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RACE PORTRAYALS IN SPORT COMMUNICATION

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For as long as media have reported on sports, they have reported on athletes of differing race. Sport communication researchers have examined race portrayals in many forms of media, including print, broadcast, and most recently new media. This chapter provides a detailed historical overview of the ways in which athletes of different races have been portrayed in the media over time. The chapter focuses on portrayals of athletes based on race in print (that is, newspapers and magazines), broadcast (that is, television), and new media. Because the depth of research and information on this topic is so broad, this chapter primarily focuses on US-based media outlets.

One issue cited within such studies of race, sport, and media is the problematic definition of the term 'race'. Bernstein and Blain explained that some scholars believe there is no such thing as race, citing a lack of biological evidence to support such a concept, but the term nevertheless "carries much ideological weight" (Bernstein and Blain, 2002, p. 17). Haslanger (2000) defined the term "race" as a hierarchical social category characterized by "physical features, ancestry, and geographical origins" (p. 51). Using this notion of race as a hierarchical structure with ideological implications, Armstrong explained many of the intricate relationships between race and sport, one of which includes media portrayals. She stated, "Media messages and images help to shape our view of the world, influence our perceptions, and inform our values and the identities we create and seek to create" (Armstrong, 2011, p. 98). Therefore, the way in which race in sport is portrayed by the media can have profound impacts on our own perceptions and interpretations of race.

Because of this potentially deep impact on society, it is important to study portrayals of race in sport media to better understand the ways in which messages about race are conveyed and also the manner in which they are conveyed. The following sections detail the ways in which race has been portrayed in many different forms of sport media, followed by a section on the implications of these portrayals.

Portrayals of race in print media

The most widely studied forms of print media relating to race portrayals are newspapers and magazines. Some scholars have examined race in terms of the amount of coverage given to athletes of differing race, while others examined race in terms of the language used to describe athletes of differing race. This section explores both areas, beginning with the amount of coverage.

Historically, research shows that minority athletes have been underrepresented in print media sport coverage. Early studies focused mostly on coverage differences between white and black athletes, such as several examinations of *Sports Illustrated*, the most widely circulated general interest sport magazine in the US. One study revealed that, from 1960 to 1974, black and white athletes were afforded the same amount of column inches in the magazine, but white athletes were the focus of more in-depth feature articles than black athletes (Condor and Anderson, 1894). Similarly, an analysis of the magazine from 1954 to 1987 showed that black athletes were underrepresented during the entire time period of the study, concluding that the magazine “disproportionately publicizes the sports achievements of whites when compared to those of blacks” (Lumpkin and Williams, 1991, p. 28). Another study on the amount of coverage granted to white and black athletes focused on newspaper coverage of the 1932 Olympic Games. This study also found discrepancies in coverage based on race, with black athletes receiving less coverage and being virtually ignored by the media in the South (Welky, 1997).

More recently, a study by Eagleman and McNary (2011) focused on media coverage of the 2006 Winter Olympics, and examined the amount of newspaper coverage devoted to white, black, Asian, and Latino athletes in five US newspapers. The results revealed that the minority athletes received statistically significant greater coverage than white athletes when measured against the percentage of white, black, Asian, and Latino athletes competing in the Olympics. Additionally, the study found that when minorities were covered in the newspapers, they received more prominent story placement than white athletes. These findings were consistent with previous research on newspaper coverage of the Olympic Games. For example, Hardin, Dodd, Chance, and Walsdorf (2004) found that black athletes were overrepresented in five US newspapers during the 2000 Olympics, while other minorities were underrepresented. The authors suggested that this overrepresentation of black athletes in sports media is done in an effort to “preserve power relations in U.S. society. This finding reflects an ‘enlightened racist’ view, that is, sport is the (sole) arena where Blacks can excel” (Hardin, *et al.*, 2004, p. 223).

As the quote from Hardin, *et al.* (2004) alludes, the amount of coverage devoted to athletes of a certain race can only tell part of the story. In order to gain a better understanding of how athletes of differing race are portrayed in print media, several researchers have undertaken qualitative studies. While most quantitative studies examined race in terms of black and white, a greater amount of qualitative research has examined multiple races, including Latino and Asian.

A study by Eagleman (2011) focused on all four of the aforementioned racial groups, examining both *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*, the second most popular general interest sport magazine in the US, to determine what frames and themes were most prominent when describing Major League Baseball (MLB) athletes of differing race from 2000 through 2007. The findings revealed very different portrayals of each race. White athletes were most often portrayed as hard workers, while the most prominent frame for black athletes was overcoming obstacles. Additionally, the articles about black athletes focused much more on the athlete’s race than the articles about white athletes. In terms of Latino athletes, the main frame of the articles

was one of the athletes having a strong work ethic. Asian athletes were described as the “other”, or being different from their non-Asian teammates. This frame was often used in a negative way, as though there was something inherently bad about being different. The study concluded “the themes revealed in this analysis were reflective of some of the predominant themes historically used to portray black, Latino, and Asian athletes” (Eagleman, 2011, p. 164).

Some scholars have undertaken qualitative research focusing on print coverage portrayals of a specific race. For example, Mayeda examined portrayals of two Asian MLB pitchers and found that one was portrayed as a model minority, or “hard working, self-sacrificing, and quiet” (Mayeda, 1999, p. 211). In other words, because of these qualities, this athlete was viewed as the type of minority that Americans revered. In contrast, the other athlete examined in the study was portrayed as an economic threat. His salary was listed in almost every article examined, and he was portrayed as being overpaid. Mayeda said, “There has been an extreme dearth of literature written on Asian athletes in America” (p. 209). The same is true for Latino athletes, whose portrayals have rarely been examined in print media. The following section examines the portrayals of athletes of differing race in broadcast media. Some findings are similar to those of print media, while others differ.

Portrayals of race in broadcast media

Television is the most popular form of broadcast media that researchers have examined under the lens of race portrayals. Similar to researchers’ findings regarding print media, minority athletes are also often underrepresented in broadcast coverage of sport. The amount of coverage, as well as the quality of coverage of athletes of differing race on television, is examined below.

One of the most widely studied sporting events in relation to race portrayals is the Olympic Games. Numerous studies have examined portrayals of athletes in the Olympics, an event which brings together a great number of athletes from varying nations and races. Historically, white athletes, specifically white male athletes, have received the most television coverage during the Olympics. Scholars such as Billings and Angelini (2007), Billings and Eastman (2002, 2003), and Real and Mechikoff (1992) examined television coverage of the Olympic Games and found discrepancies in the amount of coverage devoted to athletes of differing race. For example, Billings and Eastman (2002) found that white athletes received over 1,200 more mentions than black athletes during the 2000 Olympic Games. This indicated that the media showed favoritism to white athletes. Billings, *et al.* (2008) examined NBC’s broadcast of the 2006 Winter Olympics and concluded that while white athletes received much greater coverage than minorities, the lack of minority athletes competing in the Winter Olympics likely contributed to this finding and thus the coverage was not deemed to underrepresent minority athletes.

A great deal of the research on TV portrayals of athletes of differing race were conducted qualitatively, focusing more on the words, phrases, themes and frames used to describe athletes than on the amount of coverage devoted to each specific race. One of the most comprehensive studies on televisual race portrayals was conducted by Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan, and Leggett (1996), in which 340 hours of coverage from seven international sporting events was analyzed. While previous research found negative stereotypes of black athletes present in TV coverage, this study noted that “Black athletes were significantly less likely than were Asian and White athletes to receive negative evaluations from commentators” (Sabo, *et al.*, 1996, p. 13). The authors concluded that the findings possibly indicated that journalists took notice of

previous research findings and adjusted their coverage accordingly. Despite this finding, however, Asian athletes were still depicted in a stereotypical manner and a heavy focus was placed on Latino athletes' physicality.

Some researchers have focused their efforts on examining media portrayals of specific sports or athletes. For example, Giacobbi and DeSensi qualitatively examined TV portrayals of golfer Tiger Woods, who is unique compared with many athletes in that he is multiracial and refers to himself as "CaublinAsian" (Giacobbi and DeSensi, 1999, p. 414) owing to his African-American, Caucasian, Native American and Asian heritage. The study found underlying racist, sexist, and classist ideologies in the media portrayals, with negative racial stereotypes reinforced. Another study by Juffer (2002) focused specifically on TV portrayals of Sammy Sosa, a Latino MLB player. This study found that the media largely ignored Sosa during his race with white MLB player Mark McGwire for the single-season home run record in 1998 until it became evident that Sosa would definitely contend for the record. Furthermore, commentary in the coverage seemed to reflect a longing for the sport of baseball to be a truly 'American' game as it was in the past, without the large number of international players who are currently in the MLB.

In one of the few studies to examine TV portrayals of Asian athletes, Daddario and Wigley (2007) found that Asian female athletes competing in the 2004 Olympics were cast as weak, frail and passive, similar to previous research findings. Additionally, the idea of Asians as the model minority was also present, as Asian athletes were portrayed as "hard-working, self-disciplined, and mechanical in the execution of their sport" (Daddario and Wigley, 2007, p. 43). Despite some findings that minority athletes were portrayed less negatively in TV coverage, the majority of literature on this topic shows that racial stereotypes have been reinforced over time and continue to be perpetuated on television. The next section explores the most recent medium, the Internet, to discover whether race portrayals in new media have followed the same patterns as print and broadcast.

Portrayals of race in new media

New media have fundamentally changed and helped sport reach new levels of success in terms of viewership, commercialization, and popularity because of its ability to offer virtual access that is seemingly unlimited to the public (Coakley, 2009). Sports fans make up a substantial amount of Internet users in the US and they spend a considerable amount of time online engaging in fantasy based sports, streaming sport content, shopping for sport merchandise, and participating in fan forums (Sachoff, 2008). While the Internet serves as a powerful medium that has the ability to enhance sport-related products and content and advance the critically important fan interconnectivity with leagues, teams, collegiate sports, and athletes, new media have also proven to portray the race of athletes similarly to the portrayals found in other forms of media. This section covers some of the research examining portrayals of minority groups in new media. As the majority of adults are now utilizing the Internet (Rainie, 2010), it is important to understand how underrepresented groups are portrayed throughout this platform.

Ruddock's (2005) study of an online forum examined comments by fans after West Ham United, a Premier League soccer team, signed a controversial player after he made racist comments directed at the Asian community. In a poll conducted by the online forum, a total of 79 fans voted, with 71 in support of the club's signing of the divisive Lee Bowyer and eight disapproving. Of those fans, 39 commented on the topic. The majority of the data collected

from the forum revealed that many of the posts minimized the controversy as inconsequential and felt that the uproar about the player's signing was primarily the fault of the media. In addition, the results revealed that sport was not a viable arena to discuss social issues, as sport was considered a sacred ground where conversations of race should not be held, and minority groups such as Asians and blacks tend to be more racist than their white counterparts. The study found that the commenters felt the primary focus of the media should be on whether or not Bowyer improves the team's success and not his racially charged insults. The findings proposed that the best solution or strategy for dealing with racially insensitive issues is to change the topic and talk about something entirely different. Furthermore, Ruddock determined the study's results from the online forum "illustrate that the discourses and actions of well-meaning people cultivate an environment where bigotry is tolerated, if not encouraged" (Ruddock, 2005, p. 383).

New media research has also expanded into the country's most prominent and popular intercollegiate sport organization, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). In 2005, the NCAA enacted a policy aimed at addressing what the association believed to be a denigrating representation by some of its members in regards to the use of racial mascots, logos, and nicknames (*USA Today*, 2005). While the NCAA ruled that it did not have the authority to ban the use of the nicknames and mascots believed to be hostile or abusive, the organization did ban the use of images deemed dehumanizing and racially insensitive from appearing on uniforms or other clothing items during postseason tournament play. The University of North Dakota (UND) was one of the schools affected by the NCAA's decision, owing to the school's nickname, the Fighting Sioux. To measure the impact of the decision, Steinfeldt, *et al.* (2010) examined online forum comments over a two-year period that included the enactment of the NCAA's ban on racially insensitive mascots and logos usage during postseason play and the lawsuit settlement agreement between UND and the NCAA. Steinfeldt, *et al.* examined 1,699 online forum comments, with 1,009 (59 percent) of the coded written content containing information in support of Native-themed mascots. There were only 115 (seven percent) comments that opposed the use of Native-themed nicknames and 575 (34 percent) coded as neutral. The study revealed that several overarching themes emerged from the content on the online forums. Steinfeldt and colleagues concluded that the forum participants evoked elements of *surprise* (for example, What? This is a problem? Why us?), *power and privilege* (for example, we are the victims, reverse racism, political correctness), *trivialization* (for example, minimize the issue, perpetuate misinformation about Indians), and *denigration* (for example, attack credibility and legitimacy of dissenters, punish Indians if nickname/logo removed). From their findings, the researchers suggested that new media allow for inaccurate, erroneous, and negative portrayals of Native Americans to persist through the use of Native-themed mascots.

Other research in this area also examined online forums to determine the reaction of fans to comments made by former National Basketball Association (NBA) star and current Turner Network Television (TNT) basketball analyst, Charles Barkley, about the 2008 hiring of a head football coach at his alma mater, Auburn University (Sanderson, 2010). On ESPN, Barkley publicly criticized Auburn University for selecting a white coach with a losing record, Gene Chizik, over a black coach, Turner Gill, who helped to rebuild the football program at the University of Buffalo. Sanderson (2010) randomly selected comments made after Barkley's critique of his former institution's decision to hire Chizik from more than 9,000 postings on an ESPN.com forum. Similar to the Steinfeldt, *et al.* (2010) study, four major areas emerged

from the data. First, *transference* suggested that the lack or underrepresentation of blacks as head coaches at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions was the fault of blacks and had little to nothing to do with racism. The second theme that surfaced was *irrelevance*, which dismissed the notion that race played a role in Auburn's hiring decision. The third element dealt with *reverse racism*, which tended to shift the central problem and focus of latent inequalities in hiring practices by FBS institutions to whites experiencing racism. The fourth and final domain, *recognition*, acknowledged the lack of inclusion at FBS institutions regarding to the hiring of qualified minority candidates. While the comments that comprised the latter domain were progressive in nature, Sanderson suggested that the former domains were just the opposite, as they reinforced a delusional stance in American culture that racism is extinct, culpability was levied at those who endure racism, and many of the comments were in line with the belief that whites were the target of racism.

As revealed with other forms of media, negative portrayals of underrepresented communities have continued with the development of new media. Similar to print and broadcast, new media have disseminated stereotypical and misleading content about minority groups. The next section discusses the significance of this information and offer recommendations.

Implications of race portrayals in sport media

Mayeda (1999) said, "sports, as popular and powerful as they are in America, should be used to break down faulty images, not to reinforce them" (p. 214) yet, based on the information presented in this chapter, it is evident that all forms of media portray athletes of differing race in different ways, and minority athletes are often depicted in a stereotypical or negative manner. It is important to understand why this type of coverage persists even today, and also to understand its impact on society. The following paragraphs explain both of these issues.

It has been suggested that the journalists might have subconscious attitudes about race, which are presented in the media through the words, phrases, themes, and frames they use to describe athletes of differing race (Eagleman, 2011). These subconscious feelings about race can become problematic when presented in the media because, as Bruce (2004) explained, "most Americans understand race through media representations" (p. 863). Because media professionals are viewed as being impartial, objective, and neutral, media consumers perceive them as credible. Therefore, if stereotypical or negative portrayals of athletes of differing race are presented in the media, consumers will treat these stereotypes and portrayals as credible information and might develop underlying stereotypes about certain racial groups. As Eagleman (2011) concluded, "When stereotypes based on race or nationality are continually presented in sport media frames, such stereotypes can become part of sport media consumers' personal perceptions of a falsely constructed reality" (p. 166).

Sabo, *et al.* (1996) suggested that fair treatment of all athletes in sport media can be achieved through efforts by media organizations to attempt to appeal to different ethnic and racial groups, and also suggested that media might be forced to treat athletes of all races equally when multicultural audiences voice their displeasure or offense to stereotyped portrayals of race. Eagleman (2011) echoed this sentiment, stating that the racial makeup of the US is rapidly changing, with current minority groups growing quickly. If such racial groups perceive media coverage of athletes of the same race to be stereotypical or derogatory, they will likely choose to not read or view coverage from those particular media outlets. This could impact the media organizations' bottom lines and negatively impact their businesses if they do

not change their reporting style to reflect nondiscriminatory representations of all races. Bruce (2004) suggested that changing the way journalists portray athletes might not be so easy, however, stating, "an implicit racial consciousness infects the working environment" (p. 874) at sport media organizations.

While it will be difficult to change the ways in which decades of sports journalists have become accustomed to writing about athletes of differing races, it is important to work towards such a shift not just for the sake of media organizations' bottom lines, but more importantly because of the serious societal implications that negative and stereotypical coverage can have. Hardin, *et al.* (2004) stated, "When media endorse racial difference, even subtly, they reinforce tendencies toward prejudice by the majority" (p. 213). Likewise, Eagleman (2011) explained that when sport communication professionals use race inappropriately, it could contribute to the creation and reinforcing of a discriminatory culture in media consumers' everyday lives. That is, when the media constantly reinforces racial stereotypes, it is possible for those stereotypes to become consciously or subconsciously embedded into the media consumer's psyche and could carry over to discriminatory behavior in the workplace or other areas of society. Legitimizing all racial groups and discontinuing the oppression of some groups in sport media can result in not only more equal coverage of athletes of all races, but in greater equality in society as well.

Therefore, difficult conversations are needed in sport media to fully utilize sport as a vehicle for social transformation (LaVoi and Kane, 2011). Thorough and honest discussions on the topic of whiteness could help to overcome some of the issues that currently exist in the portrayals of minority groups in sport media. The concept of whiteness specifically deals with vivid images, information, and cultural symbols that normalize and position white dominance, power, and supremacy as the status quo in American culture (McDonald, 2005). McDonald further suggests that whiteness is extremely complicated because of its influence on many American institutions such as sport and the mass media. Regardless of the complexity of the topic, it may benefit society immensely if more honest discussions on the subject were held on a more consistent basis.

For instance, in 2003 when Rush Limbaugh, from his ESPN *Sunday NFL Countdown* seat, commented that the only reason Donovan McNabb garnered any attention was because of the media's obsession with finding a successful black quarterback, it put the issue of race in sport at the top of many conversations throughout the country. According to Hartmann (2007), Limbaugh's comments provided an opportunity to discuss the critical ideology of whiteness in American sport media culture. Unfortunately, the discussion did not happen as Limbaugh resigned and so did the notion of exploring what McDonald (2005) proposed as the institutionalization of whiteness. Very little media coverage was allocated to the Limbaugh-McNabb situation, which suggests that the media had seemingly no interest in leading the conversation for racial equality in its reporting.

The resistance to discussing the topic of whiteness is further supported by the idea that sport serves as a safe haven from societal issues and concerns (Sanderson, 2010). While ideal, this position is flawed. Research has shown that negative sport images of minority groups viewed by young minority students have a psychologically damaging impact on these individuals (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone, 2008). Conversely, young white students that viewed the same negative images experienced higher levels of self-esteem, suggesting individuals have an early understanding of the benefits and privileges afforded to them through the concept of whiteness. Thus, this provides further evidence that meaningful conversations are needed to enhance the quality of life for all of society.

As previous research discovered (Ruddock, 2005; Steinfeldt, *et al.*, 2010), virtual environments (such as online forums) can provide a space where ideas on the topic of sports can be exchanged in the free marketplace and possibly serve as “a more accurate societal barometer of fans’ views on the relevance of race in sport” (Sanderson, 2010, p. 314). The issue here is that one of the many areas new media was intended to improve was sport consumers’ lives; however, many old stereotypes and inaccuracies regarding some underrepresented groups have been perpetuated via this format. Because of the anonymity that new media provides, it allows for more open discourse than a face-to-face context. While many of the comments found in the previous literature on sport and new media were disturbing, it is this type of candor that may help to dispel the myth that race in sports is a non-issue and move the dialogue towards serious and honest discussions on the topic of racism that continues to plague our world.

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