

## *Mediatization and sport: A bottom-up perspective*

### **Abstract**

The concept of mediatization has proved remarkably popular in the past decade although recent critiques have challenged its media-centrism, a-historicism and conceptual clarity. In this paper, we draw on the work of those who suggest that mediatization is best deployed as a means of understanding particular social domains and the ways in which institutions and actors orientate their activities towards media. Using association football, or soccer, as our focus we offer a bottom-up perspective using data gathered from research workshops with young people in England. These not only demonstrate the extent to which football is followed through a range of media platforms but also how broader understandings of the game are shaped by these engagements. Moreover, we adapt insights from recent phenomenological approaches to media (Moore, 2013) to focus on the practical, embodied forms of knowledge and habit that shape how football is currently played, followed and debated.

### **Introduction**

Studies of what were initially labelled the sports-media complex (Jhally, 1989, Maguire, 1991) are now well-established in the social science literature and the reach and popularisation of digital technologies have provided the impetus for a fresh wave of research on the topic (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009, 2013, Billings & Hardin, 2014).

In this paper, we offer a relatively novel perspective by using the concept of mediatization to explore young people's engagements with association football or soccer. It is our contention that such an approach can be particularly fruitful in trying to make sense of the complex ways in which mediated forms of practice and knowledge become incorporated, and then often normalised, in people's everyday lives. Furthermore, rather than focusing on the institutional

level, as has been the case with much research around the concept, our goal is to offer a 'bottom-up' perspective by drawing on data from a series of workshops and interviews conducted in two cities in England. Our primary research questions concern the extent to which young people follow football through a range of media platforms as well as the ways in which their understanding of the game are shaped by these engagements.

The paper is divided into four main parts. In the first, we briefly note how the relationship between football and media has been analysed both in relation to mass media (press, radio, television) and digital technologies. The second assesses the relevance of recent debates around mediatization to studies of contemporary sport and sketches a theoretical framework for making sense of our own data. Here, the applicability of Schulz's (2004) four dimensions of mediatization, *extension*, *substitution*, *amalgamation* and *accommodation*, is foregrounded but we also look to extend this work by drawing on insights from recent phenomenological approaches to studying media practices. The latter's emphasis on the practical, embodied forms of knowledge and habit that shape how, in this case, football is currently played, followed and debated seems better suited to theorising media's influence in the contemporary era. In a section on method, we provide an explanation of how we collected our data, primarily through a series of research workshops involving young people as well as interviews with football coaches and administrators. The final part highlights a number of key findings, around gender and media use, the cultivation and uses of (mediated) knowledge about elite teams and players and the extent to which video gaming informs contemporary understandings of how the game is, or should be, played.

### *Football and media*

Although this paper has a primary interest in understanding how young people's contemporary engagements with football are increasingly informed by, and orientated

towards, media, we should emphasise two key points at this juncture. First, this relationship should not be viewed as one-directional, otherwise we risk putting forward a view of the social that is technologically determinist. As Frandsen (2016) has argued, institutions of media and sport are inter-twined with on the one hand, the demands of media shaping particular sports in terms of rule changes, scheduling, new business models based around television revenues, the emergence and reach of certain global teams and players and so on. At the same time, media themselves need to shift their own practices in order to accommodate sports broadcasting by, for example, developing new technical facilities and styles of reporting and accommodating the demands of wider political legislation (competition policy, rules on ownership, deregulation of markets).

Second, it is important to contextualise more recent shifts by acknowledging how football has become interlinked with various media technologies over a century or more. Indeed, there is an established body of research on the role of, for example; the press (Harvey, 2011, p. 335) in shaping the organisation, standardisation and popularisation of football, cigarette cards (Woolridge, 2002) in underpinning early forms of celebrity culture around particular players and clubs, radio in domesticating the game for substantial numbers (Haynes, 1999) and, of course, television in not only transforming football finances (Boyle & Haynes, 2004, p. 16-26) but also rationalising how the game is presented and consumed by increasingly diffuse media audiences (Sandvoss, 2002, Stone, 2007).

As well as noting the continuing globalisation of the sport, more recent studies have focused on the impact that digital technologies have had on different aspects of the game. These might include the emergence of new online fan communities (Rowe et al, 2010), the novel connections that social media has generated between clubs, players and journalists (Hutchins,

2011, Price et al, 2013) or the creative ways in which fans of the game seek to access football-related content (David & Millward, 2012).

While sport is often discussed in passing by scholars of mediatization, there have been relatively few studies that have looked to directly apply the concept, in general terms, (Whannel, 2013, Frandsen, 2016) or more specifically to football (Becker et al, 2013, Johansen, 2014, Birkner & Nolleke, 2016). Karin Becker and her colleagues' study (2013) of fan parks at international football tournaments demonstrates the extent to which fan practices are orientated towards media and how global and national symbols circulate through such media events. Alternatively, Birkner and Nolleke (2016) are interested in elite players' *perceptions* of media influence through a study of their autobiographies. Interestingly, the players acknowledge the importance of engaging with media in order to boost their overall status and income, whilst also looking to manage media intrusion in their everyday lives. Finally, Johansen (2014) points to the importance of media in underpinning Danish children's information-seeking and identity building activities in relation to football. Of particular relevance to this paper are her arguments about the different ways in which boys and girls use media and we will return to some of these findings later. In the following section, we look to provide an overview of some recent theorisations of mediatization and, in particular, show how they might be applied to an empirical study of young people's football-related activities.

### ***Theorisations of mediatisation***

The concept of mediatisation has proved remarkably popular in recent years, not only in terms of its overall visibility but also the range of topics that it has been attached to. It was primarily developed in relation to the study of politics (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, Strömbäck, 2008, Marcinkowski, 2014) and then, theoretically, as a means of tracking both the media's influence over longer-term historical periods (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 38-53)

and the impact of digital technologies on contemporary social structures and relationships (Hjarvard, 2008). Subsequently, the term has been applied with almost wild abandon drawing in studies of war, religion, education, sport, science, music, consumption and death, to name but a few. Unsurprisingly, this rush to proclaim the mediatization of pretty much everything has been met with more cautionary responses. For instance, Deacon & Stanyer (2014), have argued that much of the writing around mediatization offers simplistic narratives of social change that tend towards media-centrism. They also critique the failure to precisely define the concept, arguing that it risks becoming a catch-all for studies of very different phenomena (See also, Ekstrom et al, 2016).

This second view is addressed in some detail by Livingstone & Lunt (2014) in their ‘critical afterthought’ for a handbook, *Mediatized Communication*, written by some of the leading proponents of the concept. In an insightful piece, they first define mediatization ‘as the influence of media institutions and practices on other fields of social and institutional practice’ (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 705, see also Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17) before suggesting that the concept offers greatest purchase when focusing on those ‘domains of society ... [that] have their own institutional logics or cultural order, their own entrenched governance regimes, rules and norms, resources and expertise’ (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 706).

In this sense, our paper foregrounds the domain of football as a set of specific socio-cultural practices and institutional frameworks, involving players, fans, administrators, government agents and so on, that have influenced and been influenced by various media over time. Such an approach is important as it moves us away from accusations of media-centrism by starting with the activities of groups and individuals in a particular setting rather than media and its presumed impact (Moores, 2013, p. 108).

In the following section, we wish to situate our own study within current theorisations of mediatisation. Partly this is a ground-clearing exercise and partly it is about making clear which aspects of mediatization we think are most useful in studying young people's engagements with football.

*Mediatization as a medium-level concept*

First, for the purposes of this paper, we are using mediatization as a medium-level concept (Ekstrom et al, 2016, p.11-12) rather than one designed to 'describe overall developmental trends in society across different contexts' (Hjavar, 2008, p. 113). In other words, we are interested in exploring the extent to which our participants use different media platforms to watch and comment on football as well as how their knowledge about the game, notably who and what matters, is informed by mediated interactions.

Second, unlike much of the work on mediatization, we are coming from a social constructivist / interactionist rather than a structuralist / institutional perspective. These two strands are well documented in the literature (Hjavar, 2008, Hepp, 2013, Deacon & Stanyer, 2014, Ekstrom et al, 2016) with the latter tending to dominate in recent research. In this work, scholars have sought to map the ways in which a range of institutions (political, religious, educational, sporting) adapt their own rules, regulations and structures to accord with the demands and practices of media. This perspective views media institutions as independent actors who are increasingly able to influence, and in some cases, dominate forms of social communication (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p.15).

In contrast, we offer a bottom-up perspective by exploring the interactions and understandings of individuals in localised social settings. While in the literature such an approach has been tied to two key sociological traditions, Berger & Luckman on the social

construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) and Goffman's interactionist theory (Hjarvard, 2008), we also want to suggest that insights from phenomenological analyses of media practices (Moore, 2013, p.45-64) may be of particular relevance. An emphasis on practical, embodied forms of knowledge and habit not only makes sense in analysing how football is currently played (whether physically or virtually) but is also key in tracking the extent to which media environments become part of the familiar landscapes which people inhabit when participating in football-related activities (Moore, 2015, p.26-27). Such an approach encourages a move away from media texts or effects to instead examine 'the diverse ways in which media are embedded in practical activity as people move through the environments of which they too are part, and how media are thus part of our experiential worlds in ways that account for, but go beyond, content' (Pink & Mackley, 2013, p. 689).

#### *Four dimension of mediatization*

Finally, we suggest that this phenomenological interest in people's embodied uses of, and orientations towards, media can be combined with Schulz's (2004) four dimensions of mediatization; *extension, substitution, amalgamation, accommodation* to offer a productive way of making sense of our data. Extension refers to the ways in which communication through technologies overcomes physical constraints, connecting individuals and groups in previously distant areas. An obvious example would be football fans watching and/or discussing live games from around the world on a variety of digital platforms. Substitution, which is akin to Hjarvard's (2008) concept of direct mediatization, occurs when "media partly or completely substitute social activities and social institutions and thus change their character" (Schulz, 2004, p. 23). This might refer to people watching football on television rather than 'in the flesh' or playing a football video game rather than kicking a ball around in a park. Amalgamation occurs when media and non-media practices become interwoven, and

comes closest to Hjarvard's notion of indirect mediatization, which 'is when a given activity is increasingly influenced with respect to form, content or organization by mediagenic symbols or mechanisms' (2008, p.115). Examples of this would include spectators using social media to discuss an incident when attending a live game or the ways in which non-professional football players incorporate features from the professional game – which is primarily followed through media - into their own play e.g. attire, tactics, goal celebrations.

Up until now, *accommodation* has generally been used to refer to the manner in which non-media institutions have adapted to the requirements of media. In the sporting realm, this might include shifting matches to meet scheduling requirements or sports organisations devoting greater resources to communication strategies in order to promote their activities to potential sponsors (Frandsen 2016). However, while these forms of *accommodation* are obviously significant, a 'bottom-up' perspective encourages an alternative way of thinking about this particular dimension. For instance, *accommodation* could also reference the forms of mediated football knowledge and skill that become valued among fans and/or the competencies that are increasingly required to navigate through complex media environments in order to access particular forms of content or display one's knowledge as a fan or player.

Therefore, although Schulz's writing tends to be associated with the institutional perspective, placing more of an emphasis on what 'ordinary' people do in relation to media, increasingly as a matter of course, offers another fruitful avenue for operationalising the concept. Having outlined the theoretical framework to be used in this paper, the next section will focus on how the data was collected and analysed.



## **Methods**

The research was funded as part of the AHRC Connected Communities Scheme and was designed, managed and carried out in association with a community partner, Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD). Established in 1995, FURD is a youth and social inclusion project and charity based in Sheffield, England, which works locally, nationally and internationally, using football as a tool to combat racism and increase understanding between different communities

The study was primarily conducted in two cities in England, Sheffield and Norwich, during the period, September 2015 to May 2016. These two cities were chosen for a number of reasons. First, the research team had excellent contacts in both. Second, they are noticeably different in terms of size, diversity of population and setting. For those not familiar with the English context, Sheffield is a former industrial city in the north of the country with a total population of around 560, 000, of which 19% are BAME. Norwich is a considerably smaller city in the east of England, with a total population of 210, 000. The surrounding area is largely rural and the population is far more homogenous with a BAME population of 3%. Third, they both feature local professional football teams that are not currently part of the elite group within English football, which meant we could go some way to evaluating how influential media was in shaping our respondent's preferences for particular clubs and players.

Recruitment came through a variety of sources. In Sheffield we relied on FURD's network of contacts and also ran a session at a local school's 'Enhancement Day'. In Norwich, we again used local contacts in schools and colleges and ran a session at a university outreach day.

In total we engaged with 170 young people, the majority, around 70%, were aged between 14-16 years, and the overall gender split was 60 (male)/ 40 (female). However, the research workshops, two in each city, required pupils to sign-up for a half-day session and were dominated by male participants by a factor of 8:2.

We used a wide range of methods with all participants asked to fill in a short questionnaire detailing their favourite players and clubs, how they followed football, what they dis/liked about the game and so on. These form the basis for the first part of the empirical section and go some way to showing the extent to which many young people follow the game through various media. Workshop activities included an ice-breaker session where small groups had to identify, and then justify, their least/favourite players and clubs and a very popular quiz which tested both local and global football knowledge.

In order to complement these research workshops, we also carried out a series of interviews with people involved in the coaching and administration of the game at a variety of levels, including people working with grassroots and charitable organisations and in a local branch of the Football Association. For the purposes of data analysis, we used Schulz's four dimensions of mediatization as part of our initial coding frame and then added insights from more recent phenomenological approaches (paying particular attention to mediated forms of knowledge and practice that were broadly shared by all participants) in order to make sense of particular extracts or interactions.

### *Following football – mediatization and substitution?*

In the first part of this section, we will present key findings from our survey data, as it provides a useful overview of the ways in which our participants engaged with football, notably through mediated interactions.

Of those who replied to the question on playing football (142), the vast majority (73%) indicated that they played at least once a week. Of those who played more than once a week, there was a noticeable gender difference (70% male compared to 30% female) and far more young men also claimed to enjoy playing 'a great deal' (73% compared to 42%). In terms of media uses, there are again noticeable differences between males and females, with the former much more likely to follow football through all of the different media channels. Interestingly, television remains the most popular medium for following football for males, whether via live coverage (63% watching a great deal or quite a lot / 20% for females) or recorded highlights (62% / 18%). Facebook is the favourite for females (22% using it a great deal or quite a lot). Elsewhere, while Facebook is the second favourite for males (55% using it a great deal or quite a lot), general radio programmes (50%/17%) are more popular than Instagram (36%/13%), Twitter (33%/11%) or Youtube (41%/8%) for following football.

Given our overall framework, there are a number of points we'd like to make about the survey data. First, it is worth noting again the varying degree to which different groups engage with football through media. For instance, while nearly 60% of females said they enjoyed playing football a great deal or quite a lot, this enthusiasm was not really matched by their mediated consumption of the game with only a fifth saying they watch football on television a great deal or quite a lot. It is also worth noting the extent to which our results tie in with Johansen's study of children in Denmark. She writes, there are 'remarkable differences in boys' and girls' football practices ... girls are much less interested in media based football, such as watching games on TV or playing football computer games' (2014, p.16). Johansen attributes this difference to the lack of female role models in the media, an interesting thesis that requires further investigation.

Whatever the causes, these are quite striking figures and suggest that when evaluating claims about the impact of media in a given domain, we need to consider ‘a broad ... range of possible responses’ (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014, p.1035) rather than assuming its importance.

Put another way, this is about availability versus use of media. For instance, it is difficult to argue against the idea that both the amount of football-related media content and the number of channels producing or enabling said content has increased exponentially in the last decade (Boyne & Haynes, 2004, p.16-20). Yet, the availability of far greater content, not to mention the plethora of ways of accessing it, does not mean, of course, that everyone engages with it equally. For many of the young people we surveyed, this content is consumed sporadically if at all, even by some of those who really enjoy playing the sport.

Having made this important point, we can now turn to those who do engage with mediated content on a much more regular basis and start to apply some of the earlier theoretical insights to the data. Prior to asking our respondents to fill in the data we noted that they might want to think about the different categories they were presented with in terms of the amount of time they spent using particular media. Here, the suggestion was that ‘a great deal’ might correspond to more than three hours a week, ‘quite a lot’ to 1-3 hours and ‘a little bit’ to no more than an hour. Using this as a template, we can see that a sizeable percentage of male respondents, in particular, spend a considerable amount of time engaging with media content around football on a weekly basis. For instance, 52% said that they watched more than three hours of live televised football a week.

Now, in terms of the concept of mediatization one could propose that the growing amount of football-related media content is an example of *substitution*, where media activities replace other social activities. However, while there is some general evidence for this claim (Ofcom, 2016), our data isn’t detailed enough to allow us to make such a claim with any conviction.

Instead, we think our survey findings, alongside other qualitative data gathered in the workshops, is best analysed in relation to two other dimensions of mediatization, *extension* and *accommodation*.

*Football's holy trinity – Mediatization and extension*

Our quantitative data shows that substantial numbers of young people, generally males, are using a variety of media to follow football on a regular basis. If we combine this interesting, though not-terribly surprising, finding with young people's knowledge of football, we can start to offer some more revealing insights into the ways in which knowledge about the game is increasingly shaped by media interactions. For example, as we noted above, two of the activities we ran in the workshop were a discussion of least/most favourite players and clubs and a quiz. In the former, participants were put into teams, told to set aside individual rivalries and affiliations and settle on a player and club they considered to be the best and worst examples of the contemporary game.

What was noteworthy about this exercise was that three players, one Brazilian (Neymar), one Argentine (Lionel Messi), one Portuguese (Cristiano Ronaldo) (all playing in Spain at the time of writing) were consistently mentioned and discussed as exemplars by everyone in the workshop. There wasn't a single person present who didn't know who these players were and most could reference specific matches, goals or even tricks to back up their views. As only one of these players has ever played in England, we can probably assume that this widespread, deeply embedded and largely taken-for-granted knowledge of said players and teams was generated in relation to a whole host of mediated interactions. These would include watching live matches on satellite channels or illegal online 'feeds' as well as through the constant circulation of highlights, clips and commentary via the press, digital uploads and social media. Indeed, in the latter case, we were shown a wealth of Youtube clips of favourite

goals, assists and tricks to evidence their quality. This is also a feature of Danish children's media-related activities in Johansen's study. She not only notes the extent to which her participants are fans of Messi and Barcelona but also how many use 'YouTube for inspiration and entertainment: watching spectacular goals, for instance' (2014, p.11).

First and foremost, this is a very good example of what Schulz (2004) calls *extension*, the manner in which communication technologies overcomes physical constraints allowing media users to access both content and other users from physically distant areas. Moreover, as widespread access to these technologies and content has only emerged in the last two decades, we can say something about change over time. Prior to the emergence of networked digital technologies, knowledge of overseas football and players would have been much harder to access and not generally the preserve of 'ordinary' conversations. This is an idea that was also backed up by some of the older respondents we spoke to, including coaches from the local Football Association and FURD.

*If you go to local skills centre that we run, we run skills centres for five to eleven year olds, you will see a lot more Man City, Chelsea, Barcelona, Real Madrid kits, than you would have done 10, 15 years ago. Because of that media connection that they have got to those clubs now. They can turn the TV on any Sunday night and watch Barcelona or Real Madrid, they can watch Messi, they can watch Ronaldo and they have got that... (Peter, FA coach)*

*I think when I was their age I don't think we had Sky Sports, I always used to watch it on Match of the Day or ITV. But obviously with BT Sport coming out even the Champion's League doesn't come on ITV anymore (Anwar, FURD coach)*

In both extracts, we see the articulation of a generational difference between those who were largely restricted to watching football on domestic, terrestrial channels and those who have grown up in an era where satellite broadcasters dominate. Moreover, these satellite broadcasters have also vastly expanded the level and scope of the coverage, including broadcasting matches from a variety of foreign leagues (notably Spain, Italy and Germany) as a matter of course. As Peter notes, it is the ‘media connection’ that allows young people to follow ‘foreign’ teams on a regular basis and express their support through the purchase of football merchandise.

*Knowledge of the game – mediatization and accommodation*

This nod towards historical change is obviously important but there is another dimension of Schulz’s work (2004) that seems relevant here. As we noted above, *accommodation* is generally discussed in relation to the ways in which institutional actors shift their rules, regulations and activities in order to accord with the requirements of media. Using a bottom-up perspective, however, we want to suggest that this dimension might also refer to the manner in which individuals *accommodate* new media-related practices and forms of knowledge in their lives in order to be able to participate in social activities.

A good example of these practices would be the ways in which our participants expertly searched for video clips on the video sharing platform, Youtube, to highlight the perceived qualities or inadequacies of particular players. These clips then provided the basis for wider classroom discussions about how to evaluate individual contributions and what makes a star performer. In this case, our participants were not only demonstrating their expertise in engaging with particular media hardware (keyboards, monitors, phones) and software (how to access and navigate through a particular platform) (Moore, 2014) but also drew on

information gleaned from other media sources (televised games, newspaper reports, specialist magazines) to exhibit their own knowledge of the game. Moreover, the value of such activities also needs to be acknowledged. These apparently inconsequential discussions may operate as important forms of phatic communication in everyday settings such as the classroom, office or café, whilst also underpinning longer-term relations between friends, family members and so on.

*(Mediated) Knowledge of the game*

If being able to participate at all is a key element of this process, demonstrating expertise is another. The quiz we ran in the research workshops was a good example of this. Questions ranged from those dealing with local clubs in Sheffield and Norwich respectively, to others that required quite expert knowledge of players from around the globe, their sponsors, tattoos or hairstyles. All but one of the questions was answered in less than five minutes and the participants took great pleasure in mocking those who were struggling with any given answer.

As a result, both these elements – participation and expertise - tell us something important about media's influence in this particular social domain. If particular forms of mediated knowledge are becoming increasingly important in exhibiting one's status as a bonafide football fan, then this requires the ability to both access and engage with the most relevant media content, which can take time, effort and, in some cases, money. Of course, one could argue it was ever thus. Fans have always looked to distinguish themselves and access to, and knowledge of, particular forms of media (think collecting cigarette cards, ticket stubs, programmes) has often played a role in generating status. Our argument, here, is not only that being a fan increasingly means the performance of being a fan (from co-ordinated displays at televised games to radio phone-in shows and social media) (Stone, 2007, Turner, 2013) but



also that the knowledge about who and what matters in relation to football is increasingly tied to media. Attending games and supporting local sides may be still prized, at least, in some circles, but the wider discourse on football has shifted to overwhelmingly to focus on a narrow range of clubs, players and supporters who become known, and debated, by and through mediated interactions.

To summarise, then, the fact that most people in the room could participate in this way, that mediated content has become such a constituent part of their experiential knowledge of the game, should not be dismissed as obvious. Rather, this knowledge, and how it is acquired, wielded and negotiated, should be placed at the centre of our analyses into media's influence in the domain of football.

*'A real thing in football or not – mediatization and amalgamation*

In the final part of this paper, we want to shift our attention to examine a couple of examples that point to the complex interactions between how the game is played and wider mediated representations and knowledge. This is a discussion that might be usefully categorised in relation to Schulz's dimension of *amalgamation*, the manner in which media and non-media activities become interlinked.

*Interviewer: And if you are coaching them, would you actually try to tell them well let's play like Barcelona tonight or let's play like Arsenal? Or do you just let them run off and do whatever happens?*

*Abdal: You try, because if you are teaching them a specific... say passing, obviously the best team in the world to refer to when it comes to passing is Barcelona, so you would ask them have you seen how they do it? A few times now we have shown video clips of this is*

*how they do it.*

*Interviewer: Oh that is interesting.*

*Abdal: If interesting clips come on Facebook you will see little clips of the team putting 100 passes together fast, and you go look this is how they do it can you do it? Just try to challenge their thinking a bit. But obviously it is good to have teams like that that they can refer back to and make reference to (FURD coach)*

*2)Paula, FA coach: I just think generally kids' knowledge now of football at that younger age is much more advanced than what it has been in years gone by, because of the coverage but also the video game side of things as well, they are all playing away on FIFA<sup>i</sup>, they are more experts than anybody else. Their knowledge is just unbelievable in terms of positional play, they are messing about on their remote controls, trying all the fancy tricks and stuff that they have seen on match days on TV, they will then go and try and replicate that on a match day. I think that ethos of being a tricky player, a skilful player, is certainly much more prominent now than what it has been*

*3) Reza: I think I'm better at video games than actual real football.*

*Interviewer: Right. Do you think it helps if you play the video game?*

*Reza: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: It helps you to play real football?*

*Reza: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: Can you tell me why?*

*Reza: Because like when I'm doing on the control, I learn how to do new passes and then I can try them.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Reza: But then if I just do it straightaway, I won't know if it's actually a real thing in football or not (female player, aged twelve)*

In the first extract, certain forms of media content are being used to teach young children particular skills. There is again a long tradition of this, primarily using coaching manuals, books, videos and so on. What can be highlighted, here, are two key issues. First, how the use of mobile devices brought on to the field of play make these actions far easier, blending the ways in which mediated representations both interrupt and inform everyday practices, what Schulz's labels as amalgamation (2008, p.115). Second, the extent to which knowledge gleaned from media (about the quality of Barcelona's passing, for instance) forms a taken-for-granted reference point, something that pretty much everyone knows. The fact that FC Barcelona is a key point of reference for young, working-class people in Sheffield is also worth reiterating. This is a team that is watched, and often discussed and evaluated, via a range of media platforms.

The next two extracts again point to the uses of media, in this case gaming, but tell us something arguably more fascinating about how such mediated interactions inform some of the ways in which these young people engage with, make sense of and actually play the game. In relation to the football simulation game, FIFA, Paula's argument is two-fold. First, she suggests that this globally popular game is important because it can give young people insights into positional play, the rules of the game and so on by practising moves, playing as particular teams and trying out new tactics. Second, she argues that it has also contributed to a shift in how some of the young people she coaches evaluate the game, as they increasingly place a premium on being able to perform skills or tricks on the pitch. This is also something that we were told by other coaches and is backed up by some of the workshop discussions,

where YouTube clips of said tricks featured prominently. In pointing towards the possible significance of these mediated features, there is no suggestion of a simplistic causal explanation. Instead, what we are trying to argue is that various forms of media content (gaming, televised matches, repurposed clips posted on video sharing websites, social media discussions) provide an important point of reference in this domain, which, alongside developments in the professional game, may be subtly impacting on some of the ways in which football is played.

Reza also discusses this idea in the final extract, where she suggests that the use of football simulator games allows her to understand what might be *possible* on the field of play. In this case, what we have is an interesting hierarchy of ‘expertise’ shaping both an understanding and performance of the game. Put simply, the mediated simulation is viewed as *the* authentic experience that can be used to inform her own activities as a football player. It becomes the primary means by which she practices particular moves but also comes to understand what is a ‘real thing in football’.

It is worth noting, here, that such a view isn’t only the preserve of non-professionals. A Guardian newspaper report on the global popularity of football simulation games, discussed how professional players also used their experience of playing the virtual game to inform their own activities on the pitch.

The German defender Mats Hummels once alluded to the way in which FIFA can help players visualise new ways of playing, saying ‘some people use what they learn in FIFA when they find themselves on the pitch’. In 2008, after saving a penalty from AC Milan’s Ronaldinho, the Italian goalkeeper Marco Amelia said: ‘It was just like playing against him on PlayStation – he had the same run-up. It was very strange’ (quoted in Parkin, 2016)

All of these examples again point to the extent to which the wider domain of football is increasingly mediated, a quantitative shift that has touched all areas of the sport but in particular the elite level. What they also show is how understandings of the game - who matters and why, how it should be played at both a general and individual level - are being subtly influenced by media-related practices that are, for many, being increasingly accommodated into everyday forms of knowledge and habit.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has looked to explore young people's engagements with football and the manner in which many activities are increasingly orientated towards mediated forms of knowledge and practice. In doing so we have made reference to recent approaches to mediatization, drawing on those who have argued that it is best employed as a mid-level concept and viewing football as a particular social domain that has become increasingly intertwined with media at both the institutional and everyday levels. Moreover, we have operationalised the concept by drawing on, and extending, Schulz's four dimensions of mediatization (*substitution, extension, amalgamation, accommodation*).

In the first case, we have shown the extent to which *some* young people follow media coverage of the game whether watching live or recorded matches, playing simulated games, reading match reports or online discussions. There was, however, a noticeable gender difference with young women far less likely to be interested in watching or discussing football through media. This also supports recent findings from a study in Denmark, which suggested that the lack of female role models might account for this difference (Johansen, 2014). It also cautions us against making sweeping generalisations about the impact of media in this or that domain.

For those that did make more concerted efforts to follow the game through media, it was notable how their knowledge moved beyond the national, with overseas leagues, clubs and players discussed as a matter of course. Perhaps of even greater interest than these processes of *extension* was the manner in which many of the young people we spoke to expertly moved through a range of inter-connected media environments and drew on knowledge gleaned from media to make sense of particular issues or events, including their own performances. Here, we suggested that the dimension of *accommodation* should be extended to not only reflect how wider institutions responded to media demands but also the ways in which mediated knowledge was accommodated into everyday discussions and practices.

Again, we are not suggesting a simple effects model (people watch, people do), rather arguing that mediated knowledge, circulating through a range of platforms, settings and content, becomes a normal part of many people's experiential worlds and a common reference point for further deliberation and evaluation. It is through these inter-textual chains that particular ways of knowing and playing the game become prioritized and valued and it is these wider connections and shared orientations towards media, rather than a interest in this or that text, that should form the basis for future research.

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<sup>i</sup> FIFA is a digital computer game named after and licensed by football's international governing body that has become the most popular sports title for both the X-Box and Playstation consoles.