers began to feel the encroachment of radio into the media landscape. After the Royal Typewriter Company paid $35,000 for exclusive rights to broadcast the heavily anticipated Dempsey versus Tunney boxing match, newspapers attempted to stream boxing matches for audiences themselves:

Newspapers hoped to overcome the embargo by offering their readers something radio could not. For days they ran front-page ads announcing plans to stage fight parties at editorial offices across the country with blow-by-blow coverage relayed by megaphone and loudspeaker. The purpose was to promote the newspaper as a sports authority while providing readers with a shared experience. It worked. (Evensen, 1996, p. 87)

This form of streaming is bypassing the control or copyright that one medium possesses by allowing audiences to participate in a simultaneous, communal viewing experience. Radio's broadcasting of prizefights served to legitimate and elevate the medium beyond the level of mere "plaything" in the minds of the American public. Newspapers and radio stations would soon form a symbiotic promotional machine
that sold papers and put a radio in every home. “In Chicago, two thousand fight fans packed the Auditorium Theater at a dollar apiece for the experience of “hearing the fight while it is being fought” and thousands more descended on Hartman Auditorium at Wabash and Adams to hear the fight for free” (p. 90). Americans were beginning to experience streaming as a geographically removed, yet live and proximal cultural event.

In the book *Listening In*, Susan Douglas (1999) described how Americans used radio to construct the connectedness that forms a national identity across place/space. This is the beginning of streaming as a cultural process, which reaches past the prescribed notions of industry. Douglas explored how radio transformed the everydayness of daily living and constructed imagined communities that stretched across the country. Radio allowed audiences to sample and stream beyond their respective local communities. This too was seen as a kind of “hack” that was not well received, prompting the eventual creation of the FCC and an increasing regulation of radio. By the time television took hold in America, this restrictive approach through regulation pushed television broadcasting away from any streaming potential. If we look back to Douglas’ moment of listening to radio we can see streaming tactics very similar to contemporary Internet tactics. Classical television, however, works on an anti-streaming model where terrestrial borders are generally contained and reliant on place. The industrial framework is national in design so its content must be tethered to that infrastructure. As a result of this rootedness television only reflects a particular image of the local and the national, without much ability for audiences to intervene in the flow.

We might think of Justin.tv as a pioneering digital streaming site, which was repurposed and made successful largely by sports fans inhabiting the space. Justin.tv was originally designed for narrowcasting of original content from a user’s everyday life. This organizing principle was quickly subverted as audiences began transmitting copyrighted sports broadcasts. Cary Gertzog, senior vice-president of legal and business affairs for the NFL, likened shutting down Justin.tv and other copyrighted hosting streams to “a game of Whac-A-Mole” where “(w)e tell them to stop, they agree to stop. We look later, and they are back at it” (Stone, 2011). As these sites began to be subject to copyright takedowns they were replaced with two types of sites—those that host the streaming content and indexing sites that provide links to the hosting Web sites. Justin.tv waned in popularity as solely a narrowcasting site and was largely replaced by other sports specific streaming sites. If the next wave of popular sites such as ATDHE.eu or FirstRowSports (including a .tv, .net, .eu, and .com amongst a myriad of other variations) were shut down, they would quickly pop up with a new country code and resume streaming sports. Justin.tv and the multiplicity of streaming sites, then, are both local and narrowcasting but also national and international. This ability to exist within multiple registers and valences ties this form of streaming back to the flexibility of radio and the streaming of prizefights. This is the unsanctioned third party streaming that takes us from boxing to digital streaming but the use of VPNs augments and further ruptures the facade of national broadcasting’s centrality.
VPNs and Unsanctioned First Party Streaming

Historically, VPNs have been used by businesses and governments to build out secure networks across national and international areas at a much lower cost than dedicated leased lines. This technology has replaced the need for businesses to construct their own costly leased lines to connect local area networks (LANs) without sacrificing the security or reliability of leased lines. VPNs have played a key role in the globalization of business and the emergence of transnational corporations as well as the evolution of the Internet as a (potentially) secure channel of communication. In recent years, however, VPNs have become increasingly popular at the individual level, with people using them for a variety of purposes that require anonymity and secure channels of communication (Houmansadr, Riedl, Borisov, & Singer, 2013; Houmansadr, Wong, & Shmatikov, 2014). They have come to serve as one means of preserving anonymity and escaping Internet filters for citizens living in countries with restrictive and intrusive Internet policies (Roberts, Zuckerman, Faris, York, & Palfrey, 2011). Further, as global Internet surveillance and data mining (by the state and hackers) becomes a greater day-to-day reality around the world, VPNs are part of a suite of developing technologies and practices used to avoid detection and censorship (Karlin et al., 2011; Wustrow, Wolchok, Goldberg, & Halderman, 2011).

VPN and other similar technologies have always required a level of expertise beyond the skills of an average computer user. In recent years, however, a number of consumer-friendly VPN services have emerged on the market that have made the process of changing a computer’s location much simpler. This came to a head during the aforementioned 2012 Olympics when the simple (and humorously) designed VPN program TunnelBear (www.tunnelbear.com) received much press as an easy to use service for bypassing the BBC’s geofence on its online Olympic streams (Baker & Adegoke, 2012; Klosowski, 2012; Moore, 2012). The program itself is marketed with the tagline “Simple, private, free access to the global Internet you love.” Once opened, the application resembles an old wooden radio. During the 2012 Olympics, the program only contained two buttons: an on-off switch, and an US-UK switch (it has since expanded to include four more countries). By flipping the switch to “on,” the user could easily change their location from the US to the UK and access BBC content.

TunnelBear’s focus on being “really, really simple” is mirrored in the design of its Web site, which repeatedly touts the ability of the program to allow the user to “enjoy an open and unrestricted Internet” with only glancing, vague mentions of the security uses of VPN. Other similar services, like the popular service Unblock-Us, have cropped up that eschew the primary security features of VPN and focus solely on allowing users to bypass geofenced content.

The amount of online streaming content that can be accessed by utilizing VPNs is continuously increasing, as existing television stations continue to put more of their content online, and new, online-only services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon continue to crop up or expand to more countries. In using a VPN, an American-based streamer can quite easily watch the BBC’s entire online catalog, explore
a much wider variety of movies and television shows on Hulu and Netflix than is available in America, watch American broadcast channels, and access league-offered streaming services with no restrictions, all with a click of a button.

**Discussion**

This leads back to our opening anecdote about the 2012 Olympics and #NBCFail. As mentioned before, NBC tape delayed many of the most highly anticipated events in the Olympics, and what they did stream live was devoid of commentary and presentation—that is if a viewer could even get the malfunctioning streams to work. While the angst and vitriol built over the course of the Olympics, it was present from the very beginning when NBC chose not to stream the opening ceremonies live. The fact that many were able to follow the ceremonies through Twitter and Facebook illustrates the way in which social media exposed the tension between the nation-state as a self-contained unit of mediated consumption and the geographically agnostic consumption proffered by the Internet. This tension was further highlighted as the use of user-friendly VPN services like TunnelBear began to gain traction in the mainstream media (Baker & Adegoke, 2012). Thus the true significance of the 2012 Olympics and #NBCFail lies not in the outrage the network sustained from its audiences, but from the ways in which the audience could bypass the imposed structures of Internet broadcasting. In doing so, audiences were not just bypassing existing constraints of the nation-state and its broadcasting infrastructure but fully realizing a digital omnipresence where audiences could tactically buck the geographic restraints of global copyright and online content distribution.

This digital omnipresence stands in stark contrast to the logics of Internet broadcasting that encourage a geographical based approach to regulating distribution and access to online streaming content. As we have explained the dominant broadcasting model has been mapped onto the current state of digital space and infrastructure to reinforce the primacy of the nation-state. Still VPNs push back on the idea that physical location within the Internet exists in such a way that it can be used as a regulatory or defining agent and remind us that the geographic mapping of the Internet is a construction. As Mike Crang (2000) explains, spatial metaphors have become the vehicle through which networks are culturally understood and enacted, where the “imagining of electronic space is vital to creating it” (p. 302). Yet, along with a more palatable understanding of the basic workings of the Internet comes a naturalizing of the Internet as a spatially faithful digital reproduction of the world in which we live.

In terms of experience, this naturalization has led to the frequent understanding of the Internet as a second geographic plane, albeit with its own structures of relations and power: As Serra Tinic (2005) explained:

> we have become accustomed to living on two planes: those of “virtual geography” and of the “geography of experience.” While the latter is the place we live and work
in and experience at first hand, it is permeated by the virtual geography of the global media, which provides an experience that is no more or less real. It is a different kind of perception, of things not bounded by rules of proximity, of being there. In virtual geography, people form, maintain, and (re)establish cultural affinities, communities, and identities that may or may not coincide with the political and social identity projects of nation building. (p. 17)

Shaun Moores (2000), in discussing the impact of electronic media on social relationships and identity, made a similar argument to Tinic, stressing that electronic media, as well as broadcast media, produce a “doubling of place” for the user that allows for pluralized identities and interpersonal performances. While both Tinic and Moores adeptly address the feeling of using the Internet, both of their analyses presuppose the Internet as a vehicle of mobility. You may end up somewhere else, but you still start where you physically are.

Our analysis however, emphasizes how the Internet can not only enable a “transportation” to other places, but also, through the use of VPNs, change what place you start at. This is critically important as the Internet is increasingly being regulated, controlled, and restricted at the national level. Where you start increasingly shapes where you can end up, as evidenced during the Arab Spring in 2011, where VPNs and similar services enabled dissidents to continue communicating with each other and supporters outside their countries even as governments shut down national ISPs and outgoing Internet traffic (Castells, 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2011). These remain fleeting, ephemeral tactics that don’t amass their gains, but the simultaneous presence that VPNs afford remains as audiences are “making do” within an increasingly restrictive global media environment (Kantola, 2013). Herein VPNs act as streaming tactics. While geography and space are often secondary in discussions about digital media they continually shape policies, markets, and the everydayness of audiences lived experience (Christensen & Christensen, 2013).

In terms of the increasing convergence of television and Internet content production and distribution, this ambiguity of location necessitates a rethinking of how contemporary broadcast models can be transposed to the Internet. Merely attempting to produce an Internet broadcast infrastructure that mirrors the geographical structures of the television industry has been satisfactory in the short term. Yet, as the continual increase of unsanctioned first party streamers show, Internet geofences construct the boundaries of broadcast on top of shifting ground. The Internet isn’t some vacuous “placelessness” within the phantasmagoric global or a canvas waiting for the digital reprint of timeless television logics and strategies, but a network infused with an overwhelming amount of presence.

Current sports streaming models and the general transposition of television content to the Internet, creates an illusion of bounded place and common participants through copyright and policy—constructing the experience much like a stadium. This makes sense, as mediated representations of sport have long been enacted and understood through the stadium. As Anna McCarthy (1995) detailed, in the early days of television, many fans watching televised sports at taverns acted as if they were at the stadium, constructing the tavern “as a place where the televised
event and the bleacher experience seemed to blend together” (p. 37). Even today, pubs in England are known to go as far as installing stadium seating within the pub and laying down turf (Dixon, 2014). Thus, this blending continues on today in sports bars, Super Bowl parties, the history of radio and television distribution rights, and the marketing of streaming packages. We argue for conceptualizing streamers within this framework, especially the unsanctioned first party streamers who utilize VPNs and other similar services to bypass content restrictions and geofences. These streamers are not “pirating” material as much as they are tactically “sneaking into” the digital stadium. In contrast to the use of the Internet as a producer of non-localized space, such as in the case of the physical traveler, who utilizes the Internet to generate “mobile social spaces which are not embedded in any particular physical place,” (Mascheroni, 2007, p. 541; Monterde & Postill, 2013). Unsanctioned first party streaming utilizes the Internet as a producer of omnipresent physical place, imagining viewers within specific geographic locations and enabling access to the particular mediated representations of the desired content. In exploiting these visible pathways, these streamers not only speak to the illusory boundaries of modern streaming models, but also to the general fallacy that the structure of the Internet rigidly reflects the geographic boundaries of the nations it operates within.

References


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