

In on the Pitch

Peter McCluskey

‘Football In The New Media Age,’ Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes; Routledge, 2004; ISBN: 0-415-31791-6

In a mere ten years or so, professional football has come a long way. Once an opium for the working class masses of the terrace, it has transformed itself into a shiny new media industry: it is now an opium for the middle class too.

In October 2002, Boyle and Haynes point out, football dominated the UK news agenda. The coverage of stories alleging criminal conduct, often sexual, by young professional football players had become prevalent in tabloids, broadsheets and broadcast news. But they were soon joined by the story of Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand’s ban from the England national team for missing a drugs test. Football was clearly no longer merely back page news. Our national obsession with the sport saw it migrate to the front pages, as well as the lead slot on the *Six O’clock News*.

Compared to its previous lowly place in the media firmament, this represents something of a meteoric rise to celebrity status for “the game”. As recently as the 1980s, the saturation coverage we now know was nowhere in sight. Hooliganism still tarnished the sport’s image and the only live matches screened in the UK were cup finals and the odd international fixture. The league associations believed that showing anything more than highlights on *Match of the Day*, for instance, would tempt fans to stay at home. That they were right at the time, and that attendances are now higher, despite live football available most nights on pay-TV, shows how much has changed.

The repackaging process of the sport into a more widely marketable product began in the aftermath of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster when 96 Liverpool supporters died on the Sheffield terraces. The Taylor Report into the disaster led to improved facilities and made stadia all-seater. Whether by design or not, the removal of the terraces took with it the terrace culture that the uninitiated would find intimidating.

At the same time, the deregulation of the broadcast media sector by the Conservative Thatcher government in the late 1980s spelled the end for the ITV-BBC sport cartel which had hitherto provided all Britain’s sport coverage since the 1950s. It also signalled the beginning of the end for public service broadcasting.

News Corporation’s Sky TV was still jostling for position to establish itself in the burgeoning UK pay-TV market when it saw the chance for a take-over of its main rival. The struggling state-sponsored British Satellite Broadcasting, launched in 1988, was soon swallowed up in 1990 to create the behemoth that we now know as BSkyB.

In 1992 the top division in England, the old First Division, kicked itself free from the rest of the league and set itself up as the Premiership. The reason for this act of secession was simple: to keep for themselves all of BSkyB’s forthcoming offer of £304 million for live broadcast rights, rather than continue to share TV revenue among the clubs of the other three divisions.

The huge financial gamble paid off handsomely. Not only for BSkyB, whose business model for pay-TV services—securing exclusive live football—has been copied across Europe, but also for the Premiership.

The last three-year deal, starting season 2004/05, netted a massive £1 billion for the league. At the last count in 2002, 36% of income for the

world’s wealthiest club, Manchester United, came from media rights—some £56 million. So successful has been the branding and marketing of England’s top flight as a global product that one sixth of the world’s population are now estimated to watch a Premiership game in the course of a year.

By the latter half of the 1990s, football had become the panacea for new communications companies. NTL, ITV Digital, Lycos, Vodafone, Zenith Media, all believed football would drive audiences to their new technology and so give a return on their massive investments.

Broadcasters too remained under football’s spell. Across Europe, no digital station has been launched without an exclusive live football deal in place and the three dedicated sport channels in 1995 had grown to sixty by 2000.

Football is now the key content provider for new media platforms right across Europe. However, the reason why this cultural and media obsession has developed is not something that appears to interest Boyle and Haynes. What clearly does interest them, though, is *how* this has happened.

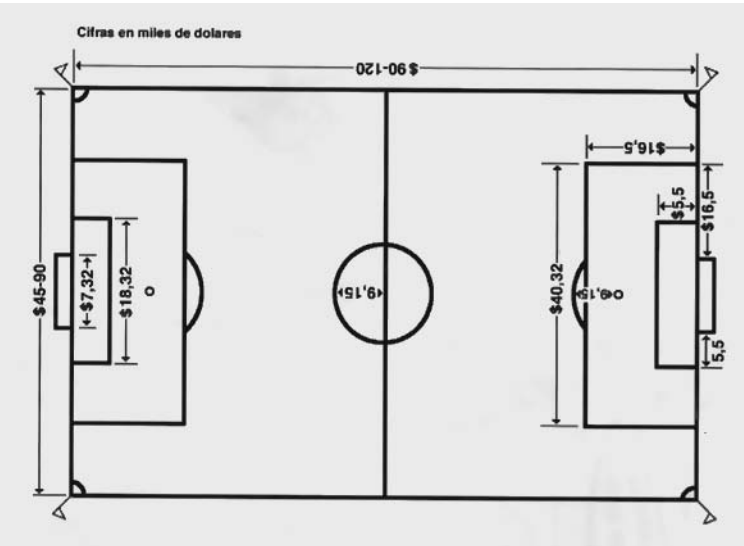
On that front, they re-tread the road to football ubiquity in fastidious academic detail, stopping to pour over the various milestone deals until the reader is asleep at the kerb. But while the style is invariably dull, events remain fascinating.

For instance, the new media market’s obsession with football led to a dangerous and economically unsustainable scramble for broadcast rights. Boyle and Haines give blow by blow accounts of this “land grab” which ended with a downturn in the advertising market and the fiasco of ITV Digital’s collapse in 2002.

Desperate to avoid being left without live football in its digital portfolio, the Granada/Carlton venture paid £315 million for a three-year deal to screen matches from England’s irredeemably unfashionable Nationwide League. This was an excellent deal for the League, who previously had received only £25 million for broadcast rights. But for UK Digital it was a death sentence.

The chapter entitled “The European dimension” gives a pointed contrast to the response by the UK Labour government to the Nationwide’s plight. Whereas the UK’s new digital service was left to flounder and disappear from the BSkyB-dominated media-scape, German politicians stepped in to rescue KirchMedia in its hour of need. Financially adrift on a sea of hyper-inflated rights deals, KirchMedia found itself facing a meltdown that would suck in the German Bundesliga, whose broadcast rights it held. The package drawn up saved Germany’s top flight, unlike many Nationwide League clubs, who were plunged into fiscal crisis after banking on ITV Digital’s huge cash injection.

But this is not just a cautionary tale of boom-and-bust bad luck or poor timing in a fickle new marketplace. It also shows the cut-throat nature of the new media market. A huge problem facing ITV Digital in the face of stagnant sales figures was the high level of piracy of the smart cards needed to de-encrypt its signal. In early 2002, Canal Plus Technologies, who produced the cards, filed a \$1 billion lawsuit in the US courts alleging piracy of their technology by rival manufacturer, NDS. NDS was part of News Corporation and Rupert Murdoch’s son Lachlan was on the board. NDS refuted the allegations that they had paid



hackers to break Canal’s encryption code, and then posted the results on the internet, but the case was not dropped until a year later. That was when News Corporation bought a controlling share in Italy’s Telepui from Canal’s debt-ridden parent company, Vivendi Universal. Meantime the damage was done to ITV Digital.

The European chapter is the strongest part of Boyle and Haines’ study. While the bulk of the book’s material amounts to a dull academic rendering of information that is largely to be found in the UK quality press, the European scene at least have the virtue of being new territory.

The pro-competition ethos of DG4, the EC watchdog which investigated in 2003 the Premiership’s exclusive deal with BSkyB, is understood as, above all, pro-technology. It wishes to see the dissemination of new technology, regardless of all other considerations. Also, European levels of uptake of digital TV provide a context to judge UK levels, which at 36% of households is double that of France or Spain. New media operators and football clubs, notably Real Madrid, seek to “control and exploit media rights and the burgeoning market of image rights.” The emergent on-line and interactive TV markets are seen as the “battlegrounds” for the struggle between them.

Boyle and Haynes claim that their investigation of this “battleground” will lead us out from football, on to wider cultural dynamics.

“We argue throughout the book that football offers us an insight into ... some of the wider cultural and political shifts that are taking place within the terrain of popular culture.” (P.14)

But it doesn’t materialise. There is no demonstration of how blow-by-blow accounts of the pay-TV football market provide these insights: argument, after all, requires more than simply laying out facts, figures and prices.

Throughout, the methodology is narrowly empirical. With an academic study, we are entitled to expect a cultural theory or analytical model. Instead, there are stacks of the data of deals, the cost of contracts, and the price of players, but no framework to connect them to “wider cultural shifts”.

There is nothing more intellectually feeble than condemning a piece of work for failing to achieve a purpose that lies only in the critic’s mind. In a sense, all criticism is essentially a matter of judging whether a piece of writing meets certain expectations. But the expectations must come from *the work itself*. The critic must guard against lazily allowing his or her own

subjective preferences to form their expectations and hence their critical stance.

So what is the intended purpose behind *Football in the New Media Age*?

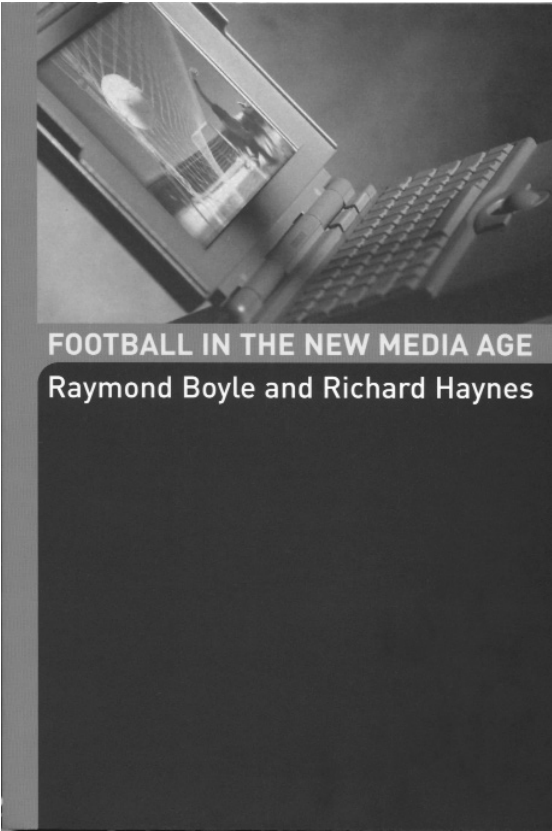
Deploying time-honoured academic stylistics, there is explicit signposting of Boyle and Haynes’ purported aim. For instance:

“[A] central theme throughout the book is a concern with the political economy of communication as well as its relationship to wider cultural and social practice. What we are attempting to track ... is the importance of contemporary media developments in helping to act as a driver for wider cultural change.” (p. 25)

But if you take this to mean we should expect a study of how pay-TV is affecting our cultural values, possibly even our political values, then forget it—it doesn’t materialise.

Despite claiming to investigate the market’s power struggles, the major share-holder behind BSkyB, News Corporation, is mentioned only in terms of its deals. We learn nothing of its global power, or wider strategy, or ideology, despite its place in the vanguard of the globalisation of the world economy. Consequently, it’s a bit like reading a history of the Second World War without finding a mention of fascism or totalitarianism. An inventory of loss and gain reveals nothing about the real power struggle that lies behind it. Instead, we get BSkyB’s business model. And even that is presented as something that simply emerges in response to the market and is borne of nothing beyond the market itself.

Football in the New Media Age therefore reveals itself as a fetishisation of the market itself. In fact, the closest we get to a thesis or controlling idea is that of marketisation. To Boyle and Haynes, players, clubs, league associations and media corporations are seen purely in terms of their relevance to the new media market: only the



market confers cultural meaning.

“... too much writing about the impact of globalisation is driven by a form of technological determinism. A view which identifies digital technology itself as the prime agency driving change across the broadcasting market in particular ... The advent of the digital age is really part of a wider structural process of marketisation; as the market has become the central frame of reference for cultural activity.” (Ch 3, p. 52)

Unfortunately for the misled reader, who was entitled to expect a wider, meta-analysis, the market has also become the central frame of reference for Boyle and Haines.

If Capitalism must reproduce the means of production, and to do that it must also reproduce

the ideological apparatus for that production, then you can bet your annual BSkyB subscription that global media corporations will *necessarily* reproduce the ideology that suits their interest. How could they do otherwise? What, then, are we to make of the current obsession with football?

Is there any analogy to be drawn between our current obsession and football’s promotion by dictatorships—albeit at a cultural, rather than political level? Mussolini was determined that Italy would host and win the 1938 World Cup, and so they did—apparently thanks to a few knobbled referees. Argentina’s Junta served up a world cup too, in 1978; and Franco made sure his team, Real Madrid, had the world’s best players in the 1950s and 1960s in order to conquer Europe. In times of oppression, nothing diverts the collective mind quite like football.

Clearly, we do not live in a time of political oppression. However, the political agenda is veering ever right-wards. As recently as the 1980s we could not have imagined a Labour leader taking Britain into five wars in the space of two terms. And at home there is the commodification of, well, everything. Boyle and Haines, rather than stand back and tell us something objective about what is happening in our culture, are instead fixed on the movement of money. When Media Studies is reduced to little more than a branch of Market Studies, we know that “wider cultural change” has been brought about. The global media corporations who helped bring this about would no doubt approve.