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# Against *Modern Football*: Mobilising Protest Movements in Social Media

## **Abstract**

Recent debates in sociology consider how Internet communications might catalyse leaderless, open-ended, affective social movements that broaden support and bypass traditional institutional channels to create change. We extend this work into the field of leisure and lifestyle politics with an empirical study of Internet-mediated protest movement, *Stand Against Modern Football*. We explain how social media facilitate communications that transcend longstanding rivalries, and engender shared affective frames that unite diverse groups against corporate logics. In examining grassroots organisation, communication and protest actions that span online and urban locations, we discover sustained interconnectedness with traditional social movements, political parties, the media, and the corporate targets of protests. Finally, we suggest that Internet-based social movements establish stable forms of organisation and leadership at these networked intersections in order to establish instrumental programs of change.

**Keywords:** Castells, consumerism, leadership, social media, protest, social movements, sport.

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## Introduction

The impact of social media in shaping protest movements is an ongoing and polarised debate (Couldry, 2015; Jasper, 2014; Murthy, 2012). One side of this debate holds social media to be the key factor in mobilising movements such as *Arab Spring*, *Occupy*, *Podemos* and *UK Uncut* (Lim, 2011; Juris, 2012). Manuel Castells (2015[2012]: 15) has placed himself centre-stage in this argument, claiming that social media engender a ‘new species of social movement’. Unlike traditional forms of protest that require groups to regularly congregate to agree on purposes and renew shared identifications (e.g. Della Porta and Diani, 2009[1999]; Melucci, 1996), Castells (2009[2013]; 2015[2012]) considers that online platforms ‘switch on’ connections between previously unrelated groups, generating leaderless, non-hierarchical, open-ended organisations that enhance the possibility to mobilise support and forge reforms.

Nevertheless, theories that hold social media as the key to understanding contemporary protest movements face several criticisms. First, a lack of evidence concerning how tangible economic or social outcomes are achieved raises questions over the efficacy of so called ‘Twitter revolutions’ (Mathers, 2014; Morosov, 2012: 12). Second, claims for *new species* of political and civic engagement tend to obscure how Internet movements interact with pre-existing political orders and policy-making institutions (Couldry, 2015). Third, Castells is accused of glossing over the internal work and machinations that define movements’ progress (Mathers, 2014), a criticism that necessitates improved evidence with respect to the leadership qualities and organisational processes through which Internet movements establish demands and work towards change (Lovink, 2012)<sup>i</sup>.

In order to evaluate Castells' claims and critics’ counter-claims regarding the effectiveness of Internet-based movements; to determine the processes through which Internet-based movements work to achieve outcomes amongst the wider social fabric; and to describe how social media are used in the mobilisation, organisation and leadership of protest

movements, this article examines *Stand Against Modern Football* (StandAMF). *StandAMF* is a network of British football fans who protest against commercialisation processes designed to generate more manageable and profitable ways of ‘consuming’ sport. In providing an empirical account of a contemporary protest mobilisation in the context of sport culture, we are able to explain how Internet media help to transcend entrenched rivalries, coordinating broader awareness and support *vis-a-vis* previous movements in this context.

Ultimately, we find that *StandAMF* achieves success in challenging existing corporate logics. However, rather than by bypassing the institutions that have upheld these logics, as Castells (2015[2012]) claims, we find that these achievements owe much to the establishment of ongoing communicative links with mainstream media, political parties, traditional social movements, and the corporate bodies at which protests are directed. Furthermore, despite Castells’ claims for leaderless, non-hierarchical organisational structures, we explain that *StandAMF* depends on ‘soft-leaders’ (Gerbaudo, 2012) whose social capital and communicative expertise enhance network cooperation and enable the insertion of alternative goals and logics into established social, political and corporate orders.

We begin by describing Castells’ claims regarding the mobilisation and structure of contemporary social movements. Following this, we apply his analytical framework to our investigation of *StandAMF* to critically extend Castells’ observations and contribute to the understanding of the impact of social media on protest movements and their effectiveness in delivering change.

## **Manuel Castells and Contemporary Social Movements**

Castells (1972: 93) defines social movements as a, “certain type of organisation of social practices, the logic of whose development contradicts the institutionally dominant social logic”. These logics - the practical goals of institutions - are *networked*, i.e. shared and

reproduced across multiple organisational nodes as diverse as people, objects, institutions, corporations, and cities. Networked logics must be *programmed*, or assigned, substantiated and distributed across networked nodes through communication structures. Although programs are irreducible to supporting communicative structures, Castells contends that networks and the social logics that they carry may be ‘reprogrammed’ through alternative communicative activities. Castells (2013[2009]) explains that although power has long emerged in social logics that are programmed through state, market and ‘old’ media channels by privileged sectors of society, these enduring financial, political and media networks are increasingly open to reprogramming through ‘new media’.

Explicitly, in *Communication Power* (2013[2009]) and *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012), Castells argues that Web 2.0/3.0 technologies change how movements mobilise. In contrast to established, top-down modes of information dissemination long used to program entrenched network logics (Castells, 2010[1996]), web-based channels encourage *horizontal networks*, “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected by many who communicate with many” (Castells, 2013[2009]: 70). In doing so, Castells (2013[2009]; 2015[2012]) emphasises ‘mass self-communication’ channels - Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and blogs - which allow “individuals and organisations to generate their own messages and content, and to distribute these in cyberspace, largely bypassing the control of corporations and bureaucracies” that have traditionally channelled information (Castells, 2013[2009]: xx).

Connections between communication and power are a constant concern for Castells. In *The Information Age* trilogy (2009[1996]; 2010[1997]; 2010[1998]) he explains how digital technologies produce ‘spaces of flows’, autonomous informational spaces where alternative logics are generated to challenge the programming of longstanding network logics. Moreover, these communication orders transcend traditional time-space boundaries, such that

spontaneous connections occur between people who share *ideas* rather than geographical space (Castells, 2010[1997]). It follows also that these movements remain open-ended, defying conventional membership-based measures of participation (Castells, 2015[2012]). Furthermore, Castells (2015[2012]) describes how this quality of mobilisation leads to movements that are non-hierarchical and distributed, such that without central leadership they enhance participation, while also posing challenges to management and policing.

Together, these qualities lead Castells (2015[2012]: 15) to declare the emergence of a “new species” of *rhizomatic* social movement. Grassroots in their emergence and growth, these connect potentially unlimited networks of parties through shared emotions, enhancing the potential to reprogram societal logics in manners that deliver change by *ignoring political parties, not recognising any leadership and rejecting all formal organisation* (2015[2012]: 252-256).

In light of such claims, however, it remains unclear how effective these organisations are in delivering social and economic change (Mathers, 2014; Morosov, 2012). Related to this, it is unclear how these movements can achieve change without interacting with established social orders (Couldry, 2015), including groups that exist prior to, and hence feed into movement mobilisations, or institutions at which change is targeted (Fuchs, 2014; Mathers, 2014). Moreover, in spite of the potential of Internet communications to rapidly broaden participation, commentary and dissent (Diamond, 2011) in manners that enhance public awareness and coordinated action (Shirky, 2011), Mathers (2014) accuses Castells of glossing over much of the practical work that occurs in organising these movements. To assess to what extent *rhizomatic* movements can be characterised as a ‘new species’ of leaderless organisations that forge autonomous logics in cyber-space, and to meet calls to more carefully describe the organisational and leadership processes through which change is managed (Couldry, 2015; Lovink, 2012), we trace the emergence and development of

*StandAMF*; a protest movement that challenges the logic of English football sustained by corporate, political and media interests.

## **Method**

Four interconnected data-collection activities took place between December 2012 and March 2016. First, participant observation occurred at locations including match attendances, informal meet-ups, and public events organised by and/or promoted through *StandAMF* (Table 1). These procedures encompassed both explicit protest actions, and backstage practices of planning and organisation (Blee, 2012; Lichterman, 1998). Concurrently, field-interviews offered points of reflection and initial themes around which depth-interviews were designed.

Table 1 – Participant Observation Events<sup>ii</sup>

Second, depth-interviews were conducted with 48 fans who either self-identified with or were involved in organising *StandAMF*. Following Blee and Taylor (2002), interviews sought oral-history accounts of *StandAMF*'s formation, as well as biographical details so as to assess demographic characteristics of movement members (Table 2)<sup>iii</sup>. Many participants brought artefacts – e.g. photographs, match programmes, fanzines, and tickets – which became interview prompts (Silverman, 1973).

Table 2 – Interview Participants

Third, collecting social media content published by *StandAMF* allowed us to trace and analyse the communicative work and organisational micro-processes that order and influence

the movement (Millward, 2011; Robinson and Schulz, 2009). Finally, newspaper, radio and other social-media content – blogs, Twitter, and Facebook - featuring *StandAMF* or objections to ‘modern football’ were purposively sampled, affording a fourth dataset that highlighted precursors and media representations of the movement, as well as policy outcomes. Throughout, we sought a balance between online and physical data collection (Murthy, 2012). Initial data analysis involved multiple readings of sources, resulting in a network of longitudinal and reflexive accounts of the events that precipitated *StandAMF*.

Event organisers were aware of the research. As Riach (2009: 363) notes, “participants’ ideas of *why* we, as researchers, research certain subjects is... of key importance when considering who we interview, and why they might want to be interviewed”. We did not hold insider positions in *StandAMF*, hence in order to answer potential questions as to our roles, Hill and Millward published a fanzine article reflecting on perceived commercial changes in English football through the lens of existing sociological research. An effect of this overt research position is that the reflexivity of both researchers and participants can collaboratively develop (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), influencing data collection and ultimately the narrative we present.

Specifically, participants augmented our sampling of media sources, suggested interview opportunities, and facilitated an, “iterative coding strategy that moved between levels of narrative focused on the thematic content and on the reflexive considerations of [participants]” (Riach, 2009: 365). In particular participants guided our access to the broader groups and influences that constitute *StandAMF*, eventually disclosing an interconnected network of parties that spanned online and urban spaces. This insight became a core aspect of our analysis, guiding our recording of the distributed micro-processes of *StandAMF*, and enabling a critical examination of Castells’ claims regarding the role of social media in



contemporary protest mobilisations. It is to this examination that we turn next, beginning with the background against which protesters are making a stand.

### **Programming 'Modern Football'**

Contemporary debates about - and protests over - *modern football* should be contextualised within the history of English football. Attendances in England had fallen since the 1940s, leading Taylor (1984) to describe football as a sport in 'recession'. Additionally, during the 1970s and 1980s, football became synonymous with violence – such that in May 1985, the *Sunday Times* declared it to be a “slum game played in slum stadiums watched by slum people” (Goldblatt, 2007: 542). Fast forward to August 1992, and in the wake of the disorder associated with the English game, legal, economic and commercial interventions materialised that would change the way football was organised and consumed.

Riding a wave of enthusiasm following England's fourth place in the 1990 World Cup, the 'F.A. Premiership' was formed. In Castells' terms, this represented a 'reprogramming' (Castells (2013[2009]: 47) of the goals assigned to the network of interested parties that regulate English football. In particular, the F.A's *Blueprint For the Future of Football* recommended a free-market logic designed to solve social and financial problems associated with the game, declaring how, “High standards of behaviour, on and off the field” (1991: 6) could be fostered by marketing techniques designed to shift the core social class of crowds from “C1, C2 and D to A, B and C1”.

Castells explains that programming is accomplished by 'switchers' who “connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks” by communicating shared goals and resources (2013[2009]: 45). In the wider society, Castells (2013[2009]: 429) declares Rupert Murdoch to be “the most deliberate switcher”, because of his capacity to link cultural, political and financial networks through his media empire. Indeed, Murdoch's control of *BSkyB* switched

together Premier league, ‘Sky Sports’ broadcasting, and clubs as marketing partners. Club directors became key ‘programmers’, building clubs as brands, asserting new practices of ‘customer care’, and transforming club ownership from a “philanthropic hobby into an investment opportunity” (King, 1997b: 227-228). Finally the new logic was communicated to football fans with advertisements promising the dawn of a ‘*Whole New Ball Game*’<sup>iv</sup>.

In 2012, the Premier League celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary having carried football into a period of growing match attendances, lucrative transnational broadcast deals<sup>v</sup>, and reduced violence. Nevertheless, many fans were dissatisfied. Exploring football fanzines from the late-1980s through to 2010, Millward (2011) discovers common frames of discontent: clubs prioritising commercial development ahead of on-the-pitch performances; a ‘sanitisation’ of match atmospheres; rising ticket prices that disrupt connections between ‘traditional’ fans and clubs; irregular kick-off times; the heavy regulation of ‘traditional’ fan practices; and finally, connected to all of these, the growing influence of television broadcasters - especially *BskyB* - on football (see also King, 1997a). Despite this, fanzine consumption remained constrained within the club-specific reach of these media (Millward, 2011), precluding wider ‘shared awareness’ that can spark collective action (Shirky, 2011: 36).

### **Mobilising in the Space of Flows**

In the summer of 2012, however, on fashion-label *Casual Connoisseur’s* web-forum, a discussion about the ‘re-branding’ of *Cardiff City* sparked a broader debate over – in the words of one participant *Brighton and Hove Albion* fan Romeo Benetti – “how abjectly shit modern football in Britain is”<sup>vi</sup>. A variety of similar conversations emerged in other web-forums: when asked what constituted ‘modern football’ in another football-fashion blog, *Yeovil Town* supporter Seb White summarised:

‘A game where fans are priced out from attending, where the young generation can neither afford or are able to get tickets, where people that do turn up receive over-the-top regulation from police and stewards, where owners act with complete disregard of supporters’ views...’ (Umbro blog 2013).<sup>vii</sup>

To channel his and others’ discontent, White joined *Stockport County* follower Mark Smith, and *Liverpool* fan Daniel Sandison to publish a fanzine that might motivate support from fans who shared anger at the corporate logic guiding football and those who ‘act without any sense of history, tradition or knowledge of football culture’ (Seb White, field interview, January 2013). In large part, *StandAMF* members establish this motivation by comparing the current program with nostalgic recollections of more ‘traditional’ football culture:

‘Football used to be this local event that everyone had access to if they wanted to be part of it. Everyone knew one another ... There was this sense of camaraderie and togetherness that no longer really exists ... Money has had a huge impact on this... Truth is many working, ordinary people - not just teenagers - don’t get to go the match anymore because of the prices.’ (Tom, Interview, 29 June 2013)

Although nostalgically venerating the camaraderie, ease of access and cheaper prices of the past, *StandAMF* members are clear that they do not favour the pre-Premier League programme that was at times associated with racism and homophobia (Back et al., 1999). Rather, men and women have gathered around the *StandAMF* movement, constituted by 15,700 Twitter followers, 6,000 Facebook followers, and those who attend protest events. Among attendees are trade unionists, and members of anti-racist, antifascist, and anti-homophobic groups (see table 2). As such, a heterogeneous network established from diverse

pre-existing fan groups begins to define *StandAMF* against previous ordering influences in English football, circumscribed as they were by club-specific interests and orders (King, 2002[1998]; Nash, 2001).

Like the social movements Castells (2015[2012]) describes, *StandAMF* began to gather support from diverse cultural flows. These include the continental European ‘Ultra’ movement, fanatical young fans distinguished by their animosity towards corporate influences (Doidge, 2015). Further links were established with disparate club protest groups such as *Liverpool FC’s Spirit of Shankly* (SOS) supporter union; multiple football fanzines; and football supporter unions, the *Football Supporters Federation* (FSF) and *Supporters Direct*. Less clearly related, but equally important are cultural influences from early-1990s electronic music and recreational drug scenes (see Gilman, 1994), and the British football ‘casual’ fashion scene (see Redhead, 1991). Helping to generate a more inclusive and textured football culture since the 1990s (King, 1997a), these intersecting cultural flows support multiple web-forums that steer clear of club rivalries.

Indeed, these forums engendered new opportunities for socialisation amongst fans from a variety of clubs, a ‘space of flows’ where on-going discussions over dissatisfaction spread. Digital technologies also enabled *StandAMF* to provide their own platform for fans to deliberate over crises across the football leagues, and to share their anger towards club directors, owners, the police, and media bosses, all of whom are considered to sustain the program of modern football. In particular, the creation of a *StandAMF* Twitter account alerted early members that they had coined a phrase that might unite fans. As White reflects, “within 24 hours of opening a Twitter account [*StandAMF*] had over a thousand followers; we knew we were onto something” (interview, 13 February 2013).

## **Unity: From Ideology to Affect**

Castells (2013[2009]) calls this work of unification, ‘switching’. For *StandAMF*, the possibility of switching relies on the ‘horizontal’ affordances of social media applications that bypass traditional ‘top-down’ media communications, allowing countervailing ideas to circulate independent of established media programs (Castells, 2015[2012]; Murthy, 2012). Employed in the cultural industries - TV production, design, fashion and journalism - the *StandAMF* editors who accomplish this work are competent in exploiting the *informational capital* (Castells 2010[1998]) of media to unite disparate networked parties. Given the varied origins and members of the movement, plus the assortment of complaints these groups express as effects of ‘modern football’, however, switchers must take care to translate across these diverse nodes.

Castells (2015[2012]) suggests this is often achieved by transcending single issues and identities that might define a movement. Fanzine co-editor Bill Biss has confirmed this ideal publicly: “we’re not about one thing in particular, rather, *StandAMF* is attempting to give a voice to all those who’ve had enough with the various ills of the modern game. I also see it as a vehicle to protest, to moan, to debate, and to exchange ideas about what we can all do as fans to influence or change the future of football” (*The Pro Lounge*,<sup>viii</sup> 2013). It follows that in contrast to SMOs with strict hierarchies, starting principles and well-defined goals, often materialised in constitutional documents (Zald and Ash, 1966), *StandAMF* retains an open-endedness, exhibiting fluid goals, strategies, and structures, and eschewing firm principles of concern that remain common to many contemporary social movements (Martin, 2015).

Indeed, despite attempts to constitutionalise *StandAMF* (Reed, 2013<sup>ix</sup>), the movement has eschewed official ideological statements or manifestos. How then are the voices of multiple groups with divergent meanings, concerns and engagements linked without firm principles of identity that have often been key to social movements? In answer to this

question, Castells (2015[2012]) cites the power of *shared affect*. Castells (2015[2012]: 137) argues that rhizomatic social movements mobilise new members through emotional ‘contagion’. By framing collective action through affective unity, rhizomatic movements remain open to emerging controversies, and to new groups that wish to join the movement, whilst steering clear of potential ideological disagreements that might result in such cases.

Illustrating these possibilities is Keith who describes *StandAMF* as, “a mood; it has no direction, which is a good thing in this case. Anyone from any club across the country can connect to it and use it in their own way” (interview, 16 May 2013). Keith suggests that *StandAMF*’s fluid identity helps the movement to bring diverse supporters together in a manner that can transfer broadly, and allow groups who become associated to respond to crises as they see fit. *StandAMF*’s fanzine and web presence are also seen to channel affect by spreading hope. *Liverpool* fan, Anthony, considers that *StandAMF* produces a “feeling of *hope* that the way football is being run at the moment can be changed. It shows that people out there regardless of team, club, league – whatever – are just as annoyed and angry” (interview, 17 February 2014). Like the discussions that occur on topics unrelated to club identities considered above, this Internet-based sharing of emotions also helps to overcome entrenched rivalries.

### **From Web-space to Urban Space**

Enhancing the unifying potential of horizontal communications to channel fans’ affect, however, *StandAMF* also brings people together in urban space, enabling members to experience emotions collectively, and *materialise* protest. Castells (2013[2009]: xxxix) asserts that although critical and reflexive work takes place in *the space of flows* afforded by the Internet, these emergent networks ‘are not identified as movements until they occupy urban space’, especially *symbolic buildings*. It is through the combination of urban space,

personal proximity, and the circulation of collective emotions that groups create ‘spaces of autonomy’; fluid and distributed practices of mobilisation that span online and urban locations (Castells, 2015[2012]: 222). Spaces of autonomy generate and harbour the multiple concerns of newly united groups within the movement, and help to overcome trepidation, maintain enthusiasm, and produce hope in ways that begin to make protests concrete.

*StandAMF* follows this blueprint. Beyond the publication of the *StandAMF* fanzine and social media presence, a number of urban events - including meetings, two protest marches, and post-march social events - took place between May 2013 and August 2014. These events were organised by or associated with *StandAMF*, and included attendees from clubs whose fans would not normally associate. Opening speeches and speakers from the floor aroused collective anger at the effects of ‘modern football’. As supporters from rival clubs came together to listen, discuss, and share their anger, these events became, as one participant put it, “tipping points” for further collective action. For instance, James McKenna, chair of Liverpool F.C. supporters’ *Spirit of Shankly* (SOS) protest group, declared that collaborations between *StandAMF* and other supporter organisations, “mark the coming together of fans in the realisation of what unites us as supporters is greater than what divides us” (fieldnotes, 9 May 2013).

This statement stands in contrast to Nash’s (2001: 52) account of Kevin Miles’ (now Chief Executive of the FSF) description of *Newcastle United* supporters’ responses to the possibility of working with other supporters twelve years earlier: ‘I am not interested in meeting fucking Mackems [*Sunderland* fans] or Mancs [*Manchester United*], all I am interested in is Newcastle fans’. Rather, McKenna calls for a dismantling of longstanding programs of rivalry by ‘switching on’ new connections between these groups. The following day in Liverpool city centre McKenna again used a meeting entitled ‘Against Modern Football Debate’ to call for unity (fieldnotes, 10 May 2013):

‘All of us can sit in the room and find reasons why we can’t be mates with one another and why we can’t actually work together. We sat here last night, and Man United fans, Everton fans, Tranmere fans and Crewe fans sat here and said ‘Yeah, it’s about time we actually do something together’ like in Germany. As Kev Rye from Supporters Direct said last night, the thing that unites all of us is much greater than what divides us in those ninety minutes’.

These meetings also reflected on the achievements of associated nodes of this movement, such as the successes of German fan movements that have given supporters more control over club governance; the efforts of SOS (Millward, 2012); and the institutionalisation of groups such as *Supporters Direct*, which was set up by a collective including Labour MP Andy Burnham (who initially chaired the group) to support fan-based ownership of sports clubs. These reflections expressed that a reprogramming of football could take place if fans were able to transcend their rivalries and act collectively. Next, we explore an instance of this trend towards supporter unity during a protest mobilised by *StandAMF* at which traditional social movement organisations as well as the media helped to materialise support for the movement.

### **Materialising Rhizomatic Protests**

An outcome of successive social media discussions, and subsequent urban meetings was the first cross-club protest against rising ticket prices in English football. On 19 June 2013, the same day the Premier League and Football League announced its match fixtures for the 2013/14 season, the *StandAMF* march took place. Liverpool’s SOS, *StandAMF* and the combined to organise and promote the event. 400 supporters from diverse clubs - many of them arch rivals - marched together from London’s Regent’s Park to the Premier League and Football League’s Headquarters at Gloucester Place. Fieldnotes from the day read as follows:



*'The plan is to meet at the Boating Lake in Regent's Park at 1pm. From Twitter, however, I discover that everyone is meeting beforehand for a drink at The Globe... At around 12:15pm, the walls outside The Globe are adorned with banners from Liverpool and Arsenal as groups of fans mix and chat. [SOS Committee Member] Ste Martin and I move to Regent's Park ... to get ready for everyone meeting at 1pm... Supporters from a range of clubs – Sunderland, Manchester City, Crewe Alexandra, Sheffield Wednesday, Manchester United (who have travelled on the Liverpool coach!), Crystal Palace, Everton, Dulwich Hamlet, as well as representatives of StandAMF and the FSF are in attendance.... Young Spurs fans provide disparaging songs about Sky Sports as their film crew appear, and a number of beach balls are being knocked about through the burgeoning crowd. By 1:45pm I count 300 people ... The protest snakes through the tight paths and quaint bridges of Regent's Park and onto Baker Street. Smokebombs are set off, and pockets of people start chants. It is difficult to keep the protest and chanting together as the crowd elongates because the protest must remain on the paths – a point made clear to us numerous times by police officers who have been present throughout the day. When we hit Baker Street though, people sprawl out onto the road, and the protest gains a new density. At this point, chants are generally led by Ste Martin, who, with a megaphone and a hi-vis jacket (adorned with 'Don't Buy the Sun' on the back), orchestrates the protest. As a result, the chants become louder, more sustained and coordinated... The group leading the march with the 'Football Without Fans is Nothing' banner stop, bringing the protest together, providing an opportunity for the national media to take photos. The march stops where the Premier League and Football League are housed, 30 Gloucester Place. The aim is to occupy the spaces outside the offices and, owing to Kevin Miles' connections to the institution, for select members of the protest to be invited in to talk with Richard Scudamore and other officials. The protest, at the point where we reach 30 Gloucester Place, is meant to move into a pen across the road, but does not ... the two policemen are now on their radios, calling for support. They urgently ask those individuals in hi-vis jackets to get everyone into the pen, a demand met with shrugged shoulders and responses*

*such as, “we don’t have the power to control what other people do and we’re not leading this”.*

Organised across online social media discussions and urban events – the spaces of autonomy (Castells, 2015[2012]) - this rhizomatic diversity of previously unconnected and oppositional groups became more ‘real’ in the ‘occupied’ and highly symbolic location of 30 Gloucester Place. Castells (2015[2012]) contends that occupying space helps solidify and strengthen rhizomatic social movements for two reasons. First, being physically together enhances collective emotional experiences. Second, protests in symbolic urban spaces materialise discontent in ways that are difficult to ignore by established programmers. For example, Figure 1 shows the defacement of the Premier League headquarters, a key institution in the program of ‘modern football’. Note the marks of multiple groups in attendance, all of which unify under the ‘Against Modern Football’ slogan.

Insert Figure 1 Here.

Moreover, owing to the diverse groups mobilised by *StandAMF*, print and television media deemed the protest newsworthy. One *Daily Mirror* columnist focused on the diversity of those who planned to attend:

‘What is really impressive about this ... protest is the level of organisation, with meetings being held in London and Liverpool, and a range of rival fans taking part. On Wednesday members of Liverpool’s Spirit Of Shankly union will walk side by side with the Manchester United Supporters Trust and Everton’s Blue Union. Arsenal Supporters Trust and Tottenham Hotspur Supporters Trust will share banners along with fans of lower league clubs like Yeovil and Tranmere’ (Reade, 2013).

Equally, *The Guardian* portrayed protestors as victims, describing the ‘intense frustration’ felt by, ‘gas fitters from Liverpool’, and lamenting how ‘dads won’t be able to take to their kids to the game anymore’ (Gibson, 2013). Gaining mainstream media attention can be key to advancing movement causes (Jasper, 2014; Gamson, 2004), and is to be considered a useful outcome in its own right. In the present case, these media representations framed and legitimised protestors as victims of the Premier League’s greed, and helped to publicise *StandAMF*’s countervailing aims for broader audiences. Nevertheless, Mathers (2014: 1064) criticises Castells for valuing the ‘expressive above the instrumental’ in terms of evaluating outcomes, hence our next task is to consider the more instrumental impacts that *StandAMF* works towards in reforming the logic of modern football.

### **Reprogramming Modern Football?**

Although measuring the outcomes of social movements is difficult (Giugni, 1998; Martin, 2015), *StandAMF*’s successes begin with the dismantling of entrenched supporter rivalries. Beyond this, the movement achieves measures of success listed by Gamson (1990), namely the ability to gain mainstream media attention in manners that shift public opinion, and the achievement of legitimacy amongst policy-building institutions. In terms of more instrumental gains, the Premier League recognised the legitimacy of the protest by establishing dialogue with the movement. Subsequent media reports disclose that while the Premier League considered ticket prices a matter for individual clubs, the institution was nevertheless ‘sympathetic’ (Gibson, 2013). Indeed, the Premier League reacted by providing £12 million over three years to improve away fans’ experiences of attending games (BBC, 2013).

Despite these gains, however, many supporters remained unconvinced that this reform should signal the end of demands. At a North-West (England) FSF branch meeting in April

2014, for instance, one floor-speaker suggested that £12m was too thin a slice of broadcast contracts worth £5.5bn for the 2013-2015 seasons (fieldnotes, 3 April 2014) and would afford negligible savings for each travelling fan over a season. Conversations continued in social media. In May 2014, Dave Kelly from Everton FC's 'Blue Union' fan-group directed an enthusiastic tweet at the FSF: 'Time for the annual visit to the Premier League, £20s plenty. Any update?', accompanying this text with a photograph from the 2013 protest.

Accordingly, on 14 August 2014 a return to Gloucester Place occurred, this time under the FSF banner. Founded to enact a 'singular voice for football fans', the *FSF* represents 180,000 members within a national council and local/divisional representatives. Andrew (interview, 28 September 2014), however, described the FSF protest as:

'lacklustre compared to last year, more organised and formal... Not to lay blame, but the FSF put a dampener on things as they took ownership of it. Rather than being dispersed and a bit more accessible where lots of supporters could join in and connect to it, this one felt a lot more hierarchical in that fans felt like they had to support the FSF and the way they want to do things [...] What was great about last year's efforts was that it was completely surprising that some fans from some clubs showed up [...] And that was probably down to last year's *StandAMF* push... the way they were able to bring people together without requiring these really formal ways of organising [...] That youthful, cross-club energy is now totally lacking'.

In 2013 the *FSF* had acted as one part of a broader, horizontal movement, mobilising resources such as access to leaders within the Premier League for the benefit of *StandAMF*. In 2014, however, having assumed overall responsibility and leadership, the progress of the same cause was centralised in line with the more formalised organisation of the *FSF*. On the one hand, marching under a single representative banner lead supporters like Andrew to complain at the lack of energy and cross-club accessibility compared to the previous year, a

point arguably justified by the reduced attendance. Yet, if the 2014 protest felt ‘lacklustre’, it nevertheless established continued media attention (see BBC, 2014), and helped ensure that ticket-prices – now a single-issue frame that *StandAMF* supported – remained a prescient frame of debate for politicians, football clubs and the Premier League.

Indeed when stories emerged reporting the 2014/15 Premier League overseas and domestic broadcasting rights amounted to £8.3bn (Harris, 2016), *StandAMF*'s case strengthened further, with commentators arguing that the Premier League must share financial gains given that supporters are a key part of the broadcasting spectacle (Rumsby, 2016). Ultimately, this frame became a key point of action when in February 2016 Liverpool Football Club announced that ticket prices would rise again. In response, supporter groups arranged a new protest on Twitter - #WalkOutOn77". Two days later, live television broadcasted the spectacle of between 10 and 15,000 supporters leaving during the second half of play.

This event attracted further media attention and speculation, with commentators touting the possibility of nationwide ‘copycat’ walkouts. In the following weeks, ticket-prices churned around daily news cycles (e.g. Sheen, 2016), and filtered into parliamentary debate. During *Prime Minister's Questions*, Clive Efford - who *StandAMF* had previously connected with to advise on policy-based reform of football - elicited agreement from David Cameron who regarded it a problem that ‘some clubs put up prices very rapidly every year, even though so much of the money for football comes through sponsorship, equipment and other sources’ (*Hansard*, 10 February 2016).

A week later, Liverpool FC's owners had apologised, freezing 2015/16 prices. Moreover, the Premier League agreed to cap away-game tickets at £30 until 2019. These instances suggest that Internet-based movements are able to achieve meaningful changes against the corporate logics they challenge, yet, pace Castells (2015[2012]), these

organisations are, when necessary, able to settle on singular points of concern. We now explain how our findings contribute to understanding the impact of social media in protest movement organisation and leadership, as well as how Internet-based social movements may interact with institutions that sustain the logics that they seek to alter.

### **Conclusion: A New Species of Social Movement?**

Castells (1977: 93) defines social movements as organisations that carry logics that contradict institutionally dominant logics. In the wake of widening social media participation, Castells (2015[2012]) considers movements to mobilise through unity established during open flows of information and shared affective responses that take place in social media. These principles help us to understand the emergence of *StandAMF*: Internet platforms afford horizontal, many-to-many communications that bypass longstanding rivalries sustained by traditional media and clubs (King, 2002[1998]; Millward, 2011). Instead, shared cultural interests, such as conversations relating to fashion and music, help overcome differences “constructed in people’s minds through communication processes” (Castells, 2013[2009]: xix), opening a space of autonomous dialogue and critique where fans share *anger* at what begins to distil into the frame of ‘modern football’.

Our case also illustrates that the refusal to settle on singular ideological claims within these deliberative platforms offers a further unifying force for these networked coalitions. Without firm identities, hierarchical leadership or constitutionalised goals, multiple groups feel able to connect to *StandAMF*. Together, these features challenge the necessity of collective ideological protest identities conventionally seen as generating effective social movements (e.g. Melucci, 1996; Della Porta and Diani, 2009[1999]); so too do they partly justify Castells’ (2015[2012]: 15) claim for a *new species of social* movement. Nevertheless, although social media facilitate ‘ad hoc synchronisations’ (Shirky, 2011: 36) of previously

unconnected groups into decentralised networks of ‘autonomous nodes’ (Castells, 2015[2012]: 111), Castells (2015[2012]) is unclear on how change is possible vis-a-vis organisations that constitute the broader ‘social fabric’ (Couldry, 2015; Mathers, 2014).

Our work clarifies this problem, showing that *StandAMF* fosters alliances with mainstream media, and political parties in order to spread its countervailing logics. Thus where Castells (2015[2012]) considers rhizomatic protests to become ‘more real’ in public space, as with the London protests, we move further to suggest that this materialisation process extends to the reproduction of *StandAMF*’s branded slogans and images that provide a ‘grip’ in the media (Murthy, 2012). This might affect the opportunity structure for change by raising public awareness, political sympathy, and ultimately legitimisation from groups against which protests develop, namely clubs and the Premier League, both of which have made concessions to protestors.

In exploring these instances, however, we challenge the notion that these movements “do not need a formal leadership, command and control centre” (Castells, 2015[2012]: 249) and question Castells’ assertions that affective ‘contagion’ is responsible for spreading interest in movements (2015[2012]: 252). Specifically, we discover instances at which ‘soft-leaders’ (Gerbaudo, 2012) fulfill various communicative functions. Though these roles are not formalised, fanzine editors and Internet-forum administrators organise and facilitate the web spaces in which diverse fan groups can unite, as well as discussions, urban protests and negotiations with target institutions. These competencies are vital, since achieving media traction is far from guaranteed for social movements (Lovink, 2012).

With this point in mind, we extend knowledge of soft leadership by suggesting that the individuals who emerge in these roles are those who exhibit social and informational capital necessary to carry out the work of uniting groups within the movement itself, and communicating with stakeholders beyond the movement. Embodying this ‘informational

capital' (Castells, 2010[1998]) for instance, are *StandAMF* members Bill Biss and Seb White. As ex-fanzine editors, their experiences afford the design of protest frames that gain traction across social media and mainstream media. Equally, Kevin Miles, as leader of FSF, was able to exploit his social capital to establish negotiations with the Premier League.

The presence of soft leaders does not invalidate Castells' (2015[2012]) claims that movements with no centre are powerful by virtue of their being hard to manage, police or co-opt. We suggest, however, that it is enough for rhizomatic movements to *appear* leaderless. Where police sought to engage apparent leaders of the 2013 protest for crowd-management purposes, those individuals maintained that their control was limited. We observe a powerful duplicity in this incident: with no *apparent* centre, or formal leadership, it is difficult to manage or co-opt the movement, or predict where subsequent protests will occur, who will be involved, or what issues they might tackle.

Despite the decentralised character of these rhizomatic movements, however, we suggest that central organisational nodes remain as latent potentials, a point that demands more detailed consideration than Castells offers (see Couldry, 2015; Fuchs, 2014). As Andrews (1997) suggests, extended investigations of protest movements can deliver important insights. In observing *StandAMF* for three years, we are able to witness points at which the movement dwells in the horizontal spaces of social media, and contrasting instances at which specific individuals and groups come forward to communicate particular protest frames and focus on singular goals with key programming organisations.

The roles played by the FSF exemplify this. In the 2013 protest, this organisation functioned as one node amongst many, willing to share resources within the wider network that *StandAMF* helped to switch together. In 2014, however, this older-style social movement brings its more formal leadership structure, manifesto and organisational methods to the fore. Some protesters consider that this thwarts work done by *StandAMF* in deconstructing



rivalries. Nevertheless, as much as horizontal spaces of social media are beneficial in uniting previously isolated fans, and encouraging deliberation amongst these diverse groups, the FSF's sustained focus on price as a more singular and instrumental outcome helps the overall movement to reprogram one specific aspect of the corporate logic against which *StandAMF*'s members count amongst their other concerns.

Finally, we note that groups such as *StandAMF* may be more common than previously recognised. Beyond the protests targeting macro-political structures and institutions of late-capitalism, to which Castells (2013[2009]; 2015[2012]) attends, our data illustrate that these kinds of rhizomatic coalitions are also challenging corporate logics by targeting smaller-scale market-institutions in the context of sport, consumption and lifestyle politics. Extending research that explores mainstream sociological issues through sport cultures (e.g. Back et al. 1999; Dashper, 2012; Dolan and Connolly, 2014; Woodward, 2004), this finding affirms that the formation and progress of contemporary Internet-based protest movements is of continuing interest to general sociology, and warrants further research to clarify these intersections of politics, media and consumption, as well as further digital-sociological studies of the folding together of online and urban realities.

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<sup>i</sup> In the second edition to *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Castells (2015[2012]: 17) concedes that it remains unclear as to how Internet-age protest movements actually deliver change.

<sup>ii</sup> All persons' named herein have granted consent in accordance with institutional ethical procedures.

<sup>iii</sup> We cannot claim to have gathered a complete or 'representative' sample, given that the nature of *StandAMF* proved to be open-ended, hence defying quantification through traditional census-type participation measures (Castells, 2015[2012]).

<sup>iv</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEAIyH\\_gDSk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEAIyH_gDSk)

<sup>v</sup> Between the 1992/93 and 2011/12 seasons, average attendance grew from 21,126 to 35,931 (Millward, 2011) and annual rights that *BSkyB* paid to broadcast matches grew from £38.3m to >£1bn (paid by a combination of *BSkyB* and co-broadcasters, *BT Sport*)

<sup>vi</sup> See <http://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2012/12/against-modern-football>

<sup>vii</sup> See <http://www.umbro.com/en-gb/blog/behind-the-scenes-what-is-stand-against-modern-football-all-about/>

<sup>viii</sup> Another blog intended to afford cross-club discussions of "a wide range of footballing interests".

<sup>ix</sup> The Manifesto and editorial preface can be found at: <http://www.standamf.com/2013/07/23/time-for-a-manifesto-for-football/>

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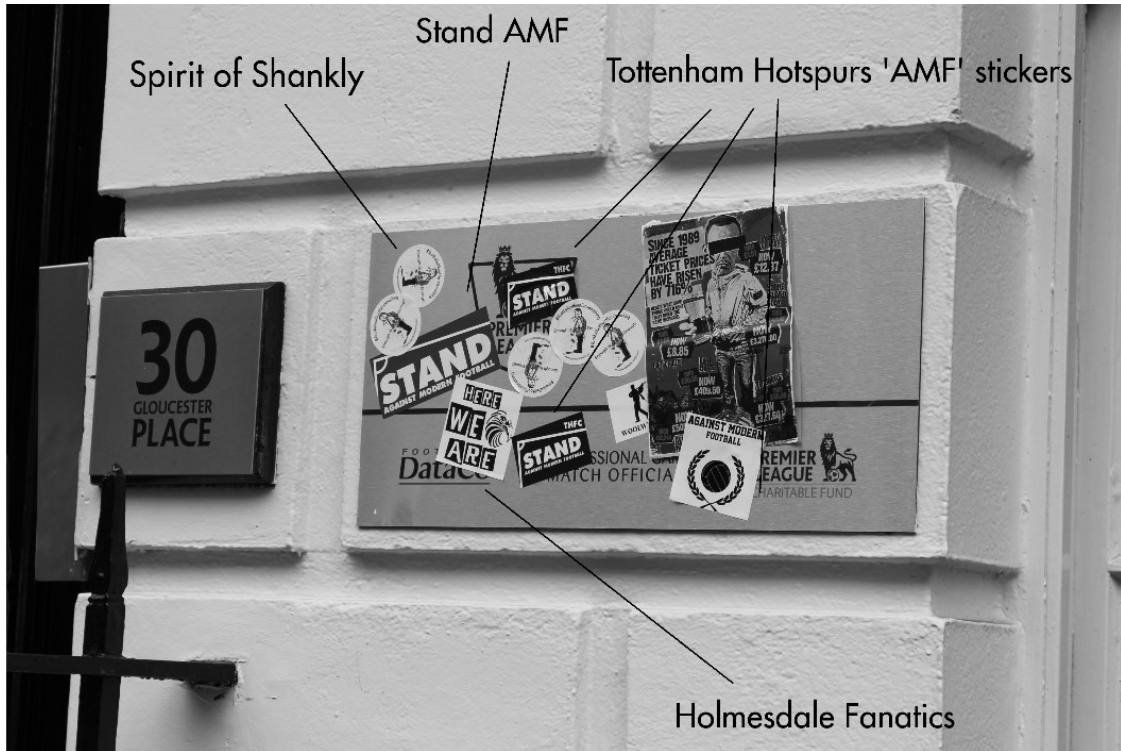


Figure 1: Premier League and Football League plaque outside 30 Gloucester Place covered in stickers (photograph taken by Author A).

Date	Public Event	Organised by:	Other groups in attendance:	Location
24.01.13	Cross-supporter meeting with the FSF	The FSF	Spirit of Shankly	Manchester
31.01.13	Cross-supporter meeting with the FSF	The FSF	StandAMF	Central London
07.04.13	FSF Southern Division Meeting	The FSF		Kingston, London
24.04.13	FSF North West Division Meeting	The FSF	Spirit of Shankly	Manchester
09.05.13	Spirit of Shankly Ticket Prices Debate	Spirit of Shankly	StandAMF, Manchester United Supporters Trust, Supporters Direct	Liverpool
10.05.13	Against Modern Football Debate	N/A	Spirit of Shankly, StandAMF, Manchester United Supporters Trust, Supporters Direct	Liverpool
16.05.13	Ticket Prices Debate	Spirit of Shankly	StandAMF	Central London
13.06.13	Fan Culture Discussion	Football Museum	Spirit of Shankly, StandAMF	Manchester
17.06.13	One Nation Football, Shadow Cabinet Debate	Labour Party	Supporters Direct	Central London
19.06.13	Protest outside Premier League & Football League Headquarters	N/A	StandAMF, Spirit of Shankly, the FSF, the Blue Union (Everton), Manchester United Supporters Trust	Central London
06.07.13	BOSS Night & Stand AMF Present 'Stand Against Modern Football'	BOSS & StandAMF		Liverpool
22.04.14	FSF Southern Division AGM	The FSF		Kingston, London

Table 1: Participant Observation Public Events

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Football Club	Field Interview	Depth Interview	Other affiliations
Amanda	40s	Female	Social Movement Organisation	West Ham		x	N/A
Dan	30s	Male	Entrepreneur	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Mark	50s	Male	Artist	Brighton		x	Trade unions
Tom	50s	Male	Journalist	Liverpool	x	x	N/A
Mark	30s	Male	Entrepreneur	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Tim	20s	Male	IT Technician	Tottenham		x	N/A
Noel	50s	Male	Nurse	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Adam	20s	Male	Fitness	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
David	50s	Male	Architect	Tottenham		x	N/A
Brian	60s	Male	Retired	Liverpool		x	N/A
Anne	60s	Female	Retired	Portsmouth		x	Football Supporters' Federation
Graham	50s	Male	Solicitor	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Chris	20s	Male	Electrician	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Adam	20s	Male	Electrician	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Seb	30s	Male	Television	Yeovil	x	x	N/A
Bill	30s	Male	Television	Yeovil	x	x	N/A
Paul	30s	Male	Chemist	Manchester United	x	x	Independent Manchester United Supporters Trust
Ian	30s	Male	Urban planning	Manchester City	x	x	N/A
Tim	40s	Male	Public Relations	Arsenal		x	Red Action (Arsenal Supporter Group)
Anthony	30s	Male	Transportation	Liverpool		x	Spirit of Shankly
Michaela	20s	Female	N/A	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
James	30s	Male	Trade Union	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Andy	Teenager	Male	Student	Liverpool	x	x	N/A
Keith	40s	Male	Lobbyist	Wimbledon	x	x	N/A
Anne	60s	Female	Retired	Wimbledon	x	x	N/A
Joel	20s	Male	Journalist	Liverpool	x	x	N/A
Keith	50s	Male	Scientist	N/A		x	N/A
Peter	30s	Male	Publisher	Sunderland		x	Football Supporters' Federation
Tony	70s	Male	Retired	Liverpool	x	x	Trade unions
Mark	40s	Male	Marketing	Leeds		x	N/A
Peter	50s	Male	Social Movement Organisation	Bristol Rovers		x	N/A
Steve	30s	Male	Hospitality	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Clive	50s	Male	Scientist	Portsmouth		x	N/A
Stuart	40s	Male	Photographer	N/A		x	N/A
James	20s	Male	IT Technician	Arsenal	x	x	N/A
Adam	Teenager	Male	Student	Tottenham	x	x	Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust
Martin	30s	Male	Marketing	Tottenham	x	x	Trade unions
Duncan	40s	Male	Trade Union	Manchester United		x	Independent Manchester United Supporters Trust
Brian	50s	Male	Architect	Tottenham		x	N/A
Steve	20s	Male	Hospitality	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Andrew	20s	Male	Research student	Liverpool	x	x	Spirit of Shankly
Gareth	30s	Male	Publisher	Liverpool	x	x	N/A
David	40s	Male	Finance	Chelsea	x	x	N/A
Tim	50s	Male	Economist	Arsenal		x	N/A
Joe	Teenager	Male	Student	Liverpool		x	Spirit of Shankly
Mike	30s	Male	Social Movement Organisation	Sunderland	x	x	N/A
Craig	30s	Male	IT Technician	Leicester City	x	x	N/A
David	20s	Male	Journalist	Coventry City		x	Unite Against Fascism

In such instances where individuals are named or quoted, verbal 'informed consent' has been granted.

Table 2: Interview participants