

The media diversity and inclusion paradox: Experiences of black and brown journalists in mainstream British news institutions

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Abstract

Over 100 British journalists of colour are signatories to an open letter demanding the US Ambassador to the UK condemns the arrest of African-American journalist, Omar Jimenez, on May 29th 2020, whilst he was reporting for CNN on the Minneapolis protests following the police killing of George Floyd. The letter is a vital act of black transatlantic solidarity during a moment when journalism is under threat, economically and politically, and there's a pandemic of racism in the west. These factors make journalism challenging for reporters from racial minorities, who are already underrepresented in western newsrooms and, as this paper shows, encounter discrimination in the field, as well as within the institutions they work for. The letter speaks to how black British journalists are all too aware that the British journalistic field, like the American one, has a race problem, and institutional commitments to diversity often don't correspond with the experiences of those included, impacting negatively on the retention of black journalists. Drawing on original interviews with 26 journalists of colour who work for Britain's largest news organisations, this paper theoretically grounds empirical findings to illustrate why and how discriminatory patterns, as well as contradictions, occur and recur in British news production.

Keywords

Black and brown journalists, British news media, diversity, journalism, race/ethnicity, racism

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Introduction

Over 100 British journalists of colour, myself included, signed an open letter (Ryder, 2020) to express outrage at the arrest of African-American CNN reporter, Omar Jimenez, whilst he was covering the Minneapolis protests following the horrific police killing of George Floyd. That the letter is from journalists of colour is significant because it speaks to our shared experience of encountering racism within the field, and our recognition that disparities exist in the UK between the treatment of black and white journalists, as they do in America. This is illustrated by the arrest of Jimenez, and not CNN's white reporter, Josh Campbell, who was working nearby at the time of Jimenez's arrest.

Via analysis of interviews with 26 journalists of colour who work for Britain's largest news organisations, this article extends journalism studies of race (e.g. Cottle, 2000), by not only showing discrimination occurs in western news production, but also theoretically grounding the empirical findings to illustrate *why* and *how* discriminatory patterns, as well as contradictions, occur.

My findings show racism operates across all mainstream UK news institutions. However, racism plays out differently depending on institutional 'doxa' and the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2005) of individuals in positions of influence within the journalistic field. As discussed below, race and news production in Britain is under-theorised. By utilising Bourdieu's (ibid) conception of the journalistic field to ground new data, this paper contributes to building a theoretical framework to facilitate further comprehensive study of racism in western news production.

The data reveals a tangle of economic and ethical rationalities underpin the visibility of journalists of colour in UK news. This tangle, which informs media diversity strategies, can be explained by the way racism is obscured by economic rationalities (Saha, 2018), but race-related issues are paramount to ethical rationalities. Because of this messiness, there's no consistent agenda on how to construct more racially just practices in British news organisations. I argue the only way to gain clarity on issues pertaining to improved inclusion of journalists of colour in the UK journalistic field is to 'see race' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017: 84).

The inclusion of journalists of colour in mainstream UK news

According to the Milburn report on social mobility, 'journalism has shifted to a greater degree of social exclusivity than any other profession' (Milburn et al., 2016). This exclusivity extends to barriers to accessing the industry by ethnic minorities (Thurman et al, 2016: 14). Such findings, which emerge cyclically and rarely show improvements in the number of black and minority ethnic (BAME) people employed by dominant UK news organisations, are met with sporadic declarations about the need to rectify the whiteness of mainstream media (Hill, 2001).

The white paper on the future of the BBC (May 2016), is one of many publicly stated commitments to media diversity. It includes a few pages on how provision for BAME audiences will improve. This follows an ongoing campaign, led by Lenny Henry,¹ to improve diversity at what he calls the 'very white' BBC (PA, 2016). Henry's campaign

renewed public debate on the employment and representation of BAME people by UK media: an arena where all citizens are meant to feel represented, but where 55 percent ‘of all black ethnic groups’ *feel* underrepresented and 51 percent *feel* negatively portrayed (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2016: 40–41).

I emphasise the word ‘feel’ because I’ll return to the importance of feelings when I address the need to take them seriously, as they’re expressed via the ‘habitus’ of individuals working within journalism, when considering the covert ways structural racism manifests in institutionally white spaces.

My data shows racism tends to be experienced covertly in elitist journalist circles. This is perhaps because the majority reaching the top of the profession were privately educated (Harrison, 4 August 2016) and, given the gender disparities within British journalism, which is largely dominated by white men (Thurman et al, 2016), they can conceivably be characterised as ‘well-educated white men’ with whom overt racism is less associated than it is with ‘poor whites’ (Stoler, 2002: 377). As such, listening to the experiences and feelings of raced Others working within UK news, is a vital way of illuminating the implicit discrimination they face.

News and race

Scholarly work on race in western news is an established research arena (e.g. Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Downing and Husband, 2005), from Hall et al’s (1978) seminal study on the racialisation of news stories on mugging in the British press to Cottle’s (1997) research on the production of ‘minority ethnic’ current affairs programmes.² Journalism studies of race are also in ferment due to renewed calls for racial justice in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement (e.g. Richardson, 2020).

Despite important early British studies (e.g. Cottle, 1997), scholarship on race in the news is largely U.S. focused (see also Saha, 2018). Research includes highlighting the whiteness and elitism of newsrooms (Johnston and Flamiano, 2007), which manifests as ethnocentrism and colonially rooted practice within journalism even as audiences of colour grow as targets for the media (Wilson et al., 2013); a lack of trust between senior white editorial staff and minority reporters (Rivas-Rodriguez et al., 2004); findings that African-American women newswriters employ strategies to ‘resist the hegemonic white, male culture [. . .] that dominate mainstream U.S. news companies’ (Meyers & Gayle, 2015: 293), and although that same culture shapes journalistic norms and the behaviour of Latino and African-American journalists, such journalists use their agency to positively influence coverage of racialised minorities (Nishikawa et al., 2009).

There’s an emphasis on agency in many of the aforementioned studies. However, Cottle (1997, 2000) attends to how the political economies of news organisations constrain journalists, thus highlighting the need to focus on structural issues. But, as Saha (2018) notes, whilst Cottle’s approach is among the most comprehensive studies of race in news production, addressing organisational contexts, the impact on journalists and content, ‘it lacks a coherent theoretical grounding that can build these different issues into a full explanatory [. . .] framework’ (p. 39)

This article contributes to filling this gap by not only focusing on the experiences of black and brown journalists in British newsrooms and showing that discrimination still

occurs in mainstream UK news production, thus highlighting how these issues manifest beyond the U.S., but also by grounding the empirical findings via Bourdieu's (2005, 1998) conception of how institutional fields are shaped by agency ('habitus') and structure ('doxa'). This theoretical underpinning facilitates an illustration of how commercial imperatives that inform organisational diversity strategies (Wilson et al., 2013) enable news organisations to extract 'racial capital' (Leong, 2013)³ to the benefit of institutional whiteness without addressing structural racism within the organisation, enabling it to recur. Thus, media diversity policies may function as forms of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1989) whereby symbolic systems, such as the journalistic field, conceal, legitimise and reinforce social hierarchies, containing 'people who dominate and people who are dominated' (Bourdieu, 1998: 40).⁴

Symbolic violence operates as a legitimising force due to the way dominant norms are often unconsciously and consciously accepted by the dominant and dominated, who must abide by them to access the field and accumulate capital to build their careers. The complicity of the dominated in upholding structures they exist within, but where they tend to possess little power to make lasting change, subjects them to further symbolic violence. However, individuals may draw on their habitus to contest institutional doxa. Attempts to instigate change may be more or less successful depending on the capital individuals acquire within the field.

Bourdieu's field theory is influential in journalism studies (e.g. Benson & Neveu, 2005; Phillips, 2015), utilised as a conceptual interpretation of how power works in newsrooms. However, race, though vital to the negotiation (Wallace, 2016) of capital, including that which structures journalism, is largely absent from academic work on the journalistic field, examined more in sociological studies that engage with Bourdieu to explore race-related issues in youth culture (Wallace, 2016) and education (Gast, 2018).

The lack of theorising regarding the significance of race in the journalistic field is surprising given Bourdieu's work around race and the violence of colonialism informed his field theory (Go, 2013; Puwar, 2009) and related concepts, like habitus and doxa. These enable a non-essentialist approach to race in the journalistic field; allowing acknowledgement of how race operates as a containing category within newsrooms, as well as a broad category in which raced journalists position themselves, depending on their habitus and capital. Field theory enables a conceptualisation of the contradictory ways race functions within mainstream UK news, and use of it here contributes to scholarly work on media diversity.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviewing was the central research tool as this enabled the 26 journalists interviewed to speak openly. I wasn't concerned with constructing a scientific sample, but gaining insight into the realities of working for mainstream UK news organisations for journalists of colour. Standpoint theory (Hill Collins, 1998, 2000) was utilised as an epistemological framework as it's suited to privileging outsider-within experiences of marginalised groups and revealing ways of seeing and doing members of dominant groups may not recognise, or find compelling. Standpoint theory was mapped onto interviewing to carve out an epistemic process which enabled an overlooked standpoint to

emerge, and for those who occupy that standpoint to acquire a degree of power over what's known about their experiences, and the working lives of others who occupy a similar dominated social location (Harding, 1993: 56) along race lines.

Interviewees include 13 women and 13 men, ranging from mid-20s to 50 plus, and levels of seniority, from junior reporters to editors. They work, or have worked, for all Britain's dominant national news organisations.⁵ Five interviewees work in broadcast news, 10 in print and 7 for both mediums and all online. All were granted anonymity.⁶

Interviewing journalists offers insight into their experiences, deliberative processes and the structures shaping them (Cottle, 2003). But to paint a broader picture of the institutional structures journalist rationalities are situated in, I also interviewed six individuals within news organisations who influence who's employed. These include editors and HR staff.

Findings and discussion

Seven themes, as categorised below, emerged during data analysis. These include the often-superficial nature of diversity measures ('inconsistent inclusion'), and tensions that arise when journalists at the receiving end of racism are tasked with addressing it and the unjust nature of this burden is amplified when their suggestions for tackling racism aren't implemented by organisations ('habitus versus institutional doxa').

Inconsistent inclusion

My findings show covert racism is felt powerfully at media institutions which do a good job of 'overing' (Ahmed, 2012) – of presenting as taking diversity seriously, such as public service broadcasters and newspapers at the liberal and/or more 'autonomous' end of the 'journalistic field' (Bourdieu, 2005). A number of interviewees report being disappointed about their experiences of working for such institutions, which they were drawn to because they seemed to be organisations where race was *seen*, so they assumed stated commitments to improving diversity were underpinned by ethical rationalities. But many interviewees who've worked for public service broadcasters and liberal newspapers explain feeling this seeing of race is a branding exercise. 'Hypocritical' was used to describe such institutions where interviewees felt/feel peripheral, and their experiences of institutional racism run counter to organisational diversity policies. I call this 'inconsistent inclusion' due to the contradictory approach that frequently shapes inclusion of journalists of colour.

This contradiction exposes the optical nature of institutional diversity whereby it's measured quantitatively not qualitatively, and increases the exclusionary surveillance of, 'those whose very presence is both 'overlooked' – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and [. . .] over determined' (Bhabha, 2005: 13). Inconsistent inclusion is also grounded in the fact that it's often just one or two individuals within these organisations whose habitus leads them to instigate diversity strategies for ethical reasons. However, at these liberal organisations such individuals are pushing against institutional cultures with histories of seeing racism in the world *outside*, in that race-related stories may be reported, but rarely in '*our*' world, in that such institutions, which are predominantly run by 'well-educated white men' (Stoler, 2002: 377), have been slow to take a sustained approach to addressing systemic racism within their organisations.

‘Quinn’, whose experience reflects that of others who’ve worked at the same liberal newspaper that supports initiatives to enable diverse talent to access journalism, says:

‘It was so snooty and Oxbridge [. . .]. I was training as a journalist, had ideas, and kept getting shut down [. . .]. My experiences at (name of tabloid) [. . .] were the opposite. Staff were [. . .] mostly white men of a certain age, but mostly working class, and they gave me the time of day. Yet at (name of broadsheet), people who were [. . .] supposedly more liberal [. . .] shut me out. I remember [. . .] asking a woman if she’d mind if I watched her lay out a page. She said, ‘yeah, I would’ [. . .]. I looked around and thought, ‘there are no black people here. [. . .] you’re hypocrites’. [. . .] in the canteen the staff were black, and there was this black tea guy who came round the newsroom [. . .]. I’d be like, ‘yeah brother!’ Then I’d feel this is so wrong.’

‘Harley’, a white editor at a public service broadcaster, acknowledges, as is highlighted by media diversity campaigners, there’s a yawning gap between policies designed to get diverse talent through the door, and management commitment to nurturing that talent:

‘It’s never been addressed properly. [. . .] you need a [. . .] leader who says, ‘[. . .] I want to see these people working on your programmes,’ rather than leaders, as we’ve had, who say what sounds nice at the time, but don’t put effective plans in place to change anything.’

Seeing the fact of race and racism

While racism is felt differently at different institutions, partly due to journalists’ expectations based on how institutions brand themselves, all interviewees who have or do work for mainstream UK news organisations report experiencing racism at work. This occurs (mostly) covertly *within* the workspace, as discussed above and below, as well as (often overtly) *externally* to it. The latter experiences may take the form of online abuse, such as ‘Addison’s’ experience of being told they look like ‘an ape’ on television, or ‘Charlie’, who travels for work in Europe and frequently receives degrading treatment in certain countries, whilst their white colleagues don’t. But the racism ‘Charlie’ encounters is rarely acknowledged by their bosses: ‘they shrug it off, like it’s the norm so deal with it’. Meanwhile, news reporter ‘Onyx’, who works for a public service broadcaster, often has to announce themselves as a journalist at events as it’s assumed they aren’t one:

‘I was reporting from a court case and [. . .] a police officer said, ‘we’re only letting the media in’. I said, ‘I am the media’. There’s a shock [. . .] from people [. . .] because there’s an idea of what a journalist looks like and it’s not me.’

The ability of journalists of colour to deal with everyday micro and macro racialised aggression that often pertains to the denial of their professional status, of not being ‘recognised’ (Taylor, 1994), is exacerbated or alleviated by the doxa of the institutions they work for. Organisational willingness to deal with racism as a fact that permeates institutional structures, impacts on the well-being and retention of black and brown staff. To be clear, institutional doxa, and the inconsistent inclusion too often integral to the dominant culture of news organisations, affects the extent to which journalists of colour are able to stop feeling, ‘sick and tired of being sick and tired’, as ‘Charlie’ says,

to the point where at least half my interviewees have considered leaving the industry due to experiences of racism perpetuated and/or exacerbated by the institutions they work for. Inconsistent inclusion also helps explain why, despite the UK BAME population growing by over 50 percent,⁷ there was a 5.4 percent decrease in BAME representation across Britain's creative industries in 2012 (Creative Access).

While there are distinctions between mainstream broadcast and text-based news media in terms of approaches to diversity, as well as between commercial and independent organisations (see below) my findings also reveal experiences of racism experienced *within* UK news organisations, whether these organisations have a more ethically (typically public service broadcasters and liberal newspapers) or economically (usually commercially funded) rooted approach to diversity, although the distinction isn't rigid.

Commonalities relate to black journalists being overlooked for promotion or certain assignments, having their complaints (if they feel able to raise their heads above the parapet, which some don't for fear of jeopardising their jobs) about unequal treatment dismissed, as well as being literally overlooked by some colleagues. As 'Spencer', a senior broadsheet journalist, says:

'My boss was away and me and one of his deputies, who's newer than me, were working on a story. Our editor, a white man, came by and chatted with my boss's deputy, who's also white. Our editor looked around the desk, clocked me, looked back at my boss's deputy and said, 'god, you're on your own today'. I was [. . .] devastated. I'd worked a 13-hour day. The editor's deputy was with him, looked at me as it happened and saw my expression. I went to see him later and said [. . .], 'I feel invisible [. . .]'. He had every opportunity to say you're imagining things, and he didn't. So I had verification it happened as I felt. [. . .] that says everything about how you're regarded as a black staff member.'

'Spencer' is also tasked (unpaid and in addition to their day job) with helping to bring more black journalists into the organisation, following them raising the issue of the newspapers lack of diversity. They explain their editor's taken to sending staff emails that include statements about the organisation's commitment to having a diverse workplace that reflects the newspaper's global readership, prompted partly by the need to attract more readers. Yet little is done beyond these emails to affect structural change at their overwhelmingly white, male dominated newspaper:

'We did an ad campaign to attract more readers. Management said it was racially neutral, but the man in the ad was white. Some of us challenged it and the response was, 'the brief was to create something racially neutral'. They're chasing an ever-decreasing demographic of more white men and I don't know whether they just don't see it. The organisation keeps no stats on diversity.'

Institutional differences and the tangle of ethical and economic rationalities informing diversity

Official monitoring of diversity is perhaps the biggest difference between mainstream newspapers and broadcast organisations. Major broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5, ITV and Sky) are members of the Creative Diversity Network,⁸ and signed up to Diamond, an industry-wide diversity monitoring system. This membership arguably means broadcasters

can be seen as ethically rooted in expressed commitments to diversity. This is because the ethos driving such monitoring is grounded, as ‘Taylor’, a journalist and diversity campaigner, says, ‘in the need to reflect society because that’s [. . .] a central purpose of the media’. However, as well as being ethically rooted, that ‘need’ is underpinned by a focus on remaining competitive, including at public service broadcasters where there’s an increasing requirement to vie for audiences (Fenton and Freedman, 2017). ‘Taylor’ explains:

‘I emphasize the importance of having diverse people in production [. . .] and being seen in content [. . .]. But bringing [. . .] profit into the conversation makes executives [. . .] take notice. Even though we’re talking about including more people from different ethnic backgrounds, and [. . .]they’ve been excluded because of racism, talking profit diverts attention from anything to do with racism.’

This campaigner’s experience illuminates how symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2005) is operationalised and speaks to Leong’s (2013) argument regarding the economic value organisations derive from race without having to address institutional racism.

In contrast to broadcast organisations, newspapers have no cross-industry approach to diversity, although some are signed up to The Journalism Diversity Fund,⁹ and others conduct internal monitoring. As discussed below, such monitoring is largely driven by the habitus of individuals within the organisation, rather than at a broader institutional level. But even those working at well-resourced newspapers, or the ‘autonomous’ (Bourdieu, 2005) end of the field, must mostly frame their ethical motivations for championing diversity in market terms to get management’s attention. As ‘Taylor’ says, ‘newspapers are businesses, numbers talk’.

The ability to ‘speak’ within media institutions

Calling out racism should be easier at institutions with diversity policies, because staff can speak to how their experiences do/don’t match documented commitments. My findings show broadcast news organisations that ‘manage’ diversity via formal systems, seemingly take such ‘speaking’ seriously, by allocating marginalised groups within the organisation ‘spaces’, in the form of surveys or forums, to express their views. ‘Kelly’, diversity lead at a public service broadcaster, explains their vision for staff being able to ‘speak’:

‘Our job [. . .]is to make sure everyone has a voice [. . .] and you can bring differences into the workplace [. . .]. But inclusion is intangible [. . .]. You can measure diversity, but [. . .] inclusion [. . .] you have to look at different ways [. . .]. The staff survey is an example. First in terms of if you have a high completion rate. Another is through questions asked. If I’m respected [. . .] I’ll feel included [. . .]. If I’m free to speak my mind without fear of consequences, but I do that in a respectful manner, I’d still feel included. Many organisations [. . .] don’t give staff freedom to speak [. . .]. That’s a marker of not having an inclusive workforce. [. . .] You have to work on [. . .] getting that culture to such an extent that people feel free to do their best work.’

However, speaking in a ‘respectful manner’ (apart from the problematic insinuation there’s a risk Others may be *disrespectful* of institutional doxa when they speak, so need

to be tone policed), and being able to do your ‘best work’, suggests, for most interviewees, speaking in a way that’s in keeping with organisational status quo. In addition, most broadcast journalist interviewees have participated in institutional initiatives to address diversity at some stage during their career, but still feel overlooked. ‘You go to these meetings and it feels like they’re laid on so they can say, ‘box ticked’. Nothing changes’, explains ‘Parker’, a reporter at a public service broadcaster. Many interviewees feel these spaces are created to contain frustrations, rather than act on them and organisational focus is on presenting as diverse to increase audiences (Wilson et al., 2013), rather than concern with the experiences of staff who represent diversity.

My data shows just one commercial broadcaster, that’s part of the Diamond diversity initiative, offers no formal ‘space’ and, according to ‘Addison’, one of their news editors, discourages networks for minority staff. I discuss the formation of networks shortly. However, it’s worth noting that networks established *by* minority staff, rather than by institutions as part of diversity schemes, tend to be more dynamic and, anecdotally, more effective at improving the quality of the working environment for marginalised groups. Arguably this is because they’re rooted in ethical, rather than economic, concerns regarding inclusion, so are spaces where race is seen, thus racism can be engaged with frankly. As ‘Spencer’, who formed an informal network at their newspaper, explains: ‘knowing there are colleagues going through similar experiences, who you can talk to [. . .], transforms your working life’.

Staff networks that see race

As outlined, the response of journalists of colour who experience disconnects between external institutional displays of pluralism and internal doxa, is to sometimes build networks so they’re better able to deal with structural discrimination, and the impact it has psychologically and on career progression. Institutional responses to such networks vary. Interviewees who work for a global news organisation with offices in the US and UK, report institutional support of identity politics and related staff networks. Economic rationalities rise to the fore here, where the institution treats these networks not just as a means of minority staff supporting one another, but as spaces where content ideas may be generated that align with the interests of particular markets.

Such networks could be deemed exploitative, using ‘racial capital’ (Leong, 2013) to add value to white owned companies. On the other hand interviewees, like ‘Quinn’, who work for this organisation cite such networks, that are part of the organisational structure, as welcome spaces. They view these as underpinned by economic *and* ethical rationalities, where racism can be addressed, and explain the organisation attempts to tackle internal bias. Although that’s noted with the caveat that, as ‘Quinn’ says, ‘we had unconscious bias training. The only people who showed up were the black, Asian and LGBTQ staff’. Clearly, despite institutional attempts to create a more genuinely inclusive workplace, much remains to be done for all staff to make that leap.

Some responses interviewees have encountered from white colleagues about the creation of support networks for minority journalists within the organisation, highlight a lack of awareness of white privilege on the part of those colleagues, and/or a perception that such networks threaten the status quo. As ‘Addison’ says of her commercial broadcast employer:

‘There’s this unspoken prohibition of black, women or LGBTQ networks. I’ve had networks wherever I’ve gone, [. . .] and that was ok. At (former broadsheet workplace) me and a colleague ramped up [. . .] a network and I got shit from people. I came out of a meeting and someone said, ‘where’s the white man’s network?’ I’m like, ‘you’re sitting in it, it’s called (name of organisation).’ I didn’t take him seriously [. . .]. But at (current workplace) it feels more serious, it’s frowned upon. [. . .] you go through these [. . .] prejudices, then you [. . .] can’t create something to [. . .] strengthen each other against it. On top of that [. . .] when they need a black person to do a black thing, who do they ask?’

Such experiences, whereby race is erased and restored at the behest of the institution, underline the necessity of diversity not just being written into organisational policies; but point to the importance of news organisations not conflating commercial and ethical imperatives vis-a-vis race. This is because, as diversity studies show, economic imperatives and the ‘bodies in the room’ (Eddo-Lodge, 2017) game they result in, often leads to ‘segregated visibility’ (Hall, 1996), rather than felt, sustainable inclusivity.

Segregated visibility is operationalised when diversity drives commodify race, mostly to the benefit of institutional whiteness (Leong, 2013; Saha, 2018). This works via the way institutionally white spaces ‘display’ black and brown employees (via picture by-lines or on screen) as evidence of their supposedly progressive brand. In turn, institutions benefit from the cultural and/or economic capital that blackness and brownness brings in the way of, as ‘Kim’ experienced, access to specific stories, without addressing institutional racial disparities:

‘They needed someone [. . .] black [. . .]. [The editor] asked me into his office and said, ‘there are stories we can’t get [. . .].’ I was sent to serve a specific challenge.’

‘Emerson’, who’s worked for a range of news organisations, had an instant aversion to the way they felt a liberal UK broadsheet capitalised off their blackness:

‘I don’t want to be a black journalist, I want to be a journalist who’s black. [. . .]the (name of news organisation), wanted me to be *their* black journalist, like we’re (name of organisation), and we’ve got black journalists.’ (‘Emerson’s’ emphasis)

Racialised market rationality is also used to justify racial exclusions and/or ghettoisation of content. Economic logics, which erase engagement with institutional racism, place journalists of colour working for mainstream UK news organisations in a paradoxical situation, whereby they’re producing content for audiences they’re often not considered part of. ‘Spencer’ says they feel ‘guttled’ about being staff at a newspaper they help produce, yet people like ‘them’ aren’t counted as part of the readership.

‘I sit in meetings where it’s usually all white men, thinking, ‘it’s my company as much as yours [. . .], I’m not a guest’, but that’s what I’m [. . .] made to feel.’

Angles constructed to appeal to audiences may be required to conform to stereotypical categories associated with blackness (e.g. sport). As ‘Frankie’, who writes for various UK newspapers, puts it:

‘There’s the issue of being boxed [. . .], it’s not easy to break through and write on topics [. . .] perceived as being outside your self-knowledge.’

The ‘problem’ of ‘black-on-black’ reporting

The perception that doing ‘black-on-black’ reporting (being a black journalist who covers news featuring black people) may result in being ‘boxed’ or ‘racially profiled’ so that, as Pritchard and Stonbely (2007) find, people of colour are limited to telling stories about their ‘communities’, whilst white journalists are permitted to write about anything, can lead to other journalists of colour giving arguably self-harming advice to black journalists starting out. As ‘Charlie’ explains of their experience at a conservative broadsheet:

‘I met this black editor and said, ‘why can’t I be like white journalists where I can write about personal matters *and* everything else’ [. . .] He said, ‘the problem with you is you write about black issues.’ [. . .] both he, and this Asian guy who said something similar, had internalised racism. They’d picked up on the idea that somehow because when I write about Africans [. . .], I mean I write about globalisation, [. . .] economics. Yes, they happen to be African characters, [. . .] but these aren’t just black people issues. I found it sad that black journalists were saying this to me. [. . .] I thought, ‘[. . .] you’ve taken the ways [. . .] the system positions us, and [. . .] you’re saying that to a young black journalist’. It was awful.’

However, ‘Jamie’, a senior journalist, views the not ‘writing black’ strategy differently:

‘I wasn’t going to be [. . .] “a black journalist”. I was going to be a journalist who happened to be black, and there’s a difference. [. . .] starting out, I wanted to do any story without anyone saying: ‘they’re only doing that because they’re black’. [. . .] building [. . .] credibility as a journalist, so I could be reporting outside the White House, as readily as reporting from Angola, [. . .] is important [. . .] so when you’re reporting from Angola people aren’t thinking, ‘they’re only there because they’re black.’ They’re thinking, ‘they’re there because they’re good’. [. . .] they can take me seriously.’

Important here is the idea that being black, and covering black stories, isn’t a wise way to build your journalistic reputation and be taken ‘seriously’. This speaks to Du Bois’s (1994 [1903]) ‘double consciousness’, whereby as a person of colour in the west, you must lose parts of yourself. This may take the form of not speaking to issues, people or places you’re racially associated with, to get ahead. Thus, in the experience of many journalists of colour, including ‘Jamie’, ‘black-on-black’ reporting equates to a suffocating collapse of difference, in an imploding, you’re like ‘them’ so not as ‘credible’ as ‘us’, way. The notion of ‘black-on-black’ reporting being problematic exposes racism that arises from, and perpetuates, symbolic violence which manifests as external and internalised limits being placed on blackness.

The lack of value attached to ‘black stories’ also speaks to aforementioned connections between market and racial logics, whereby racialised exclusions from the dominant public sphere are justified by racist market logics that dictate black people can’t feature prominently in ‘mainstream’ narratives, because black people don’t sell, and can only be tellers of stories considered, ‘palatable to white readers and viewers’ (Allan, 1999: 183).

Given this, journalists of colour who avoid doing ‘black-on-black’ reporting are arguably demonstrating an awareness of racialised symbolic violence within mainstream UK news, and strategies required of people of colour trying to build careers within that system: playing a warped game in the hope they’ll eventually build enough capital to cover stories related to, or featuring, people of colour without ‘risking’ their credibility.

‘It’s worth noting that some younger journalists interviewed, who’ve recently entered the industry, feel more able to ‘write black’ should they want to.’

‘Jamie’, who now feels they’ve enough capital within the journalistic field to do ‘black stories’, believes when they started out that had to be their strategy because ‘black stories’:

‘. . . were sidelined [. . .]. There’s a reason Trevor McDonald is an icon, because [. . .] he wasn’t simply doing black stories, he was doing all kinds and it gave him credibility when he ended up interviewing Nelson Mandela [. . .], that’s what I wanted. Now, if there’s a story in Sierra Leone or whatever, my hand’s the first to go up, but when I was starting out – no way!’

‘Habitus’ versus institutional ‘doxa’

First-hand experience often informs the ‘habitus’ of diversity practitioners. The insertion of their habitus into the doxa of news organisations can act as an ethical counter to market logics that underpin racialised exclusion and inclusion. It’s ethical rationalities, informed by the habitus of individuals within the organisation, that inject impetus into the often exhausting, sometimes career damaging work (Ahmed, 2012) of devising and sustaining diversity strategies.

Interviewees who are involved in diversity work in UK news, either on a paid (typically within broadcast media) or unpaid basis (usually on newspapers), have experience of being discriminated against, or have seen those with whom they have *felt* proximity suffer discrimination. For these individuals, media diversity and inclusion are ethical issues. For ‘Riley’, whose formative years were shaped by the racially tumultuous 1980s, with riots raging across the UK and Margaret Thatcher branding the ANC a ‘terrorist’ organisation, becoming a journalist appeared a good tool to campaign for equality. ‘Riley’ worked for Britain’s black press, often where black journalists get their break, before moving into white dominated news. Upon finding the inequality they’d dreamed of using journalism to campaign against in the world outside, was also rife within mainstream media, they tried to implement change:

‘People leaving the black press were good journalists and wanted to stay in journalism. But working for largely white media, which I accessed via a personal contact, I thought why is that when I come into [name of news organisation] I’d be one of the only people of colour and the [name of organisation] wouldn’t take any of those really good people. I felt that’s got to be wrong [. . .]. That’s why I started pushing for change.’

Exasperated by institutional silence regarding the lack of diversity at their organisation, ‘Spencer’, along with like-minded colleagues, started counting the black, and female, contributors the newspaper commissions. It’s worth quoting their experience at length

because it demonstrates the chipping away some undertake to attempt to shift institutional culture:

'I noticed a line, 'we welcome applications from all sections of the community', appearing on job ads [. . .]. I asked the union how it's monitored but never got an answer. I started counting men, women, black, white - keeping numbers on who's commissioned. [. . .] it was just white men. Later, I was arguing with a deputy who said, 'I don't care if we don't publish women'. I said, 'how many women do you think we publish?' He said, 'about 30 - 40%'. I said, '[. . .] count the last month.' It was 15%. [. . .]. I said, 'how many black people do you think there are?' He counted. The only person was Barack Obama [. . .].

I presented these numbers at a diversity [. . .] event. Everyone was like, 'god, the supposedly liberal (name of organisation).' But they were talking about women, so I said, 'for black women it's worse'. Because you start talking about diversity and the conversation focuses on gender, never race, [. . .] and generally because I'm the only black person in the room I have to raise it [. . .]. So me and some colleagues started keeping a spreadsheet with black, woman, man and presented it to senior staff. Afterwards, the editor put out a statement about wanting to improve diversity. But all the time we're saying, 'are we going to have a strategy [. . .]?' There never is.

They appointed one guy [. . .]. He said, 'keep a list of potential contributors.' We compiled a list of over 200 people, but my boss says, '[. . .] it's more trouble than it's worth. Anyway, who says black people represent diversity? I've got a European name, [. . .] what about people like me? It's racist to say it's good to have someone just because he's brown, it should be on merit.' My boss is always saying it should be on merit, but we publish rubbish things everyday [. . .] by white men, and spend hours making these mediocre pieces good. We wouldn't put any effort into something by a woman, god forbid a black woman, because it's a different merit. So, it's, 'what about that crap piece, you said was crap, by a white man?' Yet these guys get commissioned weekly, full of mistakes.'

Most interviewees spoke of their feelings as factors motivating them to pursue change in news organisations. These include feelings about not seeing people from marginalised groups adequately represented, and entering journalism to try and shift that.

Feelings are powerful and because statistics only reveal so much, feelings are a vital indicator of how valued people are within journalism. But the importance powerful people and institutions attribute to how people feel differs according to who those people are, and the socio-historical context in which their feelings are considered. The Macpherson inquiry (1999) into institutional racism, which led to unprecedented scrutiny of British institutions and their race equality policies following the racist murder of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, was a bitter-sweet period for journalists of colour, like #BlackLivesMatter is today, because it put race on the agenda in the cruelest way, and made black journalists 'seen'. Those who'd been calling for greater diversity in mainstream media also used the Macpherson report to urge senior journalists, who were writing about institutional racism the report formally uncovered within the Metropolitan Police, to reflect on equality within their institutions. Prior to the reports publication, 'Riley' tried to draw their employer's attention to racism within their organisation. 'Riley' sighs at the memory of only being listened to about

something they have everyday knowledge of, because of an external inquiry that became headline news:

'I was the [. . .] only black person in the office, you could raise an issue and it would be, 'of course [. . .] we don't do that [. . .]'. One journalist said, '[. . .] you can't tell me anything about race equality, I've read Eldridge Cleaver.' [. . .] it was that sort of attitude, '[. . .] what do you know, [. . .] we're liberals. What can you tell us about racism [. . .]? We're the press [. . .], you think you can teach us anything' [. . .]. But when the Macpherson report happened, [. . .] the door was slightly ajar.'

Such erasure of lived experience was recounted by many interviewees who've challenged racist practices within newsrooms in relation to content and/or workplace culture. Erasure is what often happens when raced habitus comes up against the doxa of 'fields' (Bourdieu, 2005), or what is colloquially termed 'the system', in western societies. Not being seen or heard, feeling contained by stereotypical categories, is what Baldwin (1991[1964]) was referring to when he wrote, *Nobody Knows My Name* in the 1960s; it's a state of being Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, invoked. Today, such feelings, which speak to the realities of not being seen or heard, are what Black Lives Matter activists are getting at when they state, *Black Lives Matter*: a painfully necessary statement pertaining to lives too often erased at the hands of systems (government, the judiciary, education, the police, mass media), meant to exist in democracies to ensure all lives are treated fairly, rather than uphold and perpetuate racial inequality.

Being a journalist is a privileged position, and I'm not suggesting racial discrimination faced by journalists is equivalent to being killed by the police. But racism happens in every area of public life and discrimination journalists face within media institutions that are meant to hold power to account, is another symptom of entrenched racial inequality. As 'Riley' observes:

'There's a structural, institutional bias we haven't dealt with (within journalism). [. . .] where people can [. . .] get firsts from Oxford, but they don't understand what's going on.'

Conclusion

Social inequalities, particularly along racial lines, remain stark (Barr et al., 2020). It's vital global news organisations employ and nurture journalists who represent the rich diversity of the societies news media claim to speak to and for, so important stories aren't missed, or mis-told and journalists of all backgrounds are free to do their work without fear of prejudice in the field or the organisations they work for. Recent events, and the data discussed here, reveals this isn't the case, and in Britain there's a disconnect between expressed organisational commitments to diversity and experiences of black and brown journalists. This disconnect is due to the way a focus on the market detracts from attending to ethical concerns centred on dismantling racial disparities.

However, the habitus of individuals in journalism who seek to influence the appointment of journalists of colour helps affect change. As do other findings this study reveals, such as the importance of networks launched by journalists of colour. The actions of such

individuals must be institutionally supported via the provision of resources, and recommendations generated via such networks must be engaged with by those in positions to instigate systemic change so ethical rationalities informing diversity take precedence over economic rationalities. A failure to do so will lead to recurring racism, continued attrition of black journalists and feelings of, as ‘Riley’ says, ‘surviving, not thriving’, for those fighting for racial inclusivity within journalism. Now is the time for lasting change, and for editors and proprietors to use their power to ensure news survives because it’s relevant: meaning it adequately represents, and is genuinely inclusive of, the public it claims to serve.

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Notes

1. Henry is a black British actor and campaigner.
2. Cottle positions his research in news production scholarship.
3. Leong (2013) explains ‘racial capital’ is ‘the economic and social value derived from an individual’s racial identity’ (p. 2190).
4. Symbolic violence has been used to study other aspects of media and diverse groups. For instance, in their research on media representations of Chinese people affecting how Chinese-Canadian youth perceive themselves, Cui and Worrell (2019) argue media-led symbolic violence damages constructions of positive identity formation.
5. Figures (The Media Reform Coalition, 2014) show dominant news providers in radio are the BBC and Sky; dominant television news providers are the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky, Al Jazeera English and CNN; and major daily newspapers (by circulation) are The Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Telegraph, Daily Star, Daily Express, The Times, The I, Financial Times, The Guardian. Online news websites (which generate original content) with the greatest reach are BBC News, DailyMail.co.uk, Guardian.co.uk and Telegraph.co.uk.
6. Protecting interviewee’s identity ensured they could contribute without fear their participation would impact negatively on their professional lives. Due to the relatively small number of black and brown journalists working for UK news organisations, and because they discussed the context of institutions they work for, I also don’t name organisations to further protect participants’ identity. Instead, I refer to organisations as ‘a national newspaper’, and so on. Non-gendered pronouns are used for additional privacy.
7. The 2011 British census.
8. Established by Britain’s leading broadcasters in 2000.

9. Supporters of the fund, which supports NCTJ training for students from diverse backgrounds, include DMG Media and the FT. However, figures from 2014/15 on the likelihood of journalism students being employed as a journalist six months after graduation indicate that white students have a 26% chance, while black students only have an 8% chance of finding employment (Spilsbury, 2017). Problematically, whatever principles inform support for the training fund, they're not translating to ensure newly qualified journalists from *all* backgrounds gain employment in the industry.

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