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MEDIA: Football and Media Matters

I appeared on a sporting discussion programme on BBC Radio Five Live with some much younger contributors and was asked about the build up to the 1966 World Cup Final. 'What build-up?' I was forced to reply. We were excited, of course, largely because there was to be live football on TV, a rarity in those days, but there were no special supplements in the papers, no dedicated sports sections, it did not occupy our every waking moment.

Martin Kelner (2012) *Sit Down and Cheer: A History of Sport on TV*, London: Bloomsbury, page 2.

Here (the UK) it's football first, second and third.

Dave Hill, BSkyB Head of Sport, 1992.

Introduction: The Invisible Game

For a sport that generates such an extensive volume of what we now call 'media content', football has often been strangely absent in research coming out of media and communication studies. This lacunae relating to the study of football is part of a wider trend that has seen sport as a cultural form to a large extent ignored or marginalized as an area of study within media research. Hutchins and Rowe (2012: 184) argue that:

Inattention stems from many sources, including the personal preferences of many scholars and commentators. The physicality and anti-intellectualism of many sporting cultures, combined with the widely publicized indiscretions of well-paid athletes, hold little fascination for those who consider them to be serious thinkers, and whose media habits may, in fact, involve the determined avoidance of sport.

It is also true that as the disciplinary boundaries of a subject such as media studies have always been porous, that research focused on sport and the media has often originated in other areas of the academy such as social history, cultural studies and more recently journalism studies. Indeed, despite the growth in studies centred on the relationship between sport and the media in the last decade or so (Boyle and Haynes, 2009) I would argue that the study of the role of media in footballing culture remains underdeveloped.

Two recent research examples, echo Hutchins and Rowe's (2012) analysis and serve to give pause for thought to those scholars who would argue that football and the media have become so deeply intertwined at a number of levels that it is an area deserving of international scrutiny and media analysis.

The Handbook of Global Media Research (Volkmer, 2012) runs to over 500 pages and identifies key areas of media related research within an international context. Sport, let alone the global game of football do not merit mention in this research defining collection, this despite the themes of internationalization, marketization and commercialization running through the research concerns of the book. All these themes are central aspects of the contemporary media sports

landscape, with football the core popular cultural activity within what media scholars have called the media-sports nexus (Wenner, 1998; Rowe, 2004). When we then turn to the large research volumes that make up the International Encyclopedia of Media Studies (General Ed. Valdivia, 2013), the situation is little better. Running to six volumes and over 3,000 pages, it makes passing reference to sport in two of the volumes and ignores football and football media culture completely. (1)

While both disappointing and frankly inexcusable, these examples serve to tell us as much about academic research silos and blind spots, as it does about the status of studying football in the academy. However in this chapter I want to both reflect on why football and football culture should matter to mainstream media studies and also why the media matter and are central to our understanding of football culture and its wider cultural and economic significance.

The Media and Football

Three key areas have driven much of the research in media studies in the last three decades. These have been a concern with the political economy of the media; issues of media representations and power and the media audience and debates around reception studies of the media. I have argued elsewhere (Boyle, 2013) that sport was largely absent from much of the initial debate and discussion that has framed media and communication research, and that this has only really began to change in the last decade or so. It has happened for two main reasons.

The first is *the broad transformation in the media industries across much of the international landscape* (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). The move towards a more demand-led and commercially competitive media markets has been facilitated by the opening up off previously tightly controlled media spaces, particularly in broadcasting and in the pay-television arena specifically. This broader media trend that accelerated during the late 1980s with the advent of satellite and cable delivery platforms and transformed the value of certain types of media content, with football being a major beneficiary.

In turn this process has been driven by politics and technology, from the advent of satellite and cable delivery systems in the 1980s, through to the arrival of the internet in the 1990s and the transformative moment in the last decade that has seen media move from analogue to digital. This has been a period that has been crucial in creating the networked sports media culture described by Hutchins and Rowe (2012: 185), a culture marked by the shift from 'analogue - broadcast' to 'digital - convergent' media. The broader political framework, characterized by a more neo-liberal approach to the relationship between media, markets and audiences has helped drive this change. In the process it has disrupted and changed various media sectors from public service broadcasting (Hendry, 2013) through the creation of a pay-television marketplace, to the decline of print media with the rise of online media content. It is an uneven process that has occurred at differing speeds across many countries, but is clearly a trend that has

made, for example, the television market more international and speeded change across the what we now call the creative economy (Hesmondalgh, 2012).

Why is this important for football? Well, because without this change the football industry would look very different today as increased competition for audiences and subscribers to new and existing television stations has fuelled the demand for football rights across many previously stagnant rights markets. A couple of examples serve to make this point.

Across Europe, the rise of new television stations has been dramatic in the last two decades. The Association for Commercial Television in Europe (ACT) represents the commercial television industry across the continent; its Director General Ross Biggam has noted how 'European Television has grown from 47 stations in the early 1990s to 9000 'channels' by 2013' (interview with author, 15 March, 2013). This explosion of television across a range of digital platforms has created the environment in which the cost of football rights have escalated as television views the sport as the 'key content' that will drive subscribers and advertisers to their stations. It has also been the decades that have seen the erosion of sport on free-to-air (FTA) television and its migration to pay-television platforms, which have been able to generate income on the back of exclusive live football content.

For many years in the UK, the most important person in the football industry was someone who was not even a football fan. Rupert Murdoch's News International group was instrumental in re-shaping British broadcasting, initially through the launch of Sky in 1989, and later, after taking over a rival satellite organization with the launch of BSkyB in the early 1990s. Through the exclusive capture of live rights for the newly formed English Premier League (EPL) in 1992, television and Sky in particular became the financial underwriter and funder of English (and Scottish) football in the UK. The money from television has both changed the sport and the fortunes of Sky. The Sky-EPL deals of 1992 (£304m), 1997 (£670m), 2001 (£1billion), 2004 (£1.2b), 2007 (£1.7b with Setanta), 2010 (£1.78b with Setanta), and in 2012 (£3b with BT Sport) have all helped Sky secure the dominant position in the UK's pay television market (with 10.74m subscribers, 2013) and make it one of the most profitable media companies in the world with regular pre-tax profits of well over £600m a year.

In the process, the English game has gone international in a manner no one could have predicted 20 years ago. When journalist Ian Ridley (2012:9) examined the massive impact that twenty years of the EPL has had on football in that country he noted that in 1992 there was to all intents and purpose no significant overseas market for televised football, but, 'The latest deal brought £1.6billion from countries with a voracious appetite for a league that has been attracting much of the best playing talent in the world'.

Of course football has had a relationship with television that predates that ground breaking 1992 deal in England, however it was this deal and its ultimate success that increasingly became the blueprint for the way that television would finance football as a form of 'media content' and aggressively market this

'television product' into international markets aided and abated by the EPL itself. The previous tightly regulated television environment meant that live football was rationed on television, indeed as late as the 1980s the only live domestic games in the UK on television tended to be the FA and Scottish Cup finals with some international matches and the European Cup final as your other live appointments to view if a football fan. Interestingly, the dominant media strategy among the football industry at this time was that television, and live coverage in particular, offered such a threat to live attendances that even appearing on television highlights programmes was deemed excessive. As media journalist James Robinson (2007) notes:

Peter Robinson, the former Liverpool chief executive, remembers the start of the 1985-86 season, when football was not televised at all. 'There was no deal in place. It only came back on at New Year and the value of the contract when it was signed was about £600,000, which covered all four divisions.' He remembers that negotiators on both sides of the table had reservations about the value of live televised football. 'The broadcasters would play down the value,' he says. 'They'd say things like, "It's a long time for people to be sitting down," claiming that most TV programmes were no more than 45 minutes.

The idea of selling something lasting an hour and three quarters was difficult. They genuinely didn't know how popular it was going to be.' Years earlier, Robinson recalls being asked over to his counterpart at Everton, who wanted to hatch a plan restricting the club's appearances on Match of the Day. 'They wanted to make a deal whereby no club was shown more than once a month because they thought they were being overexposed and they were worried other clubs would see what their tactics were.'

Those days are long gone, and its money from television that helps keeps elite clubs across Europe, from Seria A, to La Liga to the Bundesliga from going out of business, rather than the income direct from spectators paying through the turnstiles.

So television still matters in the political economy of the football industry and football is crucial for the media industry in the UK and many other international media markets. When Alex Ferguson moved from Aberdeen to Manchester United in 1986, the club secured just 9% of its turnover from television income. By 2012, broadcast revenues of over £103m per season accounted for 32% of a massively increased turnover and acted as the springboard through global media exposure for the £117m in commercial revenue generated by Manchester Utd plc (Manchester United plc annual report 2012). What is interesting is that while research on the media industries has emerged from within media studies in particular work around media economics (Doyle, 2013) specific work on television and the impact on football finance has been sparse (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). Research by sports economists such as Morrow (2003) has also been important in informing thinking on the television and football relationship. Work by investigative journalists such as Bose (2012), Conn (2005, 2013), Banks

(2003) and Bower (2007) have not been focused solely on the game's relationship with the television, but it has been a core factor running through their research.

In other words, the development of an increasingly interconnected, international media system, still shaped by national contexts of politics and economics, but underpinned by the pace and speed at which information and media content can be circulated has helped shape the football industry of the last couple of decades. The changing converging media environment of the digital age (Meikle and Young, 2012) continues to impact and shape the trajectory of the evolution of the sports and footballing industries. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) have mapped some of the key drivers of this networked media sport culture and their edited collection on *Digital Media Sport* (Hutchins and Rowe, 2013) acts as an excellent jumping off point for those scholars attempting to understand the contemporary nature of the sports industry, of which football is central, as it sits at the interface between technological change, shifts in market power and emerging cultural practices.

As argued elsewhere in this collection (chapterXX), football has always been a distinctive cultural form, that resonates with both local and national cultures, while part of an international network of competition through organizations such as FIFA. The changes in the political economy of media development, driven by technology, international capital and national politics and media policy, has facilitated the rise of the national football club in terms of international profile, with cultural and commercial implications. When Alex Ferguson became manager of Manchester United in 1986, the club was not viewed as being a sports or footballing 'brand'. By the time of his retiral in 2013, the club was by then positioned as one of the leading footballing brands in world football. Ferguson's fortune had been, in part his ability to build iconic teams, during an unprecedented media rights boom fuelled by the restructuring of the international television industry and more lately with digital technology the arrival of the age of 'media convergence' (Meikle, 2012).

The second trend, related to the above, that has resulted in football becoming more important within media and communication studies research has been *the transformation of journalism and the resultant increased public and media profile of sports and football in particular.*

The Press and Journalism Studies

"Arrived at Old Trafford at 11 am, departed 7pm after one running report, one quotes piece, 25 words on every player plus something on the substitutes and a rewrite. And not a word appears in print. How our game has changed eh?"

Football journalist covering 2012-13 English Premier League, in this instance all their copy was for the newspaper's website, quoted in Ridley (2012: 207).

The quote above illustrates some of the changes that football journalists have had to address in recent times. With multiple platforms to serve the generation of more and more copy has become one characteristic of the trade. In the connected media environment the modern journalist, even when on the road, is linked to the office, or their editor in a manner that would have been unrecognizable twenty years ago. I have written elsewhere at length about sports journalism culture and the challenges faced by journalists working in this area (Boyle, 2006; 2012; 2013). Here I want to highlight some of the factors that again emphasize how changes in the media industries have been symbiotically linked to changes in the football industry and its attendant culture.

Journalism and Public Relations

As a result of marketisation, commercialization and the internationalization of the last two decades both football and journalism have been re-cast and transformed. Technology tends to be disruptive of existing patterns and practice. For many football journalists the transition from the analogue to digital age has brought both opportunities and challenges. As noted at the start of this section in the age of 24/7 media output, and rolling deadlines, the 'always on' journalist covering football is now also a blogger, a tweeter and must be able to upload copy for a range of platforms (print, online, mobile).

There has also been a marked rise in the public profile of football due in no small measure to the money that has flowed into the sport from television. This is not simply however about finance. As television, both FTA and pay-television seek to protect and market their media output, so the promotion of football across media and indeed beyond what were often seen as its traditional markets in society has been one of the marked changes that has taken place in recent decades. As the print industry has been jolted by the impact of digital journalistic content, so too the rise in the power of television and its seemingly ubiquitous coverage of football has meant a re-invention of the trade of football journalism (Boyle, 2006).

This has been facilitated by both the strong cross media ownership patterns that have been a feature of most national media markets, as well as the proliferation of media outlets that the transformation from analogue to digital has helped to nurture. In the age of promotion, the rise of Public Relations (PR) and the synergy that has occurred between the football industry and the wider creative industry sector has allowed once well established practices prevalent in Hollywood to become part of the landscape in UK and other sports culture (Boyle, 2006, Boyle 2012). It is not only clubs that have become brands, but the superstar players, and now managers, that have always been part of the appeal of football, have been increasingly prominent, as a system or structure has emerged that has allowed 'celebrity' to be part of the mainstream news agenda. Football has not created this public relations and promotional structure, but **is** has been one the key sports to have benefited from it as the promotion of the game and its hinterland businesses have become part of a more commercial popular culture.

As one of the characteristics of digital journalism has been the breaking down of that traditional division between the categories of news and sports, so then the use of social media and protecting the reputation of brands online has become widely recognized by the PR industry in the UK as two of the major issues confronting its members.

In this process football has become an international business and a more demand-led media system means that issues of football politics, business and governance, as well as aspects of sporting endeavor, football trivia, celebrity and international competition are all areas that generate various degrees of public debate and discussion in a manner that some may find distasteful within the academy (particularly those who simply do not understand the appeal of the game). For some critics this is an example of how the media has dumbed down, as it elevates issues around football, with its celebrity culture and gives it public prominence. For others, it is an example of a popular sport been given the position within public discourse that it has been denied for many years in a more paternal media age of supply-led content. While certain sporting events were always mega media events, the age of digital sports coverage has expanded even this process. The FIFA World Cup of 2014 will see more journalists attending than any previous tournament, with the unrelenting 'always on' nature of social media presenting new challenges for journalists to remain relevant.

As I have argued:

Digital technology then has disrupted aspects of the traditional relationship in journalism between the journalist, the media and the audience. Sports journalism has in many ways been one of the areas of journalism most profoundly affected by this change. Sporting discourse is often about emotions and opinions deeply held and readily expressed by athletes and fans. Sports journalists have always traded on the myth of access to the inside story around sports culture and their ability to bring this to their audience. The US Sportswriter Leonard Koppett (2003) superbly documented this process in his memoir completed shortly before his death that also examined the changing media culture that shapes the modern sportswriter. He noted how each new media technology, initially radio, then television and finally the internet all changed the relationship between sport and those tasked with professionally reporting and making sense of it for a readership. Taking the long view of communications culture, social media can be seen as part of an evolving tradition within sports journalism, that offers aspects of change, but also continuity (Boyle, 2013: 95).

Another aspect of footballing culture and its interface with the media that have resulted in football being both a cultural area rich in potential for investigation and a highly politicized arena is that concerned with media *representations of football and footballing culture*.

Issues of Representation and Identity

The issue of the mediation of the social world and its social relations has been a central concern across media and communication studies for decades. Often this has been concerned with the political and cultural implications of the ways in which social relations or identities of gender, class and ethnicity get re-imagined through television or other media forms. Football media coverage with its local and national leagues and international rivalries and competitions has offered a rich opportunity for scholars interested in examining how various identities get represented and even distorted through popular culture.

Yet as noted at the start of this chapter the instances of football being the core of the media analysis has been much less than one might expect. The ground breaking work that analyzed British television coverage of the 1974 FIFA World Cup published by the British Film Institute in 1975 (Buscombe, 1975) did not signal a new interest in television's relationship with football and this monograph remains even to this day a distinctive and original snapshot of how television transformed, mediated and made sense of football for its domestic audience. Andrew Tudor, who contributed the analysis of the role of the 'panel' of experts during television's coverage (capturing the emergence of what we now call 'punditry') revisited this work for an analysis of the 1990 FIFA World Cup published in 1992, that examined the use of national stereotypes in television's coverage of international sporting events.

Other research examining the ways in which international tournaments such as the UEFA European Championships were covered by the media have all helped to emphasize the importance that national framing of events plays in helping to shape audience understanding of football rivalry (Boyle and Monteiro, 2005). In this way mediated coverage of football always reflects key aspects of the dominant political and cultural norms that are circulating among sections of the national audience. Media discourses both created and reproduced around a supposedly ideologically neutral aspect of popular culture often play into wider discourses that circulate in more political circles. For examples around issues of cultural boundary marking between 'Us' and 'Them', as well as national stereotypes, and indeed wider aspects of what constitutes differing forms of gender, class and collective-identity (Boyle, Blain and O'Donnell, 1993, O'Donnell, 2004:: Kennedy, 2000).

Central in this approach was a view that by studying how television represented football and the culture surrounding the game, that this offered an entry point into a range of wider debates that were (and indeed still are) central to media and communication studies. These included, for example how power relations get reproduced or 'normalized' in society; the importance of media representation and discourse in 'naturalizing' aspects of social relations and the role of mediated popular culture in playing a role in constructing both individual and collective-identity formations.

Attempts to link, or read across between footballing discourses and those that exist in the political or economic arenas of national cultures have not diminished in recent years. As argued earlier, as football has enjoyed an increased public

profile, and as the barriers described above between 'news news' and 'sports news' have become more porous so have the linkages between sporting and political success. The fact that the German Bundesliga supplied both finalists for the UEFA Champions League final in London of 2013 (Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund) generated much debate about what this footballing success told us about the wider German economy. It has commentators reflecting on what German footballing success tells us about the success of German social and political culture and what Britain (although cultural commentators usually end up speaking about England) can learn from the German model of economic and sporting organization (Wilson, 2013).

Media coverage of international football is often of course not simply about the football, but about the fans and supporters and the role, perceived or otherwise that football plays in the broader fabric of national identity formation. It also offers an opportunity to investigate the internal tensions and fault lines that often run through any national culture and are often exposed through local rivalries and deeply rooted allegiances. Thus the footballing and political rivalry between, say Scotland and England, one of the oldest in game's history, will mobilize a set of discourses that will differ depending on whether they originate from the Glasgow or London based media. While an entirely differing set of discourses will be generated when media attention is switched to a domestic football rivalry such as the one that exists between Celtic and Rangers with its quasi-religious overtones.

If these are some of the areas that indicate why football should and does matter to media and communication scholars, the list is far from exhaustive.

Audiences and Media Change

The audience has always been a central aspect of concern in media and communication studies over the years. Again, football offers a compelling terrain to investigate how shifting media practice is interfacing with changing cultural norms. The fragmenting media audience has long been recognized by the industry, yet football remains one of the few television 'events' that has the ability to pull audiences together. The fact that the television audience prefers to watch football live also has helped maintain the sports value to television over the years as offering one of those elusive 'appointments to view' so beloved of television executives. While other research by Hynes and Cook (2013) has highlighted the role of gender and the female football fan experience within this growing online footballing culture.

Of course as Kevin Roberts has argued:

When we talk about sports broadcasting today, we are not talking simply of TV but of the delivery of content across a range of differing platforms, including mobile and tablet devices. The arrival of services such as UK broadcaster BSkyB's mobile video platform Sky Go and its equivalent around the world means that sports fans with the right subscription are always able to follow their sport wherever they are (Roberts, 2013: 73).

The use of social media by the audience, the development of 'second screen' content for the audience has all seen football content at the forefront or leading edge of consumer change in the digital media environment. In this sense it is simply the latest stage in a longer process as sports coverage more generally has often been used as a leading exponent of television's technological evolution, from the 'action replay' to colour television. Football continues to be used as the key content to shape and develop media markets. BT Sport's launch in 2013 in the UK was configured around its footballing offering and was significant for all media analysts interested in the evolving pay-television and telecoms market in the UK and the attempts by a former telecoms giant BT to dent the telecoms aspirations of BSkyB.

Wider issues in the creative economy will also resonant with football in this more fluid digital international environment. The issue of illegal streaming of football matches and the policing of the copyrighted material of football rights holders are all areas of growing importance and interest to both the industry and scholars alike. The announcement in July 2013 that that the English Premier league had secured a UK High Court judgment requiring six internet service providers to block access to the illegal live streaming website First Row Sports was the first use by a sporting body of the 1988 UK Copyright and Designs and Patents Act to secure a blocking order on a site infringing copyright. This area will bring in scholars from law and other areas of the academy and is a good example of how football in its widest sense continues to act as lightning rod for a range of issues and debates that go well beyond the confines of the game.

Related to debates on copyright and rights issues, is also the growing area of football governance and the professionalization of the footballing industry, thus studies such as Wloch (2013) that examine the role of UEFA as an agent of global governance are likely to become more common place. Yet even in these more sociologically informed studies we return again to the implicit role of the media, as it is media coverage, profile and ultimately finance that give these organizations their leverage and power base.

Conclusion: The Game Goes On...

The media are integral to the professional football industry both within national and domestic contexts as well as internationally. Understanding that relationship and its implications for all stakeholders in the sport is in itself a valid reason to subject this relationship to scrutiny. However as argued in this chapter, the impact of football's relationship with the media has ramifications that resonate well beyond the confines of the sport and stretch out across the creative economy and the media industries more generally. The dramatic changes in the media industries have facilitated the growth and development of a particular kind of football industry. Football did not create these changes, but it has shaped them. The media are of course not the only driver of development and it remains striking even in this most connected of eras how important the local and national remain in shaping the trajectory of football. Yet when a club such as the English team Manchester City launch its website in ten differing languages, aimed at differing sections of a global marketplace then we ignore the

role played by media platforms in re-shaping aspects of local popular culture at our peril.

For me, the core issues of examining the political economy of media sport, understanding and analyzing its representations and audience engagement remain crucial in understanding and making sense of media developments and also the social and cultural importance of popular culture more broadly. These should be central concerns for media and communication studies, even as these fields of study implode and are encroached upon by, for example, economics and law and computing. Football matters in this sense not only because it is symbolically and structurally entwined with the media, but also because any investigation into the media/football nexus is also about making sense of broader contemporary social and cultural shifts and change beyond the game itself. That reason remains as valid today, as it did over twenty years ago when I came to this area of study.

- (1) There is a chapter on 'soccer moms' in the US, however the focus of this research is on news coverage and reporting of military issues in the US and nothing to do with soccer per se.

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