

Football Fans, Their Information, The Web and The Personal Home Page

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By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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by Shant Narsesian

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	x
List of Tables.....	xi
Abstract	xiii
Acknowledgements	xv

Chapter I..... 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 The Personal Home Page (PHP).....	1
1.3 Motivation for this Book.....	3
1.4 Aims and Objectives	5
1.5 Scope.....	7
1.6 Case Study	7
1.7 Limitations of this Study.....	8
1.8 Football Background.....	8
1.9 Football Websites.....	12
1.10 Chapter Conclusion.....	13

Chapter II..... 15

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction.....	15
2.2 Search Strategy	15
2.3 Personal Home Pages.....	16
2.3.1 Definition	17
2.3.2 Blogs (WebLogs) and Social Networking (SN) Sites	21
2.4 The PHP as an Object of Study.....	24
2.4.1 Characteristics of PHPs and Related Studies.....	24
2.4.2 Purpose of PHPs.....	26
2.4.3 Accessibility of PHPs.....	27
2.4.4 PHP Numbers	28
2.4.5 PHP Problems	29
2.4.6 PHPs and Grey Literature.....	30
2.4.7 Virtual Communities, Communities of Practice and Knowledge Sharing	32
2.4.8 PHPs as Sources of Information.....	35

2.5 Information Seeking.....	38
2.5.1 Information Seeking Models	38
2.5.2 Environments of Information Seeking	41
2.6 Football Studies	43
2.6.1 Football Surveys.....	44
2.6.2 Football in the Community.....	47
2.6.3 Football and Legal Issues	49
2.7 Chapter Conclusion.....	53
Chapter III	55
Methodology	
3.1 Introduction.....	55
3.2 Methodology Overview	55
3.3 Stage One People-Study.....	57
3.3.1 Football Fan Interviews	59
3.3.2 Football Fan Interview Questions.....	61
3.3.3 Questionnaires	64
3.3.4 Employed Questionnaire	66
3.3.5 Questionnaire Questions.....	68
3.4 Stage One Web-Study	70
3.4.1 Finding PHPs.....	72
3.4.2 PHP Inclusion.....	74
3.4.3 PHP Classification.....	75
3.4.4 Comparing PHPs	81
3.4.5 Relative Information Contents Ratings (RICR)	83
3.4.6 Comparison Results.....	88
3.4.7 Uniqueness of Information on the Web.....	93
3.4.8 Accuracy of Information	95
3.5 Stage Two Overview.....	99
3.6 Stage Two Web-Study	99
3.6.1 Website Examination Procedure	100
3.6.2 West Ham Online Website Investigation Example	101
3.7 Stage Two People-Study	104
3.7.1 Web Author Interviews	104
3.7.2 Web Author Interview Questions.....	106
3.8 Evaluation and Replicability	108
3.9 Chapter Conclusion.....	109

Chapter IV	111
Results I—Information Seeking Tools of Football Fans	
4.1 Introduction.....	111
4.2 Demographics	112
4.2.1 Premiership Demographics	112
4.2.2 Football League Demographics.....	114
4.2.3 Comparisons Within This Study	116
4.3 The Objectives	118
4.3.1 Tools and Methods Used for Acquiring Football Related Information.....	118
4.3.2 Reasons for the Use of Particular Tools and Methods.....	128
4.3.3 The Role Played by the Web	129
4.3.4 The Role of the PHP Within the Web	137
4.3.5 Football Fan Satisfaction with the Availability of Football Related Information.....	140
4.4 Chapter Conclusion.....	145
Chapter V	147
Results II—Perceptions and Facts about PHPs	
5.1 Introduction.....	147
5.2 The Football PHPs	147
5.3 Unique Information on Football PHPs.....	149
5.4 Archival Storage on Football PHPs	155
5.5 The Accuracy of the Information on Football PHPs.....	157
5.6 Factors that Affect the Availability and Quality of PHPs	159
5.6.1 Quantity of PHPs.....	159
5.6.2 Quality of PHPs.....	168
5.7 Football Fan Perceptions Concerning PHPs	175
5.8 The Causes of Football Fan Perceptions Concerning PHPs.....	182
5.9 Chapter Conclusion.....	185
Chapter VI	187
Results III—The Club Community Composite Page (CCCP)	
6.1 Introduction.....	187
6.2 Web Author Interviews.....	187
6.2.1 Demographics.....	188
6.2.2 Web Author Motivations.....	189
6.2.3 Website Difficulties.....	190
6.2.4 Site Popularity and User Participation.....	191
6.2.5 Site Collaboration.....	192
6.2.6 Web Author Opinions And The CCCP Concept	193

6.3 Website Collaboration Investigations	193
6.3.1 Football Website Franchises.....	194
6.3.2 Supporter Groups	195
6.3.3 Fanzines.....	196
6.3.4 Forums.....	196
6.3.5 Notable Collaborative Efforts.....	197
6.3.6 PHPs to Collaboration.....	198
6.3.7 Summary of Online Collaborative Efforts.....	200
6.4 Crafting A Communal Site Outline	201
6.4.1 Collaborative Sites - An Ideal Tool.....	201
6.4.2 The Club Community Composite Page (CCCP)	203
6.5 Chapter Conclusion.....	207
Chapter VII.....	209
Discussions and Conclusion	
7.1 Introduction.....	209
7.2 Foundations of the Study - Football Fan Information Seeking	210
7.3 Personal Home Page Conclusions.....	213
7.3.1 Characteristics	215
7.3.2 Accessibility of PHPs.....	217
7.3.3 The PHP as an Information Resource.....	218
7.3.4 Football Fans, PHPs and Online Collaborations	223
7.4 Original Contributions	224
7.5 Future Work.....	228
7.5.1 Web and PHP Studies.....	229
7.5.2 Related Fields	229
7.6 Conclusion	231
References and Bibliography.....	233
Appendices:	
Appendix A	249
Interview Guides	
Appendix B.....	257
Information about Interviewees	
Appendix C.....	259
Calls for Respondents	

Appendix D	261
Offline Browsers	
Appendix E.....	267
Corroboration of Web-Study Methodology	
Appendix F.....	287
Online Questionnaire	
Appendix G	305
Offline Questionnaire	
Appendix H	321
PHP Addresses (URLs)	
Appendix I.....	323
Website Collaboration Investigation Addresses (URLs)	
Appendix J.....	349
Notable Collaborative Site Addresses (URLs)	
Appendix K	351
Additional CCCP Details	
Appendix L.....	355
Notable Collaborative Site Descriptions	

LIST OF FIGURES

2.1 Wilson's model of Information Seeking Behaviour	40
3.1 PHP Identification Flowchart	78
3.2 WestHamOnline.net (WHO) front page	102
3.3 WHO FAQ page	103
4.1 Premier League demographics - socio-economic grouping.....	114
4.2 Football League demographics - socio-economic grouping	116
4.3 Questionnaires and interviews - socio-economic groupings.....	118
4.4 Notable tools or methods used by football fans for information seeking	120
4.5 Time spent talking about football (per day).....	122
4.6 Heavy users of tools and methods	131
4.7 Reasons fans use the Internet (for football purposes)	134
4.8 Types of sites used by fans	138
4.9 Sites meeting the needs of fans.....	141
5.1 Types of information according to division.....	154
5.2 Archival (A)/Locally Exclusive (X) Ratings as percentage of total ..	156
5.3 Degree of accuracy	158
5.4 Number of PHPs per division	160
5.5 Number of PHPs per team	161
5.6 PHP proportions (to stadium capacity, average attendance and total annual attendance	167
5.7 Geraldine's Viva Manchester United	170
5.8 Southend United Database screenshot.....	172
5.9 Fan Perceptions - How innovative, comprehensive, up to date and easy to use PHPs are (including online and offline questionnaires).	177
5.10 Fan Perceptions - How interactive, authoritative, independent and quick to update PHPs are (including online and offline questionnaires)..	178
5.11 Fan Perceptions - How unique, archival (meaning the information found on them goes far back) and accurate the information on PHPs is (including online and offline questionnaires).....	180
6.3 Screenshot of United We Stand (the Manchester United rivals.net site).....	195

LIST OF TABLES

1.1 Gauges of public interest in English professional football leagues for the 2003/04 season	11
2.1 Definitions or assumed definitions of PHPs	19
2.2 Personal Home Page Providers within the "Top 50 most frequently linked" websites in 2002	28
2.3 Mode, user state and identification according to Maurer (2006)	41
2.4 The 12 sections of the FA Premier League's National Fan Survey Questionnaire (2005).	44
3.1 Interview questions	62
3.2 Questionnaire questions	69
3.3 Criteria for PHP selection (custom-made using Smith's (1997) Toolbox).....	75
3.4 Inclusion and exclusion of PHPs	77
3.5 Results from QPR website search.....	81
3.6 Relative Information Content Ratings (RICR)	88
3.7 PHP comparisons for QPR	88
3.8 PHP comparisons for QPR (continued)	90
3.9 PHP comparisons for QPR (continued)	91
3.10 PHP comparisons for QPR (continued)	92
3.11 PHP comparisons for QPR (continued)	92
3.12 PHP comparisons for QPR (continued)	92
3.13 Locally Exclusive and Web-Wide Unique instances of information (QPR).....	94
3.14 Degree of accuracy	96
3.15 Accuracy of information (QPR)	98
3.16 Stage One Web-Study: Step by step	99
4.1 The FA Premier League National Fan Survey (2005) and this study's questionnaire (online and offline combined, showing the Premier League only).	113
4.2 Football League Supporter survey (2006) and questionnaire (Football League only).	115
4.3 Demographics of the two sets of questionnaires and the interviewees.	117
4.4 Percentage of respondents using tools or methods for information seeking	119
4.5 Time spent per day by respondents talking about football (percentages)	121
4.6. Contents of the Newcastle United FC Annual Report (2005/06)	125

4.7 Reasons given by heavy users of any method for the use of that method (online and offline combined).....	128
4.8 The first tool or method respondents would use when looking for information.....	132
4.9 Main reason why fans use the Internet in relation to their football needs	133
4.10 Time spent on the web reading about their team	135
4.11 Number of people that use each type of website	138
4.12 Frequency of PHP use	139
4.13 Frequency of PHP use against time spent on the web (online).....	140
4.14 Sites meeting the needs of fans (interviewees)	141
4.15 Sites meeting the needs of fans (5 point scale) against time spent on the web (online).	142
4.16 How often fans find what they are looking for (online and offline)	143
4.17 How often fans find what they are looking for (interviewees)	143
4.18 How often fans find what they are looking for against time spent on the web (online and offline)	144
4.19 How often fans look for a specific piece of information	144
5.1 PHP classification.....	150
5.2 Ratings per PHP - These are ratings (RICRs) acquired from PHP section comparisons (i.e. the numbers represent PHP sections).	152
5.3 Ratings per division	154
5.4 Instances of archival storage according to division	157
5.5 Degree of accuracy of PHPs	157
5.6 Number of PHPs, average attendance, stadium capacity and total annual attendance per team (2005/06 season, Soccer-stats.com Site 2006)	165
5.7 Features of notable PHPs.....	174
5.8 Notable PHPs and their RICRs.....	175
5.9 Don't Know replies on questionnaires (online and offline)	176
5.10 Replies from respondents when asked how Unique, Far Back and Accurate the information on PHPs was (including online and offline questionnaires).....	179
6.1 Web Author Demographics	188
6.2 Motivations of Web Authors	189
6.3 Demotivations of Web Authors	190
6.4 List of Notable Collaborative Websites.....	197
6.5 Instances of PHPs that became non-PHPs	200
7.1 Objectives 1 to 5	210
7.2 Objectives 6 to 11	214
7.3 Objective 12.....	224

ABSTRACT

From the early days of the Internet to the present day, the World Wide Web has developed into one of the world's largest information resources. One of the first genres of web pages, which was also one of the first information resources, was the Personal Home Page (PHP). Over this same period of time, professional football in England has created the world's richest league and by extension an abundance of football related PHPs. This book investigates the role of the PHP as an information resource using the subject area of professional football in England.

A holistic approach is taken so as to view the PHP from a broader context, as one information resource amongst many, including non-PHPs and even offline information resources (e.g. reference books). Within this work, football fans are interviewed along with web authors, surveys are carried out (by distributing both online and offline questionnaires) and research is also carried out online, examining football related PHPs and online web collaborations.

Results suggest that whilst there are many informational benefits to be found on PHPs, such as plentiful unique information, they have low levels of use amongst football fans. The work concludes by proposing an avenue to the maximisation of the informational benefit of PHPs through a blueprint for a type of communal football website called the Club Community Composite Page (CCCP).

Overall, several contributions are made to the field of information science, most notably attaining an improved understanding of PHPs as unique and accurate information providers online and devising new research methods for PHP research. In particular, the method of identification of PHPs developed here will be a useful tool for future researchers of PHPs. The contributions of this work are likely to be of value to researchers working in relevant sub-fields of information science, such as information seeking, web genres, grey literature and virtual communities.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

When the World Wide Web first came to being, it was primarily a means of making information easily available and accessible. Since then, it has developed many other uses, such as a real time communications medium (video-conferencing on the web), a sales point (e-commerce) and even the world's largest electronic playground (online gaming). However, the web's first role helped it achieve its status as one of the world's largest information resources. One aspect of this resource, is the Personal Home Page (PHP)- a website which represents the point of view of one individual (de Saint-Georges, 1997). At the same time, the popularity of professional English football has grown, with the Premier League achieving the status of the world's richest single league (BBC Website 2006d). In these terms, this book aims to examine the role of the PHP as an information source within the field of professional football in England.¹

1.2 The Personal Home Page (PHP)

The PHP is an entity that has attracted various kinds of interest from numerous fields. From an academic point of view, the PHP has been used from the very beginning (e.g. Koch's Personal Homepage 1993), as a portal to the individuals who created them for both work and non-work purposes. Initially the computing department's plaything, soon it was available to all academic staff, and then students. At the time of writing

¹ The subject area for the case study in this study was the top four professional leagues in England. It is acknowledged that over the years, Welsh teams have played in these divisions. However, so as to differentiate from the semi-professional Principality Welsh Premier League, this subject area is referred to as the professional English leagues (and numerous variants thereof) without the term “Wales” included.

(but also for the foreseeable future), millions of PHPs exist, in various forms and guises.

Once so many PHPs were created, it was inevitable that the PHP would be looked into further, examined and researched. PHP research has been ongoing now for over 10 years. Investigations have been carried out within numerous academic fields of interest, including computer science (e.g. Hoff and Mundhenk 2001), librarianship (e.g. Haines 1999), information science (e.g. Thelwall 2002), psychology (e.g. Joinson and Banyard 2002), education (e.g. Arnold and Miller 2000) and journalism (e.g. Dominick 1999) to name but a few. However, even though the interest spans many fields, there has not been a great deal of in-depth research carried out and there are still many gaps in our knowledge of the PHP. It would not have been unreasonable to expect more to have been known by this stage about PHPs as a whole, particularly their role as an information resource and the information available on them. This study aims to go some way in providing some potentially invaluable insight into this feature of PHPs.

In addition to this, a secondary though still potentially very beneficial and insightful aspect of this study is the examination of various aspects of the information seeking behaviour of football fans who follow the teams in the top four English leagues. There are, quite literally, millions of football fans in the United Kingdom alone and the English leagues have a reach way beyond their own borders. This is especially true presently, with football teams making a special effort to extend the range of their appeal with summer tours to the United States and the Far East. Traditionally, the fans of these teams, both inside and outside the UK, have been restricted to the more traditional media in order to find out about their football clubs, including most notably the newspaper, the television and the radio. Nowadays, with the explosion of the web and all that comes with it, the availability of information concerning any professional football team has grown significantly, even more so in England (with the English language being the most popular language on the Internet). This makes such a study interesting from more than one perspective. From an information science perspective, it is interesting to see the information seeking behaviour of people who are not seeking information for professional purposes (e.g. as librarians or physicists would) and look at the role played by the web in providing a medium for this information. Furthermore, it is useful for those involved in the football industry to see not only how their fans behave when it comes to the acquisition of football relevant information,

but also the role they play in the collection and dissemination of this information (e.g. through PHPs).

1.3 Motivation for this Book

The main aspect of this book is the examination of PHPs as an information resource, with a particular focus on aspects of information found on them, but also people's perceptions of PHPs and the reasons behind them. There are many reasons why the study of PHPs is an interesting one. They are said to provide insight to numerous issues, including gender issues (Arnold and Miller 2000, Flanagan and Metzger 2003), self presentation (Wynn and Katz 1997, Papacharissi 2002a), interpersonal communication (Dominick 1999), web genres (Dillon and Gushrowski 2000) and grey literature (Thompson and Guistini 2006). This study however, is primarily concerned with their benefits in terms of information storage and dissemination.

Traditionally, supplying information has been an expensive and time consuming business. On a broad scale, parties and institutions which have supplied information have been motivated by money (e.g. newspapers, publishing houses) or other agendas, most notably political (e.g. governments) or religious (e.g. the church). With the advent of the web and the introduction of PHPs, the ability to supply information has been given to just about anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. As a result, people who create PHPs have the ability to fill in information "gaps" in subject areas where the traditional motivations or agendas are not present. As such, any well-founded study that provides additional insight into the workings of this information resource is of value.

It also can be argued, that in a certain sense, PHPs are a resource created out of nothing. The fact that ordinary people spend time making information freely available for other people is hugely beneficial for information consumers, and particularly fascinating for information scientists as well as other information providers. In addition to the potential of filling informational gaps, the sheer scale of the information provided alone (i.e. in terms of numbers of PHPs available) makes it worthwhile to investigate this phenomenon further.

Meanwhile, using football as a case study, creates another series of interesting aspects that would be useful to look into, either directly or otherwise. Many studies have been carried out looking into the

informational behaviour of various groups of people. The titles often include broad groups such as scientists (e.g. Brown 1999), academics (e.g. Ocholla 1996), scholars and students (e.g. Bates 1996), but also more specific groups such as librarians (e.g. Schreiber and Moring 1997), mathematicians and physicists (e.g. Brown 1999), lawyers (e.g. Wilkinson 2001) and even members of parliament (e.g. Orton, Marcella and Baxter 2000). However, all these groups of people are either involved in professional occupations, or potentially involved in professional occupations (i.e. the students). In this book, the information related behaviour of the football fans is also being examined (as a result of the holistic approach being used), and this provides an insight into the informational behaviour of a group of people not normally investigated in this way. As this is an exploratory study, it will be difficult to use these results for direct comparison with studies of the "professional" groups. However, in the longer term this will help provide a new angle in the viewing of all information related studies. Indeed, to date, such studies which look at the information resources available to ordinary citizens, particularly from a football fan's point of view, have been very sparse.

Furthermore, an additional football related positive aspect of this book is its relative independence in terms of stakeholders. Such studies are often commissioned by bodies that have a vested interest in certain aspects of the field (e.g. businesses that are looking for ways to increase their revenue). In this instance, the study is purely the initiative of a football fan and without any reason to promote one group over another; the results of this study should help improve communication and interaction between all involved parties, not least between the clubs and their fans.

In academic terms, football as a field for information science studies is interesting because of its unusual information environment. This environment is a product of the various parties that are involved in football and the manner of their involvement. Firstly, the largest group (in terms of numbers of people) of interested parties is the collection of fans who have primarily an emotional investment in football (and sometimes a monetary one too). For the fans, football is not only an interest but often a way of life, with strong social implications. Secondly, there are the individuals involved in the performance of individual clubs, such as the directors, the players, the coaches and so on. Their involvement is slightly different, as they too have an emotional investment at some level, but naturally their predominant concern is (in most cases) the state of their individual careers. Thirdly, there are related businesses (such as the television companies,

clothes manufacturers), that have a financial interest either in the performance of a specific club (e.g. a club sponsor), or a financial interest in the well being of football as a whole (e.g. a football broadcaster). Finally, there are certain organisations that try to referee disputes between these parties, and whose role it is to look out for the interests of everyone involved (i.e. national governments and football associations). All of these parties take part in the absorption and dissemination of information concerning football, creating the aforementioned unusual information environment.

At the same time, with the growth of the Internet in recent years, an extra twist is now added with the relative ease of information exchange that the web has allowed between all the parties. Football fans themselves have a variety of types of sites which they use to publish information and communicate with each other (including the PHP), while those involved in football have their own sites (i.e. the club sites), as do the related businesses (e.g. British Sky Broadcasting) and the football associations. This, in combination with the fact that the English football industry is one of the largest in the world (Harding 2003, BBC Website 2006d) and that English is the primary language on the web, makes professional football in England a field which is particularly suited to such a study.

Finally, in the longer term, projects such as this will provide data which will facilitate a better understanding of what football fans use in their search and consumption of information, including aspects of the web and PHPs. In the shorter term, this study provides a more specific direction which can be taken in order to improve the information seeking experiences of football fans in England and more specifically the use of PHPs. With the millions of PHPs online (Pickavet 2006, Riley 2005, Wired Magazine 2000, Lawrence and Giles 1999), and millions of individuals putting effort into the creation of sites for the benefit of others, without a systematic study, it is very difficult to say what the effects of these efforts are. If one takes the view that these sites are a "natural resource", (seeing as there was no concerted effort in initialising their creation), more studies should look into ways of harnessing the power of these PHPs.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this study was to investigate the role of the PHP as an information resource with the view to making a recommendation for improvements that would help maximise the benefits gained by the efforts

put in by PHP and other web authors (as well as others active in the football Internet community). An attempt was made to understand the popularity of the PHP, what their users think of it, what they themselves offer, what they could potentially offer and what problems afflict them. In order to achieve this aim, a popular field was chosen where the web is heavily utilised and PHPs, their users (in the general public) and their potential users are readily available. A field which meets such criteria is professional football in England. Having selected a suitable field, an all round approach was taken, looking at all the ways in which fans acquire football related information and within this, the role of the PHP.

The specific objectives of this study were therefore:

1. To determine the tools and methods ordinary football fans use to acquire their "footballing" information.
2. To determine the reasons for which these tools and methods are used.
3. To determine the significance of the role played by the web in providing this "footballing" information.
4. To determine the significance of the role played by the PHP within the role of the web in providing this "footballing" information.
5. To determine whether, all in all, football fans are satisfied with the availability of "footballing" information.

And more specifically about PHPs:

6. To determine the number of sections that have instances of unique information available on football PHPs.
7. To determine the number of sections that have instances of archival storage on football PHPs.
8. To determine the degree of accuracy of the information available on football PHPs.
9. To determine the factors that have an effect on the availability and quality of PHPs.
10. To determine the perceptions that football fans have concerning PHPs.
11. To determine the causes behind the perceptions that football fans have of PHPs.

Having completed the research in order to meet these objectives, a recommendation was deemed suitable, and an additional objective was introduced:

12. To craft an outline for a communal site that can encourage web authors to work together in the creation of web pages for the online community.

1.5 Scope

In an attempt to meet the aims and objectives specified, this work examined certain aspects of information seeking behaviour and occasionally touched on information needs aspects (so as to give as complete a picture as possible). As this was a one-man project with coinciding constraints, it was not possible to look into all the aspects that might have been useful to this study (see 1.7 Limitations of this Study, p. 8, later in this chapter). Concerning PHPs, samples from the four top professional leagues in England were taken and indications of their representative nature have been given. The focus was on the content of the PHPs where the bulk of the information comes from non-PHPs (i.e. organisational and news sites). Non-PHPs were also looked at, though in less detail, to help ensure that key facts about football websites were not overlooked. Clearly, more studies could have been done, including studies where PHPs are the dominant form of information (on the web), but the chosen subject area, where there are varying amounts of information provided by the various groups (i.e. the amount of information available on the highest football division is not the same as that in the lowest division), is arguably the most useful.

1.6 Case Study

The chosen subject area for this research is the field of professional football in England. The benefits of this selection include having a good deal of data and also having more than just one "informational environment" (i.e. the four separate leagues). This includes the 92 professional football teams in the top four leagues (Premiership, Championship, League 1 and League 2) in England (though this also includes three teams based in Wales). The PHPs created about teams from the set of 92 were examined and the opinions of their fans were canvassed. This was felt necessary so as to be able to determine whether the position in the league had an effect on the type of sites available. Meanwhile, every

year, teams move up and down the divisions as they gain promotion or suffer relegation. For this study, the league tables used were primarily those of the 2004/05 football season. For the research carried out to meet objective 12, the 2006/07 league tables were used.

1.7 Limitations of this Study

As this study was primarily the work of one man, the scope of the research was limited in certain ways. All the limitations mentioned here are present because of resource constraints, primarily time.

One limitation of this study is its size. Interviews were conducted, questionnaires distributed and websites examined. The numbers of all three could have been increased to enhance the results further. Meanwhile, though every effort was made to ensure the sampling of all three data collection methods was as representative as possible, ultimately for feasibility related reasons, at times, trade-offs were made, and these must be taken into account when reading the results.

In terms of PHPs, the case which is examined in this book, is one where most of the information on the web is supplied by non-PHPs (dedicated football sites and news sites e.g. football365.com, BBC.co.uk). The other side of the spectrum is the instance where PHPs provide the majority of information on a topic. Though this study provides some coverage from this viewpoint, it is not the emphasis of the work. It is possible that there are subject areas where the majority of the information available on the web is provided by PHPs and in the longer term, it is the intention of the author to carry out such studies. However, this was deemed a more suitable starting point.

On a related note, another limitation is the fact that this work uses only one case study. Again to provide a more complete picture of the field of PHPs as a whole, it would be useful to look at a greater number of case studies in other subject areas, so as to have a greater perspective on the issues being examined. In the longer term, more case studies should be carried out.

1.8 Football Background

At the time of writing, the footballing information environment is rich in all the necessary aspects. There are great numbers of both football fans

and football PHPs. In the UK, according to one report, there are said to be 18 million football fans (Bradford and Reeve, 1997). Though there is no accurate number of football PHPs available, as already mentioned, the numbers of PHPs in general are said to be in the millions (Lawrence and Giles 1999, Riley 2005). The combination of millions of football fans, millions of PHPs and early investigations conducted as part of this research, all suggest that the number of football PHPs is sufficient.

Meanwhile, parts of the subject area (particularly the Premier League) can be considered "informationally saturated". There are several communication media which give constant daily coverage of the current state of affairs. These include newspapers (e.g. The Guardian, The Sun), football magazines (e.g. FourFourTwo, Shoot) television (e.g. Sky Sports 1), including dedicated sports news channels (e.g. Sky Sports News), websites (e.g. soccer.net, football365.com) and radio (e.g. Radio5Live) including dedicated sports stations (e.g. TalkSport). Whereas this suggests that perhaps the non-PHP football websites might have every fact of football covered (therefore making PHPs less important in informational terms), it also means that finding evidence to the contrary is more definitive. This section provides figures concerning the top four professional football leagues in England as a whole, but also certain figures categorised by league (i.e. each division separately). Though the figures provided do not cover one particular year, they are still illustrative of the differing amounts of information available (and general interest in) each of the leagues.

Most of the media have an abundance of football coverage. On the Internet at the time of writing, there are 2197 sites listed in the Open Directory website in the professional football categories, whilst Yahoo! has 746. On television in the UK, there are a multitude of channels (both terrestrial and satellite or cable)² which have shown football matches (or clips of matches) from this field. In addition there are three (Sky Sports News, Eurosport News, Setanta Sports News) dedicated sports news channels, one of which (Sky Sports News) averages over 15 hours of football news

² BBC1, BBC2, ITV1 are the terrestrial channels whilst other channels digitally available such as ITV4, British Eurosport, numerous SkySports channels (1, 2, 3, Extra as well as High Definition channels), numerous Setanta Sport channels, pay per view channels and club channels (e.g. MUTV, Chelsea TV, Arsenal TV) also show relevant football matches or clips of matches.

per day.³ On the radio, there are on average, 29 programmes per week about football.⁴ In the shops, there are at least three football magazines available in ordinary newsagents in London⁵. More recently, various new forms of information delivery have also been introduced, (e.g. mobile Internet, live match broadcasts on the Internet) and such trends are set to continue as more football clubs turn into more business conscious institutions, fully concentrating on the image of their "brand".

Further evidence of the popularity of professional football in England is provided by the "financial attention" it receives. The Premiership is arguably the "richest" football league in the world, with 25% of the European football industry (Harding 2003). In the list of the 20 richest⁶ football clubs in the world (2007/08 season), 6 are in the Premiership (Deloitte and Touche 2008).

Meanwhile, in terms of getting a variety of "informational environments", the chosen field has four divisions, each with a varying degree of public interest and attention. At the one end is the top division of professional football in England (the Premier League), where the concentration of information is at its peak and at the other end is League 2, which receives noticeably less coverage.

Table 1 has certain figures which can be used as a gauge to indicate the level of public interest in the leagues, as well as some informational coverage. It is clear from the table that the Premier League gets significantly more television coverage (at least in live televised matches) than any of the remaining leagues. The number of people attending the matches at the stadiums also appears to indicate that there is noticeable variation in the divisions. The final two columns on the right show the number of websites categorised per division on the Open Directory Project (Dmoz.org) and on the Yahoo! websites.

³ Based on the names of programmes with the word football in the title or description. Average in the month of September 2008 (exact figure: 15.57 hours per day).

⁴ A search for programmes containing the word football in the title was carried out and revealed 29 (exactly 29.5) programmes a week on average in the UK. The search was carried out in September 2008 (total number of shows was 118).

⁵ Three out of the following four football magazine were found in 10 London newsagents (10 newsagents were checked in total): FourFourTwo, Shoot (Monthly), Match Magazine, World Soccer.

⁶ Richest in terms of annual turnover

Table 1 Gauges of public interest in English professional football leagues for the 2003/04 season (television coverage, football match attendance and numbers of Internet websites from the Open Directory and Yahoo!).

League	Live Televised Matches ⁷	Average Attendance ⁸	Websites on Dmoz ⁹	Websites on Yahoo! ¹⁰
Premier League	106	34,900	906	414
Championship	50	15,908	467	332
League 1	10	7,486	437	
League 2		5,389	387	

Here again, the indicators are also reinforced by football finances. In terms of nation-wide television coverage in the UK, British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) and Setanta together paid £1.7 billion pounds for three years of Premiership matches (BBC Website 2005a), whilst only £110 million was paid for three years of coverage for the remaining three leagues (from BSkyB and ITV). Meanwhile the average player salaries (per annum) for the four divisions respectively in 2001-02 (Chaudhary 2003) were £600,000, £200,000, £70,000 and £42,000.

⁷ SkySports.com Website 2004.

⁸ StatMail (www.statmail.co.uk).

⁹ Premiership figures at: DMOZ Sports > Soccer > UEFA > England > FA Premiership

Division 1 figures at: DMOZ Sports > Soccer > UEFA > England > Football League > Division 1

Division 2 figures at: DMOZ Sports > Soccer > UEFA > England > Football League > Division 2

Division 3 figures at: DMOZ Sports > Soccer > UEFA > England > Football League > Division 3

All figures checked on 13/05/04.

¹⁰ Premiership figures at: YAHOO! Directory > Regional > Countries > United Kingdom > Recreation and Sport > Sport > Football > Leagues > Premiership

Remaining division figures at: YAHOO! Directory > Regional > Countries > United Kingdom > Recreation and Sport > Sport > Football > Leagues > Nationwide Leagues

All figures checked on 27/04/04.

1.9 Football Websites

Football information generally revolves around the teams or the football matches. The most sought after information involves player transfers, player injuries, incidents that took place during matches (goals, tactics, player performance), and reaction after the match. Another aspect of football information concerns the rumours, which cannot be verified and are often incorrect (if not completely fabricated). The football websites which provide all these bits of information are very plentiful.

The most popular sites used by football fans in the Premiership are the BBC website, followed by the SkySports website followed by the FA Premier League's own site (FA Premier League 2008). Official websites play a big role for football fans with 45% using them once a day (FA Premier League 2008). At the same time, newspaper websites play a substantial role as well, with 30% of Premiership fans visiting them “usually” (FA Premier League 2008).

Naturally, every team has an official website, which helps provide the team with its public image. The official site will provide the standard information about the club (as any business website) such as information about the players, facilities, directions to the club and so on. The site also has other uses, such as an outlet for press releases and a sales tool, selling not only tickets to matches, but all official club merchandise. The majority of all official team websites are run by one company, Premium TV (PTV). In the football league (the three professional leagues below the Premier League), all the club websites are created by Premium TV, with numerous clubs in the Premiership also signed up to the company (e.g. Aston Villa).

Meanwhile, there are also three companies that offer football website “franchises”. FootyMad.net and rivals.net have a dedicated site for each professional football club in the top four leagues, whilst SportNetwork.net has dedicated sites for 24 of the 92 football clubs.¹¹

Other popular football sites include team forums or messageboards, where members discuss all aspects of the football clubs. In recent years, forums have become very popular, with larger teams having several forums recording heavy activity. Recently, they have even had a direct effect on

¹¹ Checked on the Sport Network homepage (www.sportnetwork.net) on the 26th of July 2007.

professional football. In one instance a football player changed his mind about moving clubs when he read what the fans of this prospective club thought of the idea (BBC Website 2005b).

Local newspapers also play an important role in the dissemination of information about the local team, and by extension, their websites also play a part in providing information about the team, particularly where player transfers or rumours about them are important. Finally, other common football related sites include fan sites¹² (e.g. Celtic Supporter in London), webzines¹³ and of course, PHPs.

1.10 Chapter Conclusion

The vast number of PHPs on the Internet have, to date, been studied from numerous points of view within various fields such as psychology, information science, computer science and others. They have been useful to study as a way of gaining insight into areas such as gender issues, self presentation and interpersonal communication to name but a few. However, in the recent past, good reasons (e.g. the vast numbers of PHPs available) have emerged to believe that they are of value as information resources. For the purpose of studying the PHP as an information resource, the subject area of professional English football was deemed suitable thanks to the varying informational environments it provides (a vast amount of information and PHPs for the Premier League, yet significantly less information and fewer PHPs for the lower leagues).

The next step was to establish a firm foundation from which to carry out such a study, namely the examination of all current relevant literature. This is detailed in the following chapter.

¹² Fans of a team create a site to attract other fans of the same team, so as to arrange social events (i.e. watching a game all together in a public venue).

¹³ The online version of a fanzine.

