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Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards: How Social Media Has Added a New Dimension to Racist Discourse in English Football

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a discourse analysis carried out from November 2011 to February 2012 on two prominent association football (soccer) message boards that examined fans' views towards racism in English football. After analyzing over 500 posts, the article reveals the racist discourse used by some supporters in their online discussions and the extent to which posts like this were either supported or contested by fellow posters. The overall findings are that social media sites like fan message boards have allowed racist thoughts to flourish online, in particular by rejecting multiculturalism and Islam through the presentation of whiteness and national belonging and an outright hostility and resistance towards the Other. Despite this, the majority of posts that contained some form of racist discourse were openly challenged.

Keywords: football; fans; racism; message boards; whiteness

Introduction

For over 100 years from the establishment of the Football Association in 1863, English football and its various stakeholders (supporters, players, managers, coaches, referees, directors and administrators) were associated with a pattern of whiteness (Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 2001; Burdsey, 2011; Cashmore & Cleland, 2011; Garland & Rowe, 2001).¹ This pattern was also reflected across British society, but fundamentally changed through mass immigration from the 1950s. As the population diversified, a number of black players, such as Viv Anderson, Garth Crooks, Cyrille Regis, Mark Walters and John Barnes, started to ply their trade as professional footballers from the late 1970s. Although black players such as Arthur Wharton, Walter Tull and Charlie Williams played professional football before this time, it was during the late 1970s and 1980s that the true extent of racism from the terraces began, with overt and hostile behavior a regular feature of football. As a consequence of the hostility faced by the growing number of black players, an anti-racism organization 'Let's Kick Racism Out Of Football' was created in 1993 (in 1997 it changed to 'Kick It Out') and it quickly began a targeted approach towards racism and the use of racist language in football.

The focus of this article was prompted in October 2011 when a number of racist incidents within English football were reported. On-the-field were two incidents (Patrice Evra/Luis Suárez² and Anton Ferdinand/John Terry³) where racist language was used during two separate Premier League fixtures (Suárez was fined £40,000 and banned for eight matches whilst Terry was fined £220,000 and banned for four matches), and this was mirrored by a number of reported incidents off-the-field (such as the racial abuse directed towards ex-player and now media pundit, Stan Collymore, and a number of other current black players on the social media site Twitter). These incidents were just the start of a period

that has continued up to the time of writing, where the action taken by Evra and Ferdinand has encouraged other black players to publicly state if they have also been a victim of racism. Indeed, the continued acts of racism have helped to dismiss the widespread assumption that anti-racism initiatives have helped to eradicate racism in English football. Instead, what seems to be happening is that whilst overt forms of racism have decreased in the numbers they once did (in particular the collective and widespread overt chanting that used to be prominent inside stadia), the introduction of social media has now offered an opportunity for racist thoughts to be communicated anonymously online.

The creation of multiple platforms on the Internet has allowed for more 'active' football fans (those fans who actively participate in the exchange of information with other fans, clubs, supporter organizations and the media) to engage in everyday asynchronous discussions concerning footballing and non-footballing matters (Cleland, 2010; Gibbons & Dixon, 2010; Millward, 2008; Ruddock, 2005). Up until the creation of the World Wide Web in 1992, the only available outlet for supporters to publicly raise their views on footballing matters was through a print fanzine (an often humorous magazine-type publication written through supporters' eyes, which was usually sold at every other home match). The move towards an online fanzine (or e-zine) allowed technologically skilled supporters to set up a publicly available unofficial website linked to a particular club.

One of the key features of websites like this is the opportunity to register and engage in an interactive message board with other registered users.⁴ These usually come in a range of different sections, such as 'first team, 'off topic' and 'general football/sport' and allow for online discussions to take place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. As it is a public forum, fans do not have to register to view the message board, but they would be classed as a 'guest' and subsequently cannot contribute to any discussion taking place. Those that have registered predominantly use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and although Millward (2009) found that some users actually know each other, in the majority of cases only the moderators would know more of their identity through the need for a name (potentially a fake one) and an email address as part of the registration process.⁵ Not surprisingly, the often hidden nature of those engaging in online discourse across a number of social media platforms can be problematic. One particular element is the increasing opportunity for the promotion of 'hate speech' that can center on, for example, racism, homophobia, disability and sexism as well as the availability of cyber bullying and the transmission of child porn at the click of a button (Butler, 1997; Rivers, 2011; Shariff & Hoff, 2007).

Although the presence of racism within the culture of football has been a feature of scholarly work (see, for example, Back et al. 2001; Burdsey, 2007, 2011; Cleland & Cashmore, 2013; Garland & Rowe, 2001; King, 2004; Ruddock, 2005), limited attention has been paid to how race and racism is discussed on online football fan message boards. As King (2004) points out, the academic literature has primarily focused on racism existing inside stadia and on-the-field, but the advent of social media has opened up new opportunities to examine racism being communicated through other, less overt, channels. According to Clavio (2008), message boards provide an opportunity to observe, record and analyze 'live' discourse and its subtle and explicit messages in an unobtrusive way. One of the first sport scholars to examine this was Millward (2008), who assessed the message board reaction towards Middlesbrough's Muslim player, Mido, after he had played in a Premier League fixture against their local rivals, Newcastle United. The findings of Millward's study concurred with those raised by Cleland and Cashmore (2013) and Sallaz (2010) who argue that racism is never static and social media has allowed for old racial schemata to be broadcast in new social settings anonymously via smartphones and computers.⁶

In referring to the widely reported cases of racism in English football since the end of 2011, Carrington (2012, p. 965) challenges scholars to examine the 'particular importance of sports to the ways in which ideas about race circulate through social structures and mediate social relations'. In their 2013 article on 2,500 fans' views towards the continued presence of racism in English football, Cleland and Cashmore state how 80 per cent of fans feel that social media allows for racist thoughts to be communicated in ways that were not available 20 years ago. Outside of Millward's (2008) analysis of online discourse surrounding Mido, very little academic attention has been given to examining for racist discussions taking place on online message boards. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present the attitudes, opinions and views of those football fans actively involved in two prominent online English fan message boards towards the existence of racism in English football. By doing this, it provided an opportunity to examine for evidence of individual prejudices and the extent to which these views were supported or contested by fellow posters. Indeed, after analyzing over 500 posts the article shall argue that the presence of racism on the two chosen message boards reveals a deep, essentialist view of national belonging and identity that is primarily centered on whiteness and the rejection of multiculturalism.

Method

Technological advances in the last ten years have allowed people to communicate through multiple electronic platforms. Not surprisingly, the opportunity to engage in asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication (such as through message boards, blogs, chat rooms and other social networking sites Twitter and Facebook) has enabled research to be conducted on these online platforms (Bishop, 2009; Griggs, 2011; Kozinets, 2010; Miller, 2011). As well as the numerous opportunities created by new technology to conduct research online, Griggs (2011) rightfully raises a number of ethical concerns that this article also addresses: potential harm to the participants; informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception.

The focus of this article was part of a wider investigation on the extent to which racism retained a place in English football discourse. A previous article (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013), for example, focused on the existence of a 'color-blind' ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) amongst the game's governing bodies and anti-racist organizations through the collection and analysis of 2,500 responses to an online survey. To collect this number of responses a relationship has been built over previous projects with e-zine editors responsible for their respective websites across the United Kingdom (totaling over 80) who have allowed me to register and post messages with the intention of collecting empirical data. This usually takes two forms: (a) the main intention is to encourage respondents to complete an online survey, such as the focus of the Cleland and Cashmore (2013) article and (b) to analyze the virtual conversation taking place on each website once the initial post has been made.

The initial post always openly states that I am an academic looking to gather fans' views towards the topic area in question (a link to the online survey is included in the opening paragraph) and by doing so seeks avoid the kind of 'identity deception' that can be found when conducting research in an online environment (Gibbons & Nuttall, 2012; Griggs, 2011).⁷ The rationale behind this is to encourage those respondents who participate in the forum discussion to voluntarily provide an honest and anonymous account of their feelings, so after the opening post I play no further part in the discussion as the intention is to virtually observe the thread in its own right. No personal details about ethnic background, gender, age and occupational status are requested and no contact is made through the private message facility available on most message boards as this would potentially disturb the 'conversation' that is taking place.

With regards to issues surrounding informed consent, Gibbons and Nuttall (2012) and Griggs (2011) all refer to guidelines available through 'The Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) about conducting research in an online public environment. My open approach to collecting the data gives each member of every forum the option of taking part in the research, and as each forum is publicly available for anyone to view, any subsequent posts made are not deemed private and confidential. Indeed, Griggs (2011, p. 87) states that the very nature of online research means that 'what, if anything, might be considered private in cyberspace?'

The research was conducted from November 2011 to February 2012, with most opening posts included in the 'off topic' area of each e-zine message board as they tend to remain as a discussion point for longer than topics in the more popular sections of message boards (such as those about the first-team). In each section, threads with the most recent response reside at the top and due to the level of interest in the topic, the thread I instigated remained a prominent feature for longer on most websites. On some occasions there were posts that tried to divert the thread away from its original intention, but due to the volume of interest in this topic, very quickly the conversation continued with its original focus.

This article focuses on the two message boards (one affiliated to Grimsby Town and the other to Huddersfield Town) that had the highest number of responses to the original post and taken together contained over 500 posts for analysis (in the interests of anonymity, the actual name of both message boards is protected). Interestingly, when analyzing the 2011 England and Wales Census (a survey conducted every ten years that examines the characteristics of the population), the demographic of both areas was markedly different.⁸ Huddersfield is located in the borough of Kirklees, where 76.7 per cent of residents are White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British), with 16 per cent Asian/Asian British (the national average for White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British is 80.5 per cent; 2.5 per cent are Indians and 2 per cent are Pakistani).⁹ 53.4 per cent of those living in Kirklees stated their religion as Christian (the national average for England and Wales is 59.3 per cent), with 14.5 per cent stating Muslim (the national average for England and Wales is 4.8 per cent). In comparison, Grimsby is located in the borough of North East Lincolnshire where 97.4 per cent of residents are White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British), with 1.3 per cent Asian/Asian British. 60.7 per cent stated their religion as Christian, with 0.8 per cent stating Muslim.

As the process of engagement was self-selection, I am cautious with the discussion taking place (such as posts that could be deemed to be positive and negative towards the

existence of racism and racial equality) as an online ‘performance’ might exist that bears no resemblance to their offline life (Jenkins, 2006; Kozinets, 2010). Even though pseudonyms are used, anonymity cannot be assumed as scholars, such as Millward (2009), have found that in some online communities a number of posters actually know each other. On certain topics, this could encourage posters to lie or exaggerate their true feelings in trying to impress fellow posters whilst, conversely, this could also be the case for those who do not know each other. Therefore, the article makes no claim to be representative of all English football supporters or of all supporters at the two chosen clubs, as it cannot be confirmed that the posters actually supported the club whose website they were engaging with or even lived in the local area. However, what the posts do highlight is a vocabulary used by some supporters on the cultural politics of racism in football that contains a discourse of difference, resistance and contestation requiring further analysis.

When conducting research like this, it is important not to assume all of the posters are male and white. However, when he investigated the demographic nature of those engaging in American online sport message boards, Clavio (2008), via a population analysis of 14 American colleges, found that 88 per cent were male, 91 per cent were White and 77 per cent were at least 30 years old. Highlighting the time devoted to sport message boards, Clavio also found that 80 per cent of his sample spent at least 10 hours a week engaging in this online practice. With relevance to football message boards, Gibbons and Dixon (2010) found that the prominent users are also the most committed fans who regularly attend matches; a practice often ascribed as traditional and authentic.

At the beginning of the analysis phase, each fan that provided a post was given a number (identified by their chosen pseudonym) relevant to where they joined the conversation. Even if they contributed later in the discussion they still retained their original number and will be referred to as, for example, Huddersfield Town fan 1, Huddersfield Town fan 17. Each thread of data was printed off as one long virtual conversation and was analyzed through discourse analysis (Silverman, 2001) as specific attention was paid to the existence of racism in various posts and the response by fellow posters to this. Here, multiple levels of data were broken down into the thematic categories of whiteness, belonging, national identity, Islamophobia and multiculturalism. Although Griggs (2011, p. 87) raises the potential of harming participants if they are quoted directly from an online source, I concur with his thoughts that anonymity has been protected as far as possible and ‘given the richness of the messages themselves, however, it was decided to include verbatim quotations’.

Results

To assess the presence of racist sentiments across the two chosen message boards, what is presented here are examples of mainly short sections of each thread that address the thematic categories outlined above. Naturally there were individual and wide-ranging comments on the topic, such as Huddersfield Town fan 9 stating: “I’ve heard racist stuff in the last few seasons. It’s nothing like it used to be but it’s still there bubbling under the surface”, and Huddersfield Town fan 13 arguing: “The recent incidents have been over blown. I haven’t heard racism for years now”. Indeed, as well as comments like this, there were also some isolated and unsupported comments by other posters. To provide one example, for the fan below, the prominence of racism in the 1980s still resonates with their beliefs:

Grimsby Town fan 12: I remember some fella climbing the fence in 1984/85 and emptying a bin bag full of banana skins to a rapturous applause from the pontoon before being carted off by the old bill. Happy memories those were the days.

Whilst most fans on the thread ignored this as possible evidence of a type of ‘performance’ or form of bravado towards other posters (Butler, 1990; Millward, 2009), Grimsby Town fan 15 felt the need to reply: “Views on both sides of this debate are too entrenched. However, this is possibly the most depressing thing I’ve read on here”. Despite the presence of individual posts on both message boards, the remainder of this section will focus on the virtual conversation taking place between posters as it allowed for a much deeper analysis regarding the presence of racism and the level of difference, resistance and contestation within the discourse.

Whiteness, national belonging and Islamophobic discourse

One particular theme that was present across both message boards was an Islamophobic discourse (defined by the Runnymede Trust (1997, p. 1) as ‘an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination’) that also rejects the notion of multiculturalism. Despite the existence of Islamophobia before 9/11, the reaction to this event has led to increased prejudices directed at Muslims across most parts of the Western world. Meer (2008), Meer and Modood (2009), Modood (2007) and Saeed and Kilvington (2011) are a number of scholars who suggest that since 9/11, discussions have moved away from a biological focus to one of cultural difference that draws on notions of national identity and belonging (and, as a consequence, Islamophobia) by presenting a homogenous host culture of whiteness that defends itself

against threats from the Other. This racialization (i.e. differentiating or categorizing according to race) of minority groups encouraged Meer (2008) to challenge scholars to examine whether Muslims are discriminated against because of their skin color, ethnic origin or religion, or whether there is a mixture present. The data suggested a mixture:

Huddersfield Town fan 16: Let us not forget that parts of the Queens Road area of Halifax and parts of Dewsbury are no-go areas for whites after dark. White people are often attacked up there...I am sorry but a large percentage of the younger Pakistanis are arseholes. If that makes me a racist then so be it.

Huddersfield Town fan 17: How could they tell what colour someone is if it is dark?

Huddersfield Town fan 26: You drive through many large areas of somewhere like Bradford, then the 'minority' are white people. Are there support organisations specifically named 'white person's...' in those areas? Do you think there would be uproar from the left if there was? I do.

In his analysis of racist discourse, Van Dijk (2004) states how it takes two particular forms: (a) it is directed at ethnically different Others and; (b) it is about ethnically different Others. Unless a poster identifies himself or herself as a particular ethnicity, most of the discourse on online message boards is *about* ethnically different Others, rather than the discourse being directed *at* them. Of particular relevance to online discussions surrounding racism, Van Dijk has defined racist discourse as:

a form of discriminatory social practice that manifests itself in text, talk and communication. Together with other (non-verbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or "racial" domination. (p. 351)

The presence of what can be deemed racist discourse at the start of the Huddersfield Town thread led to the views being challenged (in particular those of Huddersfield Town fan 16) by other posters. For example, when fan 27 contests the earlier post and fan 16 responds with further evidence of racist discourse, another fan (Huddersfield Town fan 29) felt compelled to add a further challenge to the discourse being used:

Huddersfield Town fan 27: It is very hard to determine whether you are on the wind up at times. I remember your 'I just don't like all Muslims' statement a while back, ring fencing every person of that religious persuasion in the 'I don't like pile'....each to their own of course, but it says a lot about a person who makes sweeping generalisations about people they do not know. I think seeing colour, race and religion and making an assessment on whether I like them or not before I have even interacted, spoken to, listened to or shook their hand is akin to childish school yard syndrome.

Huddersfield Town fan 16: As for my 'I just don't like all Muslims' statement you think I said, this was years ago...I don't like the Muslim religion, though as an atheist myself I am not struck on any religion, but the Muslim brand I

find totally dislikeable. On a personal level I do not dislike every Muslim, but as I acknowledged all those years ago Muslims are not people I can have much time for due to their religion (I should emphasise here it has nothing to do with race – i.e. skin colour).

Huddersfield Town fan 29: In relation to your earlier post, I have worked in Dewsbury and found people there largely kind and understanding. Sure there are cultural differences...we all need to loosen up, need to be a bit more understanding (go on try it – I dare you!) and be less accepting of ALL types of racism, not just those points directed towards Muslims.

As suggested by Van Dijk (2004), language like this communicated by Huddersfield Town fan 16 is racist through the hierarchical ordering of racialized identities directed *about* ethnically different Others. As Modood (2007) has argued, reference to the Other, in this case Muslims, is seen by some to threaten ‘Britishness’ and can lead to hostility through the perception of Muslims being linked with terrorism. Some scholars point the finger of blame for Islamophobia at the British media, with Saeed and Kilvington (2011, p. 602) arguing that stories are ‘commonly written and spoken about in a tone which suggests anxiety over the erosion of the perceived ‘indigenous’ national culture’. Addressing research on the acceptance of Muslims in Britain, Wright (2013) suggests that less than one in four people feel that following Islam is compatible with a British way of life. Instead, Wright concludes that there is a widespread anti-Muslim sentiment existing throughout the UK and the discourse across both message boards seemed to concur with these thoughts. In their analysis of deprived areas in the UK where ethnic distinctions are prominent, Kintrea, Bannister, Pickering, Reid and Suzuki (2008) suggest that territoriality and a sense of belonging are culturally ingrained in some individuals and communities. Indeed, evidence of this local vernacular surrounding the hierarchical ordering of whiteness was present in the data:

Huddersfield Town fan 33: I live in an almost white area and would not want to move to an area where white people are a minority. Not because I dislike anyone who isn’t white; it is because I would feel slightly uncomfortable as I am used to a white community and the culture that involves (it is also because most non-white areas are shitholes).

Huddersfield Town fan 35: Non-white areas are shitholes. Don’t get me wrong, there are some council estates that are as rough as hell with some knobheads living on them, but you show me a town or city where the crime infested shitholes are and then tell me what communities live there...Chapelton, Leeds; Handsworth, Birmingham; St Pauls, Bristol.

Huddersfield Town fan 40: Personally I would not want to live in many parts of West Yorkshire where I was born due to it not being like England anymore – or the England I grew up in.

Huddersfield Town fan 42: Racism will always be present unless we live in a society which is educated and without prejudice (which will never happen). People

have an automatic distrust of change and of people who are different from them and distrust leads to discrimination. People also have natural instincts to protect what is theirs, including communities and cultures. If they feel that their community is threatened with change from outside cultures then this tends to lead to conflict.

The discourse about particular deprived parts of the UK having a predominantly Muslim population (such as those areas communicated by Huddersfield Town fan 35) with reference to them being ‘shitholes’ provides further evidence of the hierarchical ordering taking place with regards to racialized identity (Van Dijk, 2004). In an American-based study, Feagin (2010) suggests that many white people act and speak in a way that reinforced racial inequality without them recognizing the moral implications of their actions and words. Although it can only be assumed comments like this were raised by white people, reference towards non-white places as ‘shitholes’ supports Feagin’s claim that this often results in racist discourse. The ‘us’/‘them’ distinctions raised in the thread above also concurs with the thoughts of Alegria (2012), who refers to a racial stereotype and an underlying racial ideology that guides the on-going process of racialization and resistance to the Other.

Racist intent or casual racism? Reinforcing whiteness and national identity

One of the most widely cited scholars on the effect of speech, Judith Butler (1997), has spoken about a “gap” between the intention of the speaker and its effect on the recipient. Although Butler raised this without having online message boards in mind, they do lend themselves to wider analysis surrounding virtual conversations (at the expense of face-to-face). It was clear across both message boards that some fans are happy to place racist thoughts into the public domain and accept the contestation that follows from fellow posters, but for other fans they are likely to fail to recognize that their discourse is racist; instead they are likely to see it as a form of ‘casual racism’ that Cleland and Cashmore (2013) found some fans use to justify the continuation of racism in English football. For these fans, racism is seen as a social issue so occasional outbursts are inevitable; in other words, ‘casual racism’ is not the real thing and, is in fact, a form of unintentional social ignorance. On this point, Jones and Fleming (2007) state the need to differentiate between what they refer to as ‘ethically excusable’ (unwittingly racist through ignorance) and ‘ethically inexcusable (deliberately racist and evil).

The issue of racist intent was also a central theme of Müller, van Zoonen and de Roode (2007) and their analysis of racism in Dutch football. They found that fans and players seek to avoid accountability by claiming that they did not intend to be racist and, as such, are

labeled as an ‘accidental racist’. Likewise, in examining supporters of Millwall, Robson (2000) found that fans do not see their behavior as racist. Instead they portray it as doing whatever they can for their team to win. In the case of racism, this often referred to as ‘banter’ and by engaging in this practice, fans are likely to argue that it gives them social and cultural meaning (Bourdieu, 1990), primarily through the reinforcement of whiteness. Evidence of this was found in the Grimsby Town message board:

- Grimsby Town fan 32: As a Leicester fan, I have heard ‘you’re just a town full of paki’s’ in numerous places. I am, however, inclined to say it is more an extremely clumsy attempt at ‘banter’ (a word that seems to excuse acting like a complete idiot) by the immensely stupid than actual racism, or perhaps I am complacent.
- Grimsby Town fan 33: As for someone moaning about people chanting to Leicester [you’re a] ‘town full of paki’s’, I am sorry but it is...Those poor white bastards living in that city having to put up with ridicule that is not of their doing. Anyway, why is the term Paki racist, when Scot, Turk or Thai is not?
- Grimsby Town fan 35: Kids at school used to use the word ‘pakistani’ in the same derisive way as ‘paki’ so I struggled for a long time to describe someone native to Pakistan! Think it’s all about the intention and not the word per se.
- Grimsby Town fan 36: Which is why terms such as ‘paki’ and ‘I can’t bring myself to type the N word’ have such negative connotations. Even now, it’s hard to address a black person as a ‘black person’.
- Grimsby Town fan 43: In reference to Leicester and its ethnic population, fans will do anything to gain the upper hand. Just look at the homophobic abuse directed towards Brighton fans. Some people are nasty with what they say, but for others it’s spur of the moment stuff.

As argued by Jones and Fleming (2007), the use of the term ‘Paki’ and ‘those poor white bastards’ by Grimsby Town fan 33 and others across both threads should be seen as an example of (presumably white) supporters seeking to categorize racial difference. Although the discussion above is just one example, the use of it in everyday discourse such as online message boards highlights that it is a form of racist language used by some supporters to separate themselves from the Other. Across the threads though, racist discourse was challenged and Millward’s (2008) research found that when fans have opposing views, two possible outcomes emerge: (1) comments are reinterpreted to create a group consensus and (2) fans that make posts that are not welcome by the group can be challenged, criticized, mocked and even shunned. An example of the latter outcome occurred on the Huddersfield Town message board after a thread instigated by Huddersfield Town fan 57, who finds some support from fans 61 and 69, but whose views are challenged by fans 60, 64 and 74 (there were other additional posts that could have been added to either side of the debate):

- Huddersfield Town fan 57: What pisses me off is the last 2-3 governments opening the floodgates for every fucker to come into my country and take all the frigging jobs and bleed the system dry... the country is on its knees due to the fact we are overrun with foreigners...I say they should all **** off and leave us be...I am not a racist but in my opinion we should look after our own.
- Huddersfield Town fan 60: That post for me sums up what is going wrong in society. When somebody fails, blame somebody else. Thank god we do not all share your liberal, progressive views.
- Huddersfield Town fan 61: It is an opinion I endorse wholeheartedly, along with dozens of my friends, thousands of voters and most probably millions of Britons.
- Huddersfield Town fan 64: I don't think you have any life experience of hate or abuse. Everything you are angry about is media related.
- Huddersfield Town fan 69: Towns and cities have steadily filled up with foreigners (of all colours) and to many people it does not feel like their own country any more.
- Huddersfield Town fan 74: It is these kinds of archaic viewpoints that prevent any decent political debate in regards to immigration. The 'come here and take our jobs' rubbish is complete nonsense. The vast majority came over here to do the jobs that us proud Englanders didn't want to do. The parasites that sit in 4-bedroomed council houses with 6 kids and live off social benefits for the rest of their lives, correct me if I am wrong, will be white 'nationalists'. The country is on its knees because of greedy financial companies (again run by white men)...but that's obviously far too complicated to comprehend so let's just blame it on the darkies.

As argued by Back et al. (2001), discussions of race are often placed within other lines of social division and a number of interpretations can be made from this part of the thread. For some posters, there is a sense that the message board allows them an opportunity to raise their capital by stating racist views, whether they are accepted by fellow posters or not. Reference to 'my country', 'we are overrun with foreigners' and 'they should all **** off and leave us be' by Huddersfield Town fan 57 highlights the centrality of whiteness in any discourse about Britain and how the blame for social decline can be placed at the Other (Meer, 2008; Modood, 2007; Weedon, 2011). Although some of the discourse did openly mention Muslims as a source of blame, other posts were often directed at unnamed Others and it can be assumed that this was also about Muslims. For example, immigration into particular parts of the UK since the 1950s led Huddersfield Town fan 69 to echo the infamous views of the Conservative Member of Parliament, Enoch Powell, of blaming immigrants for social wrongdoings by claiming that 'towns and cities have steadily filled up with foreigners (of all colours) and to many people it doesn't feel like their own country any more'.

Indeed, Vincent and Hill's (2011) conclusion of the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* and its coverage of England's participation at the 2010 football World Cup stated how it reflected 'a historic yearning for a bygone authentic era when England was White, masculine, and

working-class'. The media are seen to influence public opinion, as raised by Huddersfield Town fan 64 above, and further discussion in the Huddersfield Town thread concurs with Vincent and Hill's (2011) suggestion that some media outlets and fans continue to reflect nostalgically on the past when the World Cup winning side of England in 1966 was white:

- Huddersfield Town fan 79: Racism is part of life. Denying it is pointless. England recently had 9 players on the pitch of non-English heritage recently. That pretty much answers the question. Do you see any blacks in Spain or Italy's national team? Did we have any in '66? No, and we won the damn thing.
- Huddersfield Town fan 81: You are not allowed to mention the England football team, it could offend our ethnic cousins...well actually it wouldn't but it might offend the PC brigade...what a load of bollocks. ENGLAND: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT.
- Huddersfield Town fan 82: We are told that our ethnic friends are as English as you and me. Yeah right. If a dog is born in a stable it doesn't make it a horse...
- Huddersfield Town fan 85: That is a terrible analogy. My friend at work has Pakistani parents. He was born in Sheffield and supports Wednesday and England, but supports Pakistan at cricket. He is English. You obviously don't think he is. He will probably marry someone in this country and have children. Will his children be English? Will their children be English?
- Huddersfield Town fan 89: I wouldn't class him as English if he doesn't support England as it seems he doesn't think of himself as English.
- Huddersfield Town fan 91: Your parents determine what you are surely. Two Africans having a child in England makes an AFRICAN born in England. It does not make them English.

Posts like this provide clear evidence that hate speech towards racism remains prominent in football discourse (Butler, 1997). The continued reference to non-whites as being un-British even though they were born here supports the claim by Modood (2007) that communities seeking to be culturally different are often forgotten in the pursuit or expectation of a homogenous host culture containing discourse about the superiority of whiteness and its continued importance in symbolizing national identity and belonging. For Millward (2008), evidence of racist discourse like this shows how embedded racism is in the everyday practice of some football supporters and this is the challenge facing the football authorities looking to tackle racist thoughts and behavior.

Towards the end of both threads were examples of Millward's (2008) claim that as well as comments on message boards being contested and challenged, some fans attempt to reinterpret the whole thread to create a group consensus. Fans across both message boards recognized a type of 'performance' as some posters were often challenged as to whether they were being serious in the point they were making, but towards the end of the thread were some

evaluative posts that sought to draw the debate together in way that challenged the existence of racist discourse:

Huddersfield Town fan 104: In all of this I can't help thinking that with the exception of one or two on here the majority of comments have underlying (and sometimes up front) right-wing tendencies. And while that doesn't exactly surprise me a great deal, I still feel disappointed and concerned. From me to the right-wing: to make jokes and sarcastic comments about something as fundamentally serious as racism is pathetic in my view. Capitalism divides people. It divides them on grounds of race, gender and sexual orientation. It divides them socially and economically and places them in ghettos. It doesn't allow for difference and demands conformity and standardisation. We all have to think the same and accept the same things if we want to live in 'nation states' and anything outside of these norms is scorned.

Huddersfield Town fan 114: On reading this thread it is clear that there are a lot of backward thinking Huddersfield fans. The small town/team mentality is prevalent. Times are changing boys. Free your mind and the rest will follow.

As suggested earlier, some threads retain a prominent place on message boards for a lengthy period of time and towards the end of the research period it was clear that the thread had ran its course. What was found on the two message boards was that posts like the two above successfully attempted to provide closure by creating an opportunity for a form of reflection where posters could move on to discuss other subjects on the respective message board.

Conclusion

As Burdsey (2011, p. 7) has suggested, racism now operates 'in complex, nuanced and often covert ways that go under the radar of football authorities and beyond the capacities of anti-racist groups'. The advent of social media has only added to the complexity of attempting to tackle racism and the evidence presented in this article strongly challenges the assumption by anti-racist organizations and the football authorities that racism is being eradicated from football. Technological advances in communication since the beginning of the twenty-first century have enabled racist and Islamophobic views to operate covertly across message boards and other platforms such as Twitter, rather than overtly inside football stadia. In fact, it is not just discussions taking place on a select number of message boards, as a number of scholars including Back et al. (2001), Burdsey (2007, 2011), Cashmore and Cleland (2011), Cleland and Cashmore (2013), Garland and Rowe (2001) and King (2004), have all outlined how the problem of racism remains socially and culturally embedded in English football in various forms.

Internet message boards allow for posts of any nature to be published every minute of every day. Message boards have moderators who oversee each forum and remove certain offensive or litigious posts, but in the majority of cases it is the fans who challenge each other's views on certain topics. The findings presented here offer a different perspective from those of Ruddock (2005) who examined for racist discourse on a message board of the unofficial Knees Up Mother Brown website surrounding the signing of Lee Bowyer at West Ham in 2003 (Bowyer had been found not guilty in December 2001 of a racist attack that had occurred in January 2000 on an Asian student after a night out in Leeds). Ruddock stated that the vernacular on the message board avoided any lengthy discussion surrounding racism when fans debated the Bowyer signing. However, the take-up of the Internet has dramatically shifted since Ruddock conducted his research (see note 6 for more detail) and, instead, the findings of the two message boards used in this article highlighted a strong vernacular of racist discourse. Although this is challenged, mocked and contested (perhaps helped in some way by the anonymity of posters), it remains prominent in the virtual conversations taking place and tends to focus on national identity, belonging and whiteness, as well as a resistance towards the Other (in particular Muslims) who are often blamed for social problems (as suggested by Meer, 2008; Modood, 2007; Weedon, 2011). Indeed, reflecting back on the 2011 Census data for the surrounding areas of Huddersfield and Grimsby, the demographics were markedly different yet racism and Islamophobia were prominent points of discussion.

Despite the prominence of racist discourse throughout both message boards, if those fans that took part in the two online discussions had the chance to explain their views in follow-up research, the likelihood is that they would not see themselves or their discourse as racist. Cleland and Cashmore (2013) stated how fans like this are likely to refer to racist discourse as a form of 'casual racism', which is justified through the existence of racism and social divisions in wider society. Similarly, as Müller et al. (2007) explained in their research on racism in Dutch football, fans and players believe that acts of racism are only committed by a racist person. Outside of this they found that fans deny they had any intent in what they said and put it down to a joke or a form of banter (they refer to people like this as the 'accidental racist'). This is one way of explaining why everyday racist abuse often goes unchallenged on social media sites (particularly Twitter) and how 'more subtle racializations of contemporary soccer culture remain completely unaddressed' (Müller et al. 2007, p. 335).

So what can be done? Despite Amara and Henry (2010) illustrating a shift away from multiculturalism towards one of interculturalism that seeks to promote a shared sense of belonging at the expense of 'separateness', the discussions taking place on the two message

boards (as well as others not included in this analysis) indicates that unless action is taken, any attempt at interculturalism is likely to fail. Indeed, the prominence of racist discourse on fan message boards suggests that this is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the football authorities need to engage with football supporters and work with them to reduce an anti-Other that retains a place in the everyday discourse for some supporters. Cultivating a respectful and tolerant attitude towards the Other might present a challenge when confronted by sections of society that continue to find outlets to express racist discourse both overtly and covertly, but we seem no way near eradicating racism and achieving racial equality in English football at the present time.

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¹ Throughout this article, whiteness will be referred to as a socially constructed concept that is tied to social status and justifies discrimination against non-whites (Garner, 2007).

² See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/16186556> (Retrieved December 20, 2011).

³ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/19842795> (Retrieved October 5, 2012).

⁴ A registered user on a message board can start a new conversation (or post) by creating a title and writing some text that fellow users can read and respond to. When a post receives responses by other users a 'thread' then develops. A thread usually lasts for 20-25 separate posts before it starts a new page. Each thread is ordered according to the date/time of the post, so the newest posts appear at the end of the thread.

⁵ Most message boards have moderators who monitor discussions taking place to ensure that each topic area and the language being used does not break the terms and conditions that users had initially accepted in order to be registered on the particular e-zine in the first place.

⁶ In the recent publication 'Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2011', the Office for National Statistics reported how the number of British households with Internet access had increased from 9 per cent in 1998 to 77 per cent in 2011 (in 2004 it was 49 per cent). Moreover, the amount of mobile phones, laptops and other computer tablets providing remote Internet access is show through the number of wi-fi hotspots increasing from 0.7 million in 2007 to 4.9 million in 2011. See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2011/stb-internet-access-2011.html> (Retrieved August 2, 2012).

⁷ Throughout the research process the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association were adhered to - see <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf> (Retrieved October 20, 2011).

⁸ For all 2011 Census data on England and Wales please see:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html>

⁹ Ethnicity as a measurement has changed since the 1991 Census, with the number of tick boxes used to measure ethnicity now standing at 18 (up from 9 in 1991).

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