

Watching the Super Bowl, An American Ritual

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1. Introduction

The Super Bowl is the final game of a National Football League (NFL) season, played every year in either late January or early February. The coverage of the event is rotated among major American television networks (currently NBC, CBS, and Fox) and generates a large audience. While the game itself remains a main attraction, the Super Bowl is no longer a mere sporting event. The NFL, its business partners, and the worldwide audience have turned it into a cultural symbol representing America.

Started in 1967, the annual event is relatively young, which is surprising given that it is already enjoying a status of being one of the most prominent American cultural traditions, with some calling it "America's last truly communal experience" (Gardner and Guthrie, 2013). Super Bowl Sunday, a name referring to the day of the Super Bowl game, is discussed often as a *de facto* American national holiday, and there is even a

grass-root discussion of turning the Monday after Super Bowl an American national holiday so that American people can enjoy a day of rest after a day of feasts (Hopper, 2013). Next to Thanksgiving and Christmas, Super Bowl Sunday is probably the most observed holiday for American people. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), it is the American food day second only to Thanksgiving, with chicken wings, potato chips, and vegetables being the most popular items ("Chicken Wings," 2012).

Then what is the appeal of this particular event so that even people who do not watch a single minute of American football all season gather at a restaurant or at a friend's home to consume food and watch the event? It might be somewhat puzzling to people outside the United States as, even though the Super Bowl constantly attracts a large global audience every year, there are other sporting events that match its popularity such as the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup of soccer, and even the annual European club soccer competition UEFA Champions League.

They might also be surprised to learn that, according to *Forbes* magazine, the Super Bowl is the most valuable sporting event brand in the world (Ozanian, 2011). For instance, NBC television network earned an advertising revenue of \$245 million dollars in 2012, selling out 70 spots at the average price of \$3.5 million per advertisement. Even at the high price, advertisers and analysts agreed that the price was still a bargain (Smith, 2012; Thompson, 2013).

This essay will first define the annual Super Bowl as a major media event with various short-term and long-term social consequences, and will investigate how this event has become a media spectacle presenting America and its culture to the worldwide audience. Then it will consider the possibility of various interpretive communities existing for the Super Bowl, contradicting the single media event perspective, and suggest

possible research ideas.

2. The Super Bowl - an All-American Media Event

The conceptualization of media events first took place at a time when scholars studying mass media from two vastly different perspectives—critical cultural studies and functional media effects studies—started asking the same question about the active interpretive role of the audience and the location of meaning in the media communication process. So it was Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz—two scholars from seemingly opposite academic traditions—who got together and proposed a comprehensive framework for analyzing various communication activities surrounding a media event, defined as live, unscripted, but preplanned events that attract huge audiences (Dayan and Katz, 1992; p. 5).

Adopting a Jewish metaphor of high holidays, a term referring to a Jewish New Year period during which people collectively spend ten days of personal reflection and repentance, Dayan and Katz (1992; p. 1) saw media events as rituals conducted in front of the television sets in millions of families. In other words, an act of watching a Super Bowl game, for instance, is a type of ritualistic behavior conducted in front of home television screen. If so, the home television sets connect many people in different places, and serves to remind the audiences that they are part of a large, global community. According to Nielsen (“Super Bowl”), more than 40% of the Americans tune into a Super Bowl telecast each year, and most of them watch it with friends, families, and relatives. Furthermore, they watch it with millions of strangers with whom they share the same experience for a few hours every year. Real (1982) contends the viewers

as ritual participants are very much aware that millions of people are witnessing the very same event in the stadium or at homes across the nation and even the globe.

Then people become virtual participants in these media events through the act of watching on television. In other words, the site of an event is not necessarily confined to a stadium, but expands to include private homes as part of the public space, which is an important function of media events. This fact is probably not lost on the NFL and its broadcast partners, co-organizers of the annual *ritual*. One of the most prominent features of the Super Bowl, or any prominent American sporting event, is the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner," the American national anthem. The organizers afford a due measure of reverence to the coverage of this portion of the event, which takes place just before the game begins, and remind the audience of the presence of the national community. In addition, several fighter jets from the U.S. Air Force fly over the stadium, in a show of patriotic display, immediately after the rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner." The Super Bowl then is an *American* ritual.

Thus, one can reasonably expect this American ritual to show American-ness, the values and qualities unique to the national culture. A few studies (Real; O'Donnell & Spires, 2011) have tackled this issue, and some of the common values and features we can find from the event include community, opportunity, competition, individuality, and excitement. These values are reflected in the media coverage before, during and after the event. The performance of the national anthem, usually by a world-famous popular music artist, is scrutinized in private homes and public forums for both its quality and fidelity to the spirit of the original rendition.

2.1. Preparing for the Event

The Super Bowl is prepared on three levels: by the NFL and the host community, by the broadcasters, and by American families. The NFL's preparation begins with the selection of the event site, which is determined at least four years in advance. Cities make bids to host the event, and NFL team owners assess the bids by evaluating issues such as stadium quality, security, guest accommodation capacity, parking facilities, and restaurants (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 83).

Then, the winner city's organizing committee begins the event preparation process. The Super Bowl in 2014 was played at the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey (the home of two NFL teams, the New York Giants and the New York Jets) on February 2, and in October, 2013 the committee conducted a power supply simulation test at the site to make sure the facility can handle a vast load of electricity that will be in use for the event ("MetLife"). To accommodate various media interests surrounding the event, the NFL annually hosts Super Bowl Media Day, which itself attracts additional media coverage, building up excitement for the event. In addition, local news media often provide coverage on the preparation process well in advance of the event (Myers, 2013).

An article in the *Hollywood Reporter* (Gardner and Guthrie, 2013) describes a typical preparation process for broadcasters. CBS, carrying this year's edition of the Super Bowl, spent close to three million dollars to produce the telecast. The network sent 500 employees and 70 television cameras. Additionally, fifteen shows from the network's various media divisions (news, daytime, late night, syndication, cable, radio, and online) produced episodes from the site of the event in New Orleans, Louisiana.

One of the more interesting aspects of media events, according to Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 15), was how they help realize many possibilities

promised by electronic media technology, and the Super Bowl offers a good example. The U.S. television networks have been competing in what one would call “an innovative arms race” for years to improve the quality of the event telecast. To wit, they have invested greatly in developing new broadcast technologies such as slow motion cameras, instant replay systems, and graphic display systems. For example, one year it is NBC introducing NAC Hi-Motion II ultra-slow-motion cameras, and then the next year CBS is celebrating the development of “hEYEper Zoom” high-frame-rate, 4K replay and zoom camera systems (Gardner and Guthrie, 2013). As a result, viewers at home benefit. NBCEE It, an instant replay system developed for NBC, allows the commentators announcing the game to magnify a picture themselves (without having to instruct the technicians) to provide a detailed look for the viewers (Repanich, 2012).

Similar to how networks prepare for the Super Bowl by employing new equipments for their broadcasts, many American families prepare for the Super Bowl event by “outfitting” their homes with new TV sets and communication devices. Typically, the week before the Super Bowl is one of the most popular weeks to buy television. Families hosting Super Bowl parties will consider upgrading to a new set and buying related devices such as surround sound system, universal remote control device, and high-definition BluRay players. Also, the sales of computers and communication devices go up at this time as more and more viewers are using them to enhance their viewing experience by getting statistical updates and by chatting with friends in different locations (Jefferson, 2008; F1).

Some fans prepare for the Super Bowl by wagering on the game. Gambling is clearly a part of the Super Bowl experience as sports fans bet millions of dollars on the game. According to the Nevada Gaming Control Board, sports fans bet 98.9 million dollars on Super Bowl XLVII between

the Baltimore Ravens and the San Francisco 49ers at various Nevada casinos (Dreier, 2013). The number probably represents only a small portion of the amount of bets Americans placed on the game, with one report estimating the amount bet in Nevada to be one percent of the total, done mostly illegally (Hairopoulos, 2011). One may call these betting activities a cultural sign showing how Americans value competition. The spirit of competition even extends to the politics as governors of the states the teams of which play in the Super Bowl traditionally trade bets with each other, with the winner claiming a prize unique to the loser's state (Duncan, 2013).

2.2. Courting the Big Audience - Entertainment and Marketing

The Super Bowl is no longer just a football game. Football was the only concern at the beginning, but the game's huge popularity has made the Super Bowl evolve over the years to become a multifaceted media showcase for sports, entertainment, and marketing. Attention to Super Bowl commercials and halftime shows featuring world-famous musical acts often rivals interests in the game itself. Some viewers even tune in to see which celebrities are watching the game on the stands as the television networks and movie studios use the opportunity to promote entertainment programs and their stars. For instance, CBS invited celebrities such as Neil Patrick Harris (a star of *How I Met Your Mother*), Lucy Liu (*Elementary*), and Daniel Dae Kim (*Hawaii Five-O*) to watch the game live. During the game telecast, they would be seen to millions of viewers watching at home and the announcers would mention their television shows (Gardner and Guthrie).

Advertisers pay over \$3 million on average for the privilege of airing

their commercials during the Super Bowl (Smith, 2012). Journalists and academics alike have asked questions whether the high cost could be justified, looking at issues such as advertising exposure, short-term sales performance, and investment decision (Kim, et al. 2013). For instance, a study analyzing the performance of Hollywood films advertised during Super Bowl telecasts revealed that the advertised films performed noticeably better than comparable, in terms of budget, films that were not advertised (Yelkur, et al. 2004). Another study found that Super Bowl advertising was positively related to abnormal stock returns for advertisers, which should have contributed to the value of the advertising cost (Kim, et al. 2013; p. 144).

The content of the commercials is a popular topic of discussion. Thompson (2013) notes that people actually feel compelled to talk about advertising once a year at around the Super Bowl, while they actively try to ignore advertising at other times of the year. This makes the sporting event play the double role as the advertising event of the year. Commercials are probably the primary attraction that convinces most of the women audiences to tune in. They are also the main attraction for worldwide audiences not interested in American football. For instance, newspapers in Korea are far more likely to run stories about Super Bowl commercials (especially those produced to advertise products made by Korean companies such as Kia, Hyundai, and Samsung) than they are to write features about the actual game and the participating players. In recent years, social media discussion on Super Bowl commercials has gained such importance that advertisers are paying attention to how their commercials are rated by social media commentators (Learmonth et al. 2012). All these mentions of commercials probably are asking us to consider whether the discourse of advertising and marketing leads to a celebration of affluence as a genuine American value, as once argued by

O'Donnell and Spires (2011).

While the celebration of American wealth is an important theme in understanding Super Bowl commercials, most people watching will probably do so for fun, another unquestionable American value. *USA Today's* Ad Meter, an annual focus group survey evaluating Super Bowl commercials, is known for its influence in persuading advertisers to use fun and humor as the main themes for their commercials. Many expert observers have commented that the change in themes was made due to high Ad Meter scores consistently received by humorous commercials (Kim et al.). As McCallister (1999) observed, Super Bowl advertising is probably as much an entertainment medium as a marketing medium (p. 410).

Fun is a theme for another mainstay of the Super Bowl, the halftime entertainment. While a normal football game assigns 15 minutes to halftime activities, the Super Bowl doubles the amount of time to leave room for an elaborate entertainment extravaganza. Because the exposure of the event always leads to an increase in sales, popular artists such as Madonna, Beyonce, and the Black Eyed Peas are happy to perform about five songs for 12 to 15 minutes while the football players rest in their locker rooms. Hiring a performer "who will resonate around the world" (according to Lawrence Randall, NFL's programming and entertainment director) is a relatively recent practice for the broadcast carrier to keep the audience who would otherwise change channels to watch other networks' counter-programming watching the halftime show (Gardner and Guthrie, 2013).

2.3. Assessing the Super (Bowl) Influences

The Super Bowl may have begun as a mere sporting event, but it has become a major event that showcases many aspects of the American

society. While it is difficult to pinpoint when and how this happened, the popularity of the sport itself probably attracted other elements to make the Super Bowl a huge media spectacle. Dayan and Katz's book (1992) presents a comprehensive analytic framework to explain various impacts of media events, and it can easily be applied to analyzing the Super Bowl's influences. For instance, they argue that media events improve the image of the host community, and studies have consistently documented how hosting a major sporting event help enhance community reputation (Manheim, 1990) even though its discernable economic benefit is questionable with both positive (Humphreys, 1994; NFL, 1999) and negative (Matheson and Baade, 2006) findings being reported. If the study results suggest anything, it is that the impact of major media sporting events such as the Super Bowl, the World Cup, and the Olympic Games is difficult to measure with numbers.

Another important impact media events have on society is how the format of covering the events live can affect people's way of thinking and their collective memories. The scholars theorize that reverence and seriousness with which broadcasters cover these media events encourage viewers, often successfully, to accept the stories they receive in the format delivered. Television cameras covering a media event often "select and highlight" symbolic details" to deliver a ritualistic experience to the viewers (Cui, 2013; p. 1226). To achieve continuity in images, then, broadcasters need to anticipate what will happen during the event, which is of course difficult due to the fact that the sporting events cannot be scripted completely. However, the Super Bowl broadcasters do have the luxury of drawing from previous years' experience and conduct a thorough rehearsal a few days before the event every year (Gardner and Guthrie, 2013; Repanich, 2012).

Years of similar ritualistic coverage of the Super Bowl have produced a

format regular viewers—that is, most American people and more elsewhere—can anticipate every year: a few hours of pre-game coverage with human-interest feature stories and live music, the pre-game ceremony with a patriotic theme (the presentation of military colors, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” fighter jets, etc.), the first half of the game, halftime activities centered around a big musical extravaganza, the second half of the game, and an episode of a program the broadcasting network wishes to promote that year. Throughout the telecast, the viewers will be treated to symbolic images and commentaries suggesting such diverse, but predictable, American values as opportunity, competition, individualism, community, excitement, and patriotism (Martin and Reeves, 2001; O’Donnell and Spires). Dayan and Katz (1992) adds that exposures to various media events can trigger the process of editing and re-editing so that symbols and ritualistic comments become what the audience automatically expects.

2.4. Observing From an Audience Perspective

One of the most common criticisms about the Dayan and Katz framework is that their vision assigns a rather simple and homogeneous role to the audience (Scannel, 1995). To be considered as a media event, an event must have a sense of centrality and significance attached (Dekavalla, 2012). That is, the event must matter to those who watch it on television. For that matter, Dayan and Katz first saw powerful media events having great impact not only on the participants (organizers, television companies, and the audience) while the event is under way but also on various social institutions and issues after the event. While we can find several pieces of evidence supporting such argument (Cui, 2003; Tomlinson, 1996), one could also argue that such views are only applicable

to those in the audience willing to accept them at face value.

From a cultural studies perspective, even the act of acceptance itself can be interpreted as an active choice the audience makes rather than a passive reception of the message. Even the message itself is open to various active interpretations, independent of the intended meaning prepared by the producers (Fiske, 1998). In other words, rather than stating that a media event attracts a large audience, one should see that a large audience made up of various cultural groups—with their own viewpoints and perspectives—make the media event possible.

The above argument is especially relevant in trying to analyze the influence of a large-scale media event such as the Super Bowl. Earlier, it was noted that the attraction of the event is not necessarily in the game itself; rather, in an effort to make the event attractive to the most number of people, the NFL, the television networks, and advertisers have cooperated to create a media spectacle around which a “holiday season” has been constructed. This fact indicates that not everyone is motivated to watch the Super Bowl for the same set of reasons. While one can point to the relative irrelevance of American football in most countries outside the United States and scope at the notion that the Super Bowl is a global event, as Martin and Reeves (2001) did quite effectively, it would be unreasonable to disregard the great level of interests the *other side* of the Super Bowl (that is, advertising and entertainment) generates worldwide.

John Fiske, in his book *Television Culture* (1987), called television an open text: the audience is often left to insert its own interpretations to stories because of the breaks in storyline created from the disruption of continuity due to commercials and episode breaks (for serial programs). Thus, he also called television a “producerly” text since the viewers should bring their own discursive competence to associate their own meanings with the information on television screen. With the Super Bowl, this type

of analysis takes on an interesting angle as we have people patiently waiting for the breaks in continuity so that they can enjoy the commercials. In addition, one can often find some attending a Super Bowl party making humorous comments about the game as they find something from the information to make fun of. Usually, it is the ritualistic and serious manner in which the event is covered by television that allows people to have oppositional, critical responses. This is an example of what Fiske calls “semiotic excess”—hints contained in the message that allow people to come up with several, often unusual, responses.

Whereas the studies and analyses on the impact of the Super Bowl as a media event remain valid, we need more studies analyzing the viewing experience and the discourse afterward to understand truly the entire scope of the event’s influences. Stanley Fish (1980) used the term “interpretive community” to refer to a group of readers and viewers developing similar interpretations of a media text due to similar interests and experiences. For instance, viewers watching Fox Television’s animated comedy *The Simpsons* were once studied as an example of interpretive community in an in-depth analysis by Jonathan Gray (2006). Noting that the 35 viewers in the central London area liked the program because of its open nature (that is, its openness to various interpretations), Gray thought that the particular interpretive community he studied especially enjoyed the program’s nonstop, merciless parodies on various social problems because the viewers themselves were tired of those issues. A similar study could be conducted to learn about various forms of interpretive communities for the Super Bowl.

3. Conclusion

Super Bowl Sunday is a day when all activities—mostly watching television, consuming food, and talking to friends and relatives—center around an event happening at a faraway place. That creates an illusion that everyone is sharing the same communal, ritualistic experience that will resonate. Dayan and Katz thought this presented the society as a whole a unique opportunity to reflect on its nature and argued that the ultimate function of media events is to reaffirm the status quo by celebrating it in a ceremony. If so, the Super Bowl is a celebration of various American ideals and values, but in an attempt to keep expanding its popularity and relevance, the NFL and its partners ended up creating an event that is impossible to describe in a simple manner; in other words, it is no longer effective as a simple ritual with a consistent message.

Indeed, the Super Bowl today is an event for all people: you can look at it from your own cultural vantage point and find something of interest. Those who enjoy American football—and its celebration of opportunity, hard work, and success—can concentrate on the game itself and the various strategies involved. Others can wait for commercials and halftime entertainment waiting to be humored and entertained. And, while waiting, they can make jokes about the players and the commentators, too. Those who are not part of the communal experiences of Super Bowl parties can participate through re-presentation of the event, often provided in a piecemeal fashion over the internet.

Lastly, it should be noted that the arrival of social media is making it more convenient for scholars to observe actively these interpretive communities. There are certainly many challenges. Issues regarding ethical research conduct should be sorted out with careful discussion. How to define an interpretive community online is another issue as there could be

many Web and social media “sites” discussing similar ideas while sharing similar experiences. However, social media do allow people to record voluntarily their honest reactions to media in a natural setting, and that offers an improvement over a research setting that forced people to watch and react to a media program in a media lab.

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Abstract

Watching the Super Bowl, An American Ritual

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Super Bowl Sunday is arguably a most observed holiday for American people. The essay defines the annual Super Bowl as a major media event with various social consequences, and uses an analytic framework developed by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) to explain its influences. Then it discusses the possibility of various interpretive communities existing for this seemingly simplistic event (a football game) as elaborate planning and marketing activities appear to have made the Super Bowl telecast what John Fiske (1987; 1998) would call open text. In conclusion, the essay calls for more studies analyzing the viewing experience, as well as the discourse following the event, to understand truly the entire scope of the event's influences.

Key Words : media events, American culture, cultural studies, media studies, media rituals, Super Bowl

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