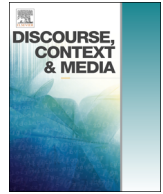




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## 'Proper football people': Talking soccer on Sky Sports News

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines a television programme with a paradoxical communicative structure. It is a sports programme that provides live updates and some commentary on football matches which viewers, for contractual reasons, cannot see. Accordingly, the void created by this paradoxical situation has to be filled by talk; but unlike radio, because this is a TV programme, the viewer is watching the talkers. The paper looks at two types of talk produced in this context: firstly forms of debate and argument (which like other types of sports talk have a 'sociable' emphasis); and secondly the subgenres of reports, commentary and updates, especially where these involve an element of narrative 'retelling'. The whole programme culminates in a classified reading of the day's football results, which in the UK, has become a weekly ritual of broadcast talk.

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### 1. Gillette Soccer Saturday

In his ground breaking analysis of forms of broadcast talk, Scannell (1996) places a particular emphasis on its 'communicative ethos'. Fundamentally this is grounded in the truism that such talk is designed to appeal to radio and TV audiences (or else they will change channels or switch off) and as such it has a mode of address that is simultaneously collective and personal: 'for anyone as someone' as Scannell puts it (p 13–14). Listeners and viewers need to feel themselves included, that the talk is designed for them, and they are not eavesdropping on private conversations. As such, a constitutive feature of broadcast talk is its 'sociability', expressed in forms of conversational interaction to which audiences can relate. For Scannell, other functions of broadcast talk, such as providing information or attempting to persuade, are secondary aspects of this primary communicative ethos, which is 'the production of a sociable occasion for listeners and viewers' (p 24).

In this paper I will examine a contemporary TV programme which, whilst it broadly conforms to the principle of sociability, regularly disrupts its classical discursive features. In the first place it not only works simultaneously to inform as well as entertain; it also involves serious and at times heated discussions where participants are arguing amongst themselves. Previously I have suggested that sociability should not be assumed to preclude

seriousness, especially in sports talk of which this programme is an example (Tolson, 2006, Ch 5). However here, as we will see, there are communicative practices and structures that seem to test sociability to the limit. In some discussions all the participants are engaged in heated argument, including the presenter who, in more conventional formats, might be expected to act as a moderator. Also there are aspects of this programme's structural design that necessarily, but also intentionally, partially exclude rather than include the viewer. This exclusion then has to be compensated by some interesting features of the talk that occurs.

The programme in question is *Gillette Soccer Saturday* broadcast every Saturday afternoon during the football season, on Sky Sports News. The programme runs from 12.00–6 p.m. and consists broadly of two parts. In the first part, the show's presenter, Jeff Stelling, together with a group of four ex-players acting as pundits, review recent events (which can include action replays) and preview the afternoon's forthcoming fixtures, including predicting their outcomes. In the second part, which starts when the games kick-off at 3 p.m., the four pundits in the studio each talk about a game they are watching on a monitor, but they are also joined by reporters around the country who provide updates on the games where they are located. On any given Saturday there may be around 25 reporters, some shown in vision directly addressing the camera, others heard in sound only. Regular viewers of the programme become familiar with the group of visible reporters, all male, apart from one token woman, Bianca Westwood.

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To some extent, *Gillette Soccer Saturday* would seem to belong to a very well established genre of sports broadcasting. This is the Saturday afternoon sports magazine format, anchored by a star presenter, and designed for viewers who want to keep up to date with the latest, and then the final, scores. As described by Whannel (1992) such programmes have been a fixture on British television (with antecedents in BBC radio) since the 1950s. From 1964, when the ITV network launched its *World of Sport* to rival the BBC's *Grandstand* the two major terrestrial TV channels were in direct competition. *Gillette Soccer Saturday* entered this arena in 1992 at the very start of Sky Sports broadcasting. Moreover, as it was defined as a news programme, when it started it was freely available, unlike the specialised and exclusive (subscription only) Sky Sports channels<sup>2</sup>.

However in other respects, which are of particular interest here, *Gillette Soccer Saturday* differs from the classic sports magazine. Firstly it does not cover a variety of sports, but rather is devoted entirely to soccer. It is not therefore faced with the particular challenge Whannel discusses, of integrating diverse events into a coherent package. Secondly, and this is crucial, what it shows in its 'outside broadcasts' is limited to reports. There is no live action or even action replays (apart from in the earlier review section of the programme). This is because of the 'black out' rules imposed on broadcasters by the football authorities which prevent any live football between 2.45 and 5.15 p.m., due to fears over the possible impact on attendances at games<sup>3</sup>. Only four or five games are shown live at the weekend (including Friday and Monday evenings) by special contractual arrangements with Sky Sports on its premium sports channels.

What this produces, in terms of the viewing experience, is a paradoxical communicative structure. This is a television programme about football matches which we ourselves cannot see. What we are able to watch on *Gillette Soccer Saturday*, in addition to a constant stream of information from 'vide-printers', is people reporting on, or in the studio watching, the games on our behalf. Not only is this different from other kinds of TV sports commentary where the action is visible in one form or another; it also differs from radio commentary where this is live and continuous. Clearly, conventional TV commentary does offer an inclusive experience, where the viewer is directly addressed (Marriott, 1995, 2007). What *Gillette Soccer Saturday* offers by contrast, in a fast flowing cacophony of rising intensity, orchestrated by the unflappable (and extremely professional) presenter Jeff Stelling, is a multiplicity of diverse reports and reactions. And here the pleasure of the programme is not, as it is with radio, to do with 'listening in' – it is about watching people talking, in animated fashion, sometimes to us, but also extensively to each other. It is the kinds of talk that are produced in this context that will be the focus for the rest of this article.

## 2. Sociable argument

To begin with, I shall examine the forms of talk that occur in the first part of *Gillette Soccer Saturday* where football 'news' is being discussed. The 'news' element of the first part of *Gillette Soccer Saturday* needs to be in inverted commas because of the very circumscribed nature of its content. For example at the time of writing this article there were major debates in some sections of the UK national press over whether a footballer convicted of rape, having served his prison sentence, should be allowed to return to

his club. There was also an ongoing concern about potential corruption at FIFA in the awarding of contracts to stage the world cup. *Gillette Soccer Saturday* avoids this type of social or political issue, and tends to focus instead on gossip, speculation and controversies within the game. Its 'news' is of the latest injuries to major players, transfer speculation and managerial appointments, particularly in the Premier League. A typical controversy that might be discussed is the validity or otherwise of refereeing decisions, particularly where these have resulted in red cards. In the following extract (which can be seen on YouTube<sup>4</sup>) discussion soon escalates from the decision itself (illustrated by repeated action replays) to speculation about the conduct of the disciplinary panel which might or might not have reviewed that decision. Here ex-Liverpool player Phil Thompson makes a point about 'proper football people' repeatedly clear:

- 5 JS: Let's talk about Bolton against Wolves more specifically initially about Wolves and the er Nenad Milijas red card against Arsenal er Mick McCarthy said the fabric of our game is based on tackles like that well not in the view of Stuart Atwell er Phil Thompson as someone who knows premier league football=  
 10 PT: Thank you [eh eh eh] Thank you Jeff  
 JS: =What did you make of Stuart Atwell's decision? (. ) A-absolutely outrageous erm there was nothing wrong with this what-so-ever in-in any league any form of the game this is not a foul erm there's not a problem with it I cannot understand now when they have gone to look at this has er Stuart Atwell has he looked at it again at this the next day and said 'No I stand by my decision' or has it been an FA er disciplinary panel which has looked at it and said 'No'? Because if it is a panel they are looking to protect the referee because of the problems he has had in the past they are trying to protect him because they don't want any more trouble us us picking on him [JS: mm]. Now you have to accept when you make mistakes Jeff he should a looked at it and said 'I have got that wrong it needs to be rescinded'. They have to do that. My goodness how can they do things? They're things that make you angry within the game and you look at it 'cos it's [wrong Jeff  
 30 MLeT: [It's an embarrassment  
 JS: It's one thing for the referee to make a mistake but for the FA disciplinary committee to then compound it >it was a disciplinary committee< to compound that mistake the club was apparently told it was not deemed to be an obvious and serious error by Stuart Atwell.  
 35 MLeT: Wow. That is quite remarkable. I find that an embarrassment to our game of football Jeff that we have a panel who can sit there and watch that free kick and and think that it was a red card it's not even a yellow card it's not even a foul. >Arteta doesn't do him any favours by the way< erm this isn't even a foul he hasn't gone in two footed he's gone in the foot is lower than the ball he's not going in to do any danger whatsoever and that is an [absolutely shocking shocking piece of judgement=  
 40 PT: [He's not even followed through on him  
 45 MLeT: =by that panel.

<sup>2</sup> It was taken off Freeview in 2010 much to the dismay of many viewers.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to my former colleague at De Montfort University, Dr Paul Smith, an expert on sports broadcasting rights, for confirming this information.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqUQ5Ct9ViM>

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