

War Of The Words: wisdom of the (football) crowds

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/02/06/war-of-the-words-wisdom-of-the-football-crowds/

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Jeremy Clarkson, Carol Thatcher, and Jonathan Ross are just the three latest combatants in the kultur kampf of what we say and what it means.

It is interesting how the BBC has become the site for this. There are three good or interesting things (at least) that have come out of this bizarre and curiously complicated set of disputes.

Firstly, we live in an age where the visual is most powerful and where the speed of communication can reduce language to the banal and functional (I should know, I have started Twittering). Yet these disputes confirm that people really care about what is said and what they are allowed to say. People instinctively understand that words are the articulation of other discourses about power.

Secondly, it shows that people feel a great sense of ownership about the BBC and they see it as the national broadcaster, the repository of our shared culture. So it may not be very comfortable for the BBC high-ups as they lurch through another 'crisis' but they should be comforted that a) people care and b) they think the BBC will listen.

Thirdly, it shows that we are increasingly sensitive about the implications of language. My fellow West Ham season ticket holder [Iain Dale](#) has a very good post with some brilliantly insightful comments on the use of language at football matches.

Footie is traditionally the place where behaviour is unleashed. But even in the 90 minutes of drama, anger and gut feeling, people are increasingly conscious of the limits to free expression and the power of the spoken. Here's what one of Iain's readers says:



I'm a gay West Ham boxholder (see, we're everywhere, but mainly near a bar) and to my similarly hard-drinking footie mates that's about as interesting as whether I'm left or right-handed. But isn't all of this about context? My black (straight) mate is forever keen to reinforce the stereotype about the size of what's in his underwear, a Jewish acquaintance is a Spurs supporter and loaded (and gets ribbed for it), I'm always complaining that West Ham players are universally ugly (though things are improving a bit of late). They are only words, it's malice or intent that matters. By all accounts Carol Thatcher meant nothing by what she said (anyone who has ever seen or heard her would be aware she's hardly the sharpest knife in the drawer). So consider this: it's the last ten minutes v Hull, everyone's up for a corner and in goes Cole, Boa Morte, Ilunga and Faubert, a bit of melee and the ball goes out of play. Bloody hell, I said, no idea what happened there it was just a forest of black, shaven heads. I know said my mate, it's like looking down on a box of matches from here. Now I think that's funny, and NOT racist. But dissect it on Radio 4 for a couple of hours and see where it ends up.

That says it all really.

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