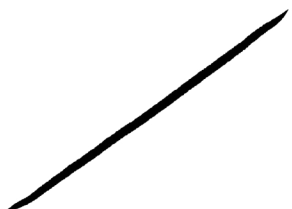


FĪ BLĀDĪ ẒALMŌNĪ –
**“IN MY COUNTRY
THEY OPPRESSED ME”.**
THE UNCENSORED
CENSORSHIP

**BIANCA
BRANDEA**



SDLIC, University of Bucharest, Romania
brandea.bianca@gmail.com

Abstract: The main topic of this paper is to discuss and discover the freedom of expression on the Moroccan stadia. This study involves the situation of the supporters of Raja Club Athletic from Casablanca, whose freedom of speech is often limited when their messages are understood as being ominous to the royal authority or to the Royal Moroccan Football Federation. The title of this articles refers to one of their chants in which they express their thoughts about oppression and injustice they get from the Moroccan authorities. Debates have been conducted in order to observe the viewpoints of the Moroccan supporters who volunteered for this study. The analysis reveals consequences that these supporters face when their intentions are not interpreted from an objective point of view. I conclude that the art promoted and created by the Moroccan supporters is constrained by the limits imposed by society or law.

Keywords: football, censorship, ultras, Morocco, freedom of expression.

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The supporters of Raja Club Athletic (further noted as RCA) are known by worldwide supporters not only for the spectacular pyro and tifo shows they make, but also for the impressive number of participants who sing along during sports competitions. What is less known about their activity is that they usually express their protest messages through their chants, graffiti, flags, phrases written on canvas, etc.

The Moroccan supporters understood that football is the most appreciated sport worldwide and football competitions always attract a large and diverse audience. This fact inspired them to overcome the limit of expressing supportive messages for their favourite team, therefore they decided to start chanting and exhibiting messages of common interest for the Moroccan society. The RCA supporters call themselves 'the voice of the people', since they are aware of the impact that they can make by raising attention to everyday life issues that most of the Moroccans face, such as poverty, corruption, emigration, unemployment, etc. (Brandea, 2020, p. 45).

The supporters' movement in North Africa came as a continuation of the protest wave from the Arab Spring. However, their manifestations during sports competition are not meant to be violent, especially if we compare them to the ones from the Arab Spring. Due to the Arab Spring events, Arab supporters – especially the Ultras – came into the attention of the media and it became convenient to blame them for many other violent manifestations, although they have not been involved in them. During the Arab Spring, it has been discovered that the Ultras are part of the actual Arab society and that there are not many known things about them (Woltering, 2013, p. 290). Ultras had been present in the media by that time, but the publications that involved them also involved violence and the inability of expressing protest messages in peaceful ways. Thus, the presence of some Ultras at the protests that started the Arab Spring made the most suitable opportunity for the media to describe this social category that does not agree with their government.

The *Ultra*' phenomenon started in Italy in the second half of the 20th century and has inspired the Moroccan Ultras since the beginning of the 21st century. Since all Ultras express themselves using symbols, chants, slogans, etc. (Rharib, 2014, p. 42), they play an important role in the contemporary cultural space. On a general note, not all supporters are Ultras, but all Ultras are supporters; the main differences

between these categories are that the Ultras are more involved in their favourite club's activities and they usually come up with the choreography ideas for every competition.

It is important to note that Moroccan supporters do not intend to offend the royal authority, as they claim to respect their king. On the other hand, they are not satisfied with the Moroccan government and blame it for all the present problems in their society, but they do not mean to make their statements in an offensive manner. According to my *hypothesis*, the general response to the Ultras' protesting nature is rather a psychological censorship against the real intentions behind their artistic expression.

As it had been proven with the reported news during the Arab Spring, the media prefers to emphasize negative events by linking any recent violent outcome to the image of the Ultras. Since this category of football fans was not very popular at that time and the general audience did not know much about them, all the negative reports in the media led to a lack of trust and objective understanding of the Ultras. Consequently, their protests during sports competitions have been interpreted as attempts of starting violent fights and their graffiti works have been understood as rather vandalism acts. Despite the fact that their manifestations on the stadia and outside of them have happened during times of political or social uncertainty, the intended messages have not got to the rest of the Moroccans who had the same problems as the Ultras. Even if the Moroccan Ultras have considered themselves the voice of the people, the people had not had a base of knowledge about them in order to be aware of their true intentions. This lack of knowledge is a consequence of the 'uncensored censorship' that built a subjective image of the Ultras in the media.

This subjective image has been created either by the lack of professionalism of the journalists who had not been involved into a deep research of the *Ultra*' phenomenon, or it has been inspired by authorities in order to prevent mass protests. During the Arab Spring events in Egypt, the local media claimed that the politicized Egyptian Ultras started the revolution, proving that Ultras may influence the society they live in. As this fact has been acknowledged all around the Arab world, the Moroccan Ultras have lost their credibility even in front of the security forces, who usually expect them to become dangerously violent during sports competitions. On the contrary, the Moroccan Ultras claim that they are willing to risk even their lives as long as they are defending the symbols of their favourite club.

During a football match in November 2019, between RCA and Wydad Athletic Club (further noted as WAC), the RCA supporters created a tifo choreography referring to Room 101 from George Orwell's '1984' novel. This analogy did not let unnoticed the fact that the RCA supporters' protests bring up aspects from the Moroccan social life that may not leave the young audience unconcerned. Another important event in the history of RCA supporters was when all the kinds of artistic support – including chants, choreographies or pyro – have been banned for two years on the Moroccan stadia after a fight between RCA fans that led to the death of at least two supporters in 2016 (Ultras-tifo.net, 2016). Therefore, the Room 101 choreography has been understood as a reminder for the authorities that the supporters are not afraid to risk their own lives as long as they show their admiration for their favourite and have the power of making strong statements.



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However, the RCA supporters claim that the real meaning of this choreography has been related to their rivalry with WAC, indicating the fact that they compared this derby with a sort of torture where they were forcing WAC to face their deepest fear, namely RCA. An important detail on this choreography is that one player on the painted canvas is raising his hands above his head, showing his free right hand and his thumb from the left hand, in order to refer to a football match which took place in 1995 between RCA and WAC and brought the victory to RCA with the 5-1 score.

In addition, Room 101 in George Orwell's novel also represents a place where victims were tortured if they went against the system and were motivated to give up on the idea of getting absolute power after being introduced to the dark implications and fears that come with such a responsibility. This interpretation has been addressed as another valid reason for banning the supporters' manifestations, due to the fact that despite the real intentions behind this choreography, it has been understood as a threat to the royal authorities. According to this interpretation, the royal authorities are indirectly accused of hiding dishonourable secrets that may be brought into light if their power is acknowledged by the entire Moroccan population.

After this derby between RCA and WAC, the authorities claimed that supporters are giving a political aspect to their artistic manifestations and decided to ban the 3D choreographies and tifo on the stadia. As a response, the RCA supporters wore black on the following football match as a sign of protest against this measure they considered unjustified.

In a broader perspective, viewers are a meaningful factor in the commercial aspect of sports. Since most of them do not usually attend live competitions due to various reasons, they collect all the information they find relevant from the media. Thus, the attitude provided by the media in reports of interpretable situations on the stadia may also shape the attitude of the viewers.

For the Moroccan supporters, banning pyro meant more than removing a spectacular element from their choreographies. Ultras around the world may agree that they use pyro in order to express freedom and their desire for achieving it. Therefore, on a symbolic level, the Moroccan authorities' decision of banning pyro on the stadia has been interpreted as an excruciating attack against the supporters' freedom of expression.

The government authorities in Morocco tend to limit the freedom of expression in order to prevent the population from gaining a more powerful and authoritarian voice than the king's himself (Smith and Loudiy, 2005, p. 1071). The Royal Moroccan Football Federation contributes to this limitation of freedom by agreeing with enhancing law enforcement whenever it seems that supporters have reached a specific limit of expression, no matter what their real intentions are. For example, before they enter the stadium, the supporters undergo a body search procedure that also implies a meticulous investigation of their clothing, flags and banners. Whenever the messages displayed in such ways can be understood as getting a political dimension or have the potential of exposing sensitive facts about the state, these objects are not allowed on the stadium and the supporters who bring them are sometimes penalized by the security forces. More often than not, the interpretations and explanations provided by the supporters are not taken into account by the security forces.

Another reason why North African Ultras have a hard time gaining the trust of the authorities in the last decade is that their artistic style of expression is similar to the rappers' who promoted protests songs that inspired street artists to create graffiti and t-shirt messages where such lyrics could be found. This initiative that came from the Moroccan youth tuned eventually into a cultural movement, *Nayda*, where they became aware of how powerful they can be as long as they stay united to fight for their freedom and to try to make a better living in their own country. Since the street protests have stopped and diverse manifestations have become more popular on stadia, the *Ultra* phenomenon in Morocco is often compared to a continuation of the *Nayda* cultural movement.

As far as the Moroccan supporters are concerned, art does not seem to be the territory of absolute freedom of expression when their messages are intended to assert more than their feelings for their favourite club. To a large extent, art creations do not have an exact or fixed rendering, considering that the beholders tend to perceive them in accordance with their own emotions in first place, then they may further adapt their interpretations to a rational dimension, where they speculate the possible intentions of the author and the context in which the specific creations are placed. The RCA supporters' efforts of referring to popular artworks uncover subjective or convenient perceptions from the authorities, who turn the supporters' protests or competitive messages against themselves. Consequently, the supporters are not only facing the limitations imposed by the manner in which their art is presented, but they might also consider all the possible understandings that their artistic manifestations may get.

They always take responsibility for their actions, no matter how outstanding or courageous they might seem for the society they belong to. According to their unwritten rules, avoiding ownership of a public statement is an evidence of lack of courage, responsibility and even a deficiency of Ultras mentality. Furthermore, supporters around the world are able to have a more accurate understanding upon the uncertain situation from the Moroccan stadia, even if they are not provided with all the available details from the media. Therefore, there is a category of audience who has a wider perceptiveness over the objectives of the supporters and they usually have some mistrust in the media reports of stadia incidents; the sports fans in this category are not interested in the sports competitions only, but they are also attracted by the supporters' protests or competitive edge. Habitually, this type of audience prefers social media as a source of information related to football events, due to their lack of reliance on the media.

By contrast, the largest category of audience is formed by fans who are interested only in the action on the football pitch. As far as this category is concerned, any manifestation staged by the Ultras is taken for granted and the interpretations that are taken into consideration are the ones that are promoted by the media. On the other hand, some supporters claim that the Moroccan media usually blames the Ultras for hooliganism and riots without accurate investigations or clear information. Wherefore, the flexible opinions of the secondly mentioned fans are shaped after the impression preferred by the media, leading to a misconception between the two categories of football fans. Nonetheless, the RCA supporters are not discouraged by the inconclusive

information that is being disseminated by the media and keep insisting on representing the voice of the Moroccan people, even if there are categories of people who are doubtful regarding them and their actions.

The oppression perceived by the RCA supporters originates from the beginning of the club's history, during the French protectorate in Morocco. The RCA supporters claim that there have been disagreements between the French and Moroccan authorities ever since the foundation of RCA in 1949. Nowadays, the controversy is happening between the Royal Moroccan Football Federation and the external authorities. In Arabic, the name of the club – Raja (*rajā*) – means 'hope'. This name choice inspired them to create the phrase 'Raja of the people', referring simultaneously to their hope for a better living and admiration for RCA. In addition to referring to the oppression that they feel by themselves, the RCA supporters centre upon the injustice in which their favourite club has been involved through the agency of the authorities. Furthermore, most of the RCA supporters belong to the lower class, thus the reality they live everyday is a common reason of empathy for the situation and history of this club.

Conclusions

As this paper demonstrates, freedom of expression on the Moroccan stadia is constrained by the various interpretations that might be attributed to the supporters' messages.

This research is significant for today's social, political and cultural context because it reveals the ambiguity behind understanding the protest art and the protest art itself. On the Moroccan stadia, censorship is applied by the security forces whenever the materials brought by the supporters and Ultras do not comply with the established limits of their freedom of expression in public areas. The Moroccan media does not censor information in the accustomed manners, instead they provide limited information. The Moroccan supporters' manifestations on the stadia are meant to encourage their favourite teams and also to draw attention on important social matters.

Thus, it becomes a problematic matter whether the supporters' situation in Morocco is placed between freedom of expression and freedom of interpretation. Ironically, the most ongoing constraints related to the consequences of the possible interpretations.

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Bianca Brandea is a PhD student at the Doctoral School for 'Languages and Cultural Identities' from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures within the University of Bucharest. She got her bachelor's degree in Arabic-English Philology (2015-2018) and her Master's degree in Philology at 'The Islamic space: society, cultures, mentalities' Master program (2018-2020) from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures within the University of Bucharest. She is an interpreter for the Romanian National Council for Refugees.