Social networks, football fans, fantasy and reality
How corporate and media interests are invading our lifeworld

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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’s theory is drawn upon using the concepts of “colonisation of the lifeworld” and “communicative action” to inform a 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 maximisation 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, 1973; 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., 2002) and the evolving digital society has had a substantial impact on this pervasive facet of British society (Auy, 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-match match drink, leave 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 fulfils many functions including information and opinion exchange, entertainment and education on an independent, peer regulated, space.

However, the media construct of football supporter as “human” has experienced a revival. News headlines highlighting the role of the internet and technologies in facilitating football related violence are prevalent. Police spokespersons are quoted as having surveilled 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 structural 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 blackout 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 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.fcunited.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 true 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 “colonisation of the Lifeworld” where big corporate interests (the system) are manipulating public opinion and freedom to speak openly within an overall goal of profit maximisation 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
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 (Petcher 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 political or business interests whilst utilizing 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:

1. 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 SNSs (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 gamblers 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 Sky/Sports sports gambling and gaming (www.bet365.com) 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 very specific "conspiracy theories" and promote popular action and insurrection (http://forums.chroniclelive.co.uk/viewforum. php?fid=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 ideologically 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 Kellner (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 (Ngwennyha and Lee, 1997; Lee, 1994; Lytyinen and Klein, 1985; Cutlir et al., 2003; Waring and Wainwright, 2002; McLean, 2000). 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, 1988, 1987). In most cases this has been simplified into frameworks utilizing the constructs of "validity claims". An interpretation by Cutlir et al. (2003) based on the work of Forestor (1983) uses a framework that comprises: truth (the propositional content is true or accurate); sincerity (the speaker is honest and means what he/she 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 freely, 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 '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 purposeful 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 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 systems (money and administrative) 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 colonisation 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 action). 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 (1957) 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).
- 1 is influence.
- 4 is value-commitments.

This is where adaptation 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, 1 and L represent the lifeworld, sets of shared values, common understandings that develop over time through relevant social and cultural reproduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reproduction processes</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural reproduction</td>
<td>Interpretive schemes for consensus &quot;valid knowledge&quot;</td>
<td>Legitimations</td>
<td>Socialisation patterns, educational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
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<td>Legitimately ordered interpersonal relations</td>
<td>Social memberships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Interpretive accomplishments</td>
<td>Motivations for actions that conform to norms</td>
<td>Interactive capabilities &quot;personal identity&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table I

Structural components


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disturbances in the domain of</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Personality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural reproduction</td>
<td>Loss of meaning</td>
<td>Withdrawal of legitimations</td>
<td>Crisis in orientation and education</td>
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<td>Social Integration</td>
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<td>Socialisation</td>
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<td>Psychopathologies</td>
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Table II

Structural components

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 scores. 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 Millwall 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 “demobilisation” of both football supporters and mobile technologies. Paul Dodd’s website 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.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2.** NUFU Fanzone post

"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 MOBIE RECKONS ITS GETTING PRETTY HOT IN THE GROUND TOO."

![Figure 3](image3.png)

**Figure 3.** Capture from Paul Dodd website relating to 1999 violence
representatives are to be allowed into the board room on match days "Fan representation must run 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 AGM 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 desirable acquisitions commented:

You can't just whip 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 Iearm, 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 (Iearm 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, supporter directors' spokesman, said: "This might be seen as a one-off gimmick and harmless enough by many, however this is a real club, these are
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 profit seekers. 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 "Goordie" 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 1969 and the FAIRS (now UEFA CUP) in the 1960s. 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 50,000 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 £120 to around £14,000 for an annual ticket).

The most recent saga concerning ownership and managerial regime change at NUFC concerns events that happened in 2006. 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 "Cokeyc""). In 2007 after a period of resentment and unrest by the supporters due to near relegation battles in the premiership (accounted for 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 supporter's 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 among 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 "Cokeyc"). 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 a 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

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This is a screenshot of a discussion thread from the BBC website. The discussion thread is about the ownership and management of Newcastle United Football Club. It highlights the discrepancy between the club's ownership and the supporters' views on the club's management. The supporters, referred to as "Goordie" fans, are described as being very loyal and fanatical about their club, supporting it through generations. The club has not won major honours recently, with the last success being the Football Association cup in 1969. The club's ownership has seen fluctuations, with recent events including the sale of the club to Mike Ashley in 2007. The supporters view the true ownership of the club as ultimately in the hands of the local Newcastle community. The text also mentions the departure of Kevin Keegan after a bitter row with Mike Ashley and his senior management team.
control of assets within the club and the Manager was relegated to the role of a Couch 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 NUFCom website 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 "jugged" 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 control access to the club and information on players, transfers, tactics and management. Local reporters responded with their own U-Tube blogs (such as Blogguenhyn) 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 NUFCom 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.

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 correspondent. Eventually the moderator "Helemdo" 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: "Thank MadPet 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).

This series of threads discussing the poor state of the club, Ashley’s miscalculation 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 NUFCom 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 "Helemdo" 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.nufcnewcastle.co.uk as of 1st December 2008).

Fainscrap – Posted Tuesday 02 Sep 2008 12:23 pm.
Just follow our posts Helemdo, most stories break here 😞
ShepherdOut – Posted Tuesday 02 Sep 2008 15:56 pm.
Helemdo, 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 an illegitimate 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 a 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 organize against the commercial power of the large football clubs. In Foucauldian terms ("the support" 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 idealized notion of a free speech society our example vignetted 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 (as 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 "Slogger" and "Foucaus", 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 NUFU 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 "spit of public football fan communities are therefore not democratic forums and do not represent ideal speech situations. The danger is that the public think 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 use forums plays into the hands of the "instrumental" systems (large corporate, football clubs and media interests).

Increasingly, the structural nucleus 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 players/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 unthinking takes place away from the influence and values that constitute the fans lifeworld. The system is seen to be parasitic on the lifeworld.

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 perhaps still, 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 idealized free 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.

References


Further reading


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