A Fragmented Diaspora? Online Communities and 'Exiled' Soccer Fans

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Abstract
   Generally speaking, sociological studies of soccer fans have labelled specific fan practices as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic', often doing so on the basis of a subjective prioritisation of 'traditional' forms of soccer fandom. Consequently, computer mediated communication (CMC) has become stigmatised and fan interactions via the internet have been widely regarded as one of the many negative consequences of the globalisation of the sport. An unhelpful dichotomy has thus emerged, which divorces CMC from 'authentic' fan practices and excludes those that interact online from 'genuine' fandom. Thorough research, therefore, into the nature of such interactions, and the distinct communities that emerge from this, has been largely neglected.
   Ironically, several studies, which have used online fan interactions as a source of data, have reported the replication of (or potential for) several forms of traditional soccer fandom within online settings – most notably, the centrality of geographic identity and origin, as well as the establishment of meaningful relationships and genuine communities of soccer fans. The results of such studies also suggest that it is precisely those fans engaged in traditional practices who are the most likely to converse via the internet.
   The central aim of this paper is to address the dearth of research on CMC between soccer fans and, more specifically, to provide conceptual outline for our understanding of online communities and the nature and consequences of online interactions. A case study on 'exiled' fans, based on a netnographic observation of an online forum, analyses the use and membership of online communities by soccer fans who are no longer connected, in geographic terms, to the club they affiliate with. Despite this, such fans are able to express their identity to a club (and/or place), establish relationships with other fans, and form a distinct community of soccer fans – features considered hallmarks of authentic fandom.

Key Words: Online communities, computer mediated communication, fandom, soccer, identity, netnography.

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The term community holds an esteemed place within the vernacular of English soccer. Those associated with the game's governing body, its many professional and amateur clubs, and fans themselves, all frequently make use of the term. As Blackshaw observed, the rhetoric of community is, therefore, pervasive within the football world.[1] A consequence of this, even within academic writing on football 'communities', is that the term is often used but rarely conceptualised; community is frequently conflated with other collective adjectives and, to some extent, has lost its distinctive elements. More or less everyone knows what community more or less means, but many struggle to articulate the defining features of a football community with a degree of precision.

These problems are heightened with regards to online communities specifically. Whilst community is a term frequently used and affectionately embraced within the football world, the same cannot be said of the online community, in which fans interact via computer mediated communication (CMC). For many, including some of the most widely cited and influential academics of the game, such interactions fall outside of the accepted notion of what a football community is. As a result, research into online fan communities has been neglected and a rounded understanding of modern soccer fandom has, therefore, been compromised.

The aims of this paper are to, a) begin to address the lack of research into online communities of football fans, b) explain how this dearth of research has resulted from the existing literature on modern soccer fandom, c) try and rescue the term community from its vague usage and propose a distinct conceptual definition within the context of online interaction specifically and, finally, d) offer some data from the early stages of my PhD research, through which tentative suggestions can be made about the nature of online communities of soccer fans. This data will focus on 'exiled' soccer fans and is drawn from a netnographic observation of an online forum, which has analysed the use of an online community by fans who are no longer connected, in geographic terms, to the club they affiliate with.

1. The internet and fandom
   Almost a decade ago, Auty identified a dearth of research on the internet within studies of football.[2] Sustained and meticulous research on the relationship between the internet and soccer fandom in particular is still in its infancy. More recently, Gibbons and Dixon suggested some important reasons as to why the problem persists.[3] Crucially, they argue that the academic discourse concerning football fans and fandom practices has actually stigmatised internet usage and has, rather unhelpfully, deflected attention away from online interaction - a development that has become an integral element of modern football fandom.[4]
   Of these studies, the highly influential work of Richard Giulianotti has been identified as particularly problematic.[5] Giulianotti's 'Taxonomy of Football Fans' argues that soccer fans exist along a horizontal axis of 'Traditional' to 'Consumer', split in the middle by a vertical axis of 'Hot' to 'Cool' forms of fandom.[6] Relationships with and proximity to soccer grounds; means of consuming soccer and interactions with other fans about soccer-related issues are amongst the aspects considered to depict levels of solidarity and identity around a club. These traditional practices supposedly help determine whether a fan is categorised as being one of the following more to less authentic 'types': 'Supporter', 'Follower', 'Fan' or 'Flâneur'.[7] In relation to the least authentic of these fan types, the 'Flâneurs', Giulianotti suggests that the internet is merely a 'virtual' and 'passive' form of communication that only the most inauthentic fans use to experience soccer in a detached manner, *instead of* engaging in more 'real' experiences like attending matches in person and interacting 'face-to-face' with other fans.

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Consequently, it has been typical for academics to continue using the internet as a source of data rather than as the object of research in itself. Message boards, in particular, have been popular and convenient means of gathering data regarding sport fans.[8] Several researchers have used internet communication as a key source when studying resistance and activist movements,[9] whilst others have investigated whether or not fan interaction and behaviour is altered by the medium itself.[10]

What these studies lack, collectively, is an attention to the origin of the data. Message boards have been used here to illustrate wider processes within sport, but have not been analysed as an entity in their own right and, subsequently, attention to the communities that have developed around them have been neglected. Many of the outlined studies refer to the 'community' of fans they are studying, but this is based on an assumption that community exists rather than a detailed and thorough examination as to whether or not this is the case. In order to address this, it is important that we turn our attention to the concept of the online community, outline its specific features and use this to underpin our analysis of the nature of CMC between football fans (to ensure they reflect, more accurately, this significant development in modern football fandom).

2. Conceptualising the online community

If the study of traditional communities was blighted by the sheer number of definitions offered, it must be noted that the literature regarding online communities is more notable for its distinct lack of theorisation.[11] Although not peculiar to the study of sport communities, it is commonplace to simply borrow a definition of virtual community from one of the pioneering scholars in the field without an explicit discussion of its comparative merits.[12]

Of the earliest conceptions of online communities readily adopted by others, those of Rheingold and Wellman and Guilia have been particularly influential.[13] To Rheingold, online communities constituted a separate entity to real-life communication and community formation. Online communities were not extensions of real-life interaction, but simply would not exist without their formation taking place on the internet. Whilst real-life interaction may result from the relationships people formed online, the genesis of those relationships is within a distinct internet-based community, separate from the 'real' lives of its members. Several authors have been critical of this 'alternate reality' stance, particularly as the internet's importance to everyday communication is increasingly apparent. As Delanty has argued, Rheingold's ideas are the product of a time when internet usage was largely confined to a numerically small, affluent, male, young, and technology savvy strata. Internet use, therefore, 'was restricted to a small section of society and thus its interconnectedness for the wider population was not there to analyse'.[14]

Whilst Wellman and Gulia actively refuted this dichotomous approach, in defining an online community as 'networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity' they do, perhaps, go too far and a distinct 'online' element to their approach is lost.[15] In reality, their definition could be applied to *any* community, irrespective of its online or offline origins. If we are to continue to discuss online communities as distinct from traditional or face-to-face community formations, there must be meaningful criteria on which a distinction can be made if the term 'online community' is to have any conceptual value at all. Only when the majority of interactions between members of a community occur via CMC, when the meaningful relationships within a group are established online rather than face-to-face, or when one of key features of the community and the identity of its membership is the online setting in which their interaction takes place, can we genuinely claim to be analysing an online community.

Although there is a distinct difference between the two camps in relation to the degree of integration between the 'online' and 'offline' lives of community members, if we analyse them more closely two important similarities emerge. Both papers make a clear distinction between the factors which *bring people together* online and those that signify a genuine *community has developed*, deliberately distancing online community formation from the traditional notion that community membership is obligatory and centred on locale. A shared identity or interest may bring these people together, but this mere 'accident of proximity' does not mean community formation occurs.[16] If we refer back to the definition offered by Wellman and Gulia, only when distinct phenomena emerge from CMC can we be sure that a genuine community exists online; in particular, Wellman and Gulia have purposefully drawn attention to several *reciprocal* features of that interaction, of which support and the sharing of information is key to their conceptualisation of online communities.

Rheingold also argues that the connections people make and the relationships they form online will, in fact, be stronger than those in traditional communities due to the shared interest and/or identity that brought them together in the first instance. He argued that online communities are where 'we get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive. In this sense, the topic is the address…[and] your chances of making friends are magnified by order of magnitude over the *old methods* of finding a peer group'.[17] To Wellman and Gulia technology not only facilitated contact between people with something in common, nor did it merely make this contact more convenient and far-reaching, but the technology itself led to the emergence of *specialised* relationships of co-operation and support. Whilst diverse, multiplex relationships could develop from this, interaction between community members centres on a distinct and narrow sense of collective identity and/or shared interests.

In another notable contribution, Castells developed Wellman and Gulia's notion of the personalised virtual community further, but was sceptical about the strength and longevity of relationships established online.[18] Castells argued that meaningful relationships were not formed and that 'ties' between people online are 'thin'; thus, online communities are ephemeral in nature as people interact, usually briefly, without resulting in long-term, significant social relations. This was, as Castells argued, due to the distinction between two types of online community members. Whilst a small number of genuine community members exist, the kind of internet homesteaders to which Rheingold referred, they are significantly outnumbered by a large swathe of transient community *users*, who only casually and sporadically interact within the confines of the community, if at all.

Castells' reminder that not everyone interacting online, even within an online community, can be considered a fully-fledged community member is an important consideration. However, his conclusion that online communities as a whole are based on ephemeral and thin relationships and interactions is difficult to substantiate. He himself identifies a core membership of

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genuine 'homesteaders' exists within online communities. It is here, in this core of committed, long-term, regular and inter-related contributors to an internet chat-room or message board that some of the fundamental components of community (as suggested by Wellman and Gulia and others) can be located.

Based on the above analysis, of just some of the key contributors to the field, online communities can therefore be conceptualised as the emergence of reciprocal behaviours, norms and values, meaningful relationships, and identity to an online space (and its members) as a result of CMC within a group, whose interaction is initially stimulated by a shared interest, identity or something in common. Whilst community members may interact in a variety of ways, CMC remains important to their engagement with one another.
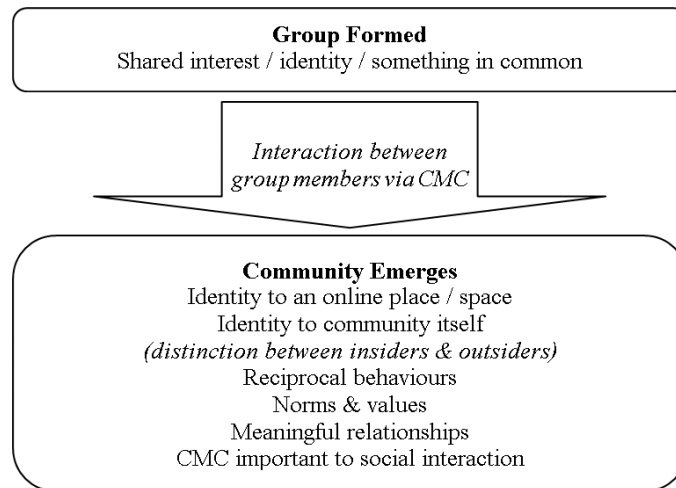
> **Group Formed**
> Shared interest / identity / something in common

> *Interaction between group members via CMC*

> **Community Emerges**
> Identity to an online place / space
> Identity to community itself
> *(distinction between insiders & outsiders)*
> Reciprocal behaviours
> Norms & values
> Meaningful relationships
> CMC important to social interaction

Image 1: The Development of Online Communities.

3. ClaretsMad

The community that forms the basis of this research project is that which frequents 'Eli's Message Board', a forum for the fans of Burnley Football Club, which contains over 3,100,000 separate posts and 18,000 members.[19]. The message board was launched in 2002 and was later named after Eli, the username of former member David Evans who passed away in 2006.

Burnley FC, nicknamed 'The Clarets', is a closer representation of a typical English soccer club than those adopted in most of the existing studies of fandom. These projects have a tendency to focus on elite clubs such as Liverpool,[20] Manchester United[21] and Chelsea[22] when analysing the impact of globalisation and commercialisation on the game. However, these hugely successful clubs (in both sporting and commercial terms) and their international supporter bases are not representative of English soccer clubs, their fans and, therefore, English soccer fandom on the whole. It is easier to point to the demise of traditional fan practices, particularly match-day attendance and the importance of local identity, when the fans under analysis support one of the elite clubs mentioned above.

Burnley FC's genesis is synonymous with the origins of the professional game in the industrial towns and cities of the north. Established in 1882, the club was a founder member of the Football League and, like many other clubs in Lancashire, it became a focal point for the expression of 'a northern populism based on the identity and achievement of local industry' which 'involved the workers own sense of identity and pride'.[23] The club successes and failures were deeply connected to the wider civic and economic identities of the town's population and although the cotton industry has long since passed, Burnley FC continues to represent the town as one of its pivotal social institutions.

In many ways it is the archetypal traditional English club and the majority of its fans practise many of the celebrated features of traditional fandom outlined previously. The club have used the same ground since 1883, the fan base is largely drawn from the town itself, and the majority of the club's directors are successful local businessmen. The rhetoric of the community club could certainly be applied here. Although not *untouched* by the forces of globalisation, commercialisation and neo-liberalism, which have significantly altered the English game since the Premier League was established in 1992, two fan publications epitomise the chasm that exists between Burnley FC and the elite clubs within the game; "It's Burnley, not Barcelona" and "Russians Don't Land Here".[24]

Although the club's fans epitomise notions of 'traditional' fandom to a large extent, many also engage in CMC via the internet. Match-days are as important to the community members of Eli's as they are to any other soccer fans. Since the message board was created, a large number of Burnley fans have logged into the forum and discussed match-day events as they unfolded. This is particularly true of 'exiled' Burnley fans, those whose affiliation with the club remains strong, but whose geographic location makes attendance at live games difficult. Fans based throughout the UK and further afield (there are regular contributors from Australia, Canada, Italy, Qatar, and elsewhere) amass to keep up-to-date with the day's events and discuss key incidents. Many, like WestTorontoClaret, buxtonclaret, Zumerzet_claret and cockneyclaret, for example, openly display their exiled status and identity to the club within their chosen moniker. As kick-off approaches on Saturday afternoon, traffic on the website hits its weekly peak and dedicated match-day discussion threads are started by some of the prominent, long-standing and regular contributors to the forum.

Before the match begins, these discussion threads are characterised by people 'signing in' to declare their presence, greet one another and predict the outcome of the forthcoming match. Within this prelude, a great familiarity and

affection between regular contributors is expressed. Over the years since Eli's was formed many of the exiled fans in question have spent a significant amount of time together conversing via the forums, particularly on match-days. They openly welcome one another, refer to each other by nicknames and (occasionally) acquired reputation, allude to personal communication away from the forum itself, and spend time catching up with the lives of each member away from soccer itself. Here, the everyday lives and interests of the community members are openly discussed – families, work, hobbies, significant events, etc. On occasion, intimate and personal issues are openly shared, either joyous or tragic, and the community at large often becomes a support network for its members or simply a location to vent frustrations.

Once the match itself has begun, the incidents of the game gradually take precedence. Two interesting phenomena are noticeable in relation to soccer fandom and community activity. Firstly, many of the community members involved make a conscious attempt to replicate as much of the physical match-day experience as possible. Fans type active encouragement for the team, support for a particular player, demonstrate wild expressions of delight when Burnley score, revel in the struggles of their rivals and even construct their own songs as homage to the team and its players. Many do so whilst consuming alcohol, discussing the tactics employed by the manager and analysing the relative strengths and weaknesses of specific players.

Secondly, contributors to the discussion thread will relay verbatim coverage from other sources. Many of the fans involved already have access to game itself through local radio broadcasting, the club's own audio feed via the official website, text based coverage from sport websites, as well as, on occasion, televised coverage of the game. However, simply knowing what is happening is clearly not enough for the fans involved, many of whom are more than happy to spend their afternoon relaying their chosen coverage for the benefit of others. Eli's allows many exiled fans to *share* their match-day experience with others who identify with the club, an experience which their location often prevents but which the online community facilitates. This sharing of information centres on match action primarily, but many contributors also refer to the behaviour of the crowd, chants at the match and the atmosphere in general. It is through reciprocal behaviours like this that a group of disparate soccer fans have started to develop meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships via the internet.

4. Conclusion

Whilst this paper has only been able to touch upon the many activities, rituals and behaviours of the online community in question, it has intended to provide a context-specific insight into the use of the internet by football fans in order to engage with one another. There is not the space, here, to delve into the many other elements of community which are detectable at Eli's message board, nor is the data collected thus far substantial enough to provide anything but tentative suggestions. However, observation of the ritualistic match-day thread at Eli's has demonstrated that some of the core elements of online communities proposed by this paper are evident and that, far from ephemeral or 'thin' in nature, the connection between those fans, the support and help they receive from one another, and the relationships that they have formed are long-term and meaningful. Not only that, but the communication between some of the fans involved has spread beyond the confines of message board itself and has become integrated into their everyday lives. Whilst referring to these exiled fans as a diaspora might be stretching that term a little far, many fans that are no longer connected to the geographic location of the club have formed a community based on their shared interest and identity. Despite being fragmented geographically, it is at Eli's forum that those fans have been brought together and developed community bonds.

Notes

[1] Tony Blackshaw, 'Contemporary Community Theory and Football', *Soccer and Society* 9.3 (2008): 325-345.

[2] Caroline Auty, 'Football Fan Power and the Internet: Net Gains?', *Aslib Proceedings* 54.5 (2002): 273-279.

[3] Tom Gibbons and Kevin Dixon, 'Surf's Up!: A Call to Take English Soccer Fan Interactions on the Internet More Seriously', *Soccer and Society* 11.5 (2010): 599-613.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., Tom Gibbons and Daniel Nuttall, 'Using E-surveys to Access the Views of Football Fans Within Online Communities', *Sport in Society* 15.9 (2012): 1228-1241.

[6] Richard Giulianotti,'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26.1 (2002): 25-46.

[7] Ibid.

[8] John R. Mitrano, 'The "Sudden Death" of Hockey in Hartford: Sports Fans and Franchise Relocation', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (1999): 134-154; Peter Millward, 'We've All Got The Bug For Euro-Aways', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41.3 (2006): 381-398; Andy Ruddock, 'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football - and the Lefties Too!', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 29.4 (2005): 369-385.

[9] Auty, 'Football Fan Power'; Adam Brown, 'Not For Sale'? The Destruction and Reformation of Football Communities in the Glazer Takeover of Manchester United, *Soccer and Society*, 8.4, (2007): 614-635; Brett Hutchins, Andy Ruddock and David Rowe, 'It's Fantasy Football Made Real: Networked Media Sport, the Internet and the Hybrid Reality of MyFootballClub', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26 (2009): 89-106; David Rowe, Andy Ruddock and Brett Hutchins, 'Cultures of Complaint: Online Fan Message Boards and Networked Digital Media Sport Communities', *Convergence* 16.3 (2010): 298-315; Andy Ruddock, Brett Hutchins and David Rowe, 'Contradictions in Media Sport Culture: The Reinscription of Football Supporter Traditions Through Online Media', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13.3 (2010): 323-339.

[10] Christian M. End, 'An Examination of NFL Fans' Computer Mediated BIRGing', *Journal of Sport Behavior* 24.2 (2001): 162-181; David McMenemy, Alan Poulter and Sara O'Loan, 'A Robust Methodology for Investigating Old Firm Related

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Sectarianism Online', *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 1.4 (2005): 488-503; Catherine Palmer and Kirrilly Thompson, 'The Paradoxes of Football Spectatorship: on Field and Online Expressions of Social Capital Among the 'Grog Squad'', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 24.2 (2007): 187-205.

[11] Mid-way through a century of debate over the meaning of the term community, Hillery brought together the various competing definitions, broke them down into their various distinct elements and tried to highlight areas of common ground among them. The fact that Hillery unearthed over ninety definitions of the term community was not the only fascinating aspect of his research; it was, indeed, overshadowed by his conclusion that the solitary factor linking these wide-ranging approaches was 'people'. Despite this, Hillery was able to demonstrate that three other distinct elements were frequently used as the basis of community definitions, namely area, common ties and social interaction. See George A. Hillery, 'Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement', *Rural Sociology* 20 (1955): 111-123.

[12] Particularly those of Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (London: The MIT Press, 1993); Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, 'Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities', *Networks in the Global Village* (1999): 331-366.

[13] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*; Wellman and Gulia, 'Net Surfers'.

[14] Gerard Delanty, *Community: Key Ideas.2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[15] Wellman and Gulia also added that these were often 'personalised communities', as members of online communities would join to develop interpersonal networks and interact online based on their own individual sense of identity and interests. Wellman and Gulia, 'Net Surfers', 127.

[16] Ibid., 9.

[17] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community,* 12. My emphasis.

[18] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[22] 'Eli's Message Board', last modified January 10 2013, viewed January 10, 2013, <http://boards.footymad.net/forum.php?tno=104>. To put that into context, Burnley itself is a small town of around 87,000 people, including the surrounding area, in the North-West of England. This small town was an integral part of the thriving cotton industry of Lancashire, during the 18th and 19th centuries in particular. Since the Second World War, however, it has been characterised by economic strife; notably the collapse of the cotton industry itself, followed by the closure of other key industries and factories. In recent years it became infamous for racial tension and riots, a declining population, high levels of unemployment, widespread poverty and some of the cheapest housing in England.

[20] Millward, 'We've All'.

[21] Brown, 'Not For Sale'?; Anthony King, *The End of the Terraces* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1998).

[22] Cornel Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television, and Globalisation* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[23] Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991): 167.

[24] Dave Thomas, *It's Burnley not Barcelona* (Manchester: Parrs Wood Press, 2003); Dave Thomas and Andrew Firmin, *Russians Don't Land Nere* (Burnley: Hudson and Pearson, 2007).

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