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Colin Kaepernick and Today's (Re)Surgence of Athlete Activism: New Media Environment, New Game?*

Abstract

Scholars point to U.S. football quarterback Colin Kaepernick as a key figure in the broader rise of athlete activism since the late 2010s. In the U.S., Kaepernick challenged decades of alleged political apathy among Black athletes, which had been associated with colour-blind racism and the increasing commercialisation of sports. Since Kaepernick-like protests have transcended national borders, an examination of his case can help us understand important historical developments in the re-politicisation of minority athletes internationally. We situate Kaepernick's activism historically and in relation to changes in the media environment. A media ecology approach allows us to examine a broad range of media strategies that enabled Kaepernick to by-pass conventional media and reach large audiences directly, with messages that gave voice to marginalised perspectives, uncovered the logics of colour-blind racism, underscored its historical and structural underpinnings, and ultimately challenged racist stereotypes and social injustice.

Keywords

Black Athlete Activism | Colin Kaepernick | Racism | Media Practices | Hybrid Media Environment

Introduction

Towards the end of 2017, American football had become a key arena for anti-racist protest in the U.S. What began in August 2016 as the controversial action of a single quarterback – San Francisco 49ers' Colin Kaepernick – had become a familiar sight in the field: players from multiple teams were refusing to stand up during the national anthem as a sign of protest against racial inequality and police brutality. According to national polls, at least half of U.S. citizens defended the players' right to protest in this way, while two thirds criticised then-President Trump's calls to fire protesting players and boycott their games and teams.¹

From being one of ‘the best football players in the world,’ but rather unknown outside the National Football League (NFL) circuit, Kaepernick became a prominent figure in debates about police brutality against African Americans and about human rights more broadly.² Unemployed from U.S. football teams (becoming a so-called free agent) since March 2017, Kaepernick continues to inspire athletes all over the world. His practice of taking the knee has been used by others, including the England national men’s and women’s football teams and Premier League teams in Europe. Recent work on sports diplomacy and human rights links Kaepernick’s protest to other athletes who ‘have spoken out about human rights issues’ since 2016, including gymnast Simone Biles in the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics (mental health); the Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey in 2019 (China - Hong Kong relations); and Formula 1 World Champion Sir Lewis Hamilton in 2021 (empowerment of youth from marginalised communities).³

While Kaepernick’s actions are considered key in activism’s increasing and growing visibility in contemporary sports,⁴ they are not unprecedented. Indeed, commentators have identified significant connections between Kaepernick’s actions and historical protests in the U.S., including the so-called Negro Silent Protest of 1917 and the Martin Luther King-led civil rights movement.⁵ Specific links to legendary African American athletes, who played an important role in that movement, have also become a common theme in news stories and opinion columns: Kaepernick has been frequently compared with Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, among others.⁶ John Carlos himself described Kaepernick as ‘this generation’s iconic civil rights leader.’⁷

It is in relation to the historical connections and disconnections between older and newer generations of civil right leaders, we argue, that the current resurgence of sports activism needs to be understood. First, because as scholar-activist Harry Edwards has compellingly explained, there is ‘a history to *be* repeated’ and neglecting that history serves dominant interests.⁸ And second, because historical repetition does not mean duplication: ‘The relationships and forces generating history simply are too complex, dynamic, and perpetually “emergent” to be precisely and exactly reiterated from one historical event, much less from one historical *era*, to another.’⁹ The history of sports activism offers clear evidence of this. It is marked by ups and downs, linked to larger socio-political phenomena. In the case of the U.S., Edwards distinguishes four waves of Black sports activism, each related to specific historical moments. He starts with the racial segregation of the early twentieth century, followed by the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement in the post-World War II period, and the Vietnam War and the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s. Edwards

places the fourth wave –the one Kaepernick is part of—in the 2010s. It is directly connected to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, as well as to camera phone technology and social media.¹⁰

While grounded in this broader historical approach to athlete activism, our specific interest in this paper is on the changing media landscape. We build on Edwards’ insights into the role of media in the current wave, but we go further than existent research by examining how it is not a specific new media technology (i.e., the digital) that makes a difference for Kaepernick and his international contemporaries. A media ecology approach directs us, instead, to examine Kaepernick’s relations to and interactions with the broader media environment, one characterised as hybrid.¹¹ By examining his use of his preferred social media, Twitter (now X), in relation to his interactions with mainstream media, we show how Kaepernick’s strategic and interconnected use of different media logics is key to his counter-politics.

We start our discussion with a historical view of obstacles and opportunities for Black athlete activism in the U.S. We then turn to how Kaepernick’s case has been approached in research until now and to the value of examining athlete activism in relation to historical changes in the media environment. In the empirical examination that follows, we focus on Kaepernick’s interactions with and uses of different media to promote his anti-racist efforts, and on how these efforts are historically grounded. The analysis underscores the key role of the changing media environment in today’s re-emergence of a kind of athlete activism that was once allegedly doomed.

Literature review

Threats to Black athlete activism

Notably, by the early 2000s in the U.S., much of the literature on political activism amongst Black athletes had given up on the possibility of a resurgence in athlete activism. It spoke about a ‘golden age’ of athletes’ activism in the late 1960s and 1970s, a time when racism was apparent, and visible public protests were widespread.¹² Key figures of athlete activism at the time were Olympic sprint runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos, baseball player Curt Flood, basketball player Bill Russell, and boxer Muhammed Ali.¹³ In the years that followed, ‘shifts in cultural politics, media landscapes, and sporting worlds would dramatically limit the appeal, appropriateness, and application of older models of protest and languages of change.’¹⁴ The literature identified two specific factors behind the decline in Black athlete activism in the U.S: the commercialisation of sports and the changing nature of racism.¹⁵

The first factor, commercialisation in sports, pointed to the threat of financial repercussions for those who refused to remain quiet. Protesting athletes risked losing benefits, such as lucrative endorsements and sponsorship deals or even contracts,¹⁶ meanwhile, their apolitical peers were seen as suitable brand ambassadors and eligible to appear in commercials.¹⁷ An often-mentioned example was that of basketball athlete Michael Jordan who allegedly explained his refusal to endorse a Black democratic senatorial candidate in 1990 with the phrase: ‘Republicans buy sneakers, too.’¹⁸ In discussing commercialisation’s impact on Black athletes, some have gone as far as talking about a new type of slavery, one that used athletes to sell endless amounts of products but severely limited their autonomy.¹⁹ Their wealth would keep them streamlined and encourage them to abdicate their sense of social responsibility.²⁰

The second factor silencing Black athlete activism, was the turn towards less explicit forms of racism or colour-blind racism, which undermined political protesting in more subtle ways.²¹ If old-fashioned racism confronted Black people with an explicitly racialised hierarchy that placed ‘White’ at a higher and more valuable level than ‘Black,’ racism now took more covert shapes, to the extent that it denied the existence of racism altogether.²² Powerful institutions were arguably implicated in this process. The mass media, in particular, were seen to ‘work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest.’²³ Colour-blind racism, in this way, delegitimised anti-racist protest, upholding claims that protesting athletes were driven by irrational anger or resentment.

Conditions for repoliticisation

Arguably, various socio-political developments in recent decades are re-shaping, once more, the conditions for sports activism. Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) principles, on the one hand, encourage brands to take a stance to be perceived as responsible.²⁴ In this scenario –and in contrast with the one where Michael Jordan refused to run financial risks by engaging in politics— sports figures may not be expected to appeal to everyone anymore.²⁵

On the other hand, the Obama presidency (2008 – 2016) and, since 2013, the BLM movement have underscored the pervasiveness of colour-blind racism and its insubstantiality. While some celebrated Obama’s electoral success as definitive proof that the U.S. society had entered a time in which race had lost its key influence, critical voices interpreted it differently.²⁶ Bonilla-Silva, for example, described Obama’s election and re-election as ‘part and parcel of the “new racism” in the United States’ and explained how they invisibilised persistent racial injustice.²⁷ If the Obama

presidency could have misled some, BLM removed any ambiguity about the myth of a post-racial era. The movement blatantly underscored how police killings of Black men and women were premised on the assumption that Black lives are not as valuable as White lives.²⁸

BLM not only repositioned race as a core problem in U.S. politics and society, but became a global phenomenon, underscoring ‘a longer history of transnational Black struggles.’²⁹ Exceptionally large protests took place in Europe and elsewhere, both in solidarity with oppressed people in the U.S. and to address local grievances related to institutional racism, police brutality, and other injustices.³⁰ BLM arguably ‘transformed existing anti-racist struggles within and across countries, bringing forward new debates, narratives, actors, and forms of resistance and organising in the social and cultural landscape.’³¹ Kaepernick’s and other athletes’ involvement in struggles against racism in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world should be read in relation to these transformations.

While developments in CSR and the BLM movement may have mitigated obstacles faced by athlete activism in the late twentieth century, the examination of Kaepernick’s case below shows how the forms and strength this activism has taken in the last decade are closely related to changes in the media.

Kaepernick and the media

A rich body of scholarship has emerged around Kaepernick’s activism, mostly focused on public perceptions of his protesting as expressed on social media, mainstream media coverage, and corporate use of his image. While valuable, this research has failed to situate Kaepernick’s activism in a historical context and changing media landscape.

Research on Kaepernick’s social media presence has focused on users’ perception of his protest. It has shown, for example, how values of ‘fairness’ and ‘respect for authority’, influenced people to, correspondingly, either support the protest or find it disrespectful.³² Research has also underscored the role of race: faced with a Black protester, ‘public perceptions become even more hardened and at times, combative.’³³ A study placing Kaepernick’s protest into a ‘complex racialized and gendered U.S. cultural moment,’ showed how far-right NFL fans’ memes about Kaepernick delegitimised his protest.³⁴ Similarly, other studies have shown how casting protesting athletes as ungrateful has commonly worked to delegitimise their politics.³⁵ Fame, then, becomes a privilege to be repaid through political silence.³⁶

Research looking at mainstream media has attributed them great power in shaping the outcome of Kaepernick's protest. An analysis of online sports news outlets and broadsheet papers found that the U.S. media coverage of the protests was mostly negative.³⁷ Kaepernick's actions were often discussed in isolation and focusing on the methods, rather than the message. Treated as 'a moment, rather than a movement,' the protest's impact was reduced.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, scholars have argued that Kaepernick was demonised by being framed as 'antimilitary, antipolice and anti-American' disobeying three sacred features of the 'American sporting ethos.'³⁹ Even a study that found favourable newspaper coverage of Kaepernick's protest underscored how it was treated as an 'anthem protest' rather than as a protest about racial injustice.⁴⁰ It also showed that print media prioritised the voices of sports 'honchos' (i.e., owners, coaches and administrators) as well as 'politicians and judges,' leaving minimal space for athletes themselves to share their point of view.⁴¹ Finally, some of this work also reminds us of this case's key historical dimensions: The same journalists who had chastised Kaepernick in 2016 were more appreciative of his intentions in 2020, 'echoing the experiences of other activist athletes such as Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith,' whose coverage also improved over time.⁴²

Research related to Kaepernick's presence in corporate communication includes an examination of the 2019 'Inspire Change' documentary campaign produced by the NFL to soften the voices of protesting athletes.⁴³ According to Rugg, the campaign allowed the NFL to regain 'its ownership over the presentation of activism within the league's media-footprint and has aligned it with the more market-friendly versions of "justice" circulated by other corporate actors involved in social justice.'⁴⁴ Other research has paid attention to Nike's 2018 Emmy winning campaign 'Dream Crazy.' The campaign celebrated the 30th anniversary of the 'Just Do It' slogan and featured Colin Kaepernick saying: 'Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.' Kaepernick's involvement in the campaign met criticism from various fronts.⁴⁵ Conservative Twitter users opposed it with the hashtag #BoycottNike, with some destroying their Nike shoes.⁴⁶ Left-leaning audiences, in turn, interpreted the campaign as a move to capitalise on Kaepernick's popularity.⁴⁷ As various authors have argued, the case underscores CSR's limitations to allow athletes to maintain good relations with corporations while being politically engaged.⁴⁸ According to some, Kaepernick's collaboration with Nike 'folded (and arguably muted) his activism into the dominant [neoliberal] ideology.'⁴⁹

Overall, extant scholarship on Kaepernick sheds light on the public perceptions and debates his protest triggered, as well as on the obstacles posed by mainstream media and reactionary spaces in

social and corporate media. However, we observe important limitations. First, in contraposition with a media ecology approach, different media tend to be treated in isolation. A second and related limitation is that research focuses on how Kaepernick is talked about, disregarding his media practices. Even the literature about Kaepernick's collaboration with Nike – where his agency is somehow acknowledged – suggests that he is simply coopted by commercial logics. All in all, this literature maintains the fatalism of earlier research on athlete activism. It offers little grounds to understand the wave of activism Kaepernick is part of. Turning our attention to the hybrid character of the media environment will allow us to examine Kaepernick as actively and creatively navigating through concrete possibilities and threats.

Protesting in a hybrid media system

The media play a key role in scholarship looking into social movements and protesting. Historically, much of the focus has been on mainstream media's tendency to undermine progressive politics and reinforce dominant social views and interests.⁵⁰ This literature shows how the asymmetrical relation with mainstream media compels activists to rely on different strategies, which Rucht characterises as the 'quadruple A' model, involving abstention (i.e., withdrawing from media contact), attack (i.e., open critique), adaptation (to mass media logics), and alternatives (i.e., creating their own media).⁵¹

The rise of new media arguably requires adjustments in Rucht's model to pay closer attention to the 'combination' of activist media strategies.⁵² Indeed, together with a shift in attention to 'the breakthrough of social networks and their affordances for activism,'⁵³ recent research on media and activism has moved away from reductionist analyses that isolate specific –commonly digital– media platforms from the broader media environment.⁵⁴ Acknowledging the hybridity of media systems has allowed researchers to consider how newer media logics do not replace old ones, but co-evolve in relation to each other.⁵⁵ In studies of activism, this hybrid approach sheds light on the complexity, interdependency and connectedness with which actors mobilise online and offline resources to promote transgressive agendas.

A case that offers particularly valuable insights to understand Kaepernick's activism is the 15M movement in Spain. In their protests against austerity policy measures in the early 2010s, 15M 'activists were deeply mistrustful and critical of the mainstream media' but knew that they needed their coverage to gain public visibility and support.⁵⁶ Their media savviness and reliance on their own communication committees and media channels allowed them to successfully challenge the

mainstream media logic by forcing journalists outside of their standardised practices. 15M activists insisted, for example, on speaking as a collective (avoiding the figure of the spokesperson), minimised contacts with reporters (including press releases and press conferences), decentralised their messages, and displaced their interactions with mainstream media to social media. ‘Social media became indispensable to political activists’ subversion of the media logic,’ while mainstream media also remained crucial for their overall strategy.⁵⁷ Paradoxically, the press limited and unconventional access to the 15M activists arguably bolstered the national and international news coverage of their claims.⁵⁸

The example of 15M points to the flaws of ‘the one-medium bias and the technological-fascination bias,’ both common in the literature on social movements and the media.⁵⁹ Attending to a single media platform or, more specifically, to the latest media technology would have severely hampered our understanding of the dynamics at play. Similarly, this example underscores the ecological approach’s incompatibility with a deterministic standpoint. 15M activists’ use of media should not be interpreted as the execution of pre-determined possibilities, but as these actors’ reflexive and creative engagement within constraints and possibilities. This ‘media practice’ perspective is central to the ecological approach.⁶⁰ Indeed, a ‘holistic’ or ‘ecological’ perspective on activism allows us to ‘see the unfolding of social practices as they cut across various media formats, genres, and infrastructures.’⁶¹

Methods

Like much research examining media practices from an ecological perspective, we relied on a case study.⁶² We specifically focused on Kaepernick’s interactions with online and offline media in a key period for his activism: between August 2016 to April 2018. In August 2016, news began circulating that Kaepernick remained sitting during the national anthem. In April 2018, he received the Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award, something we treat as his definitive global recognition as an activist. For feasibility reasons, we narrowed down the scope of our inquiry to his engagement with mainstream media and Twitter, his preferred social media platform. While this scope failed to cover the whole media environment, it gave us valuable insights into the complexity of Kaepernick’s activist media practices and the necessary inter-relations between different media logics.

Methodologically, an examination of activist media practices may consider news coverage and portrayal but necessarily goes beyond representation to try to understand activists' role in shaping those representations. Thus, to observe Kaepernick's interactions with the media, we relied on a wide array of mainstream sources that offered evidence of Kaepernick's practices, as well as on his own tweets and retweets. The first step was identifying all publicly available relevant instances in the selected twenty month period. In the case of mainstream media, this included twelve press conferences, three one-to-one interviews, four public appearances when receiving various awards, and three prominent feature news stories about Kaepernick that pointed to his unwillingness to give an interview. One of these stories made Kaepernick's refusal explicit; for another, our personal communication with the journalist confirmed this had been the case.

While our sample included all the identified mainstream media sources, for Twitter, we had to draw on a sub-sample of the 2,967 (re)tweets we scraped via Twitter Analytics, specifically searching for Kaepernick's Twitter account (@Kaepernick7) in those twenty months. Drawing on Chouliaraki and Zaborowski's focus on 'crucial moments' for in-depth exploration of significant events within larger case study analysis, we limited the analysis to tweets and retweets to four particularly significant months: the first and the last one in the twenty month period (i.e. August 2016 and April 2018), as well as January 2017, when his activism was well-established and his high Twitter activity points to a peak in his activism, and March 2017, the last month of Kaepernick's NFL career.⁶³ This led to the sub-sample of 519 tweets and retweets we discuss below. There were 53 (re)tweets in August 2016, 238 in January 2017, 155 in March 2017, and 73 in April 2018.

Our analysis involved a close reading of the data, paying attention to 'the usage, purpose, and contextual significance of the language,' and interpreting the material in light of the theoretical framework and aims of the study. While different co-authors coded the data from mainstream media and from Twitter, sharing our observations from initial readings allowed us to come up with three shared sets of 'questions posed to the text' and an integrated analysis.⁶⁴ First, we attended to Kaepernick's interactions with and uses of different media. For this, we looked at the circumstances under which he decided to talk or not with reporters, for cues about how these interactions looked like, and at the use of his own Twitter account as a medium to amplify specific voices and agendas. Second, we examined the content of Kaepernick's mediated messages across platforms. We focused specifically on how he explained the aims and the challenges of his protest, which included references to the role of the media. Third, we examined the different ways in which Kaepernick grounded his

protest historically, most prominently through frequent references to and reflections on the legacy of earlier Black activism.

Analysis

Kaepernick's strategic use of media

NFL reporter Steve Wyche broke the news that Kaepernick was not standing for the national anthem on August 26, 2016. In what was years later described as a '10-minute one-on-one interview' going viral,⁶⁵ Kaepernick explained: 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color.'⁶⁶ After that interview and until the end of the period we analysed, most interactions Kaepernick had with mainstream media were [erase] locker room and post-game press conferences.

An ESPN reporter described the first of those locker room sessions, from August 28, 2016, as follows:

There was that much media in there, probably 30 to 40 media, all kind of crowded around Colin Kaepernick's locker... Really everyone came for Kaepernick. There really wasn't any guarantee that Kaepernick was going to talk today, but it was very clear after he stood in the middle of that group that he wanted to speak, that this is a conversation he wanted to have, and a conversation that he wants to continue moving forward. He spoke for nearly 20 minutes, was very passionate about answering every single question.⁶⁷

In most of the eleven other press conferences that followed, we observed comparable media attention to Kaepernick and a similar disposition in him to willingly engage in the conversation about racism and the need to fight it. He insisted on the need to give voice to those who were being silenced and to make sure that issues of racism and oppression remained at the forefront of social debate. In Q&As after games, there was frequent talk about Kaepernick's 'message' and questions about threats to it. As Kaepernick put it in the August 28 locker room conversation, 'To be honest, it's not something I'm going to be quiet about. I'm going to speak the truth when I'm asked about it. This isn't for looks. This isn't for publicity or anything like that. This is for people that don't have the voice.'⁶⁸

With respect to other mainstream media opportunities, Kaepernick explicitly opted for being ‘outside the spotlight,’ declining interview requests from, among others, *The New York Times* (NYT).⁶⁹ Even the article where *GQ* magazine declared Kaepernick *GQ*’s 2017 Citizen of the Year (2017) as well as *Time* magazine’s cover story on Kaepernick (2016) lacked a quote or statement from the athlete. His team had ‘politely declined’ the request: ‘Colin has been consistent in his approach. He did not consent to any media interviews during last football season, as far as I know,’ the *Time* reporter told us in April 2018.⁷⁰ The two one-to-one interviews Kaepernick did give in this period (after Wyche’s NFL story) point to a deliberately selective strategy. He talked with *The Undeclared*, an online ESPN news site dealing with ‘the intersections of race, sports and culture’ (renamed *Andscape* in 2022) and with *The Nation*.⁷¹ In both cases, the interviews were part of longer stories about Kaepernick’s Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC), a program to ‘advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilisation.’⁷² *The Undeclared* reporter accompanied Kaepernick to KYRC’s very first camp, in Oakland, in October 2016; *The Nation*’s reporter joined a camp in Chicago in May 2017. While *The Undeclared* also published a separate piece with parts of the video-recorded conversation with Kaepernick as the ‘first 1-on-1 video interview since the start of his protest,’ *The Nation* produced a podcast version of its story.

Between December 2017 and April 2018, Kaepernick received four awards: the ACLU SoCal’s Eason Monroe Courageous Advocate Award, the Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award, the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship and Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience Award. His acceptance speeches served as valuable opportunities to reach large mainstream audiences. In them, Kaepernick underscored the importance of speaking up against injustice. To the audience at the Puffin/Nation Prize ceremony, for example, he said: ‘continue to speak just in an unjust room. Regardless of the consequences, regardless of the backlash.’ In the ceremony for the Sports Illustrated Award, he described himself ‘as a person who receives credit for using my platform to protest systemic oppression.’⁷³

Kaepernick’s relationship with mainstream media is better understood in connection with his social media use. In the story breaking Kaepernick’s activism, Wyche noted that ‘Kaepernick’s Twitter feed [was] filled with civil rights messages.’⁷⁴ Likewise, the long *NYT* story on Kaepernick’s avoidance of the spotlight, described the athlete as active on Twitter and cited some of his tweets.⁷⁵ In the twenty month period we covered, Kaepernick posted almost 3,000 (re)tweets, an average of 5 (re) tweets per day, 94% of which were retweets. By mid-2017, he had more than one million Twitter

followers. 617 of the (re)tweets from the sampled months were further retweeted one thousand or more times (up to 340,246 times), while some were liked thousands of times. Kaepernick's account can thus be seen as an online medium, selecting and forwarding articles or voices aligned with his agenda. Some of his tweets and retweets were liked 10,000 to 100,000 times.

When taking a closer look at the organisations or individuals from whom Kaepernick retweeted, we identified two groups who either support his activism or denounce racist events. The first group consists of celebrities ranging from singers (e.g. Eminem, J Cole, The Weeknd) to well-known sportsmen and sportswomen (e.g. Megan Rapinoe, Kevin Durant). A second group consists of critical thinkers, mostly from the U.S. (researchers, journalists, politicians, activists, NGOs, and alternative news outlets). 63% of the sampled posts were retweets from four accounts: those of African American Studies academics Ameer Hasan Loggins (25%) and Christopher Petrella (8%), both of whom also participated in the KYRC; media producer and Kaepernick's partner, Nessa Diab (5%); and the KYRC Twitter account.

Racism and the responsibility to fight it

Throughout media platforms, Kaepernick insisted on the persistence of racism in the U.S. and on how racism is visible in and maintained by public institutions, including the police, the army, the media, and the educational and the political systems. As mentioned above, Kaepernick was frequently asked about his 'message.' On one press conference, he answered:

The message is that we have a lot of issues in this country that we need to deal with. We have a lot of people that are oppressed. We have a lot of people that aren't treated equally, that aren't given equal opportunities. You know, police brutality is a huge thing that needs to be addressed. There are a lot of issues that need to be talked about, need to be brought to life, and we need to fix those things.⁷⁶

References to police brutality and racist practices, like in this press conference, were also recurrent in interviews and award speeches, as well as on Twitter. An example is a tweet, initially written by Loggins (@LeftSentThis) and reposted by Kaepernick: 'In Case You Forgot, Cops Are Still Killing Black Folks.'⁷⁷ The post reminded Kaepernick's followers that despite a rhetoric of racial equality from large institutions, including the media, statistics on police violence proved otherwise. It linked

to an online article published on March 24, 2017, which detailed how police shootings had already killed 237 people that year.

Kaepernick's protest started a few months before the 2016 presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. When asked about the candidates, Kaepernick criticised both, underscoring larger institutional problems. For example, when a reporter confronted him with the fact that U.S. citizens had elected a Black president twice, he said: 'It has elected a Black president, but there are also a lot of things that haven't changed. There are a lot of issues that still haven't been addressed, and that's something over an eight-year term.'⁷⁸ Some weeks after the election, a reporter asked whether the low voter turnout could signal that people were 'losing track' of his message. Kaepernick replied:

Well, I don't worry about people losing track of what the message is, because I've been true to the message. I'm against systematic oppression and voting is a part of that system and I've talked at length about why I believe that.⁷⁹

Kaepernick's critique of the political system also involved local authorities. When former Maine governor Paul LePage justified police violence against people of colour or of Hispanic origin, saying that it was their mission to protect the country and retaliate when enemies threaten its safety, Kaepernick retweeted professor Ben Carrington's (@BenHCarrington) reaction: 'Maine Governor: "You shoot at the enemy. And the enemy right now are people of color or people of Hispanic origin".'

Mainstream media were also prominent in Kaepernick's institutional criticism. In a press conference, he argued that there had been some misunderstanding about his position because 'the media painted this as I'm anti-American, anti-men and women of the military and that's not the case at all.'⁸⁰ He also voiced others' media critique. Examples are the retweets of an article in which sports journalist Kevin Lynch (@klynch49), said the media was falsely claiming that Kaepernick had annoyed his 49er fans; and of a post from Nessa Diab (January 24, 2017) saying 'WOMEN LIE MEN LIE... NUMBERS DO NOT! An Honest Statistical Evaluation of Colin Kaepernick 49erswebzone.com,' which linked to an article about the media's negative assessment of the player being 'devoid of any statistical facts.'

Kaepernick regularly linked his concern with social injustice to his responsibility and efforts to fight it. Asked about people's support of his protest in a press conference, he explained: 'Some of us are able to do certain things without consequences and others of us can't.... You know, me as a Black man that plays football and is considered a celebrity, I'm treated differently than a Black man that's working from 9 to 5 in the hood.'⁸¹

In another press conference, he referred to his talks ‘with a lot of different lawyers, activists, people that are helping’ to generate change in U.S. society.⁸² On Twitter, Kaepernick frequently referred to his campaign. For example, he reported updates on his pledge to donate one million dollars for oppressed communities and shared tweets from Amnesty International (@amnesty), highlighting his stance against racial discrimination. These tweets featured Kaepernick adopting poses inspired by Malcolm X, wearing clothing that conveyed a political message, or along well-known activists, most notably winners of the Nobel Prize for Peace such as President Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai. Some tweets linked to mainstream media articles on Kaepernick’s activism or to his speeches, including the one during Amnesty International’s Award ceremony. In line with his decision to only give interviews focused on his KYRC program, he also retweeted frequently from the KYRC account. Those posts not only announced future and reflected on previous events but also referred to the history of Black people and the ongoing socio-political situation.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

I stand on the shoulders of giants. Lonnie Ali, the wife of Muhammad Ali, is in attendance. I am equally honoured to share this space with her. She once said that Muhammad’s legacy is not just for me or his children and grandchildren. It’s a legacy for the world. The footprints he leaves are large and his life is and has been a multi-textured tapestry that is rich in love, wisdom, life lessons and human kindness. I can only hope that I am taking steps towards walking in the footsteps that he has left behind for the world to follow in. Though I never had the pleasure of meeting Muhammad Ali, he mentored me without ever meeting me. He in many ways laid the foundation of what I saw as the zenith of athlete activism, perfecting the utilisation of your platform as an athlete to force conversations about how America is not living up to what America professes to be.⁸³

Kaepernick’s words, when accepting the Muhamed Ali Legacy Award, are an example of the importance he gave to history throughout his mediated efforts. In some respects, his reliance on historical leaders intensified throughout the analysed period. During the first four press conferences, he wore a white, black, or 49ers t-shirt, and since October 2016, his t-shirts for press conferences

showed the faces of civil rights leaders Muhammad Ali (twice); the Black Panther Party; Malcolm X (3 times); Fred Hampton, chairman of the Chicago Black Panther Party; and Huey P. Newton. On some occasions, he was asked about his t-shirts. About one with Ali, he said: ‘for me to be able to have someone like that come before me is huge and he is someone that helped pave the way for this to happen.’⁸⁴ About a t-shirt he had worn earlier, which portrayed Malcom X with Fidel Castro in 1960, and which had been strongly criticised by part of the Cuban community in Florida, Kaepernick said: ‘That was a historic moment. And that’s something that I will always be true to. What Malcolm was, what he represented, because I’m not going to cut out history.’⁸⁵

Online, Kaepernick visibly aimed at educating his followers on the historical evidence of systemic racism and racial injustice in the U.S. His posts showed athletes protesting before him as well as quotes and pictures from well-known human rights activists and intellectuals, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK), Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, Audre Lorde, Coretta Scott King, James A. Baldwin, and Angela Davis. By pointing to the continued relevance of their message, Kaepernick underscored how racism and social injustice have a long history and still persist. One example is a retweet from African American studies academic Ameer Hasan Loggins carrying a quote from *Learning from the 60s*, a speech Audre Lorde delivered in 1982, during a Malcolm X weekend celebration at Harvard University: ‘If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.’⁸⁶ The quote was accompanied by a black-and-white photo of Lorde. The message underscored the value of self-definition, especially for Black women, and thus of intersectional resistance against oppressive societal norms and fantasies.

Other (re)tweets combined Kaepernick’s historical consciousness with his critique of the media. An example is a retweeted call from Ameer Hassan Loggins (@LeftSentThis) to ‘Never forget what Brother Malcolm said about the media, and ALWAYS remember that the media is more pervasive and powerful today than ever.’ The retweet included a picture of Malcom X and his quote: ‘The media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent. And that’s power because they control the minds of the masses.’ Other examples are a series of retweets from January 11, 2017, also from Loggins (@LeftSentThis), with clips of MLK’s speeches criticising the media for privileging his more easily digestible ‘I Have a Dream’ speech over others in which he spoke more radically about race, slavery and racism. ‘Please listen to Martin Luther King Jr. speaking out against the Vietnam War. This is the MLK they assassinated,’ said one of the (re)tweets.

Toward the end of *The Nation*'s piece with Kaepernick at a KYRC event in Chicago, it is mentioned that Kaepernick gave ancestry DNA kits to all young participants. The idea, Kaepernick explained, was that they could 'trace your ancestry and connect with your lost relatives who may have taken this test as well.' Adopted into a white family, a DNA test tracing Kaepernick's lineage to Ghana had been key for understanding not only his own personal history, but the history of his community, he explained. 'For me, identifying with Africa gave me a higher sense of who I was, knowing that we have a proud history and are all in this together.'⁸⁷

Conclusion

Our analysis of Kaepernick's interactions with the media in the twenty month period since his refusal to stand up for the national anthem was known, shows how he understood and took advantage of the hybrid environment. Kaepernick strictly limited his interactions with mainstream media to obligatory and carefully selected opportunities. He could afford to do that without threatening the visibility of his message because, at the same time, he handled a Twitter account followed by more than one million people, with some of his tweets liked and shared thousands of times, and mainstream media apparently monitoring them closely. Kaepernick amplified carefully curated tweets, underscoring the extent, mechanisms, and deep historical roots of racism in the U.S., as well as the legitimacy and value of his and his predecessors' struggles for social justice. Our results thus ground the claim that not just new media, but the broader media ecology, was central to Kaepernick's activism.

Given his role as a fore-runner in contemporary athlete activism – influencing athletes worldwide – an analysis of Kaepernick's media practices provides insights into strategies that other athlete activists may use nowadays for their anti-racism message. Indeed, it is now common to see other sportspeople, mostly Black, creatively engaging with the hybrid media environment to talk about and draw attention to their anti-racist messages. This was, for example, how British Jamaican professional footballer Raheem Sterling called out the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers for helping 'fuel racism an[d] aggressive behaviour' ([instagram.com/sterling7](https://www.instagram.com/sterling7), 2018), through an Instagram post then covered by mainstream media. Similar cases involve Naomi Osaka, LeBron James, Kylian Mbappe, Romelu Lukaku, and others.

We join those who acknowledge that Twitter/X, like other social media, can be a powerful tool for advocating for social justice and who are simultaneously concerned about social media's socio-political

threats.⁸⁸ By acknowledging the complexity of media practices, an ecological approach avoids the determinism that underpins both technological optimism and pessimism. It shifts our attention to ‘the agency and the needs of individuals and groups, and their appropriation of media technologies.’⁸⁹ A historical approach is also fundamental in this respect. It does not only call our attention to differences and continuities in activists’ media environments. It also reminds us that changes in the media, like changes in the socio-political environment, are neither straightforward nor do they guarantee specific outcomes. As observed by Edwards in his overview of 50 years of anti-racist college sports activism in the U.S., events that in hindsight appear as clear historical patterns are associated to ‘chance developments that could have been neither anticipated, orchestrated, nor controlled.’⁹⁰

Aware of this history and of the contingency it underscores, Kaepernick was mindful of his media and his socio-political environment. He knew he was not simply the subject of media coverage and social media posts. As observed by Doehler, ‘Kaepernick chose both the time and place of his protest with precision, utilizing his status as a star footballer to gain exposure for his cause, and whilst the anthem and national flag were not the reason for his protests, their symbolism was the clear target.’⁹¹ He knew of the risks and opportunities, which he tried to control, even if that was never fully possible. In the news article that broke the story of his protest, Kaepernick is quoted saying: ‘If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right,’⁹² an idea he repeated in several press conferences. Notably, they took his football away, but new kinds of endorsements became possible. His contract with Nike is a notable example. Even if it was a ‘neoliberal turn,’ it was not a silencing imposed on Kaepernick, but the ‘moderation of his radicalism as a means of amplifying his voice,’⁹³ a strategic move that would have arguably not been possible some decades ago and in a different media environment.

Endnotes

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