

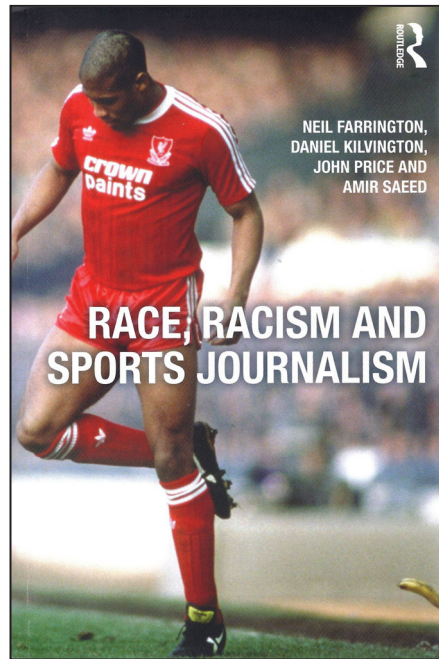
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Solid grounding on race in sport issues

Race, Racism and Sports Journalism, by Neil Farrington, Daniel Kilvington, John Price and Amir Saeed. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. 172 pp. ISBN: 9780415676403 (pbk)

THIS SLIM volume is in the Routledge tradition of highly current but also academically reputable overviews of important media studies and political issues. Overall it lives up to expectations as a useful guide to theory. Recent racial issues in European sport, particularly football, have highlighted the need to think more deeply about the problem and overcome the widely-held notion that racism is somehow now behind us.

The authors cover a number of particularly British concerns for sports journalism and race in the wider UK society. The University of Sunderland offers a strong concentration in sports journalism with emphasis on racial issues so it is appropriate all four writers are academics at that institution.



The overview of the issues in British race relations and the early chapter on theory are particularly helpful for a sound undergraduate grounding. It may be, however, that non-British students and scholars find the examples used a rather patchy compilation. For example the chapters on football and cricket tend to meander into issues of immigrant and non-immigrant sportsmen (sic) and lose focus on the overall issues of race in sports journalism.

Surprisingly rugby union and rugby league do not feature at all apart from a brief mention of Māori not featuring in New Zealand cricket. Given the number of Polynesians

and Māori plying their football trade in British and French rugby of both codes, and the arrival of featured North African and sub-Saharan players in French rugby and soccer, this is an oversight which could have been rectified to make the book more comprehensive.

Women sportspeople do not feature except in the complicated case of South African runner Caster Semenya who faced the double indignity of questions about both her race and gender. Surely women of colour in sport have to contend with these issues throughout their athletic careers.

One of the most influential thinkers on race issues is Frantz Fanon. The authors are particularly interested in his idea that black people, in this case athletes, have to put on a 'mask of whiteness' in order to fit into the dominant white society. This was particularly true in Fanon's Caribbean during colonial times and many scholars have tried to apply the theory to post-colonial and migrant people in the UK and elsewhere. The complications these peoples face include the complexities of social class in societies which feature upward mobility as a social good.

An athlete who becomes a professional in a featured UK sport such as football or cricket may be accused of leaving his people behind. The

authors grapple with this issue in the case of black Formula 1 star Lewis Hamilton. We must ask ourselves as the authors do; Is Hamilton black, half black, middle class, a role model or all of the above? Sports journalists routinely have to make professional decisions along these lines when reporting Hamilton and his sport.

The authors argue persuasively that the press guidelines as they currently exist in the UK do not provide adequate guidance. Journalists need the angles to sell their stories both to editors and audiences. Race is often seen as the angle most in tune with reader/viewer perceptions.

They also argue with good reason that reporters write within the context of popular views of race which may run contrary to sociological and indeed biological thinking on race. Race is a social rather than a biological construct yet many people subscribe to myths which can be demonstrated as untrue. Black Africans are often framed as unbeatably fast—does this make them achievers in a white world or simply racially superior in a narrow, racially-defined way? Based on the myth some have even argued that people of African descent don't even have to train hard to win!

When white French runner Christophe Lemaitre broke the 10s mark for the 100 metres, he was labelled

'White Lightning' and sports reports routinely emphasised his colour. Is this racist? Is his colour critical to news stories about his achievement? The UK guidelines require that race not be featured unless it is critical to the news story being reported. Media people could argue that Lemaitre's race or colour are essential to the news of this event. We could argue that the mythology of black superiority in sprints has created the need for the story to be framed racially.

The authors are attentive to the issue of diversity in the sports reporter's newsroom. Few Asian and black students choose sports journalism perhaps because they feel they won't fit in to the dominant culture. New Zealand has had to think about this issue as well. Few women and fewer Māori and Pasifika choose sports reporting as a career.

For all the decline in job prospects and the relatively weak pay structure this is still an issue for balanced reporting and wider community interests being covered. Are talented women and minorities choosing law, accountancy and medicine? Perhaps we need to know.

Overall this book is a useful guide to theory and to a British view of current race issues in reporting. This currency will make most of the chapters dated very quickly.

Another weakness for Pacific and New Zealand students is the lack of helpful American examples. The US has strengthened its support for minorities in a number of both federal and corporate initiatives such as the NFL's 'Rooney Rule' requiring that minority candidates be shortlisted for head coaching jobs. Federal funding requirements for university sports have emphasised and enforced gender equity in particular. This resulted from new court interpretations of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

This publication is a fitting addition to a well-stocked journalism library.