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SPORTS MEDIA IN EUROPE

An International Context

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Ideas about multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity are under discussion in many countries in Europe. There is a strong call upon racial/ethnic minority groups to assimilate to hegemonic norms and values (Essed and Trienekens 2008), and right populist groups in countries such as Greece, Hungary, and France (but also others) question the rights and status of immigrant groups. Taking the Netherlands, the country I live in and know best, as a reference point for a moment: Discussions about racial and ethnic inclusion and exclusion and multicultural society have dominated much of the national debate in the past 15 years. A variety of international organizations as well as the media have pointed to and discussed extensively the existence of various forms of racial/ethnic exclusion and discrimination in the Netherlands. The Council of Europe, for instance, suggested that minority ethnic groups in Dutch society experience disproportionate levels of racism; Amnesty International spoke of racial profiling by the Dutch police; heated debates took place over alleged racism evident in the Dutch labor market and in the meanings of Dutch symbolic figures like Black Pete. The pronounced debate around everyday (explicit and implicit) racisms shows that racism is not a thing of the past despite the general tendency in many Western European countries to discredit talk about possible racisms as outdated and no longer relevant (Essed and Trienekens 2008).

Little reflection by opinion makers seems to occur, however, on dominant and often implicit assumptions about race and ethnicity that are embedded in the current debates. One of the critical but often neglected social domains in which the meanings associated with race and ethnicity are (re)produced and manifest themselves in contemporary Western societies is sport (Carrington 1998). Sport is usually seen as having a positive function for racial and ethnic relations in current multicultural societies. Sport, the argument goes, appeals to a variety of ethnic groups and makes a fundamental contribution to the forming of social capital and to processes of social bonding and integration in multicultural societies (e.g. Verweel 2007). Contrary to other social domains, sport is often seen as a race-less arena in the sense that social distinctions do not play a major role and chances for everyone are equal regardless of racial/ethnic background (Tamir and Bernstein 2015).

In contrast to this perspective, however, stands the common scholarly recognition that sport also (re)produces and strengthens racialized ideologies. This is evident in incidents in soccer stadiums across Europe, which function not only as a place where bonding

mechanisms take place, but also as a platform for racist outbursts and chanting, including jungle noises, gorilla gestures, or the throwing of bananas toward black players (e.g. Müller, van Zoonen and De Roode 2007; Van Sterkenburg, Janssens and Rijnen 2005). Other sports are not free of racism or racial/ethnic discrimination; on the contrary, The Fundamental Rights Agency (2010), for instance, has identified expressions of explicit and more implicit and institutionalized forms of racism and racial/ethnic discrimination in a great variety of sports across European countries, including basketball, handball, amateur football, and ice hockey.

Given such continued evidence of racial discrimination in sport, it is not surprising that European sport governing bodies like UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) and FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) and related stakeholders have engaged in anti-racist campaigns and pro-diversity projects. Nevertheless, both organizers and observers are skeptical about the broader and long-term effects of these projects (e.g. FRA 2010; Müller, Van Zoonen and De Roode 2008). More specifically, anti-racism and pro-diversity projects seem to be directed at combating explicit forms of racism but tend to miss everyday forms of racial/ethnic prejudice and stereotyping that constitute an important background context for more explicit/outright forms of discrimination (Van Zoonen and Van Sterkenburg 2012). One of the places where such everyday racialized discourse is most prominent and acquires its everyday "naturalness" is *sport in the media*. Mediasport is a very popular and visible source and platform of mixed ethnic practices. As such, sport media and their representations can be considered a key site for the reproduction of dominant (and alternative) ideas concerning race/ethnicity (Hylton 2009).

The Social Power of Sport Media

The social power of sport in the media is perhaps illustrated best by the popularity of sport celebrities who offer sources for identity formation for diverse youth audiences worldwide. Previous research has shown that young viewers use celebrities and/or TV programs to negotiate among each other what is acceptable behavior to themselves and to other people (Duits and Romondt Vis 2009; Gillespie 1995). Sport in the media also offers such points of reference for the viewer, especially given its dramatization of events and continuous emphasis on key sportspersons (De Leeuw 2003; Hermes 2005; Lines 2000; Van Sterkenburg 2011a). Sportspersons function as role models but at the same time invoke discourses surrounding social dimensions such as race and ethnicity. They are, in other words, not only persons but discursive constructions as well, which represent what it means to be black or white, male or female, abled or disabled, etc. (Duits and Romondt Vis 2009; Rowe 2013). "Media talk" about sport can thus be considered a *pedagogic* site since it confronts young people in particular with possible ways of seeing themselves and others (Azzarito and Harrison 2008). Sport media *representations* of sportspersons are important here as they are "the means by which we think and feel" (Dyer 1997: xiii) about the athletes and about the markers of race/ethnicity they represent. In the next section I will therefore turn to sport media representations of race and ethnicity. Throughout the chapter I will use race and ethnicity as conflated concepts ("race/ethnicity"). Although I acknowledge that analytic distinctions can be drawn between "race" and "ethnicity," the concepts are often used in conflated ways in everyday discourse where the references to skin color and phenotype usually associated with "race" are never wholly absent from culturally informed discourses of ethnicity and vice versa (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Hall 2000; Gunaratnam 2003).

Representations of Race/Ethnicity in the International Sport Media

One of the first sports media studies examining racial patterns in sport commentators' descriptions of sportspeople was conducted by Rainville and McCormick in 1977. Rainville and McCormick hypothesized that the race of the (football) players influenced U.S. sports media commentary. Their hypothesis was based on subjective observations by the blind author Rainville, who discovered that he was able to identify a player's race by listening to live broadcasts even though the player's race was not mentioned explicitly. Their results indicated that commentators gave white players more play-related praise, representing them in a more positive light and as being aggressive (in a positive way). Black players were more often depicted as the recipient of aggression and compared unfavorably to other players (Rainville and McCormick 1977). The classic study by Rainville and McCormick has been replicated and extended by more recent studies in the realm of mediasport. Substantially, these studies have taken a critical, discursive approach toward mediasport, focusing on the relationship between sport media discourses surrounding race and ethnicity and power relations in wider society. Generally, these studies show that the sports media are fascinated with the supposed natural physical abilities of black (usually male) athletes. Most typically, sports media describe black athletes as "natural" sportsmen with great, "animal-like" physical power (e.g. Hylton 2009; McCarthy, Jones and Potrac 2003). The vast majority of this research has been conducted by U.S. and U.K. researchers who generally categorized race and ethnicity as a two-level variable: "black" or "white." This overemphasis on the physical capacities of black athletes marginalizes implicitly the mental capacities required for sports performances, thus constructing a "mind–body split" in which the black sportsman is associated with a superb body, but with a lack of cognitive abilities (Bradbury, Amaria, Garcia, and Bairner 2011; Carrington 2001). A different but related narrative comes from more ethnographically informed case studies that examined discourses surrounding individual male sport celebrities. Those studies concluded that the sport media not only represent black masculinity as physically superior but also relatively often as dangerous, animalistic, and criminal (Andrews and Silk 2010; Bradbury et al. 2011). Andrews and Silk (2010) coined this discourse *ghettocentric logic* as it associates black athletes with the urban, ghettocentric spaces of "poverty, drugs and crime-ridden streets" (1636; also see Van Sterkenburg 2011a).

Representations of White Athletes

The analytic focus on media representations of black male athletes contrasts with the scholarly attention for the media representation of *white* athletes. As Carrington (2008) and Hylton and Lawrence (2015) argued, sport sociologists have usually not considered white bodies "raced" bodies and white athletic bodies have, as a consequence, been under-researched. Nevertheless, sport and media scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of studying whiteness and representations of white athletes in recent years (Andrews 2013; Hylton and Lawrence 2015). Analyses of media content show that white athletes belonging to the racial/ethnic majority group are relatively often described in terms of their hard work, perseverance, and intellectual and organizational qualities (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2011; Hylton 2009; McCarthy et al. 2003). At the same time, white athletes are *not* represented as hyper-physical or aggressive/criminal like their black

counterparts and they can thereby become the human "norm" against which non-whites are (re)constructed as deviant and the "Other."

Critical scholars like Müller et al. (2007) have referred to this discourse as *processes of racialization/ethnization*: routine and everyday practices of racial/ethnic categorizing and stereotyping through which everyday racism becomes normalized and unacknowledged (also see Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and De Leeuw 2012). Other scholars speak of "enlightened racism," referring to a discourse in which the success of black athletes is framed in terms of natural athletic qualities while the success of white athletes remains associated with cognitive capacities and management/leadership abilities (Hylton 2009; Sabo and Jansen 1998). This racialized discourse may not be a conscious process or a product of individual intent. White sport commentators often react to events that happen ad-hoc and tend to draw on widely circulating hegemonic discourses that are readily available to them and that contain commonly held racial/ethnic stereotypes. The challenge for sport media researchers is, as Hylton (2009) argued, to identify how and when such racialized media practices occur and are being reproduced in everyday messages. This is especially important since commentators themselves—many of them white males (but not necessarily so)—are usually not aware of these stereotypes and instead tend to see themselves as objective, race-neutral professionals for whom race is no longer an issue (Spencer 2004; Van Sterkenburg 2011a). They use, in other words, a *rhetoric of color-blindness* (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000: 70), perceiving racial discrimination as not so relevant anymore and "as sporadic and declining in significance."

In practice, the end result of such colorblind rhetoric is the (re)production of unreflexive, stereotypical, and one-sided representations of race and ethnicity that can have meaning and consequences beyond the boundaries of sport, for instance in framing unconscious thinking about hiring individuals in positions of leadership and coaching. Recent internationally comparative research confirms this. A study by Bradbury, Mignon and Van Sterkenburg (2014), for instance, shows that hegemonic racial stereotypes are widespread and commonly used in the football sector and may have limiting effects on the careers of minority ethnic coaches; these coaches' experience is that they are perceived primarily as good athletes instead of good leaders/managers, which creates an obstacle for their coaching career. Likewise, Danish research reveals tendencies among white club coaches to associate black, African young players with possessing speed, power, and individuality (Agergaard and Sorenson 2009) and lacking in tactical understanding. Such skewed representations may additionally strengthen hierarchies in society at large, since it is especially the characteristics associated with being white such as leadership, intellect, and perseverance that are usually associated with positions of power and leadership in society (Rada and Wulfemeyer 2005; Van Sterkenburg 2011a).

Intersections with Gender

These racialized representations may take gender-specific forms as well. Whereas white women are associated with dependence, elegance, and weakness, African-American women are more often associated with characteristics such as aggressiveness, dominance, and independence (Azzarito and Solomon 2005). Both black male and female athletes have often been portrayed as strong, quick, and athletic, but with "unpredictable" and "wild" moments when they supposedly lack the cognitive capabilities—unlike their white peers—to have composure at "critical moments" (Carrington 2001: 94). The vast majority of sport media studies focus, still, on male sportspersons. There are some notable

exceptions but much work is still to be done to reduce this gender bias in sport and media research (Andrews 2013; for studies that *do* focus on representations of female sportspersons in diverse countries, see, for example: Elling and Luijt 2009 for the Netherlands; Wensing and Bruce 2003 for Australia; Pfister 2015 for Germany).

Other Ethnicities

In addition to the substantial focus on "black" and "white" athletes in sport media studies, international studies have explored sport media coverage of other minority ethnic athletes. These studies confirm the perception of sport commentary as a local manifestation of discourses and stereotypes that circulate broadly in society (Lindlof and Taylor 2011). Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan, and Leggett (1996) concluded, for instance, that sport commentators stereotypically represented Asian athletes as "machinelike" and "unemotional," while British studies have shown Asian athletes to be relatively often represented as self-disciplined, effeminate, and physically weak (Bradbury et al. 2011; Burdsey 2004; Coakley and Pike 2009). A variety of scholars have argued that Latin-American athletes are relatively often portrayed as passionate, hot-tempered, and/or selfish, and thus as lacking in cool headedness and psychological self-control (Coakley and Pike 2009; Hoose in Davis and Harris 1998; Juffer 2002; Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and De Leeuw 2012). Such discourses seem part of a wider, globalized discourse surrounding these racial/ethnic groups (Van Sterkenburg et al. 2012). In addition to this, East-Asian and Muslim athletes have been represented as irrational and threatening in the British press (Malcolm, Bairner and Curry 2010), while various studies have shown that the Australian sport media construct Aboriginal athletes as the ultimate racial/ethnic Other: as fast and instinctive but also as unreliable and lacking in discipline and mental capacities (e.g. Coakley, Hallinan, Jackson, and Mewett 2008; Coram 2007). An exploratory content analysis of soccer commentary in the Dutch context concluded that "Surinamese-Dutch" soccer players were associated with their physicality (Van Sterkenburg et al. 2012).

Contradictory Evidence

There is some contradictory evidence as well showing that sport journalists increasingly try to avoid prejudicial and stereotypical treatment of minority racial and ethnic groups (Billings 2004; Byrd and Utsler 2007; Van Sterkenburg 2011a). This finding reflects Hall's (1995) assertion that the media are not only a site where hegemonic discourses are reproduced but can also be a place where such discourses can be challenged and subverted (see also Van Sterkenburg 2011a). However, these studies seem to be exceptions rather than a trend until recent years, pointing to the continued urgency for those concerned with racialized sport media reporting to continue to do critical empirical research on sport media reporting (Hylton 2009). Of similar importance is the question of how such reporting is then received and negotiated by *media audiences*. As mentioned earlier, sport programs invite their audiences to talk about them, often in a social setting (Peeters and Van Sterkenburg, submitted). Such sport talk is (inter)active and productive but also bounded by the discursive parameters set by the text and the discursive competences of the audiences (Costera, Meijer and De Bruin 2003). As an experiment, I often show images of black and white athletes to groups of media students I am teaching, asking them how they would explain the overrepresentation of white athletes in sports like skiing or

weightlifting and of black athletes in a sport like sprinting. Usually, students draw on a limited reservoir of discourses for their explanations. These reflect to an important extent the hegemonic discourses (re)produced by the sport media explaining black success in sprinting by reference to natural speed and strength and white success in skiing or weight-lifting by reference to "culture." (They argue weightlifting or skiing are major sports in white-dominated *cultures*.) Such an overlap between audience discourses and sport media discourses has also been found in various other audience reception studies in the field. I will turn to those in the next section.

Audiences and Race

Most studies exploring audience receptions of race/ethnicity in media have focused on news programs, soap operas, celebrity culture, and police series (e.g. Costera Meijer and De Bruin 2003; Duits and Romondt Vis 2009; Liebes and Katz 1990; Gillespie 1995) but they have often ignored sports in the media. The audience studies that *did* focus on race and sport media have often used qualitative methodology like individual or focus group interviews (e.g. Hermes 2005; Hylton and Lawrence 2015; Rowe 2015; McCarthy et al. 2003). Such qualitative methodology has been considered an appropri-ate method to reveal individual or group-based assumptions about race and ethnicity (Van Sterkenburg 2011b). Some of these studies concluded that media users, regardless of their racial/ethnic origin, tend to adopt the hegemonic media discourse surround-ing race and ethnicity. Most notably, media users mainly tended to apply a so-called "natural physicality discourse" to give meaning to black athletes by associating black athletes with "natural" speed and physical prowess (Hermes 2005; Hylton and Lawrence 2015; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 2004). A "natural" *mentality* discourse connecting white athletes with cognitive abilities was less evident among audiences, although it did occur in some instances as well, in implicit or more explicit forms (see for research in the Dutch and English context: Hermes 2005; Van Sterkenburg 2013; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 2004).

A variety of other scholars, however, have shown the matter is more complex. They found that the discourses used by media sport users do not necessarily overlap with domi-nant race/ethnicity discourses in the media (Van Sterkenburg 2011b). This confirms the argument made by media scholars such as Boyle and Haynes (2000) who emphasize that sport media audiences do not passively absorb and accept the ideas (re)produced by the sport media but that audience discourses also depend on the repertoire of prior experiences and the social location that individuals bring to the media experience (like their racial/ethnic positioning). (Also see Buffington and Fraley 2008; McCarthy et al. 2003; Van Sterkenburg 2011b.) British scholars McCarthy, Jones and Potrac (2003), for instance, concluded in their audience reception study of British football that black view-ers experienced the discourses surrounding black footballers as naturally fast and athletic as stereotypical and offensive. The white viewers, on the other hand, did recognize the racial stereotype but tended to accept the stereotype as reflecting reality or reflecting the requirements for a certain position in the field. As McCarthy et al. (2003: 234) stated, only "a small discursive space existed [among the White audiences] between awareness of the Black athletic stereotype and acceptance of that stereotype." Likewise, Knoppers and Elling (2001) concluded that minority ethnic interviewees tended to challenge hegem-onic sport media discourses surrounding race and ethnicity more often than their (white) majority ethnic counterparts. This confirms the argument made by various scholars that

in Western societies it is especially the majority population of white people—white males in particular—who are ideally positioned to read the text in line with its "referred meaning" (Bruce 2013; Peeters and van Sterkenburg, submitted).

Knoppers and Elling (2001) and Hermes (2005) additionally found that white *male* youths were more likely than white *female* youths to draw on the black athletic stereotype. Hermes (2005) argued that *the type* of sport content matters as well. Whereas male viewers of football in her study discussed international (club) football players in terms of their technical qualities with hardly a link to discourses about race or ethnicity, these media users used nationalist discourses when watching matches of the Dutch national team. Nationalist discourses often functioned as an entry into racialized types of talk in which the white football players were implicitly or explicitly considered to be more "Dutch" than the non-white players who played for the Dutch national team (Hermes 2005). Rowe (2015) also concluded that majority ethnic populations use mediated sport as a tool to monitor immigrants' loyalty to the nation. In the interviews he conducted, Rowe found that immigrants felt greater pressure to prove their loyalty to the national sport teams than Australian citizens or permanent residents of British origin did. For immigrant populations it was important to "pass this sporting loyalty test" (22) to feel accepted and included.

Despite the relevant insights these audience reception studies give us about sport media- based audience discourses and processes of inclusion and exclusion, they have one major drawback: they are relatively limited in their scope and number. Future research should therefore continue to address interpretations of race/ethnicity by sport media audiences. Such research should focus not only on race but also on its intersections with other social dimensions like gender and social class. Such research is still relatively rare and would add to our understandings of how race and ethnicity gain meaning in and through popular culture. This type of intersectional research would, furthermore, be relevant for a wide range of related academic disciplines like media studies, race/ethnicity studies, gender studies, and sport studies, and could provide—if it is done carefully—a useful framework for future research in the field. To conclude this chapter, I will now turn to two other avenues of future research in the field.

Future Strands of Research

In identifying future strands of research I draw in part on what various expert scholars have suggested in a collection on sport media representations and audience perceptions of race, ethnicity, nation, and gender that I edited with Ramon Spaaij for the journal *Soccer and Society* (2014/15). In that special issue, Hylton and Lawrence (2015) called upon scholars to explore more in-depth the different whitenesses that are represented and perceived in the sport media. Specifically, they argued that some white players are part of the "we," the norm in the popular imagination, while audiences shift other white players to the peripheries of whiteness due to their "otherness" in terms of geography, culture, sexuality, or masculinity. An example of such a player who is central in Hylton and Lawrence's study is the white Portuguese football celebrity Cristiano Ronaldo. The authors stress, however, that "otherness" in the case of such white sportsmen is never only signaled by their whiteness but always through its intersections with other dimensions like gender or sexuality (contrary to non-white athletes whose otherness is signaled by their skin color only). The authors' exploration of the representations and audience interpretations of Ronaldo reveals the "plurality of whiteness," and indicates the need for

"future explorations of whiteness as contingent and problematic" and for "dismantling the black–white binary which shapes overwhelmingly popular discourses of racism" (14). A last strand of future research that I want to address here is the significance of social media like online reader comments or Twitter messages for meanings given to sport media coverage and its constructions of race and ethnicity. Until now, relatively little has been written about audience perceptions of mediated sport events in and through online media products and comments (Tamir and Bernstein 2015). Bruce and Stewart (2015: 16) argue, therefore, that sport media researchers should "move beyond the traditional focus solely on media texts and enter the messy, contradictory, and ever changing online public sphere, for it is here that truths are actively produced and struggled over." Combining textual analysis with audience research, Bruce and Stewart themselves focused on media representations and online audience interpretations of the New Zealand football team during the 2010 football World Cup. While their content analysis of media *representations* revealed a predominantly nationalist framing of the New Zealand football team as "our boys," their additional focus on online reader comments provided valuable additional information revealing the range of ways the public actually took up this nationalist discourse. More specifically, it appeared it was primarily the hard-playing style of the New Zealand team that the public appreciated and turned the players into "our boys," while the role of football itself in New Zealand sporting culture remained a matter of debate despite the extensive media coverage of the football event. Likewise, Billings et al. (2015) and Tamir and Bernstein (2015) showed that Twitter messages and online reader comments provide sport media researchers with rich and valuable information about public perceptions of the relationship between sport and race. Tamir and Bernstein's analysis of online comments on the Israeli national football team confirms to an important extent previous findings that revealed the difficulties minority ethnic athletes have in being accepted and valued by the public as representing the nation. Billings et al. (2014), on the other hand, in their analysis of Twitter reactions during the 2014 football World Cup, did not find as many nationalist and ethnocentric responses as they expected on the basis of previous studies of major international sport events like the Olympics. These findings show that the relatively under-explored area of the sport–social media–race axis deserves further scholarly attention. Such research should include online reader comments and Twitter messages but also fan-generated weblogs and YouTube videos (Van Sterkenburg 2011a). They all constitute an increasingly important component of public discourse in contemporary societies and reflect the increasingly significant role fans and media users play in the transmission and localized translations of globalized sport media discourses, including those about race/ethnicity in sport (Tamir and Bernstein 2015; Van Sterkenburg 2011a).

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