

2019

# 'Bigger than football': A capacities and signals approach to the NFL kneeling protests

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**‘Bigger than football’: A capacities and signals approach to the NFL kneeling protests**

By

**Brittany Szczyglowski**

A Major Research Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of Communication, Media and Film  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2019

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May 30, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

The ‘kneeling protests’ happening in the National Football League (NFL) have transformed football stadiums across the country into unlikely, yet impactful, spaces of resistance to racist rhetoric and racial violence. The reactions to the protests have been split, to say the least. Some have praised the kneeling as a powerful and moving display of civil resistance, culminating in the most high profile protester, Colin Kaepernick, being recognized as Amnesty International’s 2018 Ambassador of Consciousness. Others have interpreted the protests as a sign of disrespect towards the American flag, national anthem, and military. Now well into its third season, the symbolic power associated with the act of kneeling on the NFL may have ran its course. Broadcasters made clear their decision to not televise the anthems before the games, in a sense choking the kneeling protests of the oxygen that made for their fiery support and opposition in the first place – their circulation via traditional mass media broadcast. However, Kaepernick and #TakeAKnee are as widely discussed today as they were now almost three years ago.

In theorizing the athlete/activist in the digital age, the aim of this research is to answer the following central research question: How was visibility maintained and the narrative of the kneeling protests controlled through deliberate image making and circulation, considering the ever-shifting, yet overlaid, physical and digital sites of resistance?

The primary focus of this paper is the ability of the social movement to adapt strategy and tactic when space/place is denied or limited. It references a theoretical model (Tufekci, 2017) that measures a social movement’s power in terms of its i) narrative, ii) disruptive, and iii) electoral/institutional “capacities,” and how it “signals” to them.

## DEDICATION

First and foremost, I dedicate this paper to my parents Mark and Tammy. Your unconditional love transcends distance, and despite being far from home, I have never felt alone. To say I am grateful for you would be an understatement. I love you both very much.

To my sister Chloe, and my ‘sister’ Hannah, I just want to make you both proud. Thank you for your endless love and emotional support.

And finally, to Colin Kaepernick, who sacrificed everything to stand for what he believes in, and who gently continues to remind us that love is at the root of the resistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge my incredible supervisor, Dr. Brian Brown. Pardon the cliché, but really, where do I begin? With your encouragement and assistance, I have achieved things I had never dreamed to be possible. I am forever grateful. Thank you for your time, your patience, and your guidance.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Kyle Asquith. Always reliable and highly dependable, you provided me with much needed stability. Thank you for being a part of this project.

I must also acknowledge Dr. Neil Balan and Dr. Martin Morris, two incredibly caring professors and brilliant academics who solidified my desire pursue graduate studies. Thank you for vouching to my potential. I wholeheartedly feel that I would not be where I am today if it were not for the both of you.

Lastly, I would like to extend thanks to the entire CMF staff and faculty. My experience in this department has been nothing short of spectacular.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **National Football League (NFL) kneeling protest movement**

Standing shoeless, with raised, gloved fists and bowed heads atop the 1968 Olympic medal podium in Mexico City, African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos transformed themselves into globally recognized symbols of the Civil Rights movement. These militant gestures, performed on an international stage for a global audience to witness, were highly visible acts of non-violent resistance, staged strategically for the camera's gaze. The resonance of Smith and Carlos' protest reverberated around the world in an instant. Thus, in conjunction with the requisite presence of the mainstream mass media, the stadium was transformed into an amplifier, thrusting the message of the Civil Rights-era resistance and struggle into the dens, living rooms, and breakfast nooks of the world.

This iconic moment is the most salient historical precedent when the ongoing 'TakeAKnee' protests in the National Football League (NFL) are considered. The central protagonists of the 'kneeling protests' were high-profile athletes that chose to kneel rather than stand during the playing of the American national anthem. In doing so, they transformed football stadiums across the country into unlikely, yet impactful, spaces of protest. The kneeling protests are focused on two central issues: i) raising awareness regarding the institutional mechanisms responsible for denying African Americans basic human rights and ii) how state sponsored/sanctioned violence and poverty asymmetrically and persistently affect racialized bodies. With calculated efficiency, the

kneeling protests deliberately forced an otherwise apathetic public into confronting the racism that impacts African American populations around the United States.

While the social, political, and cultural similarities are unfortunately all too familiar, there is one significant difference between them and their historical predecessors: the technological circumstances within which they took place. The protests can be traced to the heightened awareness of systemic oppression, a paradigmatic shift hard fought for by #BlackLivesMatter activists and widely considered to be the latest iteration of Civil Rights-era militancy. However, in the adolescent stages of the movement, it would appear that the site of resistance is shifting once again, moving off the field, and in doing so calling for a monumental shift in strategy.

Accounting for the past efficiency of protest movements in professional sport, and at the same time aware of the ever-changing mediated environment, my work anticipates the kneeling protests as a historically pivotal and politically sophisticated display of non-violent resistance and protest in professional sport. In doing so, it provides a corrective to an oversight in the literature by critically assessing the complexity of the relationship between this social movement and its fluid, deft, and sophisticated use of a variety of media to advance its cause. From the physical space of the stadium, to the mainstream media's broadcasting of NFL games to millions around the US, to social media's organizational capacities, to the synergies created by cross-platform advertising strategies, this research project traces and assesses the variegated strengths and weaknesses of each according to its other.

The kneeling protests' use of the stadium lends them a degree of visibility and resonance that accounts for and overcomes the oft-parochial constraints of social media echo chambers, algorithmically entrenched timelines that make it more likely for users to only be exposed to posts that they already agree with (Tufekci, 2017, p. 160). Leveraging the broadcasting capacities of the mainstream mass media allows the protests access to corners of the populace they might not have reached otherwise due to 'echo-chamber' (Tufekci, 2017) effects. Now well into its third season, the symbolic power associated with the act of kneeling may have run its course. For instance, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick continues to be the player most readily associated with the protests, despite not having played for almost three years. Furthermore, ESPN, CBS, and other television broadcasters made clear their decision not to televise the anthems before the games, in a sense choking the kneeling protests of the oxygen that made for their fiery support and opposition in the first place – their circulation via traditional mass media broadcast. However, Kaepernick and #TakeAKnee continue to be widely discussed today. Consider, for instance, the September 2018 Nike campaign with Kaepernick's image and the tagline, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." His image, removed from his name and context, is now iconic (Mitchell, 2012).

In theorizing the athlete/activist in the digital age, the aim of this research is to answer the following central research question: How was visibility maintained and the narrative of the kneeling protests controlled through deliberate image making and circulation, considering the ever-shifting, yet overlaid, physical and digital sites of resistance? The primary focus of this paper is the ability of the social movement to adapt

strategy and tactic when space/place is denied or limited. This demonstrates a form of resiliency, creativity, and flexibility that aims to broaden the basis of struggle despite its ever-shifting media platforms.

The first section of this paper is a review of relevant literature. Drawing on previous scholarship regarding the ideological place of sport in shaping national identity (Bourdieu 1978; Rinehart, 1998; Real, 2013), my research question is backgrounded by long held ideas regarding nationalism and human loyalty, ‘imagined communities,’ and affinities to cultural artefacts (Gellner, 1974; Anderson, 1983), accounting for the highly contested nature of the topic. An exploration of sports as a site of political struggle (Robbins, 1987) and a brief history of protest in modern sport (Zirin, 2011; Henderson, 2009) serve to build an understanding of the social conditions in which the protests took place. The affordances of the football field (Juris, 2012; Mitchell, 2012) and the affordances of networked social media (Castells, 2012; Tufecki, 2017; Wu, 2018) to circulate a protest movement are also considered.

The second section of this paper draws on Zeynep Tufecki’s *Twitter and Tear Gas* (2017), and her argument that a social movement demonstrates its power, by “signaling” to its “capacities.” Tufecki believes that the strength of social movements lies in their capacities. “[A] capacity approach means evaluating the movement’s collective ability to achieve social change, rather than solely measuring available benchmarks” (Tufecki, 2017, p. 192). In short, a movement’s capacity is its ability to enact social change, from the point of view of power. A movement’s capacities are broken down into three broad subcategories: i) narrative capacity ii) disruptive capacity and iii) electoral/institutional capacity.

Each of these three subcategories of potential power is explored through an analysis of the kneeling movement's multi-modal signals to its capacities, so as to ultimately argue that the movement has engaged in a form of "tactical innovation" (McAdam, 1983) to stay relevant and visible, despite being denied its original broadcast platform. Due to the evolving nature of the kneeling protest, "the movement" here may refer to the anti-oppressive awareness and social justice promotion campaign started by Colin Kaepernick in its many forms as the site of resistance continues to shift.

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **Imagined communities**

Taking a structuralist approach to the question of why football attracts millions of viewers, we can consider the social conditions that make sport attractive, rather than looking for "inherent tendencies of the human heart" (Gellner, 1974, p. 149). Møller & Genz (2014) argue "commercial sport is only successful because the public is able to adapt to changes and interpret sport so that it continues to be a *meaningful cultural phenomenon*" (p. 257). As a meaningful cultural phenomenon, a sense of community is generated when watching the sporting event, whether viewing is happening with bodily immediacy in the stadium, or whether the stadium space is being broadcast to a variety of audiences watching on a variety of screens. Even without being physically present:

Simply watching a televised sporting event links us to a geographically spread meta-community that together forms a *single imagined collective consciousness* and a sense of affinity. This arises from the thought of thousands and perhaps

millions of people watching the same event in the very same second as ourselves.  
(Møller & Genz, 2014, p. 264; emphasis added)

A genuine feeling of meaningful closeness is produced when one watches the team that their family, friends, and community cheer for. The shared symbolic closeness is not just imagined. The images and sounds of tens of thousands of fans watching within the walls of the stadium are quite literally broadcast to another, similar audience of millions watching on television, or accessing the games via digital media, mobile devices, or streaming service used by hundreds of thousands of fans each game (Sherman, 2018, para. 3). Rinehart (1998) too acknowledges that new technologies bring at-home viewers closer to the actual experience of attending a game, as “this simulacrum of sensory experience has, for many, substituted for any ‘real’ experience – yet, paradoxically, watching a game on television is ‘real’ experience” (p. 17). In a nod to Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Rinehart (1998) writes, “television watching of games (virtual reality) has become more substantive than going to an actual game” (p. 16). In this sense, a mediated reproduction bears significant cultural weight, by virtually bringing viewers into the space of the stadium and allowing them to watch alongside their non-virtual counterparts.

The virtual closeness produced by watching football creates not only a community of sports fans, but also engenders an *imagined community*, which has the tendency to act as a proxy for American nationalism/patriotism. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously proposed the concept of ‘imagined communities’ as an anthropological/sociological approach that considers ‘nation’ to be *ideological*, which accounts for the strong attachments people feel to imagined communities, and the deep



attachments they feel to certain cultural artefacts such as football (p. 4). Anderson's (1983) definition of imagined communities is as follows:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... It is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (p. 7)

Another prominent scholar in theorizing nationalism is Ernest Gellner (1974), who defined nationalism as the, “distinctive type of sentiment and feeling of loyalty and identification which is elicited by modern political units... A movement which conceives the natural object of human loyalty to be a fairly large anonymous unit defined by shared language or culture” (p. 149). By Gellner's account, it is the *sentiment* of nationalism that brings objects of loyalty into being, rather than vice versa. Football, America's most popular professional sport, has proven to be a nationalist object of loyalty and patriotism, *produced* by the NFL and its broadcasters, and *reproduced* by fans and spectators. Indeed, sports spectators may be considered what Rinehart (1998) calls ‘arbiters of taste,’ and “as the gatekeepers of scholarship or popular culture, these ‘patrons of culture’ subtly shift the focus of culture and what culture itself means – so that a cultural hegemony is instilled” (p. 12). The Super Bowl, for example, is not just a football game, but also a cultural phenomenon, as Real (2013) recounts:

The final competition of America's football year had become, in the early 1970s, far more than a game, more even than a championship game. In its first decade,

the Super Bowl had exploded onto the national cultural landscape as America's ultimate celebration of itself. (p. 31)

Beyond television ratings, the success of the NFL is reflected in its ability to generate capital. The Dallas Cowboys are the most valuable sports team in the world, valued at \$4.8 billion USD as of 2018, ranking above both Manchester United and Real Madrid. The NFL has twenty-nine teams ranked amongst the fifty most valuable sports teams in the world, with only three NFL teams in the franchise missing the cutoff (Badenhausen, 2018, para. 2).

Anderson never explicitly addressed our current 'mass media' systems (i.e. radio/television/Internet) as being tools for the reproduction of nationhood. However, explicit links can be made between our current means of producing national consciousness, and the genealogy of nation and nationalism traced by Anderson. For Anderson, the development of print capitalism is closely linked to the rise of national consciousness. Unified fields of communication, the fixity of vernacular language, and mass cultural distribution were all developments that allowed for new technology to churn out 'culture' and laid the foundations for the growth of a national consciousness. With the invention of the printing press, and communication technologies to come, "the 'imagined' nation is a modernist construct, not a changeless myth springing from the depths of time... not rooted in history but in technology" (Castelló, 2016, p. 61). The distribution of newspapers meant that millions of people were able to share the same message at the same time, highlighting the role that the popular press played in fostering national consciousness.

As our personal lives increasingly move online, where our attention is more fragmented, watching sports, which are usually enjoyed live and in real-time, create a similar unified gaze and consciousness that was first created by mass distributed newspapers and print capitalism. In this way, live sporting events like football serve what Real (2013) calls a *ritual function*. A

[p]ervasiveness of embedded structure and value making people ‘feel connected,’ personal identification with teams, players, and outcomes individually situated but expressed communally... People watching ... with a special group of people, often the same ones with whom they spend major holidays or religious feast days. (p. 35)

The fervour and enthusiasm with which fans engage in the rituals of consuming sporting entertainment closely resemble that of religious observance. Anderson (1983) believes that to understand the profound ‘emotional legitimacy’ of national cultural artefacts, it would “make things easier if one treated it as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion,’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (p. 4). The imagined community produced by American football closely resembles the imagined community of a sovereign state – it fosters plurality despite inequalities and exploitation, and virtually ‘brings together’ individuals of all walks of life who identify with the game, particular franchises, and thus with each other. The imagined collective consciousness formed through the consumption of sports is therefore meaningful and genuine. The attachment to the cultural artefacts of the NFL (its teams, players, uniforms, and related rituals) by fans serves to reinforce ideological nationhood. The unifying gaze produced by the spectacle of watching football games in real time, experienced either in the stadium or via television broadcast,

punctuate the moments in which these connections are the most deeply felt. For this reason, carrying out a protest on the field of a live NFL game is a potent force, laying bare the racialized dimensions of nationhood and belonging, and calling into question the legitimacy of the aforementioned imagined community.

The protests are an unwanted reminder that the ‘community’ is fragile, and quick to implode when the inequalities of the ‘real world’ can no longer be polished away for carefree consumption. In a space typically reserved for social unification and unbridled patriotism, the shiny façade of horizontal comradeship is exposed as multifaceted and complex, and in the end, is a reflection the same social issues at large that the NFL tries to provide an escape from.

### **Sport as a site of political struggle**

Zirin (2013) writes that whether we see ourselves as sports fans or not, “We all have a stake in understanding why the sports page is insufficient for understanding sports” (p. 4). ‘Nation’ occupies a powerful place in our social imagination, and informs our understanding of the world. Operating as both normative and prescriptive, “[t]he nation is not a thing but a set of contingent and ongoing processes that actors mobilize for diverse purposes in a range of contexts” (Aronczyk, 2017, p. 126). When it comes to ‘nation’ and national identity, sporting events, as framed and broadcast by the media, can serve to produce and/or legitimate the idea of the ‘nation’ as a unified and collective assemblage of persons, reinforcing ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson, 1993, p. 7). Football in particular has been imbued with not only the ability to communicate the rhetoric of nationhood, but the expectation to do so. The patriotism celebrated through football reinforces a previously established hegemonic national identity.

Hegemony, as defined by Gramsci, is achieved when the ideals and values of the dominant historic bloc are presented and accepted as universal, even though they only benefit the ruling elites (Lipsitz, 1988). Robbins (1987) seamlessly ties together sport, hegemony, and the middle class through his analysis of sport, acknowledging that sport is ‘placed firmly within the context of class relations’ (p. 580). Appropriating and developing Gramsci’s ideas to understanding the treatment of sport as culture, Robbins (1987) writes:

Gramsci’s work... directs attention to the contribution that sport may make towards securing bourgeois hegemony. Hegemony is secured in sports, as elsewhere in civil society, through the coming together of the classes under the institutional and cultural leadership of alliances of middle and upper class factions. (p. 518)

Based on this hegemonic understanding of class relations, popular culture, sport, and, more specifically in the American context, football, are understood as tools used by the ruling class to indoctrinate society with pro-capitalist ideologies, and to disguise social inequalities. Jhally (1984) posits that, “sports helped to work through a crisis of ideology that a developing monopoly capitalism faced” (p. 53).

In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, as capitalism progressed and the United States shifted from the ideology of “rugged individualism” to a more “bureaucratic ethos” (Jhally, 1984, p. 53), football surpassed baseball in popularity, a decidedly more *team* game. “It is important to stress that football was not imposed upon the audience. Instead the audience elevated it above baseball to mediate a cultural

response to the material conditions,” writes Jhally (1984, p. 53). Robbins (1987) also points out:

The most revealing and significant feature of sport and leisure subcultures are likely to be found in the tensions and conflicts that exist within them and in the ways in which these are resolved by assembling potentially contradictory cultural elements into ‘teeth gritting’ harmony. (p. 581)

Although the images of hegemonic national identity produced by the NFL may be used to establish and legitimate the ‘nation’ as an ‘imagined community,’ this does not mean that the dominating national narrative is uncontested and passively accepted. Hegemony, after all, “is not something that can ever be taken to be finally and irreversibly won: on the contrary, it is something that needs to be constantly nurtured, defended, and reformulated (Miliband, 1990, p. 346). The ‘teeth gritting harmony’ achieved by sport may be (and often is!) viewed as a microcosm of the kind of ‘unification’ achievable in wider society, and of the supposed meritocracy that is the United States, in spite of the inequalities and exploitations that may prevail in actuality (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). “By 1920,” writes Henderson (2009) “most Americans thought organized sports provided the social glue for a nation of diverse classes, regions, ethnic groups and competing political loyalties” (p. 102).

NFL viewership and ownership demographics not only reflect the inequalities of the real world, but also demonstrate the league’s gross lack in diversity. NFL viewership is comprised of a majority of white viewers (70%), relative to the greater U.S. population of white Americans (61%). Players in the league are dominantly African-American

(70%), while the majority of head coaches (81%) and assistant coaches (69%) are white (Kertscher, 2017, para. 22). White men overwhelmingly hold management and ownership positions, with “still just two people of colour among the principal owners of the NFL’s 32 teams” (Garcia, 2018, para. 9). Pakistani-American Shad Khan became the first minority NFL owner in 2011 with his purchase of the Jacksonville Jaguars, and “the league has yet to have a franchise with an African-American majority owner as it nears its 100<sup>th</sup> season” (Bell, 2017, para. 11).

The idea that sport can act as a unifying social force is heavily ingrained in American culture. So too, however, is the inverse idea that sport can also be a *counter-hegemonic* site of resistance and struggle that threatens to splinter the *hegemonic* unity of the collectively imagined community fostered by professional sports such as football. Modern sport has always been political. Even without ongoing overt actions of dissent, like protest, “sport, like any other practice, is an object of struggles between the fractions of the dominant class and also between social class” (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 826). Historically, the ‘sportization’ of folk/village games into bourgeois conceptions of sport (based on justice, fairness, rules and recording) was a means of:

Localizing the control of games in order to moderate the political effects of mass gatherings. The development from game to sport and the concomitant rearrangements in the formation of playing space were thus intimately connected to policing peasant classes. (Shapiro & Neubauer, 1989, p. 310)

Bourdieu (1978) echoes this, writing that the specific social practices associated with the development of sport is concerned first and foremost with the ‘complete and continuous

containment of the working population' as "in an increasingly disguised way as State recognition and subsidies increase, and with them the apparent neutrality of sports organizations and their officials, sport is an object of political struggle" (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 832). The point here is that the political dimension of sport did not begin with its commercialization as a capitalist industry that interacts with the state, with the state "providing the conditions of accumulation, subsidies, etc." (Jhally, 1984, p. 42). These conditions for accumulation do, however, reinforce the notion of major league sports are involved in decidedly political issues. For instance, NFL teams may heavily burden the taxpayers in the cities in which they reside. The construction of new stadiums is heavily subsidized by taxpayer dollars, and, "Since 1997, NFL teams have constructed 20 new stadiums, receiving an average of \$238 million per stadium in public funding and costing a total of \$4.7 billion" (Koch Institute, 2015, para. 2). The policing efforts to control crowds of as many as 70,000 football fans at regular season games around the country may also fall on taxpayers. Public funds are drawn to provide adequate security around stadiums, for a billion-dollar corporation holding for-profit events ("The Times Editorial Board", 2016, para. 2).

The NFL's production of mythos and themes in broadcasting that foster national consciousness are deeply rooted within the longer history of the hegemonic role of sport, continuing the history of the 'teeth gritting harmony' that it produced. The images produced in the stadium space are those of blissful social unification through consumption. Here, everyone is unified, even if only briefly, by their love of sport, team, and nation. Race and class differences are, in theory, tabled as secondary, because there is an understanding that your opponent, your 'other,' is engaged in the same imagined



community founded on football. “In sports,” writes Bryant (2018b), “the scoreboard serves as a metaphor for the meritocracy America always considered itself, and sports was the barometer for where African Americans stood in larger culture, and how American they would be allowed to be” (p. xi). Most of the time, then, the images produced in the stadium and broadcast to millions around the world can be considered a piece of “sophisticated statecraft,” (Retort, 2004, p. 13) reinforcing social unification through direct and indirect modes of ideological consumption. That is, until the images produced in the stadium and broadcast to millions around the world function in diametric fashion to their dominant counterparts.

### **History of protest in sport**

Without diminishing the significance of the kneeling protests as a brave and thoughtful act of political dissent, using the highly mediated playing field to one’s advantage is not a new phenomenon. Henderson (2009) writes that:

In an age when power and capital have developed sophisticated techniques to insulate themselves against traditional, materialistic forms of protest and challenge, cultural arenas provide one of the few public spaces in which otherwise marginalized and disempowered groups can express social grievances and begin to fashion some sort of mobilization on their behalf. (p. 549)

While many may not recall what country or what year the 1968 Mexico City Olympic podium protest happened, the image of the two athletes standing on the podium with bowed heads and raised fists has become a part of our collective consciousness, an iconic

image that has persisted through time and continues to reappear. Hariman & Lucaites (2007) refer to these images as *photographic journalistic icons*:

Photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. (p. 27)

At the time, the mainstream media coverage of the protest was widespread and transcended all categories of newspaper coverage. As Hartmann (1996) recounts, “Within two days, Smith and Carlos’s gesture was pictured on the *front* page (not the sports page) of newspapers across the United States, and around the world, and still today, over a quarter of a century later, references to this image appear” (p. 150). Like the sport protests that have preceded Kaepernick and other players kneeling, the use of the stadium as a space to voice dissent has the chance of becoming what Mitchell (2012) would call an ‘iconic moment’ – and image that promises to become a monument (p. 9). In reference to Smith and Carlos, “Why has that moment over forty years ago retained its cultural capital?” asks Zirin (2011). “The most obvious [reason] is that people love a good redemption song. Smith and Carlos have been proven correct. They were reviled for taking a stand and using the Olympic podium to do it. But their “radical” demands have since proved to be prescient” (p. 20).

The aforementioned role of sport in producing ‘imagined communities’ and hegemonic national identity also affect the way that the kneeling protests have come to be understood. The idea of sport as refuge put forward by Møller & Genz (2014) as

something impeded by protest was also a fundamental difficulty faced by civil rights activists in the twentieth century. The dominant perception at that time was that sports were a unifying force and had provided many opportunities of social progress for African-Americans. Henderson (2009) writes:

The belief that sport was above politics, and specifically the sporting arena had provided black Americans with massive opportunities, dictated the largely negative view of any [protest] attempt. Faith in a racially neutral sporting ideal resisted the encroachment of civil rights activism. (p. 105)

On the subject of the 1968 Olympic podium protest, Hartmann (1996) writes that the antagonistic and critical responses the protest elicited were not surprising. For many, “sport was inherently about racial justice and civil rights; or, to put it even more starkly, sport *was* just and right for everyone, blacks included” (p. 599). Even within the black athletic community, there was not a consensus of support. George Foreman famously waved a little American flag around the ring after winning the gold medal in boxing in 1968, a move perceived as an act of anti-solidarity and damaging to the cause, “This was held up by the media as a brilliant patriotic response to our ‘black-fisted thuggery.’... George was the person who loved his country and loved the Olympics: the ‘good’ black athlete,” recalls John Carlos (Zirin, 2011, p. 125).

Grano (2009) points to “The Greatest,” boxer Muhammad Ali as the prototypical athlete/activist against which modern athletes are compared (p. 192). Remembered not only as one of the greatest boxers of all time, but also as high-profile figure in the Civil Rights Movement, Ali was an outspoken opposer to the Vietnam War:

While politically outspoken sports stars like Ali are normally reviled in their own time, and granted heroic status only retrospectively it is also clear that political silence is seen as a fundamental failure among “modern athletes” who are believed to possess a profound capacity for change because of the broad sweep and appeal of their voices. (Grano, 2009, p. 192)

We find ourselves in a renewed moment of athlete activism, as “the real world is gaining on the sports world and the sports world is starting to look over its shoulder” (Zirin, 2013, p. 4). It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate ‘real world’ issues from the ‘teeth gritting’ escapist utopia of the sporting world.

### **Divided reactions to the kneeling protests**

The kneeling protests have garnered strong reactions of both support and dissent. In many instances, those in opposition view the field as an ‘inappropriate’ space to voice discontent. Viewers often tune in to watch football to ‘disconnect’ from reality, and to tune out from the world outside the stadium’s architectural enclosure. Viewers have an allotted slot of time on a specific date that they can focus on a single thing (football) and not think about the problems of daily life. Møller & Genz (2014) call this *sport as refuge* and suggest that an escapist ‘space’ is created when viewers have a designated and short period of time to consume sporting events. This ‘space’ “is also characterized by containing a set of norms and values that differ from the everyday. A distinctive atmosphere is created, an atmosphere akin to theatre, a living, narrated drama unfolding in a fixed and agreed framework” (Møller & Genz, 2014, p. 264). The distinctive atmosphere of the stadium projected outward is one that is considered to be not the ‘real world.’ The problem here is the tension that arises when the ‘real world’ infringes on the

refuge of the stadium. When this happens, some viewers get very upset. A protest that denounces racial inequality, police brutality, and racism raises concerns that certainly do not mesh with the goal of ‘disconnecting’ from the outside world, nor with the perceived sense of community and oneness that is formed when watching football. Even though there are two teams, this sense persists due to the ‘rules’ of the game and the meritocratic myths that undergird its playing. Møller & Genz’s (2014) notion of sport as refuge is one way of explaining the controversy caused by the kneeling protests.

The NFL, above other major league sports, is particularly fertile ground for the kneeling protests to resonate as profoundly as they have, and the most opportune for disruption. This may be attributed to the ‘ritual function’ (Real, 2013) that live-broadcast football games play in structuring people’s leisure time, especially Sundays. NBC’s *Sunday Night Football* completely dominates primetime television. In 2018, by the midway point of the season, an NBC press release boasted, “Primetime TV’s #1 show for a history-making seven consecutive years, once again tops primetime television and is averaging a Total Audience Delivery of 19.7 million viewers” (Comcast, 2018, para. 1). The kneeling protests interrupt and disturb the ‘sacred’ Sunday ritual of at the height of this time dependent shared experience. The preponderance for live viewership of NFL games forces this unwelcome confrontation.

In their analysis of social control and the framing of protest groups, McLeod & Hertog (1999) write that, “The source of a message may have only a hazy understanding of the audience and know even less about the effects of the message. Moreover, mass-mediated messages have different effects for different audience members” (p. 306). The NFL kneeling protests engage in what McLeod & Hertog (1999) would deem to be

*militant* action, using strategies that challenge the norms of acceptable behaviour (p. 310). As such, the protests are engaging in a *barter arrangement* with the media – producing a spectacle for attention, which can unfortunately lead to a double bind of stimulating a more critical response from the media and the wider public (p. 310).

In the case of the anthem protests, the threat they pose is not one of bodily harm, but rather an ‘attack’ on the imagined community constituted around cherished nationalist symbols like the anthem, flag, military, and football. This results in elite athlete activists being frequently denigrated as ‘ungrateful.’ President Trump himself tweeted (in two parts):

If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU'RE FIRED.  
Find something else to do! (Trump, 2017a; Trump 2017b)

This ‘shut up and play’ attitude is not uncommon (Bryant, 2018a, para. 6), and the sentiment was echoed in many conservative majority geographical areas of the U.S. The NFL’s operates on a revenue-sharing business model that redistributes profits from television, satellite, radio and mobile broadcast deals amongst all teams in the league (Shea, 2018, para. 11). In 2017, each team received \$255 million from a pool of \$8.1 billion (Shea, 2018, para. 12). This business model has allowed teams to stay profitable in politically conservative regions in the U.S. that may otherwise not have been able to economically sustain an NFL team, for example:

The Bills and Lion, along with the Cleveland Browns and Cincinnati Bengals, are the only NFL teams valued by Forbes at less than \$2 billion – and all four are midsize Rust Belt cities just hours apart that have struggled with winning. (Shea, 2018, para. 13)

The profit-sharing model of the NFL has allowed cities in more the more politically conservative industrial Midwest and Rust Belt to retain their teams despite the decades-long economic decline.

In addition to viewing sport and the football field as an inappropriate outlet to voice civil discontent, many negative reactions stem from the kneeling protests being misinterpreted as an act of disrespect towards U.S. troops and the military. However, misguided these reactions may be, it is not at all surprising given the work of Anderson (1983), Real (2013), Zirin (2013), and Bryant (2018b), that sport spectators would conflate the NFL with the military. In an examination and critique of the NFL's "Salute to Service" campaign that highlights and celebrates the military, Adam Rugg (2016) writes that through this campaign (a production of elaborate displays of soldiers and equipment), "the NFL is able to increase its leveraging of militaristic meanings in marketing and game broadcast for a quarter of its regular season" (p. 26). Rugg (2016) identifies the NFL as an ideologically active and authoritative American public institution, and like the military, football can be seen as a way to build the ideal 'American' (p. 21). In an attempt to brand the league as a compassionate corporate citizen, the "Salute to Service" campaign "is an extension of the NFL's continual efforts to leverage and celebrate military display and codify the league's long-term efforts to market itself as supporting the troops" (Rugg, 2016, p. 21). The extravagant spectacles of

patriotic display serve to entwine the U.S. military into the very cultural fabric of the NFL. This has the effect of banalizing and normalizing the military presence into its ‘everyday life,’ and conflating the protests against systematic and institutionalized racism as having anything to do with the military. This misunderstanding and conflation has to do first with the ways in which audience members can differentially decode mediated messages (Hall, 1973), but also, second, with the relatively new found ability to share those perceptions with others via social media platforms.

### **Online vs. offline circulation of protest movements**

As human life increasingly exists online through the use of ubiquitous digital technology and social media, the leveraging of networked communication to produce and spread resistance have become integral to many modern social movements. Manuel Castells (2012) has been a prevalent scholar in theorizing what he calls the *network society*, a multidimensional exercise of power that influences human behaviour through networks of mass communication, giving rise to networked forms of struggle and resistance (p. 12). Perhaps overly optimistic, Castells (2012) believes that the rise of the network society has given protest groups the ability to exert ‘decisive influence’:

By engaging in the production of mass media messages, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication... They build their projects by sharing their experience. They subvert the practice of communication as usual by occupying the medium and creating the message. (p. 15)

This is true. Online communication and the ‘mass networks’ of the Internet have allowed protest groups to form and movements flourish. However, they also face the difficulty of



being subverted by algorithmically manipulated timelines, forcing them out of the spotlight or never allowing them to enter into it, thus thwarting their ability to communicate en-masse. “Filter bubbles” or “echo-chambers” tailor information to the interests of each user, “which sounds innocuous (giving the user what they want) but has the secondary effect of exercising strong control over what the listener is exposed to and blocking content that is unlikely to engage” (Wu, 2018, p. 556). The social networking sites with the largest audiences are owned by massive companies who are first and foremost concerned with their bottom line. On filter bubbles, Pariser (2011) writes that the future of getting one’s news will be more machine-powered than people-powered, and will increasingly “rely on a mix of nonprofessional editors (our friends and colleagues) and software code to figure out what to watch, read, and see. This code will draw heavily on the power of personalization and displace professional editors” (p. 51).

In 2012, Castells claimed that “digital social networks offer the possibility for largely unfettered deliberation and coordination of action” (p. 24). While this remains true, it is to a much lesser extent. It is harder to share one’s struggle, outrage, and hope when social media timelines are algorithmically biased towards producing agreement, not dissent. Tufekci writes about how algorithms shape our online experience, and their increasing role in personalizing ‘engagement’ that ends up filtering out viewpoints different than our own (Tufekci, 2015a, p. 9). Facebook’s algorithm, for instance, is biased towards producing agreement, not dissent, which can burry social movements and their circulation. Tufekci (2015b) calls this ‘algorithmic gatekeeping,’ “The process by which such non-transparent algorithmic computational tools dynamically filter, highlight, suppress or otherwise play an editorial role – fully or partially – in determining

information” (p. 208). Moving forward, the ethics of timeline manipulation, especially when they play such an intrinsic role in the circulation of news and other civic information, should be of the utmost ethical concern.

The attention of audiences is scarce, and time and attention have become highly valued commodities (Wu, 2018, p. 554). Social movements must navigate this ‘floodlit social terrain’ (Gitlin, 2003, p. 1) while trying to communicate their message. Using networked digital tools like social media offers no guarantee that a social movement will get its message to a large audience. The relationship between digital tools and social movements is thus complicated and interactive:

Overall, it is important to keep in mind that understanding digital technology’s role in social movements require multilevel analysis that take into account the way digital technology changes society in general, that the particular design and affordances of each technology have complex consequences, and that people make active choices in how they create, influence, and use technology. (Tufekci, 2017, p. 126)

In some instances, a social movement may wholly embrace network connectivity and technology as a ‘tool’ to achieve its goals. Yet for other movements, their circulation via digital networks may be a by-product or after effect of offline action, later incorporated into the regular operations of activists. Still others may combine a number of different approaches and media so as to leverage the affordances of some, in service of accounting for the weaknesses and limitations of others. The following subsection of this paper considers the NFL kneeling protests as a case study for the complex ways in which social

movements may choose to adopt technology, sometimes when it best serves them, and sometimes when it is inevitable.

## **CASE STUDY: NFL KNEELING PROTESTS**

### **Introduction**

In theorizing the athlete/activist in the digital age, the aim of this paper is to answer the following central research question: How was the visibility of #TakeAKnee maintained and its message controlled through deliberate image making and circulating, considering the ever-shifting and overlapping physical and virtual sites of resistance? The primary focus of this research is the ability of social movements to adapt strategy and tactic when space/place is denied or limited. Otherwise, they run the risk of what Tufekci (2017) calls ‘tactical freeze,’ wherein movements find themselves unable to develop and agree upon a new path to take when faced with an organizational challenge (p. 77). The #TakeAKnee protests have demonstrated resiliency, creativity, and flexibility, all the while continuing to not only broaden the basis of struggle, but also push it into new territories by leveraging the communicative affordances of differing media platforms and those best suited to communicate on/over them.

The theoretical framework applied to the NFL kneeling protests in this paper is from Tufekci’s book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017). Previously a programmer for IBM, Tufekci is a self-proclaimed “techno-sociologist” whose work examines the interactions between technology, society, and culture. *Twitter and Tear Gas* (2017) is based on years of systematic, multi-method, empirical research. Tufekci engaged in participant observation, peer-reviewed

quantitative analyses, and visits to numerous countries involved in political upheavals and uprisings for interviews and observations, “with a keen interest in how digital technologies interacted with movement dynamics” (Tufekci, 2017, p. xvii). The goal of the book was “above all to develop theories and to present a conceptual analysis of what digital technologies mean for how social movements, power and society interact, rather than provide a complete empirical descriptive account of any one movement” (p. xviii). Based on Tufekci’s theoretical framework, the present examination focuses the trajectory of the kneeling protests in terms of “capacities” and “signals.” Following Tufekci’s lead, the goal of what follows is not to frame the kneeling protests as a “success” or a “failure,” but to better understand the dynamic relationship between protesters, networked social movements, hostile spectators, the broader public, and those in positions of relative power.

This historical record is littered with social movements that started with high energy and massive amounts of participants, but that sputtered rather quickly and failed to enact the kind of change they demanded. Tufekci points to antiwar rallies in 1972 and 2003, global outcries that mobilized millions of people in the United States and around the world, as movements that had no impact on ending the Vietnam War, nor stopping the invasion of Iraq, respectively. This begs the question, “If numbers and energy do not tell the whole story, how do we measure a protest’s power? Why do some movements have little impact while others are potent agents for change?” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 191). Tufekci answers this question, by reference to her ‘capacities’ and ‘signals’ approach.

## **“Capacities” and “signals” theoretical approach**

The “capacities” and “signals” approach allows for an analysis that considers the strengths, shortcomings, and trajectory of a social movement, incorporating a “networked” dimension that encourages a more nuanced understanding of social movements in their multi-mediated forms. “Networked,” here is used “as a shorthand for digitally networked, to refer to the reconfiguration of movements and publics through the incorporation of digital technologies and connectivity” (Tufekci, 2017, p. xxiii). The kneeling protests and their circulation via on-and-offline channels requires thoughtful analysis in that they exist neither wholly in the ‘real world’ nor entirely ‘online,’ but as the product of the complex interaction and articulation of both. Following Tufekci, it is all too important not to fall into the fallacy characterized by the concept of digital dualism – where the virtual world is not completely virtual, nor an exact replica of the real world, but bigger and faster (Tufekci, 2017, p. 131). The significance of this approach is the clarity it provides in understanding the complex interactions between, and iterations of, “real world” protest and online activism, very different from social movements of the past. This is particularly important for looking at the kneeling protests, as they truly do *look* and *feel* like protests of the past, especially when considered within the larger history of sport. A protest that takes place during the national anthem readily draws comparisons to the 1968 Olympic podium protest, meanwhile many are quick to draw parallels between Colin Kaepernick as a leader in the footsteps of the charismatic Muhammad Ali. However, Tufekci warns that while it may be tempting to compare protests of the past to protests of the present because the visible result may seem familiar and understandable, “the conflation of past and contemporary protest events is

misleading. They are different phenomena that arise in different ways, and most important, they signal different future paths” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 61). The way that social movements come about is, too, different, thanks to the affordances (the actions a given technology facilitates or makes possible) of networked digital media (Tufekci, 2017, p.xi). The kneeling protests are, therefore, not simply a replica of the 1968 Olympic protest, but a product of the unique material circumstances from which they have arisen. In no small part, these circumstances are the result of the network capabilities to circulate the images of protest rather than relying on their distribution via the mainstream mass media. It is a movement with a different trajectory, and different signals; signals that speak to different capacities.

### **Operationalization of terms**

In this paper, the “mainstream” and “mainstream mass media” refer to broadly circulated legacy publications and television broadcasts, as well as high profile public appearances (on television, in print, or in person). The “movement” is used interchangeably to refer to the social justice campaign started by Colin Kaepernick in its many iterations (i.e. as a kneeling protest, as a discussion, and as will be discussed below the formal organization Know Your Rights Camp). Where appropriate, I have made clear which “form” of the movement I am referring to.

Tufekci (2017) argues that the ultimate strength of a social movement lies in its capacities. “In the context of social movements, a capacity approach means evaluating the movement’s collective ability to achieve social change, rather than solely measuring available benchmarks” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 192). In short, a movement’s capacity is its ability to enact social change, from the point of view of recalibrating its relationship to

systems of authority. Capacities are demonstrated through “signals.” Tufekci borrows signaling theory from biology and the social sciences, to examine:

[h]ow parties to an interaction try to communicate their potential and their intentions to other parties in order to create a favorable outcome for themselves.

(...) Signals indicate what a person or movement is *capable* of doing and *likely* to do. (Tufekci, 2017, p. 199; emphasis added)

Signals can be costly or cheap, genuine or deceptive. The concept of “conspicuous consumption,” (Veblen, 1899/2007) for example, can be considered an instance of signaling theory, where an individual tries to signal ‘attractive’ characteristics like wealth and success through the consumption of material items. Tufekci (2017) points to signaling theory as being applicable to many real-world situations, particularly in adversarial situations where parties do not have perfect information about each other (p. 199). When the transgressions evinced by the kneeling protests during the national anthem are examined by the light of that which they ‘signal,’ their symbolic threat to the hegemonic order of the imagined community is all too menacing. By kneeling instead of standing at attention during one of the most sacred and collective patriotic rituals in the world, the protesters are signaling that they will not be cowed into obedience by history, habit, or inherited propriety. Moreover, this signal is an indication of the audacity of their actions and the conviction to pursue their goals at any symbolic cost.

Distinct from a movement’s signals, the general sense of ‘capacity’ is broken down into three more specific subcategories: i) narrative capacity, ii) disruptive capacity, and iii) electoral/institutional capacity.

- i) *Narrative capacity* “is the ability of a movement to frame its story on its own terms, to spread its worldview. We might think of this as “persuasion” as well as “legitimacy” – key ideological pillars of any social movement” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 192). In a ‘floodlit social terrain,’ social movements need attention to thrive, and once the spot light is on them, they must convince wider society that their intentions are genuine, motives virtuous, and cause worthy.
- ii) *Disruptive capacity* “describes whether a movement can interrupt the regular operations of a system of authority” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 192). A movement’s disruptive capacity is its ability to disturb ‘business as usual’ through an interruption, intervention, or disruption, which can be a brief flash in the pan or carry on for years.
- iii) *Electoral/institutional capacity* “refers to a movement’s ability to keep politicians from being elected, reelected, or nominated unless they adopt and pursue policies friendly to the social movement’s agenda, or the ability to force changes in institutions through both insider and outsider strategies” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 193).

The capacity approach measures the actual potential of a social movement to create change, rather than measuring available benchmarks, particularly benchmarks of the past, as they do not accurately reflect the potential for change. For instance, having  $x$  number of people at a march,  $x$  number of players kneel, or  $x$  number of people re-tweet a hashtag are certainly benchmarks, but they do not guarantee that change to the underlying ideological foundations of a system of authority will actually occur. Movements can



demonstrate, one, two, or all three of these capacities in isolation or at the same time.

Tufekci believes that if a confluence of capacities is evident, then the social movement is well on its way to achieving its goals.

### **The kneeling protests' disruptive, narrative, and institutional/electoral capacities**

For my analysis, I look at the potential narrative, disruptive, and electoral/institutional capacities of the kneeling protests, and how these capacities were (and are) signaled. Narrative capacity, disruptive capacity, and institutional/electoral capacity are illustrated through a number of examples drawn from the past few years, incorporating discussions in the media, public appearances, awards and honours, and a selection of social media posts. The examples were selected because of their visibility, valency, reach, and relationship to each of the three underlying 'capacities' of the movement. Although many more could have been drawn upon, the below were chosen because they represent an adequate sample from which to draw provisional theoretical conclusions.

The observation period takes place from the first time Colin Kaepernick was 'caught' sitting/kneeling in August 2016 to February of 2019, the date of Kaepernick's legal settlement with the NFL. Kaepernick filed a grievance lawsuit against the NFL on the basis that NFL team owners had colluded against signing him for expressing his political views. The lawsuit was withdrawn February 15, 2019. This came after an arbitrator had previously ruled that the grievance case would be allowed to proceed to an official trial phase, after the NFL had asked for the case to be dismissed. Kaepernick, a quarterback who once had a "record" seven-year \$126 million contract with the 49ers in

2014 (Gaines, 2017, para. 1), and former 49ers teammate Eric Reid, settled with the NFL for reportedly less than \$10 million (West, 2019, para. 1).

As the site of resistance has shifted off the football field, the kneeling movement too has evolved, a move akin to what McAdam (1983) calls “tactical innovation” (p. 735). Tactical innovation is an iterative process, much like a game of chess, between insurgents and those in power as they respond to each other. In this interactive dynamic, and referencing the conceptual apparatus put in place by Tufekci, two parties signal capacities to each other, requiring the other to respond and adapt. “Insurgents must bypass routine decision-making channels and seek, through the use of noninstitutionalized tactics, to force their opponents to deal with them outside the established arenas within which the latter derive so much of their power” (McAdam, 1983, p. 735).

By and large, kneeling on the field was rendered tactically impotent due to pre-game anthems no longer being broadcast on television. It must be acknowledged that the most widely circulated images of NFL players participating in the kneeling protests are copyrighted stock photos taken by contracted sports photographers on the field. While these pictures continued to be taken even after the cessation of broadcasting the anthem on television, sports photography alone (whether the photos were taken by professional photographers, or fans in the stadium) were inadequate for circulating the images of the protest, because they relied too heavily on intermediaries like sports reporters to *make* them newsworthy (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Further, on social media, the circulation of these images, without the initial spark of outrage from viewing the protests live via broadcast, was more likely to get lost in the regular chatter surrounding games on

Facebook and Twitter, buried by algorithmic echo chambers. For this reason, the movement was required to engage in tactical innovation.

Tactical innovation is crucial to avoid what Tufekci calls “tactical freeze.”

Symptomatic of many networked social movements, tactical freeze is:

The inability of movements to adjust tactics, negotiate demands, and push for tangible policy changes, something that grows out of the leaderless nature of these movements and the way digital technologies strengthen their ability to form without much early planning, dealing with issues only as they come up. (Tufekci, 2017, p. xvi)

Networked social movements rise quickly but are often unable to maintain the same enthusiasm and momentum with which they started. Historically, movements without the affordances of social media had to engage in painstaking, time consuming organizing. Tufekci attributes to this work the ability of movements to really ‘stick it out.’ As they face challenges, they are more likely to engage in tactical innovation so as to avoid tactical freeze.

This arm of the movement, started by Kaepernick, benefited from the amplification of the mainstream mass media afforded by the space of the stadium as a highly visible, televisual context, in combination with the affordances of social media to proliferate the protests. The first time the protests really ‘blew up’ on social media with the hashtag #TakeAKnee was actually a year after Kaepernick started kneeling in 2016, and was in September of 2017 in response to the President’s inflammatory ‘son of a bitch’ comment. Ever since, the movement has existed both on and offline, benefitting

from the affordances of networked media (cheap, easy, and quick broadcasting to a large audience), as well as traditional mainstream mass media to spread its narrative. Anchored by a figurative leader who has proven his commitment to his cause, the kneeling protests have engaged in tactical innovation. This is most clearly demonstrated by the creation of the Know Your Rights Camps (KRYC) that are embodied manifestations of the #TakeAKnee hashtag, more of which will be discussed later on in this paper.

### **Narrative capacity**

Narrative capacity is the ability of a movement to control the kinds of stories that are told about itself and the way these stories and message are received. Tufekci (2017) writes that "...getting attention and convincing people of the veracity of particular narratives – are among core acts of all movements and infuse every stage of a social movement's life" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 193). Of the three capacities discussed in this paper, narrative capacity is demonstrably the kneeling protest movement's most frequently signaled, and where its power to enact change primarily lies. At the time of completing this paper, it has now been three seasons since Kaepernick has played for any NFL team. Despite this, Kaepernick continues to be the player most readily associated with the protests. This is the result of actively and innovatively signaling to the narrative capacity of the movement, through the careful orchestration of highly visible and widely circulated media appearances. There lies great power in controlling the narrative surrounding a movement. The examples discussed in the following pages are multimodal signals that speak to the continued and hard fought narrative capacity of the movement.

The kneeling protests are undeniably contentious. In terms of public opinion, there is by no means a consensus of singing support in favour of Kaepernick or the

broader issues his protests address. There is, however, an international and volatile debate taking place, at the very least in part, because of them. By co-opting and reformulating an “apolitical” space into one generative of heated debate and discussion, the protests have succeeded in making the comfortable uncomfortable and defamiliarizing the familiar. In terms of its narrative capacity, a social movement tries to not only frame but also disseminate an accurate understanding of itself to others within and beyond the support structure of the movement. The contentious nature of the protests are, then, an indication of the success of the narrative capacity of the movement in that they have forced the continued confrontation of issues of racism and systemic oppression. The hope is that even an individual who may not agree with kneeling for the national anthem may take a moment to think – *why is it that Black athletes are feeling compelled to do so?* And, later, why are they “risking everything” to make their voices heard?

The subsequent sections of this paper serve to analyze how the kneeling protest movement has signaled narrative capacity. The goal of this section of the paper is to present the narrative capacity of the movement as persistent, yet eminently and tactically adaptive. A handful of significant signals have been selected: the act of kneeling, multimodal mainstream image production, and networked image circulation. These signals all speak to the narrative capacities of the movement and demonstrate its evolution as the site of signaling resistance has shifted off the field, engaging in what McAdam (1983) refers to as “tactical innovation” (p. 735).

### ***Beginnings: Taking a knee***

The first time that Colin Kaepernick gained attention as a dissident was for sitting during a preseason national anthem on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Sportswriter Jennifer Lee Chan

had Tweeted out a photo of the stadium during the anthem, unrelated to Kaepernick, with the San Francisco 49ers quarterback barely visible. The photo ended up gaining widespread media attention and the 49ers released a statement two days later confirming that he was indeed sitting (Sandritter, 2016, para 6) (see Appendix A). In response to the obvious question of why he was sitting, Kaepernick said:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of colour. 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. (Wyche, 2016; emphasis added)

The release of this statement to the press is a pivotal moment. After making it, Colin Kaepernick became the figurehead of a sport protest movement. Unbeknownst to him in the moment he spoke, would become a role he adopted with eagerness and eloquence.

Kaepernick is mixed race and was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on November 3, 1987. He was adopted by white parents at a young age and grew up alongside his adoptive family in California. At the University of Nevada, he excelled as a student and an athlete, and joined Kappa Alpha Psi, a predominantly black fraternity, “looking for... a deeper connection to his own roots and a broader understanding of the lives of others” (Branch, 2017, para. 3)..

Kaepernick’s first statement about the photograph of him sitting during the national anthem came at a moment of heightened awareness regarding the strained racial relations in the United States. Attributed to the swift and apt responses of Black Lives

Matter (BLM) activists who unremittingly mobilized in the streets to protest numerous deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police, Kaepernick described his actions as being inspired by the BLM movement.

Citing NAACP statistics, Tufekci (2017) points out that the rate of killings by police has not actually gone up drastically in the past decade. “However, there has been a great shift in the amount of attention paid to these killings, thanks to a movement that was fueled by digital technologies, now often called Black Lives Matter in reference to the hashtag that the movement rallied around” (p. 206). Kaepernick’s sitting and subsequent statement were certainly radical and newsworthy, but not exactly shocking or surprising, as the narrative capacity built by BLM activists, whose savvy use of digital technology had actively worked to shift racial issues to the forefront of mainstream media discussions and national consciousness (Oluo, 2018, p. 5).

Just one month prior to Kaepernick’s first anthem protest, Alton Sterling was shot and killed by police on July 5<sup>th</sup>. Philando Castile was shot and killed the next day July 6<sup>th</sup>. All charges were dropped against the police officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (Swaine et al., 2016). At the moment in which Kaepernick first decided to voice dissent, the general feeling turning on the news each day was sadness and frustration, a feeling of *enough is enough* with people of colour repeatedly dying at the hands of those in positions of authority. The narrative shift created by BLM made Kaepernick’s frustration seem both justified and reasonable.

Despite this, the support for Kaepernick was by no means unanimous. When dealing with deeply engrained national symbols, such as the flag and the anthem,

controlling the narrative of kneeling protests has proven to be no easy feat. An action perceived as an “attack” on these same national symbols is often felt profoundly. Many misread the sitting as a sign of disrespect towards the military. Regarding the national anthem, Anderson (1983) writes, “No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody” (p. 145). In the particular case of sporting events, the singing of the national anthem punctuates a moment of spectacle at which all differences and allegiances are cast aside, and everyone within the enclosure of the stadium, and those brought into the theatre-like space of the stadium through live broadcast, are symbolically united, regardless of team, race, class, gender, etc.

In response to Kaepernick’s actions, former U.S. Army Special Forces Green Beret and NFL long snapper Nate Boyer penned an open letter in the *Army Times*, poignantly describing his own personal reservations about a protest that involved sitting for the national anthem:

Even though my initial reaction to your protest was one of anger, I’m trying to listen to what you’re saying and why you’re doing it... There are plenty people fighting fire with fire, and it’s just not helping anyone or anything. So I’m just going to keep listening, with an open mind. I look forward to the day you’re inspired to once again stand during our national anthem. I’ll be standing right there next to you. Keep on trying... (Boyer, 2016, para. 13-14)



In conversation with podcast host and fellow Green Beret Jack Murphy, Boyer recounts Kaepernick's publicist reaching out to Boyer for a meeting the day following the publication of the open letter. September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, Boyer met with Kaepernick and teammate Eric Reid hours before the 49ers final preseason game of the year, where they had what Boyer calls a "positive" and "powerful" conversation, describing Kaepernick as "reasonable" and "sensible" (Scotto, 2018). When the conversation finally turned to the matter of sitting for the national anthem, Boyer voiced his concern. He told Kaepernick that the act of sitting on the bench seemed apathetic and not resembling someone who was taking a stand. Upon Kaepernick making it clear that he would not be standing for the national anthem, Boyer suggested that he take a knee, as it seemed more "respectful" as you also take a knee to pray, to propose, to honour a lost service member, etc. While fully acknowledging that people were going to be upset no matter what, Boyer and Kaepernick both agreed that taking a knee was the correct course of action, and most importantly, doing so front and center alongside his teammates rather than on the sideline. Later that evening, Kaepernick and Reid took a knee for the national anthem, alongside a standing Nate Boyer (see Appendix B). The act of *kneeling*, and not sitting, signals to the narrative capacity of the movement. As this anecdote demonstrates, from its very beginnings the movement has thrived on an openness and willingness to listen, shift, and adapt in its continued attempt to convey its narrative in a sympathetic light, all without ever compromising its commitment to radical acts of non-violent dissent.

The act of kneeling is a costly signal. In the case of Kaepernick, the kneeling has cost him his career, as he has been denied work since 2016. For players who are considering following suit and kneeling, they may be sacrificing the prime of their

already short careers. According to the NFL Players' Association, the average NFL career lasts 3.3 years (Keim, para. 8, 2019). However, with this sacrifice, comes potent narrative capacity. When things in the "real world" get bad, to the point of eruption, where athletes are feeling compelled to respond, Zirin (2013) believes that, "Having athletes risk their prime perch in society for the greater good also becomes a kind of weather vane, a crackling signal that we have entered a new era" (p. 7).

After the initial 2016 preseason protest, a handful of players continued sitting or kneeling for the national anthem for the remainder of the season and continue to do so up until present.

In late September 2017, however, the kneeling protests took on a distinctly different tone, increasing drastically in both size and intensity. This was in response to a comment that President Trump had made at a rally in Alabama, September 22, 2017, saying, "Wouldn't you love to see one of those NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag to say 'get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired'" (Graham, 2017, para 2). The next day, for Sunday Night Football, more than 130 players sat, knelt, or raised their fists in defiance of Trump's comments. Owners and coaches also linked arms in solidarity. The NFL field, a supposed bastion of apolitical, neutral gamesmanship, was suddenly transformed into a politically charged space, signaling to the narrative capacity of the movement. As Bryant (2018b) puts it, "What Kaepernick revealed was that sports was no less divided along racial lines than the rest of the country, even if its workforce comprised a black majority. The only difference was, the players were black millionaires" (p. 18). Thus, the kneeling protests re-appropriated the stadium

space and repurposed the lens of mass media broadcasters to spread its narrative and amplify its narrative capacity much further than they could have on their own.

As American football continues to amass ratings comparable to television's top-rated primetime series, the numerical values attributed to viewership and ratings may seem topical, but they point to the fact that *a lot* of people are brought into the space of the stadium via mass media broadcast each game. Gitlin (2003) writes that, "political movements feel called upon to rely on large-scale communications in order to *matter*, to say who they are and what they intend to publics they want to sway" (p. 3). By co-opting the mass broadcast space of the stadium, the protests became a widely circulated event, signaling the narrative capacity of the movement to spark discussions on a *mass* scale.

### ***Shifting off the field: Kaepernick in the 'mainstream'***

Almost as quickly as Kaepernick was thrust into the spotlight as defacto leader of the protest group, he was essentially blackballed from the NFL for the controversy surrounding his protest. Broadcasters also stopped televising the national anthem before games. No longer being broadcast to the masses, the movement required a tactical shift in strategy. In order to continue signaling narrative power, the movement needed a new way to garner attention. When considering narrative capacities, Tufekci (2017) asks, "Is a movement able to make people aware of its issues? Or are its views smothered via active censorship?" (p. 195). The kneeling protests and participating protesters may not have experienced overtly violent or brutal forms of censorship like that in authoritarian countries, but "even in more democratic capitalist societies, movements that threaten the interest of corporations or advertisers can find themselves left out of news coverage, a subtler form of censorship" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 194). With Kaepernick off the field, and

the anthem no longer being broadcast at the beginning of football games, these subtle forms of censorship posed a significant threat to the narrative capacity of the protest movement.

Rather than abandoning the struggle, however, the movement begins to evolve its communicative strategy by turning to the purposeful production and circulation of insurgent, activist imagery, once again, through the mainstream mass media. Via the production of carefully curated, thoughtful images, mindful and purposeful decisions were made in order to control the narrative of the movement, signaling its narrative capacity to reassert its communicative presence, have its voice continue to be heard, and its message understood.

In a tactical adaption prompted by the evolution of the movement in response to the cessation of broadcasting the national anthem, Kaepernick leaves the football field and occupies a different, yet no less contentious, politically mediated space. Once again, this attempt to control the narrative capacity of the kneeling protests occurred not on the football field, but on the cover of *Time* magazine (see Appendix C). As Bryant (2018b) describes the image, “Colin Kaepernick [is] kneeling in his red 49ers uniform, the background completely black, a metaphor for his isolation. He now symbolized a movement” (p. 5). The article, “The Perilous Fight” (Gregory et al., 2016) highlights how the movement had spread across the country, “from NFL Sundays to college-football Saturdays to the Friday-night lights of high school games and even trickled down into the peewee ranks, where a youth team in Texas decided they, too, needed to take a stand by kneeling” (para. 3). Perhaps rather unfortunately, the cover’s tagline reads, “National anthem protests led by Colin Kaepernick are fueling a debate about privilege, pride and

patriotism.” To be clear, Kaepernick is leading a *kneeling protest*. To imply that he is protesting the national anthem itself, rather than leading a silent protest against systemic oppression, may cause further confusion and anger amongst those who do not understand the motivation for kneeling during the anthem. Narrative capacity is “a movement’s capacity to get attention and to appeal on its own terms to the broader public for redress of its grievances” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 195). This misleading title is an indication of the sometimes very difficult task of controlling the narrative capacity of a movement, and the tensions that arise as movements rely on the mainstream mass media for the circulation of their narrative. These outlets tend to adhere to the ‘*protest paradigm*,’ “A routinized pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protest. The protest paradigm is, at least in part, the product of the news production process” (McLeod & Hertog, 1999, p. 310). Perhaps, though, this was a strategic choice of wording at the time of writing, to fuel debate and encourage discussion, which aligns with the early narrative goals of the movement. When asked in August 2016 by a reporter what he hoped to accomplish with his protesting, Kaepernick responded, “I mean, ultimately, it’s to bring awareness and make people, you know, realize what’s really going on in this country” (Gottlieb, 2016, para. 4).

Colin Kaepernick’s next major magazine cover would come in December 2017, when he was named *GQ* magazine’s “Citizen of the Year” (see Appendix D), a celebration of his activism. In the accompanying article, Kaepernick appears only in images, and rather than speaking, is spoken about, in ten interviews with activists, athletes and creatives who Kaepernick considers to be both friends and confidants, including Ava Duvernay, J. Cole, Linda Sarsour, Eric Reid and Harry Belafonte, amongst

others. *GQ* writes that the goal of the article for Kaepernick was to “reclaim the narrative of his protest”:

When we began discussing this *GQ* cover with Colin earlier this fall, he told us the reason he wanted to participate is that he wants to reclaim the narrative of his protest, which has been hijacked by a president eager to make this moment about himself. But Colin also made it clear to us that he intended to remain silent. As his public identity has begun to shift from football star to embattled activist, he has grown wise to the power of silence... Why talk now, when your detractors will only twist your words and use them against you? Why speak now, when silence has done so much? (“The Editors of *GQ*”, 2017, para. 2)

The creative direction of the article that was agreed upon by *GQ* and Kaepernick was to invoke the spirit of Muhammad Ali’s anti-Vietnam War protests, and to “use photography – the power of imagery and iconography – to do the talking” (“The Editors of *GQ*”, 2017, para. 3). While *GQ*’s “Citizen of the Year” may not be the most prestigious humanitarian award (those come later), the cover and accompanying article once again signal to the movement’s narrative capacity. In other words, they signal a concerted effort to continue controlling the narrative surrounding the kneeling protests, in the face of the hatred and vitriol perpetuated by the President’s antagonizing comments.

In similar fashion, Kaepernick was recognized by another popular publication in December of 2017, when *Sports Illustrated* presented him with the “Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award” for philanthropy. Kaepernick accepted the award in person, saying, “With or without the NFL’s platform, I will continue to work for the

people, because my platform is the people” (NBC News, 2017). Appearing in these mainstream, mass circulated publications, and being framed in a light that is sympathetic and supportive of the cause, signals to the movement’s narrative capacity.

On the role of the mainstream mass media in the framing of protests groups, McLeod & Hertog (1999) write, “Media coverage of social protest conflicts plays a role in defining which groups, voices and viewpoints are considered legitimate and which are not” (p. 309). Even when denied the “NFL’s platform,” these mainstream publications have embraced Kaepernick’s story as one worth telling. While this coverage may not be based on the most virtuous of motives (controversial topics are likely to garner attention from both sides of the debate and the resultant sales or clicks associated with them), it allows the movement to circumvent the censorship efforts by the NFL and its television broadcasters, and serves to keep Kaepernick’s name and image relevant, and the discussions surrounding the kneeling protests topical and current.

### ***From the pages of magazines to the stages of humanitarian awards ceremonies***

In April 2018, Colin Kaepernick accepted Amnesty International’s “Ambassador of Conscience Award” in Amsterdam, presented to him by his friend and former teammate Eric Reid. On this occasion, Kaepernick decided to give a moving speech brimming with palpable anger against the systemic racialized hate and oppression in the U.S. faced by black and brown people, he says:

While taking a knee is a physical display that challenges the merits of who is excluded from the notion of freedom, liberty and justice for all, the protest is also rooted in the convergence of my moralistic beliefs, and the love for the people.

Seeking the truth, finding the truth, telling the truth, and living the truth has been, and always will be, what guides my actions. For as long as I have a beating heart, I will continue to work on this path, on behalf of the people. Again, love is at the root of our resistance. (Amnesty International, 2018)

In his public acceptance of this award, Kaepernick once again affirmed his unflinching commitment to the role as figurative leader of this arm of the movement, appearing as a confident leader with conviction in his cause, this time on an international stage.

Accepting a prestigious human rights award from an internationally recognized non-governmental organization (NGO) signals to the narrative capacities and abilities of the movement to frame its cause as legitimate and validates the cause as one worth fighting for. Being awarded this top honour resonated around the world, was reported on by international newspapers, and benefitted from the amplification provided by synergistic feedback loops associated with the shares, likes, re-tweets, etc., endemic to the re-distribution of mainstream mass mediated content on social media platforms.

### ***From social movement to social issue advertising***

Appearing on the covers of magazines, and accepting prestigious human rights awards, serve to build a positive narrative, depicting the movement in a favourable light. Not all attempts to keep the movement relevant have been as well received, however. As part of Nike's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Just Do It" campaign, the sporting goods company aired a two-minute commercial spot before one of the first televised NFL games of the 2018 season. "Dream Crazy" was narrated by Kaepernick, with an accompanying print logo bearing the same statement as the closing words of the TV advertisement, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" (Nike, 2018; Kaepernick, 2018)



(see Appendix E). Writing for Adweek, Monllos (2018a) points to a brand's 'virtue signaling' as a marketing strategy, "In recent years, brands that take a stand have created some of the most memorable marketing. If anyone asked you to recall 2018's biggest campaign, you'd be talking about Nike's Colin Kaepernick work in an instant" (p. 10). Much like the original kneeling protest, the advertisement was met by a dizzyingly divided response, creating massive waves of both support and dissent. Many people took issue with the tagline calling Kaepernick's actions a "sacrifice," once again conflating Kaepernick's protests with the military. Anderson (1983) asserts that, "Dying for one's country, which one does usually not choose, assumes a moral grandeur" (p. 144). While Kaepernick may not have made the "ultimate sacrifice" of one's life for their country, the concept of sacrifice can and should be understood in its many iterations. Beyond the parochial, militaristic view of sacrifice, forfeiting the most auspicious years of one's professional athletic career and the financial security of themselves and their family for a greater cause must certainly be considered a sacrifice. #BoycottNike was trending on Twitter, with Kaepernick dissenters promising to burn their Nike apparel and never support the brand again.

Even those who were supportive of Kaepernick's cause questioned him teaming up with a company with a less than gleaming human rights track record. Nike, as a brand, also embodies the very narrative that the kneeling protests sought to disrupt. Nike's 'motivational ethos' "constructs itself as the vehicle of an ethos that integrates themes of personal transcendence, achievement, and authenticity" (Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 3). This promotion of meritocratic individual fortitude is a direct contradiction to narrative of

the protest movement and the notion that the inequalities of the real world are resoundingly reflected in the sporting world.

Nike is no white knight for teaming up with Kaepernick. Monllos (2018a) points out that “Brands wouldn’t be using precious marketing dollars or donating money if it didn’t help the bottom line. Sure, that might be a cynical take, but it’s an honest one” (p. 10). Zirin (2018) echoes this sentiment, writing, “The idea that Nike executives would position themselves as messengers of Kaepernick’s righteous, years-long struggle is, to put it mildly, galling... Multi-billion dollar global corporations that run an archipelago of sweatshops don’t underwrite rebellions; they co-opt and squash them” (para. 6). However, on the positives of Kaepernick teaming up with Nike, Zirin (2018) writes:

In the last year, he has given away over \$1 million of his own money. He has been unable to earn a living during the prime years of his career. It is a great thing that he is actually going to earn an income and receive funding for his activist work, and it is satisfying that, after two years in the political wilderness, he is seeing an outpouring of support from those defending an ad with a message that reinforces the power of political sacrifice. (para. 8)

In terms of the narrative capacities of the movement, teaming up with Nike is a risky move. The potential to cause distrust with supporters, and further alienate those unsupportive or who lack understanding of the cause is ever-present. However, the advertisement once again reinforces Kaepernick as the figurehead of this arm of the movement, and the notion that he is not ‘going away’ anytime soon.

His image, removed from his name and resting on the historically established iconographic foundations laid by the Black Power movement, is now iconic. On the power of photographs, Sontag (2003) writes:

Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. (p. 22)

The Nike advertisement, along with the other examples discussed in this subsection, created purposeful and lasting images. Each image has been created with careful consideration, in many instances alluding to powerful protest movements of the past. The persistence of Kaepernick's name coming up keeps the movement fresh in everyone's minds. Kaepernick addressed the Nike advertisement, when he was awarded the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal by Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, the highest honour in the field, awarded in recognition to those who contribute to African and African American culture, and whose work has bolstered the field of studies (Hutchins Centre, n.d.). Accepting the medal at a public ceremony, Kaepernick remarked:

And I got to what recently happened with the Nike campaign where, "Believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything." As I reflected on that, it made me think, "If we all believe in something, we won't have to sacrifice everything." And in thinking about the initiation of this protest, this stance, and where we're at

currently, I got back to something I said in a speech previously: that love is at the root of our resistance, and it will continue to be, and it will fortify everything that we do. (Hutchins Centre, n.d.)

In this instance, Kaepernick recalls his Amnesty International speech, and directly acknowledges the Nike advertisement, both of which were significant moments of signaling the movement's narrative capacity.

To reiterate, Tufekci believes that the power of social movements to catalyze fundamental changes to the structures of power that orient our lives come from their capacities. If the narrative capacity of a movement lies in its ability to articulate a counter-hegemonic position and for that position to be regarded as legitimate, then this movement has achieved that goal. The discussion surrounding the kneeling protests arises perennially with each new football season, as well as every time Kaepernick appears in mainstream media publications. The narrative capacity of the movement has been hard fought and shows no sign of slowing as Kaepernick's name continues to be regularly referenced whenever the NFL rises to the fore of the media landscape. Multiple magazine covers, awards and advertisements speak to the movement's ability to communicate on a mass, mainstream, international level, despite the censorship efforts of the NFL and its broadcasting partners. Kaepernick's desire to recalibrate the often oppressive and violent relationship between people of colour and the authorities, however, goes far beyond the celebrity associated with public accolade and being a magazine cover boy. Translating the narrative capacity of the kneeling protests into a much more consequential instance of social change lies at the heart of Kaepernick's most recent activities and, accordingly, what follows directly below.

### ***Networked narrative maintenance: Know Your Rights Camp***

When considering the ‘making’ and ‘unmaking’ of social movements, on the role of traditional mainstream mass media, Gitlin (2003) writes that, “From within their private crevices, people find themselves relying on the media for concepts, for images of their heroes, for guiding information, for emotional charges, for a recognition of public values, for symbols in general” (p. 1). This relationship between the mass media and their audience still exists, albeit in an altered form, with the rise of a networked public sphere. For social movements, networked social media sites and services have the affordance of circumventing the mainstream media, who have traditionally played the role of gatekeepers with the ability to ‘make or break’ a movement based on how the movement is framed, and the narrative created. Zirin (2013) asks, “Why are more athletes speaking out? Some point to social media as a critical delivery system for a generation of athletes who don’t trust ‘old school’ reporters... speak[ing] without any filter directly to fans” (p. 7). Rather than struggling for positive coverage in the media or resorting to disruptive tactics to gain attention (discussed in the next section of this paper), participants in a movement can turn to social media to produce its own content and speak directly to those who seek it out.

Despite gracing numerous magazine covers, receiving a number of prestigious humanitarian awards, and signing a Nike sponsorship, the kneeling protests have continued to be highly controversial, repeatedly drawing the ire of the President of the United States, and with Kaepernick himself receiving death threats (Zirin, 2017, para. 3). A measure taken to formalize Kaepernick’s activism, and to demonstrate that the movement he started is indeed concerned with more than media campaigns was the

creation of Know Your Rights Camp (KYRC). KYRC is “a free campaign for youth founded by Colin Kaepernick to raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and instruction to properly interact with law enforcement in various scenarios” (Know Your Rights Camp, 2018). KYRC promotes a ‘10-point program,’ inspired by the Black Panther Party’s 10-point platform program<sup>1</sup>: you have the right to be i) free, ii) healthy, iii) brilliant, iv) safe, v) loved, vi) courageous, vii) alive, viii) trusted, ix) educated, and to x) know your rights (Know Your Rights Camp, 2018). While running workshops around the country, KYRC boasts 170,000 followers on Instagram. However, with KYRC’s messaging being shared to Kaepernick’s 3.3 million followers, the reach of this group is orders of magnitude larger than the number of followers indicates. The funding of this organization by Kaepernick would be considered a ‘costly signal,’ which are usually good indicators of genuine threat to those in entrenched positions of power. On the strategy of forming NGOs, Tufekci (2017) writes that they are

More palatable to the news media and the public and playing as nicely as possible by media rules, requires large amounts of resources and cultural capital. This strategy is therefore more open to be used by wealthier movements and more privileged people within a movement. (p. 205)

Tufekci warns that the creation of NGOs and formal organizations is often at the expense of the less privileged within the movement. As an elite athlete, Kaepernick does have a certain amount of privilege, but it seems the activist work done by KYRC tries to combat further marginalizing already oppressed groups. Oluo (2018), writes that the social justice

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<sup>1</sup> The Black Panther Party’s 10-point program is available in its entirety via:

efforts that fail, do so because of unexamined privilege. “Because of how rarely our privilege is examined, even our social justice movements tend to focus on the most privileged and most well represented people within those groups” (p. 76). The original kneeling protests, happening in the hyper-masculine NFL, and calling attention specifically to police brutality, in some ways failed to approach state sanctioned violence as an intersectional issue. Intersectionality is “the belief that our social justice movements must consider all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective” (Oluo, 2018, p. 74). KYRC works to actively counter this, with a number of women in leadership roles in the organization (including Kaepernick’s partner, radio host Nessa Diab), and collaborating closely with organizations like the Lower Eastside Girls Club in New York City. This intersectional approach acknowledges and attempts to mitigate the hyper-masculinized blind spots of the original NFL kneeling protests.

Similar, yet different, to earlier moments in the movement, KYRC uses social media as a tool to enhance the movement’s narrative capacity. By building and maintaining an online presence, the movement signals the narrative capacity to create its own content and frame its own narrative. Tufekci (2017) writes that, “To be ready to play key roles in movements that emerge quickly, activists must maintain themselves as activists over the years even when there is little protest activity or overt dissent” (p. 15). Once again signaling the protest movement’s willingness and ability to nimbly shift tactic, social media has allowed the movement to maintain an online presence through updating both Kaepernick’s personal Twitter and Instagram accounts (@Kaepernick7), promote his activism, as well as on the Instagram account for KYRC (@yourrightscamp).

Funded by Kaepernick, KYRC and the associated Instagram account are ‘costly’ because of the financial costs associated with ‘on the ground’ community outreach and resources, but worthwhile signals that serve to further promote the narrative capacity of the movement by emphasizing the volunteer and fundraising work done by the organization, as well as Kaepernick himself.

### ***Insurgent image dissemination via social media***

On Instagram, a number of hashtags have been popularized by KYRC, including #ImWithKap, #KneelWithKap and #NoKapNoNFL. The account has also been responsible for the dissemination for a number of powerful images. In the contemporary media landscape, these images are important because, “[t]o remember is (...) not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture” (Sontag, 2003, p. 89). KYRC’s Instagram feed is filled with images of events around the U.S., pictures of celebrities and high-profile athletes supporting Kaepernick (some of whom have continued to kneel), and even photos of Kaepernick with Olympic protesters John Carlos and Tommie Smith.

This photo was reposted from Kaepernick’s account with the original caption:

I recently had the honor of sitting down and sharing time with John Carlos and Tommie Smith. I have read about them, studied their public protest, admired their courage, and like many others, I have emulated them, raising my fist as both a symbol of celebrating my Blackness, and acknowledging our connected struggles. But this was different. Hearing them tell their stories, sharing behind the scenes insights into the sacrifices that they willingly made, and the ostracization that was



forced upon them... All that I could do was listen, take notes, and soak in the elders [sic] wisdom. (Kaepernick, 2017)

Kaepernick's thoughtful caption again demonstrates his eagerness to listen, which has been consistent throughout the growth of the movement. On iconic images, Hariman & Lucaites (2007) write:

...Even if [these images] are capable of doing the heavy lifting required to change public opinion and motivate action on behalf of public interest, their meaning and effects are likely to be established slowly, shift with changes in context and use, and be fully evident only in a history of official, commercial and vernacular appropriations. (p. 13)

Alluding to the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement in such a direct way suggests that Kaepernick is on a similar path as his predecessors; one where a polemical figure is reviled by some in the moment, but revered by all in retrospect as being on the 'right side' of history.

The effort, time, and money dedicated to maintaining this organization by a figurative leader who has not backed down despite being de-platformed, and a movement that has demonstrated its nimble ability to engage in tactical innovation, signals its strength and tenacity, one that if precedent serves as indicator, will not falter anytime soon. Mediated control of the narrative through the dissemination of images on Instagram directs attention to the fact that the movement is first and foremost about the promotion of social justice goals, not about disrespecting the military and the flag. As an

organization, the creation of KYRC signals the tangible power of the movement to effect real world change through education and community engagement.

In sum, as the kneeling protest movement has shifted off of the field, maintaining the legitimacy of the cause and persuading the larger public that the movement is a valid reaction to the current state of racial relations in the United States, has been the primary focus of activists dedicated to the cause. As a relatively ‘young’ social movement, it must prove its endurance over time by stating its legitimacy on its own terms, over and over again. From the initial act of kneeling, to Kaepernick appearing on magazine covers and receiving humanitarian awards, to the production and circulation of grassroots digital content, to running in-person workshops across the U.S., each is a mediated effort to signal to the movement’s narrative capacity. By laying the foundation of a strong narrative capacity, the hope moving forward is that the movement may be able to signal to disruptive capacity in substantive and meaningful ways, disturbing the status quo and operations of current systems of power (be it ‘society’ broadly, the NFL, etc.) in ways that would not be characterized by Tufekci (2017) as a *flash in the pan* (p. 193). The following section of this paper characterizes the movement as a persistent disruption. Although Tufekci (2017) states that “different types of movement capacity need not grow at the same rate or in tandem” (p. 205), the longevity of the disruptive capacity of the movement has been made possible *because* of its narrative capacity, and its ability to stay topical and relevant, in this particular case study.

### **Disruptive capacity**

The kneeling protests disrupted the NFL’s ability to promote the thin veneer of hegemonic social unification and patriotism characteristic of its choreographed spectacle.

As it stands, there are bipartisan NFL boycotts as the organization has stumbled in its responses to the friction created by Kaepernick and fellow kneelers. Tufekci (2017) defines disruptive capacity as:

A movement's ability to interrupt business as usual with the aim of getting attention, making a point, or making it untenable for those in power to continue as in the past, and to sustain such disruption over time. Disruptive capacity is powerful but also carries the highest risk of backlash. (p. 199)

Paradoxically, this backlash can be an impediment to a movement's narrative capacity, as disruptive tactics "do not always receive positive media coverage, and they risk angering people if disruption is perceived as illegitimate, counterproductive, needlessly burdensome or violent" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 198). It would be an understatement to say the initial kneeling protests were polarizing, although, "The problem is not the stunts per se, but rather a movement's strategic ability to manage them, and to channel them into, and in conjunction with other capacities" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 204). Here lies the importance of the groundwork and ongoing maintenance of the movement's narrative capacity, which has allowed the anthem kneeling 'stunt' to be interpreted as legitimate to many people. Explaining the overlapping and mutually reinforcing possibilities of signaling and multiple capacities theory, Tufekci (2017) explains:

We can also examine the difference between an orderly act of civil disobedience that may cause a brief disruption but then is followed by normalcy – a narrative act – and a persistent disruption... which functions as both a narrative and a disruptive act. (p. 222)

The kneeling act was *not* a brief disruption followed by normalcy. The narrative capacity of the movement has allowed the initial kneeling protest to change and adapt (to no longer a kneeling protest at all!) and sustain itself as a disruptive act over time.

The kneeling created such uproar, that the intentions of Kaepernick and the movement in its evolved form have been permanently tainted for some. When properly interpreted, disruptive capacity “also includes the ability to bear the costs of either the backlash or the consequences that are doled out by the authorities – abilities which are also indicative of the underlying capacity” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 199). In a way, bearing the costs, weathering the backlash, or overcoming the consequences experienced as a result of a movement’s disruptive capacity is a function of the movement’s narrative capacity. In this moment, what becomes clear is that for a movement to have long lasting social influence and impact, one capacity must ballast or support the others in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship of intertwined support. Individually, Kaepernick has bared the cost of his actions by being blackballed from the league (Moore, para. 2, 2018). Bryant (2018b) argues that Kaepernick “has discovered (...) the suffocating weight of the power of absorbing the phenomenon of white revenge and emerging more relevant, more important, and more influential” (p. xiii). While kneeling has cost Kaepernick his career, this costly personal investment is a strong signal to the movement’s disruptive capacity, in that it has impeded on the NFL’s ability to carry on with ‘business as usual.’

The following section of this paper will briefly analyze the disruption that the kneeling protests have caused for the NFL and the ways in which the NFL was forced to respond with its own signals, in the kind of tactical innovation previously described by McAdam (1983).

### ***Bipartisan backlash: #BoycottNFL***

“Protests are powerful to the degree that they operate as signals of capacity to threaten or disrupt the machinery of power or to bring about outcomes the powerful would rather avoid” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 219). NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who originally called President Trump’s statements ‘divisive’ in September 2017, later released a letter to all teams saying, “The controversy over the Anthem is a barrier to having honest conversations and making real progress on the underlying issues. We need to move past this controversy...” (Schefter, 2017, para 3). ‘Moving past’ the controversy has proven extremely difficult for the league. As Washington (2017) aptly puts it, “Even the massively popular NFL is threatened by these extraordinarily divisive times – and there’s no easy escape for a league in which the majority of players are black and the audience is mostly white” (para. 3). Even with anthems no longer airing at the beginning of games, new policies that allow players the option of staying in the locker room for the anthem, and Kaepernick out of the league, the NFL *still* finds itself in a situation where it is forced to respond to both the narrative and disruptive capacities of the protest movement.

A policy statement released by the NFL to the media in May 2018 outlined that “all team and league personnel on the field shall stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem,” and that a club could be fined by the league if “its personnel are on the field and do not stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem” (D’Andrea & Stites, 2018). Upon the release of this statement, the hashtag #BoycottNFL started trending on Twitter. A mere two months later, the league put the policy on hold, as the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) released a follow-up statement, reading:

The NFL and the NFLPA, through recent discussions, have been working on a resolution to the anthem issue. In order to allow this constructive dialogue to continue, we have come to a standstill agreement on the NFLPA's grievance and on the NFL's anthem policy. No new rules relating to the anthem will be issued or enforced for the next several weeks while these confidential discussions are ongoing. (Ketchum, 2018)

With or without the policy, the league has been backed into a corner, where it manages to anger everyone in what has turned out to be a public relations nightmare. For a supposedly 'apolitical' organization, both ends of the political spectrum are unhappy with the decisions made by the league. Stuck in a double bind, if the league enforces an anthem policy, it angers more liberal viewers who have pointed out that this is not a requirement at other jobs and impedes on athletes' rights to engage in peaceful, silent protest. On the other end of the political spectrum, if the league does not impose an anthem policy, it can further upset fans who see the kneeling as a sign of disrespect towards the anthem, military, and nation. The league's stumbling responses do it no favours.

The NFL has responded to the disruptive capacity of the kneeling protests with the production of its own signals. In a blatant case of insincere virtue signaling, the NFL has invested in a costly signal, the production of the short documentary series *Indivisible*, hosted by Nate Boyer. 'Virtue signaling' refers to conspicuously stating one's good intentions as to appear moralistic, often without "any effort or sacrifice at all" (Bartholomew, 2015, para. 1). In *Indivisible*, Boyer travels around the U.S. to talk to athletes and activists about the kneeling protests and 'social justice' in general (Davies,

2019). It makes sense that Nate Boyer would be involved in the project, seeing as he's viewed as a very 'neutral' and 'middle ground' figure, and is respected as a veteran and former NFL player. The idea that the NFL is concerned with the promotion of social justice is, however, dubious. *Indivisible* is a deceptive signal, as the league is more interested in protecting or reclaiming their bottom line by trying to regain control over the narrative. The series was produced in a futile attempt to make the discussions about the kneeling protests 'just go away.' Team owners have expressed their exasperation with the outrage caused by the kneeling protests, and ultimately want to just 'get back to football,' a desire to get back to the 'teeth gritting harmony' produced by the league and disrupted by Kaepernick's initial protest. To have the NFL even discussing 'social justice' issues is not only disingenuous but might have the unintended outcome of further alienating fans who just want the escape of watching football, and do not want to engage in 'real world' issues.

Sustaining the movement as disruptive over time, discussions surrounding the 2019 Super Bowl LIII are an excellent example of how there is often overlap of a movement signaling both narrative and disruptive capacities. Despite the event being the least watched Super Bowl, averaging 100.7 million viewers across all of CBS's televised and digital platforms, the Super Bowl continues to be the largest advertising event of the year, with advertisers willing to pay \$5 million (USD) for 30 seconds of airtime (Mullin, 2019, para 6). Reportedly, Rihanna and Pink turned down offers from CBS to perform the halftime show in solidarity with Kaepernick (Kreps, 2018, para. 2), as did Cardi B, who speaking with the Associated Press, said, "I got [sic] to sacrifice a lot of money to perform. But there's a man who sacrificed his job for us, so we got to stand behind him"

(Landrum, 2019, para. 4). Monllos (2018b) says that these are the latest “*signals*” that advertising during the Super Bowl is “no longer a politically neutral move for marketers (...), who agree that while it’s too early to tell what will actually shake out this year, it’s clear that Kaepernick will continue to have a major impact on the perception of the NFL and the Super Bowl” (para 2). Besides the 2019 Super Bowl being the lowest-scoring Super Bowl in history, critics have characterized the halftime show performed by Maroon 5 and guests as forgettable (Shaban, 2019, para. 9). The cultural ‘mega-event’ of the year and ‘ultimate spectacle’ (Real, 2013, p. 31) of American nationhood, was the lowest viewed Super Bowl in the past ten years.

Shaban (2019) speculates about the ratings slide, writing that it has come in the midst of “players protesting police brutality and racial injustice, questions about player safety, and President Donald Trump’s criticism of the league. He has urged his supporters to boycott the NFL in response to player protests” (para. 10). The NFL, an organization that has always benefited from being ‘apolitical’ in an attempt to attract broad swaths of advertisers, is no longer viewed as such. The kneeling protests have not only signaled to the movement’s narrative capacity with the renewed discussions about the movement during Super Bowl season, but also to the disruptive capacity of the movement, as advertisers and potential halftime performers are becoming increasingly weary of their image when associating with the league.

This weariness can undeniably be traced to the paradigmatic shift created by Kaepernick and the protest movement. The ‘stunt’ disruption of the initial kneeling has thus culminated into a sustained disruption, impeding on the NFL’s ability to carry on with business as usual.



## **Institutional/electoral capacity**

While Tufekci does not explicitly acknowledge any chronological process whereby narrative capacity leads to disruptive capacity, and in turn leads to institutional/electoral capacity, it should be acknowledged that it would be incredibly difficult (if not impossible) for a movement to signal to institutional/electoral capacity right out of the gates, without signaling to at least one of the other two capacities prior.

Electoral capacity is the ability of a movement to “credibly threaten politicians and policy makers with unsuccessful electoral outcomes, whether by preventing them from becoming candidates through primary challenges, causing them to lose elections, making reelection less likely or impossible, or even engaging in recall campaigns” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 196). Despite the incredible narrative and disruptive capacity of the kneeling protests and the BLM movement that brought systemic oppression and racialized violence to the forefront of collective consciousness in the U.S., 2016 saw the successful election of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, who called BLM ‘trouble’ (Campbell, 2015, para. 2). Does this mean that the movements lack institutional/electoral capacity? Or has this capacity yet to come to fruition?

The kneeling protests, Kaepernick, and any organization associated with him will continue to be controversial. Wisconsin Republican lawmakers blocked a Black History Month resolution until Kaepernick’s name was removed from it. Kaepernick, born in Milwaukee, was one of more than two-dozen prominent black Americans included in the bill, “partly because of his \$25,000 donation to Milwaukee’s Urban Underground, a non-profit that says it tries to ‘promote a culture of excellence’” (Boren, 2019, para. 6). Kaepernick was deemed too polarizing a figure with GOP lawmakers forcing the removal

of his name in order to proceed with the bill, leaving Democrats with scrapping the resolution altogether as the only other option. Despite the good that Kaepernick has done for the community, the reproduced image of the protest (through the media) can be reified as the movement itself. Gitlin (2003) has pointed out:

The processed image then tends to *become* “the movement” for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it; that image has impact on public policy, and when the movement is being opposed, what is being opposed is in large part a set of mass-mediated images. (p. 3)

This points to the issue with using disruptive tactics, as they are highly controversial, and can sometimes overshadow the progressive activist work being done by a movement.

For the sake of the readability of this paper, the different signals of the movement have been categorized into one of the three thematic subsections dedicated to each capacity as outlined by Tufekci (narrative, disruptive, and electoral/institutional). However, it is important to note here that KYRC signals to all three capacities, and acts as a bridge between them. The formal organization is an attempt on the behalf of Kaepernick to establish change that is more concrete and permanent than any protest alone could ever be. Signaling to the movement’s narrative capacity is an important byproduct of the tangible groundwork being done by KYRC. Above and beyond establishing the narrative capacity of the movement, KYRC is disruptive at the individual level of positively impacting the lives of children and teens across the country wherever it holds its camps. KYRC also signals to potential electoral/institutional capacity. While

KYRC has existed thus far as an organization outside of traditional/established institutions, it is progressively building its capacity to itself become an ‘on the ground’ institution for continued activist work.

Will the kneeling protest movement amount to any tangible institutional/electoral change? What would this look like? Electoral capacity could be KYRC, or Kaepernick personally, giving an endorsement to a 2020 presidential candidate. It could also include supporting, promoting and collaborating with more localized politicians and/or political candidates. Institutional/electoral capacity may also be the changing faces of those in institutional positions of power. The 2018 midterm elections in the U.S. were a “record year for diversity among candidates, and many could make history if they win their races” (Lai et al., 2018, para. 6). While this shift may not be explicitly traceable to the activist work of Kaepernick, historical changes in politics may ambiguously point to the potential influence of the movement’s narrative and disruptive capacities. Speculation is, in the end, unproductive, and only time will determine the electoral/institutional capacity of the movement.

Following the lead of Hariman & Lucaites (2007), the ‘influence’ of iconic images are “notoriously difficult to prove. Nonetheless, the contrary claim – that salient public practices have no effect – is even less credible” (p. 7). The fact that the movement has yet to explicitly manifest or signal to electoral/institutional capacity is neither a failure nor shortcoming, rather more likely symptomatic of an adolescent social movement, not yet fully realized.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this case study was to answer the following central research question: How was visibility maintained and the narrative of the kneeling protests controlled through deliberate image making and circulation, considering the ever-shifting, yet overlaid, physical and digital sites of resistance? Using Tufekci's (2017) capacities and signals approach to understanding the dynamic ways in which social movements exist as complex iterations of on and off-line action, a movement's ability to maintain visibility even when space/place is denied or limited lies in its ability to 'signal' to its 'capacities.' A movement's capacities are its potential power to enact social change. This power is broken down into three broad subcategories of capacities: i) narrative capacity ii) disruptive capacity and iii) electoral/institutional capacity.

Thus far, the movement has most strongly signaled to narrative capacity, as illustrated through the examples of appearing in select print publications, receiving prestigious humanitarian awards, landing a major brand sponsorship, and the circulation of insurgent images via social media. These forms of image production have positively signaled to the movement's narrative capacity, with the goal of Kaepernick and the movement being interpreted in a sympathetic light, encouraging and promoting dialogue about racial inequality and police brutality situated within the broader BLM movement. These images have circulated through both traditional print and television media and digital outlets, bolstered by the purely online elements of the movement circulated via Twitter and Instagram by Kaepernick himself and his non-profit, KYRC. Their prevalence in the mainstream mass media has allowed them to circumvent the algorithmic 'filter bubbles' of social networks (Wu, 2018), and be widely viewed and

discussed. Narrative capacity continues to be hard fought for, as the initial kneeling protest remains a contentious topic, interpreted by some as an attack on cultural artefacts (the flag, the anthem) that are deeply felt symbols of nationalist pride. (Anderson, 1983). Kaepernick poses a legitimate threat to the ‘teeth gritting harmony’ (Robbins, 1984) produced by the NFL, exposing the alleged meritocracy of professional sports as nothing more than a reflection of the inequalities of the ‘real world’ (Bryant, 2018b). The movement has appealed to a broad audience through the production of attention grabbing imagery that allude to its historical predecessors, the Civil Rights Movement, and more specifically the Black Panther Party, narratively framing itself as a modern day continuation of past social movements that are retrospectively regarded as ‘successful.’ Purposeful and gracefully orchestrated appearances by Kaepernick have served to keep his name relevant and discussions of the kneeling protests as perennial reoccurrences.

As time has passed since the initial kneeling protest, the movement has, and continues, to signal to disruptive capacity. The movement’s disruptive capacity is a constant reminder that the ‘teeth gritting harmony’ (Robbins, 1987) achieved by the NFL and the consumption of sport is fragile, and easily exposed as such. Impeding on the NFL’s ability to profit from being ‘politically neutral’ and carry on with business-as-usual, the protests even succeeded in disturbing the ‘mega-event’ (Real, 2013) of the Super Bowl some three seasons after Kaepernick set foot on a football field. To say the least, his off-field presence is anything but a ‘flash in the pan.’ The movement’s narrative and disruptive capacities have worked in tandem to consistently engage in tactical innovation so as to avoid tactical freeze (McAdam, 1983). As the movement continues to

engage in signaling to its narrative capacity, so too has it *continuously* signaled to disruptive capacity, each working to buttress and sustain one another over time.

While the institutional/electoral capacity of the movement has yet to be fully realized, the movement has successfully engaged in social change through non-traditional/institutional means. Kaepernick has directly impacted local communities through running the KYRC workshops around the U.S. In the years to come, there is no reason to doubt that persistent activism will eventually manifest as tangible institutional/electoral change. With more time, one may surmise that the movement can, and will, have influence on traditional institutions of power, perhaps only to be understood as such retrospectively (Grano, 2009; Zirin, 2011). The movement is an inspiring story of the power of one person, one athlete, to spur a national conversation on the unequal treatment of racialized bodies in the U.S., and the place of protest in sport. It is also a cautionary tale of the rhetorical power of nationalist symbols that most dare not challenge, and the sacrifices Kaepernick has made to stand (and kneel) for what he believes in, history in the making.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Kaepernick sitting on sideline



Colin Kaepernick (pictured bottom, center; emphasis added) sitting on the San Francisco 49er's bench during the national anthem. Image via @jenniferleechan on Twitter.

Retrieved from: [https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769354272735531009/photo/1?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769354272735531009/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)



## Appendix B: Kaepernick, Boyer and Reid



Former Green Beret Nate Boyer (right), stands alongside kneeling Colin Kaepernick (center) and teammate Eric Reid (left), September 1, 2016 in San Diego California. Image via Michael Zagaris/San Francisco 49ers/Getty Images. Retrieved from: <https://theundefeated.com/features/a-timeline-of-events-since-colin-kaepernicks-national-anthem-protest/>

Appendix C: *Time* magazine cover



Colin Kaepernick appears on the cover of *Time* magazine, September 2016. Image is a *Time* photo-illustration. Photography by Michael Zagaris/Getty Images. Retrieved from <http://time.com/magazine/us/4503993/october-3rd-2016-vol-188-no-13-u-s/>

Appendix D: *GQ* magazine cover



Colin Kaepernick appears on the cover of *GQ* magazine, in honour of being named the magazine's "Citizen of the Year," December 2017. Retrieved via:  
<https://www.gq.com/story/colin-kaepernick-cover-men-of-the-year>



## Appendix E: Nike advertisement 2018



Colin Kaepernick appears in a 2018 Nike advertising campaign. Image via Colin Kaepernick (@Kaepernick7) on Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/1036695513251434498>

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