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The role of Supporter Liaison Officers in fan engagement, governance and football crowd management in Sweden

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Evidence of the value of increased supporter involvement in football governance is limited and existing work focuses primarily on the boardroom, rather than on managing problems associated with fan behaviour. This paper addresses these limitations by documenting and analysing the role of the Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) in Sweden, a country that has salient concerns and difficulties associated with football fan behaviour and policing. We argue that the SLO role in Sweden serves as a model for empowering supporter engagement because the SLOs maintain a position as prototypical members of the active fans' in-group. This in turn increases their ability to reduce conflict by navigating the complex objective tensions and dimensions of intergroup power and legitimacy that exist between the different stakeholders. The paper explores the implications of our analysis for understandings of the value of fan involvement in governance, dialogue and crowd management strategies more generally.

Keywords: football, conflict, governance, crowd management, supporter engagement

Introduction

Historically football clubs in Sweden have been, and to some extent remain, multi-sports organisations. However, in the mid-90s Swedish clubs were given the opportunity to separate their football sections into Limited companies. During this process the National Sports Association (*Riksidrottsförbundet*), inserted a ‘50+1’ rule in order to ensure that the football clubs remained majority owned by their members. There have been various attempts to remove this rule in order to facilitate more rapid commercialisation but action by the Swedish Football Supporters’ Union (*Svenska Fotbollssupporterunionen*; SFSU) among others has led to a situation where fan ownership is currently the dominant model for club governance in Sweden and therefore fans have a very significant influence on policy decisions.

The involvement of supporters in the governance of football remains a contentious issue primarily because several authors argue that as the sport becomes progressively commercialised it also becomes increasingly disconnected from its fan base. This in turn feeds a situation in which problems of governance emerge within the sport that can, and should, be resolved through a return to greater levels of supporter engagement¹. In a recent review of research in this area it is argued that evidence in favour of the value of increased supporter involvement in football governance is limited². It is also the case that most academic work in this area focuses primarily on governance in the boardroom and has little to do with managing the specific problems associated with fan behaviour (e.g. violence, pyrotechnics, etc). Moreover, it is recognised that accountability to the broader supporter base is a complex issue and fan representation on the board does not necessarily ensure good dialogue³. This must be particularly true with regard to those fan groups which are associated with issues of violence. The review goes on to point out that while the concept of supporter engagement “*features heavily in current policy discourses, this has not been defined. What is supporter engagement, and what are its boundaries? It seems imperative that a term so heavily relied upon is defined in some way.*” In this paper we therefore explore a specific model of supporter engagement referred to as the Supporter Liaison Officer or SLO to understand if it can serve a model for understanding and empowering supporter

engagement and fan involvement in governance structures surrounding the problematic issues associated with fan behaviour.

Managing football related conflict in Sweden

Issues of football crowd management and concerns regarding fan behaviour are highly salient in the Swedish context. Every year there are several fixtures that are judged to pose significant risks of confrontation between fans, which each lead to the deployment of hundreds of police officers and stadium security staff. Periodically episodes of confrontation do take place. In comparison to other Nordic countries with comparable legislation and police tactics, Sweden is therefore a country not only with a strong model of fans as stakeholders in the governance of the football clubs but also a nation with a relatively high level of problems regarding fan behaviour.⁴ Swedish football fan culture also has a strong ‘active’ fan base and ‘Ultra’ dimension. These Ultra groupings tend to be well-organised, which facilitates the production of large visual displays within stadiums (tifos, including the use of pyrotechnics) and collective marching through a city on their way to and from matches. Many of these activities are conducted with other supporter groups but ultras tend to be highly active, visual and often very influential. Some clubs also have an associated ‘hooligan’ groups. It is the case that, as elsewhere in Europe⁵, Swedish hooligan culture has undergone a process over the last ten to fifteen years where the ‘hooligan’ groups have gradually moved away from seeking confrontations in the vicinity of stadia towards prearranged fights in forests and abandoned locations, where protagonists agree on terms beforehand regarding location, time, numbers and rules of engagement.⁶

Nonetheless the salience of the problems of violence and pyrotechnic use in Swedish football remain and attract high profile media attention, as well as creating strong political pressures on the Swedish football authorities, club and police to provide a ‘solution’.⁷ As a part of its strategy to alleviate such problems, the organising authority for the two top flight Leagues in Sweden, *Svensk Elitfotboll* (SEF), created and introduced the project *Stå upp för fotbollen* or ‘Stand up for football’. The project, which began in 2012, provided funding that made it possible for several top-flight clubs across Sweden, particularly those with large fan bases, to employ full and part time Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) who would attend, and work between, every fixture involving the club.

The vision for this new role was to try to alleviate some of the problems around supporter behaviour by ensuring better dialogue between the clubs, their fans and other stakeholders. The assumption being that improvements in dialogue would improve the experience of fans, promote legitimacy and positive fan culture as well assisting in alleviating tensions and conflict.

While problems endure, research and background policy evaluation does suggest that the SLO role in Sweden has been successful in achieving these goals to some extent.⁸ Adding further evidence, a recent programme of observational research across a series of football events in Sweden over a three-year period also concluded that SLOs played a key role in conflict avoidance, de-escalation and resolution. The research suggested that these outcomes were linked to the presence of a model of ‘Supporter Liaison Officer’, specifically focused on conflict prevention and de-escalation through dialogue. That research also suggested that SLOs in Sweden work to a code of ethical conduct that allows them to operate with high levels of discretion, maintaining their credibility among fans (including those that present a ‘risk’ to ‘public order’) but also to maintain an effective working relationship with the police.⁹ However, at present there is currently no systematic academic research addressing precisely how this approach to supporter engagement operates or if and how the role may be functioning to help alleviate potential confrontations.

The international policy context

The development of the SLO role in Sweden was facilitated in part due to the introduction of ‘Article 35’ of the UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play Regulations, from the season 2012/13 football clubs across Europe (i.e. those leagues under the jurisdiction of UEFA) were obliged to appoint a so-called ‘Supporter Liaison Officer’ (SLO).¹⁰ The development of this handbook was heavily influenced by *Supporters Direct Europe*, a supporter association that was appointed by UEFA to assist in the implementation process of the SLO role. It is therefore possible to view the role as part of a larger emphasis on supporter involvement in governance through their ability to join forces as seen in formation of networks and federations like *Football Against Racism in Europe* (FARE) and *Football Supporters Europe*.¹¹ Nonetheless, despite *Supporters Direct Europe*’s effort to coordinate and assist the national implementation processes, it is evident that there is widespread variability in how the role has developed. In Germany the role builds

upon a tradition of liaison with supporters through ‘Fan Projects’ that goes back to the 1990s and as such clubs there were in a good position to integrate the SLO role as an effective form of supporter engagement and representation.¹² In Italy on the other hand, the implementation seemed at least in the beginning to have been what Numerato calls a “tick-box exercise” that existed only mimetically.¹³ Whereas it is apparent that clubs in Sweden have invested heavily in the SLO as an element of their ‘safety and security’ decision making, many clubs elsewhere (e.g. the UK) locate their SLO within the organisations’ marketing team where they play little if any role in governance or conflict management and are used to liaise with fans primarily around ticketing and ‘customer’ satisfaction issues. However, despite this policy commitment and widespread variability of the role at an international level there is currently little if any research on the nature of the SLO role adopted in Sweden and thus no empirical capacity to compare or contrast these apparently different models of supporter engagement in the future.

Crowd dynamics and psychology

The UEFA policy initiative underpinning Article 35 is in line with their strategic approach to safety and security more generally; a strategy itself aligned with EU policy in international police co-operation surrounding football matches with an international dimension¹⁴. Both are informed, and to a degree influenced by, the Elaborated Social Identity Model of crowd behaviour (ESIM).¹⁵ A key issue within the ESIM approach to football crowd behaviour is that conflict is often best understood as an outcome of the dynamics of intergroup interactions rather than merely the expression of the underlying disposition of so called ‘hooligan’ fans. These dynamics revolve around the inter-relationships between social identity, legitimacy, power and ‘self-regulation’, dynamics which can and do evolve within and across crowd events.

Research has identified several conflicts involving football fans and police where violence has emerged as a function of these situationally imbedded interactional social psychological dynamics. For example, at the 1990 World Cup finals in Italy a riot developed involving England fans. Prior to the outbreak of conflict fans who saw themselves as acting legitimately (e.g. collectively marching to the stadium) were seen as uniformly hostile and threatening by another powerful group (i.e. police who saw the fans as posing a threat public order). This led the police to assert their power and try to control the marching fans through use of force (e.g. using ‘riot police’ to baton and disperse the

fans). Given they did not see themselves as posing any threat, the action of the police was interpreted by fans as illegitimate. This changed social context reshaped the fans social identity, leading many of them to feel it was legitimate to confront the police. Moreover, given their unity the fans also felt empowered and therefore able to act collectively to confront the police. Indeed, far from understanding their confrontation as violent hooliganism many fans saw hostile actions as self-defence. This conflict in turn confirmed police perceptions that they were confronting a threatening situation and thus increased the scale and intensity of their coercion (e.g. further baton charges, use of tear gas, etc)¹⁶.

In other words, the conflicts that emerge and then escalate in football can be understood to result from the patterns of interaction between groups rather than as merely a product of pre-existing disposition on the part of the fans (e.g. hooligans). This theoretical approach has the effect of forcing a reflection on the (in)effectiveness of crowd management approaches and helps drive improvements in police capacities for handling these social identity-based dynamics in ways that promote perceptions of legitimacy, enhance police proportionality and reduce conflict through empowering crowd ‘self-regulation’¹⁷. There is now considerable research to suggest that a strategic orientation by the police toward facilitation (e.g. enabling the peaceful expression of fans identity through marching and collective chanting) and a tactical approach focused on dialogue with fans to empower supporter engagement can be highly effective at reducing conflict between police and football fans.¹⁸ However, the focus of the existing research has been exclusively on the dialogue capacity of the police. The introduction of SLOs in Sweden therefore provides a unique opportunity to advance the literature by understanding how a dialogue capacity adopted by other stakeholders’, in this case the football clubs and supporters, may function and while also helping to further understand the role of supporter engagement in alleviating problems in football crowds.

The current study

This paper therefore has two primary aims. First, we seek to document and analyse SLO experiences as a means of understanding how their role functions within a broader framework of football governance. How does the role of the SLO in Swedish football work to achieve supporter engagement and does this help understand the value of supporter involvement in the governance structures designed to address the problems

surrounding fan behaviour? Second, we aim to utilise this analysis to advance understanding of how the role of SLOs in Sweden interacts with regard to crowd dynamics in the context of football events, in order to help further advance knowledge of how to reduce the likelihood of confrontations.

Method

As the Swedish SLOs are well-organized through *Stå upp för fotbollen*, the organisation appointed a single point of contact for the research team, who facilitated our access to the wider network of SLOs. To secure maximum variation, we had asked for a sample of interviewees of both sexes who were SLOs from both smaller but also larger clubs from Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. We were also aware of variation in employment status, and therefore sampled interviewees who were both full time employed as well as participants who work on a part time voluntary basis. At the time of our sample there was a total of 38 SLOs operational in Sweden. We undertook fourteen semi-structured interviews which represents 37 % of the population. Of the interviewees two were females and twelve males. The interviewees were conducted via telephone or SKYPE. All interviews were conducted in Swedish. The interviews took between 40 and 85 minutes and took place between July 19th 2016 and January 9th 2017. The interview guide focused on the educational and supporter background of the interviewees. From there the interviews moved on to discuss the content of their work including relations with various stakeholders and the situations they confronted. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The Swedish transcripts constituted the raw data for the initial analyses using a thematic or grounded theory approach that adopted the following process. First the second and third authors familiarised themselves with the raw data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Hereafter, the data was then independently coded by the second author using Nvivo data analysis software.¹⁹ This primary analysis was conducted to develop the initial themes evident in the data using procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke.²⁰ The authors then met face-to-face in an analysis workshop to discuss in English the development of a theoretical framework to coalesce the themes and relate them to our research objectives. A series of extracts that best exemplified each underlying theme were then selected and translated into English by the second author. The first author then utilised these translated extracts to revisit, adjust and simplify the data to best express the theoretical framework

developed through the workshop, the outcome of which is the analysis presented here.

Analysis

SLO background and recruitment: the construction and reconstruction of ‘trust’.

Many of the SLOs do indeed highlight how a core feature of their role is to assist in the de-escalation or avoidance of conflict. To this end some stressed the importance of personal history, whereby a few were previously prominent or influential individuals within the informal organisations of their clubs’ active supporter culture.

I used to be very active. I never sat on the board for the supporter organisation but I used to be quite driving of the supporter culture and was involved in some of the negative aspects of supporter culture too, if you put it that way. [Interview 10]

Others described how history is important to their professional capacity, primarily because of the social networks, understanding of the subculture and trust this provided.

I have been most kinds of supporter. I was active in both the TIFO groups and a member of [name of Ultra group], and some time when I was younger I also used to run around and be a part of the boys too [the ‘hooligan firm’]. I have done all parts. I know many of them personally, and they are aware of the journey that I have made - they listen to me. [Interview 6]

Some SLOs described how the clubs have a shared commitment to recruit individuals who have previously been, or the capability to become, influential actors within their club’s active fan base.

Most SLOs originate from a supporter organisation or the supporter culture and was already a known name in the club and among supporters. If you’re going to have a SLO, it’s better to have someone who is connected. It is usually clear that the clubs will take a supporter when they are employing someone as SLO. [Interview 10]

This issue of recruitment is important because many of the SLOs highlight how

legitimacy and trust with fans is critically important, but often hard to achieve and maintain; particularly among the more marginalised and ‘harder to reach’ active fans who were described as more insular in nature.

They must be able to trust you. Supporters are quite closed groups you know, and they’re more likely to listen to you as they know you, as opposed to someone random who comes up and tells them something. As a supporter, you’re attacked by both the police and media, and consequently you become very selective about who to trust. That’s my layman’s theory, what I believe [Interview 7]

Nonetheless it is apparent the processes of recruiting fans from, or who have achieved credibility within, the supporter base has constituted a form of ‘mandate’, legitimising the SLO role among fans. For example, some SLOs describe how a background in supporter culture allows them sufficient legitimacy to act as bridge between the club, its fans and the police, using their own trust among the stakeholders to facilitate dialogue and help mediate and negotiate potential solutions.

I have personal experiences and affiliations with that world and its subcultures. I have one of the largest and probably best networks in those groups, and possibly the greatest ability to reach out with what the club wants and can offer in exchange. [Interview 2]

Maintaining legitimacy within intergroup interaction: a conflict reduction role

The sense of trust and integrity upon which the SLOs apparently rely is described as fragile and as such must be actively constructed, reconstructed and managed on an ongoing basis. It is perhaps in this sense that respect and integrity were described as lying at the heart of their capacity by some of our sample of SLOs.

It’s the respect from supporters that a SLO must have to act correctly. I would not be a SLO if I burnt that respect. [Interview 11]

However, some felt they often struggled to build meaningful relationships with younger fans. For example, one described how their own changing lifestyle meant they were less able to engage in the social activities that were described as central to establishing

effective social capital.

I am starting to get older, having passed 30. Relations with my networks, who are my age and that, are natural and you can call on them, but there's also a younger generation that you actively must build relations with to be able to influence and develop good working relations.... That can sometimes be a challenge. I must work a bit harder to get to know the people in these supporter communities now that I'm a bit older, and have a family, and can't as easily attend all away games, parties, and all that.

[Interview 4]

SLOs in our sample also described how they can lose credibility among supporters if they engage in actions interpreted by them as illegitimate. Thus, one SLO described how they focused their role on facilitation, planning and supporter advocacy, whilst explicitly eschewing any involvement in the coercion that often surrounded them.

For me it's about... my work should be taking place beforehand, to ensure that it doesn't happen. If it then happens, I take a step back and let the security staff and police do their job, and just observe the situation to ensure that the relevant laws and regulations are being followed – that our supporters are being treated in accordance with the law. [Interview 11]

Instead of acting on behalf of the authorities, SLOs described acting as a type of community or social worker; a form of embedded advocacy, reaching out to fans and other stakeholders trying to prevent conflict.

I'd say that I have just as much use of the negative aspects of my previous supporter-ship, as I have of the positive aspects. I believe that I can help supporters who have gone astray to get ahead in life. I can picture myself in the situations that occur and understand how they're thinking in that place. I'm also able to explain it to other stakeholders in a good way, which calms down heated emotions that surface in those moments.

[Interview 12]

As the above extract implies, some SLOs described how the legitimacy that emerges from

this ‘advocacy’ role, empowers them to intervene in otherwise tense and problematic situations, enabling them to play an important de-escalation role during otherwise confrontational crowd events.

I have the advantage of having old friendships with some of the older influential supporters. I have even managed to make some connections with some of the younger supporters. This means that I can refer to individuals by their names even if they’re masked and put my hand on shoulders and be there in all kinds of situations to have a calming effect – you know how specific individuals work and how you can influence them to resolve situations. You don’t have to be an old supporter like me, but it helps enormously if you’ve established relations and trust beforehand. [Interview 4].

The SLO role as mediator and ‘interpreter’: advocacy version repression

For some, the main ‘translation issue’ and most important ‘bridge building mission’ within their role is to help clubs’ understanding of its supporters and the supporters to understand the rationale behind club decisions.

There are many people without a supporter background here in the office. Many of them are somewhat afraid of supporters and find them problematic – “they behave in really strange ways”. Sometimes you see things on the stands that instinctively are interpreted negatively, and it’s about translating what people see and explaining its reasons – “well that’s because” – and just being present. [Interview 5]

Thus, SLOs describe being embedded within a context of polarised relationships simply because of misunderstanding and poor communication. Therefore, trust and legitimacy with these other stakeholders, is described as equally important in helping the SLOs play a constructive role in managing tensions.

You are relying on that trust, not only by the supporters – I need to have it from [the club], the police, and everyone else too. [Interview 1]

However, SLOs describe how they often experience pressure from the clubs and the

police to act in ways that would position them among fans as part of a coercive ‘security regime’, a perception that they argue would undermine their own legitimacy among supporters.

I believe that it’s dangerous to be a part of the security establishment, because it’ll burn a lot of the trust placed in you. [Interview 6]

Defending the integrity of the role in a context of ‘objective’ tension

To deal with these contrasting and polarised objectives among the interacting stakeholders, some SLOs described how they prioritise working in ways that seek to serve common interests, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from any sense that they act directly as an agent of the authorities.

On the one hand, you need to take the club’s side, on the other you need to take the supporters’ side. It’s important that I don’t become a representative of the club who manages the supporters, but I still must be helpful with what they want to achieve. The club and supporters must work in symbiosis, and in that regard the SLO plays an important role. [Interview 11]

Yet, even when they adopt this approach they describe finding themselves facing powerful problems, born either from unrealistic expectations on the part of the authorities about what SLOs can and should accomplish or that the SLO should act as a partisan for rather ‘narrow’ supporter subcultural perspectives.

Well maybe there’s a preconception that I prioritise certain groups because I have strong affiliations to them, which I do to some extent... Or maybe that I’d exercise poor judgment. I’m sure that many believe that to be the case. I get that feeling from the police. There are often great expectations placed on me to solve problems that I believe are the police’s problems, or under the remit of the police. So yes, I often feel that there is a range of expectations placed on me from multiple different directions. That I should be doing something that I am not always comfortable with doing [Interview 2]

In defending the integrity of their role in the face of such pressures some SLOs describe how certain police commanders interpret their actions as prejudicial.

I think that I am highly trusted by the police, but it differs between individuals in the police. There are those police officers who I have had discussions with who don't agree with me. At times, I have been forceful and then they perhaps just think that I am being defensive and only take the supporters' perspective. However, I try to be balanced and explain, and always show some understanding for their actions, but that understanding can disappear at times. You may have just met the person a few times and the only time that you have had any dialogue with him is when something has gone wrong and you are advocating the supporters' perspective, and for that he may think that you are a 'bloody fool'. So yeah, you can tell that some police officers look down on me at times. [Interview 1]

In contrast, some described more accommodating relationships with police who allow the SLOs to avoid acting in ways that might otherwise compromise the legitimacy of their relations with fans.

Yeah, that balancing act can be difficult at times. It's often about novel daily matters – things that are happening then and there. My experience of it is that it works well, and I'm very happy that my club, and even the police, are very understanding of how much I'm able and willing to disclose. Many times, it's been quite nice to only tell half the story about a situation without having to go into details, and I don't always have to explain why I'll not go into details. They accept that I'm only able to tell half the story, and not go into exact details about who did what. [Interview 4]

Ethical dilemmas

As such, SLOs describe a key aspect of their role is trying to marry together these often-contrasting positions.

I always must assess what I think is best for the club, or legally, but also

to ensure that I'm not breaking trust. Most of the time I find myself in the dilemma between what I consider being the best course of action for the club and what I think is important to ensure that trust isn't broken. You have to keep assessing, and often it comes down to instinct. Sometimes you get it wrong, and sometimes you get it right. You always have to keep assessing, and I can tell you that's not easy. There are many difficult situations. [Interview 4]

To manage these dilemmas SLOs describe how they try to balance themselves between the desires and objectives of the fan base and the requirements of the authorities. Nonetheless some acknowledge the powerful negative consequences that can flow from making a 'bad call'.

My assessment may result in me not being able continue my work as an SLO – that's something that I must deal with, and in some ways, it is fair. [Interview 10]

Perhaps it is unsurprising then that it is managing these challenging decisions that some find the most stressful aspect of their job.

Yes well... that is probably one of the most difficult parts for us as SLOs –deciding when and how. That's the truth. [Interview 10]

And the competency of those skilled at navigating them is described as a key characteristic of those suited to the role.

When I went from voluntary to paid employment I talked to the guy who writes contracts and he said 'can you help me understand why, the police, supporters and the security people within the club are all saying that you're doing a great job. Surely someone must be unhappy with you. I suppose it shows that you've got high integrity'. That's what it all comes down – you have to explain right from wrong to people. You cannot share everything you know, because then you'll burn the trust placed in you. In the greater scheme of things, you must keep quiet about some things to achieve the best outcomes. That's the way it goes. [Interview 6]

The SLOs described particularly powerful dilemmas in relationship to situations

involving violent confrontation. On the one hand, some acknowledge that their role introduces a strong de-escalatory capacity in situations of tension.

My presence can have a calming effect on people. Maybe I'll go up and ask how things are going and try to contribute to resolving the situation. Then again, I'll not get involved in every situation. I'll make a judgment from situation to situation. It's a judgement call that I make then and there. [Interview 12]

On the other hand, some SLOs described experiencing contrasting perspectives about the extent to which they should actively withdraw.

Generally, when it comes to the fundamentals of the role of the SLO, it's been said that the SLO's job is over when a clash has broken out. The SLO works preventatively. My colleague and I have taken a 'hands on' approach from day one, and actively get involved in heated situations. It's almost expected that we get involved in such situations. It's also meant that we've received criticism from other SLOs who don't believe that getting involved is part of the SLO role, and that it creates the expectation that they too should be getting involved in such situations. It's an approach that we've adopted, we communicate that this is our way of operating, particularly to the police at away games. It works for us, but it doesn't work the same in all clubs and that must be respected. [Interview 14]

Nonetheless the decisions made in, and as an outcome of, such situations must ultimately be made based on a personal moral or ethical position, even if they led to judgements, actions where and outcomes where the SLO could ultimately no longer continue to play a meaningful role.

Ultimately it comes down to the fact that you are likely to be screwed as an SLO the day that you serve as a witness. That's probably what it comes down to, your personal evaluation as to how serious it is and whether you are willing to not stay on as a SLO. That's probably what it comes down to – is the crime serious enough to make you willing to change your job. [Interview 6]

A case study example: pyrotechnic use

The use of pyrotechnics inside stadiums is illegal in Sweden, but at the same time their use forms a normative, but sometimes contested, aspect of large parts of the active supporter culture in the stands. Given their common use in Sweden, this objective tension between their legality and their use pyrotechnic use presents a particularly difficult set of dilemmas for SLOs who describe developing and applying a ‘safety perspective’. Their position of trust among fans means they are likely to become aware that pyrotechnics will be used at a specific match. However, rather than automatically passing such information on to the authorities they describe seeking to operate in ways that enhance safety without compromising the identity of those involved or seeking to otherwise prevent that activity.

Under such circumstances it is most important, for me, if I know that a pyrotechnical show will take place during the game, it’s my role to inform that it’s likely that a pyrotechnic show will take place and ensure that the situation is managed as safely as possible. It’s not my job to make it known who it is that’ll be burning – that’s not my role.

Well then this means that you will make it known if you have information that there will be pyrotechnics?

I must! Because it’s about ensuring that all supporters are as safe as possible. That the necessary measures are in place to ensure that the burning is as safe as possible so that as few as possible are affected.

[Interview 11]

This ‘facilitating’ approach is in part dependent upon the extent to which the club in turn acts in a manner that does not compromise the SLO. For example, if the club subsequently imposes unusually strict controls on entry this would potentially undermine the SLO’s relationship to the active fans who had provided them with this information. Over time, the capacity of SLOs to then establish protocols in their relationships with active fans.

Then there are situations in which I have requested not to be told the whole truth. Instead I’ll ask if any burning will take place and they’ll say yes. I will then be able to say that there are indications that burning will take place, but I won’t ask how, where, and when – for me that’s not

important. I will only know that they'll burn and will only be able to contribute information about having indications that burning will take place. I'll ensure that it's discussed during the pre-game meeting and ensure that this and that is done. In my view, I am then in the clear. I have passed on the information that I have been provided. I never intend on having more knowledge. Will they burn, or won't they burn – I do not want to know. [Interview 3]

Such protocols then afford privileged access to ongoing information that ultimately reduces the risk that the pyrotechnic displays pose; a position that allows some SLOs to justify ethically their neutral and discretionary position in relationship to the application of stadium policy and the law.

I have started to ask and being told if there will be any burning, and then you're in the grey zone – it is not as clear any longer. If anyone got burnt, I would argue that I would be partly responsible. On the other hand, I am acquiring this information to work with it on the behalf of the supporters, and then I am able to justify it to myself that I contributed to safety, purely ethically to myself. [Interview 5]

Discussion

This paper has two primary aims. First, we sought to analyse interview data from a sample of SLOs working in Sweden to document and understand their experiences as a basis for theorising how their role functions within a broader framework of governance as this relates to fan behaviour. Second, the focus of that theoretical analysis is to explore how the role of the SLOs may be interacting with crowd dynamics in the context of football events in Sweden. Based on the data we have obtained it is evident that SLOs in Sweden operate in a complex and challenging role where they describe the surrounding intergroup context as often in tension, and where relationships ubiquitously become polarised. In this context, it is evident that the SLOs in Sweden believe they are playing an important conflict reduction role by navigating the complex and dynamic territory of 'supporter engagement'. Our analysis suggests that there are multifaceted underlying reasons this 'conflict reduction' role functions and inter-relates to the surrounding intergroup dynamics.

In the first instance, through the project *Stå upp för fotbollen*, there appears to have been a coordinated ‘top down’ investment and commitment across the governance structures of top-flight clubs in Sweden whereby there has been the active recruitment of SLOs, with good interpersonal skills, a few of whom were previously influential ‘active fans’. When the SLOs were from the ‘active’ fan base, this was usually from the clubs’ Ultras but there were also a few who were previously active within their club’s ‘hooligan’ groups. While this is not the case for the majority of the SLOs, the fact that clubs have not excluded those ‘active’ within fan culture appears to have empowered ‘bottom up’ relationships of credibility, trust and legitimacy. In more theoretical terms, this recruitment strategy may have created a form of governance where the more ‘radical’ elements of the fan base may have felt they now had a genuine role in the structural relationship where the SLO incumbents, while formally an employee of the club, could enjoy a perception among fans of them as prototypical members of the active fans’ ingroup.

Despite the ‘social capital’ this recruitment strategy appears to have afforded, SLOs highlighted the ongoing fragility of their relationship with fans. Their discussions focused on the centrality of ingroup legitimacy, and how this is both easily lost and difficult to maintain. To try to deal with this dynamic they define constructing an advocacy and facilitation role, deliberately avoiding and distancing themselves from any explicit role in coercion. To manage their work within this context, the SLOs describe how they are often forced to make very difficult decisions about how to act and do so in ways where they prioritise actions that are least likely to compromise their legitimacy within these surrounding objective tensions. This appears to be an experience that is amplified by the sometimes-unrealistic expectations held by the different stakeholders (i.e. fans, police and clubs). They can find themselves under pressure to divulge privileged ‘ingroup’ information by powerful groups such as the police and sometimes their own club. However, they also describe how if they were to divulge such information (e.g. on plans for the use of pyrotechnics) this could fundamentally undermine their legitimacy and status among fans and ultimately destroy the capacity of their role entirely. Nonetheless, by not divulging this information they undermine their perceived legitimacy with the police and potentially compromise their relationship with their own employer. SLOs also describe finding themselves confronted with unrealistic expectations from fans who assume the SLOs will act solely in their interests over and above those of their employer

and the authorities.

This does suggest that a key feature of the SLO role in Sweden is to navigate the dimensions of intergroup power that exist between the stakeholders in this environment. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that this ‘circumnavigation’ is facilitated when the structurally powerful groups (i.e. clubs and police) take a more accommodating position by not putting pressure on SLOs to divulge information or subtly manage their reaction to the release of privileged information from SLOs. It would appear then that the role of the SLO in the ‘conflict reduction form’ is fragile, complex and stressful. This is not least of all because SLOs describe having to operate with high levels of discretion in order not to compromise their relationships of trust and confidence, most importantly with fans. It is evident that such decisions can be extremely challenging, particularly because they involve actions that may be normative, and hence legitimate, for the one stakeholder (e.g. the active fans) but seen as counter-normative, illegitimate and even criminal by another (e.g. the police).

The study also helps us to begin to reflect on the issue of fan involvement in the processes of governance as this relates to the management of problems salient in Swedish football. It highlights the complexity of what is meant by the term ‘supporter engagement’ and how difficult it can be for fans to genuinely represent the fan base, as this relates to the challenging issues of supporter behaviour. It is clear that a key aspect of the representativeness of the SLO role in Sweden is the fact that several of them are recruited from the active fan base but judgements that SLOs must make in this role are described as revolving around a personalised ethical and moral framework they must construct to justify operating in the way that they do. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that ultimately the judgements they make and actions they take may lead to circumstances where they are judged as illegitimate by fans and therefore their representativeness and ingroup status is undermined as is their capacity to fulfil a governance role. Perhaps most importantly, this study suggests the value of clubs managing engagement with the supporter community through the SLO role in a manner that avoids it becoming personalised. The end game is not having all trust channelled through the SLO as a person, creating a huge dependence on one or a few individuals, but to find ways of managing relations between the club and the supporters by being open about the contrasting objectives, ambiguities and compromises that are necessary and by promoting consensual understanding of the

limits and parameters of the role. Nonetheless, the study does expose how effective supporter engagement has been, in Sweden, enhanced by the construction of the specific type of SLO. We would argue the role is important because it helps construct better opportunities for the inclusion of supporters in the structures of governance surrounding those more problematic aspects of fan behaviour. In this regard we also content the study adds further evidence in support of those who argue there is a value in involving supporters in structures of governance in football. Beyond this we hope this research adds value because it draws out how the SLO role in Sweden is important because it involves fans in governance beyond the boardroom and as such involves them on the ‘front line’ helping to manage the group level dynamics of crowd events and thus play a valuable role in conflict de-escalation.

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Notes

¹ Conn, *The football*; Giulianotti, 'Sports spectators'; Hamil, 'A whole'

² Garcia & Welford. 'Supporters and',

³ Kennedy & Kennedy, 'Supporter trusts'. Martin, 'Football community'.

⁴ Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*

⁵ E.g. Kossakowski, 'Where are'; Schaap et al., 'Combating hooliganism'; Spaaij,

Understanding Football Hooliganism

⁶ Radmann, *Vad är huliganism*

⁷ Stott et al., 'Policing Football in Sweden'

⁸ SOU, *Mindre våld*; Radmann, 'Idrottsvåldets karaktär'

⁹ Stott et al., *Policing Football in Sweden*

¹⁰ UEFA, *UEFA Club*

¹¹ Cleland et al., *Collective Action*; Garcia and Welford, 'Supporters and'

¹² DFL, *Fanarbeit 2010*

¹³ Numerato, 'Behind the'

¹⁴ Council Resolution concerning an updated handbook with recommendations for international police cooperation and measures to prevent and control violence and disturbances in connection with football matches with an international dimension, in which at least one Member State is involved ('EU Football Handbook')

¹⁵ E.g. Stott et al., 'Variability in'; Stott, Hutchison and Drury. Hooligans abroad?

¹⁶ Stott et al (1998) '*How conflict*'.

¹⁷ Reicher, et al, 'Knowledge-Based'. Stott & Pearson 'Football Hooliganism'

¹⁸ Gorringe, Stott and Rosie, 'Dialogue police'; Reicher et. al., 'An integrated'; Reicher, 'From Crisis'; Stott, Livingstone and Hoggett, 'Policing football'; Stott, West and Radburn, 'Policing football'

¹⁹ Bazeley and Jackson, *Qualitative Data*

²⁰ Braun and Clarke, 'Using thematic'