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Dumbs gone to Iceland: (Re)presentations of English national identity during Euro 2016 and the EU referendum

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This paper analyses (re)presentations of English national identity during the 2016 UEFA European Football Championships which were held in France between 10 June and 10 July of that year. Set against the backdrop of Britain's referendum regarding membership of the European Union, the tournament took place during a time of heightened debate about English national identity. Employing inductive textual analysis and drawing on Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined community, Hobsbaum's (1983) notion of invented traditions and Guibernau's (2007) strategies for the construction of national identity, England's three most popular newspapers, the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror, were examined. While the papers' narratives employed familiar tropes which referenced England's past history and employed militaristic metaphors and the 'us' and 'them' cliché, there was also demonstrable uncertainty regarding the articulation of 'English' (and 'British') national identity.

Key words: England, Euro 2016, football, media discourse, media sport, national identity

Introduction

Due to the referendum on the UK's continued membership of the European Union (EU), the 2016 UEFA Football Championship (Euro 2016) was played during a period of heightened debate about English national identity. On Thursday 23 June, three days after England's final group match against Slovakia, the referendum took place with 52.1 per cent voting in favour of 'Brexit' – for Britain to leave (or exit) the EU. Hobolt's (2016) analysis of the vote showed a deeply divided nation split along demographic lines with young graduates living in large multi-cultural cities voting to 'Remain' whereas those living in the English countryside and northern post-industrial towns voted in large numbers to 'Leave'. There was also a geographical split with England and Wales voting to 'Leave' while Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to 'Remain'.

Although some commentators, such as (Gapper 2014), have argued that 'The era of the Fleet Street tabloids, the populist and fearsome emblems of British culture and politics, is over', research conducted by Loughborough University (2016) showed that the press played a prominent – and partisan – role during the referendum campaign. Less than an hour after the result was announced,

Tony Gallagher, editor of the *Sun*, told the *Guardian*: ‘So much for the waning power of the print media’ (Martinson 2016) which was indicative of the feeling that, despite declining sales and falling revenues, newspapers still had a significant impact on the result (Seaton 2016). This study seeks to examine the narratives employed by the three best-selling English newspapers: the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* (Ponsford 2016) and their Sunday counterparts in covering the England men’s football team during Euro 2016. While it must be acknowledged that these newspapers articulate a particular form of Englishness, they had a combined readership in excess of four million at the time of the referendum¹ and, therefore, provide fertile ground for exploring the manner in which the articulation of English national identity reflects both the real and imagined versions of Englishness during Euro 2016 in the context of the build-up to and aftermath of the EU Referendum.

(English) national identity, football and the media

A nation is, as described by Anderson, an ‘imagined political community’ (2006: 6). In Anderson’s conceptualisation, nations are inherently *limited* because no nation identifies with the entire human race, and even the most populous have geographical boundaries beyond which lie other nations from which they are separated. They are also *sovereign* because the conceptual roots of the nation can be traced back to the age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution when the sovereign state and the concept of liberty began to usurp and replace supposedly divinely-ordained dynasties and feudalism (2006: 6-7). Nations are imagined, Anderson argues, because even people living in the smallest will never meet or know the majority of the rest of the population in that nation ‘yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (ibid: 6).

This perception of a unique national community is created through cultural phenomenon such as a shared language, a mass education system and mass media which both create and relay narratives concerning the nation’s culture (Gellner 1983). According to Womack et al., ‘national identity is thus the product of discourse’ (2009: 22) or, as Stuart Hall put it: ‘National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about “the nation” with which we can *identify*’ (1996: 613, italics in the original). This discursive national culture is compromised of what Hobsbawm refers to as ‘invented traditions’ which he defined as:

A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and or norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (2012: 1).

Wherever possible these invented traditions, which can range from national anthems, flags and emblems to the British monarch's Christmas broadcast, are associated with an idealised past. For example, in Britain, 'the war is taken to evoke the British at their best, the qualities of Churchill's "island race". This ... helps construct a sense of nation and nationality ...' (Cesarini 1996: 69). They are, in turn, bolstered through discourses articulated by both politicians and journalists. Guibernau (2007) outlined five strategies which, she argues, the state employs to construct and disseminate a definitive national identity in an attempt to unite its citizens.

- Firstly, the image of nation is defined and represented in stories about the dominant ethnic group within the nation's borders and reinforced by stories of that group's common history and culture.
- Secondly, this shared history, culture and sense of belonging is reinforced through the use of national symbols and rituals.
- Thirdly, a clearly defined set of civic rights and duties are created at the same time establishing who is entitled to those rights and is thus accepted as a citizen and who is not.
- Fourthly, a nation's identity is made distinct and reaffirmed through the creation of common enemies, thereby separating out and distinguishing the national identity (us) from the identity of other nations (them).
- Finally, the media and education systems are utilised to disseminate the above, namely: the image of the nation; its shared history and culture; its civil rights and duties, and its distinction from the common enemy thereby defining what it is to be a 'good citizen'.

As Guibernau argues, by 'strengthening a sentiment of belonging to an artificial type of extended family, the nation' (ibid: 169), this shared notion of national culture and history supersedes other social identities such as class, race and gender. Because of this, 'individuals identify with and ... regard as their own the accomplishments of their fellow nationals' (ibid). Hobsbawm expresses a similar sentiment and directly applies the idea to sport which, he argues, is 'uniquely effective' in instilling feelings of national belonging (2012). Few, if any, cultural events provide a more fertile environment for the communal expression of national identity than mediated sports events such as a football World Cup or European Championships. Thus, any national football team (which, lest we forget, begins each match by singing its national anthem) becomes a powerful symbol of the relevant nation because, to repeat Hobsbawm's oft-quoted phrase: 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself' (ibid: 143).

British bulldog or English lion?

When James VI of Scotland became King of England in 1603 he declared that he was not King of England and Scotland but King of Great Britain. However, it was not until the Act of Union in 1707 that the term 'Great Britain' was formally adopted (Kumar 2003a). Cesarini draws out the development of this process of 'forging a nation', arguing that the confused history of British citizenship means that British national identity has never been clearly defined and in many respects 'was formed in opposition to foreign countries that were considered repressive and "backward"' (1996: 61). Crucially, this notion of 'Britishness' became synonymous with a mythologised 'Englishness' that dominated the Celtic nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Fulbrook and Cesarini 1996: 212) which, in turn, 'clung to their national identities as a kind of compensation ...' (Kumar 2003a: 187).

Consequently, following the loss of the *British* Empire, *English* national identity which, unlike Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish identity, was intrinsically associated with that Empire was hit by crisis (Kumar 2003a; Nairn 2003). In the years before the 2016 EU referendum, scholars of English national identity argued that, this crisis was reinforced by political devolution of the Celtic nations (Bryant 2003); scepticism against politics in general (Kenny 2014) and also increased integration with Europe (Wellings 2012). So it is little surprise that since the early 1990s, perceived internal and external threats such as Celtic devolution and greater European integration have, in turn, led to a heightened awareness and articulation of English national identity of which football and, in particular, the men's national team has become a fulcrum. One example of this revival of populist English nationalism is the manner in which since the Euro 96 football tournament England fans have increasingly displayed the (English) flag of St George instead of the (British) Union flag, an action 'seen by many as a positive re-affirmation of an English nationalism in response to the collapse of a coherent British identity' (Carrington 1999: 76). The notion of Englishness has been further reinforced in opposition to the perceived threat of 'radical Islam' in the aftermath of both the 9/11 attacks in America in 2001 and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005 (Garland and Treadwell 2010).

Hold the back page!

The cultural representation of a nation state's identity through mediated sport is described by Rowe et al. (2000) as the 'sport-nationalism-media' troika. The potent emotive and dramatic mix provided by sport (and in the context of this study football) means that English newspapers do not just report on matches and their results. Instead, 'the football Press plays a part in the production of a shared

set of experiences or in the establishment of an “imagined community” (Crolley and Hand 2001). Coverage of the sport has become an extension of the country’s norms and values providing a representation of the perceived characteristics of English national identity (Crolley and Hand 2002: 19). This mediation of football plays a crucial role in reproducing and amplifying key characteristics associated with fans and their clubs, cities or countries, in turn helping to develop a wider collective identity among the group (Boyle and Haynes 2000: 13). Blain et al. refer to this as a ‘form of discursive paralysis’ (1993: 64) in which sports journalists construct images of their own country’s national identity (autotypification) and that of other nations (heterotypification). Therefore, and crucially in the light of the 2016 EU Referendum, football match reports and related articles ‘may be read, partly at least, as weaving a story about how Europeans interact with each other and how they reflect upon their own national, regional and group identities’ (Crolley and Hand 2002: 2). This content is aimed at what Blain and O’Donnell (2000), citing Umberto Eco, call ‘The model reader’: a constructed, idealised figure partially extrapolated from actual readers – in essence an individual representation of Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined community’. However, the football press does not simply passively reproduce existing societal attitudes, nor do its readers passively receive the content. Instead, they are both ‘part of a tripartite structure consisting of readers/viewers who are interpreting the world(s) represented or implied, and those who are doing the representing’ (Rowe et al. 2000: 121).

This interaction is complicated by the fact that those producing the texts (the journalists) and those consuming them (the readers) may not necessarily have the same political agenda, share the same socio-economic backgrounds or be of the same race and/or gender. The producers’ interpretation of the meanings embedded in the texts may be different from the consumers’ interpretation of the same meanings. Therefore, sports-media texts are polysemic and do not possess a fixed, single meaning (Kennedy and Hills 2009: 21) but are, instead, a site for negotiation of socio-cultural identity. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on the (re)presentation of that identity by the English tabloid print media *not* the readers’ interpretation of that (re)presentation.

50 years of hurt

The 1966 World Cup, which was both hosted and won by England, has become ‘... a powerful, self-sustaining myth that has been wired into the nation’s collective consciousness’ (Silk and Francombe 2011: 265). One of the key elements of the ‘myth of 1966’ (Critcher 1994: 86) was nostalgic nationalism which ‘conjures up the supremacy of Britain on the international stage and an acceptance and enactment of mythical English “values”’ (Silk and Francombe 2011: 264). Weight argues that victory for England in the final over Germany cemented the Germans as ‘an opponent’

(2002: 457) while at the same time compensating for England's decline since the Second World War, making the England men's football team a touchstone for the health of the nation. Colley and Hand (2002) have drawn out the manner in which the 'denigration of the Other' has become more prevalent in English football reports during the second half of the 20th century at the same time arguing that representations of English national identity and, in particular, the England men's football team, draw on a range of perceptions which 'derive from and feed into wider assumptions in the national imagined community dating from the imperial era that serve to define "Englishness"' (Crolley and Hand 2002: 31).

In many respects this reached a peak in coverage of the 1996 UEFA Football Championship (Euro 96). Maguire et al. (1999) and Garland and Rowe (1999) found that English national identity was defined by both the Second World War and England's 1966 World Cup triumph. The tabloid (and to a lesser extent broadsheet) press coverage invoked English national symbolism and employed 'us' and 'them' rhetoric which drew heavily on the aforementioned conflict in both its narratives and imagery, particularly in the build-up to the England's semi-final defeat to Germany. By far the clearest example of this was the *Daily Mirror's* declaration of 'football war' on Germany in a front page which used pictures of England players Stuart Pearce and Paul Gascoigne in World War Two army helmets along with the headline 'ACTUNG SURRENDER: For you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over' (*Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1996 as quoted in Maguire and Poulton 1999: 25). Analysis of the 1995 Rugby World Cup found similar coverage of the England team. Reportage employed national stereotypes in adversarial 'us' v. 'them' narratives in which players were 'highly visible embodiments [of England] – they are "patriots at play"' (Tuck 2003: 180-181).

Various studies have found that many of these narrative techniques were in evidence in the coverage of the England men's football team at subsequent tournaments. These included the invocation of the memories of British military successes (Alabarces et al. 2001) and the use of military metaphors and the negative characterisation of 'traditional enemies' (Garland 2004). Vincent et al. (2010) found that 40 years after the 1966 World Cup, the discursive construction of English national identity at the 2006 World Cup drew heavily on invented traditions and previous military successes and had '... barely moved beyond the shadow of the Second World War' (2010: 219). Similar narratives, particularly surrounding the Second World War and the 1966 World Cup victory, were also in evidence during the coverage of the last European Championships in 2012 (Euro 2012) (Vincent and Harris 2014). However, Kennedy found that in marked contrast to what had come before the newspaper discourses generated since the 2010 World Cup and, in particular, in the run-up to and during the Euro 2012 tournament, were 'uncharacteristically muted' (2014:

276). They were, he argued dominated by a narrative of ‘low expectations’ mirroring the wider societal preoccupation with austerity which was part of a long-term ‘complex and largely non-linear dialectic of decline and renewal’ (2014: 281).

Methodology

To solicit data for the research, a qualitative discourse analysis was undertaken of three English so-called ‘tabloid’ newspapers: the *Sun*, and the *Daily Mail*, the country’s two best-selling daily papers which both sit on the right of the political spectrum, and the *Daily Mirror*, the third bestselling paper which sits to the left of the political spectrum, plus their Sunday counterparts. The newspapers were chosen because of their popularity; their extensive coverage of football, and because tabloid newspapers produce more race-focused sports stories than their broadsheet counterparts (Law 2002). They are also characterised by the national stereotypes that they employ which articulate and reinforce myths and perceptions of national identity (Garland 2004). Furthermore, the *Sun*, in particular, but also to a lesser extent the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*, have been the subject of a range of earlier research on the narratives employed in media texts focused on the England men’s team at major international football tournaments (Garland 2004, Vincent et al. 2010; Vincent and Harris 2014). Mirroring such previous research in this paper will make comparisons easier, which is important as the concept of (English) national identity is fluid and changes over time and in relation to the contemporary socio-cultural environment (Crolley and Hand 2002: 25).

Hard copies of the newspapers were analysed for a period of 40 days from 2 June, the day of England’s final warm-up ‘friendly’ match and eight days before the tournament’s start, until 11 July, the day after the tournament final. The newspapers were read twice and articles and comment pieces which included text and/or photographic imagery concerning:

- (1) the England men’s team both on and off the pitch;
- (2) England supporters both at the tournament and in England or elsewhere, and
- (3) English national identity in the context of Euro 2016 were subject to coded content analysis.

The articles were organised by newspaper and date. The transcripts were re-read twice with the aim of identifying dominant and/or contradictory narratives. To facilitate this a constant comparison methodology using two levels of coding – open and axial – was used to inductively interpret the emerging themes and relationships (Corbin and Strauss 2015; Cresswell 1998). The codes which emerged from this process were subsequently interpreted using Guibenu’s strategies of national

identity, Anderson's concept of an imagined political community (2006) and Hobsbawm's notion of invented tradition (2012). Barthes (2006) argues that the myth does not need to be deciphered or interpreted to be understood or to be effective. On the contrary, if the ideological content of the text is obvious the myth ceases to have power – it stops being a myth. Therefore, myth only works when the denotive meaning of a text and its underlying socio-cultural connotations blur into one. This methodology allowed these dual interpretations to be unpackaged by first identifying the denotive meaning of the articles examined and secondly by identifying their social meaning. The aim of the paper, therefore, is not to define 'Englishness' or English national identity but to examine how this national identity is articulated in the tabloid press during at a particular moment in time against a backdrop of major socio-cultural flux (the EU membership referendum), through the coverage of the country's men's football team at a major international tournament.

Results

'Fuck off Europe – we're all voting out'

Guibernau (2007) argued that the construction of national identity united citizens around stories regarding the dominant ethnic group which drew upon a sense of shared history and were reinforced through the use of nationally recognised symbols. In the context of Euro 2016, the papers focused on white, Anglo-Saxon fans and their performance of Englishness, which was anchored in the nation's idealised common heritage. Typical of this theme was a *Daily Mirror* article headlined 'To-knight is the night Hodgson starts Crusade' which featured fans enacting a playful parody of an idealised version of Englishness in which they greeted England boss Roy Hodgson while 'dressed up as Crusaders ... decked out in chainmail and St George's cross tabards' (11 June: 7). Several scholars (e.g. Vincent and Harris 2014, Vincent et al. 2010) have noted that the increased articulation of English nationalism in the 1990s was mirrored by the 'resurrection' (Heffer 1999: 33) of the flag of St George into English football during the 1996 European Championships, held in England, and subsequent tournaments during which the flag became 'a powerful statement of national pride and solidarity' (King 2006: 250). The flag was also in evidence during coverage of Euro 2016. On the day of England's first match, team captain Wayne Rooney was pictured on the back pages of all three analysed papers in front of the Flag of St George (the *Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, 11 June 2016). The following day Rebecca Vardy, the wife of England striker Jamie Vardy, was pictured in a Cross-of-St-George vest top in the *Sun* (12 June) to advertise her tournament diary.

However, the cultural significance of the flag of St George was complicated by its association with England fans who engaged in violence in the two days leading up to the team's first match, against

Russia, as well as on the day of the game itself. Many of these fans were pictured draped in the flag or in front of St George cross flags which they had attached to the walls of local bars. Poulton has argued that in the English media's coverage of football hooliganism 'As soon as trouble breaks out, almost all distinctions between the violent, xenophobic minority and non-violent majority is lost in the media coverage that emphasises the behaviour of the former. Consequently, the majority loses all sense of identity, voice and presence' (2001: 124). At Euro 2016, this meant that those fans whose behaviour fit the 'hooligan' narrative were soon foregrounded at the expense of those fans whose behaviour was, by contrast, relatively benign. However, this (re)presentation of the England hooligans as typical of all England fans meant that their aggressively xenophobic performance of Englishness complicated the signifiers they were associated with, such as the flag of St George.

Furthermore, as well as singing songs about the IRA and German bombers being shot down – familiar refrains from previous tournaments (Vincent and Hill 2011) – the fans regularly sang 'Fuck off, Europe – we're all voting out' (Gysin 2016), a crude articulation of the campaign to 'Leave' the EU. This meant the flag of St George and associated symbols, such as the Crusader costume, became antagonising symbols of English national identity. Their ambiguous and contested meanings were evident in several stories in which anxiety about the extremes of English nationalism were both articulated and rebutted. Two days before Euro 2016 began, the *Daily Mail* featured a story about a blog post on the BBC's *iWonder* website which questioned whether the 'Crusader' costumes worn by some fans might offend Muslims. The newspaper quoted Conservative MP Philip Davies saying: 'I don't think an England supporter dressing up as a crusader is offensive to anyone other than these do-gooders. It's ludicrous.' The article also quoted several fans who claimed the BBC piece would only spur them on to wear the costume – 'anything to annoy the BBC PC Brigade' (8 June: 14).

Garland and Treadwell have outlined how the English Defence League (EDL) a high-profile group formed in 2009 and opposed to radical Islam, with loose links to the English football hooligan milieu, has adopted the flag of St George, incorporating it into their own insignia as well as clothing that they sell. Garland and Treadwell argue that the EDL's adoption of the flag is 'loaded with symbolism' (2010: 29) due to its historical links to the Crusades – a conflict between Christian Europe and Islam – and 'in many ways ... this flag as a symbol encompasses much of the message of these groups' (2010: 29). Gimson et al. argue that this link with the EDL has meant the flag has become 'toxified' (2012: 6) with 24 per cent of people associating the flag of St George with 'racism' (2012: 2). This association was evident in a separate story later in the tournament, on the

day before the EU referendum, in which the *Sun* told how a father-of-two had been branded a 'pathetic racist' for adorning his car with England flags (22 June: 17).

Launching the Varmarda

Guibernau (2007) argued that a national consciousness is created through narratives which disparage foreigners thus creating common 'enemies'. These narratives draw upon 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm 2012) and due to the legacy of the British Empire they are often 'imbued with military metaphors and references' (Crolley, Hand and Jeutter 2000: 110). In the 'tabloid' press this is done by 'bludgeoning the readership with exaggerated insular, parochial, "little Englander" "us vs. them" ideologies' (Vincent and Harris 2014: 233). Before England's first game at Euro 2016, the *Sun* (9 June: 5) sent Lee Chapman, a lookalike of the England player Jamie Vardy, to 'see off [a] Russian sub' that had sailed towards the English Channel. Under the headline 'VLAD'S BOYS THINK IT'S ALL DOVER...', the article echoed narratives identified by Vincent and Harris in their analysis of the coverage of Euro 2012 which were employed to 'capture the interest of the English "imagined community"' (2014: 229), which is 'English and, with few exceptions, white' Crabbe (2004: 70), as opposed to the country's wider multi-ethnic population. The words 'think it's all Dover' drew upon the famous BBC commentary of Kenneth Wolstenholme during England's 1966 World Cup final victory in which he said: 'Some people are on the pitch ... they think it's all over... It is now!' as Geoff Hurst scored the final goal of the game. At the same time, the headline evoked the popular World War Two song '(There'll be bluebirds over) the white cliffs of Dover' sung by Dame Vera Lynn. Furthermore, Chapman was 'dressed as Lord Nelson' and was said to be leading a 'VARMARDA' – a play on the name of the England forward, Jamie Vardy, which evoked memories of the English navy's victory over France and Spain at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and the English navy's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

The wider coverage of the England team drew on nostalgic myths rooted in the Second World War. England's match against Wales was referred to as 'The battle of Britain' by both the *Daily Mail* (16 June 16: 96) and the *Sun* (June 15: 61). On the day of the game, Martin Samuel, of the *Daily Mail*, referred to the conflict again, claiming that 'the Phoney War is over' – a reference to the period after Britain declared war on Germany in 1939 but before the two countries engaged in combat. However, the militaristic narratives never reached the xenophobic heights of the Euro '96's 'Achtung Surrender' rhetoric. This may have been, as Vincent et al. (2010) noted in their analysis of the coverage of the 2006 World Cup, due to England's poor early performances and a draw that meant that, apart from Wales, they did not meet any of their historic on- (or off-)field rivals.

St George slays the Dragons

In 1998, fulfilling a manifesto pledge, New Labour established the devolved Welsh Assembly (as well as the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly). At the same time as giving the Celtic nations a louder political voice, some argued that the move led to the ‘death of Britain’ (Kumar 2003b: 7) with which English national identity had been synonymous. This, in turn, according to some commentators, led to a heightened desire among the English to formulate a cultural identity distinct from that of their Celtic neighbours (Gibbons and Malcom 2017). Thus, the nationalistic ‘us’ vs ‘them’ tone of the papers’ coverage reached a crescendo during the build up to, and immediate aftermath of, England’s second group game against Wales.

2

This antagonism was articulated explicitly in a *Daily Mirror* article concerning the comments of England midfielder Jack Wilshere which was headlined ‘THEY DON’T LIKE US AND WE DON’T LIKE THEM’ (14 June: 60). The coverage of the game drew heavily on both countries’ ‘invented traditions’, with the *Daily Mirror* (16 June: 69) billing it as ‘Lions vs Dragons’. Crolley and Hand (2006) have argued that the lion became a key signifier of English patriotism and national identity following the exploits of King Richard I, otherwise known as Richard the Lionheart, during the Crusades in the 12th Century. The Football Association (FA) adopted the three lions (drawn from Richard I’s heraldic emblem) as their logo and regularly refer to the England men’s team as ‘Lions’ (and the women’s team as ‘Lionesses’). This symbolism gained wider resonance during Euro ’96 thanks to the song *Three Lions (Football’s coming home)*, released by comedians David Baddiel and Frank Skinner along with Ian Broudie of the *Lightening Seeds*, which became a popular fan anthem. During Euro 2016, the team and individual players were referred to as ‘Lions’ (the *Sun*, 14 June: 48 and 49) with the most overt example being published on the day of the England-Wales match when the *Sun* used a picture of England captain Wayne Rooney’s face superimposed on to the head of a lion. In the accompanying article, headlined ‘FREE LIONS: Come on Roy, get ’em roaring’, the paper implored the England manager, Roy Hodgson, to ‘make us proud’ (16 June: 68).

In a similar manner the papers referred to the Welsh team as ‘Dragons’ or ‘The Dragon’ (e.g. the *Sun*, 16 June: 60; *Daily Mirror*, 15 June: 63) drawing on that country’s national symbol, the red dragon, which was first referenced in the ninth century text *Historia Brittonum* and was incorporated into the Welsh flag in 1959, eight years after it first featured on the crest of the Football Association of Wales. After England’s victory, the *Sun* declared ‘ST GEORGE SLAYS THE DRAGONS’ (17 June: 9), a reference to England’s patron saint who supposedly fought and

killed a dragon in the 12th Century. Crolley and Hand suggest that, for sports journalists, the Lionheart attitude of the English encoded within the symbolic representation of the lion seems to embody ‘both the identity of the English people and the desired spirit of the England team’ representing an ‘overt communication of courage and pride’ (2006: 20).

The overarching narrative constructed around the game focused on which of the two (British) teams demonstrated these characteristics most passionately. For example, in the *Daily Mirror* on the day before the game, James Nursey wrote about how Welsh player Gareth Bale insisted ‘Wales had more pride and passion than their English counterparts’ (15 June: 62 and 64). In the event England came from behind to win the match 2-1 courtesy of an injury-time goal from Daniel Sturridge. The *Sun* greeted the victory with the headline ‘ROAR PASSION’, pointedly asking: ‘How was that for pride then, Gareth?’ (17 June: 88) while the *Daily Mirror* declared the England team a ‘PRIDE OF LIONS’ (17 June 17: 70-71) and the *Daily Mail* captioned a picture of Sturridge celebrating as a ‘Lion’s roar’ (17 June: 96).

Patriots at fair play

Guibernau (2007) noted that national identity is reinforced by a clearly defined set of civic rights afforded to a nation’s citizens as well as duties and responsibilities expected of them. This means that in their roles of ‘patriots at play’ and ‘embodiments of the nation’ (Tuck 2003) the England players and their coaches are held to a certain standard of behaviour and level of achievement. Vincent et al. argue that one of the ways in which this is articulated is through the ethos of fair play, which they argue is ‘one of the defining features of English sporting identity’ (2010: 212) which is frequently constructed in opposition to the supposed ‘cheating’ of foreign players.

This theme was identified in several articles before the tournament. For example, in a *Daily Mail* article headlined ‘I’d never tell my players to dive, insists Hodgson’ (6 June: 73) Matt Lawton, detailed how the England manager ‘has insisted he will not encourage his players to employ the dark arts to succeed’ as he did not ‘think it was part of our culture’. Hodgson’s stance was contrasted with that of England player Eric Dier – who, it was pointed out, had been brought up in Portugal – who suggested ‘England needed to be more “streetwise”.’ Writing in the *Sun* about Hodgson’s comments, Neil Ashton wrote that ‘English football is renowned for honour and integrity’ and that ‘the dark arts can be left to the dirty rotten scoundrels’ (6 June: 58). It is notable that, by contrast, the *Daily Mirror*, which unlike the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* took a pro-EU stance during the referendum, did not devote as much space to the story, nor offer any editorialised comment about it.

After England lost to Iceland in the competition's second round, a defeat the *Sun* labelled 'the most humiliating in the nation's history' (28 June: 1), this scrutiny intensified. None of the papers' post mortems offered detailed analysis of the long-term structural problems within the English game such as, for example, the impact of the competing demands of the Premier League, England's top football competition. Instead, the narratives were anchored within the long-term 'discourse of renewal and decline' (Kennedy 2014: 281). The result came just three days after the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU and, although the long-term political and economic ramifications of the vote were unknown, the tone taken reflected the papers' stances on the referendum and whether or not they felt leaving the EU would increase the country's fortunes.

Following the resignation of England manager Roy Hodgson, Dave Kidd, the chief sports writer of the *Daily Mirror*, wrote: 'In keeping with recent events, an England without a functioning government, opposition, nor any future plan, no longer has a manager for its national football team either' (28 June: 54-55). Thus for the *Daily Mirror*, which had campaigned to remain within the EU, the anxiety about the uncertain future of the England team mirrored anxiety about the future of the United Kingdom in the aftermath of victory for the 'Leave' campaign. By contrast, the pro-Leave *Daily Mail* published a brief, light-hearted editorial which implied that Iceland's unexpected victory was comparable to the unexpected victory of the 'Leave' campaign:

In the week after the referendum, this paper salutes the people of a proud seafaring island in the North Atlantic, who refused to be cowed by 'expert' predictions and emerged victorious against opponents who threw millions at their campaign. Well played, Iceland. And oh dear, England! (29 June: 16).

The sports journalists 'spoke as if a still great nation was being betrayed by the bunglers and shirkers who ran, or were, its football team' (Wagg 1991: 222). The *Daily Mirror* reported on a press conference the day after England's defeat in which Hodgson said he was not sure why he was in attendance while Martin Glenn, the FA's chief executive, said he was 'not a football expert' under the headline 'WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING' (29 June: 64) which evokes the terrace chant of disgruntled football fans 'You don't know what you're doing!'. This mirrored invective aimed at politicians on both sides of the Brexit argument. For example, the *Sun* took aim at chancellor George Osborne for his economic warnings during the campaign in an article headlined 'YOU IDIOT, GEORGE' (28 June: 8-9), while the *Daily Mirror* criticised Boris Johnson, a prominent 'Leave' campaigner, for failing to attend a debate on the referendum result

under the headline ‘No-show BoJo [a] political pygmy’ (28 June: 6-7). Although the focus was on Hodgson, the manager, and members of the Football Association, the players were also subject to criticism which renewed the narrative developed in the build-up to the game against Wales about whether they demonstrated the right ‘spirit’ or demonstrated enough ‘pride’. For example, ex-England player-turned-pundit Jamie Carragher claimed that the players were ‘too soft’, arguing that ‘We think we are making them men but actually we are creating babies’ (*Daily Mail*, 29 June: 74).

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While the England players were castigated for their perceived failure as ‘patriots at play’, Wales, who unexpectedly reached the semi-finals before losing to the eventual champions Portugal, were (re)presented as heroes. Euro 2016 was the first international men’s football tournament finals in which another Home Nation team³ had progressed further than England since the 1978 World Cup (when Scotland qualified but England failed to). With the absence of England, which had become synonymous with the formation and maintenance of British identity (Gibbons and Malcom 2017; Kumar 2003a, 2003b), the Welsh team became the embodiment of Britain, albeit framed within the context of England’s failure. The Welsh were compared favourably to England in a *Sun on Sunday* article headlined ‘Wales v Wallies’ which looked at ‘How Dragons got it right ’n Lions lost the plot’ (3 July: 68).

The following day, the *Sun* claimed that whatever happened in Wales’ semi-final they would ‘be crowned the best of British ... to further humiliate England’ by overtaking them in the FIFA rankings (4 July: 56). And, despite their defeat, the ‘Welsh heroes’ were declared to be the ‘Pride of Britain’ (the *Sun Goals*, 7 July: 1; *Daily Mirror*, 7 July: 62 and 63). Furthermore, the Welsh team were encoded with the quintessential characteristics usually reserved for the English players. After their quarter-final victory over Belgium, the *Sun*’s chief football reporter, Neil Ashton, wrote of the Welsh team’s ‘pride and passion and enthusiasm’ (7 July: 58). Similarly, the *Daily Mirror*’s chief sports writer, Dave Kidd, wrote that Wales had ‘been everything Roy Hodgson’s flops were not in France. Confident. Courageous. Cunning. Thrilling. And winning’ (2 July: 69).

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine how the English popular Press (re)presented English national identity through its coverage of the country’s men’s national football team and the team’s fans immediately before and during Euro 2016 in light of the fact that the tournament coincided with the run up to and aftermath of the EU membership referendum in the UK. The study found that where English national identity was (re)presented the newspapers’s coverage adhered to

Guibernau's (2007) framework for creating a national identity by employing 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm 2012) that drew on the country's heritage and culture to speak to and reinforce an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006).

In various ways the findings in this study support those of previous research dating back to the early 1990s which have analysed the articulation of 'Englishness' through coverage of the England men's team (e.g. Wagg 1991; Garland and Rowe 1999; Maguire, Poulton and Possamai 1999; Garland 2004; Vincent et al. 2010; Vincent and Harris 2014) thus showing that 'the sport-nationalism-media troika is no passing fad' (Rowe et al. 1998: 133). Journalists utilised a tried-and-tested formula which employed language that reached back into the shared mythical past of the dominant ethnic group. This language was often overtly militaristic, referencing the Second World War in particular but also the victories of Admiral Nelson and the Armada as well as the 1966 football World Cup success. 'Us' and 'them' narratives were constructed around England's opponents, in particular Wales, which provided the newspapers' readers 'a "fantasy shield" to cement and unify national sentiment for the imagined community' (Vincent et al. 2010: 219).

Furthermore, these narratives clung to outdated monocultural notions of English national identity with no acknowledgement of the country's ethnic diversity. As Blain et al. argue, there was reliance on the language of nationhood in which 'the will to construct a historically continuous account of ... national character prevails against the contrary indications of everyday experience' (1993: 192). Given that Blain et al. drew this conclusion more than 20 years ago, it might seem as if there is 'nothing new' to report. But these findings are useful in emphasising which narratives endure in the formation of national cultures in general and English national identity in particular.

However, Euro 2016 took place at a time of social and political flux in England (and Britain) when the meaning of 'Englishness' was hotly contested between those at ease with the country's multi-cultural population and its place within a united Europe and those who sought to limit immigration and leave the EU. Sports writers may have been re-employing formulaic narratives used in the past but they did so with less confidence. It was no longer clear whether symbols which had been used as positive expressions of 'Englishness' in the past, such as the flag of St George, continued to be benign representations of patriotism or had instead become racialized articulations of an insular English national identity.

Underpinning this crisis of identity was a 'new realism of low expectations within the wider political and cultural economy' (Kennedy 2014: 285) which dealt a further blow to the confidence

with which 'Englishness' was expressed. Following England's defeat to Iceland the sense of national humiliation mirrored the wider socio-economic and political uncertainty created by the referendum result. And, as the Welsh team progressed to the tournament semi-finals the 'us' and 'them' invective employed about Chris Coleman's team gave way to a feeling that England, once uniquely synonymous with Britain, was no longer the best of British.

Notes

¹According to the circulation figures for March 2016, the *Sun* sold 1.7m. copies; the *Daily Mail* sold 1.5m. copies and the *Daily Mirror* sold 784,000 copies

² It is important to note that this match took place on the same day as the murder of Jo Cox, the Labour MP for the constituency of Batley and Spen. Thus the coverage of the game, particularly at the front of the newspapers, was almost certainly less extensive than it might otherwise have been

³ The so-called home nations are England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

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