

The NBA and the World's America

Written by Rishabh Chawda

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/01/the-nba-and-the-worlds-america/>

RISHABH CHAWDA, AUG 1 2021

Sport has often occupied the margins in the study of international relations. When it has been enquired upon, the realist perspective^[1] has dominated: international sport was seen as another clash of billiard balls, and this clash was studied for its implication on diplomacy, security, military power, etc. (Budd and Levermore 2004: Introduction 8). In recent times, with an increase in the political, economic, and social influence of sport, there has been a diversification of sports actors due to the rise of domestic leagues and sports clubs. This trend urges us to look beyond the nation-state boundary when studying the intersection of sport and international relations. This paper aims to examine one such domestic sports league, the National Basketball Association, through the lens of mediascape^[2] and uncover the tactics employed to project it as a global, superior, but American brand. The paper also unpacks the recent controversial interaction between China and the NBA that highlights its unique selling point.

The NBA: History, and Background

Today the NBA, a domestic league in the USA, is inseparable from basketball. It is the most widely-watched league with the best players in the world. The NBA is not only the biggest league in basketball but also one of the most significant spectacles in the history of sports with fans around the globe. In the 2017-18 season, the league had more than 1 billion unique viewers. Furthermore, more than 35% of the visitors to their official website NBA.com are from outside North America (Murray 2019). The NBA's global presence and financial success, however, are the result of a long journey.

The 1970s and early 1980s were challenging times for the NBA as it battled with financial losses, low ratings, and high drug usage among players (Jackson and Andrews 1996). In 1984, as David Stern became NBA Commissioner, he brought in a series of reforms such as a stern anti-drug policy and salary caps, that were accompanied with the opportune arrival of a new generation of exceptional players vanguarded by Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, that put a dying league on the path to recovery and eventual global growth (Jackson and Andrews 1996). The most significant factor in the popular rise of the NBA was broadcasting, organised by the league's administrators and masterminded by David Stern. He understood the global power and influence the American culture held and that this culture depended heavily on imagery. Using the expanding avenues of media and employing a particular brand of imagery, Stern strove to attach the NBA to the 'American', making it a popular commodity-sign transcending its economic value to become a cultural icon.^[3] By the early 1990's, the NBA had established itself as a "basic American pastime" (Jackson and Andrews 1996: 58). The league's revenue grew as a result of ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, television contracts, and licensed merchandise retail. The NBA's gross income grew tenfold in a decade, as it leaped from \$110 million at the start of the 1980s, to over \$1 billion by 1994 (Jackson and Andrews 1996). Around the same time, having saturated the domestic market, the NBA decided to go global and transformed into the transnational conglomerate we see today.

The NBA — An American Mediascape

At the heart of the success of the NBA, we see a powerful connection between the association and the United States of America as a country. It is only natural that the location of an international league would have a strong influence on the league itself. Still, in the case of the NBA, we see a disproportionate amount of importance given to the brand of 'America,' evident from the use of the colours of the USA national flag in its logo. The association is surprising

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considering the NBA is a private corporation, owned and managed by the team owners who belong to various countries. An explanation emerges if we see the NBA as an 'American mediascape'. Arjun Appadurai coined the term 'mediascape' to describe mediums of mass communication and information dissemination and the images projected through these mediums. According to Appadurai,

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and 'ethnoscapes' to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of 'news' and politics are profoundly mixed."

Appadurai 1990: 299

The NBA becomes one such mediascape as it presents to its global audience a complicated yet unified narrative via television and radio, newspaper coverage, billboard, and online advertisement, merchandise shops, and products. This image-centric narrative, which is based on "strips of reality", offers its audience a "script of imagined lives" (Appadurai 1990: 299). The NBA helps its audience imagine a life of their own as well as certain others, whether it be a player, a coach, or a fan in the USA. The mediascape subsequently shapes itself according to the behaviour of its audience. The primary reason for the NBA's obsession with its sports stars is the fan reactions to them. Today the entire league revolves mainly around these famous players, evidenced by the NBA's policy, instituted in 2019, that does not allow teams to rest marquee players during nationally televised games (Golliver 2019). Fans stay involved in the personal lives of the players via social media. The lives of successful athletes living in the USA is of great popular interest. LeBron James, one of the most successful players in the league, has 54 million followers on Instagram (Gallo 2019). Through social media platforms, and all the other forms of mass communication, the audience of the NBA, at a distance from direct experience of the league, perceive the 'imagined world' of the NBA and the fictional landscape of America.

The Global American NBA

Even though the Americanisation of the NBA and its impacts across the world are the results of a post-Cold War ongoing process of global cultural homogenisation, the league makes a conscious effort to project its American identity. This attempt is interesting because, unlike the NBA, a lot of American transnational corporations, holding global currency owing to their roots, often follow a policy of "global localisation" (Jackson and Andrews 1996). This approach helps companies with an international market to blend with the local culture to make their product more appealing and to blend with the native milieu. The NBA, on the other hand, follows an ideology of cultural exception. The NBA's popularity is grounded in retaining and exhibiting a sense of difference rather than assimilating in the local culture. Josh Rosenfeld, a former PR director for the New York Knicks and Los Angeles Lakers, articulated the NBA's exaggerated American identity and global appeal for this commodity-sign when he said, "people in other countries ... like the NBA because they want the American look and the American image. And that's what they get with the NBA ... Americana, a piece of America (Jackson and Andrews 1996: 62)." The NBA and basketball are marketed to foreign audiences as a sport inextricable from the US.

The NBA is also presented as a "credible and desirable commodity within the global sports marketplace" that seeks "cosmopolitan identification" (Falcous and Maguire 2006:73). These two processes together invariably reinforce American cultural hegemony. Falcous and Maguire in their text *Imagining 'America': The NBA and local-global mediascapes* analyse the mediated presence of the NBA in the UK and identify the processes mentioned above being put to use. By looking at the NBA game broadcasts, they notice an attempt to establish the NBA as a 'world class' sport in comparison to 'local' sports (Falcous and Maguire 2006). One such game commentary displayed the subordination of locally popular sports and aggrandising of the relatively culturally-marginalised sport of basketball:

Turner: What a wicked weekend for sports fans, there's the speed of Formula One from Australia . . .

Redmond: Or the power of international rugby in the Five Nations . . .

Turner: Or there's the glamour of the quarter-finals of the FA Cup — how big is that?

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Remond: but there's one sport that has got it all — speed, power, and glamour.

Turner: It's the NBA, here on ITV."

NBA '99, 06/03/99

There was also a constant presence of educational elements and stereotyping of America in the NBA mediascape in the UK, as noted by Falcous and Maguire. An authentic US commentary was edited to place local cultural references and explanations of American basketball terminology. Pre-game visuals consisted of images of US cities, malls, freeways and stadiums, cheerleaders, etc. with familiar themes of opulence, conspicuous consumption, pleasant climate, and immense love for basketball. Falcous and Maguire note "this comparison of 'ways of life' reinforces stereotypes of materialism, consumption, and wealth in the US, a 'land of opportunity', contrasted with stereotypes of the UK as 'slower paced'." (Falcous and Maguire 2006:73)

The joint association of the NBA as global and American results in frequent slippages between the two. This slippage is perhaps best represented by the NBA World vs. USA match that takes place during the All-Star Weekend every year where the best athletes in the NBA from the USA and the rest of the world compete in a globally televised game. While the title of the event may suggest the odds being stacked against the USA, the reality is the opposite as the international players are only about a quarter of the total players in the NBA, thereby offering a smaller pool to select athletes from. In the past two years, Team USA has dominated Team World, winning games by a considerable margin of 20 points (ESPN 2019, 2020).

The presentation of the NBA as an authentic global sporting spectacle, yet profoundly tied to the ideascapes of America, emerges as a consistent feature in the NBA's global marketing. However, the marketing plan of the NBA cannot be implemented in a similar manner everywhere. Different local markets and countries respond differently. The central argument of *Imagining America* is that "no matter how apparently powerful the global, it is obliged to negotiate with the local, especially when the 'local' is a former 'super-power' with a well-established media industry" (Falcous and Maguire 2006: 75). The result of this negotiation is that when this repertoire of imagery of the NBA is exported to 'other' societies from some "mythical, simulated [American] homeland", these images, to some extent, become indigenised, and consumed according to the "conjunctural specificities of the local culture" (Jackson and Andrews 1996:63). The negotiation between the global NBA and the local aspect of an increasingly powerful China is explored later in this paper.

What Does the 'America' of the NBA Project Look Like?

Having understood how the NBA functions as a mediascape, it is equally pertinent to give closer attention to what mediated narrative it exports, especially in recent times. Since the first stage of the NBA's global expansion, a narrative that has persevered until today is the already discussed one of wealth and decadence. Originating from the US, the NBA mediascape is deeply rooted in capitalist ideology. It is interesting how the NBA not only exports America but also embodies it. The NBA, as a global stage for basketball, presents itself as a highly competitive, yet rewarding, space. The NBA is the ultimate league with the best players for which the NBA G League, Euroleague, Bundesliga, and all other leagues around the world act as training grounds. The televised NBA Draft, where the thirty teams select new players from US colleges, G-league and other international avenues and where every pick is accompanied with cheers, claps and tears, illustrates that making it to the NBA is a victory in itself. The NBA, thus, becomes an instrument of upward mobility. In 2019, an advertisement by Nike featuring Greek player Giannis Antetokounmpo, the league's recent Most Valuable Player, shows his journey from living in "a single room with his entire family" to dreaming of playing in the NBA as a teenager to becoming the NBA's best player. (Nike 2019) The league advertises itself as a path to and benchmark for success, where the only determinant is one's merit in the game. This narrative closely resembles the widely held notion of the 'American dream' — the idea that success in American society is predicated upon skill or worthiness, not luck or heritage.

The 'American dream' was championed as a true meritocracy, with the lack of systemic barriers to specific groups. The NBA is often marketed as such an egalitarian space. The league proudly boasts its hundred-plus international

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athletes and the fact that three-quarters of its players are non-white. The administration's ban of a team owner in 2015 for racist remarks and subsequent life-bans on fans have given the league its progressive image. There has been a conspicuous effort to promote women's basketball and the WNBA; homophobic speech has been vehemently curtailed and Martin Luther King Jr. Day is annually celebrated (Garcia 2018). All these efforts are laudable, but the NBA is by no means a perfect institution: two-thirds of head coaches are white, and all of them men, the league office staff is majority white, and as of 98% of the majority owners were white (Chalabi 2014). The details of the NBA's checkered history with race and gender are not the focus of this paper. However, it is essential to note that the NBA's efforts to present itself as the "superficial bastion of forward-thinking liberalism" are all geared towards the NBA American brand (Garcia 2018: 105).

The China Controversy

Through its liberal, capitalist image, the NBA co-opts the cultural flow of 'America'. The interaction of 'America' with various local cultures has been studied extensively. One such interaction of keen academic and political interest is the juxtaposition with communist, illiberal China. The moral crisis of conducting business with the economic giant that is China has been a widely contested issue. The NBA faced a similar crisis recently, one that was perhaps the most significant litmus test for the corporation as it threatened its \$4 billion business with the country (Bhat 2019). On 4th October 2019, Daryl Morey, General Manager of the Houston Rockets, tweeted in support of the ongoing Hong Kong protests, a sensitive topic for China. This tweet blew up into an international diplomatic incident as the Chinese state-controlled media channel CCTV cancelled all NBA broadcasts, and Tencent, a private streaming partner, cancelled all NBA games. The tweet, which was taken down almost immediately, triggered condemning remarks from Chinese authorities, Chinese media, and Yao Ming, former NBA legend and chairman of the Chinese Basketball Association. The NBA responded with a strong defense for the freedom of speech of the Houston Rockets GM as well as those across the aisle. The league commissioner Adam Silver also quickly dispelled Chinese demands to fire Morey.

China has a history of bullying multinational corporations into retracting controversial political statements and even apologising for them due to the size of its market. Companies like GAP, Swarovski, Coach, Delta, Marriott, Apple, Blizzard, and others have been punished in the past, and so foreign businesses in China have learned that there is a line not to be crossed (Business insider India 2019). Whenever this line has been crossed, companies have prioritised their business interests and stood down. The NBA, however, did not do so. Adam Silver told reporters in Tokyo: "I do know there are consequences from freedom of speech; we will have to live with those consequences. For those who question our motivation, this is about far more than growing our business." (Elizabeth 2019) However, a conflict with China will hamper more than just growth in business. China is the second-largest market for the NBA, and the league has invested in the country through building free courts and giving away broadcast rights for free and sending players for pre-season games and tours for years (Kludt 2020). Instead of protecting these business interests, the NBA's decision to refuse to back down makes the NBA one of the first major U.S. corporations to do so. It can be argued that the NBA's proximity to the notion of 'America' explains this anomaly.

Liberalism, emerging from its American roots, is a central feature of the NBA and its global presence, and the league, when put in a tight spot, chose to maintain it. In a press conference, Silver said, "at the end of the day though, I am an American, and there are these values that are deeply rooted in the DNA of the NBA, and that includes freedom of expression for our employees." (Pennycw, YouTube, 2019)

The league received widespread appreciation for standing by its principles. However, it can be argued that the NBA's decision was not a principled stance rather an attempt at furthering the NBA's liberal image. This superficiality explains the league's efforts to curtail free speech at home after putting up a spirited defense for it. Journalists were not allowed to ask questions related to the controversy, and several fans were expelled from games for their 'Free HK' posters and chants (Bonesteel 2019).

By choosing to keep its liberal American perception intact, the NBA has again displayed its policy of cultural exception. The interaction of its global mediascape with the local cultural specificities of China presented an irreconcilable difference for the NBA. The NBA, instead of reconfiguring its strategy, as multiple corporations had done in the past, retained and flaunted differences. The promise of a piece of 'Americana' can be attributed to the

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league's global success in the past. However, we are yet to see the complete results of this policy in the case of China. There are signs of easing tensions, though — as of February 2020, Tencent has resumed streaming NBA games (Kludt 2020). The Chinese consul general expressed gratitude for the league's \$1.4 million donations to Hubei Province, the epicentre of the Coronavirus pandemic (Kludt 2020). The future of this tenuous relationship depends on China's response to difference.

Conclusion

The global cultural flow of 'America' has a strong presence in the mediascape of the transnational corporation NBA. The league has hegemonised basketball and latches onto the cultural icons of 'America' and the 'American dream' to cater to global audiences. A study of NBA broadcasts in the UK reveals the varied tactics employed to present the basketball league as a global, superior, American product. A closer look at this product reveals its capitalist and liberal brand image, a result of its marketing as an American commodity-sign. These observations explain the corporation's behaviour in its most controversial period owing to its stand-off with China. This perspective not only strengthens our observations but also sheds some new light on the incident.

More importantly, the enquiry into the China controversy aids our understanding of both the place sports occupies in global politics and how it reflects global politics. The gradual acquiescence of China and the NBA's clampdown on speech surrounding Hong Kong are indicators of the negotiation between the global and the local. In the end, these negotiations are a function of power differentials. The global is powerful. The power of the global, in this case, the NBA, stems from the "specific charisma of a particular sport and nation" (Falcous and Maguire, 74) However, no matter how influential the outsider has to make concessions to the indigenous. The degree of these concessions depends on the power of the local. While this model can be useful to study a lot of processes linked to globalisation, this paper outlines the scope of sports to study the global-local dichotomy and cultural flows.

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[1] A feature of realism is maintaining the level of inquiry at the nation-state and looking at the actions of these countries in the international sphere. This approach has been touted as the billiard ball or black box approach as realism refuses to look inside a nation-state. Sports has also been seen in the same perspective and therefore the study of international tournaments and events like the Olympics or the World Cup has dominated enquiry in this field.

[2] Arjun Appadurai proposed an elementary framework to study the complex field of global culture and posited five dimensions of global cultural flow which he termed as ethnoscapas, technoscapas, finanscapas, mediascapas and ideoscapas. The meaning of a mediascape will be explained later.

[3] A commodity sign is an image that "crosses and re-crosses linguistic frontiers much more rapidly and more easily and which speaks across languages in a much more immediate way" (Hall 1991:27).