Towards a digital football studies: Current trends and future directions for football cultures research in the post-Covid-19 moment

Abstract

As the digital revolution continues apace, emergent technologies and means of communication have presented new challenges and opportunities for the field of football studies. In turn, researchers active across the social sciences and beyond have responded and are beginning to carve out a new field of study - digital football studies. In the absence of any concentrated review of this field, the purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to critically revisit previous 'waves' of football studies scholarship; (2) to identify themes in current digital football studies scholarship and identify areas for future study; and (3) to begin to map out some theoretical and conceptual traditions that might better equip scholarly enterprises for the study of football, and by association leisure and sport, in the (hyper)digital moment. We also postulate the establishment of digital football studies as a collective enterprise will be especially important for a post-Covid-19 globe given the rapid acceleration towards digital during the pandemic. To this end, we argue that leisure and football studies must develop empirically, methodologically, and theoretically to better capture the nature of (hyper)digitalised societies and the ways audiences are playing with, and shifting, the boundaries and possibilities for football and leisure.

Introduction

As the digital revolution continues apace, emergent technologies and means of communication have presented new challenges and opportunities to the game of football, at all levels, as well as scholars of leisure, sport and football studies. Increasingly digitalized relationships are being formed, ones that are shifting the boundaries and possibilities for leisure, sport and football cultures. Lupton (2017) recognizes, for instance, that digital technologies now not only play companion to our material bodies they actively constitute our sense of self and the very construction of our social and cultural networks and worlds. Furthermore, Jenkins (2019)

suggests the material and digital worlds are interacting in such a way that it is allowing a profound reimagination of the possibilities for the co-existence and elision of the two. In this sense, we can no longer seek to understand leisure cultures, and leisure related sub-fields such as sport and football studies, without considering the role of the digital, to greater or lesser degrees, within their perpetuation and formation. The question this then poses, and one this paper in small part will attempt to address, is whether such profound shifts away from analogue cultures, towards a greater propensity for posthuman interaction, may render established bodies of knowledge, categories of inquiry and conceptual tools, traditionally used in leisure, sport and football studies research, obsolete?

Asking such a question however must not be misread as the authors adopting an uncritical, reductivist position nor one that suggests football and leisure (both as pastimes and fields of study) operate in narrow analogue/digital dualisms, placing us fully in one or the other; rather, its purpose is to suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to the continuities and discontinuities that result from accelerated processes of (hyper)digitalization, which late modern digital societies are experiencing more intensely than ever before. Stated differently, if leisure studies relies overly on analogous theorists and methodological traditions, ignoring critically progressive theoretical frameworks from contemporary social theory (see also Silk, Millington, Rich, & Bush, 2016), it risks falling behind mainstream social science. Indeed, scholars from across the social sciences, and beyond, have in recent years responded and, for some years now, there has been a proliferation in empirical and theoretical papers that consider football and its relationship with digital cultures, technologies, and information. However, we agree with Redhead (2015, p. 1), that "there is desperate need for better sociological theorizing in our academic enterprise of creating a satisfactory sociology of football culture, and for

methodological solutions" to serve, what is quickly becoming, the field of digital football studies. This paper, therefore, contributes to digital leisure studies (McGillivray, McPherson, Jones, & McCandlish, 2016; Redhead, 2016; Schultz & McKeown, 2018; Silk et al., 2016) by arguing for the recognition of digital football studies as an emerging sub-field in its own right, by: (1) critically revisiting and rereading football studies and its scholarship as a field in the analogue moment; (2) outlining the need for an evolution to digital football studies, to appraise current work in the area and consolidate the existing knowledge base; and (3) considering some theoretical and conceptual tools that might equip scholarly enterprises better for the study of football, and by association leisure and sport, with tools appropriate for the post-Covid-19 (hyper)digital moment.

Rereading football studies scholarship and mapping some criticisms

Radmann and Hedenborg (2018) suggest that we can trace the origins of football studies to the late 1960s, when academics first began to take a critical interest in football, and in particular, football fan cultures. In many ways, this academic interest was sparked by the changing nature of football in Britain, and also significantly, its strengthening relationship with the mass media and big business. In particular, two important things happened in football in England in the 1960s that helped lead to the initial development of football studies as an area of academic interest. First, in 1961 after a successful campaign by the Professional Football Association (the professional footballers' union), the existing cap on footballers' wages that had been in place since 1904 was lifted. Though commercial interests have always played a key role in the history of football, from the early 1960s onwards, football starts to see a greater influx of big business and new commercial interests. Put simply, to pay footballers increasing wages, and attract better players, football clubs started looking to new partnerships and new ways of making money. Second, as highlighted by authors such as Whannel (1979), from the 1960s onwards the mass

media, and subsequently wider society and government, started to take a closer and more critical look at levels of violence at football. This then, directly leads to a series of government backed reports in the late 1960s investigating the current state of football in the UK, including, most notably, the Harrington (1968) and Lang (1969) reports. These, and other reports at the time, tended to cast 'football hooligans' (and often by extension all football supporters) as 'immature' and psychologically 'unstable' (Taylor, 1971b).

It is then this rising media and governmental focus on 'football hooliganism', as well as the increasing involvement of big businesses in the running of football, which led to the first wave of academic publications on football. The first of these, and of most note, was the work of Ian Taylor. In particular, Taylor (1971a, 1971b) argued that where football clubs were once a focus of local working-class identity, they were becoming increasingly taken over by new commercial interests and a general 'bourgeoisification' of the game, leading to an increasing alienation of the working-classes from what they once thought was 'their' game.

The 1970s then saw a growing academic interest in football culture and in particular, football related violence and disorder. In particular, a group of authors who significantly contributed to this growing body of literature included those working at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, such as Clarke (1973, 1976), Critcher (1971, 1979), and Hall (1978). These writers, like Taylor before them, sought to locate the culture and changing nature of football within a wider social and political context. For these writers, again much like Taylor, working-class cultures and practices, including football support and football-related disorder, were understood as a response to wider societal changes and an attempt by

working-class (typically) white men to recovery a sense of lost community and gain in-group sub-cultural prestige.

If 'football hooliganism' was a key and recurrent theme in the 1970s, by the 1980s it became the central (if almost the only) focus of the academic debate – a debate undoubtedly led by Dunning and his colleagues at the University of Leicester. Moreover, this literature also tended to focus exclusively on a British context (Lawrence & Pipini, 2016). Following the sociology of Elias (1978 [1939]) on the civilization process, Dunning and his colleagues (Dunning et al., 2014), similar to Marsh (1978) and Whannel (1979) before them, suggested that violence has always been present at football. Then, in a more civilised society, violence can be understood as a 'throwback', and a socially constructed 'quest for excitement' (Elias & Dunning, 1986).

In the early 1990s Clarke (1992) argued that the academic study of football had, up until that point, almost exclusively focused on hooliganism. However, just as the culture of football in the UK (and beyond) began to change, so did the focus of academic football studies. In particular, the late 1980s and early 1990s was a period of radical change for English, as well as global, football. Following the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, the subsequent government enquiry led by Chief Justice Peter Taylor (1990) recommended the transformation of all professional football stadiums in the UK to all-seaters. 1990 was also the year when English football teams were permitted back into European club competition for the first time after their five-year ban, and the men's English national squad came close to the 1990 World Cup Final – losing in the semi-finals to West Germany on penalties in a match in which Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne famously cried. It was this reinvigoration of football that made it a desirable commodity for the newly formed BSkyB satellite television network, and it was the lure of a bigger slice of television money for

the country's top clubs that would lead to the formation of the English Premier League (EPL) —
to be exclusively shown on Sky television. In the rapidly changing world of football in the early
1990s, it really did feel like, as BSkyB sold it, that we were witnessing the birth of 'a whole new
ball game' (Taylor, 1995).

It is in this period that we see the development of a new body of work focusing on, what was
termed, football's 'new fandom'. Writers such as Taylor (1995), Redhead (1997), Giulianotti
(1999), and King (2002) (amongst others), set out to document the changing nature of football,
but more specifically, argued that we were witnessing a prioritization of a certain kind of football
fan and certain modes of consuming the game. In particular, they argued that football was
witnessing the influx of a new kind of supporter, what King (2002) referred to as 'new
consumers', whose primary means of connecting with the sport was through the consumption
of large quantities of official club merchandise (such as replica football shirts), and live televised
football on satellite and cable television channels. Though this new fandom literature was
undoubtedly a necessary and key development in the academic study of football, an inherent
problem with much of this work was that it tended to, either explicitly or implicitly, imagine and
romanticize an era of traditional working-class (primarily British white working-class male) 'real'
fans, as opposed to what were seen as 'inauthentic' new (middle class and family-based)
consumers (Crawford, 2004).

It is then in the new century that we start to see the rapid expansion and development of an
identifiable 'football studies', largely by a new generation of scholars, who have focused in more
detail on how a broader base of fans engage with the sport and teams that they follow, which
includes (but is in no way limited to) the work of authors such as, Stone (2007), Poulton (2008),

Millward (2012), Dixon (2013), Gibbons (2014), Doidge (2014), Pope (2014), Dunn (2014), and Campbell (2020), to name but a few. Football studies is therefore today a flourishing and increasingly established sub-discipline, which is attracting a diverse demographic of scholars, writing about a broad array of football-related issues, and increasingly we have seen some examples within this growing literature that seek to engage with how the digital has impacted on, and increasingly shapes, the nature of contemporary football, such as Redhead (1997) and Schwier (2006). However, it is our argument here that we are only just at the beginning of what can be seen as a new era of football studies, or a 'digital wave', which is starting to explore the potentially transformative of new digital technologies for leisure spaces, as well as its socially regressive impact, which we explore further below.

An emerging (critical) digital football studies: mapping the early moment of the 'digital wave'
Following Redhead (2016a, 2016b) and his recognition that leisure studies, like football studies, needs to 'catch up' to capture better the accelerated nature of late modern digital worlds, we suggest that the digitalization of these fields is a much-needed evolution for the digital moment. Although some authors before them engaged with football culture and its relationship with digital technologies and media, Lawrence and Crawford (2018) build on those works and use them to understand the pace of change to be such that football cultures are best theorised as undergoing a constant and increasingly fluid process of (hyper)digitalization. This is the central axiom we argue that could underpin a developing field of a (critical) digital football studies, and act as a key conceptual pivot around which work in this field has and could develop.

In particular, Lawrence and Crawford (2018, p.3) in their edited book on *Digital Football Cultures*, which in many ways, marks the start of the maturation of the digital football studies scholarship,

and has been acknowledged as a foundational contribution to the field (Byrne, 2020; Joern, 2019; Mitrano, 2019), suggest that there are four recognizable social and cultural trends emerging within football. To this end, they suggest these are:

1. Cultural resistance to the Murdochization of football spectatorship and news.

2. The integration of the 'Internet of things' (IoT) at every level of the football industry.

3. The naturalization of digital communication across the football industry.

4. A deep and wide-reaching penetration of deterritorialization processes.

It is therefore useful to employ this framework to begin to map out, and understand better, the early moments of the digital wave of football studies scholarship. In mapping the current state of the field in this way, we are better positioned to think critically about how it relates to previous waves of football studies scholarship and how it might build on previous iterations.

The first theme Lawrence and Crawford (2018) bring attention to is that which exists in much of the existing literature identifying cultural resistances to the 'Murdochization' of football media. Murdochization was coined by David, Kirton, and Millward (2017, p. 498) to describe the cultural, economic, and political consequences allied to "the migration of [elite English football] broadcasting rights from free to air terrestrial television to [Rupert] Murdoch's Sky digital subscription service". Since the formation of the EPL in 1992, this model has allowed elite football in England, and Europe more broadly, to reproduce itself consistently as a key site of globalized media power, omnipresent in sports news around the globe (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Horky, 2011) 2011). Football fans, however, continue to be concerned about the dominance of television media across the game (Welford et al., 2015), especially BskyB in

the British context, which is a theme also common across other waves of football studies scholarship. This scepticism can be found replicated in a number of studies that have focused on the consumption of, peer-to-peer live streaming services and broadcasts (Birmingham & David, 2011; David, 2011; David et al., 2015; Kirton & David, 2013).

So prominent have digital media technologizes become in shaping the consumption practices of football fans, 'alternative broadcasts' infrastructures have forced traditional, televisual sport media conglomerates into a significant refurbishment of their broadcasting models (Lawrence & Crawford, 2018). The popularity of streaming has also piqued the interest of Internet and mobile video streaming giants such as Amazon Prime Video. In turn, this has birthed a literature exploring the "intricacy of intellectual property arrangements in global media sport" (Rowe, 2019, p. 209), which at present is "observing [a] historic shift in the global marketplace for sport coverage rights" (Hutchins et al., 2019, p. 975). Given the newness of these developments, however, more empirical explorations of the social, cultural, and political *implications* allied to this shift is needed.

The second theme, the Internet of things (IoT), is however very much in its infancy and is attracting scholarly attention. IoT is a term that is used to refer to the "escalating trend of gadgets that talk to each other, learn from each other, even control each other" (Cui, 2016, p. 61). This work spans a number of different disciplines and areas of scholarly interest: Ikram et al. (2015), for instance, have recognised the potential for technology to "monitor the health of footballers and reduce the occurrence of adverse health conditions"; and, Fenton et al. (2020), too, have explored the health benefits associated with IoT infrastructures, documenting fans' use of an official club endorsed fitness tracking smartphone app ('Fan Fit') to monitor their health. In

this way, there is much potenial for this aspect of digital football studies to contribute to broader debates about the medicalization of society (Conrad, 2007), metrics culture (Ajana, 2018), and the quantified self (Fullagar et al., 2017).

Other research that comes under this umbrella is that mainly from sport management and sport event management, particularly those who interested in the emergence of 'smart' stadia and its ethical, commercial, and spatial aspects (O'Brolcháin et al., 2019; Panchanathan et al., 2017; Yang & Cole, 2020). Notably, however, and somewhat surprisingly there is a lack of research into 'smart' football stadia *per se* other than passing acknowledgments of its emergence (Stoney & Fletcher, 2020). There is discussion of Goal Line Technology (GLT) (Winand & Fergusson, 2018) and Virtual Assistant Refereeing (VAR) (Spitz et al., 2020); however, how these technologies fit into the developing digital infrastructures of truly 'smart' football stadia is under researched at present. This gap is one we would expect digital football studies to fill in the coming years, and encourage, in particular, a deeper ecological and environmental engagement within this area.

The third theme, the 'naturalization of digital communication' has roots in previous waves of football studies scholarship. During the early moments of the Internet, for instance, Redhead (1997) identified the introduction of, what he called, "computerised soccer chatlines" (ibid., p. 32) as evidence of a key shift away from a traditional embodied fan culture to a state of 'post-fandom' (ibid., p. 32), which enabled transnational networks and cultures to flourish. This can be understood as one of the very earliest conceptualisations of fandom upon which much digital football studies literature has drawn. Digital spaces, then, have been challenging 'traditional' yet

reductivist notions of the 'real' fan as being in attendance at every game (Rowe et al., 2010), for some time.

According to Lawrence and Crawford (2018), however, the term 'naturalisation of digital communication' places less emphasis on the transnational implications and possibilities of digital technologies for football cultures and more on the way football networks, both proximal and global, use digital media as the *nominal mode* of communication. Over the last few decade, for instance, there has been a notable increase in research conducted on football fan forums, which evidences the ubiquity of multilateral, digital communication amongst football networks, including research on local linguistics (Kytölä, 2012, 2013), regionalism and local identity (Lawrence, 2015), female football fandom (Hynes & Cook, 2013), global fandom (Chiweshe, 2014), and fan identities at individual clubs (Sayan & Aksan, 2020). More recent studies have also begun to consider smartphone apps like WhatsApp, which is an increasingly inter-generational medium, and its role in naturalizing digital communications of football-related content (Cho, Khoo, & Lee, 2019; Mazana, 2018; Ncube, 2016; Tamir, 2020).

Not only has the nature of fan interaction changed then, but so too has the way content is produced and consumed. Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins (2010, p. 301) observe that, "an emerging 'postbroadcast', or at least post-hegemonic broadcast, age" has dawned. Football podcasts, fan channels and pages, for instance, have emerged as a 'new' way to consume football news and analysis and are competing with mainstream media (Turner, 2020), indicating a shift away from communal listening and viewing to streaming content on-demand. Official club media have been subjected to scholarly analysis, notably from management and marketing studies perspectives, focusing on the notion of 'branded communities' and their construction (Azizi &

Tambunan, 2018; Helleu, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2014). Further research from critical sport marketing, management and journalism scholars is however desperately needed to capture 'best practice' vis-à-vis official club communication through digital and social media. Football might then begin to establish knowledge exchange networks, which can be embedded in training and educational programmes for prospective digital media professionals across sport and leisure. Such innovations are badly needed given the style and tone of communications emanating from clubs' official social media accounts, is tending to ape the (hyper-masculine) partisanship of dominant fan cultures – often in the form of combative, reactionary, smug 'banter', and 'click-bait'. Given the literature we review below is clear that the Internet has facliated access to particiaption in football fandom beyond reductivist tropes of the 'real' fan, reverting to laddish stylsitics risks oestracising audiences that myriad stakeholders across the game have worked hard to build.

There has also been a growth in scholarship that has sought to understand football-related communications from unofficial sources on all of the major social media platforms, such as Tumblr (Kunert, 2019), YouTube (Hinck, 2018), Facebook (Petersen-Wagner, 2018), Twitter (Bruns et al., 2014; Clavio et al., 2012; Price et al., 2013), as well as across platforms (Pipini, 2018; Rivers & Ross, 2019). There has also been emerging interest in the cultual and politcal effects of unofficial/ unaffiliated podcasts and/ or Internet channels conceived, produced, edited, and published by football enthusiasts with excellent technical capabilities.. Turner's (2020) work, for instance, has been especially useful in this regard, not only to explain how digital football communities are constitued by their means of communication – through his focus on the Safe Standing Movement - but how a subnetwork of Youtube channel COPA90, the Copa Collective, used their platform to catalyze social movements and political consciousness. Rivers

and Ross (2019), too, have explored the enabling and more 'authentic' properties of fan-centered media platforms; however, they also note the tendency of successful, 'new' football media - citing the example of AFTV (previously Arsenal Fan TV) in particular – to grow to resemble the "corporate machine" its creators originally set out to offer to challenge. Such analyses then aresignaling that digital media are merely aiding a reconfiguration of capitalist modes of production, which still only benefits a small minority, as opposed to enabling a more romantic or revolutionary move towards a post-capitalist digital nirvana.

A particular characteristic of the literature documenting the naturalization of digital communication amongst football fans, however, which was certainly less prominent in previous waves, has been its notable engagement with matters relating to female football fandom and, in turn, is contributing to broader debates outside of football. Similar to research on football fan forums, research on social media has revealed the inclusive and productive as well as socially regresive and sexist nature of football-related social media engagements (Azizi & Tambunan, 2018; Hynes & Cook, 2013; Kunert, 2019; Pfister, 2015; Radmann & Hedenborg, 2018). This is something that is certainly worthy of note given what has come before has often focused predominantly on (white) male fans and their experiences of the game (Lawrence & Davis, 2019). While more investigation is needed into the racialized experience of football fandom, governance, playing and coaching, the growth in interest in documenting women's experiences has been able to highlight most provocatively that digital football cultures are certainly not devoid of sexism and misogyny, which invites criminological as well as sociological analysis of hate speech and trolling online. For a long time, such issues have been overlooked, ignored or, at worst, denied, by previous generations of football studies scholars and, worryingly, some contemporary football studies scholars, too, in their overemphasizing of the 'inclusive' nature

and effects of dominant liberal agendas in the game. As Toffeletti (2017) notes, moving forward it is important:

> to strike a balance between critiquing institutions, discourses and processes that mobilise women's sport fandom in the service of neoliberalising and globalising agendas and recognizing the significance and meaning that following sport holds for many women in their day to day actions, interactions and relationships.

Finally, what has also become increasingly notable is an evolution of football and deterritorialization research, which is a body of literature that focuses on "the weakening spatial connections of cultural practices, identity, products, and communities" (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009, p 34) due, largely, to processes of commercialization, mass migrations of people and mediatization. As Lawrence and Crawford (2018) argue, while research conducted in the late 90s and early 00s documents especially well the effects of deterritorialization for elite EPL clubs and their supporters, chiefly because Murdochization had been felt far less intensely by lower league and amateur clubs, football communities below the very elite level had been far less prominent in globalization debates (Lawrence, 2016). During the era of (hyper)digitalization, however, the effects of deterritorialization are increasingly being felt lower down football pyramids. As McGivallary and McLaughlin (2019) demonstrate, the relative accessibility and affordability of new technologies allows fans of far less glamorous clubs, too, to enjoy live streams of their favourite team. Hinck (2019), too, observes that lower league club, AFC Wimbledon, were able to acquire an online community of mostly middle-aged American female followers, with no previous interest in football or soccer, because internet celebrity John Green would play

the videogame *FIFA* as a team nicknamed the Wimbley Wombles, which he would then post on his YouTube channel.

What we might conclude from this brief overview of the beginning of the 'digital wave' then is twofold: (1) the current digital football studies literature illustrates clearly a number of uniquely (hyper)digital developments have occurred nascent to the 'digital turn', which marks a new, (hyper)digital era for football studies scholarship; and (2) in light this, future (critical) digital football studies research is well advised to reconsider (but not totally dismiss) the utility of 'classic' sociological theories and tools and their ability to capture the specificity of our current moment (Redhead, 2015). There has been application of cultural relational sociology to the study of football cultures and fandom (see Cleland et al., 2018), for instance, which, at risk of oversimplification, is a contemporary approach that understands society *is* fundamentally made up of 'connections' and 'networks'. Applications of relational sociology to digital football studies though, especially those which employ graph theory, would be well advised to guard against the creeping positivism present in certain forms of this contemporary social theory, given there is often a tendency to understand the ontological knowability of 'relations' in a confident, albeit complex, manner that sees networks and connections as being constituted by well-defined actors and organizations. As Prandini (2015) notes whether 'relational sociology' is most accurately thought of as a clearly defined sociological paradigm or an emerging 'field' that is capturing a much broader 'relational turn', into which other paradigms and theories can contribute, remains to be seen; nonetheless, what is certain is that it is a welcome and productive development in the early moments of digital football studies, at a time when such innovations are badly needed.

Digital football studies for a post-COVID19 digital globe: Accelerated culture and claustropolitanism

In what has been termed the era of the hypercommodification of football, during the late 90s and 00s, much of the scholarship of the moment was a reaction to the Murdochization of the game. In the early moments of what might be understood as the era of the (hyper)digitalisation of football (see Lawrence and Crawford, 2018), we are witnessing a surge in scholarship that is reacting to the development of a new global hegemony and media ecology, one that has emerged out of the techno-liberaltarianism of Silicon Valley, which often jars with the operations and cultures that were, and still are, evident in broadcast television football media. The unique technological, philosophical, and ideological paradigms allied to a relatively small area of San Francisco thus require us to develop new theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of digital football cultures that are cognisant of the changed relationship between neoliberalism, mediatisation, and globalisation, as they are operating under new digital, technological conditions. This is a key challenge for all scholars of football in a truly digital moment moving forward.

As Silk et al (2016, p. 716) postulate about digital leisure studies, we similarly argue that digital football studies moving forward also "necessitates a fluid interdisciplinary, theoretical and multi-methodological approach". There is currently a lack of football-specific literature detailing what such approaches might look like beyond a few notable exceptions. Following Redhead (2015, p. 1), for instance, we suggest one way forward is to encourage a deeper engagement with, departure from, and elaboration on the notions of 'accelerated culture' and 'claustropolitanism' as useful conceptual tools for a digital football studies:

The French urban theorist of Paul Virilio has argued, somewhat controversially, that we are moving from cosmopolis to claustropolis. My notion of claustropolitanism, developing the ideas from a spark lit by Virilio, denotes a contemporary cultural condition where we are starting to feel 'foreclosed', almost claustrophobic, wanting to stop the planet so we can get off, well away from our 'mobile accelerated nonpostmodern culture' or MANC or 'nonpostmodernity' (Redhead, 2011). This ... develops my previous work on theorising football culture and society to show how aspects of today's football culture reflect and refract this rapidly shifting world.

In the simplest of terms, as Connolly (2000, p. 596) has put it, "when speed accelerates, space is compressed"; it is the social and economic implications that are emergent from the elisions between speed, acceleration, culture, (digital) technology, compression, spatiality, and change to which we suggest digital football and leisure scholars pay close attention, especially the role of digital forms of media. In stark opposition to the notion that digital technologies arouse our social and cultural worlds into a state of cosmopolitan extravaganza, delighting us with the unending possibilities of transnational fandom, consumption and mobility, artificial forms of intelligence are perpetually monitoring online activities and algorithmically foreclosing us with narrow, targeted content, information, opinions, products and people designed to perpetuate and reproduce our biases, with ever greater speed and efficiency. As we spend more of our leisure time, online, away from other people, we experience an intense claustrophobia.

The development of a claustroplitan approach in many ways is a reaction to the difficulties of cosmopolitan sociological approaches. At risk of oversimplification cosmopolitan sociology is concerned with the social, cultural and financial possibilities, modalities, conflicts and power

games that have 'opened up' beyond the nation state and thus argues for more of a concentrated, theoretical and empirical focus on global sociological effects and transnationalisms (Beck & Grande, 2010). Many of its aims such as its desire to highlight the effects of global inequality, challenge narrow methodological nationalisms and confront views of sociology as objective and value-free, are laudable, and helpfully distinguishes it from earlier sociological approaches of modernity. In its ambitions to 'open up' however it risks overlooking the arguably greater significance of what is 'closing in' and the implications of this 'foreclosure'. The dangers associated with cosmopolitan enterprises then is that it privileges those voices, identities and knowledges with a global vantage point from which to 'see', experience and comment on football from global, cosmopolitan perspectives, such as academics, journalists, financiers, diplomats, technocrats and politicians. Those who mobilize such an approach to digital football and leisure cultures might consider how they ward against recentering and adorning the knowledge of mobile, liberal, global football actors or those whose professional positions allow them to speak with authority from positions of privilege about the game.

Taking an obverse position, Redhead (2015, p. 90) argues that a state of claustropolitanism is an inevitable consequence of the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–2008, the immediate 'post-crash' economic conditions of fear, uncertainty and, more recently, a gradual return to a "more generalised, brutish neo-liberalism". Redhead (2015, p.80) sees us as inhibiting "a catastrophic or post-catastrophic world" and uses Zizek (2014) to explain that global mega events, such as the GFC, might properly be conceived of as seismic, reality alerting schisms, whose aftermaths require new ontologies and theories that better capture emerging social and cultural developments. To this end, the natural evolution of or revision to 'claustropolitanism' as a theory of sport, leisure, and football cultures is to recognize the COVID-19 global pandemic as a further

watershed moment for late modern digital societies, one that has provoked a far-reaching, precipitous, and dramatic digital transformation across advanced capitalist societies. If we are to follow Zizek (2014) in noting the power of global mega events to shatter and transform the way reality appears to us, digital football and digital leisure studies must respond.

We therefore propose an evolution in sporting claustropolitanism which: firstly, continues to question critically the theoretical utility of cosmopolitan sociology for digital football studies and the post-COVID-19 digital globe; secondly, continues to probe the interplay between speed, acceleration, culture, (digital) technology, compression, spatiality, and change but in the context of the unique set of environmental conditions global lockdowns have facilitated and perpetuated; and, thirdly, understands the 'productive' (and of course tragic) effects of the pandemic which have enabled football actors to contribute to the cultural imperatives during and immediately after the pandemic. For instance, we might consider: how the notion of 'foreclosure' endures as fans emerge from global lockdowns (or enforced spatial confinements) and return to stadia; the long term effects the dubbing of ghostly crowd noise over "the phantom football match" (Baudrillard, 1993); Whether 'live' spectatorship is still desirable, given streaming and pay-per-view services, such as the English Football League's iFollow, have improved significantly and relatively quickly during the 2020-2021 season (Maguire, 2021) VAR, fandom and Virilio's prophetic notion that "[t]hose absent from the stadium are always right' (Redhead, 2007a)"; the potential for material outcomes to result from digital activism and 'the spectacle of outrage' vis-à-vis the Black Lives Matter movement, which saw English Premier League players taking a knee, in stadia devoid of fans; and, lastly, how state sanctioned 'claustrophobia' induced by the government restrictions on civil liberates impinges on or mirrors the already waning political deference vis-à-vis football's governing bodies, amongst fans.

In the early literature emerging in sociology (Lupton, 2020; Nagel, 2020), anthropology (Pink et al., 2020), education studies (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Iivari et al., 2020), , and criminology (Buil-Gil et al., 2020) we are already witnessing some of the initial consequences of the pandemic, which document an increase in techniques of dataveillance, the (forced) upskilling of employees, families and educators in digital technologies/ pedagogies and the extent of the 'digital divide' across industrial sectors, generations and socio-economic groups. These early observations, then, already point to an acceleration towards greater reliance on digital technologies, or as Redhead and Virilio would have it, the "futurism of the moment", and our now inevitable transition to a highly fractured, (hyper)digitalised society. There are examples of leisure studies (Du et al., 2020; Roberts, 2020) and football studies scholars (Bond et al., 2020; Horky, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020) already stepping into the COVID-19 research space; however, we encourage sustained attention to be given to processes of (hyper)digitalization and the rapid acceleration of digital transformation in future work. That is because ownership and ubiquity of digital devices and users' ability to translate digital technologies into useful, practical form are not one and the same thing. Not only does this refer to a disparity between fans but also to commercial, communication, and marketing departments, at differing levels of the game. Digital capital is not omnipresent simply because one owns a smartphone and thus a deeper philosophical recognition is required of digital football studies scholarship, one that engages in a constant and reflexive critical deconstruction of 'the digital' and the uneven power relations that are implicit within the discourses that construct its meanings and possibilities.

Conclusion

We concede that this paper cannot be considered a comprehensive and absolute overview of the field empirically, conceptually nor theoretically, given the rate at which the field has grown and continues to grow. Therefore, it is inevitable that we have been unable to acknowledge the work of numerous football studies authors and papers because of the space that this requires. Nonetheless this paper has been able to illustrate that more and more leisure and football studies literature is focusing on (hyper)digitalization and its associated processes and, in this sense, highlights that these fields are clearly well placed to make major contributions to much broader social, cultural, economic and political debates. One such discourse we suggest the field pay closer attention to is how football is fast becoming the stage upon which the tech giants - driven by a techno-libertarian ethos (that is becoming increasingly authoritarian) - and traditional media conglomerates and corporations - motivated by surplus and control - are maneuvering against one another. The tensions between Silicon Valley and digital satellite TV for status as the ubiquitous global media power then is one that is evident from a reading of the literature above and thus is playing out very clearly, if not in the clearest of ways, in and through football. We argue that digital football studies therefore must reach out theoretically and conceptual beyond its traditional frameworks, in which many of us are comfortable, and make these connections more explicit to ensure it contributes to debates outside its silos.

To this end, this paper has not only mapped the current state of the field it also serves as a catalyst for a shift – where appropriate - in the kind of frameworks used in the study of football. Relying overly on 'old' theorists of analogue moments may not be sufficient if we are to understand better the dynamics of the digital one. Just as the Frankfurt School took on and departed from Marx, Hegel and Freud, or as Foucault used and evolved from Nietchze, we must use and depart from Gramsci, Foucault, Habermas, Goffman, and Bourdieu et al., where appropriate. This is not to

say 'old' theorists are not useful, but it is to say that an evolution is needed and that continued engagement with contemporary social theory would benefit football studies if it is to continue to be taken seriously as a scholarly tradition both inside and outside of the social sciences and the academy more broadly. The challenge for digital football studies then, as we see it, is to consider how football is a vector through which fandoms, identities, and resistances to the broader social, cultural, political, technological, and mediatised ruptures of late modern digital societies shape and are shaped by digital cultures and actors across the globe.

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