Super Bowl Advertising as Commercial Celebration

Matthew P. McAllister

Department of Communication Studies, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0311, USA

The Super Bowl symbolizes the increasing acceptance and prevalence of advertising in society. The essay analyzes the discourse around Super Bowl advertising. After first examining the reasons why national advertisers are attracted to the Super Bowl, the essay then examines pre-event discourse about Super Bowl advertising, discourse that elevates advertising during the event, and post-event discourse about Super Bowl advertising. Ultimately, the paper argues that because Super Bowl advertising has been granted such social attention and legitimacy, it encourages the celebration of advertising as a beloved form of mediated entertainment.

Key Words: Super Bowl commercials; advertising criticism; televised sports.

During the 1992 Super Bowl, the McDonald’s fast-food restaurant chain aired a touching commercial featuring parents and children involved in a Pee-Wee football game. Supposedly, movie maker Steven Spielberg was so impressed when he saw the ad that he asked the advertising executives who created the commercial, James Ferguson and Robert Shallcross, to turn it into a full-length movie (Thomas, 1994). Thus the TV commercial eventually evolved into the 1994 release, Little Giants, co-written by two advertising executives.

Much of this movie, true its commercial roots, served as a promotion for NFL players, equipment manufacturers, and sponsors. Equipment and clothing manufacturers for the NFL, such as Reebok
and Wilson, benefitted from product placement and references in the film ("those jerseys are so cool," says one little giant early in the movie), as did cross promotional partners like Cheetos. NFL personalities such as Emmitt Smith and John Madden made appearances. As a writer for Advertising Age noted, the NFL’s active role in the film marked "the start of a major league initiative to get more involved in Hollywood and promote football products, players, sponsors and, most importantly, the sport through feature films" (Jensen, 1994, p. 16).

The heavily commercialized Little Giants is an example of the influence that Super Bowl ads may exert upon the larger culture; and it is not the only example. One may find hundreds of local television news stories each year about Super Bowl ads, as well as scores of newspaper and magazine articles. The commercials are often previewed or replayed on national television newscasts. Recognition is given for the best Super Bowl ads each year. Super Bowl ads become the topic of conversations for millions the day after the event.

This essay explores the cultural visibility and import of Super Bowl commercials. The essay will concentrate on the possible contribution of Super Bowl advertising, and the mediated discourse about Super Bowl advertising, to the social role of advertising. The Super Bowl has become so advertising-obsessed that the commercial effect has spilled over into other aspects of life. By exploring the mediated discourse about Super Bowl advertising—including pre-event discourse, post-event discourse, and the commercials themselves—the essay will argue that this discourse is encouraging not just the selling of a particular product, but also a larger commercialization of American culture.

COMMERCIALISM, MEDIA AND SPORTS

Classic works on the political economy of the media highlight the influence of commercialism upon society and culture (Bagdikian, 1983/1997; Barnouw, 1978; Schiller, 1973; Smythe, 1977). Such work has studied the degree to which advertising-supported media commodify audiences, fragmenting audiences into groups that are demographically, but not democratically, advantageous. Additionally, with an advertising-dominated system, media creators are encouraged to take an "entertainment" orientation in media content,
resulting in a quickened pace of television programs or shortening of print stories, more violent and sexualized content, and less serious discussion of social and political issues. An advertising-funded media system is also encouraged to remove ideas that are critical of advertising from content, and place ideas and images that promote specific advertisers or commercialism generally.

More recently, critics have argued that the heightened influence and reach of advertisers have accentuated these traditional concerns. We see more aggressive "advertising imperialism" manifested in very tangible ways. Product placement in movies and television programs are both more common and more institutionalized than before the 1980s (Andersen, 1995; Fuller, 1997; Miller, 1990). Sponsorship of sporting and cultural events allows product logos to invade the events, receiving prominent attention during their broadcast and in the news reports after the events (McAllister, 1998; Schiller, 1989). Infomercials on television and advertorials in print—essentially expanded ads—are used by mainstream advertisers (Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 1996). The commercialization of the Internet continues to be aggressively explored by marketers. Advertising in social locations outside the home—airports, schools, retail—is routinized as "place-based" advertising. Cross-promotional partners like fast-food restaurants, toy manufacturers and entertainment marketers join forces to create cooperative campaigns that exploit the selling potential of their respective exhibition points (for discussion of these last trends, see McAllister, 1996).

The questions of why these forms have occurred and what difference they make have also been engaged by this scholarship. Many critics argue that 1980s was a key decade in influencing recent trends in advertising and corporate promotion. Certain contextual factors during this time encouraged advertisers to be more determined when their traditional selling media became less effective. As successive generations are exposed to broadcast advertising, potential consumers became more savvy about traditional selling techniques and bored with the promotional status quo (Goldman & Papson, 1996). New technology also played a role (Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 1996). The remote control and VCR allowed viewers to escape commercials either by changing the channel (zapping) or fast-forwarding through pre-recorded programs (zipping). Traditional media, facing new competition from cable, VCRs, computers, and other media choices, responded by oversaturating themselves with advertising (exacerbating the problem of "clutter") and by allowing
advertisers to have more influence with broadcast programming or print content. Deregulation of anti-trust policies encouraged the growth of large advertisers, media and advertising agencies, while deregulation of broadcasting made stations and networks more attractive as corporate acquisitions, emphasizing the economic bottom line and corporate promotional functions (Schiller, 1989). Advertising thus responded to these mediated changes by developing promotional techniques that shattered the confines of the traditional broadcast commercial or print advertisement, including those techniques listed above.

The effects of the above movement, although diverse, may be summarized as encouraging a spreading of advertising's "voice" throughout society and increasing the manipulative or even deceptive potential of commercial messages. As advertising's influence spreads, it may become the dominant influence in modern culture, drowning out sources critical of advertising or materialism. A major philosophical foundation of journalistic media is the separation between advertising content and journalistic content (see, for example, Bagdikian, 1983/1997). However, as the above-mentioned trends become commonplace, critics have become increasingly concerned about the merging of advertising and other cultural forms and the subsequent blunting of critical evaluation of commercial influences as they become more ubiquitous. Andersen summarizes by arguing that "Modes of advertising communication, long defined as openly persuasive, were previously considered to be distinct from entertainment and information communication. But as advertising begins to penetrate the entire media spectrum, these modes become incorporated into other programming strategies" (Andersen, 1995, p. 9).

Product placement in movies, for example, may not only introduce commercial products on screen, but may encourage particularly "commercial friendly" movies to be made (Fuller, 1997). Similarly, the commercial-based Channel One in school pits the commercial voice against the educational voice, with the commercial voice benefiting from cutting-edge editing techniques and youth appeal and perhaps even exploiting the credibility of the educational environment for selling purposes (McAllister, 1996).

These commercialized phenomena often have equivalents in sports (Andersen, 1995). Critical research in the area of sports advertising often focuses on the effects of advertising upon the sports events themselves. Such effects include the addition of "TV time-outs" that slow down the event; the increase in sports salaries
and focus on stars (Real & Mechikoff, 1992); the heightening of sports spectacle to increase interest and keep audiences attentive in case of a lop-sided game (Gruneau, 1989; Tomlinson, 1996); the intrusiveness of corporate presence during the event; and the subversion of the amateur spirit of collegiate sports events (McAllister, 1998). Other researchers focus on the content of the sports commercials themselves, highlighting the destructive nature of the products sold, like tobacco or alcohol (Madden & Grube, 1994) or of gender portrayals in the ads (Hall & Crum, 1994).

The Super Bowl exemplifies the relationship between media, sports and advertising. In his classic analysis of the relatively early 1974 Super Bowl, Real noted the importance of the game in the maintenance of product promotion: "the regulatory mechanism of Super Bowl VIII advertising, on the specific level, stimulated the purchase of particular products and, on the general level, maintained the consumer ethic developed by lifetimes of exposure to continuous, pervasive advertising" (1977, p. 103). Other writers have pointed to the commercialism that occurs in cities that host the event (Schwartz, 1998; Simpson, 1998).

The commercials that accompany the National Football League’s annual Super Bowl broadcast—as well as mediated discourse about the commercials—may be added to phenomena such as product placement and infomercials that contribute to the list of expansive advertising modalities. Since Real published his critique, the commercialization of the event has increased many times over. After surveying the attractiveness of the Super Bowl to advertisers, I will explore the “cultural-spillage” effects by discussing the discursive celebration of Super Bowl advertising that occurs before the Super Bowl, during the Super Bowl, and after the Super Bowl. The implications for the celebration of advertising generally—and the normalization of an “advertising-as-entertainment” ideology—will then be examined.

THE SUPER BOWL AS ADVERTISING VEHICLE

During the 1999 Super Bowl, advertisers paid an average of $1.6 million to Fox for a thirty-second time slot, with Anheuser-Busch agreeing to pay $2 million per thirty seconds for product exclusivity during the game (Rosenwein, 1999). The average payment for 1999 was a nineteen percent increase over the 1998 average sum, though
the audience was four percent smaller. What is it about the Super Bowl that would encourage advertisers to be so willing to pay so much? The answer has to do with the social conventions of watching the Super Bowl, the timing and effectiveness of the Super Bowl as an advertising vehicle, and ultimately the increased prestige of advertising during the Super Bowl.

As noted above, with the zapping and zipping of television commercials, the erosion of network ratings because of cable, and advertising clutter, the routine thirty-second spot on network television is not the promotional panacea that it may once have been. The Super Bowl, however, is a throw-back to network programming of old. It delivers huge, captive audiences to advertisers, just like Gunsmoke or I Love Lucy in the pre-narrowcasting, pre-channel surfing days.

For example, the 40.2 rating for the 1999 game was down from the previous year, but still represented a U.S. viewership of 127.5 million (Wells, 1999). Like pre-1980s network TV, the Super Bowl recaptures television’s status as a truly mass medium. The demographics, although skewing slightly toward males, nevertheless tend to be more balanced than for other highly rated events like the Academy Awards. As a writer for Newsweek concludes, “the Super Bowl is the only truly wide target left” (Turner, 1997). For advertisers wishing to reach the mass audience, the Super Bowl delivers it.

There is also a strong incentive for Super Bowl audiences to watch the advertising rather than zap it away. Because Super Bowl ratings are so high, other channels usually do not attempt to challenge the game with original programming, thus discouraging channel surfing (McClellan, 1998). The social context of Super Bowl viewing also favors ad watching. People view the game in groups: over seventy-five percent of viewers watched the 1999 Super Bowl with at least one other person (Freeman, 1999). According to Hallmark cards, there are more social gatherings around the Super Bowl than any other event (Turner, 1997). A partial explanation for the evolution of the game as a “communal ritual” (Turner, 1997, p. 62) may be the pre-event advertising that urges consumers to treat the Super Bowl as a big party. In free-standing inserts in January, 1998 Sunday newspapers, for instance, literally hundreds of advertisers urged readers to “Make Chex Party Mix, Score a Touchdown!” “Make Halftime Snacktime!” “Lead Your Super Bowl Party to Victory!” or engage in other such commodity-based party planning.

Given that the Super Bowl is the largest social gathering centered on a television program, many people watch the ads, no matter
where these commercials are placed during the game. In six of the Super Bowls in the 1990s, the ratings in the fourth quarter have been higher than the average rating for the game (McClellan, 1998). Much of this has to do with the context of viewing—the viewers stay with the broadcast despite the score because the party continues. The ads might even receive more attention if the game itself is a blowout (a common occurrence, since only four of twenty games between 1980–1999 were decided by a touchdown or less). These factors make the broadcast an attractive advertising vehicle: marketing research indicates that recall of Super Bowl ads by viewers is significantly higher than regular television advertising (Sit, 1992).

The timing of the Super Bowl is also desirable to advertisers. Many marketers use the January airing date to launch new campaigns or new products, setting the promotional table for the rest of the year. Products such as the Macintosh computer in 1984, the Discover credit card in 1986, and the Sensor razor in 1990 were launched with advertising during the Super Bowl (Horovitz, 1987; Sauer, 1998; Sit, 1992).

Increased sales figures also point to the effectiveness of Super Bowl advertising, although of course this is not universal (Schudson, 1986). In the first six years of the Bud Bowl campaign, Budweiser was able to increase its beer sales by twenty percent in January (“A-B and host...,” 1994). More dramatically, new orders for CompuServe software increased five times after its 1997 Super Bowl ad (Pledger, 1997), and Gillette had trouble keeping its new Sensor razor in stock after broadcasting its commercial during the 1990 game (Sit, 1992). Visits to the web sites of Victoria’s Secret (Kuchinskas, 1999) and Auto-by-Tel (McGraw, 1999) increased dramatically after their Super Bowl commercials aired.

However, there is one last reason Super Bowl commercials are so valuable to advertisers. Advertising during the Super Bowl has taken on a life of its own, in many ways overshadowing the over-hyped game to which the ads are attached. It is a commercial phenomenon that has contributed to the elevation of advertising from a low-credibility form of commercial discourse to a sanctioned form of entertainment. Super Bowl ads are no longer seen as crass sales pitches—an obvious self-interested discourse that viewers eye with cynicism and suspicion. Like the latest blockbuster movie, these ads are now to be watched for their own sake. They are to be anticipated, hyped by their creators in the same way as a blockbuster movie is hyped, discussed in advance news stories that detail their creation,
reviewed after their premiere by the commercial equivalents of Roger Ebert.

It was not always so. The Super Bowl, although highly rated from the beginning, was just another vehicle for commercials through the early 1980s. But in 1984, at a time when commercial interests were grasping the severity of the increasingly cluttered and remote-controlled television environment (see, for example, Kostyra, 1984), they also discovered the promotional advantage of creating advertising that did not look like advertising, but like mediated spectacle. The commercial that launched the Macintosh computer—an aestheticized, Orwellian-themed award-winning ad—showed the potential for advertising reification during the highly rated game. Directed by film-director Ridley Scott and produced by the then up-and-coming ad agency Chiat-Day, the sixty-second ad was only shown once, during that year's Super Bowl (Ahrens, 1997). However, the cinematic nature of the adcast generated the equivalent of nearly $10 million in free publicity, and firmly established the Super Bowl as not only a football spectacle, but a commercial one as well (Sauer, 1998). As one Washington Post analysis noted about the impact of the ad, "It soon became accepted that visually striking, high-concept ads could leave a lasting impression on the consumer long after a jingle or catch phrase faded. Moreover, because the ad aspired to artistic levels, the viewer felt less insulted, less invaded, more entertained. Even awestruck, sometimes" (Ahrens, 1997, p. F4).

Since then, the celebration of advertising during this event has gradually escalated. Figure 1 shows the increased attention by major newspapers to Super Bowl commercials from 1985 to 1998. Using the electronic database Dow Jones Interactive, nine major newspapers were surveyed to determine the number of published news stories about the Super Bowl. In 1985, four articles about Super Bowl advertising were published by the newspapers collectively; in 1998, twenty seven were published. The increased newspaper coverage has corresponded with a larger number of viewers who watch the game exclusively for the advertising. In 1996, only 2 percent of respondents to a marketing survey said they watched the Super Bowl exclusively for the ads; in 1997 that figure was 4 percent, and in 1998 the figure was 7 percent, representing 10 million viewers (Fisher, 1998). According to one survey, over half of the respondents reported that they had discussed the 1999 Super Bowl ads with others the next day (Freeman, 1999). Super Bowl advertising has become a newsworthy and popular form of entertainment.
The celebration of prestige commercialism occurs in three stages: the pre-event hype that accompanies Super Bowl advertising, the self-importance and self-reflexivity of ads during the Super Bowl, and the post-event analysis of the ads. These stages work together to define Super Bowl advertising as art and entertainment.

PRE-EVENT DISCOURSE

Super Bowl ads become salient to potential viewers not just on the day of the game, but sometimes weeks or months before. This pre-event hype can come from the advertisers directly through advanced advertising or from news stories about the ads (often influenced by advertisers’ news placement strategies).

Because advertisers spend so much money on Super Bowl advertising time and production costs, they want to make sure they get the maximum return for their dollar. One way they do this is to manufacture anticipation for the ads shown during the Super Bowl. Through both pre-event advertising and public relations efforts, advertisers hope to create advantageous “buzz” previously reserved for star-studded motion pictures. By so doing, they also send the message that the event commercial is the cultural equivalent of the event motion picture.
Teaser spots—advertising for advertising—appear on television, in print, and increasingly on the Internet long before game day. These pre-commercial commercials tell viewers that some special advertising event will occur during the Super Bowl. A larger effect of such efforts may be to create in people’s minds the idea that advertising is something to advertise about.

Budweiser has been especially aggressive at creating ads for ads. Before the 1998 Super Bowl, the beer company ran promotional spots weeks before the game letting people know that the “Bud… Wise… Zer” frogs would be in physical danger from a jealous lizard. As one Busch executive explained before the game, “There’s huge amount of anticipation from our target audience about what’s going to happen next. What you will see Super Sunday is basically the Showdown in the Swamp” (Bruton, 1998, p. D8). The teaser spots helped to fabricate this anticipation. “Louie, I’m hearing rumors. People think you’re going to bump off the frogs,” says lizard Frank to lizard Louie in one such spot aired, during the NFC playoffs that year. Because these playoffs were aired on Fox, contrasted with the NBC- aired Super Bowl two weeks later, these spots achieved a very special cultural status. The Budweiser Super Bowl commercials were recipients of inter-network promotion—one network airing “promotional spots” for something to be aired on a competitor network. Not even the most prestigious of non-advertising TV programming, including the Super Bowl itself, may be granted such privilege.

Similarly hyped was the Bud Bowl campaign, Budweiser’s parallel, but faux, commercial simulation of a football game shown during the Super Bowl from 1989 to 1997. Budweiser used in-store promotions or TV spots that looked like mini-sportscasts featuring such media personnel as Chris Berman (Lev, 1990). One indication of the longevity of Super Bowl ad campaigns is that even when the Bud Bowl no longer was broadcast during the Super Bowl (the company had moved on to the frogs campaign), the concept of Bud Bowl still lived on. In a free standing insert in Sunday newspapers before the 1998 Super Bowl, readers were urged to celebrate the “Bud Bowl X Party of the Decade” with Hillshire Farm sausages. Likewise, on their Internet site the beer company, using the disingenuous headline “Ten years of Bud Bowl and we’re still going strong!” encouraged web visitors to “Check out players from the past, choose your favorite and win big money.”

Other advertisers have likewise created anticipatory advertising for the Super Bowl. Volvo touted its contest tie-in ad months before
the game (Fitzgerald, 1997). A full-page color ad in a 1998 pre-Super Bowl edition of USA Today featured Wile E. Coyote, with the headline, “Has the Road Runner Finally Met His Match? (Find Out Sunday During the First Quarter).” The ad did not even mention the product, instead using all of its persuasive power to build anticipation for the broadcast ad. One campaign, the 1997 Nissan “Pigeon Poop” Super Bowl ad, produced four-color, full-size, movie-style posters to promote its entry that year (Ahrens, 1997).

It is not only these teaser advertisements that lead to the pre-event hype, however. The news media, in their non-advertising content, also tout the upcoming sales spectacle. Part of the reason for the news coverage of Super Bowl ads may be curiosity about the sheer cost of advertising time. As one writer for the trade journal Advertising Age noted, “A million bucks is always a sign of sizzle; the media wake up when you’re paying a million-three for 30 seconds” (Sauer, 1998, p. D1). Another reason may be the willingness of journalists to accept public relations materials for news story ideas, as between twenty five and fifty percent of all U.S. news content may be affected by public relations (Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997). As an executive for Master Lock stated, “We did the Super Bowl ad primarily for the PR value” (Rosenwein, 1999, p. 75). Also, fiscally pressured news organizations may be tempted to offer advertising-based stories as a way to provide “value-added” benefits—or “complementary copy” (Andersen, 1995)—to current or potential advertisers. Lastly, of course, another factor may be the belief that stories about the creation of advertising campaigns now legitimately meet the journalistic criteria of newsworthiness.

In newspapers, for instance, one found entire news stories about the specific 1999 Super Bowl advertising strategies of Anheuser-Busch (Associated Press, 1999); Apple (Sorensen, 1999); Land Rover (“Discovery’s . . .”, 1998); 7 Up (Yung, 1999); and Victoria’s Secret (Wolf, 1999). “The Bud team beat Bud Light in the first two contests,” The New York Times reported one year, “While a rematch would surely be called for, this year’s game may bring a new twist: the appearance of Bud Dry, Anheuser-Busch’s new brand” (Lev, 1990, p. D7). In addition to these specific analyses, several broader articles handicapping the 1999 Super Bowl ads also were published (see, for example, Alm, 1999; Carey, 1999a; Harris, 1999).

Television news covers Super Bowl advertising before the game as well. In 1999, CNN broadcast five different pre-game stories about the commercials (on CNN Sunday Morning, CNN Business Day,
CNN Today, and two on ShowBiz Today). Only two stories appeared on the broadcast networks: ABC World News Tonight the Thursday before the game and CBS This Morning the next day. However, local stations more than took up the slack from the networks. Counting only news stories that included videos of ads, a search through the Lexis/Nexis database of broadcast news transcripts reveals that seventy seven television stations broadcast such stories about Super Bowl ads on their local news programs on the Friday before the 1999 Super Bowl. Nearly half of these stories were over two minutes long, and many were repeated throughout the weekend.

From the advertisers’ perspective this ad-based journalism does several things. It inexpiensively increases the audience reach of the commercials. Super Bowl ads are shown many times, for free, as well as during the game. In one local NBC-affiliate news story from 1998, an entire Lipton tea spot that was to air on Super Bowl Sunday was shown during the segment, with not even a voice-over intrusion by the news personnel. Print news stories often will reprint a still from the ad to accompany the story, or sometimes even the complete transcript of an upcoming ad (Sorensen, 1999). Advertisers thus have an incentive to encourage such stories—and perhaps to pressure the network to encourage affiliates and subsidiary cable networks to carry such stories.

The reactions of the journalists and anchors signal to the reader/viewer that they also value advertising, seeing it as something fun and something to be loved. “Sometimes the best part of the Super Bowl is all those neat commercials,” the local sports anchor announced before one 1998 NBC-affiliate story. “I love it,” concurred the news anchor. This occurs on a national level as well. After one news package previewing the ads aired during a January 23, 1997 broadcast of Good Morning America, celebratory discourse was universally shared by the studio personnel:

Charles Gibson: We all loved that baby’s reaction to Cindy Crawford [in a Pepsi Super Bowl ad that was shown].
Joan Lunden: Wasn’t that hysterical?
Elizabeth Vargas: I know, that was so great.
Charles Gibson: Just a quick mention. Bob Garfield [a columnist for Advertising Age] will be with us, as he is every Monday after the Super Bowl, to give us a rundown on which ads are received the best and which ones may have flopped.
Joan Lunden: There were some funny ones, there, though.
Charles Gibson: Yeah, they were terrific. And I must say, even if the game's a blowout, because the originality of the commercials is so great, I'll stay with it.
Joan Lunden: It makes it worthwhile.
Spencer Christian: Enjoy the spots.

In this segment, then, every news personality either praises the commercials themselves, or encourages the audience to "enjoy the spots." And this is not just "plugola," where the ABC personnel are praising a later ABC program (Benson & Alden, 1995). That year, the Fox network aired the Super Bowl.

A last effect of such stories is that they construct the previewing of advertising as a newsworthy event. In conjunction with teaser spots, the commercially-based stories equate commercials with other forms of culture for which such news stories are traditionally reserved. Audiences are given "sneak previews" of Super Bowl commercials just as other parts of the newscast may preview the game itself or other upcoming mediated events. Like analyses of the actual game, pre-event news stories often handicap upcoming Super Bowl commercials for the likelihood that they will win among the competitors that day. Such stories attempt to engage audiences not in athletic strategy, but promotional strategy. Advertisers are labeled Super Bowl "rookies" or symbolize "leadership" depending upon their role in the "game within a game" (Carey, 1999a). With the Super Bowl, commercials are no longer just aired, they are debuted and inaugurated.

COMMERCIAL DISCOURSE DURING THE EVENT

In addition to the elevation of Super Bowl advertising that occurs before the event, the commercials are also elevated during the event. This elevation takes place on several levels, including the large amount of time devoted to advertising, the production values of the ads, and the self-reflexivity of the ads.

Time devoted to advertising is a significant part of the Super Bowl broadcast. In 1998, NBC sold 58 thirty-second commercial spots during the actual Super Bowl broadcast itself, which generated $75 million for the network. In addition, there were 67 pre-game and post-game commercials, which earned another $20 million (McClellan, 1998). These do not include the network promotions.
and on-field signage that may also increase the amount of time devoted to commercial publicity (McAllister, 1998).

The symbols and production values of the Super Bowl ads also seek to draw attention and to make the ads the object of conversation and awe. Super Bowl ads often feature icons not previously found in advertising. In 1987, the agent of actor Steve Martin declared that "Steve's never done a commercial and never will" (Savan, 1994, p. 281). Yet seven years later he was featured in a series of Super Bowl ads for Nike. Paul Newman made a very rare commercial appearance (for American Express) during the 1990 Super Bowl. From the political realm, Dan Quayle, Mario Cuomo and Ann Richards have touted chips, while Bob Dole was redeemed by his Visa card.

Participants in the game's broadcast also appear in ads, likewise signaling the ads' self-importance and the merging of media content with advertising. ABC commentators Al Michaels and Dan Dierdorf appeared as themselves in a 1995 Rold Gold Pretzel ad meant to simulate the ABC broadcast. Fox commentators Ronnie Lott and Howie Long starred, with Fox-labeled microphones, in an ad for Budweiser during the 1997 Fox broadcast of the game. Disney is famous for its "spontaneous" post-game ads featuring key participants paid to say, "I'm going to go to Disney World!" In a similar strategy, running back Emmitt Smith, in quickly edited footage from the very game during which the ad aired, is shown celebrating after a Super Bowl touchdown in a 1994 Reebok ad (Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 1996).

Even dead celebrities are not sacred. Using digitized film footage, Fred Astaire danced with Dirt Devil vacuum cleaners in 1997, and Elvis ate at Pizza Hut in 1998. Once the Super Bowl debuts these ads, however, the envelope has been sufficiently pushed. Many of these ads aired long after the game without controversy or discussion, but only after appearing first in the sanctioned commercial cocoon of the big game.

Super Bowl ads are extremely slick and high-tech. It is routine for the costs of producing a Super Bowl commercial to exceed $1 million (Fisher, 1998). The Nissan pigeon commercial during the 1997 Super Bowl used extensively the work of Industrial Light and Magic, the prestigious (and expensive) special effects firm (Ahrens, 1997). The 1998 Super Bowl ad for Pontiac featured cartoon character Wile E. Coyote chasing the Road Runner in a Trans Am. It took ten months to prepare and test, involved nearly one hundred production
personnel—including forty Warner Brothers animators—and used a forty-piece orchestra for the background music (Gellene, 1998). Building upon the 1984 Macintosh legacy, one could argue that Super Bowl ads are the most expensive content, per second, on network television.

A third element of Super Bowl ads that lead to their cultural elevation is their self-reflexivity. Several scholars have noted the general use of advertising references in advertising (Andersen, 1995; Goldman & Papson, 1996; McAllister, 1996; Twitchell, 1996). By constantly referring to itself, advertising rewards viewers for their loyal knowledge of advertising icons. Super Bowl ads, however, not only show their awareness of their status as advertising, but also of their special status as Super Bowl advertising. These ads then play upon and contribute to the audience’s knowledge of this special status. Bud Bowl ads, of course, winked at the audience in a very knowing way, filling the series with insider jokes about sports broadcasting and commercials. One 1994 Bud Bowl installment even showed viewers the proper way to watch Super Bowl commercials. This particular segment opened at a simulated Super Bowl bar party, with one eager party-goer noticing the large-screen TV and yelling at the other celebrants, “Hey, Turn it up! It’s Bud Bowl!” In this way, Super Bowl advertising again attempted to reinforce, if not to construct, its own unique place in culture.

Other advertisers also refer to the special role of Super Bowl ads, as shown by a sponsor voice-over tag during the 1993 game. The network announcer listed the products that would be advertised during the next few advertising pods, including “Nike—who’ll replay Bugs and Michael during post-game for those of you just watching this for the commercials” (Shales, 1993). Chevy Chase protested indignantly during a 1994 Doritos commercial that he was “in the middle of shooting a Super Bowl commercial” after being interrupted by actors playing network suits “canceling” the commercial. A 1998 regional spot for Carl’s Jr. promised viewers “the biggest spot in Super Bowl history,” right before cat'sup was spilt (Sokolsky, 1998). And in a commercial that same year for Federal Express, a test pattern is shown on the screen, with a scroll of text reading.

We apologize. You should be watching the new ad for EarthCo Insurance. It starred those lifeguards from Baywatch and a chorus line of singing Kangaroos. We even got Garth Brooks to do the music. It was very humorous. Unfortunately, a tape of the commercial didn’t get to NBC on time. Imagine,
$1.3 million is going down the tubes all because some boob at our ad agency didn't send the commercial with FedEx. (Had they used FedEx, they would still be our ad agency.)

Such self-reflexivity and intertextuality not only signals to the viewer the exceptional station the ads claim ("some of you are watching just for the commercials, aren't you?" they imply), it also elevates knowledge about Super Bowl ads and their conventions to the status of cultural literacy. Without understanding the special place of commercials during the Super Bowl, viewers would not get the jokes.

POST-EVENT DISCOURSE

A final way that Super Bowl commercials are raised above the status of "sales pitch" to the status of "culture" is through the mediated discourse about the advertising after the event is over. Most of this discourse involves news stories in both print media and broadcast media that "review" the Super Bowl commercials for a few days after the event.

The best known example of this post-event ranking appears in USA Today. Taking 1998 as an example, on the front page skybox on the January 26, the right side enticed viewers with the headline "Pepsi Wins 5th Ad Meter Title." This teaser headline is the same size as the left side "Super Bowl" game-result skybox, thus visually equating the commercials with the program. USA Today's Ad Meter process—essentially a public display and legitimation of market research conducted routinely in the advertising industry—involves nearly two hundred participants who use hand-held meters to "chart their second-by-second reactions to the game's fifty-two national commercials" (Horovitz, 1998b). Like real marketing research, the results are broken down for readers by gender, age, and income. The "Ad Meter" stories dominated the first three pages of the "Money" section that year. During the 1997 Fox Super Bowl broadcast, the results of that year's Ad Meter results were announced after the game (Turner, 1997). Apparently the results are noted by the ad industry as well. As a writer for TV Guide observed, "It's not overstating it to say that careers have been made or broken, accounts have been won or lost" because of the Meter's publicized results (Rosenwein, 1999, p. 75).
In 1999, similar "Monday Morning Advertiser" stories appeared in many local daily newspapers. Super Bowl ads were reviewed in such newspapers as the Los Angeles Times ("Super Bowl ad reviews," 1999), the Omaha World-Herald (Taylor, 1999), The Kansas City Star (Mann, 1999), the St. Louis Post Dispatch (Carey, 1999b), and The Boston Globe (Reidy, 1999), and many others.

Television aired such stories as well, often very prominently. Day-after reviews could be found on all three major broadcast network morning news programs: ABC's Good Morning America, NBC's The Today Show, and CBS's This Morning. Local stations contributed their own unique (or at least syndicated) analyses. According to the Lexis-Nexis database, 104 stations aired stories on local news programs that reviewed the ads' performance the day after the Super Bowl.

Like the pre-event coverage, such stories also extended the publicity value of the ads by airing them as part of the news. Both the 1998 and 1999 Today Show stories, for instance, re-broadcast the commercials that were highly rated by the USA Today Ad Meter participants, and interviewed a writer from the newspaper about the process. Advertisers count on such post-game extension. As one advertising executive noted on CNN's January 24, 1998 edition of Show Biz This Weekend, "They're going to be talking about you the day after. If you do a great spot, you're going to get rated. If you do well, there's going to be articles that spin off that. I think it's a great investment."

Perhaps of greater significance than the quantity of the reviews is the way the ads are reviewed. Of all the post-game review stories about Super Bowl ads, perhaps most telling are reviews that appeared in the magazine Entertainment Weekly (Jacobs, 1998; Jacobs, 1999). This is because the criterion for judging success of the ads in these and other stories is their entertainment level. Ads will get a thumbs up if they made the reviewers laugh or left them in awe over the commercial spectacle.

This has several implications. First, by using the entertainment value of the commercials as the main gauge for judging the ads, other factors more valuable to consumers, such as product information or consumer usefulness, are ignored. In fact, these consumer factors are antagonistic to entertainment, and may even "lower the scores." Practically the only time an ad is criticized during this post-game analysis is when it is dull—which often means when the ad focuses too much on product characteristics. This is seen in a typical quote from the Chicago Tribune:
Pepsi and Bud seemingly had the most ad time and variety of pitches. The former went from a flying skier pop-fueling a goose to a Mick Jagger-like mosquito pop-singing "Brown Sugar." Bud's best were Louie and a bunch of guys hiding in a clothes rack, with television and beer, while their women shopped. Not as good was Bud's pool-playing chicken. Bud's worst was the "brewmaster" explained. Boooorrriiing (Hirsley, 1998, p. SPORTS8).

*USA Today* applied a similar criterion:

Since 1989, Ad Meter volunteers have weighed in with their verdicts on all 453 Super Bowl spots. The absolute lowest-rated ad: a 1993 spot for Subaru that explains how the four-wheel drive system works on the Impreza. Zzzzzzzzzz (Horovitz, 1998a, p. 2B).

Thus, when commercials feature product information, such as explaining how the Budweiser brewing system works or the unique nature of the drive train on a Subaru, they are "boooorrriiing" or encourage the need for "Zzzzzzzzz." On the other hand, factors that are entertaining but have absolutely nothing to do with product characteristics, including an animated mosquito in a Pepsi commercial, were praised.

Another implication of this news story frame is that the reviewing of commercials as entertainment elevates the advertisements to the level of non-advertising media content. What other symbolic forms are reviewed in the media? Motion pictures, television programs, plays and books are worthy of reviewing. With the post-Super Bowl discourse, now advertising is also worthy. By extending the life of the ads beyond the event, it encourages "water-cooler" discussions the days after the game, just as one would talk about the films one saw over the weekend. As one advertising executive hopes, Super Bowl ads are "what people are talking about the next day—not what happened in the fourth quarter" (Turner, 1997, p. 63).

The use of entertainment-as-criterion also encourages the journalists to take the perspective of the advertiser. Rather than the "objective" reporter of Super Bowl commercial phenomena, journalists who report on Super Bowl ads often approach the ads with the same eye toward the commercially effective as advertisers would. Advertisers want us to view advertising as entertainment, and not as a self-interested message system or one that should provide us with valuable product information. This tendency is illustrated in this quote from *The Press-Enterprise*:
But were those spots worth all that money, especially since many of them were less than inspired and have already been seen in recent weeks? Yes, for the most part, they were entertaining. They caught our attention and they just may have sold a few products in the process (Sokolsky, 1989, p. B6).

As this quote reveals, the success of the ads was judged decidedly from the advertisers' perspective: they caught the attention of the viewer (because they were entertaining), and were effective sales pitches. When experts are brought on to supplement the journalists' views, these experts tend to be from the advertising industry itself, either from an agency (Carey, 1999b; Reidy, 1999) or from a trade journal (Advertising Age columnist Bob Garfield on Good Morning America). Consumer advocates, who may use different criteria, are not invited.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Commercials during the Super Bowl since the mid-1980s have been given special status. They often have characteristics more in line with entertainment media messages than stereotypical commercial media messages. They are hyped by pre-release advertisements or public relations-influenced news stories, just like movies. They feature socially and culturally prominent people, including politicians (just like news stories), new and old celebrities (just like movies), and sports personalities (just like the Super Bowl). They are much more expensive to produce, per second, than virtually any other form of television, and are not shy about trumpeting their expense. They assume a foundation of knowledge about their own social status among viewers. They are reviewed the next day with the same criteria as the newest Hollywood blockbuster.

Such commercial celebration encourages the encroachment of commercialism upon wider elements of our culture, infusing this culture with even more of a promotional mentality than before. Indeed, we have already seen this encroachment directly in at least two cases, both resulting from commercials from the 1992 Super Bowl.

One case was discussed at the beginning of this essay: the 1994 movie Little Giants. Even more visible and overtly commercialistic was the 1996 release Space Jam, featuring Michael Jordan and Warner Brothers characters, also inspired by a 1992 Super Bowl commercial,
in this case for Nike. This movie version of a commercial, like *Little Giants*, maintained the original version's promotional ideology. Labeled by one critic as setting "new standards for crass commercialism" (Thompson, 1997), the movie served as a feature-length commercial for Michael Jordan as celebrity endorser, Nike, *Space Jam* toys and generic Warner Brothers merchandise—the latter worth $2 billion to Time Warner in 1994 (Curan, 1995). In one sense, *Space Jam* was the ultimate triumph of product placement. Rather than the commercial being placed in the movie, the movie was placed in the commercial.

We also see the elevation of the commercial form in news about Super Bowl ads, creating a seamless merging of advertising into content. As practitioners in the field of public relations know, one problem with traditional television commercials and print ads is that it is easy for news consumers to escape these ads: simply change to another station or turn the page when encountering the ad. Since the ads are separate from the story, no news content is lost by the viewer/reader—unless the ads are a part of the story. As symbolized by Super Bowl hype, it is now routine for national advertisers to offer packages to news stations about how high-profile campaigns are made (Twitchell, 1996). Along with PR-generated Video News Releases, print press releases, and sponsored sporting events, stories about prestigious advertising campaigns have become journalism's version of product placement.

Yet aggressive advertisers are not the only explanation for the journalistic acceptance of such materials. The media often welcome advertising influence with open arms. Several recent critics have argued that, in a corporately dominated, ratings-driven journalistic universe, news has become increasingly entertainment-driven (Alger, 1998; Hickey, 1998), which, logically, would also include news about entertaining advertising. It is fun to read news stories about how ads are made, what ads are more effective than others in the cola wars, or to see reports about the latest cutting-edge special effects in commercials. For television, stories about commercials provide good eye candy (the video of the ads themselves shown during the story). Such stories are good for ratings, if not good for the media's role in a democracy.

Media organizations may be responsible for the blurring of advertising and media content in other ways as well. One factor that encourages post-Super Bowl discussion of the commercials is the self-promoting efforts of a newspaper, *USA Today*, which receives
free publicity when media outlets report the results of its "Ad Meter" studies. Well over two-dozen local TV stations mentioned the newspaper in their "day after" reports, complementing The Today Show's national story.

Although the media are discussing advertising more, they are discussing it with a decreasingly critical eye. As noted above, the "day after" reports often use the criteria of advertisers (sales effectiveness; entertainment quality) to judge the ads. Part of the reason for this may be news organizations' own lack of expertise in using other, more biting, criteria. The increase in journalistic writing about advertising occurs as traditional consumer reporting—where more fundamental criticism often is seen—has declined. Between 1981 and 1991, the number of local television stations with consumer reporters decreased from forty percent to only twenty percent (Alger, 1998).

The celebratory discourse of Super Bowl ads encourages, and is encouraged by, the overall elevation of advertising as culture. It is not just the Super Bowl ads that have a special place in our hearts, but increasingly all ads. USA Today now reviews the advertising of other special broadcasts, such as the May 1998 last episode of Seinfeld (Enrico & Wells, 1998). Collections of TV commercials are shown in art-house theaters (Fenster, 1998). Since 1997, TV commercials have had their own category at the Emmy Awards. TV programs like America's Favorite Commercials, airing in the summer of 1997 on WTBS, or ABC's 1998 and 1999 specials The Best Commercials You've Never Seen are not uncommon. The cover story of the March 28, 1997 Entertainment Weekly is devoted to "The 50 Greatest Commercials of All Time!"; the December 19, 1997 cover promotes "The Best Commercials of the Year." Postcards with reproductions of print ads on one side are produced by two companies and distributed in bars and health clubs. "Nobody believes they're advertisements; people see them as art," gushes one advertising executive about the postcard ads (Kulman, 1997, p. 10). Catalogs, such as "Beyond the Wall: Ads as Art" and "Name that Toon: Icons of Happiness," encourage consumers to place poster-size reproductions of print advertisements on the walls in their home. In this last way, ads are given perhaps their best compliment. They are now what they love most: things to be sold.

Such celebrations of the commercial form are often justified by rhetoric highlighting the popularity or entertainment excellence of Super Bowl advertising. The first "best commercial of 1997" listed
by *Entertainment Weekly* is the Bob Dole-endorsed Visa commercial (Jacobs, 1997). A two-part series on commercial special effects that aired on the *CBS Morning News* in May 1998 focused on Super Bowl Budweiser ads. In explaining its rationale for a new weekly column about upcoming advertisements, the editor of *TV Guide* noted that Dottie Enrico, the new columnist, was the main reporter in *USA Today*'s Super Bowl coverage. "In 1999, this [TV Guide] is where she'll weigh in early on those Super Bowl extravaganzas. She'll continue to be several steps ahead in keeping tabs on the hottest ads," bragged the editor (Reddicliffe, 1998, p. 4). The new attention that advertising receives in the magazine perhaps reached its apex in the July 3–9, 1999 issue, which featured a cover story on "The 50 Greatest TV commercials of all time." All thirty-six pages of the beginning glossy section featured ads—either as part of the cover story or as ads placed in the magazine. Again highlighting the role of the Super Bowl as a rationale for this coverage, *TV Guide*'s choice for the top TV commercial was Apple's "1984" Super Bowl ad.

The media attention to advertising, like the discourse of Super Bowl ads specifically, ignores or, more disturbingly, lovingly embraces the commercial ideology of ads. Scholars who have written about the issue of fetishism in advertising (Goldman & Papson, 1996; Jhally, 1987) note that advertising traditionally fetishizes the commodity being sold. Ads present loving, aestheticized images of the product. Ads anthropomorphize their products, giving them coveted human qualities. Ads show desirable people integrating the products in their lives, or products solving personal problems. Ads present products with an overwhelming consumption orientation, ignoring the production and resource issues that went into making them. In such ways, the commodity form is celebrated in ad after ad.

Super Bowl ads and the discourse around them certainly do this. But they also do something else. In presenting descriptions of the ad strategies before the game, being praised by news personnel in anticipation of the game's ads, promoting the ads with other ads before the game, referring to their status as Super Bowl ads during the game, and being reviewed as entertainment after the game, Super Bowl ads are not just fetishizing the commodity, they are also fetishizing the campaign. Super Bowl commercials, then, fetishize themselves. And just as a successful fetishism of commodities limits the way that consumers view and understand products, a successful fetishism of campaigns may limit the possible viewpoints and critiques with which consumers may approach this message system.
When a campaign is successfully fetishized, we see how clever it is, how entertaining it is, how talked about it is. We may not see as easily how it influences us to consume, or how it might, in a different form, help us to make intelligent consumer decisions. Advertising is an overwhelmingly self-interested form of discourse. It is designed to sell us specific products and promote consumerism generally. As long as this discourse is understood in this way and socially circumscribed, then society may tolerate and even benefit from it. But when this discourse becomes one of the loudest voices in our society, and one of the most beloved—as promoted around Super Bowl Sunday—then it becomes a social issue significantly more important than what commercials made us laugh the most.

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Rachel L. Holloway for her helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. Other versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Broadcast Education Association, Las Vegas, NV, April 2–5, 1998 and at the Virginia Association of Communication Arts and Sciences, September 19, 1998.

NOTE

1. Nine newspapers were chosen because they were the only ones that have been indexed by Dow Jones Interactive since 1985. The nine newspapers chosen were The Dallas Morning News, The Houston Chronicle, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Omaha World-Herald, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Seattle Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. The database search was conducted using the key words “Super Bowl Ads,” “Super Bowl Advertising”; “Super Bowl Advertiser”; and “Super Bowl Commercial.” Articles that mentioned the Super Bowl only in passing were excluded from the count.

REFERENCES


