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Randles, D

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Article

New 'Glocal' Players: Exploring the emergence and position of football fan-produced digital media

David Randles, Liverpool John Moores University

This paper examines the emergence of fan-produced digital platforms and their position in the football media landscape in what has become a competitive environment for audience share.
The growing prominence of digital fan media comes at a time when digitisation has seen a shift in production techniques and changing consumption habits while enabling new voices to be heard, contributing to the redefinition of the relationship between content producers and users that is challenging some of football's traditional reporting practice (Randles 2022).
Exploring areas including the digital transformation of the sports media environment and football journalism in particular, we see how digital fan media has flourished by creating experiential content with interaction and authenticity at its core that is resulting in transnational 'glocal' fan identities.

Introduction

When sports journalist David Walsh used the phrase 'fans with typewriters' he was referring to those colleagues on the world cycling circuit who ignored claims of the now disgraced seven times Tour De France winner Lance Armstrong's serial doping. Instead of investigating the allegations, Walsh (2012) believes some of his fellow journalists chose to look the other way in return for access to Armstrong.

Research dealing with the occupational status of sports journalists has also highlighted complicit reporter-source relationships with football journalists in particular attracting the unwanted 'fans with typewriters' tag (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006; McEnnis 2017). The perception of sports reporters being cheerleaders for those they should be holding to account led to investigative journalist Andrew Jennings denouncing UK sports journalists as 'the worst in the world' (Francis 2010) in the wake of the FIFA World Cup bidding cash for votes scandal. Of course, this often cosy and unquestioning environment in which many football journalists operate is not exclusive to sport but does appear as one of multiple concerns raised by interviewees in this study who state a general dissatisfaction with mainstream football coverage as a primary motivation to start fan media platforms. And yet, for somewhat different reasons, the term 'fans with typewriters' might now be more fitting for a new generation of football media content producers or, more appropriately, fans with smartphones, microphones, gimbals and social media.

Just as the laptop has replaced the typewriter, and websites have contributed to a significant decline in newspaper circulations, all respondents in this study agree that without technological advance they would not have been able to enter an environment that has evolved from what Sugden and Tomlinson (2008: 159-160) described as the 'once simple world of standard match schedules [that was] based in the hegemony of print media' to a more open and democratic space.

By extending my previous research involving the digital transformation of professional football coverage in England that finds how digitisation is redefining workflows, workload and, importantly here, journalistic practice (Randles 2022), this latest study adds to other scholarly work exploring the juncture between fan produced content and professional sports

media. As McEnnis (2017, 2022) determines how sports journalists view football fan bloggers in terms of their own professional identity and provides an insightful fifth-estate logic to sports blogging, it is proposed that the dominant position enjoyed by journalists through mass media's monopolistic hold over communication methods is now being challenged by new producers of sports content (Boyle and Haynes 2009; McEnnis 2017).

Just as Gillmor (2004) wrote of grassroots journalism, Jenkins (2006) of the politics of participation and Rettberg (2008) about Web 2.0's empowerment of citizen journalists, a term Harcup (2013) applies to dissident or alternative media, Boyle (2017) recognises how digitisation of the 1990s would see sports journalism at the forefront of a transition within journalism generally, adding how the emergent online culture of consumption allowed new, fan-based sources of information to establish some prominence as sports fan culture evolved.

It is here where Domeneghetti (2022) claims the growth of non-traditional independent media signifies how professional sports journalism is not catering for the needs of all sports fans whereas McCarthy (2012) proposes that sports fan bloggers might well be reacting and responding to a mediated experience of sport. Allied to such perspectives, authenticity of fan experience is raised by all respondents as a unique characteristic of digital fan media that counters some of the standard protocols inherent to football journalism in particular.

Where some studies have tended to focus on textual blogging (Kian et al 2011, McCarthy 2012, 2014; McEnnis 2017, 2022) a new wave of fan media have adopted a converged hybrid approach to content production combining video, text and audio while utilising the hosting and distribution capabilities of a range of digital and social media platforms to engage, interact with and grow large domestic and global audiences.

Showing how digital fan media presents practical and ethical challenges for mainstream sports media outlets competing for audience in the same transnational space, this thematic discussion begins with a brief methodology and overview of selected participants before five distinct yet related sub-sections propose some of the salient points in this ever developing research field by interweaving respondent data with a synthesis of the existing literature.

Methodology

The study used in-depth semi-structured interviews with a small sample of founders of prominent digital fan media to facilitate concentrated and detailed insight to the research area. Qualitative data was gathered from three established fan media concerns – The Anfield Wrap (TAW); The United Stand (TUS) and AFTV (formerly Arsenal Fan TV). Each group was selected on the basis of their early adoption and subsequent popularity as pioneering sector leaders in this relatively new digital space.

UK-based fan media aligned with English Premier League (EPL) clubs were chosen due to the international appeal of what Millward (2011) calls 'the global football league'. Of particular interest was digital fan media of Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United football clubs due to their long-held place within the EPL's so-called 'Big Six' and their historic and established local and global fanbase. There is evidence of digital fan media start-ups across the EPL in recent years but, as yet, the vast majority have not attracted the follower and engagement levels achieved by the platforms included here that have been running for between seven and 10 years.

Two interviews were conducted over Zoom - Robbie Lyle (AFTV) and Mark Goldbridge (TUS) - with Gareth Roberts (TAW) interviewed face-to-face. Interview duration was between 55 minutes and 1 hour 20 minutes. While terms such as YouTubers and influencers are sometimes used, the term 'fan

channel' was rejected by all respondents. It was agreed that digital fan media, fan-led media and fan produced media are acceptable descriptions of the genre.

The Line-up

AFTV (Arsenal Fan TV)

Launched in 2012 by Arsenal fan Robbie Lyle, AFTV claims to be 'the largest football fan network in the world' and, as of August 2021, has 1.37million subscribers to its YouTube channel that has attracted over 1billion views (AFTV, YouTube 2021).

The United Stand (TUS)

The Manchester United focused platform was launched by supporter Mark Goldbridge in 2014 and has amassed 1.09 million YouTube subscribers and over 592 million views (The United Stand, YouTube 2021). TUS claims to be 'The world's biggest independent unofficial Manchester United fan channel' adding 'We are focused on giving fans of the club a voice in a world of professional pundits' (TheUnitedStand.com 2021).

The Anfield Wrap (TAW)

Liverpool FC fan-led platform The Anfield Wrap was founded by a group of supporters including Gareth Roberts in 2011 and has taken a different route than the aforementioned independent platforms, charging a monthly subscription for access to much of its video content and podcasts, although some of it is free. It has amassed over 60,000 YouTube subscriptions and over 18million views. TAW is part owned by US-based Red Touch Media that in 2013 acquired a 25% stake in the business. Red Touch Media has no editorial input and can be vetoed by other shareholders, most of whom are employed at TAW.

In addition to a website, each fan-led concern is prominent across the following social media platforms (figures relate to follows):

	Twitter	Instagram	Facebook	Tik Tok
AFTV	588k +	985k +	1m +	197k +
TUS	805k +	211k +	92k +	*135k +
TAW	363k +	151k +	166k +	35k +

* Tik Tok figures correspond with affiliated TUS account 'GoldbridgeOfficial'

Playing on a New Pitch – From Print to Digital

The origins of digital fan media are arguably less politically inclined as the print fanzine movement of the mid 1980's, and yet inherent to both genres of fan produced content is a dissatisfaction with mainstream media, what Boyle (2006: 142) describes in terms of 'a long tradition of dissent' seeing online fan communities 'evolving out of the print fanzine movement.' Ryan (2021) agrees fanzines provided a place of resistance for fans to criticise their clubs, players and the mainstream media at a

time when football supporters felt increasingly disenfranchised in an era blighted by crowd disturbances against a backdrop of football played in decrepit and unsafe stadia.

Football journalist and founder of longstanding Manchester United fanzine, United We Stand, Andy Mitten recalls starting the publication in 1989 as 'decisions were being made on my behalf where we had no voice and were all considered hooligans' (Sked 2017). This is a position recognised by Domeneghetti (2017: 187) in that fanzines were a means to voice disenchantment with the game's authorities but also, and importantly when we consider digital fan media today, an outlet whereby fans could 'express themselves creatively.'

Just as football fanzines grew exponentially from the 1980's into the 1990's, with Redhead (1991) recognising over 400 sport-related versions by 1991, up from a mere handful in 1985, easier access to the means of production has now led to significant growth of digital fan media but with capacity to reach much larger audiences due to the immediate and trans-global penetration of social media. And yet, similar to the sub-cultural anti-establishment ethos of fanzines in topics and tone, while digital fan platforms have been greeted with some scepticism in professional circles (McEnnis 2017), and are not universally accepted by all supporters, there are those who welcome the forthright and vocal genre as per an interview with Mark Goldbridge in Four Four Two (2019) that describes digital fan media as 'a natural evolution' of fanzines and 'a counterblast to the dreariness of media-trained banality.' Elaborating here, Goldbridge refers to digital fan media as a 'watered down version of fanzines that tend to hit the same target area' while agreeing they provide content that is unlikely to appear in mainstream media:

> 'It is that freedom of speech, you know you're not constrained. You also know MUTV or a Man United Twitter account is never going to say 'wasn't Dan James shit today'. They just can't do it. We're never going to see that on Match of the Day. And I don't actually think it ever should exist within club media or mainstream media.'

Gareth Roberts was employed as a newspaper sports sub-editor when he started the Well Red fanzine as a pre-cursor to The Anfield Wrap at a time when many Liverpool supporters felt controversial owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, were not being held to account by football journalists after leveraging sizeable debt against the club's assets, as Roberts recalls:

> 'What was going on at the club, why it was going on and what we thought was needed to stop it, none of that was being covered by the mainstream media. They didn't do it so it was left to the fans to do it. People were cynical about why there wasn't enough coverage...is the relationship between the paper [Liverpool Echo] and the club too cosy?'

This lack of confidence in football journalism to provide deeper enquiry is symptomatic of the 'fans with typewriters' phenomenon and provided an opportunity for fan content producers to react to the perceived failings of sports journalism while enhancing their own prestige and authority (McEnnis 2022).

Access versus Authenticity

It is helpful to draw from thinking on boundary work and jurisdiction to consider the degrees of separation between the professional identity of sports journalists against the non-professional domain of fan media and also hierarchies within each field. As McEnnis (2017) locates a 'Toy Department within a Toy Department' on sportsdesks, where traditional reporters assume

professional prominence over digital sports journalists, later research (McEnnis 2022) presents categories within sports blogging in terms of 'basic', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' impact, the latter area being the furthest departure from the 'bastion of easy living, sloppy journalism and soft news', (Boyle 2006: 1). Comments from all interviewees acknowledge McEnnis (2017) in that fans and journalists are now 'playing on the same pitch' in terms of hosting and distributing content across digital and social media platforms, with some crossover of journalistic activity. And while there is evidence of a growing number of contributors to fan media having journalism or media related knowledge and experience (Ryan 2021), it is not an ambition for fan media to define itself in terms of journalism, as outlined by Goldbridge, who recognises two related but distinct realms:

> 'They're very different in the same sort of area. Fan media is just a very different raw, unfiltered type of content. You're not going to get a lot of it in the mainstream. I think mainstream probably tries to wander where we are. We've probably tried to wander where they are but, actually, they complement each other really well.'

Lyle states how providing a different perspective to mainstream media and the 'tired lines from ex-players and pundits' was a key motivation for starting AFTV:

> 'You can come on here and have your say, have a chat and tell us what you think about the club, whether it be good, bad or indifferent. I just felt that in the past there was no platform offering that, whether it be established media.'

As Lyle highlights the 'honesty' of fan media over professional coverage, Goldbridge and Roberts offer 'authenticity' as a major draw for supporters, suggesting mainstream media lacks the same appeal or, as McCarthy (2014: 67) states, 'an intimacy with the sport that traditional sports journalism, even with its myriad first-hand quotes and access to information does not.' All respondents acknowledge the professional protocols that can dictate football journalist-source relationships, a key factor being access to players, managers and club officials. But in an age where access in elite football is restricted (Boyle 2006; Steen 2015) the Manchester Evening News Manchester United correspondent Sam Luckhurst (2021) describes 'a wider distance' between players and journalists and 'a tactful balancing act' in maintaining relationships with clubs. For Lyle, this has created a professional culture that compromises the privileged status of access in that clubs have 'too much control' and journalists are too often 'fed what the club wants them to hear.'

In an environment where accreditation is typically reserved for professional journalists, there are limited occasions where some clubs grant fan media access to players and managers or to attend media conferences, as suggested by Roberts in that 'we have an alright relationship with the club' but that 'our business model does not rely on it.' Moritz and Mirer (2022: 138) question access as a measure to justify the occupational legitimacy of football journalism and see a diminishing of the authority of the exclusive or 'scoreboard scoop' that has been undermined by the digital dilution of speed of information and 'the growth of quasi-journalistic work on in house team websites.' This corresponds with findings from respondents who also suggest a devaluation of access in what has become a commercial environment with different agendas at play (Boyle and Haynes 2009), content from which is not what audiences expect from digital fan media. As Lyle says 'getting behind the scenes and being pitch side. That's not important to me,' Roberts points to the 'shirt and tie' approach of traditional football coverage:

> 'People don't actually want the mainstream stuff from us. Some of the big interviews that we've done with players or whoever, that we think will fly, they don't. People watch and listen to them but they don't do great numbers.'

Where fan media is unapologetic for its partisan approach, Steen (2014) believes objectivity is not amongst the protocols adhered to by football reporters as is required, if arguably achieved, in other areas of journalism. Bradshaw and Minogue (2020: 84-85) highlight the 'myth' of objectivity in sports journalism, particularly in local or regional reporting where home team coverage often complies with the spectre of 'boosterism', a long held 'accepted, and even expected practice' in US sports journalism where reporters openly favour local teams. Nonetheless, Roberts sees the organic passion of fan media as an advantage over traditional coverage, albeit both can be seen as subjective in their own way:

> 'It's all very steady, polite applause and tweaking your intro. How dare you celebrate [in the press box]. That's odd. That's not how you watch football. They don't experience it like we do. They sit in the press box with a press pass and it's a very different experience.'

The notion of authenticity helps us consider how fan-led concerns have become principal contributors to an experiential and mediated networked media sport environment as communication technologies facilitate the creation and distribution of digitised content away from traditional broadcast and print media (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). With this, immediacy and interaction are also key factors that have transformed the relationship between content producers and audience, aspects of the sports media complex that have been activated by technology and allowed fan-media to thrive.

Interaction and the '24/7-ness' of Fandom

Forecasting changes in the media world, BBC media editor Amol Rajan (2020) pointed to an intense battle for audience in the 'attention economy', a term used a decade earlier by Napoli (2011) in recognition of new modes of delivery of content and programming as a consequence of technological advance.

There is broader recognition how media and communications sectors have been transformed by digitisation and convergent communications have redefined the balance of power between media content producers, distributors and consumers (Deuze 2007; Castells 2013). Accompanying the changing relationship between producers and audiences as a result of technological progress (Pearson 2010), the emergence and subsequent popularity of digital fan media has added to an increasingly complex sports media environment in which the lines between producer, consumer, enactor, fan and athlete have become blurred as the omnipresence of the internet has led to a surge in demand for and consumption of sports media content (Billings and Hardin 2014).

As the digital environment has removed many of the barriers that once existed between journalists and their audience (Knight and Cook 2013; Domeneghetti 2017; Lambert 2019; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020) digital transformation has democratised the means of production, enabling fans to produce and disseminate content to an expanded digital audience. A consequence of the growth and significance of non-professional sports content producers is the undermining of journalism in that the popularity of non-traditional forms of football coverage has seen some football journalists re-evaluate their professional identity and relationship with audiences (McEnnis 2017; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020).

Of course, digital fan media alone is not responsible for such introspection but, rather, is one of multiple factors redefining professional practice. And yet, as has already been suggested, if football

journalism was meeting audience demand, would there be any call for digital fan media? The technological affordances of easy and instant access to digital information have seen audiences transition from passive recipients to active consumers of content (Napoli 2011; Hutchins and Rowe 2012) allowing fan-led start-ups to take advantage of the digital tools at their disposal to engage with audiences in a way that was not previously possible. With this, according to Lyle, is a sense that mainstream media are playing catch up:

> 'We wouldn't exist if it weren't for the technology. It has been a game changer. It's key to what we do and we're constantly looking to get better with it whereas part of the problem with some traditional media is they've taken so long to embrace it. They've even looked down their nose at the technology and they've fallen so far behind.'

Though it is acknowledged sports journalists must adapt to change and adopt new technologies to ensure outputs are in keeping with audience trends (Laucella 2014, Bradshaw and Minogue 2020, Randles 2022), digital fan media claims to have stolen a march on audience interaction and engagement. The idea of a connected sports fan and how the revised relationship between producers and consumers of media sport now often focuses on what happens at the users end (Rowe 2014) is supported by respondent comments in that instant fan interaction is a key premise on which they have been able to establish loyal following. Recalling web forums as a place for online fan communities to gather in the internet's formative years, Goldbridge refers to 'slow sports news', and how his desire for a quicker form of communication saw him turn to YouTube:

> 'You would go on to something like BBC 606, type something out and then you wait 20 minutes for someone to reply and then you reply...I was a bit frustrated.
> Match of the Day and mainstream media, I felt it was very tame and lacked speed in its approach. The proper chat that really gets you going is down the pub with your mates, so I wanted to replicate that somehow.'

As Sugden and Tomlinson (2010) note the increase in comment and opinion being consequential of a 24-hour rolling news culture, the idea of 'sports chatter' (Eco 1986; Rowe 1995) assumes greater significance when we consider the expressive, analytical and opinion driven premise on which so much football content is now derived, an outcome being that some traditional content formats are proving less popular (Randles 2022). It is significant how digital-social and mobile technologies are used by fan media to broadcast live to engage and interact with fans, not only in the immediate aftermath of matches, but throughout the week to capture the continuum of football fandom, as Roberts explains:

> 'There's 24-7 media coverage of football now but also the 24/7-ness of being a fan. What's happening at Liverpool? If we're linked to someone, we'll find out about them and constantly do pieces on it. We'll write for the website. We'll do podcasts. We'll let you know. It's just that 24/7 focus on Liverpool that we're bringing to our fans.'

Fan-cams, Lives and Watchalongs

An extended mediated matchday experience means football reporters and club media will now produce more content across fluid deadlines in an attempt to engage audiences for longer, a trend that causes Reach PLC regionals head of sport, Jon Birchall, to talk of 'the whole journey around the game,' (Randles 2022: 167). Mainstream football content producers are now required to utilise web-

enabled technologies (Domeneghetti 2017, Lambert 2019, Bradshaw and Minogue 2020) as matchday workflows are re-evaluated in response to changing audience behaviours. In line with the shift to creating experiential content, that is content that captures and re-enacts fan experience for those not in live attendance, football journalists at Eurosport, BBC Sport Online and Goal.com point to the growing significance of social-mobile storytelling to help capture atmosphere and engage audience in live environments (Randles 2022). Whereas match previews, post-match summaries and Q&A's with fans over Facebook and Instagram lives are becoming commonplace for some journalists, digital fan-media have been experimenting with tech-enabled experiential formats for the past decade and are often the go-to place for many supporters who want live interaction.

The provision of experiential content has become a cornerstone of digital fan media that often plays on the emotive value of football and controversially so at times. Some fan media outlets have been criticised for their use of 'fan-cams', that is asking supporters questions on camera as they leave stadia, a format that has become synonymous with passionate and sometimes expletive-laden rants. While the fan-cam has been disposed of by some fan media as, according to Goldbridge, 'it's not what our fans want anymore', other formats such as 'Watchalongs' and live post-match shows from venues ranging from purpose-built studios to pubs near grounds are proving popular. Lyle reveals AFTV's Watchalong of Arsenal's pre-season match against Tottenham attracted over 300,000 live views: 'It's all about interaction when your team's playing. You want to talk about how you feel, the good, the bad, the ugly.'

Recognising the dual appeal of information and interaction for online audiences, it is here where Schultz and Arke (2015) see the shift from a static one-way process in which traditional media was very much in control of determining the agenda and shaping messages to be delivered to audiences. The growing significance of user-producer engagement as a consequence of the proliferation of social media platforms emphasises the role of content creation and a recognition by organisations of the social and network value of engagement within social media (Dolan et al 2016). As a result, social media content is now being used to stimulate engagement whereby fans are mediated participants in spectator sports, what Bowman and Cramner (2014) term 'SocialMediaSport'. They add how technology is bringing fans and sport closer together providing opportunities for content producers to reach out to audience on a more intimate and social level that encourages fans to actively seek meaningful connections to athletes, clubs and media organizations that are looking to engage audience through digital content.

By leveraging its position in this expanded digital space for football coverage, fan media has been able to grow audience and interact on a personal level. This interaction has taken centre stage for many supporters who are now able to participate in a live conversation by virtue of a more dynamic and interactive sports communication process that has been enabled by the emergence of digital communication via the internet in that 'literally millions of fans who had been shut out of the sports communication process, can now take part in a variety of ways' (Schultz and Arke 2015: 20).

As some fan media contributors have grown social media profile to become known as influencers independent of the channels that shot them to prominence, there are football journalists who are also now developing their social media presence to 'become a brand in one's own right' with audiences that in some cases are bigger than the organisations they work for (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020: 8). Describing the 'sense of empowerment' that can come with being both publisher and product, Steen (2014: 43) warns of a 'cult of personality' as a bi-product of social media, and yet it is this very phenomenon that has contributed to the success of digital fan media with individual persona often proving popular with audience. It is also apparent how mainstream media are turning to social media influencers, podcasters and YouTubers as sources or, in some cases, presenters. Whereas all respondents recognise and welcome closer collaboration with mainstream media, there

is growing debate as to whether some of this is facilitating the dumbing down of professional sports journalism in the quest to appeal to younger audiences (Kelly 2020).

Going Global – Transnational Glocalisation of Fandom

As Hutchins and Rowe (2012) see globalisation as one of the main consequences of the broadening of the media-sport complex, the English Premier League's transnational relationships have altered ways in which the game is now consumed in line with the league's global and commercial transformations (Woods and Ludvigsen 2021). Just as technology has been the catalyst for the implementation of digital fan media, it has also enabled global content consumption from fans positioned in this same transnational space who would previously have been restricted from the shared mediated 'live' experience of football fandom, as noted by Roberts:

> 'Fans we've got in America and Australia, they'll watch it on the telly but they don't get that fan experience. We can give them a bit of that, a bit of the match through our eyes because of the technology. It helps show we're authentic, that we go home and away, that we are who we say we are. People love that, it's some of our most popular content when we look at the numbers.'

Lyle says that while over 50 percent of AFTV's audience are UK based, the rest is global. Likewise, Goldbridge attributes some of TUS' popularity to Manchester United's global appeal, a factor, like AFTV, that is central to its business model with TUS claiming 'our social reach boasts one of the largest followings in the world,' and that it 'garners millions of views per month via a variety of different social media platforms,' helping businesses 'reach a much wider audience if you partner with us,' (TheUnitedStand.com 2021). Goldbridge says content creators can utilise new technologies to attract global football audience:

> 'The technology is massive and it makes the world of football a smaller place because you can have people from India and America…We all know we've got those world fan-bases and clubs are very aware of them too.'

Fenton (2020) applies Rainie and Wellman's triple revolution logic of fast internet, social media and smartphones to help illustrate how digital technology has been instrumental to the hyper-digitalisation of fans by enabling the amplification of messages, discussion and interaction between clubs, players and fans while allowing audience reach beyond the local into national or international spaces.

Deriving the 'cosmopolitan football flaneur', that is a new wave of global fans looking for a club to support, Petersen-Wagner (2017) agrees digitisation has led to the globalisation of fandom and, in doing so, has created scope for a more diverse transnational fan that is seen as distinct from the stereotypical traditional and authentic fan – those of a perceived homogenous group of working-class males who have enjoyed a longstanding local affinity to a club. In terms of fan identity, Petersen-Wagner asks how so-called 'less authentic' supporters were able to start following foreign clubs via digital means and how this influenced fandom practices, a point addressed by Roberts who recognises global fans expressing themselves in line with traditional fandom: 'We have subscribers from the US, Ireland, Australia and wherever who tell us they have learned chants, phrases and other colloquialisms associated with supporting Liverpool FC by following TAW.'

By promoting the traditional signs and symbols of fan identity specific to their clubs and using these characteristics of authenticity to appeal to and attract so-called less authentic global supporters, digital fan media can contribute to the 'glocalisation' of transnational fan identity where behaviour previously only associated with local supporters is now being replicated globally, providing further opportunities for content creators through 'the transnational pull of media technologies' (Ryan 2021: 140).

Warranting further exploration, there is an interesting paradox here that is seeing latest trans-global technologies being utilised by fan media to promote and emphasise local, pre-digital tropes that are forging transnational glocal fan identities. This is also an area of growing significance to football clubs looking to stimulate fan engagement for commercial gain, the spectre of which might actually undermine the authenticity of fan identity.

Conclusion

If it is now difficult to argue that fan content producers have no part to play in 'sports journalism 3.0' (Domeneghetti 2022) it helps to understand what that role is and what opportunities there might be for other football media content creators. Rather than replicate professional sports media and, in particular, football journalism, the plethora of digital fan-led platforms that have emerged over the past decade are in part a reaction to a dissatisfaction with mainstream media and a desire among fans to produce and engage with content for likeminded supporters.

Better access to the means of production has enabled the implementation, hosting and distribution of content produced by early adopters of emergent digital-social technologies, who have pioneered ways to interact with other fans through innovative content formats that have become embedded within the sports media complex.

Coupled with technological advance as the catalyst for alternative voices to be heard, it has been proposed here that the opinion-driven digital fan media is very much the product of a perfect storm that has countered some of the perceived flaws of professional sports media and football journalism in particular, filling a gap in the market to stimulate and satisfy audience demand. Where football journalism and club media are often constrained by their own professional protocols, digital fan media has captured authentic fan experience that has led to transnational following from global fans attracted to local fan identity, culminating in the glocalisation of digital fan culture.

As an area for further research, there is increasing evidence of collaboration between football journalists and fan media aware of the potential for greater exposure via each other's digital-social reach. With some fan-media formats now also being replicated by professional sports media, it will be interesting to see how this plays out in terms of defining perceptions of amateur and professional realms in a sports media content arena increasingly beholden to audience demands.

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