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'Football fans are not thugs': communication and the future of fan engagement in the policing of Scottish football

ABSTRACT

The recent history of the policing of Scottish football has been tempestuous. The enactment of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 subjected those attending regulated football matches to a range of new forms of control, and mobilised significant fan resistance that resulted in the Act's eventual repeal in 2018. By this time, however, significant damage had been inflicted upon fan-police relations, with a concomitant impact on communication and fan engagement. Drawing upon the findings of qualitative research conducted in Scotland, the analysis herein documents a recognition on all sides of the poor state of fan-police relations following the implementation of the original Act. This research traces an emergent shift in some policing sensibilities towards more constructive forms of police-fan engagement and communication following the Act's repeal. However, the study also highlights significant challenges to such emergent sensibilities, acknowledging, via a case study, that they exist in parallel with still highly problematic practices and approaches in the policing of football fans in Scotland.

Introduction

The recent history of the policing of Scottish football has been tempestuous. Kicking off the previous decade, a match in March 2011 between Celtic and Rangers – Scotland's largest and most well-known football clubs – resulted in touchline altercations between the managerial staff of the respective clubs, including after the final whistle. The subsequent media furore labelled this emotionally charged, but still relatively minor, series of infractions as constituting Scotland's 'shame game'; a response that, against a backdrop of sectarian and racist incidents largely outwith the context of football (McBride 2017), immediately catalysed a political response. Following the match an 'emergency summit' was convened involving the First Minister of Scotland, representatives from both football clubs and the Scottish football authorities, and the police (The Guardian 2011). An Executive Bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament by the Scottish Government justice secretary shortly thereafter in June, and following the usual parliamentary process the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 (hereafter 'the Act') was passed the following January. Whilst football fans featured only peripherally in the events that precipitated the Act, this legislation subjected those attending football matches to a range of new forms of behavioural and political regulation. The Act emboldened Scotland's police, prompting the implementation of intensive surveillance and enforcement tactics (see Hamilton-Smith et al. 2019).

These developments – the implementation of the Act and the police surveillance and enforcement that followed – were resisted by some fans. The campaign group Fans Against Criminalisation (FAC) acted to coordinate this resistance, and a movement mobilised to repeal the Act based on its illiberalism and its ineffectiveness in tackling sectarianism. Despite deep-seated fan rivalries that inhibited a truly united effort (see Huddlestone 2017), this movement was ultimately successful: the Act was repealed in April 2018. By this time, however, relations between fans and the police had suffered extensive damage. This was especially apparent in the ways in which football ultras were policed, and the response of ultras to such tactics.[1] Commenting on one fan ultras group associated

with Celtic – the Green Brigade – Lavalette and Mooney noted their vocal response to perceived police harassment in the wake of the Act,

Over the course of the 2012/2013 season the GB [Green Brigade] were vociferous in their complaints about their treatment from the Club and, more importantly, by Strathclyde police. Several members of the group were arrested at home. Others were picked up en route to matches. Banners were removed. Members were served with match bans (often without prior knowledge) or travelling bans. In the ground, police officers with cameras swarmed all over the section. (Lavalette and Mooney 2013, p. 23)

Fan experiences of intensive overt surveillance and vigorous enforcement (Hamilton-Smith et al. 2019), as well as more covert surveillance practices such as the use of informants (Atkinson et al. 2020), resulted in a strong perception amongst football fans of unwarranted police harassment and criminalisation. Evidence given by leading figures from FAC to the Scottish Parliament in January 2016 described a 'very poisonous relationship between the police and young fans' as a result of the Act, with such fans having 'a very negative view of the police and their role'. The evidence outlined a lack of trust in the police amongst fans, rooted in provocative and intimidating policing tactics (Scottish Parliament 2016). Subsequent evidence from FAC stated that the relationship between fans and the police in the wake of the Act had 'broken down' (Scottish Parliament 2017).

This paper acknowledges this evidence from football fans, but also contributes to existing debates by tracing an emergent shift in some policing sensibilities towards more constructive forms of police-fan engagement and communication following the Act's repeal. In tracing such a shift this paper does not seek to overstate the scope of such developments across Scottish policing, and fully recognises that these emergent sensibilities co-exist with, and are threatened by, still highly problematic practices and approaches to the policing of football fans (see Hamilton-Smith et al. 2019, Atkinson et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the research does highlight new approaches and forms of practice that have, in particular circumstances, improved police-fan relationships in contexts that were previously toxic. In detailing these new sensibilities and practical measures this paper has relevance for those jurisdictions beyond Scotland where police-fan relationships have proven to be similarly challenging. This paper also cautions, however, via a contemporary case study, that such progress can be undermined by the use of policing tactics that are perceived by football fans as illegitimate and disproportionate, and by police communications that do not reflect the authentic experiences of fans.

Literature review

Historically, the academic literature on the policing of football fans in the United Kingdom (UK) has afforded attention to football-related disorder across decades and the rise of the football hooligan as a particular 'folk devil'.[2] The work of the 'Leicester school' in successive accounts in the 1980s signalled the deep roots of hooliganism across the history of the professional game in the UK; albeit that they considered the late 1960s to be a watershed moment that heralded the recognition of this phenomenon as a social problem characterised by organised violence, sensationalist media coverage of 'hooliganism', and a particular dialectic between police tactics and fan disorder (see Dunning et al, 1982, Williams et al. 1986, Dunning et al. 1988).[3] Clearly, however, one's perspective on the roots of 'football hooliganism' will depend on how one wishes to define the phenomenon; an endeavour that

has caused considerable consternation, and a lack of consensus, in the literature (see Pearson 1998, Frosdick and Newton 2006, Spaaij 2007).

It is clearly posited in the literature that the term 'hooligan' is British in origin (Giulianotti, 1994, p. 11) and as a phenomenon it has often been considered across the decades as 'the English disease' (see Pearson 1998, Garland and Rowe 1999, Stott and Pearson 2007). Nevertheless, from the 1990s onwards the experience of attending a football match in England was, both literally and metaphorically, sanitised. The Hillsborough disaster in 1989, alongside the creation of the new English Premier League in 1992 and the subsequent injection of significant finance into the game from media outlets, transformed the stadium infrastructure and overall matchday experience for those attending top-flight football games in England (see Robinson 2010). Football grounds were safer, cleaner, more effectively policed, and more intensively surveilled. Yet despite such changes, media accounts that portrayed English football fans, and particularly those who followed the national team, as 'hooligans' persisted into the new millennium. Mike Weed (2001) noted how media outlets portrayed incidents involving England fans at a major international football tournament in 2000 as 'full scale riots' that constituted a national disgrace, even though there was little evidence of any violence taking place. Such misleading representations are problematic not only in themselves, but also because they inform legislative and policing responses to the 'problem' of hooliganism (Pearson and Stott 2017, p. 166). A particular case in point was the rushed enactment of the Football (Disorder) Act 2000 – which, amongst its provisions, strengthened Football Banning Orders – in response to the perceived 'hooliganism' at the aforementioned major international football tournament, Euro 2000 (see Stott and Pearson 2006, Hopkins 2014).

To its credit, the existing literature on football hooliganism and fan culture also features accounts that recognise that even within the British Isles football hooliganism cannot be considered an exclusively 'English disease' (see Bairner 1999, Giulianotti 1999). Football hooliganism in Scotland has been less well-traversed in the academic literature compared to the phenomenon south of the border, but existing research has made important contributions to understandings of football hooliganism here and the wider policing of football fans. The literature on the Scottish context has focused particularly upon fans of the Scottish national team and the carnivalesque nature of this particular fandom, as well as the potential for disorder (see Giulianotti 1999, 2005). Giulianotti's work is valuable here because, as with the idea of the 'English disease', it is important to be circumspect about ideal constructions of both deviance and the divine. Giulianotti's research also traced the rise and decline of football hooliganism – or the culture of 'casuals' – in Scottish club football. Giulianotti (1994, p. 331) noted the emergence of the football casual style as Scotland's major youth subcultural identity in the 1980s; from the Aberdeen Soccer Casuals, through the Motherwell Saturday Service, and on to clubs in Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow. It is tempting to fixate on the sensational aspects of this subculture; for example, the ascendance of Hibernian's Capital City Service to become the 'number one' crew, and the group's clashes with opposing fans. However, it is important to neither overstate the extent of hooliganism at this time nor the cohesion of such groups (see Redhead 2010). Giulianotti's 1994 account noted the 'wilting' of the scene across the country and, for the Capital City Service, in particular, symbolic pressures from both alternative youth subcultures in the late 1980s and more existential pressure from the proactivity of the police and judiciary in seeking to address concerns related to football-related violence and disorder.4 Nevertheless, Megan O'Neill (2005) noted in her account of the policing of football events in Scotland, based on her ethnographic research predominantly conducted late 1990s, the persistence of various forms of hooliganism, including that

of the casuals who emerged in the 1980s. The spectre of the football hooligan, as an enduring folk devil, thus continued to overshadow the policing of football fans in Scotland, even as the extent of hooliganism and any casual culture waned over time.

This literature captures important context for any appreciation of contemporary fan-police relations in Scotland, but again it is important not to reify, as those researchers would appreciate, any narrative of deep and problematic hooliganism across the Scottish game. Even in the mid-1980s, as a period often associated with hooliganism, research at the time indicated no evidence of significant disorder in Scottish football, with any tendency for a large number of arrests to be concentrated in small number of 'particularly sensitive games' (Coalter 1985, p. 114). Moreover, significant developments in fan culture in Scotland have emerged since even O'Neill's research. This is most notable in the emergence of ultras in the Scottish football fanbase. Whilst a relatively recent phenomenon in Scottish football, the historical origins of ultras culture, and perhaps its most potent and purest expression, lie in Italian football, where it emerged in the mid-twentieth century (see Testa and Armstrong 2008, 2010, Scalia 2009). Yet with the increasing globalisation of the game, catalysed through both mass media and social media, ultras culture has percolated across Europe (see Spaaij and Viñas 2005, Kennedy 2013, Kossakowski et al. 2018, Nuhrat 2018, Ziesche 2018, Joern and Havelund 2020) and beyond. In Scotland ultras groups are comprised predominantly, but not exclusively, of young people; and such groups have direct experience of the enforcement-led and surveillance intensive policing practices that were adopted following the passing of the 2012 Act (see Lavalette and Mooney 2013). Importantly, and recognising the heterogeneity in the football fanbase signalled by the presence of ultras, recent research on the policing of football fans has explored the effectiveness of new innovations, particularly the use of dialogue-based and non-coercive approaches (Hoggett and West 2018, Stott et al. 2018).

Research methods

In offering a new perspective on the policing of football fans in Scotland this paper draws upon data collected in 2019 and 2020 through semi-structured interviews with 39 participants. These participants included police officers, football fans, representatives of football clubs (including Supporter Liaison Officers, or SLOs), and – for reasons that will become clear in the case study towards the end of the piece – members of the public who participated in protest activity in Glasgow, Scotland in June 2020. Interview participants were identified through a convenience sampling procedure drawing upon and developing the researcher's networks in Scottish policing and football fan culture.[5] The interviews of football fans included those who support clubs in the top tier of Scottish football (the Scottish Premier League), as well as clubs in the lower leagues (specifically the Scottish Championship and Scottish League One, comprising the second and third tiers of Scottish football). The majority of fan interviews were with those supporting teams in the Scottish Premier League, covering five clubs, with interviews also conducted with fans from one club in the Scottish Championship and one in Scottish League One. The generalisability of the findings is limited by this unrepresentative convenience sample.

The research in 2020 also took place during a period of lockdown and social distancing in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, requiring adaptation in the interview method. Under the conditions of this pandemic, characterised by social distancing and limitations on travel, the research field has,

in new and unexpected ways, become less accessible to researchers, particularly to those using more traditional forms of qualitative inquiry. As such, the interviews conducted for this study in 2020 replaced face-to-face interviews with perhaps less fashionable forms of fieldwork, particularly the telephone interview (see Holt 2010) but also more innovative and emerging methods, such as the use of online messaging platforms to engage with participants at a distance and collect relevant data (see Gibson 2020). These interviews in 2020 accounted for nine of the 39 interviews; of which eight were conducted via telephone and one was undertaken using an online messaging platform. Telephone interviews were noticeably shorter in duration than face-to-face interviews, with the former on average at around 25 min. Face-to-face interviews ranged from 40 to 90 min. All interviews were undertaken by author. Interview transcripts were also generated by the author.

Irrespective of the diverse modes of qualitative data collection, interview data was imported into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software package for coding and subsequent thematic analysis. Across this rich dataset, challenges relating to 'police-fan relations' – incorporating issues of fan engagement and communication by the police, trust (or lack of trust) between police and fans, and experiences of criminalisation by fans – emerged as a significant theme. This theme was intertwined with issues of policing strategies/tactics and the development of new forms of fan culture in Scotland. The themes that emerged in the analysis of interview data were also used to develop the analysis of a complementary data source used to develop the case study presented in the latter sections of this article.

This case study – of political protest in Glasgow's George Square in June 2020 and the police response to the role of football fans therein – was informed by an analysis of tweets mentioning George Square published in the period from 13 June 2020 to 21 June 2020. This was facilitated through the use of both the Twitter social media website and the exporting of data from this website to Microsoft Excel. The analysis of these tweets was primarily undertaken within Excel, allowing tweet text to be read, categorised and filtered, and other data and metadata, such as usernames, dates and times, to be considered. Images and video were viewed from within twitter.com or other websites where links were available. It should be noted that whilst the use of social media data, such as tweets, represents an exciting new opportunity in social research, such use is not without its limitations. One significant limitation of such methods is the uncertainty of exactly who is creating the content and the reliability of this content (and thus the overall data). McCormick et al. (2017), for example, have highlighted the paucity of demographic information in tweets, as well as the challenges of identifying irrelevant data such as that created by automated bots. A manual process of analysis allowed the latter challenge to be addressed for this paper, and due cognisance was given in the analysis to the limitations relating to the anonymity afforded by the platform.

The research design – incorporating the use of both qualitative interview data and text, images, video and metadata harvested from Twitter – was one of mixed methods, given that it involved the collection, analysis and interpretation of multiple forms of data within a single study to explore the same underlying phenomenon (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009). Following Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) the study adopted a fully mixed sequential dominant status design, wherein two approaches to data collection were conducted sequentially. Such an approach allows both methods to be mutually reinforcing, albeit that one (in the case of this paper, the qualitative interview data) was the principal

method.6 This integrated analysis across two unique but overlapping datasets makes an original contribution by tracing an emergent shift in some policing sensibilities towards more constructive forms of police-fan engagement and communication following the Act's repeal, reflecting the view that 'football fans are not thugs'. It also recognises, however, significant challenges to such new sensibilities, acknowledging that they are emergent and exist in parallel with still highly problematic practices and approaches in the policing of football fans in Scotland. It is important, however, to note that whilst this article draws upon a contemporary Scottish evidence-base, its findings may not be immediately or unproblematically generalisable to other jurisdictions due to the importance of local contexts in both football and policing. The convenience sampling procedure also presents an important limitation of this research design.

The police on the offensive

The introduction and implementation of the Act in 2012 transformed the way in which the police engaged with football fans; signalled by a significant shift towards the use of enforcement tactics by the police and an intensification of surveillance and intelligence gathering (Hamilton-Smith et al. 2019, Atkinson et al. 2020). There emerged a perception amongst some football fans that they were being criminalised (McBride 2020). Such perceptions were understandable, given both the step-change in policing tactics and the impact that such tactics were having on individual football fans. The consequences of the Act, and in particular the way in which the Act was enforced by Strathclyde Police and subsequently Police Scotland, was recounted during interview by Angela, a committed football fan. Angela characterised relations between fans and the police as 'them and us'; a situation that she attributed to the Act and the policing regime it ushered in, including the perceived heavy-handed policing of fans on their way to football matches and the filming of fans in stadiums. The real prospect of being arrested and charged by the police due to infractions in the context of attending a football match had deeply affected Angela and her close friends. Angela, who attends both home and away games featuring her team, stated her view that the police see fans as 'not to be trusted'. She elaborated,

I can't remember the last game where there wasn't an issue with the police … I don't interact with the police. I wouldn't even say hello to them if they did … If you are being herded into games, how can you have a positive relationship with the police? The default position [of the police] is confrontation. It has escalated so much from five years ago. [Police] Batons [have been] out so many times … It's not just an issue with [mention particular clubs]. It's fans versus the police. All fans should be concerned. (Angela, football fan)

Given that Angela is in many ways the antithesis of the stereotypical football hooligan 'folk-devil' – she is a young, educated, and eloquent woman in professional employment – her account of the state of police-fan relations and her own disposition towards the police as a direct result of how she had been policed as a football fan, were particularly powerful. Such accounts, however, were not isolated in this research. Andrew, a football fan active in his local ultras scene, remarked,

People were just getting stopped [going to matches], names taken, filming exactly what you are wearing, all this kind of stuff … [The police said they were] gathering intelligence, [on] who you are. They were even coming up to people and saying who you are, obviously looking at Facebooks or

finding out off [of] other fans. They were quite intimidating in the way they were doing it. (Andrew, football fan)

Perceptions of criminalisation amongst football fans were also understood to have an impact even where individuals did not receive a criminal conviction, or even been subject to an arrest. For Tony, a football fan involved in an ultras group linked to the team he supports,

I've got a mate who didn't get a job because of the football. He never had any convictions or anything, but the police must have filmed him or had his details or whatever, and he found out it was because of the football. (Tony, football fan)

The looping consequences of the labelling of young people through police intelligence in Scotland has been identified outwith the particular field of football fandom (Fraser and Atkinson 2014), and the intensive and intrusive surveillance of football fans is likely to have similarly impacted on the future lives and careers of those caught up in this particular dragnet.7 Reflecting such concerns, there was a recognition in fieldwork that the overall approach taken by the police service in Scotland towards the policing of football fans was having a deleterious effect on fan-police relations, and that change was required. As one police officer acknowledged,

It's very much been 'us and them' at the moment … And it's important to bring the fans on board … We need to think about how that communication has gone wrong and what we can do about it. (Alexander, police officer)

This prevailing context, characterised above as 'fans versus the police' and 'us and them', was recognised by senior police officers in fieldwork as problematic, and was accompanied by the view that new approaches to engaging football fans are required in order to improve fan-police relations and re-establish the fundamental principles of policing by consent.

Shifting forms of fan engagement

Seven years after the 2011 'shame game' that paved the way for the Act, and shortly after its repeal in 2018, five people were injured at Celtic's football stadium in Glasgow. These injuries occurred as part of a 'crushing' incident as fans made their way to the turnstiles in advance of a match against city rivals Rangers. Amid this incident, many fans were panicking and in distress, with some seeking to scale adjacent walls and fences in order to escape into an adjoining cemetery. This event was a precursor to Police Scotland's commissioning of an independent review of football policing in Scotland. Undertaken by Deputy Chief Constable Mark Roberts of South Yorkshire Police, this review was published in March 2019. An important finding of An Independent Review of Football Policing in Scotland (Police Scotland 2019), and as reflected in the terms of reference for the report, was the recognition of limitations in existing approaches to 'fan engagement' and the requirement to enhance this area through the development of an overarching 'engagement strategy'. This requirement to improve engagement and communication with fans was reflected in interviews for this study, where the shift towards increased enforcement and surveillance following the 2012 Act was recognised as coming at the expense of more positive and constructive forms of fan engagement. As one police officer stated,

Policing particularly football became an enforcement function, rather than a safety or wellbeing function … Community engagement, that we used to do very well, is missing. (George, police officer)

A police officer who undertook the role of 'event policing lead' for regulated football events (a role previously known as 'match commander'), discussed the negative effect that intensive surveillance could have on fan engagement,

As match commander it is my decision as to which resources are deployed at the ground and how they are used. As soon as you start pointing a camera in people's face it's 'what the fuck are you doing? I am just trying to enjoy the game!' … Our fan engagement at grounds can be too robotic. So 'we are there as police officers to enforce the law'. No, we are there to facilitate the fan's experience. (Kyle, police officer)

Both the repeal of the Act – a development brought about in no small part by the coordinated resistance and protest of football fans themselves, particularly through FAC – and the recommendations of An Independent Review of Football Policing in Scotland catalysed an emerging sensibility in some quarters of Scottish policing that change in how the police engaged with fans was required.

Several police officers in research for this study, including senior officers, provided an account of fan engagement that indicated new sensibilities around, and dispositions towards, the policing of football events and the role of communication and fan engagement therein. For example, James, a senior officer with extensive experience of the policing of football events, recognised a need for all parties to 'overcome issues together'. He continued,

We used to say 'you have a baton and handcuffs, but that [points to mouth] is the best tool to get you out of bother and encourage interaction with supporters' … We have probably not had that longer-term engagement with the fans outwith the event … Now the force is looking to have that engagement to overcome any issues together. (James, police officer)

This recognition of the need for a more open and constructive approach to the policing of football events was reflected in the position of a similarly experienced senior officer:

We want to progress a fun and friendly atmosphere and engage with the fans … We've got a chance to engage with thousands of people from the local community and as a police officer you can have a really positive effect on the local community, or you can make an arse of it. So why would you go in with a heavy hand? Facilitation, engagement, building up rapport, until people cross the line and you have to step in. (Nick, police officer)

Another senior officer, Alexander, stated that the policing of football events should be underpinned by dialogue-based approaches that recognised that football fans should be treated respectfully,

I believe our policing style should be about communicating, about getting out there and letting fans know what's happening and supporting their safe entry and exit and enjoyment of the game … Football fans are not thugs. (Alexander, police officer)

Evidence of the practical implications of this shifting approach was perhaps most strongly apparent in the move in some areas towards more dialogue-based approaches to fan engagement, including face-to-face communication and the use of social media and other methods to engage with football fans.

Dialogue-based approaches in community contexts

Andrew, and the ultras group to which he belonged, had previously had a very strained relationship with the police. In particular, the attempts by the police to recruit football fans as informants – in order to covertly provide information to the police on the movements, activities and intentions of fellow fans (see Atkinson et al. 2020) – resulted in the ultras group of which Andrew is part engaging in visual and vocal protest against the criminalisation of fans. Such protest was not isolated at this club: several other clubs in Scotland with an active ultras scene participated in similar protests at matches around this same period (prior to, and indeed following, the repeal of the Act in 2018), through the displaying of banners and the chanting of songs. Importantly in the case of Andrew's club, however, the period after the repeal of the Act brought a significant shift in fan engagement by the local police away from a focus on enforcement-led, surveillance intensive tactics (with associated and supporting stewarding practices) and towards a more dialogue-based approach between fans, the police, and the club itself. This shift was surprising given the previously toxic relationship between the fans and the police, but was vital in achieving positive change. Andrew reflected on the nature of this transformational shift and what this looked like in practice,

Things [relations between ultras and the club] were at an all-time low … [and we had] a meeting with the club and the police … The meeting with the police was really good … it was quite a good meeting with regard to intelligence … All the important people at the club were there, and people from were sticking up for us saying 'why [has] all this police presence been happening, I've not seen fighting at the games or anything?'. And they [the police] basically went into depth about […] the police database about football-related incidents … It gave us a better look at what the police were trying to do. (Andrew, football fan)

On a practical level, this move towards the implementation of meetings that allowed all parties to explain their positions, interests and activities to one another resulted in an immediate improvement in fan-police relations. As Andrew elaborated,

[Fan-police relations got] A hundred times better. You wouldn't even believe how quickly it changed. There was [previously] no respect between us and the police, and the police and us. The police got a better view of what we are trying to do, and we got a better view of what the police were trying to tackle. So as soon as there was fan engagement in an open room and [with the police explaining] what they were trying to do, you wouldn't believe how quickly it got better. (Andrew, football fan)

This meeting was the first of a series of regular meeting between fans, the club and the police, with a focus on improving communication between all groups and provide the opportunity to raise and

address any concerns relating to the club, its support and the matchday experience. Andrew noted that relations with the police had 'been brilliant ever since' and 'at an all-time high'.

Kyle, a police officer involved in coordinating the policing of football matches for Andrew's team, elaborated on this shift towards more dialogue-based approaches with fans. He noted that there was concern amongst football fans, but also the wider community, about an increasing number of police officers present in the stadium on matchdays, as well as in the surrounding town. Such concerns prompted the first of these now regular meetings:

We went [to the meeting] as the kind of the fall guy or the bad guy, but that's fine, that's how the police are perceived on a lot of occasions. We went there and we had footage of that particular [supporter] group's conduct [disorder and the use of pyrotechnics at away games] … We showed that to them. The majority of these supporter's groups were all there thinking 'why are there so many police here [at home ground], I've never seen anything happening?'. And [showing them footage of away games] we were like 'there is what goes on' … We agreed to have follow up meetings, to go through behaviour since then, and it's hugely improved, hugely improved. (Kyle, police officer)

Alexander, a senior officer in the same area, noted the need to find 'better ways of engaging' with the ultras group linked to the local football club, and that it is when there is disengagement that 'the real risk starts'. Reflecting on the benefits of improved communication with ultras and the wider fanbase, particularly on matchdays, he remarked,

It's important to bring the fans on board … We need to think about how that communication has gone wrong and what we can do about it. Experience tells me that when you engage them [it is positive]. I tell my cops to go over and engage them: 'alright guys, what do you think the score will be today?'. And you can actually see them [thinking] 'why is this polis talking to me?'. That's the kind of thing I want my cops to do. To break down that barrier. (Alexander, police officer)

Such new approaches to engaging with fans were galvanised by the use of Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs). Stott et al. (2020) highlighted how SLOs in Sweden, as part of the fanbase, can help to reduce conflict between fans, clubs and other stakeholders (including the police) by navigating the complex tensions that can occur.

It is important to recognise, however, that whilst such developments demonstrate the successes of dialogue-based approaches, not all aspects of this practice have yet been systematically replicated across Scotland. For example, another senior police officer discussed the challenges of fan engagement and the possible approaches the police could take to improve relations with fans in general and ultras in particular,

I think we need to work harder at engaging with fans in general, fan groups including ultras. But how do we do it? I think we should do it fully overtly with their consent and engage with them so that we can police the football better … Can it be done over social media? Do we attend meetings and what meetings do we attend to get the message across that actually we genuinely want to treat you well, because I don't think that some groups think that we do … We need to work hard to build trust in the

first place … but it'll take a long time to establish trust, particularly with those who feel they've been mistreated by the police. (James, police officer)

Whilst the evidence from Andrew and Kyle suggests that dialogue-based approaches can have a positive effect even in the short term, James' view that building trust with ultras in particular may take some time is likely to be well-founded. James recognises, perhaps implicitly, the deep-seated subcultural antipathy, if not outright hostility, of many ultras groups across Europe and further afield towards the police (see Perasović and Mustapić 2018, Montague 2020). In ultras subculture the acronym A.C.A.B. signals 'All Cops Are Bastards', and this acronym (sometimes referred to as 1312, reflecting the corresponding numbers of these letters of the alphabet) features frequently on ultras related cultural artefacts – such as banners, graffiti and stickers – including in Scotland. These challenges in Scotland have been compounded by the dual effects of the continued use of frontline police tactics targeting football fans and the police justification of such tactics, particularly through the use of social media.

Dialogue-based approaches, social media, and frontline policing

Prompted by An Independent Review of Football Policing in Scotland the Scottish police service has aimed to re-shape how it communicates with football fans via social media; understanding the shortcomings of existing approaches. The recommendations of this review – including that Police Scotland should develop an engagement strategy with football fans and review their social media policy – are important, but they did not emerge from a vacuum. These recommendations crystallised emerging sensibilities in some policing quarters that existing approaches were problematic and were producing poor outcomes for engagement with football fans. A number of police officers interviewed for this study acknowledged that more sophisticated dialogue-based approaches, facilitated by social media, are required to help to explain those police tactics that could be considered by football fans, and ultras in particular, as problematic. George, a police officer, reflected on the role of social media and emphasised the need for more sophisticated forms of fan engagement with ultras,

It's not that they [ultras] want organised violence in the same way as the risk groups do, although some of the risk groups are within those … So it's how you manage those ultra fans, who want to jump up and down, want to sing, and have embraced the legislation as their cause célèbre. They are the most difficult for the clubs to deal with. All you can do is keep engaging with them, talk to them … and we don't use social media enough [to engage and inform fans] … We need to speak to people, be open and transparent. (George, police officer)

However, whilst developing positive fan engagement at a local level and investing in the promise of SLOs have both been pivotal in building trust between fans and police through dialogue-based approaches, the use of social media in such efforts has proven to be more problematic. This has particularly been the case when social media has been used by the police to engage with football fans both during and following high-profile public events at which there has been tension between the police and fans. The following case study presents an example of a significant breakdown in the police service's engagement with football fans, prompted by a lack of dialogue concerning a 'containment' and the problematic post-event framing of the incident by the police, including through social media.

Case study: 20 June 2020, George Square, Glasgow, UK

On 20 June 2020, during the COVID-19 global pandemic and the associated restrictions on social gatherings, hundreds of people, including groups of football fans, attended an anti-racism rally in Glasgow's George Square. This event drew inspiration from protests across the world following the death of African-American George Floyd during the course of his arrest by police in the United States (BBC News 2020). During this rally a group of football fans – principally but not exclusively comprised of the ultras affiliated to Celtic – were subsequently 'contained' by the police via an enclosed cordon and removed from the square en masse. This 'containment' and removal also incorporated other rally attendees who were not football fans. According to a statement made on the Greater Glasgow Police Twitter account on the day (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Greater Glasgow Police Twitter statement.

Display full size

At a meeting of the Scottish Police Authority on 30 June both the Chief Constable and the Deputy Chief Constable (DCC) of Police Scotland discussed the events of 20 June. The Chief Constable remarked upon 'groups seeking to infiltrate legitimate protest for their own ends' and who 'misrepresent' both the protest itself and the policing of the protest event. The DCC elaborated,

We had obviously put on quite a significant policing operation on Saturday the 20th June … We had a group of football risk supporters, actually in that case from the Green Brigade, who showed up, wouldn't engage with the liaison officers on site, very difficult to distinguish them, apart from the fact that they were masked up in a way that was beyond the legitimate protestors who were there at George Square, and we had intelligence to indicate they were going to cause trouble. So of course we had to act in those circumstances … We moved the group on because we knew they were intent on causing trouble, but actually the use of terms like 'kettling' which we know some people used publicly is deeply unhelpful, that is not a tactic that we either know, use or adhere to. It is not compliant with the public order manual. (Scottish Police Authority 2020)

These accounts resonate with a letter sent by the Divisional Commander of Greater Glasgow Police to a Member of the Scottish Parliament on 24 June. This letter refers to 'football risk supporters' exploiting protests to further their own agenda and who have 'in the past engaged in acts of violence and disorder' and routinely fail to cooperate with police. The letter specifically mentions the presence of 'known members of the Green Brigade' on the day and further refers to the 'demeanour' of this group as 'aggressive' and their conduct as 'threatening', and to police decision-making and tactics based on such factors and police intelligence on the group's intentions. The construction of the interlinked terms 'risk' and 'risk supporter' here requires some unpacking. The Police Scotland official definition of 'risk' includes 'communal violence', to which 'risk supporter' adds 'disorder' and 'anti-social behaviour' (Police Scotland 2018). This resonates with Hopkins' representation of police officer narratives in England, where officers perceived 'risk supporters' to be different from 'normal supporters' based on demeanour and dress and their 'determination to seek out disorder' (Hopkins 2014). Such binary distinctions are unlikely to capture the complexity of football fan identities, which

are instead characterised by 'many subtle and distinctly nuanced' subcultures and 'malleable boundaries' between groups; resulting in the potential for constructions of 'risk' and 'risk supporter' to be overly broad and of limited utility to officers on the ground (James and Pearson 2015).

The 24 June letter further rejects any reference to 'kettling' and instead describes the tactic employed as 'a containment' (Police Scotland 2020). Effectively, however, this response promotes a distinction without a difference. Peter Joyce (2016), in his overview of policing of disorder and protest in the UK since 1945, highlights that 'kettling' is simply a term used by the media and protesters to describe the tactic of 'containment'. Elsewhere, Neal et al. (2019, p. 1045), in recognising the emergence of 'kettling' as a spatial strategy in public order policing across jurisdictions, noted how,

'Kettling' has emerged in recent decades as an established, if controversial, tactic of public order policing. Departing from a historical emphasis on dispersal, kettling instead acts to contain protesters within a police cordon for sustained periods of time.

Such semantic manoeuvring by the police service in the aftermath of the event was poorly received by those fans affected. A fan collective that represents fans in area of Celtic's stadium within which the club's ultras stand also commented on the 'kettling' in the following tweet on 21 June (Figure 2).

Figure 2. North Curve Celtic Twitter statement.

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The supporter's group FAC also described the police tactics as 'kettling' (see Herald Scotland 2020). Such perspectives resonated with several research participants interviewed for this study and who were present at George Square rally, including both football fans and those with no interest in the sport. For Derek, a rally attendee who experienced this tactic first-hand,

The idea that they called this 'not a kettle' is just wild. I hadn't been kettled [before], [but] then I knew immediately what it was like. It was fast, it was threatening. It was a silent move by the police. It was a kettle, as far as I am concerned. (Derek, rally attendee)

Drew, who was also inside the 'containment', rejected the Police Scotland version of events as 'just wrong' and he considered the 'kettle' to be 'an intimidating process'. When asked about his thoughts on the police labelling of the incident as a 'containment' and not 'kettle', Ollie, a rally attendee, simply called the police 'lying bastards'.

Those who directly experienced the police response on the day considered the tactics deployed to be both intimidating and provocative. For Kirsty, who did not self-identify as a football fan,

The protest itself was really well run, everyone had masks and was socially distancing … there was no trouble whatsoever. So we started to leave the square and suddenly out of nowhere the police kettled us, I would say about nearly 200 people, including event organisers, children and parents and mostly football fans. Bear in mind this was in June so socially distancing was major at that time, and crushing us all in seemed ridiculous. The police started to get pretty aggressive towards the people asking to get out of the kettle, that was mostly the families with kids and some people began to have panic attacks because we weren't given any water and I'm pretty sure it was about 20, 22 degrees that day … The police pretty much ignored everyone [who was] asking why we were being held and when we would be allowed out. It was really tense because we hadn't done anything to suggest any violence was going to break out, so it seemed totally unnecessary so obviously people were angry. (Kirsty, rally attendee)

Kirsty recounted the behaviour of the police once the kettle had been moved to another area of the city and those 'contained' began to be allowed to leave,

When we eventually got let out one-by-one a guy who we'd be chatting to let me out first followed by my boyfriend and the policeman who seemed to be pretty high-up ranking said to my boyfriend that he should let someone else pump [have sex with] his girlfriend for him. Which obviously was completely inappropriate and just trying to incite people to kick off. (Kirsty, rally attendee)

Such provocative policing was also experienced by football fans inside the kettle as it was moved from George Square to another area of the city, with other fans recounting how they were 'pushed from behind' and had their 'heels repeatedly clipped' by police officers; actions that they deemed to be aggressive, intimidating, and confrontational. Sean a football fan provided a similar account of police tactics that were characterised by a lack of communication and provocative targeting of fans,

There was no attempt whatsoever to engage with what were clearly identifiable kinda leaders and organisers of the demo … When we were in the kettle the police weren't talking, and when they did engage they decided they were going to move us on … When we were moving they were saying to people who could quite easily be identified as trade unionists or anti-racists activists, a bit different perhaps to the young working-class boys who made up part of the football supporting crowd. So they were saying to them 'We don't want you, just get out of here, we only want the Green Brigade' and it was that point that fortunately the other protesters said, 'No, we are not going anywhere'. Not a single person left [the kettle/containment]. There was feeling amongst us that if they had got us down the Gallowgate to be kettled on our own they [the police] were absolutely prepared to steam in and give us a doing [to assault the fans], to goad us into acting, and God knows what would have happened [then]. I think the only thing that prevented that was the solidarity that was shown by the other activists. (Sean, football fan/rally attendee)

The combination of police tactics, a lack of communication, and the provocation of those who were caught inside what they understandably considered to be a 'kettle', had an immediate impact on those present; a situation compounded by the police response in the hours and days following, particularly via social media.

Discussion

It is important to recognise that the repeal of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act in 2018 created a climate in Scottish policing that allowed for the development of new dialogue-based approaches at the local level, rather than the blanket continuation of intelligence-led enforcement. Yet it is also important not to overstate the extent of such shift. Even before the repeal of the Act, academic research had traced and explained powerful criticisms of this legislation. In 2017 Maureen McBride, for example, noted how surveillance-intensive policing practices had been criticised by supporters' groups, alongside broader concerns about the criminalisation of younger supporters, particularly via their labelling as 'risk groups' (McBride 2017). Subsequent research by Hamilton-Smith et al. (2019) more directly linked police practice when the Act was in force to a decline in perceptions of the legitimacy of football policing. The argument made here was that police surveillance of fans in football stadiums in Scotland in this period was unnecessarily provocative, and signalled a retreat from any attempts to actively positively influence fan behaviour through dialogue. The police response shifted towards the digital capture of behaviour that could be subsequently sifted to identify prosecutable acts of offensiveness (Hamilton-Smith et al. 2019). There are, in theory, sound operational reasons as to why police officers may not directly intervene in a situation such as where a suspected offence has been committed at a football event, not least due to the safety of officers in effecting an arrest in a potentially unwelcoming context; however, the particular strategy adopted in Scotland had implications beyond a given match. The arrest of supporters many weeks after a suspected offence was committed, and hence where alleged harm had virtually dissipated, alongside a widely accepted fan narrative of police 'dawn raids' to enforce allegations based on flimsy evidence, further entrenched the view that the policing of football fans lacked legitimacy. Following the repeal of the Act, however, the development of an emergent shift in policing sensibilities in some quarters towards more constructive forms of police-fan engagement and communication represents a valuable, if fragile, area of progress in the policing of football fans and events. Yet understood against this broader historical canvas, the events of 20 June 2020 in Glasgow's George Square represented a high-profile return to tensions between football fans and the police in Scotland.

The use of the policing tactics used in George Square on 20 June, without the communication of a clear and transparent justification for these tactics that was accepted as appropriate and authentic by football fans and those affected, jeopardised any gains and improvements made in some local contexts. This position resonates with the existing scholarship on procedural justice. Procedural justice theory posits that actors and agencies in the criminal justice process must treat people according to the rules, with dignity and respect, listen to their voices, and explain the reasoning for particular decisions and actions (Hough et al. 2017). As a pioneer of procedural justice Tom Tyler (2011) argued that every encounter that a member of the public has with a police officer is a 'socializing experience' that either builds or undermines legitimacy; with the perceived 'fairness' of police decision-making and action at the centre of such encounters. The data in the previous sections offers evidence for procedural justice approaches (where local engagement resulted in positive change in police-fan relations), but also points towards how short-sighted, high-profile tactics can undermine such relations and usurp hard-won progress. Procedural justice approaches will, of course, face the challenge of the antipathy, and in some instances the hostility, of ultras groups towards the police. This does not, however, mean that the police should not seek to engage with such groups in an open and positive fashion. It may simply mean that such approaches will be challenging and success is not guaranteed. In 2011, two years before the creation of Police Scotland, Daniel Donnelly and Kenneth Scott remarked that the principle of policing by consent underpins Scottish policing (Donnelly and Scott 2011, p. 72). Whilst policing by consent can never imply complete, universal approval across and

between communities (Bowling et al. 2019, p. 17) the underlying principles of trust, legitimacy and accountability must remain at the forefront of any future approach to fan-engagement.

A key aspect of the policing of the event in George Square was the way in which Police Scotland considered and responded to football fans as a distinct category of people, worthy of particular focus and attention. Discussing the regulation of football supporters in England and Wales, James and Pearson (2015) noted interesting distinctions between the policing of protesters and the policing of football fans, including in the propensity of football fans to 'tolerate and normalise' the types of sometimes aggressive public order policing tactics that would otherwise incline political demonstrators to legally challenge such tactics. The events of 20 June in Glasgow, however, indicate the ways in which there can be crossover between these communities, resulting in solidarity through common experience: football fans can have a legitimate political voice, and they may wish to express that voice in ways that other members of society are typically empowered to. Challenging any arbitrary distinction between 'football fans' and 'legitimate protesters' is therefore important in effectively holding powerful policing actors to account for their deployment of particular policing tactics, such as kettling/containment, and to ensure that football fans are not deprived of their right to express a political voice both within and beyond the football stadium.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a new perspective on the policing of football and football fans in Scotland by exploring new patterns of police communication, particularly within a context of new forms of fan culture. The study contributes to existing research by tracing a recent and emergent shift in policing sensibilities in some quarters towards more constructive forms of police-fan engagement and communication. Evidence of the practical implications of this shifting approach was apparent in the move to implement dialogue-based approaches, particularly through face-to-face communication at a local level. The research indicated that the use of such dialogue-based approaches can improve fan-police relations, even within the contexts of previously toxic relationships and an ultras subculture in Scotland that broadly, but not exclusively, posits that 'all cops are bastards'. Such progress, however, is fragile. The semantic manoeuvre by Police Scotland to characterise the police tactics on 20 June as 'containment' and not 'kettling' was, at best, counter-productive to any effort from the police to develop and sustain open, transparent and productive communication with particular fan groups. The preceding data indicated how this version of events was fundamentally rejected by fans and other members of the public who were caught-up in the policing dragnet on that day, with a concomitant effect on levels of trust in, and the legitimacy of, Scottish policing.

Overall, the emergence of new dialogue-based approaches to policing and communicating with football fans, more 'fan friendly' forms of engagement, show promise for the future of fan engagement in Scotland, with relevance for other jurisdictions where police-fan relationships are problematic. Yet it is clear that such approaches remain localised in pockets of good practice, and have yet to percolate across Scotland in a way that fulfils the spirit of the recommendations of An Independent Review of Football Policing in Scotland: that Police Scotland should develop an engagement strategy with football fans and review their social media policy. If progress is to be nurtured and developed then it is imperative that the recommendations of this review are embedded in a coherent strategy to the policing of football events that engages fans – both in person and online

– in a manner that is transparent, consistent, and fair. Any failure to do so risks returning fan-police relations to tempestuous times of ten years hence.

Notes

1 Football ultras are groups of fans who participate in particularly devoted and expressive forms of fandom, including the use of pyrotechnics, banners, card displays, stickering, organised marches to games, and drum-led chanting. The activities of ultras are sometimes underpinned by political ideology as well as sporting fanaticism (see Doidge et al. 2020).

2 For an overview of 'folk devils' see Stan Cohen's classic work Folk Devils and Moral Panics (Cohen 2011).

3 It is important here to recognise the divergent approaches amongst what has been considered as the 'Leicester school' (see Redhead 1991, Dunning 1994).

4 For the latter, manifest in the arrests of 'scores' of casuals, the imprisonment of the crew's 'top boys', and extensive surveillance on matchdays and at other times (Giulianotti 1994, p. 331)

5 For an overview of convenience and snowball sampling see Bryman (2016, pp. 187–188).

6 For an overview of combining methods and the relationship between principal and complementary methods see Morgan (1998).

7 Another fan, Cameron, recounted how a fan he knows came close to taking his own life due to the consequences of being arrested and charged under the auspices of the Act.

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