# 'Surf's up!': A call to take English soccer fan interactions on the Internet more seriously

**Abstract**

Soccer fandom practices in England have been significantly impacted by globalization. The creation of the Premier League in 1992, the way in which satellite television company BSkyB dominated coverage of this, together with other developments, have led to changes in how fans consume top-level English soccer. Whilst such global transformations are well documented in the sociology of soccer literature, the implications of the rise of the most advanced global form of communication – the Internet – on the practices of fans of English soccer clubs, have not been fully taken into account by academics. As such, the significance of the Internet as a site for fans to interact remains under investigated. In this essay we argue that online interactions between fans of English clubs need to be taken more seriously by academics if they are to more fully understand how soccer contributes to the maintenance of social identities in contemporary England.

## Introduction: Heads in the sand?

Four years ago, Garry Crawford directly challenged the assumptions made by sociologists and psychologists of sport who endeavoured to create rigid typologies of sports fans based upon supposed norms of 'authentic' fandom practices. One of Crawford's key points was a counter-argument to assumptions made by these academics about the lack of authenticity of the 'types' of fans who interact on sport related issues via 'new media', including the Internet: "Rigid distinctions between

'virtual' (online) and 'real' (off-line) worlds are futile as the uses and practices of the Internet are always located within ('real') everyday life patterns."[1] However, a shortcoming of Crawford's argument was that it included little supporting evidence from research into how sports fan communities actually use the Internet.

More recently, in a previous 'special edition' of *Soccer & Society*, Brown, Crabbe and Mellor introduced the topic of 'football and community' in order to discuss practical and theoretical considerations affecting academics as they grapple with the concept of contemporary soccer audiences. The aim of their paper was (in part) to "clarify and better understand who football communities might be."[2] Using the projections of Crawford and with an endeavour to ensure that future research into soccer fandom is inclusive of 'all aspects' of community, we argue that the proliferation of Internet use and the interactive processes (that are available for fans through this medium) should be taken seriously by academics in order to understand the full extent of English soccer fandom communities in our technology laden society.

As a proponent of research into Internet communities Brian Wilson has written about the usefulness of the Internet when investigating sport-related social movements. Wilson quite rightly points out that within the sociology of sport, "there is a dearth of research investigating links between the Internet and sport-related activism." Sandvoss addresses this issue to an extent through a discussion of "sport online as a post-modern cultural form."[3] He attends to the practical uses of the Internet for sports fans and discusses popular Internet functions divided into three main areas (derived from a European Football survey): First, 11 percent of all Internet users and nearly a fifth of all football fans (18 percent) regularly use the Internet to gain immediate access to results, match reports, and current news/background information. Second, the Internet is used to follow live sporting events via video, audio and textual commentary by up to 7 per cent of football fans. Finally, the purchasing of

merchandise and gambling through online activities formed a third, yet marginal group of online services.  Although Sandvoss has his eye on a more theoretical discussion about the coverage of sport and the development of communications technology, he provides valuable information about the everyday use of the Internet by football fans as they attempt to gratify an instantaneous thirst for information:

> The use of the World Wide Web as a means of accessing background information highlights the nature of the Internet as a medium of scope, granting an unrivalled wealth of instantly accessible information.[4]

The account of Internet use reported by Sandvoss draws particular attention to passive activities such as watching, listening and reading, rather than interactive elements of fandom expression. So, while it is clear that fans are using the Internet in large numbers for practical purposes, it is the significance of interactions and Internet communications that are often downplayed if not entirely ignored by academics. For instance, researchers fail to identify the huge amount of soccer fans who, through regularly contributing to web-based discussion forums and blogs, have built communities through which they not only discuss and voice their concerns on contemporary issues in soccer, but also call for and influence changes to aspects of the game/particular teams and/or articulate and form social identities. In relation to the latter point, Edensor and Millington agree that, "football culture has become a pertinent field within which to explore contemporary formations of identity."[5] Evidence exists to suggest that soccer fans (just like other sports fans) all over the world use the Internet to interact with one another about many important issues. Wayne Wilson makes precisely this point in relation to MLS (Major League Soccer) fans in the US, concluding that: "The development and availability of information technologies such as the Internet…certainly will facilitate the building of virtual communities of fans who want to follow specific teams and leagues."[6]

An example which acts to demonstrate the growing power of the Internet for aiding interaction between soccer fans specifically in the US can be found in the community of fans who have named themselves 'The Sons of Ben'. This group was started in January 2007 by three soccer fans in preparation for the as yet non-existent Philadelphia MLS team which is planned to enter the league in 2010. This fan group is now well over 2000 members strong and they regularly travel to other MLS team's games to hurl abuse at their future opponents.[7] The Sons of Ben are very interesting because their primary community spaces (where they interact and drum up supporters) are on their own website as well as on other online sites like 'MySpace' and 'UTube'.

However, the use of the Internet as a significant site of interaction for soccer fans is not just restricted to the US. In relation to Scottish club soccer, McMenemy, Poulter and O'Loan provide examples of online interactions that clearly demonstrate fans of Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers FCs (football clubs) posting abuse about each others' politico-religious beliefs on discussion forums in 2003. The authors conclude: "sectarian content does exist on boards that are there as discussion forums for footballing issues."[8] The Internet could therefore be regarded as aiding in the articulation and perhaps even maintenance of social identities here.

Auty was one of the first to review the many ways in which English soccer fans can interact via the Internet. Yet, there have only been a handful of studies in the sociology of sport that have actually collected data relating to the ways in which English fans interact on the Internet. Those that we have found include Johnes' uses of interactions on an online discussion forum for Swansea City FC fans (a Welsh team who play in the English Coca-Cola League One) to highlight debates on anti-Englishness and racism amongst fans; Ruddock's study of fans' online responses to

the controversial signing of Lee Bowyer by the English Premier League club West Ham United in 2003; and, Millward's and Levermore and Millward's studies of Liverpool FC fans' interactions regarding the outlines of a European identity emerging through club message board postings and e-zine discussion topics.[9]

Notwithstanding the few studies mentioned above, and considering the vast (and growing) amount of literature devoted to the phenomenon of English soccer fandom in general, a dearth of research is dedicated to the study of English soccer fan communities online. Thus, in an attempt to further stimulate researchers to gather data on English soccer fan communities that now proliferate on the Internet, we attempt to build an argument to highlight the importance of researching a process whereby 'new media' and 'fandom' combine in online interactions that contribute to the social identities of English soccer fans.

**English soccer fandom since 1990**

Processes of globalization have led elite English club soccer to witness unprecedented levels of change over the last 18 years largely due to the ramifications of the Taylor Report, the rise of the English Premier League (since 1992) and the domination of its coverage by the satellite television company BSkyB (now commonly referred to as 'Sky'). The latter two (along with wider European economic restructuring processes leading to significant changes in soccer brought about by the 1995 Bosman ruling) are often associated with the rampant commercialization of English soccer.[10] The aforementioned Taylor Report which forced soccer clubs in the top two tiers of English professional soccer to change their previously standing room only 'terraces' to 'all-seater' stadiums, coupled with continued increases in players wages (partially due to the influx of foreign players into the English Premier League following the Bosman ruling), have arguably both led to the rise in the cost of

ticket prices to attend 'live' soccer matches in England. In addition, Weed provides some evidence to suggest that the English public house (pub) has been fast becoming the new place for fans to watch live English soccer matches through Sky Sports (a BSkyB television channel) since the mid to late 1990s.[11]

The commercialization of English club soccer is further highlighted by some of the various contributors to Manzenreiter and Horne's edited book *Football Goes East* which shows how elite soccer clubs are attempting to reach a much more global marketplace in China, Japan and South Korea.[12] This has also been a key point of focus in the British sports media. For instance, *The Observer (Sport supplement)* ran a four week special report entitled '21st Century Sport' which was devoted to key issues within the globalization of sport. The second part of the report was largely focused upon the effects of attempts on the part of satellite television company Sky to reach a more global audience for English Premier League soccer. The article seems to distinguish what they call 'Turnstile fans' from 'TV fans' and a psychoanalyst, Chris Oakley, wrote an article on the same page reinforcing the distinction between those who attend English soccer matches in person – 'real fans' – and those who watch on televisions in public houses or at home – using Steve Redhead's concept of the 'post-fan'. Oakley ends up arguing that "it's *not* the being there that counts", and when it comes to being considered a genuine fan he contends: "There is no superordinate point of view from which the 'real fan' and the post fan' can be compared. They are just different, that's all."[13]

Various initiatives and organizations have been set up which seek to challenge this global commercialization of English club soccer. They argue that the largest clubs have forgotten the local communities from which they grew due to the overriding focus on reaching new international audiences (through satellite television for the most part) to generate income. See for instance Nash's examples of contestation

among supporter groups in modern English club soccer; Brown, Crabbe and Mellor's report for the *Football Foundation*; and, Brown's paper on the substantial and well organised fan opposition to the corporate takeover of Manchester United by the American Glazer family. Such initiatives and organizations are often instigated by football fans themselves resulting in the formation of fan groups that maintain interaction in a variety of ways, including via message boards, blogs, discussion forums, email loops and e-zines on the Internet (cf. some of the examples used by Brown).[14]

The way fans 'consume' soccer has shifted significantly over this period, with the Internet becoming a key source of interaction between fans themselves and between fans and their clubs. Indeed, many fanzines set up in the 1980s in England are now e-zines and every club has official and unofficial websites with forums for fans to discuss various issues.[15] Nowadays, one does not have to look far to see the ubiquity of these online discussion forums for soccer fans. For instance, in an article within the January 2008 issue of *When Saturday Comes*, comments from a total of twenty online discussion forums and blogs for both English and Scottish soccer fans were drawn upon to highlight the contrasting reactions of each nation's fans to the failure of both national teams to qualify for the 2008 European soccer Championships (commonly referred to as 'Euro 2008'). Similarly, newspapers and other media organisations regularly place soccer-related stories on their websites and offer fans the opportunity to post their responses, stimulating interactions for all to see. For example, when the *Times Online* produced a short article (one-and-a-half A4 pages in length when printed) about the British Prime Minister (Gordon Brown) calling for a return of the home nations soccer competition following the failure of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to qualify for Euro 2008, 428 comments were posted within a 24-hour period from Internet users all over the world.[16]

Yet, although the growth of the Internet has been rapid and the use of the Internet by fans of television serials and sports teams, especially in the USA, have been considered in the academy,[17] the potential usefulness of the Internet as a place for analysing ways in which soccer fans interact and debate around such issues in English football (often in ways which act to maintain their social identities) has not been fully recognised. Consequently we seek to find an explanation as to why online interactions which English soccer fans engage in have not been considered more seriously by academics in the past. We begin by highlighting the failure of previous typologies of soccer fans to recognize the significance of non-traditional and 'new' types of interactions between fans.

**What is an English soccer fan in 2008?**

Much academic analysis on the phenomenon of soccer fandom has tended to concentrate on 'exceptional' cases, including 'hooligans', 'racists' and 'obsessive' fans.[18] Such a focus is likely to have implications for the accurate study of soccer fandom as a whole. In relation to this trend, Crawford suggests: "fans who buy large volumes of merchandise, those who follow sport via the mass media…are largely ignored in a large number of discussions of fan cultures." Perhaps it is these types of fans that should now form the focus of academic attention because as Bennett suggests: "It is precisely the inherent taken for grantedness of everyday life that renders it valuable as an object of social research." Stone is perhaps one of the only scholars to have used Crawford's thesis to focus on the everyday lived experiences of English soccer fans.[19] Although his work has not (at the time of writing) yet produced any empirical data to substantiate this.

According to Crawford, in recent years the literature on English soccer supporters has focused most specifically on the 'incorporation and/or resistance' of supporters to the

commercialization of soccer which has gathered momentum over the last 18 years. Both King and Crawford suggest that much academic literature seeks to establish the belief that through rampant commercialization (resulting from processes of globalization) English soccer is losing its inherently 'traditional' working class qualities, that were characteristic of a so called past 'golden age'. Moreover, Crawford argues that behaviour that is deemed 'inauthentic' or 'incorporative' is often largely dismissed within the vast majority of considerations of soccer fan behaviour. Fans who follow sport via the mass media and perhaps do not interact face-to-face, but online instead, are usually deemed to be less 'authentic' in their fandom practices than fans who go to matches in person and interact with others in this setting and in 'real' face-to-face situations.[20]

In relation to defining 'types' of sports fans in general, Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease have suggested first distinguishing between sports 'fans' and sports 'spectators/consumers'. The latter group here were used to refer to individuals who may actively witness a sporting event in person or through the media, but who do not have the same degree of involvement with a sports team or athlete as the former category of sports 'fans' might. Furthermore, Wann et al argued that sport spectators/consumers could be divided into two groups: 'Direct' versus 'Indirect', where 'direct' sports consumption involves personal attendance at a sporting event, whereas 'indirect' sports consumption involves watching sport through the mass media or consuming sport via the Internet. In addition, fans are considered by Wann et al to be either 'Highly' or 'Lowly' identified with their team/club due to the 'types' of fandom practices they engage in. Some practices, such as attending games in person, wearing team colours and actively yelling for a team were viewed as more 'authentic' and signified a greater affiliation with a sports team or club than others here.[21]

More specifically, there have also been a number of typologies created by academics who have attempted to explain soccer fandom along similar lines of authenticity. Two of the most recent and prominent academic typologies include Redhead's view of soccer fans as either 'Participatory' or 'Passive'; and, Giulianotti's admittedly 'ideal-type' taxonomy of soccer fans.[22] Giulianotti's is perhaps the most comprehensive theoretical model indicating specific characteristics of his different 'types' of soccer fans who he claims exist along a horizontal axis of 'Traditional' to 'Consumer', split in the middle by a vertical axis running between 'Hot' to 'Cool' forms of fandom. Relationships with and proximity to soccer spaces (such as to club stadia and the local community); means of consuming football (such as in person versus via the media); interactions with other fans about soccer (face-to-face versus using new media communications); and, other aspects that are meant to depict levels of solidarity and identity around a soccer club, supposedly help determine whether a fan is categorised as being one of the following more to less authentic 'types': 'Supporter', 'Follower', 'Fan' or 'Flâneur'.[23]

Despite being the most comprehensive and widely utilised typology to explain soccer fan identities, we argue that at least one section of Giulianotti's four part taxonomy should be re-visited and questioned in terms of its accuracy and empirical underpinnings. That is, Giulianotti's 'Cool/Consumer Spectators: Flâneurs' category of fan: "The cool consumer spectator is a football flâneur. The flâneur acquires a postmodern spectator identity through a depersonalized set of market-dominated virtual relationships, particularly interactions with the cool media of television and the Internet."[24] Here Giulianotti makes a generalised assumption about the ways in which soccer fans use the Internet. Through classifying it with less interactive forms of media like television, Giulianotti suggests that the Internet is merely a 'virtual' and 'passive' form of communication that the inauthentic 'flâneurs' use to experience soccer in a detached manner, instead of engaging in more 'real' and authentic forms

of fandom like attending matches in person and interacting 'face-to-face' with other fans. Indeed, Giulianotti argues that: "The cool/consumer seeks relatively thin forms of social solidarity with other fellow fans".[25] As such, it is clear that he ignores the vast amount of what might be considered 'authentic' soccer fans who *as well as* attending games in person *also* contribute to online discussion forums, blogs, email loops and message boards and use the Internet as just one form of communicating with fellow football fans and showing solidarity with their club.[26]

As a result of such assumptions about the authenticity of certain online soccer fandom practices, such typologies have merely constructed what Norbert Elias would have termed 'false dichotomies'.[27] In contrast, Crawford conceives of fandom as much more complex than authors like Giulianotti have proposed.[28] Crawford suggests that in all of the aforementioned typologies there has been a tendency to prize face-to-face interaction above computer-mediated-interaction in terms of the former being considered more 'authentic' than the latter. Significantly, such typologies fail to recognise that fans who attend matches 'live' and who participate in what are considered 'traditional' and 'authentic' fandom practices are often *the same* fans who contribute to online discussion forums, blogs, email loops and message boards – online aspects of fandom that are considered to be less 'authentic'. Crawford states:

> While it is possible to identify different levels of commitment and dedication to a sport and different patterns of behaviour of fans, it is important that we do not celebrate the activities of certain supporters and ignore (or even downgrade) the activities and interests of others…Rather than privileging the activities of certain fans over others, it is important, if we are to understand the contemporary nature of fan cultures, that we consider the full range of patterns of behaviour of all fans, including those who do not conform to 'traditional' patterns or images of fan activities.[29]

With direct reference to the consumption of 'old' and 'new' media as a constitutive part of 'everyday life', Abercrombie and Longhurst view fans in general as audiences who discuss topical media discourse which is freely available. Likewise Hughson and Poulton and Crolley and Hand demonstrate the importance of the media in setting the public agenda for soccer fans specifically.[30] Whist considering fans of any kind in this way implies that they are passive, in relation to soccer fans watching 'live' matches on television in the pub, Weed provides evidence to show that the ways fans consume soccer are changing.[31] Yet, this does not mean that fans are engaging in less authentic forms of fandom – just different ones. Hills urges us to remember that fans in general represent a dedicated, *active* audience; they are consumers who can also be 'new media' producers (officially or unofficially) through the production of online discussions, e-zines and blogs.[32] Fans often develop a sense of emotional investment and even ownership over a personality, sports team or club and rather than passively accepting performances or politics, they have been known to campaign for change.[33] Examples in English soccer include: the Charlton fans' 'back to the valley campaign'; fans' opposition to the previously London based Wimbledon FC's move to Milton Keynes; fans' opposition to Malcolm Glazer's takeover of Manchester United; and, at the lower end of the English football league structure, the community website 'MyFootballClub' even managed to purchase and takeover a controlling stake in Ebbsfleet United, a team in the Blue Square Premier League.[34]  In each of these cases the Internet aided communication between campaigning fans of English clubs, yet it has still not been fully appreciated as an important place for studying soccer fan interactions. According to Auty: "Although the impact of the Internet has been thoroughly examined in almost every other sphere…it appears that no-one has fully analysed the impact of the web on football."[35]

**New media, cyber communications and soccer fandom**

According to recent (at the time of writing) figures from the Office for National Statistics nearly 15 million households in Great Britain (61 per cent) had Internet access in 2007.[36] This is an increase of just over 1 million households (7 per cent) over the last year and nearly 4 million households (36 per cent) since 2002. Of course we need to be aware of what has become known as 'the digital divide' here. Katz, Rice and Aspden found that differences in access to the Internet still persist across gender, age, household income, education, and race. Nevertheless, mediums for expressions of fandom are being altered by the rise of Internet communications and this is often linked to the technological revolution more generally. According to Mann and Stewart, in the thirty year period between 1969 and 1999 the number of computers connected to the Internet rose from 4 to 56, 218,000.[37]

According to Bennett fear and distrust of technological advancement has long been an aspect of human history. However, Haythornthwaite, in an evaluation of Internet users from North America, suggested that the most popular Internet activities included forms of social interaction such as sending/receiving e-mail and finding hobby-related  information and interacting accordingly with others who share a similar interest. This adds support to claims that using the Internet is less about 'technology' and more about 'communication'. As such it is important to recognise that although the rise of the Internet has largely been driven by businesses recognising its power to reach a global customer base, it should also be recognised that its growth has significantly increased communication between individuals. Email loops and online discussion forums are examples of what Mann and Stewart refer to as CMC (computer-mediated communication).[38] Far from creating a dualism between an online/offline split, where offline communications are deemed 'real life' and online activities discarded as 'inconsequential',[39] researchers in other non-sport related

fields suggest that social, economic and cultural interactions occur simultaneously in cyberspace and make up part of what we call 'everyday life'.[40]

We share those assertions and argue that Internet behaviours should not be considered separately from other aspects of the multifaceted lives of English soccer fans. In previous research Wellman, Quan Hasse, Witte and Hampton support this line of thought when results indicated that the more time people spent online, the more they were involved with organisations and politics offline.[41] Thus one might expect that involvement with Internet sites for English soccer fan interactions would demonstrate a heightened level of fandom more generally – making fans located on the Internet a valuable resource for researchers.

In support of Schimmel, Harrington and Bielby we argue that research on sports fans remains largely isolated from research on other kinds of fans.[42] This needs to be overcome in order to consider the multifaceted nature of fandom. Academics unrelated to sport have often reported the value of researching online communities. Within the last 10 years virtual communications have received attention from scholars (in the area of TV programme message boards) as they offer a potential communication outlet for fans to relate to one another and discuss common interests.[43] Lee states that: "The Internet enhances the potential of interaction that transcends the time-space barrier at an unprecedented scale and scope."[44] One such development has been the establishment of 'virtual' social networks that allow the social researcher to "observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community."[45]

There is a long-established body of research on online discussion groups that became ubiquitous (particularly in the US) in the 1990s, such as 'Usenet newsgroups' and interactive forums around television shows like *The X-files* or *Twin Peaks*.[46]

Although these kinds of 'virtual' interactions are often criticised for their difference from face-to-face communications - i.e. more narcissistic than traditional interactions with few communal rules, social norms and obvious personal attachments which lean to classify long-established community experience - they still provide an example of communication between fan groups and individuals through a new medium which should not be ignored by researchers who want to find out more about how social identities are maintained.[47]

Furthermore, the distinction between 'traditional' and 'new' communicative experiences is surely context specific. While online communications may not accurately portray the same etiquette as its offline sibling (holistically at least), certain subcultures (such as soccer fan culture) retain most elements of their common offline discourse in an online format. For instance, English soccer fan discourse maintains a masculine framework, where 'boyish banter', narcissistic chanting, singing, and rants of passionate but often disorganised soccer crowds putting forth forceful and passionate opinions (with little emotive regard for feelings of rebutters or opposing fans), are commonplace.[48]

**Considering the practicalities of researching English soccer fan interactions online**

Whilst the Internet is undoubtedly a source for soccer fans to use and contribute to, it also invokes questions relating to how researchers should best excavate this resource. Although most academics would advise the initiation of a research project with a strong systematic design setting out its foundations carefully to ensure that useful data is gathered and it can stand up to ethical scrutiny; this is easier said than done in relation to Internet research. As more researchers become curious about the potential of the web and look for guidance in their endeavours they will find that few

practical and ethical guidelines exist for academics to adhere to.[49]

One major element of criticism relating to all Internet research methods involves validity of the responses collated during the research. For instance, researchers such as Gibbons and Lusted have posted questionnaires on existing websites (such as football365.com) in order to gain access to an appropriate target audience of English soccer fans. Others such as Ruddock and Wilson respectively have also examined the online correspondence of soccer fans on various sites (kumb.com and BigSoccer.com respectively).[50] In doing so, the authors know little about their respondents. Markham suggests that this is still a problem for the contextualisation of results even when demographic information is collected online. It is here where the Internet's reputation for fraud and fantasy precedes itself with critics extremely wary of potential untruths. However, as Sapsford points out: "Validity is probably not an issue. There is no reason to suppose that people are any more likely to misrepresent themselves on email or Internet questionnaires than on postal ones."[51]

On those grounds we suggest that it would be wrong to ignore the Internet as a significant site of research into English soccer fan interactions. Furthermore it is important to recognise that football fan contributions to web-based discussions and posts are often written with passion and therefore are just as likely to reflect the views of the individual concerned at a particular moment as shouting or chanting with other fans at a match itself.

Further comparisons of data with non-Internet samples would demonstrate the similarity or difference of the target audience between online and offline results. Such a methodology was implemented by Liptrot in an online survey of fans of 'punk-rock' music.[52] Using this kind of methodology would offer an opportunity to challenge academics that remain sceptical of online research and test potential myths of

incompatibility of the Internet/real life dichotomy. Furthermore, such a methodology might also address issues of consistency where it has been suggested that researchers should not assume that respondent behaviour online will offer the same results as face-to-face meetings or pen and pencil responses.[53]

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that the Internet provides an extension of everyday life for many people. Fans use the Internet to interact with one another within specific domains. In order to understand how significant certain virtual spaces are to soccer fans and what type of information is readily exchanged on a daily basis; researchers must take an ethnographic stance to Internet communications and interactions. After all, we need to find out what fans do online as well as what they say they do.[54] On at least one occasion, such steps have been adopted in academic research relating to fans of Australian Rules football. Online communities were used by Palmer and Thompson as part of (and to complement) ethnographic fieldwork when studying a group of South Australian football supporters known as 'The Grog Squad'. The researchers used the website 'rocketrooster.com' and the online supporters' forum known as 'The Roost' to follow reactions to the build up and subsequent post-mortem of matches. They concluded: "The Internet provided an important complement to the face to face field work, and, in turn it provided a crucial mechanism through which the Groggies maintained their particular cultural identity."[55] Furthermore the authors made reference to proposed distinctions between 'direct' (such as attending live games) and 'indirect' (such as following sport via mass media) forms of fandom.[56] They argue that in this particular case the hypothesised and stereotypical chat room 'nerds or geeks', lacking the capacity for meaningful social interaction is simply a myth. For 'the Groggies' no distinction between direct and indirect consumption existed: "The fact that the Groggies also have ongoing, real time contact sits in opposition to other studies of fans for which the internet is their principal form of communication."[57] In addition, Wilson alludes

to a number of sport-related transnational movements that have used the Internet as their primary source of interaction. These have included anti-sweatshop movements and anti-Olympic movements (among others).[58]

**Conclusion and future directions**

Throughout this paper we have argued that interactions between English soccer fans on the Internet are now a common everyday occurrence and should not be regarded as an 'inauthentic' fandom practice participated in by different fans to those who participate in more traditional fandom practices such as attending matches in person. Much further research is required in this regard to ensure the diversity of soccer fandom practices are more fully considered by academics. Research methodologies must evolve with the digital and technological revolution.

The real significance for research is the adoption of the Internet by ordinary members of various communities across the globe. As more and more fans of English clubs are using the Internet as a place to voice their opinions, discuss issues and reinforce their social identities, academics should also use this medium as a valuable resource to further our understanding of the complexities of soccer fandom. Online interactions are now being recognized by academics who study English fans as important sources of data regarding the maintenance of local, national and European identities.[59] Thus, English soccer fan interactions on the web should no longer be ignored and researchers should not be afraid to use them as evidence in their research.

**Notes**

[1]     Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 144.

[2]    Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'Introduction: football and community – practical and theoretical considerations', 303.

[3]    Wilson, 'New media, social movements, and global sport studies', 462; Sandvoss, 'Technological Evolution or Revolution?', 42.

[4]    Sandvoss, 'Technological Evolution or Revolution?', 42.

[5]    Edensor and Millington, 'This is Our City', 173.

[6]    Wilson, 'All together now, 'click'', 395.

[7]    http://www.sonsofben.net/Home/Home.html, Accessed 13 Apr. 2008; Wells, 'US soccer punks 1, McFans 0'.

[8]    McMenemy, Poulter and O'Loan, 'A robust methodology for investigating  Old Firm related sectarianism online', 500.

[9]    Auty, 'Football fan power and the internet: net gains?'; Johnes, '"We hate England! We hate England?" National identity and anti-Englishness in Welsh soccer fan culture'; Ruddock, 'Let's Kick Racism out of football - and the lefties too! Responses to Lee Bowyer on a West Ham web site'; Millward, '"We've all got the bug for Euro-Aways": what fans say about European Football Club Competition'; Levermore and Millward, 'Official policies and informal transversal networks: Creating 'pan-European identifications' through sport?'

[10]   Taylor, 'The Hillsborough Stadium Disaster'; See Hamil, Michie, Oughton and Warby, Football *in the digital age: Whose game is it anyway?*; Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture*; King, *The End of the Terraces: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s*; King, *The European ritual: Football in the new Europe*; Lanfranchi and Taylor, *Moving with the ball: The migration of professional footballers*; Williams, ''Protect me from what I want': Football fandom, celebrity cultures and 'new' football in England.'

[11]   Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture*; King, *The End of the Terraces*; Weed, 'The story of an ethnography: The experience of watching the 2002 World Cup in the pub'; Weed, 'The pub as a virtual football fandom venue: An alternative to 'being there'?'; Weed, 'Exploring the sport spectator experience: virtual football spectatorship in the pub.'

[12]   Manzenreiter and Horne, *Football Goes East*.

[13]   Robinson, '21st Century Sport – Part Two: Screen Grab'; Oakley, 'The fan experience: it's not the being there that counts', 13.

[14]   Nash, 'Contestation in Modern English Professional Football: The Independent Supporters Association Movement'; Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, Football and its Communities: final report for the Football Foundation; Brown, ''Not For Sale'? The destruction and Reformation of football communities in the Glazer takeover of Manchester United.'

[15]   Auty, 'Football fan power and the internet'; Millward, ''We've all got the bug for Euro-Aways''; Levermore and Millward, 'Official policies and informal transversal networks'.

[16]   Plenderleith, 'Tartan trauma, Anglo anguish'; Webster and Hines, 'Gordon Brown calls for return of home nations football after Euro 2008 debacle.'

[17]   Jenkins, ''Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid?" alt.tv.twinpeaks, the trickster author and viewer mastery'; End, 'An examination of NFL fans' computer mediated BIRGing'; Wilson, 'New media, social movements, and global sport studies: A revolutionary moment and the sociology of sport'; Wilson, 'All together now, 'click': MLS soccer fans in cyberspace.'

[18]   On 'hooligans' see Dunning, Murphy, Waddington and Astrinakis, *Fighting Fans: Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon*; On 'racists' see Back, Crabbe and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Multiculturalism and Identity in the English Game*; On 'obsessives' see Wann and Dolan, 'Attributions of highly identified sports spectators.'

[19]     Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 33; Bennett, *Culture and Everyday Life*, 1;

Stone, 'The role of football in everyday life.'

[20]     King, *The End of the Terraces*; King, *The European ritual*; Crawford,

*Consuming Sport*, 30-33.

[21]     Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease, *Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social

Impact of Spectators*, 2-4.

[22]     Redhead, The *Passion and the Fashion: Football Fandom in the New Europe*;

Redhead, *Post-Fandom and the Millennial Blues: The Transformation of

Soccer Culture*; Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs: A

Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football.'

[23]     Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs, 31.

[24]     Ibid, 38.

[25]     Ibid, 39.

[26]     Auty, 'Football fan power and the internet'.

[27]     Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*.

[28]     Crawford, 'Characteristics of a British ice hockey audience – major findings of

the 1998 and 1999 Manchester Storm Ice Hockey Club supporter surveys';

Crawford, 'Cultural tourists and cultural trends: commercialization and the

Coming of The Storm'; Crawford, 'The career of the sport supporter: the case

of the Manchester Storm'; Crawford, *Consuming Sport*; Giulianotti,

'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs.'

[29]     Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 33.

[30]     Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*; Hughson and Poulton, 'Only genuine

fans need apply: an organisational analysis of the English Football

Association's response to football supporter stereotypes'; Crolley and Hand,

*Football and European Identity: Historical Narratives through the Press*;

Crolley and Hand, *Football, Europe and the Press*.

[31]     Weed, 'The story of an ethnography'; Weed, 'The pub as a virtual football fandom venue'; Weed, 'Exploring the sport spectator experience.'

[32]     Hills, 'Fans and Fan Culture.'

[33]     Kelly, 'Fanning the flames: fans and consumer culture in contemporary Japan'; Menon, 'A participation observation analysis of the 'Once and Again' Internet message bulletin boards.'

[34]     See Maguire and Possamai, ''Back to the valley': local responses to the changing culture of football'; Auty, 'Football fan power and the internet'; Brown, ''Not For Sale'?'; Pratley and Taylor, 'Man Utd fans vent anger as US tycoon finally wins takeover battle'; and, Football Conference, 'MyFootballClub confirm Ebbsfleet deal', respectively.

[35]     Auty, 'Football fan power and the internet', 273.

[36]     Office for National Statistics, 'Households with access to the Internet, GB.'

[37]     Katz, Rice and Aspden, 'The Internet, 1995-2000: access, civic involvement and social interaction;' Mann and Stewart, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online*.

[38]     Bennett, 'The media sensorium: cultural technologies, the senses and society'; Haythornthwaite, 'The Internet and Everyday Life'; Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*; Mann and Stewart, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*, 2.

[39]     This is what Giulianotti suggests in his 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs.'

[40]     Bell, 'Cyberculture.'

[41]     Wellman, Quan Hasse, Witte and Hampton, 'Does the internet increase, decrease or supplement social capital? Social networks, participation, and community commitment.'

[42]     Schimmel, Harrington and Bielby, 'Keep your fans to yourself: the disjuncture between sports studies' and pop culture studies' perspectives on fandom'.

Apart from research conducted by Crawford, *Consuming Sport*; Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves*, and Stone, 'The role of football in everyday life', it seems most research on sports fans is separated from that on fans in other areas of popular culture.

[43]   Baym, 'Interpersonal life online'; Baym 'Interpreting soap operas and creating community: inside an electronic fan culture'; Kiesler, *Culture of the Internet*; Smith and Kollock, *Communities in cyberspace*.

[44]   Lee, 'Implosion, virtuality, and interaction in an Internet discussion group', 50.

[45]   Jenkins, "Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid?", 53.

[46]   Lee, 'Implosion, virtuality, and interaction in an Internet discussion group'; Hills, Fan Cultures; Jenkins, '"Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid?"'

[47]   Menon, 'A participation observation analysis of the 'Once and Again' Internet message bulletin boards.'

[48]   Redhead, *Post-Fandom and the Millennial Blues*, 32; McMenemy et al, 'A robust methodology for investigating Old Firm related sectarianism online.'

[49]   Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*; Mann and Stewart, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*; MacKinnon, 'Searching for the leviathan in Usenet'; Whitehead, 'Methodological and ethical issues in Internet-mediated research in the field of health'.

[50]   Gibbons and Lusted, 'Is St George Enough? Considering the importance of displaying local identity while supporting the England national soccer team'; Ruddock, 'Lets Kick Racism out of football'; Wilson, 'All together now, 'click''.

[51]   Markham, 'The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography'; Sapsford, 'Research and information on the net', 129

[52]   Liptrot, 'A mixed methods approach to researching subculture.'

[53]   Lonsdale, Hodge and Rose, 'Pixels vs. paper: comparing online and traditional survey methods in sports psychology'; Witmer, Colman and

Katzman, 'From paper-and-pencil to screen-and-keyboard: Toward a methodology for survey research on the Internet.'

[54]    Bennett, *Culture and Everyday Life*; Bennett, 'The media sensorium: cultural technologies, the senses and society'; Haythornthwaite, 'The Internet and Everyday Life'; Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*; Markham, 'The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography'; Kendall, 'Meaning and Identity in "Cyberspace": the performance of gender, class and race online.'

[55]    Palmer and Thompson, 'The paradoxes of football spectatorship: on-field and online expressions of social capital among the "Grog Squad"', 191.

[56]    As cited by Wann et al, *Sports Fans*.

[57]    Palmer and Thompson, 'The paradoxes of football spectatorship', 197

[58]    Wilson, 'New media, social movements, and global sport studies: A revolutionary moment and the sociology of sport.'

[59]    Millward, '"We've all got the bug for Euro-Aways"'; Levermore and Millward, 'Official policies and informal transversal networks.'

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