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Max Mauro

Media discourse, sport and the nation. Narratives and counter-narratives in the digital age

Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, the growth of international sport events as media spectacles has provided one of the most powerful tools for the projection of national identities. Traditional media, such as newspapers and private and public broadcasters, have been instrumental in this process. Media discourses around sporting events have historically tended to legitimise exclusionary versions of the idea of the nation, reproducing hegemonic gender divisions and marginalising ethnic minorities and immigrants. At the same time, sport is also a contested vehicle for nation-building, providing to some degree opportunities for the expression of different versions of the idea of the nation. The deep changes in the media industry, and particularly the emergence and success among young people of interactive and transnational media, open the way for counter-narratives and alternative media discourses. For example, sport celebrities can use social media to expose and criticise the racialisation of immigrants in sport and beyond. But can the millions who follow them on Instagram or Twitter be counted as a ‘public’?

Keywords

Balotelli, football, immigration, media discourse, nation and gender, race and racialisation, social media, sport

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, sport has arguably become the most popularised projection of the idea of the nation. Through the hosting of and participation in international sport competitions, populations are given the opportunity to look at themselves as collective entities, which appear as cohesive and ‘one’ as the uniform that athletes and players wear. This has been made possible by concomitant processes, such as the growth of international sport competitions as global media-events with significant symbolic, economic and political power (Wenner and Billings, 2017); economic globalisation and the role of sport as a global marketing language (Horne, 2006); and, finally, rapid developments in the media industry (Rowe, 2011). Despite

sport events and international sport competitions representing key factors in globalisation processes, the status of the nation-state has not been undermined (Barnier, 2001; Jarvie, 2016: 180-190). On the contrary, governments still succeed in using sport as a tool to support the nation form and the nation-state (Goldblatt, 2018), while international sport organisations rely on the ‘inter-state world view’ to sustain their ongoing success (Levermore, 2004).

Traditional media, such as newspapers and public and private broadcasters, have been instrumental in this process. On the one hand, to project an idea of cohesive communities has been intrinsic to their mission of constructing and maintaining a national public (Anderson, 1983; Brookes, 1999). On the other hand, it may also be perceived as a survival strategy in a rapidly changing media landscape, which sees traditional media progressively losing their role of main gatekeepers in the information chain in favour of less centralised distribution processes (Carah and Louw, 2015). A further, key aspect is addressed in this paper, which points to a highly gendered and restricted idea of the nation promoted by the sporting media (Rowe, McKay and Miller, 1998). This is particularly pertinent in a number of European countries that have witnessed a resurgence of nationalistic sentiments and growing popularity of discourses around national identity that tend to exclude immigrants and nationals of immigrant background from the idea of the nation (Loftsdottir et al., 2018). Sport offers a fertile terrain for the articulation of such discourses. The focus of this paper will be on Europe, with close attention being paid to the cases of black Italian athletes Mario Balotelli and Paola Enogu alongside those of Mesut Ozil, in Germany, and Raheem Sterling, in England.

Mass media, sport and the nation

Mass media have played a key role in the history of modern sports as components of national cultures. At the same time, sports have greatly contributed to the popularity and success of media outlets. Early examples of this close relationship are cycling events such as the Tour de France and the Giro d’Italia, created in the first decade of the 20th century by sports newspapers to promote themselves and their commercial partners (Wille, 2003). Over time, through the narration of sporting ‘national heroes’ and the representation of the countries’ landscapes, both races have added symbolic values to their original mission. From the second half of the 19th century, the appeal of sporting news among the working classes in the UK and the USA helped the growth of professional sports in both countries and boosted the circulation figures of the popular press (Holt, 1989: 306-311; Boyle, 2006: 30-41). This relationship evolved and became tighter in the 20th century, particularly since the rise of television as the dominant mass media during the 1950s and 1960s. To this day, in several countries, the most watched broadcasts in the history of national television are international sporting events. This is the case, for example, in the UK (1966 FIFA Mens’ World Cup Final), France (1998 FIFA Mens’ World Cup Final), and Portugal (2004 Men’s Euro Championship semi-final). In Italy, 49 of the first 50 most watched TV broadcasts are sport events, and namely football matches, with the only non-sporting event being the annual Sanremo music festival, at number 50.¹

In Western Europe, the growth of sport broadcasting pushed the press to reconfigure their approach to sport news, which in fact led to an increase in the coverage of sport among different types of newspapers. For example, between 1974 and 2004, the space devoted to sport by the *Daily Telegraph*, one of the leading broadsheet British newspapers, grew from 18% to 30% (Boyle, 2006: 50). A similar trend was followed by other ‘quality newspapers’ in the UK, such

as *The Times* particularly following its acquisition by Rupert Murdoch in 1981. With the emergence of digital technologies, and the consequent profound changes in the media industry, the mediatisation of sport has reached new highs. Sport events, be they international tournaments or national leagues, can hardly be understood outside of the representational process instigated by mass media and magnified by digital and social media (Wenner et al., 2017).

Within this scenario, a specific aspect of the relationship between media and sport deserves particular consideration, which is the ways sport and mass media have contributed and still contribute to the construction and maintenance of the idea of the nation. A number of authors have devoted specific attention to the connections between sport, national identity and nationalism (for example: Cronin and Mayall, 1998; Bairner, 2001, 2015; Hargreaves, 2002; Hunter, 2003; Jarvie, 2003; Poli, 2007; Marjoribanks, 2012), but limited attention has been given to the role of mass media in constructing and deepening such connections. This gap has become even more evident since the emergence of digital media and the displacement of traditional media as the central hub of the mass communication system.

Since the early 20th century, and particularly after WWI, international sport competitions have been used by countries to strengthen their image as cohesive social and cultural bodies. The pattern was arguably established by the Nazi regime in the hosting of the 1936 Olympic Games. Through a grandiose combination of different media – including cinema, advertising techniques, radio, newspapers and, for the first time, television – the minister for propaganda Joseph Goebbels succeeded in selling to the world a positive image of the country, its people (at least those considered to be ‘Aryan’) and, more importantly, of the nationalistic and racist ideology of the Nazi government (Mackenzie, 2003; Goldblatt, 2018). Since then, all global sporting events as ‘media spectacles’ (Kellner, 2003) have, to different extents, served the purpose of promoting both hosting and participating countries, and their ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983).

Writing about the symbolic process of nation-making through sport, Rowe, McKay and Miller (1998: 120) highlight the ‘key mythologising role of the media’. Boyle and Haynes (2009: 147), discuss the mediatisation of sporting cultures arguing that ‘in this process of transformation not only are discourses of identity mediated or simply transmitted, but in many instances they can be constructed or even at times invented, if the political or economic climate is suitable’. Levermore (2004: 16) points at the political implications of such a process. He contends that sport ‘shapes concepts (nation, national identity, nation-state and ultimately the inter-state structure) that construct the “inter-state worldview” – a dominant portrayal of how the political world is cartographically and socially/politically divided into competing states’. Bertoli (2017: 2) takes this view further, arguing that ‘nationalism associated with international sporting events like the World Cup increases state aggression’.

However, other observers share a more nuanced view of the role of mediatised sport events in nation-making. According to Marjoribanks (2012: 76-77), sport provides ‘numerous opportunities for nations to reinforce their sense of identity and invoke national pride, while at the same time also providing a space in which counter-narratives may emerge’. This view is shared by Coakley (2014: 254-261) who highlights that international sports provide a context for marginalised groups to express forms of resistance to dominant projections of the idea of the nation. Finally, to some, the definitions of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billing, 1995) and ‘cultural

nationalism' (Jarvie, 2006) have been understood as particularly suitable for sporting events, as people would be allowed to express their patriotism and light nationalism in a context apparently devoid of political tensions (Mutz, 2012).

Europe, migration and the nation-state

The project of the nation-state, as developed by European countries since the French revolution, entails the principle of exclusion of those who are not perceived, at certain times, in certain historical conjunctures, to belong to the 'nation form' (Balibar, 1991). Hall (1996) points to the centrality of processes of representation and selection of certain rituals, images, stories which constitute a specific, 'primordial' narrative of a nation which will be preserved and celebrated over time. To this purpose, national traditions can also be created and invented (Hobsbawn, 1983). The task, as noted by Balibar, is that of 'producing the people', or 'more exactly ... to make the people produce itself continually as national community' (1991: 93). The histories of many European countries during the 19th and 20th century, and post-colonial countries to this day (Jones, 2017: 194-196), show that the territorial boundaries within which these processes unfold are also fluid and contested. Nonetheless, they provide powerful legal frameworks for the overlapping definitions of nationality and citizenship. Giorgio Agamben (1998) highlights that the tension between inclusion to and exclusion from the nation-state was ingrained in the founding document of the French Revolution, the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (1789). He points at the contradiction implicit in the title of the Declaration, where it is not clear which rights are those to be protected – those of the 'man' or those of the 'citizen'.

As evidenced by political campaigns across a number of European countries, aimed at curtailing the rights of ethnic minorities and migrants (ENAR, 2015; Loftsdottir et al., 2018), it is increasingly the case that migrants and ethnic minorities are made to suffer in the hands of what Paul Gilroy defines as the 'painfully empty shell of national identity' (2006: 38). Non-European migrants, and often also their children and grandchildren born in Europe, are racialized and represented as the 'other' in public and media discourses (Mezzadra, 2010). In this context, sport, particularly in the form of international competitions and national teams, becomes a magnifying lens through which critical elaborations of the idea of the nation come to the fore. The 'black player', the 'son of immigrants', the 'refugee athlete', become the focus loci of discourses which overpass the boundaries of sport and sport events. As demonstrated by the case of footballers Mario Balotelli in Italy, Raheem Sterling in England, and Mesut Ozil in Germany, the 'national team' is bound to be at the same time, a major site of *inclusion* and *exclusion* from the 'national outlook' (Beck, 2006). Issues of race and racialisation intersect with questions of nationality and ethnicity.

In July 2018, after the end of the FIFA Men's World Cup, Mesut Ozil, who had represented the German national team 119 times at junior and senior level, and who was a member of the team that won the World Cup in 2014, published a hard-hitting statement on his Instagram and Twitter profiles. Writing in English, and addressing directly the president of the German Football Association (DFB), Reinhart Grindel, he claimed that 'In the eyes of Grindel and his supporters, I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose'. He consequently announced his retirement from international football. His decision and the statement followed the criticism raised by a number of German public personalities to the publication of a picture

of Ozil and other two German players of Turkish descent with Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In his 2,300-word letter, Ozil refers several times to how the German media reported his and his friends' meeting with Erdogan. Ozil's Twitter account has 24.1m followers and as of June 2019 his statement has been retweeted more than 100.000 times. A particular discourse emerges from this story – 'I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose' – which has wider implications for sport and national identity in contemporary Europe.

Balotelli and the representation of the 'other'

Since the start of his footballing career, Mario Balotelli's personal and professional trajectory has been implicated in emerging discourses around national and racial identity of his native country Italy. As the first black Italian football star, the son of Ghanaian immigrants has been the target of racist abuse inside the stadia ('There are not black Italians') while being seen as a symbol of 'new Italians' for the society at large (Mauro, 2016). Two moments in his career hold particular significance for our analysis of the interconnections between media discourse, sport and the nation. In 2012, when Balotelli helped Italy to reach the final of the UEFA Euro Championship he was portrayed as a new sporting national hero. However, the narrative radically changed in just over two years: he went from hero to villain – from being a symbol of the 'new Italians' to being someone who does not *deserve* to be Italian.

The day following Italy's early exit from the 2014 FIFA World Cup, a quite extraordinary discourse of racialization was evident in the fact that all newspapers had a picture of Balotelli, often more than one, to support their stories about the men's national team.² The only black man in the team was chosen as the symbol of a 'national demise'. The daily *Il Giornale* (owned by Silvio Berlusconi's brother Paolo) had the following title on its front page: 'Italy's failure', with a picture of Balotelli lying on the pitch with his hands covering his face. But the player's role in the demise of Italian football was not only an issue for right-wing media. *L'Unità*, the newspaper that proudly carried on its front page the caption 'Founded by Antonio Gramsci', used the same picture of Balotelli, but from a closer angle, which added drama to the story.³ The title emphasized the identification between football and the nation's 'fate': *Fuori dal mondo* (Out of the world). The *Corriere dello Sport* had the same picture on its front page, but from a more distant angle. The title, in massive letters on top of the page says: *Azzerati* (Reduced to zero). The leading newspaper *La Repubblica*, renown for its liberal, centre-left politics, chose the same protagonist for his front-page picture. Balotelli is sitting on the pitch, his head down and the manager Cesare Prandelli standing in front of him with his hands on his hips, in a worrying posture. The title refers to a disaster ('Disastro azzurro, addio Mondiali'; Blue disaster, goodbye World Cup), and namely to the 'blue disaster' (blue being the colour of the national team shirt) that is visually associated to an only player, always him: Mario Balotelli.

**Guidetti Serra
ci lascia Bianca
«la rossa»**

pag. 18

**Cunningham: ecco
la luce di New York**

pag. 17

**«L'infinito»
di Leopardi
Dubbi e asta**

Barzanti pag. 19

U:

«Mille giorni per cambiare»

● **Renzi alla Camera sul semestre Ue: con la disoccupazione non c'è stabilità** ● **Riforme: «Dopo tre mesi scoppiettanti ora programma più lungo»** ● **Oggi l'incontro tra Pd e M5S** ● **Il Colle firma il decreto Pa**

Un piano per l'Europa e uno per l'Italia. Il premier ha illustrato alla Camera il programma del semestre italiano di presidenza Ue nel quale insistere per chiedere un cambio di direzione su crescita e sviluppo. «Con questa disoccupazione non ci può essere stabilità del conto». E sulle riforme avanzate un piano di mille giorni. Oggi l'incontro in diretta streaming tra Pd e Cinque Stelle.
A PAG. 3-9

**Il tempo (giusto)
delle riforme**

ENRICO BARONCO

A PAG. 3

**Il salto richiesto
anche al premier**

A PAG. 16

**Partito della Nazione
cosa vuol dire**

ALFREDO BERCHINI

● **NAL TEMPERANZA UN PO' ENFATICA** IL PARTITO DELLA NAZIONE SI STA FACENDO CONOSCERE. IN LA VITA POLITICA NASCONE MOLTO SEMPLICE e molto chiaro: perché è dalla crisi della nazione italiana che bisogna partire. Una crisi senza precedenti che riapre molti problemi che l'Italia ha lasciato irrisolti. Il fatto nuovo è che proprio su questo terreno, molto più vasto rispetto ai tradizionali conflitti sociali, le forze del progresso e quelle della reazione giocano oggi una partita decisiva e la sinistra italiana rischia la sua stessa esistenza.
SEGUIRE A PAG. 16

DISASTRO AZZURRO: BATTUTI ANCHE DALL'URUGUAY



FUORI DAL MONDO

Si dimettono tutti: via Prandelli e Abete

Il mondiale dell'Italia finisce a Napoli l'Uruguay vince 1-0 eliminando gli azzurri. Una spedisiosa fallimentare: dimissioni lampo del commissario tecnico Cesare Prandelli («Non sono stati aggrediti verbalmente e io non voglio che si dica che rubo le dimissioni») e del presidente federale Giancarlo Abete («Fatto il possibile per i livelli di competitività che il settore calcio ha»)
A PAG. 6-7

**Traditi
da Cesare**

Siamo fuori da un Mondiale che non abbiamo mai abitato. Nessuno ha capito quale Italia sia andata in Brasile: un'aristocrazia tattica, tecnica, agonistica.
SEGUIRE A PAG. 6

**Paradosso
Italia**

Stanno Parto, Italia: proprio quando entra finalmente in Europa, ecco che esce dal mondo. La coincidenza tra l'addio al Brasile degli azzurri e l'arrivo di Renzi alla Ue, ha qualcosa di paradossale.
SEGUIRE A PAG. 16

Stalino



FRONTE DEL PORTO

La partita dell'immunità

● **QUARANTENATE, QUARANTENATE** CHE IL DISEGNO DI LEGGE N. 24, intitolato Casper, dappertutto a fare suggestione nella dialettica sull'immunità. Il tutto per dire e ribadire che a lui, a Casper, dell'immunità non importa un accidente, come non gli importa affatto del Senato, che sarebbe meglio abolire del tutto, piuttosto che farlo diventare un remanacchio, dove anche il sindaco di Vigonza Valterio dovrebbe guidare la battaglia per la sua immunità. A Casper ci sta solo Cesare Berta e ancora, perché si vada verso il presidenzialismo come a Berlusconi, tanto più che in Italia, dice, «la vera immunità è quella dei politici e i ridotti». Ora, mentre si discute di costituzionalità vanno sentiti a spiegare perché la Costituzione prevede particolari garanzie per gli eletti del popolo e quale differenza ci sia tra immunità e irresponsabilità, molti esponenti del partito appaiono in tv per prendere le distanze dai politici corrotti, aderendo al popolare sospetto nei confronti della politica, diffuso soprattutto tra i politici.



Al lettori

Ecco i giornalisti che hanno realizzato il giornale oggi in edicola. La redazione continuerà la sua battaglia in difesa del giornale e dei posti di lavoro fino all'incontro con i dirigenti della società editrice. In quell'occasione, chiederemo conto del futuro del quotidiano e del pagamento di tutte le spettanze maturate. Senza questo contante dovuto, e da tempo tempo negato, lo sciopero sarà inevitabile così come iniziative di carattere legale a tutela della stampa e dei nostri posti di lavoro.
A PAG. 1

Il staff di oggi è formato da: Chiara Alfano, Nicola Andrich, Roberto Andrich, Rosella Baricci, Andrea Basso, Mario Baricci, Jolanda Beldi, Cesare Biscione, Antonella Ciala, Angela Ciarrocca, Andrea Caragati, Giuseppe Caruso, Simone Colini, Adriano Comaschi, Francesco Cordero, Umberto De Giovanni, Francesco De Santis, Bianca Di Giovanni, Federico Farnetti, Massimo Filippini, Fabio Freni, Massimo Franchi, Vladimir Frutkin, Claudia Fusco, Gabriella Galassi, Silvia Gagli, Riccardo Geronzi, Mariavittoria Geronzi, Nadia Lencioni, Maddalena Ley, Luigi Marconi, Felicia Mazzoni, Marina Mazzoni, Laura Mazzoni, Stefano Milani, Maria Margherita, Roberto Morabito, Sonia Bontade, Salvatore Righi, Rosella Ripoli, Roberto Rossi, Alessandra Rubinetti, Francesco Sangermano, Oreste Saba, Claudio Saba, Stefano Scatena, Massimo Solari, Anna Tarantini, Daria Vaccarella, Marco Vassallo, Luigia Vaccarella, Claudio Viorio, Giuseppe Viorio, Gloria Zamboni, Maria Zappalà e da Maurizio Caselli, Alberto Compi, Massimo De Mari, Federico Farnetti, Mario Grazia Geronzi, Oreste Pianta, Paolo Solari.

**Le risposte di Parigi:
una squadra francese
nel cielo di Ustica**

A PAG. 16



- **Disfatta mondiale**
L'Uruguay elimina l'Italia: 1-0 (Godin)
Prova disastrosa ma pesa l'espulsione ingiusta di Marchisio
- **Le dimissioni**
Prandelli lascia assieme a Abete: «E' un fallimento»
Già si pensa al futuro: Allegri o Mancini
- **Le polemiche**
Suarez morde Chiellini: «Vergogna»
Buffon e De Rossi contro Balotelli: «Servono uomini»

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Tante patatine. **1 sola** Patatina Artigianale.

INTERVISTA ESCLUSIVA

Berlusconi: «Torniamo uniti»

Nel giorno dei 40 anni de «Il Giornale», appello a tutti i moderati: «Io non mollerò mai, si voterà presto e batteremo la sinistra di Renzi»

© Alessandro Sallusti

[illegible]

Presidente Berlusconi, nel giugno del 1974 nasce il Giornale. Lei che faceva, allora?

«Arrivo 38 anni, ed ero già considerato - mi piace esserlo a dirlo - il "numero uno" dell'edilizia abitativa. Per questo, due anni dopo, l'presidente della Repubblica mi avrebbe insignito del titolo di Cavaliere del Lavoro. Sono stato il pinguicce impossibile nella storia ad ottenere questa onorificenza».

Durante una stagione di forte crisi dell'edilizia abitativa avevo avuto il coraggio di realizzare una prima mostra fuori l'Inghilterra a stavo completando Milano? Un progetto ambizioso e allora si organizzò, che anticipa i ritorni e considero attualissimi ancora oggi, negli spazi verdi, percorsi attraverso i padiglioni e i ciottoli, che non interferivano mai con il traffico auto, tutti servizi aperti al pubblico. Una mostra che anche oggi architetto di tutto il mondo vengono a visitare. Nel frattempo si stava nascendo la Milano, le cose stiano cambiando.

Devo dire che io, pugliese, da imprenditore e da cittadino, mi rendevo conto del male che la sinistra mi faceva pure i comunisti, perché allora c'era davvero comunisti - stava facendo all'Italia da imprenditore, prometteva sulla pelle della famiglia e gli ostacoli che amministratori locali di sinistra creavano a chi voleva investire e realizzare progetti concreti. Da cittadino vedeva quello che succedeva nelle scuole, nelle università, nei luoghi di lavoro, la violenza, l'immoralità, l'estremismo, la nascita del terrorismo.

«Troppa chiederle per chi votava in quell'Italia anni Settanta?»
«Nelle decisive elezioni del 1948, ancora [...]

www.elsevier.com/locate/jneuro

L'URUGUAY VINCE 1-0. ITALIA A CASA

Disastro mondiale

Esulso Marchisio, azzurri mai pericolosi. Prandelli e Ibbetts si dimettono

Riccardo Sironi

28



FALLIMENTO. Mario Balotelli è stato sostituito nella scacchiera per 3.0 contro l'Ucraina.

FUORI PER GIUSTA CAUSA

© Giuseppe De Bellis

Famole perche lo siamo meriti. Fuori, a casa. Colpa nostra, dell'Italia. L'arbitro che espelle Marchetti viene dopo, Sussner che morda Chiellini e non viene espulso viene dopo. Il tutto vero, ma è comunque secondario. Prima c'è Prandelli che le sue scelte e i suoi padroni che rimbaia mai fuori porta. Andiamo a casa, torniamo a casa con sospetto che la Fifa stia filando per tenere le squadre sudamericane, ma dobbiamo guardarci dentro e fuori, dobbiamo dire che non siamo stati aff'altrove. Eliminati per giunta raschi. Erano 60 anni che

L'Italia non soccorre al primo turno per due Mondiali di seguito: era il Wicbe seguiti al 52. Il filino da Africa-Bresile è non dei peggiori della nostra storia. Abbassiamo la testa, ci diciamo: lo fa la Prandelli che s'è distrutto. Si assume la sua responsabilità, si accolla le sue colpe. Ha fatto scritte in un giornale, ha scritto sui se stesso, ha cambiato le macchine, ha dato l'impressione di essere insicuro, incerto, dubbioso. Sentiamo un progetto della nazione, con un progetto abilitato, perché si come se non avesse di

siguió a página 20

servizi da pagina 26 a pagina 33

FONDI PER IL GRUPPO A STRASBURGO

Grillo ha scelto Farage per incassare 10 milioni

Piero Marazziti

E invece, ma non quando si tratta di ricevere gli eurofondamenti. Nell'abbronzione Farage-Gillis al Parlamento di C'è anche, oltre alle comuni idee sull'Europa da cambiare, una controversia pratica. Anzi, economica. Con l'ingresso del M5S nel gruppo ESI (Europa della Libertà e della Democrazia) presieduto dal britannico Farage, i discusse (...)

00-0000 0-0000 00 11

RITROVATA L'ANIMA GARANTISTA

Forza Italia fa quadrato contro l'assalto dei pm

Francesco Craver

Il paradiso in terra?
È in Irlanda
ed è anti-europeo

Francesco P. Giordano

2-10-2014 10:00

Anche il tuo
Sogno
saprà trasformarsi
in **Realtà**
per te di Roberto Carlini
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Signed is integer 7

In his seminal book *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes famously commented a cover of the popular French magazine *Paris Match*. There was a black soldier saluting the French flag, which according to Barthes contributed to the construction of a specific myth: that of France as a great empire which includes everyone regardless of their ethnic or racial background. The case of the Italian press in 2014 is different: we are looking at a series of images, published at the same time by different sources, which have the same subject and carry, with the help of titles and subtitles, a similar narrative. In looking at the *Paris Match* cover Barthes asked himself: what is this image telling us? In the case of the Italian press and Balotelli the question should be: what kind of discourse (Foucault, 1969) are Italian newspapers expressing? In the words of Cook (1992: 1, cited by Bell and Garret, 1998: 3), discourse analysis

[I]t is not concerned with language alone. It also examines the context of communication: who is communicating with whom and why; in what kind of society and situation, through what medium; how different types of communication evolved, and their relationship to each other.

Stuart Hall (1997) contends that the meaning of an event does not exist until it is represented. In other words, reality does not meaningfully exist outside the process of representation. He further makes clear that the viewer or reader is not passive in the process of representation, but, on the contrary, she or he contributes in producing the meaning. The viewer does so through the use of shared conceptual maps and a common language. ‘We are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. That is indeed what it means when we say we ‘belong to the same culture’ (Hall, 1997: 18). The pictures of Balotelli (always the same scene, from different angles) will tell different things to different people, but above all will tell different things to someone who grew up in Italy, and someone who has not. The average Italian (particularly if male and white) will read this picture as proof that the ‘black man’, and only him, represents defeat. This is because, as noted by Hall, to make sense of things we use the principle of similarity and difference, and he, the man in the picture, looks ‘different’ from the majority. Moreover, the reader will interpret him, the black Italian, the child of immigrants, as an outsider – someone who does not belong here (Sawyer and Gooding, 2013). Blackness epitomizes here diversity and immigration in Italian society. It further demonstrates how deeply the brief colonial past of the country has penetrated popular culture and, after 80 years since the end of Italy’s colonialism, it is still active in racializing the other (Giuliani, 2019).

Digital counter-narratives

After Italy’s exit from the World Cup, Balotelli did not make any comment in Italian media, but he did not remain silent. In fact, using his social media accounts, during the following weeks and months he expressed his feelings about his ‘double consciousness’ (Gilroy, 1993); his being black *and* Italian, and not being accepted as such by part of the Italian society. Up to this point, it was a topic that he had avoided to publicly comment upon. On 25 June, however, he posted on his Instagram account (that had about 8 million followers at the time) an explicit message. Next to a video with someone saying, in Italian: ‘Mario, you’re really not Italian. Go away,’ Balotelli wrote: ‘I’m Mario Balotelli. I’m 23-year-old and I didn’t choose to be Italian.

I strongly wanted because I was born in Italy and have always lived in ITALY' (Associated Press, 2014).

In the following months, Balotelli, who had refused the offer to represent Ghana before obtaining the Italian citizenship at the age of 18, stressed again his attachment to his African heritage. On 23 July, he published on Facebook a photo of himself eating Jollof rice, a Ghanaian dish, with the caption: 'Back to my Ghanaian roots. Eating jollof rice for the first time in 15 years'. On 20 November, he published a picture of the African continent with the phrase, both in Italian and English, 'I love you Africa'. On 28 May 2015, he published a selfie while wearing a t-shirt with the phrase (in English): 'Not only am Italian, I'm Ghanaian too'. Both posts received more than 90.000 likes. According to GhanaWeb, one of the most popular Internet news sites in Ghana, his post about 'Jollof rice', 'claimed up to 3,000 comments within 5 hours with most Ghanaian fans storming the page to splash their comments' (GhanaWeb, 2014).

It is significant that, in these as in other occasions, the player's social media statements were reported by traditional and online media, both in Italy and abroad, testifying of a cycle of information flow between old and new media which is a defining trait of contemporary times. Through social media, and addressing a vast audience distributed in different parts of the world, the footballer turned mass communicator expresses his view that any identity is a social construction, it is not fixed, it is not static, and that racists and abusers should get to terms with the fact there is no contradiction in being Italian and black. This appears as a counter-narrative to the one articulated by national newspapers after the men's national team exit from the World Cup. But how powerful is it? How capable is it to resist and efficiently oppose dominant public and media discourses?

In an interview with the BBC in May 2019, Watford FC player Andre Gray provided an emphatic answer: 'Players are more powerful than media' (BBC Sport, 2019a). This was his comment on how Raheem Sterling had addressed on his social media profiles the issues of racism and discrimination. In December 2018, in an Instagram post, Manchester City's Sterling questioned newspapers' portrayal of black players arguing that it fed prejudice and racism. He compared the ways two young footballers, one black and one white, both English, had been portrayed by some media when they both bought new houses for their mothers. He made clear to his 5.2 million followers his view: 'Both innocent have not done a thing wrong but just by the way it has been worded this young black kid is looked at in a bad light, which helps fuel racism and aggressive behaviour'. His statement had wide resonance and elicited debate about the way mass media are responsible for social perceptions of race and identity (Farrington et al. 2013). At the end of the football season, Sterling was voted Footballer of the Year by the Football Writers' Association, with the specification that the award recognised both his exploits on the pitch and his public stance on racism (BBC Sport, 2019b). This case demonstrates that social media have empowered prominent athletes and given them unprecedented direct access to large audiences (Sanderson and Kassing, 2014). To some degree, sporting stars can influence public debate and media discourse around particularly sensitive issues such as racism and discrimination of ethnic minorities. It is a process that unfolds as fluid information flows between old and new media.

Allan (2010: 98, italics in the original), contends that 'news accounts encourage to accept as *natural*, *obvious* and *commonsensical* certain preferred ways of classifying reality, and that

these classifications have far-reaching implications for the cultural reproduction of power relations across society'. Carah and Louw (2015: 33) emphasise how media representations are embedded in power dynamics. 'Media empower and disempower because they are sites where symbolic power is concentrated, organised and regulated'. However, there is little doubt of the dramatic impact that digital media and social media have had on the media industry and on journalism practices, altering historical power positions. For example, in the USA, the number of newspapers per hundred million population has fallen from 1,200 in 1945 to 400 in 2014 (Kamarck and Gabriele, 2015). Since 1980, in the USA, the television networks have lost half their audience for evening newscasts; the audience for radio news has shrunk by 40% (ibid.). In the UK, over the last ten years, newspapers have faced a constant decline in circulation and readership, while the Public broadcaster BBC struggles to reach younger audiences (Ofcom 2018). In Italy, in just over ten years, newspapers have seen their sales figure halved: in 2018 they sold about 50 per cent less of the copies they sold in 2008 (Simi, 2018).

On the whole, the transition toward 'media convergence' (Turow, 2019: 3-5), and the digitalisation of traditional media, has been far from smooth (Miller, 2016). All mass media these days rely on the algorithms designed by search engines such as Google and digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to drive traffic toward their news stories, and this arguably shifts the power toward these companies. In June 2019, the publisher of the *Mail Online*, the online version of the *Daily Mail* and the most popular online news site in the UK, revealed that a change in a core search algorithm led overnight to a 50% drop in search traffic from Google (Walker, 2019). Despite these impactful developments, traditional mass media appear still to be key to the representational and news production processes, and still particularly influential in national public and political debates (Chadwick et al., 2018). At the same time, as noted by Flew and Waisboard (2015: 625), 'with societies becoming increasingly multicultural, there is also greater use of diasporic media, making transnational and transcultural media flows more significant, and throwing into question the manner in which nation-states and (sic) both supported and regulated national media in order to promote a territorially defined national culture'.

There are different views on how participatory media have become, and how truly empowered are users of social media platforms. Clay Shirky (2009, 2011) advocates the power of social media to 'make history', and of the Internet to 'transform government'. Carah and Low (2015: 32), however, focus on surveillance rather than interaction, and stress that 'the contemporary culture industry exercises power by relying on interactive technologies to watch, organise and control the participation of audiences'. Vincent and Kian (2014: 759) paid close attention to the use of social media by athletes during the 2012 Olympic Games and concluded that 'Twitter and Facebook provided a democratizing spontaneity, intimacy, and excitement that made it a compelling and indispensable medium during the London Olympiad'. Sanderson and Kassing (2014: 626) reinforce this point, emphasising how 'with the advent of new media, fan-athlete interaction has accelerated and intensified in many respects'. In their view, in a radically altered scenario fan-athlete interaction can be both parasocial (mediated, one-to-many, and in virtual space) and social (face-to-face, one-to-one, and in real time). For example, prominent athletes have the power to mobilize fans to defend their reputation from what they deem to be unjustified attacks from journalists (Sanderson, 2013). The role of sporting stars as 'opinion leaders' cannot therefore be dismissed.

One aspect of this debate is worthy of more specific attention, and it is the generational change. The younger generations (aged 16-25) are less attracted to and interested in traditional media, and this is particularly relevant to sport content, which represents a large portion of media content consumed by young people (Abboud, 2016). At the same time, the younger generations appear to develop stronger feelings of trust toward celebrities rather than other public figures, such as politicians, journalists and intellectuals. Manning et al. (2017) conducted a study about young people views on politicians and celebrities' use of social media. In the eyes of research participants aged 16-21 in Australia, USA and the UK 'politicians were typically interpreted as pursuing an agenda for their own benefit while celebrities were thought to be expressing genuine personal beliefs' (2017: 134). To some extent, celebrities who make use of social media to discuss social and political issues are attributed by young people the role of 'opinion leaders' and their views perceived to be more authentic. Focusing of football (soccer) stardom, Andrews and Clift (2016: 203) contend that, 'the contemporary football star is, within any given conjuncture, a potentially potent "representative subjectivity" (source of cultural identification) pertaining to the "collective configurations" (social class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, nationality) that define society, and through which its constituent individuals fashion their very existence'.

To some extent, these dynamics could be interpreted through the communication model proposed by Hall (1980). In his view, professional communicators (those who control resources and structures to create meaning) encode messages that are distributed to a mass audience, who will decode them relying on shared conceptual maps and a common language. However, the audience(s) will do so within three possible positions: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. In the oppositional position a decoder understands the messages, but rejects it entirely. The idea that media texts could be decoded in oppositional ways has been questioned by McQuail (2010: 119), who stresses the lack of empirical evidence to support it. Nevertheless, according to Carah and Louw (2015: 29), 'if a large group of people refuse to decode the intended message of the decoder, and that oppositional decoding is backed by other economic, social and cultural resources, it may be the sign of hegemony breaking apart'. Taking stock from the examples presented, namely those of Ozil, Sterling and Balotelli, we contend that there is a growing media space in which influential individuals (celebrities, sport personalities) can contribute in the creation and distribution of oppositional meanings to vast transnational audiences, composed in large part by young people. Their counter-narratives are, to some degree, capable of dislocating traditional media discourses' penetration in the social body. Over time and increased visibility, they could also impact on dominant power structures.

Gendered nationalism and sport

Any discussion of the idea of the nation and nationalism cannot leave aside the highly gendered terms that historically have defined this question. Nagel (1998: 244) highlights 'the masculine focus of social and political analyses of modern states', and contends that the result of the 'gender exclusion' operated in the modern classics of political theory and sociology 'has been to render invisible women's hands in the making of nations and states'. Nation-making appears in historiography and literature essentially as a male project. With a specific focus on sport, Rowe, McKay and Miller (1998: 126) observe that 'the sporting nation is constructed by the media in a highly gender-specific manner that sees men arrogating to themselves the right to

fight for the feminine virtue of the nation'. The gendered nature of sporting nationalism has been stressed also by Hunter (2006) and Vincent and Kian (2014).

When it comes to women of immigrant background, particularly black and ethnic minorities, the issue of representation of nationhood in sport acquires a further layer of complexity. They are possibly subject to two forms of exclusion: one due to their ethnic and racial 'classification' in the eyes of the national majority, and secondly as women and particularly women playing sports (Ratna and Samie 2018). This double form of exclusion has been noticed by Hearngraves (2001, cited by Hunter 2003: 420) with the examples of Olympic champions Hassiba Boulmerka and Cathy Freeman. The case of Paola Enogu is particularly relevant to this debate, and can be read alongside and against that of Mario Balotelli.

Paola Enogu is a 21-year-old professional volleyball player born in Italy to parents originally from Nigeria. She has represented Italy at junior level since the age of 15, and at the 2018 World Championship she became the best scorer in the history of the competition. Although Italy did not win (they ended as runners up to Serbia), her status as a world-star player attracted considerable attention from Italian media. Volleyball is the second sport in Italy for registered players after football, and it has brought numerous international titles to the country. The interest of the media in Paola Enogu's sporting and personal life has been significantly different in tone and quality from that directed to Balotelli.

Even during the most positive moments of his footballing career, Italian media would pay considerable attention to Balotelli's contested *Italianness*. The day after Italy beat Germany at the 2012 Euro Championship with two goals of Balotelli, the daily *La Repubblica* defined it 'the memorable night of Mario Balotelli, the dark-skinned Italian boy'. A few days before, the popular daily *Gazzetta dello Sport* decided to celebrate the football exploits of the young player publishing a cartoon whose subject openly referred to 'King Kong'. The image of Balotelli was superimposed over that of King Kong hanging on the Empire State Building. Instead of the famous New York skyscraper Balotelli is seen hanging on London's Big Ben and instead of the airplanes he has to defend himself from footballs thrown at him. The cartoonist made reference to the fact that, at that time, Balotelli was playing in the English Premier League for Manchester City. Understandably, such representation brought to the fore more complex associations. Since its introduction in USA cinemas in the 1930s, and in subsequent films, King Kong has functioned as a racially charged metaphor for black masculinity, projecting the black man as a gigantic, dangerous creature from the jungle.



Gazzetta dello Sport, 24 June 2012.

Contributing to a racialized discourse that is organized through powerful binary oppositions, the cartoon portrays the black man as the ‘savage’, the ‘uncivilized’, the ‘primitive’. It is a clear example of the representational practice of ‘othering’ (Hall, 1997). The publication of the cartoon drew criticism, and it was labelled as ‘racist’ and ‘inappropriate’ by some Italian commentators. The cartoon was criticised also by one of the leading columnists of *Gazzetta dello Sport*, Luigi Garlando, who had recently published a children’s book about racism. Quite incredibly, given the circumstances, the book was co-authored with Mario Balotelli (Balotelli and Garlando, 2012). Despite all this, just two years later, the day after Italy’s debut in the 2014 World Cup (a win on England with a goal by Balotelli), *La Gazzetta* published the match report with the following title: *Balo re della giungla* (Balo king of the jungle).

Paola Enogu has, so far, been spared a similar treatment from the media. She has been hailed as ‘the lethal weapon of Italian volley’ and ‘the ace up your sleeve of the blue volley’, but overall reports and comments have avoided heavily racialized tones. She has been invited to a popular television programme of the national broadcaster RAI, where she has spoken openly about different aspects of her life, including racial abuse suffered as a child on and off the pitch.⁴ Questioned about her identity, she defines herself ‘AfroItalian’, a category never used by Balotelli, who, as said, only publicly expressed interest in and attachment to his African roots after the criticism received for the 2014 World Cup. Enogu claims that her sense of

belonging is based on where her parents live, and this has changed and can change. Her parents and younger siblings recently moved to Manchester, England. Her sense of belonging therefore may include different localities, such as, she says, 'Lagos, Abuja, Milan, Manchester'. All this has been reported by different media when writing about her, but without much emphasis. It appears that, for the idea of the nation as an imagined community, her success entails something different, less threatening, from the success of the 'black Italian man'. A more fluid representational pattern is reflected in the use that Enogu makes of social media, particularly Instagram (with 136.000 followers), where she celebrates her sporting success both at club and international level, with pictures of her on and off the pitch, avoiding any social and political commentary.

A further turn in the media representation of Enogu makes evident a disparity in her treatment compared to that of Balotelli (or the younger black football star Moise Kean). In an interview with the leading daily *Corriere della Sera*, Enogu made public to be engaged to a girl, former teammate Katarzyna Skorupa (Morvillo, 2018). Her 'coming out' has been covered by several mass media, and in most of the cases it has been interpreted as an opportunity to start a belated public debate about homosexuality in and outside the field of sport. Even the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale* published a story with positive connotations under the title: Enogu, the regular girl who wipes out hypocrisy (Damascelli, 2018).

Journalists and sport commentators may argue that the alleged 'antics' of Balotelli make him a less likeable figure. However, the analysis of media discourses point to subtler, deeper dynamics which can be elucidated by paying attention the history of the black male athlete (Carrington, 2010). From the early decades of the 20th century the emergence of black male athletes (particularly in the USA) challenged a Western racial logic that had been instrumental to the colonial and imperialistic projects of European states and that had been developed around new ideologies of (white) masculinity (Nagel, 1998). Some of the protagonists were Afro-American sport personalities such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson. In 1908 (at the height of the Jim Crow laws era), Johnson became the first black heavy-weight world champion, contributing to the subversion of the existing racial order and of an ideology that saw white masculinity as the embodiment of physical and intellectual superiority (Carrington, 2010). Twenty years later, something similar unfolded in Fascist Italy. On 25 June 1928, *Gazzetta dello sport* (at the time, as today, the daily with the widest circulation) published on its front page an editorial titled: 'Can a black man represent Italy in Europe?' The previous night, mixed-race Italian boxer Leone Jacovacci had won the European middle-weight title beating Mario Bosisio, a white Italian and a favourite of the regime. The way Balotelli has been represented by Italian media resonates with the experience of the first Italian sport black personality, Jacovacci, and arguably points to the unfathomable persistence of specific racist discourses around national identity and masculinity, 76 years since the fall of Mussolini and the end of the Fascist regime. In such a context, social media appear a necessary and useful resource for the star player to challenge prevailing negative narratives about him and the people like him.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the digital revolution, mass media still play 'a critical role in facilitating the connection between sport and nationalism, and in presenting particular versions

of national identity' (Marjoribanks, 2012: 84). Traditional sporting media, in particular newspapers and television, have been instrumental in the construction of an inter-state world view based on international competitions. Nation-states tend to emerge from this process as fixed entities, crystallised around characteristics and traits which are the result of highly gendered selections and inventions and which legitimise the marginalisation of ethnic minorities and non-European immigrants. At the same time, mediated sport events provide also a venue for the idea of the nation to be challenged and upgraded.

This particular pattern is intensified by the growth of interactive and participatory media, which can better accommodate increasingly diasporic and hybrid media cultures. Media discourses produced by traditional media, and distributed also through digital media, elicit counter-narratives which can instantly reach vast audiences, made in large part of young people. Racialized media discourses on celebrated footballers such as Mesut Ozil, Raheem Sterling and Mario Balotelli, are countered through the personal/public use of social media. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook enable fluid interactions between celebrities and fans, originating alternative narratives about racial and national belonging, which often percolate back to traditional media, contributing to the construction of new public discourses. On their personal social media channels, sport personalities project an image of authenticity, which satisfies their followers and emerging meta-publics. Although this process tends to obscure the fact that online communication takes place in 'walled gardens', platforms which are closely monitored and managed by multinational Internet media companies, it is a defining feature of contemporary socialisation. Given the constant growth of social media and new media, and their centrality in the social communication of young people, the trends discussed in this paper are, over time, going to acquire a more prominent role in public discourse around national identity and national belonging.

Notes

¹ Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mostwatched_television_broadcasts (accessed 6 June 2019).

² The survey included twelve newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, *Corriere della sera*, *Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Messaggero*, *Corriere dello Sport*, *La Stampa*, *Il Manifesto*, *L'Unità*, *Tuttosport*.

³ *L'Unità* was founded in 1924 as the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), of which Gramsci was the leader. It ceased publication in 2017.

⁴ *Che tempo che fa*, RAI 1, 28 October 2018.

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