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Jonathan Liew

English football is consumed by racism and hatred. Can the cycle be broken?

Four decades ago, before his England debut, Cyrille Regis[1] was sent a bullet in the post by a racist fan. In 2008, shortly after being appointed as Chelsea's manager, Avram Grant[2] was deluged with dozens of antisemitic emails. These days, as footballers continue to be subjected to racist abuse on Twitter and Instagram, the temptation is to wonder whether anything has changed except the method of delivery.

5   The recent wave of social media abuse – directed primarily at prominent black footballers – follows a well-worn pattern. The incidents begin to cluster with a grisly momentum: Marcus Rashford, Axel Tuanzebe on two separate occasions, Anthony Martial, Reece James, Romaine Sawyers, Alex Jankewitz and Lauren James.[3] Statements are issued. Governing bodies, broadcasters and public figures clamber over each other to offer their condemnation, often by way of a fancy social media graphic. And then, like any wave, the

10   anger subsides. The news cycle gets bored. Racism carries on, and so does everyone else. Until the next wave, at least.

As Rashford put it last week: "Only time will tell if the situation improves. But it's not improved over the last few years."

Can the cycle ever be broken? Will football ever be able to move beyond strong statements and outright

15   condemnations and the occasional glimpse of a man walking out of a magistrate's court with a jacket over his head? Players and senior figures within the game have urged greater vigilance from social media platforms. The government has threatened tech companies with criminal sanctions and fines running into the billions. But for now, all of this remains just words. Realistically, are we ever going to get the measure of this thing?

20   This isn't just about racism, as demonstrated by the death threats sent to referee Mike Dean over the weekend, or the recent treatment of the pundit Karen Carney[4] by Leeds fans. Nor is it about single incidents, or even overt abuse. Focusing on social media platforms is to address only the thinnest sliver of the problem, given that much of the abuse currently being dished out has simply migrated online in the absence of fans from stadiums. For all the joy it inspires, the stirring stories it serves up, English football

25   feels more thoroughly consumed by hatred than at any point in its recent history: a smell you can neither accurately place nor decisively ignore.

It's in the increasing rancour and tetchiness of online discourse. It's the climate in which virtually any act can be infinitely parsed and debated along pre-existing lines of difference. It's the subtle difference between a newspaper reporting the news and a newspaper social media account baiting its followers with

30   wild, tendentious headlines. It's the difference between singing about Arsène Wenger[5] getting sacked and Ed Woodward[6] dying. And whether you like it or not, we're all tangled up in it.

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[1] *Cyrille Regis*: (1958-2018) black English international footballer
[2] *Avram Grant*: football manager born in Israel
[3] *Marcus Rashford […] Lauren James*: black footballers
[4] *Karen Carney***:** English sports journalist and former professional footballer who was subjected to abuse on social media
[5] *Arsène Wenger*: French former manager of Arsenal
[6] *Ed Woodward*: executive vice-chairman of Manchester United until the end of 2021. He was subject to death threats and abusive chants in January 2020

Last season Haringey Borough in north London were the victims of racist abuse from Yeovil Town fans during an FA Cup qualifying game. Their goalkeeper Valery Pajetat was spat at, pelted with stones and called a "black cunt". After the game was stopped for several minutes, manager Tom Loizou decided that there was only one course of action. "My players were getting racially abused," he says now. "The referee had no control. So I decided to take them off. The FA Cup don't mean that much to me. I said to the Yeovil manager: 'Good luck in the next round.'"

As ever with these things, the initial media interest quickly disappeared. The world of football tutted, frowned and returned to its business. For Haringey, meanwhile, the healing process has taken a good deal longer. The additional security measures required for the replay left them several thousand pounds out of pocket. The emotional scars, meanwhile, have been worse. "The club's been in decline ever since," Loizou says. "My goalkeeper didn't want to play any more. Coby Rowe, the best centre-half I've ever had at this club, had to move on. The players are still struggling. What do you say? It's a one-off? It won't happen again?"

This isn't Haringey's first brush with racism. At an FA Trophy game, Loizou claims that a player's pregnant girlfriend was followed to the car park by an opposition fan and taunted with the words: "You black slag, you and that fucking baby inside you." And like many within the game, Loizou senses on some level that things are getting worse. "I used to play in the local leagues around here," he says. "There was Greeks, blacks, Turkish, and no racial abuse at all. Now, all I see is hatred all around me, all the time. The country is rife with it."

Last season, 287 of the 2,663 football fixtures played in England and Wales – more than 10% – featured at least one incident of hate crime, according to the Home Office. Arrests for racist or indecent chanting rose by 150%, even though fans stopped attending matches in March. And yet to focus on a few headline figures is to ignore the broader trend: a slow and gradual raising of the temperature, a hardening of minds and a coarsening of conversation. What used to be considered beyond the pale is no longer, because we have lost any ability to decide collectively what the pale even is.

The sociologist Dr Jamie Cleland has been studying the discourse of football and football fans for more than a decade, and agrees that the window has shifted. "What we're seeing," he says, "is a 'casualisation' of language. Society has become a lot busier, and so social norms aren't being challenged as they would have been historically. People are getting away with things that they wouldn't have a generation previously."

There are clear parallels here between the rise of online abuse towards footballers and the highly gendered hooliganism of the 1970s and 1980s, a process that Cleland describes as "capital acquisition". "This was the notorious aspect of hooliganism: people engaged in violent behaviour because it gave them a form of social or cultural capital," he says. "Through the generations, football has historically turned boys into men. Whereas once they proved themselves by engaging in violence, now it's about proving their worth online as a fan. That person might not have a high level of capital in their everyday life. But this gives them a sense of worthiness. They want someone to bite. They feel alive."

The natural rejoinder is that, now as ever, the actions of a vocal and vicious minority should not taint the standing of the majority. But this defence only really works to a point, and in any case: who or what is really being defended here? You do not have to physically tweet racist abuse or sing antisemitic songs in order to be complicit in a culture that enables these actions. "We keep talking about a minority," says Loizou. "But they're in amongst the majority. And if the majority are doing nothing about it, then they're just as guilty."

Much of the debate has focused upon pressuring social media platforms to more proactively police hate speech, even if it's not entirely clear how this would work in practice. Blocking racist words or accounts only deals with the problem at the most basic level. Removing user anonymity would have a disastrous effect on repressed groups living under autocratic regimes (for example, LGBT people in the United Arab

Emirates), and does nothing about the many users perfectly content to churn out racism under their own name.

80 To a large extent, the problem is one of data and intelligence. We may think we have an idea in our head of who the archetypal racist fan might be. But we still don't know for sure, even though the technology to profile and proactively target problem users has long existed in other sectors. "We don't have a taxonomy of offenders," says Sanjay Bhandari, the chair of Kick It Out[7]. "We're aware that there are kids doing this because they're bored. There are people who don't know better. People who have extremist views, people 85 who want to put off opponents, people from outside the UK who think they're not going to be caught. For all we know, some of it might be automated bots. What we don't know is the volume of each category."

Naturally, big social media companies are highly resistant to the idea of giving up their precious user data, and often hide behind prepared statements rather than submit themselves to interviews or scrutiny. Often that approach strays into outright defiance: last July one police force investigating online abuse 90 contacted Twitter to ask for details about a particular racist post. They finally received a reply in January, almost six months later.

Bhandari advocates a two-pronged strategy: pressure on the tech giants, allied with lobbying for changes in the law. "If you look at something like hacking," he explains, "we know who's doing it. For years, the banking industry has had a common registry of offending IP addresses for anti-money-laundering 95 purposes. These systems exist. But you need the help of Twitter and Facebook, because they've got all the data. Unless you understand the problem, all we're doing is playing whack-a-mole[8]."

Dr Mark Doidge is a senior research fellow at the University of Brighton who specialises in football fan culture. He reckons football fans are often an easy scapegoat for far broader social problems. "Historically, football fans have been demonised," he says. "They're invariably seen as violent or racist. Whereas in 100 reality, football fans come from all walks of life. And it's a very convenient excuse to blame things on football fans that are happening at a wider level.

"There is a particular aspect of football culture around the world which is about: we are this, you are that. It's about superiority, masculine hierarchy. And that structures a lot of interactions between fans. However, this coarsening of debate comes from the top. The prime minister has made openly sexist, 105 homophobic and racist comments. So you have a society that is more comfortable speaking about these things."

Cleland describes this as "internalised disposition" – behaviours we learn by watching others. If we see politicians rise to power despite making openly racist or sexist comments, if the restraining influence of peers and social groups is devalued to the point of irrelevance, if we see the most obnoxious and attention- 110 seeking online behaviour rewarded with likes and followers, it follows that these traits will filter into everyday currency.

And so, if these forces go as deep as humanity itself, how on earth do we begin to resist them? "I've seen people argue education is important," says Cleland. "But in many ways, we're past that stage. The problem is so deep. The fluidity is getting out of control. It's probably impossible, but society needs to 115 shake itself down, reassess the ways in which we deal with each other."

For Doidge, meanwhile, the solution lies at source: with supporters themselves. "Over the last 30 years, football fans have shown that they can work together when they recognise there's a bigger issue," he says. "The clubs have a huge role to play, but the best way of getting fans to do something is to propose it from within the fanbase. Not UEFA[9], not the police, but your friends." And when Ian Wright[10] published

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[7] *Kick It Out*: an organization working for equality and inclusion in football
[8] an arcade game where you hit a mole that pops up before it goes back into its hole
[9] the Union of European Football Associations
[10] *Ian Wright*: black former British footballer, now a football coach

120 screenshots of racist abuse he had received last year, Instagram users identified the culprit within minutes. On Thursday an Irish teenager called Patrick O'Brien was sentenced to probation for the attack, although to widespread dismay O'Brien escaped a criminal conviction.

And so really this is a problem that goes well beyond football. It encompasses the criminal justice system, the hegemony of Big Tech, the dereliction of our politics and the way we talk to each other. The
125 solutions, too, must be equally wide-ranging: from the banning order and the boycott to the block button and the coordinated political campaign. On some level it feels like a hopeless crusade: like trying to hold back the world with just your two bare hands.

Yet perhaps there are still grounds for optimism. Football has so often acted as a petri dish for wider social trends: the same toxic combination of fierce tribalism and crowd anonymity that now feels so
130 endemic to our lives as a whole. You can look at this in one of two ways. Either we complain that the task is too monstrous, the forces of chaos too irresistible, and draw the curtains. Or we conclude that if football is a microcosm of society, then by fixing the part we can start to fix the whole. Football may not be the root cause of all its problems. But perhaps it can be the root of the solution.

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