

Boyle, R., and Blain, N. (2009) Sport as real life. In: Albertazzi, D. and Cobley, P. (eds.) *The Media: An Introduction*. Routledge, pp. 519-533. ISBN 9781405840361

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Deposited on: 30 March 2015

SPORT AS REAL LIFE

Murdoch tells WSJ execs: “shorter stories, more sport”

(The Press Gazette, 17 January 2008 reporting on the first meeting of Wall Street Journal bureau chiefs and their new owner Rupert Murdoch.)

INTRODUCTION

The study of media sport offers a range of possible avenues of enquiry around issues of representation. Across the print, broadcast and online media, representations of sport often touch on debates around the construction of gender identities; racial and ethnic identities as well as those around class and national identity (Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Brookes, 2002, Rowe, 2003). In the print media these representation of sport are often mediated via various forms of journalism, with the growth in the scope and scale of sports journalism being one of the characteristics of European media more generally in the last decade or so and the UK media in particular (Boyle, 2006; Steen, 2008; Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2009).

What we want to do in this piece is to focus specifically on the function and role of mediated sports in the constitution and re-constitution of national and cultural identity formation. Traditionally it has been the arena of international sporting coverage around events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup that have been the vehicle for much of this coverage. However the globalisation and internationalisation of elite sport and sports labour in the last decade has meant that these issues about national identity and sporting representation have become more prevalent in the discourses of sport that circulate within countries throughout the sporting year and not simply at set piece international sporting events. Within football for example these issues are often framed by the potential negative impact that imported players or athletes may have on the national team.

As in other walks of European society and economy the twin drivers shaping contemporary sport and its deep relationship with the media are globalisation and

technology. Of course neither of these forces is played out across Europe in a universal manner. National cultures, regulatory frameworks and the specific contours of political, economic and cultural life shape how these twin forces impact on life in (say) Germany, Italy or Sweden. However at the core of the debates across the continent about how everyday life is changing, and how the challenges faced by European societies are addressed, lies a dual concern about how aspects of the impact of globalisation and technological innovation are managed, shaped or harnessed for good or ill.

To this end, a study of sport and its ubiquitous relationship with the media and communication industries offers not just an insight into the growing sports industry, but more broadly informs us about culture as a whole. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm argues:

The dialectics of the relations between globalisation, national identity and xenophobia are dramatically illustrated in the public activity that combines all three: football. For, thanks to global television, this universally popular sport has been transformed into a worldwide capitalist industrial complex (though, by comparison with other global business activities, of relatively modest size) (Hobsbawm, 2007: 90).

The narratives that sports produce, the way these stories are delivered, and are made sense of by audiences, variously reflect, reinforce and construct a range of identities around class, gender, ethnicity and cultural and national identities. These operate both within particular cultural contexts and are also enacted at symbolic levels, international and global (Blain, 2002).

For some critics (King, 2003) the growth in prominence of events such as the UEFA Champions League has been broadly positive in its associated football fandom development, part of a wider Europeanisation of football fandom. Others (Williams, 2007) are more circumspect, and emphasise the role played by capital and the media industries in shaping the broader framework and the wider parameters within which football fandom in a European context operates. But the matter is more profound than that. As the European dimension of the sports industry has developed over the last few

decades, likewise the way that sport is run, governed, controlled and managed tells us much about how new orthodoxies have entered the mainstream of European economic thinking, with increased influence on our working and leisure lives. The English Premier League, underpinned by marketing, promotion and entertainment industry values and practices embodies the *modernisation* of traditional industries in Britain more generally. Its influence around the globe through a range of media platforms including the internet reinforces a political discourse which views the exporting of culture and ideas as a key process conferring ‘soft power’ on a country which has lost much competitive advantage in more traditional areas of economic influence (for example, manufacturing).

In other words, a study of what has been called the media – sport nexus, which is often characterised by a short-term market ethos, with vested and powerful political and media interests, increasingly global patterns of ownership, and a relocation of resources often transcending traditional national boundaries, in turn illuminates wider shifts in European industrial and corporate life. While at its heart sport remains organised play, the architecture and infrastructure that now facilitates, supports and mediates what is in essence an invention of a 19th century age of imperialism, is deeply embedded in the political, economic and cultural life of a digital 21st century Europe. Of late, separating mediated sport and ‘real life’ has become an increasingly difficult and complex exercise.

The next section examines why sport is important - and in what ways - in the digital media age. Then we turn our attention to some recent developments in the football – media relationship which illustrate the manner in which a study of media sport is closely associated with economic and cultural life. Throughout, we are especially concerned with the relationship between Britain and Europe.

WHY SPORT MATTERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Sport has always mattered to the media (Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Rowe, 2004). In the digital age of media, we have moved from an age of scarcity to potential

abundance of media content delivered through a range of platforms (television, computer, mobile phone). Throughout Europe the twin drivers of digital switch-over and high speed broadband are facilitating substantive, if uneven, change across the media landscape. We are entering an age where to talk of 'old' or 'new' or indeed 'digital' media will become redundant. There will simply be media and content delivered to screens (or increasingly pulled down by users onto those screens) wherever they may be located.

Of course there will be continuity as well as change. Print media will not simply disappear, but rather co-exist in a more complex media environment. People will still need a roadmap to find their way around the content they want, think they want (or have not yet discovered that they want). As a result, big media brands such the BBC will remain important, and sports content and sports journalism will remain a central component of this increasingly demand-led media environment (Boyle, 2006; Steen. 2007).

By 2008 the television marketplace for sports had changed out of all recognition from even a decade earlier. Sky Sports, once the 'new kid on the block' who created the pay-TV sports market in the UK in the 1990s, had become part of the sports media establishment, itself under pressure from a rival in the pay sports market, Setanta, which muscled into the market in the wake of EU regulation which broke Sky's monopoly of live Premiership football. Sky and Setanta's three-year deal (in 2007) with English football's elite division is worth £1.7billion or £567m a season. In 1987, by contrast, television paid £3m a season for football rights. TV executives are now the financial underwriters of the sport and many other sports in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Tennis, golf and rugby all feed off television money and exposure as part of – in the UK alone - a staggering 36,000 hours of sports broadcast in 2007.

In 2008 the digital broadcasting market in the UK had become characterised by an increasingly fragmented audience for television with both free-to-air and pay-TV digital channels competing for viewers. Broadcasters are using a range of media platforms such as the Web, and likewise on-demand technologies like the BBC iPlayer, to capture and

retain audience share. A point often missed by analysts is that in Britain in 2007 audiences were watching about 10 minutes more of television than in preceding years. Viewers are actually watching more television (on larger screens than ever) but less of this viewing is collective, or taking place at the same time. This rise of an 'on-demand culture' has led to live (or 'as live') 'event television' programmes such as *X Factor* (ITV) and *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC) which can't be time shifted, precisely because the pleasure is about the here-and-now result which the viewer can influence through voting.

Against this backdrop the premium nature of live sports events as 'event television' continues to develop. As Greg Dyke, former Director General of the BBC, argues:

In a world where you can download anything, you can't download live sport. Anything live becomes more important. The price paid by broadcasters [for live elite sport] will continue to go up (*The Observer*, 28 October, 2007).

In an age when technological change, in part unleashed through a lighter regulatory framework, is restructuring how people watch and think about television, the ability of sports at major events to pull together fragmented audiences remains compelling.

In the UK it was once common (in the late 1990s) for top television shows to regularly attract over 15m viewers. A decade later *Coronation Street* remained the most popular television programme on British screens with an average of 11million viewers (an audience share of 45%). When England played Sweden in the 2006 FIFA World Cup, ITV attracted its largest audience of the year, 18.8m viewers. The 2007 Rugby World Cup saw almost 14m tune into the England v South Africa final in October of that year, and as F1 motor racing enjoyed a ratings surge with Lewis Hamilton's attempt to secure the world title in his inaugural season, almost 8 million tuned into ITV coverage of the Brazilian Grand Prix that same weekend (BARB, 20/10/07). This sporting combination of 'event' television provided a struggling ITV with the biggest-grossing advertising revenue weekend of that year. ITV sold over £16m worth of advertising around these two events. Such is the integral nature of major international sports content (when it has a British dimension, of course) to commercial television in the UK, that when England

failed to qualify for the 2008 European Championships, it was not simply football fans who lost out. ITV's advertising revenue projects for that summer were dramatically scaled back.

So sports content, in an increasingly commercial media system, remains very important for traditional broadcasters. The main public service broadcaster, the BBC, has seen its sporting portfolio diminish as the governing bodies of sport follow the money on offer from pay-TV, but is using new technology and a cross-platform presence to fight back. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, one of an increasingly small number of sporting events that cannot be exclusively captured by pay-TV, saw the BBC make 2,400 hours of extra sports coverage available through the interactive 'red button' digital service. By London 2012, the Corporation aims to make BBC1 the premium Olympic channel, and show every event live via the interactive service. This kind of commitment is only sustainable through a large well-funded broadcaster such as the BBC. At a time of funding uncertainty this will continue to be sold by the Corporation as part of its distinctive public service remit. Given the massive public expenditure by Government on the London Games, it can be predicted that it will support the BBC as the only broadcaster capable of promoting and making Games coverage available free-to-air and across media platforms. The BBC will make the London Games part of its political argument to keep up levels of public funding (the Games will also sustain its 'national' claims).

The reality is that by 2012 the way the BBC is funded is likely to change, as the licence fee finally becomes an outdated mechanism through which to fund public service content in a multi-platform digital environment.

One key issue for both sports and broadcasters will be the extent to which sport is viewed as making a distinctive contribution to the national and cultural life of any European country, thus subject to special regulatory measures making it available for all. (This is distinct from viewing it as simply another aspect of modern life that the communications marketplace is perfectly able to support.) The marketization of the

broadcasting world will continue apace, as will the accompanying debate about when it is both necessary and useful to regulate that market for the public good.

There is more sport on television than ever before, but much is only available live if viewers are willing to pay extra to see it, as the rights holders of sport look to the short-term money on offer, and appear oblivious to longer-term implications. For example when Scotland played Italy in a vital qualifying match for Euro 2008, the game was exclusively live on pay-TV. Historically, such games involving the national team would have been free-to-air, forming part of a wider national cultural life and shared experience. Children in Scotland are now more likely to have seen England play live on free-to-air television than the Scottish national football team, a strange state of affairs for such a supposedly national sport.

AN ENGLISH LEAGUE ABROAD

World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. “Europe is off to view the merchandise”, says Taine in 1855. The world exhibitions were preceded by national exhibitions of industry, the first of which took place on the Champ de Mars in 1798. It arose from the wish “to entertain the working classes, and it becomes for them a festival of emancipation”. The workers would constitute their first clientele.

Walter Benjamin, Exposé of 1939, *The Arcades Project*, p. 17

For a nation that invented the sport, the British are not much good at football. England may be home to the Premier League, perhaps the best club competition in the world, but half the players fielded on any given weekend are neither British nor Irish.

The Economist, 22 November 2007.

As mentioned earlier, the globalisation (or as some prefer to call it, internationalisation) of sport is one of the great forces shaping modern sports media culture. This is not a new process. However, a combination of technological innovation and a more market-

orientated communications and political culture across much of Europe has strongly fuelled sports development over the last decade. As Goldblatt notes in his magisterial history of the world game:

In the 1990s European football's long economic decline was spectacularly reversed: the ailing rustbelt of Fordist football was transformed into a booming post-industrial service sector awash with money and hubris (Goldblatt, 2007: 688).

The English Premier League was created by the elite football clubs in order to generate more television revenue and allow the top-flight teams to retain this money, rather than have it re-distributed throughout the game. In the television rights deal covering 2007 - 2010 the league sold media rights packages worth in total close to £2.7billion (selling the rights overseas generated £625m and made it the most watched sports league in the world). While over two-thirds of the overseas deals are in Asia, *The Economist* (3 November 2007) noted that it is Africa which has the Premiership's largest fan base, although the relative poverty of these fans means that it is only recently that sponsors are attempting to build markets in this part of the world.

When it started in 1992 the Premier League had 11 players who did not come from Britain and Ireland. 15 years later this number had grown to over 250. Players from countries such as China are brought in by clubs to expand their brand identity in these lucrative markets. In 2003 an Everton v Manchester City match saw both teams field Chinese players and was shown in China on state television to an audience of 350m (*The Observer*, 4 November 2007). Even in smaller leagues a player's national identity value on the pitch is becoming increasingly fused with commercial and marketing imperatives. The presence of Celtic's Shunsuke Nakamura has resulted in the club visiting his country to promote awareness of the team, setting up a Japanese language website, and by 2007 selling over 140,000 replica shirts and 20,000 DVDs in this market. (*Scotland on Sunday*, 1 July 2007).

Top clubs in England now regularly have foreign managers and even more significantly, seven of the Premier League teams in 2008 including Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Aston Villa, were owned by foreign businessmen, something unthinkable back in the 1990s, but consistent with other aspects of UK Plc, such as manufacturing, banking and high street retail brands.

Early in the same year, much disquiet arose in English football culture over a proposal announced by Richard Scudamore, the Chief Executive of the Premier League, to explore the possibility of playing an additional ‘international’ 39th round of Premiership matches overseas, as exhibitions of the indigenous game. Quickly dubbed ‘the 39th step’ the idea unleashed much comment from across the world of football:

It is the logical step, given the League’s growth and ambition – “the only way to grow the brand”, said the Birmingham City chairman, David Gold – but it is also a quantum leap. For the first time clubs will be divorced from their heritage. It begs the question, what next? (Glenn Moore, ‘Premier league plans games overseas in bid to rule world’, *Independent*, 8 February 2008).

At one level this proposal was only a minor extension of the globalization of football. In England its ‘indigenouness’ was already greatly in doubt, and under constant debate, because of the major presence at the top level of overseas players, coaches and (increasingly) proprietors. The globalization process involves intensification of the export and import of economic and cultural products (Robertson 1992) amidst accelerated space-time changes. ‘Time-space compression’ is one of the more succinct definitions of globalization (Harvey 1990). The time and manner of indigenous football consumption had already adjusted to international space-time considerations, British pay TV consumers able (for example) to schedule live British and Spanish matches sequentially at weekends, and construct many similar international media packages. In any case, British sides had travelled to Europe and beyond for decades to play club and national team football. Why not run a few Premier League matches abroad, when the English big four of Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool are judged for

their success as major brands in global terms? No-one could argue that the commoditization process for football was not already far advanced.

The demographics of twenty first century production and consumption create difficulties for analyses rooted in class assumptions of the previous two centuries. Benjamin's observation that the 'masses' are 'forcibly excluded from consumption' (*ibid*, p. 18) is replaced in the present century by an entrepreneurial approach to consumption which squeezes profit from everywhere. C. K. Prahalad has argued that a market worth trillions of dollars is comprised by the poor of the world's developing nations (Prahalad 2004). The development of microfinance and microcredit (which fuelled the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2007/8) illustrate a tendency in contemporary capitalism to squeeze profit from commercial operations down to (even beyond) the limits of feasibility. The English Premiership plan to play matches overseas followed the commercial logic of its time.

For overseas consumers, most consumption of English Premier League clubs is distanced, usually mediated, or through merchandise purchase. The opportunity, especially outside Europe, to consume United or Arsenal in the stadium is very rare. It is self-evident that a Manchester United-Liverpool match in almost any country in the world will be a sell-out event. In turn, the economies of both clubs, and English football in general, will benefit from further spillover activity in the purchase of merchandise and media access to Premier League games. On the surface this looks like a win-win situation for the clubs and English football.

Likewise it would seem logical to maximize team success at every phase of the operation, both on the field and in all other commercial operations. The way in which team performance, critical for profit maximization, has been improved in the English game is through the import of overseas players and coaches. The coaches of top English sides in the first decade of the twenty first century were mainly from outside England, including Scottish, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Israeli, Northern Irish and Swedish coaches. Many of the star players of the game – Thierry Henry, Didier Drogba,

Cristiano Ronaldo, Fernando Torres and others – have been from overseas. One source reported that the percentage of English players in the Premier League fell from 71% in season 1992-93 to 38% in 2006-07 (*Prospect*, January 2008). This has been to the large benefit of the English game as a product in terms of domestic and European success, producing a level of spectacle enhancing its international competitiveness as a product in media and other markets. For example 2008 saw, for the first time, 50% of the clubs in the last eight of the UEFA Champions League drawn from the Premier League. Of those four clubs (Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester United and Liverpool) only 25% of the players active in this European competition were British. This has meant that club success has not been reflected at national level, as the pool of players from which the English national coach can draw has shrunk dramatically in the last decade.

Yet there was widespread condemnation of the plan to play Premier League fixtures abroad from across the footballing world (‘Greed will drive Premier League to more than 39th step’, Martin Samuel, *The Times*, 13 February, 2008; ‘All we know is money lurks behind Scudamore’s plan’, Sue Mott, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 February, 2008; What On Earth is Going On? Charlie Wyett, *The Sun*, 9 February 2008). The response from UEFA Chief Executive Michel Platini was splashed across the whole of the *Daily Telegraph*’s sports section (9 February 2008):

You already have NO English coach, you have NO English players and maybe now you will have NO clubs playing in England. It’s a joke.

While Patrick Barclay in the *Sunday Telegraph* opened his criticism of the men who control the game in England by suggesting that the Scudamore plan:

has opened the biggest can of worms since English football (if such a term can still be used) was split up and rebranded 16 years ago [] what a mess our football has got itself into [] if this is globalisation, a plague on it [] Scudamore is doing his best to control an organisation owned by men with no real responsibility to this country, let alone their clubs. That is the problem of

letting globalisation rule football (Power Play, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 10, February 2008).

There had already been, by the time that plan was floated, nearly a decade of growing concern about the saturation of the top reaches of the game by overseas professionals, and likewise, at national level, much disquiet over appointments of non-English national coaches.

IDENTITY, MEDIA AND MANAGING ‘THE NATION’

“Fabio is very, very open and happy to include an English coach – or coaches – within his staff.”

(Communications director of the Football Association, on the appointment of Fabio Capello as England national coach, December 2007)

If it is axiomatic that football is a business, it is nonetheless also, and especially in England, a repository of cultural values. It has been argued that there exists a striking directness of association characterizing English soccer and English society (‘an almost total failure to dissociate Football and History’. It is possible to find much more evidence of ‘indexical’, or what in literary studies would be termed ‘metonymic’, relationships in the way in which the media account for football in England, than mere ‘metaphoric’ relations of comparison (Blain 2003). Put simply, English football is often read as an actual extension of English society, not least by the foreign sporting press (Crolley and Hand, 2006). While people in many countries produce emotional reactions to sport, it is arguable if even the Australians are as sensitive to the implications for Australian identity of international rugby and cricket performances as England is on the question of international football. Elsewhere it is used as a metaphor which can be treated seriously or not, as in France or Germany (in Scotland, it is often a source of comedy).

Now that the game has reached a more intensively globalized stage, and at a time of increased general migration to the UK, what are the new elements in the relationship between English football and English culture?

Sven-Göran Eriksson's tenure as England coach, in addition to the routine vitriol from the press which the job guarantees, produced many expressions of hostility around his foreignness and Swedishness. When journalists reported the fans' cries of 'sack the Swede' (as happened when Northern Ireland beat England in 2005) they were in reality reporting on a discursive loop between media and fans, in which the media often took the initiative. Part of this discourse of England managers involves a process of forgetting. Even the *Telegraph's* urbane Henry Winter allows himself to speculate that:

Publicly supportive, the Swede's FA employers privately concede their frustration that players who shine for their clubs look so uninspired when they turn up for England duty. (Ireland shatter Eriksson's jigsaw, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 2005).

In fact, this allegation had been visited on the England of earlier coach Graham Taylor and was to become a defining characteristic of the brief reign of Steve McLaren, both native Englishmen ('The question is not whether McLaren was a bad manager, but whether he was the worst to hold the job...Farewell Steve, your epitaph shall read "worse than Graham Taylor"', Simon Barnes, *The Times*, 23 November 2007).

The problem of the under-performance of England national squads in comparison to club performances had taken on chronic dimensions well before Eriksson's appearance (Carter, 2007). The gambit of blaming anaemic England turnouts on Eriksson's Scandinavian temperament had never belonged to a world of logic, but rather to the internal myth-world of the populist realms of sports journalism. (Sven's characterization as a passionless Swede was in any case incompatible with an alternative persona, 'Sven the Swordsman': 'Veteran shagger Sven Goran Eriksson is known for his love of vital statistics', begins one tabloid piece early in 2008, *The Sun*, 6 March). In the myth-world

of the sports press, a hearty and wholly committed Englishman like Stuart Pearce, or a variety of other imagined beef-eating, pint-drinking Englishmen will extract genuine commitment from the players on the field, by virtue of being English (this is the Henry VIII, or Sir Ian Botham discourse of Englishness). In practice they don't, however, which is why an England coach was no longer a first choice at Premier League clubs, or the national side, by the time of Sven's arrival; earlier coach Graham Taylor's *Sunderland* derived soubriquet, Turnip Head, is where the myth world leads for the unwary native manager (it surprised many that McLaren was willing to don the mantle).

Representation has its own rules in these media domains. Despite Taylor and McLaren's failures there were many media voices raised in favour of limiting the search for a coach to English contenders. We look in vain for metaphorical consistency in such accounts. The amnesiac circularity of judgements on the England situation is understood well enough by media commentators themselves:

For England managers all beginnings are the same. The players will invariably say that team spirit is better, that they now dine together like a club side and that training is much sharper...There is also a sense of freshness mingling with ridiculous hope – often because your predecessor was a thorough-going disaster.

(Fans yet to be convinced by Capello's England, *Telegraph*, 7 February 2008)

The English FA decided to appoint Italian Fabio Capello as the successor to McLaren following the failure to qualify for Euro 2008. It marked the end of any illusions that England were currently able to produce top level managers.

There were stereotype confusions in Capello's relationship with the English media from the outset. On the announcement of his appointment, the possibility that Stuart Pearce (passionate, emotional, caring, English) would be brought in to support Capello (dispassionate, pragmatic, judgemental, Italian) was introduced to soften the double blow of another European in the England job. 'Psycho turns psychologist', claims one earlier

Telegraph article of Pearce (4 December 2005) noting how 'he takes a caring attitude toward his players'. 'Don't fool with Fabio Capello' says a *Sunday Times* piece (16 December 2007); while insiders like David Beckham and Ruud Gullit are widely quoted in the media advising not to 'mess around' with Capello, who will, according to Beckham, bring back the 'fear factor'. When Capello does get emotional, it's to 'scream at you', as several beneficiaries of his approach attest in interviews.

It quickly becomes clear that the British media will find Capello difficult to portray. One problem is the refusal of Italian coaches in general to behave in a Latin manner, instead being evidently technical, cool, detached, and well balanced, compared to the unstable temperaments found in English football among 'Anglo-Saxon' players like Wayne Rooney, or in the tortured self-doubts of English coaches (think of McLaren's strange observation on Sky News in November 2007 that 'I pick the team', something which a Spanish, French or indeed Italian coach might not have felt compelled to assert). A feature on BBC Sport's Football website notes, on the other hand, that Capello 'feels as comfortable at an opera house as he does on the touchline, and detaches himself from the game when it comes to his time away from football' (Mandeep Sanghera, Who is Fabio Capello? 14 December 2007). It was an Italian, Gianluca Vialli, then managing Chelsea, who, at a time when concern over foreign imports was mounting, was reported as offering the purely pragmatic reason for importing overseas players to the UK: if not, 'the other teams would simply be too good for us' (BBC News, 4 February 2000).

There was some experimentation with the account which the media wished to explore for Capello:

England boss Fabio Capello's top-of-the-range hairdryer has been stolen from his private dressing room at Wembley. Stadium chiefs are investigating the theft - which occurred after Wednesday's game against Switzerland. The suave Italian ordered for it to be installed in his dressing room before the game... A source told the Mirror: "The England manager has his own dressing room next to the players' one. After Fabio got the England job he asked for a hairdryer to be put in there for his sole use. We

thought it was a bit strange but he's the boss and we got a top-of-the-range dryer...Everyone is terrified about what he is going to say when he finds out it's missing."

(‘Fabio Capello’s hairdryer is stolen from Wembley dressing room’, *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 2008)

Nor was it clear that Capello’s reaction to the loss of his hairdryer would in any case be comprehended. His initial and much-reported linguistic self-assessment, ‘but in this moment my English is not so well’, also happened to coincide with a new and harsher form of national attention to the question of setting standards for migrant workers. ‘Britishness’ has overtly become a subject of contestation in the twenty first century, subject to redefinitions and loyalty tests. These have included proposals to tighten language demands on new arrivals to the country. Capello’s first public ventures into the anglophone world provoked scepticism about his capacity to communicate. (These were qualified by ironic press observations to the effect that this would merely put him on a par with many of the England players.)

The United Kingdom of the early twenty first century has been a land well suited to identity crisis. Globalization, migration and demographic tensions, which include Welsh and Scottish difficulties, have intensified the question of Englishness. Sport, so often a central medium for the expression of identity, especially in England, takes on a further importance as the concept of the United Kingdom becomes more and more difficult to reconstruct and reassert. In one account Capello is in fact assimilated into a tradition of Englishness:

Punctuality on parade, discipline in all measures, comradeship. Does Capello remind you of anybody? For many readers he may evoke memories of the schoolmasters they knew – and feared – in their youth. ‘Firm but fair’ is usually the phrase associated with such men, and they are still out there, mainly in the independent schools, where the master’s word is writ.

(Michael Henderson, Pampered England players must heed Capello,
Telegraph, 7 February 2008)

Surnames, as many journalists note, are now the coach's currency in addressing and referring to players (further evidence of English public school rules). 'Stevie G' and 'Wazza', of the brief McLaren age, are now Gerrard and Rooney (and the register is meticulously kept at training).

The various ways of conceptualizing how media discourses, myths and ideologies can be theoretically related to their circulation in culture and society lead to a rough consensus. Most commentators perceive a process in which the media both reflect or respond to ideologies and myths in the wider society, but also at times provide inputs and selective reinforcements, taking initiatives rather than merely reacting. We would argue that the British media are in general conservative, and that the popular press in particular has tended to articulate socially and culturally regressive views, albeit in an uneven manner. In sport, as in news, feature and editorial coverage generally, journalists react to broader social agendas (they are, after all, usually products of their own society). However, as part of a newspaper's ideological collective, and with an eye to its market position, they may take an approach broadly typical of their newspaper as a whole, thus relating to majority belief in society in asymmetric ways.

The relentless national chauvinism of the popular press which in sports coverage includes consistent and predictable attacks, say, on the Germans and the French merely on the basis of their nationality, can sometimes appear as an idiosyncratic trait of a particular section of the media, rather than a statement of sedimented opinion in the wider society. A dozen years before Capello's arrival, for example, Euro 96 sponsors Vauxhall Motors had withdrawn advertising from the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Mirror* in protest over headlines like the *Mirror*'s 'Herr we go: Krauts gun for Tel' (24 June 1996, during Terry Venables' reign as England manager). This discursive approach to Germans already had a lengthy history and spanned several sports. For example, the all-German Wimbledon final of 1991 between Boris Becker and Michael Stich had produced from one edition of

the *Star* alone such gems as ‘All mein says Hun-known hero’; ‘Hun-believable’; ‘Stich it up your Junker’; and ‘Michael’s the new power Kraut’ – and this in a game where the participants were not even appearing as national representatives.

British radio and TV broadcasters, mindful of their need to live in a much less segmented market, tend both to avoid extremes of ideological positioning, and even sometimes to satirize or attack the popular press for its views. Newspapers will overall, for market reasons, try to steer a course in which they believe themselves to be close to popular opinion. Also, journalists, commentators and summarizers will switch between available ways of talking about other nationalities to suit the context, expressing great technical admiration for footballers or coaches, while collapsing back into familiar stereotypes when trying to emphasize national traits or differences.

Since defining people by nationality is not in reality possible, and since the availability of stereotypes is limited, the arrival of Capello posed a number of questions. Whereas Eriksson played well to a myth of Scandinavian restraint (even depressiveness), Capello’s ‘hard man’ persona is as close to the mythic Glaswegian character of Sir Alex Ferguson (a manager who has copyright on the use of the ‘hairdryer technique’) as to the ‘Continental’ flamboyance of Jose Mourinho. Sports personalities like Eric Cantona had long before forced the British media into discursive knots, trying (for example) to account both for that Frenchman’s combination of arcane philosophical and poetical utterances off the field, and a stadium presence as tough as Roy Keane’s. England’s most committed club players like Rooney, Lampard, Terry and Gerrard can even have their sexuality switched at a journalist’s whim: ‘the pampered playboys of Camp England have been instructed to remove their pretty pink panties’ (*Telegraph*, 7 February 2008).

By the end of the last century there were intermittent signs that the British media might not be locked forever in discursive stasis when addressing overseas nationalities. For example, the last year of the old century saw *The Sun* running a piece on how Coventry’s Moroccan star Moustapha Hadji could speak five languages but still not understand team boss Gordon Strachan’s Scottish accent (‘No comprendo Strachanese’, 16 September

2000). That day's Scottish edition of the paper noted how Scotland Under-21 defender Lee Wilkie was learning 'the best chat-up lines' from Italian and Spanish stars at Dundee, and is quoted as saying 'They are learning a few English words but maybe it would be better if the Scots boys learned Italian'. Some masculinist and 'Latin' stereotypes are at work here but it evidenced a shift of sorts, in being able to welcome the internationalization of the British game, discussing it with a sort of good-humoured bewilderment.

Sampling from the first decade of the twenty first century, however, it has not been difficult to find evidence of the resilience of established discursive categories both in sports coverage and in general media coverage. Even questioning national stereotypes can prolong them: 'The Germans are cold and efficient, right? Wrong. In a book that is a runaway bestseller in Germany, the Times man in Berlin debunks the myths about our Teutonic cousins.' This piece is titled: 'Sour Krauts? Not a bit of it' (*Times*, 21 December 2006). The restaurant critic A. A. Gill, reviewing an Austrian establishment in Notting Hill, notes that 'it defies not just kitsch and taste but Kraut kitsch and taste' and awards a series of potential stars for performance, namely: '5 stars: Krautstanding; 4 stars: In, Kraut, shake it all about; 3 stars: Kraut and about; 2 stars: Kraut of order; 1 star: sour Kraut' (*Sunday Times*, 20 January 2008).

That the *Sunday Times* is comfortable publishing this is a sign of limited progress in more than one sense. Not only is the xenophobic tone consistent with the worst habits of the 1990s, but the puns themselves are exhausted as well as offensive, all recycled from sports headlines of the past. (The Tiroler Hut isn't even German.) In 2005, both the *Telegraph* and the *Mirror* carried front page headlines describing the newly-elected Pope Benedict as 'God's Rottweiler', while the *Sun*'s headline was 'From Hitler Youth to Papa Ratzl'. 'Here's Hun for all the family', jests the *Sun* in the summer of 2007, fronting a piece on Nazi wartime board games (20 August 2007).

In sport, though it might be argued that the low point of xenophobic headlines from the 1990s has proved an extreme, the English tabloids are still capable of extraordinary

malice. When Swiss referee Urs Meier disallowed an English goal in the quarter final of Euro 2004, the *Sun* ran a headline 'Urs hole', and other tabloids attacked him and released personal details about him, placing him under such risk that he had to go into hiding. 'You're Schmidt and you know you are!' said the *Sun* in June 2004 after England had beaten Germany 5-1 in a friendly; and detailed the website of a firm selling German flag toilet roll. Sport still, as it has done for many years, licenses some of the most rabid displays of xenophobia and chauvinism, and they are at their most concentrated in the British popular press. (This has been a subject of debate on the Continent for some years now – the British popular media are viewed from Europe with a sort of horrified fascination.)

CONCLUSION

Any scrutiny of the Internet will reveal that xenophobic and racist terminology - which the UK tabloids have (at best) made more legitimate in the eyes of some of those who use interactive sports sites – is immensely widespread. The relationship which binds English society with the English media and the sports media in particular is too complex for definition here. That the sports media still operate regressively in a number of domains (we have concentrated here on questions of nation) is unarguable.

Capello's ambivalent and, as it happens, initially mainly respectful reception by the English media is not by itself proof of change in discursive habits. It is England's next exposure in international competition which will properly measure any change which may have occurred since Euro 2004. What we can assert with confidence is a growing divide between discourse and action; and within discourse itself. A resilient media discourse proclaiming the virtues of Britishness and Englishness, and still often quick to offer insult to other European nationalities, has to share a real world in which the best of English football is thoroughly globalized, and at player and coach level, Europeanized in particular. And precisely because that improvement in English football depends on its globalization, xenophobic and chauvinistic narratives have to share space with others which admirably acknowledge the characteristics which the European world brings to British football.

The increasingly ubiquitous nature of sporting discourse in an expanded media landscape (Boyle, 2006) allied with its overt commercialisation, more than ever necessitates recognizing its intimate relationships with national and global economies, and with politics and culture. This is now widely acknowledged, whether through American political journalists talking about globalisation and football (Foer, 2004), or cricketers writing perceptively about what sport tells us about modern life (Smith, 2008).

The pace of change in the sports and media industries shows no sign of abating. Meanwhile the ability of television to remain a central mediating force in popular culture remains compelling. Broadcast sports coverage and the print and online journalism that accompanies it remain crucial in the process of legitimising the myths and narratives that surround sports culture, embedding them into deeper national and cultural narratives about ourselves and others (Boyle, 2006). The study of media sport has become better at revealing how larger - sometimes quite abstract and complex - financial and economic structures increasingly shape the working, leisure and social lives of Europeans. It also casts light on their sense of identity, whether as wholehearted Europeans, or in critical dialogue, of various degrees of intelligence and seriousness, with the European idea.

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