

# First Monday, Volume 17, Number 5 - 7 May 2012

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PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

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New media and identity among  
fans of a Norwegian football club

by Roy Krøvel

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## Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on sport, new media and identity by investigating the case of a club (Rosenborg) located outside the dominating football leagues, but still very much affected by migration and other global flow. The study introduces participatory media as sources for information on fan discourses on identity, identification, migration, “us”, “them” and community. Fans of Rosenborg reacted and adapted to global flows of players by questioning borders of identity and community, inviting in new members and reconstructing imagined communities, facilitating de-ethnicization of the local community. Many of the postings at Web forums and blogs for fans are humorous and witty, while the discussion investigated at Web editions of newspapers grew ugly when people started to call each other names. There is a sense of mutual respect on Web pages run by fans themselves which is often loudly missing when similar themes are discussed by fans online elsewhere.

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## Introduction

When former head coach, Nils Arne Eggen, approached Ntuthuko Macbeth–Mao Sibaya after a convincing performance when he was on trial with Rosenborg, he could have said something like: “We will hire you”. Or he could have asked: “Will you play for us?” But instead he chose to invite the young player to become a member of the local community represented by the club, inviting him to “become a ‘trønder’” (a person from this region of Norway). For this generation of coaches at Rosenborg, the club is not only a football club but also an important mechanism for constructing a local community. There is a mutual bond of responsibility between club and community (K.T. Eggen, 2007; N.A. Eggen and Nyrønning, 2003).

Rosenborg experienced a period of profound change in the years around and after 1999 (Svardal and Mølsknes, 2007). Founded by players in a traditionally working class neighbourhood of Trondheim, during the 1960s and 1970s, Rosenborg, the most successful team in Trondheim, also became the dominating team in the region of Trøndelag. Under the leadership of coach Nils Arne Eggen, the club went on to win 15 national championships after 1990. This meant that the club represented Norway in the Champions League at a time when incomes in football were growing dramatically because of increased earnings from television and commercials, and Rosenborg became the richest and the dominating club in Norway. The club could now field a team consisting of a mix of African, Latin American and Swedish, Danish and Norwegian players. The changing face of the Rosenborg team had repercussions for communication among fans on blogs and forums. The development represented a challenge to traditional ways to imagine and communicate identity and belonging to a community and among fans.

This investigation deals with the process of constructing — or re-constructing — the imagined community of supporters of Rosenborg Ballklubb (RBK) and more specifically the fan club Kjernen. It starts with a few short notes on some of the key terms before moving on to the methodology. I then divide the discourse on Rosenborg, identity and community into five groups or discourses according to their main line of argument, trying to relate these five discourses to existing schools of thought on identity and community. I develop these findings further, using selected examples from the debate as it is played out among members of the fan club Kjernen on [kjernen.no](http://kjernen.no), linking the process of constructing a community of fans to the overall process of re-constructing a local community in Trondheim and Trøndelag.

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## **Sport, media, community and identity**

When players move between countries and continents communities of supporters are affected. These communities exist in order to support a club represented by a group of players. Supporters therefore typically identify with the players representing the club on the pitch. Communities of supporters are forced to adapt to change as the group of players becomes more diverse through globalisation (Darby, *et al.*, 2007), for nowadays players at top clubs are as likely to come from Africa or Latin America as from local neighbourhoods in the hometown of the club, while fans are as likely to be found in China or Mexico as in Madrid or Oslo (Correia and Esteves, 2007; Madeiro, 2007). While this is certainly true for clubs like Manchester United, Barcelona and Milan, top Norwegian clubs have few fans outside Norway. The vast majority of dedicated Rosenborg fans still live in a relatively limited area (territory) and many regularly meet face to face.

This process of identity construction and re-constructing might seem familiar to those familiar with, for instance, English, French or Dutch football. Leagues and clubs in countries with a more visible colonial history often experienced similar processes in the 1980s or 1990s. A number of relevant studies on the effects of globalization on fans, identity and culture have been published by Armstrong, Giulianotti and others since the mid-1990s (Armstrong and Giulianotti, 1997, 2004; Finn and Giulianotti, 2000; Giulianotti, 1999, 2004, 2005; Giulianotti, *et al.*, 1994; Giulianotti and McArdle, 2006; Giulianotti and

Robertson, 2007; Russell, 1996; Horne, 1995; Moorhouse, 1995; Redhead, 1995; Robertson and Giulianotti, 2007; Robins, 1995; Walsh and Giulianotti, 2006). The advantage of investigating the process in Norway (or a similar country) is that it coincided with the development of new forms of information and communication technology, resulting in new media where fans can post, publish and debate directly without journalists and editors filtering and processing the information. Web pages, news lists, blogs and so on constitute historical records documenting the process as it develops, and have the potential to immensely enrich the study of identity formation.

The majority of contributions to Norwegian literature on sport and its role in society have used a historical perspective on the role sport has played in constructing a community of Norwegians. I therefore need to spend some time discussing some perspectives on a few connections between the terms “culture”, “community” and “identity”. But in this paper I will nonetheless be particularly concerned with what Archetti has called “hybridisation” — the possibility of transgressing the borders between “us” and “them” (Archetti, 1999). When footballers move between continents, countries, regions, clubs and neighbourhoods, they might be seen as “polluting” essentialist understandings of identities, or what Hognestad describes as the meanings of having ‘grown up’ with the club and having one’s autobiography closely woven into the physical community of the club [1]. Poli (2007) discusses the effects on sport of migratory flows and the increasing influence of mass media. According to Poli (2007), this results in “a de-ethnicization of the nation” and what Poli calls “identity deterritorialization.” Culture, community and identity are thus increasingly influenced by global flows of footballers.

A number of relevant studies have contributed to the general understanding of global processes, sport and local identities, for instance Miller, Denham, Silk, Giulianotti, and Jackson (Denham, 2004; Falcoux and Silk, 2006; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007, 2009; Jackson and Andrews, 1999; Miller, *et al.*, 2001; Silk, 2002). Dahlén (2008) has presented an overview of the existing literature on the role of media in these processes of identity construction. Hjelseth (2006), meanwhile, discusses the relationship between supporters and non-local players in an increasingly commercial environment based on 2,182 postings on vg.no, Norway’s largest online database. According to Hjelseth, fans resist attempts to commercialize football when it challenges what fans see as important rituals and symbols. Franzén, commenting on Hjelseth’s study, recommended more investigation of “supporter reactions when clubs buy foreign players” (Franzén, *et al.*, 2006).

The following analysis of supporter reactions to the introduction of foreign players will employ terms and perspectives proposed by Hylland Eriksen, Bauman and others. Hylland Eriksen (2008) has proposed using the two terms “roots” and “feet” to understand the identity formation of individual members of a community. “Roots” are elements individuals use to identify themselves with place, heritage, family or other elements of identity connected to “tradition” or “place”. The term “feet” designates elements of identity acquired from “the outside”, through experience such as travel. Most individuals today would recognise elements of both “roots” and “feet” in their identity. Identity is flexible, linked to the constantly ongoing psychological process of identification. Phelps (2001) has in a case study noted the importance of the “football hero in the creation of local or regional identity” in the south of England. Since individuals constantly participate in processes of identity-construction where individual experiences (“feet”) play an important role, identity should not be seen as homogenous within a community. Identities of individual members are multi-faceted; individuals belong to many communities and identify with communities at other, distant locations, or with smaller communities or sub-cultures within a community or culture. But while the intensity of globalization is increasing, this does not necessarily mean that global culture is becoming more homogeneous. Maguire (1994) found what he calls “increasing varieties” in his study on sport and identity politics. Boyle and Hayne (1996), for instance, note: “The development of Scottish football has always been greatly influenced by the Scottish nation’s relationship to England and the United Kingdom as a whole. Instead of resulting in a cultural erosion, international football relationships have provided Scotland with a forum for expressing and even increasing the Scottish aspects of its culture.” Students of sport and identity have become increasingly aware of how social and historical construction of football identities “pivot upon senses of opposition and difference” (Armstrong and Giulianotti, 2001).

Bauman has introduced the term “cloakroom community” to describe the “ghost communities” (...) “one feels one joins simply by being where others are present, or by sporting badges or other tokens of shared intentions, style or taste (...)”. Bauman discusses the “cloakroom community” in his chapter on “consumerist culture”, presenting a pessimistic view of this type of commitment-free community, one where members “fall out” as soon as the crowd disperses. Anyone can enter and leave as soon as he or she loses interest, in contrast to the demands of “the real thing” (Bauman, 2007). The public policy domain community has failed to become a “mobilising tool for creating in football some democratic operating principles that might make something like a community in the people’s game actually possible”, according to Blackshaw (2008). Nevertheless, a number of writers on sport and fan culture have noted the importance of sport in constructing the imagined community of Norwegians and the Norwegian working class in a historical perspective, for instance Goksøyr on football, skiing and sport (Goksøyr, 2008, 2005; Solenes and Goksøyr, 2004) and Andersen on football (Andersen, 2007).

This article intends to contribute to the literature on sport, media and identity by investigating the case of a club located outside the dominating football leagues, but still very much affected by migration and other global flow. The study introduces new participatory media as sources for information on fan discourses on identity, identification, migration, “us”, “them” and community.

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## Methodology

This study draws on a selection of online discussions among fans of Rosenborg on topics related to identity, community and foreign players. First a database consisting of articles published in Norwegian media is consulted for an overview. Approximately 81,000 relevant articles on Rosenborg are found between 1999 and 2009. From this body of texts 300 articles containing words like “foreign”, “trønder” and “identity” are chosen for further investigation. Most of these articles resulted in online debates on the Web sites of the newspapers where the original article was published. Accessing the online newspapers, the online discussions linked to the articles can be followed. This makes it possible to map the main lines of argument regarding definition and understanding of community and identity among readers.

Second, the Web site and online forum of Kjernen (*kjernen.no*), the organization of fans of Rosenborg, is investigated for similar types of discussions on identity and community. The members of Kjernen are the most dedicated fans of Rosenborg. There are approximately 2,100 active members of Kjernen (Milepæl, 2009). Again, the articles and postings are searched for the keywords “foreign”, “trønder” and “identity” in order to map the main lines of argument regarding definition and understanding of community and identity among fans.

The arguments will be divided into categories, each forming a specific discourse on Rosenborg, foreign players, identity and community. I do not pretend that this will be an exhaustive map of all possible discourses among fans of Rosenborg — that would be impossible because of the immense volume of the discourse. The categories will be idealised, simplifications meant to describe the main arguments, and they will later be used to enrich the findings in the qualitative study of the debate on *kjernen.no*.

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## Results: Five discourses

### Survey

A large group of arguments underlines the importance of being able to compete in the international market. In an article in *Dagbladet*, for instance, Rosenborg's chief scout is portrayed under the heading "The minister of trade", a witty comment on the global market of players (Anonymous, 2007). Another example is found in *Stavanger Aftenblad* from Stavanger — the hometown of rival club Viking (Gundersen, 2005). Both these articles see sporting success or failure mainly, or partly, in terms of the clubs' ability to operate in the global market. The competition is tough, only the best will flourish. This is also a theme much debated among the fans on *kjernen.no* or the open forums of online newspapers, such as *adresseavisen.no* and *aftenposten.no*. One example is the author "Dilt Nordland" who argues on *fotball.aftenposten.no* that "it is all about entertainment": "Let the audience be entertained by the best players from all corners of the world!" (Nordland, 2007). Typically, these authors connect football, players and team to market, entertainers and free flow of players and capital. I will therefore call the first discourse "neo-liberal". Those arguing from within this discourse, often begin with the observation that Rosenborg is now competing against some of the biggest and most powerful clubs in the world. This is seen as quite natural, especially because we live in a world where many value the possibility of travelling and working anywhere we choose. Globalisation means increased competition, and the best and richest clubs will get the best players. This is seen as natural. We will all benefit from a competition in which all the best players are allowed to take part. Of course, that Rosenborg, because of international competitions such as the Champions League, is financially way above all national rivals, is an often-used argument. Why should Rosenborg give up the benefits of being the richest and most competitive club in Norway?

The second discourse is often seen in newspapers and magazines critical to globalisation, or to specific interpretations of the term. Several articles in leftist magazines, for instance *X* and *Ny Tid* paint dark pictures of the reality behind the global market of players, using words like "human trafficking" and "slavery", while contrasting the poverty of many African aspiring professional footballers with the extravagant luxury found at European top clubs (Olukoya, 2004; Solem, 2006). I have called it the "dependency discourse". This discourse often quotes stories of exploitation of young players from Africa or Latin America. For each successful player making it in a European League, tens or hundreds have suffered long and agonising ordeals, sacrificing education and family; all masterminded by cynical agents. The human cost of this global football industry is too high to be morally acceptable, according to this discourse. Some, of course, accept that many youngsters are indeed exploited, while still, pragmatically, concluding that Rosenborg must compete in the global market if the club wants to survive.

Former coaches Nils Arne Eggen, Bjørn Hansen and Ola By Rise are grouped together in a third category because they are the most articulate and best at formulating coherent arguments which differ from those presented earlier. I have named the third discourse "functionalist", alluding to anthropological studies of, for example, indigenous peoples in Latin America. This discourse focuses on the functions or benefits of a social activity such as football. Why do the members of a society do this? What role does the activity play for the members of the community? The functionalists often argue that football is closely linked to the local community and actually plays a vital part in the small town and the largely rural region where most of Rosenborg's fans live, highlighting the importance of the club for identity and community in the region. Many of these discussants are situated within a social democratic discourse, and do not feel shy about talking about the club's responsibility towards the local community. They have therefore supported a number of local social outreach projects, and have also initiated projects to support local football talent and they worry about what will happen when, or if, the club is faced with more difficult times (both on and off the pitch). Will the local community support it wholeheartedly if nine out of eleven players are foreigners? In contrast to this scenario, the "miracle" at San Siro (Milan) is often hailed as evidence of the potential of a tightly connected and well-educated group of local players. A team consisting of nine local players beat A.C. Milan at San Siro in 1996, thereby qualifying for the final rounds of the Champions League.

So far, the arguments in this discourse should be straightforward and easily recognisable to most football fans anywhere. The ideology behind the rise of Rosenborg in the 1990s nonetheless forces us one step further. Coach Nils Arne Eggen was also a trained teacher, teaching a type of football that required highly specialised skills applied in a complex environment of cooperation. Each player had specific

tasks, of course, but the most important thing was to be able to understand each other on the pitch, to speak the same language, as it were. This underlined the importance of one's ability over others: the ability to cooperate. This ambitious ideology required stability over time. The players needed to learn to play together, without too much change in personnel or any other interruption. This way of thinking and teaching football does not fit well with some traits of the modern game such as players constantly moving from club to club, seemingly without much loyalty to any of them. A more practical problem was the difficulty of having a group of players speaking little or no Norwegian, which obviously makes communication in a teaching environment more challenging.

The fourth discourse will be called "social-constructivist", and will be described in more detail later as it is the dominant discourse on *kjernen.no*. It is nonetheless necessary to give a brief and general presentation here. According to many fans on *kjernen.no*, there is no reason to view the global inflow of players to Rosenborg from Africa or Latin America as in principle different from this process of regional or national inflow. Those arguing along these lines often noted that the biggest and best clubs today are global brands, attracting players from all over the world, of course, but also supporters. Clubs like Arsenal, Real Madrid and A.C. Milan fielded hardly any local talent in many important games, but never seemed to have any problems filling the stadiums. In fact, increasing globalisation in football seems to go hand in hand with increasing attendance in most major European leagues. This discourse often underlines how identity and community have already changed as a consequence of both internal and external forces. Rosenborg, for example, was born as a small club in a small local neighbourhood. It took many years before it came to be seen as the club representing Trondheim, and still longer to out-class regional rivals like Steinkjer FK. Being Norway's only club in the Champions League for many seasons, the club sometimes came to be seen as representing Norway — on occasion it was even supported by dedicated fans of competing Norwegian clubs, and a growing number of its players were recruited from northern Norway or from the south (here, I disagree with Hognestad who believes that "for an average Brann supporter it is unthinkable to support for instance Rosenborg from Trondheim". I believe this to be true of only a very small group of fans and that most fans love football enough to still enjoy the success of a good team, even a rival team).

What makes football fans especially interesting subjects in an investigation of the understanding of resistance and adaption to globalisation is the extreme conditions under which football fandom exists, conditions not in principle different from those affecting society as a whole, but stronger and with a more direct effect on the community of fans. The identity and community of fans are tested, constructed and reconstructed every week in the competition with other clubs. There are winners and losers, both among the players and the fans. The psychological process of identification is being tested over and over again, relentlessly. The best players become idols. The less good run the risk of disappearance.

Some members of *kjernen.no* rarely forgot to mention the paradox behind the influx of African and Latin American players: many of the nine local "heroes" from San Siro soon cashed in and moved on to play for Glasgow, Celtic, Tottenham, Liverpool, Real Sociedad, Saint-Étienne and others. This outflow of players gave Rosenborg the financial muscle to import players from smaller clubs. Inflow and outflow are linked, both economically of course, and morally.

The fifth and last discourse has been called racist. I have included it here even though I have found no clear evidence of racism in the investigated corpus of text. It is only present in these texts dealing with racism as a problem from another time or from somewhere else. Remembering the 1980s, I nonetheless find this worthy of a short note. It seems to have become almost impossible to be both a racist and a fan of RBK at the same time.

In this section I will move on to discuss some of the findings in relation to selected debates on *aftenposten.no*, *adressa.no* and *kjernen.no*. I have chosen a couple of debates that illustrate the process of collective reasoning going on at *kjernen.no* (McMahon, 2003).

The difficulty of navigating this sensitive issue was made very clear by the writer “oppsop” in March 2006 (*kjernen.no*, 22 March 2006). “Oppsop” is not just anybody at *kjernen.no*; he is an influential voice belonging to the editorial committee and, as such, among the most active participants on *kjernen.no*. He comments on recent news reports about the increasing number of foreign players. The president of the Norwegian Football Association, Sondre Kåfjord, is reportedly worried. “Oppsop” admits that the editorial committee is divided on the issue.

“We are against the flow of foreigners to Norwegian football; it is too much. But then we are also in favour, at least regarding our four new signings. We can’t seem to make up our minds. Last week we were worried with Bjørn Hansen and Harald Aabrekk [a well known Norwegian coach — my comment]. Really worried. But then we remembered how we go wild with enthusiasm when the club signs Uruguayans or Burkina Fasoans. Or French–Tunisians or German–Canadians. Not to forget really tiny Albanians. There you have it. We really believed our concern was for real. Real and authentic. But then it proved to be no more than make–believe. Again. Now we are not sure about anything except being very much in favour of really bad foreigners in the other clubs.”

My reading of these texts is that they are interesting because of the ongoing, constantly reflexive reasoning in them. They are nakedly honest and yet humorous, while openly trying to make sense of profound changes in the environment the community exists in. “Oppsop” expresses something many fans of Rosenborg feel strongly about — how we should react to all these changes, both externally and internally. As I see it, “oppsop”, in his text, is wavering between two or three of the abovementioned discourses: at one point, the text seems to begin a defence of local identity, something already discussed in the section on the functionalist way of seeing the relationship between football and identity. But then, as we start to believe we know where the text is going, it surprises us with new and contradictory arguments. It begins to sound like something similar to what I have previously called a “neo–liberal discourse.” Why should Rosenborg not sign the best and most exiting players available? The dilemma is left unresolved, even though the text implicitly seems to lean towards the second of the two arguments. But faced with this dilemma, “oppsop” typically reaches the only sensible solution, for the time being: let the other clubs spend their money on bad players.

I would also argue that this text reveals something interesting and typical about how fans of Rosenborg are starting to view ethnicity. Ethnicity is not fixed or essential, but full of complexity. The text is dealing with this complexity using terms like French–Tunisian and German–Canadian, underlining change and movement over essentialist versions of identity. I will return to this theme as we move on to the next discussion.

This heated exchange of opinion begins on *kjernen.no* (12 April 2007) when “Kvernbit” posts a message entitled “Enough whining about foreigners?” The post begins with a link to an article in the regional newspaper *Adresseavisen* two days earlier (“— Blir litt lei meg”, *Aftenposten* 12 April 2007). Here, Jan Ivar “Mini” Jakobsen, one of the most popular Rosenborg players of all time, criticises the then coach for fielding a team of eight foreigners. The former player argues for a team of more local players, much along the same lines as in the “functionalist discourse” presented earlier. What will happen when more difficult times come, Jakobsen asks. But what causes reaction on *kjernen.no* is a subtle reference to the African players on the team. According to Jakobsen, Rosenborg can’t “take responsibility” for talented players from “the Ivory Coast or Cameroon”, before he moves on to confess to “celebrating even more

loudly when Roar Strand [a local player — my comment] scores than when Traóré [Abdou Razack Traóré from the Ivory Coast — my comment] does it”.

This triggers speculation from “Kvernbit”: Why is it that “Mini” uses Traóré as an example after a game where the only scorer for Rosenborg was a Slovak, Marek Sapara? Jakobsen’s remarks leads to a long and heated debate on *Aftenposten*’s Web pages (<http://fotball.aftenposten.no/eliteserien/article78815.ece#>). “Kvernbit” is not the only one sensing an eerie undertone of possible stereotyping, or unfair criticism, of the Africans in Rosenborg. What are the African players supposed to feel about all this? Are they not to feel welcome, he asks.

within two hours of the first response. The vast majority defends the African players. One, who calls himself “Eddie Murphy” typically argues for a very radical interpretation of the whole debate: Rosenborg’s colors are black and white, he says, so why not make that true for the players as well. And, he adds, Koné, is a “trønder” as good as anyone, just look at his “sheepish” (“*småbonat*”) look in the official team photo. The term “*småbonat*” is actually impossible to translate without losing the double irony. Literally, it means something like “small peasant-ish”, but it is a term used idiomatically by *trøndere* to describe *trøndere*. Using such a term, normally reserved for *trøndere*, is actually a subtle way of including someone from the outside in the community. Being a “peasant”, is actually an important part of the image Norwegian fans like to portray of themselves when travelling abroad — not in the sense of being real farmers, perhaps, but rather like a metaphor for being from the outside, being outsiders or underdogs. The official song for the Norwegian team the last time Norway qualified for the World Cup (1998) was in fact called “We are the peasants from the North”, and performed by the most popular rock band from Trondheim. So when “Eddie Murphy” goes on to argue, playfully, for “mixing in a little African bros in the team, ebony and ivory living together in perfect harmony *likksom*”, in a tongue-in-cheek type of style quite familiar to the fans of Rosenborg, he is also saying that being a *trønder* is something flexible, something that can be changed. The term has no absolute or essential inner meaning, apart from those we decide to give it.

Another important aspect of the debate on *aftenposten.no* on that day, is that racism is so loudly absent. As soon as someone writes something remotely similar to racism, a horde of dedicated fans comes storming to the defence of the African players. I found no arguments I could define as racist among the many posts after the interview with “Mini”, neither on *aftenposten.no* nor *kjernen.no*, very unlike the debates after the first foreign and African players joined Norwegian teams in the 1970s and 1980s.

Within hours of the initial article on *aftenposten.no*, the debate had diversified to the point of becoming meaningless. Most new posts after the first hour were of the type “I did not say that” or “Yes, you did”, normally followed by the reply “Idiot!” or “Bullshit!” The next morning it died down, but the members of *Kjernen* took the discussion to *kjernen.no*, and, I would argue, in a much more respectful and reflexive manner.

Nonetheless, “Gumbo” drew some criticism after commenting on two talented young players from the rival club Vålerenga. “Gumbo” asked if Glenn Roberts and Mohammed Fellah could really be counted as Norwegian talent, apparently because of their names sounding “foreign”. “Gumbo” probably sensed that this could be a touchy issue and added a “smiley” to his post, as if to say “don’t take me too seriously. I am only kidding.” But “SunChild” was not ready to accept the comment and replied 12 minutes later: “Would you say the same thing about Tettey, then?” he asked. “Gumbo” took only six minutes to retreat: “Tettey has got nice Trønder dialect, he” and adds a “wink” this time. Before long, “Kvernbit”, “Peders” and others join in to defend the young players from being labelled foreigners, even though they played for the most hated of all rival clubs. “SunChild” made it clear that he was not willing to let the discussion sink to such a low level in the future.

In my view, this exchange of words is not coincidental, but typical of the reasoning on *kjernen.no*. While the debate on *aftenposten.no* saw fans of Rosenborg coming to the defence of “their own” African players, the debate on *kjernen.no* takes it one step further. If the fans accept, welcome and idolise “outsiders” in the community of Rosenborg, the principle must also be extended to players at other clubs.

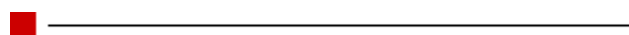


Questioning the identity of Glenn Roberts implies also questioning the identity of Tettey. That could not be accepted at *kjernen.no*. What we see, in fact, is the “pollution” of essentialist meanings of having “grown up” with the club (Hognestad, 2009). Transgression of borders between “us” and “them” makes hybridisation possible (Archetti, 1999).

I will now, finally, return to the editorial committee (“webred”). In the last section we saw how norms and values for constructing identity and community were extended or diffused to other clubs in Norway. Kjernen normally restricted themselves to matters relating directly to football and only very seldom did they venture into the political arena — and then mostly for reasons related to the interests of Rosenborg. One such example came to light in June 2006. The editorial committee sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre, demanding changes in foreign policy (“webred”, *kjernen.no*, 22 June 2006). Norway is not a member of the European Union, but is a member of the tiny European Free Trade Association (EFTA), an intergovernmental organisation set up for the promotion of free trade and economic integration to the benefit of its four member states: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. EFTA means players from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland are free to play for Norwegian clubs, without restrictions. This was not very helpful for Rosenborg’s international campaigns, the editorial committee noted, since the best players Rosenborg could afford were from Africa or Latin America. The editorial committee recommended a straightforward solution: bully Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland into accepting a few new member states, preferably Ecuador, Ghana and the Ivory Coast — which according to Rosenborg’s head scout, have the most affordable talent.

This proposal should of course not be taken seriously, but in my view it illustrates Kjernen’s playful way of making politics. Using humour, they highlight some of the often hidden but nonetheless real borders which still divide and filter individuals, regardless of “globalisation” and a seemingly free flow of people, goods, capital and knowledge. Any number of players from Iceland can represent Rosenborg, but the number of Latinos and Africans is restricted. This is not fair, according to the editorial committee, and absolutely not in Rosenborg’s interests.

We should not underestimate the importance of this type of political expression, even though it is unorthodox. Rosenborg regularly draws 20,000 supporters, quite a large number for a town of approximately 130,000 inhabitants. Moreover, it tells us something about undercurrents in a substantial section of the region, undercurrents not always visible in the traditional media and thus often ignored in the collective reasoning outside the community of fans. A number of studies have earlier shown sub-cultures over time, in complex and contradictory interaction with majority cultures, often influencing norms, values and symbols of identity in the majority culture. The focus of the qualitative research in this paper has been on the most dedicated fans of Rosenborg. The findings from the investigation of *kjernen.no*, for example, are not necessarily valid for other sectors of society. Future research on the complex and contradictory interaction between the subculture of fans and wider society could shed more light on the construction of identity and community in societies affected by globalisation.



## Conclusions

Sporting stars play important roles as role models for youngsters and are idolised by fans of all ages. Football and football players are therefore important for the construction of communities and identities.

Football fans have often been at the receiving end of understandable criticism for extreme nationalism, neo-Nazism and outright violence. In times when existing visions of identity and community come under increasing pressure from the inside or outside, people might react by constructing glorified images of the group, for example the nation, underlining their attachment to the group by displaying strong symbols of


identity. Football fans have been known to worship strong symbols of identity or simply to subscribe to racist or extreme nationalist ideology. Many non-white players have experienced, and still experience, racist abuse from some football fans.

In view of the above, the first conclusion from this investigation is surprising: the fans of Rosenborg reacted and adapted to global flows of players by questioning borders of identity and community, inviting in new members and reconstructing imagined communities, facilitating de-ethnicization of the local community. Football is an extreme example of globalisation, *inter alia* because the best players move from club to club, regardless of borders. While football is an extreme case, globalisation also have many similar effects on societies all over the world. Understanding processes of constructing identity and community among football fans can help us understand processes of identity and community in general.

The second conclusion is about new media. Forums and blogs like *kjernen.no* have greatly facilitated the historical study of processes of identity construction and collective reasoning. We know from anthropology and oral history some of the many difficulties regarding memory as a source of knowledge of the past. By using forums, blogs and the like, it is possible to study the collective process of reasoning about issues such as identity and community as they develop, not as they are remembered and interpreted in hindsight. This is a fruitful field for future studies of sport, media and identity.

The third conclusion is on style of writing and culture of communication. Many of the postings at *kjernen.no* are humorous and witty, while the discussion investigated at *aftenposten.no* grew ugly when people started to call each other names. The editorial policies are comparable in these two cases: The editors will only censor illegal (in this case, racist) statements.

There is a sense of mutual respect at *kjernen.no* which is often loudly missing when similar themes are discussed by fans online elsewhere. I would like to indicate two possible causes for this. First, all participants at *kjernen.no* are members of the same imagined community, in this case with a few shared norms and values. While the norms might change over time, they are grounded in respect for the current players in the team. The feeling of belonging to the same community helps bring about a more respectful manner of communication among the fans. While *kjernen.no* is a virtual community, existing online, the members also meet and interact face-to-face several times a week. The community still share locality. The second possible explanation is related to news criteria in journalism. When journalists cover the news, they often seek to highlight conflict. This is often understandable, as it can help clarify issues by seeing them from different angles. But this tendency to polarise issues also induced a polarised debate on *aftenposten.no*. Participants in the debate were provoked to join in to attack one or more of the others, leaving little room for more quiet reflection. The style of discussion was arrogant and participants seldom saw any value in opposing arguments put forward by others. The culture of communication at *kjernen.no*, by contrast, fomented a different style, one in which leading members of the community often openly confessed to being in doubt, seeing both sides or having changed opinion. A new argument could therefore influence the debate. The culture of communication itself helped the community to adapt and respond to global processes of change.

While “cloakroom community” might still be a useful term to describe some of the dimensions of communities of football fans, this study has shown that football fans are not necessarily detached from existing communities. And membership of a community of fans is not necessarily an easy alternative to the “real thing”, free from the many obligations of other communities. Membership of a community of fans can stimulate processes of identity and reconstruction of community in ways which also have implications for the wider community, for instance the imagined community of “Norwegians” or “trønder”. 

## About the author

Roy Krøvel is Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences.  
E-mail: roy [dot] krovel [at] jbi [dot] hio [dot] no

## Note

[1.](#) Hognestad, 2009, p. 362.

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## Editorial history

Received 27 February 2012; accepted 10 April 2012.



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New media and identity among fans of a Norwegian football club

by Roy Krøvel

*First Monday*, Volume 17, Number 5 - 7 May 2012

<http://www.firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2882/3208>

doi:10.5210/fm.v17i5.2882