Sports media professionals reflect on racial stereotypes and ethnic diversity in the organization

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to examine how professionals within Dutch sports media give meaning to racial/ethnic diversity in the organization and reflect on the use of racial stereotypes in sports reporting.

Design/methodology/approach – Ten in-depth interviews with Dutch sports media professionals have been conducted to obtain the data. Respondents had a variety of responsibilities within different media organizations in the Netherlands. The authors used thematic analysis supplemented with insights from critical discourse analysis to examine how sports media professionals give meaning to racial/ethnic diversity and the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes.

Findings – The following main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: (1) routines within the production process, (2) reflections on lack of diversity on the work floor and (3) racial/ethnic stereotyping not seen as an issue. Generally, journalists showed paradoxical views on the issue of racial/ethnic diversity within sport media production dismissing it as a non-issue on the one hand while also acknowledging there is a lack of racial diversity within sport media organizations. Results will be placed and discussed in a wider societal and theoretical perspective.

Originality/value – By focussing on the under-researched social group of sport media professionals in relation to meanings given to race and ethnicity in the production process, this research provides new insights into the role of sports media organizations in (re)producing discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in multi-ethnic society and the operation of whiteness in sports media.

Keywords Gender, Communication, Media, Diversity, Sport, Racism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on sports media representations of athletes of various racial and ethnic origins. Generally, these content analyses have focussed on print and broadcasting sports media within the USA and United Kingdom. The findings from this research generally concluded that journalists and commentators systematically assign more physical descriptions such as "natural" speed and strength to Black athletes than to White athletes (e.g. Hylton, 2009; McCarthy *et al.*, 2003; Ortega and Feagin, 2017). In addition, audience reception studies show that, in most cases, the same stereotypical bias of "the strong Black sportsman" is a common racist trope that surfaces among media consumers who discuss the abilities of Black and White athletes (e.g. Ash and Cranmer, 2020; Azzarito and Harrison, 2008). On the other hand, White athletes remain more invisible in sport media

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coverage or are relatively often associated with mental capacities such as hard work and intelligence (Hylton, 2009). In short, these content analyses and audience reception studies argue that Western sports media frequently perpetuate narratives of Black male athletes as naturally athletic. In contrast to the dominant methods of research within this field, the production process of mediated sport has received very little scholarly attention until now. This is surprising considering the significant role sports journalists play in racializing the representation of athletes. For that reason, the production process within sport media organizations is central in this article.

Within the field of media organization studies, very little research has focussed on the meanings given to race and ethnicity in the production process of sports media (Topic *et al.*, 2021). Bruce (2004) explored meaning-making and the use of racial stereotypes within the production process of North American sports media. She concluded that sports commentators generally did not reflect critically on how their own racial/ethnic background may inform their commentary practices and on their possible use of racial/ethnic stereotypes. Claringbould *et al.* (2004) studied the sport media production process in the Netherlands, from a more institutional perspective, and found that White male sports journalists, in particular, trust their "objectivity and neutrality" and consequently do not feel that a lack of gender or ethnic diversity in their profession affects the quality of their coverage. Knoppers and Elling (2004) focussed on gender instead of race/ethnicity in the sport media production process and observed the same mindset amongst (male) sports journalists. More specifically, their findings concluded that sports journalists tend to refer to their own commentary practices as "neutral", "objective" and "fair" when discussing the issue of underrepresentation of women's sports in sports coverage. Thereby, they tend to avoid broader controversies or debates about gender inequality in sports coverage. Schoch (2013) also focussed on gender in sport media offices and concluded that Swiss female sports journalists often deviate from the conventional, masculine values of sports journalism in their way of working, instead applying a type of "feminine writing" (p. 719) which gives them work satisfaction on the one hand but which also reproduces gender inequality in sports reporting on the other. More specifically, while these female sport journalists may find a "niche" within sports media organizations by choosing to cover "female" issues and "soft news" with an emphasis on emotions, they leave the most prestigious part of the profession (the "hard news", coverage of men's sports) the exclusive domain of men, thus reproducing existing gendered hierarchies in the organization.

Although these studies have contributed to the knowledge base on the production process of sport media and discourses surrounding gender and race/ethnicity, they also have some serious limitations. Most notably, Claringbould *et al.* (2004) did not pay attention to how journalists within sport media organizations reflect on their own use of stereotypes. In our present article, we therefore focus on journalists' own reflections on racial/ethnic stereotyping as a central theme, next to themes such as the perceived importance of racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor or the role of race/ethnicity in everyday work routines. Furthermore, Knoppers and Elling (2004), Schoch (2013) as well as Claringbould *et al.* (2004) focussed on gender and/or conducted their research some time ago already. Some recent studies have shown that the production process of (sports) media worldwide including the Dutch context has changed profoundly in the meantime due to the growing influence of the Internet and social media (De Heer, 2017; Bardoel and Wijfjes, 2015). For instance, the urgency to bring news fast and the "24/7 reporting" cycle have become increasingly important aspects in the work of today's media professionals (for an overview within a Dutch context, see Bardoel and Wijfjes, 2015). For that reason, we found it necessary to shed more light on the production process within the context of these more recent developments. The question of relevance that is central in the present study, and that adds to existing scholarship on sport media, can now be formulated as follows: how do Dutch sports media professionals give meaning to racial/

ethnic diversity in the organization and the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes in the production process of sports coverage?

This research question is not only academically relevant but also has considerable societal relevance. Professional-mediated sport is an important platform for the display of racial/ethnic diversity in many contemporary societies including the Dutch. Previous research (Peeters and Van Sterkenburg, 2017) has shown, for example, that 40% of players in the *Eredivisie* – the highest level within the (male) Dutch football league – have a minority ethnic background. Some journalists and policymakers have, therefore, argued that (professional) sport has the potential to bring together and unite different ethnicities and foster tolerance and intercultural dialogue (e.g. Annan, 2004; Camps, 2021). A more critical perspective argues, however, that (inter)national sport also harbours processes of racism and exclusion, whether it is in the under-representation of minority ethnic groups in leadership positions in European elite football (Bradbury *et al.*, 2018), the formerly discussed "hidden" stereotyping of Black athletes in sports media, or the under-representation of minority ethnic groups within sports media production processes (Claringbould *et al.*, 2004; Coakley and Pike, 2009). Discussing these issues with sports media professionals will give insights into how the professionals working in sports media organizations look upon these issues and what role (awareness of) ethnicity, diversity and the use of stereotypes play within the very popular realm of sport media practice and within the corps of Dutch sport media professionals.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, we will elaborate on some of the central concepts in our study such as race and ethnicity. Secondly, the method of qualitative interviews and thematic analysis will be discussed. Subsequently, we present the results of our qualitative interviews held with Dutch sport media professionals. Finally, results will be discussed and placed in a wider academic and societal perspective by using existing literature. We end with a conclusion and some recommendations for future scholarship and media practice.

Theoretical framework
Race and ethnicity are central concepts in the present study. Although the term "race" is often used in British and American contexts, it is more common in the Netherlands to speak of ethnicity instead of race and of "ethnic minority groups". While race often refers to phenotypical characteristics such as skin colour, ethnicity rather refers to differences based on cultural markers such as language, religion, norms and values. In everyday talk, however, race and ethnicity are often used in conflated ways since ideas about race are usually implicitly present when talking about ethnic groups (Essed and Trienekens, 2008). This also applies to the Dutch context where references to ethnic minorities, for instance, usually refer to *non-White* ethnic minorities only. We will therefore also use the terms race and ethnicity in a conflated way in this article ("race/ethnicity") (see also Van Sterkenburg, 2020). It should also be noted that, according to the race scholar Wekker (2016), those with White European physical features are generally not racialized or ethnicized in most Western countries including the Netherlands due to Whiteness being a normative standard. Whiteness refers to a hegemonic discourse in which White skin tone is being generally perceived as "so ordinary, so lacking in characteristics, so normal, so devoid of meaning" (Wekker, 2016, p. 2) that White individuals are often rendered invisible and remain unspoken in most Western societies. Scholars such as Reitman (2006) and Wekker (2016) have shown how the normative character of having white skin tone affords members of this social group a significant level of privilege. The privilege includes, amongst other things, that having a white skin colour is often associated with specific normative and desirable traits such as leadership, perseverance and intelligence. It is those qualities that are also often seen as valuable to achieve a successful career and obtain higher positions in various fields such as academia, business and politics

(Rada and Wulfemeyer, 2005). White privilege also means that White people often do not see themselves as "raced" and are able to ignore or deny existing racial discrimination without being affected by such denial or ignorance (Reitman, 2006). Such invisibility of whiteness to White people provides the wider context for the operation of hegemonic whiteness to be silently accepted and continued in everyday meaning making and routine practices (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018). Within an organization, this can lead to what Reitman (2006) refers to as "whitewashing": a process in which whiteness affects everybody including ethnic minority groups in an organization by imposing a White situated culture as the invisible norm. Within such a context, inclusion of minority groups is conditional "on Black and minoritized individuals de-prioritising their own cultural history and identities" and performing their identities "in a way that positions them closer to the dominant and valued identities of particular White spaces" (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018, p. 8).

Race/ethnicity and the production process of sports media

Several studies have shown how the normativeness of Whiteness applies to sport media organizations – both public and commercial – "where nearly all of the structures from television production, to radio commentary to the print media, remain overwhelmingly White and male, a situation that unsurprisingly remains largely unremarked upon by the media themselves" (Carrington, 2011, p. 94). Claringbould *et al.* (2004), Devroe (2007) and Farrington *et al.* (2012) point to the under-representation of non-White voices in media coverage including sports media coverage and the lack of ethnic diversity within media practice itself. As a consequence, it is predominantly White media professionals who report on a diversity of ethnic groups within society (also Clark, 2017). While figures on ethnic diversity within sports media are lacking for the Dutch context, the Dutch nationwide newspaper NRC claims that general news editorial offices (newspaper and TV) have become "a bit less white" (Takken and Geels, 2018). More specifically, while the NRC's 2015 inventory of ethnic diversity in print media showed that 3.2% of journalists working at the nine major news editorial offices in the Netherlands were of an ethnic minority background, this percentage had increased to 5.4% in 2018 (Takken and Geels, 2018). However, to put these figures into perspective, the percentage of people with a non-Western immigrant background in wider Dutch society was 13% in 2018 (Takken and Geels, 2018). Other studies also show that media professionals with an ethnic minority background are severely under-represented in media editorial offices (Esman, 2021; Papilaja, 2021; Remarque, 2017). Broadcast media seem to be somewhat more diverse compared to print outlets; however, recent small-scale studies in which Dutch media professionals *across the industry* were interviewed indicate clear under-representation of ethnic minorities in broadcast media as well (Esman, 2021; Papilaja, 2021).

Several scholars have shown how this reality of a predominantly White media also applies to *sports* media in many countries worldwide including the Netherlands (De Heer, 2017) – although the presence of former sport stars as analysts in some countries such as England and the Netherlands increases on-screen racial/ethnic diversity to some extent (BCOMS, 2017; Farrington *et al.*, 2012). The limited diversity contrasts with the tasks usually assigned to public media in multi-ethnic democracies, where media are expected to represent different voices in society (Clark, 2017; Willemars, 2014). From this perspective, media pluralism in various levels of the media organization and production process should be put into practice. This is important because research has shown that journalists' racial makeup or ethnicity can, unconsciously, inform their reporting practices (Shoemaker and Reese, 2016). As Nishikawa *et al.* (2009) noted, reporting is never objective but the result of a subjective process. This process is influenced by a variety of factors such as working routines, targeted public and also social dimensions such as gender and ethnic background of the professionals producing the coverage: "In spite of the traditional notion of professional "objective"

detachment, we assume these characteristics affect their work" (Shoemaker and Reese, 2016, p. 398). Knoppers and Elling (2004) refer to the work routines of journalists when they describe factors that influence (sport) journalistic work. A present-day example of such work routines includes the pressure of live reporting and the necessity to bring news fast (Bruce, 2004). Drok and Hermans (2016, p. 540) argue that this speed-driven modern journalism has serious downsides such as the risk of "oversimplification and stereotyping". This is particularly important to consider in a pre-dominantly While male working environment. McCarthy *et al.* (2003) noted a few years ago, in relation to British football media audiences, how the use and acceptance of racial stereotypes seem to apply to White people in particular for whom only a small discursive space exists between awareness of racial/ethnic stereotypes on the one hand and acceptance of those stereotypes on the other. In practice, this can be seen when (usually White) sport journalists have to react instantly to what happens on the sports field and tend to draw on familiar discourses – many of which incorporate racial/ethnic stereotypes and reproduce everyday racisms (Bruce, 2004). As the quotation used by Carrington (2011) in the beginning of this section already indicated (in which he argued how media organizations often remain unaware of the whiteness of media production structures), journalists seem not always aware of their own racial biases or the biased nature of elements in their reporting. On the contrary, they often describe themselves and their work as "objective" and free of any personal bias. The analysis in the remainder of this article will focus on this matter by centralizing sports media professionals in the Netherlands and how they give meaning to the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes, the role of their own racial/ethnic background in reporting and the importance of racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor.

Research method
Ten Dutch sports media professionals were interviewed for this research which was part of the requirements of finalizing an MA degree for the second author in 2017 (De Heer, 2017) [1]. They spoke in their personal capacities and not as a formal representative of the organizations they work for. All of them were males. Eight interviewees were of a (White) Dutch ethnic background, one was Dutch-Moroccan and one Belgian-Tunisian – but living and working in the Netherlands. The composition of our interviewees reflects the known White, male dominance in sports media production in the Netherlands. Respondents were recruited by using the snowball method, and we ensured that the journalists had a variety of professional backgrounds and came from different professional networks and organizations. In this way, interviews were conducted with sport media professionals who have working experience at nationwide football magazines (2), major national Dutch newspapers (3), regional newspapers (2), popular nationwide digital news platforms (2) and a former national Dutch press agency (1). Respondents had a variety of responsibilities within these different media organizations such as conducting interviews with, for example, football players, writing (online) articles, doing (chief) editorial work, keeping track of and covering sport results and writing match reports. Each interview was approximately 45 min–1 h and was held in coffee bars and editorial offices in the Dutch cities of Utrecht, Rotterdam and Leiden. One interview was conducted via Skype as the journalist/interviewee was abroad for a longer period of time. Interviews were held in Dutch as that was the native language of all interviewees. We translated the selected quotations literally into English for this paper to ensure accuracy of what was being said. Topics that we addressed ranged from the content of the work (work routines, tasks, career trajectory) to more sensitive issues related to race/ethnicity (reflections on racial/ethnic diversity in the organization, racial/ethnic stereotypes in the coverage as found in previous studies, amongst other things). We used an informed consent form to get consent from the interviewees, and results were processed anonymously. Repetition in themes and discourses used by the journalists indicated that a point of

saturation was reached (Boeije, 2010). Interviews were transcribed literally and then analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boeije, 2010). Previous literature research increased theoretical sensitivity in the analysis, but we also maintained an open view for alternative findings and actively searched for counter-evidence in the data that may contradict dominant themes (Silverman, 2011). The thematic analysis used the steps of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). While open coding involves a process of labelling all relevant and important words, segments and sentences in the transcripts and providing them with a code, axial coding is aimed at comparing the different codes, searching for overlaps and differences in the codes and identifying the main themes and sub-themes. Within the last step, selective coding, we focussed on the possible relationships among the various themes, and we identified some core patterns in the data (Boeije, 2010). We additionally used insights from critical discourse analysis to connect the core themes to the question how they reinforce or challenge racialized/ethnicized relations of power and discourses of Whiteness (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The next section will present the main themes and discourses that resulted from our analysis. After that we will discuss our main findings.

Results

We identified three main themes in our data: (1) "routines within the production process", (2) "reflections on lack of diversity" and (3) "racial/ethnic stereotyping not an issue". Each theme will now be presented in detail and illustrated with quotes from the interviews.

Routines within the production process

Our interviews show that the production process of Dutch sports media can roughly be divided into two different parts that we label here "sports news production" and "background stories and long reads". The interviewees working in sports news production are mainly responsible for producing (often short) news items in the field of sport. They describe their working activities repeatedly in a similar way arguing they face a continuous time pressure in what they call an ongoing need for fast news articles due to the influence of the internet. This time pressure seems to minimize the time available for reflection on the production process or on their own role in that process. One White respondent who has worked as a chief editor in sports news summarizes the current situation as follows:

> In times of print news, you also had deadlines. Still, you could work more precise. Nowadays, you have an immense 24/7 pressure to deliver articles in print but most notably online. And sometimes, this pressure goes at the expense of quality. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

What causes this pressure is a combination of an increase in online competition on the one hand and the growing demand of media consumers for (quick) access to information on the other. One web editor points to the continuous challenge to deliver "scoops". A third interviewee confirms that the pressure to publish constantly impacts journalists' ability to critically reflect on their stories. Nonetheless, these respondents evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of their work in very positive terms distinguishing themselves and their work from "copy and paste websites". In that way, the respondents perceive themselves to be professional and reliable when it comes to producing sports news items. They also argue that modern journalists should be able to focus on different activities at the same time: "Post your article on Twitter, write a small piece on the website and in the meantime work on your newspaper article." As a consequence of time pressure and fragmented activities, three respondents experience a lack of creativity, a lack of time for doing research and for revision and reflection. In short, the production process of (online) news articles does not leave much room for (self-)reflection in general, let alone reflection on ethnicity and/or the possible use of stereotypes in reporting.

In addition to this category of sport media professionals who are responsible for short news items, the second category of interviewees consists of professionals who have a relatively strong focus on the writing of in-depth background articles and long reads. Such longer articles provide a way for sports news organizations to distinguish themselves in a time when short online news articles have become the norm. Interviewees with this second category shed a different light on the production process of sports media. Here, respondents, whether they work at an online platform, a newspaper or a magazine, describe their main task as "clarifying and giving background to and insight into the news." Respondents used words such as "research", "in-depth" and "new perspectives" to characterize their work within the organization. One respondent states, for instance: "Clarifying the news is becoming more and more interesting than a push notification with just a short news item."

As newspapers are often seen – by the general audience as well as journalists themselves – as a "slow" medium in times of online journalism, the short, "quick" news items have become less important for newspapers, whereas the importance of long reads and background stories has grown. This affects the way of working:

> The main difference is time. You do not have a lot of time to write, for example, a news item for the website. It is just a straightforward desk article. In the case of a longer article for on paper, for example, you have more time to go in depth. (non-White minority ethnic interviewee)

In short, the working procedure concerning the production of shorter, often online news articles limits the time available for reflection on own media practices. Whereas those journalists involved in the production of longer background stories within the organization seem to have more time and opportunities to reflect on their own work and (potentially) on the role of race/ethnicity in the production of that work. The next theme will pay specific attention to this latter aspect and describe how and to what extent the sport media professionals that we interviewed actually reflect on racial/ethnic diversity issues and the impact of race/ethnicity on the production of sport media content.

Reflections on lack of diversity
In general, respondents argue there is a lack of racial/ethnic diversity within sport media organization and sports media production. At the same time, however, such acknowledgement is only expressed after the topic had been brought up by the interviewer. It seemed they had not considered the issue before:

> In our case, it is indeed a White male's world, for the most part. We have got one boy working with us with a slight colour because he has Indonesian parents. Besides him, it is all White. This is the first time I think about it, but yes, our pool of freelancers has been the same for years and apparently it is a bit of a White man's world. (White, majority ethnic interviewee)

Another (White) interviewee confirms this by saying that "there are not many sports journalists with an ethnic minority background. I believe I cannot mention three. No, I have not thought of it earlier."

The data show that opinions about ethnic diversity in the media production space can be divided into two categories. Most respondents do not consider diversity and ethnicity relevant topics within sports media. As one chief editor states:

> For us, ethnicity is of no importance. The only thing that counts is whether you are a good journalist or not. Every chief editor will say this. No, it has no consequences for our policy since I do not think we lack anything so to speak. If anyone has a good idea to write about and it fits within our view on sports, he can go and write a piece whether he or she is Black, White, Moroccan or Turkish. That is not an issue at all. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

Similarly, the following respondent emphasizes the importance of "quality" and colour blindness in sport media organizations:

> Sports journalism is color blind, so to speak. It does not matter which ethnic background someone has. I do not pay attention to colour, neither do my colleagues. If you are good then you are good so please be welcome. It is all about quality, not ethnicity. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

Two respondents articulated a somewhat different opinion. One respondent was at first uncertain whether or not ethnic background may play a role in the production process, though, in the end, he mentions "quality" as the decisive factor when it comes to reporting and argues that ethnic diversity in the editorial office is not really related to quality of reporting. Another states that ethnicity and diversity may have some influence on the reporting but not substantially.

On the contrary, a second, less dominant, category of respondents points out how ethnicity and diversity can actually influence sports reporting. One respondent mentions how a journalist's racial/ethnic background will influence his or her commentary/reporting practices:

> It is a stubborn viewpoint that as a journalist you can be objective, but it is just not the case. You always have your own ethnic background, your own opinion and topics you are more interested in than others. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

Although this journalist is the only one who reflects critically and explicitly on the connection between ethnicity and "objectivity", other respondents within this second group implicitly make the same statement. According to these respondents, diversity amongst journalists in an organization can be seen as important asset of the organization as it potentially provides access to a wider and more diverse network of athletes. One of the interviewees, for instance, states that it may be hard for a 50-year-old White journalist to relate to and understand football players such as Memphis Depay (Dutch professional football player of mixed Ghanaian-Dutch origins), which results in biased reporting. At the same time, one journalist states it is not an ideal situation either when, for example, a journalist of Moroccan descent always gets the task to interview players of Moroccan origin. The two respondents of minority ethnic background mention that a more diverse editorial team would encourage the incorporation of new perspectives into sport coverage. To illustrate this, one of them mentions that the idea for an article about the impact of the Ramadan on Muslim athletes came up due to his own Islamic background.

> I was interested in that topic and I spoke with a colleague who would have never come up with the same idea. Clearly, diversity is important to make sure there is more than just the Dutch viewpoint. (non-White minority ethnic interviewee)

Racial/ethnic stereotyping not an issue
We also discussed with the interviewees the findings from previous content analyses that showed how sport journalists tend to use racial/ethnic stereotypes in their coverage. Again, like in the previous theme, opinions of journalists can be divided into two different categories. Most respondents simply deny the reproduction of racial/ethnic stereotypes in sport media. Respondents within this group (who were mainly White) distance themselves from earlier international research findings, instead they emphasize that their reporting on minority and majority ethnic athletes is objective. More specifically, respondents claim that descriptions of Black athletes in terms of natural physicality are not stereotypical but are objective and fair. One respondent says, for instance:

> It is true that when it comes to Black athletes, it is often about their physicality. But in football, in general, they are the ones who are quick and strong indeed. This is also evident when you look at amateur football. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

Another White media professional states that it is "natural" to describe Black athletes in terms of their physical qualities as they are, for example, generally better on the hundred meters sprint which has a "physical cause". Two others state that Black sportsmen often have "an intimidating physical body" and they "exude strength" and "muscularity". One White respondent claims that these descriptions are not produced *because* the sportsmen are Black. Instead, respondents stress that they only look at competences and performance of players on the field irrespective of skin colour. In this way, professionals within this group claim that they only use descriptions corresponding to the stereotype when it is functional and reflexive of reality, for example, to "do justice" to the reality of the perceived situation. This applies to descriptions of Black players but also to other racial/ethnic stereotypes that are commonly used for racial/ethnic groups:

> Sometimes stereotypes like "the lazy Brazilian" or "the proud Moroccan" player come across. But often they are true, to be honest. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

Another shares the same opinion:

> There is a core of truth in these kinds of clichés. Moroccan players are often extremely talented, but they never become world class. The Moroccan community itself is also considering this problem. (White majority ethnic interviewee)

In the eyes of these respondents, they use stereotype-like descriptions when they are functional and from their perspective appropriate to use. In other words, they argue they just report facts based on "objective" reality. Some respondents strengthen this notion of objectivity by emphasizing that open-mindedness and awareness about this topic already exists within Dutch sports media. Our findings, however, refute these claims, because during the interviews many journalists did not show any awareness of the issue and deemed the topic of racial/ethnic stereotyping unimportant and "not an issue". The consequence of this trivialization of race issues for their own media practice is that meanings given to race/ethnicity are not likely to be discussed or evaluated. This, in turn, may result in the heedless reproduction of existing discourses which include racial/ethnic stereotyping. We return to this in the Discussion section.

Despite the finding that most of the respondents from this group do not recognize the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes within the practice of Dutch sports media, there are two respondents who believe that these race-infused stereotypes require more attention in the work field. A journalist with an ethnic minority background mentions that, during his time as a final editor, he recognized certain racial/ethnic stereotypes and removed them from the articles he scrutinized:

> I cleared articles from this kind of descriptions. When Mulenga of FC Utrecht was typified as the "extremely strong Zambian", for example, I took that out. (non-White minority ethnic background interviewee)

According to this journalist, these and similar stereotypical descriptions are used unconsciously and just because of that, it is important to create more awareness amongst journalists. The same reasoning is found with another professional, this time after the conversation about the use of stereotypes had taken place. He feels that when reviewing his own articles now, stereotypical descriptions would stand out.

> When I would read "the fast Ruben Schaken" [Black Surinamese-Dutch foot baller] for example I would recognize it now as such a stereotype: a Black football player who is immediately described as fast. It would be a good thing as journalists would become more aware of it. (White majority ethnic interviewee, own addition between brackets)

At the same time, this respondent acknowledges that an awareness concerning racial/ethnic stereotypes or racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor is not promoted or encouraged within sports media organizations.

Discussion

Authors such as Willemars (2014) and Devroe (2007) state that prioritising diversity in the workforce is an important journalistic quality in times of pluralistic and multicultural societies. Nishikawa *et al.* (2009) agree and argue that a diverse media corps can bring fresh perspectives to the table and will result in more balanced coverage of majority and minority issues. At the same time, findings by Nishikawa *et al.* (2009) show that media professionals, both of a majority and minority background, generally conform to traditional journalistic principles such as fact-checking sources, writing effectively and most importantly being objective in one's reporting. These norms are an important part of their training/education and are reinforced by editors on the work floor on an everyday basis (Nishikawa *et al.*, 2009). Within this hegemonic discourse of what is "good journalism", an emphasis on racial/ethnic or gender diversity, an in-depth reflection on racial/ethnic bias, encouraging discussion on race in the organization, or including minority ethnic voices in the actual media coverage, is often seen as "advocacy journalism" or "promotional journalism" and as inconsistent with the alleged professional standards of "neutrality" and "objectivity" (Clark, 2017; Knoppers and Elling, 2004; Nishikawa *et al.*, 2009). This is also evident in our findings for the Dutch context. The majority of journalists that were interviewed acknowledge that there is a lack of racial/ethnic diversity within sports media organizations, but they also argue this is not a problem since "good journalism" is independent from racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor. Interviewees in our study sometimes used the term "colour blindness" when describing the sports media, thus considering sport media as a colour blind institution in which race or ethnicity does not play a role and where journalists work in an unbiased way reporting on "facts" in a way that is objective, precise and neutral. At the same time, however, research shows how sport journalists tend to incorporate systematically racial/ethnic biases in their coverage along the lines of the Black Brawn-White Brain dichotomy [2]. Spencer (2004) used Feagin and Vera's (1995) concept of "sincere fictions" for this paradox. Applying this concept to sports media, sincere fictions refer to sport journalists' self-perception of being unbiased, race-neutral professionals while research actually shows the opposite. Bonilla-Silva (2015) suggests that colour blind rhetoric upholds the racialized/ethnicized status quo. It does so by, on the one hand, denying (or ignoring) the significance of race/ethnicity in today's society, while, on the other hand, reproducing subtle racial/ethnic categorizations and stereotypes on an everyday basis so that they become normalized (Hartmann, 2007). For that reason, critical race scholars argue that colour blind rhetoric not only blinds people to the significance of racial/ethnic stereotyping and exclusions but also tends to *normalize and naturalize* these exclusions (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Hartmann, 2007; Hylton, 2009). The use of colour blind rhetoric amongst some of our interviewees is not unique to the Dutch context; Hartmann (2007) and Carrington (2011) already described how in the British and North-American contexts, White sports media commentators draw on a rhetoric of colour blindness to defend their racialized claims and to dismiss accusations of racism in their commentary. Our study now confirms the existence of such a "colour blind" mindset amongst Dutch sport media professionals who work in a variety of roles in the sport media industry. The journalists in our study regularly dismissed academic findings that document the existence of racial/ethnic stereotypes in sport media and instead used an idea of sports media as being colour blind and "race-neutral".

Whiteness

The colour blind rhetoric that respondents in our study used cannot be separated from discourses of Whiteness that permeate sports media organizations and that we have

discussed in the Theory part of this article. Hylton and Lawrence (2015) have defined Whiteness as a discourse that privileges White people. Moreover, whiteness, in their perspective, refers to the *performance* of being White, with "performance" not only referring to having a white skin colour but also to acting, dressing and speaking in a way that is generally considered "White". Such "White" performance is usually constructed as normative in Western White-dominated societies and often remains invisible – in particular to White people themselves (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Fletcher and Hylton, 2018; Wekker, 2016). And although Whiteness, in this definition, can thus, in principle, be "done" and promoted by both Whites and non-Whites, having a white skin colour facilitates inclusion within this hegemonic discourse since it is being White, in particular, that is associated with preferred and normative characteristics such as leadership, rationality and objectivity. It is, therefore, mainly White people, and especially White men, who benefit from this discourse (they experience "White privilege") and who, intentionally or unintentionally, promote it. Most journalists in sports media organizations – and in particular those who work full-time – are White males, this applies to the Dutch but also international sport media contexts (e.g. Claringbould *et al.*, 2004; Coakley and Pike, 2009; Nishikawa *et al.*, 2009). We know from research that White people generally have difficulties seeing how Whiteness operates and often have a "blind spot" to identify their own and others' use of racial/ethnic stereotypes instead arguing they are race-neutral or colour blind (Essed and Trienekens, 2008). This may apply, in particular, to sports journalism since sport journalists – including the ones in our study – often have to report instantly on what happens on the sports field and/or have to produce fast news articles under high time pressure. Consequently, they tend to draw on easily accessible discourses– which often include specific racial/ethnic stereotypes (Bruce, 2004).

The combination of fast reporting and hegemonic whiteness within sports media production thus facilitates the reproduction of unreflexive reporting. Within such a context, a critical (self-)reflection on issues surrounding race/ethnicity is not self-evident, especially since those with decision-making power who set the prioritized codes of what is considered good reporting are also White males, generally (Hartmann, 2007). Some of our White (male) interviewees, for instance, worked in leadership roles within their own organization and, like many journalists, tended to dismiss a critical reflection on the use of race/ethnicity in reporting as a "non-issue" (also Hartmann, 2007). Such denial of seeing "race" and/or the distancing from the theme of racism results in the continuation of (normalizing) racialized discourses of Whiteness that generally privilege White people (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018; Reitman, 2006).

As Hall (1995) noted, however, discourses are always contested and never uniform and fixed. Our results confirm this, since we also identified some alternative meanings given to race/ethnicity amongst the sport journalists. These alternative voices challenge the hegemonic discourse of colour blindness and race-neutrality. They mainly (though not exclusively) came from the minority ethnic journalists in our sample. They emphasized the need for sport journalists to pay more attention to the structural reproduction of racial/ethnic stereotypes within sports media and stressed the added value of racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor. However, as our results show, a real discussion about these topics is currently rare or non-existent within Dutch sports media organizations and sports media are mainly considered meritocratic, race-neutral domains. Moreover, Clark (2017) argues in this respect, after a literature review on the topic, that when ethnic minorities are not represented in the organization, and/or are assigned to on-air roles only (instead of management roles), a hegemonic White situated perspective will tend to override minority perspectives and "voices". So, although some of our interviewees stressed the importance of diversity for balanced reporting, their voices remain marginalized.

Conclusion

In contrast to most research within the academic field of sports media, this article has investigated how sports media professionals themselves give meaning to diversity, ethnicity and to the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes in sports reporting. Our findings suggest that most respondents do not consider these topics an important issue as they trust (and are convinced of) their objectivity and journalistic skills. Most of them acknowledged, however, the fact that there is a lack of diversity within Dutch sports media organizations. At the same time, (self-) reflexivity concerning racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor or the possible use of stereotypes are, in their view, not very urgent topics within Dutch sports media. In contrast to this, a small group of respondents did raise the importance of the issue. Still, these professionals also state that a discussion around these issues does not exist within Dutch sports media. This is a valuable addition to former studies connected to sports media which already suggested – based on single-case studies – that many sports journalists are unaware (or unwilling) to critically reflect on racial/ethnic diversity and racial/ethnic bias in sports reporting (Hartmann, 2007).

From a normative approach, Dutch sports media organizations strive for equal, stereotype-free reporting and an increase of minority ethnic journalists (Willemars, 2014), an ambition that is shared internationally (Clark, 2017). The findings presented show that this is actually not of real concern to many sport journalists we interviewed. Finally, by centralizing the meaning making within the production process itself, this article introduced a focus which until now had received relatively little attention. We recommend further investigations into the role of race/ethnicity in the production process of sports media organizations, not only within nations but also in an internationally comparative perspective. Such research should also address racialized recruitment processes and selection policies and other "machinations which contribute to race discrimination" in sport media organizations, such as opportunities for career development and experiences of exclusion in decision-making processes (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018, p. 7). Recent research into Dutch media (print and television) showed that attempts by media organizations to recruit more minority ethnic professionals sometimes remain merely symbolic and mask problematic, racially biased recruitment policies where recruitment mainly takes place from within white (male) networks, thus reproducing existing whiteness within the organization (Esman, 2021; Papilaja, 2021). To conclude this article, it is, therefore, relevant to elaborate on some of the actions and interventions required to address racial exclusion and stereotyping in sports media. According to Reitman (2006), organizations should become more reflexive of their own invisible racial biases in recruitment practices and in their everyday ways of working. A recent study into Dutch mainstream media shows how voices from female journalists and those of a minority ethnic background sometimes get neglected and marginalized on the work floor and in editorial meetings (Esman, 2021). This results in a working culture characterized by invisible (male) whiteness, with alternative voices being marginalized. Nishikawa *et al.* (2009) and Reitman (2006) found similar processes of racialized exclusion in the workplace in their studies on US mainstream media and on whiteness in the high-tech sector. This seems to apply to sports media as well where, as our study indicates, any real discussion on racial stereotyping and diversity on the work floor is lacking despite some critical voices emphasizing the need to create change and start a discussion on racial dynamics in professional practices. It indicates a lack of understanding and/or reluctance to prioritize racial equality in sports media amongst the (usually White) decision-makers. We, therefore, recommend more attention for and understanding of racialized relations of power and the operation of whiteness from the part of those in managerial positions. They, in particular, have a responsibility to ensure that pro-diversity and anti-racism measures are implemented and journalistic norms are changed where necessary (Nishikawa *et al.*, 2009). This would also prevent that race-equality initiatives are the responsibility of just a small group of people

within an organization (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018). Implementation measures would also include recruitment procedures that use trained and ethnically diverse appointment panels combined with targeted recruitment campaigns that go beyond the own White-situated networks and mainstream journalism schools (Farrington *et al.*, 2012; Kilvington, 2021). Moreover, it may be worthwhile to extend interventionist measures from other domains into the field of sports media. Within critical sport studies, for instance, the so-called Rooney Rule is championed as a successful interventionist measure to create more racial and ethnic diversity in management positions (Bradbury *et al.*, 2020). The Rooney Rule basically mandates football clubs to invite at least one candidate of an ethnic minority background for a vacant senior management position (Bradbury *et al.*, 2020). Such an approach may also be effective for sports media to engender sustainable change in the recruitment procedure.

To conclude this paper, we recommend regular training within sport media organizations to challenge implicit racial bias in task allocation and selection of topics. Several scholars have shown how those in a minority position in (sports) media, whether it is those of an ethnic minority background or women, often carry the "burden of representation", with editors-in-chief leaving the coverage on topics related to race and gender to minority groups (Papilaja, 2021; Schoch, 2013). Nishikawa *et al.* (2009), for instance, argued how minority journalists in the USA should, on the one hand, adhere to universal journalistic norms but are, on the other hand, expected to "bring enhanced coverage of minority communities and issues to the mainstream newsroom" (p. 246). Some of our data indicate this may also apply to the Dutch sports media context. With this article, we have tried to reveal such (often hidden) discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in sports media production processes. We hope this will give scholars some inspiration to further develop research in this area. Such research will help provide more insights into how sports media production reinforces (or challenges) hegemonic discourses and processes of racialized in- and exclusion and hopefully stimulate self-reflexivity on such matters amongst sport media practitioners.

Note

1. The research is based on the Dutch-language MA-thesis by the second author at Erasmus University Rotterdam (De Heer, 2017).

2. Of course, this study cannot confirm whether or not the interviewed professionals indeed tend to use stereotypes within their reporting themselves, after all we did not do a content analysis of their reporting. However, this article confirms that there is hardly any (self) reflection from the part of most journalists on the possible use of racial/ethnic stereotypes in their own or others' commentary practices.

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