Sports-Media-Military Nexus

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**Summary and Rationale for Assignment**

One of the most important dimensions of teaching students about the Nexus of Sports, Media, and the Military is helping them to understand it as a discursive phenomenon. The connections within this nexus are maintained through metaphors, descriptions, and overt comparisons that perpetuate beliefs such as “athletes are warriors” or “stadiums are battlefields.” Because of how we discuss sport, these connections seem natural. So, one of the best ways to examine them is to identify moments or people around which tensions exposed how these discursive links are put together. One such instance was the evolution of Pat Tillman as a characterization of an athlete/warrior.

For those who the name Pat Tillman does not ring a bell, many simply remember him as the athlete who left his professional football career to join the Army following 9/11. In the years since, Pat Tillman has become a complicated character in US politics in large part due to the controversies surrounding his friendly-fire death while fighting in Afghanistan.

I have taught this topic in courses such as Rhetoric and Popular Culture or Gender Communication, but I also have activities for courses specifically pertaining to Nationalism, Controversy, and Sport. There are a variety of contexts in which this topic can be explored in order to help facilitate a better understanding of the relationships between media, sports, and the military. For example, one approach explores the historically rooted traditions of the intersection between athletes and soldiers. David Zirin wrote extensively about this issue and looked specifically at how Tillman plays a role in it in his book *A People's History of Sports in the United States*. Another approach is to examine how Pat Tillman became a symbol of a virtuous, almost unquestionable, masculinity through both his pursuits in the NFL and his willingness to defend his nation. For this, I might lead students to when Jim Rome exclaimed in his eulogy, “Pat is the man I want to be. Pat is the man we all want to be. Pat’s the man we should all aspire to be,” and took for granted that being a man is both something that we should all aspire to and something that was easily observed in Tillman’s actions. In each instance, the goal is to better understand the discursive practices that shape our understandings of the relationship between athletes and soldiers as well as sports and war.

The particular lesson I have chosen to detail here is an exploration of how the life and death of Pat Tillman became a means for examining the nature of heroism. Teaching this lesson allows students to both explore comparisons between what it means to be an athlete-hero and a soldier-hero as well as how the concept of heroism is employed in mediated public discourse. Why Pat Tillman was a hero became a point of contention following his death.
To spur our classroom discussion, I present students with a variety of positions on what Tillman's life and death meant. Many, such as John McCain chose to make clear that “Many American families have suffered the same terrible sacrifice that the Tillman family now suffers. The courage and patriotism their loved ones exemplified is as fine and compelling as Pat's, and their loss should grieve us just as much.” Others, such as Mike Bianchi of the Orlando Sentinel marveled at how “Pat Tillman sacrificed the American Dream to Defend It.” University of Massachusetts graduate student Rene Gonzalez was publicly vilified and forced to apologize after he wrote in the Daily Collegian that Tillman “got what was coming to him.” Later, Pearl Jam front man Eddie Vedder penned the politically charged hit-single World Wide Suicide inspired by Tillman and the cover-up of his death. These are just a few of the ways that Pat Tillman was discussed, but they can provide a basis for a productive discussion about what it means to be a hero and how our understandings of what it means get mediated. The assignments for this lesson are largely centered on the readings that I have detailed below, but I also encourage students to “Google” Pat Tillman and look at some of the ways he is characterized and the people who are doing the characterizing. When they arrive in class, my goal is to get them to begin to examine their own understandings of heroism using the discussion prompts also outlined below.

Discussion Prompts

These discussion prompts are based on previous directions that discussions have gone when I have taught this material in different classes. Of course, not all classroom discussions will cover all of this terrain, but as the discussion develops these themes will help direct the discussion back to the discursive interconnections between heroism, media, soldiers, and athletes.

• Was Pat Tillman a hero? Why or why not?
  o If yes, was it what he gave up?
  o If yes, was it his willingness to serve?
  o If no, was he ever? Does the legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan change how we remember him?
  o Do you think Pat Tillman was different from other soldiers?
  o Why do you think the circumstances leading to Tillman’s death were covered up?
  o What role have media played in understanding Pat Tillman as a hero?
  o Do you think the different ways he was characterized or the lies about how he died change his status as a hero? Or why he is a hero?

• Can athletes be heroes? Why or why not?
  o If yes, what makes their actions heroic?
  o If no, what distinguishes them from true heroes?
  o What about athletes that served in the military? Ted Williams?

• Are all soldiers heroes? Why or why not?
  o Were Vietnam Veterans heroes?
  o Are they now?
  o What changed?
  o What role have modern films played in how we remember the Vietnam War?
  o John Kerry (swift boat)?
• Why do we pay more attention to athletes than soldiers?
  o Does fame play a role in defining a hero?
• What qualities make someone a hero?
  o Can those qualities change?
• What can calling someone a hero teach us?

Undergraduate Readings
Required

Supplemental

Graduate Readings
Required


**Supplemental**


**Reactions to the Assignment**

Typically, students find this lesson both frustrating and rewarding. They have an impulse to define the essential qualities to heroism; and struggle with how heroism can shift and change based on the cultural priorities that come to the surface when the notion of heroism is invoked.

**Notes on Contributor**

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Deconstructing NFL Films’ *They Call It Pro Football*

Thomas C. Johnson
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Summary and Rationale for Assignment

COMS 339 (Masculinity in Film) is a course that takes a feminist perspective to analyze portrayals of sex and gender in film with a particular emphasis on how men and masculinity can be represented. The focus is on how films construct different notions of gender, how films can be read in different ways, and to what social uses film portrayals may be put. The course includes lectures on film criticism, gender theory, and theories of representation, as well as screenings and discussion.

In this course I utilize NFL Films’ first picture, *They Call It Pro Football* (Sabol, 1966), to examine documentary constructions of reality and to help students understand what the film reveals to us about the world and how we as viewers respond to the film as it relates to our lives.

Prior to class, students prepare by reading about the construction of gender identity (Bem, 1993) and the centrality of the male body image in pro football (Morse, 2003). During lecture, I first outline how pro football’s materialization on television effectively engaged emerging domestic viewing patterns and rituals. Second, I define the ways documentary films engage the world via representation. Third, I point out that Sabol’s vision was the product of a particular kind of technological and corporate organization based on sponsored film’s importance as a means of branding a particular product. Fourth, I introduce issues pertinent to masculinity, militarization, nationalism, and public health for students to consider as they watch the film. After screening the film, I present discussion prompts:

1) How do you read this film? How might Morse read this film?
2) How is masculinity constructed?
3) What are the relationships between sport (specifically pro football) and development of masculine identities?
4) In a debate on football, journalist Malcolm Gladwell argues, “As long as the risks are explicit, the players are warned, and those injured properly compensated, then I’m not sure we can stop people from playing. A better question is whether it is ethical to WATCH football. That’s a harder question” (Waldman, 2012). Do you agree or disagree with Gladwell? Is it ethical to “WATCH” football?

As an assignment, students write a three-page reaction paper in response to one (or more) of these questions. To begin the class in which the paper is due, students identify a half page worth of material from their paper representative of their strongest work and proceed to frame, read/perform, and briefly expand on, their excerpt for the class.

Overall, this approach to the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality and the military-sport-media nexus forces students to consider the social construction of manhood and how masculine identities vary historically and cross-culturally, makes students confront sport
media and its valorization of particular themes and ideas, and finally, compels students to produce and evaluate claims concerning *They Call It Pro Football* (Sabol, 1966).

**Student Reactions**

Aaron Budhas, sophomore WGST major: “Televised football, in its endeavor to achieve masculine success through the use of a machine-like body, focuses its attention on the individual, thus creating value for independence and self-reliance.”

Kelsey Engbrecht, senior COMS major: “Phrases like “bolt of lightning,” “the speed and the fury,” “swift,” and “fierce” emphasize again the physicality of the players. The phrases, “no-man’s land,” “he’s on the attack,” and “search and destroy” allude to war and the concepts of duty, power, and valor. The descriptors, “racehorse halfback,” “locomotive fullback,” and “the face of the tiger” simultaneously mechanize and animalize the players, alluding to concepts of dehumanization, mechanical power, and animalistic drive.”

Henry Jungbauer, sophomore MATH major: “Effectively using violence and brute force to glorify a sport as a game of war, as *They Call It Pro Football* does, comes at a cost. But what is the cost? What is at stake in accepting the equalization of football and war? The safety of the players, present and future, is at stake.”

Charlotte Page, senior NURS major: “Now it hard for me to say that watching professional football is unethical, for what does that say about those that I know and love who watch the sport? Despite these thoughts, I do believe on some level watching professional football is unethical. Those who watch and defend the ethics of the sport should first, like I have, take time to understand their relationship with the sport through time, and decide for themselves whether the defense they have constructed in honor of professional football is strong enough to cave under this ethical dilemma.”

**Readings**


**Notes on Contributor**

Thomas C. Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Luther College. He teaches courses in the areas of critical media studies and media production. He received his PhD and MA in Communication Studies from the University of Minnesota and his BA in Communication from Saint John’s University.
Summary and Rationale for Assignment
In the face of US militarized culture it is imperative that we foster productive critical attitudes which recognize that “sport rhetoric is an especially persuasive vehicle for sustaining and extending the culture of militarism” (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009, p. 413). Towards this end, the following lesson takes a rhetorical approach to the examination of contemporary performances where collegiate sporting events are linked with narratives of militarism. By focusing on collegiate sporting events, I argue that students are encouraged to encounter militarized culture’s impact on their own lives. Rather than simply reveal the dangers of a militarized culture, this lesson attempts to orient students towards a critical democratic attitude; one that encourages action and fosters productive responses to militarization. This lesson envisions a class of 12-32 students and a time-period of roughly one hour.

There are several animating questions that drive the following lesson plan. They are as follows:

1. How is military culture normalized by collegiate sporting events?
2. How is militarism packaged and marketed to students through collegiate sporting events? How are students called to respond?
3. Who is postured as the ideal democratic citizen in militarized collegiate sporting events? What implications does this have for democratic citizenship in general?

Readings


Lesson Plan
I. Pre-Class Assignments:
   A. Assign Butterworth & Moskal “American Football, Flags, and ‘Fun’” and Butterworth “Rituals in the ‘Church of Baseball’” to read before class.
   B. Divide the class evenly and assign each student one of four college sporting events to examine in terms of the articles they read.
      1. Carrier Classic <http://carrierclassic.net/>
   C. When examining the web pages for these sporting events, students will respond to five questions:
      1. What sporting event did you have?
2. Where was it played? When was it played?
3. Who were the primary participants?
   a) e.g. teams, branches of the military, audience, etc.
4. How is the audience’s attention drawn toward the military?
   a) e.g. Location, event’s audience, team uniforms, played on Veterans Day, etc.
5. How is this sporting event presented as exceptional, or unlike other games?

II. In-Class Group Presentation:
A. Break class into four groups; each group consisting of the students who researched the same sporting event.
B. Have students share their findings regarding the assigned collegiate sporting event with their groups.
C. Have the groups prepare a short presentation on their findings.
   1. Provide each group with chart paper and markers to visually present their findings.
   2. Have each group present their observations to the class.

III. Class Discussion/Debriefing
A. After the group presentations, facilitate a class discussion.
B. In this discussion turn student’s group observations back to the readings.
C. The following questions can be helpful towards that end.
   1. Who is respected/glorified by these sporting events?
   2. You have been asked how these sporting events posture themselves as unique or exceptional. How are these sporting events not exceptional? What characteristics are similar to “normal” sporting events?
   3. Is the military presented in terms of sports on these websites? If so, how?
   4. Who is presented as the model democratic citizen in these sporting events?
   5. Imagine yourself as an audience member for one of these sporting events. How are you asked to respond as a casual observer? As a fan? As a citizen?

Supplemental Readings


Notes on Contributor
J. David Maxson is finishing his M.A. in Communication and Culture at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is currently teaching Introduction to Communication and Culture. He received the *First Year Teaching Award* from his department and will be presenting in the Great Ideas For Teaching division of Central States Communication Association in Kansas City this spring.