

THE CASE OF THE
**CULTURAL
INFLUENCERS**

POWER OF POP SERIES

COLIN KAEPERNICK

JIMMY KIMMEL

AND #METOO



The Opportunity Agenda

Introduction

The image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing atop the Olympic winner's podium with their arms raised and fists clenched remains a pivotal symbol of the movement for racial justice—a moment that has been memorialized in art and popular culture in the decades that have followed. In an act reminiscent of this scene, on August 14, 2016, Colin Kaepernick, then quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, took a knee on the sidelines as the national anthem played—an act of protest that has sparked national debate and has become a central talking point about issues ranging from police brutality to freedom of speech. While the long-term impact of Kaepernick's actions is still yet to be realized, he and the growing list of athletes who have joined his protest form part of a long history of athletes and entertainers using their status and platforms to speak out and challenge social ills.

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.

There is currently 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.



Methodology

Research Framework

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.

Media Content Analysis & Social Media Analysis Sampling Method

Our sample of mainstream news media articles was drawn from the LexisNexis database, which provides access to more than 40,000 sources, including up-to-date and archived news, public records, industry information, and social media content. Each media analysis is based on an examination of the content of 49 randomly selected news articles (per case study^[1]) evenly distributed between each of the 7 days of the week. The 49 articles for each case were sampled using a constructed week sampling method—a stratified sampling method in which media content is sampled based on the day of the week. As noted by Hwalbin Kim, S. Mo Jang, et al, existing studies have indicated that constructed week sampling can reduce the possibility of overestimating or underestimating certain days of the week.

Alongside an analysis of media coverage, we made use of social listening tool Crimson Hexagon to extract social media data generated within a similar timeframe for each case study. Crimson Hexagon is a leading social media analytics software that aggregates publicly available social media data. Crimson Hexagon enables users to create monitors^[2] for any topic or set of phrases and establish customized timeframes for data analysis. Once a monitor is established, Crimson Hexagon's algorithm categorizes relevant social media data—identifying content volume trends, patterns in conversation, demographics, sentiment shift over time, and audience segment interests/affinities.

1 196 total.

2 A saved search or query is referred to as a monitor.

Timeframe and Scope

The goal of each analysis was to track trends in media coverage and online/social media discourse for at least a 6-month period, starting from the time each influencer first spoke out and/or acted. Central areas of focus included:

1. Analyzing the extent to which stated goals aligned with media coverage
2. Analyzing the extent to which public discourse (as observed through digital media and social media) aligned with influencers' stated goals and messaging
3. Identifying shifts, if any, in overall public discourse related to issues/policies as a direct or indirect result of public influencers' actions

Colin Kaepernick

The time span of this media analysis covers **August 1, 2016, to September 30, 2017**, whereas the time span for our analysis of online discourse covered **August 1, 2016, to August 1, 2018**. The first year of analysis enabled us to track and compare trends in media coverage and online discourse related to Kaepernick from the time he first took a knee in August 2016 to the beginning of the following football season in 2017. The additional year of online analysis enabled us to examine how the conversation has continued over time as well as identify key influencers still driving the digital conversation.

Because the central goal of this research was to examine Colin Kaepernick's impact on the national discourse, we were mindful to exclude search items that could potentially lead or skew the data. As such, the in-depth content analysis focused specifically on explicit references to Colin Kaepernick in media coverage and the context in which references to Kaepernick emerged. Our sample was drawn using the following search terms: "Colin Kaepernick" or "Kaepernick" and "protest."

LexisNexis returned more than 8000 articles published between August 1, 2016, and September 2016. From this population, a final sample of 49 articles was randomly selected using seven from each day of the week; media articles were drawn from an overall pool of 7954 articles. The sample was selected by applying a random sequence generator to ensure it was representative of all the articles picked up by the scan. The qualitative research tool Dedoose was then used to organize overarching identifiable themes: medium type, the day of the week, reach of news outlets, the tone of articles, month published, the area of focus, and year.

The vast majority of the 49 articles (42), were published between the months of August and September 2016. This coincides with the preseason for the NFL with a major decrease in public attention to Colin Kaepernick until his protest once again hit headlines in September 2017. It should also be noted that the stories produced by the randomized search were predominantly regional/local news sources. This leads to questions of national tone if the overall tone examined below is from local contributors.

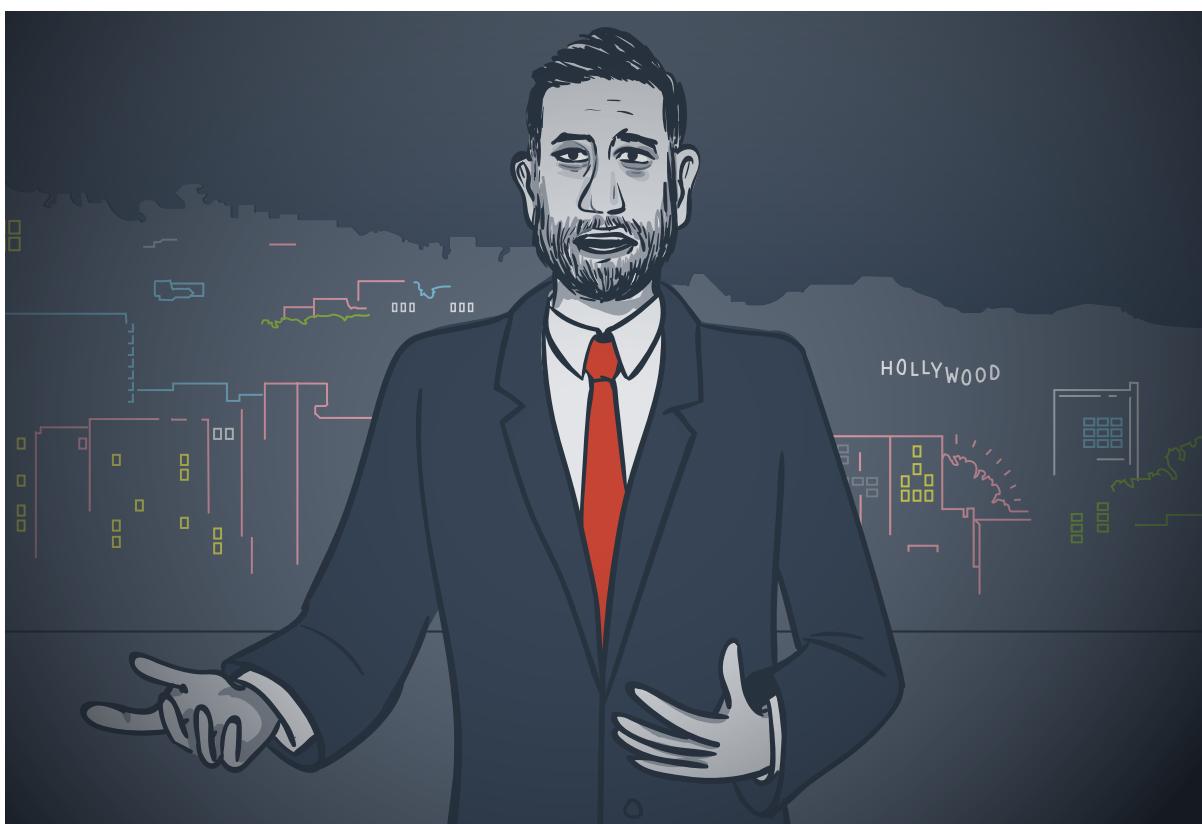
Alongside an analysis of media coverage, we also examined social media content generated within the same timeframe, making use of the same search terms.

Jimmy Kimmel

The time span of our analysis of Jimmy Kimmel covers **April 2017–October 2017**. Using the LexisNexis database, we entered the following search terms: “Jimmy Kimmel and health care and affordable care act.” A final sample of 49 articles was randomly selected using a constructed week sampling method. Articles were drawn from an overall pool of 388 articles, with the vast majority being distributed within the month of September. This coincides with a public dispute between Senator Bill Cassidy and Jimmy Kimmel about the Graham-Cassidy bill that was proposed to replace the Affordable Care Act. The reach of the outlets was divided relatively evenly, 41 percent nationally and 59 percent locally, with an overall neutral tone to the conversation (84 percent). Because the Graham-Cassidy bill was introduced to the Senate and scheduled for a vote in September 2017, the majority of the articles, 56 percent, were published in September.

Alongside an analysis of media coverage, we also examined social media content generated within the same timeframe, with the two-fold goal of:

- Tracking trends in public discourse around Kimmel’s actions before, during, and after he began talking about healthcare
- Monitoring wider discussions of Kimmel’s ability to shape the discourse around the American healthcare system



MeToo

The time span of the Me Too media analysis covers **October 1, 2017 to February 16, 2018**. Using the LexisNexis database and Crimson Hexagon the following search terms were entered: “metoo,” “metoo movement,” and “#metoo.”

A final, random sample of 49 articles was sampled again making use of the constructed week sampling method. News media articles were drawn from an overall population of 8953 articles in the three-and-a-half-month span. The qualitative research tool Dedoose was then used to organize overarching identifiable themes: medium type, the day of the week, reach of news outlets, the tone of articles, month published, the area of focus, and year. The 49 articles were almost evenly distributed between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018. The reach of the outlets was mostly from local sources (69 percent), with an overall supportive, positive tone from the publications (80 percent).

Alongside an analysis of media coverage, we also examined social media content generated within the same timeframe with the four-fold goal of:

- Identifying publicly facing leaders within the movement
- Tracking trends in public discourse around sexual assault before, during, and after Alyssa Milano’s initial call-to-action tweet
- Monitoring wider discussions of #MeToo’s ability to shape the discourse around the systemic issue between power and sexual assault or abuse
- Analyzing the shift in power structures created through the immediate networking power of social media

PRELIMINARY SEARCH OF #METOO IN THE MEDIA

FIGURE 1



Colin Kaepernick and #Takeaknee Protest

Background

Long before gaining national notoriety for his field side protest, Colin Kaepernick was a promising quarterback, passing over 10,000 yards and rushing for more than 4000 yards in his college career, the only quarterback in Division I college football history to do so. He was voted Western Athletic Conference's Offensive Player of the Year in 2008 and 2010.³ Kaepernick was drafted as the 36th overall pick during the 2011 NFL draft by the San Francisco 49ers as a backup quarterback. In 2013, he made his first appearance as starting quarterback at the Super Bowl but, due to a series of injuries, continually switched from starting quarterback to backup quarterback throughout the 2014, 2015, and 2016 seasons.

It was during the August 2016 pre-season that Kaepernick first knelt while the national anthem played in protest of police brutality against people of color. This action ignited a national conversation covering a vast scope of issues including Black Lives Matter, patriotism, and freedom of speech.

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

³ Colin Kaepernick. (2010). Retrieved from <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/colin-kaepernick-1.html#>

Alongside this statement, Kaepernick made a pledge to donate \$1 million, in addition to all the proceeds of his jersey sales from the 2016 season, to organizations working in oppressed communities.⁴ Shortly after this statement, he launched the Colin Kaepernick Foundation with the mission to “fight oppression of all kinds globally, through education and social activism.”⁵ In October 2016, the Colin Kaepernick Foundation started the Know Your Rights Campaign, which aims to “raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and interacting with law enforcement.”⁶ At the end of the 2016 season, Kaepernick opted out of his contract with the 49ers and became a free agent. As of October 2018, Kaepernick has received no offers from an NFL team.

This case study examines news media and online discourse related to Colin Kaepernick’s protest from August 1, 2016 to August 1, 2018, with the central goal of examining the extent to which Kaepernick has impacted the overall discussion of police brutality. This case study also aims to examine the broader implications of the Take a Knee protest and identify lessons learned and best practices for those seeking to better understand the power and promise of high-profile influencers.



FIGURE 2

4 Kaepernick, C. (2018). Million dollar pledge. Retrieved from <https://kaepernick7.com/pages/mission>

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

Findings

Overview

Colin Kaepernick's protest, alongside the subsequent actions of other high-profile individuals, elected officials, and members of the public, has had a profound and sustained impact on overall national discourse related to police brutality and a myriad of other social issues.

Since Kaepernick first took a knee in August 2016, our analysis of news media coverage, social media, and search engine trends reveals a direct correlation between discussion of Colin Kaepernick and increases and shifts in the overall discussion of police brutality in the United States. At the same time, Kaepernick's protest has extended far beyond the issue of police brutality, with debates about freedom of speech, patriotism, and the National Football League accounting for a significant portion of news media and social media discourse.

Taken together, our findings suggest that Kaepernick's actions have sparked a nationwide cultural debate, which has already presented important implications for how many Americans view and engage with the NFL, the role of brands and publications (such as GQ and Nike) in social justice advocacy, as well as the role and importance of athletes and entertainers in political discourse.

The following section begins with an analysis of the volume of media and online engagement related to Colin Kaepernick and police brutality and is followed by an in-depth analysis of media and social media discourse. We conclude with a series of recommendations for those seeking to work directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers to drive positive social and political change.

I. VOLUME OF ENGAGEMENT

Trends in Discussion and Coverage of Police Brutality

Measuring the volume of content generated around an issue is one of the most effective strategies for identifying the extent to which an issue is present within the wider national discourse and when and why patterns of engagement tend to shift.

In the 12 months preceding Kaepernick's first kneel (July 2015–July 2016), just over 1.6 million social media posts were generated related to police brutality and more than 5000 mainstream news media articles were published touching explicitly on the issue of police brutality. In the following 12 months (in which time Kaepernick first gained media and public attention for his protest) media and online discourse related to police brutality saw

1.6 million+

social media posts were generated related to police brutality in the 12 months preceding Kaepernick's first kneel.

a slight decline, with just over 1.4 million social media posts and just over 4000 news media articles published. However, between September 2017 and September 2018, engagement rose significantly, with over 3 million online posts generated and over 7000 news media articles published.

The slightly higher rate of engagement in the 12 months preceding Kaepernick's protest was a result of a significant increase in both media and online engagement throughout July 2016. In July 2016 alone, over 600,000 unique social media posts were published related to police brutality, up from just over 38,000 posts the month prior. The high level of engagement in July 2016 was the result of a series of events that propelled the issue of police brutality into the public discourse. These events include the July 5, 2016 killing of Alton Sterling by two white Baton Rouge police officers; Donald Trump's claim that Black Lives Matter is a "threat to police"; and several NBA players, including Lebron James, wearing "I can't breathe" T-shirts in reference to Eric Garner's last words (*Figures 3, 4, and 5*).

The volume of engagement in July 2016 forms part of a wider trend of heightened media and online discussion of police brutality following high-profile police killings of black Americans. This pattern of engagement has remained a consistent and prominent driver of online content related to police brutality in the past few years. However, since August 2016 a new pattern of engagement has emerged, with media and online discussion of police brutality also directly tied to increased discussion of Colin Kaepernick.

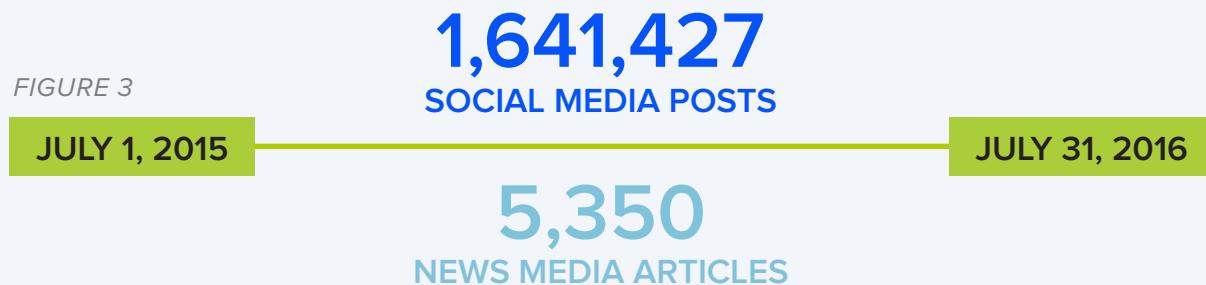
In order to examine the overall impact of Kaepernick's protest on national discourse, we examined the volume and timing of media and public discussion of Colin Kaepernick and police brutality as independent variables. In doing so, we were able to identify overlaps in the timing and sources of increases in both news media and online engagement.

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 August 2016, September 2016, September 2017, October 2017, August 2018, and September 2018—all months that correspond with increased discussion and engagement with Colin Kaepernick and his protest.

5,000+

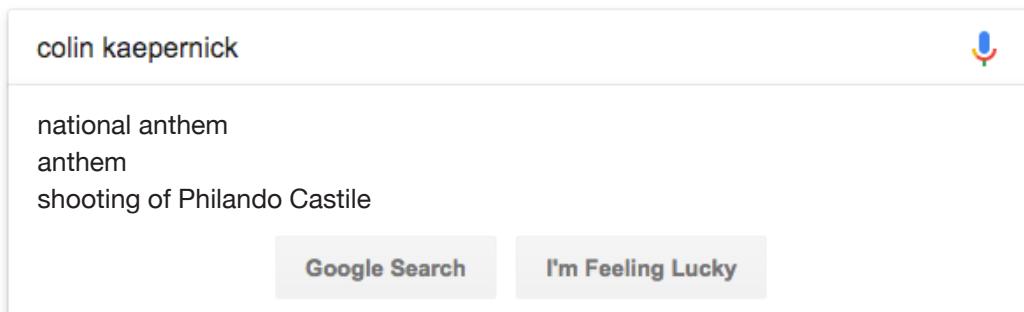
mainstream news media articles published touching explicitly on the issue of police brutality.

NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS AND NEWS MEDIA ARTICLES FOCUSED ON POLICE BRUTALITY



Online Search Engine Trends

Online searches for the phrase “police brutality” spiked significantly in the months of August 2016, September 2016, September 2017, and August 2018 (*Figure 6*). Google trends also indicate that the top terms to emerge in association with police brutality in the 2-year timespan examined include “Colin Kaepernick,” “national anthem,” “anthem,” and “shooting of Philando Castile.”



SEARCH FOR POLICE BRUTALITY AUGUST 1, 2016—AUGUST 1, 2018

FIGURE 6: GOOGLE TRENDS



Social and Digital Media Trends

Similar patterns of engagement are seen in the timing of volume shifts in online content. On social media platforms, forums, and comments made on online news and entertainment websites, nearly 11 million unique posts were generated making specific reference to “Colin Kaepernick” or “Kaepernick,” averaging roughly 429,000 posts per month in the 25 months analyzed. In line with online search engine trends, there was a clustering of activity within August 2016, September 2016, August 2017, and September 2017 (Figure 7). At the same time, as seen in Figure 8, discussion of police brutality saw significant spikes in 6 of the 25 months included in the sample, with the sharp rises in September 2016, September 2017, and October 2017 corresponding directly with increased discussion of Colin Kaepernick. The other three increases in the overall engagement level were a result of media and public reactions to high-profile instances of fatal police shootings.

News Media Coverage Trends

This clustering of engagement is seen again in the volume and timing of engagement in news media coverage. Our search of the LexisNexis database returned nearly 8000 articles published in local, regional, and national news outlets between August 1, 2016 and September 30, 2017. The vast majority of coverage fell within the months of September 2016 and September 2017 (Figure 9).



NFL star Colin Kaepernick sits in protest during national anthem

By Euan McKirdy, CNN
Updated 1837 GMT (0237 HKT) August 28, 2016

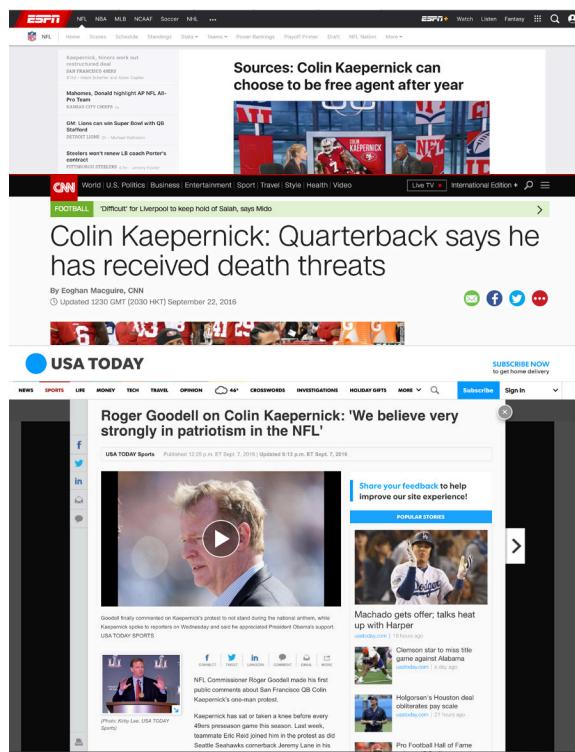
This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling

Obama: Colin Kaepernick 'exercising constitutional right'

By Athena Jones and Tom LoBianco, CNN
Updated 10:40 AM ET, Mon September 5, 2016







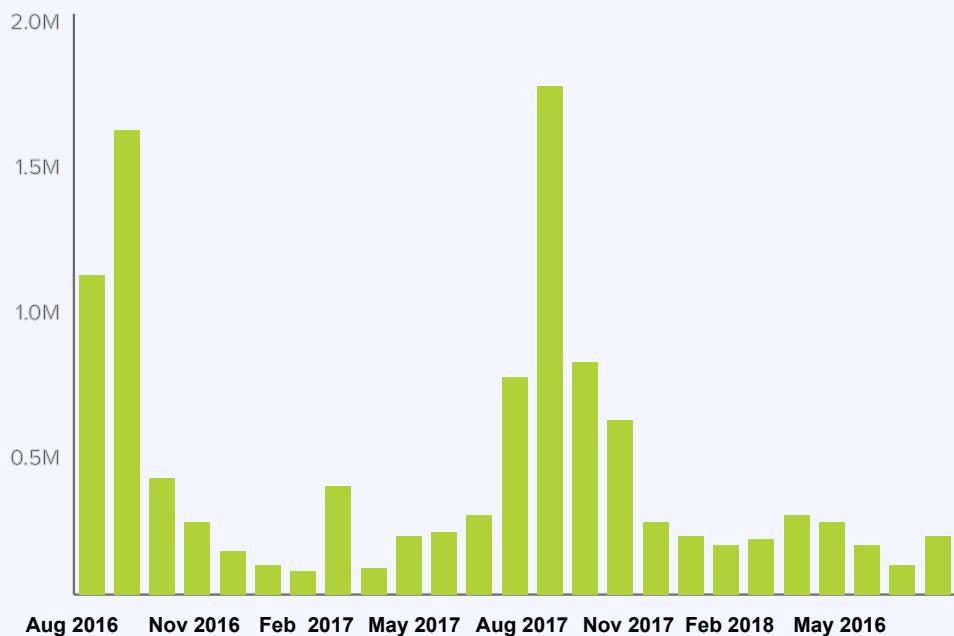
Sources: Colin Kaepernick can choose to be free agent after year

Colin Kaepernick: Quarterback says he has received death threats

Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: 'We believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL'

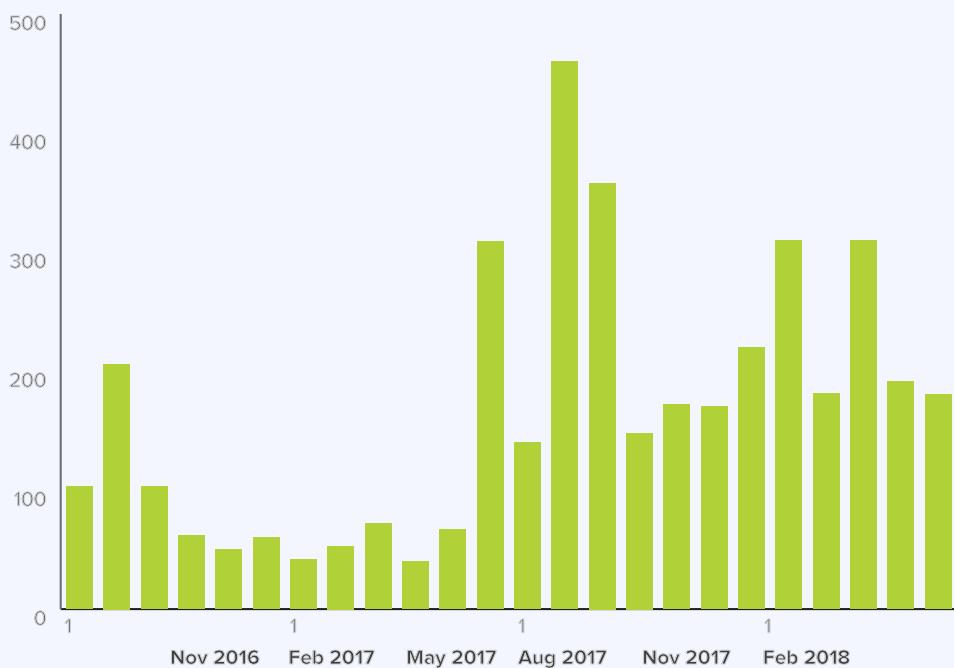
VOLUME OF SOCIAL MEDIA REFERENCES TO COLIN KAEPERNICK: AUGUST 1, 2016–AUGUST 1, 2018

FIGURE 7



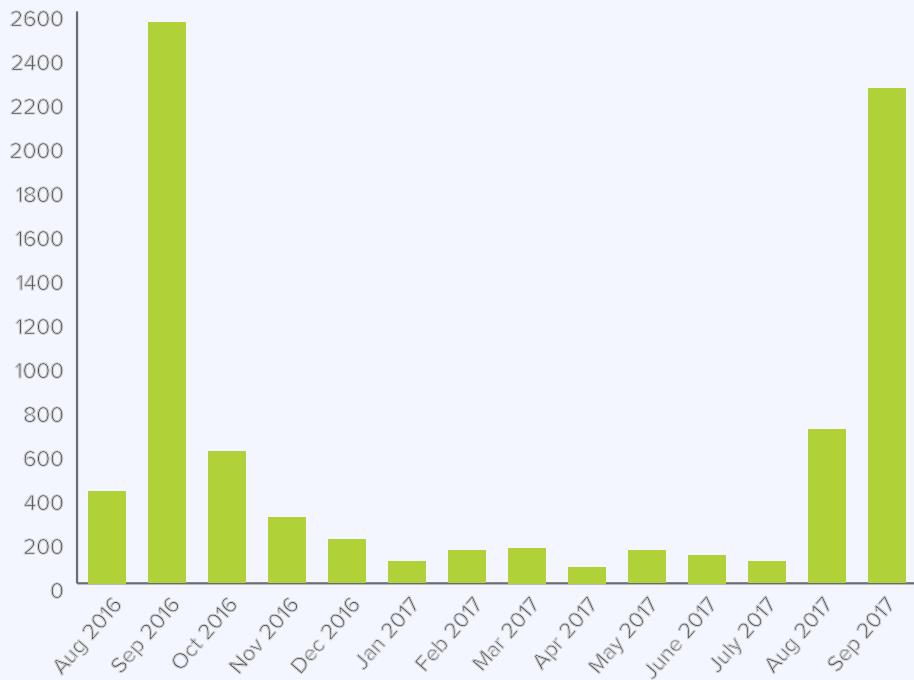
ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS ON POLICE BRUTALITY AUGUST 1, 2016–AUGUST 1, 2018

FIGURE 8



VOLUME OF NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE AUGUST 1, 2016–SEPTEMBER 30, 2017

FIGURE 9



A preliminary examination of some of the most prominent social media content provides some context for this clustering of activity.

The initial spike in social media engagement in August 2016 (when Kaepernick first began his protest) was a direct result of early media coverage of Kaepernick's initial statement about his protest. Online posts in August 2016 centered on individuals' reactions to initial media coverage of the protest. Word cluster analysis indicates that a significant portion of comments made reference of the "national anthem" and alluded to the offense caused by Kaepernick's decision not to stand; however, this was largely in the context of people voicing support for Kaepernick.

The volume of posts jumps from just over a million in August 2016 to over 1.5 million unique posts in September 2016. At this point, references to "civil rights" first appear within our cluster analysis as a direct result of widely shared post offering statistics about the level of white disapproval of Kaepernick's protest and comparing these data to the level of white opposition to the civil rights protests in the 1960s (*Figure 10*).

The post received more than 4000 likes and shares on Twitter alone. September 2016 also saw a significant focus on a clip of sports commentator Colin Cowherd of The Herd speaking up in support of Kaepernick and what he deemed the league's unreasonable attempts to control players. During the clip, Cowherd states, "Colin Kaepernick is not hurting the 49ers and he is not hurting the NFL."

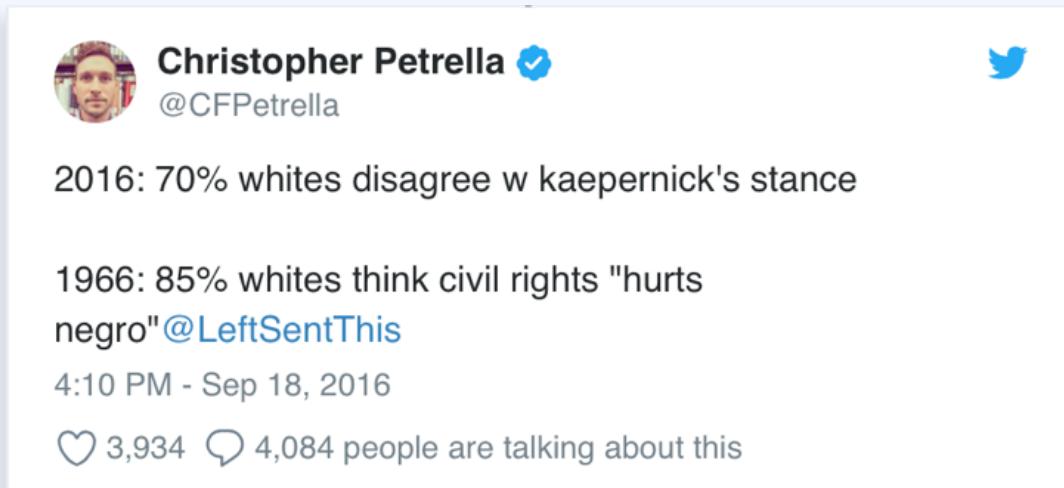
After September 2016 there is a dramatic decline in both news media and online engagement with the protest, with news coverage dropping to just 600 articles and online comments dropping to just over 400,000 in October 2016. Despite this decline, October is the first time references are made to other professional and amateur athletes taking a knee in support of Kaepernick and his mission to raise awareness/tackle police brutality.

Following 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 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 Kaepernick’s protest. Trump’s comments and the subsequent media and public commentary resulted in a significant spike in online engagement and media coverage throughout September 2017. Following September 2017, online engagement remained relatively consistent across months, with engagement averaging out at roughly 312,000 Kaepernick-related posts per month.

Alongside volume trends, we conducted an in-depth analysis of media coverage over a 12-month period and online discourse over a 25-month period.

SAMPLED TWEET: SEPTEMBER 2016

FIGURE 10



Christopher Petrella  

@CFPetrella

2016: 70% whites disagree w kaepernick's stance

1966: 85% whites think civil rights "hurts negro" @LeftSentThis

4:10 PM - Sep 18, 2016

 3,934  4,084 people are talking about this

II. NEWS MEDIA DISCOURSE TRENDS

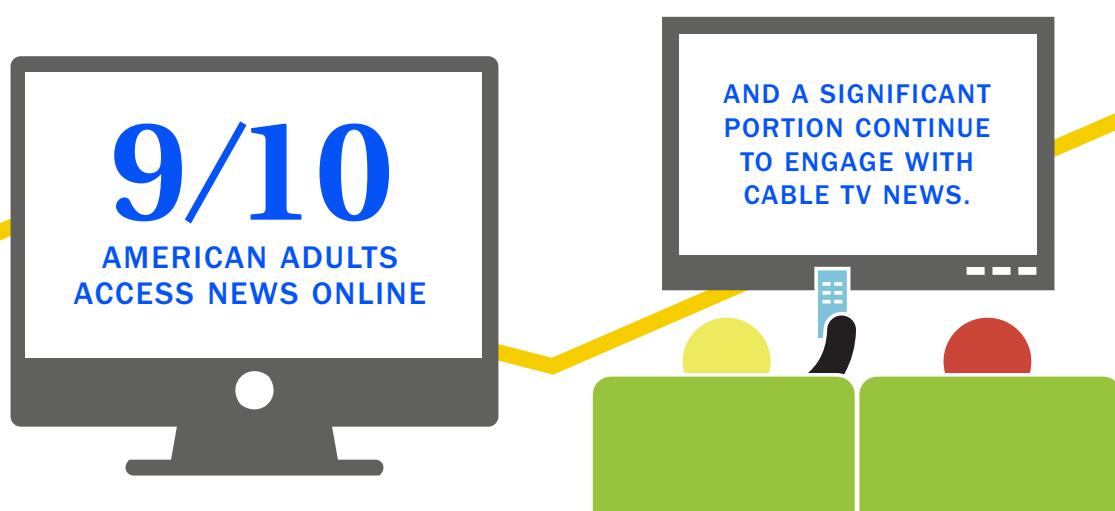
While the media ecosystem has shifted dramatically since the advent and proliferation of social media platforms, the mainstream news media continues to play a significant role in shaping public perception and understanding of social and political issues. Despite declining levels of media trust,⁷ as of June 2018, 9 in 10 American adults report accessing news online⁸ and a significant portion continue to engage with cable TV news.⁹

The most prominent storylines, themes, and spokespeople to emerge in media discourse related to Kaepernick's protest point to the potential and limitations of the news media as a platform to aid in social change efforts. Kaepernick is highly featured in quotes, and his original statement outlining the reasoning for his protest was featured heavily in coverage. However, there was also significant focus on the more sensational aspects of the debate, including wide coverage of inflammatory comments from Donald Trump and other anti-Kaepernick commentators.

This section provides an overview of mainstream news media coverage of Colin Kaepernick's protest from August 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017.

Storylines and Themes

Mainstream news media coverage of Colin Kaepernick's sideline protest and subsequent events fell into six broad categories of focus, with discussion of Kaepernick's blackballing from the National Football League dominating coverage in the timeframe examined. Coverage related to debates surrounding anti-patriotism and disrespect of the national flag also featured heavily in media coverage, followed by a focus on freedom of speech, peer support for Kaepernick, anti-black racism, and police brutality.



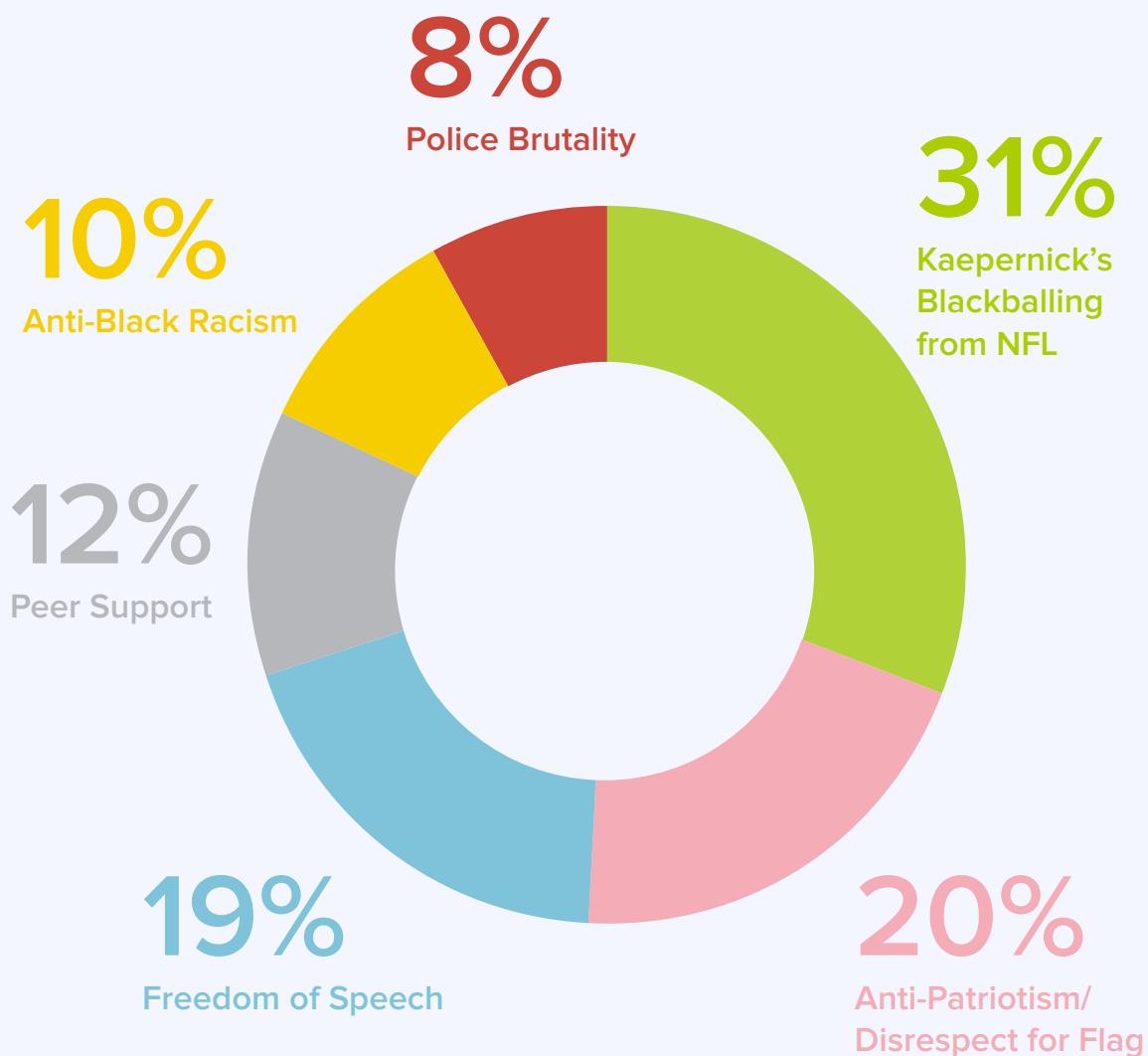
7 Mathew Ingram. "Most American say they have lost trust in the media." *Columbia Journalism Review* September 2018, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/trust-in-media-down.php

8 Pew Research Center. Digital News Fact Sheet. June 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>

9 Pew Research Center. Cable News Fact Sheet, July 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/cable-news/>

AREAS OF FOCUS IN ARTICLES

FIGURE 11



31%

Kaepernick' POSITION WITHIN THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Media coverage of Colin Kaepernick's field-side protest was dominated by discussions of Kaepernick's role within the league and eventual ousting. Coverage within this category ranged from sport commentators discussing weekly statistics to conversations related to Kaepernick's talent and the perception that the NFL "blackballed" Kaepernick from future employment.

Lack of Talent and Blackballed by NFL

A significant portion of media coverage within this category of storytelling centered on Colin Kaepernick's abilities as a quarterback, a segment of the conversation that later becomes connected to discussion of Kaepernick's blackballing from the NFL.

Following the 2016 football season, Colin Kaepernick opted out of his contract renewal with the San Francisco 49ers and became a free agent.

In subsequent months, as Kaepernick remained a free agent, there was growing speculation about the reason for the continued lack of interest from teams and coaches. This speculation resulted in significant media commentary related to Kaepernick's talent as a quarterback.

Leading up to the 2017 season, coverage within this category generally featured spokespeople for or against Kaepernick discussing the reason he remained unsigned. A highly publicized argument originating from some of Kaepernick's critics suggested that Kaepernick had been declining in athletic performance and protested to bring national attention to himself. This argument became more prevalent at the beginning of the 2017 season as Kaepernick continued to be overlooked and unemployed.

With the 2017 NFL season well underway, the uproar surrounding Kaepernick's absence on the field became a central point of contention in media coverage. Several articles within our sample featured supporters of Kaepernick voicing anger that the 32 teams of the NFL worked together to ensure unemployment for Kaepernick. Celebrities such as Spike Lee were quoted in articles rallying behind Kaepernick to press the NFL for an explanation on why Kaepernick remained a free agent.^{10,11}

"The NFL is complicit in the ostracization of Colin Kaepernick and the current climate of the National Football League by not saying anything."¹²

¹⁰ Reyes, L. "Hundreds of Colin Kaepernick supporters rally in front of NFL headquarters, demand meeting." USA Today, August 23, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2017/08/23/hundreds-colin-kaepernick-supporters-rally-nfl-headquarters-demand-meeting-roger-goodell/595725001/>

¹¹ "Spike Lee announces rally for Colin Kaepernick at NFL headquarters. Rolling Stone, August 8, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/sports/news/spike-lee-announces-rally-for-unsigned-colin-kaepernick-w496615>

¹² Jones, J. Hundreds declare their support for Colin Kaepernick at rally outside NFL headquarters: Event organizers and attendees demand the league protect players making statements of advocacy. Huffington Post. August 24, 2017

A sample of quotes include:

“Kaepernick doesn’t have a job because he spoke out about race,” Mystal said. “That’s the thing you’re not allowed to do in our sporting culture and most of our popular culture, unless you’re so over-the-top talented that they need you for winning.”¹³

“Either some owners and/or the NFL are punishing him for speaking out, or they’ve decided that it’s best for business to sweep these valid issues under the rug in order not to upset fans who, in our opinion, don’t have a valid reason to be upset about Colin Kaepernick being on their team,” said Tim Clark, who is organizing boycotts of all 32 teams for the NFL’s regular-season opener.¹⁴



Photo: Keith Allison/Flickr

13 Heyman, B. “United We Stand rallies for Colin Kaepernick in Manhattan.” Newsday. August 24 2017.

14 Har, J, and Holland, J. “U.S. still in turmoil a year after Colin Kaepernick’s protest.” Chicago Tribune. August 20, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/football/ct-us-turmoil-colin-kaepernick-protest-20170820-story.html>

20% ANTI-PATRIOTISM/DISRESPECT

Alongside discussions of Kaepernick's abilities and unsigned status, a significant portion of media coverage focused on the topic of anti-patriotism/patriotism and/or disrespect for the flag—comprising 20 percent of the overall coverage in the timeframe examined.

Articles within this category generally focused on opposition to Kaepernick's protest, specifically the notion that taking the 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 anti-patriotism and/or debating the notion that the national flag and anthem are, in fact, symbols of the military and veterans.

Although a focus on disrespect and anti-patriotism was always a feature of media coverage, comments from Donald Trump made during a rally in Alabama in September 2017 resulted in an overall uptick of media coverage and a heightened focus on the question of patriotism and disrespect.

A smaller portion of coverage within this category touched on the origin story of Kaepernick's protest, specifically how he decided to kneel. In a widely quoted interview with HBO's Real Sports, former Green Beret and Seattle Seahawks player, Nate Boyer, explained the conversation that he and Kaepernick had in September 2016 about how to respectfully protest. During the interview, Boyer explained how he convinced Kaepernick to kneel during the anthem instead of sitting to show respect to soldiers and veterans. He states during the interview:

“ Soldiers take a knee in front of a fallen brother's grave, you know, to show respect. When we're on a patrol, you know, and we go into a security halt, we take a knee, and we pull security.¹⁵

Better Ways to Protest

Alongside discussions of patriotism and disrespect, media coverage within this subcategory also featured a significant amount of commentary focused on opposition to Kaepernick's method of protest. This subcategory typically featured a spokesperson claiming to be sympathetic to Kaepernick's message but voicing concerns about his approach or choice of venue. Such comments were also regularly accompanied by suggestions for Kaepernick to "do more than kneel," a branch of commentary that often overlooked or failed to make reference to Kaepernick's foundation or activism beyond the field. A sample of quotes within the subcategory include:

¹⁵ Brinson, W. "Here's how Nate Boyer got Colin Kaepernick to go from sitting to kneeling." CBS Sports, September 27, 2016, <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/heres-how-nate-boyer-got-colin-kaepernick-to-go-from-sitting-to-kneeling/>

“ To paraphrase my old boss, “If you don’t propose a solution, you’re just complaining.” Colin Kaepernick complains that some police officers have only six months of training and less than is required of a cosmetologist. Well, he does have the means to express his views. He should lobby Congress to require more training for police. Do community outreach. In the meantime, get off your butt and show some respect for a country that does so much good here and abroad.¹⁶

“ If Kaepernick wants to prevent violence in this country (and who does not?), he should do something about it, not sit on his butt during the national anthem. He could become a Big Brother. He could establish a gym or clubhouse in poor areas to provide children with a safe place to gather. He could establish scholarships for poor students so they can get the education they need to move ahead in this world.¹⁷

“ Mr. Kaepernick could have held a news conference and donated several months of his salary or his entire off season to assist the Black Lives Matter cause. He chose a symbolic act that he had to know would be controversial and achieve nothing instead of doing something that would have generated sympathy for the cause.¹⁸

Such commentary reflects a broader trend within media coverage of only marginal focus on Kaepernick’s work off the field or reference to the Colin Kaepernick Foundation.

16 Kitagaki, P Jr. “Kaepernick’s protest of the national anthem.’ Sacramento Bee, August 29, 2016.

17 Howitt, G. “Boxer Joe Louis set example Kaepernick should have followed: The football player’s refusal to stand for the national anthem stirred controversy but helped no one.” Portland Press Herald. September 11, 2016.

18 Ibid.

19% FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Although never addressed directly by Colin Kaepernick, freedom of speech and First Amendment rights have been a prominent area of discussion within media coverage following comments from 49ers personnel, NFL spokespeople, elected official, and other public figures in reference to Kaepernick rights to protest.

Commentary related to freedom of speech and the First Amendment started the day after the protest came to the forefront of the US news cycle. This political pivot steered the national conversation from police brutality to constitutional rights.

A statement from President Barack Obama in the final months of his term in office set the tone for much of the media coverage related to freedom of speech. In September 2016, just a month after Kaepernick began his field-side protest, Obama spoke out in support of Kaepernick; at first affirming the importance of “honoring our flag and our anthem” he goes on to state:

“The test of our fidelity to our Constitution, to freedom of speech, to our Bill of Rights, is not when it’s easy, but when it’s hard...We fight sometimes so that people can do things that we disagree with...As long as they’re doing it within the law, then we can voice our opinion objecting to it but it’s also their right.”¹⁹

Obama’s statement was quoted repeatedly in media outlets and resulted in heated debate about the First Amendment and, more broadly, constitutional implications of Kaepernick’s actions. Other quotes touching on the topic of the First Amendment include:

“We recognize his right to do that,” Kelly said in a media conference call Saturday. “It’s not my right to tell him not to do something. That’s his right as a citizen.”²⁰

¹⁹ Diaz, D. “Obama defends Kaepernick’s anthem protest.” CNN, September 29, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/28/politics/obama-colin-kaepernick-nfl-national-anthem-presidential-town-hall-cnn/index.html>

²⁰ Chip Kelly respecting Colin Kaepernick’s rights; talks roster cuts. The Mercury News. August 27, 2016.

“Dolphins running back Arian Foster also supported Kaepernick. “The flag represents freedom,” Foster wrote. “The freedom to choose to stand or not. That’s what makes this country beautiful. You can’t be selective and dictate what freedoms this country stands for. You’re free to have any religious/political views you feel.”²¹

““It’s his right as a citizen,” Sabathia said of Kaepernick’s decision to remain seated during the Star Spangled Banner at three games this preseason. “There’s a lot of stuff going on that’s not right; it’s just something that he chose to do. It’s his right.”²²

“Campbell is a career Navy officer who retired in 2015 with the rank of captain. She served in Afghanistan in 2009–2010. “I supported and defended the Constitution which gives Colin Kaepernick the right to make his statement the way he did,” Campbell says.²³

While a focus on First Amendment rights remained a core element of media coverage throughout the period analyzed, the issue was once more propelled to the center of media focus a year later as a result of comments made by the newly elected president, Donald Trump. During a rally in Alabama, Trump took the opportunity to make reference to Colin Kaepernick’s protest, specifically urging NFL owners to fire Kaepernick for “disrespect” to the flag and referring to Kaepernick as a “son of a bitch.”²⁴

Trump’s inflammatory comments sparked a sudden spike in media coverage related to Colin Kaepernick’s protest and a heightened focus on the First Amendment.

21 Clayton, A, and Leonard, P. “Won’t stand for injustice: Kap’s refusal to rise during anthem draws mixed reactions.” Daily News, August 28, 2016.

22 Feinsand, A. “CC tips Kap to Colin: Yank says QB has ‘right’ to protest.” Daily News, August 30, 2016.

23 Morrill, J. “NC lawmakers tell Colin Kaepernick he’s ‘picking a fight with Mother Freedom.’” The Charlotte Observer, September 2, 2016.

24 Graham, B.A. “Donald Trump blasts NFL anthem protesters: ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field.’” The Guardian, September 23, 2017.

12% PEER SUPPORT/BACKLASH/NFL BOYCOTT

Colin Kaepernick may have been the first NFL player to take a public stance and protest during the national anthem to shed light on the issue of police brutality, but his actions had a strong influence on his peers and began a movement wherein other professional athletes came forward with public statements or actions that supported or condoned Kaepernick's protest. Quotes within this category include:

“Every guy has the right to voice his opinion and his beliefs, and I support him, like any teammate should,” Scott said. “With the death of Muhammad Ali, I think it’s raising a lot of social consciousness in athletes. This icon of humanity passed, and you reflect on his life, and as a great athlete, you want to emulate that. (Kaepernick) is doing what he can do [to] have his voice heard to speak for a movement.”²⁵

“Kaep is using his platform & brand to make a compelling & polarizing point, which is his right, even if it’s met with ire! @idontagree,” ex-Giants running back Tiki Barber tweeted.²⁶



Chad Johnson and Bart Scott

25 Glauber, B. “Colin Kaepernick draws criticism from Boomer Esiason, praise from Bart Scott.” Newsday. August 31, 2016.

26 Clayton, A., and Leonard, P. “Won’t stand for injustice: Kaep’s refusal to rise during anthem draws mixed reactions.” Daily News, August 28, 2016.

10% ANTI-BLACK RACISM

Explicit references to racism, particularly anti-black racism, was the central focus of 10 percent of articles within our sample. This category of commentary ranged from analysis of the lack of reconciliation of racist roots in U.S. history to discussions of the racist attacks experienced by Kaepernick and other athletes of color choosing to protest police brutality. Although articles that were predominantly focused on racism, including the Black Lives Matter movement, accounted for just 10 percent of the articles, quotes making references to race or racism were featured in 26 percent of the articles, whereas 8 percent of the articles made specific reference to Colin Kaepernick's biracial background. Quotes within this category include:

“One of the faces in the crowd belonged to Willie Colon. The cause is bigger than football to the former Jets guard. “It’s a fight for not just Kap, but it’s about us coming together,” Colon said. “It’s sad that after Charlottesville, we’re still here..... Racism is alive. It’s in our face.”²⁷

“If only Colin Kaepernick, millionaire, black football player, were instead Donald Trump, billionaire, white reality TV star. Then, all of this America questioning would be cool because, let’s be honest, Colin Kaepernick’s sin wasn’t his questioning of America’s greatness or his expression of shame and disappointment in the country. His only sin was that he did those things while sticking up for other minorities.²⁸

Black Lives Matter

Alongside a broader focus on the issue of racism and anti-blackness, a portion of articles within this sub-category and also in other categories of coverage made specific reference to Black Lives Matter in media coverage.

This subcategory of storytelling focused on uplifting the intersections between Kaepernick's protest and Black Lives Matter, specifically the role that black athletes have played (both historically and currently) in social justice movements in the United States. Quotes within this subcategory include:

27 Heyman, B. “United We Stand rally for Colin Kaepernick in Manhattan.” Newsday. August 24, 2017.

28 “Don’t question America...unless you’re white.” The Montgomery Advertiser (Alabama). September 4, 2016.

“It’s uncertain how history will treat Kaepernick. But just as Ali was linked to the ‘black power’ movement, Kaepernick has become linked with the Black Lives Matter movement, says Soyica Diggs Colbert,” a Georgetown University professor who is writing a book on black movements.²⁹

Kaepernick’s decision to speak truth to power and the ensuing fallout illustrates something important. The same nation that upon his death celebrated Muhammad Ali’s youthful rebellion has yet to develop the political maturity to engage in a dialogue with a young black athlete courageous enough to make his own righteous point: that there is a yawning gap between one of American democracy’s most enduring symbols and the nation’s treatment of black bodies who continue to fight, bleed, and die to preserve freedom at home and abroad.³⁰

29 Har, J. and Holland, J. “Kaepernick’s future debated a year after his protest, discussion is about his career.” August 21 2017. Associated Press.

30 Joseph, P. “How Colin Kaepernick is bravely speaking truth to power.” CNN, August 29, 2016.

8% POLICE BRUTALITY

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. 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.

A smaller portion of articles within this category touched on an incident during the 2016 preseason when Kaepernick was pictured wearing socks displaying pigs wearing police hats. This image became a source of controversy, as opponents of Kaepernick attempted to use this image to discredit Kaepernick as anti-police. Several articles included quotes from law enforcement critiquing Kaepernick's protest and making reference to the socks and quotes from Kaepernick trying to redirect the discussion back to the issue of police brutality. Quotes within the category include:

“The Santa Clara police union says its officers may stop working San Francisco 49ers’ home games amid quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s decision to protest police brutality and racial injustice by refusing to stand during the national anthem, according to media reports.³¹

“He is severely under-informed, and I welcome him to go ride in a cop car and take numerous 911 calls, going into places where guns and violence are everyday occurrences,” Esiason said. “Put on that blue (police) uniform and put the shield on and see what it’s like to put your life in harm’s way every single day, and then get back to me when you’re making \$35,000 or \$40,000 a year, as opposed to the \$11 million he’s making.”³²

31 Green, J. “Santa Clara: Police union may boycott 49ers games over Kaepernick.” The Mercury News, September 2, 2016.

32 Blauber, B. “Colin Kaepernick draws criticism from Boomer Esiason, praise from Bart Scott.” Newsday, August 31, 2016. Bob Glauber

“

“Not only does he show an incredible lack of knowledge regarding our profession and ‘officer-involved’ shootings, but also shows a naive and total lack of sensitivity toward police officers,” SFPOA president Martin Halloran wrote. “I only wish Mr. Kaepernick could see the emotional and psychological challenges that our officers face following a fatal encounter.”³³



Photo: Fibonacci Blue/Flickr

³³ Hurd, R. “Kaepernick gets open invite to attend Alameda County Sheriff’s training academy.” The East Bay Times, August 30, 2016.

Key Spokespeople and Quotes

Based on the articles within our sample, news media coverage of Kaepernick's protest has been heavily focused on detailing the conflict the protest has created among NFL fans and the American public more broadly.

Between August 2016 and October 2017, members of the public accounted for 28 percent of the total quotes in our sample of articles, much of which expressed anti-Kaepernick sentiment (*Table 1*). Colin Kaepernick himself followed as the second most frequently quoted source. More than half of the quotes from Kaepernick were a direct re-quote of his original statement in August 2016.

Other prominent spokespeople frequently referenced in quotes include NFL personnel (including coaches; current and former players; and, to a lesser extent, NFL owners), sports commentators and journalists, and elected officials.

NEWS MEDIA SPOKESPEOPLE QUOTED

TABLE 1

Spokesperson	% of Quotes in Sampled Articles
Academic	3
Activist/Advocate	4
Athlete (Anti)	4
Athlete (Pro)	6
Elected official	6
Historical Figures	4
Kaepernick	13
Law Enforcement	3
Member of public (Anti)	15
Member of public (Neutral)	4
Member of public (Pro)	9
NFL Coach	9
NFL Commissioner/Owners/Other Personnel	4
Other	5
Retired Athletes	4
Sports Commentator	7
Veterans	2

Quotes from Members of the Public (ANTI-KAEPERNICK)

“

“How arrogant of him to disrespect the flag that represent the thousands of people who died in wars to protect his right to sit on his derrière.

**OUR COUNTRY IS NOT
PERFECT AND WE DO STILL
HAVE ISSUES TO ADDRESS,
BUT THAT IS NOT REASON
TO DISRESPECT THE FLAG
THAT REPRESENTS ALL
PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY
THOSE WHO ARE TRYING
TO MAKE OUR COUNTRY
BETTER.**

He is too blinded to recognize he is so fortunate to live in this country and had opportunities due to that fact.”

“So, the poor, little millionaire rich boy feels that he is among the oppressed in America and refuses to stand up for our national anthem. If he has such a problem with America, what's keeping him here? Why not leave and go live in all of those many countries that have no prejudice, no problems and are so much better than the United States?”

“Colin Kaepernick is no hero. He is a man who is overpaid to play a violent game before millions of people. Real heroes are the men and women of all color who serve our country 24/7, and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, to ensure the freedom of individuals to express themselves, even if it's in bad taste.”

“If Kaepernick wants to prevent violence in this country (and who does not?), he should do something about it, not sit on his butt during the national anthem. He could become a Big Brother. He could establish a gym or clubhouse in poor areas to provide children with a safe place to gather. He could establish scholarships for poor students so they can get the education they need to move ahead in this world. If he just wants to make a statement, he could have written it on his body, if there is any room left.”

Quotes from Colin Kaepernick

“

The player said he was fully aware of the controversy he was courting with his decision.

“THIS IS NOT SOMETHING THAT I AM GOING TO RUN BY ANYBODY. I AM NOT LOOKING FOR APPROVAL. I HAVE TO STAND UP FOR PEOPLE THAT ARE OPPRESSED...IF THEY TAKE FOOTBALL AWAY, MY ENDORSEMENTS FROM ME, I KNOW THAT I STOOD UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT.”

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat in protest during the national anthem for a pre-season game, saying he would not honor a song nor “show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” Referencing the recent shooting deaths of African-Americans by police, he told NFL Media that his conscience would not allow him to partake in the pre-game ceremony Friday against the Green Bay Packers.

“To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

“I wore these socks, in the past, because the rogue cops that are allowed to hold positions in police departments, not only put the community in danger, but also put the cops that have the right intentions in danger by creating an environment of tension and mistrust,” he wrote. “I have two uncles and friends who are police officers and serve ALL people. So before these socks, which were worn before I took my public stance, are used to distract from the real issues, I wanted to address this immediately,” he said.

He also addressed the recent shooting deaths of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, and Terence Crutcher in Tulsa—African-American men killed by police. “People are fighting for their lives on a daily basis and not just the ones that are getting killed,” Kaepernick said. “And we’re turning a blind eye to this and saying that’s OK. I can’t do that. I have to try to help.” Kaepernick has seemingly started a movement in the past month that has swept the sporting community.

Colin Kaepernick has been called unpatriotic as he protests what he says are social injustices and inequalities. Do his parents support his decision? “They agree with what I’m standing for,” Colin Kaepernick told *USA TODAY Sports* at the 49ers practice facility in Santa Clara, about a two-hour drive from his parents’ house. “It’s not a protest against America. It’s a protest against oppression and injustices and the equality that’s not being given to all people.”

Quotes from Veterans

“

Carl Sebern, 67, an Air Force veteran who flies the American flag, the POW/MIA flag and a California state flag from his pickup truck, said he supports Kaepernick's right to dissent.

“IF HE HONESTLY DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT (THE AMERICAN FLAG) REPRESENTS WHAT HE FEELS AT THIS TIME...HE SHOULD PROTEST,”

Sebern said, working with his son to raise the trio of fluttering flags. “I would love to see him at least make a gesture toward the military. Because I don't think he feels that way toward us. He feels that way toward our government, and the persecution they make toward African-Americans. I can't disagree with him.”

“

But ex-Marine Oscar Dorantes had only blunt disapproval.

“IT'S NOT RIGHT. MILLIONS AND MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WATCH (NFL GAMES).

That's our lives, American life. For him to do it that way? That's not right.”



Quotes from NFL Coaches/Players

“

If Colin Kaepernick continues to sit during pregame national anthems, 49ers coach Chip Kelly won't object. "We recognize his right to do that," Kelly said in a media conference call Saturday.

"IT'S NOT MY RIGHT TO TELL HIM NOT TO DO SOMETHING. THAT'S HIS RIGHT AS A CITIZEN."

“

"Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem and regardless of what people want to say about it disrespecting the military or the country or whatever it may be,

HE SHED LIGHT ON AN ISSUE THAT NEEDED TO BE REVEALED SO NOW WE'RE HAVING THIS CONVERSATION."

— Doug Baldwin



III. SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

Our analysis of social media data over a more than 2-year period revealed a degree of overlap between news and social media in terms of thematic and topic focus; however, there were some important distinctions in the tone and focus of discourse.

Due to the multi-directional nature of Internet engagement, we made use of a range of strategies to measure and analyze online discourse trends, including an exploration of the top links (or URLs) shared by online users and the most frequently used phrases and terms to emerge in social media posts. Top URLs provide insights into the most popular content being shared by online users and, in turn, the most prominent content sources. At the same, analysis of the top phrases and terms provides a more comprehensive understanding of the language governing a conversation.

Influential Storylines and Content Sources

We examined the website addresses that generated the highest number of shares across online platforms between August 2016 and August 2018. Collectively, the top 100 web links were embedded in about 900,000³⁴ posts across multiple online platforms and forums and shared and liked millions of times by online users. Links shared include social media posts from high-profile figures, elected officials, and members of the public; direct links from online media sources (including popular entertainment sites like TMZ); and links or social media posts from traditional news media outlets.

The most prominent content sources shared among social media users include several traditional media outlets, such as *GQ*, *Huffington Post*, ABC News, *Sport Illustrated*, CNN, Fox News, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, as well as advocacy organizations and activists such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Shaun King.

The content within these links and corresponding commentary on social media typically fell into one of five broad categories:

- 1** Anti-Kaepernick Rhetoric/Boycott NFL
- 2** Praise/Support/Defense of Kaepernick
- 3** Blackballing from the League
- 4** The Role of Other High-Profile Individuals
- 5** Instances/Images of Police Brutality

³⁴ 893,178 to be exact.

The content within these links and corresponding commentary on social media typically fell into one of five broad categories:

1

Anti-Kaepernick Rhetoric/Boycott NFL (32%)

This category of online engagement accounted for 32 percent of the most popular content shared online in the 25-month period examined and tended to consist of both the sharing of and reaction to anti-Kaepernick rhetoric. Tweets from Donald Trump feature heavily in this category, alongside stories from Fox News and other right-leaning media outlets. This category also was defined by calls for a boycott of the NFL for not penalizing players who chose to kneel (however, calls to boycott the NFL were also voiced by those in support of Kaepernick).

2

Praise/Support/Defense of Kaepernick (22%)

A significant portion of some of the most engaged with or shared content centered on publications, public figures, and members of the public praising Kaepernick for taking a stance and, ultimately, sacrificing his career as a football player. The most prominent piece of content within this category of engagement was *GQ*'s November 2017 cover naming Kaepernick their man of the year. The *GQ* cover, alongside other articles uplifting Kaepernick's advocacy, typically attracted high levels of engagement and were widely shared by both supporters and opponents of Kaepernick.

3

Blackballing from the League (22%)

Another 22 percent of some of the most shared content from August 2016 to August 2018 was focused on Kaepernick's blackballing from the National Football League. 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.

4

The Role of Other High-Profile Individuals (18%)

News stories and social media posts about other athletes choosing to kneel or speak out in support of Kaepernick also featured heavily in social media content. American sports journalist Jemele Hill and Carolina Panther safety Eric Reid featured heavily within this category of content.

5

Instances/Images of Police Brutality (6%)

Roughly 6 percent of most circulated content included the sharing of new instances of police brutality, typically in the form of videos. Comments accompanying this content made frequent use of the *#Whywekneel* hashtag.

TOP 20 WEBSITE LINKS SHARED

TABLE 2

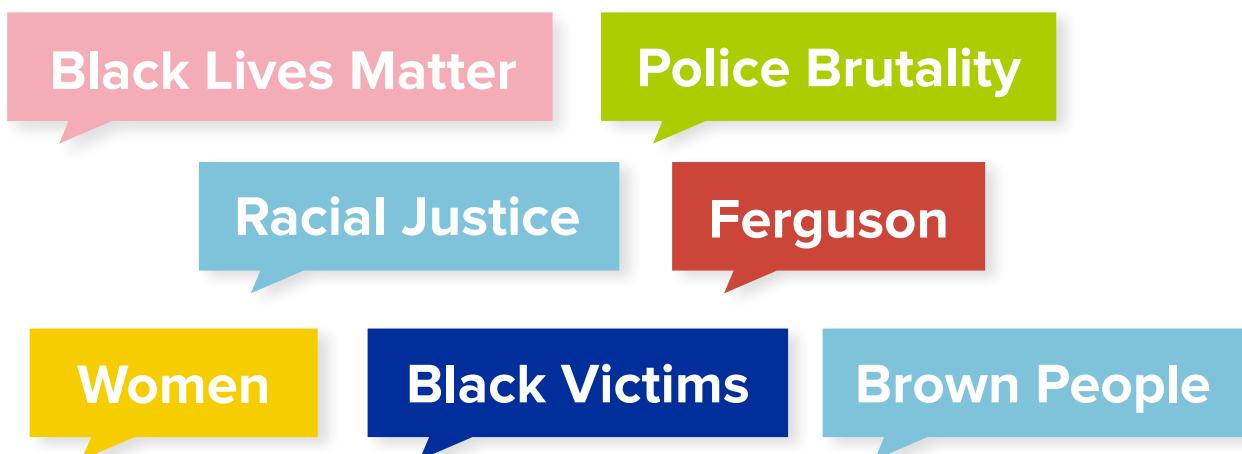
Website/Social Media Link	Total Shares
Colin Kaepernick Is GQ's 2017 Citizen of the Year	44431
New York Daily News Twitter status	35731
Joe Walsh Twitter status	30451
San Francisco 49ers Twitter status	30233
Sports Illustrated Twitter status	29574
Brent Scher Twitter status	27138
George Foster Twitter status	26652
Donald J. Trump Twitter status	26270
AJ+ Twitter status	23667
Adam Clanton Twitter status	22684
David A. Clarke, Jr. Twitter status	21018
ACLU Twitter status	20823
Sports Illustrated: Colin Kaepernick Is Recipient of 2017 Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award	19604
Daily Mail: Colin Kaepernick donated...	18593
GQ: Colin Kaepernick Will Not Be Silenced	17317
Ben Jacobs Twitter status	17255
HuffPost Twitter status	15120
Player Press	14925
The Source Magazine Twitter status	13580
Abby D. Phillip Twitter status	13383

Use of Language in Comments

Alongside an examination of the most share website links, we also explored the key phrases that have tended to be included in posts and tracked how language and terminology use has shifted over time.

As seen in the topic wheel (*Figure 12*), which visualizes the most prominent terms to emerge in relation to discussion of police brutality, in the period since Kaepernick first began his protest, the top phrases and topics discussed in relation to police brutality have shifted significantly. In the 12 months preceding Kaepernick's first kneel police brutality was largely discussed in the context of protests, black victims of police brutality, and Black Lives Matter. As visualized in the topic wheel, "Black Lives Matter," "black victims," and "Ferguson" were some of the most commonly used terms to emerge in association with "police brutality" before August 2016.³⁵ Terminology trends since 2015 point to the significant progress by Black Lives Matter in not only pushing the issue of police brutality into the national discourse but also successfully framing the conversation as a predominantly anti-black issue.

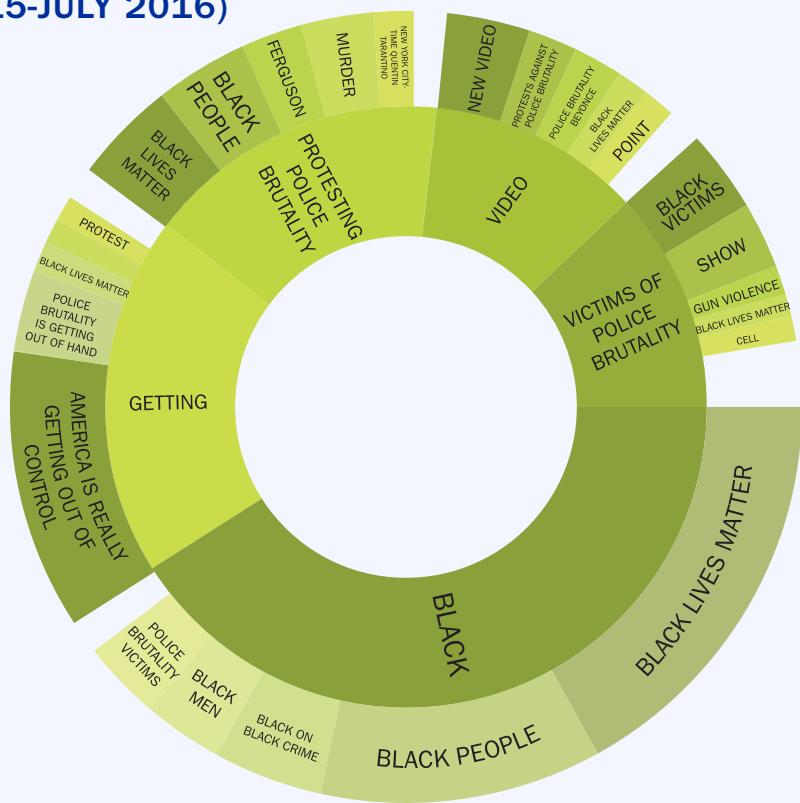
Since Kaepernick began his protest, the language governing the discussion of police brutality online has shifted dramatically. Talk of police brutality is now very much intertwined with discussion of Colin Kaepernick. As seen in *Figure 13*, since August 2016, "racial justice" has emerged as a prominent term discussed in the context of police brutality, alongside a strong connection between discourse related to police brutality and talk of the NFL, national anthem, and Colin Kaepernick. Conversations related to "women" and "brown people" have also emerged as prominent topics signaling the impact of other prominent movements (particularly MeToo) and the growing intersectional nature of online discourse.



51 Based on a random sample of 3,251,128 posts.

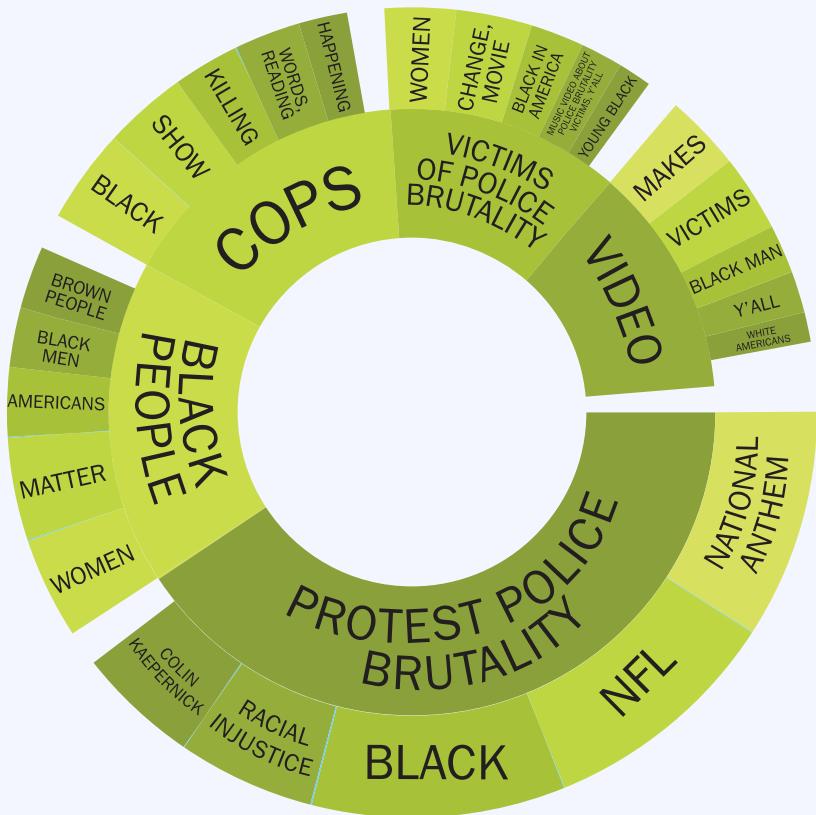
ONLINE LANGUAGE TRENDS PRECEDING KAEPERNICK'S PROTEST (JULY 2015-JULY 2016)

FIGURE 12



ONLINE LANGUAGE TRENDS SINCE KAEPERNICK'S FIRST TOOK A KNEE (AUGUST 2016-AUGUST 2018)

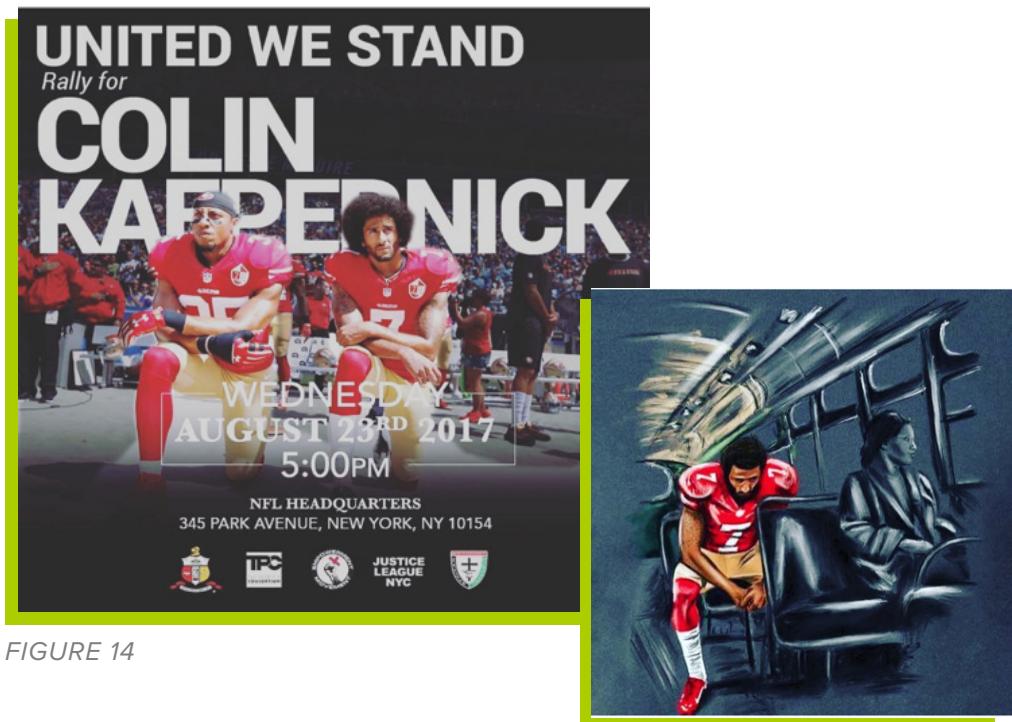
FIGURE 13



Imagery and Symbolism

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. Visual references to Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Muhammad Ali, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos are just some of the examples of this visual rhetoric (Figure 14).



Spokespeople and Influencers

While an examination of volume and discourse trends is central to our understanding of how an issue is being framed and discussed, another important element is identifying the key media outlets, organizations, and individuals shaping a conversation. Through analysis of the content with the highest level of online engagement, including the top Twitter handles and mentions, we identified some of the key actors and organizations shaping the current debate around Kaepernick protests and police brutality.

Based on the 2 years of online content within our sample, online discourse related to both Colin Kaepernick and police brutality has been dominated by progressive voices; however, a small but vocal opposition to Kaepernick also exists, largely as by-product of inflammatory comments from Donald Trump.

Trends on Twitter

Top influencers on Twitter are the most active authors in a conversation over time, regardless of their influence (Klout) score. Influence on Twitter is determined by volume of retweets related to a given topic.

Between August 2016 and August 2018, individuals from both the public and private sectors spoke out openly about police brutality and Colin Kaepernick's protest. Although there was some overlap of prominent voices discussing Colin Kaepernick and those discussing police brutality, there are also important distinctions in the key influencers driving discourse around these two interconnected topics.

The most influential tweets (in terms of retweet 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 (Figure 15).

MOST INFLUENTIAL TWEET AUGUST 2016-AUGUST 2018

FIGURE 15

The figure displays two tweets side-by-side. The left tweet is from Jemele Hill (@jemelehill) on January 15, 2018, at 10:55 AM. It shows a photograph of her sitting in a courtroom-like setting, looking towards the right. The tweet text reads: "Me, watching people who criticized Colin Kaepernick for his nonviolent protest post MLK quotes today". It has 286K likes and 107K retweets. The right tweet is from ChuckModi (@ChuckModi1) on July 7, 2017, at 6:34 AM. It shows a photograph of a man wearing a t-shirt with the text: "WE MARCH, y'all mad. WE SIT DOWN, y'all mad. WE SPEAK UP, y'all mad. WE DIE, y'all silent." The tweet text reads: "This shirt is better than any article ever written on Colin Kaepernick." It has 153K likes and 73.3K retweets.

MOST INFLUENTIAL RETWEETS (RELATED TO Kaepernick)

AUGUST 1, 2016-AUGUST 1, 2018

TABLE 3

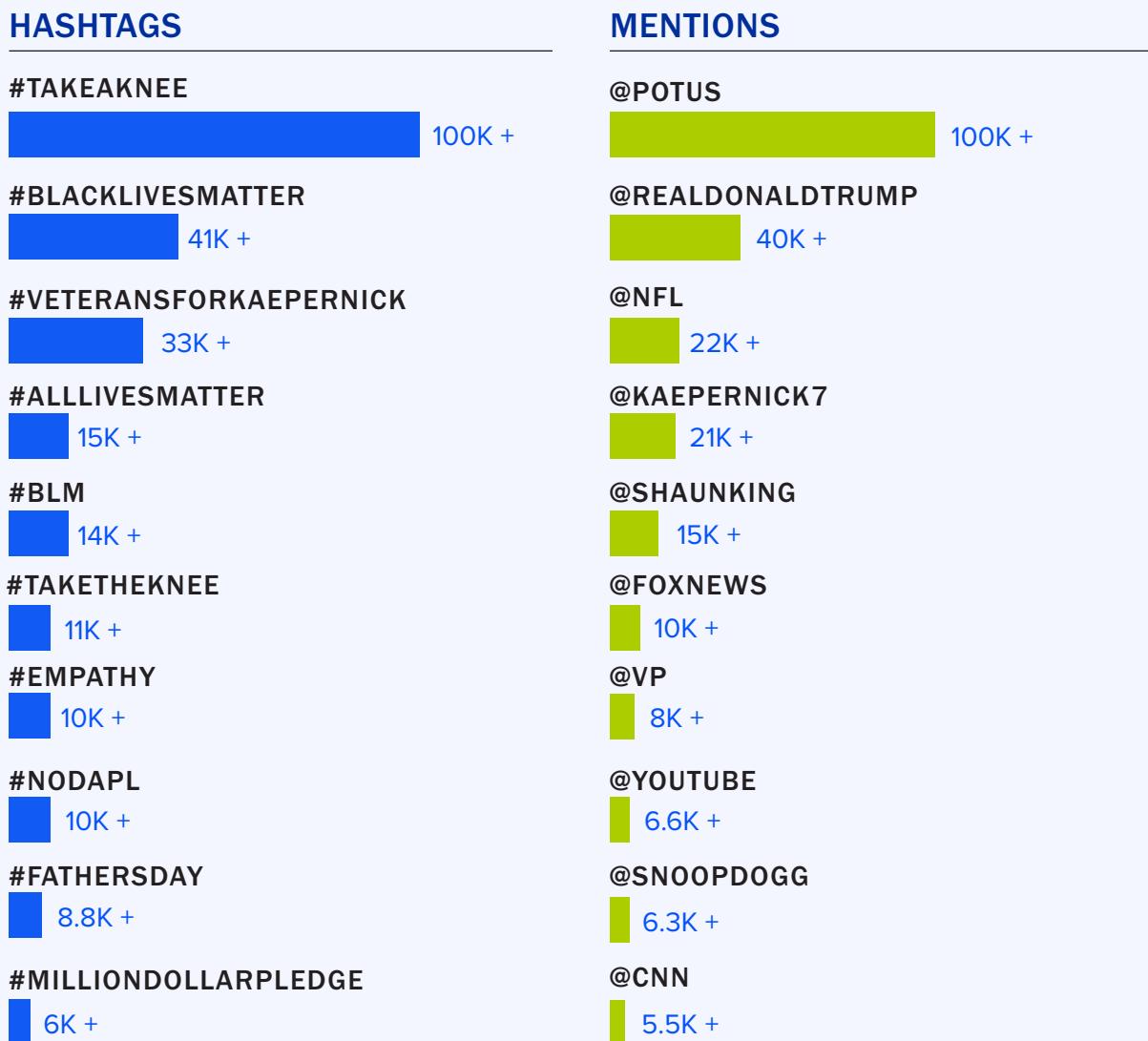
Retweet	Occurrences	Author
Me, watching people who criticized Colin Kaepernick for his nonviolent protest post MLK quotes today	63000	jemelehill (Jemele Hill)
This shirt is better than any article ever written on Colin Kaepernick.	40000	ChuckModi1 (ChuckModi)
Republicans in Congress hate Colin Kaepernick b/c they can't understand someone who's willing to lose his job over something he believes in	38000	mrbenwexler (Ben Wexler)
I'm honored to be recognized by @GQMagazine as Citizen of the Year.	36000	Kaepernick7 (Colin Kaepernick)
RT @ByRosenberg Just to recap today's NFL news *Colin Kaepernick won't say if he'll kneel next season, so Seahawks cancel his tryout *Linebacker Reuben Foster charged with 3 felonies for allegedly punching his girlfriend in the head 8-10 times, and 49ers keep him on the team	35000	ByRosenberg (Mike Rosenberg)
RT @XLNB A reminder that ABC is allowing this, while it permanently shelved a Blackish episode about Kaepernick & black athletes kneeling to protest police brutality.	35000	XLNB (X)
Trump has now attacked Jemele Hill, Colin Kaepernick, & Stephen Curry. All have something in common but I can't quite put my finger on it.	32000	RyanLizza (Ryan Lizza)
Kaepernick started his protest while Obama was President, but, you know, facts.	30000	franklinleonard (Franklin Leonard)
Y'all...literally pushed Kaepernick off of your team and left him out to dry for this very action, but...go off.	29000	_hoemo (Poz Vibes Only)
Where is Kaepernick???? Smh	28000	ChrisEvans (Chris Evans)

Top Hashtags and Mentions

The top hashtags³⁶ and mentions³⁷ from Twitter are another indicator of the central frames that have come to a particular conversation.

The top mentions and hashtags related to Colin Kaepernick suggest a strong and coordinated support base of support for Kaepernick on Twitter, with most of these top hashtags voicing support for Kaepernick and/or the Take a Knee protest. The Take a Knee hashtag has been used more than 100,000 times (not including likes and shares), outpacing the use of #BlackLivesMatter within the same timeframe.

Following comments made by Donald Trump during a rally, the discourse surrounding Kaepernick and Take a Knee became increasingly partisan. The increased interest of more right-leaning commentators is seen in the top mentions from Twitter from August 2016 to August 2018, with @POTUS and @realDonaldTrump topping the list of mentions.



36 A word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic.

37 The tagging of a username in a tweet or retweet using the @ symbol.

Facebook Trends

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 (*Figure 16*). 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 Clark.

Compared to the overall online discussion of Take a Knee, roughly a third of Facebook content related to the protest was focused on debates surrounding the national anthem and its connection to patriotism. As seen in *Figure 16*, unlike the wider online conversation, the topic wheel of the most prominent phrases to emerge in Facebook content was absent any reference to police brutality or Black Lives Matter. It is instead dominated by discussion of the NFL and national anthem.

The demographics of those engaging in discussions related to Kaepernick and the wider Take a Knee protest also differed slightly on Facebook. The overall discussion has leaned more male than female or nonbinary, with 64 percent of individuals engaging across online platforms identified as male and 36 percent identifiable as female. On Facebook, however, 79 percent of active participants were identifiable as male, compared to just 21 percent active female participants (*Figure 18*).

Demographic of individuals engaging in discussion on Facebook:

79% MALE v. 21% FEMALE

SAMPLE OF MOST INFLUENTIAL FACEBOOK POSTS AUGUST 2016-AUGUST 2018

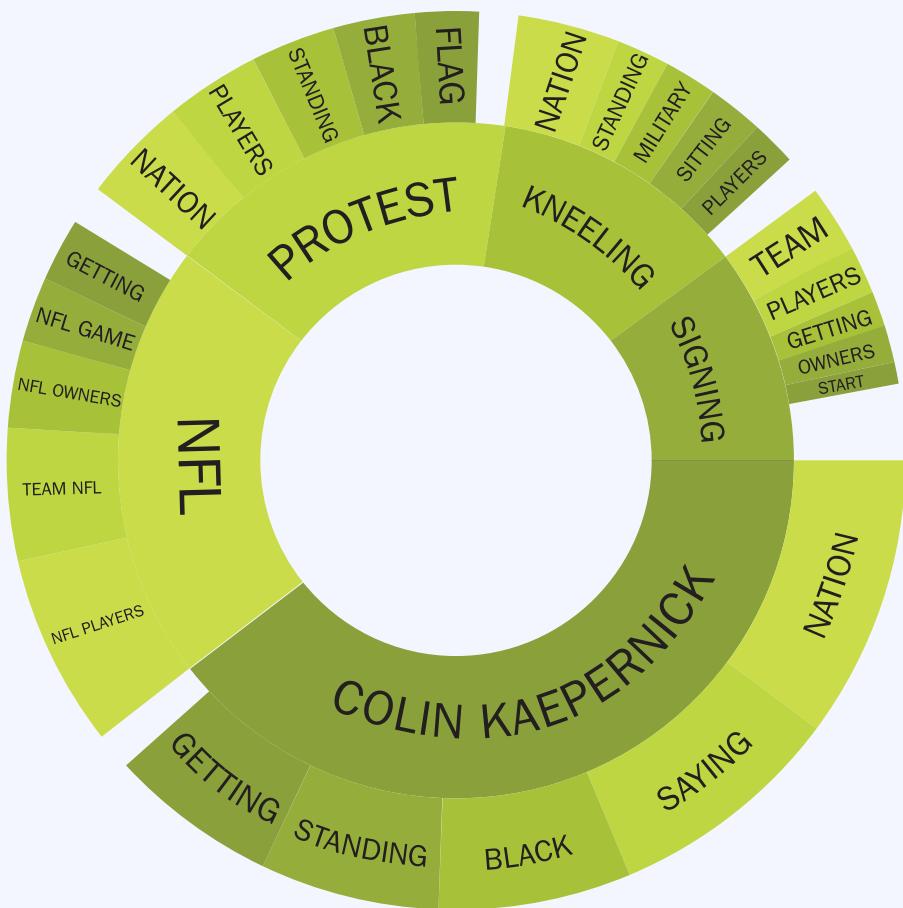
FIGURE 16



TOP PHRASES IN FACEBOOK CONTENT

AUGUST 2016 - AUGUST 2018

FIGURE 17



DEMOGRAPHICS OF ONLINE USERS DISCUSSING COLIN KAEPERNICK

FIGURE 18

Multiple Platforms



Facebook



ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

When Kaepernick first took the knee in August 2016, his stated goals in subsequent statements aimed to:

- 1** Bring immediate attention to the disconnect between the values the flag and/or anthem are intended to represent and the treatment of black Americans by law enforcement.
- 2** Force NFL fans who were otherwise disinterested or disengaged to think about the issue of police brutality.
- 3** Educate black Americans and other directly impacted communities about their rights.

Media coverage and online discourse related to Colin Kaepernick's protest point to a marked shift in the overall focus of coverage related to the NFL and, more broadly, the role of athletics and sports in political discourse. While police brutality accounted for just 8 percent of media coverage focus, references to his protest were present throughout the news media, even when not explicitly about police brutality. Social media engagement was even more promising, with a significant shift in both the volume and content of online engagement around police brutality.

Although the long-term impact of Kaepernick's protest is still yet to be realized, our analysis revealed the following direct shifts because of Kaepernick's actions:

- 1** Showed marked increase in social media engagement related to police brutality and anti-blackness
- 2** Generated significant media and online engagement related to a range of issues
- 3** Resulted in periodic increases in the discussion of police brutality, with apparent long-term recognition of Kaepernick as a key figure in the movement against police brutality
- 4** Sparked corresponding debates related to the right to protest, patriotism, and the role of athletes and other high-profile figures in social justice advocacy

- 5 Created a symbolic movement that has generated a myriad of creative content
- 6 Lead to other athletes and high-profile figures speaking out/ replicating his stance/drawing attention to anti-blackness
- 7 Created the slogan and hashtag #WhyWeKneel, which is actively used after instances of police brutality

Kaepernick's continued unsigned status is just one indication of the price he paid for his protest. His GQ Man of the Year award and recent collaboration with Nike also points to Kaepernick being recognized as a pivotal figure in the movement for social justice for decades to come. With that said, the clearest and most immediate implication is that high-profile activists will likely face consequences for speaking out. Although no one can expect athletes or any individuals to make such sacrifices, when they do, we can learn from their experiences and find the best ways to support and uplift their advocacy work. Kaepernick's protest presents important implications for high-profile individuals, advocates working directly or indirectly with these figures, and those seeking to support and uplift their work in more indirect ways.

This final section provides recommendations for influencers and those working directly or indirectly with influencers.



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