

The Curious Case of Colin Kaepernick and Catachresis in Contemporary Communication

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I. Introduction

With the 2019 NFL regular season set to start at the time of this writing, the discussion surrounding politics in football is heating up for the fourth season in a row. Former San Francisco 49ers star quarterback Colin Kaepernick has not taken an NFL snap for more than 30 months, but the effects of his pregame protests against racial injustice are still being felt. The Atlantic has referred to him as a shadow looming over the league,¹ and the NFL decided in February to settle their collusion case with Kaepernick after several failed attempts to have the case dismissed by arbitrators.² As the media continues to release information about the actions of team owners during the initial controversy, it has become difficult to argue that Kaepernick's inability to find a team during the 2017 season was not being orchestrated behind the scenes.³

Kaepernick's movement started as a small, unpublicized act of protest. In August of 2016, Kaepernick, then quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, remained seated during a pregame performance of the national anthem. This quiet act went mostly unnoticed. It did not see headlines until the third game of the preseason when an NFL.com reporter, who had apparently noticed Kaepernick's head and shoulders at Gatorade table height in a pregame photo, asked why he had not stood. Kaepernick responded:

"I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. 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."

Kaepernick is, of course, referring to the issue of police brutality against people of color in the United States and the idea that courts rarely convict officers with a crime.⁴ The comments caused an internet firestorm. Kaepernick, who set several quarterback rushing records and even appeared in a Super Bowl, had never and has not since trended more on the web or in the news. The most prominent narrative, which would seem related to the NFL's decades-long flirtation with conservative jingoism and deep ties to the military,⁵ was that the demonstration was disrespectful to American soldiers. Kaepernick issued a response a few days later saying that he respected "the men and women that have fought for this country," but reaffirmed commitment to his cause.

Throughout September and October, more and more athletes, and particularly football players, began to demonstrate during the national anthem. Some stood with one fist raised. Others locked arms with like-minded teammates. They included some relatively high profile players such as Seahawks Legion of Boom defensive tackle, Michael Bennett, the Denver Broncos' Brandon Marshall, and Arian Foster of the Miami Dolphins. It was around this time that Kaepernick says he consulted with a former member of the US military on the best way to conduct the protest respectfully, ultimately arriving upon taking a knee.⁶ US Women's soccer player, Megan Rapinoe, also knelt during the national anthem. In a postgame interview in Chicago, she told reporters her gesture was "a nod to Kaepernick" and acknowledged social and political issues facing black people in America. Perhaps the most intriguing case in terms of league response (besides Kaepernick himself) was Oakland Athletics catcher, Bruce Maxwell. Maxwell was the first Major League Baseball player to perform a Kaepernick-style pregame protest, and it may have done irreparable damage to his career.⁷ Interestingly, prior assault charges, weapons charges, and a .182 batting average had never been enough for minor league demotion.

In the three years since Kaepernick's initial silent demonstration, the issue has branched in a number of different directions. Millions of words have been written about police brutality and systematic oppression, the NFL's relationship with black players, free speech and democracy, the rise of European-style leftism in the popular psyche, the military's relationship with the National Football League, respect for veterans, corporate responsibility, the national anthem, Kaepernick's abilities as a player, and even workers' rights in Southeast Asia.

Some of these conversations pushed events into very bizarre territory. Donald Trump's call on Twitter for an NFL boycott at the beginning of the 2017 season prompted entire NFL teams, including their right-leaning executives, to kneel in protest of Trump himself.⁸ Denver Broncos Hall of Famer Champ Bailey said, "I feel like it's for show. I don't trust Jerry [Jones] or any of the owners on issues of social justice." The rhetoric grew even more heated when Kaepernick's girlfriend, Nessa Diab, compared the owner of the Baltimore Ravens and their hall of fame Mike linebacker, Ray Lewis, to a plantation owner and his obsequious house slave from Quentin Tarantino's 2012 Western, *Django Unchained*.⁹ Lewis garnered further negative reaction on social media when he claimed to have knelt only to "honor God in the midst of chaos" and clarified that he absolutely was not protesting.¹⁰

Other conversations were productive. Brandon Marshall ended his pregame demonstrations when the Denver Police Department agreed to review their use of force policies.¹¹ Had more police departments reacted this way or had pundits been able to stay focused, kneeling during the anthem may have been a non-issue. But the reaction, very little of which directly addressed the content of Kaepernick's demonstration,¹² was so dramatic that it sparked protests, counter-protests, boycotts, and burnings in effigy. Comedian Dave Chappelle joked that he could kill every white person in America by having OJ Simpson kneel on the 50-yard line during the Super Bowl. "That's a brittle spirit," he would say.

This catachresis, the phenomenon by which the conversation is effectively intercepted and carried off in the wrong direction is a point of interest in this tale. Narratives being written and rewritten ultimately overdetermining the root subject is not an unusual process in political discourse. The modern media environment certainly seems to accelerate that. However, the reaction in this case is strikingly similar to phenomena observed in rural Japan where individuals questioned on issues of race impress their understanding onto the problem and, consciously or unconsciously, avow and impute motives that pick-six the conversation.¹³

The Kaepernick saga brings up questions about the nature of public protests and conversations that surround issues of race and racism in the United States. Kaepernick defined the meaning of his initial protest, but once images and words about the event enter the digital realm, all control over the narrative is lost. What do these conversations mean? Innumerable supporters and detractors

have jumped into the discussion, wresting it away from and back toward its initial focus. Since those initial comments on NFL.com, the issue has expanded well beyond what Kaepernick likely imagined. Even multi-billion-dollar corporations and Russian troll farms participated in the discussion.¹⁴ What does their participation speak to in American culture? This phenomenon may tell us something about institutionalized and implicit behaviors that the current framework of racism studies cannot.

The utterances that appear in this intense colloquy are in themselves empirical data to be studied. As C. Wright Mills theorizes, they are “verbalized appendages of institutionalized behaviors” and socially situated.¹⁵ There seems to be a similarity between the macro-level reaction the United States as a nation had to these events and the documented motive talk of individuals confronting accusations of bigotry or other improprieties. Americans are painfully aware of how polarized our politics have become. What can conversations about this event tell us about the cultural environment?

We will examine media coverage of the event and observe how netizens handled various topics in a highly politicized media landscape. Google Trends is useful here. In 2016, events that generated the most media coverage and search term traffic for ‘Colin Kaepernick’ were the initial protest, Trump saying Kaepernick “should find a country that works better for him,” Kaepernick comments on Hillary Clinton’s alleged crimes, and Kaepernick wearing pig socks and a Fidel Castro t-shirt. In 2017, Trump calling the players “sons of bitches,” players and owners protesting Trump, Trump specifically mentioning the “respect for flag and country” narrative, Kaepernick filing a collusion grievance against the NFL, and Kaepernick being named GQ magazine’s Citizen of the Year all generated headlines and searches. Significant events of 2018 were Nike’s ad campaign featuring Kaepernick, the resulting protests and counter-protests, and Trump tweeting about respect for the flag.¹⁶

II. Internet Discussions

Thanks to internet forums and comment sections, analyzing utterances has never been easier. While this erases some of the charms of ethnomethodology, such a rich source of information has significant advantages. Without conducting interviews or making life histories, one can access an immeasurable amount of

talk about virtually any popular subject. The body of literature that examines internet forums is growing, and the practice is beginning to emerge in fields closer to the sciences, such as psychology.¹⁷ American anthropologist, Nancy Baym, and Estonian researchers, Peter Holtz and Wolfgang Wagner are some strong examples of academics working in this genre.¹⁸ The latter even published a guide for other researchers in 2009 having analyzed forums over a number of papers.

One significant advantage of utilizing internet forums that Holtz and team note is just sheer volume. Even smaller sites can have hundreds of members contributing thousands of posts. News aggregator fark.com is not even a top 7,000 Alexa-ranked site, but it has over 5,000 active posters and 25,000 'lurkers' in the comment section. With more topic-focused forums, one can examine a narrow group but still have a lot of data. A study conducted at the nursing school at Emory University even referred to internet forums with specific topics as "unmoderated focus groups."¹⁹ Because the data sets are large, they can be examined more quantitatively. One can pore over conversations directly as would an ethnomethodologist, use software and grounded theory techniques to find trends, or both.

There is another advantage to forums in that data are potentially cleaner and friendlier to review than that which can be gathered personally. Users are entirely separated from the observer and can be examined in something of a natural environment (though it is important to note that conversations are not definitely natural). Issues such as survey bias, acquiescence, or order effects are non-existent. Furthermore, the data is publicly available.

Without having to confront the consequences of their words directly or face pushback from an interrogator, individuals are more likely to discuss controversial topics. In long-form interviews or focus groups, there is always potential for interviewer effects or partiality. Techniques of conversation analysis can be employed to account for some slant,²⁰ but the danger is still there. For example, research into anti-Korean proto-alt-right groups by Makiko Shoji of Doshisha University used life histories to put a face on Japanese anti-foreign sentiment. While this research is unique and exciting, the process will have influenced the results. Shoji admits to being strangely attracted to interviewees and feeling guilty about enjoying events and contact.²¹ The close-up format may also give the impression that interview subjects are the target

of condemnation rather than the cultural framework that girds their understanding.²² Analyzing forums could accomplish a similar flavor, but with potentially fewer problems.

This impersonality carries disadvantages. As Holtz and team note, there is an ethical issue with making subjects of the unwitting. While internet forums are mostly public, there may be forum members who would object to being part of a study. Depending on how much data is attached to each username, it may be possible to reverse engineer personal information about the individual. When the topic is something sensitive, such as politics or race, privacy concerns are amplified. One must also account for 'deindividuation effects' (familiar to anyone brave or stupid enough to read YouTube comments). In the case of an online study, it resembles a kind of new extreme responding. Posters will write obscene or radical things for seemingly no other reason than to offend, provoke, or 'flame.' The impulsivity and lack of conscience resembles antisocial personality disorder.²³ Ecological validity is difficult to determine in a study of utterances, and deindividuation effects further complicate matters.

That performative element of online commenting is an obstacle. Participants compete for eyeballs, votes, and feedback; whether it be reddit.com karma, fark.com 'smart' and 'funny' votes, clicks on the 'like' button, or even just angry responses. Further, many individuals play characters or even operate multiple accounts, sometimes within one discussion. 'Trolls' post offensive or digressive comments so they can sit back with popcorn and watch the resulting carnage. There is also research that suggests individuals attempt to one-up each other with their offensive comments.²⁴ That is not to say trolling is entirely worthless with a Millsian approach. We know golden retrievers love tennis balls. In the same respect, the material with which trolls and 'sockpuppets' distract people can give us valuable information.²⁵

The Goldingesque lack of typical social structure should be accounted for when relying on this data. It is here that Holtz and company deserve some criticism. In their guide, they say there is evidence that posters are not offering the most extreme opinions possible, but their real opinions in the most extreme manner possible.²⁶ The evidence is a single paper from 2002 by grounded theory pioneer, Jack Glaser, which examines white supremacist internet forums in America. Drawing any conclusions about the behavior of all online commenters based on white supremacists participating in a private bulletin is

questionable. Care must be taken to accurately assess comment content without being influenced by the prospective treasure trove of material.

III. Previous Research

Papers that analyze web forums or comment sections to study ethnic exclusionism are not immune to the usual pitfalls of racism studies. Many works, including those of Dr. Holtz, tend to point out that there is some racism somewhere. Others offer a list of the no good, very bad words that racists use. One analysis from the guide to analyzing internet forums examines Neo-Nazi message boards connected to the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany. The team looked at 5,000 posts from forums totaling nearly 2,000 users. They found that German white supremacists were concerned with black men procreating with white women, German identity, and Jewish power and influence. While the paper is valuable for its methodology, the results fall in line perfectly with established racist tropes. The value of unmoderated discussion is lost.

Another report in the guide solves this issue somewhat. Researchers observed a handful of forums frequented by young Muslim men of Turkish descent living in Germany and identified 'typical discourses.' The distinct types of talk they identify here allowed for a correspondence analysis that identified very religious but not politically radical and very secular but also very politically radical groups. While it may not seem surprising at first blush that communities with various mixes of religiosity and political radicalization exist amongst Muslim immigrants to Western nations, it shows the necessity of a multi-dimensional approach when studying radicalization and reveals some motive vocabularies used in those communities. For example, very political young men were found to use the word 'kuffar,' or infidel, quite frequently on other expats. The value of unmoderated discussion is appreciable.

It is also common to analyze internet data via word counts. Researchers use software to count the number of times a particular word or phrase appears throughout a conversation and run analyses using various statistics software suites. Given that quoting varies wildly from site to site, it means that a person must still check the data. Jokes, sarcastic use of terms, and context too require a human eye. If this human check is necessary, it makes sense to hand-tag or

'code' phrases in the first place.

The cost of this method is much time, but time alone, and the result is a large data-set. No panel discussions, no questionnaires, no interviews, no life histories. With taboo topics such as white supremacy, religious extremism, or Nazism, this approach is easier and potentially more valuable than those methods.

IV. Framework

The concept of 'catachresis' is utilized to identify colonialist structures in society and identify a defect or impropriety.²⁷ Similar to literary catachresis, like the 'deepest winter' of Lord Timon's purse, it describes a meaning or system of understanding forcibly imposed. Literary theorist Gayatri Spivak and other postcolonial Marxist critics utilize this concept to address ideas like 'woman' or 'the proletariat' that ground social phenomena. Thought experiments may easily strain these ideas, and there are no "true examples." To answer the questions set out for this project above, we will analyze comment sections of a handful of articles that cover or provide commentary on the 'anthem protests.'²⁸ These comment sections are selected for their relevance to the initial content of Colin Kaepernick's protest: police brutality against people of color and systemic racism.²⁹ In this manner, we can catalog vocabularies and examine how people are (again, consciously or unconsciously) massaging the conversation or imposing different meanings upon it.

This process is similar to that in political conversations observed in rural Japan. Natives filter topics with much weight through the local history and system of understanding. In the city of Iga-Ueno, Mie Prefecture, even transplants interviewed about perceived problems of racism in town and in Japan steer the direction toward local history or points of local pride.³⁰ It must be repeated for emphasis that whether this catachresis is purposeful or incidental does not matter. Imputing a thought process in this situation would constitute motive mongering. However, utterances and the vocabularies used therein are empirical data to be studied. Further, they represent a symptom or component of structural bias and racism.

To better understand this, let us look at an example. On YouTube, fark.com, and news sites covering the protests, it is common for comment threads to transform slowly (or in some cases immediately) into football conversation. In

the midst of that, commenters discussing racism bring up 'the black quarterback,' a well-explored sociological concept. While this may seem in line with the original topic, it is very much different. Whether this imposition is an intentional act of racism or not does not matter. We can still glean from this process that the issue of police brutality is losing to football. There is a stymying effect whereby superficial topics subsume crucial political speech. As participants jockey to make their points, they impose an entirely new sense of meaning upon the initial conversation.

V. Analysis

We will examine the comment sections of news aggregator fark.com and comment system Disqus.³¹ Discussions take place on Fark and are attached to an outside article. Disqus allows for conversation directly below a news article or on disqus.com. The sites are relatively diverse, and audiences are a majority American according to Alexa rankings. Fark targets mostly 25- to 40-year-old affluent individuals but is politically diverse. These sites were chosen for their relative neutrality. Faced with trolling and flaming, many news and opinion sites have stopped allowing comments, so communities that discuss current events with no particular focus are the best for our purposes. Studying how narratives evolve in targeted communities would be interesting, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Threads are laid out cleanly and lend themselves well to coding, particularly on Fark. Both communities require an account for use. Disqus allows users to login with Facebook, Google, or Twitter credentials, potentially reducing deindividuation effects.³² Quoting and attribution is clear, decreasing the chance of counting the same post twice or using the same code many times on a single user. Moderators are relatively hands-off. They will remove obscene posts, comments that exhibit flaming behavior, or those that veer too far off-topic. Fark's feedback mechanisms are particularly useful. 'Smart' and 'funny' voting options give a bit more information about the intent of posts than typical sites. Coding sarcastic or humorous posts exposes the process to extra subjectivity, but with these vote counts one can defer to the crowd rather than determine the tenor of a post. While not perfect, this medium level of moderation and security should give us a good idea of discourses.

Comments were classified into five different types before other codes were applied, so a pattern of typical discourses could be established. The five types are: disagree, contrary, neutral, supportive, agree. Comments tagged as 'disagree' must contain some language where the poster outright states that they believe Kaepernick is wrong in his protest or methods. Comments that fail to meet that requirement but argue against Kaepernick or supporters are 'contrary.' Similarly, 'supportive' comments are those that argue in favor of Kaepernick or supporters but do not contain an explicit endorsement. 'Agree' posts are those that contain explicit support. Finally, neutral posts are those related to the topic where there is no opinion stated, or a coder should not make a determination.³³ The types on either side of neutral are coupled together into code groups called 'positive' and 'negative.'

Posts are also coded based on how relevant they are to the topic of the article. If a significant number of different posters are talking about the same unrelated topic across threads, that topic receives a tag such as 'football,' 'anthem,' or 'economic.' These codes belong to the group 'tangent' and represent the catachresis that we hypothesized above. If a discourse as tagged appears too infrequently or the fit of a particular comment is difficult to establish, it is omitted. Some additional codes that account for the tenor of a post include 'vitriolic,' 'on-topic,' 'authoritarian,' 'straw man,' 'racist trope,' 'joke,' and 'sarcasm.' In total, the project has 72 codes, 32 of which met the threshold for a typical discourse, which is 50 instances.

ATLAS.ti performs correspondence analysis between codes. The software marks related codes with a percentage of explained variance and automatically identifies relationships of interest that a human may miss. The tests ATLAS.ti performs are similar to a chi-squared test, and it provides a Cohen's kappa for agreement. However, given that codes are researcher generated and data is typically from complex surveys, interviews, or other nonrandom data, no p-values or significance levels can be provided. The software warns users that its data visualizations are not enough to establish statistically significant relationships. Holtz and team graph their data and use a cosine distance method recommended by Michael J. Greenacre of Pompeu Fabra University to test significance. For our purposes, we will avoid definitive statements. A permutation test or even a simple chi-squared test would not be wholly inappropriate given the independence of our variables and how we have

structured the data, but a study of discourses does not require econometric bluster.

The discourses below come from 3,839 coded posts over three years (2016-2018). With these tools, we can paint a picture of the conversations people were having about this issue in online communities.

1. “The Wrong Type of Protest”³⁴

As expected, a great many posters claimed to be offended by someone kneeling during the national anthem. Not standing for the anthem was deemed anti-American or disrespectful to those “who fought and died for this country.” As mentioned above this argument was seen often in the media. In a particularly heated CNN Tonight segment in 2017, host Don Lemon challenged a guest on his use of this rhetoric. Lead guest Micheal Eric Dyson of Georgetown University likened it to an abusive husband complaining when his wife finally speaks up.

Of specific discourses, this was the one most highly associated with ‘negative’ posts. Some ‘positive’ posts also contained this language. Interestingly, ATLAS.ti marked a relationship between ‘negative’ commenters and comments that go out of their way to mention that the protest was acceptable. When those posts are analyzed directly, this would appear to be a technique of neutralization. Nearly half of such posts directed vitriolic language at Kaepernick, and all disagreed on other grounds.

Example: “He’s free to protest however he feels. We’re free to say that he’s a [expletive] idiot, who doesn’t understand what the [expletive] he’s talking about. That’s how freedom works.”

2. “He Sucks”³⁵

A prevalent discourse that was especially common in 2016 threads was that Kaepernick was a just lousy quarterback. Nearly five times as many ‘negative’ comments contained some variation of this theme as ‘positive.’ The attitude was used as a bludgeon to attack the quarterback. While the idea that Kaepernick is unfit for the NFL was expressed in overwhelming numbers by ‘negative’ posters, the disparity between expected and actual opinions for ‘neutral’ posters (and indeed football statistics) indicate that this is not the case.³⁶

Example: “He protests the anthem by sitting down, and he protests the [NFL] by playing like [expletive].”

3. “Redbaiting”

After Kaepernick appeared before the media wearing a shirt depicting Fidel Castro, many posters used political arguments to dismiss Kaepernick. It appeared in threads well after the initial event, but numbers were few. It does not appear to be common after 2016. A vast majority of people who used this discourse either self-identified as a conservative or negatively mentioned ‘liberals,’ ‘Democrats,’ or ‘leftists.’ Contrary to our initial predictions, this vocabulary did not meet our threshold for a typical discourse.

Example: “[The] Washington Times wrote about him [giving] to a charity that supports Cop Killer Assata who went to Cuba. So, Colin is not totally ignorant of the Castro brothers, Colin is an avowed leftist. Please read the Washington Times article.”

4. “He’s Too Privileged”³⁷

Another ad hominem style argument that came up often was that a wealthy football player should not be protesting, was not helping, or could not understand oppression and thus could not protest it. Comments used Kaepernick’s white adoptive parents as an argument were also tagged with this code.

Example: “He thinks he’s oppressed because he makes tons of money playing [expletive] football? [expletive] him and the [expletive] pony he rides.”

5. Political Codes

As we expected to see highly politicized speech mimicking highly politicized coverage, several codes were used to track commenters who self-identified on the American one-dimensional political spectrum, or who used blaming language while referencing an ideology or political party. Contrary to expectations, this type of discourse was surprisingly rare, at least on one side. Conservatives, Republicans, and Trump supporters were generally against the protests as expected, but ‘negative’ codes were far less likely to be associated with those attacking left-leaning ideologies than the reverse. Liberals,

Democrats, and Clinton supporters were generally in favor of the protests. 'Positive' and 'neutral' commenters were associated with posts attacking the right, Trump, and right-leaning ideologies. They were highly associated with straw man arguments and accusations of racism. There were surprisingly few Clinton supporters tagged as 'negative' after Kaepernick's controversial comments.

"But Democrats" ³⁸

Example: "Crimes involving non-white people against their own race isn't talked about nearly enough, for whatever reason. You don't see a lot of 'black lives matter' yahoos and the scene of black-on-black crime, do you? Didn't think so. [...] Your argument is slanted, biased, and happens to fit the 'over-hyped' liberal 'all whites are racists' agenda of the moment."

"But Republicans" ³⁹

Example: "Why are most of the people who are upset about Kaepernick support a party whose main platform is 'Rich guy complains about America'?"

6. Tangent Codes

This category is perhaps our most important as it helps quantify the catachresis we noted. Tangent codes were applied to comments that participated in or started a continuing tangential conversation. One unexpected result was that strong attitudes toward the protest had little connection to whether or not one deviated from the topic. Both 'positive' and 'negative' codes were less associated with tangential conversation than would be expected from their respective populations. Under the Millsian portion of our framework, we would expect to see 'negative' commenters following tangents as they explore ex post facto lingualizations. 'Neutral' was the only group to exceed expected values. This result makes sense in half of our theoretical framework; those with less investment in the issue are more likely to follow socially situated topics.

The most common tangential topics were football, the anthem, and the flag. Associations for anthem and flag discussion are so close to the expected values that if we could run a statistical test, it would not likely be meaningfully different from random. What the disparity between football and patriotic narratives says about the power of those narratives is unclear. Tangents that

did not meet our threshold included economic, political, and free speech discussion. The last one is particularly surprising.

All Tangents (includes specific and blanket tangent tags)⁴⁰

Example: “I don’t think Nike cares about losing redneck [expletive] customers. Brooks are better running shoes anyway. I made the switch several years ago. really the best.”

“Football Tangent”⁴¹

Example: “Romo hurt his back and going to miss half the regular season. The Prescott Era begins. Or Jerrah is on the phone with San Fran right now...”

“Anthem/Flag Tangent”⁴²

Example: “Not for nothing, but when Angry Guy X says, ‘That bastard hates America! My grandpappy died for that flag!’, I learn much more about Angry Guy X’s wrong-headed idea of what America is or should be.”

7. “On-Topic”⁴³

In contrast to various ‘tangent’ codes, the ‘on-topic’ code was associated with posts that continued a conversation about whether or not Kaepernick was correct to protest or discussed the content of the protest. Posters with ‘positive’ codes were associated with ‘on-topic’ comments more often than other groups. Those with ‘negative’ codes were less associated with both ‘on-topic’ comments and tangents. Possible explanations to that seeming contradiction are hit-and-run troll behavior or a large number of people writing a small number of comments. Less than 10% of posts were coded ‘on-topic.’ This is a damning result.

Example: “One problem is perception. law enforcement seems to work to protect rather than punish the bad actors among them, fighting against accountability instead of for it and this is why so many people have a problem with them. If the “good” cops are actively or even passively staying complicit, well...”

8. “Vitriol”⁴⁴

This code is not a discourse, but the associations are particularly interesting. Those who outright disagreed with Kaepernick or argued against him were more associated with vitriolic language than other commenters. Even in heated exchanges, those who supported Kaepernick were associated less with hateful language or cursing. Interestingly, even these relatively vitriolic Kaepernick dissenters were in line with or slightly better than the typical proportion of hateful comments on the internet at large.⁴⁵ This relative cleanliness could speak to the quality of chosen communities or at least their content moderation.

Example: “Kaperwhatshisface is an attention whore. ‘Oooh. No one has noticed me for the last few weeks’. [expletive] him.”

9. “Racist Trope”⁴⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the use of racist tropes were much more likely to be associated with ‘negative’ attitudes.

Example: “You’ve done nothing for blacks but sit down in protest and personify the ‘Thug life.’”

10. Millsian Code Groups

The Millsian code group covered motive talk that we might expect given the subject matter. While some of the anti-Kaepernick rhetoric associated with negative posts falls in line with condemning the condemners, the requirements were strict for those codes. A commenter had to use condemning language defensively. Not one of the Millsian codes or groups met our typical discourse threshold. ‘My black friend’ was two comments shy of the requirement, while a group of victim-blaming codes fell short by one. ‘My black friend’ is exactly what it sounds like. The victim-blaming code group was a number of ‘on-topic’ posts that dealt with language attacking or blaming those experiencing police violence. Codes included ‘but black on black violence,’ ‘but criminals,’ and ‘racism everywhere.’ They co-occurred with ‘negative’ codes often.

11. “Meta”⁴⁷

This final code group was fascinating. It was almost exclusively associated with ‘positive’ commenters. Posts that received this tag were cognizant of the idea that anti-Kaepernick commenters were pushing the argument away from the essential themes (but interestingly unaware that more neutral individuals were also participating). These individuals were aware of many of the catachreses that we discussed above, including those that we expected to see but could not make any definitive statements about given the data. Another noteworthy aspect is that the ‘meta’ code appears to increase across the observed three year period.

Example: “anyone going to bother to dispute the validity of what he said or are you just going to ‘lol shut up football man’ for the rest of the afternoon”

12. Miscellaneous Codes

Other codes that met typical discourse requirements, but were close to expected values were ‘joke,’ ‘sarcasm,’ ‘straw man,’ ‘but the media,’ ‘you’re a troll,’ ‘no you,’ ‘but BLM,’ ‘All Lives Matter,’ and ‘Blue Lives Matter.’ Given that the final two are typically considered counter-movements to Black Lives Matter, this is surprising. ATLAS.ti did mark correspondence between ‘negative’ attitudes toward Kaepernick and All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter codes, but it was small. It would seem that despite the ideological lines that we would expect given media coverage, those threads simply turned into general All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter discussions. For the most part, participants did not appear to take political sides. Those threads were associated with an uptick in vitriolic language (“A lot of [expletive] bootlickers in this thread”) and accusations of racism (“You lot think black lives don’t matter.”).

VI. Conclusions

If we retroactively apply something of a null hypothesis, our results ultimately support the catachresis we initially observed. People did not follow current events and media coverage, nor did they adhere to substantive conversation. Instead, we observed an imposition of socially situated understandings over events. As news stories were used to resolve narratives, we should expect to

see discourses that in some way echo events. While those discourses were present, they are confounded by football and patriotic narratives. That is not outwardly surprising, but the tangential conversation that results is. Once the initial topic is painted over, participants run headlong into Wile E. Coyote's tunnel.

Intense debates about America and free expression may be a tertiary effect of the political environment. It is interesting that even those people who support Kaepernick appeared to consider the issue from a free speech perspective. We should be careful not to boil this effect down to "netizens do not understand the first amendment." That vocabulary is genetically imputed. It would require further study, but we may expect less parenthetical discussion if the kickoff were something more direct. Black Lives Matter would be a good example. That is not to blame Colin Kaepernick for the effects we observe. One might argue that tailoring a message to the majority puts the onus for change on the oppressed. In this case, however, it is more akin to Bellichicking an opponent's weapon off the field of play.

How well our results map to the broader population remains to be seen (we certainly bumped into the limits of this method), but given the nature of these online communities, the observed gap between media coverage and discussion is striking. That seems to be especially true of individuals with less investment in the material. Football is the most popular and profitable spectator sport in the country, but it represents more than that here. Here it is an iceberg off Colin Kaepernick's starboard side. The ease with which football inserted itself into conversations makes a compelling argument for including rhetoric in implicit bias training. Think back to the precedent of Brandon Marshall and the Denver Police Department. Colin Kaepernick's protest had potential for immediate change when the table was properly set.

The protest has lost some of the public's attention, and its goals are far from fulfilled. While discrimination is the obvious and easy answer, fine details merit exploration. Most Americans are not outright racist and do not believe themselves to be. It must be stressed that they are still participants in that system. Conversations that move valuable intellectual resources away from a solution, even inadvertently, are part of the problem. Some might dismiss this as a form of implicit or aversive racism. However, an ethnomethodological examination gives a more intimate look at the mechanism.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/09/the-colin-kaepernick-shadowlooming-over-the-nfl/569494/> :: 10 Aug. 2019
- 2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/sports/nfl-colin-kaepernick.html/> :: Accessed 10 Aug.2019
- 3 The case's sudden settlement in February of this year unfortunately means we will likely never know. The terms remain undisclosed, but tapes provided to the New York Times by an anonymous source show that players agreed he should be on a roster. In a meeting between owners and prominent players in October of 2017, owners reportedly sounded panicked when confronted with the idea that they were blackballing Kaepernick. When Philadelphia DL Chris Long brought up the idea of signing Kaepernick and introducing some positivity into the conversation, owners were noncommittal. Terry Pegula, owner of the Buffalo Bills, acknowledged the divisiveness of Trump's rhetoric, but said, "All of us now, we need to put a Band-Aid on what's going on in the country."
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/sports/nfl-owners-kaepernick.html> :: Accessed 30 Apr.2019
- 4 Professor Philip Stinson found that as many as eight percent of police officers are arrested for crimes in the first four years of their careers, highlighting a significant cultural issue inside police departments. He is quoted in a 2019 NBC report saying, "An officer gets on the stand and says 'I feared for my life,' and that's usually all she wrote. No conviction, more often than that, no charges at all."
Stinson, 2017.
- 5 Historian Jesse Berrett argues that the NFL is such a powerful force in American politics that it actually remade the political landscape. He outlines the NFL's sticky relationship with the military in a Washington Post perspective.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/12/10/the-nfl-marketingploy-that-was-too-successful-for-the-leagues-own-good/> :: Accessed 11 Aug. 2019
- 6 <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/27/us/nfl-anthem-protest-race-trump-trnd/index.html/> :: Accessed 11 Aug. 2019
- 7 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/mlb/report-maxwell-may-never-play-in-mlb-again-afteranthem-kneel/ar-BBQWi5F> :: Accessed 27 Jul. 2019
- 8 <https://theundefeated.com/features/nfl-all-22-week-3-did-cowboys-owner-jerry-jones-kneelwith-players-for-the-right-reasons/> :: Accessed 27 Jul. 2019
- 9 The tweet joins an image Ray Lewis hugging Steve Bisciotti from behind with a still from the film where distraught house slave Stephen hugs his dead master from behind. As of this writing, the tweet was still available on her account, 2019. <https://t.co/N9k7nDgmDh> :: Accessed 30 Sept. 2019
- 10 http://www.5z8.info/rickroll_t4w6cc_creditscore :: Accessed 26 Aug. 2019
- 11 <https://thinkprogress.org/nfl-player-stops-national-anthem-protest-after-denver-policerewrite-use-of-force-policy-591f80ae114f/> :: Accessed 24 Jul. 2019
- 12 This author could find but one major publication that disagreed with Kaepernick's actual message. A 2019 Quillette article entitled "Don't Blame Police Racism for America's Violence Epidemic" attempts to argue that police shootings are a symptom of America's

deeper issues with gun violence.

<https://quillette.com/2019/07/27/dont-blame-police-racism-for-americas-violenceepidemic/>:: Accessed 26 Aug. 2019

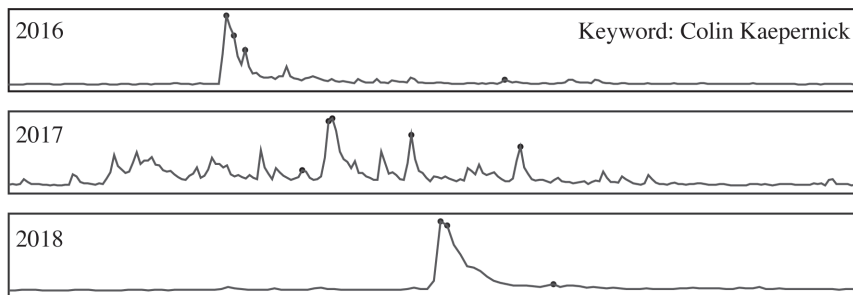
13 Gibson, 2017.

14 Online network research firm, Graphika, claims that Russian sockpuppet accounts were involved in the backlash against Nike after their “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” ad campaign featuring Kaepernick. Graphika CEO John Kelly is on record with the Daily Mail saying “they were definitely participating in the Nike hashtag and in particularly driving it at the beginning.” According to their research, more than 80,000 different Twitter accounts had posted messages with anti-Nike hashtags within less than a day of the campaign launch. They claim ‘many’ were linked to the IRA. The finding is interesting, but the vague wording should be noted.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/sportsnews/article-6257003/Colin-Kaepernick-advertcriticism-heightened-Russian-run-social-media-accounts.html> :: Accessed 26 Aug. 2019

15 Mills, 1940.

16 Blips represent events mentioned above. Google Trends data is normalized to the highest number of searches in a given period. As such, data represent relative popularity and height differences may not be an indication of overall search popularity. Searches cannot be compared across graphs. Source: Author.



17 Skitka, 2006.

18 There are dozens of fascinating articles that use internet forums and grounded theory, but for this paper, we will pay less attention to these. The methodology is complicated and, according to Grbich, requires the researcher be extraordinarily impartial and disconnected from existing theory. It would be quite easy to proffer a bad theory with the given subject matter.

Grbich, 2013.

19 Moloney, 2003.

20 Researchers such as Mizukawa Yoshifumi, Maeda Hirofumi, and Gregory S. Poole have been producing quality scholarship here in Japan with these methods for years. The former released a guide to ethnomethodology wherein they describe a method that reproduces interviews in excruciating detail. This process may allow the reader to identify where the interviewer misinterpreted, missed, or ignored something important.

21 Shoji, 2014.

22 That is a criticism this researcher received while researching ethnic exclusionism in rural Japanese villages.

23 Bishop, 2013.

- 24 Williams, 2002.
- 25 In Senate testimony, Director of Research for New Knowledge Renée DiResta outlines how the Moscow-based Internet Research Agency used 'sockpuppet' accounts to disrupt forums and comment sections on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Russian agents recognized America's racial tension as a fracture point and attacked it specifically. They released divisive content targeted at African Americans on issues vital to them, such as police brutality. The fact that a foreign power was able to exploit this weakness in American society while YouTube and government agencies claimed that "IRA content was not targeted to the US or to any particular sector of the US population" is a significant finding.
Senate IC Hearing, 2018.
- 26 Holtz, 2012.
- 27 Hawthorne, 2013.
- 28 Even this term is loaded. It can sound as if the anthem itself is being protested rather than the systemic problems of the country the anthem represents.
- 29 <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/don-lemon-confronts-cnns-ed-martin-for-bashing-nflprotests-what-protest-is-acceptable> :: Accessed 8/13/19
- 30 Gibson, 2017.
- 31 Initially, YouTube comments were also included in the analysis, but the amount of content that had to be coded as 'vitriolic' or 'trolling' was close to 60% for some videos.
- 32 Santana, 2014.
- 33 For example, in a thread discussing his protest and methods, a user posted an image of Kaepernick sitting on the bench listening to music captioned: "Colin during the anthem." The same image is again posted below captioned: "Colin after the anthem." The comment is decidedly negative, but the content is too open to interpretation. This post is coded as 'neutral.'
Another example would be a post with no quotes for context that said: "Stand up for what is right, sit down for what is wrong?" This post appears to be a negative reaction to Kaepernick, but there is not enough information.
- 34 "The Wrong Type of Protest"
Code counts (count/total posts): negative - 160/1,227, positive - 60/848, neutral - 78/1,914
Expected (count/total posts): negative- 92/1,227, positive - 63/848, neutral - 143/1,914
- 35 "He Sucks"
Code counts: negative - 172/1,227, positive - 30/848, neutral - 85/1,914
Expected: negative - 88/1,227, positive - 61/848, neutral - 131/1,914
- 36 <https://theundefeated.com/features/33-quarterbacks-signed-before-colin-kaepernick-freeagent> :: Accessed 1/11/19
- 37 "He's Too Privileged"
Code counts: negative - 147/1,227, positive - 15/848, neutral - 70/1,914
Expected: negative - 79/1,227, positive - 49/848, neutral - 111/1,914
- 38 "But Democrats"
Code counts: negative - 31/1,227, positive - 1/848, neutral - 38/1,914
Expected: negative - 22/1,227, positive - 15/848, neutral - 35/1,914
- 39 "But Republicans"
Code counts: negative - 7/1,227, positive - 119/848, neutral - 194/1,914
Expected: negative - 98/1,227, positive - 68/848, neutral - 154/1,914
- 40 All Tangents
Code counts: negative - 176/1,227, positive - 128/848, neutral - 558/1,914

- Expected: negative - 265/1,227, positive - 183/848, neutral - 414/1,914
- 41 “Football Tangent”
Code counts: negative - 19/1,227, positive - 9/848, neutral - 115/1,914
Expected: negative - 44/1,227, positive - 30/848, neutral - 69/1,914
- 42 “Anthem/Flag Tangent”
Code counts: negative - 54/1,227, positive - 58/848, neutral - 95/1,914
Expected: negative - 64/1,227, positive - 44/848, neutral - 99/1,914
- 43 “On-Topic”
Code counts: negative - 75/1,227, positive - 181/848, neutral - 77/1,914
Expected: negative - 102/1,227, positive - 71/848, neutral - 160/1,914
- 44 “Vitriol”
Code counts: negative - 211/1,227, positive - 44/848, neutral - 108/1,914
Expected: negative - 112/1,227, positive - 77/848, neutral - 174/1,914
- 45 Santana, 2014.
- 46 “Racist Trope”
Code counts: negative - 111/1,227, positive - 3/848, neutral - 43/1,914
Expected: negative - 48/1,227, positive - 33/848, neutral - 75/1,914
- 47 “Meta”
Code counts: negative - 3/1,227, positive - 128/848, neutral - 39/1,914
Expected: negative - 52/1,227, positive - 36/848, neutral - 82/1,914

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