

Fandom on the Air: Geography of American College Football Radio

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1 Abstract:
Sports fandom represents a significant aspect of place identity, as demonstrated by the colorful landscapes associated with team loyalty. However, there has been little research on the geography of sports fandom. While several geographers have studied the link between Southern regional identity and the sport of stock car racing, American football is the most popular spectator sport in the United States, and it seems to have a particular strength in the U.S. South. Therefore, examining the geography of football fandom can add depth to the study of place identity. A 1988 article by Roseman and Shelley on the geography of collegiate radio football broadcasting deserves an update. Using data on college football radio coverage as our proxy, we mapped college football fandom for the "Power 5" conferences. Our results show that state borders continue to have an important influence on the geography of college football fandom, but we also identified a strong region of identity in the South. Our results support the theory that place identity can be fruitfully examined using quantitative data, although many questions remain about how sports fans contribute to the making of place.

2 In their analysis, Roseman and Shelley examined spatial distributions of radio affiliates in 1987 across the U.S. Their conclusion: state borders played a key role in delineating fan regions (43). In Paasi's (2003) terms, college football fandom seemed to reinforce identification with the state where a fan resides. We seek to assess this conclusion in the light of new data, changes in technology and organization, and recent literature on sports and place identity.

Our study is limited to the "Power 5" conferences: the Atlantic Coast (ACC), Big Ten (B1G), Big 12, Pacific 12 (Pac-12), and Southeastern (SEC) conferences. The Power 5 represents only 64 of the 350 Division I football schools, but their budgets and advertising mean these conferences dominate college football spectation. (Burnsed 2014; Smith 2015; Wolohan 2015).

RESULTS
State Saturation
Most Power 5 teams exhibit a pattern of coverage which Roseman and Shelley called "state saturation" (1988, 43). This means that a university's radio coverage matched closely to the borders of its state. This may reflect a rational strategy of many comprehensive public universities. Roseman and Shelley also found that most such universities exhibit this pattern. Our results: 38 out of 67 (57%) radio networks exhibit this pattern. An excellent example: Ohio State University. Buckeye fans can listen to games all across Ohio.

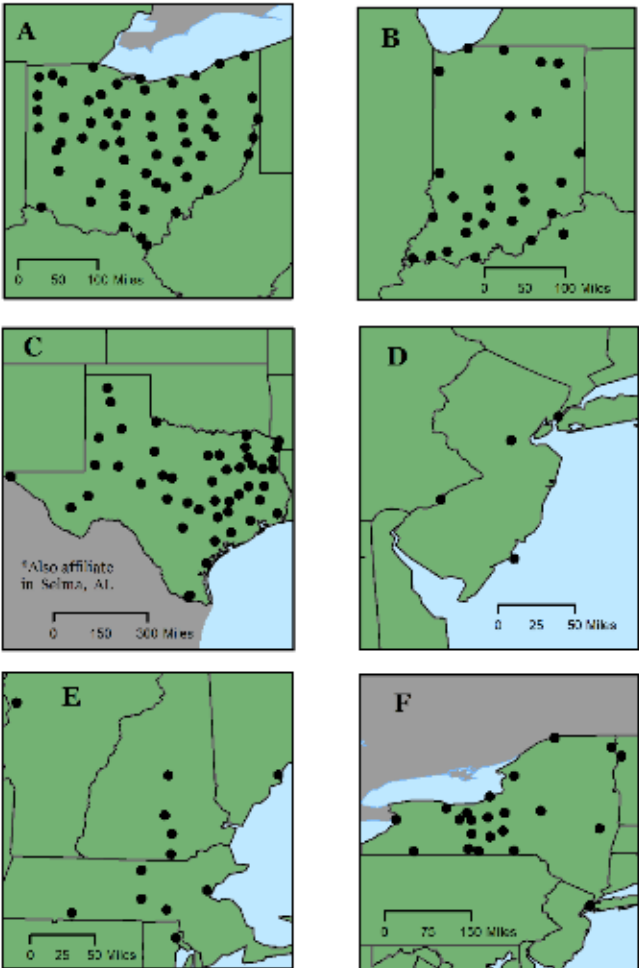


Figure 1. Radio affiliates of (A) Ohio State, (B) Indiana, (C) Texas A&M, (D) Rutgers, (E) Boston College, and (F) Syracuse.

3 Multi-State Coverage
The most wide-reaching category was "multi-state coverage" in which a team's network goes far beyond home state boundaries. In 1987 Roseman and Shelley found only eight schools in this class: Illinois, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Southern California, Washington, Notre Dame, Air Force, and BYU. As of 2018, three of those - Nebraska, Notre Dame, and BYU - retain such coverage; Alabama, Auburn, Penn State, Florida State, and Boston College have joined the group: today 8 out of 67 teams (12%) have multi-state coverage.

Auburn and Alabama are special examples. As of 2019, nine out of the last ten football national championship games featured one or both of those teams, and six were victories. For Southern teams, "athletic superiority ... offers a basis of keen regional pride ... likely one of the strongest forces defining regional identity" (May 2012, Morgan & Klimasewski 2015). This fandom may have another social function in the South where there are strong divisions in race and class. "The structures of privilege, inequality, and oppression are left intact" by such fandoms (Young 1986). The fervor of Alabama and Auburn fans can be seen in their coverage, which goes far beyond saturation of Alabama itself (Figure 2J). Yet Notre Dame's coverage indicates it is perhaps the most national team of all.



4 Power 5 Conferences as Regions

Abbott (1990) holds that the very "formation of college conferences" was fostered and enabled by "a sense of regional cultural identity." Radio stations for members of the Power 5 conferences were mapped. Figures 3 and 4 show aggregate data for these conferences. When 10 to 14 team networks are combined, can the results resemble any cultural region? Most conferences do not. The Pacific 12 network does not resemble the Pacific region delineated by Zelinsky (1980). The Big 12 footprint does partly match the Great Plains, but West Virginia sits as an enclave. The ACC could perhaps be likened to the South, Atlantic, or East, but there are major mismatches. The Big Ten's footprint almost matches the Middle West, but its expansion pushed the conference's footprint all the way to the Atlantic. The SEC coverage, however, does resemble the South. There is the obvious omission of coverage in Virginia and North Carolina, but each member of the SEC broadcasts its football games from within the South. The SEC is the only conference to offer radio coverage from each of its members from within a single region, indeed one of the main culture regions defined by geographers, the classic example being Zelinsky (1980).



Alabama fans 2017 - photo by Kevin C. Cox Getty images

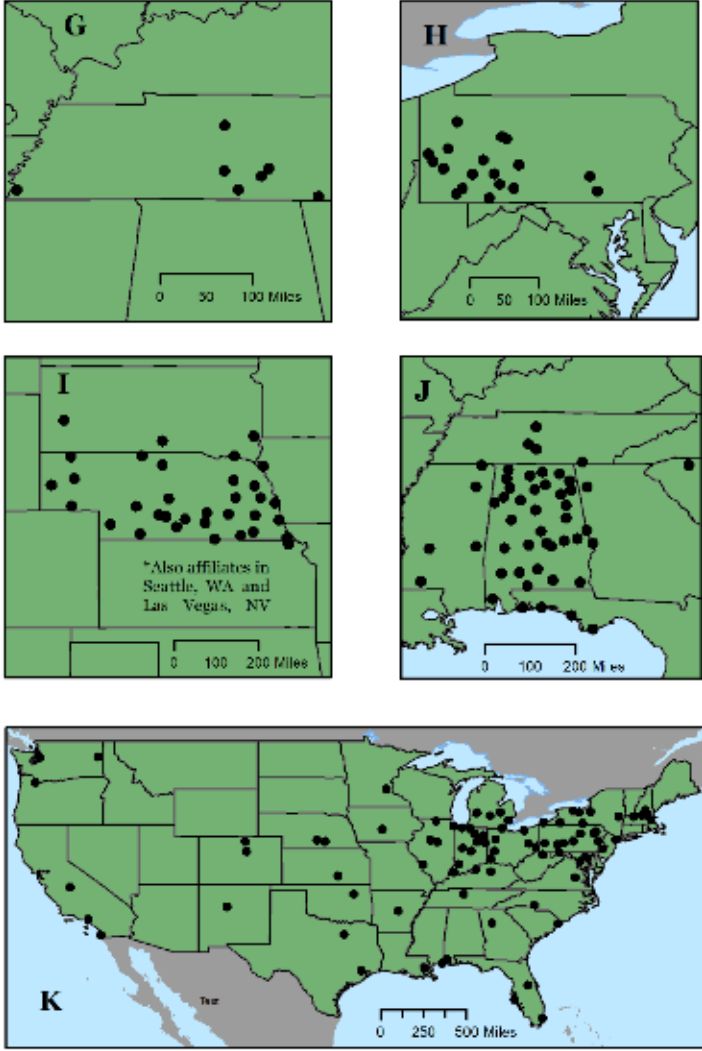


Figure 2. Radio affiliates of (G) Vanderbilt, (H) Pittsburgh, (I) Nebraska, (J) Alabama, and (K) Notre Dame.

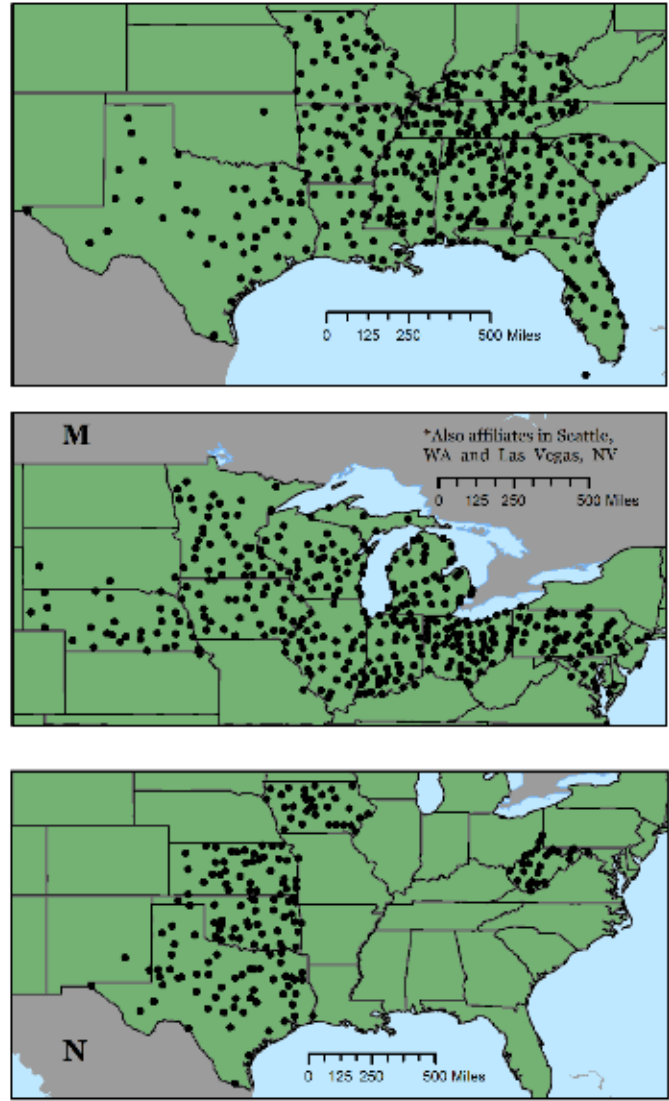


Figure 3. Radio affiliates of the (L) Southeastern, (M) Big Ten, and (N) Big XII Conferences.

5 So conference-based college football fandom does not seem to serve regional identification and expression as much as its team-based counterpart does for state identity. Athletic conferences used to express regional identity, but the realignments of 2010 and 2012 changed that. The size of major conferences ballooned to numbers unimaginable in 1988, and the cultural region faded as a framing idea. Instead, as Rooney and Pillsbury (1992) predicted, the shift to "align schools with television programming demands" became "the rule rather than the exception."
The SEC was the only one of the Power 5 to retain traditional bounds. While the SEC was motivated by capital like the other conferences, its leaders prioritized regional cohesiveness in expansion decisions. Primary sources from the 2012 expansion to absorb Texas A&M and Missouri are explicit on this (Lofrin & Burson 2014). The SEC radio network does not perfectly resemble the South; North Carolina and Virginia each host only one SEC station, and Texas A&M and Missouri's networks push further west and north than many delineations of the South. However each SEC team offers coverage to some part of the traditional "South."

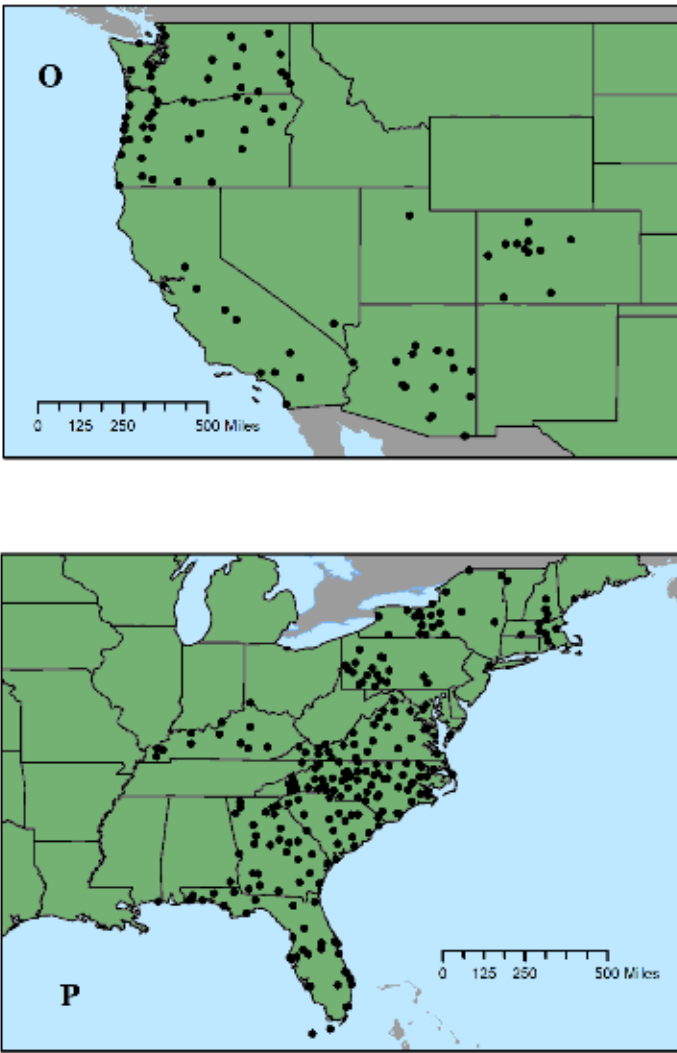


Figure 4. Radio affiliates of the (O) Pac-12 and (P) ACC

6 Conclusion
Our study, confirming Roseman and Shelley, finds that college football radio coverage correlates with - and may help maintain and solidify - identities within state borders. The state-saturation that has increased since 1987 reinforces this connection between people and the functional region of the state.
However, such processes do not maintain in all cases. State borders are less "bounding" for certain teams. Fans can identify with other institutions, such as a religious denomination (e.g., Notre Dame, Brigham Young). Fans may also identify with an athletic conference, as in the case of the SEC and the South. Satellite radio, cable television, and the internet have changed the sports industry since the original 1987 study. Access to live game coverage is now potentially much wider as some fans can listen to or watch games almost anywhere, that is, far outside any clear place or region. However, so far we see no significant decline in the broadcasting of college football on traditional radio. So we are confident in our use of radio as a proxy for football fandom but encourage geographers to study other forms of communication.
Questions remain about how college sports create and maintain place identity. How do race and class affect place identity? Can we find expressions of this among sports fans? Does a fan's understanding of a vernacular region, such as the South, affect football spending behavior? A social-geographic analysis using qualitative and quantitative methods is needed to further investigate the overlapping nature of multiple place identities.



University of Tennessee vs East Tennessee State University 2015 photo by Galen McKin - News Sentinel

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