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**Super Bowl**

## Super Bowl ad spat not Tebow's fumble

By **Michael Lewis**, Special to CNN

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**(CNN)** -- For the last two weeks I've listened to people all up in arms that former University of Florida quarterback Tim Tebow will star in a 30-second, anti-abortion commercial with his mom during Sunday's Super Bowl.

They shouldn't be pushing their agenda, some complain. It's ridiculous that political, issue-driven ads are now being allowed in the Super Bowl, others say.

But let's pause to make sure any criticism goes where it belongs: with the weak-kneed network airing the game.

Ever since he burst onto the national scene, Tebow has worn his religion on his sleeve, right next to his play sheet, wearing eye-black adorned with Bible verses, helping with circumcisions in the Philippines as part of missionary work (yep, and there are pictures, too!) and doing his best to force his beliefs into your face.

This is something of a time-honored practice in sports -- particularly in football, particularly in the South, where prayers are said before kickoff in jam-packed stadiums.

One of Tebow's predecessors at Florida, Danny Wuerffel, is also famous for blending Christianity and football, offering up slant passes and sermons. And legendary defensive end Reggie White once told reporters that God had directed him to sign with the Green Bay Packers. [Tebow](#) is just the latest athlete to engage in this kind of thing. But he is not to be blamed for appearing in an issue ad; he's just doing what he believes is right.

The real problem is that [CBS](#) drew a line when it made room for just this ad under its loosened rules about allowing advocacy spots during what has long been the biggest television show of the year.

And, sure, it is their right. If they want to run an anti-abortion spot and take the \$2.6 million, or so, from Focus on the Family, the Christian group that's sponsoring the commercial, fine. It's tough to sell ads in this economy, and CBS needed to sell out the Super Bowl.

But they accepted only the ad from [Focus on the Family](#). When a gay dating site called Mancrunch.com tried to buy air time to run a goofy commercial showing two men holding hands and then kissing, the network suddenly got the willies.

They turned that one down.

So, here is a straightforward question. Is Mancrunch.com's money not green? Is there some reason why one button-pushing, open-to-debate point of view gets an airing, but the other one is deemed unacceptable? We all may think we know the answer, but this does not make it right.

The relevant answer is, that when it came time to test-drive their new ad policy, the network turned cowardly.

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### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Michael Lewis says anti-abortion ad uproar should not be aimed at Tebow, but at CBS

Mixing religion, sports a longtime practice, he says

CBS cowardly in relaxing ad standards for Tebow ad and not for gay-dating site, he says

Lewis: CBS' hypocrisy, possible fear of backlash led to unfair decision



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On one side you have the mammoth Focus on the Family, a conservative, evangelical Christian, non-profit organization with a \$138 million budget and an unsavory agenda. It's an organization so powerful that it can make or break political candidates, steer the national conversation on everything from physician-assisted suicide to abstinence-only sex education in schools, and cause a furor where none previously existed. On the other side, you have a Canadian gay dating site.

If a network rejects Focus on the Family's ad, what does that mean? Tom Krattenmaker, an author whose recent book "Onward Christian Athletes" chronicles the immersion of religion into sports, suggested one real concern that CBS may have feared beyond any notion of gauging the nation's appetite for the gay dating ad.

"They probably had to contemplate the reaction they would get if they rejected Focus on the Family," Krattenmaker said. "Maybe Focus on the Family would then put out some publicity bashing CBS."

The Colorado-based organization has already shown it's willing to try to do financial harm to companies it doesn't like, companies who dare to support things like civil rights for gay and lesbians. Focus on the Family has urged boycotts of major corporations over gay rights issues. Could CBS have been thinking about this?

Television networks are in bad shape these days and don't want to lose a nickel of revenue. The thought of risking the buying power of the Focus on the Family followers could be too terrifying to contemplate. And then running a gay dating ad during the same broadcast?

In a statement, CBS said its standards and practice process "ensures all ads -- on all sides of an issue -- are appropriate for air," and that it would "continue to consider responsibly produced ads from all groups for the few remaining spots in Super Bowl XLIV."

Of course, it's sheer hypocrisy for CBS to pretend a humorous commercial in which two men watching the game on the couch accidentally brush hands, lock eyes and then start kissing for eight whole seconds while a companion looks away awkwardly (the ad is already all over YouTube), is too racy for the usual highbrow lineup of Super Bowl ads.

If CBS's defenders contend that viewers can just exercise their free will and choose to get up for Tostitos and beer during the Tebow ad, why does the network not allow them to make that same decision for the Mancrush ad? After all, there's no more of a national consensus about abortion than there is about homosexuality.

I don't think anyone would've cared much about any of this if advocacy ads from all sides of the social and political spectrum had a fair chance to air. But it's this selective method that paints the network as the biggest wimps of all on Super Bowl Sunday.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Michael Lewis.*

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