Handbook of Sports and Media

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Sports and Media Through the Super Glass Mirror: Placing Blame, Breast-Beating, and a Gaze to the Future

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CHAPTER 3

Sports and Media Through the Super Glass Mirror: Placing Blame, Breast-Beating, and a Gaze to the Future

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“This is another fine mess you’ve gotten me into” was the way Oliver Hardy put it to Stan Laurel on many occasions. Like Hardy, I would like to (unfairly) place blame where it is due. I may not be Stan Laurel whimpering to the most classic of Oliver Hardy’s signature lines, but I have Michael Real to blame for this “fine mess” of media and sports that he has “gotten me into.” If I hadn’t, as a graduate student, read Real’s 1975 Journal of Communication article “The Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle” as required reading in one of Sam Becker’s media and society classes, my role (and that of many others) in what is really the wonderfully “fine mess” of studying media and sport would not have been possible. Let’s place the blame where it is due, with Real. It is worth reflecting a bit on Real and one road to the present that is suggested by his work before considering the road ahead.

THE ROAD TO GETTING REAL ABOUT SPORTS AND MEDIA

In 12 pages, Real took sport and its mediation seriously, critically engaged that connection, and made linkages to the core cultural values and political sensibilities that formed the contours of national ideology in a commodified and globalized context. To my mind and to many others, Real had thrown a long forward pass. And, in an era where media scholarship had come to be aligned with an ascendant communication science, he did it without testing a hypothesis or counting anything apart from the ludicrously small amount of time the ball was actually in play during this super spectacle. Real’s larger point—that the game of mediated sport was much more than the game—stuck. That point, however obvious it may seem today, marked an important tipping point, a critical event (c.f. Kraus & Davis, 1975) for the study of media and sport. Before Real’s “Super Bowl” the mediation of sports was not part of the disciplinary conversations in either media studies or sports studies; afterwards the door had been opened and such consideration had standing, if not much immediate traction.

Looking back, what was most puzzling was how long it took for many, including myself, to catch Real’s long bomb. There were exceptions, of course (and Bryant and his colleagues were notable repeat offenders). Yet, as I have observed elsewhere (Wenner, 1989b, 1998b), the late 1970s and early 1980s saw remarkably few published studies that considered media and sport. In the academic culture of the time, the topic of sports media carried risks to undermine the credibility of the untenured. To put it another way, the “popular” was not yet popular, and there was a fear factor in approaching sport. Sport in media studies and the media in sport studies both faced disciplinary discrimination. These areas were often viewed as “not ready for prime time” and their legitimacy needed proving. The disciplinary biases paralleled the common perception in journalism that the
sports pages were the toy department of the metropolitan daily newspaper, a place where “real” journalism was not done. Similarly, in communication studies, sports were seen by many as deserving of a place at the margins as they were more “frivolous” than the discernably “serious” social effects agenda of an increasingly scientized discipline’s own quest for place in the social science community. Undoubtedly, conflated fears of scholarship infused with fanship lurked beneath the surface. While sports could be put in the toy department of media studies, media played that role in sports studies. Sport studies had its own disciplinary issues that conspired against media inquiry. Its quest for legitimacy moved from being a sideline in the often academically maligned physical education to a similar position in the area’s scientized recasting as kinesiology. In the first instance, adding media to the mix would be adding insult to injury (in terms of a seriousness to bolster disciplinary credibility), and in the second instance, media inquiry drifted further away from the core science aimed at understanding the body in movement and exercise.

As has been nicely chronicled by Trujillo (2003), there was a self-reflexive awareness amongst the early settlers (and the many want-a-bes in the closet) of sports communication. To be sure, there was an excitement amongst those gathered for a brew or two after early-in-the-game sessions on media and sport in the early and mid-1980s at meetings of the Speech Communication Association and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. But the joking about the prospects for a Sports Communication Division in one of the major communication organizations recognized that much would have to take place for sport to be taken seriously in the context of communication study. Most of us in the field of communication knew that, for the time being, the reaction we’d get back in our home academic departments would be chilly bemusement that would demand explanation. Fortunately, it was not cold for long. Once the ice was broken, much melted quickly. In hindsight, I think it helped that a distinguished group of scholars with credentials established in other areas of communication research were willing to join with me in a maiden voyage (Wenner, 1989a) that went under the title Media, Sports, and Society. With books taking so long to actually get to press, that volume’s contributors joined me on a barnstorming tour of major meetings that included the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, the International Association for Mass Communication Research, the Western States Communication Association, the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, the North American Society for Sport Management, and the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. The strategy was to go from nowhere to everywhere. While at times many came out of the closets to attend the mediated sports sessions at the major communication meetings, there were handfuls in the audience for a number of these early panels.

The reactions, however, were far different at the sports meetings. Here meeting rooms were jammed and communication scholars were welcomed with open arms and the hopes that they could advance sport studies. This kind of reaction continues to this day. The study of mediated sport, while tolerated and accepted in the mainstream communication organizations, has, with an ascendant role for cultural studies, become a core line of inquiry in sports studies. As a result, there was shifting tilt of balance to sports sociologists, as opposed to communication scholars, in my attempt to update the terrain of the field in MediaSport (Wenner, 1998a) in the late 1990s. Quite simply, at that time, there was more there. The authorship pattern in this Handbook shows that the core
contributions of scholars from outside the field of communication continue to play an integral role. It remains that the role of “sports” in “comm” has had less impact than vice versa. While I do not believe it has been the case that any communication journal has done a special issue on sports, sports journals have welcomed communication scholars into their fold, with Toby Miller following me as editor of the Journal of Sport and Social Issues and my being asked to edit a late 2004 special issue of the Journal of Sport Management on “Issues in Sports Media.”

In considering my comments on the future of studying the media and sport relationship for this Handbook of Sports and Media, it is clear that much has changed. The “popular” has long been popular and no longer is seen at odds with the legitimate. Cultural studies has made its mark and the study of media and sport has become truly interdisciplinary. As a result, sportscomm now comprises a widely recognized academic area, one with a vibrant present and a discernable past. And thanks again to Mike Real, and a forward looking international organization, the International Association for Mass Communication Research, there is now a media and sports division in one of communication’s academic societies, and the institutionalization of sportscomm for the National Communication Association and the International Communication Association cannot be far behind. However, while it is certain, to quote the Virginia Slims tagline in sponsoring the women’s tennis tour in the 1980s, that the academic enterprise of studying media and sport has “come a long way, baby,” it is less clear that the object of our inquiry has made similar social progress.

We are in many ways in regressive social times, and sport and its mediation play a role here. The games we play and the public stories we weave about them tell tales about social priorities, actions, and distractions. In telling ways, stories of sport and the character of their mediation inform answers to the question of what follows postmodernism in the saga of late capitalism. The door that is cracked gives us many hints. While the possibilities for sport itself are of course far ranging, the more truncated space for sport that is “ready for prime time” and featured in a role on the mediascape remains leaning to core sensibilities of a hypermasculinity that might far better be vestigial. Women’s place in sport that is mediated remains too often secondary and reflective of the male standard. Race and ethnicity continue to play centrally on the canvas of mediated sport in distorted ways that are often at odds with other cultural formations. Sport continues to play a pivotal role in the identities that form nationalism even as mediated sport attempts to port itself as globalized product. In that quest, sport, like many other cultural products, has been hypercommercialized and more and more becomes a media product first, and more telling, a media strategy. As a result, mediated sport has played a fundamental part of the machinery that helped blur the hero with the celebrity and meld the two as marketing tool. That these issues, and the many more that are considered in this volume, are only the tip of the media and sport iceberg tell us that the future of media and sport inquiry will be an expansive one.

LEARNING FROM A BUMP (AND A BREAST) IN THE ROAD

Because the landscape of media and sport inquiry is so vast, my attempt to gather hold of some strategies for the future is inspired by Real’s original case study. In this instance, I
suggest that we gaze ahead through a more limited set of issues raised by one of sport’s most notable recent critical events, one that has been characterized as “Super Bowl 38D” (Costello & Moos, 2004). Led by an all-time high of nearly a million complaints to the FCC and breaking the record for the number of Internet hits (Lewczak & Lapidus, 2004; Steenberg, 2004), the fallout over the fallout of Janet Jackson’s breast in the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show broadcast has been considerable (Wenner, 2004). There is some patent absurdity to the case, but this undergirds rather than belies its importance as a barometer of key issues before media and sports scholars. And while the 2004 Super Bowl broadcast certainly does not raise the specter of issues considered in this Handbook, it suggests some overarching concerns that can help guide future inquiry.

In hindsight, this incident reminds us that timing is everything. On the face of it, a pratfall such as Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” that led to an exposed breast could have been easily excused as an honest mistake. But during the dinner hour, with families viewing together, in the most watched of television programs, in the context of an already raunchy halftime show, amidst advertising that crossed the line too many times towards the vulgar, in a spectacle that many believed featured privileged and steroid-enhanced athletes who had learned to skirt not only drug testing but broader social rules including those of sex and excess, Jackson’s briefly bared breast was a molehill that easily became a mountain. Indeed, Janet Jackson’s breast was not the only thing that took a beating after all was said and done about the CBS broadcast of Super Bowl XXXVIII. As a result of Jackson’s breast-baring, there was a good deal of breast-beating in the corporate suites of CBS and the National Football League over their roles and garbled explanations. The fallout of the breast spun out as a public relations disaster for both the media and sports industries. The results were chilling for the media more broadly and showcased an increasing distaste for the monster that many thought big-time sport had become.

In trying to make sense of the cultural import of the Jackson incident, I have argued that it is best understood as a case study in organizational action and media strategy gone ethically awry (for more extensive analysis, see Wenner, 2004). In a way, it provides a not so surprise ending to the story that Mike Real began to tell in 1975. Let me briefly back-ground the case and then reflect on the intersection of some of the issues that come together.

Super Shock and Bra

The 2004 Super Bowl broadcast that featured Jackson closing the halftime show was, like most sports broadcasts, an exercise in mutual beneficence and the building of corporate synergy. It had long since been supersized. The ever-growing hyping of the game and its broadcast had led to a state of affairs that announcer Dick Enberg once maladroitly but accurately called “an unannounced American holiday” (Wenner, 1989c, p. 166). Coming in the collective doldrums of winter, deadly mid-season lulls in the basketball and hockey seasons, and the film industry’s pre-Oscar meaningful new-release moratorium, there was a void for this kind of cultural event to fill. As a result, ratings for Super Bowl broadcasts have long lead the top-rated television programs lists, and its advertising holes and sponsorships have long been the most desirable and expensive. Thus, when what was to
go wrong went wrong, the logic of the entire enterprise was more prone to dissection. This, of course, goes contrary to the corporate goals of naturalizing these processes so that they fly comfortably under the cultural radar. When we got a look under the hood of this event, what was largely seen was a mediaworld and a sportsworld out of touch and out of control.

Jackson’s breast came out as a coda on a halftime show that was a corporate partnership between the NFL and CBS and the synergy that Viacom was nurturing between its graying CBS brand and its more youthful MTV sibling. At the urging of the broadcast rights-holder CBS, the NFL hired MTV to produce its halftime show, as it had three years earlier (a show that had featured instances of crotch grabbing and many near misses of mammary exposure) (Rich, 2004). In going to that well again, the program featured three icons with the contemporary edginess of rap and hip-hop—P.Diddy, Kid Rock, and Nelly—and Jackson, a less of-the-moment pop star, who had never been bashful in using sex towards self-promotion. The NFL and CBS, as older juggernauts long in the corporate mainstream, were struggling to show they were hip and use that to advantage in attracting desirable and elusive youthful consumers into their tents. This was a classic “Joe Camel” strategy and not without risks. One risk was that this manufactured edginess would be too easily spotted as corporate artifice in the service of invigorating their brands. The other was that this edginess would alienate the core older audiences for the NFL and CBS. Both risks materialized, for the effective organizational control that was critical to the success of the media strategy turned out to be both elusive and ineffective. The NFL and CBS had ample opportunity to exercise their oversight powers. Given their experiences with the tone of the show three years prior, they not only approved the talent and material for the halftime show, but “signed off” after seeing the performances and choreography from “every camera angle” (see Attner, 2004; Drudge, 2004; Rybak, 2004).

The halftime show that emerged was edgy. There were few surprises. True to form, P.Diddy’s raps glorified violence and his choreography simulated sex. With the nickname “Pimp of the Nation,” Kid Rock sealed his reputation as potty mouthed with lyrics that paid homage to hookers and druggies as heroes, all the while costumed in a shredded American flag poncho that struck many as defilement and an insult to U.S. forces overseas. Nelly followed the form of his performance in the halftime show three years earlier by adding some crotch grabbing not seen in the rehearsals to amplify the “bodacious ass” and “take off all your clothes” aspects of his song “Hot in Herre” (Nason, 2004). With the stage thusly set, Jackson closed the show by teaming in a duet of “Rock My Body” with Justin Timberlake, who as a member of ‘NSYNC had matched Nelly in crotch grabbing during a performance in the aforementioned earlier show. The finale featured Jackson in sexy black dominatrix garb dirty dancing—bumping and grinding—with Timberlake. All tracked with the rehearsal, until, as one observer (Rybak, 2004, p. 1A) noted, “Right after Timberlake sang the lyric “I’m going to have you naked by the end of this song,” he reached across Jackson’s gladiator-type bustier and pulled off the fabric covering her right breast, which sported a sun-shaped metal stud.”

This flash of naked breast made this Super Bowl broadcast “the first bowl game to become the subject of both congressional hearings and a federal investigation on indecency” (Kelly, Clark, & Kulman, 2004, p. 49) and brought the words nipple shield to many a family dinner conversation.
The reconstruction by the players and the stakeholders shortly after the event was telling. Out of the chaos came a pattern. Everyone apologized but much of it was either unconvincing or shifted blame. The principals cast the incident as an accident, but undercut that notion’s plausibility by admitting to some undisclosed planning for a more G-rated version of the stunt. Timberlake opened the door first by contritely apologizing and blaming a “wardrobe malfunction” that he pitched as unintentional and regrettable. Unfortunately, Timberlake undercut his sincerity and stoked the fire when further hounded on the matter by laughing and saying “we love giving you something to talk about” (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 12). Jackson lagged in response until the following day. She too cast the incident as an accident but admitted a “surprise” had been planned after rehearsals that required a “costume reveal.” For the mishap, she apologized to all—the public, MTV, CBS, and the NFL. Still, her response fueled questions about intentionality. With the nipple shield in place, the breast seemed suspiciously ready for prime time, and the explanation that a red lace bra beneath the bustier was supposed to be revealed lost credibility. This was enhanced later by two other indicants. One was that a Jackson assistant had gone shopping in the days prior to the show and had come back with selections for consideration. Second, reports that “top executives” at CBS had approved the reveal reeked of complicity in the corporate suites, especially when paired with promises of “something shocking” seen on the MTV Web site in the rollup to the event (Nevius, 2004, p. A1). Regardless, many felt that “two microns of red lace over Jackson’s areola wouldn’t have made [it] any better” (Poniewozik, 2004, p. 73), given the rape fantasy context of the song and the explicitness of the choreography.

The way that the “suits” expressed disappointment with the incident and engaged in an endless circle of finger pointing did not help matters. Corporate executives at CBS and the NFL were comfortable letting the performers and the edgy MTV culture take the fall. That the initial CBS response attempted to show they were clueless that something like this would happen worked against them. They expressed disappointment with the performance like a parent with shock and dismay over a child’s drug use when there were telltale signs of problems. Further, the initial CBS apology was only for “[t]he moment that did not conform to CBS broadcast standards” (Shales, 2004, p. C1), and their “surprise” belied their oversight of rehearsals and approval of what they otherwise characterized as a “superb broadcast” (Carter & Sandomir, 2004, p. D1). The heights of the “cluelessness defense” came in Viacom’s then-President Mel Karmazin’s congressional inquiry admission that he was “told that that’s the way adults are dancing these days” and that he “wouldn’t have picked these songs,” he would have “had Andy Williams” (Meek, 2004, p. 18). With this, even Advertising Age was aghast over the lack of control and willingness to take responsibility (“Credibility malfunction”, 2004).

The NFL response was far less clueless than CBS and far more angry. Their breadth of their disappointment broke with CBS’s continued efforts to limit the offense to the breast. Moving beyond being duped by wayward artists, they attacked, feeling burnt by and holding MTV responsible for the whole halftime- show fiasco. Unfortunately for the NFL, MTV mounted the “Viacom defense” on the matter. They cried foul, noting that an “in-charge” NFL had reviewed material, dancing, and garb during the rehearsals and further had experience with MTV producing similar acts and material, including crotch grabbing, in the halftime show three years earlier, and none of that had fallen “under [the NFL’s] microscope” (Poniewozik, 2004, p. 70). For MTV, the NFL was being stodgy and there really was only need to apologize for that “one moment.” For the other parts of the program, MTV was unapologetic with its chairman making the case that hip-hop had
been “the most dynamic force in pop music for the past two decades” and suggesting for anyone under 40 that the rest of the show was “old hat” (Carter, 2004, p. E1). About the best the NFL could do was stomp off, claiming that they had had a “communication problem” with and difficulty controlling MTV, and in the future they would take the reins of managerial control, something that they had all along in this instance but had bungled. This public sparring over blame and cultural sensibilities caused *Time* magazine to announce, “Let the bogus outrage and culture wars begin!” (Poniewozik, 2004, p. 70).

The bogus and not so bogus outrage was seen in a broader and lingering deconstruction of the event. At first glance, the implausibility and shifting of blame seen in the reconstruction of the incident was what caused this story to have remarkable legs. But, when examined more carefully, the tipping-point character of the event relative to the moral landscape drove consideration of structural forces little explored in media discourse. As I have noted in more detail elsewhere (Wenner, 2004, p. 329),

In a sound-bite media economy where the media are largely populated by conglomerates willing to reward the creative community for pushing the cultural bounds in order to break through increasing noise and clutter, the public airing and raising of questions about the structural pressures that lead to media and corporate excess become unusual. Unfortunately for the NFL and CBS, the stars aligned in this instance.

That so many voices were not willing to let Jackson and Timberlake take the fall alone drove this. Right-wing media pressure groups, as Thompson put it, had hit the “mother lode” (Carter, 2004, p. E1). Technology amplified by blogging and the batch e-mailing strategies stirred the drink of the FCC’s then-Chairman Michael Powell, who recently had been upping the ante for media indecency infractions. While Powell weighed in on the whole of the halftime show as “onstage copulation” and the FCC eventually levied a $550,000 fine to the CBS stations for the offense, Congress grabbed what was an incendiary political opportunity to grandstand in hearings that dressed down both CBS and the NFL (Ahrens & de Moraes, 2004; de Moraes, 2004). The chill that the media felt was palpable, and the year that followed was to feature numerous examples of the media reigning themselves in as they approached moral flashpoints.

That the multidirectional bungling of the corporate spin was cast as tiresome “don’t-blame-me’s” (“Credibility malfunction,” 2004) opened the door for a larger scrutiny of life in the fast lane of big-time sport, a world where marketing excess and moral pratfalls were wearing thin. Ultimately, it was the NFL that took it hardest on the chin for being disingenuous in attempting to shift blame in the matter. Under the microscope came its double standards with a broad array of problematic practices that ranged from trash talking in its licensed video games to glorification of violence to scantily clad cheerleaders to its use of faux militarism and nationalism in promotional themes to unfair labor practices that included racial discrimination in hiring minorities in management (Bondy, 2004). The particular coarseness in the 2004 Super Bowl commercials were seen as being on the NFL’s watch. That the NFL was embarrassed by the halftime show when the broadcast’s much-touted commercials featured flatulence, crotch jokes, crude double entendres, and warnings for products should an erection linger beyond four hours struck many as the height of hypocrisy (Elliott, 2004).
SUPER THEMES

The media dissection and political outfall that came on the heels of the 2004 Super Bowl broadcast shows the central role that media and sports can play in the larger public discourse about mass culture, its foibles, and how to control and police it. Mediated sports, and even one event, can be a lens through which to better understand broad cultural dynamics. This case, while limited, suggests a number of conceptual pairings, some binaries and some not, that are worthy of attention in future media and sport inquiry.

Pop and Hip-Hop

This case reminds us that sport and its mediation are always on a continuum of hipness, perched at a delicate balance between mass popularity and the edgy knowingness of the next cool thing that will differentiate youthful audiences from the mainstream. This connection of mediated sport to the popular is deserving of our attention as we attempt to understand sport in the context of broader social forces. While pop’s place on the moral axis can be more easily discounted, its juxtaposition with its oppositional derivatives can be particularly instructive. A good case in point for us to follow will be the emergence of “extreme” sports that aim to corral fragmented audience in compelling ways by positioning deviance as a major selling point.

Sex and Gender

That a sexual offense in this case stoked such significant cultural reaction is telling. On one hand, it tells us that sex and sports don’t mix, which Miller’s (2001) treatment has demonstrated is patently absurd, and on the other, it tells us much about the peculiarities of American culture in this reaction in contrast to other sensitivities, particularly those about the routinization of gratuitous violence in the games we play and elsewhere. While our understandings of the media’s vastly different treatment of men and women is considerable, the imbalances continue to be more so. Title IX, in a sense, has never been a meaningful part of prime time for mediated sport. Sport, especially in the forms that dominate the mediascape, remains as a select and powerful bastion of vestigial hypermasculinity and, as such, we should use this lens to understand our identities. Sexual offenses at the perimeter of sport should also continue to garner attention. We need to begin to interrogate these irregularities as well as others that are seen as they tell us much about cultural assumptions of heterosexuality and its prowess in sport and life.

Race and Ethnicity

While unspoken in my analysis and in much of the press reaction to the Jackson case, it is clear that reactions to this incident are conflated with understandings about race and ethnicity. That the halftime show was dominated by African-American artists and that the offense was ostensibly the playing of rape fantasy by a White man upon an African-American woman was not missed by many. Yet sport and its mediation regularly miss stories about racial and ethnic portrayals and relations that matter. An easy case-in-point
here remains the structural bias of Whites in sport management positions and minorities on the field or court. Media regularly glosses over that story because of the need to sell an unblemished mediated sport product. Of particular interest to scholars should be understanding the cultural dynamic that comes about with White audiences watching sports dominated by minority players. This is a cultural anomaly for which understanding may be prescient to understanding shifts of cultural power.

**Young and Old**

We often miss the obvious in studying media and sport. This case reminds us that sport itself is youth on parade and that it is increasingly being pitched to a youthful audience. Especially as many nation’s populations are both aging and living longer, we need to turn some attention in media and sport inquiry to lifecycle dynamics. We need to better understand the relationship between sports spectatorship and sports activity, and media scholars in particular will need to be informed more broadly about the sociology of sporting activity relative to other forces.

**Celebrity and Hero**

At the core, the Jackson case is really a bellyflop of the interaction between mediated sport and celebrity culture. There have been many fine works recently (c.f. Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Whannel, 2002) that have looked at the far-reaching impacts of the sporting celebrity. Because the sports star is perhaps the most easily identified hero in the contemporary era, this dynamic will continue to deserve our attention. Stories of the rise of heroes and others about their downfall are among the most compelling moral stories that culture tells and retells. We need to continue to interrogate these lessons and make connections between celebrity and its use in sports culture to its counterparts in other spheres of popular and political life.

**Mass and Fragments**

Because the Super Bowl is so unusual, this case reminds us of the death of the truly mass audience. And its programming strategy for its halftime show reminds us of the market’s preference for certain segments over others. Presently, sport is being used as a way to hold larger audience fragments together in an era of increasing fragmentation. While sport may continue in its role of providing the broadest ground for shared cultural experience, it seems unlikely that it will be able hold a firm line against the trend of a media more and more attuned to niches. We should watch the playing out of this with interest. As well, in our work we should monitor which of the niches are given primacy, how this comes about, and what is the role for the grassroots and the authentic.

**Technology and Activity**

That replays of Janet Jackson’s exposed breast received an all-time high of Internet hits tells us that social infractions, in sport and elsewhere, can far more easily be subjected to lasting moral interrogations. The shaping of public opinion was changed by the blogging
and political response that was enabled through communities that would not have had coherence without newer technologies. The whole experience reminds us that the changing nature of audience activity, for sports and media content, has structurally altered the way events come to be understood. In the future, our inquiries into audience experience and mediated sport will have to better interface with understandings of how experiencing media is now a multistream phenomenon.

National and Global

The Super Bowl reminds how when the megaevents of sport and media mix they are most likely to command the powers of nationalism while, at the same time, benefiting the global interests of transnational corporations. That there have been so many sporting events in the United States recently that help fuel a nationalism that is in aid of an ideological position that has come with a most tenuous ascent to executive political power is worthy of more reflection. Why is it that organized sport and its mediated formations are so likely to align with the powers that be, even on issues where there is clear evidence of considerable dissent? We need to trace this with better understanding to the social structures of sport and its historical roles in culture and look ahead for ways for mediated sport to play to broaden its interface with political discourse. This notion may strike many as contrary to the idea that the political does not have a place in sport, but I think this is wishful thinking. Politics has always had a place in sport, and in a mediated age, we need to bring it out of the shadows and broaden its scope.

Super and Ordinary

The Super Bowl generally, and the 2004’s “breast bowl” in particular, reinforce how important it is for us to study “media events” (see Dayan & Katz, 1992; Scannell, 1995) for clues to social and cultural shifts. Many media events may be planned and largely play out according to script, while others, far more important, such as the fireworks that followed the planned halftime show in the Jackson case, may be far more “critical” (Kraus & Davis, 1975) and deserving of our attention. However, in our focus on the big, we risk overlooking the ordinary and its constancy of drip in the social mix. It is clear that media researchers have long been drawn to questions, such as violence and stereotyping, where there are hopes of demonstrating dramatic effects and often come away disappointed. It is the “drip, drip, drip” rather than the “big bang” that really matters in assessing media effects, and media and sport inquiries need to dig in more clearly both for long haul and to understand the everyday.

Frame and Game

A number of years ago, when doing a more extensive analysis on a Super Bowl pregame show (Wenner, 1989c), I made an argument that was in essence “the frame is more important than the game.” That understandings of both frame and game are needed in getting the big picture about the mediation of sport is very much showcased in this volume. Dissecting mediated sport content for overt or covert prejudice or for sense-making logics that are deserving of more scrutiny is an important element of the research
agenda. However, from the perspective of the communication discipline in particular, the broader cultural sense making that comes with the mediation of sport is where much of the compelling action promises to be. The newer frames—cyberspace, gaming, disability, fiction, and fantasy sports among them—will add important perspectives on that sense making.

**Selling and Distraction**

Mediated super sport and its more regular counterpart are, as much as anything, about the big sell. The case of the Super Bowl reminds us of the present state of affairs in advertising. Getting commercial messages out of the clutter and getting the undistracted attention of the audience have become primary challenges. Both the ubiquity of advertising and the “run the other way” technologies like TiVo make an event like the Super Bowl aberrant in that people actually look forward to the commercials. But that will not be business as usual, and the march of product placement, cross-marketing strategies, and the like will continue to assault the landscape of media and sport. Here, there are many questions to answer for audience researchers, policy analysts, and media ethicists.

**Control and Denial**

One of the most interesting issues highlighted by the “nipplegate” saga of 2004’s Super Bowl are those having to do with organizational control and the taking of responsibility. That those most in control were those in most denial over their power presents a conundrum arranged along a spectrum of deception and spin. In that light, it is satisfying to see the extensive attention given in this volume to institutional perspectives. We need to look under the hood of mediated sports more carefully. Critical studies of production context and reporting, and marketing, sponsorship, and promotion in their socioeconomic context, need far greater attention.

**Deviance and Distaste**

The premier lesson that came with the fallout of Janet Jackson’s breast was that mediated sport is very much perched on a moral landscape. Moral action and mediated sport interact with each traffic stop of a wayward athlete, with revelations over performance-enhancing drugs, with each instance of sexual misconduct or domestic abuse, and with every fight in a sporting contest that becomes more than that. Each consideration of issues such as these, especially when considered with the backdrop of exorbitant salaries and the cultural worth of big-time sport and its largesse, become an opportunity to reexamine not only our cultural values and priorities but the ethics of the marketplace. As the Jackson incident portends, public distaste over sport may occasion broader moral fissures. As such, they are sites of both political opportunity and policy action that can have far-reaching consequences.
THE ROAD AHEAD

The host of issues that are raised by the Janet Jackson incident and the increasingly hypercommercialized backdrop for mediated sport suggests that there is much work to be done, in these and other areas, as inquiry moves ahead. While even the partial and highly selected pairings presented above may be daunting in taking in the whole of the media and sport mix, they are indicative of what we might see should we step back from the more highly demarcated areas of inquiry hinted at in this volume’s treatment. The individual areas within media and sport inquiry, and the relations that media and sport have with other areas of communication and social inquiry, are necessarily “blurred genres” (Geertz, 1973). As such, they demand big questions, messy ones, that tend to see forests rather than trees. Towards that end, let me siphon further to four lines of concern that I think deserve attention as we gaze to the future of inquiry about sports and media.

Sports, Media, and Dirt

There is little doubt that one of the chief reasons that the scholarly community has finally blessed the study of mediated sport has been the recognition of the powerful role that sports plays in culture. We have widely turned the corner that sport is merely a toy store and that its mediated form is just entertainment. Mediated sport and all of its appendages (its commercial space, its marketing strategies, its manufactured synergies) all gain power from the cultural meanings and logic of sport itself. The way this works and the propriety of it raises questions that are far more complex than at first glance. Towards a more focused interrogation of this, I have earlier suggested (Wenner, 1991, 1994) a reliance on Leach’s (1976, p. 62) arguments “that power is located in dirt.” I have taken Leach’s notion of “dirt” to mean the “cultural borrowing that allows one cultural entity to adopt the logic of another” (Wenner, 1991, p. 392). As such, there are no necessary negative connotations to “dirt”; in fact, “dirty uses” may be logical, deemed appropriate, and fully enjoyed. But they are by definition “parasitic” in that, as Hartley (1984) has argued, there is a “cultural leak” from one place to another and texts are necessarily “contaminated by seepages from other parts of culture, including media” (Wenner, 1991, p. 392). “Cultural dirt” such as “sports dirt,” like its organic counterpart, is something that lands where it did not originally belong. Dirt, even when its importation has been mechanized or routinized, is, in a way, out of place. In the mediated sports context, sports dirt is at the core of what makes it powerful. For the fan in particular, sports dirt is compelling. I have argued elsewhere that “the sports fan has long enjoyed rolling around in this dirt” and goes to “great lengths to unearth this dirt many times over in watching television sports programming, in reading the sports pages in the daily newspaper, and in conversations with friends and acquaintances about sports” (Wenner, 1991, p. 404). We know, for example, that it is the “essential dirtiness” of many sports-themed beer commercials that contribute to their success by giving “the fan one more opportunity to turn that soil and revel in its richness” (Wenner, 1991, p. 404). A key element, discomforting for some, is that the notion of dirt and using it as an analytic tool requires making judgments about what is dirt, the propriety of a “dirty” use, and the way that positively infused “dirty logics” overcome associations that we have with that to which it is appended. The upside,
however, for “dirty” interrogations are considerable, and this notion will help us tremendously in understanding how “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980) make sense of media that have been touched by sport.

Sports, Media, and Organizational Action

Done originally for the Journal of Sport Management, my look at the dynamics behind and cultural reaction to the baring of Janet Jackson’s breast centers on organizational action and the ethos of managerial decision making. My study, however, was necessarily reliant on reconstruction at a distance. My strategy, and the foci of the vast proportion of the agenda of media and sport scholarship, reminds us that sometimes we do the easy things first. Consequently, we see that the vast bulk of scholarship has focused on either examinations of mediated sport content (both critical and “count-em” studies) or those of the mediated sport audience (surveys, experiments, and small scale ethnographies). All of these studies are important to our understandings. But what they share in common is relatively easy access to data. In the future, we will need to prioritize getting access to sport organizations and to media organizations as they fashion their sport-centered product. To be sure, this will be no easy task, but I think it will help us to understandings about professional life that will inform our content studies and enrich our understandings of how the audience has been conceptualized. Such a focus means thinking more in terms of the traditions of occupational sociology and the tensions of “creativity and constraint” that confront media workers (c.f. Ettema & Whitney, 1982). Revisiting that tradition a bit more may also cause some reflection on the framing of our area of inquiry beyond mediated sport to a broader sportscomm where the traditions of organizational, group, and interpersonal communication inform our understandings about the dynamics of sport.

Sports, Media, and the Moral Order

As I have suggested in my pairing of deviance and distaste above, the Jackson case reminds us that mediated sport very much interacts with moral sensibilities. If ever there was an example of a mediated moral panic button, the Jackson case was it. Sport, and our cultural understanding of it, very much plays out along a moral spectrum. Its mediation tells us regularly how good sportsmanship is linked to ethical health and should be praised. The stories of athletes gone awry, on and off the field, provide regular moral fodder. And with the constant pushing of bounds in a cluttered and competitive marketplace, the routine practices of media entities will more and more push the tolerances of propriety. Given this, media and sport inquiry needs to ponder how its own ethical interrogations might best proceed. One avenue might be to follow some of the leads seen in sport-centered inquiry (c.f. McNamee & Parry, 1998; Morgan, Meier, & Schneider, 2001; Tomlinson & Fleming, 1997). Another approach would to to build on the emerging traditions of ethical criticism (c.f. Booth, 1988; Carroll, 2000; Gregory, 1998). In any case, media and sport researchers should not be afraid to bite the ethical bullet. Taking an ethical stand, whether making clearer the liabilities that are suggested out of social scientific findings or questioning the propriety of sense making in studies of media workers or their audience, can only help get our work more into the public dialogue.
Sports, Media, and Citizenship

This last concern really should be the big picture, but I’m not so sure its been in the picture much at all. When we think about mediated sports, we very often think about its consumption and thereby are thinking about consumers. But sport and its mediation plays out on a far greater field than the consumption economy. Consumers of mediated sport are foremost citizens. To the degree that their citizenship is formed by and influenced by mediated sport, we should be paying particular attention. It is notable the topic of mediated sports and politics is absent from the mix in this volume. For this, I don’t hold the editors responsible. Rather, we may have gotten out of the practice of looking through this lens. This is notable in that sports metaphor is often used in politics, that we see politicians make media opportunities to bask in the reflected glory of sports success, and the sport system’s logic has long been bolstered by the notion that sports builds character. There are many important opportunities ahead for researchers to visit the intersection where media and sports meet politics and citizenship. While there are many clues to where to start on this agenda, Miller (1998) articulated a particularly compelling set of arguments about the contours of “cultural citizenship” as a way to think about how the popular interacts with everyday political life. In the realm of sport, there is no better place to start to trigger thinking than Gruneau’s (1983) classic work on the dynamics of sport and class. Finally, given the vastly greater “mediasport” (Wenner, 1998a) world we have before us today, with multiple sports networks, sports talk radio, and the prospects of cyberspace and gaming, it may be an appropriate time to revisit the “sport as opiate” hypothesis afresh and without the constrictions of more formal Marxist logic (Hoch, 1972). There is little question that mediated sport has garnered a good deal of our attention, and the political significance of this distraction is certainly worthy of our consideration.

A POSTGAME COMMENT

My efforts to put a limited set of big issues on the agenda of inquiry about sports and media come on the heels of a vastly greater set of issues addressed and suggested by the authors in this Handbook. At the beginning of my essay, I spoke to the difficulties facing scholars of media and sport to gain academic traction. While much in the cultural climate has changed in terms of taking sport and its mediation seriously in academic and other spheres, there remain strong voices and much public sentiment for us to look the other way, to let the masses have a little fun. A good encapsulation of that sentiment was voiced by Gregg Easterbrook (2005, p. D7) in a Super Bowl Sunday critique in the New York Times:

The Super Bowl is outsized, preposterous, excessive—which is the good thing about it. This is also why attempts to find hidden meaning are doomed to futility. The game has no vast social significance. The Super Bowl is just a big, overdone party. Every year, news organizations labor to supply ultraserious analyses of the Super Bowl buildup. They quote sociologists on the philosophy of mass culture, economists on the class structure of sports, media theorists on the fine points of sports symbolism. Last year 144 million Americans watched
the Super Bowl, joined by an estimated one billion more around the world. Surely an event watched by such an incredible number of people must ooze significance! But somber analyses of the Super Bowl look for import that is not there. It is essential to bear in mind that professional sports are, foremost, entertainment…. Neither year’s ads denote any larger development. They’re just a bunch of ads, dreamed up to cause laughs and sell Tabasco sauce. Don’t try to analyze whether the cheerleaders represent objectification or empowerment. It’s simply entertainment…. Just don’t try to find any larger significance, because there isn’t any.

Easterbrook’s comments are important and should remind us that sports fans and marketers are not looking for us to rain on or reign in their parade. However, when we hear comments like this, we shouldn’t be disgruntled. It indicates that we’ve gotten their attention. We should continue to have fun making sense of the social power of the media and sport mix while we show that it is far more than mere entertainment. We need to keep working and engage in public discussion to show how the mediated sports carnival relates to capital—economic capital, cultural capital, and political capital. The work in this volume shows that we are on the right track and, to Mr. Easterbrook and to those with like sentiments, it should indicate in no uncertain terms that we respectfully disagree.

REFERENCES


