

Henner Barthel  
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

# Communication and Political Change

## SPRECHEN & VERSTEHEN

Schriften zur  
Kommunikationstheorie und  
Kommunikationspädagogik



Band 20

Röhrig  
Universitätsverlag

## Gene Michaud

### Patriot Games: A Ritual Analysis of Super Bowl XXXVI

As the theme of this anthology is “Communication During Times of Political Change,” it seems important at the outset to briefly discuss the political changes that have occurred in the United States since the events of September 11, 2001, before analyzing the ways in which these changes have been incorporated into American media. The idea, frequently expressed by U.S. political and corporate leaders, that “everything has changed since September 11th” needs to be examined in terms of the actual changes that have occurred in the relations of power both externally – between the U.S. and other nations and cultures – and internally – between the U.S. government and its people.

The destruction by “terrorists” of the two World Trade Center towers and a part of the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C. produced a climate of crisis in the United States. Over the last century, the continental U.S. has been largely spared the kind of direct material effects of military and political conflicts that have been visited on other countries. Even the ubiquitous analogies between the events in New York City and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 are imprecise in this sense. Though the attack on Pearl Harbor was a direct attack on U.S. military forces, the Hawaiian Islands were not at the time part of the United States. Thus, on September 11, the U.S. found itself in a crisis situation, and post-September 11 policies can be viewed as an attempt to deal with this crisis.

In regard to global political relations, perhaps the most obvious change in this regard was the announcement by U.S. President George W. Bush of

an open-ended “war on terrorism” that has had some profound immediate effects, most notably the ongoing military operations in Afghanistan, as well as some far reaching implications. Bush called on the international community to join the U.S. in this effort, but it was clear, as a number of analysts pointed out, that the U.S. intended to proceed with its aggressive military and intelligence efforts with or without international support.

Within the U.S., there have also been some significant political changes. Of these, perhaps the most important was the swift passage of the “USA PATRIOT Act,” which altered the relations of power between the U.S. government and the people of the United States. As Chang (2001, 2) points out:

The USA PATRIOT Act creates a federal crime of "domestic terrorism" that broadly extends to "acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws" if they "appear to be intended [...] to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion," and if they "occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States." Because this crime is couched in such vague and expansive terms, it may well be read by federal law enforcement agencies as licensing the investigation and surveillance of any political activists and organizations based on their opposition to government policies... Environmental activists, anti-globalization activists, and anti-abortion activists who use direct action to further their political agendas are particularly vulnerable to prosecution as "domestic terrorists." [...] [T]he Act grants the executive branch unprecedented, and largely unchecked, surveillance powers, including the enhanced ability to track email and Internet usage, conduct sneak-and-peek searches, obtain sensitive personal records, monitor financial transactions, and conduct nationwide roving wiretaps.

In addition to the changes in global and internal political relations, the events of September 11 also precipitated some important changes in the content of the U.S. media. These included the withdrawal from television, movie theaters and other media forms of certain programs, films and advertising campaigns that were thought to be inappropriate in the wake of the crisis (Elliot, 2001; Friedman, 2001; Leland and Marks, 2001; Vignoni 2001). Another significant change had to do with an emphasis on what

constituted “newsworthiness.” One manifestation of this was the inclusion of much more coverage of international news, though journalists, editors and commentators wondered openly how long this would last given the market-driven nature of U.S. media. A second manifestation was the large number of stories in the media that dealt with the immediate social response of U.S. citizens to the events of September 11. American newspaper readers and television news watchers were treated to story after story about self-sacrifice and selflessness in the face of the crisis, from the police and firefighters who gave their lives, to the merchants who gave away food and provided shelter to rescue workers, to the hundreds of Americans who lined up and waited for hours to donate blood. Such stories have traditionally been assigned to the margins of mainstream journalism, categorized as “human interest” stories. In the immediate period after September 11, these stories *were* the news (Cook 2001, 6).

But as the initial effect of these events faded, some other trends in media representations of the September 11 tragedy and its consequences began to appear. Many of these acknowledged the crisis of September 11 and simultaneously tried to incorporate the event within the familiar discourse and paradigms of mainstream commercial media. These included numerous statements of political leaders, widely reported and repeated in the media, that the proper response to the events of September 11 was not to allow acts of terrorism to disrupt American life. For example, former New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani stated, “Some one told me they thought it’s their patriotic duty to shop. I certainly think it’s our patriotic duty to get back to our lives” (Lacheller 2002, 1).

I would argue that a significant issue concerning the U.S. response to the events of September 11 is the way these events have been articulated through various media forms in ways that both promote or accommodate certain changes in global and internal political relations while maintaining

the traditional relations of power within the U.S. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the reaction to the events of September 11th have been integrated into ritualized forms of media in order to reinforce existing social relations of power that favor the U.S. political and corporate elite both internationally and internally, and that one key mass mediated event in which this can be seen is in the telecast of the XXXVI Super Bowl on February 5, 2002.

It is common knowledge that different cultures develop different cultural forms that best express their beliefs, values, the goals of their society, etc. Through their interaction with cultural forms members of society become enculturated – learn the values and beliefs of their society. Communication theorist James Carey (1988) explicitly emphasizes this phenomenon when he articulates two different views of communication events: the transmission view of communication and the ritual view of communication. Under the transmission view, the emphasis is on the transmission of messages across space to influence or control thought and action. This, of course, is the view that guided mainstream communication research in the U.S. and other countries for many years and still dominates most discussions of communication. Under the ritual view of communication, however, the emphasis is on repetition of messages over time to maintain a society by reaffirming certain cultural beliefs and values. Carey uses the example of reading a newspaper to make the distinction between these two views. Most people would think of that activity within the transmission view – as an experience in which information is transmitted from the newspaper to its readership. But Carey describes the process of reading a newspaper as a cultural act in which the reader is offered a familiar interpretive position or role to assume (i.e., “an American citizen”). The reported events are presented in a familiar dramatic form with well-established lines of conflict, and the reader then experiences the playing out

of these conflicts until some resolution is reached. Under this view, reading the newspaper is a situation where, to quote Carey, “nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed.” (Carey 1988, 20)

A point that Carey makes and I want to emphasize here is that communication occurs and should be seen in both of these ways. Both happen simultaneously. Information is presented, and beliefs and values are expressed, reaffirmed, or altered. But understanding the ritual nature of communication, especially in regard to mediated communication events, helps us realize why some media forms begin from a privileged position. Although audience members are free to reject both the ideas and the interpretive positions that are proffered, the ideas and values they contain and the positions they offer the audience are very familiar and do not therefore require much effort to appropriate and accept.

The stories that get told and retold over time are central to this process, and are versions of, or parts of, what is sometimes referred to as a master narrative – the big stories around which forms of social organization are constructed and maintained. If this big story has been sufficiently repeated and elaborated over time, it becomes unnecessary to retell it in detail – it can be evoked by the use of a few key symbols, phrases and images. As we shall see, the Super Bowl provides many good examples of this phenomenon.

Understanding the Super Bowl as a ritual requires some acknowledgement of the role that sports, and especially televised sports, plays in U.S. culture. Real (1995) points out that the conventional theories of sports that are most frequently articulated in the United States generally avoid criticism and tend to emphasize the social integration of youth into certain American cultural values that are generally accepted as important. Most notable among these are the values of teamwork and competition,

which are held to prove useful in many areas of American life, including work, school, business, and warfare. On the other hand, researchers who look at sports using various modes of cultural analysis have tended to emphasize the ways in which sports promote values related to conflict within the power relationships of society. As Real states: "Whatever positive social integration sports accomplish, they also injure people, create antagonisms between fans, encourage passive consumption, pit owners against players, endorse male domination, and in some cases encourage violence" (Real 1995, 464).

In terms of media, sports events play a prominent role. Many Americans, especially males, who read newspapers, watch television, or look for news on the Internet seek sports related information first. The economics of media sports also indicate their importance in U.S. society. Billions of U.S. dollars are spent each year in the representation of sports activities in the media, and vast amounts of technological resources are also brought to bear. Advertisers pay large amounts of money to have messages about their products inserted in mediated sports events in various ways, and are constantly seeking new methods.

Media sports events, in particular, provide multiple opportunities to articulate the dominant myths of a particular society, producing, supporting and reiterating common social understandings. Gopnick (2002) has argued that, largely as a result of intense media coverage, the sports that are central to American culture are those that lend themselves to visual spectacle. As one of the announcers during Super Bowl XXVI proudly states: "The Super Bowl has evolved from a game into one of the greatest spectacles...". Televised sports activities provide precisely the kind of dramatic presentation that Carey points to in his analysis of the ritual view of communication. The viewers are invited to take up positions in the unfolding action as fans – they are encouraged to make personal and

emotional identification with the competitors. In U.S. professional sports, the actual geographical and social links between the fans and individual sports competitors or members of particular teams is frequently very tenuous. Professional sports teams such as the New England Patriots or the St. Louis Rams are primarily made up of players who do not come from the geographical areas that their team represents. Further, these players may be members of a particular team for only a short period of time. Nonetheless, as the particular sporting event unfolds, viewers are strongly encouraged to identify with a particular player and/or a particular team.

Televised sports activities, like all media events, are also sites of ideological struggle. As noted above, the meanings of a particular media event – a news program, a situation comedy, a drama – is to some extent dependent on the perspective of the viewer who engages in that event. But it is also clearly true that media events are produced in ways that allow particular meanings to predominate. Media sports events represent one form of what anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) calls “social drama” – a ritualized form of conflict management. Social dramas play an especially important role when norms are breached, prompting a crisis that requires social action to repair and refurbish the pre-existing norms and to incorporate new events into familiar perspectives. The final stage of the social drama precipitated by crisis is the reintegrative stage – an attempt to make sense of the crisis in terms consistent with previous social experience and established cultural patterns. As Becker (1984) points out, confronted with events that are new or extend beyond the parameters of the easily understandable, members of a given society tend to fall back on previously established shared understandings of the world to make these events comprehensible. Thus the successful conclusion to a social drama will resolve the crisis, frequently in symbolic form, in ways that invite all members of society, including marginalized groups, to share the meanings.

As Haines (1990) notes, such a process is by nature essentially conservative. Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) point out that media rituals must be able to accommodate change when necessary, while essentially reiterating existing social values. As Turner notes, any changes must be accomplished within established frames of reference – otherwise reintegration would fail, creating or exacerbating social fragmentation. Under this view, cultural forms such as televised sports are sites where social meanings are enacted or performed and, when necessary, where distressed societies and subcultures find healing and closure in the aftermath of crisis.

Consequently, when we look at the specific events of Super Bowl XXXVI televised on February 5, 2002, we are looking at one form of social drama that necessarily had to deal with the crisis precipitated by the events of September 11, 2001. The overarching question is: how does this specific media ritual address the events of September 11, and what options does it offer U.S. citizens in terms of the reintegration of U.S. society. While I will not be able to address in this essay all of the ways that this occurs, we can look at a number of important moments within the spectacle of Super Bowl XXXVI itself and find some important answers to this question.

### Super Bowl XXVI as Ritual

If sports events are central to a society's articulation of its central beliefs and values, the Super Bowl is the premiere sports event in the United States. It meets the three criteria that Goethals (1981) states are basic requirements of all rituals. First, it offers the possibility of participation to many individuals. Secondly, it occurs in a special space that is set aside for

the performance of the ritual (in this case, the Louisiana Superdome). Finally, it occurs within a specific and special time frame, with a carefully structured beginning, middle, and end. Super Bowl XXXVI was telecast on the Fox television network, a division of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation of America, which in turn is a division of Murdoch's multinational media empire. As promotional material offered by one of the event's sponsor's points out, "the Super Bowl is annually the nation's highest-rated TV program and the most-watched single-day sporting event, [with] an expected 130 million viewers in the United States and 800 million viewers worldwide." Specifically in regard to Super Bowl XXXVI, according to ratings data, an estimated 131.7 million people (or just under 60% of the U.S. population) watched the televised version of the game, in addition to the tens of thousands of spectators in the arena and several hundred more people involved in the pre-game, half-time, and post-game ceremonies. Because of the immense television viewership, advertisers paid just under \$2 million dollars per 30 seconds of commercial time to advertise their products and services during the game.

According to newspaper listings and TV Guide magazine, the official time of the game's telecast was 6pm EST. Those who tuned in at that time first saw an ad for the upcoming film *Spiderman*, which ironically was one of the film's scheduled for release in the Fall of 2001 but held up because it featured the title character swinging from the World Trade Center buildings in pursuit of a mad terrorist and his henchmen. Some of the original footage from the film was re-shot and re-edited, and the ad informed the Super Bowl audience that the film was now scheduled for release in May 2002. This was followed by an ad for Radio Shack products, featuring an ex-football player as a spokesman for the company and showing an African-American couple using and enjoying some of Radio Shack's new

audio technologies. A trailer for an upcoming FOX network program, "That 70s Show," followed this.

At the conclusion of these three advertisements, the broadcast then moved to the Superdome in Louisiana, but the actual beginning of the game was still about 40 minutes away. As with all recent Super Bowls, televised pre-game activities had been underway for several hours on several networks, and viewers who had tuned in at 6pm saw the end of Fox's Super Bowl pre-game programming featuring Paul McCartney. At the end of McCartney's performance, television viewers were treated to five more advertisements, the first for an upcoming Fox network telecast of a Nascar race, the second for Hyundai automobiles, the third for Sam Adams Light beer, the fourth for Jaguar automobiles, and the fifth for McDonald's fast food. In the Sam Adams beer commercial, a young African-American male plays a prominent role.

When the ads concluded, television graphics announced the beginning of "The Charles Schwab Super Bowl Kick-Off Show." This segment of the broadcast begins with a short video establishing the importance of Super Bowl XXXVI in light of the events of September 11. It begins with a shot of the American flag, followed in rapid succession by a shot of an American eagle, a shot of the Statue of Liberty, a shot of American schoolchildren reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, a shot of a middle-aged man in a suburban setting receiving a newspaper from a delivery boy over a white picket fence, the shadow of a weather vane against a stormy sky, a shot of a fireman with soot on his face, a shot of an American fighter pilot saluting from the cockpit of his plane, a shot of loggers posing in front of a downed tree, a shot of the Iwo Jima memorial as the flag is lowered to half-mast, and finally to shot of a New England Patriot football player waving a small American flag. Over this montage, the play-by-play announcer for Fox football telecasts, Pat Summerall, intones the following words:

There comes a defining moment in our nation that cries out for support. With hopes toward tomorrow, it is our traditions and values that are the flames that will burn forever in this nation's soul. Americans have answered back, showing unwavering courage, character, and an indomitable spirit. But there are times when we can look to the past to point us in the present direction.

These shots lead to a sequence in which players from both teams quote excerpts from famous presidential speeches, including those of John F. Kennedy, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and ending again with Kennedy's exhortation to "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." As this sequence ends, we see a shot of a stealth bomber flying overhead, followed by a succession of shots featuring players from each team taken from various games preceding the Super Bowl. Over this montage, our narrator says:

This Sunday we celebrate so much more than football, we celebrate freedom as well. The freedom to honor men whose contributions may lie on the playing field, but whose happiness lies in the thrill of effort and the joy of achievement. Super Bowl Sunday has evolved from a game into one of the greatest spectacles in the world. At the end of the day, there will be a winner and a loser, but lives will be changed forever because they are part of something great, and greatness, no matter how instantly achieved will stay with them forever – much like the indelible spirit of Americans everywhere.

The sequence ends with these final lines, and viewers are presented with an image of an African-American in a soldier's uniform lifting and embracing a young African-American child.

Following this video segment, the teams are introduced as they run onto the field. After several more advertisements, Maria Carey, an African-American woman who the television audience is informed is "the biggest selling recording artist in history," sings the U.S. National Anthem accompanied by the Boston Pops Orchestra. This followed by another series of advertisements, after which viewers are presented with the

ceremonial coin-toss to determine which of the two teams will begin on offense. The two celebrities chosen to carry out this part of the ritual are Roger Staubach, a former quarterback and naval officer, and former president George H. W. Bush, father of the current U.S. president, who is introduced as a “World War II hero and 41st President of the United States.” After several more advertisements, and at about 6:40pm EST, the actual kick-off takes place and the game begins.

As the first series of plays unfolds, the telecast cuts away from the action on the field to graphics that highlight the players on each team. For Super Bowl XXXVI, these graphics are introduced in a sequence in which members of the U.S. military, standing around a lighted globe, touch points of light from which images of the players then appear.

Dyer (1993) has argued that a key function of entertainment is to provide an audience with utopian visions of the world, and that these utopian visions are directly and specifically related to real social conflicts and tensions within society. For example, although there is deepening poverty in the U.S. that disproportionately affects people of color, the images contained within the Super Bowl, and especially within the advertisements, are images of material well being and abundance that specifically include African-Americans. Miller (1991) has pointed out that the inclusion of African-Americans in entertainment in prominent roles is precisely to suppress the notion of racial conflict in U.S. society and to promote the idea that all Americans live in a consumerist utopia in which everyone shares equally. Certainly, the images from Super Bowl XXXVI ritually reinforce these sentiments.

The prominence of advertising in Super Bowl XXXVI is nothing new, and is part of the ritual that most Americans expect, accept, and in some cases, eagerly anticipate and enjoy. Although sports commentators may utter a few lines about the celebration of “effort and achievement” that they

see at the core of this ritual, the continual bombardment of images of consumption suggests a different emphasis, particularly in light of the events of September 11. As Cook (2001, 6) has argued about American popular culture, and especially advertising, in the wake of September 11, "In addition to the ubiquitous display of Old Glory, [the American people] are now exhorted to re-associate our identities under the signs/flags of McDonald's, Prada, Tommy Hilfinger, Old Navy, and Coca-Cola, fusing citizenship and consumption once and for all in some grand integration of self, commodity, and nation." For Halton (2001, 1), the patterns of living proffered to Americans through such mediated and consumer-oriented rituals as the Super Bowl represent a form of automatism, which works to suppress various forms of "spontaneous life through which we are human... Halton states, "The September 11 [airplane] hijackers represented one example of this automatism" and further argues that "unaware, automatic consumers" represents another. According to Halton (2001, 1), "...the automated American is underslept and underwalked, overworked and overspent, for these deprivations enhance compliance and reduce awareness." Media rituals, of which Super Bowl XXXVI is a prime (and prime time) example, tie together patriotism and consumption in ways that deflect critical evaluation of each. Perhaps more disturbingly, the images of the Super Bowl XXXVI ritual responds to the crisis of September 11, 2001 by adding to these American values the idea of an unbounded and ubiquitous U.S. military presence that encompasses and polices the nation and the globe, making the U.S. consumer utopia safe from the forces of "terrorism." As a social drama, Super Bowl XXXVI replays the traditional rituals of sports and consumption within the context of a more militarized world.

## Literature

- BECKER, H. 1986, Culture: A sociological perspective. In: Becker, H. (ed.), *Doing things together*, pp. 11-24. Chicago.
- CAREY, J. 1988, *Communication as culture*. Boston.
- CHANG, N. 2001, The USA PATRIOT act: What's so patriotic about trampling on the Bill of Rights? Center for Constitutional Rights. New York.
- COOK, D. 2001, For country and commodity. *Consumers, Commodities and Consumption*, 3, (1), 1-6.
- DYER, R. 1993, Entertainment and Utopia. In: Durang, S. (ed.), *The cultural studies reader*. London.
- ELLIOT, S. 2001, In a whole new climate, the networks scramble to review and revise their own fall promotions. *The New York Times*, Sept. 26, Sec. C., 5.
- FRIEDMAN, W. 2001. Networks may yank terror attack shows. *AdAge. Com*. Sept. 17. [www.adage.com](http://www.adage.com).
- GOETHALS, G. 1981, *The TV ritual: Worship at the video altar*. Boston.
- GROSSBERG, L., WARTELLA, E., WHITNEY, D. CH. 1998, *Media making: Mass media in a popular culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- HAINES, H.W. 1990, They were called and they went: The political rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran. In: Dittmar, L., & Michaud, G. (eds.), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam war in American film*. New Brunswick, NJ.
- HALTON, E. 2001, The home front. *Consumers, Commodities and Consumption*, 3, (1), 7-8.
- LACHELIER, P. 2002, 9-11 and the triumph of capitalism. *Consumers, Commodities and Consumption*, 3, (2), 1-4.
- LELAND, J., & MARKS, P. 2001, New look for entertainment in a terror-conscious world. *The New York Times*, Sept. 24, Sec. A., 1.
- MILLER, M.C. 1991, *The big picture*. New York.
- REAL, M. 1995, Sport and the spectacle. In: Downing, J., Mohammadi, and Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. (eds.), *Questioning the media: A critical introduction*, pp. 460-475. Thousand Oaks, Ca.
- TURNER, V. 1982, *From ritual to theater: The human seriousness of play*. New York.

VIGNONI, A. 2001, Humorous ads that aren't funny anymore. AdAge. Com. Sept. 17. [www.adage.com](http://www.adage.com).