

COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo, Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier

edition lumière

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edition Lumière Bremen 2019 Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb. ddb.de abrufbar.

© edition lumière Bremen ISBN: 978-3-948077-03-7

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Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

Electronic version accessible at: http://www.researchingcommunication.eu

The publishing of this book was supported by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). The 2018 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School was sponsored by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy) and supported by the Department of Communication and Performing Arts of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Almed - graduate School in Media, Communication and Performing Arts, and Sky Italy.

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Football and mediatization: A serious academic pursuit or just scholars playing silly games?

Michael Skey

Abstract

This paper seeks to extend current debates around mediatization by avoiding some of the more extravagant claims about the media's all-encompassing role as both an institution and influence. Instead, it starts with a primary interest in the every-day activities of 'ordinary' people in a given social domain and utilities Schulz's four dimensions of mediatization as a means of grounding the concept. Football fans in East Africa provide a novel case study, allowing opportunities to show how football-related activities are increasingly orientated towards the schedules and performances of leagues, clubs and players in Europe and, as a result, become inextricably bound up with, and informed by, media.

Keywords: Mediatization, sport, power, fans, Africa, English Premier League

1. Introduction

To its adherents, mediatization is a means of understanding both the media's increasing significance as an institutional actor as well as indicating the extent to which everyday interactions are mediated in an era of digital technologies. To its critics, mediatization is, at best, another of those grand, sweeping narratives of change that obscures more than it reveals, at worst, academic grandstanding by a discipline still looking to justify its existence to the academy and the wider world. This paper tries to steer a course between those two opposing poles, using insights from the more grounded approaches to mediatization, whilst avoiding some of the more extravagant claims about the media's all-encompassing role as both an institution and influence.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the next section, we first define mediatization and then engage with some of the key arguments of its main proponents and critics. Of particular relevance, in the former case, will be Schulz's four dimensions of mediatization, which, in our view, provides one of the most grounded and practical frameworks for operationalising the concept in relation to empirical research. The third part of the paper discusses method and the salience of our case study, before the final section provides a number of examples culled from our engagements with football fans, watching, discussing and playing football, as well as interviews with football journalists in East Africa.

2. Mediatization

After first being developed in relation to the study of politics in the later 1990's (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), debates around mediatization have mushroomed over the past two decades. Theoretically, its main proponents have argued that mediatization can not only be used to track the media's influence over longer-term historical periods but also to assess the impact of digital technologies on contemporary forms of social organisation and practice (Hjarvard, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Much of this work has focused on relationships at the institutional level, with mediatization defined "as the influence of media institutions and practices on other fields of social and institutional practice" (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014: 705).

While mediatization may have become the "word of the decade" for many media scholars (Corner, 2018), some have been much more critical, arguing that the concept is so poorly defined that it risks becoming a dumping ground for studies of very different phenomena (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). Others have questioned the novelty of the concept and the extent to which it trades in simplistic narratives of social change that over-emphasise the role of a "singularised media" as a causal agent (Corner, 2018: 83).

Some of these accusations have been partly addressed in the literature. For instance, Livingstone and Lunt (2014) suggest that mediatization may be best employed as a meso-level concept rather than one designed to "describe overall developmental trends in society across different contexts" (Hjavard, 2008: 113). To this end, they argue that it offers greatest purchase when focusing on those "domains of society ... [that] have their own institutional logics or cultural order, their own entrenched governance regimes, rules and norms, resources and expertise" (Hjavard, 2008: 706).

It is our contention that football may be viewed as a social domain defined by a range of socio-cultural practices and organisational norms that have influenced and been influenced by various media over time (Sandvoss, 2003). In the following section, we address a further critique of mediatization, which questions the somewhat nebulous nature of a concept that, at times, seems as if it has no boundaries (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014: 1040). Here, it is argued that Winfried Schulz's four dimensions of mediatization are particularly helpful in operationalising this concept in order to identify "more defined indicators for the purposes of analytic differentiation" (Corner, 2018: 83).

2.1. Grounding mediatization

In this section, we wish to situate this study within current theorisations of mediatization. In trying to move beyond general claims about the influence of media across time, we have found that Schulz's (2004) framework offers a productive means of both grounding the concept and making sense of our data. Schulz identifies four dimensions of mediatization, which he labels as: extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation. Extension refers to the ways in which communication through technologies overcomes physical constraints, connecting individuals and groups in previously distant areas. In relation to football, the growing availability of satellite and digital technologies now means that increasing numbers of football fans can access live games while social media platforms have also connected organisers, clubs, players and fans in new ways (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013). Substitution refers to the process whereby "media partly or completely substitute social activities and social institutions and thus change their character" (Schulz, 2004: 23). This might refer to people watching football on television rather than in a stadium or playing a football video game with friends instead of kicking a ball around in the local park. Schulz labels the process whereby media and non-media practices become interwoven as amalgamation. Examples of this in the domain of football might include the ways in which fans follow updates or place bets on a mobile phone when attending a live game.

Accommodation usually refers to the manner in which non-media institutions have to adapt their own practices in order to meet the demands of the media. It is worth noting that, starting in the domain of politics, this has been one of the most popular arguments, and areas of research, in relation to mediatization. It is commonly associated with what has been labelled "the structuralist/institutional tradition" (Hjavard, 2008: Deacon & Stanyer, 2014) and provides a top-down perspective that views media institutions as independent actors who are increasingly able to influence, and in some cases, dominate forms of social communication. In football, the most obvious example of accommodation would include the moving of live matches from one date to another in accordance with media schedules.

However, while such top-down forms are obviously important in tracking the influence of particular media organisations in a given domain, we believe that a complementary bottom-up perspective can also offer us important insights by exploring the ways in which individuals increasingly accommodate mediated practices and forms of knowledge in their football-related interactions. For instance, consider how an increasing number of people are required to navigate through complex media environments in order to access particular forms of content or display their knowledge as a fan. An emphasis on practical, embodied forms of knowledge and practice not only makes sense in analysing how football is currently followed (whether physically or virtually) but is also key in tracking the extent to which media environments become part of the familiar landscapes which people inhabit when participating in football-related activities. Moreover, it is by foregrounding these processes that we can begin to offer a more sophisticated analysis of the ways in which media become central to this particular domain of everyday life. In the following section, we outline a brief rationale for how our data was collected and analysed, before noting the significance of the East African context.

3. Methods

This paper is based on a research project that was carried out in three East African countries: Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. The data was collected during March and April 2018 and involved participant observation as well as a series of 'on-the-fly' interviews with people (mainly men) on the street, in taxis, in pubs and at local football matches. In many cases, we approached those wearing the shirts of European club teams (of which there were many) and asked them general questions about their affiliations. In other instances, local people approached us (we were something of a novelty as white Europeans) and after telling them about our interest in football, we had a conversation about their interests, preferences and so on. Some of these interviews were very brief, lasting a couple of minutes. In other

cases, we chatted for extended periods of time with individuals or small groups watching games in a pub or as we travelled around the city in buses and taxis. Most of these informal interviews were not recorded and we made notes immediately after they concluded. In this way, around 40 interviews were carried out with football fans and these were complemented with more formal discussions with sports journalists in Zambia and the organisers of a sport-development charity, also in Lusaka, Zambia. As we were using a form of purposive sampling, there is no suggestion that this sample is remotely representative of the population in East Africa. Likewise, we also need to be acutely aware that although the interviews we carried out were very informal, and might be seen as resembling 'natural' conversations with correspondingly high levels of ecological validity, there is obviously a major power differential between ourselves as white, middle-class Europeans speaking with Africans from a variety of different class backgrounds. To this end, it was noticeable that some of the people we spoke to were very reserved and somewhat ill-at-ease in our presence. At the same time, it is also worth stating that many people seemed more than happy to chat with us, notably when they found out our interest in football! On our return to the UK, we transcribed the more formal interviews and begun to code all our data using Schulz's four dimensions as an initial framework for analysis.

4. African football fandom

The project focused on Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, we were able to access pre-existing support networks in both Zambia and Tanzania through our academic institutions. East Africa is also an interesting case from a theoretical perspective since —although football is incredibly popular —local leagues and clubs are not that well supported (with one or two notable exceptions), while European leagues and clubs (notably the English Premier League) are avidly followed by large numbers (Monks, 2016). When it comes to wider research on African football fandom, there is a small, but growing, body of work. Almost all these studies note the profound impact that occurred in the 1990's, as "new television technologies, telecommunications, and information technologies, coupled with the liberalisation of media, opened up African space to transnational television broadcasters" (Akindes, 2011: 2177). This meant that increasing numbers of African football fans were able to watch games involving foreign leagues and clubs, and in many cases these are compared favourably with local versions, which continue to be plagued by poor organisation, lack of investment and, in some cases, corruption (Omobowale, 2009). Akindes argues, in an echo of the cultural imperialism thesis, that this rapid transformation of the African

mediasphere means that "African football fans are placed in a passive and remote position; they have become football content consumers of just a handful of European teams" (Akindes, 2011: 2187). While, however, flows in football content from Europe to Africa are not reciprocated and, as we will see, have had a significant impact on everyday footballed-related activities, whether fans should be characterised as passive and/or mere 'consumers' is open to question. For instance, Solomon Waliaula (2015) has argued that fans of the English Premier League in Kenya, far from being passive consumers of Western products, use talk about their favourite teams and players as a "form of social currency" to boost their own standing and, in some cases, commercial operations. It is these forms of interaction and sociability, alongside the wider social structures and technologies that underpin and inform them, that are of particular interest and in the following sections, we will use illustrative examples from our own data, and the work of Waliaula, to highlight the grounded approach to mediatization we have been advocating thus far.

5. Following football: Extension and substitution

When looking to apply Schulz's framework to our own empirical study of football fandom in East Africa, the dimension of extension—the connection between distant groups through media—would seem to be the most obvious. The popularity of foreign players, clubs and leagues can be seen on a daily basis in a range of 'ordinary' settings, from people wearing replica club shirts, posters in shop windows, logos adorning taxis, buses and private vehicles, people watching games in bars, restaurants and betting shops and so on. Furthermore, we can safely assume, given relative levels of wealth in East Africa and the fact that only one Western team, Everton, has ever played a game in the region, that their support for, and knowledge of said players etc., has to come through communication technologies, whether satellite television, websites, internet feeds or mobile phone networks. While research into football in Europe has also noted the increasing shift from local to mediated forms of fandom, there is still the possibility of Norwegian fans of, say, Manchester United going to see their favourite club—with many actually doing so (Hognestad, 2006). For fans in East Africa, their only connection with these clubs is mediated. However, much of our interview data supports other studies in Africa which point not only to processes of extension but also substitution as people shift their attention from the local league and instead become orientated towards, and then passionate about, games taking place in Europe.

They stopped [going to live games]. The numbers really drastically dropped. Because again when the social set up in most cases is that every bar has a TV. And they pay for DS TV and

they show Manchester. And everybody likes beer (Moses, Football journalist, Lusaka)

Interviewer: Do you think the interest in the English Premier league has a negative impact on the Zambian league? Is that true?

Wedi: It is true, it is true. When Manchester City was playing Man United at 1400 hours, then the stadium would be empty.

Interviewer: So the Premier league is more popular?

Wedi: Yes, they are denying the income that the teams could have got in by going to watch football team from England

(Manager, Youth Sports Organisation, Lusaka, Zambia)

People in Zambia prefer the English Premier League to the Zambian Premier League. On Sunday if you go to any bar, it will be full of people watching the EPL. In fact, I had to ask the bar staff to turn on the ZPL game this afternoon!

(Ian, Football fan, Bar in Lusaka)

These insights are supported by studies in other African countries, including Nigeria where Omobowale talks about a "redirection of fans' alignment with European clubs" (2009: 624), the Ivory Coast, where a top official laments "empty stadiums" (quoted in Akindes, 2011: 2183) and Kenya, where the rivalry between two Manchester sides is more keenly anticipated than the final of a major African tournament (Akindes, 2011: 2184). There are a number of points worth making in relation to these quotes. First, is the manner in which they point to a shift from the local to the trans-national, a reorientation that is built on access to newer forms of communication technology (satellite television and digital platforms) in combination with other political and socio-economic factors.

The references to bars and other establishments showing the EPL (English Premier League) are also worth exploring in relation to some of our earlier discussions of the practices of media users. Given the cost of accessing satellite television, the majority of East African fans tend to watch foreign games in public places or as part of a group of friends where payments can be shared. These places have not only become an important feature of the local economy but also, at least initially, have had to be incorporated into fans' social and mental landscapes. In other words, if people wanted to watch foreign football they had to first find out about these places and then accommodate the demands of foreign media schedules into existing patterns of work, family and leisure. For instance, a young fan in Kenya discussed how he negotiated with his parents about when he should do his household chores

You know I was such a deep and committed fan [of the EPL] that every Saturday my parents understood, and wouldn't assign me work to do, I preferred to work on Sundays. (quoted in Waliula, 2015: 28)

This strikes us as both a useful way of extending Schulz's dimension of *accommodation* and providing a complementary 'bottom up' perspective on media's influence in a given domain, starting with what people are doing, and then analysing how such activities are bound up with media. In this case, a growing interest in foreign football (*extension*) means, in many cases, a concomitant shift away from the local game (*substitution*), the emergence of new establishments to cater for these interests (*accommodation* as a top-down perspective) and the development of new forms of mediated knowledge and practice (*accommodation* as a bottom-up perspective).

In the final part of this paper, we will look at further illustrative examples from the East African context, this time focusing on these practices and the manner in which they are designed to underpin the cultivation of mediated knowledge that can be put to use in other football-related activities.

6. Digital orientations

The relationship between digital media and football has been the subject of much scholarly interest with recent studies pointing to the emergence of new online fan communities (Rowe, Ruddock, & Hutchins, 2010), the novel connections that social media have generated between clubs, players and journalists (Price et al., 2013), and the creative ways in which fans of the game seek to access football-related content (David & Millward, 2012). All of these insights can also be applied to the (East) African context although questions of access and affordability are of particular salience here. This idea is borne out by many of the interviews we conducted:

Do people follow through mobile phones, through Facebook through WhatsApp? Do they also use those, or is it much more about television?

Much more on television. Then on the phone ... they may be getting it through the Premier league website. You can follow it on the phone ... in terms of scores and stuff like that. Just follow the scores and get the updates

So do fans have conversations with WhatsApp?

WhatsApp is very popular nowadays. Facebook is as well. In fact, Facebook is probably more popular compared to WhatsApp

(Cuthbert, football fan, Lusaka)

Again, these wider socio-economic factors caution us against making broad, general claims about the extent to which digital technologies are transforming a social domain or impacting on the habits of media users. In East Africa, television, radio and, to a lesser extent, newspapers remain the dominant ways of consuming football. However, it is worth briefly noting how online platforms are used. In the East African countries we visited, it was easy to find Facebook pages set up by fans of foreign football clubs in England and Spain. Some of these pages attracted up to 40,000 followers but the majority had much less and tended to involve between 1,000-10,000 followers. Likewise, most of these pages generated relatively little active engagement and seemed to represent an outward facing news bulletin board where fans could find out basic details about their favourite club, an idea confirmed by many of the people we spoke to. What is of interest, for our study, is the ways in which this information from online sources is utilised and how it links back to our earlier theoretical framework.

7. "You start seeking out for more information"

We noted earlier that new establishments had grown up around the practice of watching televised foreign football in East Africa. It was also argued that new cultural norms and hierarchies have emerged in relation to these activities with fans, not only wanting to watch the games but also display their knowledge about players, clubs and the league as a whole. As a supporter, in Waliula's study (2015: 31) in Kenya, comments:

You start seeking out for more information, going out to watch the matches, and indeed you get thrilled at how the game is played. That way you start knowing more and more about the teams, the players transfers, etc. and sometimes it is very exciting, like here, when the fans ask each other questions, you see one of them respond very informatively, and he strikes you as a very well informed person ... You start to gain interest, so that you too can be informed and participate in these conversations

(my emphasis, Norris, football fan in Eldoret, Kenya)

While Norris only makes reference to television as a mediated source of information, many of the people we spoke to also discussed the importance of digital sources, ranging from official websites of clubs, the social networking accounts of their favourite players or the aforementioned Facebook groups, in providing the sort of insights that can then be used to prove one's credentials in more public settings. The best example we can give of this came from a man who we spoke to at length whilst travelling on a minibus in Lusaka. The man was wearing a Manchester

United replica shirt and was happy to talk football and technology, being the proud owner of an iPhone. Indeed, he talked at length about how he used his phone to keep up-to-date on the club's activities, including transfer targets, team selections and tactics, match reports and so on. He was a supporter who had navigated his way to a whole host of sites, discussion groups and social networking accounts that provided him with information that could then be used to inform his discussions with friends and family. We had similar discussions with fans in pubs who used certain sites in a largely habitual manner (Moores, 2015: 205) in the pursuit of further information about their favourite teams. This information would, in many cases, give them a competitive advantage when it came to discussing said teams in public settings.

The fact that it is so increasingly routine for people in East Africa to follow football through mediated forms, to orientate themselves towards foreign players and clubs, to accommodate, into everyday routines, the schedules of leagues thousands of miles away, actually tells us something rather important about the significance of media in this particular domain and the power of media to shape disparate lives. Moreover, Schulz's framework allows us to move away from some of the grander claims of mediatization scholarship to identify those processes whereby daily activities are not only bound up with, or informed by, media but also increasingly viewed as normal, part of the way of being a football fan in East Africa in the contemporary era.

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Biography

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