

The colour-line of journalism: Exploring racism as a boundary object in journalistic practice and principles

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Abstract

This article argues that Danish journalistic boundary producing practices and principles uphold a representation of racial disparity. Based on critical theories of race and racism in journalism and a boundary work framework, we conduct a discursive analysis of two collective case studies that encompass 56 articles and 23 Facebook posts. Focusing mainly on 1) the construction of knowledge about potential racism, 2) who are positioned as authorities on the topic of racism, and 3) who are missing among the potential actors in the stories, we identify meta-journalistic discourses and the (re)establishment of journalistic principles and practices. We conclude that journalistic norms and practices, for now, withstand the challenges posed by minority media's call for the recognition of race as structure by applying discursive strategies of firstly rejecting racism as structure and secondly asserting principles and practices of specific kinds of objectivity, utilising, for instance, elite sources.

KEYWORDS

boundary work, discourse analysis, journalism, race, racism, minority voices

Introduction

This article departs from the journalistic representation of two disparate incidents in Denmark during the summer of 2020. While different, they both point toward journalistic responses that continually reproduce and reimagine the boundaries of journalistic practices and principles. The incidents are, firstly, the death of a Danish-Tanzanian man who was killed on the island of Bornholm and, secondly, the publication of a study concluding that sports commentators' descriptive remarks are racially biased. In both cases, the journalistic coverage was questioned and discussed at length outside and within the journalistic institution. Both cases raise the question of how to cover race and racism in Danish journalism.

Bringing the critical history of racism and journalism to mind, this article explores racism as a boundary object that invites radically different meanings in public discourse (Carlson, 2015, p. 7), thus drawing up – what may be termed – shifting ‘colour-lines’ in Danish journalism. The article employs a discursive approach (Foucault, 1971/1994; Hall 1997/2002) to the two collective, critical cases (Stake, 1995, p. 4; Flyvbjerg, 1991) presented in a selection of print media published between 25. June and 31. August 2020, to ask and answer the question: How are race and racism expressed as boundary objects in the cases of the death of the Danish-Tanzanian man and the study on the racially charged remarks of sports commentators?

In the following, we proceed from a brief review of previous scholarship on the topic of racism and journalism to discuss the theories of boundary work before embarking on the discursive analysis. Finally, the article concludes with a combined theoretical and empirical argument for how Danish journalism may learn from the critical history of race and racism to reimagine journalism as a political boundary actor.

The racial challenges of white journalism

Race and racism in the press have been researched extensively, although not necessarily systematically, for almost a century. While comprehensive studies have been conducted in North America, in the early 1990s, Teun van Dijk (1991/2016, p. 20) found that Euro-

pean and Scandinavian studies lagged. However, several critical case studies have highlighted the continuously strained relationship between the white press and minorities in recent years. The studies may be divided into studies that, on the one hand, focus on potential racist discourses and their implications produced and promoted by the white press (e.g. Hall et al., 1978; van Dijk, 1991/2016; Said, 1997; Downing & Husband, 2005; Titley, 2020) and studies that, on the other hand, focus on the minority press and its importance for general journalistic practice and history (e.g. Vogel, 2001; González & Torres, 2011; Blaagaard, 2016; Richardson, 2020). In their separate ways, both traditions point to the limitations and challenges to professional journalism.

The white press' challenges

In his ground-breaking study of “how racism comes about and how it is perpetuated by the [white] Press”, van Dijk (1991/2016, p. 5. emphasis in original) asserts that racism is produced and reproduced discursively, socio-culturally and continuously through talk and text. Because the media and, mainly, the societal elites, who are the primary sources of the press, control this (re)production, they “may be seen as the major inspirators of and guardians of white group dominance” (p. 6). Indeed, van Dijk’s earlier research “strongly supports the [...] thesis that a country or society is as racist as its dominant elites are” (p. 6). In this earlier work on news journalism in The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, van Dijk finds that the media play a vital role in forming public opinions about minority groups. Thus, “the mass media provide an ideological framework for the interpretation of ethnic events” (p. 7). These sentiments are echoed in work by Danish scholars, exploring the history of representation of visible minorities in the Danish national newspapers and tv-stations (Andreassen, 2007), the discursive constructions of racist attitudes in the Danish public sphere (Hussain, 2000), and migrant media consumption (Christiansen, 2004). These studies position minorities in the role of ‘a societal problem’ and opposition to a national construction of ‘us,’ i.e. the white majority (van Dijk, 1991/2016, p. 18; Andreassen, 2011, p. 238). Indeed, the stereotypical, criminalised and peripheral representation of minorities is an all too familiar and long-lasting discourse found in the research in Denmark and abroad.

For example, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) identify how news-making is an ideology-producing process that constructs newsworthiness according to an 'objective', but white perspective; Edward Said (1997) writes about the political discourse of the everlasting Muslim stereotypes in the news; and John Downing and Charles Husband (2015) argue that due to journalism's organisational structures it reproduces (negative) racial relations.

The racial history of journalism extends beyond the discursive meaning-making power of media (Hall, 1985). Reviewing early research on the relationship between the press and minorities, van Dijk (1991/2016) finds that in addition to a lack of coverage that takes the point of view of the minorities, the press consistently limits the access of minority groups in terms of hiring minorities in journalistic positions and promoting minority journalists within the profession (van Dijk, 1991/2016, p. 20-1). Similarly, less than 5.6% of the Danish media workforce has a minority background compared to 12.3% in the general workforce (Slots- & Kulturstyrelsen, 2020, p. 21). Ariadne Matamoros-Fernández (2017) argues that editorial practices and policies continue to be embedded in libertarian ideologies that privilege a white and western bias. These ideologies, she argues, are moreover extended into the digital realm. Clearly, from the perspective of the research taking the critique of the white press as a starting point and object of study, journalism is faced with challenges on organisational, discursive and ideological levels.

The critical memory of the minority press

Focusing on the minority press in the United States, Juan González and Joseph Torres (2011) cover an extensive but mostly overlooked part of the journalistic profession. At the turn of the century, the mainstream journalistic profession – challenged by new election laws and wider-spread literacy – re-invented itself in the image of science and objectivity (Schudson, 1978). However, underscored by the technological developments of the telegraph, which preferred short and easily digestible phrases, the re-invention resulted in a stereotypical representation of minorities and an exclusion of their voices (González & Torres, 2011, p. 137-160). Meanwhile, the minority press contributed to the history of journalism in wide-ranging but parallel publications, which covered the communities and their political

and social struggles for civil rights. The black press distributed its first publications in the 1820s. The newspapers and pamphlets produced news on a range of topics concerning black America, and they were far from all about enslavement and emancipation, writes Todd Vogel (2001, p. 1). Throughout the centuries, the black press debated diverse topics, such as “trade unions, the Spanish civil war, and cold war consumer culture”. In this way, the black press serves to stitch African American experiences into the fabric of the white mainstream. Likewise, in Denmark, David Hamilton Jackson produced and edited *The Herald* in the Danish colonies in the Caribbean (Blaagaard, 2018). On the pages of this newspaper, Jackson created a far-reaching community connected to the black press in the north while seeking social reforms akin to the reforms that developed in contemporary Denmark. Similarly, Connie Carøe Christiansen (2004) finds media consumption to be a transnational and social practice that “reveals the cultural-geographic orientation among individual consumers” (p. 186). Migrants in Denmark use transnational media to construct powerful imagined communities.

While these examples show the powerful social performativity of journalism, Allissa V. Richardson (2020) convincingly argues that in the current context, black journalistic community building takes place on Twitter by means of witnessing the implications of societal politics and policing. On Black Twitter, “black people are using smartphones to create video evidence for each other – especially in instances of documenting excessive police force”, writes Richardson (2020, p. 17); however, “[they] are making these videos for external audiences too. They want to set the record straight in many cases”. As Houston A. Baker (1994, p. 15, 31) puts it: “... there is a continuity in the development of black publicity rather than a recurrent novelty” that focuses on the critical and creative “efforts, strategies and resources for leadership and liberation”. As the minority press and the minority communities that follow continue to insist on having their voices heard and their significance also recognised outside the bounded minority press, the white press is challenged from yet another angle: While the reproduction of racial structures persists on the organisational, discursive and ideological levels, white mainstream journalism is also facing the critical memory of minority communities disputing the very legitimacy of journalistic ideology and thus challenging its boundaries.

Building and breaking boundaries

The relationship between minority voices and the minority and the mainstream press continues to be relevant to understanding the performative process of journalism and how common sense is constructed – even if it remains invisible to many journalistic practitioners and scholars. Understanding this relationship as boundary work enables us to look at our chosen cases as possible boundary objects that are “at once something shared among disparate groups while holding sometimes radically different meanings” (Carlson, 2015, p. 7), and therefore have the potential to deconstruct common-sense.

The concept of boundaries has a diverse history in science. In studies of political communication, it was initially conceptualised as “boundary roles” that served to co-produce a shared culture by negotiating legitimate norms and practices (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, pp. 38-39). Recently, Matt Carlson (2015) has identified three forms of boundary work in journalism: expansion, expulsion, and protection. They refer to processes that either incorporate new practices and participants into ideal journalism (expansion), delegitimises (expulsion) them or at least keeps them off its fences (protection of autonomy) (p. 10). Moreover, Carlson (2015) observes a blurring of boundaries when traditional divisions between journalism and the public cannot be upheld (p. 2).

Focusing on boundaries presents opportunities to be sensitive towards how meaning is continually constructed in relation to other phenomena and social developments. While Pierre Bourdieu’s (1989) field theory is a boundary theory in the sense that it analyses how social hierarchies and positions emerge in relation to each other and thereby bring symbolic capital to the actors of these fields, theories about the social construction of institutions (Berger and Luckman, 1967) focus primarily on how boundaries mark and characterise a specific domain more than how it defines the outside. Here, boundaries demarcate social domains consisting of values and norms that stabilise the social structure, secure continuity and authoritatively distinguishes between what is deemed legitimate and illegitimate. Changes in a domain can be explained by institutional shocks (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), external, critical, or unexpected events that demand reorientation and perhaps the adoption of new practices and demarcations. Carlson (2016) points to how

meta-discourses may characterise such processes of reorientation, and in the case of journalism, meta-discourses about journalism as a “cultural practice charged with delivering valid accounts of the world” (p. 349). Power is, then, at play in these processes because boundary roles and boundary objects inevitably construct authority, rules, resources, and subjects (Hall, 1997/2002) that grant privileged positions to represent reality. In some instances, boundary work as power presents a blurring of boundaries (Amado & Waisbord, 2015). It is a discursive strategy that marginalises or confuses subjects and interests to preclude political voices and mobilisation.

The critical history of the interdependence between racism and journalism questions the idea that boundary actors construct shared culture. Instead, the history accentuates the question of how power relations come to defend and maintain boundaries. As the history of the minority press shows, boundaries around journalism – and thus journalistic practices and principles – are bound up with political epistemologies such as race. The critical history of racism and journalism illustrates how the defining power at play in the rearticulation of journalism’s boundaries has as much to do with what is being said as with what is kept quiet. In this light, boundary objects become lenses through which the contingent nature of journalism’s cultural reproductions become clear.

It could be claimed that since journalism is not a profession protected by authorisation, it is especially vulnerable to critical incidents such as new technologies and other societal changes. Journalism is a precarious and reflective practice, a discursive institution oriented towards itself as an ideal practice (Hanitzsch, 2017). Understanding journalism is thus a matter of discursive analysis. It seems that the delivery of valid accounts of the world is a nodal point in meta-discourses about journalism and its *raison d’être*. Therefore, using the collective of two critical cases, we explore if racism as structure is the boundary object at play and articulated by journalistic practices and rituals of expansion, expulsion or protection. On the one hand, it may compel journalistic practitioners, editors, and institutions to ritualistically re-enact journalistic practices and principles to re-affirm their profession’s political and social role. On the other hand, racism as structure renders visible the contingent nature of journalism’s representations of the world and thus may play a critical role in

the necessary developments of the “hows and whys of journalistic practice” (Zelizer, 1992, p. 67).

Method

Following the theoretical discussions above, we proceed to answer the question: How are race and racism expressed as boundary objects in the cases of the death of the Danish-Tanzanian man on the island of Bornholm and in the study on the racially charged remarks by sports commentators? As collective, critical cases, these two events may be generalised to the extent that, if the conclusions hold true in such high-profile cases, they may hold true for journalistic principles and practices more generally (Flyvbjerg, 1991, p. 146). The following analyses are based on articles on the two selected events in major Danish national newspapers published between June 25 and August 31, 2020. The digital archive search for articles produced 51 articles and opinion pieces on the murder on Bornholm and five articles about the study suggesting racist language among sports commentators. The articles were retrieved by use of the digital archive Infomedia using the respective search strings: “mord” (trans: murder) and “Bornholm” for the articles regarding the murder on Bornholm, and “RunRepeat” (name of the company behind the study) and “Racial Bias In Football Commentary” (name of the study) for the articles on the study. Additionally, we found 23 posts by Redox collective and Black Lives Matter (BLM) on Facebook posted within the same time frame. Because this study focuses on professional journalism, these digital posts are discussed in the concluding remarks.

We employ a discursive reading of the newspaper articles focusing on two aspects of boundary work in journalism: meta-journalistic discourse and the (re)establishment of journalistic principles and practices. These two aspects help us identify, firstly, the construction of knowledge about potential racism in the cases, secondly, who are positioned as authorities on the topic of racism, and thirdly, who are missing among the potential actors in the stories. Inspired by Hall’s (1997/2002) reading of the Foucauldian discursive approach, these points of reference help us identify how – by using journalistic principles and practices – racism as an object is discursively constructed within journalistic products and, in turn, how journalism

is constructed in relation to racism or, indeed, through its relationship to racism and societal racial structures within meta-journalistic discourses. Finally, we illustrate the challenges to these discursive constructions coming from outside the journalistic profession and practice.

Analysis of the coverage of the murder on Bornholm

28-year-old Philip Mbuji Johansen was found lifeless on the morning of June 23, 2020 at a campsite in the woods on the small Danish island of Bornholm. He had been brutally beaten, tortured, and had had a knee pressed against his neck resulting in haemorrhages in his eyes. Combined, the injuries had led to his death. The police had already arrested the first suspect by the time the story was published in the tabloid newspaper Ekstra Bladet June 25. However, the case of the murder of the young man of Danish-Tanzanian descent emerged as a critical incident when the research collective Redox announced on Facebook and its website (25.6) that the murder bore similarities to the murder of an African American man, George Floyd, who had died in police custody in Minneapolis the month prior. Floyd suffocated when a police officer pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes during the arrest. Moreover, Redox revealed that one of the suspects in the crime on Bornholm had ties to right-wing politics, had posted anti-black slogans on social media, and wore a tattoo of two swastikas and the words 'white power' on his leg. Following what appeared to the editorial teams as a coordinated campaign, the Danish press was "bombarded by emails" urging editorial action and sustained coverage of the case (DR 25.6; Politiken 26.6). Due to the racial nature of the crime, the murder warranted closer attention and scrutiny by the media, the emailers asserted. The critique of the journalistic and editorial choices became a pivotal and recurrent point in the coverage during the following weeks, thus challenging boundaries by forwarding a meta-journalistic discussion and discourse. The analysis of the murder on Bornholm begins by focusing on the meta-journalistic discourse followed by an analysis of the journalistic principles and practices.

Rejecting race

Arguably, the reason for the relatively heavy coverage of the murder was not its grizzly nature nor the potential racism involved, but rather the fact that the media stood accused of not doing their job properly, i.e., not naming the inherent racism involved.

Three main meta-discursive strategies were undertaken in the newspaper articles to counter the critique: Firstly, an approach that opposed critical voices with officials' counterclaims is identified in most, if not all, articles retrieved during the selected period. The articles mentioned the criticism of the media coverage laid out initially by Redox and later supported by BLM, political influencers, and public intellectuals online. However, these critics were cited using their social media accounts and online comments and were not interviewed or asked to comment directly. The articles, by and large, continued by presenting a defence of journalistic practice and coverage by referencing authoritative sources such as the police and the lawyers involved in the case. Indeed, the DR editor in chief argued that it is up to the authorities how the case is covered and investigated (DR 26.6). Thus, TV2 (26.6) headlined an article: "Chief prosecutor wants racism speculations about killing removed: - people should have the real picture"; BT (03.7) issued a "warning against a people's court"; Politiken (26.6) wrote: "the spokesperson for Black Lives Matter, Bwalya Sørensen, is convinced that the killing of a 28-year-old man on Bornholm earlier this week is racially motivated. The prosecutor, the police and the defence attorneys say that there is nothing to suggest that"; DR (26.6) argued that "chief prosecutor, Benthe Pedersen Lund, says that the killing probably happened because of a personal relationship between the two accused men and the victim that went horribly wrong"; and Jyllands-Posten wrote that the chairing judge found it "terrible that people are telling half-truths" (4.7) and "the police don't see a racial motive - but online another theory rules" (27.6). From these assertions, it emerges that in the eyes of the authorities, claims of racism is a personal 'conviction' or a threat to institutionalised rights. The demand posed by Redox and BLM to consider racism as structure and a historically shifting discourse practice is identified by Gavan Titley (2020) as a refusal by anti-racists to bend to the consensus of racism as personal intent. However, this "refusal is not a full stop, but a question mark. It is a pointed invitation to

reflect on how boundaries to permissible speech are produced and policed” (p. 56). The journalistic discursive strategy explained above, in contrast, represents what Titley (p. 61) calls the “postracial denial”, which allows an open debate about racism, as long as the authorities set the definition.

A second discursive strategy was initiated when in early July, The New York Times wrote an article describing the murder and how the Danish police had failed to investigate the racial relations between the victim and the perpetrators as a potential motive. This article, then, countered the Danish press’ angle on the incident and was promptly critiqued by them. Because The New York Times was “seen as the world’s most respected newspaper”, this particular coverage left the Danish journalists “disappointed” (Information 2.7). The New York Times’ article was said to “present factual mistakes and manipulative claims” (Bdk 1.7), “misrepresenting statistics about hate-crimes in Denmark” (Weekendavisen 3.7) and generally having “conducted a kind of journalism that doesn’t live up to the paper’s reputation” (Politiken 6.7). To support the critical assessment of The New York Times piece, the journalists interviewed statisticians to talk about the misrepresentation of data and colleagues to talk about the standard for good journalism. The practice of interviewing each other to defend journalistic choices is found in *Kristeligt Dagblad* (13.8), in which a journalist working at the competing newspaper *Berlingske* was interviewed. Likewise, the editor of *Bornholm Tidende* was interviewed in, among others, *Bdk* (1.7) about the journalism conducted in The New York Times. Although The New York Times is not personalised and called out as a threat, the Danish news articles did approach the critique using a similar strategy to the one used to oppose BLM and Redox: They reproached the New York Times’ article using countering authorities’ statements, leaving no room for the New York Times’ journalist to defend his piece.

In a final discursive strategy, racism was relativised by focusing on the white suspects’ rights. In one article, the defence attorney argued that he was “worried” about the charges of racism against his client because they could make it difficult for him in jail and cause a “failure to thrive” (Information 2.7). The charge of racism against his client is presented as a severe attack that almost seems to eclipse the crime of manslaughter, for which the attorney’s client was later convicted.

Referring to an American study from the mid-80s, van Dijk (1991/2016, p. 14) argues that "the concept of 'racism' remains taboo in the Press. Instead, euphemisms such as 'disadvantaged' or 'under privileged' are used to denote the victims of racism. Indeed, racism for many whites is seen as a thing of the past." However, rather than using euphemisms for the ideas and consequences of race and racism, the Danish press, in this case, argued against its very existence and hence its relevance – making it redundant a priori. This argument, moreover, doubled up as a defence of their coverage. While racism was reluctantly discussed, the discourse of the social and political betrayal of the two accused men allowing them to grow up in a drug-infused stupor is forwarded in several articles (Information 2.7; Politiken 6.7; Berlingske 12.8). Indeed, while racism does not exist in the case, the readers are told, social inequality and lack of social responsibility are very much presented as a dark part of Danish society. A journalist, who is interviewed by *Kristeligt Dagblad* (13.8), wondered "why several [people] have chosen to read a political dimension into a speculative case such as this". Thus, it could be concluded that, to the journalist, race is political, subjective and speculative and therefore out of bounds to journalistic factual representation, while social inequality is not.

In all three meta-discursive strategies, it is not journalistic choices alone but particularly the choice not to name the potential racism in the case which is at stake. The construction of racism lies in the rejection and reluctance to try to identify its structure and implications. The reluctance to name racism was supported by citations from members of public institutions and authorities as well as by the friends of the suspects, who vehemently argued against that at least one of the suspects had racist affiliations (Information 2.7). Ultimately, the meta-discursive strategies of rejection help to create racism as a boundary object.

Uses of sources as boundary work

Already it is clear that the meta-journalistic discourse is supported by distinct journalistic principles and practices. We have shown how the press used institutional and authoritative sources and sources close to the perpetrators as character witnesses and to understand the details of the case. The articles retrieved for this study largely

made use of identical sources. They were the local police, the defence attorneys, Asser Gregersen and John Jørgensen, and the chief prosecutor, Benthe Pedersen Lund. But also friends of the accused's family, Sarah Krogh and Tobias Krähmer, were interviewed by several newspapers as were researchers and professors of law, ethics, and statistical methods. In addition, journalistic colleagues were interviewed to shed light on The New York Times article.

Common among all the sources mentioned above is that they defined racism as intentional harmful action to people of colour. The fact that one of the accused had swastikas tattooed on his leg was not evidence of racism in the legal system and hence not to journalistic practice. On this score, only three articles stood out: Articles by the socialist paper *Arbejderen* (7.7), the digital journalism website *Zetland* (3.7), and the conservative national paper *Berlingske* (12.7). The first publication published an interview with a researcher of racism, and the two latter contained interviews with people on Bornholm of other ethnic backgrounds than Danish, who had no personal connection to the accused. Not surprisingly, these three articles produced a different understanding of racism as structure and as the underbelly of Bornholm's public space. The fact that seemingly only one newspaper editor thought to ask a researcher and, indeed, an expert on racism, while researchers of law and legal matters were plentiful, clearly helps produce a particular kind of institutional discourse of racism married to a legal framework, and which perhaps hints at the implications and limits of journalistic principles and practices.

Few politicians, such as Roger Courage Matthisen (TV2 26.6) and Rosa Lund, made their way into the pages in these stories, and when they did, it was because they had been outspoken on social media concerning the case. For instance, Rosa Lund of the left-wing party, *Enhedslisten*, tweeted early in the process that she sensed a racial motive for the murder. Based on this tweet, she was interviewed by three different newspapers (DR 25.0; *Information* 3.7; *Politiken* 21.8) and asked almost identical questions. The questions focused on why she tweeted the way she did and if she regretted the tweet once the police and the defence attorneys had determined the motive to be a personal conflict. As a politician, Lund seemed somehow difficult to parse within the given set of journalistic principles. While she belonged to the preferred institutional and authoritative sources, she presented a different definition of racism from the legal lexis.

This dissonant position was what the repeated questions implicitly pointed to and tried to bring into tune in the three interviews she gave in the period.

By the end of the selected period, when the dust had settled, the spokesperson for BLM, Bwalya Sørensen, was interviewed (Bdk 19.8) and granted a voice in Politiken's debate section (25.8) in which she contextualised the events in historical and transnational terms. The victim's mother was moreover interviewed by Se & Hør (26.8), providing a personal portrait of Philip Mbuji Johansen. Because Bwalya Sørensen and the victim's mother entered the stage in late August, they became sources in the periphery of the news, relegated to the debate sections and as human-interest stories. Their voices softened the journalistic take on what had happened and the role that racism had played not simply by presenting another angle but also by offering a historically situated, personal and political context. Taken together, the positions of Rosa Lund, Bwalya Sørensen and the victim's mother disclose the boundary work of journalistic principles and practices.

The racial discourse of a murder

In the articles, knowledge about racism clearly followed and supported the legal discourse, which was continually underscored by the journalistic use of official sources such as the police, prosecutor, and legal scholars. This discourse was reinforced by, on the one hand, a rejection of racism as structure and, on the other, a journalistic affinity with the legal definition and ideology. The discourse was upheld by a selective choice of sources, who collectively vouched for the journalistic truth, while simultaneously quotes from social media posts and online comments were used to report on other angles and arguments - until quite late in the case. In turn an asymmetrical power relation was produced, which favoured the authorities. It is striking that the few articles that conducted interviews with people of colour presented a different definition and experience of racism. In the case of the murder on Bornholm, the journalistic practice was criticised for being insufficient as an inclusive public sphere. In its defence, journalistic practitioners and editors held on to the principles of journalistic trustworthiness by positioning their sources as authorities on the topic, which in turn was perceived in a legal

framework deeming race as structure irrelevant. Indeed, in JP (2.8), a Danish poet called the murder a “modern-day lynching”, only to see her piece annotated with an editorial notification disqualifying her statement with reference to the legal discourse. However, these principles were simultaneously questioned by the voices outside the public sphere, arguing for their right to be represented.

Analysis of the coverage of the study on racial bias in football commentary

Another critical incident in the summer of 2020 that more directly called into question the hows and whys of journalism was the publication of a study concerning skin colour bias in sports commentators’ verbal remarks in Premier League’s football games. The study was published June 21, 2020 by RunRepeat with support from The Professional Footballer’s Association. RunRepeat reviews sports shoes and conducts analyses of issues concerning football and other sports with the aim “to understand running, soccer, basketball and other sports and their surrounding cultures more deeply.” (RunRepeat, 2020). First, the study analysed the adjectives of remarks made in 15 minutes of 80 games (= 20 hours logged and coded). Next, it stratified the remarks as positive or negative according to the annotated player’s skin tone (lighter/darker). Finally, the study cross-tabulated this with a range of coded variables. Some of the variables were “hard work”, “intelligence”, “power”, and “quality” (RunRepeat, 2020). According to RunRepeat, the key findings:

“show bias from commentators who praised players with lighter skin tone as more intelligent, as being of higher quality, and harder working than players with darker skin tone. Players with darker skin tone were significantly more likely to be reduced to their physical characteristics or athletic abilities -- namely pace and power -- than players with lighter skin tone were.” (RunRepeat, 2020)

Five Danish media outlets took up the story. Firstly, despite the short length of the mention, the website *plbold.dk* (30.6) that covers Premier League issues, nevertheless formed a discourse that thoroughly placed racism as an undisputed and problematic media prac-

tice. The discourse was formulated by referencing The Guardian that called the study ‘comprehensive’. Plbold.dk contextualised the study by moreover mentioning the work of the BLM movement. While this reference was also practised in subsequent articles, these later articles struck a more sceptical tone. The initial coverage in plbold.dk was followed by TV2 (30.6), DR (2.7), Berlingske (2.7) and the weekly conservative paper Weekendavisen (2.7). Whereas Weekendavisen assigned its article to the culture section (possibly because it does not publish a sports section), the others assigned their articles to the sports sections.

Self-righteous ambivalence

While British media were reported to initiate re-education of their sports commentators as a response to the study, the Danish media and their sources from the sports commentariat appeared ambivalent. In Berlingske, Danish sports commentator Flemming Toft was reported to be “indignant” to the claims of racist bias and unable to recognise “this tendency – especially among Danish commentators, that he believes are always ‘on the right side’”. Also, in TV2, a Danish commentator and a Eurosport commentator were cited to believe themselves not to comment according to skin colour but to be “objective”, comment on what they see in a game, and not have political intentions. Nevertheless, the Danish commentator in the TV2 piece was not surprised by the study results because he believed that there are indeed challenges concerning racism facing football and society. The same discursive strategy of ambivalence was employed by the commentator cited in Berlingske, who at the end of the article was quoted saying that the study should be taken very seriously, and action should be taken against the problem. Nevertheless, he added: if indeed the study’s conclusions were valid.

The use of journalistic principles further underscored the ambivalence. Berlingske signalled its adherence to the principle of objectivity by directly quoting the commentator, Toft, when he uttered his indignation about the study in several cases. In another instance, however, Toft’s knowledge about the alleged differences in physiology between people of African, Asian and European descent was written as an indirect but undisputed quote. This tension between refuting and engaging reflexively in the question of racial bias was

solved in the articles by claims of intentions; instead of a reflexive dialogue with their practice, the commentators expressed their wish to be “colour blind” (TV2). Moreover, the racialised subjects did not figure as sources in the case material. Instead, authority to define the case of racial bias was primarily delegated to the sports commentariat, RunRepeat and to academics that commented on the quality of the study. In the latter case, three scientists in the piece from DR became primary definers of the “weak” (Weekendavisen), uncritically treated (DR) study that was merely the expression of a “zeitgeist” (DR).

Real science and political risks

The Achilles heel, so to speak, of journalism’s defence, was indeed the factual discourse of the study. This sore spot became visible both in avoiding certain topics in the meta-journalistic discourse and in the impact that DR’s article had on two following items: the item from Weekendavisen and especially the item from TV2, which was updated according to the academic critique of the study. Firstly, the study’s claim that white players are more often defined by intelligence than players of colour was not commented upon, although the related claim concerning physiology was. In the piece from TV2, a physiotherapist indirectly supported the study’s claims of racial bias by refuting the racist notion of physical differences between white players and players of colour. However, the issue of alleged white superior intelligence – which has a long political history – remained uncontested. In this way, it appeared as if the crux of the study was critically assessed and covered according to journalistic deliberative ideals. Secondly, the factual discourse of the study was challenged by three scientific sources in a piece from DR that was subsequently quoted in Weekendavisen and TV2, as mentioned above. According to a media researcher and a sports professor, the RunRepeat study would not pass a scientific quality test. Their remarks were highlighted on the DR webpage and framed by the storyline that media worldwide and even journalistic “heavyweights” had been quoting the study uncritically. Another scientific researcher who was said to undertake a research project about sports commentators was cited for saying that the study had some faults and didn’t point to the

same results as his research. However, the article did not disclose the results of his research.

The scientific critique of the RunRepeat study became part of a discursive strategy in which the director of RunRepeat was held accountable not only for the research but for the consequences of the research and the motives of RunRepeat. He was asked whether the initiatives such as re-education of commentators were reasonable, and he was probed concerning the economic motives of the company. The critical angle of the article was: “How conclusive is the evidence? And can we trust its methods and data at all?” (DR). Critique concerning the actual content of the study was almost non-existent in the DR piece. In contrast, the concerns about academic criteria were quantitatively comprehensive, quoting three scientists and providing a bullet point summary of their seven “points of critique”.

The journalistic approaches thus designated authority and rules to the discourse of the case by their choice of sources, angles, and quotation practices. The discourse was ambivalent in many instances, thus expressing boundary work. The analytical article in *Weekendavisen* mainly unfolded how racism as a boundary object created oppositions between objectivity and politicisation, on the one hand, and between domestic knowledge and international politicised practices, on the other. Under the headline “Systemic regret”, the article in *Weekendavisen* reviewed current activist phenomena in the Western domain of sports in which individuals and organisations actively relate to structural inequalities. Activism had become a “transatlantic” enterprise, according to the analysis, and the “weak” study from RunRepeat that only analysed a “snapshot” of European football was part of that trend. On the one hand, this trend was described as overly sensitive to minor violations and, on the other hand, as constituted by a “fear of the ghost of the past” - the ghost being how discourses of sports have historically been formed by theories of race and imperial power manifestations. However, the analysis concluded that activism was too risky business and a problematic solution to the apparent colonial and racialised structures in the world of sports because it would invite sentiments that may not be legitimate, for instance, support for the Turkish military. In other words, the argument in *Weekendavisen* - as the last article published in the selected data - was that despite historical precedence of racism in sports, the solution lies neither in over-reactions nor belong in the domain of sports itself.

The role played by the journalistic practice was in this case being the primary definer of the field. *Weekendavisen's* analysis constructed politicisation as part of the history of sports but at the same time as an unwelcome player that could destabilise and challenge the status quo of the domain. By defining activism in sports as regretful and an enterprise that may have gone too far, the journalistic article thus defined its role as a conservative boundary actor.

A racial discourse of football

The case of the RunRepeat study about racial bias in the work of football commentators shows two main discursive strategies that articulated the colour-line of the journalistic coverage. Firstly, one dominant group of sources were Danish commentators. They were portrayed as rejecting claims of racial bias in their work while simultaneously reluctantly recognising the fraught issue of racism in sports and society in general. The latter was strengthened by sources that presented structural perspectives of racial bias in football. Secondly, another dominant group of sources were scientists quoted at length and with great authority questioning the scientific quality of the RunRepeat study, thus legitimising an institutional status quo in football commentary.

The ambivalence of both rejecting and recognising the issue at stake and the strategy of delegitimising the RunRepeat study forms opposition between journalistic principles of objectivity and politicisation. A notion of proper domestic knowledge furthermore strengthens the principles of objectivity as opposed to irrational and politicised transnational sentiments.

Concluding discussion

In the analysed cases, race and racism are expressed as boundary objects that challenge the journalistic discourse of mainstream, objective, and universal news. Rather than engaging in the possibility and challenge of racism, in both cases, the coverage focuses on the validity and reliability of the people who make claims of racism. In this way, it is a case of playing the man, not the ball, when the reliability of RunRepeat's data is given predominance over the substance

of the study. Likewise, the opinions of BLM and other activist groups are instantly countered by questioning the validity of their cause and convictions.

The analysis has made clear that the cases reproduce discursive and ideological structures that favour a view of Denmark that is without racist structures. The challenges that van Dijk (1991/2016) identified 30 years ago and continuously discussed by Titley (2020) are still in operation in current Danish journalism. More interesting are the principles and practices that uphold this view and the boundary work it requires. On the one hand, in journalistic practice, racism is seen as an individual practice. We see this in the underscoring of racism as intent to harm rather than a social structure and in the sports commentators' personal ambitions to be objective. Alternatively, racism is seen as structure by academics, foreign media, and people of colour. The relative erasure of the latter perspective helps preserve the boundary of journalistic practice and move to close the debate on what racism is (Titley, 2020). On the other hand, the individualistic ideology also aids in underscoring the universal claims of journalistic practice by constructing them as a binary pair. Whereas journalism aspires to a universal, non-political perspective, the individual may hold political opinions. Concomitantly, what is seen as common sense to journalists – such as social inequality – is non-political, whereas claims of racism are perceived as a political and individual opinion. Here, it is the powerful position of journalism to define common sense that is kept invisible to keep up the boundaries. The boundaries are negotiated and supported by the choices of various authoritative sources, who also subscribe to the journalistic-individualistic ideology. Sources in less powerful positions are rarely heard. By not naming the political ideology underlying so-called mainstream reporting, the journalistic articles hide their own bias as well as their power. Finally, a sense of ambivalence is utilised in some instances to blur the boundaries and preclude political minority voices (Amado & Waisbord, 2015).

Redox and BLM represent the critical memory of minority media on Facebook. In line with the findings of Richardson (2020), minorities seek to hold mainstream, white media accountable online. About half of the 23 posts by BLM Denmark in the selected period are links to newspaper articles reporting on the story about the murder on Bornholm. The other half are comments and posts that utilise the

creativity of social media to make arguments about the racial inequality in Denmark and its relation to the particular case. An example is the meme posted June 27 with the text “Bornholm authorities be like ...” followed by a photo from the film *American History X*, which portrays the hate of white supremacists in the United States. The photo is, moreover, photoshopped to incorporate a placard with the words ‘white lives matter’. In this way, the meme calls on connections and structures within powerful cultural institutions and historical facts. Another post (30.6) features a gruesome image of the dead boy Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955 in Mississippi. The critical memory of injustice towards and sufferings of African Americans is brought to bear in the contemporary, Danish context. The accompanying text says, “the image of Emmett Till is not coincident”, but doesn’t offer an explanation. The communication here is for the people already in the know about African American history and the details of the Bornholm murder. Finally, BLM posts visual and written commentary on the ongoing case, keeping their followers up-to-date on their alternative reading of the case. They use irony by juxtaposing quotes from authorities with images that tell a different story, such as the quote “nothing suggests that racism was a factor in the murder on Bornholm” with a picture of the swastika and ‘white power’-tattoo on the leg of the accused. Part of this particular kind of communication is the emphasis on the connection across time but also space. The fact that BLM Denmark underlines their arguments with references from the United States precedes Danish colonial media in which transnational lines were drawn between the Caribbean colonies to Denmark and New York. The connections are not bound by national borders but by political rights claims, displaying a “continuity in the development of black publicity” (Baker, 1994, p. 15).

In this cursory review of the critical memory of minority media in Denmark in the summer of 2020, additional two factors emerge that position BLM in opposition to Danish journalistic discourse and ideology. One is the refusal to adhere to a preconceived communicative format, and another is the insistence on a transnational political subjectivity. This radical expression of political subjectivity presented by this minority community invites us to reimagine journalism as a political boundary actor that can negotiate the premises of public sentiments in a racially stratified society. However, it would take a daring kind of journalism that includes other expressions and let go

of predominant national perspectives – in other words, an expansion of practices (Carlson, 2015, p. 10) linked to the coverage of race. This expansion may include reflexive stances towards how ideologically imbued practices of allocation of incidents are expressed in ‘beats’ – such as crime and sports – that favour certain sources and angles. For now, however, the colour-line of the Danish press is keeping safe the boundaries of conserving norms and practices.

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