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Does Watching College Football on TV Have to Be So Miserable?

The corporations that control these broadcasts know: It can still be hugely lucrative to provide an experience that fans come to despise.

By Ben Mathis-Lilley

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It is, let’s say, 8:43 p.m. on a Saturday. You are watching a college football game that is taking place at this hour despite being played in the Midwest in November, and the people in the stadium, which is not entirely full, look very cold and a little put off. The season schedule said kickoff was at 8 p.m., but it didn’t actually take place until 8:18. In the 25 minutes that have elapsed, play has been interrupted for three commercial breaks. Each advertisement shown during these breaks has been for pickup trucks.

The announcers have just begun a discussion of your team’s head coach, and his alleged inability to win “big games,” which is indistinguishable from identical discussions held by other announcers in each of the team’s nine previous contests.

You will continue watching this broadcast until it ends at 11:47.

Why? Because you are a college football aficionado and the bond between you and the team you support is an idiosyncratic one that is hard to extinguish.

In an era in which television ratings are in decline, the aggregate live-audience demand to which you contribute — some teams can bring in more than three million viewers every week, on average — is valuable for the multinational corporation broadcasting the game. This demand lasts through the season, which begins for most teams this weekend and runs through, if you are lucky, January of next year. It is not necessarily affected by the quality and care with which the broadcast has been produced.

You are a case study in the consolidation of modern media: It can still be hugely lucrative to provide you with an experience that, in many respects, you find insulting.

As both a professional journalist and an expert on watching college football, I felt obligated to explore such matters while researching my forthcoming book “The Hot Seat,” from which this article is adapted. The book tells the story of overenthusiastic modern college football fandom through the 2021 Michigan Wolverines (average weekly viewership: 4.74 million) and their divisive coach, Jim Harbaugh. I took my responsibilities so seriously that I often asked my wife to mind our three children during the team’s games so I could observe and consider the state of televised sports with the clearest possible mind. (She often declined.)

I also spoke about the subject with John Kosner, a former ESPN executive who helped oversee college sports at the network in his 21 years at the company, owned by Disney, and now runs his own sports media business. Mr. Kosner grew up in New York and became a fan of college football because it was, in his words, “so different from anything I experienced.”

But what college football is now is far from what he first started watching regularly in the 1970s. There is much more of it on television, for one thing. And each school and conference wants, understandably, to maximize its earning potential in a competitive environment. (A 1984 Supreme Court ruling forbade the N.C.A.A. from single-handedly controlling its members’ TV rights.) It’s an arms race of commercial breaks.

“You’re making deals at the demand of these conferences and of the media companies you work for and it’s a competitive arena,” Mr. Kosner said. “You might decide, ‘Gee, this is terrible. We shouldn’t do this.’ But if you decide not to make a deal, someone else is going to make that deal.”

This is true. Big Ten games have been broadcast on ESPN and ABC for years, but the parties were unable to come to terms on a renewal of their relationship. The seven-year, $7 billion agreement the conference announced this month is with Fox, CBS and NBC instead. Disney still dominates college football, having televised 41 of 2021’s 44 postseason bowl games. In 2020, it secured exclusive future rights to broadcast the Southeastern Conference, whose teams are more successful on the field than the Big Ten’s and almost as popular.

“What happens is the conference is saying, ‘OK, we want more for our rights, or we want $25 million for the championship game,’” Mr. Kosner said. “And the answer frequently is, ‘We want to expand the commercial for that.’ And they say, ‘OK.’”

In response to questions about how long games now take — up to four hours with all the scheduled breaks — and whether this tangibly affects the live experience, an ESPN spokeswoman noted that many factors affect the length of a game, including the style of play, replay reviews and advertising.

“Commercial breaks are a standard part of every televised sport and are a major element of media companies recouping their significant investment,” the spokeswoman said.

Michigan's 2021 season was unexpectedly redemptive, but in the years prior the team's supporters were subject to relentless, hurtful reminders on game broadcasts that, as head coach, Mr. Harbaugh had never beaten Ohio State, had a poor record against elite teams in general, and had failed to win a Big Ten championship. A Tampa-based sports TV expert, former Deadspin editor and archivist named Timothy Burke helped me compile transcripts of 43 Michigan football broadcasts aired between 2018 and 2021; there were at least 31 comments about Mr. Harbaugh's not having beaten Ohio State in the file, and I excluded the actual games against Ohio State from my search.

Coach Jim Harbaugh during Michigan's game against Ohio State in Ann Arbor in 2019. Leon Halip/Getty Images

Coach Harbaugh's purported overratedness was a favorite subject not just during games but also on ESPN's original programming. One of the network's college football pundits, Paul Finebaum, has described him as "the most overpaid coach in college football history," "stunningly embarrassing," "an idiot," "a colossal failure" and "a total fraud." As Mr. Finebaum noted with enthusiasm, until last season, Michigan had never made the College Football Playoff — the four-team championship system that began in 2014, to which ESPN has exclusive TV rights.

Mr. Finebaum wasn't the only person on ESPN from whom one heard about teams that had succeeded or failed by making or not making the College Football Playoff on ESPN. According to an article in The Athletic, the C.F.P. was mentioned 27 times during one three-hour December 2020 episode of "College GameDay," the network's flagship news and discussion show for the sport. Nine promos for the Playoff ran during a 2021 bowl game I happened to watch. (Fine: It was the Cheez-It Bowl. I watched the entire Cheez-It Bowl.)

But what recourse do fans have? ESPN is increasingly the only game in town, which reflects the hollowing out and nationalization of the media more broadly.

Daily newspaper circulation in the United States has fallen to 24 million from 62 million in the past 50 years, according to the Pew Research Center. There were about 80,000 newsroom employees in the country combined between newspapers and the internet in 2008, according to Pew, and by 2020, that number fell to 49,000.

In the athletic realm, Sports Illustrated has been controlled since 2019 by a company that has variously called itself TheMaven, Maven and The Arena Group, and whose central project as owner of the magazine seems to have been to attach its brand name to team-specific sites run by individuals who don't necessarily have journalism training. ("College football is on fast approach," begins a recent post on one of those sites.)

ESPN, for its part, employs some of the best reporters and commentators in the industry, but is cutting them at an alarming rate. About 100 newsroom contributors were terminated in a single day in 2017, and more were dropped during the pandemic.

One way ESPN fills its schedule now is with so-called hot takes: This is the five hours of weekday broadcasts filled with talking heads — opinionated journalists and ex-players — airing their hyperbolic and provocative views.

Fox Sports — which is part of the Murdoch-controlled Fox Corporation — is nominally a competitor of ESPN's, but it may be more accurately described as an imitator. About five years ago, the company laid off nearly all its writers and reporters and hired away a number of ESPN talking heads and the top producer of ESPN's talk shows. Fox's lineup can feature *six* daily hours of the discussion (i.e. argument) format.

One of the top ESPN-to-Fox personalities is a longtime radio host named Colin Cowherd, who once noted, in an almost admirably honest interview with Bryan Curtis of The Ringer, that "in my business, being absolutely, absurdly wrong occasionally is a wonderful thing." He also said he constantly tells one of his friends in the industry that "there's no money in right," and concluded a rumination about whether he'd been wrong about the subject of that day's show — his accusation that a particular quarterback didn't prepare enough for games — by asking, "Who cares?"

Wrong on purpose is not necessarily a bad strategy. Opinion stories are disproportionately represented at the top of news sites' most-shared lists, and internal Facebook memos made public in the fall of 2021 revealed that the company had been rewarding outside content that users reacted to with the "angry face" emoji with better placement in news feeds. Executives and producers further emphasize characters and story lines they believe will be especially divisive: Tim Tebow, LeBron James and whether he chokes or is better than Michael Jordan, the Dallas Cowboys in general, and so on. "I was told specifically, 'You can't talk enough Tebow,'" the pundit Doug Gottlieb said after leaving ESPN in 2012.

Disney knows the value of a captive, excitable audience — in addition to its sports rights, it owns the Star Wars universe, Marvel comic book characters and Pixar, among other things. Disney's profits jumped 50 percent in 2021. The financial information firm S&P Global Market Intelligence estimates that ESPN makes more than $8 a month from each of its nearly 100 million cable subscribers; it estimates that the most lucrative cable channel that doesn't show sporting events, Fox News, makes about $2. There are 16 scheduled commercial breaks in national college football broadcasts, which can last as long as four minutes each.

Curious as to whether this feeling of oppression by a cultural monopoly might be addressed by the kind of legal remedies more typically associated with companies that make steel beams and computer software, I spoke to a University of Michigan law professor and antitrust expert named Daniel Crane.

He was open to the idea that my lengthy complaints about commercials and hot takes were evidence of "quality degradation," that being one of the typical consequences for consumers of a monopolistic market. (The others are rising prices, diminished innovation and reduced output. Mr. Crane, for the record, says that if he's not at a Michigan game in person he usually listens on the radio.)

But he cautioned that simply being a monopoly doesn't mean anything has to change. "Unless you can show that they have obtained or maintained their monopoly through anticompetitive means," he said — and despite the allegations mentioned above, no litigant or regulator has formally done that — "it's just kind of too bad. "

What's more, he added, the law doesn't really care that to fans of a particular team, changing the channel to watch another game isn't the same as switching to a different brand of dish soap.

Reporting which preceded the Big Ten's recent contract suggested that college administrators had themselves become uneasy with the amount of control that ESPN and Disney had over their sport. Whether this will ameliorate the quality degradation remains to be seen. Certainly none of the news releases about the deal that I have read mentioned anything about reducing the duration of commercial breaks.

Is this a silly thing to worry about? Yes and no. On the one hand, college football is not as materially crucial of an issue as, to take two examples, climate change and cancer. On the other, like all cultural narratives, highbrow and low, it has an intangible but foundational importance to the lives of those who use it to define their social communities and to explain their personal origins and values — to understand how life works, basically.

Karl Marx held that *alienation* is the condition people experience when they have no autonomy over something personally or socially meaningful to them because it is subject to the power and incentives of accumulated capital. I believe I embody the concept, as so defined by Marx, when I am watching five to eight consecutive commercials 16 times during a college football broadcast so that Disney shareholders and Rupert Murdoch might benefit.

Mr. Crane's advice to unhappy viewers, informed by the success that European soccer fans had in killing a consolidated "Super League" proposal in 2021 by exerting pressure through political channels, was to pursue activism at the local level — to create a headache for university presidents, regents and others who actually have the leverage to tell a TV network to cool it.

But what makes the situation tricky is that fans have an incentive to want their schools to sell out too. The essence of college football's hold on its audience is that it asserts a particular school, state or region's status and relevance in a way that no other activity, even any other sport, can.

To choose not to have the financial resources other schools might be availing themselves of, to walk away from the prime-time slot, would be contrary to the entire enterprise. I do a great deal of whining about announcers, but when Fox analyst Joel Klatt said (to Colin Cowherd!) that the atmosphere during Michigan's 2021 win over Ohio State in Ann Arbor was "the best environment I've ever been at, in any sport," I was proud. Thanks, Joel!

When I spoke with Mr. Kosner, the former ESPN executive, he recounted the stakes of a Thanksgiving 1971 game between Nebraska and Oklahoma that he remembered watching. "It had everything," he said. "It was everything you would imagine from middle of the country, a super-rivalry between states." (I think he is right that a football game between Oklahoma and Nebraska would have been the exact conceptual opposite of 1970s New York City.) “That game doesn’t happen anymore because Nebraska chose to go to the Big Ten,” he said wistfully.

Of course, as he recognized, the reason Nebraska joined the Big Ten was so it could reap the rewards of consolidating its brand with those of other national draws like Michigan, Ohio State and Penn State. That choice was offered to the school by executives like John Kosner, and was accepted enthusiastically. Nebraska averaged 2.29 million viewers a week last season, and there’s no going back.