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The Rebirth of the Football Fanzine
Using E-zines as Data Source

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This article presents e-zines as both a legitimate data source and a basis of investigation for sociologists of popular culture. To do this, the article describes and evaluates the rise of the “fanzine” in the 1970s and 1980s along with its decline in the final years of the 20th century and parallels this with the emergence of the Internet as an “everyday” commodity. The unfolding argument is that e-zines provide a site for both the construction of (collective and individual) identities and “information age” sports fan democracy.

Keywords: popular culture; e-zine; fanzine; sport; football; fandom; discourse

Since the latter part of the last century, a new cultural movement among football supporters—the e-zine—has been growing. E-zines, as online fanzines that contain interactive fan message boards, offer (usually) unofficial channels in which supporters can air their views and publicly debate subjectively important issues. As such, there may be two areas of social scientific interests in e-zines: first, the concern with e-zines as an example of cultural contestation, whereby the roots of the movement and motivations of e-zines producers are investigated. In many ways, this type of research echoes Haynes’s (1995) on fanzines more than 10 years ago. Second, an appeal may be methodological, insofar as e-zines offer a rich but relatively untapped domain for sociologists of popular culture to use to tackle broader social issues that emerge in the prism of sport. The aim of this article is to open the door to both of these issues by first tracing the history of the e-zine back to the fanzine movement and exemplifying the continued links and juxtapositions of the two cultural artifacts before, second, moving on to show how e-zine discourse can, and should, be more widely used as a data source by cultural sociologists. The article begins by looking to the history of fanzines, which are argued to be the forerunner movement to e-zines.

History of Fanzines

Haynes (1995) argued that the origins of fanzines can be traced back to the 1970s, when a group of Cambridge graduates produced Foul, an amateur publication that was a play on words on the titles of existing, professional magazines such as Shoot!
and *Goal*. The aim of *Foul* was to adopt the *Private Eye*–style humor in the context of football. *Foul* also heavily borrowed from the growing music fanzines in its style by utilizing “cutouts” from newspapers, bubble captions on photographs and cartoons, and examples of mistakes made by the wider sport media. Therefore, in 1972, the first football fanzine was created. Over the subsequent years, this blueprint was adopted by a range of supporters from a number of football clubs and publications based around such teams emerged around the United Kingdom. In addition to voicing criticisms of professional media sources, writers also expressed very critical views of their club’s official match-day programs.

Hence, Duke (1991) and Jary, Horne, and Bucke (1991) have pointed out that fanzines are quite literally independent “fan magazines” that are made by fans and reflect the current sporting and other issues in a humorous way. Haynes (1995) further elaborated that such publications are mostly club specific, while also noting that a minority of fanzines talk about football more generally. Indeed, the following comment, given in the editorial section of an early edition of Oldham Athletic fanzine *Beyond the Boundary* (*BTB*), the editor made the aims of the publication clear:

> To entertain, inform and, hopefully provoke discussion. It is above all a vehicle for YOU to express YOUR opinions and ideas about the club, on whatever subject—provided, of course, that your comments are not racist, sexist or injurious. . . . BTB will offer constructive criticism of officials, players and the club in general, especially when criticism is merited, and especially when it has come to our attention via the people who really count—THE FANS. (Pete Mason, “The Latics Report,” Issue 4, 1989)

This discourse illustrates a number of points that are typical of fanzines. First, such publications are fan centered, dealing with supporter related issues. In this way, fanzines are discursive insofar as they are a “vehicle for YOU to express YOUR opinions and ideas about the club.” This is significant given that Jary et al. (1991, p. 585) pointed out that club officials do not necessarily favor club-based fanzines, especially if, as is often the case, the published articles and letters are often critical of the power structures within the football club. However, in the early part of the 21st century, as some smaller clubs became threatened with bankruptcy, fanzine contributors became increasingly involved in “supporters trust” movements and even sometimes involved in full club takeovers. Second, Back, Crabbe, and Solomos (2001) pointed out that fanzines have a liberal voice and were partially created as a form of cultural resistance against the 1980s widespread conflation of football with the racist–hooligan couplet. This is highlighted by Pete Mason’s claim that any fan voice is welcome as long as it does not give “racist, sexist or injurious” opinions. Therefore, although Haynes (1995) argued that it would be impossible to make too many broad claims about the diverse range of fanzines, he did suggest that most seem to have left-wing or liberal leanings.

Similar trepidation should be taken when attempting to characterize fanzine producers. Giulianotti (1999) pointed out that the only absolutely consistent factor when
considering such individuals is that they are “football supporters,” that is, in his opinion, among the most committed type of fan. Indeed, fanzines are produced by “amateurs”—that is, the people who write the fanzines and who publish them are not professional journalists. They are, in Duke’s (1991, p. 637) terms, “a labour of love,” and editors do not make a great deal of money out of them—it is not their main source of income. Beyond this, it is difficult to draw any convincing demographic arguments about fanzine producers. However, according to Jary et al. (1991), the Leicester School for the Sociology of Sport (Bucke, 1988) drew up a survey that looked at such factors. Although this is now almost 20 years ago, the group administered 180 questionnaires and received a response rate of 70%. The results indicated that football fanzine writers were “young,” with 79% aged 30 years old or younger, and were mostly male, White, and educated beyond a compulsory educational standard.

### Fanzines as a Data Source

With such characteristics in mind, Duke (1991) argued that sociologists of sport needed to make better use of fanzines through the 1990s. This advice was perhaps not as well heeded as some research directions in the sociology of sport. Therefore, although some, such as King (1998/2002, 2000, 2003) and Giulianotti (1999), have consistently made use of fanzines to study identities and behaviors of football supporters, and others, such as Haynes (1995) have taken the fanzine movement as the subject (rather than medium) of their research, the subdiscipline has not been as responsive as it may have been. Despite this, I would like to fully endorse Duke’s advice and argue that there are numerous advantages associated with using football fanzines as a data source. First, the acquisition of fanzines is fairly inexpensive. From my previous experience, large collections of fanzines, spanning the lifetime of a publication (which may be 15 or more years), can be bought for a few hundred pounds. Given the institutional and structural changes associated with elite football development (e.g., commercialization and transnationalization or internationalization), if a researcher wishes to analyze changing fan identities and values, fanzines are an inexpensive way of collecting data that can be longitudinally analyzed. The cost of a similar piece of ethnographic research would be much more expensive, and data would have to be recorded and/or transcribed. Second, in addition to being cost-effective, fanzines are easy to locate and can be found in at least three sources: (a) fanzine editors will often sell available back issues of their publications, (b) rarer editions can be bought (for larger sums of money) from specialist fanzine dealers, and (c) most interesting, others can be picked up very cheaply on the Internet marketplace eBay. Third, fanzines are relatively simple to understand given that editors will usually act as “interpreters” and will usually explain what loosely understood information refers to.
The Birth of the E-zine

However, in recent years, it appears that the appeal of football fanzines has waned.¹ There are a number of potential reasons why this has occurred. First, as Needham (2006, p. 33) suggested, the popularity of fanzines may have spread beyond their original “cult” level into the mass media. So, for instance, in the early 1990s, the BBC commissioned Fantasy Football—a football fanzine-styled television show—which became hugely popular and relaunched the careers of cohosts Frank Skinner and David Baddiel. Also, Needham pointed out that the British tabloid newspapers launched their fanzine (or “fan-zone”) football columns, which mimicked the original movement. In essence, fanzines were seen to be stripped of their “underground cool,” and as a result many producers and consumers refocused their attention elsewhere.

The loss of interest in the fanzine movement also coincided with the increasing availability of the Internet. In December 1994, Microsoft launched Windows 95, which, for the first time, facilitated widespread public access to “cyberspace.” Thus, the World Wide Web was created. The (usually) young, well-educated men who were so instrumental in the development of the fanzine movement were likely candidates to develop information and communication technology (ICT) skills, and the movement—along with many other leisure activities—therefore slowly migrated onto the Internet. The e-zine was born.

E-zines are best considered as a developing part of fanzine culture, in that they are the electronic editions of paper fanzines or online fanzines in their own right. According to Nash (2000), a major reason why fanzines are sociologically interesting in the study of football fandom is that they offer a democratic arena for the sociocultural and political concerns of the collective group of fans to be aired, and Johnstone (1999) consolidated Nash’s argument by suggesting that “fanzines have a political dimension, even if not in the party political sense . . . as well as discussing the team, board, supporters and authorities” (pp. 178-179). E-zines heighten the discursive dimension of fanzines by providing online message boards on which any fan can leave comments and debate with his or her fellow supporters. The message board is perhaps the most interesting facet of the e-zine given that fan discourse is created without researcher intervention and is ready for collection with the click of the mouse button. This is particularly interesting given that discourse and narratives are recognized as legitimate ways of interpreting individual and collective identities. Given that much “sociology of popular culture” research seeks to explore identities, assumptions, reasons for action, and values, it seems as if the narratives that are developed in e-zine interaction could be better utilized across the social sciences. Despite this, there has been very little sociological research conducted on football e-zines, even though Boyle and Haynes (2004) have argued,

Much like the explosion of football fanzines in the late 1980s fan websites, or e-zines are created from a labour of love motivated by passion and heavily tied to the construction of cultural identities. As with the fanzine phenomenon most are not-for-profit
and produced outside of work hours. The dispersal of new media production has therefore opened up a whole new communicative space for football fans. (pp. 141-142)

Boyle and Haynes suggested that e-zines are responsive to technological advances. This is entirely consistent with the production of fanzines given that Haynes (1995, p. 53) previously argued that they were seen as a rejoinder to the “desk top publishing” and office photocopying revolution in the 1980s. This returns the argument to assume that e-zines have replaced fanzines. Yet the relationship between fanzines and e-zines is perhaps not as linear as has so far been implied. Indeed, in many cases e-zines may be better viewed as the online continuation or sister project of fanzines rather than their direct replacement. So e-zines may enhance the marketability of paper fanzines, through free online promotion. However, a common argument among fanzine editors is that e-zines have lead to a decline in sales. This was highlighted by Steve Kelly, editor of Liverpool FC’s long-running fanzine Through the Wind and Rain:

Before the Internet, fanzines were the only outlet for fans to “mouth off” in any way they chose. The “web” gave people the chance to do it at that very moment and not have to wait to months for a new issue [of the paper fanzine]. (personal communication, January 7, 2004)

Therefore, e-zines carry an advantage over fanzines in that they provide discourse at the very moment it is produced. Given that fanzine articles are published less frequently (usually four to six editions per year), they are likely to be written in a more contemplative mood rather than the sometimes rather rashly constructed e-zine comments. Although this means that accounts are less likely to be well written, it does mean that identities are unlikely to be managed (cf. Goffman, 1959). From the football supporter’s point of view, an appeal of e-zines is that they are fast moving and allow strong online communities to develop, whereas from the social researcher’s perspective, a clear advantage is that they allow a wealth of comments to be produced. The number of comments is often so great that qualitative information can be coded into descriptive statistics, therefore potentially sufficing many of the neopositivist and interpretivist concerns about the measurability of the social world.2

### E-zines as a Data Source

E-zine contributors (like those of fanzines) define themselves as a group by ritually coming together to become a tight (often imagined) community of similar-minded individuals (Crawford, 2004, pp. 144-145, 159; Stoneman, 2001, pp. 34-35). By doing this, e-zine producer performativities develop a “group style” that exists above the level of individuals. This creates a patterned and durable culture (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003, p. 737). As briefly touched on, e-zines are very different from fanzines in one crucial sense: They provide discursive “message boards” on which
supporters can talk and debate particular issues. This advancement of interactivity provides the opportunity for “expressive individualism” (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003, p. 755), in which the pervasive group structure of e-zines is broken by comments that may unintentionally contradict the ingrained group structure. Therefore, comments are not absolutely homogenous on the same message board. When two opposing viewpoints are made, two possible outcomes emerge: First, the most common result is that comments are reinterpreted to create group consensus. When this is not possible, an opportunity may be given to the supporter to retract his or her statement before the issue is forgotten. On the other hand, the fan may not so easily be forgiven, and his or her comments may be criticized, mocked, politely tolerated, or completely shunned. As a group outsider, the offensive comments do not seem as controversial as some seemingly inoffensive statements given by popular posters. In such cases, it seems as if supporters look for reasons to argue with less popular members within the group. Therefore, although e-zines are democratic insofar as all fans are entitled to their own opinions, not all supporter voices have equal power when “threads” are constructed.

Message boards are composed of multiple “threads.” A thread is the group of e-zine comments that are given under the same title. Generally, each thread begins by discussing a particular issue, which may relate to football, sport, or any issue that is subjectively considered to be important to the group of supporters (e.g., music, fashion, culture, or politics). The theme of the thread often remains within the broad title, which means that fans often discuss the same issue, although it is also commonplace for the theme of the conversation to change. This is especially the case as discourse is open to interpretation and a supporter may find an aspect of a fellow fan's online communication to be particularly interesting and look to redirect the virtual conversation according to that point. An example of such discourse is given below, found on the Stoke City e-zine The Oatcake, under the thread title of “The curse of the England car flags”:

In the example discourse (see Figure 1), Stoke City fans are debating the “merits” of publicly displaying St. George’s flags prior to the 2006 FIFA World Cup. In this case, the substantive content of the exchange is less important than the stylistic features of the online conversation. Of particular note is that fans are prone to use local and national “slang” to communicate (e.g., “muppets” and “idjits” to refer to “fools” and “chavvy,” which hints at a particular “low-cultured” style associated with many U.K. urban youth) and slightly altered swear words (e.g., “fcuk,” which would normally read “fuck”) that are changed to bypass the automatic online detectors that are sensitized to subjectively offensive terms. Nevertheless, the production of such discourse means that e-zines offer potential as a data source, if the researcher holds the assumption that modes and methods of communication can be utilized to describe and/or explain the social world. The question is how e-zines would be best analyzed.

There are two broad, valid ways of considering this. First, given that researchers do not usually witness fanzine articles being written but find them in a finished format,
the data-collection approach to a piece of research that utilizes fanzine data should probably be best considered as a form of documentary sourcing. As e-zines grew from the fanzine movement, any discourse that is produced could be considered a piece of documentary evidence and could therefore be treated as such. Finnegan (1996), Chamberlayne (2000), and MacDonald (2001, p. 200) all argued that documentary sources (e.g., diaries) are good data sources for self-identity sociological research because they represent personal narratives that reflect personal and social changes. Indeed, Duke (1991) argued that fanzines “provide a rich archaeology of texts that are representative of the collective identities of traditional football fans” (p. 637; echoed in Giulianotti, 1999, pp. 61-63; Redhead, 1991, pp. 149-151). Any researcher analyzing e-zines could look to such literature as in many respects e-zines form a collective diary. To elaborate, in common with diaries, e-zines tell stories about the monitored group as they unfold. The main difference is the stress of composition: E-zines are produced by groups of fans, whereas diaries are usually written by individuals.

Although there is value in this approach, I personally believe that a large number of e-zine comments, collected over a period of time that spans more than a couple of weeks, moves beyond collective diary accounts and is best considered as a form of ethnography. There are two main reasons that inform this perspective. First, there are the criticisms of documentary sources that are not applicable to an extended e-zine collection. For instance, according to May (1993), a popular criticism associated with using documents is the possibility that they may have a heavy journalistic bias.
This may mean that the data source is not necessarily a true representation of a body of public opinion or that "facts" have been tailored to fit an argument. However, football e-zines (like fanzines) make no claims to objectivity and are proud to offer subjective accounts. In addition, both MacDonald (2001, p. 205) and Mason (1996, p. 75) argued that a potential problem with all documentary evidence is whether those selected "[constitute] a representative sample of the universe of documents as they originally existed" (MacDonald, 2001, p. 205). A selection of a few e-zine comments from a relatively short number of days would justify this concern, but this would not be the case with an extended sample. Also, Finnegar (1996, p. 144) argued that a diarist may be writing with an eye to later publication possibilities, and this may affect how various events are reported as the author aims to "create the right impression." This is not the case with e-zines because it is impossible to contemplate Internet message board comment being published without any analysis, although it is possible that e-zine supporters may be producing measured "cyber identities" in the hope of impressing their fellow fans. The second reason why it is preferable to call the data-collection strategy a form of ethnography was formed in the light of Christine Hine’s (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. In this book, Hine showed how she immersed herself in an online news discussion group as she monitored the case of Louise Woodward, the British nanny who was controversially found guilty of unintentionally killing an American baby in 1997, and created a new research approach that she referred to as “virtual ethnography.”

This term can equally apply to football (or other sport) Internet message boards for a number of reasons. First, the way Hine approached her research can easily be replicated by sociologists of sport. She found that a specific advantage of this was that she could engage with the group while her in-depth and accurate field notes were being compiled by her participants as they discussed the case. This also happens with football supporters as they discuss the issues that are subjectively important and are immediately ready for data collection, via a simple “cut and paste” into an appropriate analysis program (e.g., NVIVO). This positively compares to carrying out research on other sports fans given that, in its deepest sense, ethnography involves the researcher fully immersing himself or herself into the field. In principle, this gives a rich seam of data, although there are clear problems associated with the reliability of field notes because they are unlikely to be instantaneously recorded. This did not happen in this study as field notes were essentially transcribed at the point of inception. This offers an immediate advantage when ethnographically studying “everyday” people such as sports fans, who may be very welcoming and responsive to researcher questions; however, such a rapport may be threatened if the researcher decides that the only reliable way to record notes is to use a tape recorder. Although group members may be acting in entirely legal and responsible ways, the introduction of a recording device helps to construct barriers between the research participants and the researcher. Therefore, football fan message boards help to immediately counter this problem. Second, Hine felt that by observing the discursive interaction among group members, a high level of in-group culture was able to be monitored. Once again, this is applicable to supporters in the context of
e-zine message boards, although it is highly recommended that a long period of time be spent in the virtual field so that the researcher can familiarize himself or herself with the environment and discover the discursive rhythms and patterns of communication before data analysis begins.

An associated question is whether the researcher should make himself or herself known during the research. Hine argued that he or she should insofar as it is necessary for the researcher to contribute to online discourse, if the project is to be considered a form of ethnographic inquiry, as she felt that an ethnographer must shape the discussion. This claim is disputable given that there is also appeal in a covert strategy in which online fan discourse is measured without interviewer intervention, as this potentially adds validity to the research. Therefore, this type of passive e-zine “virtual ethnography” offers the clear advantage of “unobtrusive measures,” which refer to the “ideal methods” (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966, p. 3) that do not intrude or affect the personal lives of those who are being researched and so they do not change their behavior accordingly. Therefore, the common term that message board contributors would use to define this type of behavior is a “lurker,” that is, somebody who visits the fan site and reads the comments but does not usually contribute his or her own discourse. This inevitably raises ethical issues that a researcher must tackle before using e-zines as a data source. As in any research, there are two ethical approaches that can be applied.

The first is the defensive ethical style. At the center of this approach is the idea that the ethical guidelines of a governing association or society must be met before the researcher can proceed with his or her data-collection strategy. If this model were adopted, issues would emerge around the widely circulated guidelines of anonymity and consent. Here, the ethical justification for e-zines would be, first, that every attempt be made to protect the anonymity of the supporter, in that all identities could be stripped and fans could be referred to only as numbers (e.g., Oldham Athletic Fan 1). Second, relating to consent, it is possible to argue that once the e-zine comment has been aired, it becomes the property of the e-zine moderator (the person who carries out the message board administration). Therefore, it is possible to argue that if he or she gives his or her permission to use the discourse, it is ethical.

A second approach is to adopt a more “reflective” model. This involves placing ethical debate at the core of the research process and placing due consideration at all such steps (research design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination). Here, the ethical concerns could be multiple, but as such an awareness of the potential contestations becomes a research strength rather than weakness.

A noticeable methodological weakness in using e-zines as a data source is that it is often very difficult to check contributor details with any level of certainty. This concern is shared with Ruddock (2005), who previously researched the e-zine of West Ham United supporters. A researcher can attempt to bridge this pitfall in at least three ways. First, the researcher can attempt to question his or her participants, perhaps administering online questionnaires. This allows the researcher to ask participants vital demographic information. However, the drawbacks of this method are that the researcher can ask the participants only for information about themselves
that they are prepared to divulge to the online supporter community and that even if a large number of e-zine “posters” respond to the thread (which is by no means certain), this will constitute only a small sample of the overall number of fans. Second, if the e-zine has a “personal mail” facility, a researcher can send similar questionnaires out to all e-zine members. These could then be returned, with the participant possibly encouraged by the fact that his or her details will not be exposed to the group. However, much like the previous option, this approach is likely to produce low response rates. A third way of overcoming this problem, particularly if a “virtual ethnographic” approach is adopted, is for the researcher to engage in a lengthy fieldwork period, in which supporters are likely to make statements that reveal insights into their “offline” personal lives. Finally, although there are some e-zines that are almost exclusively used by non-football-match-going fans (e.g., those that have been set up by fans who do not live in the country where the team they support is based), there are also fanzines produced by such fans. These e-zines should be selected according to the type of supporter that the researcher wishes to investigate.

In addition, e-zine researchers should be aware of the “digital divide.” This phenomenon exists to different degrees on both the global and social levels and explains that some people cannot use the Internet. Hargittai (2000) and Millward (2003) have both pointed out that this can exist on two levels: first, those who do not have access to such technologies and, second, those who do not possess the necessary confidence or ICT skills to use the Internet. Such groups that are argued to be disadvantaged by a social digital divide include those with little or no education (Castells, 1998, 2001; Norris, 2001), older people (Haddon, 2000; Millward, 2003), and some ethnic minority groups (Castells, 2001). If, as is supposed by association with the fanzine movement, e-zine contributors are predominantly educated, young, and White, the digital divide would provide further barriers that create social and cultural exclusion. E-zine researchers should carefully think through the impact of the digital divide when deciding which “type” of football fan they are monitoring through this medium. In addition, although most commentators seem to believe that a gender-based “digital divide” does not exist (Castells, 2001; Norris, 2001), the e-zine contributors, much like those of fanzines, are generally male. Once again, researchers should be aware of this potential cultural exclusion.

Conclusion

E-zines, much like their fanzine forerunner movement, provide evidence of vibrant fan cultures. Indeed, more than 15 years ago, Duke (1991) argued that sociologists of sport needed to make better use of fanzines throughout the 1990s. In the contemporary period, I would go as far as arguing that researchers within the sub-discipline should continue to utilize fanzine material but, wherever possible, also look to e-zine message board comments as a key data source. There may be debates
that relate to the collection approach for such data. Typically, e-zine comments can be conceptualized as documents or “live” discourse, and either approach could be valid but may reflect different analytical positions. Personally, I prefer to think about an extended period in the “e-zine field” as a form of virtual ethnography. Adopting this tactic entails treating the generated discourse as “live” but also considering the emergent ethical and access issues. Nevertheless, e-zine virtual ethnography offers a rich data source that is worth pursuing.

In addition, the discussion offered in this article should not be merely restricted to sociologists of sport but should resonate across the spectrum of the sociology of popular culture. It must be remembered that the fanzine movement was developed by popular music and punk fans, and the emergent e-zine movement also exists in such contexts. In this respect, e-zine discourse generated on popular music Web sites also offers untapped research promise. However, the aim of this article is to raise awareness of the e-zine movements as, first, a cultural movement within the canon of fandom and, second (and most significant), a possible data source among cultural sociologists. Therefore, it is hoped that this type of article will raise debate rather than provide objective cultural and methodological answers. The underlying message is that the e-zine has been born; social scientists should be aware of its potential.

Notes

1. For instance, in the 1990s both Through the Wind and Rain (Liverpool) and Beyond the Boundary (Oldham Athletic) were at the peak of their sales, selling 5,000 and 6,500 copies of each edition, respectively. However, by 2004 these numbers had reduced to 1,600 and 450.

2. For instance, over a 14-month sample period, Liverpool’s Red All Over the Land–Online received an average of 134.27, and JKLatics of Oldham Athletic 138.42, comments per day.

3. I have made the featured comments anonymous to protect the identities of the Stoke City fans who discussed the issue.

4. Indeed, many underlying philosophical questions that have pertained to sociological inquiries have centered on the question of whether there is actually an “objective” truth to the complex social world at all; e-zines can make claims only to represent the subjective opinions of those who they represent—a body of committed football supporters.

References


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