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## **“He needs pulling down a peg or two”: Assessing online fan responses to racialised discourse in sports broadcasting.**

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### **Abstract**

Although overt expressions of racism are increasingly rare within the sport media, implicit and conscious/unconscious racial bias, on the other hand, is a common feature within contemporary sports reporting (Farrington et al., 2012). A comprehensive body of research has illustrated that black athletes are more likely to be praised for their supposed innate biological superiority while white athletes are more likely to be credited for their work ethic and intelligence (Billings, 2004; Rainville and McCormack, 1977; Van Sterkenburg, 2011; 2013). In addition, black, Asian and minoritised ethnic athletes, such as Lewis Hamilton and Raheem Sterling, have often been criticised for being too ‘flashy’ by some sections of the UK press which conjures up images of undeserved riches. These representations are symptomatic of a wider culture in which minoritised communities are ‘othered’. This article, then, focuses on one example of racial bias from BBC Radio Derby’s Sports Scene podcast from February 2020. Former professional footballer turned pundit, Craig Ramage, suggested that “all the young black lads” needed “pulling down a peg or two” and needed to work harder (Hyde, 2020). This work will therefore empirically investigate three online post-titles across Facebook, Instagram and a forum to critically examine how contemporary football audiences reacted to such comments. The analysis illustrated that online participants were: i) divided over whether Ramage’s comments were racist or not, ii) unsure of who was to blame, iii) unsure of who the victim was. The article concludes by outlining preventative measures to avoid such reoccurrences and emphasises the importance of educational training around equality and diversity within the sport media.

### **Introduction**

We very rarely observe overt or explicit racist comments in sports media discourse. Conversely, we often witness examples of unconscious bias and stereotyping in sports broadcasts. In 2018, one Twitter user posted a thread containing a number of newspaper headlines relating to Manchester City and England forward, Raheem Sterling. The thread, which received almost 50,000 likes and over 37,000 retweets, contained headlines from *The Sun* and *Daily Star*, among others, labelling Sterling a ‘footie idiot’ and ‘greedy’. Sterling’s

attitude has been routinely scrutinised in the press while he has also been framed as ‘flashy’ due to his considerable wealth. Sterling is just one example of how conscious/unconscious racial bias weaves itself into sport media discourse. Research has shown that black athletes tend to be framed and described differently in sports commentary and reporting in comparison to their white counterparts (Hoberman, 1997; Farrington et al, 2012; McLoughlin, 2020; Rainville and McCormack, 1977; Van Sterkenburg and Spaaij, 2015).

This article focuses on a recent example of racial bias and stereotyping within the sports media. It focuses on an episode of BBC Radio Derby’s Sports Scene podcast series from February 2020. The podcast, which was pre-recorded, featured former Derby County player turned football commentator, Craig Ramage, who said that “all the young black lads” at the club possessed attitude problems, should work harder, and needed “pulling down a peg or two”. This research critically examines Ramage’s comments and attempts to ground them within a historical and cultural context. The primary focus of this work, however, is to critically understand how fans across different online platforms reacted and responded to Ramage’s comments. Using a critical sampling approach, three post-titles, which then become threads, were analysed across a forum, Facebook and Instagram. Overall, 807 individual thread responses were analysed. Thematic analysis enabled the construction of several relevant themes thus allowing us to comprehend how online audiences decoded Ramage’s outburst and the BBC’s decision to dismiss him. The analysis explores participants’ views on: what does and does not constitute racism; whether the BBC were correct in dismissing Ramage; and who is the victim and aggressor. The article ends by summarising the failures of sports media institutions in regards to equality and diversity and illustrates the importance of education within, and outside, the sports media.

### **Racial framing and sports journalism**

For many, ‘race’ refers to the ordering of human groups based on phenotypical (biological) differences including skin colour, hair type and body shape. In contrary to hegemonic worldviews, however, it may come as some surprise to learn that racial groups, such as black, Caucasian, or Asian, cannot be linked in any meaningful scientific or genetic way (Roberts, 2011). ‘Race’ is not biological. Racial groups are nothing other than social constructions invented for the purpose of maintaining and legitimising white supremacy (Cole, 2009; Gillborn, 2006). ‘Race’, now commonly placed in inverted commas to emphasise that it is a social construction, has been scientifically discredited since the mid twentieth century.

Europeans' scientific obsession with 'race', however, harbours an unsavoury history involving the study of, and experimentation on, black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. Throughout the Enlightenment period of the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, Africans in particular were studied as rationales to justify the 'natural' world order were scientifically pursued. These studies examined Africans' intellect by measuring cranial capacities, while muscle mass and pain resistance were also investigated (Kendi, 2016). This relentless search for racial differences served to protect the power holders as capitalist modes of production relied on racist ideas. In other words, if science could prove Africans were better suited for manual labour, then slavery and colonialism could be justified thus protecting white supremacy.

The legacy of genetic difference, despite being scientifically void, has had remarkable resilience in sport and has been employed to explain black dominance in certain sports. It has been suggested that black people have more fast-twitch muscle fibres and thicker skulls which helps explain successes in sprinting and boxing, respectively (Hoberman, 1997). Hylton (2009: 1) succinctly outlines the problem of 'race' thinking and sport:

There is a popular perception in sport that our genes and to a degree our cultural background dictates the prowess of an individual sportsman or woman. The discourse of advantage and of course disadvantage in sport is invariably reduced to 'harmless' racial differences, a reduction that suggests, however, a more sinister undercurrent.

This undercurrent ascribes "black athletes a natural physical advantage as a result of genetics, while being mentally inferior to white athletes" (Van Sterkenburg and Blokzeijl, 2018: 93). This imbues a racial dichotomy between black-brawn and white-thinkers (Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Farrington et al, 2012; Hoberman, 1997). White athletes work hard, read the game, and show leadership, while black athletes rely on their supposed genetic advantage but are lazy, work shy, and have attitude problems (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Hoberman, 1997; St Louis, 2004). Athleticizing the black body, then, results in reduced social status which may disadvantage career opportunities for black people not only within sport but in other domains such as management and leadership in sectors including academia, politics and business (Van Sterkenburg and Blokzeijl, 2018). Hoberman (1997) labels the media, particularly the sport media, an image factory which, above everything else, has problematically kept alive the idea of meaningful genetic difference.

The media play a crucial role in the creation and development of race relations. Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic groups are often framed as problems within media discourse. From the supposed criminal mentality of black communities (Hall et al, 2013) to Islamic fundamentalism (Poole and Richardson, 2006), minoritised communities continue to be represented in negative contexts. Hatter (2020) and Gilroy (1987) argue that the press frame black men as aggressive, hyper-masculine and threatening which illustrates a cultural form of racism. Rowe (2004) takes aim at sports journalists and commentators and emphasises their power and influence. Worryingly, research has demonstrated that sports broadcasters and commentators embrace and perpetuate ideas of black 'natural ability' (Hoberman, 1997; Farrington et al, 2012; Van Sterkenburg and Spaaij, 2015). For example, Rainville and McCormack (1977), who explored televised commentary in American football, found that European-American players were less likely to receive criticism when compared with African-Americans. Similarly, Billings (2004), who analysed 162 hours of televised American football commentary, noted that black quarterbacks in collegiate and professional football were characterised as succeeding due to genetics while whites were depicted as failing because of their lack of innate ability. And, in 2020, despite its questionable methodology, RunRepeat, in partnership with the Professional Footballers Association (PFA), analysed over 2,000 statements made by 80 football commentators during the 2019-20 season stating that white players were statistically more likely to receive praise, black players were 6.59 times more likely to be labelled powerful, and a positive work ethic was more likely to be attributed to white players in comparison to any other ethnic group (McLoughlin, 2020). These findings correlate with various studies which have investigated the racialisation of ethnic groups in sports commentary, e.g. Latin-Americans are framed as selfish and hot-tempered (Bernstein and Blain, 2003; Hylton, 2009), British South Asians are small and slight in build (Farrington et al., 2012; Kilvington, 2012), and Australian Aborigines are athletically gifted but lazy (Coram, 2007).

Sports discourse, then, is embroiled in racialised ideas. Research on 'race' and sports commentary has explored athletics, football and basketball, to name but a few. Yet, less research has been conducted on the impact that commentary has on sports fans and audiences. That said, McCarthy, Jones and Potrac (2003) investigated the use of racial stereotypes among white British football media audiences, finding that they subscribed to beliefs around the natural physical power and strength of black players. Hermes (2005) and Van Sterkenburg (2013), who both focussed on Dutch audiences, discovered that some young Dutch males tended to employ exclusionary discourses when referring to black and minoritised ethnic

players within the Dutch national football team. They add that some viewers stated that their level of support for the Dutch national team would decrease if too many black players were in the squad. Sport therefore acts as a vehicle in which viewers and fans make sense of ideas surrounding 'race' and ethnicity. Such ideas are so deeply woven into everyday discourse that they become normalised and often unchallenged among broadcasters and audiences.

Because whiteness is woven into the fabric of sport, it has led to the 'othering' of minoritised ethnic groups. In short, racialised assumptions, attitudes and stereotypes become internalised, common-sense, and unchallenged. Feagin's (2013) conceptualisation of the white racial frame, which is a core element within Systemic Racism Theory (Feagin, 2006), illustrates the process in which whites consciously and subconsciously make sense of everyday situations pertaining to racial matters. Feagin and Cobas (2008: 40) emphasise the power of racial framing:

That frame has long included not only negative racial images, stereotypes, emotions, and interpretations, but also distinctive language and imaging tools used to describe and enforce the racial hierarchy. Central to this framing has long been a concept of white superiority, in counterpoint to an idea of the inferiority of racialized others.

Deeply embedded in the white racial frame are the stereotypes that quickly come to mind when we observe an 'outsider'. Racial framing, then, helps us explain the phenomenon of 'stacking', for instance, in sports such as cricket, football and American football (Brooks and Althouse, 2000; Kilvington, 2019; Malcolm, 1997) as well as the paucity of black managers and coaches in a variety of sports (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). Stereotypes enable ideas around what groups are like and why they are like that (Gorham, 2019). Considering that people who watch more television news have a higher tendency towards racial linguistic bias than those who do not watch television news (Gorham, 2006), it is crucial that we investigate and critique the discourse of sports broadcasters, pundits, and commentators. This article therefore focuses on former BBC Radio Derby presenter, Craig Ramage, whose contract was terminated by the BBC in February 2020 after his racially charged comments, which were not identified in the edit, were broadcast.

### **“All the young black lads”: Ramage and racial framing**

Following a 1-1 draw against Huddersfield Town, Ramage, who was a regular guest on BBC Radio Derby's Sports Scene podcast, suggested that all of Derby County's young black players needed to work harder and had attitude problems. He said:

When I look at certain players, their *body language, their stance, the way they act*, you just feel, hold on a minute, *he needs pulling down a peg or two* [...] I'd probably say that about *all the young black lads*, all the young advice if they wanted it, that, you know, it's about, when you are struggling for form, you are going through a sticky patch, it's about *going back to basics, working hard, and doing the right things* (cited in Hyde, 2020 emphasis added).

These comments, uttered within the space of a minute, brought to an end a seven year working relationship between BBC Radio Derby and Ramage. These comments led to a swift rebuttal from 22-year-old Derby County defender, Max Lowe, one of the 'black lads' of which Ramage was referring to. Using his Instagram account, Lowe replied: "On behalf of black footballers at Derby County [...] Racial ignorance, stereotyping and intolerance negatively affects the image of impressionable young footballers and creates an unnecessary divide in society" (cited in Sky News, 2020). Ramage then took to Twitter to apologise, stating that his comments did not represent his personal views. While acknowledging his comments were "wholly inappropriate and unintentional", he added that "race was irrelevant" to what he was discussing. But, based on our discussion in the previous section, is 'race' irrelevant or relevant here? To what extent did race thinking motivate Ramage's comments?

There is little doubt that Ramage's comments were influenced and shaped by ideas and stereotypes manifest in the white racial frame (see Feagin, 2006; 2013). Ramage managed to draw on a number of anti-black stereotypes including black men being lazy (Brookes, 2002; Hoberman, 1997), acting above their station (Farrington et al, 2012), and having a chip on their shoulder (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; King, 2004). As noted above, laziness and attitude problems are common sinister tropes imbued within the natural black athlete stereotype. Pulling "the black lads" down "a peg or two" essentially implies a reorientation of said group where they must know their place. This is a common narrative as black footballers are routinely criticised and admonished in the press (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001) for being too flashy or bling.

In January 2018, Raheem Sterling used his Instagram account to expertly illustrate the differential media treatment between two young players. Sterling, who is no stranger to undeserved press criticism, posted screenshots of two *Daily Mail* articles. The first featured Tosin Adarabioyo, a "young" player who had "splashed out" on a "mansion" despite never playing an English Premier League game. The second focused on "starlet" Phil Foden, who "bought" a "home for his mum". At this time, neither players had played many first-team games

and both houses were bought for their families. While Foden was framed as a “starlet” and family man, Adarabioyo’s framing conjures up images of undeserved riches. To some extent, then, he needed “pulling down a peg or two”. For many decades, academic work has documented inferential and implicit racism in sports media discourse (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Farrington et al, 2012; Hoberman, 1997; Kilvington, 2012), however, due to Sterling’s global reach, his single Instagram post arguably made the biggest impact to date as it forced national conversations about sports reporting, unconscious bias and racism.

Tatum (2014: 26) notes that cultural images and messages, such as those espoused by Ramage or those highlighted by Sterling, help “affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color”, adding that these messages are “like smog in the air [...] If we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing in the air”? It is therefore of paramount importance that sports broadcasters, pundits and commentators are informed and educated on matters pertaining to prejudice and discrimination. Ramage’s remarks raise a number of important questions: i) what educational training do broadcasters undertake to perform such a role? ii) who is responsible for checking the content, if it’s pre-recorded, before its release? iii) why was Ramage’s racially charged outburst not challenged by the other presenters? iv) should Ramage accept full responsibility for his error or is this a wider failure of the production team or broadcasting institution? v) why did the BBC delay a statement or apology following this event?

These are pertinent questions, and ones that the BBC will, or should, have considered subsequently. The purpose of this article, though, is to understand the attitudes of contemporary football fans in response to accusations of racism in the sports media. Significantly, then, the above questions, and more, are discussed by football fans across various online platforms. For example, many fans offer sympathy with Ramage while others agree with his dismissal. Some attempt to downplay and dismiss racism, alluding to the age-old political correctness gone mad mantra. Before the analysis, however, the following section examines the methodological approach taken in this study.

## **Methodology**

A critical sampling approach was adopted as online forums and social network sites discussing this ‘critical’ event were sought. A scoping exercise was undertaken to identify online



platforms and posts whereby fans were responding to Ramage’s remarks en masse. Upon completion of this exercise, three online post titles, which become threads, were identified across three different platforms. The selected platforms and post titles are outlined in Table 1.1. Because this research captures potentially sensitive online data in relation to views surrounding ‘race’ and racism, a number of ethical considerations must be considered. As a result, I have attempted to protect online users’ identities in the following ways. First, I have revised the post titles across the forum, Instagram and Facebook (see Table 1.1). Second, I have provided blanket anonymity for non-public accounts (see Dawson, 2014) meaning that social media handles and forum usernames will not feature in this work. Third, direct quotations from online participants will be avoided and instead, quotations will be paraphrased in such a way to maintain user meaning but hide user identity.

**Table 1.1. Platform and post-title**

Platform	Post Title	Number of posts analysed
Forum	<i>BBC Radio Derby: Reflecting on Ramage and racism</i>	360
Facebook	<i>Should Craig Ramage have been sacked by BBC Radio Derby following his racist comments?</i>	102
Instagram	<i>'All the young black lads': Why is this statement problematic?</i>	345

A total of 807 posts were analysed across the three platforms. In order to make the sample size manageable, only direct replies to the original posts were analysed. Put simply, replies to replies were omitted to retain focus as users had a tendency to digress away from the ‘critical’ event. In turn, this helped reduce the overall sample size from 1,134 to 807.

The research utilised a qualitative content analysis approach which “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication” and pays particular “attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). This method adopted a four stage approach, as outlined by Bengtsson (2016), which began with *decontextualization*. This initial stage allows the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data as early codes are flexible. During this interim stage, a lengthy list of codes were generated. The researcher relies on instinct which has been shaped by a critical awareness and understanding of the wider literature when identifying early notable codes. Second, *recontextualization* enables the researcher to check whether the codes correspond to the study’s aims and objectives. At this point, irrelevant codes are dismissed. The third stage involves *categorisation* and all categories are checked and compared across all forums. A spider diagram was created to find common

themes and connections. Bengtsson (2016: 12) adds that “several categories are often generated, but the number is later reduced”. The fourth stage, *compilation*, is achieved when a document summarising themes and categories has been finalised. A total of 19 categories were established across the three post titles, or threads, each containing multiple sub-categories. The compilation phase saw the construction of three overarching themes which will be explored in the discussion section.

## **Analysis**

A qualitative content analysis approach enabled the formulation of three overarching themes. These themes were constructed despite participants’ behaviour and responses to the Ramage’s comments being markedly different across the three platforms - the reason for this was because each post title asked a slightly different question which thus encouraged different responses in the thread. Unlike Facebook and Instagram, the forum began with discussions and criticisms of BBC Radio Derby. Fans of the podcast demanded an immediate, and comprehensive, explanation for why Sports Scene had been taken off air. In fact, the podcast was removed and re-uploaded later with Ramage’s racist comments removed. To some extent, participants projected greater anger and frustration over the initial removal of the podcast than with Ramage’s racially charged comments. Although BBC Radio Derby was critiqued across all three platforms, the forum users devoted more time to this topic.

Across all three platforms, considerable debate was devoted to whether or not Ramage’s comments were racist. The majority of the forum participants believed that Ramage’s language was racist and inexcusable. In addition, only one participant on Instagram attempted to defend Ramage’s choice of words while several others sympathised with him. Conversely, the majority of Facebook users denied or downplayed racism and argued that Ramage was unfairly dismissed by the BBC. In fact, the page included a poll which amassed over 5,000 votes and reported that 61 percent disagreed with the BBC’s decision to sack Ramage thus illustrating Facebook users’ consensus views on the event. For some, Ramage was martyred as he had fallen victim of a hyper-sensitive and politically correct culture. Within the forum, participants used the topic of ‘new presenters’ to criticise inclusion and diversity initiatives as Ramage’s replacement would likely be “diverse” and “female” to meet “quotas”. Many participants across the platforms, however, noted that BBC Radio Derby responded appropriately and were correct in dismissing Ramage while others suggested that Ramage’s fellow presenters, and in some cases the entire production team, should have been disciplined or dismissed. Participants

generally showed a level of uncertainty around who was to blame, what the appropriate punishment should be, and who exactly should be punished.

There was also uncertainty around who was the victim. For some, Max Lowe and his fellow black team-mates are singled out as victims. Lowe therefore receives considerable sympathy and support, but almost exclusively on Instagram. This sympathy, however, is rarely observed in the forum and on Facebook. Instead, Lowe is occasionally labelled the aggressor as his post on Instagram attacked Ramage, his fellow presenters, and publicly shamed them. For some, Lowe should have spoken individually with Ramage rather than starting a “trial by social media”. In turn, Ramage is also considered a victim, falling foul of so-called political correctness gone mad.

The following analysis explores three themes which were constructed from the qualitative content analysis. These themes relate to key topics which were discussed by the participants across the platforms. The themes include: *Making sense of Ramage’s comments; the ‘blame game’ and disciplinary action; and the aggressor and the victim.*

#### *Making sense of Ramage’s comments*

The majority of the forum and Instagram participants indicated that Ramage’s comments were unacceptable and racist although the analysis of Facebook illustrated the opposite. Although many participants were quick to judge these comments as racist, very few elaborated on why which caused some confusion, hostility and confrontation between users. This led to Ramage being defended and the racist comments being downplayed by some. It was perceived that if the comments could not be comprehensively defined as racist, then Ramage was innocent and the furore was an over-reaction. On Facebook, one participant said that it was just a “clumsy casual mistake” while another user expressed confusion, asking how the phrase “young black lads” could be perceived as racist (Instagram post). Some participants demonstrated genuine bewilderment and shock and refuted accusations of racism, with some posting eye roll emojis and Gifs. On Facebook, one user said: “If Ramage said ‘all the young white lads’ then there wouldn’t be an issue”. And, in the forum, one user noted that ethnic terms such as white or black are common-place and using such descriptors are acceptable. A number of participants focused on the word “black” and rejected racism because black is not a derogatory term, unlike many other racial epithets. What was commonly ignored by participants, however, was context

- Ramage was drawing on racist stereotypes and attributing them to an entire group of people. In context, Ramage was postulating a racially essentialist viewpoint.

While many participants suggested that Ramage was not racist and should have been given the chance to explain his views as he was caught out “in the heat of the moment” (Facebook post), others displayed joy at his dismissal. Yet, forum users, in particular, were not joyous because a presenter, guilty of espousing racist stereotypes, had been sacked, but joyous because of his lack of ability and skill as a presenter. One forum user noted:

Ramage’s media career has been built upon questionable negativity and hyperbole which masquerades as passion. This leads to problems because he regularly has to go to increased levels of hyperbole to stay relevant and seemingly passionate [...] He was always bound to make a mistake because he got too close to the edge. This incident revealed his inner-most beliefs and attitudes (Forum post).

Participants, notably in the forum, chose to criticise Ramage’s presenting style rather than his use of racial stereotyping as users focused on his persistent negativity, lack of insight, and hot-tempered style. It was also suggested that his negative attitude influenced his co-presenters and affected their performances and views. Across the platforms, much discussion was devoted to who should be blamed and what the punishment should be. Interestingly, it was highlighted that not only Ramage should face disciplinary action but so too the co-presenters and production team while the BBC, as an institution, were also culpable.

#### *The ‘blame game’ and disciplinary action*

Many participants engaged in discussions and debates around who was to blame for this error. Although some attempted to absolve Ramage of any wrongdoing, the majority of participants across the platforms apportioned sole responsibility with Ramage noting that he should face disciplinary action such as a suspension or dismissal. However, several users articulated that Ramage’s co-presenters, and in some cases his entire production team, should have faced ramifications, while a minority of users took aim at the institution, the BBC, and highlighted previous past failings.

Many participants agreed with the decision of Ramage being sacked but were somewhat apologetic at this verdict:

I wouldn't say that Ramage is a racist, but he said something racist on-air and that is something that people are sacked for. I do feel sorry for him though. (Forum post)

It is harsh that he has been sacked. I don't think he meant any racism, they were just off-the-cuff comments in the heat of the moment (Facebook post).

Some participants argued that Ramage was unfortunate to be sacked while his production team, including co-presenters, editors, and senior managers appeared to face no disciplinary action. Lowe's Instagram rebuttal to Ramage and the Sports Scene podcast added that he was "disappointed" after the BBC failed to "step in" and ask Ramage to "explain his reasoning, or to distance themselves from these archaic thoughts" (cited in Sky News, 2020). On Instagram, one participant noted that it was "frightening" that Ramage was "not challenged at the time" by his co-presenters while another participant said it was "horrendous that he wasn't challenged on the spot". In addition, one user went further, suggesting that "all of the radio team should be dismissed for not questioning or acknowledging Ramage's comments" (Instagram post).

Across the platforms, then, the co-presenters of Sports Scene, Ed Dawes (who was not actually co-presenting the episode in question) and Chris Coles, received criticism for not challenging Ramage over his comments. Not only that, they are also criticised for allowing it to air without acknowledging or omitting the comments in post-production (the comments were subsequently omitted and the podcast was re-uploaded). In the forum, in particular, Dawes, akin to Ramage, received a barrage of criticism not for failing to challenge the comments, but for being a 'bad presenter'. Conversely, Coles is revered by the forum participants who appear to display greater outrage and sadness at the prospect he may be dismissed as opposed to outrage over Ramage's racist slur:

I am really hopeful that Chris doesn't face any punishment for what Ramage said. Chris is a first-class presenter and doesn't deserve any criticism. (Forum post)

I'd be so unhappy if Coles is sacked, it wasn't his fault (Forum post)

I feel sorry for Coles! He's been caught up in this but could be completely innocent. He might not have fully heard what Ramage said. For example, he might have been looking down at his notes or thinking about his next question. He was probably under the cosh of a deadline and encouraged to post the podcast as quickly as possible. He's probably under a lot of pressure and because of all this, he's missed Ramage's comment. I'm sure it's an easy thing to miss (Forum post)

People shouldn't be jumping on Coles' back for not calling out Ramage. Presenters have time constraints and he might not have even heard the comment at the time. But, whoever edits the

podcast should've spotted it ... whoever edited the audio and posted it online will be in serious trouble (Forum post)

Although some participants argued that Coles should receive a 'slap on the wrists' for his part in the podcast, the overwhelming majority of forum participants supported and defended Coles. The latter two comments, for example, put forward an array of excuses in defence of Coles. By apportioning the full blame to Ramage, and absolving blame elsewhere, however, it negates the failure of the production team as a laissez-faire attitude towards racial slurs passed-by unchallenged. This demonstrates a clear lack of education and understanding around racial prejudice and discrimination within the entire production team, perhaps exposing deeper institutional failings surrounding equality and diversity practices and policies at the BBC. These apparent failings are encapsulated in the following response:

The BBC has a huge responsibility to ensure all of their staff are aware and trained on all things equality and diversity related. The BBC have a clear responsibility and have taken the easy option by dismissing Craig. I am confident he isn't racist (Facebook post)

Another participant added that the BBC's senior management team must further scrutinise how their programmes are "quality assured" in regards to 'race' and ethnicity (Forum post). To some extent, Coles was framed as a victim by some participants as he could face disciplinary action due to Ramage's comments which he may not have heard due to "being under the cosh of a deadline". Interestingly, then, rather than Lowe, and his fellow black team-mates being perceived as the victims, participants argued that both Coles and Ramage were victimised.

### *The aggressor and the victim*

Lowe received considerable support and praise, largely on Instagram, following his rebuttal to Ramage:

I'm the parent of a young football player. He's already faced racism on the field so I'd like to thank Max Lowe for speaking out (Instagram post)

Max is a well-spoken and intelligent young man. Thank you, Max (Instagram post)

Lowe offers a brilliantly worded response to Ramage's ignorant nonsense. He could go in all guns blazing but instead offers a classy response. (Instagram post)

Following in the footsteps of other sporting superstars and activists, such as Raheem Sterling, Lowe used his platform to publicly challenge racism. However, Lowe's Instagram post which criticised Ramage and the BBC, was considered, by some, to be unfair and unjust. Not only

did Lowe's response arguably further ignite criticism towards Ramage, but it also placed Coles, a Derby County fan favourite, in a precarious employment position. In turn, Lowe was alleged to have started a 'trial by social media' with some users arguing that he should have reached out to Ramage and/or the BBC privately rather than using social media. This led to the following participant responses:

Coles' promising career as a sports journalist has essentially been shattered by Lowe just because he didn't challenge Ramage. Coles is not to blame and it's likely that he didn't even hear Ramage's silly comment. I feel really sorry for Coles, a talented young journalist, who has an annual salary close to what Lowe makes in a week (Forum, post)

Lowe started this media frenzy. I'm so annoyed with Lowe getting involved. It just seems like sour grapes to me (Facebook post)

Here, Lowe, framed as a high-flying and wealthy professional footballer, becomes the aggressor and is guilty of potentially sabotaging a young journalists' promising career. On Instagram, one participant noted that footballers calling out racism is tiresome as they are able to "hop into fancy cars and private jets and go somewhere else", thus escaping racism. Another participant encouraged Lowe to "join a different club" (Instagram post). F1 Racing driver, Lewis Hamilton, has similarly called out racism in his profession and has also been criticised for doing so. Farrington et al (2012) suggest that athletes from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, such as Hamilton, who challenge racism are perceived as illegitimate claimants of racism because of their social status. This almost suggests that class and socio-economic status outweighs 'race'; in effect, it neutralizes blackness and reduces ones legitimacy to experience and challenge racism. That said, many participants were quick to defend Lowe and state that he is the victim in the story:

Please do not place any blame with Max Lowe (Forum post)

Why is Max Lowe being blamed for this? Remember, who are the aggressors and victims? (Forum post)

On the other hand, Ramage was presented as a victim of a hyper-sensitive and politically-correct culture whereby free-speech is becoming increasingly threatened. Several participants displayed anger at political correctness and attempted to offer humorous rebuttals including: "Hot off the press: Derby County FC will no longer wear the 'racist' black away shirt" (Facebook post). Many participants, then, notably on the forum and Facebook, suggested that the accusations of racism were illegitimate, noting that there are greater problems and issues in the world. A number of responses thus attempted to defend Ramage:

The main problem is that we've never had lessons about what is and what isn't racist. He mentioned skin colour, but Craig Ramage wouldn't even realise whether the comment was racist or not (Facebook post)

He absolutely should not have been fired. What is the world coming to? People can't even say what they think now without there being consequences. Okay, some people say it's racist, he apologised so that should be the end of it and we should just move on (Facebook post)

The former participant illustrates that Ramage is a victim of his era because his generation failed to receive an education around 'race' and racism. As a result, Ramage is "stuck in a time warp" (Instagram post) through no fault of his own. In short, guilt is absolved because he 'knows no better'. In turn, a number of participants attempted to downplay the severity and impact of racism and indicate that a simple apology should suffice in order to "move on". This, however, dismisses the influence and damage of racial framing and fails to acknowledge the systemic problems that exist in the industry, and wider society. Arguably, if the BBC responded immediately following the broadcast, rather than delaying, and offered a clear statement explaining why these comments were considered to be offensive and racist in nature, alongside guidance pertaining to the BBC's commitment towards equality and diversity, then it may have allayed certain criticisms and helped position Lowe, and his fellow black team-mates, as victims in this story, as opposed to the aggressors.

## **Conclusion**

This article has critically investigated audience reactions following BBC Radio Derby's unwitting broadcast of racist comments during their Sports Scene podcast episode in February 2020. The event, in which a football commentator homogenised Derby County's black players as being lazy and having attitude problems, illustrates yet another example of conscious/unconscious bias within sport media discourse. There are multiple failings – not only did Ramage demonstrate a complete lack of awareness by making such comments, but they remained unchallenged and were not identified in post-production; which illustrates serious problems within the institutional processes. Therefore, as some online participants postulate, it is essential that presenters, residing in powerful and influential positions, receive mandatory training around equality and diversity (if this is not already happening). Moreover, production teams should also be trained to identify racism, and wider forms of prejudice, further helping prevent such racialised discourses in the future. As one participant argued, this approach would help ensure that programmes become "quality assured" (forum post). I am certain that



presenters, and those within production teams, across the institution, were encouraged to attend educational training, or retraining, following this event. Of course, this would constitute a positive step forward, however, broadcasting organisations must be proactive rather than reactive in order to avoid such reoccurrences.

The empirical work helped illuminate audience reactions to contemporary accusations of racism in the sport media and the analysis illustrated that fans were often divided in regards to whether Ramage's comments were racist or not. Online users often failed to contextualise Ramage's comments and instead relied on simplistic understandings of 'race' and racism, with institutionalised practices being ignored. While some believed that Ramage's comments were racist, others suggested that Ramage is a 'product of his time'; his views reflect his era and were without malice. As a result, many participants across the forum, Facebook and Instagram displayed some sympathy for Ramage who made his comments without "bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded" (Hall, 1990: 13). As Tatum (2014: 26) adds, then, if we live in a world where we breathe in "smoggy air", ideas and beliefs remain hegemonic and we are thus less likely to identify and understand prejudicial comments and discriminatory actions. It is poignant that Ramage's "heartfelt" public apology via Twitter included the word "unintentional". For Hall (1990) and Tatum (2014), *unintentional* is arguably fitting as Ramage's views may well have been unconscious and deeply rooted.

Some participants therefore shifted the blame towards the BBC, noting that they had failed Ramage and the production team because they either had not been trained sufficiently or post-production checks were absent or worthy of revision. Others criticised the BBC for how they handled the event, noting their delayed public response as an exemplar - both Max Lowe and Craig Ramage issued public responses prior to the BBC. It is essential that broadcasters guilty of publishing racist and derogatory comments should offer an immediate and comprehensive apology outlining why such discourse or behaviour is problematic and what they are doing to prevent reoccurrences. This would have helped counter such voices who staunchly supported Ramage and refuted that his comments were racist in nature. Without a swift public apology, online discussions escalated which led to Lowe being criticised and framed as the aggressor in the story. This would be one way to help prevent players from being targeted and abused online.

Events such as this help normalise and preserve racial stereotypes which harm minoritised communities. This, however, is not an isolated case as implicit and unconscious racial bias is embedded in the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013) and manifest in sports discourse (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Farrington et al, 2012; Hoberman, 1997; Kilvington, 2012; Van Sterkenburg, 2011; Van Sterkenburg and Blokzeijl, 2018). Sports broadcasters thus have a responsibility to ensure that their content avoids such biases. It is essential that institutions, such as the BBC, have rigorous processes and checks in place to ensure acceptable content is being released, and that staff members are fully (and regularly) trained on matters concerning equality and diversity. This error from Ramage, and the BBC, offers an insight into fans' reactions and responses to racist comments and demonstrates that there is still a long way to go in the fight against racism. The sport media can, and do, play a crucial role in how consumers see the world and understand 'race' and racism. The industry must learn from such racialised events in order to provide sports media audiences with content which avoids racial bias and stereotyping. In sum, the importance of education and racial literacy, across the sport media and wider society, cannot be understated. Education challenges unconscious bias among sports reporters and equips audiences with a firmer understanding in regards to identifying, resisting and challenging racism.

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