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Published online: 06 Mar 2018.

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Scalar tensions in urban toponymic inscription: the corporate (re)naming of football stadia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines issues of scale in urban toponymic inscription. The specific focus of inquiry is toponymic commodification, whereby corporate brand names of international scope are imposed on English football stadia and their locally embedded fan communities. We employ primary data relating to three football clubs in the Greater Manchester conurbation, all of which have sold their stadium naming rights to corporate entities. Drawing on fans' perspectives, our findings initially surface the scalar tensions arising from such occurrences. We explore how football club authorities attempt to manage these tensions; first through efforts to embed corporate names into the fabric of urban communities, and second by using commemoration to valorize notions of the "local" for their fan base. The article concludes by discussing how our findings deepen understanding of critical toponymies, particularly in terms of theorizing scale and shedding light on the workings of neoliberal agendas for controlling urban space.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, there has been growing academic interest in critical toponymy, which lies at the intersection of place naming, place making and power (Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009). Much of this work considers the political dimensions that underpin the urban toponymic landscape, particularly via street naming (e.g. Azaryahu, 1996; Karimi, 2016; Rose-Redwood, 2008a, 2008b; Shoval, 2013), and as a means of power, identity and nation-building by government institutions in postcolonial or post-authoritarian/ totalitarian contexts (e.g. Duminy, 2014; Light & Young, 2014; Yeoh, 2009). However, as Hagen (2011) notes, "[a]lthough often implicit in toponymic studies, theorizations of scale are seldom engaged in a sustained manner" (p. 24). This is manifest in a paucity of research into how constructions of scale are deployed in urban toponymic practice by relevant place stakeholders.

Our paper addresses this lacuna by investigating the inter-scalar power relationships involved in the (re)naming of football stadia by sponsoring corporate entities – or what Boyd (2000) refers to as "selling home." The spatial remit of these sponsoring brands

can often be far wider (typically international or global) than that of the clubs concerned, which have been described as "small businesses that are locally embedded" (Edensor & Millington, 2008, p. 188). In particular, we focus on scalar tensions arising from the juxtaposition of internationally oriented brands as stadium toponyms with the typically strong connections of football clubs to urban locales and their populations. This emphasizes how the construction of sporting identity continues to resist reductionist accounts by clinging onto spatially rooted distinctiveness, usually within urban contexts (Edensor & Millington, 2008; Williams, 2006). Here, we can turn to Andrews and Ritzer's (2007) critique of the "constitutive inter-relationship between the global and the local" (p. 137), which avoids flattening accounts of globalization's dominance by acknowledging local agency.

Counter to the above arguments, we should not romanticize the local as a site of resistance, as this deflects from the global and "imperialistic" (Andrews & Ritzer, 2007) ambition(s) of some locally embedded institutions and organizations, not least those football clubs that consistently occupy the highest echelons of Europe's various elite leagues (e.g. the English Premier League, the German Bundesliga, and Spain's La Liga). Thus, it has been argued that clubs such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Barcelona, Manchester United and Chelsea, to name but a few, have established themselves as global brands, with legions of fans far removed from the club's locality, and who can be positioned as consumers of its successes and failures (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). Furthermore, an ongoing and intense bidding war for the global television rights to elite league football has fueled its internationalized marketization (Millward, 2013). Andrews and Ritzer (2007) indicate that in a sporting context such developments are best captured by the deployment of the term "grobal" – an apparent neologism combining the words "growth" and "global", which emphasizes "the fact that there are global processes that overwhelm the local rather than neatly integrating the two" (p. 137).

Building on the above issues, our paper is also concerned with an aspect of critical toponymy deemed worthy of further research (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2010); namely, toponymic commodification and the selling of naming rights to places. This connects to wider debates regarding the commercialization of urban space, particularly when cities embrace an entrepreneurial agenda (Harvey, 1989). While Light and Young (2015) identify private sector involvement in the naming of sports stadia as a well-established manifestation of such practice, they also recognize that there has been "limited scrutiny of this phenomenon" (p. 439 – for notable exceptions see Boyd, 2000; Church & Penny, 2013; Vuolteenaho & Kolamo, 2012). Thus, by examining the corporate (re)naming of three football stadia within the Greater Manchester conurbation of northwest England, we advance understanding of urban toponymic commodification, and specifically reveal how scalar processes and interactions play a crucial role in this. In doing so, we contribute empirical evidence towards emerging debates regarding the use of corporate toponyms, which have been largely dependent on secondary sources (e.g. Light & Young, 2015; Medway & Warnaby, 2014). Linking back to Harvey's (1989) notion of an urban entrepreneurialism, we also shed light on the machinations of the neoliberal city by demonstrating how institutional elites enact management processes to facilitate the influence of corporate toponyms over urban space.

We begin with a review of literature relating to toponymic commodification, scalar perspectives in critical toponymy, and the local embeddedness of football. Following a brief overview of the three clubs studied, and the data collection/analysis procedures undertaken, our findings are reported under two broad thematic areas: 1) fan perspectives on the scalar tensions arising from corporate (re)naming of their club's stadium; and 2) organizational management of stadia toponyms from the perspective of club authorities. The discussion and conclusion draws the threads of our argument together to shed light on the scalar complexity of urban toponymic inscription in a footballing context.

Toponymic commodification, scale, and football's embeddedness

Previous work has shown that corporate entities can rename areas of urban space for attempted economic gain. Medway and Warnaby (2014) identify how property developers and estate agents in London refer to an area of Kings Cross as the "Regent Quarter" in an attempt to boost property values and attract inward investment. Similarly, Vuolteenaho and Ainiala (2009) demonstrate that the toponymic landscape of Vuosaari, a residential district of Helsinki, reveals "a burgeoning neoliberal tendency in suburban linguistic namescaping, ultimately intended to enthral people as consumers" (p. 247).

We are concerned with corporate toponyms as applied to football stadia. Whilst naming sporting venues after wealthy team owners dates back to the early twentieth century (Leeds, Leeds, & Pistolet, 2007), the purposeful sale of naming rights to stadia by football clubs and their owners is a more recent development. What makes this different from other attempts to rename urban space is that it typically involves the *direct* use of a corporate name, arguably moving into the realm of toponymic *branding*. To illustrate, 14 out of 18 German Bundesliga football stadia had been renamed after corporate brands by 2013 (Woisetschläger, Haselhoff, & Backhaus, 2014); and in 2017, seven of 20 English Premier League stadia also bore a corporate name (Football Tripper, 2017).

However, attempts to apply corporate names to stadia are not always well received by fans. Such a reaction was evident in the 2011 debacle over the renaming of Newcastle United's St James Park ground, so called since 1880, to the "Sports Direct Arena." Significant in this case was the fact that the owner of Newcastle United Football Club, Mike Ashley, also owned the company Sports Direct International plc, with which the stadium naming rights were associated. It was argued by the club that the name change to the Sports Direct Arena signaled the financial potential of Newcastle United to other prospective sponsors, and that, in this respect, the St James' Park name was no longer "commercially attractive" (BBC, 2011). In response, fans took direct action, including painting the original name back onto the perimeter wall of the stadium from where it had been removed (BBC, 2012). As a result, by 2013 the St James' Park name was reinstated (Edwards, 2012).

The corporate renaming of a football stadium arguably moves beyond a straightforward business transaction embedded within conventional sponsorship dealings, when it extends the political and economic influence of private finance into a formerly public realm. This is the recognition that it is not just football stadia themselves that may carry

a corporate name, but also the urban space and infrastructure surrounding them, which can become similarly rebranded. Thus, the area around Manchester City's Etihad Stadium is now rarely referred to in Manchester City Council documents and plans by its former name of "Bradford," but as the "Etihad Campus" (see, for example, Manchester City Council Executive, 2017, p. 18). This is reflected in local residents' concerns that the "Bradford" name will be erased with the ongoing march of urban regeneration (Glendinning, 2013). And, as we discuss below, the "Etihad" name has also found its way onto a tram stop of the city's public transport network. These practices are not simply confined to particular sports or countries; in the US, for example, the Dallas Cowboys American football team play at the AT&T Stadium, which is found on AT&T Way.

Such developments appear to demonstrate a "stealthy" (Brown, 2015) approach to the neoliberalization of urban space (Peck & Tickell, 2002), which "is caught up in specific forms of naming that symbolically and materially solidify current (and historical) processes of capitalist accumulation by dispossession" (Berg, 2011, p. 13). In the case of elite international football clubs, these toponymic practices are often ably abetted by super-rich owners, who may seek corporate value, as well as personal status, via financial involvement in their club (Franck, 2010) – indeed, in this sense, the media and supporters' associations often portray football clubs as "playthings" for the rich (Hayward, 2017). Current practice also suggests that corporate value is viewed by a club's ownership as being further enhanced through the imposition of corporate stadium names. This appears especially the case when these stadium names relate to companies in which a club owner may also have financial involvement, as seen with Newcastle United (outlined above) and Manchester City (explained in more detail below).

In another context, Light and Young (2015) identify examples of corporate toponyms in Hungary, manifest in the long-established practice of naming streets after commercial enterprises; a phenomenon more common following the end of state socialism in 1989. Their work also emphasizes the importance of scalar issues, in that some streets with corporate names reflect the embeddedness of *local* companies. However, as Light and Young (2015) note:

> [a] further set of street names reflect the significance of international investment for the Hungarian economy, and the naming practice is clearly linked with promoting Hungary as firmly embedded in global capitalist economic networks (p. 442).

This is evident in toponyms such as Mercedes Street, Nokia Street, and Samsung Square; although demonstrating local as well as global ties, these streets are close to production facilities operated by the companies concerned. Furthermore, Light and Young (2015) indicate the inter-scalar implications inherent in the complex stakeholder relationships underpinning such urban toponymic practice:

> [i]n some cases the companies involved built new roads, which they named after themselves, while in other instances businesses paid local authorities for the naming rights. There are also examples of urban administrations choosing to name streets after companies without payment, perhaps as a means of establishing good relations with them, and in order to embed them (and the investment and employment that they bring) into the local economy (p. 443).

This clearly reveals the importance of scalar considerations in toponymic commodification. However, as noted above, Hagen (2011, p. 23) states that, aside from a few studies (e.g. Alderman, 2003), toponymic research "often ignores how constructions of 'scale' are deployed."

When considering issues relating to scale in wider geographical research, Hagen (2011, p. 24) suggests general agreement "that scale can be conceived as a practice or process rather than an ontological given," thereby connecting to notions of relationality and plurality in scalar matters. Similarly, Brenner (2001) contends that the "politics of scale" should be considered, not in terms of *singular* connotations (i.e. as occurring *within* a relatively bounded geographical area), but from a *plural* perspective, denoting "the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among* geographical scales" (p. 600, emphasis in original). This is articulated in terms of "scalar structuration," whereby the "meaning, function, history and dynamics of any one geographical scale can only be grasped relationally, in terms of upwards, downwards, and sidewards links to other geographical scales" (Brenner, 2001, p. 605).

A complementary viewpoint is articulated by Marston, Jones, and Woodward (2005, p. 419), again challenging the "rigidities" of traditional approaches to the concept of scale, arguing for *the local* as an "entry point to understanding 'broader' processes, effectively, examining scale from underneath." This perspective is manifest in the work of Howitt (1993) and Cox (1998), with the latter distinguishing between what he terms *spaces of dependence* and *engagement*. Here, spaces of dependence are defined by more-or-less localized social relations, which define place-specific conditions for material well-being and sense of significance – for our purposes this might include fan affiliation to the local football team. By contrast, spaces of engagement constitute broader sets of relationships of a more global character, which may act to undermine or dissolve spaces of dependence. Drawing on such ideas, we highlight the interactions arising from the imposition of toponyms as corporate brands of international scope on the unique local embeddedness and rooted place identity of football stadia, clubs and their associated fan communities.

In unpacking football's embeddedness, particularly for English clubs with their links to individual cities, towns, and specific urban districts, Edensor and Millington (2008) note the strong ties between teams and the communities in which they were established and have subsequently developed (see also Stone, 2007). These ties are sometimes reflected in the persistence of team nicknames linked to a historic industrial heritage of the town or city in question. Thus, Sheffield United are known as "the Blades," and Stoke City "the Potters" – a reference to the former global dominance of these cities in cutlery and pottery production respectively.

Traditionally, fans have supported their local team, and their cohesion as a community is founded on shared experience and memories (Hand, 2001). Accordingly, football stadia and their environs are rendered as "memory places" (Boyd, 2000) and sites of pilgrimage (Bale, 2000; Church & Penny, 2013), within which a team's triumphs (and disasters) have occurred. Moreover, football stadia are often closely linked to their surrounding areas via road names (Bale, 1989), or other similar references in the local signscape, including the names of small businesses. Local embeddedness is also reflected in place-specific match-day rituals and routines centered on stadia (Edensor & Millington, 2010).

Nevertheless, Edensor and Millington (2008) also recognize that local ties can be eroded by the contemporary restructuring of the football "industry." This takes many forms, not least the growing sponsorship of clubs (especially in the game's higher echelons) by international corporations and their brands, and the associated sale of stadia naming rights, which arguably "dilutes" a club's "local inscription" (Edensor & Millington, 2008, p. 178). Conversely, the influence of football's restructuring forces might sometimes be overstated. For example, the high-profile club Manchester United has ruled out any corporate renaming of its Old Trafford ground, supposedly to preserve the tradition and associations with which this original name is imbued (Ogden, 2015). A more critical reading might contend that clubs like Manchester United have evolved into significant corporate entities in their own right, thereby viewing their stadium name as a lucrative brand asset requiring protection.

Context and method

As noted above, this study focuses on three clubs in the Greater Manchester conurbation, which have all changed their original stadium names to ones associated with a corporate sponsor. The clubs are Manchester City, which, at the time of writing, plays in the English Premier League (the top tier of English professional football); Championship (second tier) team Bolton Wanderers; and Oldham Athletic from League One (third tier).

From 1923–2003, Manchester City played at the club-owned Maine Road stadium to the south of the city center, before moving to a stadium in the east of the city (Manchester City, 2017), originally built for athletics events at the 2002 Commonwealth Games. This new venue was initially named the City of Manchester Stadium, but in 2011 the club negotiated with the City Council (the stadium's owners) for control of the naming rights in return for an increase in rent payments. This paved the way for a 10-year deal with international airline operator Etihad (Taylor, 2011), owned, like the club, by Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family. As indicated above, the development of the area around the Etihad Stadium has also been funded by the company and named the Etihad Campus.

Bolton Wanderers played at Burnden Park, a club-owned ground close to Bolton town center, from 1895–1997. The club then moved to the newly-built Reebok Stadium, which it also owned, on the outskirts of Bolton Metropolitan Borough. This venue was initially named after the global brand Reebok, but was subsequently renamed Macron Stadium in 2014, after an Italian-owned international sportswear company (Bonnar, 2014). Oldham Athletic have played at the club-owned[1] Boundary Park stadium since 1899 (The Beautiful History, 2017). In 2014, this venue was renamed SportsDirect.com Park, following a five-year naming rights deal (BBC, 2014) with the UK-based international sportswear manufacturer and retailer Sports Direct International plc.[2] This company is also known for its present and past financial involvement with other UK football clubs, including Newcastle United (see above).

Our findings are drawn from three key data sources collected by two of the authors. First, the environs of the three stadia studied were walked to get a "feel" for the urban areas in which they were situated and observe any toponymic congruity between current and former stadia names, and those of streets and buildings

in the vicinity. These data were recorded using field notes and photography. Second, group discussions were undertaken with fans of the three clubs, comprising broad-based topic prompts focused on issues relating to corporate stadium (re)naming. These discussions took place in mutually agreed venues. Participants were recruited via supporters' association representatives and through online sources such as fan message boards, where we gained permission from message board moderators to approach fans. Reflecting a recognized male gender bias among English football fans (EFL, 2015), participants were predominantly male (14 males and 4 females). We also attempted to gain the views of adult fans across a wide variety of age groups, with participants ranging between 20 and 69 years in age. Third, to obtain an organizational perspective, interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with senior executives from the three clubs (one at Bolton, one at Oldham, and two together at Manchester City.)[3] Both group discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Our epistemological approach to the collection and analysis of data accords with an interpretivist philosophy, emphasizing the importance of how language, discourse and meaning are socially constructed (Myers, 2013). Consistent with Abdallah and Langley (2014) and Heracleous (2006), we began from the position of viewing all data (i.e. group discussion/executive interview transcripts and field notes) as text. Each author independently reviewed the data, looking for relevant points of interest. Following the tenets of inter-coder reliability (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013), the authors then collectively negotiated their interpretations of the data into the aggregated key themes explored below.

Scalar tensions and corporate (re)naming: fan perspectives

All three clubs studied were open to inter-scalar toponymic tensions (Hagen, 2011; Light & Young, 2015), arising from brand names with international presence and scope being applied to their stadia – and in the case of Bolton, more than once. Such brand impositions on stadium spaces hold the potential to *conflict* with locally embedded fan communities, for whom the stadium is a nexus of regular interaction (see, for example, Edensor & Millington, 2010). "Conflict," in this sense, equates closely to ideas in scalar geography outlined above, relating to how spaces of engagement can undermine and dissolve spaces of dependence (Cox, 1998). However, fan comments in relation to stadia renaming suggested a distinction between the perspectives of Oldham fans tied to a long-established stadium, and those of Bolton and Manchester City, whose stadia had both been newly-built and involved relocations.

Corporate toponyms and the long-established stadium

From the outset, many Oldham fans discussed a perceived irrelevance of the SportsDirect.com Park toponym:

> Boundary Park *is* Oldham Athletic. SportsDirect.com can be any ground in the country. They can go and sponsor anybody else if they want to. They're not tied to us at all... there isn't another Boundary Park (Oldham fan a).

Here, the imposition of a corporate toponym highlights the scalar discrepancy between an international brand and local community interests. Tension surfaces in the perceived potential of the corporate name to render Oldham Athletic's stadium as a space of "nowhereness" (Arefi, 1999), or "any ground in the country." As one fan explained:

> Boundary Park; it's got something about it. It's more a sports name. It's a park. The area is part of the town. Sports Direct is not part of the town. (Oldham fan b).

Similarly, another fan identified how the Boundary Park name "defines a geographical area that people can relate to, whereas you can't do that with a company" (Oldham fan c).

Corporate names were therefore regarded as little more than temporary, removable "place holders" that could not dislodge the original toponym:

> Boundary Park… it wouldn't be SportsDirect.com Park because it's not a permanent name. Boundary Park's a permanent name, if you know what I mean (Oldham fan a).

This dislike of – and unwillingness to engage with – the corporate stadium name encapsulated fans' protection of, and pride in, their locally embedded and rooted identity (Edensor & Millington, 2008; Stone, 2007):

> Oldham fan d: "Some people are more ferocious about their area and their name than other areas."

> Oldham fan e: "It's our pride isn't it."

> Oldham fan d: "It's like Stoke fans are really ferocious, Newcastle fans are really ferocious."

> Oldham fan b: "They need their name, they need their identity."

> Oldham fan e: "It's because those clubs are more rooted in the local environment. If you look at Man United, there's more fans outside Manchester than there are in."

> Oldham fan d: "They've got history, but they haven't got local support. [From] Salford maybe, but otherwise they're coming from all over the world."

It can be seen here that Oldham fans also contrasted their situation with that of bigger clubs like Manchester United. Whilst it is clearly unrealistic to suggest that Manchester United has not got "local support," the point remains that such support is inevitably rendered less significant when set against a backdrop of grobal forces (Edensor & Millington, 2008; after Andrews & Ritzer, 2007). These forces are geared to promoting and monetizing the football club as a global brand (Hamil, 2008; Lee, 1998), which can result in an international fan base that outnumbers and overshadows that drawn from the local area.

Corporate toponyms and newly-built stadia

For Manchester City and Bolton fans, scalar tensions were less defined, perhaps reflecting the fact that both the Etihad and Macron stadia are recently built, and have involved relocations from the clubs' former "homes." Consequently, the corporate name was less likely to be in direct conflict with any deep, topophilic bond (Tuan, 1974) between fans and their new stadium and its surroundings, as this had not had

time to fully develop. This accords with Edensor's (2015, p. 83) suggestion that the emotional and affective sense of belonging that typifies the connectedness of fans and football stadia is embedded through "repetitive practical, embodied engagement," and therefore takes time to "settle" and "knit" in new locations. As one Bolton fan stated:

> We haven't got the history yet [at] the Reebok/Macron. Maybe in 50 years' time there might be, because the history will be there; but because it's a new stadium, or still quite a new stadium, it's not got the history (Bolton fan a).

Despite this, the same fan contrasted the local connections of the former Reebok corporate stadium name (a global brand, but originating in Bolton), with the absence of a similar local heritage for Macron:

> Reebok was kind of a Bolton firm..., it was at least keeping it within Bolton. It wasn't like it was branded or something, like it is now (Bolton fan a).

Another fan noted that there had been a loss of local connectivity and embeddedness for the club through this change of corporate toponym, claiming, "We've lost that local side of it to an Italian company" (Bolton fan b).

Stadium newness also deflected concerns over the Etihad name amongst Manchester City fans:

> For us, it was slightly different because it's a new stadium, we had no history (Manchester City fan a).

In addition, fans recognize the fact that since 2008 the Etihad name can be associated with significant financial investment in the club by its current owners, the Al Nahyan family. This has clearly contributed to the team's most recent success in the form of FA and League Cup wins in 2011 and 2016 respectively, and two Premier League titles in 2012 and 2014:

> ...because that's a new stadium, I didn't really give a monkeys, if it's more money to buy players... So changing it to something like the Etihad, I think we're okay with: a) because it's new, b) because it's a direct relationship between the owners of the club, and not many people were unhappy with the owners (Manchester City fan b).

Notwithstanding Manchester City fans' general acceptance of the Etihad stadium name, the brand's international scope has inevitably pushed the club further onto a global stage, to rival the media profile of footballing neighbors Manchester United. This has attracted a new breed of football flâneurs (Giulianotti, 2002) and "tourist" fans (Linden & Linden, 2017, p. 159) that are not always welcomed by existing supporters:

> We're getting tourists now... There is an uneasy relationship between those who have been there a long time and those who are new to it. I feel that tension sometimes (Manchester City fan c).

There is also an apparent "othering" discourse at play here, whereby genuine fan identity is constructed as something time-served and locally rooted, compared to new fans from outside the area who are devoid of such credentials.

Prior to Etihad's involvement in Manchester City, Edensor and Millington (2008) optimistically proposed that the club was attempting to apply a "glocal" strategy of "nuanced embeddedness" to its business, combining a global focus with continued

sensitivity to local fan bases. However, fans' views above suggest that ongoing tensions between global and local fan bases, catalyzed in part by the introduction of the Etihad toponym, are becoming increasingly challenging to manage effectively without a "flattening out of place, identity and culture" (Edensor & Millington, 2008, p. 173) at the local level, and an inevitable drift of the club towards grobalization.

Imagined resistance to corporate stadium toponyms

The above discussion indicates that a club's move to a new stadium denudes the local embeddedness of its fan base to some degree. Others suggest this is manifest in the disruption of fans' match day routines and associated geographies of practice in new stadia settings (Edensor & Millington, 2010). Such a weakening of place connectedness appears to temper fans' hostile responses to the renaming of their *new* stadium after an international brand, as locally embedded notions of identity have not had time to develop, and are not, therefore, perceived as under threat.

Conversely, when imagining the hypothetical scenario of their former stadia assuming a corporate brand name, Bolton and Manchester City fans alike indicated they would view this as a more direct threat to a historically accumulated sense of local embeddedness and spatially connected identity. This resonates with ideas regarding the importance of an individual's "interactional past" with a physical site in the development of place attachment to it (Milligan, 1998). As two Bolton fans explained:

> Bolton fan c: "I would have been totally disgusted. I don't think I could have accepted that…"

> Bolton fan a: "It's the history that comes with that. Like Burnden Park was, you know, years, 100 years of history that is there at that stadium, that's always been Burnden."

> Bolton fan c: "That's Burnden and that's where we are, who we are."

> Bolton fan a: "Yeah, exactly, that's like your identity embedded in the stadium."

Manchester City fans were equally certain in their imagined resistance to any corporate renaming of the former Maine Road stadium, where the team had played for 80 years, emphasizing how this would have disrupted a temporally and spatially accumulated sense of connection with the club:

> Yeah, I would have been a lot less happy if it had been Maine Road… because one of the things that makes football such, when we have this connection to it, is we can go back with those years and those links and so forth. And I think if you'd start interfering with that it weakens the whole relationship you've got with the club (Manchester City fan c).

These narratives of imagined resistance arguably act as a form of psychological "repair and maintenance" work (Graham & Thrift, 2007), allowing fans to articulate a tough rhetoric of toponymic resistance that preserves a stability between signs and spatial order in a hypothetical sense. This presents them as loyal supporters with a sense of club heritage. At the same time, the imagined nature of such toponymic resistance allows room for fan discourses to acknowledge that, in reality, the corporate name of their new stadium (and any associated investment) is part of the

modern game. Furthermore, it could disadvantage the club if these opportunities were rejected:

> I mean it's a sign obviously of moving towards more modern times, isn't it? It is a branded stadium. Obviously, that's more money… Burnden Park was Burnden Park because of where it was. And I suppose there's a lot of nostalgia around Burnden… I think it helps keep that era and obviously the memories alive there, but it's a brand new stadium, modern, and it was kind of just keeping up with modernization of sponsorship of the stadium, which obviously other clubs are doing as well (Bolton fan a).

Oldham Athletic have played at the same stadium for over a century, and as evidenced above, their fans articulated a "ferocious" protection and preservation of the original Boundary Park toponym in the face of its corporate replacement. This is perhaps the best evidence that the imagined resistance of Bolton and Manchester City fans to the renaming of their former Burnden Park and Maine Road stadia is not just idle talk.

Organizational management of corporate toponyms

It is also instructive to consider the corporate (re)naming of football stadia from the perspective of club authorities. The critical toponymy literature highlights naming practices as manifestations of political power play, and hegemonic control by institutional authorities within urban space (e.g. Alderman, 2003; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Such practices may also face active citizen (or in our specific context, fan) resistance in the form of deliberate, counter-performative toponymic utterances (Rose-Redwood, 2008b), or a more passive inertia and habit through the continued use of historical toponyms by the local populace (Light & Young, 2014).

Previous work on institutional efforts to inscribe space with new toponyms has been largely based on archival work (e.g. Duminy, 2014; Rose-Redwood, 2008b; Shoval, 2013). Here, by contrast, the renaming of stadia was so recent and so fresh in the memory that club executives could be questioned directly on the matter. They were candid on the intent of such initiatives, emphasizing the importance of sponsorship and commercial investment (Buhler, 2006; Emery & Weed, 2006), and that the views of fans were of limited consequence in determining the outcome of corporate (re)naming processes.

One executive (anonymized) articulated his club's approach quite simply, noting, "It's whatever the deal the commercial team is able to strike that will come out on top." Another advocated a slightly more flexible approach:

> I mean ultimately, because we're obviously a private business, the decision was made by the Board at the time. But historically, we do have several focus groups with fans, just to get a flavor and stuff like that. But ultimately the final decision will boil down to the chairman. (Club executive – anonymized).

This suggests that fans had been consulted. In this instance, however, it is implied that this amounted to a token gesture by the club to show that is was acting in a consultative manner, rather than out of a genuine desire to capture fans' views.

Embedding corporate names at the local level

Despite this rather bullish approach, club authorities were clearly aware of the potential for scalar tensions between corporate brands of international scope being used as stadium names, and the local connectedness of fan communities. They were, therefore, keen to highlight attempts to embed those brand names more effectively at a local level. At Manchester City, this has been facilitated through a purposeful strategy of widening the scope of inscription for the Etihad brand name into the regeneration of space and buildings around the stadium, and even a nearby tram stop (Figure 1):

> It wasn't a standalone move… it became the Etihad Campus and the [Etihad] tram stop opened. And at the same time it became the Etihad Stadium (Manchester City executive).

As Church and Penny (2013) indicate in their work on Arsenal Football Club, names that extend the reach of stadium institutions into surrounding spaces in this manner may also help to legitimize the process of public space management.

In addition, the Etihad Campus also includes venues for all-year-round community activities and participation, enabling the Etihad name to become further engrained within the fabric of the local area:

> …building facilities on this site [are] kind of rooted more into the local wider community. And it's not just a football ground at weekends and stuff, but a 7/365 destination (Manchester City executive).

This shows how toponymic commodification can be more successful when there is a degree of "scalar sensitivity" in its introduction, embracing a spatial remit which involves integration of the corporate brand with community life, and in which the

Figure 1. Sign denoting the name of the tram stop nearby the Etihad Stadium.
Source: Authors' image.

stadium itself is but one integrated element of a broader toponymic intervention within an urban district.

Such an approach also represents a scalar inversion of the brand-place interrelationships identified by Pike (2011), using the example of the beer brand Newcastle Brown Ale. Here, connections to Newcastle, realized through incorporation of the toponym within the brand name, arguably act as a marketing platform for increasing the international sales of this consumer product, capitalizing on ideas of authenticity and local provenance. Thus, embeddedness within a particular locale is a promotable asset, leveraging inherent and existing connections, rather than something that needs to be nurtured, as is seen with Etihad and Manchester City. These issues aside, efforts to embed the Etihad brand at the local level appear to be appreciated by fans:

> The owners aren't daft. They've picked that area and they can effectively do what they want. [The city of] Manchester's glad of the investment; and quite rightly so… that investment is coming into Manchester… and it's never going to be fast, but it's regenerating the whole area. And that in turn will give a hinterland for City to be pulling in fans. It's not just about renaming the stadium. It's about almost renaming the whole area (Manchester City fan a).

Unlike Etihad, Macron has not made significant investment and toponymic interventions in the landscape around Bolton Wanderers' stadium, partly because the development opportunities for doing this are limited.

Nevertheless, since 2014 the company has made a concerted effort to build relationships with the local fan base through community action and philanthropic intervention. This includes donating kits to local junior football clubs and clothing to the town's homeless community at Christmas, as well as offering opportunities for fans to win Macron-related experiences, such as visits to the company's factory in Italy. These efforts have also been positively received:

> Bolton fan b: "It's things like that that get noticed, isn't it? Makes them look good… it'll make the fans happy that it's not all take, take, take…"

> Bolton fan a: "It's getting involved isn't it, with the community…"

At Oldham Athletic, there was no evidence of Sports Direct attempting to build such connections. On the one hand, this is surprising, as findings show that of the three clubs studied, Oldham Athletic was where scalar tensions arising from the imposition of a brand name on a stadium were felt most acutely by fans. Conversely, the lack of local engagement by Sports Direct may be a result, rather than a cause, of negative fan reactions to the incorporation of this brand into their stadium name – reactions arguably influenced by the fact Boundary Park was a long-established toponym for a stadium that has not, crucially, moved location. As outlined above, it may also be significant that Sports Direct received similar adverse fan reaction when it briefly renamed Newcastle United Football Club's St James' Park stadium (another long-standing venue and toponym) the "Sports Direct Arena" in 2011 (BBC, 2012). This might explain why SportsDirect.com branding was barely evident on the exterior of Oldham Athletic's stadium, with the exception of one small sign over the club shop (Figure 2). There were no signs declaring the official "SportsDirect.com Park" toponym;

Figure 2. Sole exterior sign for SportsDirect.com on Oldham Athletic's stadium.
Source: Authors' image.

and, three years into the sponsorship deal, there seemed little impetus from the company to change this:

> ...they are entitled in the contract to repaint the roof... fully entitled to repaint that and rebrand it. They haven't done it yet..., but that's entirely their choice. It's in the contract but it's at their cost... They're still in the process of looking at it (Oldham executive).

When fan reactions are so negative (or indifferent) towards corporate toponymic inscription, it suggests that the key commercial benefit for a naming rights sponsor in these instances lies with the toponym's media presence, rather than its physical imposition upon stadium space and surrounding areas. However, such media usage requires managing, and executives at all three clubs identified that compliance with the corporate stadium name was something they policed within media and press coverage as part of the contractual obligation to their sponsoring brand.

(Re)embedding the "local" through commemoration

The use of commemoration in toponymic inscription has been associated with strategies by political elites "to construct and institutionalize a hegemonic narrative of history" in urban space (Light & Young, 2015, p. 436). In the case of Bolton Wanderers and Manchester City, club authorities were also keen to invoke commemoration of former grounds and toponyms. However, it appeared this was less about providing a particular version of history, and more concerned with giving a focus for

fans' memories and nostalgia that could quell the spatially disruptive and locally de-embedding forces of stadium relocations and associated name changes to internationally positioned brands. The Bolton executive explained how this was the rationale for naming a road outside the club's new stadium "Burnden Way" (Figure 3), after the old Burnden Park ground:

> ...if you move somewhere new like here it's a blank canvas..., but there was always a view that we wanted to retain part of the history... And Burnden Way... I think fans would have been consulted... Although we are moving away, we very much want to return to the heritage of the club from that.

Similarly, at Manchester City, club authorities recognize the power of commemoration as a means of (re)embedding fans within the new stadium location by using artifacts from the former Maine Road ground, along with statues, and the naming of roads and stands, that reference former players and managers from the Maine Road era. This echoes Church and Penny's (2013) work, identifying similar commemorative devices around Arsenal Football Club's new Emirates stadium. Significantly, whilst this approach encourages fans within a new stadium to create a "memory place" (Boyd, 2000) that connects them to a former ground, in the case of Manchester City this is attempted without any overt reference to the Maine Road name, which might arguably undermine the credibility of the Etihad brand as a stadium toponym:

> Manchester City executive: "There used to be a mosaic from Maine Road..., which I now think is in the memorial garden. But it used to be above the main entrance to Maine Road. The Colin Bell Stand is named after a legend of that era. You've got Joe Mercer Way, with a statue at the top to again commemorate a manager from the Maine Road era... And then

Figure 3. Burnden Way sign with Macron Stadium in background.
Source: Authors' image.

you've got the ring, you know inside the bowl you've got all the names of previous captains which all dates back... It doesn't reference Maine Road."

Interviewer: "It mainly references the players?"

Manchester City executive: "But if you're aware of those players, it takes you back..."

For Manchester City, these commemorative interventions also help to further ameliorate potential scalar tensions resulting from the imposition of Etihad's internationally prominent brand name onto a stadium frequented by supporters who see themselves as locally embedded, "real Mancunians" (Edensor & Millington, 2008, p. 172); especially as the club has implemented a degree of consultation in this process:

I would say [the owners are] pretty respectful of the history of the club and learnt about the history of the club and so forth... they've asked people who know what they're talking about... they really researched it (Manchester City fan c).

At Oldham, commemoration of the former stadium name is perhaps less of an issue, as the stadium itself has not moved. Whilst a road leading to the newly named stadium is called Boundary Park Road, this is not intentional commemoration by the club, but a long-standing relic of the original toponymic inscription.

Discussion and conclusion

Through an examination of three clubs, this article has revealed the pluralistic scalar tensions arising from the corporate toponymic (re)inscription of football stadia, as well as the associated interplay of internationally focused brands and the locally embedded nature of English football. Echoing the work of Hagen (2011), we would argue that this emphasizes how notions of geographical scale in toponymic application cannot simply be reduced to the assigning of place names to fixed and boundaried concepts of space. Rather, scale and scalar interaction in the toponymic landscape needs to be understood in terms of dynamic and ongoing socio-economic and socio-political processes. Our research reveals that such processes are shaped according to complex relational entanglements, which affect how one scale of understanding may interact with another (Brenner, 2001; Cox, 1998; Howitt, 1993; Marston et al., 2005). The evidence presented above also demonstrates how these entanglements have temporal and locational dimensionality, including: the longevity of a stadium within a specific locale; how long a usurped toponym was previously associated with the football club; and whether a stadium has moved to a different site.

For example, Oldham Athletic fans, whose stadium occupied the same location with the same name for over 100 years, are more "ferocious" in their resistance to a new corporate stadium toponym. This is in contrast to Manchester City fans, based at a new stadium (physically removed from the location of its predecessor), which initially had a name assigned from its former life as an athletics venue. Bolton Wanderers fans also appear far less resistant to the imposition of a corporate toponym. Whilst they may have had 20 years to (re)build a sense of local embeddedness around their "new" stadium, the fact that its name has changed in that time appears to engender a degree of indifference to corporate naming and renaming. This is perhaps symptomatic of the relentless and ongoing churn of corporate sponsorship deals in football. As one Bolton fan stated:

> It's not as important. It's just corporate isn't it? If it was being named the Nat Lofthouse Stadium,[4] or something like that, then there'd be a lot of ceremony around that, but it's just literally changing hands, changing sponsorship I suppose (Bolton fan a).

The degree of international coverage and scope for those brands involved in the corporate renaming of stadia also has clear scalar implications. Of the three clubs studied, Manchester City's Etihad stadium name is underpinned by the most significant brand in terms of international reach and value. This, in turn, reflects how Manchester City is promoted through the Etihad brand on a global stage. It raises questions, and tensions, regarding how the club can effectively maintain local embeddedness whilst emphasizing a glocal perspective; or whether the globally-scaled ambition and focus of the Etihad brand carries over to the club, rendering its outlook as more grobal.

Other issues are also relevant in this scalar battleground. One relates to the level at which a football team plays, with more successful clubs such as Manchester City attracting sponsors and brand names that possess greater international presence and exposure. Unless dealt with sensitively, the toponymic application of these brands to stadia and their surrounding urban infrastructure may clash with the views of localized fan bases. Equally, the size and diffuseness of the locale to which a club is tied may be important, particularly if smaller, compact settlements deliver a stronger sense of community and local embeddedness. This may further explain the more resistant attitudes of Oldham Athletic fans towards the corporate renaming of their stadium, compared to those of Manchester City; a possible reflection of the fact that the population of the Metropolitan District of Oldham is less than half that of the City of Manchester (City Population, 2017).

A further complexity in scalar understandings of corporate toponymic inscription relates to how the companies (and in this case clubs) deploying brands as toponyms can embed them more effectively at the local level. This could include urban regeneration by the relevant corporate entity and naming sponsor in and around the area of toponymic inscription, along with associated philanthropic interventions in community-based activities. Equally, invoking commemoration of former toponyms may temper fan resistance to corporate replacements. Whilst it is not the task of this paper – or necessarily our wish – to deliver a "how-to guide" for neoliberal urban intervention, it seems, in this context, that there are tactics that organizations can effectively use to facilitate toponymic commodification without destabilizing topophilic notions of "home."

A final point relates to organizational and institutional control over the use of corporate stadium names. We have identified how club authorities attempt to manage this in media contexts. Yet, they have far less jurisdiction over whether fans use official corporate toponyms when referring to *their* stadium in everyday conversation, or engage with other counter performative (Rose-Redwood, 2008b) and habitual (Light & Young, 2014) toponymic colloquialisms and utterances. As the Oldham Athletic executive explained: "Fans do it deliberately. They prefer to call it Boundary Park still. But we obviously can't control that side of things." Equally, Bolton fans reported sometimes using the former Reebok epithet for their stadium, largely out of habit and inertia in speech. Manchester City fans also recounted the occasional use of alternative toponyms for their current stadium, such as CoMStad (an acronym of the

pre-Etihad City of Manchester Stadium) and Eastlands (the name of the site on which the Etihad is built). Toponymic corruptions for the Manchester City stadium, such as Middle Eastlands (a reference to the club's Arab owners), can also be found in use on social media.

Clearly, examining how corporate toponyms are performed, counter-performed, or not performed at all in football fan discourse, and how this links with any scalar tensions relating to the application/imposition of corporate stadia names, is one area for future research. Another direction of inquiry might be to examine how scalar relations between corporate toponyms and urban communities are realized in different contexts. It could be that English football, with its typically localized and loyal fan base, maximizes the potential for scalar tensions to arise through corporate naming practices. Alternatively, those tensions revealed in this study may reflect a more universal urban phenomenon arising from the corporate creep of neoliberal intervention in the toponymic landscape of towns and cities.

Notes

1. Boundary Park was owned by Oldham Athletic between 1899 and 1999, when the ground was sold to Oldham Property Partnerships (OPP), a joint venture company involving Oldham Council. This allowed the football club to raise funds and avoid going out of business. In 2005, the club bought back their ownership of Boundary Park from OPP (MEN, 2013).
2. Since this renaming, the company Sports Direct has been involved in media controversy over its employee working conditions and contractual arrangements (e.g. Goodley & Ashby, 2015a, 2015b). These revelations only began to surface whilst the fieldwork for our study was being undertaken, and were not mentioned in detail by our research participants, specifically those from Oldham.
3. For the sake of brevity, we often use the terms "Oldham" and "Bolton" to refer to "Oldham Athletic" and "Bolton Wanderers" respectively. Conversely, we always use the "Manchester City" name in full, as there is another major football team within Manchester.
4. A legendary Bolton player who played for the club from 1946–1960.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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