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Juan Carlos Barrón Pastor*

Digital Fandom The NFL's Transnationalization

*Football fans share a universal language
that cuts across many cultures and many personality types.*

A serious football fan is never alone.

*We are legion, and football is often the only
thing we have in common.*

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

The National Football League (NFL) held its big season finale at the Super Bowl LVIII in February 2024, pitting the San Francisco 49ers against the Kansas City Chiefs. As expected, it broke last year's audience record, jumping from 115.1 million to 123.7 million viewers,¹ after a very successful postseason that attracted 385 million viewers over twelve games.² Among the NFL's popularity indicators is the number of fans, which since 2020 has topped out at between 390 million and 410 million worldwide.³ Of those, 190 million are in the United States, including 30 million "Hispanics."

In the world, the main countries with NFL fans are Brazil (63.7 million), Mexico (48.5 million), China (41.9 million), Germany (19.2 million), and Canada (12 million).⁴ A second popularity indicator for this sport could be that in 2023, the average number of viewers per regular season game came to 17.9 million, very close to the 2015 record, when 18.1 million fans watched every game.⁵ We can also mention the increase in the number of people who bet on the Super Bowl this year, which may have reached 67.8 million people in the United States. This would be a 35-percent increase over the previous year.⁶ And the cherry on top of the cake is that ninety-three out of the one hundred most-watched live television broadcasts in the United States were NFL games.⁷

In recent years, NFL fans have done the same as other sports fans by following fan groups on socio-digital networks like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (now X). In Mexico, several groups follow both the league's games and its broadcasts as well as groups of fans that not only follow their teams, but also create and share content about the sport, as I will mention further on.

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In addition, the commercial association between millionaire Taylor Swift, the league, and the twice-champion Kansas City team has increased the audience, bringing in young women and the so-called Generation Z (people born between 2000 and 2012).⁸ This marketing strategy has used the singer's heteronormative, sexual-emotional relationship with the Chiefs' player Travis Kelce to broaden its fame and wealth, as well as its capacity for political influence among its fans, possibly to capitalize on her charisma in this electoral year.

"Fandom" is a word that merges the word "kingdom" with "fans" in the sense of followers of a game or team. E. Wenger has dubbed the groups in which people meet because of an objective or field and create interpersonal relationships about a theme or area of interest that strengthens the ties among them "communities of practice."⁹

This article explains how, in a process of internationalization, fans of this sport, and particularly of this league, use and produce digital content building their collective identities and transnational digital communities. As they do that, they breathe life into the cyber-localities that are part of their online interactions, strengthening ties of friendship that are reinforced with certain in-person activities, but whose central axis is the digital community.

To do this, it is important to think that this game, like probably any other sport, not only organizes matches, but generates an endless number of cultural products, ideological campaigns, and merchandise, which can become more important than the game itself or the actual scores. This is the case above all when the identity of a team does not lie in its sports successes, but in a more profound, more deeply rooted and complex identity that is in a process of transnationalization.

The transnationalization of the social world is "a specific form of intensification to social, cultural, political, and economic relations that goes beyond national spaces."¹⁰ In the world of sports fans, this was not born with digital communication, and it would be a topic for research to

study from this perspective how the media system participated in the construction of fan bases beyond family traditions and the places one was born or lived in. However, digital communication brought a great change that led authors today considered pioneers in the topic, like Steve Redhead, to conceptualize digital fandom as "post-fandom."¹¹

Cyberspace is a place for non-face-to-face interaction in the media system and is key for reproducing the power and assignation of identities and subordinations. However, it does not seem to be enough to understand that certain powerful actors, such as a league's investors or a franchise owner, seek more influence by controlling the direct and indirect milieu of social interaction. It is also important to know what is happening among the social actors who subordinated themselves in terms of identity and membership in exchange for a place for dialogue.

According to Judith Butler, this kind of voluntary submission (the identity that you can gain from a team, club, or franchise, in each case) is produced as well as the membership in a specific community with which you share discourses and practices, but, above all, a growing intimacy and emotional closeness, which leads, precisely, to a kind of community.¹² Despite not including traditional elements such as a territory or a history of resistance in classical terms, we can see that the interaction can build forms of communities that create identities and resistances, and that they are disputing control over cyberspace, pushing the boundaries imposed by those who create the environment of interaction—in this case, the NFL.

Fans are having an increasing influence and are becoming interlocutors who challenge traditional privileged corporate actors for more and more decisively influencing issues related to strengthening the group. They pressure regarding hiring, marketing strategies, and possibly even administrative and sports decisions made by those in charge, specialists, and media analysts.

This confirms what D. Rowe, A. Ruddock, and B. Hutchins have already observed: the media patterns of hegemonic influence are being undercut by the high speed of online communication, which leaves behind in the dust any reductionist ideas about what it meant to be a "real fan."¹³ To do this, digital fan communities create and recreate hybrid, tentative, changing identities to feel belonging. This does imply subordination and voluntary submission to gain membership and to access more or less organized forms of hierarchization, as Butler proposed. However, at the

same time, the communities seem to seek out a pleasure they obtain from the feeling of gaining symbolic weight, strengthening their negotiating capacity, broadening out their discursive room for maneuver, and the right to exercise power in a community that shares a code.

Thus, we can observe that the digital fan community links up common interests and interpersonal relations, facilitated by platforms like WhatsApp. They offer the possibility of a personalized response and direct deliberation as well as of sharing among friends situations from each person's daily life, moments of pleasure or difficulty, messages of solidarity and support that reinforce friendly links beyond what is discussed regarding the team or the game, in addition to serving as a platform to access Facebook and YouTube.

These platforms nourish roles, leaderships, and hierarchies and facilitate the production of information and forms of validation linked to differences among those who have experienced something directly (for example, having gone to the stadium) and those who aspire to it, with roles of influence and emulating homemade reproductions of programs of sports analysis, but with greater depth than televised analyses, which are predictable and boring compared to the online experience. The episodes are made dynamic because they use ordinary language and frank exchanges among the community members who follow and participate in these podcasts. The podcasts are reminiscent of sports analysis programs, but with broad knowledge about the teams, traditions, trajectories, and performance statistics of current and historic players, as well as specific issues of specialization, practical experience, positions, etc.

Of course, just like in in-person spaces, online interaction reproduces different kinds and degrees of violence. On the one hand, there is the construction of subjectivities, diverse opinions about analyses, problems, and solutions for the difficulties a player or the team are going through throughout the season. On the other hand we see the passion that comes with fandom and the suffering caused by technical, practical, or even referee errors that can spark clashes or subjective or situational violent events.

It is also possible to observe “sweetened” forms of violence in exchanges among members of the community, but that are very permissive when it is a matter of depersonalized ranting or railing against current or historic rivals, with whom there is greater permissiveness for

uttering sexist, homophobic, and —rarely, but also— racist discourses.

On WhatsApp, more spontaneous communication about these topics is possible, while on Facebook, mainly, but also on YouTube, the cancel culture and filtering bubbles demand that language be politically correct, making these exchanges more rigid or even hypocritical or fake.

In visual content, both on WhatsApp and Facebook, memes and infographs predominate. Of the 60 million page updates that Facebook reports a day, in a group of 1435 members, almost all living in Mexico, they share between ten and fifteen contents, usually produced by the administrators, some outstanding fans, and sellers. This interaction shoots up on a game day, when, during the 2023 season, between 350 and 480 interactions happened during the game and between forty-five and sixty-five contents in the twelve hours afterward, a number almost 50 percent higher than the previous year. On one occasion, correlating to the excitement of the game, the record of 498 interactions took place in less than four hours, although one out of five fans were in the same place, watching the game together.

Finally, I should point out that it was possible to observe forms of what Steve Redhead called “claustropolitanism”: all the processes of digital capitalism that produce the feeling of wanting to escape from the planet, from its spaces of consumption, violence, and glamour. With this kind of practice, community members seem to restrict their interactions and flee toward a kind of lockdown, a way of distancing themselves from the vicissitudes of daily life to be entertained until they die. This is a way to distinguish and separate themselves from the crowd, at the same time that they connect with certain people and interact with other people with whom they have something in common without actually abandoning their solitude.

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Although very few of these interactions relate to international, political, or controversial themes, when these topics are touched upon, they sanction them and erase the messages considered off limits. This may be for understandable practical reasons and to maintain the group's cohesion and identification, but diminishing the possibility that discussions arise around other topics. When this happens, this community seems to close in on itself and at the same time feel claustrophobic about it.

This seems to be a pragmatic way of containing community members' diverse identities and artificially restricting them to a single topic. On the other hand, it also keeps the fans atomized and unable to reach their potential as a complex community. **NMM**

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10 Ludger Pries, *La transnacionalización del mundo social. Espacios sociales más allá de las sociedades nacionales* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2017), p. 10.

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12 Judith Butler, *Mecanismos psíquicos del poder: teorías sobre la sujeción* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015).

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Notes

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