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Douglas Ponton

## **Getting Past the Gatekeepers: Membership and Identity in 5-Live's 'World Football Phone-in'**

### **Abstract**

This study explores identity construction in the context of a popular radio programme (5-Live's 'World Football Phone-in'), which offers long-term contributors the possibility of achieving membership of a virtual community (Fox 2004) established by the programme, via the award of a 'Brazilian shirt name'. In particular, it focuses on the discursive strategies involved in gaining entry, especially on interactions involving the principle gatekeepers, and their role in the construction of an acceptable 'identity' (Widdicombe 1998). The role of nicknaming (Liao 2006) in constructing and maintaining group boundaries is also highlighted. In general the conclusion is that, although interactions show references to membership 'rules', and would-be members are seen to conform to these, a successful application depends on more subtle factors, and especially on the personal whims of the principle gatekeeper.

### **Key words**

*Community; membership; discursive interaction; nicknaming; identity; phone-in; gatekeepers*

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## **1. Introduction**

Community membership is a fundamental aspect of human social organisation (Dunbar 1996). Communities can be seen in geographical terms, as populations linked by feelings of unity and interdependence (Munon 1968). However, in the post-modern social context it is arguable that this sense of belonging to a specific geographical area has been eroded or lost entirely, because of factors such as demographic mobility, loss of traditional industries, and so on. New ways of

socialising are gaining ground on more traditional forms of human interaction at pub, church or market. ‘Cyber communities’, for example, have been called:

“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (Fox 2004: 6)

The groups of which we are members, moreover, are significant indexes of our personal, individual identities, and have been used as such by many students of human social interaction. Tajfel and Turner (1979), for example, focused on the different social categories individuals are members of, while Harvey Sacks, too, described the identities oriented to by participants in interactions in these terms (e.g. *Catholics, Jews, Blacks*; Silverman 1988: 17).

In the current study I examine a community found in the context of a radio phone-in about soccer, 5-live’s ‘World Football Phone-in’, focusing on membership rules and their implications for would-be members’ identities. The data was taken from eight radio programmes listened to over a period of about a year, between 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010. For closer listening I selected the episodes which focused on the membership issues motivating the study; occasions which dealt explicitly with a request for membership, for example. Though, as a researcher, I was interested in all aspects relating to potential membership, the data at times was incomplete, as will be seen in Table 1 (below). In point of fact, the programme generally proceeds without mention of the whole Brazilian shirt name business, and references to it were at times thin on the ground. The ten instances provided were those for which most information was available.

## Soccer

The communities that are formed around soccer are notorious, for a number of reasons. As Tim Parks (2002: 26) aptly notes: “It’s the creation of community around an idea but, at the same time, knowing the idea is meaningless.” Most football fans, Parks suggests, know that soccer is essentially trivial, but still see in it a way of evading the emotional straitjacketing of life in a post-modern world. The phenomenon has cohesive effects at micro-levels (the unifying effect of a local soccer club) or, as Bishop and Jaworski (2003) indicate, at a macro-level, as a single speech community unites around a national team – in each case with implications for processes of ‘othering’ and discursive self-definition. If Parks’ view is accepted, then the discursive community represented by the World Football Phone-In (WFP) is equally affected by this paradox: if it is absurd to allow a trivial activity to serve as a basis for community relations, to influence an individual’s passions and govern his behaviour, it must be equally so to expend time and energy discussing the game *as if* it had any ontological significance.

The World Football Phone-In has evolved a membership mechanism, based on the award of a ‘Brazilian shirt-name’ to certain of its long-term listeners. As well as creating a community of feeling among ordinary listeners, therefore, which many radio programmes do, WFP has created an inner community for privileged listeners, sharing with ‘real’ communities features such as membership rules, gatekeepers, initiation rituals, and nicknaming. The study will explore how such rules can be gleaned from interaction, and how would-be members attempt to conform to them; to discursively construct, in this performative context, an ‘identity’ that will prove acceptable to the gatekeepers.

### **Identity and nicknaming**

As Sokół (2006: 11) says, identity can either be understood as a cognitive/psychic phenomenon, or viewed as a public phenomenon interpreted by people in social interaction. This latter perspective is familiar to modern linguistics, which has frequently emphasised the role of individual identity in human interaction (e.g. Halliday 1978: 19). In ethnography, too, Saville-Troike (1996: 357) has written:

“Each member of a community has a repertoire of social identities and [...] each identity in a given context is associated with a number of appropriate verbal [...] forms of expression.”

As stated above, however, my concern is not so much on how the identity of ‘football fan’ is interactively achieved (Widdicombe 1998: 196), but rather on how listeners achieve entry into the inner circle that guarantees them a special kind of identity, that of privileged group member, perhaps that of ‘real’ football fan (Gee 1999: 14).

Admittance to the WFP’s inner circle is sanctioned by the official award of a special name, suggested by listeners, loosely based on Brazilian footballers’ names. Tschaepé (2003) puts the case that one’s name expresses not just an aspect of one’s identity but, indeed, its very essence:

“The giving of first names not only allows an individual to be ‘grasped’ as an object of knowledge, but determines what that object of knowledge is through the emotional essence of the name that is delivered onto the individual.” (Tschaepé 2003: 75)<sup>1</sup>

The scientific status of such theories is not relevant here. The kind of naming that goes on in WFP is more akin to the process of nicknaming inseparable from human social contact. As Liao (2006: 71) explains, nicknaming can serve to *reinforce group boundaries, control access and signal membership*; it can also be *a form of abuse or mockery*; or, more positively, *signal approval and esteem*. Liao (2006: 70) also states that a nickname “reflects a person’s impression of the

nicknamed”, echoing here Bucholtz and Hall’s notion of identity as depending, in part, on “others’ perceptions” (2005: 606).

In the context of WFP, the relevance of such considerations is apparent. Formal membership of the WFP inner circle is signalled by the award of a kind of nickname – group boundaries are defined thereby; and while, as we shall see, interaction among group members is characterised by good-humoured joshing and even occasional abuse, the names are given precisely to signal “approval and esteem”. Just as in real communities, where nicknames can be given which express an aspect of the perceived persona of the individual in question, in the virtual community of WFP the nickname chosen has some basis in some aspect of the everyday identity of the person concerned.

Providing some examples of these nicknames will show their connection with the actual identities of the individuals involved:

**Table 1.** Brazilian shirt-names<sup>2</sup>

|    | <b>Brazilian shirt name</b> | <b>Real name</b>       | <b>Possible identity connection</b>  |
|----|-----------------------------|------------------------|--|
| 1  | The Gent                    | Andrew from Blackheath | Sounds an elderly white man, refined in speech   |
| 2  | Constanti-know-all          | ?                      | Turkish, knowledgeable about Turkish soccer  |
| 3  | Tammy-Wynette-O             | Todd from Nashville    | Comes from the home of country music   |
| 4  | Gawinchester                | Caroline               | From Winchester; named after Garrincha, a Brazilian star   |
| 5  | The Big Wheel               | Sean Wheelock (USA)    | One of the studio experts, supposedly has power over admittance                                  |
| 6  | Sloughcao                   | Mark                   | Comes from Slough  |
| 7  | Springbokker Junior         | ?                      | A South African expert; his name plays on the connection between ‘Springbok’ and ‘Bocca Juniors’ |
| 8  | The Legendinho              | Tim Vickery            | Studio expert with deep knowledge of Brazilian soccer  |
| 9  | Paolino                     | Paul Scott             | Based on his first name  |
| 10 | Cleo ‘the Book’             | ?                      | An extremely knowledgeable female listener   |

Of these ten names, only five (4, 6, 7, 8, 9) actually relate to Brazilian, or South American, football. The identity connections of the nicknames can be classified as follows:

- a) Based on a place linked with the individual (2, 3, 4, 6, 7)

- b) Based on the individual's real-world name (9)
- c) Based on a perceived personal attribute (1, 5, 8, 10)

The subtler names blend these factors, and conjure a variety of identity-related inferences. For example, the name awarded Caroline from Winchester places her geographically but contains a reference to an ability to do two things at once, revealed in her e-mail to the programme, in which she claimed to listen to the radio while reading a book. The great Brazilian player Garrincha, in fact, once famously joked that he could not kick the ball with both feet at the same time.

Possession of a Brazilian shirt-name is not a new baptism; the caller simply obtains an official nickname by which s/he will be greeted on future occasions. The names, as we can see, humorously mark their owners' status as long-time callers, as well as providing them with an 'identity' within whose contours their future contributions to the virtual community can be played out.

### **Being in with the in-crowd – what are the rules?**

Each time a potential new member's case is discussed, some explicit and implicit membership rules emerge, generally enunciated by the principle gatekeeper, host Dotun Adebayo:

- (1) DA<sup>3</sup>: we dedicate a football shirt name or you do because it's our listeners who choose the name a Brazilian shirt name for our callers our regular callers who have made great contributions to the programme (WFP podcast 04/10/2009)

The rules here are:

- a) Callers must be regular
- b) (Regular) callers must make great contributions to the programme
- c) Listeners choose the name

The vague term 'regular' is more closely defined as this interaction continues:

- (2) DA: Todd has called up what is it five or six times now Todd?  
Todd: That's right

As Dotun continues his response to the Todd request, we notice other nuances relating to the rules, that involve implicatures which need to be recovered (Blakemore 1992: 58) if they are to be appreciated:

- (3) DA: Five or six times from Nashville Tennessee he's only sung a Nashville Tennessee country and western song once which I personally didn't think was all that great

From this we can see that, for Dotun at least, to sing a country and western song, in Todd's case, would be to make a 'great contribution to the programme'.

### **An unsuccessful membership request**

The following unsuccessful application is revealing in terms of the interplay between membership rules and caller identity:

- (4) Caller: Also has er has anybody rung up and asked for a Brazilian shirt-name tonight yet I was wondering if I could get in there I've had a couple of chats with you guys now and sent in plenty of texts  
 DA: Ooh  
 C: They don't always get read out  
 DA: hahahahaha  
 C: Obviously  
 DA: You're very good you're very good ooh  
 C: Seeing as Sean's on tonight you know and everything last time I spoke to you about Carlos Muller and the flu incident swine flu and everything  
 DA: Sean convinced he needs to do a bit more work  
 SW: You know I'm one of inclusion and there are a lot of texts that come in that Tim and I just aren't privy to because we're not sitting there at the BBC Tim's in South America I'm in North America so I think there's an honours system here Dotun you know you're the MBE I'll actually defer to you on this but I'm one of inclusion I really am (WFP 25/07/2009)

The caller demonstrates his familiarity with the explicit membership rule about great contributions, even if his initial claim 'I've had a *couple* of chats with you guys' shows that he falls short of the 5 or 6 required. The detail he adds about the many texts he has sent in could be an attempt to compensate for this deficiency. However, in his first statement is implicit a rule which nobody has ever stated:

- (5) Also has er has anybody rung up and asked for a Brazilian shirt-name tonight yet?

The implicit rule here is that 'only one Brazilian shirt name can be awarded per night', or that 'shirt-names are awarded on a first-come-first-served basis'. One could see this as a face-saving strategy involving lack of directness (Brown and Levinson 1978: 130), since by the introduction of this non-existent rule the caller allows his

interlocutors space for a possible rejection (“*Yes, I’m afraid you’re too late*”). The caller demonstrates, however, that he is not perfectly familiar with the membership rules, and this may be one factor that determines Dotun to reject his request. The invented rule presents Dotun with a kind of *fait accompli* since, if he answers “*No, no-one has phoned up and requested a Brazilian shirt-name yet*”, the caller will have scored a point in his bid for membership, unless Dotun wishes to engage in a possibly face-threatening process of negotiation over the status of this ‘rule’.

An additional membership rule, referred to here by the caller, is that ‘Sean Wheelock has final say over membership applications’. This (explicit) rule is frequently evoked by DA to ward off membership applications during programmes in which Wheelock is not present. Despite Wheelock’s explicit willingness to admit this caller, however, Dotun rejects him:

- (6) DA: No no no shall I tell you what em  
 C: I need to work a little bit harder  
 DA: No no no not that much harder Sean’s on again in two weeks time call us then  
 C: Okay there you are Dotun I’ll try and come up with a better question  
 DA: No not at all it’s not that it’s to see your passion I wanna see your passion I wanna hear your passion  
 C: Okay  
 DA: Call up again in two weeks time you never know

The caller’s attempt to explain his rejection shows that he is familiar with the membership rules, and is willing to try harder to achieve the necessary standard. His promise to ‘come up with a better question’ could be seen as evidence of his determination to comply with the rule about making ‘great contributions’. However, Dotun now unveils a new and more important rule, i.e. that ‘members must have (demonstrable) passion’.

That this requisite is in some way fundamental can be appreciated by comparing the rejected caller with Caroline, who was awarded her shirt-name the week before. She has no interest in soccer, but was drawn to the friendly banter and sociological chit-chat she found in WFP. After four years of solitary listening while reading her novels, she decided to apply for a shirt-name. She has, therefore, made no outstanding contributions to the programme, yet has shown, over the years, that she has what Dotun evidently feels is true ‘passion’ for the programme. He tells her:

- (7) DA: I’m so delighted that you stuck with it all these years even though you weren’t interested in football (WFP 25/07/2009)

In fact, the rejected caller makes an immediate attempt to convince Dotun that he too possesses this quality:



- (8) C: It's difficult because I'm working every night Friday cos I have to pull over and stop and  
 DA: Eh what's more important the job or a Brazilian shirt name  
 C: Oh the Brazilian shirt-name, by far  
 DA: Thank you well  
 C: I can do without the job I can live without that just give me the shirt-name  
*(laughter)*  
 DA: No no don't do that  
 C: *There's the passion for you you see*

A membership application can be an ongoing process involving negotiation between applicants and gatekeepers. Before this closing exchange Dotun had been non-committal about the outcome of the application, telling the caller “*you never know*”. His parting shot to the caller changes this to a promise: “*call up again and we'll do it next time along*”. The point, perhaps, is not that potential members of the WFP must demonstrate a willingness to abandon their livelihoods; rather that, by this humorous fragment, the caller convinces Dotun that he is able to make ‘great contributions’ to the programme, and that he would therefore be a suitable member. From the caller's point of view, he must mull over what he has learned about membership criteria before his next call, to ensure that his next attempt will indeed meet with success.

### **A successful application**

In the following exchanges, a journalist on the programme makes an application:

- (9) DA: The reason I've kept Paul Scott here is you realise this is his last open night shift as a news – as a sports reporter we're going to lose him after to-night  
 AB: No way  
 DA: Do you know the cheeky git do you know what he asked for as his leaving present  
 AB: A rolex *(laughter)*  
 DA: The cheeky little git can you believe it he said oh can I at least get a Brazilian shirt name tonight as my last –  
 PS: I didn't say it like that  
 DA: Oh come off it –  
 PS: I asked humbly  
 D: The cheeky little so and so he thinks we just give out Brazilian shirt names like you know

The above, unsuccessful applicant perhaps rubbed Dotun up the wrong way by the point-blank manner of his request. Here PS shows the importance of respect as he

rebutts the off-handedness in Dotun's characterisation of his application: "I asked *humbly*", he says. He therefore denies certain negative identity traits – arrogance, off-handedness and cheek – while asserting that he possesses the positive opposite.

There follows a passage of negotiation over whether PS's application meets other membership criteria, at the end of which one of the studio hosts suggests that he needs 'an accent to get him over the line'. Dotun once compared these initiation rites to those at his London secondary school, during which a new boy would have his head thrust down an outside toilet and the chain pulled. Todd from Nashville, in fact, balked at the prospect of singing a country song on worldwide radio, and so does PS object to showing off his skills of mimicry:

- (10) DA: I want listeners to know a bit more about you so that they can decide which Brazilian shirt name you should get  
 PS: Well why do they need an accent for that?

The journalist continues to raise objections:

- (11) DA: And in a Brazilian accent please eight five oh five eight you decide whether Paul Scott decides- who gets a Brazilian shirt name tonight and what it should be  
 PS: I wouldn't even know what a Brazilian accent sounds like

The negotiation continues, Dotun moving away from the specifically Brazilian accent he had selected in favour of any accent from South America:

- (12) DA: Any Latin American South American Central American accent you want  
 PS: Oh blimey that's a tough one  
 DA: It's not a tough one just try  
 PS: Well I can't tell you the difference between a Bolivian accent –  
 DA: Yeah but any one any one will do  
 PS: But do you know – Hello I'm from Ecuador (*laughter*)

PS's final comment 'Hello I'm from Ecuador' is spoken in his normal, English voice. Eventually the dispute is resolved by PS's producing a Geordie accent – since the Brazilian player Juninho developed an accent of this kind during his time in Middlesbrough.

In considering why PS's application was successful where the other interaction had a negative outcome, it is clear that there are substantial contextual differences between the two cases. Most importantly, PS is a professional colleague who the hosts have personal contact with. However, it is possible that, had he completely failed to produce the accent required – if he had clammed up on air, for example – then he too might have been asked to re-apply. As it is, Dotun comments, after his performance: "*good sport*", indicating that he had passed the test. In fact, the whole studio debate, which lasted for about ten minutes, was

conducted in an amicable spirit with plenty of laughter, and certainly constituted 'good radio', so that PS, at least in this instance, met with the requirements of the 'great contribution' rule.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on a basic question in human social life, that of how to achieve membership of social groups. The processes involved can be complex, involving the conscious or unconscious sifting of clues about membership rules, which can be obtained both by overhearing interactions involving gatekeepers and other potential members, as well as by first person interaction.

The relevance of all this to the question of identity construction is that would-be members must consider whether the personas they project through verbal interaction satisfy the 'rules' they have picked up during their period of remoter contact.

In the study of interaction between caller and host in WFP, I have identified several rules, arguing that, though some of these had the appearance of hard and fast membership criteria, in practice they were susceptible of modification according to the judgement of the principal gatekeeper, the programme's anchorman. The interactions studied all revealed a fundamental asymmetry of power between Dotun and his interlocutors: in the case of the unsuccessful caller, Dotun overrules Wheelock, thereby upsetting the rule-book and showing that membership rules are subject to his own personal interpretations. In the Paul Scott exchange, his insults ('cheeky little git', etc.) mark his higher status and evoke the sort of 'sounding' processes, identified by Labov (1972), by means of which group hierarchies are established and maintained.

Dotun Adebayo is the principle gatekeeper; as anchorman he directs the interaction and can initiate membership business, think up tasks for would-be members, appeal to 'rules' that nobody else can remember, and so on. For example, he launched Todd's application by announcing that Todd in Nashville was 'getting dangerously close to a Brazilian shirt name'. He also impacts on the name eventually chosen by listeners by means such as reading out those he particularly likes ('Turnuplateforeverywar-io' was one rejected by listeners for Todd, but given airplay by Dotun). Moreover, as a seasoned radio performer, Adebayo has a taste for 'numbers' such as songs and comic routines involving funny accents that will enliven the programme. This means that callers must possess, or develop, an extravert streak in order to submit themselves to the rites of initiation he imposes. As we saw in the case of the journalist, however, resistance to these rites does not necessarily entail disqualification, as long as the negotiation process is carried out in a 'sporting' manner, and leads to good radio.

In the final analysis, the key factor in any membership application is whether Dotun feels that the caller possesses an indefinable something, for which he uses the term 'passion'. In WFP, and in many other human social groups, the funda-

mental coin is not adherence to an invisible rule-book, but the human chemistry involved – such is the glue that binds all communities, virtual or real.

## Notes

- 1 Tschaepe gives the following example, concerning the name ‘Madeleine’:  
 “The girl named ‘Madeleine’ will be stamped with both the connotations of her name and the affects of the name’s physiognomy. The formerly unnamed, ambiguous infant is called into existence as being associated with the wife of Gide, teacups and madeleines of Proust, gastronomy, and French culture in general and all connotations that are carried with it. In addition is the sound of her name, which is multi-syllabic, and therefore of an upper class, as well as being both ‘mad’ while ‘in line’ or ‘lean.’ Underneath these considerations are the phonetic connotations of her name that bind her to every word that sounds remotely similar, and the connotations that follow. From the point of naming onward, the girl is not only named Madeleine; she is Madeleine” (Tschaepe 2003: 75–76).
- 2 The reader will appreciate that some information is missing in cases where, for example, the real-world name of the participant is irrecoverable from the particular tapescript in which it occurred.
- 3 The initials used for studio experts are as follows:  
 DA = Dotun Adebayo  
 AB = Andy Brassells  
 SW = Sean Wheelock  
 PS = Paul Scott

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