‘We are the vocal minority’: The Safe Standing movement and breaking down the state in English football

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Mark Turner

Solent University

Abstract

Lord Justice Taylor’s final report into the Hillsborough stadium disaster recommended that all Premier League and Championship football grounds in England and Wales should become all-seated and that football supporters would eventually become ‘accustomed and educated to sitting’. Thirty years later, thousands of fans continue to stand at matches but in areas not designed for them to do so. This ritual has become a source of conflict between clubs, supporters and official safety bodies. In 2018, the UK Sports Minister claimed that despite this problem, there remained no desire amongst top clubs to change the all-seating policy and that it was only a ‘vocal minority’ who wanted to see the permanent return of standing in English football. However, supporters, networked through the national Football Supporters Association, had been actively mobilizing a social movement against the legislation for over 20 years. In this article, I use relational sociology to analyse empirical snapshots of the latest phase of this movement, ‘Safe Standing’, to show how the switching and cooperation of supporter networks and their tactics were successful in breaking down the state to create new political opportunities. In doing so, the article reveals the key characteristics of safe standing, including conflict, organizational form and intersubjective motivations, to represent the collective – but also often complex and contradictory – responses to the neoliberal political economy which English football, and society more broadly, has inhabited over the past 30 years.

Keywords

fans, football, networks, relational sociology, social movements

Introduction

This article cross-pollinates ideas from relational sociology and social movement studies to analyze one of the most high-profile football supporter movements in English football, and *the* legacy of the worst sporting disaster in the UK, which has dominated public consciousness for 30yrs. This movement, ‘Safe Standing’, seeks to bring about a change to existing all-seating legislation and ground rules that penalize supporters for standing at football and engender conflict amongst and against fans. To do this, it argues that a number of alternative technologies would now allow clubs to create purpose-built Safe Standing areas, and that clubs would decide, in consultation with their

supporters, what mix of standing areas or permitted standing in existing seated areas would be most suitable for them (Football Supporters Association, 2020). This represents the latest phase of a 30yr social movement characterized by feelings of social unrest and displacement of some 'traditional' supporters, as the free-market arguments which informed English football's transformation became dominant (King, 1998). Whilst continuing to expand football's wider public appeal as a modern inclusive game, the abolition of traditional standing terraces and imposition of all-seated stadia in the top two divisions after the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989, became one of the most important issues which fans collectively coalesce around and a multifaceted component of the football fan activism complex (Numerato, 2018). This is sociologically important, because the restriction and partial exclusion of this social group constitutes a profound social change (King, 1998). However, only very recently, has the movement achieved some small political gains. Indeed, for 30yrs, many supporters have continued to stand at football in all-seated stadia and thus arguments have persisted between supporter groups and those responsible for the governance of the game, on issues of supporter safety and democracy. Despite the Premier League, Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA), and Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), only 15yrs ago being publicly opposed to changing the legislation, the issue is now high on the political agenda, with all three main political parties now formally supporting the introduction of Safe Standing, following a recent UK government review in 2018[1].

By analyzing empirical snapshots of the latest phase of the movement across 2009-19, the article argues that Safe Standing, currently coordinated by a small network of approximately 30 supporters, sought to break down the state by using innovative tactics which were culturally available and shaped by cultural meanings within the historical contexts of English football. To understand this, attention must be paid to the ways in which movements and the restless indeterminacy of events (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010), in this case Safe Standing and the legacy of Hillsborough, engage in a 'hermeneutic tug-of-war' (Gillan, 2018). This case offers a key contribution to our understanding of temporality within the sociology of sport because it reveals the ways in which agents, in this case football supporters, are often embedded within dominant social discourses and employ ideas that they provide across different temporal periods (Steinberg, 1999). In doing so, some movements, which start out as anti-neoliberal initiatives and embrace the coordination of a diverse hierarchy of status groups, nonetheless, demonstrate reflexive discursive practices which are temporally sensitive, and both inhibit and enhance social change (Numerato, 2015). To demonstrate this, the article seeks to answer the following question: what do the key characteristics of Safe Standing, across 2009-19, including conflict, organizational form, and intersubjective motivations, reveal about the socio-

political environment of English football? To help operationalize this research question, the article applies relational sociology to (a) investigate the networks of supporter activists and the roles they adopted, (b) investigate the ways in which the movement coordinated relational collective action, and (c) investigate the particular tactics, narratives and innovations through which the mobilization of the movement could be driven.

The emerging empirical snapshots reveal that there has been an effective attempt by activists to build diplomacy with key figures inside the governance of professional football, and in doing so, establish new political relationships. However, whilst these macro-level strategic interactions played an important role in ensuring the movement made its way to the inside of English football's commodity structure and governance, this was also achieved by the micro-level mobilizations within, and around, professional football clubs during a changing political landscape on Hillsborough. As such, the article identifies several important questions regarding the movement's future direction. These questions are of analytical importance for sociologists of sport researching contemporary football and its interactions with politics, spectacle, consumption and social change.

Relational sociology and unpacking football fandom

Anthony King (2004) argued that much late-twentieth and early twenty-first century sociology is often characterised by a dualist ontology; that being the cold institutions of modern society versus the creative individual which favours abstraction over empirical understandings of the complex interplay of human social life. As such, many contemporary social theories are, in various ways according to King, marked by the same fault. That being, human social relations have been effaced by a dualistic picture in which structure confronts the individual, and that the infinite richness of shared human life is reduced to a mechanical model; structure imposes upon the agency, the agent reproduces structure. The challenge for contemporary sociologists is to avoid this philosophical dualism and instead focus on recognizing the reality of modern society as consisting of complex webs (networks) of social relations between humans. Consequently, sociologists should look to investigate the shared meanings which are a product of humans interacting and focus on how these relations come into being and are transformed by the humans engaged in them. And so relational thinkers have subsequently conceptualised their work in contrast with both holist and individualist thinking in the social sciences.

Adopting a similar social relational ontology to King, Nick Crossley (2011) argues that to overcome such philosophical dualism, we should conceptualise what are often termed 'structures' as reducible to social networks or worlds of social relations in particular locations, and that these

complex networks, which flow dynamically across different temporal periods, mutually influence each other. This relational thinking has informed what has been described as a 'relational turn' in social movement studies. Consequently, for Crossley (2002), social movements do not grow out of networks, nor do networks foster movements; rather movements themselves *are* networks, and in the first instance, they are the very networks that movements grow out of. Understanding movements *as* interpersonal networks of interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations is critical to analysing how they emerge, mobilise and communicate. Relational thinking has also been important in critiquing the centrality of the state as not only a target of activism, but also central to the political opportunities for successful mobilisation (Edwards, 2014). Whilst not all movements themselves are political or subsume politics under a single focus, they do nonetheless, operate within environments which may provide them with both cultural and political opportunities. However, what is needed according to Polletta (2004), is an appreciation of the cultural dimensions of structures, because cultural traditions and norms shape the nation-state and its interactions with movements. And so relational sociology is useful because it enables us to understand the environment in which movements operate, in this case English football, as a symbolic and discursive space in which interactions between activists and other players, which may include the state, take place (Goldstone, 2004).

Applying relational sociology to unpack the connections that matter to football fan social movements, it is important to recognize that most conceptualizations or typologies of fandom itself, are characterised by relationality, as a central theme (Cleland et al, 2018). 'Traditional' fandom emerged during the mid-late 20th century an expression of local identity and developed through standing terrace culture. As Millward (2011) noted, it is many of these traditional supporters who long to consume matches in ways of bygone times including a return to the standing culture of the terraces. However, as both King (1998) and Giulianotti (2002) found in their analysis of fans at the turn of the 21st century, supporters, including those with both 'hot' or more 'cooler' consumerist affiliations, are heterogeneous, and thus their experiences, are often based on networked socialities in different local and cultural contexts. Thus, the social worlds of football comprise a diverse network of supporters that have a variety of interests and connections in the game (Cleland et al, 2018). This is analytically important because it shows the contemporary consumption of football to be complex and contradictory whereby different social groups of supporters, appear to be dependent on each other and mutually influencing (Giulianotti, 2002). What is clear, whether from early studies on football hooliganism, to the practices and identities of supporters in the face of globalization, that the creative sociability of football fans and their connections, are central to the social worlds and life of football.

It thus makes little sense to study individual football fans in isolation, or the structures of contemporary football, without the networks which build or resist those structures (King, 2004). The connections between football supporters, move beyond the production and consumption of modern football, but are themselves significant to the ways in which power and counter-power operate in football. And as King (2003) argued, such supporter networks consist of a complex and diverse hierarchy of status groups which coalesce and unify at specific football clubs to develop relational fan cultures. More recently, there has been an increasing focus on football supporters' interactions in the transnational 'network society' (Castells, 2000) and the ways in which virtual communities have produced sites for the construction of both collective and individual fan identities (Millward, 2008). As such, research should pay attention to the ways in which the relational power of supporters' collective actions may emerge across both offline and online spaces.

Within the sociology of sport then, fan protest movements have in recent years, become an increasingly important topic of sociological inquiry (Canniford, Hill and Millward, 2018; Millward, 2012; Millward and Poulton, 2014; Numerato, 2015, 2018, Webber, 2017). Connecting this burgeoning body of research has been the investigation into how modern supporter networked identities are constructed and negotiated in ways which are informed by the realities of social interaction with the neoliberal landscape of Football across Europe over the past 30yrs. Debates have broadly centered upon networked protests against various commercialising processes at specific European clubs such as Manchester United (Brown, 2008), Liverpool (Millward, 2012), A.S. Livorno (Doidge, 2013) and Sankt Pauli F.C. (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). This research makes clear a need to rethink neoliberalism by recognising the role of market-driven policies in agitating supporter social unrest, but in ways which understand 'friction' as creating protest cultures which are co-produced in networks and interactions (Dubal, 2010). To capture the multi-faceted phenomenon of these cases of fan activism, Numerato (2018) presents the 'football fan activism complex' which categories the interconnection of fan mobilisations across 7 different areas; political issues, social issues, governance, security, performance, experience, symbolism, and atmosphere. This offers an important theoretical contribution because it captures the relationality of different topics of fan activism and the internal differentiation amongst different supporter groups both culturally and politically. Moreover, the opposition of fans to aspects of contemporary football culture is expressed in both complementary and conflicting ways. For some supporters, this may involve engagement with professionalized activism through organizations like the Football Supporters Association and other political bodies, whilst others, may prefer to limit resistance to unofficial sites of protest and direction action. Indeed,

the plurality and internal complexity of movements like Safe Standing, do according to Numerato (2018), characterize the various dimensions of activism as interconnected.

Where I extend this body of research, is to examine the micro-level networks, relations and interactions of supporters across a longer temporal period, which I argue, are crucial to understanding how movements like Safe Standing interact with different economic, cultural and political processes. In doing so, I add empirical value to the multifaceted nature of the football fan activism complex and thus develop a more comprehensive and empirically grounded relational logic of collective action, relational understanding of the world around a social movement, and relational understanding of culture and emotion (Edwards, 2014). Central to this, is the programming of relational collective action by 'switchers', whose power lies in their ability to 'connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources' (Castells, 2013:45). Applying relational sociology to map the territory of Safe Standing across 2009-19, affords analytical primacy to the social ties between networks which stand opposed to holism and individualism. These intersubjective and interpersonal networks consist of dynamic family, friendship, and political ties, and it is through the interaction of shared experiences and memories, which give the social world of football pre-and-post-Hillsborough its cultural meaning.

Method

Since this research was concerned with the longer-term impact of all-seated stadia on supporters' consumption of the game, I analyzed both the historical archives and current practices of the national Football Supporters Association (FSA) who currently coordinate the movement at a national level. I was able to connect with the original founding members from 1985 in order to build up a wider network including various chairs, vice-chairs and leading regional branch members across 1989-2019. These networked supporters, some of which were also members of Independent Supporter Associations (ISAs), Supporters' Trusts and writers of football fanzines, were considered important because they helped coordinate collective action on national supporter issues. In doing so, I was able to code the data across four themes: the biography of the FSA, early campaigns against all-seated stadia, the role of important network recruiters and switchers, and the emergence of the Safe Standing movement.

Fieldwork was also carried out throughout the course of 2014-19 into the current practices of the FSA which included attending national conferences and events to establish myself within an informal network of supporters. This data was analyzed using a small research diary which recorded

key observations and discussions at breakaway Safe Standing sessions. And in 2016, I was invited by the FSA's lead on Safe Standing, to join the core Safe Standing network in the form of a Google Group Forum, which, over a period of 3 years, helped me interpret the ways in which online discussions created new interpretative frames and strategies. This closed network, of 30 supporters, comprised of leading figures within the FSA, and other local supporter trusts or affiliated associations, and the online forum contained over 1600 topic threads and several thousand posts dating back to 2011.

Finally, I identified 26 supporters to interview as a type of activist life story. I followed Della Porta's (2014) approach to analysing the interviews in a 'restructured' fashion by creating three stages of analysis. These were, a chronology of their story, a semi-codified scheme, examining how they became involved with various Safe Standing protests, and a synthesis of those main themes. Each lasted between 1-2 hours in length, and the validity of each interview was affirmed by the fact that statements recorded, accorded with views and events, which I had both read and heard across the archival and fieldwork research.

'A love supreme': North East networks and building diplomacy

Across 1989-2009, those that those who took on specialized roles within the FSA and influential ISAs, such as national and regional chairs and campaign coordinators, were often found in larger populations, notably cities such as Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Birmingham, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester and Southampton. Together, they constituted a critical mass because as Crossley (2015) argued, in larger populations the connecting of resources, communication, capital and collective effervescence is more successful. And many of these supporters, hailing from the middle class, and having attended university, included academics, police officers, trade union activists, businessmen and journalists, and held prior social ties to key people inside individual football clubs and the wider industry. By mapping these networks, important switchers with cultural capital were identified and they helped build relational collective action on issues with wider national significance.

Together, 11 supporter activists formed a small Coalition of Football Supporters (CoFS) network and were connected by means of pre-existing networks within the FSA, football fanzines and Independent Supporter Associations (ISAs) and Supporters' Trusts. Central players inside this network included *Independent Manchester United Supporter Association* activists, Adam Brown, Andy Walsh and Mark Longden and other former *Militant Tendency* activists within the *Independent Newcastle United Supporters' Association* and the *Southampton Independent Supporters Association*,

including Kevin Miles, and Perry McMillan and Richard Chorley. Consequently, they were successful in switching the networked practices of leading ISAs and the CoFS across Europe at the turn of the 21st century to program new fan projects in Holland, Italy and Switzerland to build a *Football Supporters International* (FSI) transnational network. And Miles and Walsh's prior social ties to activists in Germany, including Schalke 04 and the *Association of Active Fans* (BAAF), were important in helping the FSA to produce a Safe Standing report into new modern 'Rail Seating' technology, which was being developed in Germany for the 2006 World Cup[2]. This became tactically significant because activists recognized that 'terracing' and 'Hillsborough' were inseparable in the minds of those with political capital in professional football. Consequently, by aligning the movement with Rail Seating as *the* master frame, it ensured the 'terracing' word became less dominant as a post-Hillsborough focused 'rhetoric of reaction' (Hirschman, 1991). This is sociologically important because it evidences the capacity of supporters to gain some control over the interpretation of English football's post-Hillsborough landscape.

In 2009, a small FSA Safe Standing network emerged from these coordination mechanisms, and in doing so, became part of a broader social movement dynamic which sought to gain greater supporter representation within the governance of English football. This network now professionally organized by the FSA as an effective social movement organization (SMO) must be situated within the wider social transformations of contemporary British society and the legacy of the Third Way political economy. Indeed, both the FSA chair Malcolm Clarke and CEO Kevin Miles had begun to play an important role in building diplomacy with the DCMS, the SGSA, and other stakeholders including the Premier League and Football Association, by engaging in 'behind the scenes' lobbying which smaller networks like the CoFS were unable to achieve. Alongside this, one of the mechanisms which helped build the FSAs profile and communication infrastructure was the recruitment of former Sunderland fanzine writer Peter Daykin as FSA Communications Officer. Daykin and Miles were co-directors of a marketing company *A19 Ltd*, who through a formal partnership with the FSA, were able to change how it communicated as a more effective electronic-based organisation. The publication of the FSAs magazine; *The Football Supporter*, connected Daykin and Miles to other commercial networks and fanzine writers in the North East, including Jez Robinson, David Rose, Jonathan Wilson and Michael Brunskill. Robinson had co-created the Sunderland fanzine *A Love Supreme (ALS)* with Martyn McFadden in 1989 and was a member of the FSA *Football Supporters Northeast* alongside Daykin and Brunskill. Like Daykin, Brunskill had also worked for *ALS* when studying journalism at the University of Sunderland. He became active within the FSA after *ALS* were invited to an FSA North East protest, against the Premier League's proposal to introduce an international *Game 39* to

the football calendar. Meanwhile, Daykin's connection to Jonathan Wilson, a sports journalist for the *Guardian, Independent* and *Sports Illustrated* was formed at high school, and this tie led Wilson to becoming involved with the FSAs *The Football Supporter* alongside Brunskill and Rose, with the latter joining Daykin and Miles as a co-directors of *A19 Ltd* in 2011. And later that year, these mutually influencing connections produced a new digital quarterly football magazine; *The Blizzard* published by *Blizzard Media Ltd* who were based at Ashmore Terrace in Sunderland.

These interactions were important in both recruiting the North East agents to the core Safe Standing network and relocating the FSAs London office to the *Blizzard* headquarters in Sunderland. According to Brunskill, this helped set up the FSA and the Safe Standing network as a 'driving force for more direct action and activity' (personal interview, 27 January 2016), and characteristic of social movement actors often hailing from the 'creative class' to create new ideas, technology and content which require higher levels of formal education and cultural capital (Florida, 2002). Consequently, Daykin emerged as a leading figure within the Safe Standing network and used his creative social ties to further develop the organizations campaigning infrastructure, which included developing an online petition, and the forming of a closed Safe Standing Google Group network. This became a mechanism to build on the work of earlier activists, but characterized by the diplomacy and relationship building tactics adopted at the macro-level by Malcolm Clarke and Kevin Miles within their strategic interactions with the SGSA, the Premier League, the Football league, and the Football Association.

> For eight or nine years you had this kind of almost cold war where nothing was changing, nobody was listening and both sides of the debate were completely entrenched and Phill Gatenby must have written a million letters and got really angry why nobody was listening and so when I took over, the first thing we did was to try and make relationships with people and engage them in dialogue, do a bit of listening and slowly help them understand we're trying to change the game for the better. (Peter Daykin, 21 January 2016)

> The FSA had always supported Safe Standing and there had been bits and bobs of campaign work but I think that it was a bit outside the football world shouting in and what needed to happen at the time was to get into clubs a bit more and to get in the institutions in football such as the PL, the FL and the FA and so there was a bit of a strategy around about 2010 where we would try and win over clubs individually. (Michael Brunskill, 27 January 2016)

Finally, the importance placed on strategic diplomacy helped strengthened Clarke and Miles as central figures both within the political networks of the DCMS, Premier League, Football Association

and Football League. Indeed, in 2012, Miles' network capital saw him appointed as a member of the DCMS 'new Expert Working Group on *Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement*. By paying attention to the importance of temporality within social movements, it is possible to comprehend how former *Militant* activists like Miles, become professionalized and sophisticated political actors (Numerato, 2018). As Cleland et al (2018) recognize, these political connections are of great importance in the social worlds that involve the consumption and production of football. And in some cases, activists like Miles, work to switch together previously disparate supporter groups by forming coalitions, and sometimes, foster working relationships with organizations which those supporter coalitions are collectively acting against (Martin, 2015).

Switching Celtic: Misbehaviour and the Green Brigade

In 2009, FSA and Bristol City Supporters Trust member Jon Darch, who held a prior social tie to Kevin Miles and Portsmouth Supporters Trust Chair Ken Malley through the *England Supporters* network, formed a partnership with *Ferco Seating Solutions* to manufacture a Rail Seat demonstration model which became a key tactic in making social change visible to football clubs and independent supporters groups. *Ferco*, had previously supplied seats at Arsenal's Emirates stadium in 2006 and were the British partner of the German company *Eheim-Mobel-GmbH* who had installed high-Rail Seats at TSG Hoffenheum and VfB Stuttgart in the Bundesliga. In doing so, Darch, through the forming of a 'Safe Standing Roadshow', became a central figure within the FSA's Safe Standing network.

> Jon Darch must have been to every bloody club in the country over the last five years taking the Roadshow up and down and that has been hugely beneficial in showing a model which is palatably different to the terraces of the 1980s and so he's been working on that kind of thing on a very boots on the ground level whilst at the FSA, we've been concentrating much more on building relationships with all of the different stakeholders. (Peter Daykin, 20 January 2016)

> Jon has been inexhaustible, the amount of time that he pours in with the Roadshow has helped make the breakthrough. We have worked closely with Jon but we deliberately keep a little bit of a public distance because whilst we're hand in glove, in reality it actually helps sometimes if he retains a degree of independence because there are certain things which can be said by an individual campaigner which can't be said by an organisation but we work in close cooperation. (Steven Powell, 29 January 2016)

Darch's creativity in spotting a 'gap in the market 'was characteristic of what McCarthy and Zald (1977) conceptualised as a movement entrepreneurship, in the way the Roadshow was able to recast grievances such as the 'unsafe persistent standing of supporters in all-seated areas', as instead, 'preferences for new technology'. In doing so, the Rail Seat demonstration model became a technical innovation to leverage power against established power brokers such as the SGSA and Premier League, through the 'art of surprise' (Edwards, 2014). To achieve this, the FSA began working on localising strategic interactions at club-level.

> We encouraged supporters of each individual club to test the water themselves at local level. Every time we did a survey, club by club, each one would come back with a 90% vote for yes we want it. We also knew we had some supporters out there in individual clubs and we also had to find out whether that existed throughout football or isolated cases and so we set out one by one, using the Roadshow and talking to different supporters groups to find out whether they wanted it. (Martin O'Hara, 29 January 2016)

In 2011, Celtic F.C. in Scotland, issued a formal statement in response to media reporting of spectator behaviour in sections of the stadium occupied by the self-identified 'Ultra 'group, the *Green Brigade*, which included overcrowding, persistent standing and the lateral movement of spectators (Celtic, 28 April, 2011). Consequently, representatives of the Celtic Supporters Trust met the club's Chief Executive Peter Lawwell to discuss the feasibility of introducing Safe Standing areas which became a formal proposal at the Trusts AGM later that year (Celtic Trust, 2011). These interactions produced relational collective action in a context of interdependence by local Celtic networks who were also connected to the FSA in the UK. Throughout the course of 2011-13, Darch took the Roadshow to Celtic, Rangers, Hearts, Hibernian and Aberdeen in Scotland, and met both the Chief Executive of the Scottish Professional Football League, Neil Doncaster and Celtic's Peter Lawwell to discuss Rail Seating after the Scottish Premier League formally approved the proposal to allow clubs to pilot standing areas, subject to further approval from the police and local authorities (SPFL, 2011). According to FSA activist, Martin O'Hara, Scotland offered an open political opportunity post-devolution to campaign because the all-seating legislation, whilst enforced in the top two Scottish divisions, only actually applied to England and Wales:

> We realised because of the political landscape in Scotland and the rise of nationalism that it was a bit of an open door for us because there was no way that the UK government would force the Scottish government to enforce the legislation (although they did try) and so we knew this offered a strategic opportunity. Once

> we'd persuaded Celtic as a club, bear in mind Jon Darch had acted as a go-between the manufacturers of Rail Seating and the club, you know he'd put a lot of work into that, then after getting people to visit Celtic we thought this would go through. (Martin O'Hara, 29 January 2016)

Despite an initial set back, Darch continued to network with Celtic's stadium manager Rob Buchanan across 2014-15, and this connection ensured the Safe Standing network were able to establish a relationship with the Celtic Trust and the club's Supporter Liaison Officer, John Paul Taylor. These relations were important because they enabled Darch to switch the networked practices of supporter activists in Scotland and the working tactics of the Safe Standing network coordinated by Daykin and the FSA in Sunderland. In June 2015, four years after Darch had taken the Roadshow to Celtic, the Glasgow Safety Advisory group gave the club permission to install 2,600 Rail Seats at Celtic Park from the 2016/2017 season (Celtic, 2015). Whilst this represented a critical milestone, it is important to recognise the ways in which such mobilisations are tied to a sequential view of social movements with a temporal sensitivity. Indeed, the ritual of persistent standing by Celtic fans was consistent with the problems of crowd control experienced in England and Wales since the introduction of all-seated stadia in 1994. As such, new networks bring new creativity, skills and resources to the tactical repertoires adopted by social movements and these are relational to the discursive field in which they move. Whilst Celtic did not produce a successful change to the all-seating legislation in England and Wales, it did demonstrate the impact of programming the Roadshow as a 'Safe Standing logic', through the collaborative actions of networks which are switched together at critical junctures (Castells, 2013; Della Porta, 2018).

Corporate logics of fan engagement: standing up for choice

Over the past 10yrs, the networks, tactics and mobilisations of the Safe Standing movement are characterised by the hyperdigitalisation of football culture, through an increasing importance placed on digital technologies and the effects of digitisation on the (un)structuring, (re)organising and (re)negotiating of late modern digital societies (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). To help drive the movement at club-level, the Safe Standing network helped coordinate club-specific surveys and events with local supporter liaison and safety officers, and the mobilisation of resources within and around independent supporter groups and Trusts. A new style of football writing operating at the intersection of blogging, photography, magazines and fashion, including *STANDfanzine*, *Mundial Magazine*, *The Set Pieces*, and *COPA90*, and characterised by the corporate logic of late capitalism, became important in switching other digital subnetworks to produce relational fan cultures at specific

clubs. Indeed, whilst these networks had coalesced around Safe Standing as a national supporter movement coordinated by the FSA, they were to some extent, prepared to do collective action on their own, but as part of a wider Safe Standing relational collective identity (Edwards, 2014). In doing so, supporter groups at Oldham, Bury, West Ham, Norwich and Huddersfield, worked with established independent supporter networks at Manchester City (1894 group) and Watford (1881 group), who together, with the help of funding from the FSA, the *STANDfanzine* and the *Football Action Network*, produced a large *Legalise Safe Standing* protest banner for display at specific televised games.

In 2015, a subnetwork of *COPA90*, under the name of the *Copa Collective*; a network of football fan filmmakers and artists seeking to capture expressions of football culture across the world, produced new strategic interactions on Safe Standing after publishing an article by Jon Darch on its digital platform. According to FSA activists Martin O'Hara and Steven Powell these interactions reflected the ways in which social media had begun to mobilise Safe Standing in new ways.

> There are some guys at the *Copa Collective* who have decided they want to bring Safe Standing into English football, so they invited us to a meeting which was very kind of them (sarcastically) … I think Peter and Michael were going to it. They are a video and YouTube network and have done things on Standing and Ticket Pricing. They said they could clearly see Safe Standing was on the cusp of happening and wanted to share in the success but they don't want to edge the wrong people out so I shared my reservations with the group. (Martin O'Hara, 29 January 2016)

Consequently, at a *Copa Collective* Safe Standing action meeting at the Gunmakers pub in Farrington, attended by multiple digital networks and representatives from the FSA, the global sports investment firm, *Tifosy*, emerged as a leading social entrepreneurship, and recognized the opportunity to make Safe Standing a key part of their fan engagement strategy. With the help of *COPA90* and Jon Darch, *Tifosy* began working with clubs including Brentford and Wycombe Wanderers to create fan crowdfunding projects, which in turn, would fund the installation of new Safe Standing areas at Griffin Park and Adams Park. According to Cumming and Hornuf (2018), crowdfunding acts as a new and important source of financing for entrepreneurs which fills a funding gap that was traditionally difficult to close. At Wycombe, this proposal included the crowdfunding of a *Copa Collective Zone* for Safe Standing Rail Seats, whilst at Shrewsbury Town, their Supporters Parliament spearheaded a campaign in partnership with the club and *Tifosy*, to raise the £65,000 target to install 500 Rail Seats in the clubs new 10,000 all-seated New Meadow ground.

The expanding digitalization of football culture has produced supporter networks which are switched between the FSA as a SMO and local independent supporter groups, and in doing, so create relational Safe Standing protests in ways which complicate the collective and individual dimensions of movement activism (Edwards, 2014). These mobilisations are characterised by a culture of fan engagement which has embedded Safe Standing within a corporate discourse informed by notions of social entrepreneurship. Somers (2013) identifies the emergence of contemporary forms of social entrepreneurship as the legacy of New Labour and Third Way politics and questions the extent to which social enterprises like crowdfunding, extend or reform, modern capitalism. Whilst groups such as *StandAMF*, F.A.N and *COPA90* produce coalitions seeking to challenge the late capitalist logics of modern football, the digital platforms and networks in which they are embedded, both consume and produce modern football culture. Towards the end of this temporal period, activists such as Darch and Brunskill, recognised the ways in which digitalization and emerging network coalitions enable fans to coalesce around Safe Standing as determinant stakeholders in value co-creation (Zagnoli and Radicchi, 2010). This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it refocuses Safe Standing as an issue of ‘stakeholder ’choice and embedded in local communities in ways which benefit both supporters and clubs. And secondly, the building of social enterprise networks to help fund the Rail Seating area at Shrewsbury, produced new strategic interactions between the club, the local Safety Advisory Group, the FSA and the SGSA during a period in which the *Green Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds* was being rewritten. Tellingly, this becomes a mechanism to normalise Rail Seating in English football, not as to create formal standing areas, but instead to ensure fans who continue to stand, do so in a safe manner, and compliant with the all-seating policy[3].

Finally, the hyperdigitalisation of Safe Standing is characteristic of wider developments in fan behaviour and contemporary fan experiences, through which self-generated communication emerges. Castells (2013) highlights the power of the internet in facilitating the formation of horizontal networks which largely bypass the control of corporations and organizational bureaucracies, like the FSA. Consequently, information-age mobilizations are more fluid and instantaneous affording new forms of network coalitions to mobilize (Cleland et al, 2018). This is sociologically interesting because digital technology enables supporters to communicate in ways which transcend longstanding rivalries and engender affected frames, which themselves may unite diverse groups against the corporate logics of modern football. Despite this, it is important to recognize that online mobilizations continue to express the values, beliefs and lifestyle of activism in formal but also spontaneous ways (Numerato, 2018). Nonetheless, in the case of Safe Standing, whilst online mobilizations shoot in different complex directions, the importance of small organizational networks, which themselves are a product

of a history of previous networks and interactions, remain important in coordinating relational collective action at a strategic level, and have potential to unite disparate groups within the movement itself (Hill et al. 2018).

Small political wins and emerging questions

As a key tactic in breaking down the state and its sub-actors in English football, Rail Seating offers an opportunity to frame Safe Standing as an effective business case for clubs and authorities to achieve greater (supporter) stakeholder choice. Duyvendak and Jasper (2015) conceptualise the state as comprising of sub-players or actors who engage one another for influence over decisions and thus attention must be paid to the ways in which these players are influenced and constrained by broader social, cultural and political structures. And because the state is not a homogenous unified actor, occasionally, interactions between sub-actors create tension and conflict.

One such tension emerged in April 2018 after the Premier League club West Bromwich Albion had a proposal to install 3,600 Rail Seats, rejected by the Sports Minister who claimed there remained 'no desire among the top clubs to change the all-seating policy' and that it was only a 'vocal minority' of fans who wanted to see the return of standing in English football (Taylor, 2018). However, West Bromwich Albion's application was submitted by the deputy chair of the *Football Safety Officers Association* and supported by the club's safety advisory group including members of the West Midlands police, the fire and ambulance services and the SGSA, and thus it became clear that the Sports Minister had placed the DCMS in conflict with its own advisory body on safety at sports grounds. Consequently, three critical mobilisations occurred. First, Crouch's 'vocal minority' comment created a 'moral shock' (Jasper, 1997), agitating thousands of supporter groups to protest online. In doing so, fans formed conversational communities on Twitter in the form of two hashtags: *#NOTaVocalMinority* and *#WeAreAVocalMinority*. These hashtags helped create a sense of mutual loyalty within the Safe Standing network, and more importantly were used as a framing mechanism to connect a growing sense of agitation with an emerging online protest in the form of a e-Parliamentary petition led by a young Ipswich Town supporter. Whilst this supporter was not a member of the core Safe Standing network, he was through social media, able to connect with Jon Darch. Consequently, Darch's network capital and connections to leading sports journalists helped mobilise an average of 17,000 signatures per day, and on 25 April 2018, the e-petition reached the 100k threshold required for parliamentary debate.

Second, the success of the e-petition and media criticism of Crouch helped mobilise senior Labour Party MPs, including the deputy leader and MP for West Bromwich East, Tom Watson, and the Shadow Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, to publicly call for a reappraisal of West Bromwich Albion's application, and in June 2018, Safe Standing became a formal policy commitment of the Labour Party. However, as Goldstone (2004) argued such political opportunities are not structures but discursive spaces in which interactions take place through networks. And thus, the formal support of the Labour Party was achieved after ten years of network building and trust between members of the FSA and Labour politicians who were either members of the *All Party Parliamentary Group for Football* or known to be football fans. And third, 17 days after the Labour Party announced their formal support, the Sports Minister Tracey Crouch, at the formal parliamentary debate triggered by the e-petition, announced that she would commission an official review of the all-seating legislation. Safe Standing's 'success' in this sense, might be understood as integrating previously excluded issues and groups, such as football fans, into 'normal' political debate (Scott, 1990).

Despite this, it is important to also consider why other stakeholders in football including the Premier League, after refusing to engage in dialogue on Safe Standing for over 15yrs, now publicly support a position which ensures clubs have the choice to offer alternatives to all-seated stadia. Attention must thus be paid to the ways in which Safe Standing is seen as compatible with the Premier League's brand and the marketing of its product to global audiences. According to MacInnes (2016), the Premier League has become increasingly concerned with the 'hush' inside contemporary all-seated stadia and thus its willingness to consider Safe Standing is a sign that the league realizes something needs to be done to address the problem of atmosphere, as a core component of its brand. However, as Numerato (2018) notes, sometimes, political authorities or corporate actors seek to politicize the topic with a secondary objective of reinforcing power. And thus by arguing that the Premier League and DCMS had been in danger of falling behind when it came to listening to 'customer' demand, Safe Standing is characteristic of a movement, which is not *against modern football*, but embedded within the *neoliberalisation of modern football*. To some extent, this is characteristic Kennedy and Kennedy's (2013) critique of leftist supporter movements, which argues that even amongst supporters critical of the lurch in football governance toward naked marketization of the game, there remains a tendency to fall in with the type of economic rationality that now permeates football. The FSA are now an effective SMO in advocating more sustainable forms of governance and community-based enterprises, however Safe Standing has moved beyond mobilising

supporters around ideas of tradition and collective consciousness and instead transmits reflexive discourses which are characteristic of the commodification of protest (Numerato, 2018).

Whilst Safe Standing may seek to bring about a long-term change to the all-seating legislation, the focus on Rail Seating or 'Seats with Barriers' continues to operate within the parameters of that legislation itself through innovation. To achieve this, the adoption of Rail Seating as a movement for greater customer care, has been successful in making the case against current conventional seating. And by focusing on the technical aspects of protest, it became characteristic of what Numerato (2018) argued as the expression of *reflexivity* within anti-neoliberal initiatives which both enhance and limit social change, through the cooption of business-like language. Through this lens, modern Rail Seating technology is being installed at some high-profile Premier League clubs as compatible with the current all-seating legislation, seeking to overcome those problems associated with the persistent standing of fans. This is significant, because it demonstrates the ways in which movements adopt relational tactics, which in turn, produce movement outcomes which become path-dependent, and in some cases, unintended (Giugni, 1998; Della Porta, 2018).

Finally, the emphasis on Rail Seating as 'dual purpose' and compatible with the all-seating legislation in English football raises several important questions for future policy directions. First, what would be the value and indeed vested interests of high-profile Premier League clubs in changing conventional all-seated areas to Rail Seating? And what are the practical challenges of policing the all-seating legislation in Rail Seating areas as opposed to conventional all-seated areas? Second, in what ways might this tactic create conflict between supporters of clubs across different levels of football, where both traditional and modern standing terraces, which meet the safety guidelines as set out by the SGSA, may be perceived differently to Rail Seating, if the legislation is changed or relaxed? In other words, if a lower league club with terracing is promoted to the Championship, would a change to the all-seating legislation include Rail Seating only, as a legitimate form of standing, or would it extend to other (terraced) standing areas? And third, if those with a vested interest in Rail Seating are successful in getting Premier League clubs to install such technology, so as to enhance the safety of those persistently standing, to what extent does a change in the all-seating legislation itself continue to become the movement's primary aim?

Conclusion

To operationalize the research question, the introduction set out three aims. The empirical snapshots across 2009-09 reveal three emerging themes. First, whilst the state and its sub-actors are important

political structures in football which both open and close opportunities for successful mobilization, the micro-level human actions of networked supporters are critical for the creation of new political opportunities (Edwards, 2014). Second, movements are relational to wider social and cultural transformations, and thus Safe Standing became part of a hyperdigitalization of football culture through accelerated levels of digital literacy amongst supporter networks (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). Sometimes, these networks are switched between national supporter organisations and independent supporter groups, producing relational protests which further complicate the collective and individual dimensions of protest. And third, emerging late-modern supporter protest movements like Safe Standing, are producing coalitions which seek to challenge the capitalist logics of modern football, but the digital platforms in which they are embedded, both consume and produce late modern football culture. Together, these reveal the key characteristics of Safe Standing, including conflict, organizational form and intersubjective motivations, to represent the collective, but also often complex and contradictory responses, to the neoliberal political economy in which English football, and society more broadly, has inhabited over the past 30yrs.

English football is a *lifeworld* with a rich array of resources and networks. As such, the all-seating legislation impacts many supporters within this *lifeworld* and in some cases, the people with power to make changes or become important political actors, are football fans themselves. And the freedom or choice to watch football in particular ways, which includes both standing and seating, brings into question what type of society we are, and the ways in which some social groups are subject to more governmental control than others. This research advances the social scientific study of English football, by highlighting how whilst fans continue to typically mobilise on a club-basis, they are, through the forming of small coalitions which are switched together by networks across different temporal periods, able to create a quasi-national movement. However, supporter movements like Safe Standing are not universalistic or homogeneous, and thus the interconnection of mobilizations can often produce conflicting manifestations (Numerato, 2018). Indeed, by paying attention to these mobilizations across time, it is possible to comprehend the multifaceted nature of the fan activism complex. Through this lens, fans' struggle over the all-seating legislation is about the socio-cultural and symbolic aspects of football, and stadium atmosphere and fan experience, but also security measures and policing and the broader governance of the game.

Whilst it remains unclear whether the Safe Standing movement will be successful in changing the all-seating legislation, it has achieved some success in normalizing new Safe Standing technology within the production and consumption of modern football culture, both in the UK and across Europe. Moreover, the mobilizations across 2009-09, reveal the legacy of 20yr supporter coalition networks

to be able, in some cases, to bring dominant social discourses into national and transnational spaces, and in doing so, become effective political actors. Despite this, the agitation of these networks against the all-seating legislation has lasted over 30yrs and thus this brings into question both the extent to which a movement remains a movement after this length of time, and how best to assess its efficacy. By paying attention to the wider social transformations across the post-Hillsborough landscape, it becomes clear that the pressure for change has come from both supporter activism and new social, cultural and political contexts. Consequently, Safe Standing is characterized by a relational logic of collective action and a relational understanding of the environment in which it moves in two significant ways. First, it demonstrates the power of long-lasting uncoordinated direct action, such as the persistent standing of supporters in all-seated areas, to be temporally significant, and characteristic of the restless indeterminacy of significant events like Hillsborough. And second, it shows the ways in which the employment of dominant social discourse by activists, in this case, 'spectator safety', becomes an interpretative struggle lasting 30years. Tellingly then, whilst new developments in stadium technology, as those found in Germany during 1999-09, and new political events are important macro-level structures, the multifaceted nature of micro-level networks, relations and interactions, give those events meaning, across the compelling time-frames and orientations of English football.

Finally, whilst this article focused on recent micro-level mobilizations of Safe Standing, future research should look to examine the wider social, economic and cultural implications of the movement and the broader impact on fan behaviour, the match day experiences of fans, and different fan typologies. Indeed, it would be analytically illuminating to situate Safe Standing within wider developments of fan behaviour in football, or in socio-political circles which have also played a key role in shaping the debate and recent political outcomes.

Notes

[1] The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties all pledged support in their 2019 general election manifesto.

[2] Convertible 'Rail Seating' refers to seats folded against a barrier which run the length of every two rows allowing fans to stand for Bundesliga matches in Germany where the legislation does not apply. During UEFA competitions, the seat is unlocked and pushed down to comply with all-seating legislation.

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