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Feeling the void – Covid-19 creativity and football without football

Katarzyna Herd

This article is based on the lack of football activities during the global pandemic of 2020 (and unfortunately still in the beginning of 2021), focusing on a Swedish club from Stockholm called AIK (Allmänna Idrottsklubben). This lack of activities presented in the article happened between April 2020 and March 2021.

A virus that became known colloquially as 'Coronavirus' or 'Covid-19' (officially classified SARS-CoV-2) caused a halt to large gatherings of people. The ban on events was one of the methods to prevent the virus from spreading. Even though Sweden did not have a lockdown, as many other countries had, the number of people coming together was gradually restricted and sport events involved players only. No public was allowed. As Covid-19 spread in Sweden in early spring of 2020, the football season was just about to begin. Unlike many European countries, the Swedish league is played from spring to autumn (the most common schedule is autumn to spring, with a summer break). This meant that in 2020 football as it has been known for decades, with filled stadiums, chanting fans and an occasional open conflict with the police, did not happen.

How to consume something that does not exist? The Covid-19 pandemic that hit Europe resulted in drastic restrictions of events that form a core of experiences in popular culture, like concerts, gigs, theater, opera, art installations and art performances. Sport events were cancelled as well. Football was cancelled. After initial attempts to have some audience, or hopes that within a few months everything would be under control, it became apparent that seeing things 'live' would be out of a question.

The restrictions and lockdowns in most counties meant that the exchange economy based on 'I give you money you give me my emotional experiences' model was disrupted. Cultural as well as sport institutions faced a hard reality of drastically cut income and no audiences or spectators. The sport and culture

enthusiasts were in turn left with a void to fill. Football supporters in Sweden, anticipating a new season, waiting for April that usually starts the league matches, were left with meaningless year tickets and a dilemma of being an active supporter without being able to be an active supporter. Fans were supposed to sit at home and do nothing.

After a decade (at least) of a mantra calling for live support, supporting your local football club and watching it from the stands as 'real supporters' it all became 'unreal'. The 'nonsense' of relying on TV-screens rather than live atmosphere became the new 'sense'. Folklorist and literary critic Susan Stewart stressed the connections between constructing the common sense while defining the nonsense. They depend on each other and on individuals' ability to categorize them:

The common-sense construction of reality takes place in contexts of everyday life situations. Common sense underlies and is an outcome of the interpretations created in and by these situations; it is rooted in the reality of this everyday world. These interpretations depend upon the immediate situational context, on such features of the interaction as "settings, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms and genres" (Stewart 1979, 27).

The football fandom serves in this text as an example for consumers deprived of their main source of nourishment – feelings and emotional engagement experienced at football stadiums – caused by the global pandemic. Like any group of fans, they are willing to spend money on tickets, travel to away matches, make banners, buy merchandise, and consume beer and hot-dogs during games. The monetary investment is translated into the emotional engagement that forms (at least for some) a key element in one's processes of identity constructions. Another abyss opened as well: every year TV, newspapers and social media were filled to the brim with football news, and a big part of it was about fans, about their engagement, their displays, the unrests and conflicts with the police, impressive or questionable behavior.

As the reality of empty stadiums was sinking in, the clubs (in Sweden and in other countries) began voicing a plea for help, as the economic situations for most of the clubs were far from safe and sound. But what was there to consume apart from TV screens? Quite a lot, as it turned out. After the initial 'What now?'-dismay, an eruption of creativity flooded social media and official clubs' channels, as fans and clubs themselves presented possibilities for spending money on their

beloved teams. To be able to consume something that was impossible to consume – a live event – a range of ways to support football was created, with a fair dose of humor and irony, which highlighted the nonsense of the new sense (Stewart 1979, 13-14).

It should be stressed that the activities presented here were visible throughout the football world and many clubs were incredibly creative in finding new ways to survive the pandemic, like sofa-tickets, fake games online etc. It was a global phenomenon providing many interesting examples. The focus on one Swedish club provides a plethora of activities in one specific context as it was not just one activity per club but rather a long, ongoing effort throughout the pandemic.

Board a fictional buss

Restrictions following the Covid-19 outbreak made clear that many Swedish clubs were in dire economic situations. Lack of spectators meant even less income. Clubs offered 'couch tickets' for example, asking fans to contribute, while sitting in their sofas. Supporters quickly organized themselves providing fake, or imagined, events one could take part in. Black Army, a supporter organization attached to AIK, started advertising fictive away trips to the team's away matches. During a normal year, they would have real trips organized. The ads, appearing regularly on their Facebook page for example, were very similar to those from 'normal' years. It just... did not happen. And it was cheaper. A hundred Swedish crowns for a trip. All the money was donated to AIK (4 Dec 2020; <https://www.facebook.com/blackarmy1981>). In a post that ended last year's campaign, Black Army could claim 46 000 SEK (Swedish crowns) for their club.



Picture 1. From Black Army's official Facebook page (retrieved April 2021).

The virtual bus trips were an example of a simple engagement that supporters could do, and with a small amount of money, they could support the club, and see their strength and meaning rising with every crown collected. During the 'normal' year, away matches can be exhausting. Sweden is a relatively big country, with hours of driving between towns. Matches are often on week days, especially Mondays, which makes it problematic with work arrangements. The virtual bus was a substitute for some, but a unique opportunity for others. It also showed how small contributions could turn into substantial help. But AIK turned out to be in dire need for more help, both moral and monetary, which prompted a bigger action.

Collect money to buy players

'Come on Gnaget!' – in Swedish 'Kom igen Gnaget' (Gnaget is a nickname for AIK) – was a supporter reaction to a bad start of the season and perceived stagnation on the transfer market, mixed with reports of a very, very bad economic situation. Swedish journalist and sport commentator Anders Lindblad called AIK in 2020 'a tragic comedy' (Lindblad 2020). In other words, the club was almost broke, with equally broken spirits, playing badly, and hitting the bottom of the league. The coach of the team had been sacked after the first few months, but a light at the end of the tunnel was nowhere to be seen. In those circumstances various supporter organizations, from ultras groups to official fan gatherings, came together to get some financial help. The fear of relegation,

inability to support on the stands, and info about bad finances in the club prompted a spontaneous reaction that united supporters to collect money. A message about the action was posted on AIK's official web page:

The season for the men's team has not started as we thought or hoped. The trend has not yet reversed and the meager points harvest creates anxiety, disappointment and frustration, although some improvements can be seen. At the same time, we AIK members have a burning desire to support the team when things are going badly. After the loss in the last home match, a spark was born out of frustration. Quite quickly, more than SEK 100,000 was collected after a spontaneous initiative and now we want to make it even more (...).

The goal is to raise SEK 1,000,000. Every krona that comes into the campaign will go directly to AIK Football and the money will be used to finance the reinforcements that have been made and are being made in the player squad. If we cannot support on the spot from the stands, we can at least try to support at a distance financially and create better conditions for the club to get out of this situation.

The fundraiser will run until August 31 (even if the transfer window closes on August 25) so that everyone will have the opportunity to contribute and be part of this force that will take us forward. The important thing is not when your contribution comes or when new players are introduced, but that your contribution comes in. In this way, we supporters are also part of the financing solution. For every krona that comes in via this campaign, AIK Football has the opportunity to save the same amount for the coming season. Given all the uncertainty that exists with the corona pandemic and matches without an audience, there are great financial risks in the future for AIK Football and with our support, those risks can be mitigated somewhat. Now we turn this around together! (<https://www.aikfotboll.se/komigengnaget>, retrieved 12.04.2021, my translation)

The action resulted in more than one million SEK (Swedish crowns), which was announced when it was closed in August 2020. It became a point of pride among fans and showed their strength. It also showed different logic than what one would expect when it comes to finances of an institution like a football club. As it emerged, AIK was extremely weak financially, and some of the exposed affairs seemed shady. Instead of demanding answers and asking for more reasonable economic behavior, as well as transparency in the economic department, fans spontaneously collected a substantial amount in order to finally see some results. Fans responded to the crisis with a challenging attitude to what would normally have made sense. This was possible because the process can result both in nonsense and in actual sense, as Susan Stewart put it: 'manufacture of common sense and the transformations by which nonsense is made out of common sense belong to the same social universe' (Stewart 1979, 7).

This exposed, to some extent, a different logic of being a supporter. In a way, everyone knows that pouring money into football is a risky business, and seeing one's club on minus budget has become a standard for many. However, the

Covid-19 season hit AIK hard not only financially, but also on the scoring board. The team lost matches that in theory should have been won, and fans could not see any decisive actions being taken, such as buying new players. Unable to show up, to make displays, to sing and chant, or curse the opponents, the fans decided to give the club some money, so maybe they would be able to get a new player, some new hope, some spark to continue fighting. The action was widely reported in media and fans were praised for their devotion. The logic seemed basically to be 'here take some cash and please make me feel better'. From online discussions, one could get the underlying tone that AIK was clearly a club unable to perform without its supporters. It was both good and scary news. The pandemic seemingly exposed reliance on screaming crowds that the team needed.

The winds did change for AIK. They made a bold transfer of Mikael Lustig, a known player with international career and many appearances in the national team. Fans felt as if they received a Christmas present. The team won some crucial matches and finished middle of the table. It was far from a fantastic season, but the mood was cheerful, mostly because of the spontaneous actions that brought results. The club needed them, and the fans delivered. In turn, the club understood that with no possibilities to watch football and engage emotionally in stadiums, reactions were strong and thus strong gestures were necessary. As the following season was shaping up, and again with restrictions, the club organized two campaigns that would put supporters in the spotlight.

Your name carved in stone. In the changing room

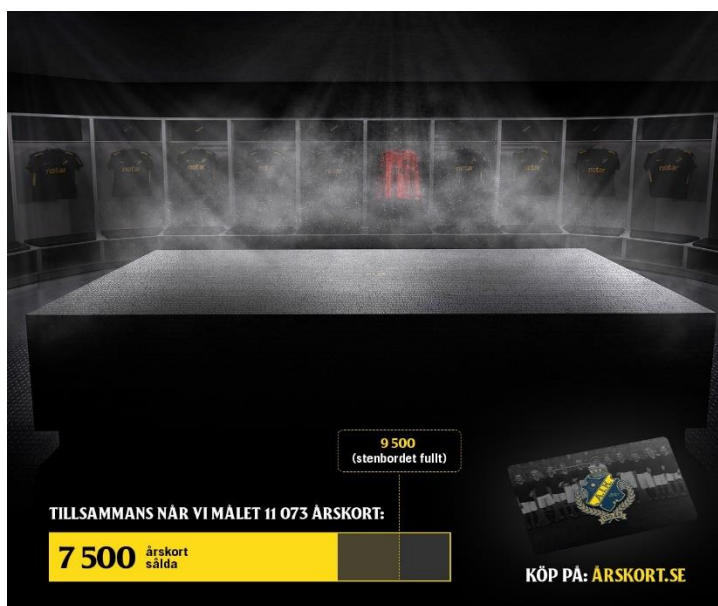
The initial joy of vaccines against Covid-19 was wearing off in the end of January 2021. The Vaccination process was long, cases were on the rise again, and restrictions in Sweden were getting tougher. There was no formal lockdown, but at best eight people could meet together. The hope for welcoming the 2021 football season from the stands was fading fast. Amid the grim mood, AIK launched an initiative that included a block of granite and season tickets that admittedly would be rather useless. In an issued statement one could read:

When the Allsvenskan season 2021 starts, with a fixture between AIK and Degerfors IF at Friends Arena, it will probably happen with a reduced audience in the stands. To remind players of the supporters' presence, a monolith of black granite, with the season ticket holders' names engraved, will be placed in the middle of the team's locker room.

The 'supporter stone' becomes a permanent part of AIK Football's locker room and is made of a granite (...), a hard and deep black stone.

To get your name engraved on the monolith, you need to buy Årskort-21 (season ticket-21) no later than the day before the Allsvenskan premiere, a match that is played on Monday 12 April. (<https://www.aikfotboll.se/nyheter/supportrarnas-namn-hugget-i-sten-mitt-i-omkladningsrummet> 03.03.2021; retrieved 20.04.2021; my translation)

The visual representation of the stone was used almost daily in messages on AIK's social media platforms, together with an indicator showing how many cards were bought and how many names were to be carved. The sale of the cards exploded once the granite monument was announced.



Picture 2. A visualization of the monolith, retrieved from AIK's Facebook page; <https://www.facebook.com/aik>; (retrieved 07/04/2021).

AIK has run several advertisement campaigns in the past based on black, which is one of the club's colour, and its unapologetic attitude towards other teams in Sweden and basically everything else (Herd 2018, 178-194). A black rock makes sense in the AIK world. It is also an interesting attempt to make supporters feel important, to 'set them in stone'. The desired result was to increase sales of tickets to nothing. As fans donated money on a regular basis during 2020, and many faced economic uncertainties because of personal problems with the pandemic, it was hard for clubs to justify why one would even consider buying any tickets without a glimpse of hope that one would be able to use them. The monolith promised something else instead. To be immortalized in a sacred space that us, average mortals, could not use nor see. The changing room is restricted, secluded, and available for just a few. When conducting research in Malmö FF for

my Master thesis in 2013, I, a female researcher, was not allowed to see their team's changing room even when it was completely empty. I still do not know what my presence would do to the benches, lockers or equipment rather than jinx it with some sort of female magic that I presumably possessed.

AIK offered a symbolic intimacy with the team and a constant presence where one would not be allowed normally. That 'little extra' would spice up purchases of empty promises (meaning the tickets). The club wrote openly that they could not guarantee anything, thus offered a range of prices for tickets, based on nothing really, just your willingness to either part with 1000, 2000, or 3000 SEK. However, one's name would be set in stone and the maximum capacity of names (9500) was actually reached in April 2021. Thousands of names of true supporters are going to decorate the room. The money that they paid was transformed into a promise of eternity.

Number 12 on the pitch

The granite monolith with engraved fans' names connects to the idea that many of the football spectators in Sweden share; namely, that it is them, the fans, who make the most important part of a football club, as they devote their emotions, time and money. They make the most stable element in the hectic football reality as players, coaches, and arenas change with a growing pace (Herd 2018, 113-121). To the monolith, another benefit was added that would motivate people to buy symbolic year tickets. A lottery was made and all those who bought those tickets had a chance to appear during the first match of the season. A message from AIK, after one lucky person was selected, read like this:

#11 Stefan Silva will carry Emilia Forsberg's name on his back in the Allsvenskan premiere.

Do you want to see your name on a player shirt against Degerfors on April 12? Buy Årskort-21 via www.arskort.se and you have the chance! (from AIK's Facebook page, retrieved 26.04.2021)

The players, like Stefan Silva, instead of their own name were to have a fan's name on the shirt instead. The little additional nod towards supporters was greeted with a murmur of admiration and the joy of being 'the chosen one' was openly expressed. The fans are sometimes nicknamed as 'number 12', indicating the 12th player (12th man), apart from the eleven on the pitch, and a key

element in the football world. There have been articles and chronicles written about it, and the term is even listed on Wikipedia.

AIK, then, took the issue very literally. The 12th man was on the pitch and all the players had different names than their own. Among the comments from supporters some express a happy nonsense as 'they scored a goal', meaning certain players with their names on their back did, wondering if they shall be listed in the official statistics. It was the supporters that played in the first match of the season, albeit symbolically. As the football world is often accused of 'selling itself', and football shirts often look like advertisement boards, with plenty of sponsors' names, AIK cleared the space for supporters, who often stay anonymous. The club tried to give a sense of importance and belonging, as well as a special position within the club.

Can you feel the void?

Curiously, the pandemic gave people an opportunity to consume football in a way that was not possible before, as more and more drastic measures of signaling connection and commitment were necessary to invent. A simple plea for financial support resulted in creative engagement with the fans and with new ideas how to communicate football and how to make it happen when hardly anything was happening. Many clubs had to come up with ways that would encourage fans to spend money on (almost) nothing. Many used ironic or mocking narratives trying to justify the 'new normal' and the nonsensical character of the corona-sense; for example a team called BK Häcken started selling so-called schäslongskort – lounge/couch cards, marking that one is going to watch matches from one's couch, but it still will be more than TV-watching. In the empty stadiums fans found out that the air was still filled with their emotions, feelings, engagement, and devotion. The 'immediate situational context' made the transition and redefinition of sense possible (Stewart 1979, 27).

Perhaps a quote from Roland Barthes can help unpack this successful failure of 2020 football season. Barthes wrote about sports: "it is man's victory over ignorance, fear, necessity. Man has made his victory a spectacle, so that it might become the victory of all those watching him and recognizing themselves in him" (2007, 9). Even though one could not watch football live, it was certainly still

there. But the pandemic made it possible to have other battles, wins and losses that are going to be engraved in collective memory – battles over Corona-related fears, battles to still believe, battles to keep the rites and rituals developed in football. And battles to survive the trying time of global worry. As football thrives on emotional engagement, 2020 (and at least the first part of 2021) contributed to a profound amount of possibilities for such. Perhaps it was not as much a void, but rather a new set of challenges to overcome. And as with every battle something will be destroyed, or lost, and there will be wounds. The next season (for I assume there will be one) shall show what emerged from the pandemic.

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