

TELEVISION

Sunday's Super Bowl was the most watched telecast in U.S. TV history


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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

 Eric Deggans

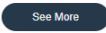
NPR's Juana Summers talks with NPR TV critic Eric Deggans about Super Bowl viewership and the reach and dominance of NFL programming.

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Transcript

JUANA SUMMERS, HOST:

Sunday's Super Bowl matchup broke viewership records, becoming the most watched telecast in U.S. TV history. **An average of more than 123 million people tuned in over the duration of the game. That's according to national ratings figures from Nielsen and CBS.** But that gigantic number raises more questions. Is this a reflection of the NFL's relentless marketing machine or the popularity of halftime performer Usher or the Taylor Swift effect? To break it all down for us, we have NPR TV critic Eric Deggans, who watched the game, pored over all those numbers and is with us now. Hi, Eric.

ERIC DEGGANS, BYLINE: HI.

SUMMERS: OK, let's start with the numbers - 123.7 million. That just sounds like an awful lot of people.

DEGGANS: For sure. And even though this is about a 7% increase from last year, that - back then, an average 115 million people showed up. And that was still astounding, I mean, especially considering that the entire U.S. population is around 330 million people. So the game was watched on platforms that include CBS, Paramount Plus, Nickelodeon, Univision, NFL's digital properties and more. There was an average of about 120 million viewers who watched the game just on CBS, which Nielsen says is the largest single-network telecast audience in U.S. TV history.

Now, there was about 2.3 million other viewers who watched the Spanish-language broadcast on Univision, another 1.2 million who watched a kid-friendly telecast on Nickelodeon and Nick At Nite. CBS also said it was the most streamed Super Bowl in history, setting records on Paramount Plus, but they didn't give us specific figures for that. It's worth noting that there's some major past events, like the moon landing, that were telecast by several different channels that might have gotten a larger figure, but their viewership tabulation might not be easily comparable because they happened so long ago.

SUMMERS: Right. OK. Well, I know why I was so excited to watch this game, but help me understand more broadly. Why was this game so popular?

DEGGANS: Well, my hunch is that a few things came together. I mean, I'm sure some Taylor Swift fans showed for that storybook moment where the biggest pop star in the world kisses a Super Bowl champ right after his team wins the big game. Right? Halftime performer Usher has lots of hits, loads of fans. We had that rare overtime play in a Super Bowl. The ratings company Nielsen also has improved how it measures viewing outside the home, which

probably helped boost figures. And the numbers prove that football has been a popular sport in America for a very long time, which means it's been popular on TV for a long time. I mean, most of the most-watched episodes of American television are Super Bowls. Baseball may call itself America's pastime, but football gets better TV ratings.

SUMMERS: And, Eric, I mean, why is that? Is this the result of savvy marketing by the NFL, or is there something else going on?

DEGGANS: Well, the NFL has been very savvy in its marketing, but the game itself is often more exciting than other sports like, say, baseball. OK, I know that's controversial. But they've got fewer games, so each matchup matters more. Ad industry experts credit Apple's 1984 ad, if you remember that. It introduced its Macintosh computer during the 1984 Super Bowl as the moment when advertisers realized they could make spots into event programming that would draw in non-sports fans. And so now, when everybody's watching their own streaming series and media's so fragmented, there's not that many events on TV that we know most people will watch or will talk about the next day. And the Super Bowl is the ultimate example of that.

SUMMERS: Eric, last thing - do you see any lessons here for other media platforms or perhaps even other sports that are in search of bigger audiences?

DEGGANS: I don't know. Get Taylor Swift to come to your game (laughter). I mean, this feels like the culmination of a trend that's been building for years. I mean, it's a blend of the most popular American sport with other stuff like the halftime performance and super-ambitious ads that entertain non-sports fans. I mean, 20 or 30 years ago, we had many more events on TV that brought lots of Americans together. Now we have the Super Bowl and, you know, whenever Taylor and Travis decide to get married.

SUMMERS: Oh, boy. That was NPR TV critic Eric Deggans. Eric, thank you.

DEGGANS: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF ANDERSON .PAAK SONG, "COME DOWN")

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