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Contested Meanings: The Italian Media and the UltraS

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Abstract

Despite their presence in Italian football stadiums, the *UltraS* have been the subject of limited empirical research. I use the capital S to identify neo-fascist oriented fans to distinguish them from the wider football supporters *ultra*' (Testa and Armstrong 2008; Testa 2009; Testa and Armstrong 2010a). This study is part of a series of publications to fill in this lacuna; it is part of an ethnographic research project carried out from 2003 to 2009. The research aimed to analyze the *UltraS* social world using as a sample two hardcore subculture of fans at the two main Rome football clubs - AS Roma and SS Lazio. With neo-fascist sympathies, these groups -the *Boys* at Roma and the *Irriducibili* at Lazio- are political and well-organized (Testa and Armstrong, 2010a).

The present paper focuses on the relationship between the *UltraS* and the Italian media; the media are often considered by the *UltraS* as enemies because believed to be biased against them. To complement the ethnographic data, three renowned Italian sports journalists were interviewed in 2008. One was Franco Arturi, deputy director of *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, which is the most established and popular of the Italian sport newspapers. Another was Giuseppe Tassi, a sport journalist and deputy director of *Quotidiano.net* (internet edition of the *Resto del Carlino*, *La Nazione* and *Il Giorno* editorial group). The third was Gabriele Marcotti, journalist for the British *The Times* and the popular Italian daily *IL Corriere dello Sport*. Analysis stresses the importance of media coverage in influencing the *UltraS* deviant dynamics and suggests, considering the experiences of other European countries, a reduction of media attention towards the *UltraS* as a strategy to contain this phenomenon.

Keywords: Media, *UltraS*, Italian Neo-fascism, Football, Politics

1. Introduction: The Italian Media and *il Calcio*

Football in Italy is not only a significant cultural practice; it is also an important industry. Over the past few seasons, Italians have spent millions of Euros on admission tickets for football matches and football magazines and on the football betting game called *Totocalcio* (Note 1). If we compare that amount of money with some of the nation's biggest industries, football finds itself close to the top. His Holiness the Pope, in his Sunday *Angelus*, has repeatedly spoken about the powerful effect that football exerts on any Italian province and Italian social life generally. The common saying that football is the foundation of the Italian State exceeds the meaning. Nowadays such a relationship is felt more than ever. During the *Campionato di Serie A* (the major Italian football Championship) one finds a common Sunday scenario: following lunch, families and friends gather in football clubs or bars with pre-paid TV channels, or at home to watch TV or listen to the radio. It is possible to witness the same story every Sunday, and hear from bars the commentator's voices particularly via the radio programme *Tutto il Calcio Minuto per Minuto* (All Football Minute by Minute). Following the match, the requisite TV broadcast of *90th Minuto* presents the first interviews of the coaches and players, accompanied by the *schedina* (betting card) and the hope for a point's accumulation numbering 14 in the *Totocalcio* lottery, for a fortune in winnings. The comment *Scusa, Scusa Ameri* (Excuse, excuse me Ameri) heard among friends is frequently said, imitating a phrase often used by the now-deceased Italian radio sport journalist Enrico Ameri to announce that a goal has been scored in a Sunday *Serie A* match.

The link between football and the media is very strong and this is particularly relevant in Italy (Porro 2008; Testa and Armstrong 2010a). The Italian media, for instance, have greatly contributed to the popularisation of the 'beautiful game'. Media have a tremendous influence on supplying publicity and creating the need for advertisements. Equally, football influences the media: it is the reason why many newspapers exist. However, not everything in this relationship is constructive; the saturation coverage of football by the Italian media has created some dysfunctions; among these, we find the triviality of many sport talk shows that in content resemble barroom debates. Heated arguments (and even brawls) among sports journalists frequently occur on such shows.

At times, such behaviours are promoted, as they improve the audience ratings. One sports talk show, hosted by journalist Aldo Biscardi (Note 2), exemplifies this trend. The tone of the commentators and conversations has progressively worsened in recent years. Triani (1994) argues that in Italian TV sports, broadcasting there is a constant disappearance of intellectuals, meaning that to be heard, the commentators adopt simplifications bordering on vulgarity. Three Italian newspapers give extensive coverage to sports (especially football): *la Gazzetta dello Sport*, *il Corriere dello Sport* and *Tutto Sport*. Moreover, on Monday, all Italian newspapers focus on the Sunday football league results. Many national and satellite TV channels dedicate entire programs to the games, their tactics, results analyses, and trivia. One can find regional and local televisions focusing on their local teams and fans; these broadcasts are often led directly by hardcore football supporters. It is in this context that radio programs such as the *Irriducibili* and *Boys's la Voce della Nord* (the Voice of Nord) and *Giallorossi si diventa* (Yellow-Reds) emerged and became popular in the Lazio region in the late 1990s. (Note 3)

2. The voices of the reason?

The media have extraordinary power in today's society, not only to make 'things visible' but also to manipulate what people think (Entman, 1989). They provide definitions and explanations, and present both problem and solutions (Cavender 2004; Cavender et al. 1993). The media portray real or 'supposed' dangers, giving people the opportunity to react, to protest and to be actors in the subsequent outrage. They particularly help in shaping opinion and orientation in relation to deviant behaviors and crime. (Cavender, 2004). With this in mind, an analysis of the media-*UltraS* (and hardcore football supporters) relationship needs to be attempted. My starting point focused on a central question: How do the *UltraS* perceive the media? Among the *Boys* and the *Irriducibili* (the *UltraS* groups studied in this research) the media provoked strong sentiments. These were not without ambiguities. Generally, the *UltraS* had an avoidance relationship with the media: '*we avoid [overtone of disdain] speaking to the press. The group has its hierarchy and needs to have only one public voice. The only one who has media contacts is the 'big boss' (Boys). Giorgio (Irriducibili) never failed to stress his and the group's dislike of the Italian media; for him the media discriminated against the UltraS and specifically against the Irriducibili. Considering them hypocrites, Giorgio could not comprehend why they focused on the Irriducibili's display of the Celtic crosses (which he admitted were not only a Christian symbol but also a neo-fascist one) but at the same time failed to stigmatize football players (such as the Livorno's striker Cristiano Lucarelli) for displaying tattoos of communist icons like Che Guevara, or groups that openly supported communism. Communism for Giorgio committed as many crimes against humanity as Fascism.*

The *UltraS* also considered the media as an ally of the forces of their repression. The Media acted as a tool to serve the interests of the 'system'. In addition, the *UltraS* believed that media money was the main reason why Italian football was lacking in values. This was a common feeling, not only among the *UltraS* studied, but also by a large part of the Italian hardcore supporters groups regardless of ideology. This attitude, though, contains a strong contradiction; while ostensibly fighting the media, the *UltraS* aim to be in the stadium because it is the only place where, because of the media coverage, they can be visible and heard in promoting their way of life, their ideology and, in the case of the *Boys* and the *Irriducibili*, their struggle against societal and football institutions.

In November 2008, I interviewed three well-known Italian sport journalists with the purpose of explaining their viewpoint on the *UltraS* phenomenon and the relationship between their trade and the *UltraS*: Franco Arturi (deputy director of *la Gazzetta dello Sport*, an historical and popular Italian sports newspaper); Giuseppe Tassi (Note 4) (sports journalist and deputy director of *Quotidiano.net*); and Gabriele Marcotti (journalist of *The Times* and of the Rome based *Corriere dello Sport* -another major national sport newspaper). The interviews allowed them to reply to the *UltraS* accusations and to explain their points of view about the *UltraS* phenomenon. From these interviews, two patterns of inquiry emerged around the media-*UltraS* dynamics; one we might term 'alarmist and interventionist' (Arturi and Tassi), the other 'skeptical' (Marcotti).

Asked what he thought about the hardcore football supporters and more specifically the *UltraS* phenomenon, Arturi argued the following:

'We should not be afraid of words such as 'terrorism' and 'terrorists'; for example when a person commits a crime, he/she is a criminal. In Italy we tend to be tolerant and to use meaningless formulae... we in fact seem not to criminalize.... I argue that if anyone imposes fear in a curva [Football terrace] and masterminds a strategy of terror then he is a terrorist. The curve enjoy territorial immunity; the police do not enter these locations because they are strongholds of these groups.'

Tassi took a similar line and called the *UltraS* group '*young thugs disguised as football supporters*'. Arturi, more than Tassi and in accord with most of the national press, identified the groups (often without any distinctions

between them and 'ordinary' supporters) as 'outcasts' from the Italian 'civil' society requiring strong State intervention to control them. In addition, Arturi, in defending his hypothesis of associating the *UltraS* with terrorism, argued that ordinary people in the *curve* were expropriated from their seats and the stewards or the police could do nothing about it. In his opinion, many Italian stadiums events resembled anarchy: there were no rules and the *curve* were dominated by groups who chanted horrible slogans and exposed disgusting symbols. The accusation that the situation is akin to anarchy highlights a hasty observation of the journalist with regard to the social world of the *curve*. There are indeed words spoken and chanted that many would not agree with; that said, the *curve* have historical customs and norms justifying specific behaviors' that an outsider can understandably perceive as illogical. In the *curva* the principle of seniority, for instance, is strictly respected by groups regardless of ideology. Such seniority highlights the supporter-team connection, and is considered by the fan as a badge of loyalty. If an individual has occupied a seat for many years, then that seat, regardless of its number, is considered 'reserved'. This process does not follow the dominant reason of the wider society, but it is perfectly logical to both the 'ordinary' *curva* supporter and the *UltraS*.

Another source of contention between the *UltraS* and the media was the *UltraS* involvement in what they termed 'social campaigns'. During his leadership of the *Boys*, Paolo Zappavigna was the main promoter of these campaigns. The first such project was focused around agitation for a national referendum to abrogate law No.40, 2004, which regulated assisted procreation. The law banned testing on human embryos and prohibited more than three embryos from being implanted in a womb simultaneously. The law also forbade fertilization by the use of semen or ova provided by persons other than the couple. Zappavigna collected signatures proposing a referendum to abrogate the law. He did this in the *curva sud* and convinced groups therein to create a huge banner urging people to sign the referendum. These actions helped the protagonists reaching the necessary target signatures for a 2005 referendum to proceed. However, due to pressure from the Catholic Church, technical confusion around the issue and the effectiveness of the oppositional campaigners convincing people not to vote (only 25.9% voted), the law remained unchanged (La Repubblica –online- 13 June, 2005). The second cause Zappavigna tried to support was that of the Argentinian Desaparecidos. (Note 5) In doing so, he invited into the *curva sud* Estella Carlotta, a representative of *The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of *Plaza de Mayo*) and collected monies for their cause in the *curva sud*. The *Irriducibili* were not only strongly against pedophilia and drugs use but they also aimed to raise public awareness on other issues, as Giorgio explains:

'We help a dog refuge near Rome for mistreated and abandoned dogs; we got involved five years ago because they did not have funds and the refuge was about to be closed and the dogs killed. Now the place is a safe haven supported by Laziali. We also help an association in the fight against tumors in children; we donated to the hospital Bambin Gesù (Note 6) a machine called the 'Retcam Photography System' to help diagnose tumors and complex eye diseases (Note 7). They invited us to a dinner and once there received from us this very expensive machine. We also collaborate with the Italian Anti-Tumor Association. We are involved in the fight against vivisection; we have thought to do as many do in the UK to go to the university/drugs companies labs and free the animals. We are against vivisection especially when testing for cosmetics; we have also financially supported people who lost their homes when their building collapsed in Rome [he did not remember the date during the interview]; in that occasion, Lazio supporters lost their lives. We are available to any socially worthwhile battle; we have a radio and a television program that is open to any cause if we can help. Just to have one of us on the radio speaking about the initiative is helpful.' (Note 8)

The response of the Gazzetta dello Sport's journalist to such projects was dismissive; Arturi compared such gatherings to the Mafia and dismissed the campaigns as 'ordinary' good actions any citizen would undertake. He rejected the accusation from the groups that the media did not advertise their social campaigns but only their violence, and affirmed that when such groups were involved in social campaigns his newspaper informed the public. Nonetheless, he dismissed the campaigns as a publicity stunt conducted to 'buy' a sort of immunity for the groups' violent acts. Arturi maintained that the press had to fight the *UltraS* because in Italy 'we live in an emergency state.' Tassi spoke from a more moderate stance and tried to differentiate supporters. He argued that the press had the right to strongly denounce the violence of mindless thugs like the *UltraS* and the degeneration of the *tifo*, but needed not to dismiss the good side of the hardcore supporters' movement. Tassi believed that the football supporters choreographies are an integral part of the footballing show and contributed to the 'good' atmosphere of the stadium.

It would be incorrect and naive to consider the media as 'evil,' as many *UltraS* and hardcore supporters would argue. On the other hand, the same risk of being accused of naiveté is evident if we analyze, without a critical eye, the Italian media coverage of events connected with these 21st century 'folk devils' (Cohen, 1980). As Todde (*Boys*) argues with some justification: '*they [the media] seldom write the real fact; they do not understand the UltraS phenomenon in its entirety and most of all are superficial and lazy in researching and understanding.*'

3. Media Framing and the UltraS

It is important to recognize that the media, in their function to inform, link events together; they build or ‘map’ events into larger, wider frameworks of meaning so that viewers come to ‘know’ more than just what is happening. From that knowledge viewers and listeners also construct ‘pictures of the world, scenarios of action.’ (Hall, 1975 in Doran, 2008, p. 126). Two examples suffice here: one relates to the *UltraS* studied, the other concerns the hardcore football fans of Naples (who are not generally ideologically oriented). These two examples underline the risk that the exercise of the mandate to inform can bring.

The first instance illustrates one of the flaws of certain Italian press and its inclination to readily identify conspiracies. The episode in question occurred at the final game of the 2003-2004 *Serie A* season between Roma-Lazio. The match saw normal pre-match mingling, accusations and boasting between the rival fan groups, augmented by mutual chants of abuse and occasional missile throwing in the stadium. What was unprecedented was the mass confrontation between the forces of the law, clad in their designer riot gear, and the momentarily united ranks of Roma and Lazio supporters some 60 minutes later. This Roman fan alliance, which Arturi in our interview defined as ‘unnatural’, was unique in terms of the numbers and anger involved but not unusual to the participants. The uniqueness originated from the nature of the event. The dynamics around this 2004 fixture were bizarre. In the second half, a rumor circulated in both *curve* that, in the pre-match mêlée between fans and police outside the stadium, a police vehicle had struck and killed a young boy. This rumor had the effect of transforming the vociferous antagonism between both sets of supporters and the police into an open conflict. The police subsequently faced attack from angry *UltraS* throughout the Olympic Stadium. The police responded with baton charges. The two football teams, clearly in shock over the happenings on the terraces, stopped play shortly after the beginning of the second half when smoke bombs were let off, making it difficult to watch events on the pitch. In the hiatus, three men in their 30s – Roma *UltraS* – entered the pitch. One put his arm on Francesco Totti’s shoulder, the Roma captain and Italian international, and spoke with him demanding he lead the players off the pitch (thereby suspending the match) both out of respect for the dead and in a show of protest against the supposed police brutality. The next 20 minutes made for global debate. Totti discussed matters with Lazio’s Serbian-born enforcer, Sinisa Mihajlovic. The referee, sensing their fear, approached the pair and in typically macho language encouraged the pair to continue playing. Meanwhile the public address system broadcasted denials that a child had been killed. In the chaos, Totti spoke to the AS Roma coach, Fabio Capello. His words were recorded as stating: ‘*If we play on now... they’ll kill us*’ (Panorama –online- 22 March, 2004). Sensibly, the majority of players did not want to continue. The *Prefetto di Roma*, (the highest provincial authority of public security) then entered the pitch demanding the referee and players restart the game in the interest of public order. The referee then took a call on a mobile phone from Adriano Galliani, the President of the Italian Football League; after a short conversation, the game was abandoned. The police were powerless in this football context. By the end of the night, 15 fans and 60 police were reported to have sustained injuries and some 36 fans were arrested.

The interruption of the match brought global notoriety to the city of Rome and Italian football. Several Italian newspapers ran headlines the day after, which compared the *UltraS* to the Sicilian Mafia. The next ‘discourse’ published by the Italian magazine *Panorama* reported the *tifosi* invasion in the following impressionistic fashion:

They approach Totti threateningly and spoke agitatedly to the captain. Sky’s [Murdoch’s television channel] camera operators were sent away as if they were spying (which is an unacceptable violation of the right of information). The players’ faces are perturbed and frightened; it is not possible to hear it but the scene suggests that they have been threatened’ (Panorama –online- 22 March, 2004).

An important trait of media discourse is their ability not only to reflect reality but also to construct it; expressions of reality are often used to construct representations that fit a particular ideology (Fairclough, 1989). According to Fowler (1996), ideologies are, amongst other discursive structures, articulated in lexical processes. Even if the journalist admits the impossibility of listening to the conversation, expressions such as ‘perturbed’ and ‘frightened’ direct the reader to an assumed scenario.

The three main *UltraS*, Stefano Carriero, Roberto Maria Morelli and Stefano Sordini, who had entered the pitch from the terraces, were arrested as they left the pitch. Days later, the Roman magistrate Giorgio Maria Rossi released the three from police custody arguing that they had not threatened Totti. The supporters had entered the pitch to inform Totti of the (false) death of the boy and asked him to abandon the game so that fans could go home and therefore the angry reprisals against police would cease. Whilst entering the field of play is not permitted under the regulations of the Italian Football Federation, the circumstances at the Olympic Stadium did not belong to the realm of normality. The *UltraS* had shown the nation watching TV on a Sunday evening that in

some situations they had enormous power, they strongly denied the media's theory that they had organized the episode to show their power. The three *UltraS* also denied having threatened Totti. Francesca (*Boys*) dismissed the plot allegations as silly, arguing that if she would have known that the *Boys* and the other *UltraS* were planning to destroy the stadium and attack the police she would not have gone to the Olympic Stadium with her son. The Boxer of the *Irriducibili* instead accused the media in this occasion of being *infami* (abjects):

'They just wrote what they wanted without even asking us what we thought and our version of the story. If the Irriducibili are involved there is surely something 'dark' behind it. Almost every journalist behaves in the same way ; when we plan a nice show in the curva with banners, choreographies either they will not cover it or will minimize our work; if instead there are problems at the stadium is our fault we are the mindless thugs, the fascists, the delusional; I say instead they are the scum.'

After a few days of online research seeking to find out more about the epilogue of the episode, I discovered an article of La Repubblica- dated 2007 and titled ' *The suspended derby was not a plot, the magistrates established the facts about the 2004 match*' – that informed the reader:

'The magistrates beliefs after nearly three years of investigations were crucial to the fate of the seven Roman fans suspected. All the serious criminal charges (among these private violence and incitement to disobey the laws of the State) were dropped while they still faced minor charges of violations of the law on the safety of the stadiums and creation of panic which will be prescribed only a pecuniary fine' (La Repubblica –online- 05 February, 2007).

Oversimplifications about bad practice of the Italian media would be inappropriate here; nevertheless, this is an obvious example of the media's ability to re-present reality creating meaning via a careful selection, presentation, organization and re-construction of the news (Hall, 1982, in Juris, 2005, p.422).

Another episode involving media 're-presentations' of reality - this time non-ideologically oriented- occurred at the first match of the 2008-2009 season. The respected Italian journalist Oliviero Beha reported the episode in his popular blog (Note 9). On the first match of the *Serie A* season, Roma and Napoli drew (1-1). The media informed the public of 1500 hardcore Neapolitan fans attacking a train station in Naples, forcing 300 passengers to get off the train. Four controllers of *Trenitalia* (the Italian state railway company) were reported as being wounded and the train was apparently damaged and looted. At their arrival at the *Roma Termini* railway station, the aggressors were said to have thrown paper bombs and tear gas. *Trenitalia* estimated the damages at 500,000 Euros. The Italian newspapers carried the headlines, '*Naples' ultra' owner of the train: Trenitalia: damages for 500,000 Euros*'; '*ultra' out of their minds, trains and train stations destroyed*' (La Repubblica –online- 31 August, 2008).

Beha was the only journalist to publish the account of the German sport journalist Reinhard Krennhuber who was also chief editor of *Ballesterer FM Radio*. Krennhuber, together with his colleague Jacob Rosenberg, had travelled with the Neapolitan hardcore fans to Rome for the match. Krennhuber, when asked about what really occurred that day in his interview with Thomas Hirner of the *DerStandard.at* (Note 10) , stated:

'Firstly, it is incorrect to say that the fans of Naples threatened and pushed 300 passengers to get off of the train; we also did not see any train controllers attacked. The train should have left at 9.24 am but after 11 am Trenitalia representatives came aboard to advise the passengers to leave the train and take another one. We left at 12, 30 with a train completely full. When we arrived, the match had already started by 52 min; it is a shame the fans had paid for their train and stadium tickets. The frustrated fans started to demolish the toilets but I am unsure how such damages reached 500,000 Euros...I cannot imagine why a person should loot a train; what is there so important to loot? I also find it strange the news about the tear gases at Termini.'

The journalist of the *DerStandard.at* (Note 11) asked Krennhuber if they were afraid; he answered:

'We did not fear the Naples fans, they had not attacked the police in the train station nor at the stadium, because they knew what was at stake... The allegations that the incidents were planned and orchestrated by the fans or even by the camorra [criminal organization of the Campania region] seem totally absurd.'

Krennhuber concluded:

'In the future, I will believe even less the news of Italian media about clashes involving fans. There is an enormous discrepancy between what we experienced that day and what the media reported. All day we did not meet a fellow journalist. The media had not done any research on the spot; they are collecting information from the local authorities. In addition, in their coverage the fans' version is not taken into account or only minimally. Raiuno [the Italian equivalent of the BBC] was the only broadcaster to permit the fans and ordinary people to speak, instead of just politicians and representatives of various authorities on the facts. The versions of the fact

from the ordinary people and the fans are similar to ours' (Note 12).

In his interview, Krennhuber portrays the Italian media as too lazy to find out what really occurred and too reliant on the 'spin' of authority. It is difficult not to notice that Krennhuber's argument is similar to many *UltraS* opinions about the media. The example of the Naples fans may illustrate the media's process of 'encoding' (Doran, 2008). According to Hall et al. (1978), journalists have easy access to the versions of events given by individuals or institutions in positions of power. These groups become the 'primary definers' of crucial society issues because they have privileged access to information out of the sight of the public (Doran 2008; Hall et.al. 1978). Deviant actions and their coverage are often shaped around the perspectives of the 'primary definers'. The primary definers interpret the event creating a dynamic by which, *'the first interpretation is discursively powerful and extremely difficult to alter, once established'* (Hall et al. 1978, in Doran, 2008, p. 201). In our analysis of the media, we also need to be cautious in characterizing them as passive recipients. Once the journalists receive the primary definers' versions, they act to select and shape these viewpoints; as a result, they are not merely passive tools in the hands of the powerful. Events are 'coded' in each paper's own mode of address and into its public idiom; the media often adapt the tale of the primary definers using versions of reality that fit into the common language used by the 'average Joe,' giving further strength to discourses characterized by 'popular force and resonance' and 'naturalizing' these views for the audience (Doran, 2008). Moreover, both examples mentioned earlier underline the role of the Italian media as agents of moral resentment (Cohen, 1980).

The media-*UltraS* dynamics (and more widely the whole of the hardcore football fans), though, cannot be completely understood using just Hall's hypotheses; it is complex and multi-dimensional. An excess of media coverage is also another issue in this highly complex media-*UltraS* relationship; dense coverage is a dysfunction that may become dangerous. The excess focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on negative actions, real or perceived. This trend appears to be rooted in two factors; the first is economic, namely the need to sell news. The other is specific to the *UltraS* identity, notably their logic and characteristic as an oppositional movement. Two different opinions emerged from the interviews with the Italian sports journalists. From one side, Arturi did not mention any problems related to an excess of coverage even if he rightly underlined the difference in quality of the coverage according to the skills of the journalist:

'The press - I would add the 'good' press, because as always in life there are the average journalists, good journalists and bad journalists - is one of the pillars that underpin a democratic country, these 'Mafiosi' see the police and the media as an obstacle to their criminal business. If the press intervene strongly it is due to living in a state of emergency.'

The third journalist Gabriele Marcotti, though, held a different view:

'Violent acts from hardcore fans receive less coverage in the UK media than in Italy. For example, two years ago, Chelsea and Tottenham fans fought and 13 Tottenham fans were wounded and ended up in hospital; if you search, you will find only brief reports. I do not remember any Italian match ended with 13 fans wounded but I imagine, if this episode had occurred in Italy, the press would have covered the event for ages. If we want to be cynical we could say that broadcasting channels such as BBC and SKY do not cover the phenomenon so much to avoid damaging football as a product and business. We can also say that they do not want to encourage an emulation process. When the Italian inspector of police- Raciti- tragically died (Note 13) , the Italian TV channels showed the episode millions of times; I am not sure how necessary this obsessive coverage is; can this instead have an opposite effect?'

While Arturi's statement argued for the supposed 'emergency' situation that justifies an excess in media coverage, Marcotti pointed out an 'obsessive' coverage of negative episodes involving not only *UltraS* but also any hardcore-football fans.

The first, apparent, justification of the Italian media coverage of the *UltraS* phenomenon might be best explained by the statement *'bad news is good news'*. Fights between rival fans are more likely to be reported than the *UltraS* campaigns against pedophilia. A more articulate explanation might help focus this issue. According to Cavender (2004), the pleasure that audiences draw from crime stories comes from the eternal battle between good and evil. Such stories ideally contain, as protagonists, heroes (the State, the police and the media) and villains (the 'mindless' football thugs). This representation is a constant feature of news about crime. The media increases the tension/drama between the two forces, which is good news albeit hardly 'fair' coverage.

'This similarity of presentation produces a unity of narrative themes about crime. Crime, in the real world, but also as depicted in the media, becomes a part of the agenda of public discourse' (Cavender, 2004, p. 339).

In their presentation of crime/deviant news (such as those involved the *UltraS*) a clichéd scenario ensues. The

tension has to be built up; the enemy is defined. The drama is then played out and the public's interest is used to justify all subsequent coverage.

The other possible explanation focuses on the specificity of the *UltraS* having a dual vested interest, not only as hardcore football fans but also, as this study explains, as a 'genuine' neo-fascist extra-parliamentary groups motivated by a logic of 'action' and opposition against the Italian authorities. As stated previously, the *UltraS* consider themselves outside the 'system'. They, hence, need the *Agorà* of the stadium and seek, via this location, the possibility of mass audience in their struggle for visibility (Juris, 2005). Confrontations, together with banners and fanzines based on ideology, are a good means to attract media attention, which then decontextualise and re-shape the events to highlight the *UltraS* criminal or deviant traits (Gitlin, 1980), augmenting in this way the *UltraS* sense of injustice and marginalization. The militant nature of the *UltraS* encourages the media to represent any aspect of their protest as dangerous. Their symbolism, ideology, and warrior/rebellion spirit does not provoke inquiry but seems only to help the media constructing them as a threat to the social order. Arturi, commenting on the *UltraS*, considered them: *'more than terrorism, this is Mafia! Within the stadium, there are Mafiosi attitudes. The contempt shown for journalists can be only understood in this context'*. Therefore, groups of militants, such as the *UltraS*, increase the media discourses of fear and terror, and may serve to justify a strong repression that at times involves not only the *UltraS* but also 'ordinary' supporters. This type of coverage, on the other hand, can strengthen the very phenomenon, especially considering the nature of *Communitas* of the *UltraS* where there is a strong group identification based on 'a shared ordeal'. This media strategy can work to increase the *UltraS*' cultivation of perceived stigma (Corte and Edwards, 2008). The stigma – discrimination element plays a central role in understanding the dynamics between the *UltraS* and the 'others' including the media. As Marco argues:

'We tend to defend the young guys of 17/18 from the control and labeling of the State; you must understand that being an UltraS and being a neo-fascist can be devastating for the future of these guys. In Italy, there is not a democracy; we are guarded and filed by the police; we do not expose these youngsters to this danger even if we fight; the direttivo is in the first row; the young follow. We do not want to expose them when they will have the maturity they will choose; we do not want to let them become attached to a label so they will not be discriminated against like many of us are.'

The risk of reinforcing the *UltraS* discourses of persecution and discrimination is, hence, real.

4. Conclusion

In a study of the Italian neo-fascist militants carried out by social scientists Milesi et al. (in Klandermans and Mayer, 2006), the data stressed that the crucial element, which motivated the participants to join the 'action', was the discrimination suffered by those who embraced this ideology. Similar to the *UltraS*, the young participants underlined discrimination during their adolescence or early adulthood at high school and university. Milesi et al. argued that such discrimination did not discourage them from identifying themselves in public as fascist. In fact, it had the opposite effect, reinforcing such identification. In the past, these perceptions have brought the *UltraS* to act together against what they considered oppressive institutions (Note 14). This type of coverage might, as Corte and Edwards (2008) point out, reinforce the claims of marginalization made by the *UltraS*, and supports their vision of being the righteous victims of persecution perpetrated by a system-wide conspiracy. The sense of 'being against' creates tension, anger and hate that could develop into new forms of attack against the State. Concomitantly, this type of coverage also contributes to promoting the underdog discourse that can help recruitment in the *curve* (Corte and Edwards, 2008).

While this study does not suggest in any way to restrain the democratic freedom of the media to inform the public, it proposes a more balanced use of media coverage as a strategy to contain the *UltraS* violence in light of not only this study but of findings and experiences in other countries. For instance, a negative correlation was found between a decrease in media attention and the violent actions of Austrian hardcore football fans (Marani, 2003). Perhaps the British attitude towards this phenomenon, which the journalist Gabriele Marcotti supports, could be exported to Italy.

4.1 Methodological notes

The choice of the *Boys* and the *Irriducibili* was influenced by the need for the study sample to satisfy the requirement of transferability, a central concern of sound research (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Bryman 2008). For the intransigence of their ideology, the *Boys* and the *Irriducibili* are well-known and respected among similar *UltraS* groups. Many Italian *UltraS* have adopted their names into their vocabulary. This emulation, together with the nature of Italian fascism (and its modern form), which tends to encourage uniformity of individuals via shared

values, myths and beliefs (Kallis, 2000), suggests a certain degree of transferability of the findings to other similar groups. As the logic of the *UltraS* of Lazio was similar to the *Boys* regardless of the teams that they support, so the logic of the studied might be similar to other neo-fascists, such as the *Boys San* of Inter or the *Settembre Bianconero* of Ascoli. Based on such transferability, this micro-scale study has also macro-scale implications.

To gather data, I adopted a triangulation strategy (Testa and Armstrong, 2010b). As the term suggests, this approach utilizes more than one method to collect information (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). I complemented the Participant-Observation method (Gold, 1958) with semi-structured interviews, carried out mostly at the head offices but at the stadium in few instances. I also consulted documents ranged from newspaper articles, the groups' fanzines, their websites, and the musical genres that they favoured. Data were coded according to specific topics of interest (Haenfler, 2004): *ideology, personal traits, organization, repression, politics, media, and norms*. The data were read, compared and re-read to identify phrases, terms and patterns of behavior (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

The names of the *UltraS* used in this paper are imaginary (Cf. Testa, 2009, Testa and Armstrong, 2010a).

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Notes

- Note 1. The Totocalcio is a prize contest. The punter, using the *schedina* (betting card), must predict the outcome of 14 football matches every Sunday.
- Note 2. The television broadcast title *il processo di Biscardi* (the Trial of Biscardi) is broadcasted every Monday after the Sunday football matches by channel 7 Gold.
- Note 3. The broadcasts were used to advertise the *UltraS pensiero* (i.e. values, opinions) about football but also about political and social issues. Moreover, listeners could hear stories around the groups' social initiatives.
- Note 4. Cf. <http://club.quotidianonet.ilsole24ore.com/tassi>
- Note 5. The term literally means 'disappeared' in Spanish and is applied to people arrested for ostensibly political reasons by the police of the Argentine Junta of the 1970s and early 80s. It is estimated that between 1976 and 1983, up to 30,000 dissidents went 'missing'. The *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo) are mothers and grandmothers of the "disappeared". Since its foundation in 1977, the organization has also been searching for over 200 "disappeared" children, some born in clandestine detention centers during the captivity of their mothers or "disappeared" with their parents after being taken into custody by members of the police or security forces. Cf. <http://abuelas.org.ar/italiano/storia.htm>
- Note 6. A hospital in Rome internationally renowned in treating children's diseases.
- Note 7. The two initiatives were also acknowledged by the newspaper *Il Manifesto* (issue 04/06/03) ; a popular national newspaper that propounds a communist ideology.
- Note 8. Giorgio refers to the radio broadcast, *La Voce Della Nord*.
- Note 9. Cf. <http://behablog.it/>
- Note 10. Derstandard.at. (2008, September 04). Schikanen bewusst geplant?. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://derstandard.at/?url=/?id=1220457342474>
- Note 11. Derstandard.at. (2008, September 04). Schikanen bewusst geplant?. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from

<http://derstandard.at/?url=/?id=1220457342474>

Note 12. Derstandard.at. (2008, September 04). Schikanen bewusst geplant?. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://derstandard.at/?url=/?id=1220457342474>

Note 13. In 2007 ,the police inspector Fillippo Raciti was killed by an hardcore football supporters during the derby Catania versus Palermo at the Massimino stadium.

Note 14. For example the derby in 2004 which has no precedent in Italian football history.