Football Worlds: Business and networks during COVID-19

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Abstract

The structure of football can also be conceived as a form of ecosystem, or even a social world, constructed through a network of individuals, within a division of labour, that interact under a set of specific conventions. In this commentary we describe that socially constructed world – Football World. The nature of this structural world makes network theory an appealing framework to explore processes of the football ecosystem during COVID-19. While we focus on the English Premier League, notably this league is embedded within a European and international marketplace it offer relevance for the broader global football ecosystem. We proceed to explore this dynamic Football World by considering how the different collectives forms – specifically fans, players and clubs – have been affected by COVID-19. We comment on the potential implications for the connective fabric of the broader network and what these observations mean for potential future research.

Keywords: Networks; COVID-19; Football; Business;

Introduction

The global economic crisis of 2007-2008 shattered the banking and financial markets and plunged western economies into recession pushing some governments into a debunked political ideology of austerity. It would be extremely difficult to find an industry not effected by the cascading failures of banks across America and Europe. Yet there was one. While sport like any other industry rode a turbulent austerity, elite level football bathed in somewhat calm waters. Indeed, the elite professional football industry delivered impressive revenue returns. This seemingly 'recession proof' sustainability has perhaps encouraged some football clubs to live a financially high-risk, and precarious existence, often prioritizing football performance ahead of financial longevity.[1] Yet football is vulnerable to exogenous market shocks, and its inherent fragility has been laid bare by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, this pandemic has opened up the Pandora's box of football financial fragility. Whilst football could continue during the great financial recession of a decade ago, COVID-19 has wiped out its core offering, with European football events cancelled for the first time since World War II.[2] In doing so, it has uncovered the fragility of football's 'ecosystem', with club owners, investors, broadcasters and advertisers forced to reconcile the downstream impact of event cancellations and make operational modifications. Indeed, taking a structural view of the football ecosystem through this crisis allows us to better observe and understand the networked Football World and its emerging properties. This commentary offers insights into issues

emerging within the football industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic and provides important observations for associated future research.

Football Worlds

The structure of football can also be conceived as a form of ecosystem, or even a social world, constructed through a network of individuals, within a division of labour, that interact under a set of specific conventions. That is a socially constructed world. The nature of this structural world makes network theory an appealing framework to explore processes of the football ecosystem during COVID-19.[3] Football Worlds, for us, is theoretically reliant on the sociologist Howard Becker. Becker, exploring cultural production process, formalised his framework in the masterful Art Worlds[4] noting that it involved people doing things in a series of processes with established ways of working. Becker put forward that for art forms to exist as we know it (e.g. paintings, poems, books, and visual art), it requires people to be involved in the process of construction, often in large numbers, working in collective action in a series of different steps (processes), with a predefined but always in flux set of conventions, mostly (although not always) with a clear division of labour. The social organisation of cultural production was not just an interest of Becker. Nick Crossley drew heavily on his work to develop the theory of relational sociology. Using a more formal application of social network theory, Crossley explained how the social world is comprised of networks of interaction and relations, and suggested Becker's treatment of networks did not appreciate the social 'structures', which generate opportunities and constraints for members.[5] Both agree however that 'Worlds' whether that be Art or Music, or any another, involve people in collective activity.

Taking the lead from Becker and Crossley, we position Football as a social product, just like Music or Art, and as such we can study network processes of the system to uncover opportunities and constraints for social action. That is, football is deeply embedded in interactional processes and warrants further research through the lens of Worlds.[6] In this respect, it means studying the social organisation of the production of football. Football is a collaborative effort which involves a complex division of labour and organisational effort, and that it should be treated as a Football World, in the Beckerian tradition. In this respect, we seek to extend the work of Becker into the football industry, whilst including Crossley's networked view of worlds to examine social structure through our observations on the football ecosystem

during COVID-19. This includes the commercial aspects of economic networks that can be observed within collective activity.

As we see it the Football World includes the players, audiences, management teams, executives, administrative staff, stadium security, catering staff, sponsors, journalists, equipment manufacturers, journalists and cleaner. This is a small part of the of the people involved in the production of football that make up the Football World, but they are all involved in collective action. Without these individuals interacting, working within conventions and a division of labour, the football product as we know it would not exist. Yet what happens to this football world when the product is temporarily postponed because of a global pandemic. This has important consequences for our understanding not only how sporting organisations function, but on their fragility and robustness and how networks and interactions function during an economic shock.

While we focus on the English Premier League, notably this league is embedded within a European and international marketplace. The European football market is thought to be worth ~£25 billion, with combined league revenues for the 'Top-5' leagues across Europe was worth ~£13 billion for the 17/18 season.[7] Much of this growth is due to the hyper-commercialisation and commodification of football across Europe. Global investment funds, multi-national conglomerates, sovereign wealth funds, even royalty, are all now common ownership structures within the Football World. The networked world of football is clearly shrinking. Collectively these different actors have all contributed to creating a financially valuable, and globally visible industry. However, this has come at numerous costs, from inequalities across the different levels of the game, to the common culture of financial mismanagement. Yet, it is only now, in wake of potentially the worst global health and economic crisis, that serious questions are being asked of the football industry, at a time when the industry looks into the abyss for arguably the first time.

Broadly, COVID-19 represents the most severe market shock to sport in modern history. International mega-events, elite domestic competitions, and grassroots sport have all been adversely affected. Some will not return across all levels. Financially, for example, the postponement of EURO 2020 comes at an estimated financial cost of €300 million.[8] Similarly, across Europe's 5 top football leagues, the potential maximum revenue loss due to COVID-19 in the season 2019/2020 is estimated at €4.14 billion with lost broadcasting revenue accounting for over half of that amount.[9]

While the postponement of elite football competitions has financial implications, it also has a social impact. Sports events provide routine to people's lives, punctuating work and fostering social ties amongst family and peer groups.[10] While the market shock created by COVID-19 'brings the future forward' by forcing service providers to experiment and innovate – i.e. digital transformation of services – the very nature and rhythm of social practices and human interaction with sport is tested.

In many ways, mirroring what we find in contemporary capitalism, there is a hidden fragility to the Football World. Indeed, in many ways the Football World can be viewed as a fragile ecosystem. Football clubs do not operate within the traditional industry silos that are features of other sectors, rather football has coalesced over the past 30 years into a richly networked ecosystem, and has sustained itself by creating new opportunities for innovation through its relationship with technology, the media, and by leveraging its embedded social nature. Similarly, for fans and corporate sponsors of football, this ecosystem is a collaborative space, anchored in geographic and digital communities. Fans behave locally and globally, operating in tribal communities. Sponsors are more individualistic, they are geographically distributed, and heterogeneous in terms of their context, culture, and goals. They collaborate, or 'activate' to better achieve common goals with clubs, fans and broadcasters[11]. Collectively these actors morph between the roles of consumer and producer as they engage in social and economic activities directed toward value creation.[12] This value creation has the potential to satisfy both economic interests and social concerns.[13]

The Football World is thus a socially constructed terrain that, unlike many other sectors, is simultaneously constructed through the interplay of actor networks; and consumption communities. Importantly, "community emphasizes identity and network emphasizes connectivity".[14] COVID-19 disrupts the identity of the actors whom collectively shape the football ecosystem, it displaces well entrenched conventions or ways of working now become habitualised, while at the same time disrupting the ways by which these networked actors connect with each other. We now proceed to explore this dynamic Football World by considering how the different collectives forms – specifically fans, players and clubs – have been affected by COVID-19; while also commenting on implications for the connective fabric of the broader network and what these observations mean for potential future research.

Football's Leadership and Decision-Making

There is no doubt, the hyper-commercialisation has impacted on decision-making in football. No longer merely a social and cultural institution it once was – only appeasing the community it served – it now must take a multi-stakeholder approach. Therefore, the more complex the ecosystem becomes, as more money and industries become entwined decision making becomes harder. Indeed, UEFAs EURO2020 competitions networked structure, with playing sites across different European countries was once highlighted as its strength, however this feature became its biggest weakness.[15] Geographical borders are eroded and despite each national governing body or federation having ultimate responsibility for their own jurisdiction, the networks of influence spread across space and place into a global network. For example, English football authorities acted ahead of the United Kingdom Government to postpone football (i.e., mass gatherings) potentially due to its European connections through competitions and responses to the virus elsewhere (i.e., lockdown in Italy).[16] This raises areas that require further examination related to macro level governance, leadership, stakeholders, relationships, influence and power.

Implications on Clubs

Given that there is a complex relationship within the Football World has implications on decision-making and thus leadership. In the process of decision-making, the leadership function of an organisation is crucial, in the case of a football clubs, its board.[17] Whilst the external influence of relationships are key, the internal dynamics of this group is also important.[18] One example, evidences a lack clear coherent leadership and decision-making within football clubs. Liverpool FC opted to place some non-playing staff on furlough, then u-turned on the decision in the face of intense public scrutiny and fan resistance, as many football stakeholders challenged the legitimacy and morals of the club. When making a decision, a leader must examine a situation and determine which style or level of involvement to engage. An autocratic approach is when a decision is solely the responsibility of the one leader (i.e., the Chairperson or CEO). A consultative approach in which the leader merely takes into consideration the contribution of other members of the Board before making a decision. Finally, the participation group or team decision, is an approach is used to make the decision together with the participation of the board members through a vote or consensus.[19] We do not know who or how the decision was made at Liverpool FC. However, the original decision appears to contradict the CEOs and club's media narrative of making and operating under 'socialist' decision-making processes (which was already under criticism).[20] Indeed, in an interview in 2019, Peter Moore CEO of Liverpool FC stated:

"We had this historical figure, Bill Shankly, a Scottish socialist, who built the foundations. Today too, when we speak about business questions, we ask ourselves: 'what would Shankly have done? what would Bill have said in this situation? He was a true socialist who believed that football consisted of working together […]. We sat down and said let's put it down in words and that was the conclusion. That Liverpool means more. More than winning or losing. More than going to football, going to the pub and then going home."[21]

Such decisions may have consequences for the manager and team in the future who have consistently delivered messages and actions towards social and philanthropic goals. Not only does this offer evidence of a potential incongruence between corporate and football decision-making, it also leaves fans questioning the narrative. These different philosophies and may have a consequence for internal relationships, culture and performance of the club. This sheds light on the lack of transparency and clearly consultative (or group) decision-making at the club, alongside the impact this has for other aspects of the business from commercial, to performance, to community. These are not confined to one club, however this one example, evidences the need to examine and analyse the role and decision-making process of football leaders to understand the process engaged in the strategic management of the club, and its impact on commercial and football performance of the clubs.

Much attention has been placed on players to take wage cuts and deferrals in the short-term. It has generally been the responsibility of the Sporting Director or Manager to negotiate these wage cuts and pay deferrals. This has been dependent on who in the club has the strongest relationship with the players (i.e., captain and / or playing leadership team). In some leagues and clubs these negotiations have been deemed reasonable and quickly resolved, due to an absence of excessive finances across clubs and league and strong connectivity across club relationships. For the latter, if players see that non-playing staff are placed on a Government support scheme, they also want to support their colleague's future, alongside the sustainability of the club if there is a genuine sense of unity across club departments. Yet, some other high-profile cases have shed light on players who have refused to take a wage deferral or cut. We should argue why a player should have to defer or cut their wages given the wealth of English Premier League owners, which is in the region of £80bn.[22] However, if we put this aside, the pragmatics of a player in a team refusing to create a wage cut or deferral (rightly or wrongly presented by the club) could create tensions on relationships between a teams of players, between a player and the Sporting Director or Manager. Indeed, a player's future may be

reconsidered if they do not align with the decision-making and cultural norms and expectations of the club. Whilst many players face uncertainty and they should be wary of changes and the real and genuine prospect of mass player redundancies (and very few contracts for homegrown players being offered). This alongside the 30th June fast approaching, a difference in the way football executives, owners, managers and players have decided to, or have been asked to handle the financial burden of COVID-19 will undoubtedly impact the quality of relationships across football club and eat it the fabric and culture (or D.N.A) many have invested heavily in over the past few years. This require continued examination and analysis.

External factors impacting clubs also includes Brexit and the UKs departure from the European Union. Indeed, the culture of the club and its capability to develop homegrown talent and provide ample opportunities will no-doubt become more important as Brexit looms close and changes to GBE (Governing Body Endorsement). In this respect, the UK Home Office has a points-based system based on which clubs must apply to The Football Association for a GBE. Given the UK Government have given The FA the responsibility to agree on the finer detail of GBE, we may find they opt for a GBE that favours more homegrown players. Therefore, clubs must closely follow these external changes, as culture, talent development and opportunity may become more important in new GBE circumstances. This again highlights the networked nature of the football ecosystem and identifies a number of potential avenues for football scholars to examine.

Players constitute prominent actors within a networked world of football. As football is placed under great scrutiny, notwithstanding the internal pressure placed on players, other external factors have influenced the day-to-day of social action of players and in some respect their families. While the pandemic is posing unprecedented and sometimes impossible questions on Governments across the globe, football seems to be continuously at the fore. Never more has the analogy of managing-within-a-fishbowl been so true of the Football World. For example, the incumbent Health Secretary in the UK, singled out English Premier League players to "play their part", which was an invitation to contribute financially to the NHS 'war' [against COVID-19] effort. While it is logical to ask those much more financially better off to help in a time of need, it seemed rather abhorrent in the midst of global health pandemic that the UK Government should specifically target English Premier League players as those to help. Especially considering there was no mention, request for support or call for action aimed towards the 151 billionaires currently living within the UK. It appears, that football, more than any other industry, is excessively scrutinised and used as a totem for diverting attention of the

masses. Moreover, it is clear that football is treated more than just business. This should be remembered by scholars as the UK Government seeks football ownership and governance reform, as this is an ongoing tension between different stakeholder narratives and expectations.

When it comes to the question of restarting the season however, it is clear that the voice of stakeholders is not consistent in range or volume across the industry. For example, while players' captains are working with the English Premier League, their involvement problematizes how we traditionally define their role, responsibilities, and the nature of their work. For example, are they contracted workers? Or are they assets? If they are indeed assets, it is easy to conceptualise as players are bought, sold and recorded on balance sheets. However, it is less easy to understand the decision to ask players to complete the season, would a company put its most valuable resource at risk for relatively little gain? The gain would of course be solely financial. It is also a difficult decision to understand if we conceptualise players as contract workers – which except for their 'value' recorded as an asset – they are. We suggest that the problem is that society has varying and wide-ranging expectations and preconceptions of football players. The precarious nature of football as workers during COVID-19 required further examination.

Fans are crucial to Football Worlds and the industry ecosystem. Arguably, in true capitalist nature, if it was not for fans, the complex web of stakeholders looking to capitalise and leverage fandom would not exist. Fans are complex stakeholders to incorporate into decision-making, simultaneously consuming and producing value through their engagement with their respective clubs. That said, during a global pandemic, and through the suspension of that which links them together – the sport – some might question the necessity of their role in the decision making of clubs in terms of a business and management response to the crisis. There is no doubt however that fans play a crucial part in the value creating processes of the Football World, and thus whether or not they have a direct line to the decision makers at leagues and clubs, their collective actions ascribe value structures within that world. For example, amid global safety concerns, 3000 Atletico fans were allowed to travel from Spain (whilst in lockdown) to England, to contribute to the 52000 fans in Anfield stadium (UK). Fans were generally happy the fixture went ahead, even though it may have put many people at risk. For some fans who have since contracted COVID-19 possibly as a result of attending the game, and the ensuing public dismay, it has encouraged reflection. Had the decision been to postpone or play behind closed doors, it would have been unpopular, but safe. Fans are often portrayed as a group that behave emotionally more than rationally, yet many are heavily involved in

decision-making in club functions. This again raises questions over the decision-making processes in elite football contexts and football clubs, including the constituents and process of the decision-makers.

Financially its it clearly urgent for football to return to protect TV revenue rights. This will be followed quickly by club strategies to begin to capitalise on the commercial and match-day revenue lost during this period. Indeed, football has returned behind closed doors in the Budesligia and the English Premier League prepares for similar, clubs will be readily aware that football without fans will have a significant impact through lost matchday revenues. While lessons must be learnt from the recent past, we must also be cautious as clubs begin their journey to return. At present clubs are considering strategies for fans to return when it is safe to do so, through stadia adjustments, reduced and managed crowd densities, education on social distancing, stricter cleaning operations, access to hand sanitizer, space between seats, toilet access, ques for food and beverages and strict social distances in the approach to and within stadia alongside minimized travelled to and from stadia and a potential to limit the attendance of high risk spectators.[23] Any strategies for the 'return of spectators' to stadia must be closely monitored.

Social isolation has been a key aspect of the global strategy to reduce the spread of corona virus.[24] Any sport and football spectator will recognize that attending a match-day as we know may change, not just in the short-term, but forever. In the short-term, one Danish football club FC Midtjylland has opened a football drive-in at the club's MCH Arena for live streaming of Superliga games. Whilst for some this may appear a gimmick, it may prove a novel approach and other clubs (or indeed groups of clubs) may seek similar type drive-in version of fan zones either at their own club stadia or through utilizing regional appropriate existing space and facilities (i.e., existing drive-in cinemas or temporary match-day centres which may host multiple clubs). As football resumes behind closed doors, as mass gathering in any context, including sport, is a huge risk and presents super-spreader potential for a virus.[25] It is pertinent for clubs to explore innovative strategies for fan engagement and income generation.

Considerations for future research

The impact of COVID-19 on the Football World will be evident for years to come. It has exposed a fragile ecosystem and future research is needed to understand the developing and dynamic nature of football worlds. Football, like sport in general, is a naturally multidisciplinary terrain. As such, the nature and effect of phenomena within the Football

World cannot simply be reduced to economic interests. It must consider too the dynamics of how football is culturally produced, how it is anchored in local and global communities and social practices, as well as the performance, science, and medical components. We enter a world were previous cliché narratives, have become the reality - the cleaners are just as important as the players. Football is and can be viewed as an interconnected ecosystem.

At a practical level, clubs and leagues must consider more critically the role of employment contracts, transfer / labour markets, broadcasting deals, salaries, fan experience and engagement, management decision, organisation structure and culture, governance, leaderships and the longer-term role within the construction of communities, and connective potential within the network. Important work should understand where clubs are positioned within the networks of the Football World, and the impact on decision-making. Further work is vital to understanding the role players have within football' networked society, and importantly, whether they are assets, temporary workers, consultants, service providers. Crucial research should focus on the crisis management within the Football World, and how it responds, following the decisions made as football looks to manage its way out of the current one.

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