

When Media Bites

Solidarity Federation

Winter 1998

Media frenzy happened at Hillsborough. The police 'did their bit' (sic). And it led to one of the biggest media boycotts in Britain. Almost 10 years on, The Sun still doesn't sell on Merseyside.

On 15th April 1989, Liverpool were to play Nottingham Forest, with the winners going to Wembley for the FA Cup Final. 96 Liverpool supporters ended up going home in a coffin, and to this day, their families have seen natural justice denied. The victims who survived were accused of killing their own people, even though the TV pictures showed fans were the ones who organised the rescue operation whilst police, despite their 1st Aid training, mostly stood and looked on. Once the officers in charge 'froze' and lost control of the situation, the fans, despite witnessing death and injury, acted on impulse and without a chain of command, by ripping down advertising boards to carry the injured out of the ground. They did the job the police should have done.

Liverpool had played Forest the previous year at Hillsborough, and there were many complaints over the venue and ticket allocations. Liverpool's average attendance was almost double Forest's. The 1981 FA Cup semi-final at Hillsborough was saved from disaster only because several hundred fans were able to escape crushing by climbing onto the pitch.

The safety certificate for Hillsborough had not been amended since 1979, even though a perimeter fence had been installed all around the ground. An anonymous South Yorkshire Police Federation spokesman stated: "Many did not have tickets but they were demanding to get in. It looked as if mayhem was going to start outside, it was too late to postpone the kick-off because that could have caused disorder inside".

The first media comment on the unfolding disaster was when BBC Radio Sport commentator Peter Jones stated: "This should have been a show piece, this should have been a classic. At the moment, it is simple mayhem". The disaster was broadcast live on TV by BBC1's Grandstand. Dozens of photographers and journalists, commissioned to report on football, were instead covering a scene of devastation, injuries and horrific deaths. Their stories and photographs formed the basis of the initial international press and TV coverage.

At 3.40 pm, BBC's Alan Green reported from Hillsborough Football Ground when he said there were "unconfirmed reports that a door was broken down at the end that was holding Liverpool supporters". By 4.15, deaths were reported, but no numbers given. Graham Kelly, the Chief

Executive of the Football Association, reported that he had spoken to police who “had not given the impression that they had ordered the gates to be opened”.

A short while after, at approximately, 4.30 pm Alan Green gave a crucial report. Based on information from Graham Mackrell (secretary of Sheffield Wednesday FC), who had spoken to the police, he described events:

“At 10 to 3 there was a surge of fans at the Lepping Lane end of the ground. The surge composed of about 5,000 Liverpool fans, and the police say a gate was forced, and that led to a crush in the terracing area – well under-capacity, I’m told, there was still plenty of room inside that area”.

Later in this report, it was stated that the gates were “broken down” and “large numbers of ticketless fans had arrived at the ground”. The media’s opinion seems merely to be that of the police’s defence. As the bodies lay all around them, the officers in charge seem to have been composed enough to put their own self survival first. Their comments were made to deflect the blame, and police officers were certainly told to alter statements, to further back up the officers in charge. From the police/media’s immediate groundwork of forming public opinions, we witnessed a media frenzy, in which the events of the day became another story to be played for all it was worth. But the stories backfired badly in Merseyside, where thousands of eye-witnesses came back from Hillsborough with a completely different version of events.

boycott

The Sun Newspaper, with a massive circulation on Merseyside, was the worst offender. The April 19th edition (see cover illustration) was burned in the streets by working class people. I witnessed my town centre, where crowds of people had set fire to copies taken from newsagents. Local Councils were forced to ban the Sun from local libraries, etc., a ban that is still in place 9 years later.

The boycott mostly spread by word of mouth, and some people almost came to blows when some unsuspecting person walked into a house or pub with a copy – the ‘Scum’ quickly became the term by which it was referred. The Merseyside boycott is widely reported to have cost the ‘Scum’ £10 million per year. The Hillsborough Campaign intends to step up the action in the run up to the Sun’s planned special apology issue on the 10th anniversary, in April 1999.

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