Article – Theme section

#walkouton77
Football fan activism in Premier League

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis and a discussion of a protest over ticket prices among fans of the English football club, Liverpool FC. The protest was organized with the hashtag #walkouton77 and combined social media activity with a massive walkout during a globally televised football match. I explore the #walkouton77 protest from two perspectives: Firstly, how fan-activity transformed a franchised TV football match into a transmedia event. Secondly, how fan activism combines cultural and political dimensions as well as offline and online dimensions. It is suggested that football fan activism holds distinguished fan activism potentials demonstrated by the #walkouton77 movement influencing the LFC owners' club-as-commodity discourses by promoting a club-as-culture discourse. It is concluded the football fans are able to function as collective cultural critics thereby obtaining a position as co-authors of the club as a cultural institution.

Keywords:
Transmedia storytelling, media events, fan activism, cultural critique, protest movements

Introduction

On February 6th, 2016, Liverpool FC (LFC) played Sunderland A.F.C. in England's top foot-ball division, the English Premier League (EPL). A crowd of 44,179 attended the match on a virtually sold out Anfield, LFC's home ground. At first glance, a perfectly standard match in the EPL. However, four days earlier, on February 2nd, LFC's owners, the American Invest-ment Company, Fenway Sports Group (FSG), published new ticket price structures for the following 2016/2017 season. The announcement, which contained a heavily tiered price system, including an increase on the most expensive tickets from £59 to £77, sparked widespread criticism among the fans[1] and in mainstream media. Using the hashtag #walk-outon77 LFC fans organized a protest resulting in over 10,000 supporters leaving the sta-dium after 77 minutes of play. This happened in front of not only the players and the rest of the supporters at Anfield, but also in front of a global TV audience. Four days later, FSG withdrew the proposed ticket structure, apologized to the fans and promised to freeze ticket prices for at least two seasons (subsequently extended to three seasons).

Research on digital activism has grown to be an important part of the wider dis-cussion of the democratic consequences of digital society. Naturally, much attention has been given to the role of the Internet and social media in political protest contexts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Dahlberg-Grundberg et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017). However, the networked structure of digital society has also shaped activist practices in other spheres. For instance, football fans employ a broad range of new digital possibilities for consum-ing and discussing football as well as performing fandom (Gantz & Lewis, 2014), including new ways for the fans to communicate and organize protests movements (Millward, 2011; Hodges, 2018). Increasingly, football is viewed, read and discussed across a widening range of media. Therefore, it makes sense to examine the #walkouton77 protest using transme-dia perspectives as well as theories on protest movements and fan activism. Fan activism, and football fan activism in particular, takes place in the intersection between culture and politics and is a relatively underdeveloped research field needing "further case-based studies as a next step toward more nuanced understandings of how fan cultures may mobilize around political and civic goals" (Brough & Shrestova, 2012).

The #walkouton77 case is symptomatic of a growing dissatisfaction among many fans towards the commercializing processes within professional football (Bruns et al., 2014). The increasing global interests and investments in football are generally associated with profit-seeking motives that aim to promote football brands through huge events and stars. This conflicts with many fans' romantic inclinations towards maintaining the local and historical aspects of their club and of football in general. The #walkouton77 protest was not only a highly visible and demarcated instantiation of football fan activism, it is also distinguished by its apparent success. Hence, to approach a better understanding football fan activism in a digital networked age, this paper aims to study which factors contributed to this success and the how this success should be understood.

To approach these questions, I start by contextualizing the #walkouton77 protest through a brief historical account of media and English football. Afterwards, data and the methodological considerations are presented which marks the foundation for the following analysis of the transmedia environment surrounding LFC, and of how the #walkouton77 protest took form as a transmedia event (Bacallao-Pino, 2016) combining a globally broadcasted TV football match and networked fan activity on Twitter. In the final section, the #walkouton77 protest is examined as football fan activism performed in the dual dimensions of culture and politics, and of offline and offline settings. It is demonstrated how LFC fans function as *collective cultural critics* that through transmedia activities are able to function and exert authority as co-authors of the club's identity.

English football and media – a brief historical account

Before diving into the #walkouton77 protest, it is relevant to consider football in a historical perspective to shed light on the origins of the tensions between fans and the clubs which to some degree have existed since the organisational establishment of football in England in 1863. On the one hand football is a cultural phenomenon that is historically and locally anchored; on the other hand, it is a commercialized entertainment product operating according to commercial logics. Football clubs emerged as "important local sociocultural, political and economic institutions" providing a strong source of local identity to people while at the same time attracting economic and political attention (Sondaal, 2013, p.486). Since its formation football has acted as a space or a vehicle for protests (Kuhn, 2011) and has been associated with forms of resistance activities towards hegemonic structures (Rowe, 2011, p.1). General processes of globalization, fuelled by technological developments, have supported the corporate and commercial logics among football institutions which helped football evolve into a huge global, economic force characterized by sold out stadia, global TV audiences, foreign multibillionaire owners, escalating sponsorships, TV deals and transfer sums. Thus, professional football today can be defined as a "global media sport".

Football's development can be described as a process defined by three dimensions: 1) institutions such as the clubs and organisations like FIFA, UEFA and the English Football Association (FA), 2) media technology and 3) fans and supporters. First, from an institutional perspective, Hill et al. (2016) pinpoint the "reprogramming" and "re-branding" of English football in 1992 that took place when the traditional English 1st Division was reinvented as the EPL. The English FA "recommended a free-market logic designed to solve social and financial problems" (Hill et al., 2016, p.8), which had troubled English football during the previous decades. This involved new regulations for stadia which now had to be all-seaters, heavier fan regulations and the influx of international capitalist club investors focused on developing and presenting the clubs as brands (King, 1997).

Second, media technological developments have facilitated new commercial developments. Satellite technology and the internet have allowed for a major increase in TV and digital coverage of football. Probably the most pivotal element of the EPL era is BskyB's purchasing of the TV rights. Since 1992, successive transnational TV-deals have increased at a massive rate (from £191 million for the 1992-1997 deal to the recent £5.136bn for the 2016-2019 deal[2]). The influx of global interests and investments facilitated by a networked internet environment has not only propelled the EPL into becoming a financial superpower in international football. It has established EPL as a global media phenomenon attracting TV viewers as well as "football tourists" from all over the world. The massive TV investments reflect that live sport has emerged as a key asset to TV channels. Sport relies on the sense of presence (Gantz & Lewis, 2014) and liveness (Scannell, 2014), which is distinctly afforded by broadcast TV. However, the TV channels are increasingly challenged in an age where "live broadcast is further replaced by the 'perpetual contact' and 'ambient awareness' afforded by mobile technologies" (Cui & Rothenbuhler, 2016). This general movement towards streaming and on-demand TV is now also seen in football where Amazon in June 2018 was the first digital company to win exclusive rights to show Premier League matches (Forbes, 2018).

Simultaneously, digital media in general create *new points of entry* (Jenkins, 2006, p. 97) and possibilities for participation. Gantz & Lewis (2014) list how the internet and social media enable an enhancement of the sports fan experience by allowing the fans to 1) express themselves and establish their identity, 2) interact with other fans in fan networks, 3) share and immerse themselves in information on their club, 4) engage in parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) by following official social media profiles of their favourite players, and finally 5) enter into competitive activity in terms of the vast amount of betting services and fantasy sports such as computer games.

Third, despite such new fan possibilities and that new economical riches have attracted many of the world's best players and managers, these developments have seen a growing disconnection between clubs and fans. The commercialization contrasts with fan cultures that traditionally have identified football clubs as locally based cultural institutions in which the fans themselves play a central role. Increasing TV revenues for the football clubs have not been felt by the fans, on the contrary the cheapest tickets at Anfield increased by 1108% between 1990 and 2011 (The Guardian, 2011). Such expensive tickets price out many locals, especially young fans. In addition, those able to afford the tickets often complain about gentrified, deteriorated match atmospheres and irregular kick off times that are altered to accommodate TV stations.

Guilianotti (2002) describes this disenfranchisement of many football fans as a *hypercommodification* of modern football. The personal, emotional investment of the *supporter*, he argues, is gradually cooling towards more detached, consumer-like approaches of the *follower* or even the fleeting investments of the *flaneur*. The extent of this trend is questioned by Davis (2014) who notices how fans seek to reclaim authenticity in new

ways with some fans going as far as leaving their club to set up fan-driven alternatives like FC United, AFC Wimbledon and City of Liverpool FC (by former fans of Manchester United, Wimbledon and LFC, respectively). Protest activities like #walkouton77 consti-tute other manifestations of this struggle for authenticity, as do the various international fan movements, often associated with the slogan "Against Modern Football". In England, these processes have resulted in the formation of nationwide organisations like *Stand Against Modern Football* (Hill et al., 2016) as well as club-oriented organisations like LFC's Spirit of Shankly (SOS), Manchester United's *Independent Manchester United* and Arsenal FC's *Red Action*.

Understanding the relations between fans and clubs in modern football involves considering the expanding transmedia infrastructure through which football is broadcast, consumed, analysed and discussed. These transmedia relations are further explored in the following sections focusing on how traditional media like TV and newspapers are comple-mented and supplemented by fan activity on new media where users are empowered to create and spread alternative narratives upon the game.

Data and methods

Methodologically, the #walkouton77 protest is examined as a case study of football fan activism. Liverpool is a working-class city that historically has identified itself in opposi-tion to (traditionally London-based) hegemonic powers. This mentality was extensively demonstrated in the period of 2008-2010 when LFC fans globally participated in ongoing protest activities accusing the club's former owners, the American investors Tom Hicks and George Gillett, of broken promises and for placing life-threatening debts upon the club. New supporter organizations such as SOS and ShareLiverpoolFC emerged from these protests and their activities saw a combination of local protest meetings, marches outside the stadium before matches and global online activities (which included targeting and pressurizing financial institutions with thousands of weekly emails urging them not to refinance the Hicks and Gillett loans).

LFC fans tend to subscribe to the viewpoint of their former, charismatic manager, Bill Shankly: "At a football club, there's a holy trinity - the players, the manager and the sup-porters. Directors don't come into it. They are only there to sign the cheques." (Carragher, 2017, 423). Shankly, who managed Liverpool from 1959 to 1974, lived by the principle that football is more than simply recreational entertainment and, hence, not for com-modification. This suggests that football is a real matter of politics between directors who provide the necessary money and the "holy trinity" that maintains and builds the club's culture and identity. As such, it should not surprise that a major protest against ticket prices emerged at Anfield. You might argue that due to their history of antiauthoritarian identity Liverpool FC fans can be seen as an extreme case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of the gen-eral conflict between globally and commercially oriented football institutions and fans

for whom the local identity and authenticity of their club is essential (Evans & Norcliffe, 2016). Extreme cases are illustrative as they "often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 229). Besides addressing current tensions between local and global forces within modern football, the #walkouton77 protest constitutes an example of protest movement in the digital transmedia environment. Analysing the transmedia relations within the #walkouton77 protest provides a way of illustrating how football is situated within and affected by a wider media ecological circuit.

As discussed by Johansen (2016), football is a phenomenon situated in local culture, which cannot be unequivocally demarcated into texts. Similar to the Pokémon franchise mentioned by Jenkins (2006, 132), there is no undisputable primary LFC text (Fiske, 1987), or "mothership" text, to apply Scott's (2013) terminology. Nevertheless, in this case it seems apt to define the TV broadcast match between LFC and Sunderland as the primary text, as this is what the #walkouton77 hashtag points towards. As my primary focus is on fan activity and transmedia relations, the analysis presented in this paper is based on how fan-produced media texts react and relate to and influence the primary TV broadcast as well as two official LFC website announcements respectively presenting and withdraw-ing the new tickets price structure. Most importantly, tweets using the #walkouton77 hashtag were collected using the archiving tool TAGS to capture ordinary fans' attitudes and ways of discussing and promoting the protest. It is important to note that TAGS only grabs a minor sample of the total amount of tweets using the hashtag. Also, the sample is not expected to be representative of all LFC fans. Given the nature of the hashtag you would expect the dataset to be skewed towards fans with positive attitudes to the protest. Despite these reservations, the sample is capable of offering a qualitative glimpse into how fans apply Twitter as a tool of football fan activism, and accordingly reveals insights into football fan activism as a subgenre of fan activism. In addition, the analysis also includes a few, illustrative quotes from newspaper web articles and fan produced web articles referred to in the tweets. Rather than forming a representative sample of all coverage of the protest, these articles illustrate examples of how the protest was sup-ported outside the Twittersphere.

The transmedia environment of LFC

As a foundation for the transmedia analysis, I use Waade and Toft-Nielsen (2015, p.67-68) who, building upon Jenkins' (2007) concept of transmedia storytelling, operate with three text dimensions: sender-produced *franchise* texts/events, a *storyworld* including user-produced texts/events and a *brand world* including more loosely related texts/events. This distinction is useful for analysing the media environment relating to major clubs in modern football today. In LFC's case, the franchise dimension refers to the club's coordi-nated usage of different media. Besides the primary tv matches, this includes a growing

number of paratexts (Genette, 1987) such as the official LFC website liverpoolfc.com, the TV channel LFC TV and official profiles on a range of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr, etc.).

In the storyworld dimension, Waade & Toft-Nielsen (2015) distinguish between texts produced by professional (i.e. critics and journalists) and non-professional (i.e. TV-viewers, fans) users or receivers. However, this distinction is increasingly challenged in a digital environment where non-professional football fans participate in online, networked publics (Ito, 2008) as *produsers* (Bruns, 2007) of a wide variety of texts on LFC. This includes fanzines (e.g. *Through The Wind and Rain*, *Well Red*), message boards (e.g. *Kopworld*, *Red & White Kop*), news sites (e.g. *This is Anfield*), podcasts (e.g. *The Anfield Wrap*, *The Anfield Index*), blogs and video blogs (e.g. *The Tomkins Times*, *Redmen TV*) and fan organizations (e.g. *Spion Kop 1906*, *SOS*). This activity ranges from fans that sporadically partake in discussions or share a tweet to semi-professional, transmedia fan media enterprises like *The Anfield Wrap* that employs 11 staff[3] and produces e.g. podcasts, videos, a website, live shows and are actively present on several social media platforms. As mentioned, such fan-productions offer new entry points into the LFC world whether you wish to follow the team's destiny during the seriality of the matches and seasons or you want to immerse yourself into the LFC history, to expand your tactical understanding of a single match or of the history and culture of the club.

The brand world dimension points to texts and events that in different senses are less directly linked to the football matches. This dimension has gained importance as club branding has intensified in the globalized age of the EPL. Like other top clubs, LFC strives to strengthen its global brand through a broad range of *internally* oriented initiatives including profiling players and managers who, with the success of EPL, have become global celebrities. LFC also promotes specific aspects of the club's history and identity such as being five-time European Champions, having a scouse identity (preferably with a few local players in the squad), and the LFC International Academy, which set up football schools all over the world providing kids the opportunity of learning to play "The Liverpool Way".[4] Of crucial importance, the Heysel and Hillsborough tragedies[5] are accentuated as unforgettable wounds in the clubs' history and identity. Additionally, the club anthem turned dictum *You'll never walk alone*, sung by the supporters before and at the end of each home match, plays a central part as a culture defining aspect of the club. Club branding also happens through football tourism which may be club-organized (e.g. stadium tours, club museums) or not (e.g. taxi tours showing LFC related sites in the Liverpool area). The more financially lucrative dimension of the brand world is *externally*, globally oriented initiatives such as sponsorships with multinational and globally known corporations like Standard Chartered Bank, Dunkin' Donuts and New Balance and pre-season tours every summer in North America, Asia or Australia in which huge fan markets are nurtured.

A protest in three phases

Applying Waade & Toft-Nielsen's dimensions I now outline how the relations between the franchise texts and the fans' storyworld texts unfolded during the #walkouton77 protest; as an example of the conflict between "modern football" and its fans. Essentially, the #walkouton77 protest fell in three phases, reflecting how the protest developed around three franchise texts: 1) LFC's announcement of the new ticket price structure, 2) the match where the walkout took place, and 3) FSG's apology and withdrawal of the ticket price structure.

1) Feb. 6 – after FGS's new ticket structure announcement

The first phase of the #walkouton77 protest began on February 2nd 2016 with the official club statement presenting the new ticket structure. Here LFC addressed the challenge of balancing the demands of securing financially responsibility and acknowledging fan requests. "We always carefully consider ticket pricing to ensure the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the club, while listening to the views of our match-going fans to understand the priorities around accessibility and affordability" (Liverpoolfc.com, 2016a).

The new structure involved a substantially tiered ticket pricing model, allegedly in the attempt to balance attention towards the local and the global fan audiences. Local fans were catered for by e.g. "priority access to over 20.000 tickets across the EPL season, with prices starting from as little as £9", a separate price category for fans aged 17-21 and over 1.000 free tickets to local kids. Simultaneously, the model addressed wealthy global fans (for whom prices are less of an issue) offering the best seat locations at Anfield's new Main Stand, where prices rise to £1029 for season tickets and the infamous £77 for match tickets that named the protest.

This franchise discourse of LFC as a commodity having to maintain economic balance was sternly countered among fan-produced storyworld texts. On the same day as the club statement, the fan organization SOS released on their website a stinging critique of the LFC ownership labelling the new ticket structure "a missed opportunity for LFC to lead a process towards a fairer approach to ticket prices" (Spiritofshankly.com, 2016). Whereas the club's statement focused on the share of decreased prices, SOS noticed that while the increases may be fewer, they were bigger. The price levels were already at an unacceptably high level, especially in light of the club's dramatically increased TV deal income, it was claimed: "In the context of the huge income rises the club will receive next year, to up their revenue from fans through season and matchday tickets is both unnecessary and morally unjustifiable." The franchise arguments about financial sustainability were countered by the fan site *This is Anfield* who alluded to football's particular role as a cultural institution and that "supply and demand and market forces do not operate in an environment where generational bonds and emotions dictate so much" (Thisisanfield.com, 2016). The owners' "responsibility to run the business" was met with a "fight against football's increasingly and blatant disregard of the people who matter most, the sup-

porters". Additionally, newspapers such as the local Liverpool Echo provided mass media channels for organisations like SOS to voice their critique and the nationwide The Telegraph echoed this criticism describing a general "Ticket price scandal" in English football (The Telegraph, 2016).

Subsequently, the #walkouton77 protest for LFC's next home match, on February 6th, was quickly planned and coordinated on social media like Twitter through the circulation of information among the fans about the ticket issue and practical details about the protest. In order to allow for an examination of the protest's development, three small samples of tweets were collected at three points during the course of the protest: before and after the match on February 6th and on the 10th, corresponding to the three protest phases. The tweets belonging to the first phase (n=40) are dominated by LFC fans calling to action stating that the ticket issue is "Bigger than 3 points" and "we must stand together". Fan critique of the owners is also prominent, e.g. with warnings they "don't price out another generation". A couple of tweets argue against the protest but otherwise the hashtag is used in tweets expressing support. The tweets consist of British LFC fans and a single, sympathising Tottenham fan.

2) Feb. 6 - after the match protest

The Liverpool-Sunderland match marks the second protest phase. Here, tweets (n=50) were collected in the immediate aftermath of the match and the walkout. The tweets are now more globally distributed with almost a fifth coming from outside Britain (e.g. France, Indonesia and Malaysia). This reflects the TV broadcast expanding the range of the #walkonuton77 protest from being a primarily local protest pre-match into a movement of global reach. Most of these tweets express support and pride, e.g. "sent a big & clear message to FSG". Only a few tweets voice critique of the protest, while a few tweets lament the match result, referring to the dramatic ending in a 2-2 result after LFC surrendered a 2-0 lead in the 13-ish minutes following the walkout on 77 minutes. To some, this turn of events only demonstrated the value of the fans: "just goes to prove football without fans is nothing". The walkout also prompted tweets from fans of other clubs, some commenting sarcastically on the result, but also voices of solidarity with the protest. Finally, a few tweets link to the first news coverages of the protest.

3) Feb. 10 - after the FSG apology

The third protest phase occurred on February 10th as FSG withdrew the new ticket structure with a letter of apology announcing an alternative ticket structure that kept the special initiatives for young and local fans while freezing the level of the most expensive tickets. The tweets (n=50) following the apology consist of fans applauding the protesters and a few also acknowledging FSG: "also well done to #FSG and #LFC for listening". Many tweets are celebratory ("WE DONE IT") and identity asserting ("best supporters in the world", "scouse solidarity"). Thus, the fans' activities formed an alternative media

coverage, a storyworld with alternative perspectives before, during and after the match. By sharing and promoting their own discursive construction of LFC, the fans succeeded in influencing the club owners' policies. This remarkable and financially impeding move by FSG reflects an acknowledgement that LFC constitutes a storyworld in which the fans figure as an essential part. The apology indicates that in a transmedia environment, the sender does not have complete control of the storytelling surrounding a franchise. Building an authentic LFC brand world to some degree needs to happen with acceptance from the fans. After this transmedia analysis of the protest's phases, it is time to look closer at how the fan activity succeeded in turning the football match into a media event.

The #walkouton77 protest as a transmedia event

One of the central characteristics of professional football is the participation and actions of the supporters in the stadium. The importance of the physical, ritual presence of supporter crowds at football matches is generally accepted and reflected by slogans like "football without fans is nothing" (also quoted on tweets and on banners in the stadium during the #walkouton77 protest) and widespread references from players, managers, journalists etc. to supporters functioning as "the 12th man".[6]

However, with the #walkouton77 protest, LFC fans demonstrated an ability to not only play a part of the franchise TV match. Through online activity, mobilizing around the #walkouton77 hashtag, they were able to coordinate a massive 10.000-person walkout of the match. Fundamentally, this was storyworld-users re-interpreting the franchised live TV broadcast and turning it into a media event, corresponding to Dayan & Katz's (1992) definition of big, preplanned, live-presented interruptions of normal routines of television. Having originally identified three event types, *contest*, *conquest* and *coronations*, Dayan and Katz, and others, have since identified a need for expanding the definition of media events, partly due to media technological developments (Dayan, 2010; Katz & Liebes, 2007; Hepp & Couldry, 2010). For instance, Bacellao-Pino (2016) supplements Dayan and Katz's original festive and integrative media event types with a fourth, disruptive and conflict-based *contention* event type that refer to media events like terror or war. While not dealing with this kind of severity, the #walkouton77 protest does qualify as a kind of contention event, one between club owners and fans.

As described earlier, in the digital media environment non-professional users are facilitated access to unseen amounts of content and everyone is able to create and spread their own information resulting in more fragmented media usage patterns. But while TV events' ability to capture our collective attention may be somewhat diminished compared to a few decades ago, the walkouton77 protest also proved that TV still is a powerful medium. Obviously, the social media activity was essential in mobilizing and coordinating fan groups, but the protest gathered its ultimate potency and visibility by addressing and harnessing the global television audience. As revealed by comparing the

three groups of tweets, being shown on television significantly broadened attention to the protest, which fed into a wider media circuit with social media users and mass media reporting it.

Essentially, the #walkouton77 movement developed as a "made-for-media event" (Brügger, 2016) that eventually, through its combination of newer and older media, constituted a form of "transmedia event" (Bacallao-Pino, 2016). In contrast to the original definition stating that media events "invite their audiences to stop being spectators and to become witnesses or participants of a television performance" (Dayan, 2010, 25), the distributed, network-based nature of this protest meant that it could not be pre-planned in a traditional sense. None of the initiators could know how far the hashtag and its message would spread, let alone how it would be received by the wider supporter crowds at the stadium. However, as it happened, when over 10.000 fans walked out after 77 minutes of the Sunderland match, it not only took place in front of those present at Anfield. The images of an emptying stadium dramatically altered the event in front of a global TV audience. The fact that the supporters at the stadium form an important part of the spectacle of the match broadcast, representing the club's storyworld, provides football fan activists with possibilities unknown to other kinds of fan activism. In this "contest for ownership" (Dayan, 2010, 30) of the storytelling of the event, the LFC fans were able to "hijack" and disrupt the traditional agenda of a franchised EPL TV match, thereby communicating a counter-narrative.

#walkouton77 as fan activism

Having analysed how the protest developed and succeeded in promoting an alternative transmedia storytelling of LFC, the challenge is now to analyse the conditions and usage of the #walkouton77 hashtag for football fan activism and how the LFC fans were able to change FSG's ticket strategies. Studies of fan activism represent a variant of fan studies that offers insights into forms of political fan activity. Brough and Shresthova (2012) define fan activism as "intentional actions by fans, or the use of fanlike strategies, to provoke change" and set up four analytical themes characterising fan activity: 1) The combinations of cultural and political/civic participation, 2) Tensions between participation and resistance 3) Activism in spaces of affect, collective identity and authenticity, and 4) Evaluation of the eventual impact.

Building upon the transmedia analysis and Brough & Shresthova's four themes, the remainder of the article looks closer at the #walkouton77 tweets and analyses the protest as football fan activism operating along two dimensions: a combination of culture and politics as well as of offline and online activities.

Cultural and political aspects of #walkouton77

Brough & Shresthova (2012) note that "a clear-cut distinction between fan activism and real-world activism remains elusive". It seems perhaps even more elusive when it comes to football fan activism which "can be seen as resistance practices which attempt to change the status quo within power relationships of football world" (Zaimakis, 2018, p.253). Football itself is a cultural phenomenon. In one sense, the game could be said to constitute a diegetic, fictive world guided by particular rules and every match a team plays could be said to exist in a seriality of matches that cumulatively adds to the "diegetic narrative" of the club. In another more fundamental sense, football clubs are embedded in geographical spaces and socio-cultural identities (Evans & Norcliffe, 2016) which also gives football a political dimension. This is demonstrated in the #walkouton77 protests being concerned with external issues surrounding the game, i.e. access to the matches. The issue of ticket prices has real-life consequences for the fans whose desire to fully express their identity as LFC fans is threatened by rising ticket expenses. This dichotomy can be expressed through the distinction between audiences and publics (Livingstone, 2005). As such, fan activists are audiences that turn into publics when shifting attention from the narrative to concerns with issues. Following this, the LFC supporters turned into a public and a political movement when they walked out on 77 minutes to protest on the ticket pricing issue.
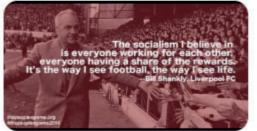
This cultural-political nexus is clearly represented in the collected sample of #walkouton77 tweets. The following examples (including a few spelling errors) demonstrate how this is expressed as endorsements of their own fan culture (1-2) and the fan organisations (3-5) but also how the protests are related to larger political issues with mentions of solidarity, socialism, people power and retweets of Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn's support to the protest (1, 5 & Figure 1):

1. **MarkmaccaMc (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Scouse Solidarity #WalkOutOn77'
2. **l_chafer (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'there's one reason lfc fans are some of the best in the country, first to make a stance and the first to be rewarded #WalkOutOn77'
3. **Paulstringy (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Welk done to the SOS and SpionKop lads who organised #WalkOutOn77 and also well done to #FSG and #LFC for listening, that's all it was about'
4. **Kolow_T (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'A massive well done to everyone who took part in #WalkOutOn77!! @SpionKop1906 @spiritofshankly @LFCSupCom #FanPower ✊'
5. **SeanCayford (Feb. 6, 2016)**: 'Solidarity to @paddock5 @spiritofshankly @SpionKop1906 and others. @LFC need to give football back to the working classes. #WalkOutOn77 #LFC"'

Brough and Shresthova's sesond point about fan activism involving tensions between resistance and participation is clearly present too. Operating in the intersection of culture and politics means that the fans are caught between identifying with and having the need

Figure 1: Several of the #walkout77 tweets promoted political perspectives

for supporting the club and, simultaneously, opposing to some of the club's activities, e.g. by engaging in protest activities. In the build-up to the #walkouton77, protest leaflets (Figure 2) were produced for distribution both online and on the streets in the Liverpool area. The leaflets hold easily sharable instructions for action, namely to leave the stadium on 77 minutes (reflecting the £77 ticket prices) of the next home match, and also high-lighted the dilemma between protesting and supporting with the statement "Love the team – Hate the prices". Besides aiming to mobilize a broader section of the fan group by raising awareness, it is significant that the leaflet also clearly addresses the dilemma emphasizing the rationalities behind the protest, that "supporters need to get behind each other" and that leaving the stadium is about collectively sending a necessary long-term message to the owners, and that is not conflicting with supporting the team. On the contrary, by asking "who will get the next increases", the protest is indicated to be neces-sary to preserve the essential aspects of the LFC culture.

The tweet sample contained an example of how this dilemma exists within individual fans (6) but more typically it is expressed as divisions among the fans, which is reflected in tweets criticizing the protest (7-9) and strongly worded tweets retaliating against those criticizing the protest (10-11). While some emphasize the protest as part of a general political struggle, the protest criticizers, on the other hand, seem to emphasize fans' duty to support the team, apparently either disinterested in politics or resigned to fans having little say in the governing of football.

6. **johnny_morrison (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Respect to the #LFC fans who drove the #WalkOutOn77 campaign. I was skeptical and thought it was a waste of time. FairPlay #YNWA'

7. **AtlantaLFC (Feb. 6, 2016)**: '@Tommycross91 thanks for showing us how important spell checking is. #WalkOutOn77 is a disgrace to the club, just like #FSG is.'

8. **ashleymoat1989 (Feb. 6, 2016)**: '#WalkOutOn77 is not going to help!!! #LFC'

9. **LaNellyMostrar (Feb. 6, 2016)**: '#WalkOutOn77 exposes the short-termist mentality of #LFC fans, clearly ignorant of how FSG saved our beloved club with their £115m 0% loan.'

10. **oDickoLFC (Feb. 10, 2016)**: '@Lea1978red why did you #WalkOutOn77 u tit , you won't achieve anything, gang of divs... Egg on your face naysayers'

11. **dean1979 (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Great result..... Wonder what all those are thinking now that said it was the wrong way to protest #WalkOutOn77'

> Sunderland at home on Saturday, the first stage of many planned protests against the club in regards to the ticket prices at Anfield for the 2016/17 season.
>
> LFC think its acceptable to make more money than ever before from supporters. £2million more. That means price rises for many. £77 match tickets and £1,029 season tickets. Big increases for some, a few frozen and others get a tiny bit off. The club still make more. Don't think it's ok because yours is ok. Who will get the next increases do you think?
>
> Every week we get right behind the team. Now supporters need to get behind each other. Let's make sure the owners know this is unacceptable. On 77 minutes, leave your seat and walk out. Tell your mates and family. Tell the people around you. Tell them why.
>
> Walk out on 77 minutes and show you care.
>
> **Love the team - Hate the prices.**
>
> **#WalkOutOn77**

Figure 2: The leaflet made by the protest organizers was spread online and in paper form, thus combining old and new media channels.

Offline and online dimensions of #walkouton77

As already shown in the transmedia analysis, the tensions between culture and politics among the LFC fans play out in offline as well as online settings. To study this dimension, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) definitions of collective and connective action are useful. The more traditional form of collective action describes groups with high level organization and shared, often local, collective identities. Connective action, on the other hand, is based on the way digital networks allow individuals to combine and engage in spaces of autonomy (Castells, 2015) in fluid, heterogeneous networks. Instead of being organised around and rely on shared, strict social group identities, connective movements build upon personalized sets of fluid, "weak tie" networks of potentially global reach.

Twitter offers a space for counter movements and hashtags often function as headlines of such movements. Connective action was clearly demonstrated by the Twitter use of the #walkouton77 hashtag with LFC fans from all parts of the world connecting in a global network of resistance towards the club. But as demonstrated by the aforementioned tweets (7-11), hashtags are "signifiers not empty, but open to definition, redefinition, and re-appropriation" (Papacharissi, 2015, p.2) and therefore they are often used by people with varying understandings and attitudes towards the general issue in question. Nevertheless, referring to the politicisation of the everyday, Highfield (2017) identifies "hashtag campaigning" as a "well-established process for promoting issues and movements, and for framing concerns [that] accompany other processes, such as physical protest and demonstration". While political online protest groups are normally connectively assembled on a case-by-case basis, football fan activism is invariably built upon an already established sense of collective identity among fans of a club, especially among local fans who are rooted in the social and cultural context of the club.

Papacharissi (2015) describes how hashtags and the ambient nature of social media afford instantaneous, affective commenting on events before they turn into stories. In such affective publics, users create alternative news streams which surround and extend beyond mainstream news stories, as seen for instance during The Arab Spring where Twitter users used the #egypt hashtag for reacting to and to some degree promoting the revolutionary processes. This corresponds to Brough and Shresthova's (2012) theme of activism in affective spaces, but simultaneously, Papacharissi cautions that online activity alone does not guarantee impact. Tufekci (2017) also notes how the effectiveness of connective activity like the networked #egypt public during the Arab Spring hinged on offline, on-ground protesters on the Tahrir Square. Similarly, the #walkouton77 protest did not form an independent online protest but could only gain importance as a disruptive appendix to a TV football match. Thus, the #walkouton77 hashtag functioned as a space for sharing and reading affective reactions to the protest's unfolding and to its aftermath. Among other things, it was a tool for mobilization and coordination (Figure 2) involving locals and fans abroad (12), for eyewitness reporting and instantaneous evaluations (13), and for celebration (14-15). As such, the #walkouton77 tweets functioned as

a narrative extension of the protest; an extended Anfield interacting with the physical supporter crowd at the match. Watching a football match is, as it is, a highly affective and often ritualized experience for most fans involving shouting, cheering and similar emotional expressions. Clearly, the #walkouton77 tweets reflect this behaviour, particularly the celebratory tweets following FSG's apology with some resembling celebrations of a goal or a victory.

12. **yeoreumsblink (Feb. 6, 2016)**: 'turning off my television at 77th minute to support the local supporters, this coming from an int'l fan #WalkOutOn77 #SupportersNotCustomers'
13. **Thisisanfield (Feb. 6, 2016)**: 'Plenty have left, but plenty still inside Anfield. #WalkOutOn77'
14. **Cunningni (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Fantastic 👏 #WalkOutOn77'
15. **Magnuspho (Feb. 10, 2016)**: 'Wow. Fan power! #WalkOutOn77'

Conclusion: Evaluating the impact of football fan activism as collective cultural critique

This article has studied the #walkouton77 protest as football fan activism combining culture and politics, and online and offline activity. It appears that the #walkouton77 protest initially reached a happy conclusion from the fan perspective with the owners' apology and cancellation of the proposed new ticket prices. Obviously, football club owners automatically hold the ultimate decision making power concerning club strategies and remain the official voices of the club. But the #walkouton77 case demonstrated that the fans are able to challenge and supplement the "hierarchical model of cultural evaluation" (Verboord, 2014, p.935) of football. This is particularly apparent in the way many fans countered the owners' *club-as-commodity* discourse by insisting upon a *club-as-culture* discourse, often centred on the slogan "supporters, not customers" (12). In their apology letter, FSG seemingly acknowledge the importance of considering the local, historical aspects of LFC. They adopt the cultural fan discourse as they champion "the unique and sacred relationship between Liverpool Football Club and its supporters" and emphasize that "serving as custodians of this incredible institution is a distinct privilege" (Liverpoolfc. com, 2016b).

The LFC fans' protest has been analysed as transmedia activity, combining TV's global mass-audience reach and the low-cost, affective networked connectivity of Twitter. Thereby they were able to mobilize a protest walkout that directly redefined and disrupted franchise TV football, turning it into a contentive media event. It has also been examined how the #walkouton77 protest combined culture and politics, and how it was constituted by collective and connective action with the online protest built upon an

established fan culture and identity among LFC fans. In some ways, the case seems to indicate that football fan activism in some ways differs from political activism as well as from other forms of fan activism, such as those related to movies or music. Football fans are, in Scott's terminology, part of the "mothership" (Scott, 2012) as crucial contributors to the primary text in terms of match atmosphere and, in the long run, as co-authors of the club history. The owners might sit at the wheel of the mothership but do not have exclusive power to define the club. It is a culture they have inherited. In her examination of transmedia fiction stories, Scott introduces the notion of "fanboy authors" (2012, p.44), describing how some authors engage in para-social and para-equal relations with fans by functioning as "human bibles" in relation to the transmedia content world created around their original stories. Conversely, in football, with clubs being cultural institutions situated in local communities, the role of human bibles naturally applies to the fans. Thus, the LFC fans as a community of everyday experts have authority through vast experience as culture carriers and experts of the club from decades of playing their part as fans in club's history. This authority and expertise enable them to exert a collective kind of cultural critique (Kristensen & From, 2015). Thus, their experience-based expertise gives them a "co-authoring" capacity when it comes to defining the culture of LFC as "a whole way of life" (Williams, [1958] 2011).

Having defined the LFC fans as *collective cultural critics* functioning as co-authors of the club as a cultural institution, the analysis now ends with a few evaluating reflections on the impact potentialities of fan activism. Obviously, the long-term power struggle between the local, culturally oriented fans groupings and the commercial capitalist interests in football is a different question to issues concerning individual case studies on football fan protests. Football consumption and production are always and everywhere interwoven with economic forces, and there is no escaping that processes of globalization and mediatization have fundamentally shaped football into a global, commercialized product.

Still, the #walkouton77 protest illustrates a more nuanced dynamic around the local-global nexus within modern football. Essentially the top clubs in EPL simultaneously are global brands but also local, cultural institutions. Historically, football has always been attached to the broader local community, hence a 'text' that is collectively and culturally produced (Evans & Norcliffe, 2016). The #walkouton77 case tells a story of the club owners initially expressing financial concerns guided by the aim to commodify football and ultimately maximize profit. But FSG's backtracking reflects the importance of the local community to the tradition and legacy of the club. Because football clubs tend to blend into people's lives and cultural identities, club owners need to root their global ambitions in the local. Not only in empty brand slogans, but also in terms of actual policies that acknowledge and accommodate local fans separately to the global audiences. Otherwise they risk eroding the cultural value of their club. In order to retain a unique image in an increasingly globalized world, owners need to somehow nurture the club's local cultural and historical heritage, as it often is the "localness" that global fans buy into (Sondaal, 2013).

In LFC's case, an important part of the global appeal is indeed achieved by the club's branding og the local roots, the 'scouse' culture of LFC. However, it remains to be seen to which degree the LFC (and other clubs) fans' influence as collective cultural critics are affected by future developments in the football world, with ongoing processes of digitalization and globalization increasingly pushing the commercialization of football. Naturally, further case-based research on football protest movements as football fan activism, e.g. in other clubs with different supporter sizes and cultural identities, is needed to gauge the nature and extent of football fans' ability to function as collective cultural critics.

Notes

1   In this article, I define "fans" to be the general public of people that support a certain team. "Supporters" is used to refer to fans who are physically present in the stadium at a match.
2   The 2016-2019 rights are shared between Sky Sports and BTsports. In February 2018, the majority of a new deal spanning 2019-2022 were published amounting to £4.464bn. This amount is still to be supplemented with revenue from international TV rights where the room for growth is bigger.
3   https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-anfield-wrap/ (accessed on 07.06.18)
4   http://soccerschools.liverpoolfc.com/ (accessed on 07.06.18)
5   In 1985, before the European Cup final, played at Heysel Stadium in Brussels, 39 – mostly Juventus supporters – were killed in a confrontation with aggressive LFC hooligans. In 1989, 96 LFC supporters were crushed to death in an overcrowded stand at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield. After years of struggles against cover-up measures from the police and stadium authorities, in 2016 the supporters were ruled to have been unlawfully killed as a result of "grossly negligent" services from the police and ambulances.
6   Throughout 2018, LFC's website held a countdown of "50 men who made LFC" culminating with The 12th man, the supporters, placed as number 1. https://www.liverpoolfc.com/news/125/303673-50-men-who-made-lfc-the-12th-man (accessed on 04.06.18).

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