Social networks, football fans, fantasy and reality

How corporate and media interests are invading our lifeworld

Rachel McLean
Games, Computing and Creative Technologies, University of Bolton, Bolton, UK, and
David W. Wainwright
School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the digital culture on football supporters through analysis of official and unofficial websites and media reports. At first glance it would appear that technology has brought about greater opportunities to communicate, to share views which previously could not be widely published, and to organise against the commercial power of the large football clubs. However, surveillance, censorship and control continue to impact on supporters to restrict and ultimately prevent the ideal speech situation that is necessary to empower fans and promote greater participation in their clubs. Current media manipulation and corporate interests restrict and alienate fans who often have more of a historically constituted (over generations) sense of ownership and culture within their local clubs.

Design/methodology/approach – A critical social theory approach is adopted to examine structures and processes related to communication between fans, the media, football clubs and the public. Habermas' theory is draw upon using the concepts of "colonization of the Lifeworld" and "communicative action" to inform a theme and discourse analysis of official and independent football club websites and media reports. How corporate interests (the system) are manipulating public opinion and freedom to speak openly within an overall goal of profit maximization for club owners and the large media corporations are explored.

Findings – Although steps to enable free communication have been made we are still a long way off supporters having a powerful enough voice to organise against the commercial power of the large football clubs and media conglomerates. The ideal speech situation remains elusive and the hegemonic state remains unchallenged. Football supporters are increasingly constructed as "consumers" and the ultimate power remains in mass media and broadcast rather than personal "narrowcast".

Originality/value – This paper extends debate on the impact of the developing "digital culture" focusing on football supporters, a specific and prevalent community within British society. It raises issues for further research in this area.

Keywords Football, Networking, Communication technologies, Mass media, Information systems, England

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Football supporters have a long established "community" and tradition of "organisation" (Critcher, 1979; Taylor, 1971) and a historically constituted (over generations) sense of ownership and culture within their local clubs. Domestication of ICTs (Silverstone, 1995; Griffiths *et al.*, 2008) and the evolving digital society has had a substantial impact on this pervasive facet of British society (Auty, 2002). In addition to football club websites, supporters "unofficial" websites are increasing in number and membership. Football fans can now comment on forthcoming matches, predict the score, arrange to meet for a pre/post match drink, learn the words of a new chant, or discuss wider political issues together, from home, work or via mobile devices, on the train or from the match, whatever the time of day. This interaction strengthens the community and fulfills many functions including information and opinion exchange, entertainment and education on an independent, peer regulated, space.

However, the media construct of football supporter as "hooligan" has experienced a revival. News headlines highlighting the role of the internet and mobile technologies in facilitating football related violence are prevalent. Police spokespersons are quoted as having surveillanced internet postings on supporters' websites as part of "pre-planning exercises" to prepare for possible violence at forthcoming matches. The media have also traditionally been complicit in "stirring up" conflict amongst football managers, players and by implication supporters and the public. This is then re-broadcast and amplified through the power of social networks and associated technologies such as discussion forums. Football clubs and management are not innocent in a "Machiavellian" sense to the use of the media to further their ambitions and socially construct debates around emotive issues such as strategic acquisition of clubs, ownership, hierarchical control, transfer markets and players, role of agents and suppression of contradictory views from the fans. This has even resulted in news blackouts imposed on the press by managers and, in turn the control of discussion groups and forums to dilute and deflect negative arguments from the football clubs and club management.

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of the digital culture on football supporters through analysis of official and unofficial websites and media reports. At first glance it would appear that technology has brought about greater opportunities to communicate, to share views which previously could not be widely published, and to influence (Baym, 2007), or organise against the commercial power of the large football clubs (FC United of Manchester, set up in a fight against the Glazer takeover of Manchester United, www.fc-utd.co.uk/). However, surveillance, censorship and control continue to impact on supporters to restrict and ultimately prevent the ideal speech situation that is necessary to empower fans and promote greater participation in their clubs.

In this paper, a critical social theoretical (CST) approach is adopted to examine structures and processes related to communication between fans, the media, football clubs and the public. We posit that trife social discourse amongst genuine football supporters, which should be increasingly facilitated in the digital society, is being infiltrated by big business, corporate and media interests in order to develop and embed a false view of the football league systems. In the terms of Jurgen Habermas this would be regarded as a "colonization of the Lifeworld" where big corporate interests (the system) are manipulating public opinion and freedom to speak openly within an overall goal of profit maximization for club owners and the large media corporations.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we will give an overview of the adoption of online social networking within sports communities. The next section introduces the theoretical framework adopted here, namely Habermas' theory of communicative action and social theory based on system and lifeworld. We use

Kemmis's (2001) adaptation of Habermas (1987) and the AGIL framework, (Franks (n.d.) after Parsons, 1937) to explore this in detail. The next sections will explain the research method adopted and present a joint analysis and discussion of three key vignettes showing events of social networking applications:

(1) The construct of football fans.

(2) The Ebbsfleet United evolution.

(3) The recent events surrounding the ownership and managerial crises at Newcastle United Football club.

An analysis of these three vignettes leads to the conclusions.

2. Social networking and online sports communities

Social network sites (SNSs) are a growing phenomenon and perhaps the latest user-led innovation to emerge from the world wide web and Web 2.0 technologies. Research into their, use, effects, consequences, motivations, influences and development trajectories is still embryonic (Fletcher and Light, 2007). Their proliferation and unforeseen developments currently far outstrip the academic multi-disciplinary research communities' abilities and capacity to explain and predict their rapid growth, popularity and diffusion across society, education, the media and more recently business and commerce. Boyd and Ellison (2008) refer to hundreds of such sites and provide a historical timeline ranging from: SixDegrees.com (1997) through to Linkedin (2003), YouTube (2005) and Twitter and Facebook (2006), to name but a few. These sites can focus on groups with similar or shared social, political or business interests whilst utilising a range of emerging technologies such as blogging, wikis, music, photo/video sharing and mobile technologies. Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211) define SNSs as:

> [...] web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

SNSs have rapidly developed in terms of innovative technologies, user sophistication, societal and business awareness. This has been compounded by a range of adaptive social behaviours that have either terminated sites, redirected the user base or provided the stimulus for even more creative applications to be developed. The media, political parties, government and increasingly large corporate business have also not been slow to take advantage of this range of technologies. It is increasingly difficult to separate out the functionalities and diverse uses of SNSs from their use towards specific and instrumental personal, social and business interests. Even though Boyd and Ellison (2008) have been criticised as offering a narrow view of SNS (Beer, 2008) they do provide a useful historical account which provides many examples to illustrate these evolutionary developments and their effects whilst making a call to researchers to conduct more experimental and longitudinal studies of SNS initiation, adoption, diffusion and use.

One such strand of research focuses on the use of SNS for Sports fans and gamers with a particular focus on football. Farquhar and Meeds (2007) conservatively estimate there to be over 15 million people participating in fantasy sports termed fantasy sports users (FSUs) in the USA alone. The popularity and growth of internet gaming, gambling and SNSs within sport is quite phenomenal. More specifically within UK these trends are mirrored and are often allied to large corporate and media companies such as SkySports sports gambling and gaming (www.bettingzone.co.uk/) and the daily telegraph fantasy football (http://fantasyfootball.telegraph.co.uk/) or they can emerge as small independent hobbyist sites such as the football score prediction site (www.thepredictionsite.com). Other sites are dedicated to forum and discussion threads to provide the opportunity for football fans to discuss their individual supported teams, football in general or even voice "conspiracy theories" and promote popular action and insurrection (http://forums.chroniclelive.co.uk/viewforum.php?f = 7). Farquhar and Meeds (2007) reviewed recent research into internet usage and motivations and found that a particular subset of motivations might be considered applicable to FSUs. These comprised: social interaction, surveillance, escape, arousal and entertainment. Their research (using Q-methodology) examined these factors amongst FSUs operating in a virtual environment. They found that the motivations of arousal (seen as games of chance, risk taking and individualistic and low social involvement) and surveillance (seen as games of skill, statistics, high social interaction and intelligence gathering) were the primary differentiating characteristics concluding "the FSUs were either highly involved and enjoyed statistics, knowing that they outsmarted those who did not win, or they were less involved and sought the thrill of victory and subsequent bragging rights" (Farquhar and Meeds, 2007, p. 1224).

These areas of recent research indicate that the phenomenon of SNSs and FSUs (as representative of one constituency of users) are complex, multi-faceted and perhaps more worryingly open to political manipulation and sophisticated uses of power by business and corporate users to control user behaviours. What is idealistically seen as the power of democratisation of the world wide web and the internet to promote free speech and individuality is open to infiltration by corporate and media interests in an effort to constrain and manipulate speech for instrumental means/ends and actions. A theoretical framework that explains these complex behaviours and distorted patterns of communication is contained with critical social theory, specifically the notion of system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). We explore the use of such "colonization" frameworks as a means to explain complex patterns of use, behaviours and communications associated with SNSs and football support communities – in particular using adapted frameworks from Kemmis (2001) and Frank (no date).

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 The theory of communicative action, system and colonization of the lifeworld

A growing number of researchers have used a CST lens to examine complex issues within the discipline of information systems and especially focusing on the usage, behaviours and power relations associated with collaborative working systems, enterprise systems and email (Ngwenyma and Lee, 1997; Lee, 1994; Lyytinen and Klein, 1985; Cukier *et al.*, 2003; Waring and Wainwright, 2002; McLean, 2008). These studies have provided an important theoretical contribution in different IS application contexts whilst focusing mostly on an interpretation of Habermas's core work relating to a substantive theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987). In most cases this has been simplified into frameworks utilizing the constructs of "validity claims". An interpretation by Cukier *et al.* (2003) based on the work of Forester (1983) uses a framework that comprises: truth (the propositional content is true or accurate); sincerity (the speaker is honest and means what (s)he says); clarity (what is said is

intelligible and comprehensible) and legitimacy (what the speaker says is right or morally appropriate with regard to existing norms or values). Judgements on the degree that speech acts or utterances meet these validity claims lead to a pragmatic utopian situation for communication termed by Habermas as an "ideal speech situation". The closer to the ideal where all parties in the discourse (whether individuals, groups, organisations, spheres of society or public bodies) can communicate fairly, justly and without fear of prejudice or domination leads to a system that may be considered to be more rational and based on a reflection of norms, values and beliefs which are representative of the participants concerned (football supporters in the case of this study). According to Habermas, distortions of these validity claims can lead to disorder, mistrust and a collapse of the legitimacy of a group, organisational or political system.

A less common application of Habermas's work within studies of information systems adoption and use relates to his development of a social theory based on the concepts of "System and Lifeworld". Although working in the field of organisation studies, education and emancipatory action research, Kemmis (2001) attempts to develop a pragmatic framework based on Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987) which focuses on identifying the core components that constitute the concept of both "System and Lifeworld". This comprises structural "nuclei" of the lifeworld: culture, society and personality. These are combined with reproduction processes (which are necessary to maintain the structural components of the lifeworld) comprising: cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, Table I.

Referring to these components in Table I. Society encompasses organisational and institutional structures that include roles and rules. Systems are seen to operate through rational purposive action (what Habermas terms instrumental means where goals and purpose are not open to discursive action or democratic principles). This is termed functional rationality. Goals are measured empirically through quantitative targets in order to monitor levels of efficiency, progress and attainment. Key contributors to the system are advanced forms of capitalism, markets, the economy and the political legal infrastructures.

The system is then mutually constituted and reproduced by its circular relationship to the lifeworld. The lifeworld is in turn constituted by speech acts that lead to mutual understanding (through comprehensibility, truth, sincerity and rightness). This is

Reproduction processes	Culture	Society	Personality
Cultural reproduction	Interpretive schemes fir for consensus ("valid knowledge")	Legitimations	Socialization patterns, educational goals
Social integration	Obligations	Legitimately-ordered interpersonal relations	Social memberships
Socialization	Interpretive accomplishments	Motivations for actions that conform to norms	Interactive capabilities ("personal identity")

Source: Kemmis (2001) based on Habermas (1987)

Table I.
Structural components

reproduced through cultural reproduction (continuity of tradition, coherency of knowledge leading to consensus for everyday practice); social integration (legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships leading to group identity) and socialization (new situations are connected within a historical context to harmonize life histories and collective life forms).

A problem occurs however, when the system becomes uncoupled from the lifeworld. This is where the economic and political-legal systems (money and administrative/judicial power) start to operate relatively unconstrained and autonomously without any reproducing processes linked back to the lifeworld. This results in a set of pathologies resulting in "anomie", domination and helplessness. This happens due to a distortion of communications (speech acts) again resulting in a new colonization of the lifeworld by the hegemonic discourse of the system (where individuals and groups act unquestionably in terms of the goals, measures and rewards of the system and then contribute to the reproduction of a discourse of roles, functions and functionality shaped by instrumental or strategic actions). Kemmis (2001) examines these pathologies as depicted by Habermas (1987) which can be seen in Table II.

An alternative perspective on this thesis is presented by Frank www.ucalgary.ca/ ~ frank/habermas.html. Frank (no date) examines the origins of Habermas's theory of communicative action and draws on the work of Parsons (1937) classic, "The Structure of Social Action". Habermas's revision of Parsons AGIL functional pre-requisites is examined in order to describe the legitimation crisis (where lifeworld is colonized by system) of society. This is where a generalized media is identified with each function:

- Adaptation depends on the general medium of money.
- Goal attainment depends on power (specified in number of votes).
- I is influence.
- L is value-commitments.

This is where adaption and goals media (money and power) may be seen as quantitative and instrumental constructs – where whoever has the most wins without debate. The influence and value media are seen to be qualitative where you cannot quantify value commitments as they are only enacted and reproduced in communications and discourse between persons, Figure 1.

A and G are fully rationalized systems, I and L represent the lifworld, sets of shared values, common understandings that develop over time through relevant social and

Disturbances in the domain of	Culture	Society	Personality
Cultural reproduction	Loss of meaning	Withdrawal of legitimations	Crisis in orientation and education
Social integration	Unsettling of collective identity	Anomie	Alienation
Socialization	Rupture of tradition	Withdrawal of motivation	Psychopathologies

Source: Kemmis (2001) based on Habermas (1987)

Table II.
Structural components

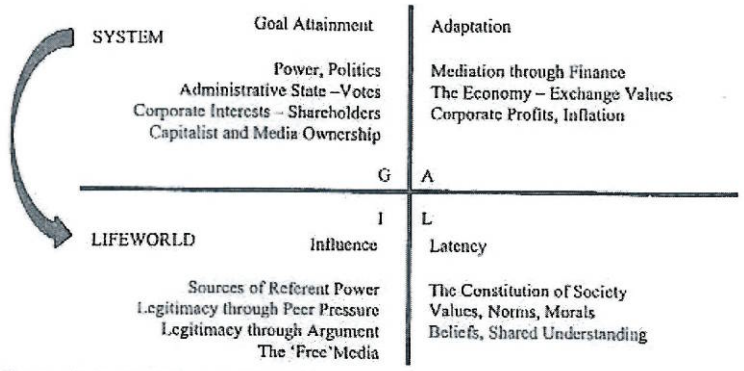

Figure 1.
The AGIL framework

Source: Franks (n.d.) after Parsons (1937)

institutional groupings. The systems media are always seen to be parasitic on the lifeworld – but are destroying their host. This is the pathology of colonization and uncoupling.

4. Research method

Drawing on virtual ethnography, an increasingly prevalent method of researching online communities and interactions (Rutter and Smith, 2005) we carried out analysis of a number of official and independent supporters' networking sites. At the same time, we carried out an analysis of broadcast media reports to explore themes from a range of perspectives; the supporters (lifeworld) and the corporate (or system) view. Virtual ethnography is increasingly relevant in information systems research as the field redefines itself in terms of ICTs as social media (Cushman and McLean, 2008), and with our theoretical framework focusing on the interaction between "System" and "Lifeworld". A method which focuses on symbolic interaction and discursive action in various forms (Fairclough, 2003) fits well with social media research. Further, we sought to gain understanding of "the natives" perspective and the lifeworld of football supporters (Geertz, 1973). Analysis of discourse and message exchange can reveal a great deal about the power relations between the source and the intended reader of the text which is in keeping with the aims of this paper.

There are many ethical issues in researching online communities and their interactions (Sharf, 1999; Hine, 2000). Distinctions between "public" and "private" are not easy to define, nor necessarily clear to participants (Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, it would be a huge task for us to obtain consent from each participant in the communities which were the focus of this research. Whilst being sensitive to the issues we take the view that this material is in the public domain and that the research we are engaging in will not be damaging or detrimental to participants. User names and identities will be protected as far as possible.

In our analysis, we focus on three key events or issues which appear to suggest that football supporters are gaining power and influence. However, a closer analysis through the AGIL framework illustrates that through the colonization of the lifeworld, corporate and media interests remain dominant and the hegemonic state is being preserved.

5. Analysis and discussion

5.1 The construct of football fans

ICTs especially social media and mobile technologies facilitate high levels of time and space free connectivity which serve to strengthen disparate communities. The football community has experienced greater opportunities to connect, communicate and organise as a result of the increasing prevalence and domestication of ICTs. It is not uncommon to see fans listening to rival teams' matches whilst at a game or texting the latest score. It is easier to organise to meet up before or after a match, and to compose and circulate the latest football chants in readiness for the weekend's match (Figures 1 and 2).

However, not coincidentally, the negative construct of football supporters as "hooligans" has experienced a revival. As early as 1999 the media began to focus on the role of ICTs in football violence. Following a series of fights between Cardiff City and Milwall fans news headlines such as "Soccer Hooligans Organise on the Net" and "UK Soccer Fans Organise Riot on the Web" appeared (BBC, 1999). ICTs are frequently shown to be a facilitator of crime in many contexts (Smith and Rupp, 2002; Wall, 2007), the world of football is no exception. The revived and continued construct of the "football hooligan" began to be amplified through media reports of football hooligans using mobile technologies to organise violence, video clashes and circulate footage instantly on the web. Significantly, in 1999, the National Criminal Intelligence Service highlighted the use of ICTs in football violence as a key issue for concern (Auty, 2002). Postings referring to live violence helped to fuel the flames of this debate and the "demonisation" of both football supporters and mobile technologies. Paul Dodd's web site was key in providing evidence for this demonisation (Figure 3). What the majority of the media failed to note was that Paul Dodd was a notorious football hooligan, set on stirring up violence with or without ICTs.

In response to this reported use of ICTs, the police also began to adopt new technologies into their surveillance and prevention operations. In what the media described as a "technology race" (Nutall, 1999) between the police and football hooligans, hand held CCTV cameras began to be used at matches facilitating the broadcast of violence

Previous | Next | New Post | Top of Board XXXXl9 Posted on 16/04/2008 14:16 Email this Message | Reply pre match drink?
Where are people going for a drink on Sunday? Rumour has it, the Three Bulls are opening at nine.

Figure 2.
NUFC Fanzine post

Source: http://forums.cfcnet.co.uk/lofiversion/index.php?t39011.html

"YEAH IT'S KICKING OFF RIGHT NOW AS I SPEAK HAS BEEN ALL MORNING, TIME NOW 1:45PM LOADZA OB AROUND. "BACK SOON FOR AN UPDATE. DON'T MISS THE TEAR UP OF THE YEAR:) " ……..
"nothing happen, too many old bill, millwall well up for it"
"YEAH YOUR RIGHT, TOO MANY OLD BILL. BUT IT'S GOING OFF IN PLACES. JUST WAIT NOW FOR AFTER THE GAME . MY MATE ON THE MOBEY RECKONS IT'S GETTING PRETTY HOT IN THE GROUND TOO."

Figure 3.
Capture from Paul Dodd website relating to 1999 violence

(perpetuating the "supporter as hooligan" construct) and to facilitate arrests. Further, police forces began to monitor independent supporters' sites in their campaign against hooliganism another example of corporate and media interest prompting an invasion of supporters' independent space or "Lifeworld". The issue of self regulation, evident in many postings on football related discussion forums (Figure 3), goes unreported.

This posting clearly illustrates the concept of latency in the AGIL framework. Shared values, norms, and peer regulation are all being negotiated and constructed through social interaction on the supporters' sites, where possible independently, and away from corporate and media invasion and colonization (Figure 4).

5.2 Ebbsfleet united

In 2007, amid media hype of revolutionising the football industry, "MyFootballClub.com (MYFC) suggested a novel way of "empowering fans and banishing the Board of Governors forever" (Rajan, 2007). Set up by a former football journalist (Will Brooks), MYFC promised to give fans a say in the running of the club by making them stakeholders in return for an annual fee of £35. Fans would have a say in all issues, including kit design, transfers, team selection and even brands of beer served in the club bar. The only decisions fans would not be involved in are those taken during the match. In April, 2007 when MYFC went live more than 53,000 people registered an interest. Football fans were eager to blur the boundaries between fantasy football and reality and become involved in "real" virtual football.

In November 2007 a deal was reached to purchase Ebbsfleet United in the Blue Square Premier Division (MYFC, 2008). Since then members have voted on issues such as accepting Nike as the club's kit and merchandise supplier, freezing season ticket prices and setting the weekly playing budget. In March 2008, seven members of MYFC were elected on to MYFC's limited board giving fans more say in decisions. In May 2008, Ebbsfleet United won the FA Trophy at Wembley the club's greatest achievement since it began in 1890. At the opening of the 2008 season, it was announced that two fans'

Username removed
Sep 17 2008, 23:54
QUOTE(username removed @ Sep 15 2008, 13:25)
I heard Wayne Rooney is getting real upset at the fact people are making chants and songs because he is going bald or because of he's weight. Lets get him really frustrated during the game and hopefully he gets himself sent off. Ill start with;

He's fat
he's scouse
he'll prob'ly rob your house
Wayne Rooney, Wayne Rooney

So come on True Blues add some baldy chants too.

Do you really want to focus all your efforts on undermining someones self-esteem rather than trying to cheer our team on? I really wouldn't want to win this game for the sole reason that our fans have turned up at someones place of work and jeered his hair loss or fatness, because they think it'll upset him...

Figure 4.
Screen capture from CFCnetforums

Source: http://forums.cfcnet.co.uk/lofiversion/index.php?t39011.html

representatives are to be allowed into the board room on match days "Fan representation runs right through this club now", said Ebbsfleet Chief Executive David Davis (Ebbsfleet United FC, 2008). The MYFC initiative does indeed appear to offer an alternative to the current state of the football league system which is increasingly alienating fans. Brooks describes his initiative as an "ethical mission":

> I've created a vehicle that will pool fans' opinions, passion and wealth and turn fantasy football into reality. This is an unprecedented opportunity for fans to get closer to football than ever before – to have, at long, long last, a say in what goes on on and off the field (Brooks quoted in Rajan, 2007).

In terms of the AGIL framework Ebbsfleet United initially appears to show a harmonious blurring of the lifeworld of supporters with the system (corporate and media interests). The backlash from other club managers appears almost to confirm that what Ebbsfleet offers stands in opposition to the mainstream corporate world of football. The Independent on Sunday reported the views of other club managers. Lee Power, the Chairman of Cambridge United, who are third on the MYFC list of desireable acquisitions commented:

> You can't just whisk up genuine commitment by charging £35. Fifty-three thousand new fans would be great, but are these people going to buy football kits, match programmes, hot dogs? That's what a club needs, not internet voting (Power quoted by Rajan, 2007).

Further, Barry Hearn, owner of Leyton Orient attacked the MYFC concept saying:

> The idea is totally impractical. As far as I'm concerned, when you're running a football club, the ideal size of the ruling committee is one. I don't buy this mass voting nonsense; democracy and football don't mix (Hearn quoted by Rajan, 2007).

And Jack Charlton said:

> I've never heard anything like it in my life. It sounds completely daft. Only one person should pick a team and that's the manager (Charlton quoted by Harris, 2007).

These attacks get to the heart of the issue; the world of football is hierarchical, financially motivated and increasingly commercialised. Fans are a commodity used to generate income through increasingly inflated season ticket charges, and merchandise sales. In reality, Ebbsfleet United members get very little in return for their annual thirty five pounds membership fee; membership is not the same as being a season ticket holder. Action, or lack of it (only 50 per cent of members voted on how many members of MYFC should be elected onto MYFC's limited board, and who should supply the kits and merchandise, and discussion forum postings appear to suggest that members are already beginning to feel disempowered and alienated just as supporters of mainstream football (Figure 5).

The postings above suggest that members are beginning to recognise that they do not have as much power as they were promised. Daish, the manager, overrules votes and controls transfers, members powers "are being eroded". One post even states that MYFC is "a scam" and several postings state that they will not renew their membership, reminiscent of season ticket holders deciding not to renew as a protest at the colonization of their lifeworld. This declining interest could have serious wider implications. Kevin Rye, supporters directs's spokesman, said: "This might be seen as a one-off gimmick and harmless enough by many, however this is a real club, these are

Failing??
Ebbsfleet

by X 02 September 2008
is the MYFC movement now failing?
There seems to be much less interest in voting, and the general opinion seems to be that people wont be renewing next year. People seem to think that becuase Daish is still alowed to control most transfers etc, that MYFC members are being robbed of money, a scam >
if ur a member whats your thoughts, and will you be renewing?
Also what are your expectations of this season and do Ebbsfleet have a good chance for promotion in to the football league?

comment by Y
posted 3 Weeks Ago
"Did anyone get the impression that they would become shareholders when they joined?"
i thought if people gave money then they were shareholders, what did these people buy if it wasnt a share? *add comment | complain about this comment*

comment by A
posted 3 Weeks Ago
What people bought was membership to a website, renewable every year. The website then formed a trust which used the money to buy the club.
add comment | complain about this comment

comment by B
posted 2 Weeks Ago
It is a utter scam. Your vote can be altered by the manager, you have to renew after a year and they charge you for watching TV interview or match highlights.
I was cutting my losses until i saw DC-Grecian's comment. Please tell me how to get a refund!
add comment | complain about this comment

comment by C
posted Last Week
I'm also a member who won't be renewing. I also believed that when you joined you owned part of the club, but since joining members have had their powers eroded and are now left with useless votes which probably aren't taken into consideration anyway.

If anyone is thinking of joining..... DON'T!

Figure 5.
Screen capture of Ebbsfleet discussion thread

Source: http://bbc.co.uk/dna/606/A40462102

real finances and real fans. What happens if the novelty starts to wear off?" It appears that it already has, fans are beginning to see through the "ethical mission". A most powerful statement of this was made on fansfocus.com (Figure 6).

Lost?

I am not a member.....I'M A FREE MAN!!!!!!!!!

My definition of Myfc:
A few Genuine Football Supporters.(*names of some members of forum* removed)
A lot more playing EGO Football Manager- The Reality 2007/08. (*names of some members of forum* removed)
A SELECT FEW!.....Chaccchhhhiiiinggggg!!!!!(goes with out saying)

Figure 6.
Fansfocus.com posting

Source: http://fansfocus.com/forums/ubbthreads.php/topics/1460048/of_supporters.html

This fan clearly defines himself as a "free man" rather than a member of MYFC and goes on to illustrate that MYFC is, like any other football club, made up of a few genuine fans and a number of power seeking profiteers. The "ethical mission" which appeared to offer an alternative to the corporate world of football has fallen short of the promise.

5.3 Protests against London ownership and managerial turmoil at Newcastle United Football club

Newcastle United Football club (www.nufc.com) is perhaps gaining notoriety as one of the worst managed football clubs in the English Premier League. This is due to a constant state of flux concerning the ownership of the club and a constant "churn" with respect to unsuccessful managers not meeting the aspirations of a very demanding and loyal set of "Geordie" football supporters (with a main *locus* within the Newcastle City and surrounding area of the North East of England). Newcastle United have won very few major honours – their last successes being the Football Association cup in 1955 and the FAIRS (now UEFA cup) in the 1969. The football supporters are considered to be very loyal and fanatical about "their" club supporting it through generations: it has one of the largest grounds with a capacity of around 54,000 seats and for the past ten years has consistently filled the stadium at most games with over 35,000 consistent season ticket sales each year (ranging from £520 to around £1,000 for an annual ticket).

The most recent saga concerning ownership and managerial regime change at NUFC concerns events that happened in 2008. These events, perhaps more than ever before, were fuelled by the media (television and newspapers), the supporters (using their voice at the football ground during and after matches and also through the radio, local paper and internet discussion/chat forums) and the financial power of the city (london financial markets).

NUFC supporters view the "true" ownership of the club as ultimately in the hands of the local Newcastle community despite the physical ownership of assets being vested in powerful business men (more recently Sir John Hall and his son Douglas (property developers from the north east), then Freddie Shepherd (former business man and friend of the Halls again from the north east) and latterly Mike Ashley (sports retail magnate and a southerner deemed a "Cockney"). In 2007 after a period of resentment and unrest by the supporters due to near relegation battles in the premiership (accentuated by the sacking of a local Newcastle "hero" Sir Bobby Robson as manager and his replacement by a series of unpopular managers finishing with Sam Allardyce – NUFC was sold to Mike Ashley in July 2007. There was much euphoria over this deal due to promises of large investments in the club to buy new players to compete with the top four in the premiership. Ashley initially supported Allardyce but when results turned sour and the supporters rebelled against his "long ball" style tactics he was dismissed. A surprise new appointment (second choice however in January 2008) was the return of the "King" Kevin Keegan who had managed the club previously and was a former player. Keegan was an extremely popular choice amongst supporters and hailed as the "Messiah" and saviour of Newcastle United. On the 4th September 2008 Keegan resigned after a bitter row with Mike Ashley and his senior management team (led by Dennis Wise – a "Cockney"). Reasons cited were the lack of promised funds to buy world class players, the selling (or offer of sale) of the best players including James Milner to Aston Villa and an under-mining of Keegan's right to manage by taking away his control of the buying and selling of players. In effect the Board Room had full

control of assets within the club and the Manager was relegated to the role of a Coach purely in charge of team selection and tactics.

During this period, the voice and views of the fans were completely disregarded. Even though there was huge public outcry conducted through the local paper (*Newcastle Evening Chronicle*), on local radio phone-in programmes usually following poor performances, through the discussion and internet forums and amongst the local community in the pubs and clubs and workplace. The official NUFC.com web site was fully utilised by Ashley to project a corporate image of a well run club –mostly containing "feel good" stories from players and club officials. This followed an extremely astute commercial manoeuvre in the summer of 2008 to force fans to commit to three year season ticket terms for a promised price freeze – otherwise they would have to pay a 20 per cent increase. This was a distinct play on the loyalty of committed fans to lock them in – especially if success was not immediately forthcoming. The players and their agents were effectively "gagged" and instructed not to give interviews directly to the press and media. Pressure was also exerted on local newspaper reporters not to publish material that would agitate the fans – the effective sanction being controlled access to the club and information on players, transfers, tactics and management. Local reporters responded with their own U-Tube blogs (such as Blogonthetyne) where they could discuss more contentious issues with greater freedom – but not officially under the banner of the newspaper.

Fans sought solace and therapy for their feelings of injustice, bad treatment and lack of information forthcoming from the club over events in the use of internet discussion forums. One such forum, run and moderated by the local *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* newspaper (the NUFC general discussion forum) might be considered the most popular site for postings about events. Discussions reached a peak over the events surrounding the resignation of Keegan. The majority of fans were sympathetic to his views as he was regarded as one of their own and with his heart in the club. This rebounded in a tidal wave of resentment and vitriol against Ashley and his senior management team recreating prejudices related to UK North South divide – especially a dislike and a distrust of London ownership of a Newcastle football team.

An example of this type of post is provide below where "MadPete" expresses caution to other forum users after the messages were becoming increasingly litigious or possibly subject to police monitoring and (perhaps corporate) surveillance. He reminds users that even though pseudonyms are used – fans identities can be traced through IP addresses of forum users (and they will have signed up to the policies and conditions of the forum itself).

This is an example of what is popularly thought to be a "free speech situation" rapidly rebounding on forum users into something that could get them into serious trouble. The more emotive the outbursts (and this was an escalating situation where fans "wound each other up in heated debates either agreeing or disagreeing) the riskier the position of the respondent. Eventually the moderator "HelenD" from the newspaper has to step in and make announcements for users to be careful and not to use bad language or defamatory comments – or incite violence. She states: "Thanks MadPete for your post. The chronicle and journal will not tolerate threats of violence on our forums ... We understand that fans are angry and upset – we are too – but we cannot allow posts containing abusive insults and violent threats to remain published". Posted 4th September 2008 (Figure 7).

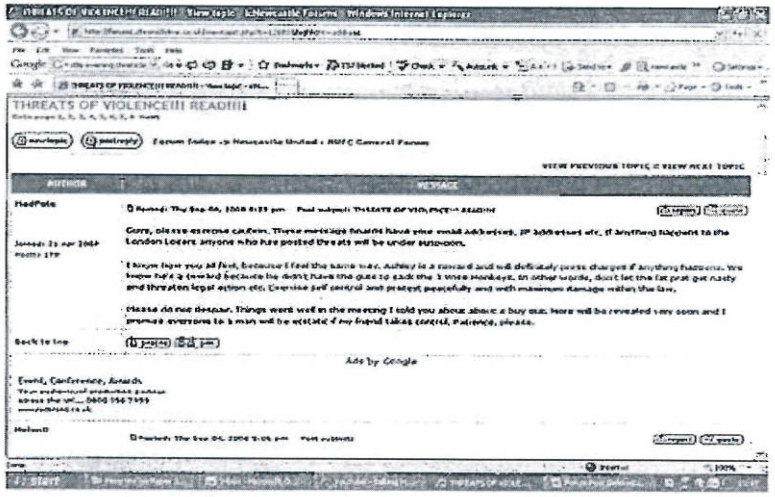

Figure 7.
Warning from a "user" of the forum – reminder of legal implications

This series of threads discussing the poor state of the club, Ashley's mismanagement and possible motives, possible solutions to the crisis and possible threats of action represent real democracy or free speech in action. However, we can see how this is curtailed with a mild threat from the corporate media interests (supported by the judicial and legal systems) and a sharp reminder that the users are not secure in their conversations. They can be under surveillance, they may be identified and they are asked to modify their behaviours to be less emotive and speak more rationally (again a culture of instrumentalism from government and large business).

Owing to a lack of information coming from the club, and a restriction of flows of information to the popular local press the NUFC general forum became the main focal point for fans to obtain any breaking news, rumours or general intelligence about the state of the club and future speculation. This can be seen in a series of threads posted on Tuesday 2nd September 2008 in response to what was seen as heavy handed moderation and deletion of message posts related to the "calls for a fans boycott of matches". The discussion was aimed at the forum's moderator "HelenD" who represented the local paper. These threads were later deleted and can no longer be seen or found within the forum archives (search performed on http://forums-icnewcastle.co.uk/as of 1st December 2008):

Fairscup – Posted Tuesday 02 Sep 2008 12:23 pm.

Just follow our posts Helen, most stories break here ☺

Shepherd-Out – Posted Tuesday 02 Sep 2008 1:55 pm.

Helen, the local papers response to this issue is very important. Why won't you let us discuss that fact on our threads? Fair enough the boycott thread was out of order, but a thread pondering how you will react is a legitimate public interest? So why delete it?

Posts are in real time and seem to run constantly throughout each day with a dedicated set of users. This represents a public sphere for discussion and is an important counter-veiling power to corporate interests. Users cannot be controlled or verified however – there is no certainty that the media (as in HelenD) or representatives from the club owners, management group or players agents are not "leaking" information to manipulate, provoke, counter, misinform or influence debates and opinions.

If this is representative of fans' culture and their particular lifeworld, it is certainly currently colonized (or at the very least at risk of being colonized) by the system of large business interests, players commercial interests and the media.

6. Conclusions

Our analysis shows the "colonization of the Lifeworld" where big corporate interests (the system) are manipulating public opinion and freedom to speak openly within an overall goal of profit maximization for club owners and the large media corporations. Fans are still controlled both through how they are constructed in the media and what is broadcast to them. Empowerment through connectivity has not happened. Although steps to enable free communication have been made we are still a long way off supporters having a powerful enough voice to organise against the commercial power of the large football clubs. In Foucauldian terms "(the supporter) is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1995) as the ultimate power remains in mass media and broadcast rather than "narrowcast". Football supporters can communicate with each other but not with the football clubs, restricting any power promised by connectivity through social media. Football supporters continue to be constructed as consumers their lifeworld colonized and controlled. The hegemonic state remains unchallenged as the ideal speech situation remains elusive.

In terms of Habermas's theory of communicative action and the idealised notion of a free speech situation our example vignettes demonstrate that the SNSs may involve large distortions of communications that the public spheres may not necessarily be aware of: being under the impression that they have free speech and a democratic voice. We can see that in each case concerns arise over: truth (is the propositional content true and accurate) where vested interests are at work to promote rumour, suspicion, prejudice, propaganda or false information. Sincerity (the speaker means what they say) is doubtful in many cases as well as the intentions of the users are not clear. The users on SNSs also use disguised pseudonyms such as "MadPete" or "Slayer" and "Toonfus", etc. The clarity (whether the messages are intelligible and comprehensible) of posts is also of dubious quality, especially where sub-groups of users have developed their own style of postings, and use a specific form of language (often very bad or abusive language). The last validity claim of clarity (utterances are morally appropriate with regard to existing norms and values) can also be disputed – especially in the NUFC ownership debate where threats of violence and illegal actions are made leading to the media having to take control action to moderate the discussions. SNSs in the sphere of public football fan communities are therefore not democratic forums and do not represent ideal speech situations. The danger is that the public think that they are private communities under their own group ownership. This is not the case and they are open to infiltration and corporate and media manipulation. A case of system colonizing lifeworld which could lead to potential disorder, mistrust and a collapse of legitimacy of an organisational system. The colonization is increasingly successful the greater these pathologies occur as the collapse of the democratic user forums plays into the hands of the "instrumental" systems (large corporate, football clubs and media interests).

Increasingly, the structural nuclei of the lifeworld (culture, society and personality) within the context of football clubs and their supporters are being eroded. Our three vignettes of recent events demonstrating the interactions between business interests, media power and football club owners demonstrate examples of how these pathologies start to emerge and grow. We can see that increasing cynicism due to the domination of business interests abusing fan loyalty can lead to disturbances with cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. Public spheres such as fans discussion forums start to lose meaning, collective identities are undermined by increasing fragmentation of subgroups of fans with differing viewpoints and there is a rupture of tradition. An increasing sense of "anomie" sets in where the fans feel divorced from the strategy, culture, operational running and player/fan interactions within the clubs. This then leads to growing alienation from the way that football is managed and the celebrity lifestyles of the players. The adaption and goals media (money and power) representing the system become dominant and an uncoupling takes place away from the influence and values that constitute the fans lifeworld. The system is seen to be parasitic on the lifworld.

In our examples we have shown how the use of media, websites and SNSs can be used to actively promote democratic discussion amongst fans and stakeholders in football clubs. Conversely, or perversely however, they can also be used to constrain, infiltrate or manipulate discussion. This plays into the hands of the large corporate, state and media interests. A large question remains – how can SNSs in particular be used to enhance democratic discussions and provide more idealised frees speech forums?

Our future research will examine these complex issues in more depth using virtual ethnographic techniques allied with analytical frameworks derived from critical social theory. These are important social issues and we have a long way to go before we begin to understand them and hopefully promote a more democratic society (lifeworld) that is not so colonized by the instrumental actions of others.

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Corresponding author

Rachel McLean can be contacted at: r.mclean@bolton.ac.uk