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About the (W)hoopla: A Few Pedagogical Thoughts about the Super Bowl Ritual

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About the (w)hoopla: A few pedagogical thoughts about the Super Bowl ritual.

February 8, 2010

By [Tim Anderson](#) | [22 Comments](#)



Forty four years strong with no indication of letting up, the Super Bowl is only rivaled by *A Christmas Story* and *It's A Beautiful Life* as ritual viewing in United States television. Overnights show that this year's contest was a truly massive affair as Nielsen reported that it beat the [M*A*S*H finale as the most-watched program in television history](#). Impressive as this is, I am always impressed more by how socially contentious the program is. Please note, I said program, not game. Sarah Jedd's piece about [the hype surrounding Focus on the Family's "Tim Tebow Ad"](#) is indicative of the debate concerning what should compose this televisual corpus. The least visually interesting ad of the night, the commercial's politics became visible because of the hype. It's ostensive message of "Celebrate Family, Celebrate Life" is hardly controversial. In fact, if you had not been looking for the ad, you would have probably missed it. I had to rewatch the ad online because I simply missed it when it was on and, yes, I had expected it.



Less political but just as contentious in some quarters was the inclusion of The Who as the halftime act. There are a number of reasons for this debate, including the fact that The Who haven't recorded and released any new music since 2005, and nothing of any cultural consequence since the early 1980s. As a longstanding staple of classic rock radio, the choice of The Who raised the eyebrows of many Internet critics and Twitterers. Watching the debate I couldn't get over the fact that the children of "My Generation" were skewering one of their parent's most iconic bands for being "out of touch". I don't know who should be playing the halftime show of the Super Bowl, but as far as rites go, The Who and the Super Bowl fit as well as you could expect. As comfortable as your dad/older brother's well-worn copy of *Quadrophenia*, they are one of the very few musical acts in the world that a majority of the program's listeners could say, "Yeah, I've heard of them at least once".

This kind of mass recognition is the the point of Super Bowl programming, after all. In an era of fragmentation it's the only media program left that has any kind of mass ritual component. Which, of course, is not only why so many debate its contents but why and how we, as scholars, should approach the program. So here's a few suggestions for media scholars and educator's approaching next year's event:

1) For those teaching media industries: even if you hate football and cannot stomach the thought of watching the Super Bowl, lead your students through a counterprogramming exercise. Even to the most inexperienced, it will become apparent that everything from television to local film theaters must acknowledge the presence of the 800 pound gorilla that will be SB XLV and allow you to drive home a number of points about media audiences and how media industries envision their composition and behaviors.



2) For those taking an anthropological or sociological slant on the games: A week before the game walk your students through local media sources in search of collective viewing options. This will allow you to illustrate how the program acts as a catalyst for explicit collective pleasures. See how churches, union halls, and other organizations use it as a moment to play together and ask them to discuss its importance to these groups. Also lead them to controversies where [the NFL has shut down these parties](#) and ask them to discuss how organizations vie for audiences. It will allow your students to better understand media programming act as explicit moments of sociality that sometimes confront other legal and financial aims.

3) For those teaching from a cultural studies point of view: After the program, ask students to list all of the debates that students participated in, both on and offline. If Janet Jackson and Tim Tebow have taught us anything, the Super Bowl is a moment where the connection between culture and politics become explicit. Use

the opportunity in class to reiterate the most basic of cultural studies aims and make it clear that even if you didn't watch the program, the fact that you could **not** avoid it may be the most interesting path of debate for scholars and students alike.