Behind the digital curtain: Ethnography, football fan activism and social change

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Abstract

Football supporters worldwide organise protests, petitions, campaigns, workshops and congresses and are engaged in political lobbying. These expressions of supporters' activism are nourished by both discontent with developments in football culture and an effort to change them. The aim of this methodologically driven article is to critically examine the role of digital ethnographies in exploring these processes. To reflexively explore the complex realities of recent transformations in football culture, this research study complemented offline data with online data. The use of digital data is discussed along the following dimensions: informational, representational, epistemological and relational. It is argued that the analytical *dualism* employed to critically discuss the relationship between online and offline spheres should be complemented with empirical *duality* to fully understand the role played by the digital sphere in social reality.

Keywords

activism, digital methods, fans, football, online research, reflexivity, social change, supporters

Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a significant role in civic engagement and political activism (for example, Dahlgren, 2013; Earl and Kimport, 2009). Considering the significance of ICTs in contemporary societies, online data collection techniques represent an inevitable part of the social-scientific methodological repertoire for understanding processes of social change. Despite the increasing centrality of digital methodologies, critical reflections on online approaches have been rather limited. By providing a reflexive insight into the complementary use of online and offline methods in the exploration of football supporters' national and transnational activism, this article aims to inform the reflexive methodological debate.

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The use of digital approaches was unavoidable in the course of the research project titled 'Football fandom, reflexivity and social change' (FANSREF), during which I explored the increasing activism of football supporters with regard to the contemporary football culture, captured by the recently emerging scholarship on critically engaged football supporters (Brown, 2008; Nash, 2000; Williams, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Particularly, the research project analysed supporters' critical engagement with hyper-commodification (for example, Kennedy and Kennedy, 2012; Millward, 2011) and securitisation of so-called modern football (for example, Giulianotti, 2011; Numerato, 2015) and the proactive call of supporters to increase their participation in decision-making processes in football clubs (for example, Cleland, 2010; Welford et al., 2015). The study focused on a rich repertoire of contention that included protests in football stadiums and in the public sphere, boycotts, critical chants, banners and petitions, as well as workshops, seminars, congresses, political lobbying or consultancy to football associations and clubs. These initiatives have frequently been supported both in offline and online social spheres.

Against this backdrop, the main objective of the project was to critically examine the potential for supporters' activism to transform contemporary football culture. The main research questions were as follows: To what extent does the critical reflection of fans provide a base for the cultural transformation of the game? What mechanisms enhance and undermine the processes of change? In order to achieve these aims, particular emphasis was given to the dynamics between football supporters and football clubs, football associations, political authorities and mass media.

Similar to other examples of critical engagement with contemporary sport cultures (Bundon and Hurd Clarke, 2014; Wilson, 2007), football supporters' activism is enhanced and shaped by ICTs (for example, Auty, 2002), which are situated in the broader logic of the political economy of the media (Millward, 2011; Rowe et al., 2010). Although online approaches have several positive assets and ICTs play a central role in supporters' activism, online methods were not the exclusive technique used for data collection. Considering supporters' activism not only has strong transnational links but is also heavily embedded in local and physical offline contexts, online data collection techniques have been complemented with offline approaches.

The decision to integrate online and offline methods was also motivated by the apparent reciprocities and associations between the online and offline spheres (Crawford, 2004; Miller and Slater, 2000; Sade-Beck, 2004), which are neither autonomous nor antagonistic but blurred (Orgad, 2008). Notwithstanding numerous calls to integrate online and offline methods (for example, Palmer and Thompson, 2007; Wilson, 2006), the combination of online and offline data collection techniques cannot be considered to be holistic because every ethnographic account is both partial and selective (Hine, 2000).

In the FANSREF project, I used the online approach as the starting point for my research to orient myself to the topic, to obtain information about respondents and access to the offline field. The continuous movement between online and offline spheres inspired me to create a methodological reflection on the use of digital technologies that already represent an established and legitimate, yet rarely reflected approach to studying football supporters.[1] I reflect on these processes with respect to the following questions: What happens when researchers open the digital curtain and step into the physical field?

To what degree does the online sphere provide us with correct and accurate portrayals of social reality? How does the digital sphere impact relationships between researchers and their respondents? How does the employment of digital methods structure how researchers explore social reality?

To address these questions, the sections that follow will first present the methods employed in the course of the research project. Next, the main dimensions of methodological reflection are presented. Analytical chapters then critically examine the relationship between online and offline research along these dimensions.

Methods

The combination of online and offline qualitative approaches was unavoidable in light of the multi-sited nature of the qualitative research project, which aimed to explore supporters' activism in three European countries (Italy, the UK and the Czech Republic) and also at a European level. In this vein, the use of online data facilitated my mental presence in spaces from which I was physically disconnected and guaranteed the simultaneous continuity of information flows. ICTs can provided me with a relatively comfortable, unobtrusive (boyd, 2008), quick and economical (Seymour, 2001) initial insight into a new topic and increased my familiarity with new spaces (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

The data were collected from November 2013 to November 2014. In this regard, websites at both transnational (for example, Football Supporters Europe) and national (or for example, Football Supporters Federation and Supporters Direct in the UK, supporters.cz in the Czech Republic and Supporters in Campo or Sport People in Italy) levels were first reviewed together with institutional websites of football governing bodies. Furthermore, e-zines, blogs, Internet discussions, message boards, Twitter accounts and Facebook profiles of key actors, associations and institutions were followed; they served as a source of information for further snowball sampling. Additionally, offline research, notably semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations, facilitated the identification of those actors and social networks that were not directly connected to the most visible platforms of communication that secured the flow of core information. A continuous comparison of offline and online resources enhanced by the NVivo 10 software package permitted me to identify key actors and the agendas of supporters' activism in three studied countries and at the European levels.

The snowball sampling strategies were carried out with an attempt to capture the variations of supporters' activism and to describe its nature across three different countries[2]. The sampling was further driven by theoretical purposes to conceptualise the relations between social change and reflexivity and analyse the dynamics between supporters and football and political authorities in three countries. Three different contexts were typical of different configurations and dynamics between the so-called reflexive subjects – football supporters – and the objects of reflexivity – contemporary football culture.

The position of supporters' activism differed across the three countries; Italy and the UK represented strong supporter engagement, although it was expressed in different manners, with a higher level of institutionalisation and proactive initiatives in the UK and higher level of reactive and dispersed engagement in Italy. Supporters' activism in the Czech Republic was limited to isolated cases around specific causes. The countries

also differed in terms of the development of football culture. Whereas the UK represented an example of a hyper-commodified and economically successful football culture, Italian football, although significantly commodified, experienced a period of crisis. The Czech Republic displayed a less commodified, semi-peripheral football culture, and, similarly to Italy, with a profound crisis of legitimacy regarding football governance.

Despite the availability of Web 2.0 communication technologies and their participative potential, I made only limited use of their interactive capabilities. As will be discussed, in the initial phases of the data collection process, ICTs were deliberately used in a one-directional and passive manner, with no intent to enter and intervene into the social space I explored. The research therefore cannot be considered as a virtual ethnography in a strict sense. I opted to position myself as a passive observer instead of an active participant in online communities. In other words, I used the online platforms as a secondary data archive. This was due both to the sensitivity of the research topic and to the apparent impossibility of controlling perceptions of my online communication, which was potentially available to diverse and heterogeneous audiences, including not only political and football authorities but also groups of radical supporters. Misrepresentation and stereotypical images about my own position and status, which would have been created by online displays impossible to control, might have inhibited my access to some (groups of) participants, undermined their trust and had a negative impact on offline data collection.

Analysis

The complementary use of online and offline data is critically examined along the following dimensions: informational, representational, relational and epistemological. The informational dimension addresses the issues of authenticity, validity and correctness of information when compared to the offline sphere. The representational dimension addresses the issue of reliability of data collected in the course of the research and the capacity of the online sphere to accurately represent social reality. I am not using terms such as *correctness, validity, authenticity* or *accuracy* with relation to the representational and informational dimensions to imply an ontological primacy of the offline sphere over the online sphere; these terms are used rather instrumentally, as analytical tools of methodological reflection. I must remember that the methodological reflections must not dismiss the assumption that both the online and offline spheres have their valuable empirical status and are equally meaningful for the existing social reality. The aim of the relational dimension is to critically explore the relational dynamics between the researcher and the participants in the course of the research. Finally, the epistemological dimension addresses how digital data collection impacts the production of sociological knowledge.

Informational dimension

By focusing on the informational dimension, I am attempting to critically examine the capacity of the digital sphere to provide an authentic picture of social reality constituted altogether by online and offline social spheres. Does the social reality presented online

mirror offline social circumstances? How valid are the pieces of information retrieved online, from a comfortable position at one's desk? From the ontological point of view, both the online and offline spheres co-exist, and there is no hierarchy between both spheres in terms of authenticity. The communication maintained in both spheres simply exists in its own right and altogether influences the politics of the social world, which, in this specific example, is seen as the impact of the supporters' activism on contemporary football culture. The online sphere is used not only to portray the offline reality, but to interpret it, give it new meanings and redefine the nature of social world. Although some online claims can be inaccurate and incorrect in terms of their factual value when compared to the offline social reality (for example, displaying information that is factually wrong), they still have their place in the construction and reproduction of social reality.

Despite this ontological assumption that social actors may strategically or unwillingly behave differently in online and offline social spheres, from the methodological point of view, the trustworthiness of data from offline social worlds must be assessed. The collection of data in both online and offline spheres, in this regard, facilitates data and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1970), by enhancing the data collection at multiple sites and by using different methods for data collection. Understanding of the discrepancies between the online and offline spheres can unveil the digital curtain and enhance an exploration of socio-cultural mechanisms and reasons beyond the formation of the online facet.

When I physically left the comfort of my office and entered the offline social world, I started to experience occasional concerns that the social world reality behind the digital curtain would never be able to mirror my expectations, which were based on online secondary data. This concern was particularly related to exploring the implementation of supporter liaison officers (SLOs) in the European football clubs. The role of SLOs is to mediate relationships between football supporters and their clubs, to foster dialogue and to prevent conflict at stadiums via communication with competing clubs' SLOs. SLOs' implementation has been included in the European football's governing body (UEFA)[4] licencing regulations since the 2012/2013 season. The SLOs were included in the UEFA regulation following strong lobbying by supporters at the European level.

I considered the SLOs as an indicator of supporters' empowerment and a certain transformation of mainstream football authorities that are willing 'to listen to the voice of supporters', as declared by many official websites, leaflets and handbooks produced not only by fans but also by football associations. My decision to explore SLO implementation in Italy was further encouraged by a report issued by the UK Football Supporters Federation following its Annual Supporters Summit in June 2013. The report reflected on the Italian situation suggesting that 111 clubs had adopted the role (Football Supporters Federation, 2013). The report of the FSF was posted online on 28 June 2013, and was coherent with the statement of the former president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), Giancarlo Abete, who claimed that '111 clubs in Italy have adopted the role' (Massucci and Ferrigni, 2013: 11). Additional online evidence about policy planning and several workshops in Italy equipped me with a sufficiently convincing argument that focusing on Italy might provide empirical information to help explore adoption of the SLO role not only at the national level of the FIGC but also at the level of the clubs.

However, I soon learned through face-to-face interviews and non-participant offline observations that the implementation of SLOs in Italy was a 'tick-box exercise' that existed 'on paper only' (Field notes, 23 May 2014, Milan; 15 June 2014, Ancona, Italy), rather than in terms of real implementation across Italian football clubs, as the digital curtain would have suggested. The reality was – as I was told during a December 2013 interview with an FIGC official – that there was 'probably no club in the Serie A that would have taken the role seriously'. Both subsequent interviews with supporters and non-participant observations at two SLO events (Field notes, 23 May 2014, Milan; 17 October 2014, Rome, Italy) confirmed that the implementation of the SLOs was in a very embryonic stage of development and that frequently, SLOs existed only mimetically.[3]

Another illustration of a specific status of the online portrayal of social reality, which once promised to yield substantial empirical evidence (at least according to its digital front stage), is the example of an engaged supporters' group, PFANS, which is related to the Czech football club, FC Viktoria Pilsen. In the recent past, the group's voice reso-nated in the critical discussion surrounding Czech football governance, and although the supporters' group had a privileged space on the official FC Viktoria Pilsen website in early 2014, evidence collected offline suggested that the group was no longer active. In both this and the earlier example, incorrect information provided by the digital sphere can be explained as a consequence of missing website updates in the case of PFANS and a combination of transnational idealisation and mimetic strategic behaviour by football authorities and policy makers in the case of SLO implementation in Italy.

In summary, returning to the previous ontological assumption, the role of social researchers should not be limited to unveiling the digital curtain, de-masking biased representations and exposing the informational discrepancies between online and offline spheres. Researchers should be aware of the possible motivations beyond the construc-tion of the digital curtain and should be able to understand the social and political conse-quences of this for the development of the social world; for example, the UK idealisation of the Italian situation with respect to the SLOs' implementation could have inspired SLO development outside of Italy.

Representational dimension

In addition to the informational dimension, the digital portrayal of social reality must be critically assessed against the nature of the offline sphere, due to the processes of repre-sentation. These processes are related to the way in which existing facts in the offline reality are portrayed and interpreted and the extent to which this portrayal is either accu-rate or biased, when compared to the offline sphere. A potential representational limit of online narratives can be illustrated by the example of the Football Supporters Congress, which is organised every year by Football Supporters Europe (FSE), a pan-European network of supporters. In 2014, the Football Supporters Congress was organised in Italy as part of the anti-racist tournament Mondiali-Antirazzisti, and online reflection about the event included the following:

> '*It was one of the best decision ever that we have made to come to Mondiali anti-razzisti, it helped many people to open up their minds on matters of discrimination, to connect with many more people outside of the fan movement…*' (UISP Emilia-Romagna, 2014).

However, behind this digital curtain, several FSE board members would reject this framing. Some FSE members suggested that rather than opening minds, the event consisted of a socially closed group of like-minded supporters who would merely convince themselves how 'great, nice and good' they were (Field notes, 3 July 2014, Bosco Albergati, Italy). Numerous Italian supporters who refused to mix football and 'politics' decided not to attend the event. According to other observers – whose voices could not be heard without looking behind the digital curtain – the event was far from open because it did not fulfill expectations that it would become an 'opportunity for Italian football' and a chance to mitigate increasing cleavages between the Italian supporter movement and football authorities. In light of the event's ideological and politicised public image, Italian football authorities did not attend the FSE Congress. Notwithstanding these representational discrepancies, the official online presentation still has its ontological status and must be taken into consideration in the analysis of social reality; although the anti-discriminatory discourse in the FSE Congress in Italy does not fully represent the complexity of the supporter movement, it can stimulate further anti-discrimination initiatives.

A critical examination of the representational dimension should also consider the potential 'sampling bias', that is, the fact that a digital portrayal can hide some aspects of social reality and emphasise some aspects of reality at the expense of others. The problem of sampling bias can be well documented, as in the words of an interviewed football supporter: 'The trouble with the fan forums is that they are not representative at all. Anybody can go to the website of any club and can write any sort of rubbish.' Although the qualitative research need not be assessed according to the positivistic category of 'representativeness', the above-mentioned representational limits would suggest that any attempt to achieve empirical saturation through an exclusive reliance on digital methods is limited.

Other representational discrepancies derive from the simple digital invisibility of certain social actors. Some supporters who are engaged in transforming football culture are digitally invisible by choice. This is particularly common in Italy, where supporters' engagement is frequently formed vis-à-vis recently strengthened security measures. Some influential groups within the supporters' movement balance on the edge of legality, particularly because of the application of highly repressive measures. Several supporters have informally declared that they prefer to not be active online due to an *ex ante* criminalisation of football fans; accordingly, they use their own restricted, publicly unavailable channels of communication (Field notes, 11 April 2014, Rome; 7 June 2014, Genoa, Italy). Furthermore, digital invisibility can result both from digital divide processes and from digital stratification (Millward, 2008; Murthy, 2008; Seymour 2001). In this vein, digital sampling bias can be caused by a low degree of digital literacy or by limited access to information technologies.

The invisibility of the digital display can be motivated not only by personal security but also by identity – and recognition-building processes. Some supporters tend to hide the mere fact that they communicate with authorities, particularly in the Italian and Czech contexts. *A priori* opposition to authorities represents a constitutive part of the countercultural identities of Italian ultras (see De Rose, 2009). The term *ultras* refers to the highly passionate and active groups of football supporters who are emotionally attached to their clubs, internally organised and committed to providing colourful and traditional support for their teams. There is no single homogenous ultras culture. Various

ultras groups that emerged across time and space can be distinguished by their position in relation to ideologies, politics or violence (for example, Doidge, 2015; Podaliri and Balestri, 1998; Testa, 2009). A public disclosure of any form of liaison with authorities undermines the very basis of these identities. Some supporter groups oppose any communication with football or political authorities, and they refuse any open contact not only with those stakeholders but also with supporters who approach the authorities (Field notes, 6 July 2014, Bosco Albergati). Conversely, supporters sometimes negotiate with authorities without publicly recognising backstage initiatives. Some communication flows between supporters and football authorities, and football clubs therefore remain undisclosed online. Both supporters and club representatives admitted to convening not only official and regular meetings but also informal meetings during which sensitive issues are discussed and negotiated (Field notes, 24 April 2014, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic; 22 May 2014, Milan).

In summary, considering that the Internet is considered the first source of information, any analysis of digital displays must take into account the fact that online presentations are often used as tools to strategically display social reality rather than to perfectly mirror it. Digital data cannot be approached without suspicion, regardless of its source of information. Furthermore, and this is particularly applicable to transnational comparative research, pan-European representations can nourish a transnational bias, stereotypisation, mythologisation and idealisation of other countries' situations.

Relational dimension

A critical examination of the relational dimension considers a dialectic relationship between researchers and their respondents during which trustworthiness and credibility are established and maintained (c.f. Hine, 2000; Wilson, 2006). Assuming that online research is at some point complemented and enriched by an offline enquiry, researchers inevitably step into an empirical field with some digital footprint that is available to the offline social world. By its nature, access to digital data is two-sided, which means that potential respondents can – and sometimes do – verify the identity of their counterparts. In addition, the fact that the interviewees know who the researchers are can steer their statements in a certain way or even influence their decision about whether to participate in research. What implications does the use of digital methods have for relationships between researchers and their respondents? Furthermore, what aspects do participants consider when creating their online display?

The impact of the digital sphere on relationships between researchers and respondents can be explored along three layers of a digital footprint: personal, professional and institutional. First, there is a question about the degree to which researchers should disclose their personal identities to participants in terms of lifestyle, values, beliefs, and preferences through publicly available online communication channels. This issue is particularly significant with respect to a research topic such as football. Ethnographers' relationships with football supporters, and particularly hooligans, can be influenced by rivalries between clubs and sympathies for the same football club (Giulianotti, 1995). In my research, during offline interviews and informal chats, respondents frequently expressed their curiosity about my favourite football club. There is no doubt that shared

sympathies for either the same club or a friendly club enhanced communication. The disclosure of personal information also consists of much broader cultural tastes or lifestyle preferences that can be at odds with the sub-cultural styles of supporters.

Second, the relational dimension of the digital footprint has a professional layer that is related to researchers' objectives and to interpretations of the social world. This can relate to several spheres of sociological inquiry that frequently represent an object of supporters' critical engagement, such as standpoints regarding the use of pyrotechnics, criticism or support of repressive measures, interest in the commercialisation of contemporary sports and 'against modern football' movement and advocacy against the misuse of power or the lack of transparency in sport governance. Researchers are therefore confronted with different groups that have different vested interests. Public engagement, criticism or even activism by academics who are critical of football clubs and sport authorities or who defend supporters' civil liberties vis-à-vis repressive measures might restrict their access to resources regardless of their institutional affiliations (Field notes, 25 October 2013, Florence, Italy).

Third, researchers should reflexively consider the implications of their institutional digital footprint. This institutional digital footprint relates to the disclosure of institutional affiliations, disclosure of the sources of funding, or their involvement with NGOs or policy-making, governmental agencies and committees. On the one hand, any display of either university affiliations or European Commission (EC)[5] funding can enhance liaisons with governmental agencies or, possibly, football authorities. On the other hand, an institutional digital footprint can also undermine the relationship between researchers and respondents. Even the disclosure of such elementary aspects as one's institutional affiliation, funding institution, previous collaborations and partnerships can stimulate ambiguous reactions, including a refusal to give an interview, stereotypisation of a researcher, initial distrust or suspicion (Field notes, 25 July 2014, London, UK).

In this regard, a research project website or an open declaration of EC funding can increase the credibility of a researcher vis-à-vis public authorities and football club officials (Field notes, 13 November, Rome). However, such information can also alienate those supporters who are programmatically opposed to any liaison with football or political authorities (Field notes, 11 April 2014, Rome; 6 February, Pilsen, Czech Republic). Considering the two different types of respondents that I addressed during my research project and who often were in conflict and opposition to one another, I deliberately opted for a limited online portrayal during the data collection phase. In reflecting upon that decision, I argue that this strategically ambiguous approach created an atmosphere of functional uncertainty that stimulated the respondents' constructive curiosity and an atmosphere of dialogue during the interviews. This approach also allowed me to maintain a certain amount of control over the possible interpretations of my digital footprint and to avoid both misunderstandings and an almost definite framing of my position through a digital display that would have *ex ante* undermined my relationships with supporters, football authorities, or public authorities.

I was aware that institutional allegations could have posed a particular challenge to my position in the Italian context. As a former research fellow at one of the leading

Italian universities in the areas of management and economics, which the public stereotypes as related to the business elites, my role and beliefs could have been stereotypically connected to the commercialised football system challenged by numerous critically engaged supporters. Another risk for my relationships with participants was related to EC funding because the European Union is often viewed as prohibitive to supporters. I was also aware that by being explicit about public funding, I risked being suspected of strategically misusing supporters' passion and mooching off of the symbolic world that they create (Field notes, 13 September 2014, Genoa; 4 July 2014, Borgo Albergati).

The relationship between researchers and participant is two-sided. Whereas the previous paragraphs focused on the 'impression management' strategies employed by researchers, a short remark must be made about the stance of explored social actors. Respondents' relationships with researchers who step into offline world and openly ask for interviews are not their only relationships; in other words, respondents' relationships exist not only with *known* but also with *anonymous* and *unknown* observers. Some social actors act and interact online while keeping the universe of potential observers in their minds. In the case of some sensitive social groups, including football supporters, the universe of potential observers consists of not only researchers but also of funding bodies, football associations, security forces or the mass media. The receipt of substantial funding by football associations or governmental bodies by supporter associations such as FSE or Supporters Direct (SD) can moderate their public criticism expressed online. Although this is not a general pattern, some supporters' representatives admitted that these circumstances can auto-regulate their behaviour, constrain them to 'play the game' and have an impact upon on their official and online presentation.

The most cognisant supporters have interiorised external control, and they post online content knowing that their messages are read by audiences outside of their communities. The awareness of an external witness is illustrated by a Czech football supporter who made an Instagram posting of a picture of a secret agent in action at the stadium, commenting on subtle details typical of secret agents in general. Similar experiences were documented by a couple of UK supporters who have been critical of their club management and who asked me to not quote their identities in my research output. 'The club management is curious. They regularly control the message board and they are well informed.' (Field notes, 25 July 2014, London).

Some supporters try to obtain even more control and understanding of online communications. A representative of a supporters network argued that they are accustomed to doing some 'intelligence' work (phone interview, 14 November 2013) due to 'previous bad experiences' (Field notes, 13 September 2014, Genoa) with security forces online and due to 'a misuse of the research posture to spy on the supporters movement' (Field notes, 4 July 2014, Borgo Albergati).

In summary, a mere curiosity about or a systematic interest in researchers' digital footprint is possibly, although not necessarily, employed by supporters, football authorities and policy-makers. Participants, such as those observed during their online social actions, are aware that they might be observed, and they may take into account an observer's gaze. Conversely, researchers, as observers, are possibly observed by those who are themselves observed, i.e., research participants.

Epistemological dimension

As some of the remarks in the previous sections on informational, representational and relational dimensions suggest, the digital sphere affects the *status* and *context of production* of sociological knowledge. The discussion of the relationship between online and offline inquiry raises several epistemological challenges that can be formulated through the following questions. How does the employment of digital methods structure how researchers explore social reality? In particular, how are these challenges materialised in the examination of the dynamics between supporters and the football and political authorities? To address these questions, the next paragraphs will reflect upon the following epistemological aspects: first, the implications of representational dimension; second, the social-scientific co-production of the observed world; and, third, the ephemerality of online representations.

First, online content is necessarily incomplete, inaccurate and inevitably provides researchers with only a limited understanding of social reality (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). An overemphasis of the digital aspects of reality risks marginalising the offline aspects of social reality in the understanding of the social world. In relation to the explored role of football supporters and their impact on football culture, this approach might co-construct an illusion of social change and overestimate the capacity of football supporters to transcend and transform their own culture and that of football generally.

Performing a sociological interpretation that draws exclusively on online resources poses a challenge that one will perceive the mythological sense of change, a change interpreted as such by an active minority of social actors but not by mainstream football or political authorities. These analytical processes are epistemologically problematic because they tend to focus the analysis on critically engaged subjects, i.e., supporters, and explore social reality through their lens while disregarding the examination of contested objects, i.e., football or political authorities, and the dynamics between supporters and authorities.

Reflecting backwards on the developments of my analytical work, without considering the offline world, I would have attributed higher importance to online symbolic displays than they really have. By focusing and collecting indicators related to supporters' activism, I risked losing any sense of the impact of that activism. This was illustrated during the meeting of supporters and Italian politicians organised by an informal network of Italian supporters that aimed to critically discuss and eventually amend a law related to supporters' civic liberties, thus suggesting the unconstitutionality of the existing legislation. Initially, the meeting was portrayed as a significant achievement by online communities of supporters. However, this was not the case in the broader debate. In front of Rome's Santa Chiara Church, where the meeting with politicians took place, the only photographs that captured the event were those of supporters themselves, tourists enchanted by an unusual gathering of football supporters dressed in the symbols of various clubs, or security forces gathered in front of the church to police the completely peaceful event (Field notes, 11 April 2014, Rome). The public attention was limited to like-minded supporters, politicians and a couple of non-mainstream, relatively critical journalists interested in ultras culture.

Second, there is an epistemological challenge related to the fact that to explore supporters' critical engagement means to examine the social world that has been co-produced

by social scientists. Social scientists are frequently on the frontline of supporter activism and exist behind the digital display (Brown, 2008; Numerato, 2015). Under these circumstances the sociological inquiry risks becoming redundant, self-confirmative and relatively descriptive. The idea of *relative descriptiveness* suggests that the explored narratives of the social worlds – and in particular, those commonly posted online – are frequently formulated in a highly sophisticated manner, using social-scientific terminology, perhaps one that deciphers the (hyper-)commodified nature of contemporary football. The similarity of the discourses of activism and social sciences implies that the significance of sociological inquiry is primarily legitimised by the nature of the explored phenomenon, which tends to be a social problem, not a sociological one. What is the role of social science, and what is the added value of research in this context?

These notes apply to conditions in which digital research is complemented by offline research; the previous sections suggested that this approach is highly desirable under certain conditions. Through the online availability of their work, researchers potentially create circumstances in which they risk hearing *what they would like to hear* rather than what they *would have normally heard (or observe)*. To be more specific, curious respondents can and do read academic narratives and during interviews, they tend to formulate their answers congruently. In this regard, I argue that the idea of the unobtrusiveness of online ethnographies does not apply to all types of digital ethnographies and that it can be challenged. Obtrusiveness does not occur directly through the methods that are applied during the course of laboratory research or surveys but instead, it occurs indirectly through the co-presence of academic discourses that surround and frequently shape the main facets of activism.

Third, researchers who step into a digital inquiry risk being seduced by the ephemeral nature of digital data can distract them from more serious sociological endeavours (Tinati et al., 2014). The highly visual and emotionally intensive culture of boycotts and protests might on the one hand, create an impression of experiencing the life world and contribute to a descriptive thickness of social scientific narrative. On the other hand, it can provoke a lack of critical engagement with the data and a certain analytical blindness and uncritical fascination with explored social worlds.

This observation is further enhanced by the rapidity of developments in the areas of digital activism that transform the 'digital repertoire of contention' (Earl and Kimport, 2009). Photos, podcasts, tweets and Facebook posts should be understood as pieces of a data mosaic that must be re-connected to offline data rather than definite data that should be purely and descriptively transmitted through academic stories. As can be observed, supporters' online culture is not only a culture of political activism and civic engagement but also a culture of visual display with its own self-reproductive rules, its myths and 'stars', a system in which supporters' groups struggle for recognition. Under these circumstances, some critical meanings included in supporter displays are disconnected from their signifiers and compose part of this sub-cultural competition.

Discussion and conclusions

The critical examination of informational, representational, relational and epistemological dimensions suggested that the use of digital data should be complemented with

offline data collection. With an awareness that the clear separation of online and offline spheres may imply an idea of two disconnected spheres with separate ontological statuses, I emphasise that this division has been made primarily for analytical rather than for empirical purposes. Therefore, the idea of analytical *dualism*, i.e., the separation of both spheres, should be accompanied by the idea of possible, albeit not necessary, empirical *duality*, i.e., the ontological interconnectedness of the online and offline spheres.

The assumption of empirical *duality* should motivate us not to consider the disclosure of informational and representational inconsistencies between online and offline worlds as the end of an ethnographic endeavour; such an approach would be consistent with the idea of the *dualism* of both spheres. In other words, although detailed insight into both spheres can disclose informational and representational discrepancies between the online and offline worlds, this does not mean that a squeezed online presentation does not place part of the social world under ethnographic scrutiny; even inaccurate online representation potentially becomes part of societal dynamics and contributes to the maintenance, reproduction, redefinition or redirection of social worlds.

Of particular significance is the discussion of relational aspects. Any use of online material should take into consideration the degree to which researchers' identity should be disclosed. This is particularly relevant in the context of recent digital scholarship practices (Lupton, 2014; Weller, 2011). Researchers should reflexively consider the implications of digital display for their research in terms of data collection and knowledge production. This consideration can be at odds with the increasing demand for the accountability of social researchers (Murthy, 2008), the emphasis on an impact agenda and the contemporary 'display' imperatives for academic careers.

During this study, I have encountered several ethical dilemmas that resonate with the previous research in online spheres: it is difficult to anonymise publicly available data (Garcia et al., 2009; Murthy, 2008); because online content is not necessarily posted with the expectation of further reproduction, confidentiality is difficult to guarantee (Griggs, 2011; Kozinets, 2010); there is an issue of informed consent (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Millward, 2008); and more broadly, there is an issue related to the possible utility of traditional ethical guidelines in the context of quickly evolving technologies (Pearson, 2012). In the context of diverse Internet cultures to which standard guidelines can hardly be applied (for example, Eynon et al., 2008; Flicker et al., 2004), the interconnectedness of offline and online research strategies facilitated the possibility of dealing with these ethical dilemmas, in particular by providing space for negotiated ethics.

The approach of negotiated ethics was also enhanced thanks to the increasing level of overtness during the course of the study and reinforced trust with research practitioners. Moreover, as part of the research project, I will further inform all possible stakeholders and research participants about the dissemination and outcomes of the study. Two different manuscripts in their draft versions have, in fact, been circulated to research participants, and a publication of possibly sensitive quotations was also separately discussed. Some pieces of information that were identified as potentially harmful for the involved research practitioners were not disclosed. Lastly, avoiding exact quotes by paraphrasing and describing situations helped to anonymise online retrievable data.

To conclude, this article discussed various pitfalls that researchers might face while using digital methodologies. My aim was to caution against an uncritical overemphasis

on online communities in the exploration of social worlds that assume that the online social world is all there is. By focusing on the example of transnational supporters' activism, this reflexive approach aims to consider the contextual and nuanced aspects of the use of digital methodologies. Furthermore, these reflexive remarks are relevant to the social sphere outside of football; they can inform a much broader debate about the role of online media in civic engagement and political mobilisation.

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Notes

1. In addition to the previously mentioned focus on critical supporters, the main focus of the scholarship on football supporters' usage of ICTs was on sport consumption and football clubs (for example, Crawford, 2004; Gibbons, 2014; Pearson, 2012) or gender-related identities (Hynes and Cook, 2013; Palmer and Thompson, 2007); sensitive topics such as racism (for example, Ruddock, 2005), homophobia (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012), sectarianism (McMenemy et al., 2005) and anti-Semitism (Poulton and Durell, 2014); and, recently, online streaming (Kirton and David, 2013).
2. In the Czech Republic and Italy, the interviews took place in Czech and Italian and all of the quotations that appear in this article are translated from Czech and Italian to English.
3. The official title of UEFA is in French: Union des Associations Européennes de Football.
4. Only recently (late 2014) has there been a certain shift in these developments and more activity at the level of clubs, federations and leagues.
5. The EC through a variety of its research funding programmes represents the most significant funding body in the area of research and innovation in Europe.

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