Interventions

Common Knowledge and the Sidelining of Football Fans' Rights and Civil Liberties

Abstract: In recent years, debates have revolved around the treatment of football supporters and supporters' rights. Building upon Geoff Pearson's idea of a 'common knowledge' on 'football hooliganism', this essay explores how this common knowledge is theoretically expandable and sustained via three important avenues speaking to the (i) control of data production; (ii) fantasy documents and (iii) popular cultural manifestations. These collectively underpin not just a 'common knowledge'; crucially, they assist the sidelining of fans' rights across Europe.

Key words: Football; Fans; Knowledge; Hooliganism; Legal Regulation.

Introduction

Reporting from Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Euro 2024 in men's football hosted in Germany, *The Guardian's* Jonathan Liew noticed how European football events, increasingly, have been characterized by organizational, safety and logistical mismanagement and the sidelining of football supporters' basic rights. Late at night in Gelsenkirchen – amidst an 'apocalyptic storm' – many supporters having attended England versus Serbia not only had to rely on very limited access to post-match transport back to the city centre but had to endure long queues and potentially dangerous issues of over-crowding. As Liew explains:

> But to the disorder of Wembley in 2021 and the disgrace of Paris in 2022 and the dysfunction of Istanbul in 2023 can be added the disarray of Germany 2024. And while the symptoms may be different, *the common thread is an apparent indifference to the ordinary fan experience,* a capacity to spread misery, a very late-capitalist absence of basic human dignity at virtually every stage of the process. We hear a lot about the trouble football fans cause, the potential for violence and mayhem that in reality is only ever embodied by a tiny minority. *But when you consider how they are regarded and problematised by the authorities, perhaps the only surprise is that it doesn't kick off more often* (Liew, 2024, emphasis added).

Different issues speaking to fans' rights, football violence and legal responses have, for years, constituted a central plank of several *Entertainment and Sports Law Journal* articles (e.g., Pearson 2005; Tsoukala 2009; Redhead 2010a). Yet the poor treatment, or repressive policing of supporters across Europe – demonstrated by European or international fixtures in Paris, Istanbul, Gelsenkirchen and, most recently, Athens (November 2024) – continue. In the latter case, English supporters were reportedly 'treated like animals by police' whilst 'riot police used shields and teargas to rearrange the [fan] queue' (Steinberg 2024).

Liew's (2024) story from Germany captures precisely what this essay seeks to explore further: the ways in which football supporters have been *problematized*, as assisted by what Pearson (1998, 1999) – over two decades ago – called the 'common knowledge' on 'football hooliganism'. And, moreover, how this knowledge is instilled and evolve across Europe. Following Pearson, this common knowledge, built up by law enforcers, political and football authorities, and the media, contributes not only to make football supporters' 'legitimate targets' for innovative or panic laws and other 'extreme' social control mechanisms but, as asserted, it also serves to conflate elements of football supporter culture with 'hooliganism'. Pearson (1999: 29-30) writes:

> Much of the belief about the inherently problematic nature of football crowds has led many to confuse aspects of football *fandom* with acts of football '*hooliganism*'. As a result, the apparent difference between 'fan' and 'hooligan', although often stressed by club and football officials, can be regularly denied (p. 29-30, original emphasis).

However, the practical consequences of this confusion far exceed the abovementioned 'indifference' to fans' experiences and are well-covered in the academic literature. Significantly, they encompass the regular erosion of fans' civil liberties and human rights and, across European countries, and it remains the case that football supporters routinely are viewed as a 'threat to public order' that must be controlled and subjected to football-specific, often innovative legislation (Tsoukala et al. 2016: 177; James and Pearson 2015) that commonly follow as a consequence of reactionary '"knee-jerk" attempts to mitigate football crowd disorder' (Pearson and Stott, 2022: 7).

As this essay argues, to holistically understand *why* this remains the case*,* it is required to not just revisit the concept of a common knowledge (cf. Pearson 1998, 1999) but critically unpack how precisely such knowledge – like all types of knowledge – is set to life, redefined, matures, and is adapted.

Hence, this intervention paper's first aim is to revisit and update Pearson's intriguing concept or notion of a 'common[-sense] knowledge' on 'football hooliganism' and explore three avenues through which is maintained or instilled in contemporary Europe. Second, this essay theoretically extends his idea by placing it in conversation with compatible criminological and political sociological insights regarding epistemic power, knowledge production (Boutros 2024) and truth-making (Bigo 2008). By delineating three avenues through which a common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' is preserved in Europe, this paper focuses on (1) the control of the production of data, (2) fantasy documents and (3) popular cultural manifestations. Overall, it is argued that these aid the evolution of the common knowledge on 'football

hooliganism' which, in turn, contributes towards the regular sidelining of fans' rights and experiences across Europe.

Epistemic Power, Knowledge Production and Transnational 'Truths': Some Conceptual Considerations

Much is written about both football 'hooliganism' (Giulianotti, 1995; Tsoukala, 2009) and fandom (Millward 2011), and this short paper's purpose is not to review these literatures. Yet, one thing is clear: football fan behaviour has, for decades, constituted a major cause of concern throughout Europe (Frosdick and Marsh 2005). There is also a broad academic consensus that football supporters and supporter cultures are often criminalized, heavy-handedly policed and tightly surveilled (Pearson and Stott 2016; Tsoukala et al. 2016). As Webber (2024) maintains, the simple everyday pleasure of 'going to the game' means being subjected to a host of legal and security-related restrictions; on alcohol consumption, where to sit or stand, and digital identity cards.

However, the centrality here of what Pearson (1998, 1999) called the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' has been afforded limited discussion. That is *not* to say that scholars have failed to draw our attention towards how media coverage and representation of 'hooliganism' have assisted the social construction of the issue (Crabbe 2003; Tsoukala 2011), through, for instance, the employment of metaphorical interpretations such as 'hooliganism' as an '[English] disease' (Pearson 1998). The use of such metaphors, accordingly, replaced the need for legally defining the phenomenon; given that metaphors, often, appear more powerful than definitions, by-passing the 'rationality of the individual and instead conjuring *images* in the subconscious' (Pearson 1998: 9). Yet the media is solely one of the powerful actors that symbiotically construct or instil this common knowledge.

Since the 1980s, European football competitions and international tournaments have been characterized by their extensive legal, security, and social control features. Driven by the legal, surveillant and policy mechanisms on the levels of the European Union (EU), UEFA and Council of Europe (Tsoukala 2009; Lee Ludvigsen 2023), this has had significant socio-legal consequences on supporters' civil liberties and rights that are commonly eroded (James and Pearson 2015). This includes issues of proportionality, limitations on freedom of expression or assembly and so-called 'banning orders on complaint' – sometimes even before an offence has taken place (James and Pearson 2015; Coenen et al. 2016; Pearson 2005). Following Pearson

(1999), it accordingly becomes an important task to explore the power relations between those actors possessing power over football supporters more broadly:

> […] it may be fruitful to start an investigation into civil liberties in this area by considering the disposition of those with power over football fans in general. This disposition is one which is based upon the 'common knowledge' which is shared about football hooliganism. Such a 'common knowledge' construction of the phenomena is based upon a distinction between football-related disorder and other crowd offences, a belief that football violence is 'mindless' […] This construction effects not only the understanding of what football hooliganism 'is', but also has practical implications for the ways in which it is reacted to in the realm of the criminal law (p. 29).

Central to this essay is this construction of knowledge on what 'football hooliganism' *is* – as a phenomenon that seemingly 'requires no introduction' and which we all seemingly 'know' (Pearson 1998: 1) – and the symbiotic relations between the media, police, football and political authorities that underpin this knowledge.

This raises questions about how a common knowledge comes to life; but also, the wider politics of knowledge production and sharing. Knowledge and power cannot easily be separated (Foucault 1979) and, as this section argues, this invites a turn towards insights located in criminology (Boutros 2024) and the study of (in)security (Bigo 2008) that remain theoretically concerned with how 'knowledge' and 'truths' are produced when something becomes defined as a security problem or threatening to the social order.

First, law enforcers are central in the construction and maintenance of a common knowledge in the context of football-related disorder and violence. Therefore, Boutros' (2024) concept of 'epistemic power' can be remobilized to theorize how the police maintain their hegemonic position over oppressed social groups, given that it captures how the police's ability to control both knowns and unknowns regarding policing practices and the social groups subjected to policing. Boutros thereby offers a departure from earlier ideas of the police's 'coercive' or 'symbolic power' since epistemic power relates to the knowledge production that is embedded through the dominant ways of knowing. Specifically, the police's epistemic power 'operates both through constructing knowledge that portrays the police in a positive light […] and through manufacturing ignorance around their oppressive practices as a tool for exonerating themselves from blame' (p. 3).

This is achieved via three key mechanisms. First, by the police's control of the production and non-production of policing and crime data, including official (crime) statistics. Second, the established hierarchy of credibility – meaning that police officers' versions, hierarchically, are

ranked as more 'credible' than those of their targets who, regularly, suffer from a 'credibility deficit' (p. 10) (indeed, this is not unthinkable; Tsoukala [2007: 17] reminds us about the 'low opinion of many intellectuals on football and football supporters'). Third, the police's privileged access to the media, demonstrated by the 'dependence of journalists on the police for crime news provides the police with leverage vis-à-vis the media' (Boutros 2024: 13). In turn, the knowledge production – despite representing a contested domain – remains largely monopolized by the police in this context. Returning to Pearson's common knowledge, Boutros' insights therefore make it possible to add that the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' is not only constructed through processes of media amplification; but must be seen as co-dependent upon law enforcers' epistemic power and, hence, ability to steer our understanding of football violence as a phenomenon.

A second compatible insight that should be seen as related to the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' is offered by Bigo (2008) whose influential work is concerned with the role of (in)security professionals situated within relational security fields. This becomes especially relevant because, in Europe, 'football hooliganism' is regularly treated as a serious security issue (Tsoukala 2009, 2011) and the common knowledge surrounding the phenomenon has contributed towards this status. However, the designation of something as a security issue could be understood in terms of who possesses the authority and power to define what constitutes a threat. The actors doing so can be characterized as 'managers of unease': they are 'invested with the institutional knowledge about threat and with a wide range of technologies suitable for responding to those threats' (Bigo 2002: 74).

In the twenty-first century, webs of actors, individuals and institutions coalesce and struggle over the 'boundaries and the definition of the term "security", and over the prioritisation of different threats as well as the definition of what is not a threat but only a risk or even an opportunity' (Bigo 2006: 394). Yet, these definitions also depend on the same actors' production of transnational truths (Bigo 2008). Thus, a competitive struggle takes place between private and public actors all claiming to:

> possess a 'truth' founded on numerical data and statistics, technologies of biometrics and sociological profiles of potential dangerous behaviour, applied to the cases of persons who feel themselves the effects of the (in)securitization, living in a state of unease (p. 8).

In this context, the productions of *truths* vis-à-vis security threats are influenced – again – by the credibility and legitimacy of the (in)security professionals and, it can be argued, their epistemic power (Boutros, 2024). Accordingly, law enforcers, security agencies and institutions

steer the definition of security, but create also 'regimes of truth' (Bigo, 2008) and, as argued here, a common knowledge (Pearson, 1999) on 'unruly' or 'disorderly' groups through technical knowledge and symbolic capital possessed by actors which hold specialized or particularized status through their specific expertise on one type of threat (consider, for example, the rise of football policing or anti-corruption units, immigration liaison officers, etc.).

Hence, this conceptual discussion makes the point that epistemic power, the production of knowledge (Boutros, 2024) and truths (Bigo, 2008) must be considered to lie beneath and complement what 'everybody knows' about 'football hooliganism' (Pearson 1999: 38). Yet, this knowledge does not exist in a vacuum (cf. Foucault 1979) and matters because it collectively enhances the justifications of increasingly restrictive security and surveillance mechanisms – also targeting 'ordinary fans' – whilst legitimizing possible infringements upon their civil liberties (Tsoukala et al. 2016). It essentially obstructs the coherent realization of a scenario where '[f]ootball supporters should first and foremost be seen as a peaceful social group whose rights to free expression and assembly should be actively protected by the state' (Tsoukala et al. 2016: 177). It is therefore unsurprising that fans' rights regularly are deprioritized across Europe – underpinned by the stories opening this essay about fans being 'treated like animals' (Steinberg 2024) and 'an enemy army to be defended against, rather than human beings trying to get to a football game' (Liew 2024).

Notwithstanding, the common knowledge surrounding 'football hooliganism' is not static: instead, it is extended, maintained, reframed, and refined through different mechanisms, three of which this essay interrogates in detail, as it seeks to elaborate upon Pearson's (1999) conceptualization.

Numbers Telling the Full Story? Controlling the Data Production

Following Boutros (2024), one way in which law enforcers attain epistemic power relates to their ability to control the production of data about crime, public safety and policing. The production of such empirical knowledge allows the police to 'construct certain issues as public problems and to preclude others from being placed on the agenda (p. 499). One example of this relates to statistics on football fan violence.

Acknowledging that some European countries lack central systems that track football-related violence (Grodecki et al. 2024), one could use the UK as a potent case here, although there are some existing (yet more dated) statistics compiled by the EU and Council of Europe

(EU/Council of Europe 2018). In the case of English football, this data is released annually by the Home Office, but it is based upon information provided by the United Kingdom Football Policing Unit which, in turn, relies on information from English and Welsh constabularies (Lowerson 2023). Whilst the Home Office (2024) rightly acknowledges that caution must be exercised when 'comparing small differences between time periods', some scholars have echoed this (Lowerson 2023). However, Lowerson's (2023) work also highlights some inconsistencies and a lack of standardization concerning how separate police constabularies have logged data on football-related offences and incidents that, in turn, inform the annual statistics.

Furthermore, whilst the extant literature demonstrates how the annual statistics on football-related arrests, banning orders and, more recently, online hate crime connected to football, can help underpin the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism', and serve to influence claim-making and the mentioned reactionary responses on the legal and policy levels, it remains important to note that arrest statistics, as Pearson and Stott (2022: 16) write, can be 'notoriously unreliable as indicators of levels of criminality and usually tell us as much about police priorities and resources as they do crime'. Consequently, arrests reductions may simply be explained in terms of declining police numbers, and any potential increases in arrests do not necessarily evidence a more 'violent' or 'disorderly' situation in football but could be explained by increases in police numbers at fixtures which, again, could 'lead to higher numbers of arrest and reported incidents' (p. 16). More broadly on official crime statistics, Boutros (2024) also reminds us that statistics cannot capture unreported crimes, but also rely on the discretion of law enforcers when it comes to crimes that go unreported. Beyond this, regarding arrests, it also must be acknowledged that these are not synonymous with statistics of charge, prosecution or, indeed, conviction (Pearson and Stott 2022). As such, while arrest statistics might underpin the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism', Pearson and Stott (2022: 35) also highlight that statistics on arrests can also be illustrative of 'policy decisions, policing priorities, and resources more so they act as a proxy measure of fan behaviours'.

However, in the case of the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' in Europe, statistics – if uncontextualized – may therefore contribute towards 'verifying' this knowledge especially when new spikes or trends are typically mediatized without clarifying the necessary context (Frosdick and Newton 2006). For example, in 2024, *The Daily Mail* (2024, emphasis added) reported on an 'increase from last year's *record breaking* figure', and that the new figures revealed 'a 14 per cent increase from the previous year when 2,264 arrests were made'.

However, the series of caveats that apply regarding such statistics, highlighted by the scholars cited above, are commonly dedicated little space by the media, 'who are content to take the figures as a league table of the extent of football hooliganism' (Frosdick and Newton 2006: 406). Such context could have included, for example, comparisons with previous decades (e.g., the 1980s or 1990s); or the Football Supporters Association's (FSA) important observation that: 'Almost 11% of this year's [2023-24 season] "football arrest stats" were made up of people watching Euro 2024 on the TV in England or Wales (aka not matchgoers)' (FSA, 2024). Moreover, the FSA also remarked that: 'Taking out people arrested watching tournaments overseas (they never used to be counted) arrests are roughly where they were 10 years ago but we suppose that wouldn't get as many clicks' (ibid.).

As such, whilst some supporter organizations attempt to contest the production of data – or produce alternative knowledges, including the Football Supporters Europe's 'Away Fans Survey' capturing different challenges encountered by supporters travelling to UEFA club competitions – we can still get a glimpse of how the production of data enables a common knowledge on 'football hooliganism' to not only exist but be maintained. Across European contexts, this becomes increasingly problematic given the lack of standardized data internationally regarding the 'extent and severity of football hooliganism' (Rookwood and Spaaij 2018: 6) or if statistics are, subsequently, utilized to inform the public and government policy, and feed into rhetoric regarding the true scale of football disorder (Lowerson 2023; Rookwood and Spaaij 2018).

Showcasing Preparedness: Fantasy documents

Building on Boyle and Haggerty's (2012) notion of 'fantasy documents', it can be argued that such artefacts similarly underpin the common knowledge on 'football hooliganism'. Writing on Olympic security complexes, Boyle and Haggerty's argument holds that fantasy documents represent ways of communicating that efforts *are* being made in order to address conditions of insecurity and risk. Fantasy documents refer to 'the plans, statements, or reports produced by government and/or private organizations' (p. 252) which are responsive to public anxieties prior to sporting events. There is an intrinsic performative aspect attached to fantasy documents though, insofar as they are designed to:

> foster confidence in the capability of authorities to manage uncertainty and constitute a series of cultural narratives about how we should think about risk, security, authority, and related social values (p. 242).

Especially before international football tournaments, one might observe this logic. There is no denying that there is a longstanding history of violent fandom at European Championships, including Ukraine and Poland in 2012 and France in 2016 (Pearson and Stott 2022). Yet, commonly, public statements and communications, quoted in newspaper articles or news reports, shed a light on how law enforcers, authorities, and security actors are preparing for, and planning for the risk of 'football hooliganism'. This, in turn, implies the *existence* of serious insecurity.

Consider for example the recent case opening this paper: Germany's month-long Euro 2024. In the lead-up to the tournament, several newspaper articles containing quotes and statements focused on how Germany was preparing for the influx of 2.7 million fans and, accordingly, boosted its security (DW, 2024).

Some primary examples of this follows. In one article an unnamed spokesperson spoke about how Germany was preparing for the 'high-risk' fixture of England versus Serbia, and how there would be 'significantly more manpower than at an average Bundesliga match […] The police will also receive support from Serbian and English colleagues, who know high-risk individuals and can identify them on site' (quoted in Politico 2024). Meanwhile, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, during a visit to the international police centre, stated that the country was 'very well prepared' to deal with any security issues at Euro 2024. Acknowledging that providing 100 percent safety was next to impossible, Faeser stated: 'Security is the highest priority for us […] We are very, very well prepared and I therefore hope that it will be peaceful and safe games' (quoted in DW 2024).

Furthermore, several months prior to the tournament, in April 2024, AP (2024) reported that 'Hundreds of German police subdue "hooligans" in training exercise for Euro 2024'. Here, it was reported how around 600 police officers prepared for various scenarios of football violence ahead of Euro 2024. Whilst a spokesperson, cited by AP, noted that it would be a minority of people arriving with a 'violent attitude', it was also stated that:

> As police we have to be prepared because there's the potential risk of hooligans or violent people. Today we use the chance to train for those circumstances, how to stop them, how to communicate with them, and also how to force them if they've done any trouble (quoted in AP, 2024).

If we consider these statements – focused on showcasing preparedness and actions taken – as artefacts set out in the attempt to address public anxieties (Boyle and Haggerty 2012), it could also be argued that they underpin the common knowledge in question, while the public

exhibition of risk may also assist justifications regarding potential failures to *control* the risk. The display of these 'images' of pre-emptive action, preparedness and precautionary logics addressing 'potential risk', coming from individuals possessing epistemic power and/or authority to speak on the matter of security, reinforce the long-standing narratives surrounding football supporters as an uncontrollable security threat, while feeding into the common knowledge which surrounds 'football hooliganism' in the current day. One important implication of this, however, is that in certain cases, this risk logic and 'prioritisation of pre-emptive administrative processes in turn drives the deployment of resources' (Pearson and Stott 2022: 151), thus creating situation where a heightened security or policing presence in itself may also reinforce images of 'threatening' supporters.

The Usual Headlines? Popular cultural depictions

Poulton's (2008: 344) research affirms how '[f]ootball hooliganism has evidently become a subgenre of a broader genre of violent media texts and interest in sports-related violence, crime, and deviance within popular culture today'. Through books, movies, documentaries and games, what Poulton calls 'fantasy football hooliganism' has emerged, defined as the 'attempts by various sections of the entertainment industry to either represent, reproduce, or simulate football-related disorder in different textual or visual forms for leisure consumption' (p. 331).

Numerous scholars have focused on the linkages between 'football hooliganism' and popular cultural descriptions in the form of so-called 'confessional tales' (Dart 2008) and 'hit-and-tell' hooligan memoir literature (Redhead 2010b). Meanwhile, less attention has been directed towards how the common knowledge in question may be reinforced through popular cultural manifestations. Not only have literary texts in form of 'hit-and-tell' 'confessional tales' been parallelled by some texts telling stories from the perspective of law enforcers (e.g., *Hunting the Hooligans: How a Covert Police Team Brought Down One of Britain's Most Violent Gangs,* by Layton and Endeacott [2015]), but in recent years television documentaries, including Netflix's *The Final: Attack on Wembley* and Channel 4's [UK] four-part documentary *Football Cops* represent two rather interesting examples of how the issues of fan violence or disorder are represented in popular cultural formats.

Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak (2020) draw our attention to how a documentary screened by the BBC prior to Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine, titled *Stadiums of Hate*, contributed towards 'moral panics' about the prospects of violence and disorder at the tournament, but lacked contextual information regarding the specificities of the relevant fan cultures and scenes in the

countries. In terms of *The Final* documentary, this tells the story of the disorder surrounding the Euro 2020 final in London where, as Netflix's (2024) own synopsis describes it: 'With England finally in contention for a major championship, 6,000 ticketless football fans storm Wembley Stadium, leaving destruction in their wake'. Whilst the documentary focuses much on the hyper-masculine behaviours of the supporters storming Wembley, the lack of context and nuance within this production has already been recognized. Whilst the documentary, as Pope (2024, emphasis added) submits, 'examines the scenes of chaos at England's national football stadium, [it] did not examine how this hyper-masculine behaviour affected women as fans, police officers and stewards. *Instead, it focused on the usual headlines: ticketless fans, cocaine and alcohol consumption'.*

It could also be mentioned that the English Football Association (FA) commissioned an independent review into the events on the night of the final led by Baroness Louise Casey of Blackstock. Whilst this report – in no way – exonerates the actions of the ticketless supporters and states that, 'I want to be very clear from the outset that responsibility for that risk to human life lies with the individuals without tickets' (Casey 2021: 6), it should also be noted that the report pointed towards organizational errors or shortcomings. For example, the 'collective failure to plan for the worst case scenario' (p. 12), or the '[t]he absence of a fan zone or fan zones [which] denied the police and other agencies a key crowd management tool and was potentially a very significant factor' (p. 12). Yet, as Pearson and Stott (2022: 7) observe, the recommendations following this review thus called for 'new football-specific offences, "tougher" enforcement, and increased sentences [and] characterise much of what we describe as the early piecemeal and 'knee-jerk' attempts to mitigate football crowd disorder'. It is perhaps unsurprising that the story of this contested political aftermath of the 'Euros Sunday' remains rather marginal in a 1 hour and 22-minutes-long documentary, yet in some ways it encapsulates precisely the logic discussed in this essay. Even through popular cultural manifestations, a contemporary, common knowledge on 'football hooligans' is instilled and influenced by the those holding the definitional power to re-active the '"common sense beliefs about the apparent nature of "football hooliganism"' (Pearson 1999: 47). Rationalizing tougher action against supporters, as a whole, thus becomes easier as we again see how pre-existing assumptions and power relations mould constructed truths and knowledge of an essentially complex and undefined phenomenon.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the treatment of football supporters, and supporters' rights and civil liberties have been widely discussed in recent years and assume a high socio-legal and political significance across Europe. This article contributes with a theoretical expansion upon, and update of Pearson's (1998, 1999) under-researched concept of a 'common knowledge' on 'football hooliganism'. Specifically, with regards to its conceptual relationship to epistemic power, knowledge production and the construction of truths (Boutros 2024; Bigo 2008). Overall, this short article argues that this common knowledge, at the hands of law enforcers, the media, football and political authorities, continually evolves but continues to risk a conflation of football fandom with 'hooliganism' (Pearson 1999).

This conflation – as the article's introductory examples outlined – matters because it can have very real consequences and practical implications related to how supporters are approached, talked about, policed and subjected to football-specific legislation. As argued in this article, the common knowledge is also further reinforced through (i) the control of data production, (ii) fantasy documents and (iii) popular cultural manifestations. Though, this constitutes no exhaustive list and other factors upholding the common knowledge should be deciphered in future work.

Considering this, it is perhaps unsurprising that ordinary or regular fans' rights and freedoms, all too often, are sidelined, and that there exists an 'indifference to the ordinary fan experience' across Europe (Liew 2024). Further, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is, as Turner and Fitzpatrick (2024: 11) write, a 'long-term failure to incorporate the democratic voice of fans in the event management of football'; and, lastly, that attempts to reduce football crowd violence or disorder often proceed with reactionary or panic laws (Pearson and Stott 2022) or disproportionate responses which become problematic with regards to fans' civil liberties (Tsoukala et al. 2016).

Overall, this short essay contributes to the socio-legal literature on both violent fandom and football supporters' rights with a critical understanding of the power/knowledge nexus lying behind the attempts to control football crowds. By updating and developing further the concept of common knowledge (Pearson 1998, 1999), the first key implication of this paper is that it advances the scholarly literature on football-related violence and disorder insofar as it provides insights into how knowledge – constituting one expression of power – becomes attached to an undefined phenomenon and the mechanisms enabling this. A second – and more practical implication for actors managing football crowds – is that the paper echoes and demonstrates

the importance of the contention that supporters 'first and foremost be seen as a peaceful social group whose rights to free expression and assembly should be actively protected by the state' (Tsoukala et al. 2016: 177), rather than sidelined by a common knowledge that is historically instilled and continues to evolve.

Competing Interests

The author/s have no competing interests to declare.

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