

## **SOCCER FANS AND SUBCULTURAL MEDIA**

Prof. Dr. Jürgen Schwier  
Justus-Liebig-Universität

*Recebido em 1 de março de 2007*

*Aprovado em 13 de março de 2007*

### **Abstract**

Soap addicts, fans of Hip Hop, Folk Music, or Basketball have one thing in common: the various forms of their particular fan cultures will have experienced a rapid and extensive medialization over the last decade. Football is no exception – intensive active consumption of mass media representation of the game has long been a hallmark the sport. In this context, the paper will discuss the changes in German fan culture since the 1990s. As in England, two features are prominent. First, there is the foundation of independent fans' organizations, which have demanded proper representation within the clubs' power structures. Second, the emergence of fanzine-culture has – offline and online – become a significant motor for change. Fans, therefore, on account of their desire and need to participate, have developed variegated forms of media activity. This paper aims to assess the importance of these media in the changing structures of fandom.

Key words: football; media

### **Fan-culture in the change**

In the last years soccer fans have unfolded increasing own media activity. By means of those they articulate their requests and their need for participation. Single fractions of the fan-scene especially use the World Wide Web in order to produce a media public *from below* by means of their own homepages, webzines and network campaigns.

Characteristic for the change of the fan-culture in Germany are surely at first the groupings of s.c. critical soccer fans, who combine the passion for the play and the respective supported club with a thoughtful and sceptical attitude to the concrete club politics and for the entire commercialisation of football (see Aschenbeck 1998: 133-134 and Schwier 1998). In the tradition of the slogan *Reclaim the Game* the critical soccer fans after all want to influence the

development of football and the fan- culture belonging to it. Because they are moreover characterized by a mixture of irony and passion, media competence and the endeavouring for participation hardly to be found under the soccer followers afore, Giulianotti (1999) designates the critical fans absolutely accurate as *post-fans*.

On the basis of the results of an empirical study (see Schwier & Fritsch 2003) it will be represented in the following that the use of the digital media and the *networking* of supporters can be interpreted at the same time as a symptom and as a motor for transformation tendencies in the fan-culture. The reports try first of all to trace the differences and commonalities of the heterogeneous Internet-presence of fans as well as to carry out arrangements of the web pages. Subsequently the question will be which processes for building up meaning have any effect in this media practice.

### **Distinction and Participation**

The media activities of soccer fans are characterised in principle by the common characteristics demarcation and cooperation. Beside the obvious try for distinction, the digital documentation of differences in taste to other fractions of the fan-scene, the Internet-activities at the same time try to promote the solidarity of all engaged soccer fans in the often attested *Fight for the Game*. The horizon of the cyber fan-culture in this perspective is finally determined by the complex interrelations between demonstration of group identity respectively of alternative models of the fan-being on one side and the ordinary demonstration of cultural differences - both to the hegemonic forces in soccer and to the *Fair Weather Fans* - on the other side. The following statement of an ultra-alignment which is quite typical for the online-activities of fans indicates furthermore that the demarcation underlines usually substantial aspects of the own self understanding: "We, the generation Lucifer, will further try to gather those around us ... who see their own small world in the curve. (...) We don't need to act like

a cloned heap each week and to deliver a mad show for the Internet.” (<http://www.generation-luzifer.de>; transl.).

Soccer fan-groupings can be regarded as distinctive subcultures whereby the production of the own activities and preferences of taste in the World Wide Web play an important role for the development of the group identity and the consecutive contest for preferably authentic style of fan-being. In the endless fight for the status *best fans*, Internet-presences have become virtual arenas next to the songs, language choirs and curve choreographies on the social stage in which each fraction presents itself - with different setting of priorities - as especially authentic, humorous, creative, passionate and original. The afore quoted critical comments of the *Generation Lucifer* to the online-presentation of fan-actions point out simultaneously that the style-contest through the new medium became more confusing and more unsteady. Just in the quickly growing ultra-movement, groups for instance can influence their significance in the scene at least short-termed through comments on different forums and reproduction of spectacular curve choreography on their homepage. In this context it mostly remains uncertain whether range and quality of the online-activities correspond with the *real* appearance of the respective group of fans in the stadium.

The subtle distinctions between the various forms of development of fan-being can anyhow be documented in a multimedia way on the digital stage. In a comparable way as Wheaton & Beal (2003: 172-172) have exposed for the niche-magazines of the alternative sport, corresponding Internet-presences of fan-groupings are always a component of the fight for interpretation-sovereignty in the field of soccer and offers to both the insiders and the prospective customers a scene-typical stock of knowledge, whose acquisition can both prove affiliation and serve the extension of the subculture capital.

The examined media objects of soccer fans show a correspondent will for participation on the discourse-field of football and for co-operation at politics in the own club. Beyond the

extremely different interpretations fan-being among active soccer supporters there seems to be a fundamental agreement over the fact that fans must be more interested in the organization and production of the game and must intervene if they do not want to lose every influence on the soccer sport – more precise: on play planning, security concepts, ticket allocation, marketing measures or arrangement of the local stadium. The quintessence is thereby the continuance and the support of the grown fan-culture, whereby it becomes not always sufficiently clear, if the single groupings and initiatives fulfil this concept in substance.

By means of the online-activities, the fans create an own popular cultural capital that stands mostly in ambivalent relation to the ruling power constellation in the professional soccer. On the one hand the fans want to co-design the *experience soccer* and sometimes to participate in the decision-making processes of the clubs and organisations from within, on the other hand they detach themselves from the media-sport-complex and try its constraints of the system and mind-settings through self-willed practices and forms to creep in the protest communication. The fan-groups sketch themselves as a speaking tube of the interests of soccer followers and as faithful trustees of the *true* soccer, which they want to protect against further commercialisation-thrusts. That is why from their point of view this would also be connected with a process of the transformation of the stadium public - toward passive consumers on expensive seats instead of active fans on standing places.

The tension between the commercial penetration of popular culture and its potential at obstinacy and self-authorization expresses itself apparently in the field of the soccer in a vital way because this is favourably positioned on the continuum of expressivity. Here intensive feelings come into play and chances to bring up more utopian wishes for discussion. Just the emotional involvement into the discourse field of soccer sport probably stimulates the wish for participation and in content wise commitment whereby the productivity of the fans also affects the appearance of the original (see Fiske 1997: 62).

### **The Interactive dimension**

As the Internet represents a suitable communication platform for soccer fans, it can hardly surprise that in the forums of the websites a lively discussion culture has established itself long ago. According to the general opinion the electronic language deforms not only the linguistic usage, but also the language itself. The fans involved at the online-discussion communicate at the interface between speech and writing. This is also true for the current stylistic devices of the fans: jargon, insider-intonation, shortcuts, emoticons, associative references, word-creation etc.. Numerous contributions in the forums are spontaneous, casual and unedited. That is where the impression of the verbal linguistic usage - in written form - comes from. In this perspective communication in the Internet is accompanied by a change of language: 'The electronic language changes the dealing with text, it makes it mobile, but elusive as well, removes it from the concept of the contemplation and dependability that it had developed within the book culture' (Simanowski 2002: 10; transl.). The panellists in the fan-forums try to get coherence and refer to one of their previous speakers by quoting and/or explicitly addressing them. Though at the same time a general problem of online-discussions becomes evident: The more participants take part, the more difficult it is to follow the discussion; often the round divides itself into several discussion cords or drifts away from the original subject. This is where the hypothesis lies at hand that the sophisticated panellists know about the characteristics of the copy-and-paste-procedure and master these by considering, correcting and if nothing else by shortening the text – and that before they publish it in the forum. Their experience helps them to make use of the possibilities of online-communication. The contributions of beginners however are often redundant and awkward - and therefore less effective.

In substance the discussion in the forums circles around the usual subjects of fandom (among other things the self-image of the scene, commercialisation of football, violence and

repression). The majority of the fans writes about the social stage soccer: the human together and against each other. Soccer fans argue about such values that are also valid in other social connections: solidarity, justice, worth-faithfulness, morality, mutuality, group affiliation, envy, reward and punishment. At the same time they make sure that the generally accepted rules of giving and taking are kept and otherwise react with protest, refusal, criticism and indignation. They distinguish between facts and fiction and expose signal counterfeiters and cheaters. Soccer fans therefore proceed with a 'social brain module' (Schwier & Fritsch 2003: 147-168). From these written negotiations of value and sense giving arises tension: On the one hand each author intends a gain in status and distinction by creative and substantial remarks and positioning. He wants to stand out. On the other hand he searches for connection to the community, to which he recommends himself as a good alliance and cooperation partner. He wants to be integrated. These parallel processes embed themselves into an elusive interplay of the alliances and loyalties.

On the one hand the discussions in fan-forums tend to be part of authentic communication. Here and there different roles are assigned: the agitator, the negotiator, the opportunist, the loudspeaker, the madman etc. In the course of an online-discussion, which can extend over several weeks, the participants will repetitively occupy these roles. At the same time it can happen that a participant changes (sometimes several times) role and strategy – for instance from a consent-oriented argumentation to an isolated radical position. According to Simanowski (2002: 10) theatrical elements can be awarded to the electronic writing act since the reproduction of the senders and receivers and the usual role-play gives the entire act the character of a performance. On the other hand debates in digital media go according to their own rules. The anonymity of the Internet allows the factors dominance and hierarchy to lose their importance. The balance of power between producer and recipient flattens - but also that within the community. Nevertheless the everyday life-rules of the interpersonal understand-

ing, although moderated, are valid in the World Wide Web: he who already participates for a longer time in the panel and has made a name for himself among the other panellists disposes of more authority and credibility. Consequently he is able to influence regulations and agenda. Compared to discussions in face-to-face communication and to traditional media discussions the range of power is smaller. One cause for this is that in the (half-) anonymous network the panellists with a will for power don't have the disciplining instruments, which they can use in the face-to-face-communication or in the traditional communication via media. No strict look can prevent an incorrect contribution. No authority can devalue an opinion before its expression. Furthermore nonverbal communication means such as volume, intonation and visual contact cease to apply.

### **Attempt of a Classification**

On the basis of the analysed media objects of soccer fans four versions can be distinguished. These will be outlined in the following as (a) Online-Activities of critical fan-fractions, (b) Internet-presence of fun-centred-fractions, (c) Online-magazines of intellectual fractions and (d) Online-activities of ultra-fractions.

#### *Online-activities of critical fan-fractions*

Web pages of critical Soccer fans are generally characterised by the enhancement of an active, independent, basic-democratic and multicultural fandom. The use of the World Wide Web coherently aims at the profiling of the *grown fan-culture*, the mobilisation and showing of solidarity of soccer followers as well as the attention of the public media. After a closer look it stands out that concerning the range of the self-expressed requirements, there are two directions to detect. On the one hand it is about the Internet-presence of the fan-groups which concentrates on soccer-specific subjects (e.g. *Aktion Pro Fans*, Webzine

*Schwatzgelb*) as well as on the other hand about web pages of fan-initiatives, which beyond that are interested in socio-political questions (e.g. *Schalker Fan-Initiative*, *Bündnis aktiver Fußballfans*). While the last mentioned initiatives and fanzines were mostly formed offline already during the 1990's and then, with the beginning of the new century used the special opportunities of an Internet-presence, the soccer-centred actions and magazines were online-projects right from the beginning.

The best-known example for this trend surely is the club-overlapping action *Pro Fans*, which in the meantime has counterparts in more than 30 soccer clubs and is being recognized from the side of the media as well as the DFL and DFB as contact person. The idea of the formation of this online-campaign was developed - at that time as *Pro 15:30* - during a discussion of soccer fans from different clubs in the forum of the Internet-portal of *Stadionwelt*. The action *Pro 15.30* is known to successfully have implemented the Internet-based protest communication in the field of soccer and sees itself as a representative of "peculiar fan-interests". Overall, the future perspective of this project surely depends on continuous dedication of their active members and the further expansion at the basis (see König 2002: 67). The game surpassing demands are, with the exception of the universal, critical position about commercialisation of soccer, irrelevant. The sport of soccer is seen more as a politics free space. This leads to the assumption that the extensive exclusion of political topics from online-communication is supposed to guarantee the gathering and solidarity of possibly all fans under the banner of the club.

On the opposite, there are groupings like *BAFF* and the *Schalker Fan-Initiative* as well as fanzines like the *Übersteiger* - their founding followed as an answer to hooliganism and right wing extremist tendencies in national league stadiums about a decade ago - which intensively deal with current political questions and social problems. Disputes about social inequalities, violence, racism, right wing extremism or anti-Semitism are therefore an integral



part of their contributions to the soccer discourse. Acknowledging this background the critical fandom sees itself as an avant-garde of the football supporters.

#### Internet-presences of the fun-oriented fan-fraction

The fun-oriented fan-fraction does not counter the complete capitalization of the soccer sport with protest campaign, but rather with hedonistic annexation tactics, which caricature the supposed seriousness of soccer sport or use it for experience-oriented productions. Beside the homepages and webzines - the *Blutgraetsche* can probably still count as their prototypical representative - that aim on a humorous and/or satirical view, online-activities of the Groundhopper can also be assigned to this direction. These kinds of Internet-presences are an almost ideal communication opportunity for fans, who love to communicate and to express their opinions, who publish self-made texts, in which they observe the soccer industry with joke and irony as well as occasionally cover it with scorn and mockery. The distribution of humorous or satirical online-texts to the soccer sport as well as the practices of the ground-hopping scene can be interpreted within certain limits as a way to satisfy unfulfilled cultural needs whereby "the dividends ... are paid in the form of joke and recognition within the community" (Fiske 1997: 57; transl.). What concerns the media objects of the fun-centred fan-fraction primarily is therefore their own community; they are self-contained and only bid partially for public attention.

#### Online-magazines of the intellectual fan-fraction

For several years new fanzines like *der tödliche Paß* or *11 Freunde* tie up to the British tradition which is at the same time an intellectually stimulating, humorous and game-motivating argument. The magazines differ from other multimedia and subcultural forms of soccer reports on the one hand through a demanding linguistic level and on the other hand

through the consideration of subjects that are hardly treated otherwise online and offline (among other things: the transformation of soccer in east Europe, soccer and pornography, a trade union study about coaches in the professional sport or review of documentary films). The makers of the fanzines see a goal perspective for their journalistic activities in the establishment of a form of sport journalism that is oriented to the fan and suitable for the cultural concept of soccer. Users may be above all those new “cosmopolitan fans”, that Giulianotti (1999: 104-105) describes as younger, well trained and financially strong members of the average social layer, which - although they appreciate the comfort of today’s stadiums in all scepticism - still hang on to the search for the mythical ‘real genuine’ soccer. Especially the *11 Freunde* seem furthermore add to take over a moderating function between the communicative self-products of the fan-scene and the sport reports of the national quality press, that is they adopt debates begun on other fanzines and fan-initiatives and transport selectively the point of view articulated by soccer fans to the sport pages of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

#### Online-activities of the Ultra-fraction

The in the German soccer stadiums only since the nineties active ultra-scene understands itself basically as authentic youth movement and as new and at the same time fanatic and fanciful form of fan-being (see Gabriel 2004). In this context especially online-activities have decisively contributed to the networking and quick polarisation of this movement. The central idea of the ultra-philosophy is the possibly intensive experiencing, common, and the competition with other supporting groups mentioned and towards independence from club leading pointing production of fandom in the stadium. Obviously there are different interpretations of the appropriate ways for realisation of a loud, creative, and attention attracting supports. While some groups concentrate on spectacular curve choreographies, large sized ban-

ners, the making of original double brackets and the presentation of these activities on their websites, other ultras keep up the tradition of the so-called *Bengalo- and Pyro- Actions* or they participate – partly in cooperation with hooligans – in violence outrages in the surrounding of the game.

Under the label *Ultra* there are *left* as well as *right* symbols used. The refusal of every discrimination of minorities does apparently a priori not exclude the threat for other supporters or functionaries of a club. Ultras are anyhow no homogeneous and closed subculture. The websites of this fraction prove that the being-ultra is lead back to an inner attitude - to the club, the support or to the fandom. The ultra-movement remains troubled to strengthen this sticking together of the fan-scene and to take over the leading position within this process. The in the Internet demonstrative exhibited apolitical habit and the offensively represented higher valence of soccer passion and club-fidelity on the opposite of every political conviction is from the view of the ultras an essential presupposition for the inclusion of hopefully many soccer supporters. While the position of the audience violence is in no way unitary, online dominates an anti-racist position.

The relationship of the associations of the national league to the ultra-movement seems to be ambivalent before this background. On the one hand they welcome the colourful productions in the curves as a positive image-factor, on the other hand the actions of this emphasized independent groups evade the control and strive for canalisation of the clubs.

### **Powered Up or Dreaming?**

The online-activities primary pick up those subject areas that with the resistance against the commercialisation of soccer, the effort for the preservation of terraces, the critical conflict. The fight for an independent fan-culture and for the influences on the development of

the soccer sport is surely a common denominator of the websites. In the following these areas will be taken under a summarizing consideration with focus on the central aspect of commercialisation.

The progressing economy of soccer should – together with the breakthrough of new media technologies – contribute to a forming up of active fan-networks, which then serve as a speaking tube of all those soccer fans who refuse to stand opposite to the creeping integration of the ballgame in the recreation industry. Fans use the World Wide Web meanwhile as a central forum for the criticism of the commercialisation of the game and the fight for the preservation of the fan-culture. The homepages of the fan-groupings and webzines inform extensively about corresponding tendencies for development in the domestic soccer market and in the European foreign countries, enable the exchange in online-forums, force the mobilisation, promote in all the community under the soccer supporters and foster the cooperative cause of publicity effective actions. Thereby it has been produced a largely autonomous fan-area in the Internet which does not a priori need the supply of the classical sport journalism.

As communities of interpretation the active soccer followers deal just as extensive as pleasure-stressed with the cultural project soccer, whereas present playroom and possible potentials are being used for processes of self-authority. The *Pro Fans St. Pauli* for example have taken part in the competition *Fan Movie* organised by *Coca Cola*. The self-produced film by the fan-initiative (<http://www.p96.de/pro1530/pro-fans-stpauli.mov>) expresses opposition to those marketing strategies (“bought fan-culture”) and picks out the negative effects of the pressure capitalisation of soccer on the fandom as a central theme. The last mentioned example illustrates that the soccer fans articulate their own interests with their medial ways of action and they come up with cultural differences. The fans are in no way helplessly exhibited by the strategies of the media-sport-complex but they can run under rules, product logics or system constraint with the help of unpredictable practises. One can convert the com-

mercial campaign *Fan Movie* promoted by the firm *Coca Cola* and take part like the *Pro Fans St. Pauli*, “by doing something with it” (De Certeau 1988: 60; transl.). By creating their own meanings soccer supporters move quasi as pathfinders supple in the jungle of social control and poach on the ground of the soccer industry. The online-activities mirror among other things the will of the fans to make a difference in the (soccer-) world. If the different fan-fractions keep on showing the diversions to the media-sport-complex they keep hoping for making a point in improving the circumstances in the soccer sport with their passion, their bound with each other, their ideas and their engagement.

### **Bibliography**

ASCHENBECK, Arndt. 1998. *Fußballfans im Abseits*. Kassel : Agon

BAFF (Hrsg.). 2004. *Ballbesitz ist Diebstahl*. Göttingen : Verlag Die Werkstatt

BOYLE, Raymond & HAYNES, Richard. 2004. *Football in the New Media Age*. London : Routledge

DE CERTEAU, Michel. 1988. *Kunst des Handelns*. Berlin : Merve

DEMBOWSKI, Gerd & SCHEIDLE, Jürgen (Hrsg.). 2002. *Tatort Stadion. Rassismus, Antisemitismus und Sexismus im Fußball*. Köln : PapyRossa

FISKE, John. 1997. Die kulturelle Ökonomie des Fantums. In SpoKK (Hrsg.): *Kursbuch JugendKultur*. Mannheim : Bollmann: 54-69

GABRIEL, Michael. 2004. Ultra-Bewegungen in Deutschland. In BAFF (Hrsg.), *Ballbesitz ist Diebstahl*. Göttingen : Verlag Die Werkstatt: 179-194

GIULIANOTTI, Richard. 1999. *Football. A Sociology of the Global Game*. Cambridge : Polity Press

KÖNIG, Thomas. 2002. *Fankultur. Eine soziologische Studie am Beispiel des Fußballfans*. Münster, Hamburg, London : LIT

SCHWIER, Jürgen. 2000. *Sport als populäre Kultur. Sport, Medien und Cultural Studies*. Hamburg : Czwalina

SCHWIER, Jürgen & FRITSCH, Oliver. 2003. *Fußball, Fans und das Internet*. Baltmannsweiler : Schneider

SIMANOWSKI, Roberto. 2002. *Interfictions. Vom Schreiben im Netz*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

WHEATON, Belinda. & BEAL, Becky. 2003. `Keeping it Real`: Subcultural Media and the Discourses of Authenticity in Alternative Sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38: 155-176

**Informações do autor:**

Prof. Dr. Jürgen Schwier  
Institut für Sportwissenschaft  
Fachbereich Psychologie und Sportwissenschaft  
Justus-Liebig-Universität  
Kugelberg 62  
D-35394 Giessen  
Juergen.Schwier@sport.uni-giessen.de