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## SPORT MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

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## FOOTBALL'S 'COMING OUT': SOCCER AND HOMOPHOBIA IN ENGLAND'S TABLOID PRESS

### Abstract

*This article examines the current contradictory discourses on homosexuality and soccer within the British (specifically English) newspaper media. While support ostensibly is given in the press to the eradication of homophobia in relation to soccer, the continuing promotion of traditional masculine football stereotypes, such as the 'hard man', imagines an ongoing heterosexual normativity. Furthermore, the media fascination with professional soccer players 'coming out', although expressed in supportive terms, may be decoded as an attempt to publicly reveal the deviant other. Such ambivalent representation is even evident in coverage of the Kick It Out anti-homophobia campaign. News releases from the campaign have been reinterpreted within media representation to fuel a perceived public interest in wanting to know which Premier League soccer players are gay. Accordingly, by employing a psychoanalytic and post-structuralist perspective on the instability of discursive constructions of heteronormative masculinity, the article considers soccer and its related media as a site of hegemonic contestation in which the dominant discourse of male heterosexuality is at once undergoing challenge and reinforcement.*

Homophobia is an enduring feature of sport and its popular media representation. There is no reason why sexual orientation should be held to have any bearing on athletic ability or fitness to participate, but sport is nonetheless a key cultural sphere in which heteronormativity is reproduced and the rumoured or known homosexual orientation of particular athletes viewed as a source of scandal, concern, ridicule or ambivalent acceptance. As Heather Sykes (2001) has observed (invoking Freud, 1930), this is a sign of the defensive, often paranoid 'narcissism of minor differences' in action. In order to illustrate and analyse the complex, frequently ambivalent psychodynamic operation of homophobia in popular sports media discourse, this article primarily examines the British tabloid media response to recent efforts to rid English soccer of homophobia.

Association football – commonly referred to as soccer in North America and other parts of the world, where different forms of football enjoy greater popularity – emerged as the national sporting pastime in England from the late 1800s (Walvin, 1975: 67–68). Despite its various controversies, soccer maintains a status on England's cultural landscape unrivalled by other sports. Over recent years, England has enjoyed international sporting successes in the sports of Rugby and cricket, which received considerable media coverage and associated fanfare. However, despite England's sole World Cup success (1966), the unparalleled popularity of soccer endures in England, and this is reflected in the sport's blanket media coverage (Ward and Williams, 2010: 3).

At the time of writing, there are no gay-identifying players in the upper levels of English soccer. However, in October 2008 former Premier League player Paul Elliott declared that he could name twelve gay players in that league. Elliott was speaking at a forum organised by the 'Kick It Out' campaign, on the subject of homophobia in

relation to soccer.<sup>1</sup> Elliott, a long-time campaigner against racism in soccer, is that sport's adviser to the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission. He has emerged as a staunch anti-homophobia advocate, and his comment was clearly intended to expose the myth – explicitly promulgated by the managing director of Juventus, Luciano Moggi – that 'there are no gays in professional football' ([www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-9327.html](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-9327.html)). However, despite the good intentions and hard work of campaigners such as Elliott to fight homophobic prejudice associated with soccer, our study highlights the existence of an affected media support that ultimately works to the benefit of hetero-normativity and the attendant social perception of ideal heterosexual masculinity, while exhibiting a degree of latent homoeroticism in its prurient fascination with certain soccer players.

### **Sport media and the ideal of heterosexual masculinity**

The national mass media provide the discursive institutional terrain on which sport's popularity is mapped out, assessed and measured. The national popularity of a sport can be measured in a number of ways, but in contemporary Western societies television audience numbers provide a key index. By this measure, soccer ranks well ahead of other sports in popularity in England. But perhaps more telling for the prominence of a sport within what Raymond Williams (1958) referred to as a country's 'common culture' is the extent to which it receives coverage on television sports bulletins – and maybe even more so, the extent to which it features within what Umberto Eco referred to as 'sports chatter' (1986: 159–65). The discussion of a sport, more than how much it is watched or played, is arguably the mark of that sport's register within a nation's consciousness. Soccer receives more column space in English newspapers than other sports, and is likely to lead and take the most coverage time in television sports bulletins.

Sport as a cultural symbol of national identity will be regarded as the institutional bearer of certain national characteristics. Such characteristics are, of course, contested and change over time. Presumed characteristics paraded within sport reflect the ideological influence of hegemonic power within a society; accordingly, sport has served the patriarchal relations of modern Western societies rather well (Hargreaves 1994). Even though the relations of patriarchy have been challenged within sport as within other social institutions, these relations are tenacious, and the symbolism of a dominant masculinity in and in association with sport constantly reinvents itself within such areas as commercial advertising featuring sports stars. The prevailing image, whether explicit or implicit, is of the male sports star as heterosexual. While there has been an apparent shifting acceptance towards homosexuality in sport, this has not really challenged hetero-normativity – and indeed when hetero-normativity is perceived as under threat, reactionary responses of the type addressed in this article can be expected.

Perceived disruption to entrenched notions of ideal-as-heterosexual masculinity within sports with 'national pastime' status are especially prone to reactionary response. This is so because in modern hetero-patriarchal societies collective notions of manhood are intertwined with notions of nationhood, and therefore the ideals of nationhood and manhood are mutually supportive. If the ideal/norm for manhood is heterosexuality, then this applies to the nation as it is symbolically invested with a mutually confirming sexual identity. Sport has especial symbolic significance because, apart from war, it is the social arena in which the nexus of manhood and nation is most obviously paraded. To acknowledge that the national game is played at the highest level by men who contravene the conventions of ideal, heterosexual manhood is to acknowledge that there are 'traitors' in the ranks.

Our use of the word 'traitors' here reflects how sport and war have commonly been used as metaphors for each other, while sport is frequently used as a metaphor for heterosexual sex – 'scoring', 'getting to first base', and so on (Palamatier and Ray, 1989; Jansen and Sabo, 1994; Segrave, 2000). The notion of homosexuality as treason in turn reflects how sport represses the potential, or perhaps inevitable, homoeroticism of gazing at bodies engaged in intense physical activity organised on a same-sex basis.

As Pronger (1999: 376–77) argues, it limits its expression to ‘a libidinal economy of territorial domination’, a kind of mapping of the invasive but defensive male body on to the warlike field of play, the ‘masculine colonizing will to conquer the space of an “other” while simultaneously protectively enclosing the space of the self, in an attempt to establish ever greater sovereignty of self and consequent otherness of the other’. Sport is a ‘phallogocentric formation of desire’, maintaining the male body’s imaginary integrity by disintegrating the metaphorically penetrated, colonised territory of the other.

Homophobia in sport may thus illustrate Freud’s (1989: 41) analysis of the roots of male homophobia and ‘persecutory paranoia’, where the transformation from love, in the early bisexual phase of infancy, to hatred of the father is ‘effected by means of a reactive displacement of cathexis, energy being withdrawn from the erotic impulse and added to the hostile one’. Simpson (1994: 71) argues that soccer attracts men by promising ‘membership of the [heterosexual] masculine club itself’, but that this involves homosexual desire being sublimated in love of the game and its ‘manly violence’, partly de-sublimated in the homoerotic love of players, but re-sublimated through the forbidding of homosexual love by the internalised paternal ‘voice’ as superego (1994: 78). The ‘homosocial’ (Sedgwick, 1985), homoerotic and homosexual are on an actual continuum with each other, but homosexuality is forbidden, while the homoerotic that underpins ‘homosociality’ is realised indirectly through affection and professional and technical admiration.

On the occasion of Soccer World Cup tournaments, English popular media engage in a protracted bout of nostalgia for England’s long-lost ‘golden age’, epitomised by the nation’s sole World Cup victory in 1966. The song ‘Football’s Coming Home’, released when soccer’s European Championships were staged in England in 1996, typically harked back to this victory. Such nostalgia is indicative of a ‘melancholic’ attachment to a long-lost, deeply loved but compulsorily heterosexual paternal masculine ideal akin to the broader melancholic yearning for a glorious – *white, imperial* – past in English society (Gilroy, 2005). As such, it is a classic instance of Butler’s (1997) analysis of a love for the father that cannot be acknowledged, therefore cannot be grieved, and so is mapped on to the body and ritually ‘performed’ as heterosexual masculinity. However, as in other sports, soccer’s homoeroticism coexists with and is inextricable from the homophobia of its fans and commentators.

### Twelve men out(ed)

Paul Elliott’s comment on gay soccer players in English soccer was faithfully reported in tabloid newspapers to the extent that the content of articles gave indication of his anti-homophobia message. However, the headline and opening to the news report text may be read to deliver an alternative message. The headline in *The Sun* (18 October 2008) declared: ‘12 Gay Footie Stars Claims Ace’. The lead-in line of the article continued: ‘Ex-Chelsea ace Paul Elliott has said he knows 12 football stars who are gay.’ This headline and lead-line, although heading an article that goes on to report the anti-homophobe intent of Elliott’s message, connect with a pre-established interest exhibited in the British tabloid press in outing soccer players suspected of being gay. A prominent case occurred in 2006 when *The Daily Star* ran a story on ‘gay orgies’ involving high-profile soccer players. Subsequent stories – also taken up by the *News of the World* – were clearly concerned with identifying the participants in the implicitly deviantised activity. This resulted in considerable speculation about the sexuality of Ashley Cole (an England international player who at the time played for the prominent London-based Premiership club Arsenal). Although Cole was not directly named in stories about the alleged orgy, other stories questioning his heterosexual masculinity and supposed denial of being a homosexual – the comment, ‘I’m no rear gunner’ was attributed to him – were taken up in blogs and web discussions to suggest that Cole was a participant in the increasingly media-magnified ‘gay orgy’. Cole eventually pursued *The Daily Star* in court, and an official apology was ordered. In a subsequent statement, Cole’s legal representative declared:

the newspapers knew there was no basis to name Ashley but arranged the articles and pictures in such a way that readers could identify him ... there is no truth whatever to these allegations. Ashley Cole will not tolerate this kind of cowardly journalism or let it go unchallenged. ([www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-809.html](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-809.html))

Whether or not Cole was refuting the allegation regarding the orgy specifically or disputing the more general suggestion of gayness is unclear, but the more important point at this stage of discussion is that tabloid media generate homophobia by seeking to expose possibly gay men within the assumedly heterosexual bastion of professional soccer. As already indicated, the reportage is particularly insidious when a story masked in support of anti-homophobia generates or refuels gay 'witch hunts' in soccer-related discussion. A prominent example concerns the former England player Sol Campbell. Campbell's departure from Premiership club Tottenham Hotspur to play with the North London rival club Arsenal in 2001 led to considerable upset for Tottenham fans. The animosity from some Tottenham fans carried on over the years, even to pursuing Campbell upon his departure from Arsenal to play with another Premiership club, Portsmouth. In a match between Tottenham and Portsmouth in 2008, a section of the Tottenham crowd directed a series of chants containing extreme homophobic abuse towards Campbell. This incident received considerable media attention and was a key point of discussion during the 'Kick It Out' anti-homophobia forum in October 2008. The media response across the board was one of support for Campbell and of opposition to homophobic vilification.

However, the case of the reportage in *The Daily Star* (1 October 2008) exhibits a glaring contradictoriness of message. The article reported on the defence of Campbell forthcoming from the Gay Football Supporters' Network. In regard to the chants from Tottenham fans, a spokesperson from this organisation was quoted as saying: 'Such treatment of footballers is completely unacceptable and is one of the reasons why there are no out gay professional footballers.' The newspaper reportage ostensibly supported this view, critically referring to the homophobic chanters as 'terrace thugs' and to their chant as a 'sick song'.

However, the headlining of the article - 'Gay Footie Fans Right Behind Sol' - is more telling, and can be read in complete contradiction to an anti-homophobic intent. Jokes about homosexual men approaching heterosexual men from behind are a staple of English pub and working men's club humour. The message of 'don't bend over' or 'defend your anus' is always involved in such humour. In regard to the headline in question, it appears to have a double meaning. First, the article goes on to suggest that Campbell is not a homosexual - evidenced by the 'fact' that he is known to have had a 'string of girlfriends'. If sincerity can be read into this disclaimer, the headline might be read as an indictment of the gay men who are creeping up behind Campbell. From this reading, their support will do little to help him in the heterosexual world of professional soccer. Second - and this is our 'preferred reading' of the text - the article is intended to heighten speculation about Campbell being gay. From this reading, Campbell is seen in concert with other gay men. He is one of them and so they get behind him, metaphorically and literally, as is crudely implied.

In a variation on such double entendre, while the literal meaning is that the song is sadistic and therefore unacceptable, a contemporary colloquial meaning cannot be ruled out. In contemporary youth culture, 'sick!' has been used as a term of exclamatory approval. Therefore, reference to the homophobic chant at Campbell as 'sick' may actually be sub-textually read as a message of approval for that chant, a reading that would have particular appeal to some young people.<sup>2</sup>

### **'Rear gunners': Anal erotism and homophobic humour**

These examples illustrate additional recurring features of media and popular cultural discourse concerning gay identity. The most striking aspect of the Cole story is the

reduction of gay identity to a hyper-sexuality so all consuming that it completely defines gay men's subjectivity. The implication is that gay men are permanently sexually active, so that their homosexuality is an invasive presence in whichever social sphere they inhabit. The prurient fascination with gay sexual activity in this story is, in turn, related to a marked 'anal erotism' (Freud, 1991: 300) in the pun 'rear gunner'. Simpson (1994) maintains that homophobic discourse – specifically humour amongst heterosexual men – sublimates anal erotism in a way that defines them as 'safely' heterosexual by distancing them from deviant homosexual activity, while indulging erotic fantasies of anal and rectal stimulation. 'Rear gunner' is a complex pun. It invokes the well-known nickname for Arsenal, 'the gunners', which derives from its origins as a workers' team for the Royal Arsenal armaments factory at Woolwich (Soar and Tyler, 2005: 21–22). It also invokes the specifically military image of a wartime air bomber gunner, so reproducing the frequent use of war metaphors for sport and vice versa as means of reinforcing the 'hegemonic masculinity' associated with both (Jansen and Sabo, 1994). And it is a seemingly 'innocent' variation on Cole's playing position as Arsenal 'left back'. But of course, it additionally invokes an image of aggressive, forced homosexual anal penetration, implying that a gay player is a liability because his supposed homosexuality is a danger to the implicitly heterosexual team effort by threatening (to extend the military analogy) a treasonous 'rear offensive'. The metaphor of 'scoring' is commonplace in masculine (hetero)sexual humorous discourse (Segrave, 1994), and the pleasure of actual scoring in a game is often compared to orgasm in the cultural enmeshing of sport and the eroticisation of the body as object of narcissistic identification and homoerotic sexual fantasy that Miller (2001) calls 'sportsex'. But here, 'rear gunner' combines soccer's military and sexual associations to mark homosexual activity as doubly deviant.

The multi-dimensionality of this pun highlights the persistent anal erotism underlying much homophobic humour. The centrality of repetitious homophobia to much of the 'homosociality' (Sedgwick, 1985) of 'male bonding' masculine interaction strongly suggests that homosexuality's 'otherness', invoked pejoratively to underpin asserted heterosexuality, is the repudiated trace of the early homosexual attachment to the same-sex parent as love object in infancy (Butler, 1997). Following Freud's (1923) seminal work, where he argues that the infant ego is formed by 'melancholic' identification, through introjection, with the idealised abandoned object-cathexis of infancy, making the ego the 'precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes' (Freud, 1923: 29), Butler stresses that initially each child's melancholic identifications are both male and female, but that heterosexual gender identification follows repudiation of homosexual attachment to the same-sex parent as a loss that cannot be acknowledged or grieved, and so remains as a melancholic identification *performed* as heterosexual identification *with* the same gender, but which 'embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis' (1997: 136). Butler's perspective on gender as performance helps to illuminate the seemingly paradoxical combination of tacit homoeroticism and overt homophobia in sport.

Commentators on Argentine soccer have observed this combination in action in supporters' verbal abuse of their rivals. Suarez-Orozco (1993) contends that the Argentine soccer chant vowing to 'break the ass' of opponents reproduces the perverse homophobic and sexually sadistic logic that to be anally penetrated, however involuntarily, implies homosexuality while penetrating another man's anus nevertheless preserves the penetrator's heterosexuality (1993: 227). It reflects an Argentine culture of machismo founded on anxiety where fear of homosexual attack represents 'an unconscious and forbidden wish', disguised as 'projective inversions' (1993: 232). Tobin (2000: 114) makes a similar point in relation to accusations of effeminacy and sodomy in rival Argentine supporters' mutual taunting.

While the defensive retort 'I'm no rear gunner' seemingly reassuringly reinforces the assumed 'heteronormativity' of the paper and the reader by (through the tabloid press's tendency to use imaginary first-person direct speech) 'attributing' this homophobic remark to Cole, as Cavanagh and Sykes (2006: 85) insist, sport both enables 'heteronormative

gender identifications' and 'evokes anxieties about gender instability'. These anxieties are manifested as repudiation of homosexuality in both men's and women's sports, but a nonetheless ambivalent repudiation often expressed as a homophobic humour that enables indulgence and denial simultaneously. 'Rear gunner' typifies coded references to anal and rectal stimulation in the homophobic humour to be found in British male popular culture. On the BBC2 television program *Fantasy Football League* some years ago, for example, comedian Frank Skinner, on hearing of a guest's interest in the Welsh soccer club Wrexham, quipped (with 'knowing' ambivalence) 'ooh, I love a Saturday afternoon up the Wrexham'.

### Flirting with boundaries: Ronaldo, Beckham and metrosexuality

Perhaps the most striking example of this combination of homophobia, apparent liberalism and homoeroticism in England's tabloid press is *The Sun's* enduring fascination with former Manchester United player Cristiano Ronaldo, the homoerotic current in whose representation is regularly denied or displaced through a variety of stylistic devices peculiar to the tabloid newspaper. This Portuguese player is regularly subjected to markedly playful insinuations of homosexual leanings and deliberate or actual appeal to gay men. Reference is regularly made to his many female partners, but while he has not been 'accused' of homosexuality he has been used as a vehicle for deeply homophobic humour, and for the assertion of a crudely 'heteronormative' version of soccer.

In an article entitled 'Ron looks like George Michael' (*The Sun*, 24 July 2008), Ronaldo is shown on holidays, bare-chested and wearing shorts looking at the back of another man walking away from him. The article commences with a pun on gay singer George Michael's 'Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go', 'Well Trip Me Up Before You Go-Go', a clearly homophobic anal sex reference, while an imaginary 'Ronaldo remix' of Wham's 'Club Tropicana' contains the lines 'Club Tropicana, winks are free' and 'I'm still diving', with references to Ronaldo's propensity for winking at the camera and supposedly faking fouls in soccer used here as code for masturbation (winks/wanks) and fellatio respectively. It concludes, 'Ronaldo is due back in Manchester soon, so he'd best enjoy his Freedom while he can'. The use of suggestive puns, rather than explicit language, and the obvious but unstated double meaning of 'Freedom' (another Wham song title) fall short of direct accusations of homosexuality. But the picture, recycled from an article published the previous day ('Ronaldo: Dude Looks Like a Lady'), clearly suggests homosexual leanings on his part while enabling the reader to both gaze at Ronaldo's body (again!) and deny homoerotic attraction towards him. As Redfern (1984) shows, puns are a form of metaphorical connection, linking things through homophonic words or – as here – minor vowel variations to create imaginary associations. These associations with homosexuality equate it with sexual acts only, with this evident fascination suggesting ambivalence rather than outright revulsion.

The complexity of this ambivalence is extended through the addition of an accompanying article headed 'Cris Looks Gay and That is Fantastic' by Matthew Todd, 'Editor of the UK's best-selling gay magazine *Attitude*'. The latter's presence displaces the homoerotic fascination on to an openly gay man whose article, by 'proving' the newspaper's liberal credentials, also 'balances' the homophobia of the newspaper itself. Indeed, Todd's contributions have been used regularly by *The Sun* to highlight and seemingly legitimate Ronaldo's gay appeal while he has otherwise been cast as a deviant, alien presence within the heteronormative world of soccer and endured as an object of ambivalent homoerotic fascination for 'straight' readers. Hence, regarding the announcement of Ronaldo's 2009 calendar, a headline stating 'Is Ronaldo Playing for the Other Side?' (*The Sun*, 27 September 2008) clearly marks homosexuality as the deviant 'other' (the article describes it as 'a bit gay'); readers are instructed that 'You can see more snaps from the calendar in today's edition of *The Sun* newspaper' [original italics]. The article is accompanied by



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Todd's 'My view': 'THIS is the calendar that fans of the hottest face and body of 2008 have been waiting for.'

Such treatment of Ronaldo as 'fair game' for ridicule does nothing to make the homophobic environment of soccer and soccer fandom in Britain more accepting of gay players. Indeed, players like Ronaldo and David Beckham are highly attractive to such popular media because it is known that in 'reality' they are 'straight', because their enjoyment of their own bodily display makes their pictorial representation in such papers a very saleable commodity to 'straight' and gay men (as well as to female readers), and because their awareness of their gay following can be justified by their willingness to economically exploit that following, rather than signifying actual homosexual leanings.

While Beckham's 'gay icon' status features heavily in his media representation, as Rahman (2004) argues, it simultaneously invites and disavows homoerotic fantasies by constantly stressing his 'obvious' heterosexuality. Although Miller (2001: 8–9) argues that Beckham destabilises images of masculinity and English national identity, Rahman points out that this 'querying' is nonetheless anchored by discourses of heteronormativity. Beckham's circulation as signifier of *legitimate* masculine narcissism simulates 'queerness' while reassuring us that it is 'only' a simulated embodiment of the forbidden homosexual love object underpinning heterosexual performance. Beckham is often cited as the classic case of the phenomenon of the consumption-obsessed masculine narcissistic desire for display and self-presentation as the object of the gaze of the other (hetero- or homosexual) that Mark Simpson was the first to call 'metrosexuality' ('Here Come the Mirror Men', *The Independent*, 15 November 1994). But whereas Simpson emphasised that 'gay men provided the early prototype for metrosexuality', wryly noting that gay men like Beckham 'because imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' ('Meet the Metrosexual', <http://dir.salon.com/ent/feature/2002/07/22/metrosexual>), in its appropriation by the marketing industry in 2003 the label 'metrosexuality' was narrowed to equation with unambiguous heterosexuality (Coad, 2008: 27).

Like Beckham, Ronaldo's calendar may indeed be calculated to appeal to gay customers, and 'playing for the other side' in the *Sun* story is ambiguous, as it might mean 'selling to', profiting from the 'other side', without necessarily implying that he himself might be gay. But note that gay players and readers are still unambiguously 'other' to the implied newspaper reader. And Ronaldo is never quite afforded Beckham's 'straight' metrosexual status in these tabloid newspapers. This may relate to his Portuguese, markedly Southern European identity, historically associated with an inferior, quasi-effeminate masculinity in British popular culture.

## Conclusion

The failure of any players at UK soccer's highest levels to identify as gay indicates the rigidity of that sport's hegemonic terrain. Gay activists are all too aware of this rigidity. Prominently, Peter Tatchell of the Outrage! organisation includes as a key point within his plan for ridding soccer of homophobia the need for gay players to come out. However, Tatchell recognises the difficulty involved, and acknowledges that it must be done strategically:

Kick It Out and the FA could privately sound out several gay and bisexual premier league players about a collective coming out. If half a dozen top footballers came out in a joint statement, there would be safety in numbers. No individual player would be vulnerable to isolation and victimization. ([www.fyne.co.uk/index.php?item=717](http://www.fyne.co.uk/index.php?item=717))

But the kind of reception such players might receive – at least at the outset – is perhaps indicated by a *Sun* article on England's representatives in the 'FA-backed Gay World Cup', the title ('Footie's Coming Homo for World Cup', *The Sun*, 23 August 2008) and opening line of which ('AN England team finally looks like cruising to victory in a World Cup – for GAYS') once again reflect at best ambivalent homophobic humour,

despite quoting Tatchell's remark that 'this championship challenges the machismo and homophobia often associated with football' and the names of the teams, some of which appropriate homophobic language as markers of identity – 'Brighton Bandits', 'Bent ... like Beckham', and so on.

As scholars of Gramsci know well, hegemony always contains counter-hegemonic tendencies (Hughson et al., 2005: 126–29). These tendencies need to be activated in some way for the dominant power form to be shaken. In regard to the hegemonic heterosexuality of soccer, the open self-identification of well-known players as gay may well be paramount. However, Anderson's (2002: 873) cautionary note remains relevant:

openly gay athletes, even though they may conform to all other mandates of orthodox masculinity with the exception of their sexuality, threaten the ability of sports to reproduce the hegemonic form of masculinity. Rather, gay male athletes, threaten to soften hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, they may help open doors to increased acceptance of subjugated masculinities, such as gay identities.

Furthermore, for gay men to be able to self-identify successfully as professional soccer players – and thus send the message to other men that it is possible for them to enjoy soccer as players and supporters, without homophobic opposition – these players must be able to 'come out' rather than be 'outed'. Thus far, the tabloid press in England has hardly assisted this process. Rather, through an invidious representation of homosexuality in regard to the Premier League, the media have served to reinforce the dominant heteronormative culture of the sport throughout its various levels. The extent to which 'preferred meanings' (Hall, 2001) are taken on board by readers will remain a matter of debate, and we cannot assume a direct correspondence between 'preferred' textual meaning and reader interpretation. However, we believe that the eradication of homophobia from the most popular and high-profile sport in England will be thwarted as long as homophobic messages are rife in the over-arching hegemonic institution that is the mass media.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Kick It Out' was established as an organisation in 1997 with support and financial backing from the governing bodies of soccer in England. 'Kick It Out' is linked to the Football Against Racism in Europe network, which is supported by the sport's governing European body, UEFA, and the world governing body, FIFA. While 'Kick It Out' has focused on combating racism within soccer, the combating of homophobia has now been incorporated into the agenda.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted that popular and mid-market 'red-top' (tabloid) newspapers in Britain completely dominate newspaper sales. *The Sun* is the highest (and one of the highest selling of all English language newspapers) at 2,817,857, *The Daily Mail* sells 2,039,731, while *The Daily Star* sells 699,216. Sunday tabloids include the [now defunct, since this article was written] *News of the World* at 2,664,363 ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2011/apr/15/abs-national-newspapers?INTCMP=SRCH](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2011/apr/15/abs-national-newspapers?INTCMP=SRCH)). Such figures dwarf sales of 'quality' broadsheets, with *The Daily Telegraph* (626,416) and *Sunday Times* (1,031,727) currently topping the daily and Sunday title circulation figures, respectively ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2011/apr/15/abs-national-newspapers1?INTCMP=SRCH](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2011/apr/15/abs-national-newspapers1?INTCMP=SRCH)). The readership for 'quality' newspapers clearly is dominated by the upper professional and managerial middle-class fractions (i.e. those associated with high cultural and economic capital) of the ABC1 end of the social class spectrum (see [www.nmauk.co.uk/nma/do/live/marketPlaceCharts](http://www.nmauk.co.uk/nma/do/live/marketPlaceCharts)). Despite their relatively small readerships, their status is such that they are 'newspapers of record'. However, recent falls in circulation figures notwithstanding, the tabloids can still be seen to play a central role in circulating, reiterating, refining and reshaping the 'opinions' of their readers.

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