

THE CASE OF THE
**CULTURAL
INFLUENCERS**

POWER OF POP SERIES

COLIN KAEPERNICK

JIMMY KIMMEL

AND #METOO



The Opportunity Agenda

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About The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2006 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people's lives.

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Executive Summary

In recent years, the power of popular entertainment to inspire large audiences and shift cultural norms has become a topic of growing interest in the social advocacy space. A large body of research has been dedicated to tracking representation trends in film and television^[1], and a growing cohort of organizations provides practical recommendations for those seeking to leverage popular culture in their advocacy work. While existing research has provided critical insights into the effectiveness of high-profile spokespeople in short-term campaigns and fundraising, significant gaps in the literature exist in terms of in-depth analysis of more symbolic actions on the part of high-profile individuals as well as measurements of the impact of celebrity influencers on long-term narrative shift.

Currently there is a pressing need to better understand the potential of high-profile influencers to not only draw attention to social issues but also spark meaningful dialogue and actions that lead to lasting social and policy change. As part of our *Power of Pop* series, this current research examines three cases of high-profile entertainers and athletes speaking out or advocating for a social and/or policy change. The cases include:

Case 1: Colin Kaepernick and the Take A Knee protest

Case 2: Jimmy Kimmel and the healthcare debate

Case 3: Me Too and Time's Up movement

This research aims to better understand the unique influence of high-profile athletes and entertainers and provide practical recommendations for those seeking to work directly or indirectly with cultural influencers to shift narratives and effect policy change. Key questions explored in the research include:

- Under which circumstances do cultural influencers have the greatest ability to achieve their goals?
- Are cultural influencers' interventions best suited for long-term cultural change, short-term policy shifts, or other types of impact?

There is currently a pressing need to better understand the potential of high profile influencers to not only draw attention to social issues; but spark meaningful dialogue and actions that lead to lasting social and policy change.

¹ See Panis, K. and Van den Bulck, H. 2014. In the footsteps of Bob and Angelina: Celebrities' diverse societal engagement and its ability to attract media coverage. *Communications*, 39(1), pp. 23–42. Retrieved 2 Jan. 2018, from doi:10.1515/commun-2014-0003; Drake, P. and Miah, A. 2010. The cultural politics of celebrity. *Cultural Politics*, 6 (1), 49–64; Panis, K. and Van Den Bulck, H. 2012. Celebrities' quest for a better world: Understanding Flemish public perceptions of celebrities' societal engagement. *Javnost – The Public*, 19 (3), 75–92; Wilkins, KG. Communication. 2015. Celebrity as celebration of privatization in global development: A critical feminist analysis of Oprah, Madonna, and Angelina. *Culture & Critique*, 8, 163–181.

- What types of celebrity intervention have the most impact?
- How can social justice advocates best support/leverage the influence of cultural influencers both through direct and indirect contact?

To evaluate the effectiveness of the range of strategies and issues covered in our selected case studies, we established the following criteria for success:

- If the action or sets of actions had a clearly stated goal, to what extent was this goal achieved?
- Was there a marked impact on the national discourse, in both media coverage and public discussions of the issue the cultural influencer was addressing?
- Did the actions of one influencer encourage others to speak out or also act?
- Were there unanticipated shifts in the public discourse (and, where applicable, policy change) as a direct or indirect result of a cultural influencer's actions?
- Based on these criteria, we conducted a media content analysis and social media analysis for each individual case. Our findings point to a series of lessons learned and best practices for future cultural campaigns.

The Impact

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that strategic engagement from high-profile influencers can have the following impact on social advocacy campaigns:

- **Significant increases in news media and social media engagement with social justice issues:** All three case studies revealed a marked increase in both the volume and focus on news media and social media engagement. For instance, since Colin Kaepernick and other athletes began taking a knee, news media coverage of police misconduct has nearly doubled (from an average of 4000 articles to 7000 articles published every 12 months), and social media engagement with the issue has seen a nearly three-fold increase.
- **Direct or indirect policy and cultural changes in organizations and institutions:** The case studies in this report have resulted in a myriad of organizational policy and cultural shifts as a direct and indirect result of the efforts of high-profile influencers. In the case of Jimmy Kimmel, the Graham-Cassidy bill was ultimately defeated. Since Kaepernick and other athletes began taking a knee in protest to police killings of unarmed people of color, the National Football League (NFL) and several teams have spoken out in support of criminal justice reform. For instance, in September 2016, shortly after Kaepernick's first field-side protest, the San Francisco 49ers announced that it would be donating \$1 million to two charities in the Bay area focused on racial and economic justice. In January

2018, the NFL in conjunction with players formed the “Let’s Listen Together” coalition, which aims to improve police and community relations.^[2] As of July 2018, 10 NFL teams have announced the launch of new committees, coalitions, or other activities aimed at raising awareness and tackling social justice issues. The Me Too movement has had a similar impact. Since the Me Too movement first began to proliferate in October 2017, more than 800 high-profile figures have been publicly accused of harassment, sexual assault, rape, workplace misconduct, and other related behavior.^[3] A recent article details the range of policy changes that have been introduced across industries because of the Me Too movement.^[4] This includes the introduction of mandatory annual anti-harassment trainings for lawmakers and staff in Congress and the inclusion of so-called “Weinstein Clauses” in several large mergers and acquisitions.^[5]

- **Encouraging other high-profile individuals and members of the public to speak out:** Each case study was characterized by high-profile influencers successfully encouraging others to speak out in support of or opposition to an issue. Following a series of monologues from Jimmy Kimmel, several Republican senators spoke out openly against the Graham-Cassidy bill, eventually leading to its defeat. Since Kaepernick first began his protest in August 2016, more than 200 athletes have sat or kneeled during the national anthem.^[6] Our analysis revealed that a significant portion of news media and online discourse focused on actions and commentary of other high-profile athletes and spokespeople. In the case of the Me Too movement, not only did the personal stories of high-profile entertainers propel the issue of gendered violence into the national discourse, but also subsequent coordinated efforts of the Time’s Up campaign maintained engagement with the issue after media coverage began to wane.

In the following sections, we begin with an overview of key findings from each case study and conclude with recommendations for advocates seeking to implement a cultural influencer strategy.

2 McManamon, P. “How NFL players, teams put action behind their protest.” ESPN, July 2018.

3 Temin and Company. “Between Cosby and Kavanaugh—810 High-profile public figures accused of sexual harassment.” PR Newswire, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/between-cosby-and-kavanaugh--810-high-profile-public-figures-accused-of-sexual-harassment-300723738.html>, October 3, 2018.

4 Pesce, NL. “The #MeToo Movement has changed policies across industries, but there’s still work to be done.” Moneyish, <https://moneyish.com/upgrade/the-metoo-movement-has-changed-policies-across-industries-but-theres-still-work-to-be-done/>, October 4, 2018.

5 Ibid.

6 Stapleton, A. “More than 200 NFL players sit or kneel during national anthem.” Chicago Tribune, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/football/ct-nfl-national-anthem-kneeling-20170924-story.html>, September 2017.

Colin Kaepernick and the Take a Knee Protest

Background

In August 2016, during the National Football League (NFL) pre-season, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat on the sidelines during the national anthem to bring awareness to the deaths of unarmed people of color at the hands of police. In the coming weeks, after consultation with a military veteran, Kaepernick would begin to kneel, rather than sit, in order to continue his protest while also showing respect to those who have served. Kaepernick's action ignited a national conversation covering a vast scope of issues.

In his original statement to the press, Kaepernick outlined his intentions, stating:

“I’m going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there’s a significant change and I feel that flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it’s supposed to, I’ll stand. This stand wasn’t for me. This is because I’m seeing things happen to people that don’t have a voice, people that don’t have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change.”

— Colin Kaepernick

Since Kaepernick first refused to stand during the anthem, more than 200 professional athletes have joined his protest and the NFL has come out publicly in support of progressive criminal justice reform. At the same time, debates surrounding the National Football League persist, with both opponents and supporters of Kaepernick continuing to call for a boycott of the league.

This case study examines Kaepernick’s impact on overall discourse related to the killing of unarmed people of color spanning August 1, 2016–August 1, 2018.

FINDINGS

Although the long-term impact of Kaepernick's protest is still yet to be realized, our analysis revealed the following major findings related to the actions of Kaepernick and other professional athletes who have catalyzed the protest:

There has been a marked increase in social media engagement related to the killing or harassment of people of color by law enforcement

Since Kaepernick first took a knee, overall news media and online engagement with the issue of police misconduct has increased. Media and online discourse related to police misconduct increased from an average of 1.3 million social media posts and 4000 news media articles published over a 12-month timespan to more than 3 million online posts generated and more than 7000 news media articles published between September 2017 and September 2018—a significant portion of which is directly tied to coverage and engagement with Kaepernick's protest.

There was a significant correlation between increased social media or other engagement about Kaepernick and increased news media coverage of police misconduct

Since Kaepernick first began his protest in August 2016, media coverage, online searches, and social media engagement with the issue of police brutality saw significant spikes in the volume of engagement in the months of August 2016, September 2016, October 2017, August 2018, and September 2018—all months that correspond with increased discussion and engagement with Colin Kaepernick and his protest.

Kaepernick's protest alongside other movements has ushered in a more intersectional discussion of police misconduct and instances of police brutality online

Kaepernick's protest has built on the significant work of the Black Lives Matter movement—and has moved the discussion of police accountability in a more intersectional and nuanced direction. Since August 2016, references to “racial justice” have emerged as a prominent term discussed in the context of “police brutality.” Word cluster analysis indicates that the emergent discussion of “racial justice” is directly tied to online discussion of “Colin Kaepernick.” At the same time, conversations related to “women” and “brown people” have also emerged as prominent topics (in relation to discussions of “police brutality” and related issues), signaling the impact of other prominent movements (particularly Me Too) and the growing intersectional nature of online discourse.

Pro-Kaepernick voices have dominated Twitter content

Between August 2016 and August 2018, the most influential tweets (in terms of retweets and likes) touching on Colin Kaepernick's protest tended to originate from high-profile supporters of Colin Kaepernick. For instance, a January 2018 tweet from sports commentator Jemele Hill was the most influential tweet related to Kaepernick between August 2016 and August 2018, generating nearly 300,000 likes, more than 100,000 comments, and more than 63,000 retweets. Hill's tweet alongside many of the other most influential retweets incorporated a visual component (usually a comical meme or image of Kaepernick and/or other athletes protesting) and were explicit in their defense of Kaepernick or critique of his opponents.

Online audiences focused on Kaepernick and police misconduct diverge significantly between Twitter and Facebook, with Facebook featuring a more vocal and coordinated opposition

Discourse on Facebook was distinct from Twitter in both the tone and focus of the discussion. While Twitter was dominated by pro-Kaepernick spokespeople and discourse, on Facebook a significant share of the most popular content focused on controversy surrounding Kaepernick's protest and, in turn, attracted a significant amount of anti-Kaepernick sentiment. Some of the most heavily engaged with content, in terms of comments, likes, and shares, originated from Fox News. Other popular content on Facebook featured sensational headlines intended to highlight conflicts and disputes or people of color speaking out in opposition of Kaepernick, such as Jim Brown and David Clarke.

Kaepernick's "blackballing" from the NFL and the continued protest of other professional athletes occupied a significant portion of online discourse

We examined the website addresses that generated the highest number of shares across online platforms between August 2016 and August 2018. Twenty-two percent of some of the most shared content from August 2016 to August 2018 was focused on Kaepernick's blackballing from the NFL. This segment of content generally featured supporters of Kaepernick pointing to his continued unemployment. A significant portion of posts within this category featured members of the public calling for a boycott of the NFL. Some of the most influential posts within this category touched on the hypocrisy of the NFL, specifically their willingness to hire players accused of domestic violence but seeming unwillingness to re-hire Kaepernick. Another 18 percent of the most influential social media content focused on other athletes (such as Eric Reid) choosing to kneel or speak out in support of Kaepernick.

Imagery connecting Kaepernick's protest to the civil rights era generated some of the highest levels of social media engagement

A significant portion of the most influential content shared, liked, and commented on within the 25 months examined featured some form of imagery. Images of Kaepernick and other athletes kneeling emerged as a focal point in both media coverage and social media discourse and was characterized by the creation and sharing of memes, gifs, and artwork. The most widely shared images in sampled content made visual connections between Colin Kaepernick's protest and the civil rights era and anti-Vietnam protests.

News media discourse was slightly more positive than negative, with pro-Kaepernick voices outnumbering anti-Kaepernick voices

Overall, the tone of news media discourse was slightly more positive than negative, with 33 percent of news articles presenting a more positive angle of Colin Kaepernick and the Take a Knee protest, while 39 percent took on a neutral tone and 28 percent took a more negative stance. Pro-Kaepernick voices also slightly outnumbered anti-Kaepernick voices in direct quotes. Overall, 38 percent of quotes originated from pro-Kaepernick voices, including former athletes, sports commentators, and high-profile entertainers. This compares to 28 percent from anti-Kaepernick voices, with 15 percent of quotes within this segment originating from members of the public and 4 percent from Donald Trump.

Colin Kaepernick's original statement featured heavily in news media coverage

Colin Kaepernick himself was a prominent voice in news media coverage, comprising 13 percent of the direct quotes in our sample. Of that 13 percent, a significant portion of quotes were a re-quote of the original statement Kaepernick made during an interview with NFL Media in August 2016. During the interview, Kaepernick explained the reason for his refusal to stand during the protest, pointing to the lack of accountability following police shootings of people of color and the need for widespread reform. This statement is re-quoted frequently in news media coverage related to Kaepernick and Take a Knee and comprised 9 percent of total quotes from Kaepernick.

A significant portion of news media coverage of Take a Knee has focused on the issues of patriotism and the military

Between August 2016 and October 2017, 20 percent of news media articles within our sample focused on opposition to Kaepernick's protest, specifically the notion that taking a knee during the national anthem is disrespectful to the national flag and anthem and, in turn, the nation's veterans and military. Articles generally featured spokespeople making arguments for and against the idea that kneeling during the anthem is a form of disrespect and unpatriotic and/or debating the notion that the national flag and anthem are, in fact, symbols of the military and veterans.

Only a small portion of news media coverage has focused explicitly on the issue of police brutality related to Kaepernick's protest

Colin Kaepernick began protesting to bring attention to racism, racial profiling, and police brutality. In the articles examined, 8 percent were centrally focused on police brutality, the lowest of the six focus areas. Discussion of Kaepernick's blackballing from the National Football League dominated coverage in the timeframe examined (31 percent) followed by a focus on freedom of speech (19 percent), peer support for Kaepernick (12 percent), and racism (10 percent). The majority of the articles that did mention police brutality did so as background information. Articles focused exclusively or predominantly on the issue of police brutality were the most likely articles to feature a direct quote from Colin Kaepernick explaining the reason behind and origin of his protest. The original statement given by Kaepernick in August 2016 was regularly featured in articles focused specifically on the issue of police brutality.

Partisan discourse featured heavily in both news media and social media content following comments from Donald Trump

After 10 months of low levels of engagement, references to Kaepernick and #TakeaKnee resurged once again in both news media coverage and social media discourse as a direct result of comments made by Donald Trump during a campaign rally in Alabama on September 22, 2017. During the rally, Trump called on NFL owners to "get that son of a bitch off the field" in reference to athletes taking a knee. Trump's comments and the subsequent media and public commentary resulted in a significant spike in related online engagement and media coverage throughout September 2017.

Jimmy Kimmel & the Healthcare Debate

Background

On May 1, 2017, Jimmy Kimmel began the opening monologue to the late night talk show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, when he began to tear up. Through a cracking voice, Kimmel described the birth of his son, Billy. Billy was born on April 21, 2017, with a congenital heart disease. Kimmel took his audience step by step through his family's experience, from the moment a nurse first noticed discoloration in Billy's skin, to multiple conversations with doctors about the months, if not years of surgeries to come. In the final few minutes of his monologue, Kimmel pivoted to the future condition of the United States healthcare, stating:

“We were brought up to believe that we live in the greatest country in the world, but until a few years ago, millions and millions of us had no access to health insurance at all.

You know, before 2014, if you were born with congenital heart disease, like my son was, there is a good chance you'd never be able to get health insurance because you had a pre-existing condition. You were born with a pre-existing condition and if your parents didn't have medical insurance, you might not live long enough to even get denied because of a pre-existing condition. If your baby is going to die and it doesn't have to, it shouldn't matter how much money you make... I think that is something, whether you are a Republican or a Democrat or something else, that we all agree on that... Right? We do. And whatever your party, whatever you believe, whatever you support, we need to make sure that the people who are supposed to represent us, the people that are meeting right now in Washington, understand that very clearly. Let's stop with the nonsense. This isn't football—there are no teams. We are the team. It's the United States. Don't let their partisan squabbles divide us on something that every decent person wants. We need to take care of each other... No parent should ever have to decide if they can afford to save their child's life.⁷

⁷ Yahr, E. "An emotional Jimmy Kimmel discusses newborn son's heart disease, makes passionate health-care plea." The Washington Post, May 2, 2017.

Kimmel's statement about the state of healthcare in America came in the midst of widespread political debates about the future of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Days after that monologue, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) made an appearance on Jimmy Kimmel's show. Earlier that week, Sen. Cassidy had coined the term the "Jimmy Kimmel Test" while talking to reporters about the new healthcare bill that he and Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) were creating.^[8] Cassidy defined the "Kimmel Test" as a new barometer for healthcare that would ensure every "child born with a congenital heart disease [gets] everything he or she needs in that first year of life."^[9] While interviewing Sen. Cassidy, Kimmel pushed Cassidy to go even further and expand his bill to ensure no family could be denied medical care for pre-existing conditions or their inability to pay.^[10]

On September 13, 2017, Sens. Graham and Cassidy introduced the Graham-Cassidy Healthcare Bill. On September 19, days after the bill was introduced to the public, Jimmy Kimmel explained that the Graham-Cassidy bill did not pass the Kimmel Test. Sen. Cassidy had promised four specific aspects while promoting the bill in the media, including coverage for all, no discrimination based on pre-existing conditions, lower premiums for middle-class families, and no lifetime cap.^[11] Addressing these discrepancies in his September monologue, Kimmel noted,

"The bill does none of those things... And this guy, Bill Cassidy, just lied right to my face.

Kimmel ended with a call to action for his viewers to reach out to Congress and express their opposition to the healthcare bill; he provided the number to do so on the bottom of the screen. On September 25, following multiple Republican senators' refusal to support the bill, the decision was made to not take the bill before the Senate floor.

This case study examines news media and social media discourse related to the Graham-Cassidy bill and healthcare more broadly from April 2017 (the month preceding Jimmy Kimmel's first monologue about healthcare) to October 2017, the month following the decision not to put the bill up for a floor vote.

8 Yahr, E. "Jimmy Kimmel gets heated about health-care bill, says Sen. Bill Cassidy 'lied right to my face'." The Washington Post, September 20, 2017.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Jimmy Kimmel Timeline

Birth of Billy Kimmel to Death of Graham-Cassidy Bill

FIGURE 1

April 21, 2017

William (Billy) Kimmel - Molly McNearney and Jimmy Kimmel's son is born.

May 1, 2017

Jimmy Kimmel reveals newborn congenital heart defect in late night monologue.

May 8, 2017

A week after his first monologue, Jimmy readdresses American healthcare issues and interviews Sen. Bill Cassidy on show.

September 6, 2017

In his monologue, Jimmy Kimmel explains Congress and government shut down through barrister sketch.

September 19, 2017

Jimmy recaps conversation with Sen. Cassidy, outlines the aspects of the newly released Graham- Cassidy Bill, calls Sen. Cassidy a liar and urges viewers to call Congress.

September 20, 2017

President Donald Trump tweets support for the Graham-Cassidy Bill and Sen. Cassidy, VP Pence and Sen. Kennedy all appear separately on Fox News to refute Jimmy Kimmel's comments.

Kimmel again addresses the Graham-Cassidy Bill in his monologue and again calls on viewers to reach out to Congress.

September 22, 2017

Sen. Al Franken appears on Jimmy Kimmel Live to discuss healthcare.

September 25, 2017

Kimmel addresses speculations of him being a mouthpiece for the left from Fox News, continues the conversation about healthcare, and announces Sen. Susan Collins's decision to not support the bill.

September 26, 2017

Kimmel announces that the Graham-Cassidy Bill did not pass thanks to Sen. McCain and Sen. Collins, defends Sen. John McCain from President Trump, and asks Congress to write a bipartisan healthcare bill and donate to Puerto Rico.

FINDINGS

Arguably, Kimmel's battle against the Graham-Cassidy Bill can be seen as a success—the bill was not passed.

Our findings indicate that Kimmel's multiple monologues generated the majority of news media coverage and online engagement related to the Graham-Cassidy Bill. Kimmel's initial monologue and continued engagement had the following impact:

Kimmel's monologue was only a small portion of the overall healthcare debate, but it generated the majority of social media content related to the Graham-Cassidy bill

Overall, references to Jimmy Kimmel made up only 2 percent of overall online discourse related to “healthcare”; however, the main cluster of social media engagement related to the Graham-Cassidy bill was a direct result of Jimmy Kimmel's multiple monologues.

News media coverage of healthcare in relation to Jimmy Kimmel aligned with Kimmel's own talking points

Media coverage of Jimmy Kimmel's engagement with the Graham-Cassidy bill aligned with Kimmel's talking points and his central focus on the American healthcare system, with 51 percent of the sample focusing solely on healthcare, specifically the Affordable Care Act. The majority of these articles made reference to Kimmel's monologues discussing healthcare, while informing their audiences about the differences between the ACA and the Graham-Cassidy Bill when it came to individuals' healthcare plans.

A significant portion of news media coverage focused on Jimmy Kimmel's ability to influence public opinion

Of the articles in our analysis, 31 percent focused on Kimmel's perceived ability to move the public sentiment because of his platform as a popular late-night television host.

YouTube was a key factor in audience engagement

In addition to his live viewers, Kimmel generated a significant number of views of clips posted on the Jimmy Kimmel Live! YouTube channel. There was an average of 3,108,571 views on 8 videos posted on Kimmel's channel touching on the Graham-Cassidy bill.

Less public pushback

Unlike the Me Too movement and Take a Knee protest, only a small portion of the social media and news media discourse was focused on anti-Kimmel rhetoric and those opposing his message. The vast majority of the negative commentary originated from public and elected officials, including Cassidy, Graham, and Donald Trump. There are a myriad of reasons for this difference. Kimmel's platform—a nightly talk show—gave him the unique opportunity to respond to negative commentary in a controlled space. It also seems highly likely that Kimmel received less harsh pushback due to gender and racial bias.



CASE 3:

The Me Too Movement and Time's Up Movements

While there has been much debate about the exact start of the current Me Too movement, it is clear that the issue of gendered violence has been propelled into our national discourse and remains a central topic of debate.

The phrase and hashtag “Me Too” was originally coined by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence build unity and tell their stories. Widespread use of the phrase and hashtag did not take place until October 2017. In the months preceding the emergence of Me Too in wider public discourse, there was already heightened discussion of the issue of sexual assault and harassment.

On April 1, 2017, *The New York Times* published a story detailing a series of sexual assault allegations against Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly and \$13 million worth of settlements paid to five women who worked with O'Reilly throughout the years.^[12] The revelations surrounding O'Reilly came just 10 months after the resignation of Fox's former chairman Rogers Ailes over a series of sexual harassment allegations.

\$13 million

worth of settlements paid to five women who worked with Bill O'Reilly



¹² Steel, E. and Schmidt, M. “Bill O'Reilly thrives at Fox News, even as harassment settlements add up.” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2017.

Months later, on October 5, 2017, *The New York Times* published an article detailing sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein in his three decades of power within the entertainment industry.^[13] Shortly after the Weinstein article was published, women from around the world came out with similar stories of systematic sexual assault by Weinstein. By December 13, 2017, 84 women had come forward with accusations against Weinstein ranging from *Black Panther* star Lupita Nyong'o to actress Gwyneth Paltrow.

It was in the midst of this increasing news media coverage on October 15, 2017 that actress Alyssa Milano posted a pivotal tweet, which arguably brought Me Too and the discussion of gendered violence to a mass audience for the first time (see Figure 2). Public and media engagement with the Me Too movement was further amplified in January 2018 by the launch of Time's Up Now (referred to as Time's Up through this report)—a movement against sexual assault founded by Hollywood celebrities.

This case study examines news media and online discourse related to sexual assault and sexual harassment from April 1, 2017 (when the *NY Times* began extensive coverage of the widespread culture of sexual harassment at Fox News) to October 1, 2018. Alongside an analysis of overall discourse related to gendered violence, this study also examines news media coverage and online discussion of the Me Too movement between October 1, 2017 and October 1, 2018.

84 women

had come forward with accusations against Weinstein

ALYSSA MILANO'S ORIGINAL TWEET

FIGURE 2



¹³ Kantor, J. and Twohey, M. "Harvey Weinstein paid off sexual harassment accusers for decades." *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017.

FINDINGS

Discussion of the Me Too movement became part of wider public discourse in October 2017

Following Milano's tweet on October 15, 2017, online references to gendered violence saw a dramatic spike in engagement. As of September 30, 2018, more than 27 million online posts with specific references to "Me-Too," "me too," "me too movement," and other variants have been generated, with significant spikes in engagement in October 2017, January 2018, and September 2018.

Online discussion of sexual assault and harassment has increased dramatically since October 2017

The Me Too movement, alongside Time's Up, has had a significant impact on the volume and tone of online discourse related to gendered violence, especially sexual assault and sexual harassment. Between October 2017 and October 1, 2018, more than 31 million online posts were generated making specific reference to "sexual assault," "sexual harassment," and related terms, up from just 11 million posts generated in the prior 12 months.

The coordinated, offline efforts of high-profile entertainers through the Time's Up campaign helped keep momentum going

Media coverage of widespread sexual harassment allegations against film producer Harry Weinstein, followed by Alyssa Milano's pivotal tweet, resulted in a surge of online engagement. However, after a significant spike in online and media engagement in October 2017 wider discussion of sexual assault began to plateau. Three months later, in January 2018 both online engagement saw a sudden resurgence, resulting in the highest volume of online engagement within the timeframe of our research. This surge in engagement was a direct result of the coordinated efforts of more than 300 women working within the entertainment industry and the launch of the Time's Up campaign, which combined online and offline direct actions. The mission statement, which included the link to the Time's Up website, has been shared more than 22,000 times, while the Time's Up hashtag has been used more than 1.5 million times as of October 2018. The offline actions, specifically the collective wearing of black by actresses and actors during the awards season, helped maintain engagement throughout January 2018.

Individual storytelling featured heavily in news media coverage

The survivors' perspective was the most prevalent topic in the sampled article as 27 percent focused on this topic to bring a voice to the movement, making it more personal and relatable; additionally, more than 50 percent of the articles had survivors' testimonies or unpacked the mentality behind staying silent in the past.

***The New York Times* played a prominent role in shaping discourse around the Me Too movement**

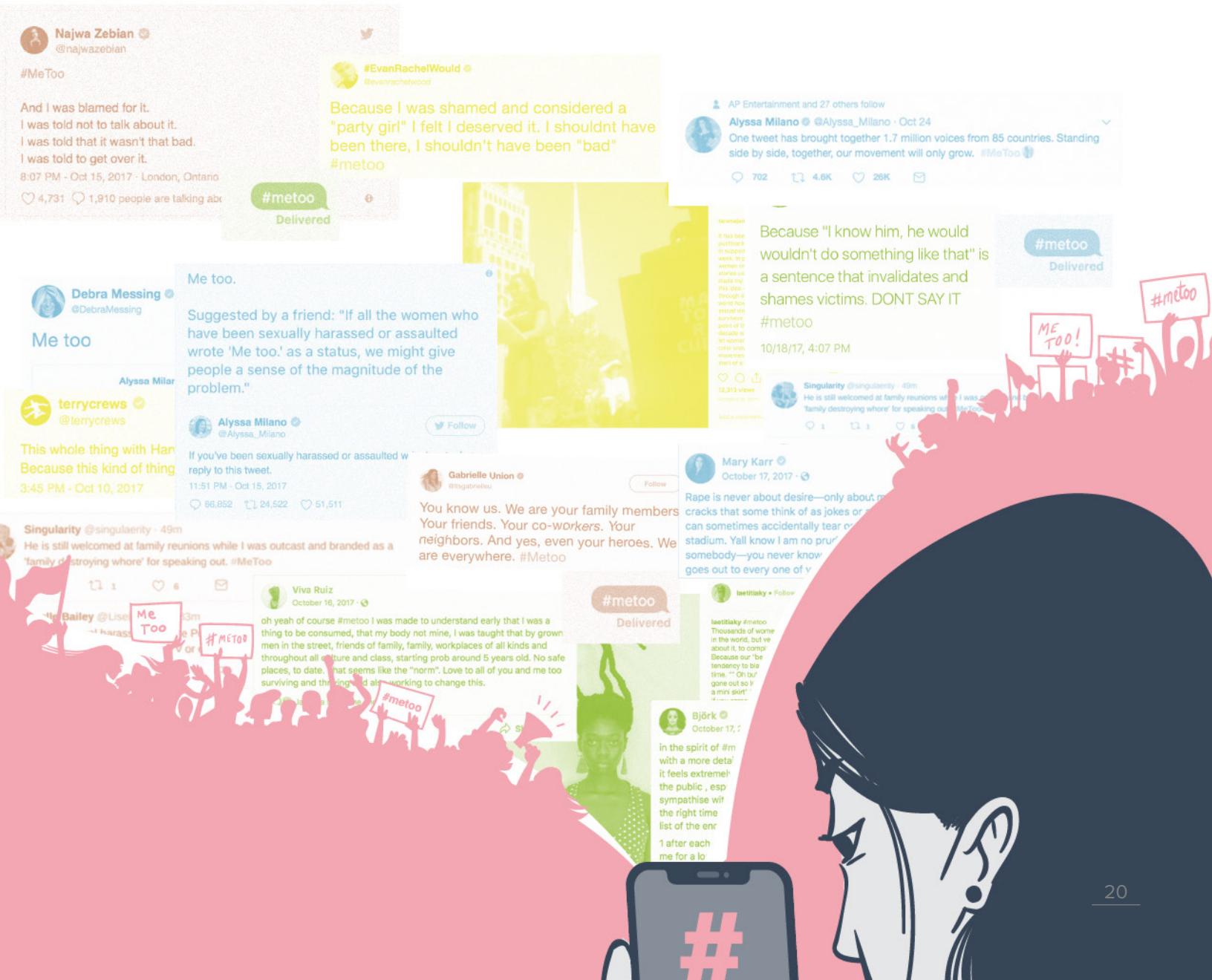
This particular newspaper emerged as a prominent and widely shared information source related to the Me Too movement as a direct result of their coverage of Harry Weinstein.

Media focus on opposition to the Me Too movement intensified in August 2018

August 2018 saw a sudden increase in news media coverage related to the Me Too movement, with a little more than 3,200 news media articles published during the month, up from just 1,280 articles in July 2018. This spike in news media coverage was coupled with a marked shift in the focus in tone of news media coverage and online discourse, specifically following the accusation against Asia Argento—an actress and director and one of the many women to speak out against Harvey Weinstein. Following revelations of accusations of sexual assault against Argento, oppositional voices (which have been present since the onset of the movement) grew significantly in news media coverage. Opponents of the Me Too movement argued that the movement had gone too far, while more extreme opponents pointed to the issue of false accusations of sexual assault facing men. These more extreme views were featured heavily in media coverage in August 2018. The heightened focus on opposition to the Me Too movement was compounded by a series of events, including comments made by Lindsey Lohan accusing the Me Too movement of making women weak, vocal defense of actor Casey Affleck (who had been accused of sexual harassment) from other high-profile entertainers, and comments from a former Republican politician named Randolph Blake. Television and radio presenter Melanie Skype also featured heavily in news media coverage throughout the month following her comments that the Me Too movement had "gone too far."

The Me Too movement was subject to partisan efforts to undermine and delegitimize the campaign, which intensified in September 2018 as a result of Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearing

The focus on opposition to the Me Too movement intensified and became more overtly partisan during the confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh. Both news media and online focus on the issue of false accusation grew in prominence, and GOP spokespeople, particularly Donald Trump, began to occupy a more prominent place within the overall discourse related to both Me Too and gendered violence.



Recommendations

For cultural influencers and those working directly with cultural influencers:

1

Center the voices of those directly impacted and traditionally marginalized groups

Take a Knee, Me Too, and Time's Up demonstrate the potential of high-profile influencers to not only bring attention to an issue, but also help center people of color and traditionally marginalized communities in discourse related to social justice. The Me Too movement made significant strides to account for early accusations of co-opting and quickly acknowledged Tarana Burke as the originator of the term and hashtag. The Time's Up movement has also incorporated the voices and experiences of low-income women and women of color into their campaigning and storytelling. Those working directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should take extra steps to incorporate the voices and perspectives of those traditionally overlooked and excluded from public discourse and ensure that credit is given to grassroots activists and/or community organizers who are already leading the charge in social change efforts.

2

Partner with organizations and those directly impacted by the issue/s

There are many ways to center the people who are working or living on the frontlines of an issue. During the 2018 Golden Globes, actors invited activists to be their “plus ones” as a way to highlight the issues they work on. Among them, Michelle Williams invited Tarana Burke, creator of the #MeToo movement, and Meryl Streep invited Ai-jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Politicians invited sexual assault survivors to attend President Trump’s State of the Union Address. Developing partnerships and uplifting frontline voices can bring important expertise into the discussion and help keep attention on the issue rather than on the influencer. Partnering with organizations who themselves have an activated audience can provide a base of support ready to defend and take action on behalf of influencers in the event of any backlash or reprisal.

3

Work with influencers who are seen as having firsthand knowledge of an issue.

Our finding shows that the individual storytelling from those directly impacted featured prominently in news media coverage. In sharing their stories, survivors were better able to spread the reach of the network of solidarity and empower people inside their network by giving a face to the movement. Jimmy Kimmel was also seen as a relatable “expert” when it came to the healthcare debate due to his first-hand experience as a parent of a child with a congenital heart disease. Kimmel in no way would be directly affected by a change in the ACA, but because of his ability to tell the story of his lived experiences as well as champion stories of families directly impacted by changes in the American healthcare system, he was viewed as an authentic and reliable source of information, particularly in news media coverage. Kimmel also made sure to update viewers on a regular basis with accurate information and sought the opinions or recommendations of well-known organizations such as Children’s Hospital LA, American Cancer Society, ALS Association, AARP, etc. Advocates seeking to work directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should consider the benefits of working with influencers who can speak directly to particular social issues or prioritize partnering with organizations led by or serving directly impacted communities.

4

Recognize the power of numbers.

Kaepernick’s protest has sparked a national movement and is redefining many Americans’ relationship with the National Football League. As of October 2018, many current NFL players continue to take a knee, despite threats of fines and other punitive actions from league owners and upper management. While backlash and reprisal are to be expected, particularly when openly challenging racial and gendered hierarchies, Kaepernick’s decision to begin his protest alone made him a target of NFL owners seeking to soothe the anger of anti-Kaepernick fans. The findings from our research indicate that Kaepernick’s ousting played a significant role in the success and continued engagement with the Take a Knee protest; however, the symbolism of the kneel itself has also been influential. High-profile cultural influencers wishing to speak out or begin a protest/long-term campaign should consider coordinating with other high-profile influencers in the same field as a means to minimize the likelihood of one individual being targeted for reprisal.

5

Consider the power of symbolism and imagery.

The power of imagery played a central role in the effectiveness of Kaepernick's protest and emerged as a key organizing tool that kept the protest in the public eye and also enabled other professional and amateur athletes to signal support for both Kaepernick and the wider movement. Our analysis of social media content revealed the image of Kaepernick and others kneeling was widely connected to civil rights imagery and enabled engagement from the public in a creative way. Those working directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should consider incorporating some form of symbolism into their change strategy and using imagery to uplift core values or visualize a concept. Symbolism should also be paired with specific actions for fans. Advocates should consider connecting fans and online audiences with a small set of actions they can take, such as contacting decision-makers, making donations, and sharing content with friends and/or networks.

6

Provide supporters with something they can replicate.

Closely connected to the use of symbolism is the need to create an avenue for widespread participation. Kaepernick's kneeling and the simple but powerful #MeToo hashtag are examples of the effectiveness of replicable social action. Those working directly with high-profile influencers should prioritize incorporating some element of participatory culture. Participatory culture is defined as "content or actions that have relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, encourage strong support for new creation and sharing, include some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices, members believe that their contributions matter, and members feel some degree of social connection with one another."^[14]

7

Lead with values.

Attention was driven by broad values shared by large segments of their audience, not by facts or rhetoric standing alone. Advocates working with influencers should center communication on the values at stake.

¹⁴ Jenkins, H. 2006. Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, 5–7, 19–20, 3–4.

8

Be prepared to talk about policy reform.

Jimmy Kimmel's intervention was predominantly focused on a short-term policy change that had a concrete start and endpoint. Although the fight to create a better healthcare system is far from over, the push to end the Graham-Cassidy Bill started with the introduction of the bill on September 13, 2017, and ended on September 25, 2017, when the decision was made not to advance the bill to the Senate floor. While the Me Too and Take a Knee movement did not outline specific policy reform goals, both movements have resulted in a series of policy changes in a range of industries. Our own existing research indicates that now more than ever, Americans are eager for clear solutions to our nation's problems. As such, high-profile influencers and those working directly with influencers should be ready with a few facts that reinforce the values and problem statement and clear policy or institutional reform solutions.

9

Link a personal story to the larger story.

Even if an influencer is not directly impacted by the issue they care about, it is important for them to name their connection to the issue and to reinforce their framing of the issue as often as possible, whether by making public statements, by sharing their spotlight with frontline activists, or through their artistry and cultural platforms. If influencers don't frame their own story about why they are speaking out about an issue, then media or trolls will frame it for them. Personal stories can be impactful and persuasive, and it is important for influencers to take steps so that their stories center on the issues rather than themselves. Jimmy Kimmel provides an excellent example of how this can be done well when he used his experience with his son's health as the foundation to have a larger conversation about the importance of all people being able to access healthcare.

10

Understand and account for the role of the trolls, bots, and other oppositional influencers.

A plethora of new research is being published on the coordinated and widespread online strategies of white supremacist groups in recent years.^[15] The use of paid trolls, bots, and other techniques has become an effective strategy to target social justice advocates. Our analysis revealed a vocal and coordinated digital effort to derail and attack Colin Kaepernick's protest and the Me Too movement. Narratives falsely conflating Kaepernick's protest with Anti-Americanism featured prominently in social media discourse and news media coverage. Although the derailment and co-opting of social justice movements is not new, it is important for advocates working with high-profile influencers to understand and account for this new layer of complexity. For instance, in the case of Kaepernick and Take a Knee, a significant portion of both news media and online discourse focused on patriotism and disrespect of the flag. All social media accounts attached to a protest, movement, or individual should be assigned an administrator to monitor for bots and, when needed, block troubling or offensive content. Digital strategies training for all campaign staff should also be prioritized.

11

Draft a clear and concise mission statement.

In media coverage, requotes of Colin Kaepernick's original statement and Jimmy Kimmel's monologue against the Cassidy-Graham bill accounted for a significant portion of news media quotes. These original position statements laid the foundation for subsequent debate and highlight the centrality of having a clear and concise mission statement at the outset of a social or policy change effort. In the drafting of a mission statement, feedback should be sought from various sources, with priority placed on incorporating the feedback of those directly impacted and individuals and communities regularly excluded from national discourse.

12

Fit message to medium.

Kimmel had a big stage and platform for his monologues and interviews. He used his existing platform, including social media channels, effectively to weave in specific facts and calls to action that were not available to Kaepernick or many early Me Too proponents. Kaepernick used the largest platform he has (the sideline of NFL games) to send his message in a powerful way.

15 See Marwick, A. and Lewis, R. "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online." Data & Society, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf, 2018.

Recommendations

For those seeking to leverage/support an influencer's movement

1

Keep the drumbeat going.

Unlike short-term policy solutions, longer-term cultural and narrative change efforts are not only harder to realize, but also will likely face greater and more coordinated resistance. The significant and coordinated resistance to both the Me Too movement and Take a Knee—specifically, attempts to redefine the narrative sounding these protests—points to the considerable threats these movements present to the current status quo. Social media discourse revealed a vocal opposition to both movements but also an equally vocal and coordinated base of support. To ensure these movements continued to have an impact, those seeking to support the advocacy of high-profile individuals must keep the drumbeat going.

2

Expand the conversation.

When influencers draw attention to an issue, it is an opportunity to insert expertise and help frame the conversation. Through the context of talking about the influencer's actions, uplift your own expertise and experiences through social media engagement, with traditional media (op-eds), and by any other means available to you.

3

Publicly support the influencers who are speaking out.

It can be risky for public figures to take a stand on issues that matter. The larger their vocal base of support, the more likely other influencers will find the courage to speak out. If an influencer faces reprisals, it is important for supporters to take action on their behalf. This can help protect the targeted influencers from further harm and can signal to others that their bravery will be supported.

TACTICS INCLUDE:

- Continue engaging with popular hashtags such as **#TakeaKnee**, **#WhyWeKneel**, **#MeToo** and **#TimesUp**.
- Recirculate content.
- Specific to Kaepernick, use **#Thisiswhywekneel** following instances of police brutality.
- Uplift the names of images of athletes continuing to take a knee, such as Eric Reid.
- Create your own content that links to the cultural moment (blog, memes, etc.).
- Engage on social media during the moments (i.e., awards shows, NFL games, award season) influencers are expected to take action or speak about the issues.
- Specific to Colin Kaepernick, continue to hold the NFL accountable for Kaepernick's blacklisting.
- Continue to support survivors of sexual violence by sharing their stories online and by holding elected officials and other high-profile influencers who undermine the efforts of the Me Too movement accountable.