Dialogue preparation

Chosen topic: How should NAC deal with the potential consequences of bias in their dashboard?

Introduction

For decades, the football community has been an active participant in, as well as a witness to, racial aggressions targeted towards non-white players. Racial bias in football can lead to inequalities in opportunities, such as scouting and recruitment setbacks as managers might favour players based on ethnicity, referee decisions, racial disparities in player rankings, and even contract negotiation. Addressing these issues is imperative to align the sport with the inclusive values society upholds, ensuring equal opportunities for all players, regardless of their background.

The five stages of critical thinking used to conclude my chosen position:

Phase 1:

There are a multitude of approaches that NAC could choose from to fight racial biases in their dashboard. One of them could be to adopt an RRI (Responsible Research and Innovation) vision when it comes to the developmental process of their dashboard. RRI implies a wide range of stakeholders, as well as ongoing communication with them, continuously throughout the development and being responsive to their suggestions and critiques (leading to increased diversity and inclusion because of the multitude of perspectives that could prevent bias(es)), open and clear communication about the root of the data, funding, decision-making process, etc. (ensuring accountability), consideration regarding the societal impact of the decisions that said dashboard would lead to and how it would affect players and teams overall. Overall, due to the generalised nature of the RRI approach, it can help combat any type of unintentional bias.

Phase 2:

There have been many instances of racism reported throughout various leagues in Europe, including fans throwing bananas at players of African origin during Serie A matches in Italy, accompanied by ape noises (Doidge 2015), as well as incidents of racist songs in English soccer (Holland 1995). This is only the tip of the iceberg, however. Caselli et al. (2023) investigated how the absence of fans during football matches in Italy influenced player performance in a recent study using the COVID-19 epidemic as a natural experiment. The study discovered that when supporters were missing, African athletes, who were frequently subjected to racial harassment, performed better. Black players experienced a similar, albeit less substantial, effect. This finding highlights that performance is affected by racist behaviour from fans. Ultimately, adversely impacting performance leads to a lower player value. This could have a snowball effect and could potentially lead to missed career opportunities.

Another significant study is the one carried out by RunRepeat, a Danish research firm, which showcased the racial disparity when it comes to football media (specifically commentators). The research found that light-skinned players were more likely to be praised by commentators for their intelligence, hard work, and quality, while dark-skinned players were more likely to be praised for their speed, power, form, and versatility. Commentators

are trivial when it comes to football because they offer an expert's insight into the sport's world while educating the listener. Because of this, their unconscious biases will slip into the listener's values and subsequently reflect when it comes to evaluating Black and non-white players' performances. Therefore, this type of commentary hardens "the view of black athletes being less intelligent and hard-working and able to succeed only because of their "God-given" physical and athletic attributes" (The Guardian, 2020).

Phase 3:

In opposition, some fans argue that the field of football is in a good place when it comes to ending racial harassment and that over time the problem will eradicate itself. To support this claim, Quansaha et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between the percentage of Black, sub-Saharan African, and foreign players in stadium attendance in the five major European soccer leagues between 2008 and 2018. The study concluded that there was no negative influence on the attendance of supporters when non-white ethnicities were partaking in a match (except for Serie A, where the correlation coefficient between the capacity utilization and percentage of black people in a team was -0.24 - the highest of all). Surprisingly, the study revealed that higher team diversity could lead to a positive impact on attendance.

Additionally, it could rightfully be concluded that the football community is winning the battle against racism since "in 20 years, the Premier League has been transformed into an astonishingly diverse, multinational and multicultural workplace. About a quarter of professional players are from black or ethnic minority backgrounds. Coupled with greater tolerance in society, reforms and campaigns by organisations such as Kick It Out – supported by all 92 professional clubs in England and Wales […]" (The Guardian, 2011).

Phase 4:

When it comes to racial biases in player data, they have indeed been countered and/ or eliminated through societal movements. It is important to acknowledge the improvements made so far. However, as Jason Roberts, the 33-year-old Blackburn striker states, "In my 14-year career, I've had it numerous times. More times than I can count. It has certainly slowed down recently but the battle isn't won. People still need educating." (BBC, 2011). It is still as important as ever, maybe even more so, to understand that systematic racism affects any statistical analysis in any type of field. Numbers do not lie. The context of them does so. In the context of player analysis where one's career might permanently be affected by a mathematically correct value derived from an erroneous context ingrained in harassment, one needs to fix and more importantly, prevent to evaluate a player properly and truthfully as an athlete.

Phase 5:

Synthesizing the insights gathered offers a holistic perspective on addressing racial biases in football data. While one can deduct positive correlations between team diversity and attendance, applying RRI principles urges teams like NAC to delve deeper, since the problem at hand is systematic. The emphasis on ongoing communication, transparency, and responsiveness to stakeholder input becomes paramount when looking at the multiple studies that highlight the relationships between racial disparities (especially when it comes to Black

players) and players' respective performances, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered to prevent unintentional biases.
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