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THE FUTURE OF FOOTBALL FANZINES: HAVE THEY LOST THEIR VOICE IN THIS DIGITALISED AND DEREGULATED AGE.

Paul Breen and Paddy Hoey

ABSTRACT: Football fanzines once stood at the vanguard of fan activism. Historically, they have served as the voice of supporters, largely independent of the clubs they are associated with. Indeed, a recurring characteristic of these fanzines is that they often challenge and question authority. In the halcyon days of past decades, they proliferated and often acted as a powerful vector of change within football. Increasingly though, they have been pushed to the margins for a number of reasons. Such reasons range from the increasing digitalisation of media to the growing distance between fans and club owners as a consequence of the money that's now in the game. The consequence of football's inexorable drift towards deregulation is that fanzines alone can no longer act as agents of change and challenge. They need to work in synch with supporters' groups in order to make their voices heard. More than that, this needs to happen not just at a local but a national level so that supporters from top to bottom of English football's shaky pyramid are seen to speak with one voice. Perhaps above all, there is a need for independent regulation of the game's governance.

Keywords: football, finance, governance, fanzines, media, deregulation.

THE NAMES of football fanzines generally represent particular associations with specific clubs whether Middlesbrough's *'Fly Me to the Moon'* or Hull City's *'On Cloud Seven.'* Very often the reasons for such monikers is not readily apparent to outsiders. Even less cryptic incarnations such as *'Voice of The Valley'* at Charlton Athletic and *'Monkey Business'* at Hartlepool United require some knowledge of locality or history. Fanzines then have been a historical reflection of the insular spaces, the bastions that football clubs aspire to being. They exist in their own orbit, as remote from another as moons around the rings of Saturn. Sometimes, even when bringing the wider world into their hemisphere, it's just to reinforce their own sense of exceptionalism. Perhaps no greater example of this can be found than Peterborough United's former classic of the early 2000s – *'Blue Moon is a Man City Song for f**k sake.'*

Within the latter, there's a glorious sense of irreverence; another striking characteristic of football fanzines. Often, even in the very naming of them, there is a subliminal jag at authority or history. As such they've played a crucial part in carving out a niche for themselves, creating a distinctive face for their clubs in a very crowded landscape. Paradoxically though in this age of free market individualism, their past strengths in standing alone as an independent voice have now become an Achilles Heel of sorts. Such a situation is one that has allowed speculators to move from club to club stripping assets, knowing there's little communication across contexts. As has happened in several cases of recent times, a football club can be bought for a minimal fee and stripped of assets, before the perpetrators move on to the next target. Gregor Robertson in a *Times'* article of 2019 described this as "historic clubs being driven into the dirt" whilst others such as Kieran Maguire, of *Price of Football* podcast fame, have written and spoken widely of the rogues' galleries at the heart of all this.

Of course it has to be said that at individual clubs, fanzines have remained a constant thorn in the side of profiteering owners. The aforementioned *'Voice of The Valley'* is a prime example of this, helping to instigate, steer and solidify the opposition of Charlton Athletic supporters to Belgian businessman Roland Duchâtelet's ownership, wherein his attitude was that football fans are merely customers of a product he dictated. Fanzines can generate a sense of solidarity that leads to mobilisation in support of a common cause, such as opposition to what they see as bad ownership. As such, many owners see them through the same lens as Margaret Thatcher viewed unions – that they lack the economic understanding which underpins business practices. Increasingly that business has become “a high-risk gamble” (Stockwood, 2022) in which the ultimate losers are the supporters that fanzines speak to and for.

More than ever, in the present climate, there is a need for the voices of football supporters to be heard. Since 2018, the Football Supporters' Association (FSA) has been helping to further that cause of giving fans a greater voice in football's milieu. This organisation was formed after an amalgamation of the Football Supporters' Federation and Supporters' Direct so as to support and promote the work of Supporters' Trusts amongst other causes. Like fanzines it has its roots in a time of needing to impact change for the sake of constructively re-shaping the game. In doing so, the FSA is mirroring what the fanzine movement did to some extent in the first place, but now trying to enact that on a national rather than localised level.

Fanzines have popped up at every professional club in Britain and huge numbers of clubs in non-league and junior football. The anarchic spirit of the movement was reflected in often wilfully obscure titles such as Gillingham FC's *'Brian Moore's Head Looks Uncannily Like London Planetarium'*, Welsh non-leaguers *'Dial M for Merthyr'*, and the surrealist St Johnstone zine *'Wendy Who?'* Notably too, these fanzines shared commonalities across borders and regions.

The first acknowledged fan publication was *'The Shamrock'* at Glasgow Celtic which began life in 1963. It was produced by Edinburgh-based fans and centred on voicing their opposition to the Celtic board at the time. The popularity of this was such that that it is said that the club founded and established the official club magazine *'The Celtic View'*, still going to this day, as a response. The thing that separates fanzines though from official club publications is that fanzines have rarely spoken in the corporate and conformist tones of officialdom. When the first wave of popular football fanzines appeared in the 1980s, on the back of the boom in punk and post-punk music fanzines, they were an often surreal response to the gradually shifting politics, culture and economics of the football 'industry'. Hooliganism in the 1970s and 1980s had seen fans set in opposition with the police and authorities and the Thatcher government used it as an excuse to treat all football fans as another branch of the 'enemy within' – which also included trade unions. Writing in football magazine *442*, author Simon Curtis (2016) noted that football fans in the 1980s were “unvalued animals” and “the fanzine movement emerged, borne out of a deep-seated frustration at having no voice at all to respond to the government's whitewash job on all football supporters.”

In that pre-digital era, where the costs of making television or radio was prohibitively expensive, fans relied on the gatekeepers of the mainstream media - broadcasters, national newspapers or local newspapers for news about their team. Fan voices were rarely heard. This is why fanzines have served such an essential purpose. So much

of their success is down to the way that they are written. The late Professor Steve Redhead, the academic most associated with chronicling the development of the fanzine movement, noted that the ironic, piss-taking humour and wit of the zines had been inherited from punk rock and indie music in the 'musicalisation' of the football fandom, as popular music fashion influenced terrace culture and vice versa. (Brown, 2011) The South London punk fanzine '*Sniffin' Glue*' was the template for many of the first football zines.

Assembled with photocopiers, glue, staples and sticky tape, the rough and ready aesthetic combined with a critical approach to the game provided anarchic two fingered salutes to the police, club management and the football authorities. In the wider movement of football fanzines, that glorious irreverence is what gives them their tequila shot kick of wider impact. One such example found in Merseyside is that of '*The End*', jointly edited by Peter Hooton who would go on to be the lead singer of the band The Farm. This seminal fanzine provided a witty, scabrous account of the development of the culture and politics of the scally casuals who were going to Anfield and Goodison Park during a golden age for both clubs and the music of the city. In the fertile world of the Merseyside football casuals, '*The End*' told those on the outside what was in and what was out, the best places to drink and the places to avoid, commenting all the time on the culture and politics of Liverpool in the 1980s. The producers of other early fanzines readily admit that it was the Scousers who provided the template for almost everything else that appeared after their publications.

In fanzines there were no predetermined editorial standards or style to maintain like there were on newspapers and comics like *Roy of the Rovers*, and other than *Shoot* and *Goal* which were aimed at younger fans and teenagers, there were no other reality-based football magazines. Standing outside club structures, fanzines have always been able to voice thoughts that go against the grain of the mainstream, without compromise. That distance from the club they love has always been an essential part of the role that fanzine writers play.

At the same time, there has always been a lot more to football fanzines than just fighting the rogues' gallery of football clubs they seem to face habitually. They also keep their readers in touch with what's happening on the pitch with match reports for those unable to travel away. These match reports in fanzines up and down the country have always been delivered through the eyes of the hardcore fan for better or worse, in sickness and in health. For those lower down the pyramid, this has become increasingly important too with the mainstream news media's almost singular focus on stories of life in the cash-rich Premier League.

The anarchic spirit of fanzines that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s came at a time when there was a dearth of similar 'content' in the mainstream media but bubbling away in the background at this time was the developing platform of the Internet which was itself filled full of countercultural potential. Just as the Net hacked away at the economic and cultural role of the newspaper industry, social media put communicative potential in the hands of people who had previously been spectators of mainstream media. Now 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006), in possession of a smartphone or computer, could be fanzine editors and football phone-in hosts themselves without the need of a printing press or radio studio. The revolution in fan

media this century has happened because supporters grasped one of the great maxims of the age: “Don’t hate the media, be the media.” (Democracy Now!) Smartphone technology and social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have relatively low barriers to artistic expression (Jenkins, 2006) and thus a revolution in fan media has happened but to the detriment of sales for the old inky fanzine.

However, one should not be too quick to play the final death march for the fanzine because they have endured and displayed durability with new print-based fanzines springing up in recent times. This includes ‘*My Only Desire*’ magazine at Charlton Athletic (MODMAG) where the legendary ‘*Voice of the Valley*’ has recently switched to digital format only. But publications such as MODMAG are going in the opposite direction of many. Increasingly, the drift is towards digitalisation to stave off threats of extinction. In an era of smart phones, social media, YouTube and podcasts, the average fan can produce broadcast ready content that was once out of their grasp. Channels like Arsenal Fan TV and podcasts like *The Football Ramble* have bypassed the established broadcasting channels and produce as much content as the fans can consume at any time of the day and night. In a world where younger fans consume a majority of their ‘content’ on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, fanzines have faced a challenging time to survive. Some of the long standing and larger circulation fanzines continue and combine a magazine with social media, video and podcast content, including Newcastle’s ‘*True Faith*’, Sunderland’s ‘*A Love Supreme*’ and Leeds United’s ‘*Square Ball*.’

While it is tempting to take a digital utopian position on fans wresting the controls from the mainstream media during the Internet age, the spirit of the fanzine had already transferred to radio and television in the 1990s in the wake of the football boom after Italia 90 world cup and the formation of the Premier League. Radio legend Danny Baker, who cut his teeth on ‘*Sniffin’ Glue*’ and the punk-era New Musical Express, brought the fanzine spirit to Radio 5’s phone-in 606. Frank Skinner and David Baddiel did the same with *Fantasy Football* on BBC2 and Stuart Cosgrove and Tam Cowan maintain the anarchy of the fanzine on *Off the Ball* on Radio Scotland, a show that is a couple of years away from celebrating its 30th birthday.

A question arises then of whether the fanzine movement can reinvent itself afresh and again become a powerful symbol of supporters’ resistance to authority. Unfortunately the answer may well be that it cannot. Their traditional strengths of irreverence and individualism are not the tools needed to till the present fields. Football’s fractured landscape is such that it needs to move beyond a habit of holding conversations within its own close-knit circles. This is a time for forming allegiances not just at a local but also a national level. There is a pressing need for supporters groups to step out of the shadows and into more public, unified spaces and create a new radical form of solidarity. Right now, in the deregulated world of football, something badly needs to be done as consistently argued by those such as Kieran Maguire and by Jason Stockwood.

The time is right for an independent regulator to review what’s happening in the game and to see how a more sustainable and equitable environment can be created. This was a central tenet of Conservative MP Tracey Couch’s argument in her 2021 independent report for the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, entitled

Fan-Led Review of Football Governance: securing the game's future. This report highlighted a growing number of deep-seated issues in the English game and advocated the need for regulation. Such a passionate call though seemed to fall by the wayside when free-market disciple Liz Truss took charge of government, endorsing an ethos of greater deregulation of business and society, not less. However, Truss's shortest Prime Ministerial tenure in history, there now seems to be an opportunity to reinvigorate the call for an independent regulator. Football fanzines can play a significant part in that too.

One way in which this might be done, as has now happened at Charlton Athletic, is for fanzines and fans' groups to team up in acting as the voice of the fans. Recently the Charlton Athletic Supporters' Trust has launched a partnership with the aforementioned MODMAG, co-joining and taking the voice of fans in a new direction. Although this is a partnership taking place within one club, if this is replicated across clubs and contexts, it could have a major impact in terms of empowering supporters. The FSA has also done a great deal of work in trying to bring disparate voices within football together. The stronger such a chorus grows, the better for all concerned. Right now, football governance in England is crying out for change, perhaps mirroring the country as a whole. There's a need for greater connection within and across our clubs and communities. By using social media and web campaigns as part of that effort, fanzines can also reshape the digital age into an opportunity rather than a threat. Ultimately then, the demise of fanzines may yet be greatly exaggerated. However, to save themselves, they may need to save English football first of all.

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