

Setting the Standard: Why Fanzines Matter

Contributed by Professor Chris Atton - Napier University

It is easy, perhaps too easy, to dismiss fanzines. Some consider them as the inconsequential ramblings of obsessive's with too much time on their hands. Others feel that they are vehicles for wannabe journalists who cannot make it in the professional media. With so many fanzines available on the web, some believe that the level of discussion that takes place on fanzine sites rarely rises above that of the gutter.

As an academic I have been researching fanzines for over fifteen years. My work shows fanzines in a very different light. I have read thousands of these amateur publications; I have talked with their editors, their contributors and their readers. And I have learned that fanzines play an extremely important role in the cultural life of a nation.

The fanzine deals with popular culture, such as football, music, films, television and genre fiction. By its very nature, popular culture is enjoyed by ordinary people – its audiences do not need any special qualifications to appreciate it. In this respect football fans (for example) are no different from sports journalists. Simon Frith, Professor of Music at Edinburgh University, argues that ‘critics of popular forms need know nothing about such forms except as consumers; their skill is to be able to write about ordinary experience’. In other words, the ‘amateur’ fan has the potential to write about their experiences of football just as expertly and just as knowledgeably as the football commentator. The football fan is just as likely to offer a detailed analysis of a game, of a team or of an individual footballer as is the professional journalist. That fan is likely to draw on a wealth of accumulated knowledge, comparing games that have taken place that same day, comparing games and players historically, examining the local game as well as the European competition.

These analyses do not take place in a vacuum, however. Simon Frith goes on to say that music fanzines provide a space where a ‘democratic conversation [takes place] between music lovers, a social celebration of a particular kind of musical attention and commitment’. The same is true of the football fanzine. I would add that the conversation in fanzines is ‘democratic’ because the knowledge and authority on which it is based come not from formal education or professional training but primarily from untutored, amateur enthusiasm. The development of online fanzines makes this conversation even more intense: no longer do contributors have to wait till the next issue to have their opinions read, nor wait till the issue after that to read the reaction of others. The online fanzine is valuable not only to local fans. It enables fans scattered across the country – even the world – to participate freely in this conversation.

There are negative aspects to this freedom, of course. Much attention has been paid to the display of sectarianism on some football fan sites, and with good reason: hate speech must not be tolerated. But we must remember that the majority of fans do not engage in this shameful activity. More importantly, perhaps, all the football fanzine editors I have spoken with over the years have expressed their strong antipathy to such speech: they do everything they can to prevent it and nothing to encourage it.

Sectarian behaviour comes from a misguided sense of loyalty to a club. That loyalty, however, is more often put to much better use, to create a community. Fanzines are produced by amateurs, by non-professionals. They offer great potential for democratic participation. Rather than media production being the province of elite, centralised organisations and institutions, fanzines offer the possibilities for individuals and groups to create their own media ‘from the periphery’, so to speak. But this is not to think of fanzines merely as cultural aberrations or marginal activities: the football fanzine can be central to an especially powerful form of community. The loyalty of fans to a club does not end when the full-time whistle blows. Their loyalty extends to an interest in how the club is run, the facilities it offers and how it manages its finances, even to the price of the match programme. Football fanzines are often places where the corporatism of the big clubs is critiqued, not out of a sense of disloyalty or disruption, but because fans care passionately about the game. For them money should not be the primary concern (though all will concede its importance). Pinned above my desk I have a clipping from the Celtic fanzine *Not the View* that captures this attitude perfectly:

“The problem with having the club run by financial investors is that when they look at Celtic they see only a bunch of assets which make money. When we as fans see Celtic, however, we see something unique and magical.”
Replace ‘Celtic’ with the name of your favourite club and you would probably agree. Views such as this can make for uncomfortable reading in the boardroom. Fans, though, have invested heavily in their chosen club, financially (season tickets do not come cheap) and emotionally (this is their passion after all). They might not be actual shareholders, but they have a very significant stake in what they consider to be ‘their’ club. The fanzine is able to bring together this community of fans who care, the better to give them a collective voice.

Whether it gives a voice to individual opinion or to collective commitment, the football fanzine offers fans the opportunity to engage with – and perhaps improve - aspects of popular culture that are central to their lives. (Who was it who said that football’s not a matter of life and death, it’s important than that?) In a world where so many of our experiences seem to be mediated by professional critics, where we seem to be constantly told what to like and how to like it, the fanzine is where ordinary people can engage with popular culture on their own terms, finding their own pleasures for themselves and engaging socially in the cultural life of their country. That is why fanzines matter.

About Prof. Chris Atton

Chris Atton is Professor of Media and Culture in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. His research specialises in alternative media, and he is the author of four books, including *Alternative Media* (Sage, 2002) and *Alternative Journalism* (Sage, 2008), as well as over fifty articles and book chapters. He has made special studies of fanzines, popular music journalism and the media of new social movements.