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# **ECJ Rulings or Wayne Rooney's Hair – Issues, Non-Issues and Hidden Issues in Online Football Fan Discourse**

**Alexander Brand & Arne Niemann**

***From Habermas to Fanblogs: Exploring the Public Sphere of European Football***

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Football Research in  
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# ECJ Rulings or Wayne Rooney's Hair – Issues, Non-Issues and Hidden Issues in Online Football Fan Discourse

Alexander Brand & Arne Niemann

## The Europeanization of Football, Identity Change and How to Research It

So far, our research into the Europeanization of football (cf. Brand/Niemann 2011, Brand/Niemann/Spitaler 2013) has been directed at changes of governance structures and dynamics as well as policies in various domestic contexts mostly. It could be argued, however, that “Europeanization” in sport has also set in motion other processes, not least on the level of *identities* of those involved. Several drivers have tentatively been identified such as the influence of a more cosmopolitan and specifically ‘European’ make up of players and coaches across the continent’s major leagues. Another important factor is a relatively stable pattern of continent-wide competition of top teams, the UEFA Champions League. Apart from the pioneering work of Anthony King (2000, 2003, 2004) and Levermore/Millward (2007), our own preliminary research so far has, however, only hinted at new forms of allegiance, orientation and networking among actors, mostly elite actors such as big clubs’ representatives, in the football context (Brand/Niemann 2007, 2011). Nevertheless, it could plausibly be expected that the aforementioned Europeanizing mechanisms have also left their mark on *sports fans*, i.e. the main consumers of sport.

Our research interest is hence guided by the assumption that the Europeanization of football governance has also had an effect on the patterns of collective identification of fans across Europe, or: on European identity formation in a wide sense. The difference of our approach taken vis-à-vis most political science work on “European identity” is that it is *not* the formation of transnational *political* identities (in a stricter sense) or identities that are *geared towards the political institution or the political integration project of the EU* which are of interest to us (see e.g. Brand/Niemann 2012 for an overview of different strands of the mainstream political science-debate on European identity). Rather, we aim to focus on a change of spatial orientations, notions of inside/outside, frames of reference stimulated through leisure-time activities, i.e. identity-related issues for football spectators precisely in their capacity as people following a sport and participating in sport-related events.

To *define* the term “identity” satisfactorily would necessitate a series of books, and still it is safe to assume that the resulting definition would be partial, selective and disputable.<sup>1</sup> Some authors even question the very use of the term “identity”. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6-20) for instance argue that in order to come up with a term amenable to social science, the term “identity” should be replaced by more specific concepts. The first substitute they use is “identification” with the advantage that it invites social scientists to specify the social actors who *do* the identifying. The second identity-substitute they offer is “self-understanding”, on the grounds that this alternative explicitly recognizes the *subjective* nature of identity. The third alternative is “commonality” which is to merely denote similarities within social groups, promoting “a feeling of belonging together”. Based on this, our understanding of identity in the context of football is inspired by the notion of group identities proposed by Eder (2009). Following from that, identities are collectively

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<sup>1</sup> See Brand/Niemann (2014) on this.

held self-understandings which are grounded in frames or narrative constructions delineating the boundaries of a network of actors. Consequently, identities are about “us versus them”-phenomena, normal/foreign, acceptable/unacceptable actions, ideas and lifestyles, about “membership” and the stories upon which it is founded, emotional attachment and delineations from “others” in a situation of group plurality.

As has been said, in the context of our research interest, increasingly Europeanized players’ markets, frequent club competition at the European level and its continent-wide broadcasting could have already had some effect on perceptions of fans and spectators. In that sense, it might not be trivial when German fans cheer Dutch players and accept them as “theirs” or when, as one colleague once remarked, it might be of more relevance for a Liverpool supporter what happens at Barça than what is going on in Stoke. Gradually changing perception patterns might also be indicative of an emerging collective European identity, at least the Europeanization of such identities, anchored in cultural and lifeworldly practices. For this purpose, we have started to explore two identity-dimensions among European football fans and spectators: “communities of belonging” and “frames of reference”. “Communities of belonging” refer to in-group/out-group phenomena, perceptions of “foreignness” and delineations vis-à-vis other groups. Here, one would have to look at fans’ reactions to the Europeanization of players’ markets (normalization or “foreignness” still as a hot topic?) as well as to the overall level of interaction and networking of fans and spectators across borders.

“Frames of reference”, in turn, include the attractiveness assigned to different forms of competition (national vs. European level), the reasons for such peer orientation (being top or being a national representative) and the eventual normalization of “going Europe” (Millward 2006), i.e. travelling at the occasion of football matches and experiencing Europe all along that way. Some trends suggest that a gradual transformation of self-understandings and identities towards more Europeanized, less nationally-defined ideas is indeed underway. The arrival of and growing acclimatization towards “non-national heroes” (Levermore/Millward 2007) is a fact, as are more defensive gestures in fear of “over-foreignization”. An interesting phenomenon in this regard is also “foreign fandom”, i.e. fandom directed at clubs from other European countries. This is especially true for forms of fandom which are not reducible to migration and diaspora situations. It may be true that the regular fan travel between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland (Celtic vs. Rangers) is mostly due to religious affiliations and respective identity-work, and hence not exactly an embodiment of Europeanization. But what about the 8.000 vacant seats at Liverpool’s Anfield road when flights across *European* airspace had to be cancelled as a result of volcanic ash clouds? (Millward 2011: 78). How come that FC Barcelona is, according to a 2012 survey of the ISBS Institute for Sports, Business and Society, fancied by 29 per cent of the football fans across Europe? Ethnographic research in Britain has also shown that followers of clubs who regularly compete at the European level, find more pleasure in a culturally defined notion of “Europeanness” (King 2000). Anecdotal as this might be at the moment, we think it is worth undertaking more efforts to explore whether there is an incremental Europeanization of identities of football fans by default.

But how to do actual research on such abstract, supposedly unconsciously evolving phenomena (incremental identity change *through football*, in the minds of fans and supporters without seeing them intentionally engaging in “identity-work”)? Here, we argue that it is necessary to apply a multi-method approach using different methods

in combination. The ensuing triangulation is necessary to establish and enhance the validity of research results given the (still) spotty nature of the research object and the ‘moving target’-nature of identity formation processes. (Qualitative) discourse analysis is key in this approaches-/methods-mix, since it is arguably – next to ethnographic research – *the* method to grapple with (changing) self-understandings of social actors.<sup>2</sup> Hence, identities – if at all – are expressed, articulated and communicated via discourse, here: what fans and spectators tell each other about themselves, their object(s) of fandom and wider issues of importance to them. Consequently, our research interest is directed at the question whether there are “Europeanized traits” in football fan discourse across several national domestic contexts in Europe.

Since the FREE conference in Ankara (2014) is about “new media” and the eventual emergence of new forms of a “public sphere”, however, two caveats are necessary at this point. First, we directed our attention so far mainly at *online* fan discourse, i.e. at message boards, fan fora and online fanzines not so much in order to explore what is “new” about communication through “new media” but simply for pragmatic reasons. Such instances of online discourse present relatively easily accessible data and lend themselves to research from a distance, potentially also in a multi-national fashion (doing research across various domestic contexts). Second, our take is not so much that of an eventually emerging *transnational* public sphere<sup>3</sup> of football fans (where, for instance, the same issues are debated cross-nationally, or where there are truly transnational debates, networks and forms of solidarity are emerging). We are predominantly interested in what is going in various European football contexts in terms of different levels, degrees or dynamics of an Europeanization of perspectives, frameworks and self- understandings. However, as we hope to elucidate in the remainder of the paper, quite similar methodological problems might arise.

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<sup>2</sup> A thoroughly different, yet fruitful way to assess the Europeanization of football and its perceptive dimension (through media coverage) can be found in: Vliegthart (2013).

<sup>3</sup> For the most recent debate and controversy on how to conceptualize such a “transnationalized” public sphere, see e.g. Fraser et al. (2014).

## Online Fan Discourse as Valid Data Source?

In what follows, we will focus on some opportunities and some difficulties – or rather: what we see as difficulties and ways of how to cope with them – of discourse analysis as regards debates among and articulations of football fans in online media outlets (mostly: entries in chat- and message boards related to football clubs, as well as contributions to blogs and e-zines/electronic fanzines published online). One of the first issues arising in this regard is whether such online message boards and websites laden with commentaries by football supporters are an appropriate place *at all* to do research on what is going on at people's (here: football fans', supporters', followers') minds, or rather: *what exactly* is being researched when we dissect what is posted there. We all, presumably, agree that this *could* be a potentially rich and promising source of data. However, as some of our colleagues have pointed out with remarkable clarity, we should ask first whether what the quality of the material is that is "posted online" for very different reasons. Geoff Pearson, for instance, in his marvelous study "An ethnography of English football fans" has pointed out that one should refrain from taking such online postings and commentary "face value" (2012: chap. 8). That is, one should question whether it is conceptually convincing in the first place to take these articulations as a valid proxy of: (a) what is going on, out there in reality, and (b) what is going on the respective people's minds. He lists at least three reasons why a more cautious approach might be warranted here. As he states, such online fan fora are usually

- *selective as regards who participates*: hence, we will find specific groups of fans, supporters represented in different outlets with the so-called die-hard fans rather avoiding publicly accessible fan fora;
- *ripe with exaggerations and posturing*: a lot of claims and statements are simply made strategically to impress fans of opposing sides, to mock them, to mislead the media or influence their coverage, to mislead the police etc. (as Pearson himself recounts, it had temporarily become sort of a "game" among the fans he researched to feed media and especially the police with inaccurate accounts; in turn, what we would take as data material *could consist* of deliberate inventions for the sake of amusing an audience or misleading someone);
- *full of rough and misleading vocabulary*: the overall tonality of many online postings and articulations may give the analyst a "wrong" (or biased) impression if they are not contextualized with more ethnographic fieldwork.

As these are thoroughly valid observations, one should however not lose sight of the opportunities offered through analyzing online football fan discourse, even if one has to be aware that things are far more complicated if actual analysis is being carried out. Our colleague Pete Millward from Liverpool has made some very cogent points on why it is, despite all difficulties, nevertheless justified to go into message boards and e-zines with commentary function in order to assess how fans and supporters tick. In his 2008 article on the "Rebirth of the Football Fanzine" (Millward 2008) he argued that doing frame or discourse analyses with such contents posted online is

- *a cost-effective data source*: the acquisition of data is fairly inexpensive in comparison; hence, if a researcher wishes to analyze changing fan identities and values, e-fanzines are an inexpensive way of collecting data, especially if the aim is to run a longitudinal analysis, to see whether there are changes over time;
- *a promising avenue in particular for identity research*: fanzines in general, as he hints at, are identity-related in the first place; as they are discursive and



primarily, as one editor is quoted by Millward: a “vehicle for you – the fan – to express your – a fan’s – opinions and ideas about the club and what is going on around the object of fandom” (ibid.: 300), they most likely mirror some substance of what a person’s – a fan’s – identity is being composed of;

- *auspicious because of the quality of identity articulations*: accordingly, e-zines/message boards etc. carry an advantage over printed fanzines and other printed print publications in that they provide discourse *at the very moment* it is produced; they are instances of instantaneous identity expression rather than of carefully managed and edited ones.

From our point of view, the benefits mentioned outweigh the shortcomings. And this is so for a very specific reason. The problems of “faking identities”, pretending, misleading, hiding behind anonymity are, as our experience suggests, not the most pressing problems with regard to those discursive spaces which we want and have to analyze. Why is that the case? In a rather restricted sense, one could argue that issues of sports governance and the changing institutional and organizational structures of sport/football, *if they become subject to online fan discourse at all*, are not necessarily the topics where fans typically taken on “fake identities” or feel the need to act provocatively in order to challenge an opponent or poke fun at a rival. In other words, these topics are not the stuff that lends itself to posing and posturing. Yet, as has already been said, identity-related dynamics in our reading are by no means restricted to such issues of sport policy, governance or even politics at the European level. More than that, we suspect most identity-relevant talk to be directed at issues which are *outcomes* of such changes (i.e. frequent interaction in European club competition, a gradual normalization of foreignness as a consequence of the Bosman ruling and its implementation). And here we would argue that fans might debate the implications and consequences of governance and structural changes fiercely, they might even use dramatic vocabulary to describe their opinions and perspectives, but it is still not in the realm of faking and pretending for the sake of overplaying one’s own glory. For our purposes, it might be, to the contrary, even instructive to see whether and how often issues such as “foreignness” (of players playing for one’s own club or playing for the rival side) or the attractiveness of “going Europe” and the comparison of national-level and European level football are actually interwoven with such self-referential talk which is often riven with exaggerations, allegations, jokes, insults as well as a host of other, rather strategic remarks. Following from that, for us being interested in “identity changes” or “identity articulations” related to a process of the growing Europeanization of football, the issue of authenticity (or vice versa: pretending/faking) does not seem to play the most vital role, for the reasons mentioned. But what are then the most crucial problems from our point of view?

### **Why Wayne Rooney’s Hair?**

Methodologically, first experiences tell us, that the task is twofold, at least. It is, first, about finding the relevant sites, places – i.e. postings, debates, threads and articles (fanzines) where issues of importance to our questions (issues related to the “identity”-dimension) are being debated. This seems slightly more easy for those (in the FREE project) who are interested in the contours of an emerging “public sphere” of football fans in general, not least since such a sphere can be defined in a very broad sense by the fact that any issue is being debated collectively or in parallel at the same time in various national contexts with *no specific demands on what is being debated*. Very different issues can become a topic for a transnational “public sphere” of football fans (e.g. FFP rules, specific transfers, ticketing, violence & hooliganism,



surveillance, wider societal issues such as the protests at Gezi park or at the Maidan, but also lifestyle issues such as Wayne Rooney's hair, commercials featuring star players, girlfriends, wives, boyfriends of players etc.). Here, since we have decided to look for more specific issues which we think could indicate changes at the identity-level in the direction of a "Europeanization", we are more restricted and have a harder time to really locate our "objects of analysis".

The title of our talk to some degree indicates this: *ECJ Rulings or Wayne Rooney's hair*. It is simply the case that, more often than not, issues that are being debated in online football fan discourse do not seem to be related *at all* to what we expected to find. In this sense, the title of this paper refers to the impression of one of our research assistants who did conduct a preliminary analysis of online communication in selected message boards. After a while, she got sort of frustrated because the keyword search within these chat- and message boards (for specific, governance-related keywords) did not yield many meaningful results. What she found was extensive commentary on Wayne Rooney's hair transplant – at this time the big news at least in British online football chats.

Hence, as trivial as it may sound, the most pressing questions for us are:

- How to *locate* material to be analyzed?
- What is the relevant material, and how can we determine that something is relevant?
- Can we make use of *keywords*, or rather: what are appropriate keywords to search and locate portions of discourse? What are pertinent proxies or substitutes in case a keyword search does not help?

That holds, of course, only if one is not to surrender and to conclude at the very beginning of research that there is probably nothing much to research precisely because there is hardly an identity-laden message board thread title or mushrooming online debates on "Europeanness". What does this imply? From our perspective, we all have to use plausible rules of thumb, because the things we want to analyze are obviously not simply "out there", easily consumable & neatly compressed in discussion threads with the respective keyword in the thread title. Our presumption is, to the contrary, that most, or at least a quite substantial part, of online talk and debate pertinent to what we are interested in is rather hidden in such online fan fora. Some rules of thumb which might help us in our Europeanization/identity research might be: searching all material for occurrences of the words "Europe\*" and "transfer" or focusing on threads geared towards foreign teams and leagues as well as cross-boundary networking and travelling activities alongside football matches.

The second problem, intimately related to this, indeed, following from this is and now at the level of actual discourse analysis is: How to deal productively with the problem of supposed non-occurrence? If a topic, an issue, seemingly does not pop up as an issue of debate in message board entries, blogs, online fanzine articles etc. – what does this imply? Is the issue then a "non-issue"? (Do we have to concede that this is something we may have speculated about but which has no empirical reference?) If there is no vivid discussion of, let's say, the overall importance of the CL vis-à-vis the national competition or: the foreignness of foreign players playing for one's own club or that of the opponent: Does that mean that this issue has no place in football fans' lifeworlds, that the issue has no formative impact on fans' perceptions? Or do we have to fine-tune our methods of analysis because either these topics are being debated, but much more indirectly or some themes might be there in fan discourse but simply do not figure as prominently as expected. Yet, lesser prominence does not mean absence in discourse.

In other words, our task is not only to locate “hidden issues” (= where are things commented upon, framed, discussed etc. against the background of what could be “Europeanized” perspectives, frameworks etc.) but also to find means to analyze them. Two concepts discussed in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which could be of use for this purpose are “lexical absence” and metaphorical tropes” (cf. Machin/Mayr 2012). In what follows, we shortly introduce what these two concepts convey and how we propose to employ them in actually analyzing fan communications.

Machin and Mayr (ibid.: 38) define lexical absence as a situation where “certain terms that we might expect in a text are absent”. Hence they represent a form of suppression which is intentional and the result of a more or less willful act on behalf of the text producer. Here, we would argue, our notion slightly diverges from that of CDA, because we are mostly in a different research setting: We have to do with utterances of belief and opinion rather than with carefully tailored political a/o commercial messages. For us then, lexical absence is simply about a situation in which meanings are “there” although they do not materialize into words. Specific vocabulary is not used but meaning is being provided for by sort of a background knowledge. While for CDA (and Cultural Studies by and large) such a lexical absence is “telling” and marks with silence a site of violent erasure (cf. Cherniavsky 1995), we stick to a softer notion of lexical absence as simply vocabulary made not explicit in speech and texts. What are the implications of such absence? First, you cannot locate meaning in such instances simply through a keyword search. Second, you cannot produce any meaningful result through applying a predetermined codebook. Third, and following from that, you need to retain a certain degree of flexibility in qualitatively analyzing (still “coding”) texts and discourse. Fortunately, we have by now some very helpful tools in qualitative discourse analysis which allow the “coder”/analyst to both search for specific meanings and adapt the “codebook” in parallel in order to insert hermeneutically gained insights into the analytical scheme.

Another way of approaching “hidden issues” in online football fan discourse via CDA is to use the insights on so-called metaphorical tropes. Without delving too deep into sociolinguistic debates on metaphors and their use, such “metaphors” can be said to represent figures in speech which use implied comparisons, i.e. they function as substitutes for specific words and utterances. (So, again, certain meanings are “there”, but the way they materialize is very indirect and deciphering it depends upon a lot of interpretation.) CDA and Cultural Studies tend to attach a very specific understanding to metaphorical tropes: according to these fields of study, metaphors work through hidden ideological meanings and ways of concealing (cf. Goatly 2006, van Dijk 2006, Hart 2008). This way, our understanding(s) of certain things are shaped in a peculiar manner. Relatedly, we would ask: What do metaphors used actually convey and “do”? If used in fan discourse, do they evoke notions of familiarity, notions of collectivity, and most importantly, which metaphorical repertoires are used? What does the selection of specific metaphorical tropes (where others would have been possible, too) indicate?

A couple of rather stylized examples might illustrate this. Does a squad with numerous foreign-born players from all over Europe rather resemble „our family“, or (more detached) a „successful enterprise“ or a “band of soldiers” from the perspective of fans/supporters? When a new player from across Europe is signed: Are his merits discussed in terms of his national background or his sporting abilities? Hence, it is the relation between the *target* (what is to be described) and the *source domain* (which repertoire is being used to describe some phenomenon) which is important, does not exist by chance, and is indicative of specific perceptions. The focus in

analysis would then be mostly on the source domain and the vocabulary employed there; in this regard, one could easily speak of “political effects” of specific tropes.

Let us conclude – after all this talk about where and how to locate what we want to analyze, and how to approach online football fan discourse – by pointing out that these observations and initial ideas concerning the problem of “non-occurrence”, or supposedly: “non-issues” also serve as a reminder that discourse analysis is far more demanding than often thought. It is so, because we – we all, I presume – are in the business of searching for ways to demonstrate that something is going on in the sphere of football but this “something” is more “below the surface” and requires of us to “read between the lines” *without inventing things*.

Discourse analysis is more demanding as well, however, as Charles Antaki and his colleagues from Loughborough University underline because “Discourse Analysis Means Doing *Analysis*” (Antaki et al. 2002; own emphasis). Hence, discourse analysis is clearly more than summarizing what has been said or spotting some features of a text (pointing out is not analysis, as the authors have it). It is, in a nutshell, about showing how particular frames, ideologies, perspectives, discursive repertoires interact to produce “something” – in our case: identity change (in case of the FREE project, this might be the parameters of an emerging new “public sphere”). In this regard, we think that contemplating the issues of supposed “non-occurrence”, lexical absence and metaphorical tropes might be of use in order to actually not only locate words but to analyze what is going on in online football fan discourse.

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