

Fan-made Football Journalism:  
Its Position in the Media Landscape and Its Critique of Mainstream Journalistic  
practices. The Case of Arseblog.

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**Abstract:**

With the Web 2.0 facilitating the production and dissemination of content, new actors entered the sport media landscape. A relatively new presence is the fans who made a profession out of their fandom and textual productivity, going further than blogging and turning into professional independent journalists, specialists of their favorite team. They cover and report on the object of their fandom, operate their own fan-centered digital media outlets, and produce content on a daily basis.

The case study of this thesis, Arseblog—a news website and blog dedicated to the London-based football team Arsenal—is one of these hybrids merging traditional sport journalism and fan blogging, rooted in the football zine tradition. While previous studies have shown how this type of fan labor tends to be critical of the mainstream media, this thesis seeks to unravel the specific way in which it does so by looking into the Arseblog example. It also investigates how Arseblog negotiates its position as an alternative media, and what makes it stand out in the media landscape. Critical discourse analysis was applied to two Arseblog articles using Fairclough's three-dimensional model to examine the existing power dynamics between this type of alternative media and its mainstream counterpart, as well as to shed light on its distinctive discursive features.

The study concludes that Arseblog supplements and critiques mainstream media outlets' coverage of Arsenal by its ability to step back from the immediacy of events, and act like a media observer and news stories curator. Moreover, it is able to demarcate itself from the mainstream media by allowing the fans to take center stage in their narratives, and by adopting creative ways of reporting which draw on several genres and uncommon discursive practices in football writing.

Keywords: Fandom, fan labor, sport journalism, critical discourse analysis

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## 1. Introduction

In 1989, at a time where the commercialization of media and sport started growing exponentially, Wenner (1989) laid the foundations of research regarding the intersections of sport and media. He coined the term “MediaSport”, meaning the cultural merging between the two topics, and he delimited the field as one that is concerned with the institutions, texts and audience of sport and media, and where these interact. Over the last two decades, the amount of MediaSport research has grown significantly in this era of internet and hyper-globalization and encompasses studies from a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economy, communication, and culture (Gantz 2011). Wenner’s (1989) suggested model of analysis of MediaSport is still relevant though: its four major elements, the production complex of media sports, media sports’ content, the audience, and the social system that ties these elements to each other (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013), capture perfectly the multidisciplinary nature of the field.

The interest in MediaSport and the implications of new technologies on the field made new journalism journals such as *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, and *Journalism Studies* look into sport communication more regularly. Additionally, two peer-reviewed journals exclusively dedicated to sport communication have been published for more than a decade: The *International Journal of Sport Communication* (since 2008), and the *Journal of Sports Media* (since 2006) (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013).

More recently, the implications of new technologies on both sport and media sparked academic interest on the audience, its practices and its use of these new technologies (Hutchins and Rowe 2009; McCarthy 2012a, 2012b; Millward 2013; Ruddock, Hutchins, and Rowe 2010; Vimieiro 2018; Wilson 2007). However, as Vimeiro (2018) recalls, the textual productivity of football supporters is still an often-overlooked topic as there are not many studies dedicated to it.

Furthermore, the studies that do address the subject were mostly interested in bloggers (e.g., Dart 2008, McCarthy 2012a, Vimieiro 2018) and nothing much has been said about the football supporters who take their fandom and productivity to a more professional level than the typical blogger, operate digital media outlets with a

significant outreach and produce media content on a daily basis about their favorite team and dedicated to other fellow fans. An example of this portion of supporters is Arseblog, an award-winning fan-made blog and news site dedicated to the Arsenal Football Club. This thesis uses it as a case study to explore questions regarding the specificities of this type of alternative media outlet in the media sphere, and the relationship it has with mainstream media. It will be done by applying critical discourse analysis to two texts from Arseblog.

In the next section, I will detail the rationale behind the choice of topic and research questions, before shedding light on the use of critical discourse analysis in the Theoretical Framework.

## **1.1. Literature Review**

### **1.1.1. Sport Fandom in the Digital Era**

What is meant here by “supporters” is “fans” and not just “spectators”. It is an important distinction to make, before delving into the academic interest in football fans’ textual productivity, because spectators may not be fans (Shank and Beasley 1998). Pooley (1978) outlines this differentiation as follows:

“whereas a spectator of sport will observe a spectacle and forget it very quickly, the fan continues his interest until the intensity of feeling toward the team becomes so great that parts of every day are devoted to either his team or in some instances, the broad realm of the sport itself”. (65)

It is reminiscent of Anderson (1979) recalling the Latin origin of the word “fan”, that means “fanatic” which implies a degree of passion, zeal, and fervor from the individual towards their favorite team, athlete, or artist.

Additionally, sport fandom has its specificities compared to other types of fandom. Gantz et al. (2006) compared the viewing experience among fans of sport, reality

television, comedies, talk shows, drama and adult-oriented animation and came to the conclusion that sport fans were more implicated, more motivated, and especially more likely to prolong the viewing experience (before and after the game) than fans of other television genres. Gantz and Wenner (1995) considered that one of the implications of this strong involvement is the fan's accumulation of knowledge about whatever they are fan of, they know the tactics, the rules of their favorite game, the teams' and players' news etc.; they are "walking compendiums" of information about particular teams and players.

It is interesting to look at these definitions through the scope of the digital era. For many fans, the interest in their team does not just occupy big parts of their everyday life while being a passive consumer of everything related to the team or the sport, it makes them actually create cultural products related to the object of their fandom because of their passion and their knowledge of the topic. However, it is not exclusive to football fans and it is broad practice among popular culture fans in general. It is noteworthy to add that many publications in the fields of communication and cultural studies have explored this phenomenon utilizing concepts such as "participatory culture" and "convergence culture" (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Jenkins and Ito 2015). Indeed, the textual productivity of fans is a common topic in studies about popular culture fandom (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992, 2000; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Hills 2013; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992).

When it comes to football, message boards were the first representative trend of fan productivity to be analyzed (e.g., Baym 1999; Benigni, Porter, and Wood 2009; Berg and Harthcock 2008; End 2001; McCarthy 2011; Millward 2008). Subsequently, the emergence of blogs provoked academic interest (e.g., Dart 2009; McCarthy 2012a; McCarthy 2012b; Vimieiro 2018) in them because of the possibilities they offer in terms of expression and the potential of having regular readers. Moreover, football blogs seemed to carry on the football fanzine tradition which made their study even more compelling.

### **1.1.2. Fanzines, Ancestors of Digital Fan Production**

Jary, Horne, and Bucke (1991), as well as Duke (1991), define fanzines as “independent fan magazines”, Millward (2008) adds to this definition that they are “made by fans and reflect the current sporting and other issues in a humorous way”. Haynes (1995) retraced the origins of fanzines back to the 1970s, when the magazine *Foul!* was created by a group of Cambridge students. *Foul!* drew on journalistic vocabulary and used satire to bring humor to football while placing the fan at the heart of the narrative. In addition to voicing criticisms of professional media sources, writers also expressed very critical views of their club’s official match-day programs. Ultimately, *Foul!* laid out a blueprint that was adopted by many groups of football fans across the United Kingdom.

There is a number of typical characteristics of fanzines, firstly, they are fan-focused, addressing supporter related matters (Millward 2008). Secondly, they draw on journalistic vocabulary by mimicking it and being critical of it at the same time (Haynes 1995). Thirdly, they were partly created as a sort of cultural resistance against the pairing of football and hooliganism that was prevalent in the 1980s (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001). Fourthly, fanzines are a work of amateurs in the sense that they are not professional journalists.

It is only natural that such a culture managed to thrive in the digital context that drastically lessens the costs of production and distribution. The online age has created a new consumer that is creative and socially connected and creative consumer (Jenkins 2006) or what Bruns (2008) called “produser”, a person that consumes as well as uses media.

### **1.1.3. Recent Studies about Producers**

In more recent years, a few studies have addressed the topic of sport producers and it is worth noting that many of them explored the producers’ relationship with the mainstream media, as it is the case for this thesis. In 2009, a survey of more than 2010 sport bloggers conducted by the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism and Pennsylvania State University (Penn State News, 2009) provided insight into the motivations and profile of a typical sport blogger. Eighty-five percent said their work is



a form of sport journalism, but most did not have newsroom experience. However, since they are part of the global media sphere, they did have their opinions about mainstream media: 96 percent of the bloggers expected responsibility and high ethical standards from mainstream journalists.

When it comes to the bloggers' reporting practices, only 40 percent stated ever applying for a credential to a sporting event and 60 percent never included "original reporting"—meaning producing texts after attending sporting events. It confirms the findings of Kian, Burden Jr., and Shaw (2011) who also concluded that many sport bloggers do not physically attend the games and events they report on. In the same vein, Hardin and Ash (2011) stated that this job can be considered "inferior" to traditional journalism because of the lack of formal training and the inability to access traditional reportage sources and methods.

Instead of concentrating on the journalistic shortcomings of this type of sport writing, other studies have preferred focusing on what it brings to the media table. McCarthy (2012a) defined the sport fan blogger as a "sports fan who contributes their own narratives to the quotidian reportage of sports by publishing an online sports news site on [blogging] platforms." While her aim was to show how sports media audiences utilize and interpret the media they consume, in order to offer insights into the interpretative behaviors of these audiences, she brought up evidence that sport bloggers do emulate sport media in their productions. However, they are not just a pale copy of conventional journalism, in fact, they build on traditional sports coverage and supplement it. Moreover, she found out in a later study (McCarthy 2012b) that blogging can be considered as a medium for supporters to critique and react to the mainstream media's work in communicating sports, which ultimately augments and supplements information related to their particular sport. McCarthy (2012b) did so with a comparative case study investigating the outlooks of niche and non-niche sports bloggers toward mainstream media. It is along the lines of Singer's (2006) findings that news blogs can be seen as corrective and supplementary to mainstream news media, a tendency that might emanate from a dissatisfaction with mainstream sport media.

Vimieiro (2018) looked into the specific case of the textual productivity of fans of the Brazilian football club Clube Atlético Mineiro. She explored how fans appropriate

journalistic jargon and construct innovative narratives that pluralize and enrich the media sphere. Her study showed how this desire to create media products about the club emanates from different incentives such as enhancing writing skills or helping their club. Besides fulfilling these aspirations, there is an important byproduct to what these fans are doing, and it is “sustaining contemporary alternative football fan cultures in an increasingly hypercommodified football context.” In other words, it is a kind of “cultural resistance” (Sandvoss 2005) that might have its own political significance as Ruddock (2007, 90) stated: “fan cultures become ‘political’ as they insert ordinary voices into discussions of how public culture should work.”

Furthermore, in this age where news experiences are getting more “portal, personalized, and participatory” (Purcell et al. 2010), there is undeniably a market for this type of fan productions. Sanderson (2011) noted the rise of niche sport companies and observed how many smaller media outlets have been commercially successful and critically acclaimed, even if they were historically marginalized in the legacy media sphere. One of the most noticeable developments that the Web 2.0 has brought to the world of media and sport is the leveling of the sports media hierarchy.

Hutchins and Rowe (2009) described how we went from a media industry model that was composed of separate markets (newspapers, magazines, radio, television etc.) differentiated by their specific features in respect of the used technologies, workforce, infrastructure, relationship between producer and audience etc., to a significant reconfiguration marked by “digital plenitude”, where bigger and smaller actors compete for audiences. As an example, they cited Carolyn McCall, ex-chief executive of the *Guardian* Media Group (Kiss 2007) who stated that the *Guardian* “is no longer competing just with national newspapers but with broadcasters, search companies and Web publishers.”

As Bowman and Cranmer (2014) indicated, this new media landscape challenges Dimmick’s (2002) theory of media niche that argues that “older and new media forms often coexist rather than compete for audience members as users sample from a growing menu of highly-focused niche publications—including those written completely by fans [...]—rather than a few broad ones.”

To summarize, the intricate and inextricable relationship between sport, media and culture has been offering new research possibilities as it is evolving, as the three are affecting each other, and as technological advancement is continuously changing the rules of the game. In the light of this literature review, it is apparent that the studies that have had football audiences and their relationship with mainstream media at their center have concentrated on bloggers as an example of producers.

In the previously mentioned sources, sport and football bloggers are typically passionate amateurs who produce texts that emulate the mainstream media; they have their opinions about this type of media and occasionally critique and supplement them; and are motivated to do so by reasons that have been explored in several studies.

However, little attention has been given to the producers who have gone further than mere amateur work and who have stepped up to professional journalistic standards like Arseblog.

## **1.2. Arseblog**

Arseblog is a website covering the London based football club Arsenal. It was created in 2002 by Andrew Mangan as a fan blog and has grown in popularity along the years to become nowadays a media outlet that provides different types of content about the club in different formats on a daily basis.

The daily blog entry of Mangan is still the front page of the website that has kept the word “blog” in its name despite outgrowing the term that has a connotation to amateurism, and inferiority to traditional journalism (Hardin and Ash 2011). According to its founder, the website receives millions of visitors every month and the listens/downloads of the podcasts exceed four million per year.

Besides, the blog, the website has columns analyzing different facts of the game such as tactics, statistics, and finances. It also does more immediate, less analytical reporting in its news section (Arseblog News). It is described as a “one-stop-shop” where readers can get a variety of information about the club. Arseblog News is dedicated to reporting

on Arsenal-related events by providing match reports and news stories (e.g., squad news, transfer stories, player injury news). Additionally, Arseblog has three podcasts: Arsecast, Arsecast Extra and The Arsenal Women Arsecast. The first one addresses general issues regarding the club, the second one debriefs Arsenal games and the third is focused on the women's team.

Arseblog has a reputation of seriousness and reliability in the Arsenal online fan community, as it has often broken stories before mainstream media outlets, as well as debunked fake news. It is also worth mentioning that the website does usually have a reporter that attends games, events, and press conferences of the club, unlike the majority of sport bloggers (Kian, Burden Jr., and Shaw 2011) and its founder does have a journalism background by working in Kiss FM radio in Dublin. As previously seen, the lack of original reporting as well as the lack of journalism training are factors that make blogging seen as “inferior” to journalism (Hardin and Ash 2011).

### **1.3. Thesis Aim and Research Questions**

Arseblog represents a new type of actor in the media landscape—a hybrid between traditional sport journalism, and blogging—that is worth looking into. As Pegoraro (2013) pleaded: “because media, like fans, are constantly changing, sports media researchers need to be constantly observing and recording these changes.”

Additionally, while some studies (McCarthy 2012a, Singer 2006) have classified sport producers work as a supplement and critique of mainstream media, few researchers (e.g., Vimieiro 2018) have explored in which ways they do so. It is exactly the task this thesis undertakes in order to unravel how an outlet like Arseblog demarcates itself as an alternative media. The research questions are articulated as follows:

- How does Arseblog supplement and critique mainstream media outlets?
- How does Arseblog negotiate its position as an alternative media?
- How does Arseblog stand out in the media landscape?

## **1.4. Thesis Outline**

In the next chapter, I will lay out the theoretical framework used in this thesis. It will be followed by the Methodology section that will recount the data collection process and explain the method of analysis used to tackle the research questions. The subsequent section will be the analysis and its outline will be described further in the Methodology section (3.2), before ending on the conclusion and discussion section.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The literature review helped identify some elements of major importance to this thesis for building a theoretical framework: Firstly, producers like Arseblog do a work that is reminiscent of mainstream media (e.g., by drawing on sport journalism vocabulary) while supplementing and critiquing the latter. Secondly, it is this textual production that defines them and separates them from a fan who is just a simple media consumer. It means that in order to unravel Arseblog's specificities in the media industry, how it operates as an alternative media, and the concrete way in which it complements and critiques mainstream media; attention should be paid to these productions, and thus, an analysis of discourse is in order.

Furthermore, football producers carrying on the cultural resistance of fanzines against the ever-increasing commodification of their favorite sport as well as having their critical outlook on mainstream media, suggests the existence of a power dynamic between the two. The existence of this power dynamic is further confirmed when knowing that they compete for market shares as seen earlier.

Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is going to be the method used in this study because of its concern with power struggles within societal systems and the way they are embedded in language and discourse. It will be performed following Fairclough's (2014) three-dimensional model that will be described further (in section 2.3), but before delving into the fundamentals of CDA, it is essential to delineate what is meant by discourse.

## **2.1. Defining Discourse**

Cook (1989) gives a broad definition of discourse that can be used as a starting point in delimiting what is meant by it in the context of this thesis. He sees it as “stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified, and purposive”. However, this definition lacks the social character of discourse that is paramount to critical discourse analysts.

Indeed, discourse is not just “meaningful, unified, and purposive” stretches of language devoid of context. It also involves the context of the interaction that generated it, as well as the social relations that are part of this interaction. (Fairclough 2014; Martin and Nakayama 2017, 233).

In this sense, discourse encompasses the entire social interaction process and the text is just a part of it. In addition to the text, it also contains the process of interpretation that sees the text as a resource (Fairclough 2014, 24). Therefore, in order to analyze discourse, these intertwined elements that are part of it should be dissected, examined individually, and scrutinized as a whole. It is exactly the task that Fairclough’s framework undertakes, which is going to be explored in section 2.3.

## **2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that is concerned with socio-political inequalities and power struggles in society. It considers language as a form of social practice that enacts and reproduces the existing power dynamics and it offers methods and theories to empirically study “the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

In doing so, it seeks to uncover how these power relationships are encoded in language, and this is what makes it “critical” unlike other forms of discourse analysis. Indeed, according to Fairclough (1995), “critical” indicates a concern for revealing covert connections and causes. Critical discourse analysts are interested in questions regarding the positioning and angle of texts, as well as the agendas behind them; the interests that

are served, and those that are negated by these underlying motives; and the consequences of these factors.

As aforementioned, CDA only provides theories and methods for text analysis and, as Van Dijk (2001) states: “[it] is not a specific direction of research, it does not have a unitary theoretical framework”. Within the aims that it seeks achieving, there are different types of CDA approaches that can be analytically and theoretically quite diverse (Van Dijk 2001). It is because different texts require different tools: an analysis of a political speech is very different from an analysis of a university lecture or a news article. However, given the commonality of aims among different approaches to CDA, they all have key common features. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) identified five of them, drawing on Fairclough and Wodak’s overview (1997, 271–280):

- Language and discursive practices—the production of texts and their consumption and interpretation—are a crucial form of social practice for constituting social identities and social relations. It is through them that social and cultural reproduction and change happen.
- At the same time that discourse is a social practice that constitutes the social world, other social practices constitute and shape discourse. Therefore, discourse also reflects the shaping and reshaping of social structures.
- The third point stems from the previous two: because of the bilateral relationship and influence between discourse and the social world it is part of, CDA does not just analyze it individually but it dissects it within its social context.
- As previously acknowledged, discursive practices create, reproduce, and reflect unbalanced power dynamics between social groups, for instance, between an ethnic minority and the majority, or—as it is the case for this thesis—between big mainstream media companies and an independent small media outlet. These effects are considered as ideological.
- CDA is not politically neutral as it takes the side of the oppressed or smaller group.

### 2.3. Fairclough's CDA Framework

In *Language and Power* (2014), Fairclough sought to explore how the forces and structures of the social institutions within which we live have a ubiquitous influence on the ways we communicate. To that end, he developed his model for CDA that consists of three interrelated processes of analysis, superimposed over each other, referring to three interrelated dimensions of discourse (see Figure 1 below).

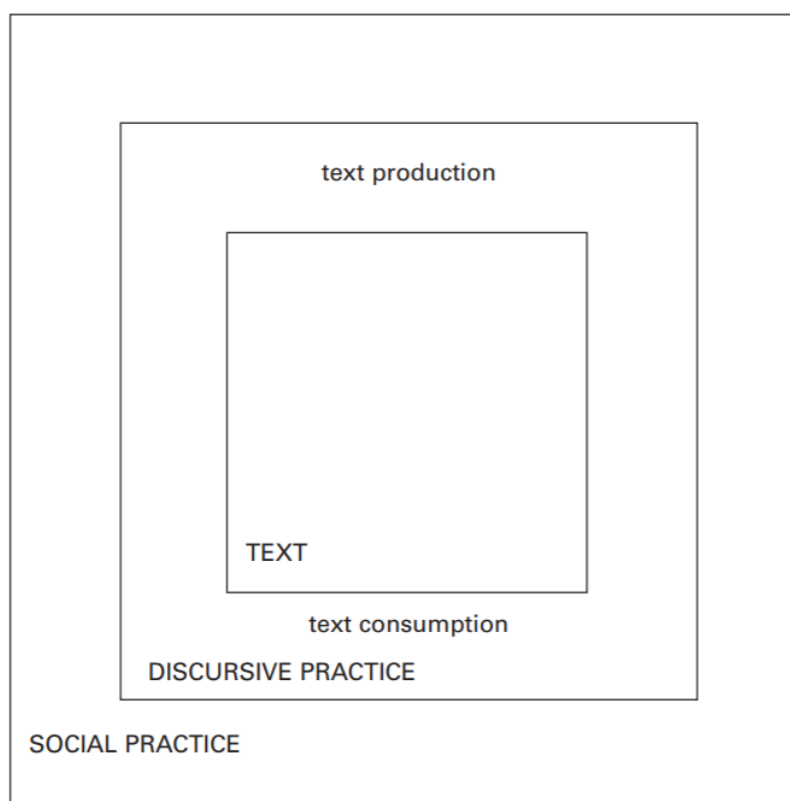


Fig.1. Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2014).

Fairclough sees every use of language as a communicative event that has three dimensions:

- Text: verbal and visual images or a combination of both.
- Discursive practice: the processes through which the communicative event is produced and received.
- Social practice: The social and historical context where those processes fall into place.



An inter-influential relationship ties these dimensions to each other. Discursive practice works as the mediator between text and social practice. This means that texts shape and are shaped by social practice through discursive practice—which is the use of language in order to produce and consume texts. Simultaneously, the textual choices affect both the production and the consumption process (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Each of the three dimensions is to be analyzed in a specific way which is going to be developed in the next section.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to answer my research questions, I opted for critical discourse analysis (CDA) as previously mentioned. I deemed it the most suitable approach because of the centrality of power dynamics in it. Indeed, as explained earlier, football producers like Arseblog have an inherent ambivalent feeling towards the media: they are huge media consumers whose productions mimic the functioning of media (in terms of production and distribution) as well as their contents in terms of the formats (reports, news stories, interviews, radio talk shows etc.) and lexicon, while being critical of them; all of that happening within the same market since their audience is broadly the same: football fans.

It is true that traditionally, CDA has been associated with weightier matters than football writing. The topics to which this approach is applied the most are related to social justice, racism, gender equality and politics—however, generally speaking, media discourse is also a recurrent topic in CDA (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2003). Additionally, this thesis topic conceptually contains a dichotomy that makes CDA relevant to studying it: the “David against Goliath” character of the relationship between producers and bigger media companies.

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

In order to get a better insight into Arseblog’s practices supplementing and critiquing mainstream media outlets, how Arseblog negotiates its position as an alternative media,

and how it stands out in the media landscape, I had to find relevant website entries to be analyzed. These entries had to fulfill specific criteria:

- Have the media as the main topic or one of the main topics.
- Be representative of Arseblog's editorial line so that they would lend themselves to generalizing about the website's viewpoints regarding itself as a media outlet and regarding the mainstream media.
- Be from different sections of the website, as writing styles might be different for example between a daily blog entry and a news story. Additionally, different sections of Arseblog cover different facets of fandom, therefore, this criterion will permit having a more expansive outlook on the website.

At the beginning, keyword searches were done using the website's built-in search engine meaning that the search was performed on all the texts that have ever been written on Arseblog. It encompassed the daily blog entries of the website's founder Andrew Mangan, the news articles on the news annex of the website—Arseblog news—and the columns.

“Media” was the first key word searched, producing 2,196 results—which is understandable considering the ubiquity of media in football. Due to the scope of this thesis, it is impossible to look into every one of these results, so I narrowed down my search by using different, more specific keywords.

“Mainstream media” was next and generated 9 results, 4 of which were from sentences citing them in a neutral fashion (e.g., “I leave you with this extract from Mr. Roy Keane's autobiography which seems to have been passed over by the mainstream media”), whereas 5 of the occurrences of “mainstream media” were comprised in sentences that had either a negative connotation (e.g., “as per usual, the mainstream media sinks its teeth into the debate and saturates it remorselessly with their squealing brand of hysteria until you just stop giving a tiny shit about the whole issue.”) or critical portrayal of the matter (e.g., “Yet Pulis is allowed say what he says unchallenged by anyone in the mainstream media so it becomes fact.”).

“Football journalism” gave 3 search results which had, interestingly, all negative connotations. Football press was labeled as “sub-gutter” (Mangan 2009), and “hysterical, shrieking overreaction” was called the “cornerstone of UK football journalism” (Mangan 2011).

Finally, the word “clickbait” generated 25 results and was used to describe football articles or some practices of mainstream media (e.g., “I know, I could just dip in this morning, and look at the clickbait trash the likes of the Daily Express, Daily Star and the Daily Mail are churning out.”).

After carefully reading the articles found through the local search engine, two of them stood out: “Arseblog membership and Patreon” (Mangan 2018) and “Super massive mega exclusive: Zaha storm all guff” (Allen 2012). Not only did they fulfill the wanted criteria, but they also had additional interesting features.

The first text, “Arseblog membership and Patreon”, is dated February 27, 2018. It is a blog entry that is different from what is published on a regular basis on the website: while the most common publications are the daily blog entries and the news articles, this entry is an announcement to the Arseblog readers concerning an upcoming change in their financing model and an explanation regarding the rationale behind the change.

At first sight, it is evident that the choices of wordings as well as the contrastive reasoning of the text (opposing what Arseblog does—and/or wants to do—to what is done by other outlets) contain several value judgements, opinions, and assumptions from Arseblog about the economic and journalistic modus operandi of mainstream football digital media outlets. Therefore, the text indirectly touches on the research questions exploring Arseblog’s position in the media landscape and is very suitable for being dissected using CDA in order to reach a deeper understanding how the website negotiates its position as an alternative media and how it stands out in the media landscape.

The second text “Super massive mega exclusive: Zaha storm all guff” (Allen 2012) is dated November 29, 2012. It appears on Arseblog News, the news section of the website which is dedicated to reporting on Arsenal-related events. Team news, match

reports, financial news, and transfer stories usually have the lion's share of Arseblog's textual production but every now and again, in case of contentious happenings different from the previously mentioned typical stories, the editors would go out of their way to investigate the subject and clear it up.

It is precisely the case of the second chosen text. It is published in Arseblog News which means that it is informative and that it is reporting on an event, but the event in question does not concern directly what happened on a football pitch, but rather the way that some mainstream media outlets have been covering the eventual interest of the Arsenal Football Club in Crystal Palace player Wilfried Zaha.

It is a type of practice that Arseblog carry out during, and a bit before the transfer window (i.e., the period of the year when football clubs are allowed to sell and buy players from other clubs). This period of the football season is known for the proliferation of rumors and fake news (Caled, Silva 2018, Smith, 2013) and as a response to that, the website undertakes the role of media watchdog. It reports on other media outlets' reports on Arsenal, it contextualizes the news stories published by other outlets, and it assesses and evaluates information.

“Super massive mega exclusive: Zaha storm all guff” is then a typical example of criticism of media practices by Arseblog. Additionally, from just a superficial reading of the text, one can see that parts of the answers to research questions number 2 and 3 might be encoded in the text's vocabulary, and choices of phrasings. For example, the sometimes coarse language when talking about those other media outlets suggests a tension that is worth digging into using CDA.

In conclusion, I whittled my search results down to two texts. Then again, due to the scope of this thesis I decided to analyze an admittedly limited number of articles, but they are articles that are characteristic of Arseblog's ethos regarding the football media landscape in general, and also representative of their journalistic praxis.

Moreover, the third part of Fairclough's (2014) three-dimensional model of CDA, analysis of social practice, requires exploring the sociocultural context of the data. Thus, the analyst does not only try to find meaning in the formal and discursive features of the text, which can eventually increase the reliance on sheer interpretation and skew the

analysis. On the contrary, they have to dig deeper in the environment from which the analyzed communicative events emanate to have a better understanding of the power relations at play, how they clash, and how they contribute to social change or on the contrary, consolidate the existing social order.

### **3.2. Method of Analysis**

The following section explains the three stages of Fairclough's CDA framework: textual analysis, discursive analysis, and social analysis.

#### **3.2.1. Textual analysis**

This dimension of the analysis is concerned with the formal linguistic features of a text. The focus here is on features such as vocabulary, sentence coherence, and grammar. Fairclough (2014, 110) provides a list of ten main questions accompanied by a number of sub-questions, that could be employed to analyze a text. It is not so much a blueprint as a guideline that helps cover the different features worth looking into. Additionally, not all the questions are relevant to all critical discourse analyses.

Three notions are fundamental here: the experiential, relational, and expressive values of the formal features of a text. Experiential values of a text reveal "the text producer's experience of the natural or social world" (Fairclough 2014, 112). Formal features that have experiential values uncover the writer's knowledge, beliefs and opinions. Relational values bring to light the "social relationships which are enacted via the text in the discourse", which means that they help identify the social relationship between the text's participants and/or the text's producer and its recipient through the choice of wordings. Finally, *expressive values* have to do with "the producer's evaluation (in the widest sense) of the bit of the reality [they] relate to." Fairclough (2014, 112) describes these expressive values as analogous to experiential values in the sense that the former help identify the text producer's knowledge and ideas, while the latter assess the "way of judging" of the text producer.

According to Fairclough (2014, 110), the ten questions are arranged into three categories: vocabulary (questions one to four), grammar (questions five to eight), and textual structures (questions nine and ten). They are as follows:

#### A. Vocabulary

1. What experiential values do words have?
  - What classification schemes are drawn upon?
  - Are there words which are ideologically contested?
  - Is there rewording or overwording?
  - What ideologically significant meaning relations are there between words?
2. What relational values do words have?
  - Are there euphemistic expressions?
  - Are there markedly formal or informal words?
3. What expressive values do words have?
4. What metaphors are used?

#### B. Grammar

5. What experiential values do grammatical features have?
  - What types of process and participant predominate?
  - Is agency unclear?
  - Are processes what they seem?
  - Are nominalizations used?
  - Are sentences active or passive?
6. What relational values do grammatical features have?
  - What modes are used?
  - Are there important features of relational modality?
  - Are the pronouns “we” and “you” used, and if so, how?
7. What expressive values do grammatical features have?
  - Are there important features of expressive modality?
8. How are (simple) sentences linked together?
  - What logical connectors are used?
  - Are complex sentences characterized by coordination or subordination?

- What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?

### C. Textual structures

9. What interactional conventions are used?
  - Are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of others?
10. What larger-scale structures does the text have?

In question one, we can see that classification schemes are of crucial importance. They are the way in which aspects of reality are classified and structured on the basis of common ideological characteristics between the words. According to Fairclough (2014, 113), in order to identify these schemes, one should be on the lookout for words that are ideologically contested; rewording (the systematical replacement of an existing, dominant, and naturalized wording by another one in conscious opposition to it) or overwording (an unusually long phrasing containing words that are near synonyms); and meaning relations (synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy) that are ideologically significant.

Question two is about lexical choices that reflect or help create social relationships between participants. The relational values in a text's vocabulary are encoded in the use of formal/informal words as well as euphemistic expressions.

Question three addresses with the expressive values of a text's vocabulary. How choices of words and phrasings show ideological stances of the text's producer originating from his evaluation of the situation.

Metaphors are the focus of question four. Their importance lies in the fact that any aspect of experience can be illustrated with a wide variety of metaphors, and metaphors in general have different ideological attachments. Therefore, the choice of a certain metaphor itself holds meaning. For instance, Fairclough (2014, 120) illustrates this with the example of representing a social issue as a disease. It is a clear stance regarding said issue as diseases have an unambiguous negative connotation.

In question five, process and participant are key in finding the experiential value of a text's grammar. "Process" refers to what happens or is the case and "participant" refers

to by or to whom it happens. Fairclough (2014, 120) cogently describes their importance: “when one wishes to represent textually some real or imaginary action, event, state of affairs or relationship, there is often a choice between different grammatical process and participant types, and the selection that is made can be ideologically significant”. He identifies three main types of process: actions (subject (S)+ verb (V) + object (O)), events (subject (S) + verb (V)), and attributions (subject (S) + verb (V)+ complement I). The choice between process types has ideological significance: it can either highlight or obfuscate responsibility and agency. For example, the sentence “civilians were killed” is an attribution type of process (S+V+C) where the death of civilians is acknowledged but the responsible agent is absent; unlike the sentence “enemy forces killed civilians” which is an action type of process (S+V+O) where the agent is explicitly mentioned. Such choices could be commonsensical and automatic, thus, ideological; or they could be deliberate hedging or deceit.

Another linguistic feature to be vigilant about is nominalizations (Fairclough 2014, 124). It is the conversion of a verb or process into a noun or a multi-word compound noun. It backgrounds the action and hides the agent of the process, which can be a deliberate clouding of attributions of causality and responsibility. The same goes for opting for a passive voice phrasing over an active one. However, it is worth noting that the function of passive sentences and nominalizations can also be to simply avoid redundancy if the information was already delivered in one way or another.

Question six is concerned with the relational values of grammatical features. They can be found by looking into the modes of a sentence, modality, and pronouns. Firstly, the three major modes are: declarative, grammatical question, and imperative. Declarative sentences are characterized by having a subject followed by a verb. Imperatives start with a verb and do not have a subject at all. Grammatical questions can either start with a question word (who, what, when etc.) or with a verb (e.g., “are you here?”).

Each of these three modes positions the subjects differently (Fairclough 2014, 125). Typically, the declarative mode positions the speaker as the giver (of information) while the addressee is the receiver; the imperative mode makes the speaker ask for an action of the addressee; while in the grammatical question, the speaker is asking for an information of the addressee who becomes in the position of a provider of information.



Each one of these choices has implications for the power dynamic of a situation. An imperative could position the addresser as holding power over the addressee, or a person who is asked a question could have power over the asker by possessing information of which the other does not have knowledge.

However, it is not systematic: “(a) there is not a one-to-one relationship between modes and the positioning of subjects, and (b) there is a much richer set of subject positions than those [...] identified so far” (Fairclough 2014, 126). Ultimately, it is partly a matter of formal features, and partly a matter of interpretation from the analyst.

Secondly, analysis of modality concerns the degree of affinity of the speaker with their statement, or the degree of affiliation to their statement. For example, “it’s cold”, “I think it’s cold”, and “it might be cold” are different phrasings describing the weather. Each one represents a different degree to which the speaker commits themselves to their statement, i.e., different modalities. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 83). Modality can be expressed by modal auxiliaries (verbs like must, should, may, might, can, can’t) but also by other means such as adverbs or tense. Fairclough (2014, 127) makes the distinction between two types of modality: relational modality and expressive modality. The former has to do with the authority of one participant in relation to another, while the latter has to do with the relationship of the author to the truth value of the statement. However, this question is only about relational modality. Expressive modality is discussed in the next question.

Thirdly, relational values can be encoded in pronouns. The use of “we” and “you” is particularly telling when it comes to the relationships that are implicitly claimed in a text. According to Fairclough (2014), “we” can be either inclusive (i.e., comprising writer/speaker + reader) or exclusive (i.e., writer/speaker + other(s), not including the addressee) while both might implicitly entail an “authority claim by speaking on the behalf of a group”. In the case of the pronoun “you”, it is often used in mass communications to mitigate the impersonality of a message. This simulated personal address is widely used in advertisement for example.

Question seven examines the expressive values found in grammatical features. Expressive modality is central to it and as I have mentioned before, it reflects “authenticity claims” or “claims to knowledge”.

Questions eight is concerned with the connective values of formal features of a text. Not only is it the formal features connecting parts of text together (which is referred to as cohesion), but also the formal features connecting parts of text with elements that are outside the text, referencing for example other texts that are related to the one that is being analyzed. The first two sub-questions relate to the former and the third one to the latter.

Logical connectors are of importance because they highlight the argumentation and reasoning in a text, and because they can reveal ideological assumptions. It is also worth mentioning that causal or consequential relationships between parts of a text are not always explicitly signaled by logical connectors. In fact, these kinds of relationships can be implied just by juxtaposing sentences.

Furthermore, complex sentences can be combined using coordination, meaning that clauses within it are of equal importance, or subordination, which implies that there is a main clause containing the most important information and a subordinate clause having background information. Subordinate clauses can in some cases be “presupposed”, taken as a given by the recipient and/or the writer, which could reveal implicit ideological stances.

Moving on to textual structures, question nine is specific to dialogues which means that it is not relevant to this thesis. Question ten refers to the experiential values in the textual structure of discourse. Fairclough (2014) illustrates it with the example of a basic news story about an incident: It generally follows the same structure, based upon newsworthiness. The first paragraph and the headline provide the gist of the story, whereas the later ones add further details. Naturally, this hierarchization of information has ideological background because the choice of emphasizing certain facts at the expense of others has consequences on the way the news story is read and interpreted.

### **3.2.2. Analysis of discursive practice**

The analysis of discursive practice happens at two levels. Firstly, the focus is on the processes involved in the production of text, and the processes involved in their consumption. That means knowing the sources, reporting modes, and the situational context of the text, as well as analyzing who the typical reader of the text might be. Secondly, the discourse types that the text draws on is of interest. Fairclough (2014) defines discourse type as the “conventions, norms [and] codes of practice” of a discourse. Articulating different discourse types and genres in a text is called interdiscursivity and its pertinence here lies in the fact that it can be revelatory of socio-cultural change.

Indeed, Fairclough (1992, 1993b) states that creative discursive practices that mix discourse types in intricate and new ways hint to, and are a catalyst of, discursive and socio-cultural change. In the same way, discursive practices where discourses are combined in more conventional ways are a sign of, and enforce, the dominant order of discourse and thus, the dominant social order. Fairclough (1992, 1993b) also notes that the “discursive creativity” that is the basis of interdiscursivity is not simply the product of creative individuals, but it needs the right breeding ground as well: social conditions that enable change.

### **3.3.3. Analysis of social practice**

As Fairclough’s (2014) three-dimensional model shows, the text and the discursive practice are part of the broader social practice. Thus, the final part of CDA is concerned with “the extent to which discourse is shaped by and, at the same time, influences social structures and the nature of the social activity of which it forms part” (Cots, 2006)

To do so, the analyst has to contextualize the communicative event by placing it in its broader social context, so as to determine if the text maintains or challenges the existing social order (Fairclough 2014). In the case of this thesis, it means situating fan-made football content in the media sphere, being aware of the power relations at play, as well as the economic conditions to which football journalism is subject.

This phase of CDA requires drawing from other studies and disciplines (for example sociology, economy, political sciences or cultural theory) as language is simply not enough for the deeper understanding of social orders. Fairclough (2014) suggests the following questions to explore the relationship between text, discursive practice and social practice:

- What power relations at situational, institutional, and societal levels help shape this discourse?
- How is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional, and societal levels? Are these struggles explicit or implicit? Does the discourse sustain existing power relations, or work towards transforming them?

Concerning the first question, because the two analyzed texts are from the same media outlet, the power relations that help shape their discourses are broadly the same. It means that only one answer is needed for both texts. On the other hand, the second set of questions requires a different answer to each text because the discourse's positioning in relation to power struggles does change from one text to another.

Consequently, in order to avoid redundancy, the analysis of social practice will be carried out in a separate subsection (4.3) in the analysis section. That section will be divided in two parts, the first will answer the first question for both texts, then the second will itself be split in two, one analyzing the discourse positioning of text A and another analyzing that of text B.

## **4. Analysis**

The analysis section is comprised of three subsections. In the first two, a textual and a discursive analysis will be carried out on text A (4.1) and text B (4.2), whereas the third one (4.3) will address the analysis of social practice of both texts.

### **4.1. Text A**

This subsection reports the first two stages of analysis of text A: textual analysis and discursive analysis. The quotes in this section are from text A.

#### **4.1.1. Textual analysis**

The first part of the analysis focuses on the text. Vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures are examined here in this order, in three separate subsections.

##### *Vocabulary*

What *experiential* values do words have?

There is a noteworthy instance of overwording in this text when its producer says:

“We don’t do clickbait, we don’t do pop-ups, pop-unders, auto-playing videos or 17 things you learned about that thing you never needed to learn anything about anyway. What we do is create great quality writing and podcasts.”

Clickbaits, pop-ups, pop-unders and the other characteristics of the online advertising business model that Arseblog is rejecting are not synonyms per se but rather different sides of the same coin. The point could have been made across without citing that many aspects of the deplored subject, but the author’s choice of phrasing is not fortuitous. In fact, Fairclough (2014) points out that “overwording shows preoccupation with some

aspect of reality—which may indicate that it is a focus of ideological struggle” (115). The writer’s frustration with that particular kind of online advertising is, indeed, at the heart of this text. Furthermore, when delving into meaning relations between different parts of it, it is apparent that Arseblog are actively placing themselves ideologically against that business model.

The “what we don’t do...” sentence is followed by “what we do is create great quality writing and podcasts. We have a team of people who love to write and talk about the team they love.” The way the two sentences mirror each other in their form (starting in a similar way, the first one being negative and the second one positive) suggests a relationship of antonymy between the two.

Additionally, there is another revelatory overwording in the text:

“Everything that we do already on Arseblog and Arseblog News remains free, the same as it always has been. The podcasts, the blogs, the news articles, match reports, stats, player ratings, columnists and everything else – 100% free”.

This sentence comes as part of the answer to the question “does this mean you’re going behind a paywall?” and even if the answer is already given in the first clause “Everything that we do [...] remains free”, the writer still expands on the types of content that are available and that will remain available. As aforementioned, overwording generally reflects concern which means that what we have here is another one of the text’s main preoccupations: letting its readership know and reassuring them that the free content is going to stay free.

To summarize, the two instances of overwording and the antonymy relationship discussed, reflect classification schemes. The producer takes an ideological stance concerning the online media business model that relies on advertisement, opposing it to what him and his collaborators do on Arseblog which he describes as quality content made with passion.

What *relational* values do words have?

Fairclough notes (2014) that it is probable for words to have relational values simultaneously with other values as is the case with this example from earlier:

“We don’t do clickbait, we don’t do pop-ups, pop-unders, auto-playing videos or 17 things you learned about that thing you never needed to learn anything about anyway. What we do is create great quality writing and podcasts. We have a team of people who love to write and talk about the team they love.”

When favoring what they do to the detriment of what they do not do, the producer assumes a commonality of values with his readers and therein lies the relational value of this choice of wording.

Furthermore, the use of informal vocabulary throughout the text strengthens this feeling of camaraderie between producer and recipient. A telling example is when he informs about the Patreon subscription fee, adding right after the price and practical details “That’s barely the cost of a pint, a couple of takeaway coffees, or two-thirds of what’s left of the Arsenal transfer budget after our January shenanigans?”. Opting for mundane examples coupled with a self-deprecating in-joke regarding the Arsenal club’s finances certainly evokes a familiarity and nonchalance in the relationship between writer and reader.

Additionally, the word “great” occurs three times in the text in a rather colloquial way:

- What we do is create *great* quality writing.
- A monthly Arseblog long-read featuring *great* writers.
- The business model of creating content and giving it away for free is not a particularly *great* one.

Finally, the last example is a euphemistic turn of phrase downplaying the difficulty of trying to sustain a content production business while offering content without a paywall.

What *expressive* values do words have?

Words with expressive values can be classified into two categories: those with positive connotations and those with negative connotations. On the one hand, those that are positive are associated with Arseblog, their team, and the content they create; on the other hand, those which are negative are used in conjunction with the online advertising business model.

Positive connotations:

- “*great* quality writing and podcasts”
- “*love* to write and talk about the team they *love*”
- “*great* writers”

Negative connotations:

- “increasingly *annoying*”
- “highly *dependent*”
- “*not great*”
- “growing *disdain*”

What metaphors are used?

In Fairclough’s ten questions model (2014, 110), it is not the metaphor per se that is of particular interest—as any aspect of one’s experiences can be depicted in an infinite number of metaphors—but rather “the relationship between alternative metaphors”.

There is only one metaphor used in this text and it is “two-thirds of what’s left of the Arsenal transfer budget after our January shenanigans” which I have mentioned earlier because of its relational value—an inside joke directed at the Arsenal fan reader. Its intended meaning is that the Arseblog Patreon subscription is cheap, and the choice of this particular metaphor reinforces the feeling of familiarity between producer and recipient. Moreover, it helps the writer to stay on-brand writing style wise, keeping his usual light-hearted expression trademark in a text that is much closer to advertising



discourse than his daily sports blogging entry, which will be discussed in the discursive analysis.

### *Grammar*

What experiential values do grammatical features have?

Agency is clear and processes are what they seem. There is no use at all of the passive voice. There are some nominalizations, but they do not obscure the sentences' agents that are easily understood from the context. For example, when the text says, "creating content and giving it away for free", it is known that it is the Arseblog producers who create content and give it away for free.

What relational values do grammatical features have?

All the sentences in the text are in the declarative mode except for the paragraphs' titles, which are grammatical questions ("does this mean you're going behind a paywall?", "how much does it cost?", "what do I get if I sign up?", "OK. I'm in! How do I sign up?"), and one sentence ("If you enjoy what we do and you'd also like access to exclusive podcasts and articles, then sign up as an Arseblog member via Patreon") which is in the imperative mode.

As mentioned in the Methodology section (3.2.1) the declarative mode positions the speaker as the giver (of information) while the addressee is the receiver (Fairclough 2014). Therefore, there is nothing surprising about the preponderance of this mode in the text since the latter is of informative nature, seeking to brief the readers about the upcoming changes in the website's business model.

Moreover, the grammatical questions in the text are not questions that the author is directly asking the reader but rather, paragraphs' titles phrased like questions that the reader might have in mind. Therefore, the usual positioning of subjects that a grammatical question implies is not applied here: the author is not requesting

information from his addressees, he just phrased his titles in question form in order to provide further information.

Concerning the sentence where the imperative mode is used, it is more a suggestion than a direct imperative because it is preceded by a condition “if you enjoy what we do and you’d also like access to exclusive podcasts and articles”. Furthermore, there is no important feature of relational modality. There is no instance where one participant gives or withholds permission from another or imposes an obligation on another.

Finally, the pronoun “you” is the most frequently used word in the text (23 times). It can be explained by the fact that this text is not a normal blog entry or a piece of Arsenal related news, but an informative message for the website’s audience as well as a call for Patreon subscriptions. The writer directly addresses his readers informing them about impending changes in the website’s business model. As previously mentioned, the use of *you* is not uncommon in advertising when the aim is to make the message more personal.

The pronoun “we” is incidentally the second most recurrent word in the text if we exclude articles and conjunctions. It is an exclusive “we” that is used throughout the text and it stands for the Arseblog team of producers on the behalf of whom the writer is speaking.

What expressive values do grammatical features have?

There is not any important feature of expressive modality that is relevant to the topic. The first sentence of the text, “online advertising is becoming increasingly annoying”, could perhaps be considered as a claim to knowledge that is reminiscent of mainstream news reports where happenings are generally recounted as categorical truths (Fairclough 2014) but it seems closer to general observation.

How are (simple) sentences linked together?

Concerning logical connectors, the following sentences are not linked with one, but there is a strong logical connection between them:

“We don’t do clickbait, we don’t do pop-ups, pop-unders, auto-playing videos or 17 things you learned about that thing you never needed to learn anything about anyway. What we do is create great quality writing and podcasts.”

I previously showed (section 4.1.1.1) how they mirror each other in their form and the implication behind that. Furthermore, when looking at the logical link between these two sentences, one can see that there is an implied “whereas” or “on the contrary” between the two which makes the reader infer that there is an inherent opposition between those two bundles of characteristics of an online media outlet, that is, if a media outlet uses clickbait, pop-ups, auto-playing videos etc., it is therefore just money driven and unable to create great quality, passionately-made content. This is ideologically significant because the opposition between the two sentences that is supposed to be commonsensical, actually relies on the writer’s assumption that pop-ups, auto-playing videos, etc., are synonymous with lesser content.

On the subject of coordination and subordination, they are both used to link complex sentences in this example but only one is ideologically relevant: “because of ad-blockers and people’s growing disdain for ads, it’s becoming more difficult to make ends meet”. The main clause here is the second part of sentence, placed after the comma. It is an assertion that comes from the writer’s personal experience, whereas the subordinate clause that comes after “because” reveals something that the writer is taking as a given and further unveils a facet of his opinion regarding the economic functioning of online media.

### *Textual structures*

What larger scale structures does the text have?

The text is organized in five parts. It has an introduction and four sub-headings. The introduction lays the foundation of the message that the writer is trying to convey by explaining that it is time for Arseblog to add a new financing method. The sub-headings are phrased as questions the reader might have about the upcoming changes, as well as the answers to these. The rationale behind the order of paragraphs seems to be to explain the situation first in the introduction, then further expand on the changes, before delving into the practicalities of the subscription and what is there to gain for the future subscriber.

#### **4.1.2. Analysis of discursive practice**

As previously mentioned in the Methodology section, the analysis of discursive practice is carried out in two stages. The first one is concerned with the production and consumption processes, while the second one deals with interdiscursivity.

#### *Production and consumption*

The text is an important announcement to the Arseblog readers about the financing of the website. It was therefore written by the founder, Andrew Mangan, who is talking directly to the readers. As he explains throughout the article, the financing of a small online media outlet is a delicate issue because of two main factors that we have discussed in the textual analysis (4.1.1). Firstly, the fact that internet users are used to getting their content for free while at the same time finding online advertising somewhat irritating. Secondly, because of the belief that he has that the current state of online advertising pushes media outlets towards sensationalism rather than quality reporting and analysis.

On the consumer end, the typical reader of this text would be the regular Arseblog reader, given that it is not a normal blog entry or news article about the football club, but a message about the functioning of the website. Of course, the occasional visitor of the website or a newcomer might as well read this, but since the article is asking for financial support from Arseblog followers, I would assume that the main recipient is somebody who knows the website and even visits it more or less regularly.

Furthermore, as it was said in the textual analysis, the familiar tone of the text reinforces a sense of familiarity or even camaraderie between writer and recipient which makes it more likely that the typical reader would be an Arseblog regular.

### *Interdiscursivity*

Ultimately, the aim of the article is selling Arseblog Patreon subscriptions and in order to do so, it draws on a fair number of promotional discourses to create its own interdiscursive mix. The identified discourse types are as detailed below:

- Corporate discourse: Enforcing brand identity through the use of the Arseblog logo in the heading, as well as putting the quality of the content on the forefront (e.g., “what we do is create great quality writing and podcasts”) as something from which they take pride and is embedded in their brand identity.
- Personification of reader and institution: As it was noted in the textual analysis, the use of an exclusive “we” represent the institution and engage with the reader through using “you” to personify the message and make the announcement sound like a normal life conversation.
- Question and answer structure: Just like the personification of reader and institution, the structure of the text simulates a conversational discourse, making the producer less distant from the reader.
- Community discourse: Reading, listening to and following Arseblog makes you part of a community but being an Arseblog Patreon subscriber gives you a more

privileged position (e.g., “we love you anyway, but we’d love you just a little bit more”, “you [...] get love and thanks for being part of the Arseblog member community, and the knowledge that your contribution will help us do more”).

- Discourse implying camaraderie: The light-heartedness of the tone and use of in-joke that the Arsenal fan would get and find amusing while talking about the price of the subscription (“That’s barely the cost of a pint, a couple of takeaway coffees, or two-thirds of what’s left of the Arsenal transfer budget after our January shenanigans”), whereas in a more traditional marketing discourse, talking about money could sound stiff, uncomfortable, or forced.

All in all, text A is a dynamic and creative interdiscursive blend. As aforementioned, in Faircloughian theory (1992, 1993b), a high-level of interdiscursivity signifies discursive and socio-cultural change, and is also a driving force towards said change.

## **4.2. Text B**

This section addresses the textual and discursive analyses of text B. It is performed in a similar fashion to the analysis of text A:

### **4.2.1. Textual analysis**

A textual analysis of text B is carried out in this subsection, exploring vocabulary first, grammar second, then textual structures last.

#### *Vocabulary*

What experiential values do words have?

There is an instance of rewording when the transfer period is dubbed “two month-silly season period” which is a value judgement regarding that time of the football calendar.

The behavior of some media outlets during this time of the football season is also seen in a negative light when the writer sums it up in calling it a “game of ‘let’s-write-the-most-extreme-attention-grabbing-headline-ever-fuck-the-consequences-it’ll-be-fun-to-start-a-war””.

Moreover, there is an overwording when the reader is asked to see what the article is talking about as a “warning” ahead of the transfer period, only to be warned again—in the next sentence—about the same thing: “do yourself a favor don’t believe everything you read”. It is reflective of a concern about the mainstream media’s work ethics when it comes to generating transfer stories.

With respect to the quoted headlines from different media outlets, the first five give an unequivocal character to the story that opposes the nuanced statement of Arsène Wenger (Arsenal manager at the time of writing of the news article) on which the news stories are based. For instance, three of them (Daily Mail, Goal.com, Daily Mirror) use the word “confirm” to describe the interest in the player.

What relational values do words have?

There is a notable use of informal words. The title of the article is an example of that with words such as “super”, “mega”, and “guff”. It is in line with the usual familiar writing tone of Arseblog articles that uncovers a recognizable familiarity between the producer and recipient of their texts.

What expressive values do words have?

Positive connotation:

- “good headline”

Negative connotation:

- “guff”
- “twisted version”

- “bad etiquette”
- “criticize”
- “attention-grabbing”
- “silly season”
- “I don’t think that’s right”

The only word or expression with expressive values that has positive connotation is “good headline” when the text’s producer is talking about what the journalist who asked the first question in the press conference—which sparked the events that the article is about—is looking for. “Bad etiquette” and “I don’t think that’s right and proper” are Ian Holloway’s words and are not relevant for us here. “Guff”, “attention-grabbing”, and “twisted version” are all pejorative words and expressions that show the writer’s opinion about some media outlets’ behavior in the Wiflried Zaha transfer saga. He sees their news stories as sensationalist journalism misrepresenting the events to gain attention.

What metaphors are used?

Two metaphors are used in the text and they are located in the following sentence: “the bloke has merely been used as a pawn in a game of ‘let’s-write-the-most-extreme-attention-grabbing-headline-ever-fuck-the-consequences-it’ll-be-fun-to-start-a-war’”. First, the metaphorical representation of Ian Holloway as a pawn in a game reflects Arseblog’s take on the story, that the Crystal Palace manager was played by the journalists who twisted the events in order to get from him a visceral reaction that generated sensationalist headlines afterwards. Second, the controversy created by the headlines quoted in the article is labelled as “war”. It is a hyperbolic metaphor that makes the point that Arseblog is bothered by the consequences of such journalistic practices, as well as the lack of sensibleness in news reporting.



## *Grammar*

What experiential values do grammatical features have?

Processes are what they seem, agency is clear, and no nominalization is present in the text. Furthermore, there are two occurrences of the passive voice: “Ian Holloway [...] gets fed a radically twisted version of Wenger’s comments” and “the bloke has been used as a pawn in a game [...]”. It is implied that the agents are journalists affiliated with mainstream outlets. However, the intention behind the first passive voice could well be to voluntarily reduce the visibility—in this article—of the journalist who asked the question, neutering their involvement in the story. It is a conscious move that would reflect a power struggle between this alternative media and the mainstream media sphere.

What relational values do grammatical features have?

The declarative mode is predominant in the text. Otherwise, there are three grammatical questions and two uses of the imperative mode. One imperative sentence is relevant to this thesis: “do yourself a favor don’t believe what you read”. It is a direct suggestion to the reader regarding how to behave with other media.

In respect of the use of the pronouns “we” and “you”, the following sentence is interesting:

“We don’t really need to point out where the blame lies, although we do feel it’s worth highlighting the above as a warning ahead of the impending two-month silly season period. Do yourself a favor don’t believe everything you read. Are we interested in Zaha? Who knows...”.

The first two uses of “we” are exclusive and stand for Arseblog as a media outlet positioning themselves in the role of critic of mainstream media, while the last one is inclusive and stands for Arseblog and the readers as the Arsenal fan community. The

“you” addresses the reader. Finally, there are no important features of relational modality.

What expressive values do grammatical features have?

The headlines by other media outlets that are quoted in this article have all interesting features of expressive modality, especially when considering the context that is provided by the article. As mentioned before, Arsène Wenger did not give the categorical confirmation of his club’s interest in Wilfried Zaha that many media outlets have reported and yet, six out of ten headlines are in the present simple tense (Daily Mail, Goal.com, Daily Mirror; London24, Clubcall.com, The Sun), two are in simple past (Sky Sports; Teamtalk), one is in present continuous (Daily Mail) and one is a nominalization (Goal.com).

Simple tenses reinforce authenticity claims. It is a usual practice in news reporting that hides the complex process of information gathering and interpretation behind assertive phrasings. (Fairclough 2014, 129)

How are (simple) sentences linked together?

The first opening sentences of the article are linked by the word “because” which expresses causality. The sentence is as follows: “Here’s a question posed to Arsene Wenger in Thursday’s pre-Everton press conference by a bloke looking to write a transfer story because it gets hits for his website and is a good headline in the newspaper”. The assumption here is that the journalist’s intention is not to objectively report the happenings of the press conference but rather to get a sensational story that would generate attention and ultimately, money for his employer.

Another linking word that uncovers the writer’s motive in this article is “although” in the sentence: “we don’t really need to point out where the blame lies, although we do feel it’s worth highlighting the above as a warning ahead of the impending two-month silly season period.” The word “although” expresses contrast and the sentence that

follows contradicts what is before it. Even if the text's producer says that he is not pointing out where the blame lies, he is still warning the readers about the media practices he is denouncing, adding that they are about to happen again during transfer season.

### *Textual structures*

What larger-scale structures does the text have?

The article is organized chronologically. The first paragraph contains the interaction between a journalist and Arsène Wenger that sparked media interest. The second one quotes some of the headlines that appeared consequently. The third and fourth paragraphs also follow the same pattern: a press conference snippet that gained media attention followed by a selection of headlines that were published about it. Finally, the concluding paragraph is the text's producer's opinion on the happenings he described along the article. This structure makes the writer step back from the events and have a critical look on the story-creating process of the media outlets he talked about.

#### **4.2.2. Analysis of discursive practice**

In the same way as in text A, the analysis of discursive practice is done at two levels: production and consumption first, then interdiscursivity second.

### *Production and consumption*

The text was published on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2012, one month before the start of the winter transfer window. It is reporting on the media interpretation and treatment of a statement from the Arsenal manager at the time, Arsène Wenger, during a press conference prior to a Premier League game against Crystal Palace; and the escalation of events it provoked.

The argument of the article is that initially, an intentional misinterpretation of Wenger's words by some media outlets contributed in creating a transfer rumor sending Crystal Palace player Wilfried Zaha to Arsenal; and that secondly, a misrepresentation of Wenger's statement was told to the Crystal Palace manager in a second press conference, prompting a reaction in him which in turn, generated sensationalist headlines.

The typical reader of this article would be an Arsenal fan who counts Arseblog among their Arsenal news sources, but not just. Given the critical look the article has on mainstream media that is seen skeptically by many, it could have seemed appealing to non-Arsenal fan readers as well, in case they saw the article doing the rounds in social media for instance.

### *Interdiscursivity*

The text contains an interesting hybridity of discourse but before examining its particularities, the website section where it is located is worthy of attention. The article appears on Arseblog News which is an annex of the website, dedicated to news regarding the Arsenal football club. Rowe (1992) argued that texts produced by football fans tend to be very similar to traditional styles of sports journalism and Arseblog News is no exception in that regard.

The Arseblog news articles are—in their form and content—akin to those found in mainstream media websites: the article structure is usually that of an inverted pyramid, starting with the most newsworthy piece of information and descending towards the least important one; and the contents are information-based and/or critical and analytical. The only difference with conventional sports journalism, lies in the occasional light-hearted tone and the obvious Arsenal bias in treating the news.

Going back to the article, even if it appears on Arseblog News and has the form of a normal news article appearing on Arseblog News (heading, photo, writer's name, date etc.), the content does not draw solely from a news report discourse. On the contrary, one could say that the only common feature with standard news discourse is the form,

the location within the website, and the fact that the article's aim is informative. The other identified discourses are as follows:

- Zine discourse: The tone is sarcastic (“Ian Holloway, who presumably doesn't have an Arsenal Player membership”) and irreverent (calling the transfer window “two-month silly season period”, and use of coarse language “Arseblog News couldn't give a flying fuck”) reminiscent of the zine style that disregards traditional writing conventions.
- Opinion column discourse: The last three paragraphs come into play after the article is done reporting the events. They are written in a style that is closer to an opinion column than a news report.
- Personification of reader: When stepping out of the events and having a critical look on them, the text's producer goes on to directly address the reader in saying “do yourself a favor don't believe everything you read”.

To sum up, the article mixes up genres and draws on different discourses in order to tell a news story that is in itself creative: it is not about a strictly football related or Arsenal related matter but rather about other media outlets' processing of an event that is Arsenal related.

### **4.3. Analysis of Social Practice**

The analysis of social practice of both texts is executed in this section. As explained in the Methodology section, it will be done by answering Fairclough's (2014) suggested questions.

#### **4.3.1. Power relations at play**

The first of Fairclough's (2014) questions is answered in this subsection. The power relations at situational, institutional, and societal level that help shape the discourses of

both text A and text B are explored here in two parts: “Football media and the fans” and “Economy of clicks”.

### *Football, media, and fans*

Football and television have undoubtedly revolutionized each other. Economically speaking, it is a symbiotic relationship that generates tremendous amounts of money that are still on a steady rise. Live television broadcasting in particular, has been a major—if not the biggest—actor in an enlargement of audiences worldwide and capital injections as a consequence of broadcast rights inflation (Boyle and Haynes 2000; Rowe 2004).

In 2019, for instance, the cost of the English Premier League broadcasting rights has risen by almost 8% to 10 billion euros for the following three seasons. Gone are the days when ticket sales at stadia were the main source of income. For a couple of decades now, amongst high-income nations, TV rights have been the main source of revenue for football clubs (for data about television revenue in football in several European nations, see Ascari and Gangnepain 2006; Baroncerlli and Lago 2006; Barros 2006; Buraimo, Simmons, and Szymanski 2006; Dejonghe and Vandeweghe 2006; Frick and Prinz 2006; and Gouguet and Primault 2006).

In the English Premier League—as well as other major leagues worldwide—TV money has enabled clubs to grow bigger globalized audiences, build bigger stadiums and modernize training facilities. Moreover, it provides them a possibility of enhancing their sporting results through business (more money in the bank means being more attractive to better quality players and coaches) which ultimately, would make them more successful, more popular, and richer. More than ever, football fans are interested in the economic side of the functioning of their favorite team because of the interdependence between what happens on a football pitch and what happens in corporate offices.

Many scholars (Conn 1998; Hamil et al. 1999) have described how business and market talk have pervaded football culture. Boyle and Haynes (2004) argued that “football as an industry and business simply adopted many of the established commercial and

market driven aspects of other areas of both public life and popular culture in Britain”. In sum, it was a logical development in the age of capitalism which has benefited both clubs and television in terms of the money and development opportunities it generates. It has raised the profile of the game and “add[ed] to the excitement that is generated by the moments of collective identity which transcend the sport” (Boyle and Haynes 2000).

However, not everything in the football/television garden is rosy: when clubs and leagues are ceding broadcasting rights to big media companies, they lose some agency over their sport, e.g., major media companies that own broadcasting rights dictate the schedule of competitions and games. Sport in general has become ingrained in the corporate networks of big entertainment institutions to which sport is like any other form of income generating product with multiple distribution channels. All in all, it is a complex power dynamic where corporate media culture practically owns the sport while the latter portrays itself as something deeper and more culturally significant than a mere basic media product. Miller et al. (2001) sum it up by stating that “sport is increasingly shaped by the media, spectacularized by commerce, [and] employed to deliver audiences to sponsors”.

Another downside of this marriage of convenience between sport and broadcasters is recalled by Morrow (2003): many discussions in purely economic terms about this situation paint an incomplete picture of the customer. As a matter of fact, they “fail to consider the role played by supporters in creating the product they are asked to buy, i.e. the atmosphere. In other words, football needs supporters not just as customers but because they form part of a unique joint product.”

Indeed, one of the effects of the appropriation of sports by the media is the fans’ feeling of disenfranchisement. An example of that is broadcasters having the final say in competition’s schedule. It is not rare to see their interests put ahead of the fans’, and having games programmed at times that do not accommodate the supporters who want to attend their favorite team’s game. Consequently, fans can have a certain sentiment of feeling subdued by corporations that only have their financial profit in mind, whereas the supporter should be the most valued element in this paradigm.

Nonetheless, this feeling of disenfranchisement is not anything new. Boyle and Haynes (2004) argue that:

“fans have always been exploited in various forms throughout the history of the game which has been run primarily by a class other than its mainstream supporters. Fans have often been the last to be consulted on change within the game”. (15)

Furthermore, Fynn and Guest (1999) consider that:

“fans have always been treated with disdain. It is nothing new, only the details change. When supporters who traditionally were drawn from low-income groups, provided the chief source of income by paying to attend matches, stadia were large and facilities poor. Now that football attracts a wealthier clientele, stadia are smaller, but facilities are much better. It is not television or commercialization that are the enemies of the fans, it is the attitude of owners and administrators, and that is the same as it always has been.” (258)

While this two decades-old quote is still relevant, it is worth noting that stadia are actually getting bigger (e.g., West Ham, Arsenal, and Tottenham Hotspurs have all built new bigger stadiums in the past decade, as a consequence of the constantly increasing revenues and popularity of the Premier League), but indeed, the fans’ feeling of not being seen at their true value is still the same if not even amplified by the media takeover of their favorite sport. In this context, “media takeover” does not only mean the owning of broadcasting rights by big television companies, but also the huge and extensive football coverage by the mainstream media by which many fans feel alienated.

Sandvoss (2005), when talking about popular culture fandom, calls this feeling of alienation “‘little breakages’ between fan and object of fandom in the relationship, which leave fans disillusioned and sometimes disenfranchised”. He interprets fandom as a resistance battle between the powerless consumer against the almighty producers with fan fiction and performances instead of guns. McCarthy (2012b) extrapolated Sandvoss’ (2005) reasoning to sports fan bloggers and the findings of her research



highlighted that behind these “little breakages” is the dissatisfaction with the communicative output of mainstream sport media through which fans largely experience and interpret sport. Something that ultimately incentivizes some fans to do their own brand of sport journalism, like it is the case for Arseblog.

### *Economy of clicks*

An important factor in this dissatisfaction with the quality of mainstream sport journalism is the “tabloidization of news” (Chittum 2013; Rowe 2011). It is a general tendency in digital journalism nowadays and is not specific to sport. At the heart of it, an economic model based on advertising, thus making the number of website visitors paramount, whereas journalism’s traditional principles of objectivity and accountability for the “quest of truth” are relegated to a lesser degree of importance (Fisher 2014). For Chen et al. (2015) also, online news are now often driven by the quest for page views instead of the quest for truth, and one symptom of this phenomenon is the spread of clickbait headlines.

Clickbait refers to “a vague headline that induces curiosity, which is then used to lure readers into clicking on the headline” (Kuiken et al. 2017). It is a phenomenon that was identified in earlier phases of this CDA as the object of an ideological struggle in the two analyzed texts. It is worth mentioning that in football digital media, transfer periods are a fertile ground for the proliferation of clickbait articles which explains Arseblog’s concern with it in text B and the sardonic referral to it as the “two month-silly season period”.

Because football transfers happen behind closed doors between representatives of clubs and players, and are often only made public when it is a done deal; rumors start spreading and become the bread and butter of many football media outlets. Moreover, as I have personally observed from my experience as a sport journalist, it is not rare that players’ agents leak fake information to the press about an eventual interest of major clubs in their client. Their intent is to spark speculation about the player’s future, so as to raise their stock in the transfer market and allow them to have a stronger hand ahead of future negotiations with other clubs. In the current state of online news, described by

Chen et al. as “one that heavily incentivizes the speed and spectacle over restraint and verification in the pursuit of ad dollars” (Chen, Rubin, and Conroy, 2015), the agent’s information gets published, unverified, and it is a win-win situation for the player and his representative, as well as for the media outlet that would generate clicks and money from tantalizing headlines about the story.

As Cable and Mottershead (2018) summed it up: “on the most basic of levels clickbait exists to generate traffic, increase site visitors and attract more advertising. As a result, this is reducing the quality of football journalism in a never-ending quest for easy content.”.

In conclusion, three main areas of power struggle that shape the discourse of the analyzed texts can be identified:

- The appropriation of football by the media: Television’s ownership of broadcasting rights and its implications, as well as different types of mainstream media controlling the narrative through which spectators experience football.
- The ever-increasing corporatization of football, distancing the fans from the sport through shifts in power and exacerbating the long-standing disdain towards them.
- The financing model of many digital media outlets, driven by page views rather than the quest for truth.

#### **4.3.2. Discourse positioning in relation to power struggles**

This subsection addresses the second set of Fairclough’s (2014) questions on the analysis of social practice: “how is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional, and societal levels? Are these struggles explicit or implicit? Does the discourse sustain existing power relations or work towards transforming them?” It is articulated in two parts. A first one for text A, and a second one for text B.

### *Text A*

Firstly, the textual analysis of text A revealed a clear preoccupation and frustration with the online advertising financing model that Arseblog has been utilizing, which is the one that is mostly used in digital journalism. Not only was the article criticizing that model, but it was explicitly taking a stand against it. Furthermore, the very aim of the article was to inform the readers that the website is taking concrete action to be less dependent on online advertising in order to avoid the ethical shortcuts that it might entail. It does so by trying to start a direct transactional relationship between them, the producers, and the consumer/reader through Patreon. The goal is cutting out the middleman—which is online advertising—or at least mitigating its negative consequences on overall journalistic quality. All of which is done while assuming a commonality of values and beliefs concerning the areas of power struggle defined earlier, by invoking camaraderie in the language and common fandom-related references.

Secondly, the struggles are very much explicit since the text's producer tackles them head-on and does not mince his words when articulating his opinion about them as it was shown in the previous first phases of CDA.

Thirdly, as seen in the discursive analysis of the text, the high level of interdiscursivity shows that it challenges the established order. Moreover, the aim of the article—working on an alternative to online advertising to preserve journalistic integrity—is a clear-cut evidence of the discourse's effort to transform the existing power relations.

### *Text B*

The second text is concerned with the practices of some mainstream media outlets starting a transfer rumor and misrepresenting events to generate sensationalist headlines consequently. It is upfront about challenging the mainstream media through debunking the headlines. It does so by citing them along with their sources, providing context to them and by revealing how the transfer story started, how it has taken shape in the headlines, and how the truth was meddled with to generate clicks.

Moreover, by playing the role of media critic and engaging directly with the reader—as seen in the previous two phases of the analysis—it enhances the fan’s position in the narrative by exposing the dubious media practices they are subject to, by warning them that it is commonplace in transfer news, and then again, by sharing common values and beliefs about the previously mentioned areas of power struggle.

In a similar fashion to the first text, the second one creatively blends genres to create a hybrid informative article that positions itself against the clicks-driven attitude of some mainstream media outlets. It confronts this lack of journalistic ethics and the way it insults the fans’ intelligence and definitely works towards transforming the existing power relationships.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

After decades of football experience and consumption dominated by television as an all-encompassing medium providing live broadcasting, reporting and analysis, internet has revolutionized the field by offering a more democratic and inclusive alternative. It brought up more interactivity to the experience, a platform to express one's self, and a vast array of consumption and production possibilities as technological change sparked a shift in communication toward more user control (Shaw et al., 2000). It has challenged the definition of fan and transformed it, making it more globalized and turning it from a mere passive consumer to somebody whose voice can be heard in social media or on a platform of their own.

Indeed, Jenkins (2003) noted that fans in niche areas were the first to embrace new online technological possibilities to form communities and share information about the object of their fandom through the use of message boards and blogs, and build what he called "collective intelligences", dedicated to producing and sharing knowledge. In the case of football, Real (2006) observed the same phenomenon as British fans moved their zine culture to the digital world to make it more easily reachable and to reduce its production costs. It has paved the way for myriads of blogs who took up the zine's torch of irreverent, witty writing.

Moreover, Shirky (2010) observed how technological advancement made amateur producers more influential than in the past. I would say that it also made their productions more professional as it is the case for Arseblog who went from a blog rooted in the zine tradition to a media company with an extensive range of content.

To conclude, this thesis used Arseblog as an example of producers who bring something new to the table of football media and whose work can be considered as a form of resistance against the ever-growing commodification of football. CDA was instrumental in exploring their practices, finding patterns in the way they operate and analyzing their relationship with the mainstream media. With the objective to understand this hybrid and innovative media outlet, the analysis found out that Arseblog supplements and critiques mainstream media outlets by:

- Emulating journalistic practices and reporting on the immediacy of Arsenal related events (results, player injuries, player transfers etc.), as well as being able to step back from it and have a critical look on mainstream media's take on those events in the age of the tabloidization of news.
- Working as a media observer and news curator, assessing the truthfulness of news stories published by the mainstream media, at a time where the need for content is constantly increasing, making it difficult for the fan to keep track on all the stories and assess their veracity by themselves.
- Establishing a trust relationship with the reader by making trustworthiness a personal brand and by sharing common values and beliefs about the sport, the economic side of it, as well as the place of the media in it.

Furthermore, the website negotiates its position as an alternative media by:

- Having a direct transactional relationship with the customer through Patreon to mitigate the dependence on online advertising revenues which can easily have negative effects on the overall journalistic quality of the product.
- Being upfront about its editorial line and its opinions regarding the way mainstream media operate, at the risk of being politically incorrect.

Finally, they stand out in the media landscape by:

- Putting the fans at the heart of the narrative and addressing them directly to counter the feeling of disenfranchisement that characterizes football fandom.
- Not sticking to traditional reporting methods, blending genres and discursive practices to innovate in sports writing which depends on an economic model that encourages sensationalism at the expense of accuracy.

Vimieiro (2018) recalls how other researches in the field of digital cultures (Bruns, 2008; Burgess and Green, 2009) have demonstrated how “users in ‘produsage’ communities formed around Flickr, Linux, Second Life and YouTube are challenging professional media providers, media norms and the cultural authority of ‘legitimate knowledge’ through continuous collaboration and through creative decentralized ‘co-creation’ with a clear democratic and transformative appeal”. And while Dart's (2009)

study concluded that sports fans do not think blogging poses a threat to mainstream media companies which cover sport, further research could be done to investigate what Arseblog-like websites (e.g., Stretty News, for Manchester United fans; or Empire of the Kop for Liverpool fans—much more advanced than blogs in terms of content and productivity) could change in the media sphere.

It is worth exploring in the light of the quality drop in digital journalism noted by many scholars (Barthel 2015; Cable and Mottershead 2018; Chen et al. 2015; Chittum 2013; Rowe 2011), as well as the market fragmentation permitted by the digital age where “people are seen as being able to make individualized lifestyle choices from a never-ending array of possibilities offered by the market [that] is seen as a method for maximizing choice in relation to media texts (Lister et al. 2003). Internet has become a haven for niche content and choice variety, and it would not be a surprise if this became a challenging situation for big media companies who have a bigger competition.

Some of these companies have already started their adaptation process and The Athletic is a quite telling example. The subscription-based American sports journalism website has started its invasion of the British football market in August 2019 by snapping up some of the region’s top journalists and bloggers and offering them lucrative contracts. What is interesting about it is that many of these football writers have earned their spurs in the digital realm (for example Michael Cox, founder of the successful website *Zonal Marking* about tactics; James McNicholas, Arseblog collaborator and owner of the Arsenal fan blog *Gunnerblog*). They were just passionate football fans who made a reputation for themselves on social media with top quality writing before being offered more conventional journalist jobs. In addition, The Athletic have added to their roster successful outlets previously owned by independent producers such as the Arsenal Vision Podcast and award-winning website/podcast/YouTube channel Tifo Football.

It is debatable whether it is an attack from rich corporations on fans’ last bastion of freedom, or the producer fans infiltrating these corporations and shaping them more in their image with the motto of “if you can’t beat them, join them”. What is sure is that the lines between producer and consumer are getting more and more blurred as time goes by, and the experience of football fandom and spectatorship is richer than ever,

preserving alternative football fan subcultures at a time where the commodification of the sport feels alienating for many of its fans.



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