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Citation:

Dart, J (2019) Commentary: The first 20 years of Soccer and Society. *Soccer and Society*, 20 (4). pp. 704-710. ISSN 1466-0970 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2018.1564283>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Soccer and Society* on 12 January 2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14660970.2018.1564283>

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This is the pre-publication version

Note. A version of this article will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Soccer and Society*.

The article appears here in its final draft version. It has not been copyedited, proofread, or formatted by the publisher.

To cite this article: Dart, J. (2019) Commentary: the first 20 years of *Soccer and Society*, *Soccer & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/14660970.2018.1564283](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2018.1564283)

Received 12 December 2018, Accepted 23 December 2018, Published online: 12 January 2019

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2018.1564283>

Commentary: The first 20 years of *Soccer and Society*

Soccer and Society was the first, and remains the only, international academic journal that is focused on a single sport. In anticipation of the vicennial volume, I offer here a snapshot of this journal's content over its first twenty years. This commentary is part-audit and part-personal observation of the main themes, countries, tournaments, leagues and clubs that have featured, and on the gender of those who have written for the journal. The aim here is to offer a timely reflection on those elements within football that have been well served and those which have been under-represented. After briefly outlining the purpose of academic journals, I present the findings of this audit and conclude with some questions on the next twenty years.

The role of the academic journal

The current model of scholarly communication can be traced back to the 17th century practice of academics exchanging letters in which they shared their research.¹ Increased letter writing led to journals aggregating the letters with peer review introduced when the volume of letter writing increased to such an extent that a degree of 'quality control' was deemed necessary. The purpose of contemporary academic journals continues to be to

publish research to a now global (academic) community, to legitimise the intellectual development of the discipline and to move the conversation forward.² It has been suggested that academic journals are the 'life-blood of the discipline'³, and that from a feminist standpoint the 'codification of knowledge production' results in journals becoming significant power bases.⁴

Since the 1960s reward structures for academics (including tenure and promotion) have been linked to 'professional outputs' which, defined broadly, includes research (traditionally via monographs, textbooks or journal papers), teaching, administrative duties and community service⁵. Although academic researchers can disseminate their research across a range of fora, it is publication in peer-reviewed journals that is given the most value, with the 'publish or perish' syndrome a staple topic of conversation in many higher education institutions. Publications in journals have taken on greater importance in securing tenure and influencing promotion in the USA, in the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise.

Journals are at the heart of an academic discipline with their influence far-reaching⁶, not least in introducing key topics/issues to the next generation of scholars. Acting as a mechanism for academics to disseminate the fruits of their research, an academic journal is not a 'neutral space' for sharing research.⁷ A journal is shaped by its editorial leadership which, in turn, is informed by its editorial board. From soliciting and reviewing papers, assembling and managing an editorial team, and selecting topics for special issues, the final decision to publish (or reject) a paper lies with the journal's editor(s). It is this subjective judgement which concentrates significant power in the hands of the editor, editorial board and reviewers, none of who receive any direct financial reward.⁸ The primary role of an editorial board is to take on high-volume of peer reviewing, and also when appropriate, to write editorials and comment on the review process, on special issues, and medium/long-term planning for the journal. At the time of writing, the journals webpage indicated that the senior editorial board (7 posts) was comprised of all males. The wider editorial board comprised 33 individuals; 28 men and 5 women. Thirty-three of those listed were based in Europe (22 in the UK alone), 4 in the USA, 2 in Australia, and 1 in South America. This gender and geographical imbalance is repeated in some of the findings presented below.

This audit has included only original, peer-reviewed, full length articles. It did not include editor's comments, announcements, errata or similar notices. Book reviews were reviewed and will be commented upon in a separate sub-section. The main articles were coded using the title of the paper, the abstract, and key words. Where there was no abstract available, the paper was scanned to identify the main foci of the article. It is acknowledged that authors are often strategic in the choice of words that appear in the paper's title and abstract (often in a desire to attract as many 'online hits' as possible). That said, the selected units of analysis (title, abstract, key words) were chosen on the basis that they offered a sufficiently accurate description of the content of the paper. It might be that other themes were contained within the paper, but if they were not stated in the title or abstract,

or listed as a key word, it suggests they were not central to the research. If this were the case, I have not been able to capture them and thus should be borne in mind when reviewing the following audit. The overriding intention has been to offer a broad-brush identification and commentary of the dominant countries, clubs, leagues, themes/topics, and authors' gender of the articles that have featured in this journal.

The number of issue and articles published each year has increased from an initial 3 issues and 37 articles in 2000 (when the journal was launched), to 7 issues and 68 articles in 2018. In total 854 articles were coded for this audit. In addition, the gender of the reviewers of 255 book review was noted.

'The Results'

Countries: There are 211 countries affiliated to FIFA with a total of 85 countries featuring in the research articles. The countries that featured most often (with the total percentage across the 19 volumes, since 2000) were:

1. England: 16%
2. Australia: 5%
3. India: 4%
4. USA: 3%
5. Brazil: 3%
6. Germany: 3%
7. Spain: 3%
8. South Africa: 2%
9. Republic of Ireland: 2%
10. Sweden: 2%

Seventy-five countries made up the remaining 57% of articles that had a clear geographical focus (with each of these 75 countries at less than 1% of the total output). Six percent of the articles featured more than one country, indicating a level of comparative studies. In terms of six FIFA Confederations, the geographical content (as a rounded percentage) was:

- AFC (Asia, 46 associations): 18%
- CAF (Africa, 54 associations): 9%
- CONCACAF (North America, Central America and the Caribbean, 35 associations): 6%
- CONMEBOL (South America, 10 associations): 6%
- OFC (Oceania, 11 associations): 1%
- UEFA (Europe, 55 associations): 60%

To quote from the journal's aims: *'The journal intends to become truly international in terms of content, perspective and space. It is committed to encouraging original empirical*

research from scholars across the world. It is evident that while England dominates, perhaps due to the origins of the game and the current prominence of the English Premier League, other countries and regions are well-represented. There was a strong showing from countries that might be perceived as not having a particularly strong footballing pedigree (e.g. Australia, India), with some surprise at the low showing of Latino countries. The presence of South Africa (Africa's only representative) is due to it hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup. It is difficult to underplay the significance of the absence of writing on football from the wider African continent and from Latin America. These are significant lacunas with language the most likely factor. Articles on China were also notable by their absence, but this will likely change over the next few years. Based on conversations with colleagues, there is excellent research being undertaken, but which is unavailable to the global academic community because Soccer and Society is printed in English. Given that Editors can only publish from submissions they receive, and with greater cognisance of 'mansplaining' / 'whitesplaining', the challenge is to solicit submission from (female) academics working in these countries/regions. There is the related issue of sport/football not being taught in higher education institutions in those countries. How 'we' might better achieve scholars from across the world submitting their research to this journal is revisited in the final section of this commentary.

Tournaments, Leagues and Clubs

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the FIFA World Cup that was the most featured tournament, with South Africa 2010 well represented (due in part to a special edition, discussed below). The second slot was filled by articles that were focused on the EPL and the English Football Association, followed in third place by UEFA Euros and their Champions League tournaments. The other tournaments / leagues that featured more regularly were the various incarnations of the MLS, the German Bundesliga, The A league (Australia), the J League (Japan), and the Africa Cup of Nations. Beyond these professional (male) tournament, there were infrequent articles on the Women's World Cup, the Homeless World Cup, and Blind World Cup tournaments.

There was little research on national knock-out tournaments across all six federations, with several well-established leagues notable by their absence (including Seria A (Italy), Brasileirao (Brazil), Argentine Primera, Liga MX (Mexico), the Dutch Eredivisie, the French Ligue 1, and the Chinese Super League. These absences suggest there is a lot more work to be done to secure academic contributions from academics researching these leagues. Much of the focus of the research has been on the (male) professional leagues and tournaments with very little research being conducted on the lower leagues and the semi-professional and amateur game.

A surprisingly small number of football clubs were the central feature of specific research articles. Some 30 different clubs did feature, with the most researched club being Liverpool

FC followed by Everton FC (this was primarily due to these two clubs being featured in a special issue). The other clubs that featured more than once (in order of frequency) were FC Barcelona (Spain), Manchester United (England), FC St Pauli (Germany), and Malmo FF (Sweden).

Topics featured

In this audit 240 separate codes were identified, with 137 codes featuring only once. This coding did not include countries, leagues, tournaments or clubs noted previously. The following list shows those topics that featured most often (in order of appearance):

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Fans / Supporters | 10. Community |
| 2. History | 11. Health |
| 3. Women's football | 12. Economics |
| 4. Media | 13. Football Grounds |
| 5. Footballing Rivalries | 14. Governance |
| 6. Politics | 15. Hooliganism |
| 7. National Identity | 16. Nationalism |
| 8. Globalisation | 17. Government |
| 9. Football Players | |

The wide range of issues that feature across the 854 articles suggests that the journal is succeeding in its stated aim of "covering all aspects of soccer" by drawing on a "wide array of perspectives - anthropological, cultural, historical, sociological, political, economic and aesthetic". Some topics were more highly placed as a result of being featured in a special issue (including women and football, football rivalries, health, and nationalism). In a total of 81 issues, there were 40 issues that were designated Special Issues, generating a healthy 1:1 ratio. Typically, special issues (hereafter 'specials') emerge when the editor feels there is an opportunity to engage with an emerging (or 'hot') topic and is indicative of a burgeoning body of work and/or unusual or pioneering ideas. Specials allow for additional publicity to be generated for the journal and have the potential to attract new audiences, increase hits, downloads and citations. Specials also allow for editorial duties to be shared (developing new academics in the skills of editorship). However, it is important that specials are not viewed as 'an insider's game' with editors making this opportunity available only to their friends or allies. Some of these specials have been sole-authored and have since been published in book format (with the same publishers, for copyright reasons); this might mean they are more accessible to wider audiences, but it is also noted they are a 'money-maker' for the publisher. Commercial sensitivity prevents revealing details of the 'success' of specials, but the high incidence of *Soccer and Society* Special Issues (running at 50%), indicates that this model of publication is working.

The contributors' gender

A review of the authorship of the 854 article shows a male: female ratio of approximately 6:1. When the four special issues that were authored by a sole male, and the two special issues that focused on women's football (which although multi-authored, were predominantly female authored), were removed, the overall ratio increased to approximately 1:7. The audit of the gender of the authors of the 255 book reviews showed a similar 1:7 ratio. The substantial gender disparity is significant for several reasons, with the book review of concern given its traditional role as a 'stepping stone' into academic publishing for early career academics. Of equal concern is the overall lack of female authorship of original articles but this is perhaps unsurprising given the continuing 'second class status' of women in football more widely. What is evident is that the vast majority of research being undertaken and submitted for publication is being done by men, researching and writing about men's football for predominantly (male) undergraduate students. While significant steps are being taken to 'close the gender gap' it is pertinent to ask what role should/could the journal play in this? Resolving this gender disparity is beyond the remit of a single journal editor and their editorial board, with the question as to what more can be done revisited in the concluding section.

Issues arising from this 'snap-shot audit'

In this concluding section I want to identify some of the other issues that arise from this audit. How can we work to ensure 'our' journal is the best representative of our professional (and often personal) interests and work to support all those researching and studying football across the globe? After conducting this snapshot audit, I was left with three questions.

Question 1: How can we get a greater diversity of voices represented in the journal?

Specifically, more diversity in terms of the geographical location of the author and of the research sites. There is a particular need for more research from beyond the Anglosphere. While India (and Indian academics are well represented) there is a dearth of content (and researchers) from South and Central America, West and East Asia. There is also the potential for more interdisciplinary studies, but the increasing tendency for academic departments to be organised in 'academic silos' that prevent interdisciplinary working is an issue that lies far beyond the influence of the journal. There is huge potential for football to be used to create and develop interdisciplinary research.

Without wishing to make any judgement, it is important to reaffirm the influential role of the journal's editor, the editorial board and peer reviewers. This commentary is an audit of

what has appeared, not what has not appeared, with it not possible to know how many articles are rejected and on what basis. It has been suggested that the existing peer review process is deeply flawed, in part due to the potential conservatism of editors and referees reviewing submissions based on their personal intellectual proclivities.⁹ What would be useful would be an audit of the reason/s for why a paper was rejected.

Question 2: How wide is our purview, how good are 'we' at disseminating our research and do we 'speak truth to power'?

Although many involved in tenure and promotions roles will often use a journal's impact factors in their considerations, a journal's ranking is not always an accurate indicator of the 'quality' of the research itself. The only sure-fire way to assess its contribution is to read the article. Football is now omnipresent across social media with some of us involved in teaching finding it increasingly difficult to engage our students in academic reading. One tactic is to highlight to the students how a peer-reviewed journal article differs from other (potentially more accessible) sources. In addition to getting our own students to read, many of those who work in football, but outside academia, are unlikely to read our research given the costs associated in accessing individual research articles. Having noted the need for academics to work in a more interdisciplinary way, it is also important to (continue to) work alongside sports coaches, teachers, journalists and other media professionals. It is important that we disseminate our research widely and that it can be accessed by those working outside HEIs, that we write for different 'audiences,' and that we avoid academic journals becoming primarily a mechanism for academics to secure 'evidence' for their tenure and promotion applications. As Howard Becker said in 1967 'Whose side are we on?

In a British context there is increased pressure for work to have 'impact' and to demonstrate 'community engagement'.¹⁰ Beyond publishing in academic journals, Burawoy has called for more 'public sociology' with some successes, including Dave Zirin's "Ask a Sports Sociologist".¹¹ The lack of an on-going 'public sociology' could be the result of increasing hostility towards 'experts' (as part of a global shift towards populist politics and its predilection for anti-intellectualism), and because researchers are often advancing ideas (e.g. multi-culturalism, feminism, diversity, inclusion) that challenge football's dominant modus operandi as being a heterosexual, traditionally 'working class', and masculine space/activity. Those researching potentially 'sensitive' issues such as governance, ownership, corruption, and human rights within football (and in sport more widely) have become increasingly important given the decline of many mainstream media outlets willingness to 'speak truth to power'; as a result, researchers and journals are uniquely placed to publish their findings under the umbrella of academic freedom.

Q3: Does (and can) the journal need to innovate?

Do we have too narrow a view of what an academic journal should look like? Can we advance new ways of writing that can 'speak to' academics, practitioners, policy makers and sports fans alike? Can we create an approach to research and publication that is based on the co-production of knowledge – between academics and practitioners? While I can pose these questions and would like to 'invite' responses this is not possible in the current arrangement. How can we be more interactive and create a space for an open debate? Generating a discussion might be possible at a conference (albeit within the typical 'Five minutes for questions' slot at the end of presentations); this would typically only ever involve a limited audience and one set to get smaller given the decline in universities funding attendance at conferences. Unfortunately, there is no place in this journal for 'letters to the editor' or 'opposing viewpoints'. One possibility might be for journals to offer a facility whereby readers can 'make comments' on the published article. I am thinking here of the comment section that can be found on many social media news websites. Examples of this are *'The Conversation'* (www.theconversation.com/uk) and the UK *Guardian* Newspaper's 'Comment is Free' facility.¹²

How willing is 'the journal' - specifically, the publisher, the editor, the editorial board and the peer reviewers (all of who are guardians of the journal and the discipline), to engage with new forms of writing and new formats for contributions? How would a non-standard piece of academic writing be viewed by the editor, editorial board and peer reviewers? Academic publishing has been slow to 'catch up' with the facilities being offered by social media platforms (although this journal, as part of the Taylor & Francis / Sage / Informa PLC corporation, has begun to engage in open access, <https://www.tandfonline.com/openaccess/opensselect>).

Challenges for the next 20 years include how to retain the 'peer review' quality check while broadening the pool of those submitting (in terms of their gender and geographical location), and to diversify the types of submission, the audiences, and the level of interaction on the published research.

Notes

¹ Cameron Neylon, quoted in Jump, 'Research intelligence'.

² Heck and Cooley, 'Most frequent contributors'

³ Tomlinson, 'Leisure studies'

⁴ Spender, *'Men's studies'*

⁵ Boyes, Happel and Hogan, 'Publish or perish'

⁶ Tomlinson, 'Leisure studies'

⁷ I should declare at this point that I have had papers rejected and published by a range of academic journals (including *Soccer and Society*), and that I have served as a reviewer, but have not formally applied for, or served in any editorial capacity for this journal.

⁸ Dart, 'Sport sociology'

⁹ Mumford, 'Peer pressure'

¹⁰ See the UK Research and Innovation's website

¹¹ King, 'Towards a radical'

¹² Singer & Ashman, 'Comment is free'

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