

# **Football's Coming Home?:**

## **Digital Reterritorialization, Contradictions in the Transnational Coverage of Sport and the Sociology of Alternative Football Broadcasts**

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## **Abstract**

This article critically utilizes the work of Manuel Castells to discuss the issue of parallel imported broadcasts (specifically including live-streams) in football. This is of crucial importance to sport because the English Premier League is premised upon the sale of television rights broadcasts to domestic and overseas markets, and yet cheaper alternative broadcasts endanger the price of such rights. Evidence is drawn from qualitative fieldwork and library/Internet sources to explore the practices of supporters and the politics involved in the generation of alternative broadcasts. This enables us to clarify the core sociological themes of 'milieu of innovation' and 'locale' within today's digitally networked global society.

**Keywords** Reterritorialization; football; live-streaming; digital parallel imports; television broadcasts; online sharing

## Introduction

The early years of the twenty-first century has seen elite English football undergoing various processes of 'globalization'. Sociological literature has responded to these changes by broadly exploring the 'glocalization' of football (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004; 2009) and smaller studies which have focused on particular dimensions of transnational movement. Some of these studies have addressed football player migration patterns into English football (Littlewood, Mullen and Richardson 2011; McGovern 2000; 2002); new transnationally-dispersed models of football club ownership (Millward 2011); support for English football clubs from other regions across the world (Kerr and Emery 2011; Rookwood and Millward 2011) and, even the possibility that English Premier League (hereon EPL) matches could be staged outside of the United Kingdom (Rookwood and Chan 2011). However, the growth in the number of countries receiving broadcasts of its live matches – which reached 211 in 2008/9 season (interview with EPL commercial director, 28 January 2009) – that yield cumulative domestic and overseas broadcasting contracts that are worth over £1bn per year to the competition, is a crucial dimension in the globalisation of the EPL that has received little attention, but which underpins many of these changes. Viewed this way, it is tempting to refer to the EPL as a 'deterritorialized' tournament. It is in the context of the EPL being broadcast to such a large number of nations that the issues of digital parallel imported broadcasts and, related, the live-streaming of football matches become significant.

Parallel importing is the practice of re-exporting goods into one country from another where it has been marketed at a lower price. This may even involve importing goods back into the country of origin (David and Kirkhope 2006). EPL matches have been digitally parallel imported back into the UK – often broadcast in independent public houses – for a number of years, despite legal ambiguity on the issue (Geey 2007). However, in October 2011 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that customers

should be able to legally 'parallel import' and purchase broadcasts of football matches from television stations based in other European Union/European Free Trade Area (EU/EFTA) countries as a result of an appeal launched by Portsmouth publican, Karen Murphy, who wished to pay for cheaper broadcasts from overseas (in her case, Greece) rather than subscribing to *BSkyB*'s 'Sky Sports' package (see Nixon 2011). Live-streaming is when an online channel is used to reroute a digital television broadcast on to the Internet so that others can view the broadcast by logging-on to the channelling service. Live-streaming arose out of a tradition of online file-sharing, as occurs in music. The live-streaming of copyrighted material is a violation of intellectual property rights but websites such as 'MyP2P' and 'Justin.tv', which 'hold' links to streaming channels, evade legal threats by agreeing to take down any site that is found to be streaming protected content. The problem for copyright defenders is that the time taken to contact the streaming channel and for it to be closed if found to be infringing intellectual property rights is far longer than the duration of the event being streamed (Birmingham and David 2011). Although the term parallel importing is most commonly used to refer to commercial trading activities rather than free online streaming, live-streaming is a form of parallel importing. Whilst the ECJ case addressed commercial rerouting, other legal actions have been taken against free-streaming services.

Wide variations exist between the prices broadcasters pay for the right to screen EPL matches in their nationally-defined markets. In the UK, *BSkyB* and *ESPN* hold a duopoly on the right to domestically screen live EPL matches having paid £1.782bn for the 2010/11 – 2012/13 seasons' rights. This figure exceeds the combined £1.4bn for the right to broadcast matches across the other 210 countries that show EPL matches across the world. *BSkyB* does and *ESPN* seeks to make large returns on their investments by charging viewers expensive monthly subscription fees. Despite the sums of money flowing into the EPL through its sale of broadcast rights, many of its twenty member clubs do not make operating profits as revenues are largely consumed by rising player wages. For instance, in February

2010 then-EPL club Portsmouth FC entered into administration after player wages at the club exceeded revenues and, had 'normal' business practices applied, half of EPL clubs would have been technically insolvent by the middle of that year (Bose 2010).

There can be little doubt football is worthy of serious sociological analysis. Whilst Foer's (2004) claim that football can tell the story of globalization better than anything else in the contemporary social world might be hyperbole, the current value of the sport is such that in the UK both the Conservative and Labour parties pledged to explore ways of improving fan relationships with football clubs in their 2010 General Election manifestos and socially, the number of supporters involved in uprisings in the wake of rising levels of individual club debts – particularly connected to leading English clubs – is so high that reliable figures of fan involvement are unquantifiable. The sociology of the EPL's alternative broadcasts (commercial and live-streams) is important for at least three reasons. First, alternative commercial broadcasts threaten UK domestic broadcast rights holders as UK residents can 'parallel import' far cheaper digital broadcasts from other countries within the EU/EFTA. Second, the number of people engaging in the practice of viewing free 'live-streamed' football matches has expanded rapidly with any EPL fixture viewed by hundreds of thousands of users across the world (Birmingham and David 2011: 73). This claim is evidenced by *NetResult's*, an online copyright protection agency that represents the EPL, research into the scale of live-streaming of football matches that led its CEO, Christopher Stokes, to state: 'We have seen over a million people on a single stream and that's pretty scary' (quoted in Smith 2009). Similarly, EPL Chief Executive Richard Scudamore (2009) described live-streaming as a 'very real threat' to existing broadcasting contracts. If either of these two possibilities result in a reduction in the number of people paying for domestic-based subscriptions, the prices which *BSkyB*, *ESPN* or any other broadcaster pays for the British market will surely fall, resulting in a significant loss of income for EPL clubs. Third, if football can be used to illustrate dislocating aspects of 'globalization', the practices of some of its supporters – particularly those that have parallel

imported digital broadcasts back to locations close to, but potentially marginalized from, globally branded EPL football clubs – illustrate a form of relocalizing the production/consumption of fan identity that extends the ‘milieu of innovation’ beyond elite clusters within global networks. This article will tackle these three issues by first, looking to explore the politics and institutional practices of those that develop live-streams and other alternative broadcasts and second, using observational and interview material with consumers of such broadcasts to produce a ‘sociology of live-streaming’. The work of Manuel Castells in his accounts of the *Informational City* (1989a, 1989b) and *The Information Age* (1998, 2000a [1996], 2000b, 2004 [1997]) has been particularly, though not unproblematically, useful in the construction of our argument.

### **Manuel Castells, digital distribution and reterritorialization in the network society**

Castells is interested in questions of transnationalism and localization. His *The Information Age* trilogy (1998, 2000a [1996], 2004 [1997]) is broadly concerned with the structural and informational conditions that have helped to create a globalised network society, whilst his earlier book, *The Informational City* (1989a) helps to establish some of the groundwork for his trilogy by providing an empirical analysis of processes of localization in an informational economy which has post-Fordist practices and transnational reference points. As such, the interplay between an understanding of structural and informational conditions that shape a global economy, and local experiences of these forces are fundamental to our understandings about how seemingly ‘de-territorialised’ forces of production operate in the context of parallel imported television broadcasts (including live-streams) and how they are ‘re-localized’ in fans’ practices.

Castells (2000a [1996]) argued that the capitalist ‘mode of production’ underwent a deep change in the 1980s as the nature of ‘the mode of development’ shifted from industrial to informational. This social

transformation was powered by the development of a new technological paradigm – most specifically characterized by the Internet – that allowed information and immaterial capital to move across the world instantaneously. Castells saw this network as a geographical space with discrete points bound together by connections of links, people and objects, where capital and ideas can flow between nodes that are spread across multiple and distant spaces and times. According to Castells (2000a [1996]; 2000b) networks became the primary form of social organization throughout the world and, emphasizing the transnational socio-cultural and economic values of such connections, he argued that this made established national boundaries – and regulations – increasingly porous or ‘lighter’ than in previous eras. Castells (2000a [1996]) argued that the triumph of the capitalist mode of production over the soviet statist mode of production lay in its more effective take up of the affordances made possible by the new networked mode of development, or ‘capitalist perestroika’. The efficiency of the network organization is key to its ability to integrate useful nodes from anywhere within the network and to bypass ‘places’ that obstruct organizational goals. Castells used the term de-territorialization to refer to this capacity to displace place in favour of integrated networked space, or the ‘space of flows’ (2000a [1996]). In Castells’ account capital is largely synonymous with power in the network society. Within this new age, capital takes not only material and traditional symbolic forms but can also be ‘informational’ and as such mobile across boundaries.

In this respect Castells’ (2000a [1996]) formulation of de-territorialization becomes open to forms of abstract mystification. Networks enable any particular place to be bypassed but for action to take place, flows have to come from and go somewhere. Places can be played off against each other, but capital investment in particular regions creates new locales as network hubs, particularly where informational goods are being produced. In short, location – and locales as physical spaces in which creative production is undertaken through proximate (dense) networks of real world interaction - still matter. Castells’ (1989a: 82–103) account of spatial concentrations in the emerging informational economy

highlighted the significance of proximity within key informational cities. Informational industries do not need to locate close to customers as was once the case. Rather they need to locate close to clusters of other producers to draw upon the milieu of shared orientation, memory and experience. Saskia Sassen suggests that in global finance the best way to stay on the ball is to meet face to face in and around central park in Manhattan (see Castells 1989b: 11–12). Because so many of the global players are there, many global players want and need to be there. In ‘the global game’ of football many key players feel the need to relocate to a small number of pitches in London and the north west of England. De-territorialization, as distributed integration within networks, always requires re-territorialization. Simply noting the possibility of mobility in abstraction becomes ideological as it highlights the autonomy of capital whilst downplaying the limits of such autonomy. As such, the very notion of purely informational capital is fictitious, even if it is often used in very concrete ways.<sup>1</sup> In football, the seemingly unbounded power of key players in the network seemed to bear out Castells’ almost exclusive focus upon such actors, but, as we will suggest, alternative network affordances challenge this.

For Castells (1989b: 14–17), the informational city is characterized by a three-way dynamic: a spatial division of labour between key players and low skill support labour; an increased dispersal of support labour around the world, and a concentration of key players within informational cities. Castells (1989b: 19) argued that key players increasingly insulate themselves within the space of flows (luxury hotels, airports, homes and work-spaces), whilst support labour, increasingly interchangeable and remote, fall back into parochial and powerless forms of community identification. Anger exists: ‘But how can the flow be fought?’ (1989b: 19). For Castells, ‘milieu of innovation’ is defined very narrowly, with ‘key players’ and ‘support labour’ set in extreme opposition to one another. In football, however, such frustrations and dislocations between key players and support labour are long-standing with some early accounts even suggesting that at least twenty years before the rise of the EPL manifestations of the globalization of football played a role in the perceived distancing of clubs from their local communities



of fans (see for instance Taylor 1971). More recent work on global dimensions of the EPL has contested whether supporters have embraced or rejected these developments (Giulianotti 1999; King; 2003; Millward 2011). Like in Castells' theory, many of these studies have at least implied that the quest for larger economic markets has led to the expansion of club's networks into transnational spaces, while at the same time being undeniably located within the club's region of domicile. Giulianotti and Robertson (2004, 2006, 2007) have empirically explored this relationship and argued that football demonstrates a key site where 'glocalising' processes are in action across the world. Digitalization of EPL match coverage, discussed below, intensifies longstanding, and potentially contradictory, relationships.

In his later work, Castells (2000a [1996], 2000b, 2009) suggested that the new technologies powering the space of flows in the network society have broken down both the 'natural' sense of time, as well as the logical sequences of time. Thus the space of flows generates what Castells calls 'timeless time' or the globally simultaneous 'now'. The reformation of top flight professional club football in England in conjunction with digital subscription based commercial broadcasting is a paradigmatic example of the fusion of network technical affordances and network capitalist business organisation. Indeed in many respects, elite English football's 'digital capitalist perestroika' – as the turn to (subscription-based) satellite broadcasting revenue as a key source of income - was a response to an earlier decline in the size of its live-match attending fan-base, as Taylor's (1984) description of football in the 1980s – on the back of a long-term trend of decline in match attendances – as a sport in 'recession' seems accurate. At the F.A. Premiership's birth in 1992, its new broadcasters, *BSkyB* sought to rebrand the sport as 'A Whole New Ball Game' (see Baimbridge, Cameron and Dawson 1996)<sup>2</sup>. Within two decades, elite English football had moved from mainly being watched through physical attendance to being predominantly viewed digitally, although the cultural significance of matches played in front of packed stadiums remained crucial in the marketing of the spectacle of such events. However, live broadcasts

of EPL matches that are beamed from a football ground to an overseas television channel and then returned to the city in which the match is being played through parallel broadcasters are examples of 'timeless time' in the 'space of flows' that challenge dominant commercial models.

By critically engaging with Castells' restricted conception of the milieu of innovation within informational economies, our argument takes two parts. The first, explores the politics involved in the production of parallel imported broadcasts (including live-streams) while the second discusses the consumption of such products with particular reference to the extent to which they enable alternative supporter practices. The first part of the research examines library and web-based resources to explore the impacts that alternative broadcasts may have on the football industry and the ways in which the EPL – using the UK government and the mainstream media – have sought to head off these challenges. The second part of the research critically explores fans' engagement with such broadcasts by ethnographic interviews with Wigan Athletic supporters in public houses in the post-industrial town of Wigan (north-west England) where unofficial broadcasts are shown. The official round of data collection took place over match-days at the beginning of 2011/12 season. These ethnographic interviews were supplemented by interviews with publicans that show parallel imported broadcasts. Although such matches are advertised on chalkboards outside each of the public houses, the publicans felt insufficiently confident about the legality of showing parallel imported broadcasts and, as such, both requested that their confidentiality be upheld. Accordingly, both they and their hostilities have been given pseudonyms. The interviewed fans are the 'traditional' supporters that inhabit 'The Red Lion' in the Hawkley Hall district of the town, and its landlord, 'John', is actually a key member in the supporter community being studied.

## **Institutional processes and the producers of alternative broadcasts: the politics of parallel imported broadcasts**

Castells (2000a [1996]) argues that the key agents in the 'space of flows' will occupy the most lucrative space, which is increasingly global. This has proved to be the case with the EPL in that although the competition is seemingly inherently nationally hemmed, it has become transnational with respect to the spatial dispersion of fans across the world, its recruitment of players and managers and interest in individual clubs from overseas' investors (Millward 2011). In recent years, the number of countries in which it is possible to subscribe to digital broadcasts of matches has grown exponentially and the cumulative values of the EPL's overseas broadcasting contracts have loosely doubled with each new negotiation in the twenty-first century. So, for instance, 2001s three year overseas broadcast deals were worth £178m to the league, 2004s were valued at £325m and 2007s at £625m (Wilson 2007). Deloitte (2008: 30) argued that the 2007 contract was particularly culturally important as it gave the tournament a cumulative television audience of three billion people and at the time Richard Scudamore said the largest increase in payments for rights had been in the Middle East and East Asia (for full details of global sales deals see Harris 2010). As capital is power in the network society (Castells 2000a [1996], 2009), the strength of overseas markets is growing apace. Although the value of overseas contracts for 2010/11–2012/13 seasons (£1.4bn) did not exceed domestic rights for the same period (£1.782bn), the EPL may soon become the first league where overseas broadcast income exceeds domestic sales. Yet, the technologies and circumstances that are at the core of 'digital capitalist perestroika' create the conditions whereby globally distributed networks can be freely or more cheaply rerouted. This leads us to discuss the politics involved in the production of parallel imported broadcasts – including live-streams – specifically in football (with particular respect to live match attendances, existing broadcast agreements and their impacts on clubs of differing sizes) and the complex intermeshing of interests from European courts, national governments, television companies and football clubs.

From the 1930s, there have been fears expressed that broadcasting live matches would have a negative effect upon match-day attendances (Barnett 1990). However, Forrest et al.'s (2010: 113) econometric data strongly suggests that 'broadcasting of Premier League matches has had a negligible effect on [the size of live match] attendance' even whilst ticket prices have risen. Indeed, there is also reason to believe that the excitement created by the televising of events may have encouraged some fans to attend live matches. Similarly, Beech et al. (2004) suggest that radio coverage of events has not reduced their live attendance either. In light of this, it should not be assumed that parallel imported broadcasts (including live-streams) of football matches would reduce attendance at EPL matches. Indeed, during the first full season that followed the 'credit crunch' – in an era shared with growing availability and awareness of live-streams and parallel imported broadcasts – it was reported that season ticket sales had remained at approximately the same level as the previous season (Gibson 2009). However, as in the 1930s, some football club directors suggest the impact of such broadcasts is negative on football clubs. For instance Sunderland chair Niall Quinn responded to fan interest in parallel imported broadcasts by arguing that they have had:

[A]n extremely detrimental effect on our attendances. I can point to the evidence uncovered by an agency who covertly visited pubs and clubs in our catchment area and witnessed thousands watching the illegal broadcasts. To anyone watching the game illegally in the pub I will continue to say: 'By doing so you're not supporting your team, you're actually damaging the progress of the club.' We have a real chance here to make this club feel great again but to do it we need everyone behind us. I would urge these people in the pubs and clubs to come back to the Stadium of Light [Sunderland's home football ground].

Niall Quinn (quoted in Taylor 2011)

Sunderland had the seventh highest average attendance in the EPL in 2010/11 season, with a mean matchday gate of 40,011. This figure was loosely consistent with its average attendance for the previous season and its seat occupancy rate remained at around 82 per cent. Ten seasons previously,

in an era before parallel imported broadcasts and live-streams were widely used, the club experienced one of its most successful recent years on the pitch but its average attendance was only a few thousand people higher. As such, the evidence that alternative broadcasts dramatically impact on gate receipts at football clubs like Sunderland is weak. The situation may be different in the lower divisions of English football, however. Despite such matches not regularly being screened on either live-streams or parallel imported broadcasts, key personnel at such clubs claim match-attendances have dropped when televised top-level games commence at the same time as their own. Currently, football matches are not broadcast live in the UK at 3pm on a Saturday afternoon to avoid this threat. However, these rules do not apply outside of the UK, raising fears that parallel imported broadcasts of EPL matches at that time may result in a loss of attendees in the lower reaches of English football (see *Football Governance Inquiry* 2011: 45). That the EPL was created to marginalize lower league clubs in relation to a share of rising television revenues makes it rather ironic that supposed difficulties at such clubs could be used as a defence for the existing EPL business model of selling exclusive broadcasting rights packages.

Recent data detailed in Deloitte's football industry reports shows that the sale of broadcast rights outstrips match-day and other commercial income streams as the largest revenue generator at 16 out of the top 20 highest revenue generating teams in world football, contributing an average of 44 per cent of each club's total revenue (Deloitte 2011). The EPL collectively sells its broadcasting rights and redistributes the money to clubs whose business models – as with many other clubs across Europe – have become premised upon an expectation of growing broadcast rights revenues. This may be an unreliable presumption as both live-streaming and parallel importing of television increase consumer options for watching EPL matches by means other than current monopoly providers, thereby reducing the value of domestic rights and hence the core revenue currently keeping EPL clubs afloat. However, alternative broadcasts are ultimately produced by 'someone', even if it is not the EPL's established

partner (i.e. *BSkyB*). These moves may not be welcomed by the existing broadcasters or the EPL, but this attitude would be opposed by new providers of the alternative broadcasts. King (1997b, 2002 [1998]) noted how a new type of football club director that aggressively monetised football's fan base emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s (the 'new directors'). He pointed to Tottenham Hotspur's then-majority shareholder Alan Sugar who supported *BSkyB*'s plan to purchase the rights to broadcast the new FA Premiership – not least because satellite dishes produced by his electronics company, Amstrad, would be used as the hardware needed to receive transmissions – as one example. More recently, the *Abu Dhabi Media Company*, which, like Manchester City, is owned by the Abu Dhabi royal family, purchased the right to broadcast EPL matches to the Middle East and North African countries, by paying over £200m for three football seasons at the 2009 round of negotiations. In March 2010, the group announced the launch of its subscription-based 'Premier League TV' platform of channels which broadcast every EPL match. Although this company carried an official aim of broadcasting to the Middle East and North African countries (via both set-top boxes and live-streams), significantly the company established the platform's base in London (*AME.info* 2010), meaning that it is positioned inside EU/EFTA boundaries. Thus, as the ECJ's ruling appeared to allow parallel imported broadcasts within the EU/EFTA – and there is sufficient ambiguity for resultant legal cases to emerge – it is possible that British-based supporters could subscribe to 'Premier League TV'. Whilst Manchester City's owners may not profit directly from owning the club, they may be able to source other revenue streams from football by being based in the EU/EFTA.

The EPL has responded to possible threats posed by parallel imported broadcasts in three ways, all of which are territorially constrained relative to global flows. Yet as Castells (2000a [1996]) argues the strength of transnational economic power is such that national regulation over issues cutting across nations have only limited impacts. First, the EPL created the 'Creative Coalition Campaign' with other copyright dependent groups (such as those in the music industry, which has undergone similar digitally-

created changes, see David 2010) to lobby the UK government for a 'desirable' outcome in the Digital Economy Bill. The Bill became law in April 2010 and Section Three requires Internet service providers (ISPs) to notify subscribers when copyright owners report suspicions of infringement. However, for those whose copyright infringing is sufficiently dated and thereby easily identifiable, a pre-court letter pointing this out may encourage the adoption of less visible sharing strategies (such as streaming) rather than abstention. Evidence of infringement in relation to live-streaming is not straight forward, as it is not technically downloading (i.e. making a copy) and is thereby relatively immune to national legislation on copyright enforcement. Second, Castells (2000a [1996], 2004 [1997]) pointed out that the media continue to be culturally and ideologically important in the network society. On the issue of live-streamed football matches, the established media have provided a platform for EPL executives to claim that matches viewed on the Internet are of 'poor' quality. For instance, in the light of the Advocate General's recommendation to the ECJ that parallel imported broadcasts within EU/EFTA should be allowed (in February 2011), EPL chief spokesman Dan Johnson told *BBC News* (2011) viewers that:

what they [the fans] care about is the quality; and they care about the quality of the broadcast so a broadcast you know, where the broadcasters invest very heavily in production – like the *BBC*, like *[B]Sky[B]* – they produce a quality product and people will choose it on that basis.

Whilst it is true that some live-streams are lower in quality than televised broadcasts, time and technological advancements have seen exponential improvements in this respect with *NetResult* conceding that there are now 'good quality streams' available (Christopher Stokes, quoted in Smith 2009). Third, even before the ECJ had come to a decision over whether to accept the recommendation of its Advocate General, Dan Johnson announced (*BBC News* 2011) that if the court allowed people in any EU country to buy their television sports subscription from whatever EU-based provider they choose it:

would actually lessen [consumer] choice because what you would have would be a de facto pan-European broadcast where only a few very large broadcasters would be able to buy that and that would eat away at the principles of cultural diversity enshrined in European Union law.

Rather, he argued that the EPL would 'be forced' to suspend individual country-by-country rights deals and instead offer only one pan-European monopoly to avoid 'unfair competition', which includes any competition with existing domestic broadcasting agreements (*BBC News* 2011). Such a pan-European monopoly would certainly increase interest in free alternative global streaming channels.

### **Fan practices and alternative broadcasts**

Debates on this issue are limited without engagement with fan practices, given that – although many supporters would be loath to openly recognise themselves as such (King 1997a, 2002 [1998]) – they are the 'consumers' of such products. In this section we critically engage with Castells' account of the creation of informational products in the network society by looking at local engagements with parallel imported broadcasts. By asserting a radical geographical and productive separation between key players and support labour in the informational economy, Castells is able to claim that the 'milieux of innovation' is to be found only amongst the former, who come to occupy the core spaces within new informational cities, with the latter being cast out into interchangeable and thereby disposable locales. The key players interact in these hubs, as this is said to be 'where the action is'. Locals are seen as reactive at best, or otherwise inactive.

In its 'Internet football piracy alert' report, *BBC News* (2009) presented Liverpool fan Sion Gates watching live-streams alone in his bedroom. Notwithstanding debates in the sociology of sport over how supporters watch games and how this might connect to levels of commitment (Giulianotti 2002;



King 1997a; Millward 2011), most fans understand an appeal of watching football to be its social nature. *BBC News*' portrayal of Sion Gates stands in clear contrast to this. While many fans watch matches at home, the isolated individual frame stands in stark contrast to the broadcasters' own presentation of television football viewing as a communal activity (whether at home with family/friends or in public places). Whilst many fans do not attend matches, the experience of watching football retains a communal aspect through the presence of live-attending fans as a key part of the very product being mediated around the world through digital networks. Though live attendees often question the 'true' fandom of small screen viewing, technological affordances and digital compatibility legislation mean that all televisions manufactured today can show Internet streams by being plugged into a computer via a HDMI cable. As such 'small screen' broadcasts can be shown in any big screen communal context. Thus, the issue of how supporters interact with technologies and how technologies become embedded within, whilst also enabling alternative, fan practices becomes important.

Parallel imported broadcasts have become so synonymous with hostelrys that Geey (2007) labelled them 'pubcasts'. Internet-broadcast live-streams are less obviously linked to public houses, but John, the publican from 'The Red Lion' in Hawkley Hall in Wigan suggested that the distinction was less clear cut in his hostelry by stating that 'we'll try to find the Latics' [Wigan Athletic] game on the telly, through the set top, but if we can't find it so easily, we'll hook up the computer to the telly screen and watch it through there' (interview 28 July 2011). Similarly, Dave, the landlord at the 'Royal Oak' in the Standish district of the town, stated (interview 28 July 2011) similar views:

Well, you know what it's like in here. You've got the Wigan [Athletic] fans, the Man U [Manchester United] fans and the Liverpool fans and you've seen what we do. Basically, if two of them are playing at the same time, we can only show one of the [parallel imported] broadcasts on at once, so we put the other one through on that screen or that screen [points to two large televisions] from the computer [an Internet live-stream] and we keep everyone happy.

That these public houses are located in Wigan was not intended to be of any particular significance. However, all places are imbued with local particularities and Wigan is a case in point. In recent years, the town's sole professional football team, Wigan Athletic has shed its previous status as a lower league club to gain promotion to the EPL and establish itself. Despite this rapid on-the-field progress, the club has often been mocked in the media for its attendances, which have grown from its lower league years but are smaller than most other EPL teams (at around 70 per cent seat occupancy rate in 2009/10 season).

Despite the manifest importance of public houses as places where football is consumed, Weed (2006) has conducted what little research exists in this field drawing on England fans during the 2002 FIFA World Cup and argued that 'the "collective enjoyment" or "shared communal experience"' (2006: 90) is a major appeal of watching football in hostelries. In short, many people like to watch games in public houses because of both the atmosphere that is generated by groups of supporters who are allowed to consume alcohol together and the weakened forms of social control in such places, which stand in contrast to live match attending experiences. In an era in which the public house trade has diminished (Goodley 2010) such broadcasts have 'made a massive difference [to the level of custom], especially when the games were on' (Karen Murphy, quoted in *The News* 2011) to the point where Dave from 'Royal Oak' admitted that 'a big Saturday afternoon of football is now my busiest time of the week' underlining that while official broadcasting revenues might be threatened by alternative broadcasts, independent hostelries have benefitted in this new leisure economy.

In his study of Manchester United supporters in the 1990s, King (2002 [1998]) suggested that a 'lads' fan-group existed. He argued that these were 'local' (although defined as such by elastic cultural boundaries) and 'traditional' supporters with a preferred consumption of the game being attending

matches together, standing on terraces (rather than sitting in stands) and engaging in collective drinking, singing and potentially fighting. Although King's (1997a, 2002 [1998]) 'lads' saw themselves as working class, their social location was difficult to classify and masculinity principally demarked their fandom. Whilst King found that most 'lads' outwardly reject the commercialization of football, their reactions to it were 'complex and contradictory, comprising moments of opposition, when the board's interests contradict their own' (King 1997a: 342). To elaborate, King (1997a, 2002 [1998]) points out that many of the lads found it difficult to keep up with increasing match-day ticket costs, and are strongly opposed to both the changes of football grounds to all-seater stadia and increasing numbers of 'new' fans, as these negatively impact upon their engagement with football. However, the same fans selectively approve some dimensions of the commercialization of football by happily talking about their pride in Manchester United's stadium being the 'best' football ground in the UK and are pleased that 'the revenue that the club's merchandizing operations brings in assists the club in competing in the international market for players' (King 1997a: 342). The lads also stressed deep rooted familial ties to the club, typically talking about how their older family members once carried out many of the same activities that they do. King (1997a; 2002 [1998]) further stated that the lads talk about their 'love of the team' but sublimate their opposition to the board, who they see as driving the club's commercialization, by carrying out 'an imaginary excision, which neatly slices the business side of the club from the team' (King 1997a: 340). Public houses were important sites in which 'the lads' engaged in the 'craic', but were places where they met and visited together (often before or after a match) rather than where they watched Manchester United play.

When the co-author first met the fans who inhabit 'The Red Lion' public house in the late-1990s, they possessed many of the 'lads' attributes. In 1998, many of the members of the group were aged in their late twenties with most in heterosexual relationships (of varying degrees of 'seriousness') but did not have children. In 2011, the core members of the group still support Wigan Athletic and many continue

to be in heterosexual relationships (of varying degrees of 'seriousness') with a majority having young children. However, the nature of their support had altered: while they are still 'home' match 'season-ticket' holders most of the group do not generally attend 'away' matches, especially those which are not defined as 'big' or involve considerable travel. During the parallel broadcast of Wigan Athletic's 'away' match at Swansea City at 'The Red Lion' on 20 August 2011, Ste, a long-standing member of the group was asked why this was:

I think you just get older, and life catches up with you a bit, I suppose. You want to go to the match, but sometimes you just can't with the kids and so on. You'll know, it [attending football matches] costs a lot of money these days too – not that I didn't spend a bit more than I could afford then. Since John bought this place, he's put all the matches on. [...] It probably isn't quite as good as going to the match but all the lads who used to travel come here and that's important. [...] I've always just liked watching the match with my mates.

By 2011, Ste had fathered two children whom he lived with (along with his wife). However, despite arguing that he could not attend matches because of this, he watched 'away' matches in 'The Red Lion' – from 1pm until 7pm on Saturdays – consuming a number of pints of beer and a 'pub lunch' before taking a taxi home. As such time and money saving were far from full explanations. That he wanted to watch the match with long-standing friends was significant however, as many of his group of 'lads' from the late-1990s were also in the pub and together they cheered, chanted and drank beer.

When asked a similar question, Paul responded:

I wouldn't have done it [not attended away matches] in the lower league or even the first couple of years in the Premier League. But you get a bit bored with it [the EPL], in the end don't you?

This response also chimed with King's later findings (2003) where he was told that the lads he studied had grown increasingly frustrated with 'sanitized' match atmospheres at Manchester United's ground. In this case, Paul claimed to have grown 'bored' with an EPL match atmosphere and instead watched it in the public house. Interestingly, neither fan – nor the other eight interviewed – claimed that their actions were in anyway overtly political against the commercialisation of English football or Wigan

Athletic. Indeed, when this suggestion was raised the co-author was told not to 'be so fucking daft' by Si, another long-standing member of the group. Further, none of the supporters claimed that watching parallel imported broadcasts would affect their decisions about *BSkyB* subscriptions, although the six members of the group who took out such packages all agreed that football broadcasts were their main reason for doing so. 'The Red Lion' subscribed to *BSkyB*, although John said that he would cancel this should parallel imported broadcasts from inside the EU/EFTA be confirmed as legal. Thus from this small sample of supporters the impact of parallel imported broadcasts upon subscriptions with 'official' existing broadcasters appears to be complex and it remains to be seen how such broadcasts will impact upon future generations' consumption of football (although the message from the music industry would appear to be that the established forms of digital mediation – CD sales in music – might be more endangered than attendance at live matches, or 'gigs' in music – see David 2010).

Castells (1989a; 1989b) argued that milieu of innovation are important in 'informational cities' but his radical separation of key players and support labour does not capture the dynamic relationship between players and supporters in the production of 'the action' that is the lucrative informational product that is the football experience. In Wigan, the 'Royal Oak' locally pioneered by being one of the places that could 'more or less guarantee [that] the match would be on [...] when we could first get foreign channels' (Dave, 'Royal Oak' publican, interview 28 July 2011). As a result, 'people started coming from all over to watch the matches here [...] not just Standish, but Shevington, Appley Bridge, Beech Hill, Aspull [all districts of Wigan]. All over the place' (Dave, interview 28 July 2011). By innovating in his display of matches, Dave built up a customer base who returned to his hostelry to watch matches even when potentially more convenient choices were available as more local public houses replicated the development. Similarly, the 'lads' in 'The Red Lion' tended to live in the Wigan district of Swinley, so they had to pass through several other districts – including the town centre – to arrive at 'The Red Lion' in Hawkley Hall. They did so for reasons of sociality or, as Castells (1989a: 93) argued with

reference to the milieu of innovation, to be 'where the action is' – in this context, 'the action' was in the locale of a public house in the company of friends, rather than at the football match. This theme of locality raises two important sociological points. First, digitally parallel importing football broadcasts back into the regions in which matches are played illustrates an altering of the dynamics in the consumption of the football spectacle: new crystallisations of consumption outside the control of the English football authorities and their member clubs. The results we have presented clearly suggest a new set of locales – as 'local' public houses – represent physical sites in which fan solidarities grow. While supporters like Si do not always recognize the politics of their actions, others have made deliberate attempts to avoid visiting EPL matches – often for social reasons – to act against their perceived loss of football, and their belief that match attendances have been 'sanitized' (see also King 2003). This highlights a contradictory relationship that some traditional supporters might feel they have with the commercialisation – and in turn globalisation – of a local game in that by not attending matches they are resisting one form of global capitalism in the EPL – while consuming its derivatives by alternative means. Second, the travel incurred to watch parallel imported broadcasts from 'all over' really means a few miles from within the same town, not like the seemingly de-territorialized broadcasting flows – that are also produced in locality-dependent places – which they collectively observe in the 'local' hostelries. Alternative broadcasts in 'local' public houses challenge dominant forms within the milieu of innovation from within network affordances, as does the domestic use of streaming channels relative to digital television subscription services. In doing this, fans are able to choose alternative ways of maintaining their supporter-identities and can actively participate in the reshaping of the networked economy of football. Although they may not see their actions as overtly political, they are not passive, powerless or simply reactive observers on the margins, as Castells' distinction between key players and support labour suggests. Rather, they create new hubs or milieu of economic and cultural innovation, such as in the hostelries they collectively visit.

## Conclusion

Castells (2000a [1996]) suggests that capital equals power in the network society. The value of EPL overseas broadcasting contracts are growing at a rate that exceeds domestic equivalents. Yet British audiences still generate the majority of broadcast revenues. The problem that EPL clubs have to face is that they have become dependent upon both forms of income as they compete with each other and other globally leading football clubs in the pursuit of the highest quality football players. Yet, with the aid of live-streaming and other digital parallel importing technologies – now freely available at the ‘everyday’ level of society – transnational flows of broadcasts remove the secure monopolies that domestic broadcasters paid for, held, valued and sold access to. The EPL have recognized the potential threat that the uptake of such behaviours might have and have sought to re-territorialize, by trying to fight against the ‘space of flows’ in three territorially-defined ways: first, through the production of the ‘Creative Coalition Campaign’ designed to lobby the UK government for a ‘desirable’ outcome in the Digital Economy Bill; second, by using the cultural power of the national media to project a perception that live-streams offer poor quality images and, third, an insistence that should the ECJ find against it, which it has done, it will be ‘forced’ to sell its rights on a pan-European basis. None of the territory-based threats appear to be particularly effective when set against alternative broadcasts in the digital space of flows. However, whilst fan practices have changed, no crisis in commercial mediated access has occurred as has been the case in music.

A key contention in this article is that new forms of broadcast have changed patterns of consumption of football amongst groups of fans, offering the potential for a reform in the way social geographies are drawn. Parallel imported broadcasts (including live-streams) are dependent upon transnational flows of images through a ‘space of flows’ (Castells 2000a [1996]) spanning 211 countries that might appear to be de-territorialized. The act of consuming parallel imports via either the Internet or set-top boxes by

millions of others highlights how alternative locations (places of action) can be constituted even within, and in fact by means of, global network flows. Locality can mean, as it does with football's 'new directors' at Manchester City and *Abu Dhabi Media Company*, that new broadcasting stations are positioned in locales close to the football grounds where matches are filmed. Locality may mean inverting the EPL's global business strategy by means of parallel imports into public houses. Locality is crucial in the consumption of such broadcasts because many fans' enjoyment of the match depends more on the company that they keep rather than, necessarily, the quality of 'product' on display. Therefore, seemingly dull matches can still be enjoyed given that the 'craic' (King 2002 [1998]) is still produced with friends. Live-streams and other parallel imported broadcasts have not altered this dynamic but merely facilitated its development in spaces that are not necessarily at the football ground. Our analysis pays particular attention to a small sample of a particular 'type' of fan. These supporters are renewing their locally-defined friendship bonds (through support for a local football team) through digitally facilitated forms of fandom. In contrast to Castells' suggestion that elite hubs are 'where the action is' network affordances mean that every computer is a hub, and each such computer's location represents a place where choices, and thereby action – that can significantly re-programme the network – takes place. With digital alternatives distributing choices throughout the network, so fan scope for action, change and innovation spills out beyond elite control. Viewed in this light, 'de-territorializing' network affordances actually enable a resurgence of locality. Castells (1989a) radical separation of elite 'key players' as 'actors' from marginalized 'support labour' as 'non-actors' within 'milieu of innovation', appeared to be confirmed in football by the way local fans came to feel increasingly powerless in the face of football's 'digital capitalist perestroika'. However, our research suggests the opposite: supporters can now choose how and where to watch matches and to create their fan cultures accordingly, they become significant players, able to challenge dominant practices, offer alternatives, and thereby themselves participate within the 'milieu of innovation'. We have given particular attention here to forms of public consumption of alternative broadcasts which are of particular



significance for the reasons we have outlined. They are also more readily identifiable than the millions of private acts that are less easy to locate, but which are also significant. In this context, the notion of the 'locale' retains significance in a globally networked world. It is clear from the evidence presented in this article that 'local' public houses become important sites where fan solidarities grow and reproduce with the aid of parallel imported broadcasts. Thus, such hostelrys clearly constitute the specific physical spaces that form supporters' locales. As such, the symbolic value of such places are that they provide a building within which a group can mobilizes itself on the basis of forms of attachment to particular place, or football team.

'Consumer' practices are changing for many fans, although the enjoyment of watching matches together endures. Alternative broadcasts do not threaten 'home match' attendance. Rather, whilst domestic *BSkyB/ESPN* subscription levels have been maintained, failure to reach market expectations regarding continued growth (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009) led to *BSkyB's* former rival *Setanta* going bankrupt and has left its replacement *ESPN* continuing to run its football coverage as a loss leader (Iger 2010: 8). The results of the ECJ case may alter subscriptions in public houses, where *BSkyB* can cost over £1,000 per month (Goldberg 2010). With technologies – such as HDMI cables – increasingly ubiquitous, fans can now alter their practices further as the boundary between television and computer increasingly evaporates, although commercial providers have sought to generate new forms of distinction, such as with HD and 3D formats. Whilst alternative broadcasts in particular public houses may create particular 'masculine sub-locales', places where fandom, drinking and masculine togetherness combine, this is not the whole story. Alternative broadcasting of EPL matches in public houses presents a very public legal and symbolic challenge to domestic broadcasting rights holders. The challenge is to the legitimacy of current commercial arrangements over the control of mediated access, rather than live match attendance. The wider ramifications of such public challenges for private streaming practices will no doubt be significant, though such hidden populations and practices are

harder to identify than the public behaviour focused upon in this article. The future of football broadcasts cannot be predicted as outcomes will depend upon an array of cultural and economic choices, not just technical advancements. The failure of legal, rhetorical and economic strategies to eliminate alternative forms of digital access must be set against the current willingness of millions to pay for digital sports broadcasting. Whilst network affordances are fundamental to the dynamics of change, the milieu of innovation and locations of action within it are neither intrinsically bounded, nor determined. Things are changing – and will continue to do so.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008 banking crisis highlighted that pure informational assets either require states to materially redeem them, or else they are nothing.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/video/2009/feb/05/sky-sports-football> for the original television advertisement.