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## MEDIA

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### Chapter Highlights

- *The media are integral to the history and contemporary configuration of football, both as a source of information, news and entertainment, as well as a significant source of commercial income. The relationship can be characterised as the football-media nexus.*
- *Football provides an important form of content for the media. The ways in which sports journalists access and gather their sources on football have been transformed by the increasing management of players, teams and governing bodies of the sport, through the use of agents, publicists and communications managers.*
- *Innovations in technology and the internet, especially the rise of socially networked media, have transformed the traditional dominance of mass media in football, and have enabled dynamic self-mass communications on football by various actors including players, fans and journalists.*
- *The competition for television rights to leading football competitions such as the Premier League in England have transformed both the structure of football and broadcasting in quite profound ways. Battles over the 'triple play' of telephony, broadband and television will continue to transform the nature of televised football for the foreseeable future.*

### Introduction

It is difficult to imagine contemporary football without the media. Even youth and amateur football are mediated in some shape or form on a regular basis, whether it be via local news outlets, or, more popularly, on websites and socially networked media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. If we think about how our own knowledge of football is informed and shaped, it becomes clear the media and associated forms of communication have an important role in this process too. The multiple ways in which football is covered by the media for its various audiences, informs and frames how we understand what football means to us

as individuals and collectively. This includes our understanding of how the sport is played, owned, coached, managed, refereed, supported, marketed and generally consumed in different forms, spaces and moments. For most people, most of the time, to think about football, whether consciously or not, is informed as much by their mediated experience of the game as it is from playing or watching the sport. This gives the media an important place in the cultures of football, and therefore, within the study of football.

Of course what we call the media, and the audiences for them, are not monolithic. That is, there are different kinds of media: with different technologies; different kinds of organisational structures; competing public or commercial interests; with local, national or global audiences; and different regulatory and legal requirements. So when talking about what we might call the 'football-media-nexus', in other words the inter-relationships between football and the media, we must be mindful that it is a concept that has many variables, some of which have important consequences for not only how the sport is communicated and consumed, but also in some cases how the very structure of the sport is governed, organized and played. Conversely, football as a form of content has an increasing influence of the shape of the media itself, including its market structure, new technologies, and regulation. This chapter will unpack some of the various relationships between football and the media, and should provide you with a more rounded historical and globally contextualized understanding of media sport more generally.

Before we start, it is helpful to think about the kind of questions we should ask about football's relationship with the media. One commonly asked question is whether or not the media produces a fair representation of football? In other words, does the media distort our view of football? If so, how can we recognize and analyze such representations, and how has football attempted to manage this process? One view of the media is that it is a 'mirror on the world', merely reflecting back what is happening, but such a view itself misrepresents the processes of mass communications: the media we consume have gone through a number of stages of production and distribution to reach us, and we need to understand how media practitioners – journalists, editors, broadcasters, and producers – do their jobs with the objective of

producing media for different readers, listeners, viewers and browsers of content. For example, what is the role of a football journalist? How does the nature of their work and how they report on football vary depending on the publication or broadcaster they work for? How has the rise of football stars and their management as popular celebrities by agents and publicists changed the nature of football journalism? Have the ways in which journalists gather information from football, what we call the 'news-source relationships', been transformed by the media management of teams, managers and players? To what extent might this be due to: increased suspicion of the press by governing bodies, clubs and players; new technological methods of newsgathering such as information through the internet; or the demands of audiences for different kinds of information about the game? Finally, when football becomes newsworthy, perhaps because of a scandal of some kind, why might news journalists and sports journalists report the same events differently? This latter point also raises questions about how football organizes its own communications. In thinking about media relations and the impact technology and globalisation might have on the flow of communications, how have developments in socially networked media and increased access to mobile media transformed the way we access and consume information about football?

While traditional football journalism in the press maintains its function in the football-media nexus, the dominant media form is television. Football was first televised by the BBC in 1937, and ever since, administrators of the sport have worried that televising of football will damage the attendance at games. Of course football now receives enormous sums of money from television for the right to televise games, which has led many to question whether television exerts exceptional power and influence in the sport. Has football metaphorically 'sold its jersey' to television? It is a reasonable question to ask whether or not the money invested by television companies in football means that television executives now dictate how football is organized? How might this affect how football is played and consumed? Has the money flowing through the game transformed the sport purely to suit the television spectacle or are there other beneficiaries? Finally, how has the rise in the globalisation of televised football changed the nature of fandom itself and how we access and view the game? Have these processes changed the meaning of football and the identities associated with it?

We can, therefore, see that the 'football-media-nexus' raises a set of important questions that need to be addressed when trying to understand the relationships between football and the media. The key to answering such questions is to acknowledge that to understand one side of the relationship, we must also understand the consequences for the other. In this sense, we need to understand the football-media-nexus as a 'symbiotic relationship': one with mutual interests and complex interconnections.

### **Football Journalism and Its Discontents**

The sport historian Tony Mason (1980) first alerted us to the centrality of the sporting press at the very origin of what we call association football. The media environment of the mid-to-late Nineteenth century was characteristically different to the media landscape of the late-Twentieth century. In terms of sport, the major difference was the evolution of a distinct sporting press, published on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, and dedicated to sporting matters. Periodicals such as the *Athletic News* (1875-1931) were primarily targeted at a burgeoning middle-class market, for who the development of organised sport and sports clubs – including football - were a key feature of their new leisure pursuits. The main protagonists in writing about football were football administrators themselves, who were evangelical amateur sportsmen with typewriters looking to drum up interest and support in their new sports organisations. The coupling of football and publicity therefore has a long history, and takes us to the roots of the organised game in Britain.

Post-war Britain saw a blossoming of media consumerism around football, including publications such as *Charles Buchan's Football Weekly* (1951) and *Raich Carter's Soccer Star* (1952) in the 1950s, followed by *Goal* (1968) and *Shoot* (1969) aimed at a younger market in the 1960s. For many years these publications celebrated the star players and leading teams of each era, and set the tone for the elevation of football players in British popular culture alongside cigarette and bubble gum cards and Panini stickers.

The coverage of football in the press steadily grew in the inter-war period, especially in popular newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express*, which began to carry more sports photojournalism in their match reports. This trend continued in the post-war period which saw the emergence of leading football correspondents with national reputations such as Geoffrey Green of *The Times*, Peter Wilson of the *Daily Mirror*, Patrick Collins of the *Sunday People*, Ian Wooldridge of the *Daily Mail* and Hugh McIlvanney of *The Observer*. Newspapers also became an important source of information for the football pools, which gained enormous popular appeal in the middle of the Twentieth century.

At a more local level, the regional press have long covered football, and local clubs are the domain of sports journalists who foster a particular 'beat' of close, but independent, associations with club chairmen, managers, coaches, players and supporters groups. Where regional papers cover more than one local club the pressure for editorial neutrality places great strain on the newspapers' ability to serve the needs of its readership who might have intense rivalries within it. In Scotland, for example, the popular tabloid the *Daily Record* has consistently trod a fine line in its coverage of Celtic and Rangers, and has frequently been the focus of complaint from one side or the other for publishing what some might consider unfavourable reports. Where national newspapers can regularly transcend regional rivalries and ignore the nuances of local football sensitivities, local football reporters have to remain careful not to bite the hand that feeds them for fear of damaging relations between a newspaper and the club. The football press has historically been dependent on free access into football grounds based on the mutual benefit local reporting brings to the publicity of the club. In a more commercially driven era of elite football this historical relationship has occasionally broken down, either because club owners fear critical reportage will damage reputations and upset commercial partners, or have commercialised aspects of press access to the club, such as the licensing of images on match days. Clubs such as Port Vale, Nottingham Forest, Newcastle United and Southampton have all imposed bans and restrictions on local football journalists and photographers based on perceived interests of the club. In July 2015 Newcastle United introduced a new policy of 'preferred media partners', which honoured contracts for media access to a select group of media organisations including

Sky Sports and the *Daily Mirror*, but excluded all others including the local press. In a quotes-driven news environment, media partners can look forward to privileged access to players, managers and coaching staff and other club information, whereas other media stakeholders are left out in the cold. However, strategic communications policies of this nature can also be viewed as a deliberate attempt to deny open communications, which ultimately impoverish and sanitise the information consumed by fans and the wider public. A football club, like any organisation, fears bad news for obvious commercial reasons, but unlike many organisations there is a wider public interest in its daily business, the performance and condition of its players and the acumen of its team manager. Press bans have led journalists to pay for entry among supporters or in the case of the *Plymouth Herald* to send a cartoonist to match days in order to circumvent Southampton's ban on external press photography. Commercial exclusion of the press or vindictive bans on individual journalists, constrain the purpose of journalism. Football, historically deeply embedded in local communities, remains a central feature of local news output and can be central to the credibility of local newspapers to their readers.

### **Newshounds and Celebrity Footballers**

On 25 January 1995 the French star player of Manchester United, Eric Cantona, infamously kung-fu kicked supporter Matthew Simmons following provocation by the Crystal Palace fan. Cantona was found guilty of assault and initially sentenced to two weeks in jail, which was later overturned to 120 hours of community service. Although the image of Cantona's kick remains iconic, the whole episode is equally renowned for his comments at a subsequent news conference. In his charismatic French accent Cantona sat in front of the mass bank of reporters and photographers and slowly and simply delivered his cryptic message: 'When seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea'. For Cantona, his statement expressed a prophetic condemnation of incessant celebrity driven media, he had had enough of the feeding frenzy.

As the fame, fortunes and public profile of footballers changed because of increasing television exposure in the 1990s, so too did the variety of newspaper coverage of the sport.

Football stories have long appeared outside the confines of the sports pages, particularly those involving sex, violence, drugs, or gambling scandals. From the partying playboy image of George Best in the late-1960s to the moral panics on the so-called football hooliganism of the 1970s, football has generated soft and hard news stories in the traditional news sections of newspapers for many decades. News and sport journalists do, however, look at the events on and off the field with quite different lenses, for quite different purposes. Where sport journalists are preoccupied with reporting on the closed 'world of football' with a focus on performance, news journalists focus on the human-interest stories, celebrity gossip and scandal of football stars.

One early example of this occurred during the 1978 World Cup finals in Argentina when Scotland was the only UK national team represented at the finals. Expectations on success were very high prior to the tournament but things started to go wrong when news of drug-taking by Scotland forward Willie Johnstone created a news-media storm among the Scotland camp. Football journalists who had spent a couple of weeks attached to the team maintained their focus on the hype surrounding Scotland's hopes in the finals, whereas freshly arriving news journalists sought salacious stories from behind the Scotland camp. Front-page headlines in the British tabloids about the Johnstone scandal undermined the public perception of the team whose ignominy was compounded by poor results and an early exit from Argentina. The episode represents an early occasion of the contrasting news values of sport journalists and news journalists (the 'hounds' after blood). However, as the commercial value of footballers grew in the 1990s so too did their non-sporting media profiles. The World Cup in Italy in 1990, which gained the media sobriquet 'Italia '90', produced something of a watershed in the proliferation of media stories related to all things football. The media celebration of the English national team's advance to the semi-finals and Paul Gascoigne's tears on exit were symbolic of a changing social and cultural profile of the sport which was more upbeat than the late-1980s which had suffered reputational damage, not least following tragedies at Bradford, Heysel and Hillsborough. Lowbrow football culture fused with highbrow art as the BBC's world cup coverage used 'Nessun dorma' from Puccini's opera Turandot as its theme tune, and press features on football fashions, the cross-over of football, youth

cultures and popular music proliferated in the soft news stories of national newspapers (Steve Redhead, 1991).

Public attention on football, especially star players, has intensified in the 24-hour rolling news environment of contemporary media culture. Like any other celebrity in the media gaze, footballers have been targeted and subject to intense scrutiny by news media. High profile scoops on footballers, such as the exposé of infidelity by Ryan Giggs by the *News of the World* in 2011 reflect the intrusive and morally judgemental undertone of many celebrity media narratives, which are actually produced for the titillation of their readers. The Giggs story was initially suppressed through a 'super-injunction' that prevented the newspaper naming the high profile footballer. However, the legal intervention proved futile to prevent the speculation on social media as to the identity of the player, and in a calculated move to circumvent the injunction which had been awarded in an English court, the Scottish newspaper *The Herald* named and shamed Giggs suggesting the courts jurisdiction did not apply to the Glasgow-based title. A similar attempt by Chelsea and England player John Terry to silence news of his affair with the girlfriend of fellow player Wayne Briggs, also revealed the problems associated with trying to manage news media in the courts when the internet and especially social media appeared to operate outside such jurisdictions. Whether or not the law applies to the online world, once a star players scandal goes viral there is no turning back. In the case of both Giggs and Terry public contrition enabled them to ride beyond the media storm and humiliation, albeit leaving in their wake private hurt and family destruction.

Football fans, by and large, appear to be indifferent to scandalous stories of players, unless it has a direct impact on their professional abilities to perform. When former Sheffield United player Ched Evans was released from prison in October 2014 after serving half of his sentence following his conviction for rape, the future regarding the prospect of his return to the sport inflamed a broader public debate on whether or not a convicted rapist should be allowed to continue a professional career in football which had high public profile and significant monetary rewards. Some fans championed the players' claim of innocence and turned to pernicious 'rape-blaming' commentaries on social media, naming the victim who



had to continually move house to avoid further attention. Nevertheless, a broader popular media stance refused to condone the actions of Evans and his friends, and challenged his right to return to professional football. In 2015 Sheffield United, Hartlepool, Oldham and Grimsby Town were all linked with signing the player but each retracted their initial offers following local public pressure from fans. There are clearly some aspect of condemnation in the media and public life that simply cannot be transgressed.

Some players have been able to manufacture more positive exposure in tabloid news media, the most notable being David Beckham. As Ellis Cashmore has suggested, Beckham, assisted by a heavily professionalised squad of publicity and legal partners, has produced a 'tabula rasa' that has enabled his public persona to operate like a 'blank slate' on to which media audiences can inscribe their own meanings (Ellis Cashmore, 2014). Following other global mega-stars such as Madonna, Beckham the brand is heavily commercialised, and ultimately flexible enough to fit the desires of anyone who is interested in him. The successful media and brand management of Beckham has therefore been viewed as model commodification of a player, which transcends his undoubted football talents and is reliant on strategic use of his wider celebrity status and legal control of his image rights (Richard Haynes, 2007).

One final point of interest on footballers and the news media are the instances of players writing in national newspapers. Ghost written pieces on football by players and managers has a long tradition in British football, and in some cases, like former Tottenham Hotspur captain of the 1960s, Danny Blanchflower, they have retired from football and become fully-fledged journalists in their own right. Perhaps because the world of football carries a certain amount of mystique, the voice of players has been sought to provide an insight into what happens and why behind the scenes. What players say is not necessarily revelatory, but it can occasionally shed some light on what life as a professional footballer is actually like. Of course, the reporting of player stories is not so simple. Footballers are not trained to be journalists or even good communicators. The stories they have to tell might not always be of interest to a wider audience, and it is important to recognise that the sourcing and selecting of

football stories is subject to broader processes that include the needs of media organisations to attract readers and sell advertising. But readers love nothing more than to read gossip, and gossip, opinion and a dash of controversy are the stock-in-trade of selling newspapers. In the 1960s, as competition grew among the British newspapers, having your own 'voice of football' delivering an inside track was an important device of distinction against your rivals. The ghost-written column therefore became a new addition to the sports pages. Player and manager columns are usually written by a staff journalist and based on an interview or telephone conversation with the player, who also takes the byline. A significant issue of such columns has been the general inability for players to criticise their clubs, other players, managers and the game itself. In 2012 such constraints on inside disclosure from within the changing room were exploded through anonymity and a new column in *The Guardian* newspaper written by a player using the pseudonym 'The Secret Footballer'. It was an old newspaper device turned to ingenious effect, enabling an unknown Premier League footballer to explode some of the myths about the game, clubs and its leading players claiming to 'lift the lid on the world of football'. While many may view such opinion-pieces as 'yellow journalism', there to sensationalise and lacking professional rigour, the Secret Footballer was a rare attempt to produce an insiders view on the economics, politics and social agents in the contemporary game including the actions of owners, managers, coaches, players, agents and even the media itself. As we shall discuss below regarding the impact of social media on the football-media-nexus, the Secret Footballer is not alone in providing insider information from the game. However, in the safe harbour of anonymity it is a rare occasion of a footballer breaking ranks to provide a more honest and reflexive impression of football at a time of immense transformation in the commercial success of the sport.

### **Football, Public Relations and Self-Mass Communication**

While the Secret Footballer is a rare intervention by a player in to mainstream printed media, footballers, and the industry as a whole, mainly manage their media relations and news output through publicists and communications professionals. Often turning to former sports journalists, football organisations require the strategic advice and communications skills of public relations professionals to manage their public affairs and ensure reputations are kept in

tact. Commercial partners of football also have reputations and brands to consider, and so there is trinity of interests between football, sponsors and advertisers, and the media that require constant and vigilant management by a range of business professionals, including communications or public relations managers, who ensure the various commercial stakeholders in the sport have their interests accounted for. The interconnections within this trinity of interests have become increasingly complex with the evolution of the internet, something Brett Hutchins and David Rowe (2012: p.5) have labelled 'networked media sport'. When we add the interests of the consumers of football, the fans, in to the mix, the variegated nature of relations through networks such as social media make understanding the differentiated flows of communication even harder to grasp. As previously noted by Raymond Boyle and myself:

The plenitude of content created by networked media sport is so expansive that it is increasingly difficult to fully comprehend the multitude of ways in which sport relates to new communications technologies. This is not only an issue for academic researchers of the sport-media-nexus, but also for the sports industries, the media industries and consumers of sport alike.  
(Boyle and Haynes, 2014: p.134)

One of the best ways to understand how complex the management of communications can be in football is to consider the case study of FIFA's corruption scandal in 2015. In May 2015 the arrest of fourteen FIFA executives or former executives on charges of financial corruption and kickbacks by the FBI created one of the largest global news stories of the year. News agencies across the World focused their attention of FIFA's headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland, and especially its embattled president Sepp Blatter. The allegations of corruption, money laundering and racketeering were not new. Public mistrust of the governance and transparency of the world governing body of football had long been expressed in various fora, particularly regarding the award of the 2022 World Cup finals to Qatar. Investigations by the Insight reporters at the *Sunday Times* and journalist Andrew Jennings for the BBC's Panorama programme for nearly a decade raised public awareness that bribery among FIFA's elite had potentially influenced the awarding of the World Cup to South Africa, Russia and Qatar. The subsequent FBI-led arrests precipitated a new order of scrutiny and suspicion of FIFA and its senior officials, which included the organization's handling of the crisis.

On the day of the arrests FIFA's only response to the unfolding events came from its director of public affairs Walter De Gregorio. Appointed in September 2011, De Gregorio, a former sports writer, was integral to Sepp Blatter's re-election campaign in 2010, and was spearheading his bid for the fifth term as FIFA President in 2015. According to Jennings, De Gregorio had for many years been managing Blatter's media affairs ensuring many sports journalists, including in the UK, were fed information that led to the suppression of FIFA corruption stories, usually based on 'spin' that exonerated the FIFA President from any wrongdoing (William Turvill, 2015). On the day of the arrests De Gregorio presented a news conference for the world's media making proclamations that welcomed the arrests as a positive development for FIFA. However, there was no mention of Blatter's position on the matter, or how the organisation would be responding to the scandal. His public relations performance was roundly criticised by communications experts from across the world on Twitter, including leading trade magazines such as *PR Week* who thought his performance was 'arrogant' and 'deflective' (Diana Bradley, 2015). Gary Lineker, the former Tottenham Hotspur and England player turned broadcaster, also weighed in with a widely cited tweet that proclaimed: 'There can't be a more corrupt, deplorable organisation on earth than FIFA. The house of cards is falling. Time for change!' (Gary Lineker, 2015) One of the main reasons for this critique was the lack of contrition and sense of reality of the significance being associated with the arrests. The media coverage had certainly raised concerns among some of FIFA's top ranking partners, including VISA and Coca-Cola, but there was little concession to the impact this would have on the organisations governance, transparency or accountability.

The FIFA corruption scandal and investigations can and will be analysed for many years to come as one of the most disturbing and discommoding episodes ever to have arisen in global sport. In the context of the media, it will also be remembered as one of the worst news stories in the history of football, which was managed appallingly by both FIFA executives and their communications professionals. Beyond football, it served notice that what Hutchins and Rowe (2012) have identified as 'information accidents' in sport are now impossible to fully control in the era of what sociologist Manuel Castells (2009) has called 'self-mass communication',

such as Twitter. Scandal in football, as in other domains of public life, can emerge rapidly from both within and outwith a club or governing body. Because most self-mass communication is now conducted on mobile devices such as smart-phones, text, images and video can quickly be uploaded to the internet with relative ease. What may once have been considered private spaces can via social media become public. What may once have been private conversations or thoughts are now often shared in social media communications that are easily copied, forwarded and reused by the mainstream media. Some football clubs have introduced stringent guidelines or regulations to curb errant communications from players, managers and officials on social media, but many of these, such as a ban imposed by Manchester United on its players in 2010 were soon repealed as it became clear social media can be an important marketing communications tool. Like any major business surveillance of social media is important for maintaining reputations. In October 2014 the Football Association issued their most high-profile sanction on social media when they fined and banned Queens Park Rangers player Rio Ferdinand for three matches following publication of his tweet which was deemed sexist for using the derogatory Caribbean slang word 'sket', meaning a promiscuous women. Such micro-management of social media is highly problematic, not least because of who decides where the boundaries of taste and decency exist, especially if the communications are within the law and not causing serious offense or harm.

The employment of social media managers in football organisations has therefore become a significant area of investment in their broader communications operations and some in football have taken a more 'empowered approach' to the use of social media. For example, in 2012 in an attempt to boost the profile of the women's professional game, the English Women's Super League introduced a digital ambassador programme to engage supporters and raise awareness of the different aspects of the women's game. Developments of this kind emphasise an deeper understanding of the changing dynamics of mobile media communications that have emerged in the second decade of networked media sport, so that 'selfies', 'photo-bombing' and irreverent YouTube memes such as the 'ice bucket challenge' videos are now part and parcel of the contemporary language of young footballers. The

caveat to the use of these technologies of self-mass communication is to understand how the context of such messages can be misappropriated or misconstrued in other contexts. A final example here is that when the Women's national team returned to England from the World Cup in Canada in 2015 the FA's Twitter feed @England commented: 'Our #Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners and daughters today, but they have taken on another title - heroes.' While the sentiment may have been genuine the tweet was soon trending with complaints the players were being stereotyped in to traditional female roles, undermining their achievements.

Social media 'information accidents' and conversations are now a firm part of the football media landscape. One further dynamic to note in this regard is to consider how social media, especially Twitter, is now used by media professionals including journalists and broadcasters to shape the news agenda on football. Research by Boyle and Haynes (2014) revealed that sports journalists engage with social media for variety of reasons. For one, Twitter is clearly now considered to be a bona fide news source from official and unofficial sources including other journalists and players. It is also used as a barometer of fan opinion on particular issues, which we have seen with the Evans and FIFA examples. To call these interactions conversations is perhaps stretching the imagination, but they are certainly new forms of engagement between those who are in the news, those who write the news and those who read the news. Indeed, increasingly in the context of social media itself, these distinctions are meaningless. Finally Twitter is a platform to promote and raise their profile and stories. Twitter increasingly shapes contemporary news stories, yet the manner through which these stories gain mainstream attention or traction is often through more traditional media outlets, suggesting a co-existence between media forms rather than some sort of dominance by any one platform. We should expect football news to be characterised by a polymedia environment, where multiple sources of information, with multiple and flexible modes of delivery, will prevail for the foreseeable future. However, one media form continues to dominate the economics of football: television.

### **When the Tail Wags the Dog: Television and Football**

In their study on the political economy of television sports rights around the world, Tom Evans, Petros Iosifidis and Paul Smith (2013) highlight the ways in which 'synergetic relationships' have emerged between professional sports organisations and television conglomerates. From the 1980's onward, a process of what they term the 'marketisation of broadcasting', by which they refer to the rise of commercial, subscription based television services, have eroded the importance of free-to-air public service broadcasting, especially in the coverage of sport. Football, in particular, has been at the cutting edge of these developments, and since the early 1990s there has been a profound transformation in the ways in which football is televised, distributed and consumed. These changes have largely been due to two processes: the technological developments in television delivery systems with satellite and cable networks increasingly prevalent across the world; and the deregulation of communications and broadcasting to increase competition in television markets. One consequence of these developments has been the increased competition for television rights in response to the evolution of niche multi-channel pay television such as Sky (formerly BSkyB). The rise of the Premier League in England has been the focus of a number of critical sociological and media studies, which have identified the social, economic and cultural dynamics of late-modernity (Anthony King, 2002; Cornell Sandvoss, 2003; Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, 2004; and Peter Millward, 2011). Football in its new configuration is characterised by increased consumerism, rationalisation and globalization. All of these transformative processes have made football beholden to the commercial drivers of neo-liberal market economics and individualism – just witness the enormous salaries now enjoyed by the elite players in the major European leagues – at the same time as disenfranchising many supporters, in other words disconnecting them from the traditions and social bonds they have with a club, who have made their fandom the site of vigorous cultural politics and activism (for example, the anti-Glazer campaign by Manchester United fans in the early-2000s).

The two decades of the Premier League have been bankrolled by investment from television (Evans, Iosifidis, and Smith, 2013). This has been further supplemented by sponsorship and commercial streams of income, and in some instances capital investment by wealthy, multi-

millionaire owners (Millward, 2013). The consequences of investment in the English professional game have been quite profound and require summarising briefly. The Premier League was formed in 1992 after a period of social, economic and political crises in the sport, motivating the Football Association to prompt the then leading clubs in the former First Division to break away from the former governing structures of the Football League to a far more selective, commercially aspirational competition that would place more power in the hands of the clubs and their Chairmen. A crucial dynamic of the new League was a more expansive contract with television, specifically Sky, which handed over more control and commercial incentives to the satellite company. One example of this control was the power of television to change the scheduling of matches to suit their needs. Successive rights deals have ratcheted up the value of television income to the top flight of domestic football, at times prompted by new competitors to Sky's dominance (which have included NTL, ITV Digital, Setanta, ESPN and BT) and an expansionist strategy to sell the Premier League brand and its TV rights on a global scale. Renewed deals for televised coverage of the seasons 2013-14 to 2015-16 were estimated to be worth a total of £5.5 billion when overseas rights were included. Domestic rights alone for this period were worth £3 billion and in February 2015 the sale of UK rights to the Premier League were sold to Sky and BT Sport again for a staggering £5.136 billion in a three-year contract from the 2016-17 Season.

The enormous influx of money in to the sport has changed the value of being in England's elite league, and transformed its financial and operational structures. These structural changes reflect broader processes in the globalisation of international business, which sociologists such as Roland Robertson (2000) had begun to identify and analyse in the late-Twentieth Century. The marriage of television and professional football interests has therefore seen increasing transnational flows of capital through international investment in football, the international migration of specialised labour in the form of players, coaches, and managers, and increasing socio-cultural homogenisation created by transnational media and communications and which has made the Premier League and its clubs a global brand thereby intensifying a global consciousness of its existence. The heightened competition to maintain a position in the Premier League has increased the investment and financial risk



many clubs are prepared to engage in. Attracting increasing numbers of international players to England, has been the hallmark of this process, transforming the profile of domestic English football squads, which are increasingly bereft of domestic talent. The globalization of players was accompanied by similar transitions in the rise of international owners, most notably Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, as well as increasing numbers of international managers, coaches and ancillary staff operating in England.

As the television-led commercialisation of English domestic football ensued through the 1990s and into the new century, the nature and form of ownership went through an unsettled period of restructuring. Many clubs sought investment through floatation as public limited companies, which in turn encouraged investment from media corporations including satellite broadcaster Sky, cable and telecommunications company NTL and commercial television company Granada (now merged as part of ITV) (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). This period in the mid-1990s famously led to global media conglomerate News Corporation attempting to buy Manchester United, a transaction that was vehemently opposed by a section of supporters and was ultimately blocked by the then Conservative government on public interest grounds (Adam Brown and Andy Walsh, 1999). This temporary block on global interests owning a stake in English club football did not last long. From 2003 with the sale of Chelsea to Abramovich the Premier League saw a flood of investment from wealthy private interests, which saw the shares of publicly floated clubs returned to private ownership. At the start of the 2015-16 season, eleven of the twenty Premier League clubs had majority international owners.

Although the motivations of international ownership of Premier League clubs may vary, as too may the reactions of supporters to such investment, there is a unified objective to increase the capital gains from such investment, through increased season ticket sales, increased television and commercial revenue and the general enhancement of the club brand through association with the Premier League. Pre-season tours of South East Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere, are testament to the global aspirations of clubs and their owners, the naturalised progression of which has led to the notion of the 39<sup>th</sup> game, whereby a final set of

Premier League matches might be played outside England in one of the key markets for the brand such as China, India or the Middle East. If such a scenario ever came to fruition, fans in the UK would no doubt be able to watch such games live on pay-TV.

### **Your Home of Sport? Sky's Hegemony of the Premier League**

Having initially beaten off competition from the ITV companies when the Premier League began in 1992, Sky have enjoyed a hegemonic, that is culturally dominant, position in televising the competition and in part due to its sports coverage have successfully built the most successful commercial television company in Europe. Its majority shareholder is Rupert Murdoch's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox (previously part of News Corporation which now only focuses on the publishing business) which holds 39% of the shares in Sky. Sky has operations in the UK, Ireland, Italy, Germany and Austria with over 20 million household subscribers. Attempts to compete with Sky Sports by cable television companies, the ill-feted digital terrestrial platform ITV Digital (originally branded OnDigital), the Irish owned sports channel Setanta and finally the dominant American television sports franchise ESPN were all seen off by Sky in a succession of clever marketing and pricing policies that showed more strategic awareness of the importance of the Premier League rights to the success of the company. Other sports, especially Test cricket and championship boxing, and first-run Hollywood movies, have also helped Sky maintain dominance in the UK domestic market, but football has been the key driver of premium profits for the company which have managed to absorb each cycle of inflation in the rights to the Premier League.

Sky's abilities to grow its number of subscribers, and its profits, has been due to its ability to transform the availability of packages to meet the needs of contemporary viewers, who now prefer to time-shift their viewing by recording programmes on digital television recorders or downloading programmes on-demand. Although these new technologies and modes of access have transformed the viewing habits of many people, live televised sport, including football, is one of the key media forms that continues to bring people together to share a live viewing experience. Live sport is also available on multiple devices by use of applications (apps) on mobiles, laptops, tablets and gaming devices, and also to non-subscribers on a

pay-per-view basis via its internet television service Now TV. The broadening of its customer base has enabled the company to maintain its strategic financial objective to increase what is called the Average Revenue Per User (ARPU), which in the first quarter of 2015 was £47 per month. While this financial information may at first sight only be of interest to shareholders, it does provide an important clue for understanding why the rights to Premier League and Champions League football have been so cherished by Sky, a model copied across most subscription-based television services in Europe. Sky Sports packages have on average cost £20 per month over a decade or more, and the enticement of live Premier League and Champions League football formed the key content for drawing in new customers. It has been a strategic approach that has served the company well for over two decades, however the use of television football rights in competition for consumers to pay-TV, broadband and telephony, known as the 'triple-play' of televised football, entered a new phase of heightened competition in 2015 with the increase in scale and scope of BT Sport in the British and European sports rights markets.

In November 2013, BT paid £897million for the UK rights to exclusively televise the Champions League from the 2015-16 season. The amount was double that previously paid jointly by Sky and ITV. The hyper-inflation of rights was symbolic of the how important media corporations and telecommunications companies now consider football to be in their competition to attract new households to their services. When combined with the shared television rights to the Premier League from 2016-17, noted above, BT Sport has taken a sizeable bite in to Sky's hegemonic position in the coverage of live televised football in the UK. Why did BT, traditionally a telecommunications company, move in to televising football? The answer, again, reveals much about the contemporary environment of converged communications and technology that now dominates many of our lives in the developed world. As our cultural experience of television, the internet and telephony have merged – experienced on mobile devices or on adaptable screens – so too have the corporations who dominate these sectors sought to commodify these services in combination with each other. Once Sky started to bundle telephone and broadband services with their television subscriptions, it was perhaps inevitable, that BT, the UK's major supplier of

telecommunications, would move in to the television market to compete with its new rival for the broadband market. BT's investment in BT Sport television services, and the rights to premium televised football, must therefore be viewed as an attempt to compete for broadband customers, especially its superfast fibre-optic service, and not to develop a rival platform to Sky television per se. Providing free access to BT Sport to its broadband customers was confirmation that BT saw the battleground with Sky as being the broadband market and not growing profit directly from television services. Nevertheless, BT Sport has had to turn to a small subscription fee for its Champions League coverage in order to recoup some of its astronomical rights payment to UEFA.

One final threat to the stability of the television football market is worth noting. The rise of broadband internet capacity has enabled the illegal streaming of television channels on the web to grow exponentially. The demand for watching football remains greater than many people's ability or willingness to pay for access to subscription televised sports services. The streaming of Premier League matches online infringes the copyright of the broadcaster and television companies invest significant resources in tracing and closing down such content. The problem for the Premier League is that rights to live games have been sold so widely around the world that the 'pirating' of coverage is incredibly difficult, almost impossible, to police. Football fans around the world, always resourceful and increasingly technologically literate, continue to find ways to evade detection by the specialist organisations now contracted by rights holders to close such services down.

Sky and the Premier League have also faced legal challenges to close down access to live English football via the importation of television decoders from other territories inside the European Union. Sky charges a higher premium to commercial premises, such as pubs, which can cost up to £12,000 a year. When screening Sky's service in such premises the legitimate service shows a small pint of beer symbol in the right hand corner of the screen. Sky's practice of charging differential rates to households and commercial premises has led to many pubs withdrawing from screening live football due to cost, or in some cases, looking to alternative suppliers, including the Greek television service Nova which charges

considerably less for access to its football channel which also carries the Premier League. The practice led to a number of court cases against publicans, and one Portsmouth landlady Karen Murphy, took her case with Sky and the Premier League on appeal to the European Court of Justice claiming the restraints on the importation of foreign decoders was contrary to the freedom of services in the European Economic Area. In February 2012 Murphy won her appeal to subscribe to Nova as the ECJ ruled that it was not an offence to subscribe to a non-UK EU satellite broadcaster and to use a foreign decoder card to receive broadcasts from that broadcaster. However, the ECJ also recognized that although there is no copyright in the matches themselves, there is copyright in the "branding" around the football - the Premier League graphics, music and highlights used in Sky's coverage. Any transmission of Premier League coverage that shows its logo therefore required permission to do so in that territory. The result has been viewed as victory on both sides, and the consequences of the Murphy case will continue to reverberate through television football rights deals in Europe for the foreseeable future.

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## **FOOTBALL RESEARCH IN ACTION**

*Title of the Research:* "Truly a Fan Experience"? The Cultural Politics of the Live Site, by David Rowe and Stephanie Alice Baker, in Roy Krøvel and Thore Roksvold (eds) *We Love To Hate Each Other*.

### ***What are the goals of the research?***

The primary focus of this research is the changing nature of twenty-first century mediated football fandom, especially at organised 'live sites' called Fan Fest created around the world by FIFA during its premier championship the World Cup. Through a participant observation of fan behaviour at one of the live sites in Sydney, Australia during the televising of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa the researchers were able to test the claim by the organisers that mass public viewing of football would produce a 'truly fan experience' that replicates the experience of supporters actually at the stadium. The study enabled the researchers to explore themes of globalisation at local and global spaces, assessing the destabilising socio-cultural impact of the world cup as a transnational mediated phenomenon.

### ***Why was the research relevant?***

Rowe and Baker's research is a rare attempt to understand the socio-cultural complexities of mediated ways of 'being there' at a football event, beyond watching a game at home. Collective viewing of football is an increasingly common phenomenon, which has different ontological dimensions to home viewing because of the dynamics of the 'crowd'. Their research therefore moves beyond a traditional sender, content, receiver model of mass communications to explore the dynamism of these emergent mediated forms of football fandom to suggest that both football organisations and news journalism should understand such phenomena in more complex ways beyond traditional models of rival sets of supporters traditionally associated with football fandom in the stadium. The research has broader significance for understanding the cultural politics of fan identities and embodiment in mediated contexts. In other words, poses the question whether it is any longer possible to distinguish the experiences of 'being there' and 'viewing from a distance'? Do we, in fact, need a more nuanced, synthesised understanding of both experiences? The research sheds light on how 'live sites' have the potential to mediate local, national and international audiences, compressing time and space, and binding together diverse spectator cohorts across the world.

### ***What methods are used?***

The research was based on observations of four researchers on a select sample of night-time live site events in Sydney, Australia, over a 31-day period of the 2010 World Cup. The researchers visited the Fan Fest site at times when live World Cup matches were being televised on large screens, as well as moments when they were not. The observation team also focused in on some distinct event, team and fan configurations which reflected different identities associated with both the location of the World Cup (hosted in South Africa), the location of the mediated live event (hosted in Australia), the games of interest to large national migrant groups in Sydney (such as British, Italian and Greek), games of smaller minority groups in Australia (including Uruguay and Ghana), and mediated contests that were of either high or low significance, which was contingent on the nations involved and their

history and status in the World Cup (for example matches involving Brazil would be deemed a high-status contest, whereas games involving first-time World Cup finalists would be considered of minority interest). The research devised an instruction guide to address crowd positioning, interactions and flows, the structures and techniques of crowd-control and modes of co-present and distant communication. Observers noted and recorded a range of actions by fans, including the use of public-space photography to capture the configuration of large groups of people in the live sites.

***What were the main arguments?***

The researchers drew on some important sociological ideas on the role of reflexivity in modern social life proposed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash. Referring back to oneself in a highly mediated world has, the authors argue, intensified this self-reflexive process. One might simply think of the 'selfie' as a prime example of how new media technologies are transforming the spatial configuration of public life. The media are key to the collapsing of distinctions between local events and the global public sphere, as mediating mega-events transports viewers beyond their immediate locale. The researchers therefore argue that being at a live site creates through mediation a 'double-embodied sport experience' in the sense that fans are 'being there from a distance'. Broadcasts of the World Cup make it possible for those in the live site to view the matches taking place without contributing to it, but social media, like Twitter or Instagram, do enable commentary and communication on the event to be shared from outwith the event to be picked up by those inside stadium, and similarly experiences of those inside the stadium to be shared with those outside the stadium in a similar way. There are multiple dynamics to these modern mediated processes, some of which are orchestrated by the official organisers of the live sites and the media, which Rowe and Baker argue inform and encourage fans to be self-conscious and reflexive in their performances, which are then relayed to the others as exaggerated displays of fandom.

Rowe and Baker examine the similarities and differences of 'being there' and 'viewing at a distance' but reiterate the need to avoid simple dichotomies between the mediated and

embodied experiences of fans. For instance, the authors describe how the construction and management of live sites replicated some of the viewing experiences of being inside stadia, with 'scarcity of view' and highly commercialised operations for food, drink and merchandising. There were, however, noticeable differences in fan experience, where those in the live site have in general a static gaze at a large screen, whereas fans in the stadium have a more dynamic embodied experience and engagement with other supporters and the players. Nevertheless, the researchers were struck by the emotional dimension of public viewing which became a major factor in constructing the embodied fan experience in the live sites. Therefore, distinguishing between 'real' and mediated emotions at live sites is erroneous and misrepresentative of collective fan viewing.

***And the conclusions or key findings?***

The significant finding of the research was that mediation, the process of mass media does in communicating events, is integral to contemporary football fandom. For Rowe and Baker, the interrelationship between mediation and embodiment of an event like the World Cup creates multiple ways of 'seeing and being seen', of 'acting and being acted upon' and thirdly of 'performing and watching the performances of others'. The researchers were particularly struck by what they observed as being 'reflexive mediation' of fans both in the live site and at the event itself, which revealed a self-conscious awareness by fans that they were being 'imaged' across the globe. Fans, in the context of highly mediated global sport mega-events like the World Cup, are very aware of the media's awareness and dependency on the performance of fans to create part of the mediated event itself. This leads the researchers to conclude that the sport-media-globalisation nexus has broadened its scope of interest in the event to include fans, which in turn has led to more focused media practices to capture this dynamic of sports mega-events. The researchers therefore manage to problematise standard ways in which audience research on sport, itself very limited, seeks to capture and explain the experiences of those involved in the mediatised contexts of sport, such as World Cup live sites. Where the media coverage of football fan sites tended to replicate the standard fan posturing of rival fan groups, the researchers actually discovered a more complex forms of



fan sociality which were contingent on a number of forces including crowd assembly, mediation, globalisation, commercialisation, governmentalisation and embodiment.

***What are the strengths of the research?***

The strength of the research is that it provides some empirical evidence to challenge normative conceptual ideas of significant differences between spectator experiences at football matches and those of collective fan viewing at organised live sites. The research provides preliminary insights for further work on the cultural politics of football fandom and notions of cultural citizenship that centre on the televising of major sporting events such as the World Cup.

***Do you think there are any weaknesses?***

As Rowe and Baker point out, their research is a preliminary and limited study of fan experiences at live sites. The research was purely based on participant observation, and did not include any interviews with participants. As the authors reveal in a methodological footnote, this was mainly due to the last minute planning of the research which meant ethical clearance could not be given. Future research on collective viewing of football could take a more in-depth approach to gathering empirical data from fans, which could be triangulated with official sources of data, observations and any quantitative methods such as surveys which could be carried out.

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