

Beyond The Silver Screen

As the Ivy League Digital Network eyes expansion in its second year, a question has arisen: how can the network balance its revenue-bearing identity with its self-prescribed objective of increasing viewership?

BY CALEB LEE AND FORREST K. LEWIS, CRIMSON STAFF WRITERS

After faking a lateral pass to her teammate, sophomore flyhalf Taciana Pereira saw a small window of opportunity and took it, sprinting from the 22-yard line to put the Harvard women's rugby team up, 43-0, against Cornell.

Over 4,000 miles away in Curitiba, Brazil, Pereira's mother, father, aunts, uncle, and cousins—streaming the September match live through an Ivy League Digital Network subscription—cheered and rejoiced with an enthusiasm that transcended that of the fans at Cumnock Field. They celebrated as Pereira pointed squarely at the rolling camera, dedicating the try to her family back home.

Just over 13 months ago, neither Harvard varsity women's rugby nor a centralized Ivy League streaming service existed. Now, as the Ivy League Digital Network enters its second year, women's rugby, men's squash, and women's squash join 24 other Crimson teams livestreamed across the country and around the world.

“People in my family who would have never heard about rugby are now watching it because I'm playing, and they actually enjoy it,” Pereira said. “So I think [the network] has a great impact on people around the world.”

Yet, as the breakthrough subscription-based offering continues to expand, the network's goal of providing accessible and standardized viewership comes at a significant cost. Harvard athletics—the nation's largest sports program with 42 varsity teams—has reported a net monetary loss for the service.

Widely viewed games, such as those of the **Harvard-Yale** football rivalry and the **March Madness** basketball tournament, currently fall under the purview of larger networks like NBC Sports and CBS, depriving the network of potentially substantial gains in revenue from single-day subscription sales. Furthermore, the network's **\$71.95** single-school yearly

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SETTING STANDARDS

When the Ivy League Digital Network **premiered** 23 live events during its inaugural weekend in Sept. 2013, the conference-wide streaming service was significant, but not unprecedented. Predating the ILDN, Harvard had partnered with network provider Stretch Internet to stream varsity sporting events online, using a similar pricing structure to the ILDN offerings. However, as consolidated networks in other sports conferences around the nation debuted, it became clear that the Ancient Eight was ready for unification.

“The question is what is good for the fans,” explained Imry Halevi, the director of multimedia and production for Harvard athletics. “If you have a fan of Harvard football, the best solution for them is to go one place to watch all Harvard football games—not to go to our website for home games and go to the Yale website for the Yale game if they’re hosting.”



The Pereira family gathers each week in Curitiba, Brazil to watch Taciana play rugby a continent away. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ivy League Executive Director Robin Harris said the mission to enhance the fan experience began four years ago as the eight athletic directors communed with the intention of joining the band of rivals under one digital heading. The talks accelerated as nationally televised appearances and victories by Cornell and Harvard in the NCAA men's basketball tournament brought in monetary bonuses, which were then earmarked by the committee for the creation of what would become the ILDN.

Harris, the athletic directors of each Ivy League institution, and other league office members sitting on the pragmatically-named and newly formed Digital Strategy Committee sifted through the various requests for proposal sitting on their desks, a familiar face caught the committee's eye.

Before 2013, Columbia, Dartmouth, Penn, and Princeton had already employed the company NeuLion as their network of choice. Beyond the basic features of the previous networks, NeuLion offered extras that gave fans what Harris described as “the best technology out there” in their request for proposal and subsequent negotiations.

For Craig and Michele Rea—who had watched their daughter, senior field hockey player Caitlin Rea, for two years with Stretch Internet from their home in Manchester, England—the switch to NeuLion and the ILDN has offered a significant improvement to their viewing experience.

“The quality has vastly improved since the switch to the Ivy League Digital Network,” the pair wrote in an email. “The filming is better, the resolution is better, and now there is very well-informed commentary.”

In exchange for the infrastructure, marketing, and customer service contributions that NeuLion provides, the service receives 50 percent of the money brought in through subscriptions. The remainder is distributed to the respective schools based on the percentage of overall subscribers the school is responsible for.

At Harvard, Halevi said that all funds received are reinvested directly back into the network, paying for expenditures such as the salaries of the 40-odd part-time employees charged with operating all of the technical equipment used to broadcast sporting events.

But just as the number of live-streamed sports and events continues to rise, so, too, does the cost.

Athletic programs among the Ancient Eight operate on budgets Harris characterized as “already stretched pretty thin.” The implementation and production costs associated with the ILDN have not helped the situation. Additionally, internal talks of infrastructural expansion and further partnerships with restrictive national streaming services indicate the network is likely to put a greater strain on finances in the future.

Now two months into the second year of the ILDN, the league appears to be looking in only one direction and its members seem relatively unconcerned about the financial implications of its current model.

Making money, according to Halevi, was never in the blueprints.

“Harvard spends more money on the digital network than it brings in,” Halevi said. “Which is fine—that’s not a problem.”

Referring to the ILDN as a service to Harvard fans, Halevi stood firm in assuring that losing money is a risk that Crimson athletics—which foots the bill and compensates for the lack of profits—is willing to take.

“Our goal is for people to get the service that they want and make sure they can follow our teams,” Halevi said. “We’re not striving toward breaking even at this point.”

Harris said that she is excited by the results across the board, regardless of the revenue numbers. She noted that the ILDN streamed over 1,000 events during its first year, accumulating more than 17,000 subscribers, 450,000 unique visitors, and 3,000,000 page views.

“We exceeded all of our expectations—every single one of them,” Harris said. “We’ve been thrilled—the network has been well-received by subscribers, and we’re thrilled with the production quality.”

existence, the network has made it a priority to get the word out, whether through emailed newsletters or marketing on the GoCrimson athletics website.

“Growing the awareness is really critical, since we’re still very new,” said Susan Byrne, associate director of athletics for marketing and sales at Harvard. “We’re trying to get more customer service, more content out there...and then try to fine tune the whole customer service aspect of it.”

While viewership data from individual schools and sports is not publicly available, Halevi revealed that he is aware of certain trends at Harvard.

“In general, the sports that draw more in-venue attendance tend to be watched more online,” Halevi said. “Football, basketball, hockey, and lacrosse get more online viewers. The other sports get nice viewership, more than we had in the past.”

Although Harvard’s more widely demanded sporting events could offer significant profit potential from single-day passes, the athletics department has opted to focus on disseminating its broadcast on a wider scale rather than on the finances of the venture. Nine of Harvard’s sporting events for the 2014-2015 academic year will be simulcast on ESPN3, allowing fans who do not already have season passes for the ILDN to have the option of either purchasing a timed online pass or watching the event through their cable provider free of charge.

Though Halevi could not confirm that simulcasting sporting events on ESPN3 diverted page views from the ILDN website, he said that it is “logical to assume” that some interested fans may opt for the free television option as an alternative to buying an online pass.

And according to Halevi, the network sees no flaw in that structure.

And if we get more viewers when we have a game both on the digital network and on ESPN3, that's a good deal for us."

Streaming games through ESPN3 has also been an opportunity to introduce the network to national viewers, which acts as free advertising for the ILDN.

"[ESPN3] is a terrific opportunity to feature the network and showcase it to fans that haven't subscribed yet," Harris said. "The hope is that fans will tune in and watch the football game and then say, 'Wow, this is great production, I'm going to subscribe [to the ILDN] so I can watch the other games this year.'"

However, as the ILDN looks to expand its reach beyond ESPN3 to other national networks with larger spotlights, the Ancient Eight institutions are confronted with self-imposed legality issues as they find themselves without the streaming rights to many of their own high-attendance games.

Harvard's most widely-attended ticketed athletic event—The Game—is not streamed on the ILDN. Instead, the rights are leased out to NBC Sports, which brings in its own camera crew and production truck, running the show without any of Harvard's infrastructure.

Similarly, the CBS network reserves the streaming rights to the entire men's March Madness basketball tournament and the ILDN cannot follow Harvard basketball once it leaves Lavietes Pavillion for the Big Dance.

In addition to the solidified relationships with NBC and CBS, Harvard is making strides to connect its resources to a broader fan base. Recently, the Athletics Department announced that the New England Sports Network will be streaming five of its events throughout the year using the ILDN equipment and crew. However, the recordings will not be uploaded to the ILDN website until 48 hours after the initial broadcast, potentially impacting fans who live outside of the NESN coverage area and are hoping to watch a live stream of the events.

In an emailed statement to The Crimson translated from Portuguese, Pereira's mother Andressa Pereira credited the ILDN for having a significant influence on the family during her daughter's time away from home.

"Being connected to [her] in these moments makes us, even from afar, take part in her routine, like in games when we see each play that she makes," Andressa wrote in an e-mail. "I regard this as extremely important to support her, and it even makes us feel a bit better about how much we miss her."

Thus far, NeuLion has met every expectation that that the committee and the Ivy office has laid out, rolling out new technical enhancements in year one such as a single screen, quad-view option that allows subscribers to watch multiple contests at once. And as NeuLion, Harris, and the Ivy League office continue working toward "improving the fan experience"—rolling out Twitter integration earlier this year, for example—all parties affirm viewers are the number one priority.

But although the targeted fans are benefiting from the improved quality and infrastructural expansions of the ILDN, many undergraduates who have not purchased ILDN passes benefit more when external sources broadcast the events. When Harvard men's basketball advances to March Madness, Harvard students can view the action for free through Philo or CBS programming on cable television.

In the case of many of the earlier season basketball games against fellow Ivy League schools—which often attract fewer student viewers than March Madness—Harvard students need to buy subscriptions from the ILDN website to watch their peers compete.

As the network transitions into its second year, the question of how to market the network to the Harvard undergraduate population is on the minds of many.

In the initial talks preceding the network's launch, the athletic directors and Ivy League officials discussed offering the network free of charge to the Harvard student population,

“It’s not that it’s not a priority, it’s just not what the league is doing right now,” Halevi said. “At this time, the athletic directors decided they would like to charge money.”

Further complicating any proposals to alter the current system is that it would take more than just Harvard’s desire for the network to be offered free for students for such a change to go into effect.

“Harvard is one-eighth of the [conference], so it would really have to be something that all the teams in the Ivy League could gather on and decide that this would be the best way to get some exposure,” Byrne said.

While future Ivy League conversations may address the question of student viewer accessibility, Byrne noted that serious league-wide consideration of a free subscription offering for students won’t happen until the Digital Network has established itself. For now, \$71.95 yearlong and \$9.95 single-day subscription fees will continue to be the option for all viewers.

“Down the road, with increased funding, we might want to go to a free model, as opposed to a subscription model,” Byrne said. “That certainly has been discussed, and our biggest goal in all of this is to give exposure to our sports. The best marketing might be offering that at no cost to the consumer.”

Harris seemed less optimistic about the prospects for immediate changes to student membership fees, citing “no effective way to do it because if we gave [students] a code, it would get out and everyone would have it.”

“We think the price is...quite moderate, but we know that students are on student budgets,” Harris added.

students. Having achieved recognition as having one of the most successful Division III athletic programs in the nation, Williams viewed the lack of cost as essential for fan satisfaction.

“When we sat down and figured out just how many people live at a distance that they can’t comfortably come and see their son or daughters compete, it became more of a service rather than a chance to make money,” said Dick Quinn, associate director of communications for sports information at Williams.

While the athletic directors and members of the Ivy League office alike reacted positively to the idea of providing the network to students at a free or discounted price, it’s still unclear how much exposure or how many subscribers would be enough to push for such a change.

In an email to The Crimson, Harvard Athletic Director Robert L. Scalise echoed Byrne’s statements, and said that Harvard is at the forefront of potential movements to consider a subsidized ILDN for fans.

“We are working with the league to lower the costs for all subscribers to the Ivy League Digital Network and will be happy to propose the idea of a free subscription for all current students,” Scalise said. “We feel that having the broadest exposure possible for our contests is preferred over pursuing a revenue maximization goal.”

“Not everyone in the league currently agrees, but we will do our best to advocate for what we feel is right and fair,” Scalise added.

Byrne said that although reduced costs may be years in the making, Harvard and the Ivy League will take students’ perspectives into account when making plans for alterations within the ILDN.

response we're getting from the subscription model. And if we can start getting some interest and some numbers generated with the subscription, then down the road...perhaps then we're able to consider a free model."

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