

New models of football governance: fan-ownership in UK and Italy

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Objectives. *The paper presents an ongoing study of fan-ownership as a new alternative method of football governance, in both Italy and the UK, and it aims to assess its limits and possibilities, in a competitive and capitalistic sector like senior football. Football is witnessing important changes in recent years, as newer ways of organising are questioning the established models of ownership and management, typical of leagues such as the English Premier League or the Italian Serie A. Alternative ways are offered by the recent but growing phenomenon of fan-ownership, aimed at promoting a more democratic governance of football clubs. Those recent developments find their roots in the process of hyper-commodification of football (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2001), deemed by the scholars to contain pathological circumstances and elements, where the corporatization of football clubs constitutes the main one. Because of the hyper-commodification of the football industry, football clubs in the last thirty years have become rapidly and steadily transnational companies, welcoming the idea of the ‘customer’ and ‘football flaneur’ as a replacement for the traditional ‘football fan’ (Giulianotti, 2002). The fan-ownership model constitutes an existing and growing trend in the UK, where about thirty football clubs currently exists, albeit with some differences in their governance model, but all sharing a sense of discontent with the commodification of the game. In Italy, the discussion about fan-ownership is at a much earlier stage, and fan-associations ToroMio and MyRoma have just recently drafted a law proposal to introduce a new governance model for football clubs. As Hognestad (2012) argues, football fans, for their loyalty and attachment to the club, constitute a fundamental stakeholder, so fan-ownership implies a shift for football fans from emotional to actual stakeholders, agents of change and custodians of the football club. A strong duty of care towards the surrounding communities is often at the heart of those (utopian) projects, in the attempt to reaffirm football fundamentally as a grassroots activity and exploit its potential for social development.*

This paper looks at fan-ownership in two countries: the first one is an ethnographic study of one the most radical examples of fan-ownership in the UK, namely Football Club United of Manchester (hereafter FC United), a semi-professional club set up in 2005 by disenchanted Manchester United fans, who saw the acquisition of the club by the Glazer family, after borrowing the incredible amount of £500 million, as the ‘last straw’ (Poulton, 2009) of twenty years of deep changes in the nature of football. FC United was created as a 100% fan-owned club, according to the one member-one vote principles reminiscing of co-operatives: in just ten years of history it has achieved four promotions and has managed to build its own stadium, thanks to huge donations from members and fans and through several partnerships with the public sector. The club has now over five-thousand members from all over the world. FC United also strives to affirm the aggregative power of football, to reconnect with surrounding communities, both geographical and of fans, as a means to fight the incessant individualisation of society (Bauman, 2000; 2001). The second Country of this analysis is Italy but, given the novelty of the argument in this Country, the ongoing fieldwork study will strive to provide a preliminary account of how tangible and feasible the introduction of the fan-owned football club would be, giving voice to the proponents of fan-ownership and to football fans on how this initiative could challenge the status quo in football management. As fieldwork in Italy is just starting, findings will be mostly related to the ethnographic research of FC United.

The paper seeks therefore to explore and analyse challenges and opportunities for ‘making a difference’ as alternative (and utopian) organisations in a highly competitive environment like senior football, questioning whether fan-ownership models can constitute a viable and credible alternative to management, as it is presented in mainstream business education.

Methodology. *The research methodology is inevitably affected by the different nature of the two cases of the UK and Italy, and it deploys the research methods that are considerate more appropriate to investigate fan-ownership in different settings. The research is, first and foremost, guided by the key principle of reflexivity: for Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), this means that regardless of the epistemological and ontological stance of our research, we are part of the social world that we study, so the findings will be shaped as much by the researcher as by the people or phenomenon studied.*

The research in the UK has been carried out ethnographically, and the researcher has offered voluntary work in exchange for access to the organisation. Ethnography was chosen for this phase of the research for its ability to produce thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), hence to understand and interpret the systems of meanings that produce a

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culture. The ethnographic fieldwork lasted for a year and a half and data were collected through daily notes arising from participant observations, countless conversations in the field, twenty semi-structured 'reflexive interviews' Hammersley (1992, p. 117), all complemented by internet fora, fanzines, Facebook groups and other literature on the club, which provided a great additional tool, especially to understand and analyse the club's past, in order to make sense of the here and now.

Conversely, the research in Italy is quali-quantitative, will feature semi-structured interviews with the actors behind the proposal of the introduction of fan-ownership, and followed by a large-scale questionnaire among football fans, aimed at understanding how fan-ownership is perceived, and to what extent fans themselves would be willing to invest time and money into the club they support.

Findings. The long study of FC United as an alternative football club, with a novel model of governance, helped analyzing challenges and opportunities for making a difference, and its credibility as a counterforce to mainstream business models. FC United can be considered as an experiment in cooperativism applied to football. Operating in senior competitive football, the club is clearly part of a different field from many worker co-operatives. Nevertheless, at its core, FC United follows principles of openness, democracy, community participation, autonomy and education. Despite setting a great example for other organisations operating in football, the principle of openness and the attempt to assert democracy on a wide scale across the club, proves to be also one of the biggest challenges the club must face, especially after a significant expansion. To prove and sustain its status of alternative organisation, FC United must attend to the principles of democracy and collective participation that the constitution promotes. For the club this means finding ways to actively engage with the wider membership in decision-making and in the operations and reconciling different positions has proven to be difficult. The work of Webb and Cheney (2014) helps to reflect on two aspects: what would be the optimal size for a member-owned organisation, and what would be a good turnout at general meetings, as a sign of member's engagement with the club. FC United is a rather large organisation nowadays, having reached over five thousand members in the season 2015-2016, but it can be seen just as a potential challenge, because the nature of FC United is such that not all the membership, or even better a rather small percentage, can be considered as active: many people join FC United as an act of sympathy and allegiance to the values it represents. The way FC United is set up as an organisation, leaves members the freedom to identify with what they prefer, whether is the football, the community or the politics, therefore not making the growing size an insurmountable problem. On the second matter, only about three-hundred members, almost all living locally, are active and regularly attend general meetings to vote. To date the club lacks an online system to stream and vote for fans who cannot be physically in Manchester. This is certainly a problem that needs addressing in the attempt of exercising the type of participative democracy that FC United promotes, and to become more and more a 'glocal' (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007) organization.

The other great challenge is financial: despite the undoubtedly great achievements in keeping competitive the football club, building a brand-new stadium and constantly expanding range and scope of the community work, the ethnographic insights coming from the several members' meetings, pictured a situation where fans were continuously invited to make donations. The utopian side of the FC United project has often clashed with the reality of numbers and finances and, whereas for some of the staff the economic side was not an issue for other people, like some players or some community coaches, being part of something different (and quite in the spotlight, especially for the players) became secondary if the money earned was much less than what they could have earned somewhere else. It can be concluded that the economic challenges are even greater than the organisational matters in terms of democracy and representation. The club fights capitalism from within, directly challenging it, but cannot escape from the system of competitive football leagues it is in. To be able to compete on the same level as the other teams, the club must go to great lengths, and most of all keeping the members interested, engaged and happy to sacrifice their time (mostly for free) and their money for the well-being of the club. The cost of the stadium, which was finished in May 2015, has represented an unprecedented expense that had a duplex effect: on one side it revamped the flame of hope and utopian dreams; on the other side it highlighted one of the main limits of this organisational model, that in a very competitive environment like senior football, the more you try keeping up with the other teams and grow as a club, the harder it gets to financially sustain a model that excludes the presence of wealthy investors.

In terms of the opportunities for making a difference, FC United is an organisation with an immense potential, which has been able to gather worldwide attention of the media and football fans. The club shows that it is important to stay loyal to some basic principles, as much as it is to show openness and adaptability: in many ways, it became glocalised, respecting its Mancunian roots, but growing into a global entity that is taken as example of good practice by many people and other clubs from Europe and overseas. Moreover, the unwillingness to compromise and remain consistent over time, despite the promotions and the achievements, enhanced the club's profile and attracted new fans and members. To assess whether the FC United's model represents a viable alternative to mainstream models of management, for football clubs and beyond, it is important to look at the process of growth of the club, rather than just at the here and now. FC United had a steady evolution, following the motto often pronounced by the General Manager that 'this club can only go as far as members want it to go'. If we look at the process and development of the club, it encompassed all the elements of Alvesson and Willmott's (1992, 2014) emancipation diagram: it started with a questioning phase aimed at challenging the dominant socio-economical arrangements with modern football and especially Manchester United, which led to the decision to start a new club with different principles; a utopian phase, before the formation and during the very early days served to create a broader vision of the club and its potential goals;

finally over the years utopian elements have been alternated with incremental undertakings, as part of the wider utopian vision of the club. FC United can be better understood as an organisation that started with a grand vision of a football where ordinary fans could actively participate and not feeling just as customers. To getting close to achieve the grand vision, the club has embarked in a series of micro-emancipatory projects aimed at giving voice to fans and helping local communities. What is the real potential of the model though? If we look at the goals reached in its first ten years of history, it would be sensible to say that the participatory model of fan-ownership proposed by FC United can be developed into a widespread working alternative to mainstream management models of football clubs that could work in other contexts, such as the Italian one. It is also sensible to say that the model proposed by FC United takes fan-ownership to its most extreme heights and it is yet to be tested at higher levels. If fan ownership was to be introduced in Italy in some forms, it would probably strive to resemble more the German Fußball-Liga model of ownership, where members own most of the voting rights, following the '50+1 rule (BBC, 2013) that prevents football clubs to become fully privately owned. According to Massimiliano Romiti, president of the ToroMio association, commercialisation and privatization in football cannot be escaped in toto, especially in top-flight club but, with a cultural change that allows fans to get closer again to the teams they support, it is possible to shape football governance in a way that pleases both parties. The rest of the research among Italian fans will say more on this matter.

Research limits. Due to time constraints, in the UK only one club was studied in depth. The research would have certainly benefited from a multi-sited ethnography in the UK, to explore how other fan-owned clubs deal with issues of representation, decision-making and community, for instance; AFC Wimbledon and AFC Telford United would have been good examples. The research in Italy is just beginning, so it is difficult to foresee what the boundaries will be: one thing for sure is that fan-ownership project is still in its embryonal phase, as the draft law has just been presented and it is just trying to gain momentum, therefore many of the implications have yet to be seen.

Practical implications. The primary objectives of this research are to highlight the challenges and opportunities for alternative organizations in senior football to make a difference in a very established model of governance and to tease out the wider implication of the fan-ownership model for business and management education. Fan-ownership is an emerging phenomenon in football: understanding its potential in Italy will facilitate its introduction and eventually generate alternatives to the orthodox model of ownership and governance in this Country. Conversely, in the UK, the study highlights that fan-ownership, especially in the radical way proposed by FC United, can be hindered by advancement in the leagues, as money pressure arises. This highlights the challenges for football politicians to help sustaining and making viable these organizational forms at all levels of football.

Originality of the study. This is the first ever study that analyses fan-ownership in football from a business and management point of view, and as an alternative approach to more established models of management and governance in senior football. Previous research on FC United provided a political-economic framework to understand fans' motivation for joining FC United, and how fans and club interact (Poulton, 2013), and has assessed instead how notions of (fans) authenticity are articulated within English football, using Manchester and FC United as examples, focusing especially on the journey towards the formation of FC United (Porter 2011). Such studies have therefore looked at fan-owned football clubs from sociological, cultural and political perspectives, without stressing the challenges of establishing themselves as viable organizational alternatives.

Key words: football; alternative; critical management; fan-ownership; governance; community-value

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