

Study and Development Fellowship for Sessional Lecturers (CUPE 3913 Unit 2), Winter 2020 Final Report

Sometimes the best discoveries come about by accident. When I embarked up on this project I was surprised where it ended up taking me. Before discussing the specifics of my journey, I would like to thank the Study and Development Fellowship Committee for providing me with this opportunity. This fellowship has allowed me to sharpen my skills as a researcher and as an instructor. I have grown tremendously from this experience and most importantly, my students are benefiting from the results of my research.

Pre-Proposal

One of my research interests has been sports in general and the Super Bowl in particular. I believe that the world of sports provides a unique window into our culture. For many years, I have provided a basic lecture on sports and culture for my Media Perception and Power course (MDST 3040) at the University of Guelph-Humber. With a curriculum change, this course saw its title change to Power, Culture and the Individual and the delivery converted from in-class to distance education. After making the initial transition to distance education, it became apparent to me that a discussion of sports with a wider scope and breadth would be beneficial to my students.

My goal for this project was to use the Super Bowl as a focal point for a new component for Power, Culture and the Individual. The Super Bowl has become one of the largest spectacles in the world. It not only reflects American culture and values but can be used to help reveal power structures that exist in our society. According to Richard Giulianotti, "sport spectators maintain the social order by paying admission, cheering the athletes, and consuming merchandise; they undermine social order through 'excessive' behaviour that offends dominant groups and by creating 'subcultures' that castigate sports authorities," (Giulianotti 44).

More specifically, this project attempted to better understand the impact of the Super Bowl pre-game show. Television drives professional football and the NFL. The latest set of broadcasting contracts which take effect in the 2022 season and last through the 2033 season will earn the NFL over 100 billion dollars. In an age of cord-cutting and fragmentation of television audiences, broadcasters can rely on the NFL to deliver among the largest audiences. The Super Bowl broadcast consistently attracts the largest audiences of the year for the American network that carries the game (CNBC and Variety).

The Super Bowl is well known for promoting American values and consumerism. For this project, my goal was to analyze how the various networks that carry the Super Bowl pre-game show accomplish this. For example, many Super Bowl pre-game show broadcasts begin by claiming that Super Bowl Sunday is an unofficial holiday. Both DJ Khaled and host James Brown used this language during the opening of the Super Bowl LIV broadcast. NBC's Dick Enberg referred to the Super Bowl as "an unannounced American holiday," at the start of the Super Bowl pre-game show for Super Bowl XX in 1986.

This project would require a content analysis of Super Bowl pre-game show broadcasts. When I embarked on this project, my plan was to shot list as many Super Bowl pre-game show broadcasts as possible and try to better understand what themes the main networks NBC, CBS and FOX emphasized. My expectations were that I would find a heavy emphasis on consumerism and American values. And this was certainly the case.

Post-Proposal

It quickly became apparent that the Super Bowl pre-game show broadcast contains a number of different themes and is actually used in different ways by different broadcasters. After conducting a content analysis of a number of Super Bowl pre-game broadcasts, my thesis for this project needed to be refined. There is no question that the Super Bowl pre-game show continues to embody consumerism and American values. But it has become more complex than that. In fact, it is my belief that the three main networks that have carried the Super Bowl in recent years use this broadcast for the same broad purpose which is to earn advertising revenue. The most recent Super Bowl broadcast on NBC in 2022 earned over 6 million dollars for a single 30 second commercial (Steinberg).

What is even most interesting, is how each of the three networks use the Super Bowl pre-game show broadcast in subtler ways. In recent years, NBC and CBS are increasingly viewing this broadcast as a way of promoting other properties owned by their corporate parents. This is nothing new, but the size and scope of this exploitation has changed – and it's integrated into the actual content of the program. During NBC's Super Bowl pre-game show for LII in 2022, there were at least eight different segments that promoted the network's coverage of the upcoming Winter Olympics. In fact, NBC and CBS swapped Super Bowl broadcasts so each could better take advantage of future promotional opportunities and avoid competing with another in certain areas.

On NBC's pre-game show broadcast for Super Bowl LII, the network showcased both of its late night hosts, Jimmy Fallon and Seth Myers, promoted its coverage of NASCAR, and included a segment on one of its dramas, *This is Us*. The Weather Channel, a partner of NBC's parent Comcast, was also featured with one of its most prominent hosts Jim Cantore providing a detailed weather forecast for Minneapolis, even though the game would be played indoors. Comcast properties were repeatedly utilized during the 4 ½ hour broadcast. Telemundo's World Cup coverage was promoted and David Feherty of the Golf Channel even made an appearance.

When CBS hosts the pre-game show, a similar approach is taken although more integration is included with advertisers. The network showcases its late night hosts such as James Corden as well as Cedric the Entertainer, one of the stars of a CBS Sitcom. During the last two Super Bowl pre-game show broadcasts, Pizza Hut has been involved directly in the content with talent from CBS. Cast members of *Magnum PI* appeared during one broadcast discussing Super Bowl snacks, which included Pizza Hut. In another segment, play-by-play announcer Jim Nantz and Nate Burleson discussed Super Bowl preparations while snacking on pizza provided by the sponsor.

Making maximum use of synergy appears to be key for NBC and CBS. For NBC, the use of synergy appears to be prioritized towards properties that are either part of NBC or part of the Comcast family. CBS also attempts to utilize as much cross promotion as possible, but makes a considerable effort to integrate advertisers into the program content too.

FOX network uses many of the same techniques that NBC and CBS utilize. And as is the case with CBS, FOX also uses sponsors during the program's content. The network has also included a promotional opportunity with the main talent and Pizza Hut. But the network also appears to take on a more patriotic tone during its pre-game show broadcast. For example, a tradition on FOX's pre-game show

since the 9/11 attacks is to broadcast a well edited reading of the Declaration of Independence as read by a number of celebrities, political figures and FOX broadcasters.

All of the broadcasters who air the Super Bowl for American television continue to promote American values and consumerism. This has not changed over time. But it is clear after conducting a content analysis of recent Super Bowl broadcasts is that utilizing synergies to promote other platforms that are part of the parent corporation and advertisers in a more assertive way has become normalized. Given the audiences that Super Bowls provide for the networks that carry them, networks must take advantage of these increasingly rare opportunities for a shared experience.

Achievements and Reflections

Again, I must express my gratitude to Study and Development Fellowship Committee for providing me with the opportunity to conduct original research and explore this extremely interesting area. This research has informed my teaching and formed the basis of the unit for my course: Power, Culture and the Individual (MDST 3040).

In July, I will be presenting my findings in person at the Thirteenth International Conference on Sport & Society in Aarhus, Denmark. I am very excited to have been given the opportunity to present at one of the most prestigious conferences in the area of sports scholarship. Again, this would not be possible without receiving this fellowship. It is my hope that the feedback provided by the many senior scholars in attendance will provide additional insights as I continue my research on the Super Bowl.

It is my belief that I have only scratched the surface in this most fascinating and important area of research. I hope in this brief report that I have demonstrated the value of conducting original research on the Super Bowl in a way that has academic rigor but is also accessible to students. I expect to build on the work I've done during this fellowship in the years to come.

Works Cited

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