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Taking the star-spangled knee: the media framing of Colin Kaepernick

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ABSTRACT

Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, opted to kneel during the American National Anthem throughout the 2016 NFL season as a symbolic protest against racial injustice and police brutality throughout the United States. His actions provoked criticism when the media focused on Kaepernick’s alleged unpatriotic and anti-military stance. Using the concept of media framing, this paper analyses the newspaper coverage of Kaepernick's protest. We identify four key frames which can be scrutinized and understood using the theoretical framework of the protest paradigm. In an innovative approach the research also analyses the coverage of Kaepernick in 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a police officer, which sparked worldwide anti-racism protests. This paper builds on the understanding of media framing towards an individual’s protest and the consequences they face.

Introduction

There are few more appropriate examples of modern athlete activism than former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who chose to kneel during the American National Anthem throughout the 2016 season. Kaepernick’s action was driven by his perspective on America’s treatment of racial minorities, where he called for systemic change to the criminal justice system. His protest, where initially he remained seated rather than kneeling, went unnoticed during the San Francisco 49ers first two preseason games. By their third game a grainy photograph emerged on Twitter and attentive fans noticed Kaepernick sat during the anthem. Quickly clarifying his actions, Kaepernick stated: ‘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’ (Wyche 2016). Aware of the criticism he faced and allegations of disrespect, particularly towards the American flag and the military, Kaepernick insisted his actions were not unpatriotic. He answered media questions for 18 minutes, an especially long time for a locker room interview (Graber, Figueroa, and Vasudevan 2020), in which he discussed gun violence and racism. Historically known for his brevity with the media, this was a subject Kaepernick could discuss at length, stating:
I have great respect for the men and women that have fought for this country...I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country. And they fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone. That's not happening. People are dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody (Branch 2016a).

As scrutiny and condemnation intensified, Kaepernick and teammate, Eric Reid, sought counsel from former NFL player and Green Beret, Nate Boyer, who suggested that kneeling might be a more respectful approach. The compromise made little difference an after a season of activism Kaepernick opted out of his contract, becoming a free agent in 2017. Following rumours of being blackballed, Kaepernick filed a grievance against the league, accusing the club owners of collusion to keep him out of the sport. In February 2019 Kaepernick reached a confidential agreement with the NFL to withdraw the complaint but has yet to play professionally since. The murder of George Floyd, an unarmed black American in May 2020 at the hands of a Minneapolis Police Officer, triggered worldwide protest and a new perspective on Kaepernick emerged. In an innovative departure from other scholar's research into sports protests and activism, this paper returns to the reporting of Kaepernick in the aftermath of Floyd's death to offer a nuanced understanding into the hindsight of athlete activism. This paper utilizes the concept of media framing evident in the coverage of Kaepernick's protest in 2016 to unpack the narrative and key themes that developed through the media reporting. Adding further theoretical context, the research applies the characteristics of the protest paradigm to explain how the media approached the protest. The paper argues that the story of his protest was imbued with a rhetorical discourse which pursued an altogether different agenda from his intentions.

**Literature review**

This section offers a brief overview of previous academic research into Kaepernick's activism, before addressing the concept of media framing and the theoretical framework of how the media report on protests, known as the protest paradigm. Finally, we conclude with the research questions that will be answered within the paper.

**Research into the Kaepernick's activism**

Several papers have already been published on the topic of Kaepernick's protest, e.g. Schmidt, Frederick and Pegoraro (2018) who investigated the Facebook narrative surrounding both Kaepernick's and footballer Megan Rapinoe's activism, Boykoff and Carrington (2020) conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage between 2016 and 2018, as well as Graber, Figueroa, and Vasudevan (2020) and Coombs et al. (2020) both of whom also examined the media coverage of Kaepernick. Boykoff and Carrington (2020) concluded that print media's coverage was largely favourable to Kaepernick, whilst Graber, Figueroa, and Vasudevan (2020) critical discourse analysis identified that the American flag, the National Anthem and the military were all used to avoid discussions on racism. Meanwhile Coombs et al. (2020), who adopted an almost identical methodology to this paper’s when scrutinizing the 2016 reports, established a range of frames and applied the protest paradigm accordingly. However, two of their identified frames could be challenges in terms of their validity. The
first, Kaepernick himself, is somewhat simplistic. One would assume Kaepernick sat centrally within all analyzed articles and as such, the examples given in this section could be suitably explored within more sophisticated frames. Similarly, their frame titled Deflection and distraction could have been appropriately included within the method vs message frame. To avoid replicating this concern we aim to identify clear, distinctive frames that, whilst they examine the same protest, can be addressed independently with appropriate associations to the protest paradigm.

**Media framing and the protest paradigm**

Goffman (1974) first conceived the idea of framing as a principal framework into which experiences are organized and this has been further explored by Entman (2007). A clear definition of framing remains contested amongst scholars and whilst Entman has updated his conceptual work around framing since first investigating it in the nineties, the definitions he offers are consistent with this paper utilizing his 2007 definition that framing is: ‘the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation’ (Entman 2007, 164). Fundamentally, by promoting eminence to specific notions the media encourage their audience to think and feel in certain ways. Boykoff and Yasuoka (2015) discuss this further, proposing that it is through agenda setting where the media coerce the public into what issues to consider, whilst framing is where the media tell audiences specifically how to think about these issues. However, separating these is challenging despite Entman’s (2007) theory that the former suggests what people accept, whereas the latter refers to what they actively consider when drawing their conclusions. We argue that they are somewhat indistinguishable; it would be implausible for the media to exert their significant influence in telling people what to think about, without being decidedly suggestive on how they think as a result.

We must acknowledge that the concept of framing has come under scrutiny from academics, with some arguing that it is both outdated and insensitive to the mechanics involved in the reports of modern protests (Cottle 2008). Whilst Murray et al. (2008) and Cottle (2004) suggest the media have adopted a more progressive outlook when reporting on sports protests, other scholars (see Angelini, MacArthur, and Billings 2014; Eagleman, Rodenberg, and Lee 2014; Huang and Fahmy 2013) provided evidence that demonstrates athlete activists are marginalized through media framing. Framing studies have also been criticized for neglecting to recognize the relationship between media frames and wider issues of social and political power (Carragee and Roefs 2004). This paper aims to alleviate this by analyzing reports on Kaepernick following George Floyd’s murder, at a time when social and political issues were charged with animosity. Notwithstanding the criticisms of media framing, we believe in the worthiness of framing research to highlight the association between the media and protests. Undertaking this research allows us to identify the construction of protest reporting and how valued Kaepernick’ protest was, in both 2016 and 2020. Such an exploration of news reports is crucial given that mainstream media is central to influencing the public’s perception of social movements (Cammaerts 2012).

Research shows that despite the principle of objectivity, the media are far from an impartial third party given their very existence centres on circulating ideas to mass audiences. To support the theoretical notion of framing, we will accompany it by applying the protest paradigm to the analysis. Developed by scholars researching the Hong Kong protests, the
The protest paradigm refers to a framework used to understand how the media reports specifically on protests (Chan and Lee 1984). Early researchers utilizing the paradigm suggested that the more radical the protests, the more negative the media coverage is (see McLeod and Hertog 1999). These characteristics being: (1) news frames, in which the media frame social protests as violating socio-behavioural norms; (2) reliance on official sources and definitions used as information sources to give stories prestige and objectivity; (3) invocation of public opinion which, generally, contrasts those of the protesters, thus marginalizing messages; (4) delegitimisation, whereby the media often deems protests futile or even irrational; (5) demonization, by identifying potential threats and negative consequences of threats (McLeod and Hertog 1999). Research suggests that protest coverage exhibits varying levels of the characteristics, some articles will display all five characteristics, whereas others will not (Leopold and Bell 2017).

As with media framing, this concept is not above scrutiny with some scholars arguing that the framework is less relevant in modern reporting as the media becomes more accepting of protests, especially those that support their own agendas (Bishop 2013). Further challenge came from DeLuca (1999), who suggested that some protesters adapted to the paradigm by organizing their activism with media exposure in mind. Cammaerts (2012) supports this sentiment by arguing that protest groups are more professional and organized in their communication with the media than previously, thus now controlling their own narrative. This is evident with Kaepernick who, given his status, method and message, was undoubtedly shrewd enough to discern that his protest would capture extensive media attention. Whilst legitimate concerns over the protest paradigm have been raised, it remains the most competent and applicable framework by which to analyze the media's reporting of protests. Conceptually, this paper adopts the protest paradigm as envisaged by its original researchers, to study the extent to which media coverage adheres to the characteristics of the framework. Indeed, this implies an initial assumption that the media’s narrative of Kaepernick’s protest will prove to have been framed in a negative manner. To engage in a meaningful exploration here, we discarded that hypothesis and acknowledged when the characteristics of the protest paradigm were either absent or offered only a weak association with the media frames that emerged from the analysis. This approach follows the advice of Lee (2014) who suggests that we should disregard the protest paradigm as a framework that can be definitively applied and instead address the variations in its applicability.

The following research questions were developed to guide this analysis:

RQ1: What key frames were utilized in the media’s coverage of Kaepernick’s protest in the five weeks after his action was first identified?

RQ2: How do these frames support, or challenge, the protest paradigm?

RQ3: How does the media’s reporting of Kaepernick in 2016 compare to the five weeks following George Floyd’s murder in 2020?

**Methodology**

We follow guidance from Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey (2016) who suggest that qualitative methods should be employed to answer research questions relating to experience, meanings and perspectives. Furthermore, adopting a predominantly qualitative approach
ensured the research effectively scrutinized the complex framework and strategies employed by reporters in their narrative of Kaepernick’s protest. Some limited quantitative data has also been explored relating to the frequency of frames across the publications.

**Data collection**

To determine how Kaepernick was framed by the media during his protest articles were obtained from three American news websites. The *San Francisco Chronicle (SFC)* was used to offer a localized analysis, covering the geographical location in which Kaepernick played. This was chosen in favour of other local newspapers as the only major daily publication covering San Francisco. Two national news sources were also used: *The New York Times (NYT)* and *The Washington Post (WP)*, both deemed ‘newspapers of record’ for having an editorial process that places premium on accurate reporting and encompassing national viewpoints. The decision to focus this research exclusively on online versions of print media was a deliberate one. Newspaper content is generally subjected to higher levels of monitoring from editors, which is beneficial to understand the superior ideologies imbued within the organizations (Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese 2009), and ensures a level of accountability that may not be present if we were to include blog sites and/or social media within this study. A search for articles using the term ‘Colin Kaepernick’ was undertaken on all three websites, and articles dated between 26 August 2016 (when Kaepernick’s protest was first noticed by the media) and 29 September 2016 were analyzed. This five-week period allowed for a significant enough timeframe for the media to report on the protests and is consistent with other studies examining the framing of events (e.g. Coombs et al. 2020; Muschert and Carr 2006). An identical five-week period was analyzed on the date following George Floyd’s murder, running from 26 May 2020 to 29 June 2020. The same search term and three news sources were used as a foundation for this section of the research.

**Sample**

The initial sample contained 396 articles from 2016. However, match reports and articles not addressing the protest were removed, as were those which only included a brief mention of Kaepernick as part of a wider discussion within the article. Consequently, the final sample for analysis included 222 articles: *SFC* (n = 100), *NYT* (n = 36) and *WP* (n = 86). The initial sample from the 2020 analysis contained 156 articles. Again, irrelevant articles were omitted, with the final sample comprised of *SFC* (n = 32), *NYT* (n = 25) and *WP* (n = 45).

**Data analysis**

Drawing on the work of Glazer and Strauss (1967) the analysis utilized a constant comparative method, an approach commonly adopted by researchers to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing simultaneously (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The flexible open coding guidelines outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2015) were implemented through the data analysis process. Each article was read and allocated a general theme or themes, before a set of principal frames emerged based on what themes occurred most frequently. The articles were then analyzed for a second time and allocated to the most appropriate frame(s),
thereby categorizing the data. Following this, in the 2016 analysis a further theoretical approach was undertaken by identifying the relevant characteristic(s) of the protest paradigm, therefore conceptualizing the association between the frames and the paradigm. Whilst the use of automated data analysis tools, e.g. Discursis or Leximancer, were considered, limitations involving the lack of ability to capture an implied tone from the author and the potential for unexplained concepts outweighed the benefits. Furthermore, Neuendorf (2002) suggests that human contributions are an important and essential step in the data analysis. It would be remiss not to acknowledge a limitation of this study here, as all analysis was undertaken by a sole principal investigator. Therefore, whilst this ensured methodological consistency, it lacked the ability to compare interpretations.

**Key findings from the 2016 reports**

RQ1 seeks to identify the key frames that the US media utilized during the early coverage of Kaepernick’s protest. This section is organized by initially examining a key frame, before associating it with the relevant characteristic(s) of the protest paradigm, thereby also responding to RQ2. Table 1 displays the percentage of articles featuring each frame across the three publications.

**Frame one: the action, not the issue**

There is an anticipation that athletes who exhibit aberrant and deviant behaviour face criticism, particularly from the media. Ironically, negative reactions are common even when athletes act with honour and integrity by involving themselves in progressive social causes (Kaufman 2008), which are often met with derision and contempt. Subsequently, the most dominant frame from the 2016 analysis highlighted that very little reporting addressed Kaepernick’s issues on racial injustice and police brutality, strongly favouring a focus on his action of kneeling instead. This act provoked disapproval from many NFL personnel, e.g. New Orleans Saints’ quarterback and Super Bowl champion, Drew Brees stated ‘there’s plenty of other ways that you can do that in a peaceful manner that doesn’t involve being disrespectful to the American flag’ (Barbash and Andrews 2016), Minnesota Vikings’ Alex Boone called Kaepernick’s action ‘shameful’ (Lamothe 2016), whilst Kaepernick’s former coach, Jim Harbaugh, told reporters ‘I don’t respect the motivation or the action’ (Branch 2016b). Even those who spoke more positively of Kaepernick focused attention on his method, reinforcing the dominance of this frame, ‘It wasn’t Kaepernick’s message that drew so much reaction; it was his method for dissemination’ (Blackistone 2016) and ‘It seems like most people are talking about WHAT Kaepernick did. Not WHY he did it’ (Somerville 2016). Former NFL star and renowned activist, Jim Brown responded by stating, ‘I am with him 100 percent. People are talking about the methodology, but every young man is not a professor’ (Branch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>SFC</th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>NYT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frame One: the action not the issue</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Two: the military</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Three: patriotism vs freedom of speech</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Four: moral outrage to a discrete action</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brown’s support here is diluted by implicit questioning of Kaepernick’s intelligence and, despite approving the sentiment behind the protest, his dialogue offered yet more perspective on the protest itself. Even reporters who acknowledged the focus had guided away from what Kaepernick intended rarely engaged in meaningful debate on issues of racial injustice, highlighted by Bonesteel (2016), ‘We’re no closer to a conversation about the actual issues at hand than we were before Kaepernick decided to remain seated during a song’.

**Protest paradigm: delegitimisation**

McLeod (2007) proposes that protests are delegitimised because of the media’s inability to sufficiently clarify the meaning and context behind the protest. This characteristic of the protest paradigm is clearly demonstrated within the above frame, as the media regularly presented Kaepernick’s protest in terms of the action he took, not the explanation behind it. Such a heavy focus on this approach inevitably impacts the public’s opinion of Kaepernick and support Boykoff and Yasuoka (2015) claim that through framing the media tell the public how to think. ‘He says he’s oppressed making $126 million’, Shane White, a lifelong 49ers fan, wrote in a Facebook post that included video of him torching a jersey while the National Anthem is played. ‘Well, Colin, here’s my salute to you’ (Boren 2016a).

**Frame two: the military**

Kaepernick’s supposed disrespect towards the military evoked impassioned dialogue in the media’s narrative. Despite protestation that his action was not intended to insult army employees, a link between the protest and the military was quickly established, e.g. ‘the question being asked was whether Kaepernick was disparaging the sacrifices made by the military’ Witz (2016) and ‘I can understand why some fans, especially ones with friends and relatives in the military, are angry at Kaepernick’ (Bowen 2016). Even President Obama acknowledged that the protest would be a ‘tough thing’ for the military to accept (Wan and Nakamura 2016), whilst emotional responses from the public were commonplace, e.g. ‘Colin Kaepernick should be sent as a gift to ISIS. Disrespecting everyone who’s fought for him to be an NFL 3rd string QB. Pathetic’ (Payne 2016). Perhaps the media’s narrative here should have been expected, after all the NFL has long pursued an agenda to associate itself with the military. Consequently, when Kaepernick defied the norms and ideals of the nationalistic environment that American sport personifies, he was considered a traitor rather than a worried citizen with legitimate concerns. This was emphasized when members of the military were asked their opinion of the situation, ‘It made me sick’ claimed one Vietnam veteran from Kaepernick’s hometown of Turlock, California (Ostler 2016a). However, their views on racial injustice were not sought. When coaches and players commented on Kaepernick, whether positive or negative, they were often coupled with pronouncements of their personal military affiliation. Former Navy quarterback and Baltimore Ravens wide receiver Keenan Reynolds said ‘Obviously, being in the military, I’m proud of that position, I’m proud of being able to defend the country’ (Russell 2016), whilst Carolina Panther’s head coach Ron Rivera stated ‘Again, the National Anthem is a very personal thing for me, obviously for specific reasons—my father and my mother’s family and their service to this country. And that’s why I stand’ (Bieler 2016a).
Protest paradigm: reliance on official sources and definitions

This characteristic often minimizes the effect of protests by relying on perceptions from authority figures. In this corpus, many articles focused on the reactions of those in positions of power and institutional authority to enhance credibility. Presidential nominee Donald Trump and then-President Obama both voiced their standpoints, whilst NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said players are ‘encouraged but not required to stand’ (Branch 2016). Martin Halloran, San Francisco Police Officers Association President, sent letters to both NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and 49ers CEO Jed York denouncing Kaepernick as ‘foolish’ and having ‘embarrassed himself’ (Boren 2016b). The reliance on official sources by the media to enhance credibility has been long established (Paletz and Entman 1981). In Kaepernick’s case, it was evident that the media gave those with the highest visibility the most authority to speak on the issue, thus supporting the protest paradigm. The extent to which the characteristic was prevalent across the three publications differed with SFC and WP relying more heavily on the inclusion of official sources compared to NYT.

Protest paradigm: demonization

The demonization of protests tends to manifest through the media’s identification of threats and the negative consequences of the protests (McLeod 2007). McLeod and Hertog (1999) suggest violence, property damage, traffic congestion or increased cost of law enforcement as key consequences, and whilst these did not materialize through Kaepernick’s protest, instead we suggest that this characteristic was more aligned to Kaepernick himself. Accusations of being anti-American, anti-military and anti-police all served to damage his character. Conservative talk show host Mark Levin said, ‘He’s spitting on the men and women who are in one hell hole or another all over this country, fighting for that flag and fighting for this’ (Barbash and Andrews 2016), whilst Fox Sports’ Clay Travis called the protest ‘an insult to anyone with a working brain’ (Ostler 2016b). Admittedly, these comments are more deprecating than strictly demonizing, but nonetheless by focusing his perceived anti-military stance some coverage did, to an extent, demonize Kaepernick and his cause. Demonization also manifests by suggesting negative consequences of protests, both personally and socially (McLeod and Hertog 1999). There were proposed implications for Kaepernick within media coverage that implied his career would be harmfully impacted. However, we should acknowledge that Kaepernick was not demonized to the extent that is distinctive in the reporting of more radical protesters.

Frame three: patriotism vs freedom of speech

A clear conflict emerged through the analysis between those who felt Kaepernick’s protest displayed a clear disregard to the patriotic nature of the United States, against those who acknowledged his right to exercise freedom of speech. We must first accept that this frame could have been split into two isolated frames pressing them into single interpretative directions. However, on occasions frames intertwine and clash in a concept known as frame contests. Within this paper we follow the guidance from Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2006) who propose that a meaningful framing contest involves at least two clear frames that are offered frequently and prominently. This is the only framing contest we identify
Within our research and follows a similar approach to Coombs et al. (2020), who include one called Method versus message. Though within their analysis, there is no direct reference to framing contests. By taking the knee during the National Anthem, Kaepernick was automatically at odds with two of the most fundamental and sacred symbols of Americanism; the anthem itself and the American flag. ‘Here's what bothers me about the 49ers quarterback's protest: its symbolic target. The American flag’ wrote Diaz (2016), whilst Ostler (2016c) suggested that many perceive Kaepernick as a ‘renegade national traitor’. Despite protestations that he was neither disrespecting the American flag nor unpatriotic, Kaepernick faced intense scrutiny into his national identity. ‘The instigators of such symbolic stunts usually spend more energy explaining what they didn't mean than what they did' wrote Swaim (2016). The reporter’s use of ‘stunt’ here represents a further example of delegitimising Kaepernick’s cause. Whilst NFL’s Roger Goodell acknowledged Kaepernick’s right to protest, he still emphasized that the action contradicted his own stance, ‘I support our players when they want to see change in society…on the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that’ (Bieler 2016b). Others displayed tolerance towards Kaepernick, even if his method was not always favourable, as evidenced by Wade (2016), ‘The same Constitutional amendment that allows him to sit in protest during the national anthem also protects your right to call him a ‘sick son of a bitch’. But it doesn’t make it right’ Footballer and United States Naval Academy graduate, Keenan Reynolds, stated ‘We fight to protect your freedom to do that, regardless of how I feel about it…The flag gives you the right to do that’ (Wang 2016). Meanwhile some writers offered more apparent support of Kaepernick’s right to protest e.g., ‘Kaepernick absolutely has a constitutional right to express his opinion on the politics of diversity in America’ (Edwards 2016), ‘The contradiction comes from those who trumpet the freedoms the flag represents but then criticize someone who exercises those freedoms?’ (Borden 2016). One user on the NYT’s digital platform eloquently wrote, ‘The very thing that makes America great is our right to free expression, but don't try to use it or you will be called un-American’ (Moore and Patel 2016). A clear contradiction is created within this frame’s narrative whereby national unity clashes with constitutional values outlined in the First Amendment. The analyzed corpus here fails to definitively identify a dominant discourse between the framing content, with several condemning Kaepernick, whilst others, irrespective of their view on his method, acknowledging his right to petition as per his statutory right.

**Protest paradigm: reliance on official sources and definitions**

This frame spotlights the media’s dependence on utilizing official sources to support their perspective. Considerable reference was made to the constitutional rights of Americans, particularly the First Amendment which acknowledges one’s right to express ideas through speech and protest, and was the source of substantial debate from journalists. Those who felt Kaepernick was in violation of the symbolic patriotism referenced military personnel who fought to give Kaepernick his rights, i.e., those he was now ostensibly insulting. Conversely, those more sympathetic towards Kaepernick simply suggested he had a fundamental right to protest. It is important to recognize that the 15th anniversary of 9/11 fell during this analysis and therefore the media rhetoric, somewhat understandably, exhibited heightened emotive discourse around this time. Nevertheless, by focusing on the divergent nature of patriotism, the National Anthem and the American flag, in addition to pertinent
consideration of the First Amendment, this frame continued to deflect the issue Kaepernick was protesting against, thus creating an unintended side debate.

Frame four: moral outrage to a discrete action

This final frame explores the general outrage towards Kaepernick for his activism, who was described as ‘Just a backup quarterback’ (Marks 2016), ‘A less-than-perfect football player’ (Ross 2016) and ‘ham-fisted’ (Saracevic 2016). Moreover, the legitimacy of Kaepernick, who was adopted and raised by white parents, as an appropriate protester was called into question by former NFL player Rodney Harrison who bluntly claimed, ‘He’s not black’ (Disbrow 2016). When not questioning his sporting ability or validity as an activist, Kaepernick, and other athletes who knelt in solidarity, had their actions defined in discrete terms, not as part of a wider movement. The media framed his act as a disconnected and isolated incident - this was Kaepernick’s protest, not a movement that was adopted by a multitude of athletes across the country. This was supported by the opinions of athletes who declared they would never engage in such action. Philadelphia Eagles’ Malcolm Jenkins said, ‘If you want change and you want things to get better across the country, there’s different ways to go about it’ (Branch 2016e), four-time NBA champion Shaquille O’Neal claimed, ‘Each to his own…I would never do that’ (Bieler 2016b). Even Kaepernick’s 49ers teammates effectively reduced the scale of the protest by emphasizing that it belonged solely to the quarterback. Torrey Smith said, ‘That’s not something I would do, but he did it’, whilst Daniel Kilgore reinforced his own patriotism whilst indirectly questioned Kaepernick’s, saying, ‘I’m going to think about and honor those who are fighting…if Kap decides not to, that’s his decision’ (Branch 2016f). As other athletes took similar action, therefore increasing visibility of the message, framing remained on the individual’s action rather than the collective objective. For example, Megan Rapinoe, one of America’s most recognizable soccer players, knelt before a fixture and was subjected to similar disapproval that focused exclusively on the act. Washington Spirit, Rapinoe’s opponent the following game, changed their scheduling to ensure that the National Anthem took place before the players emerged from the locker room. In a club statement, Spirit said, ‘We respectfully disagree with her method of hijacking our organization’s event to draw attention to what is ultimately a personal—albeit worthy—cause’ (Goff 2016). This narrative, in addition to prior examples within the frame, defined Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests as individual actions and there was no suggestion by the media that the protests generated a social movement.

Protest paradigm: invocation of public opinion

According to McLeod (2007) opinion polls and bystander portrayals are often utilized to represent public opinion. Ingraham (2016) cited an opinion poll which explored levels of patriotism for white and non-white Americans, associating Kaepernick’s protest with civic pride and remarking that white citizens are more likely to consider themselves ‘extremely proud’ to be American. Meanwhile, in another poll Kaepernick was voted the most disliked NFL player in September 2016 (Pereira 2016). All three newspapers published reader comments, supporting McLeod’s (2007) suggestion that examples such as letters to the editor are used to symbolize the community’s response. Within this characteristic, McLeod (2007)
also emphasizes the media’s tendency to scrutinize the appearance and behaviour of protesters to draw focus towards their deviance. ‘Now, if he plans to continue his role as quarterback with a conscience, a suggestion: I love the ‘fro, but maybe a little off the top and sides,’ wrote Willie Brown (2016).

Key findings from the 2020 reports

Here, we progress four years to May 2020. Following George Floyd’s murder, Kaepernick, who spent the intervening period advancing his social reform mission, was the source of discussion once again by the media, this time with a more favourable narrative. A deliberate choice has been made omit the protest paradigm within this section as the media were no longer debating a ‘live’ protest and discourse differed considerably since the 2016 reporting. It is within this section that RQ3 is investigated.

Frame one: it’s (largely) not our fault!

An overwhelming narrative focused attention on criticizing primarily the NFL for their ineptitude in failing to understand the sentiment behind Kaepernick’s protest, largely absolving accountability of their own reporting during 2016. Jenkins (2020a) wrote, ‘Two knees. One protesting in the grass, one pressing on the back of a man’s neck. Choose. You have to choose which knee you will defend…NFL owners chose the knee on the neck’ . This was the same reporter who labelled Kaepernick as ‘Not the most clarion of dissidents’ in 2016 (Jenkins 2016). Bowen (2020) suggested, ‘While he made some people angry and uncomfortable, he was trying to get people to pay attention to an important issue: police violence against people of color’. In 2016, Bowen exhibited sympathy towards those angry at Kaepernick’s action (Bowen 2016). Similar rhetoric was presented by several other reporters, e.g. ‘They spoke out, often in the face of scorn and ridicule, years ago about an issue that continues to roil America’ claimed Kilgore (2020), whilst Boren and Bieler (2020), two reporters who associated the protest to patriotism and the armed forces frequently in 2016, wrote ‘Kaepernick and NFL players made it clear that their protest had nothing to do with the flag or, for that matter, the military’. In June 2020, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell acknowledged the league was wrong to ignore player protests in 2016, though failed to reference Kaepernick directly. The media took this as an opportunity to excoriate the league, with Brewer (2020) calling it an ‘astounding about-face’ of social justice that is now ‘good for business’ for the league, whilst Svrluga (2020) criticized Goodell’s admission writing, ‘The apology could have been replaced by an honest conversation four years ago. But why double down on a wrong rather than make it right, even if you’re late in doing so?’. One reporter even wrote a satirical open letter from the perspective of several of the American sports governing bodies professing humiliation at their response in 2016:

Starting today, any of our players who participates in peaceful protests will have the full backing and protection of our league. Gosh, are we embarrassed! We should have done this at least a century ago, but you know how it is. You get busy, stuff falls through the cracks. Our bad, Colin! (Ostler 2020).

The same reporter previously ridiculed the irony of America stumbling towards a more cohesive nation, spearheaded by ‘a diverse bunch of lummoses in shoulder pads’ (Ostler
Criticizing the NFL was an interesting approach taken by reporters. The league, by its nature, culturally oppose the type of dissent displayed by Kaepernick by virtue of its intrinsic patriotic and militaristic ideologies. As such, one would expect their stance to be negative towards anyone who threatened to challenge the American flag and what it represents. We also question whether the NFL are the organization to lead discussion on racial inequality and police brutality, and suggest the media might be better placed to ignite debate into a topic which has been ignored for too long. We should acknowledge a limited number of reporters did recognize their role in the rhetoric towards Kaepernick in 2016, e.g. ‘The vague phrase “systemic racism” is not just perpetuated by men with badges. It’s also propagated by our false victory narratives’ (Jenkins 2020b), whilst Killion (2020) wrote ‘Maybe if we had listened to Colin Kaepernick four years ago, we wouldn’t be here. [We] as a nation—had a chance to have a real conversation about systemic brutality. And we whiffed. He was vilified for it.’ This, coming after previously decreeing Kaepernick’s protest as an ‘empty gesture’ (Killion 2016). These mea culpa suggests the media could be more open to undertake difficult and controversial debates in a more appropriate and valuable manner than before. Nevertheless, the admission of accountability was narrow amongst reporters within all three publications.

**Frame two: Colin Kaepernick, the revolutionist**

As history has proven for other athlete activists, time has been largely kind to Kaepernick, with a ‘new appreciation’ (Slusser 2020) for his protest. Seattle Seahawks Coach Pete Carroll suggested that Kaepernick’s message was ‘right on point’ (Maske 2020a), should be recognized as a ‘symbol of courage’ (Bieler 2020a). Meanwhile, Golden State Warriors Coach Steve Kerr stated, ‘I think often times the very act of making a ground-breaking statement can be so surprising and shocking that it’s not fully appreciated until later on,’ before suggesting that ultimately Kaepernick will be ‘considered a hero’ (Boren 2020). In response to Roger Goodell’s apology, Osler (2020b) proposed that it symbolized a ‘long-overdue recognition of the legitimacy of the message of Colin Kaepernick and others’. The same reporter formally described Kaepernick as ‘a nobody with zero credentials for this task’ (Ostler 2016d). Others were equally generous with their developing position, e.g. Jenkins (2020a) labelled Kaepernick as ‘a reformer, in the great American tradition’ and Morris (2020) suggested he was ‘simply ahead of his time’. Readers of the publications also displayed a reversal in attitude, with several affirming their pride in Kaepernick, e.g.

I would recommend putting up a life-size monument to Colin Kaepernick kneeling in front of Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara. His courage of walking away from a fortune as a star quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers by kneeling down to a higher cause of social justice is nothing less than heroic (Dawson 2020).

**Frame three: time for change**

Criticism of the media’s evolution in their reporting notwithstanding, 2020 signified an opportunity for change, as Branch (2020) notes, ‘There are signs of change’. With major companies racing to publicly condemn racism in the wake of George Floyd’s murder the issue of racial inequality has been placed front and centre of the public’s consciousness, and now the media readily acknowledge it. ‘In the past two weeks, more well-known athletes,
sports executives and even commissioners, including the NFL’s Roger Goodell, have taken strong public stands on societal-political issues’ stated Boswell (2020). Several NFL players have spoken out on racial injustices, including Kaepernick’s former teammate and fellow activist, Eric Reid:

Before we are able to realize impactful change, we must first have the courage and compassion as human beings to come together and acknowledge the problem: black men, women and children and other oppressed minorities continue to be systemically discriminated against (Bieler 2020b).

Meanwhile, many players publicly declared that NFL must address Kaepernick directly if its recently established progressive stance is to be viewed as legitimate (Belson 2020), whilst privately, Roger Goodell allegedly lobbied for teams to give Kaepernick the opportunity plays professional football once again (Maske and Kilgore 2020). Others have also backed Kaepernick for a remarkable return to the sport (e.g. Boswell 2020; Maske 2020b), and even President Trump, one of Kaepernick’s most vocal detractors, suggested he should be afforded another opportunity to play, ‘If he deserves it, he should’ (Bieler 2020c). This frame can be powerfully summarized by Boswell (2020):

I think the times are changing and you will see a significantly different response to kneeling protests. And it will be MUCH harder for those opposed to the protests to say, ‘They are disrespecting the flag. Or the military. Or the police.’ Or whatever. We are in a much different place.

Discussion

This analysis establishes how mainstream American newspapers handled the association between sport and protests in their coverage of Colin Kaepernick. RQ1 sought to identify the frames employed within the media’s coverage in the early stages of Kaepernick’s protest. The findings illustrate how the media discursively concealed Kaepernick’s intended anti-racism debate, almost exclusively evading the discussion. We have uncovered interesting insight into the parameters of the debate around this protest and, whilst not a focus of this paper, the outrage at Kaepernick continued for not only the remainder of the season but also once he had been apparently blackballed by the league. As noted by Kaufman (2008), athletes who take a stand for social justice face intense backlash, with blacklisting a very real consequence of being an activist athlete (see Craig Hodges and the NBA). Whilst some journalists defended Kaepernick’s right to protest and acknowledged that discussion around patriotism steered away from the meaningful debate, the approach was largely disadvantageous as their dialogue still diluted Kaepernick’s message. Despite attempts to redirect the conversation, pertinent issues were barely discussed or even acknowledged in the wider debate. However, whilst it was certainly inelegant for reporters to focus so fervently on issues that spanned wider than Kaepernick’s intention, it would be unfair to suggest that the journalists were exclusively accountable here. Kaepernick chose both the time and place of his protest with precision, utilizing his status as a star footballer to gain exposure for his cause, and whilst the anthem and national flag were not the reason for his protests, their symbolism was the clear target.

Analysis into the nuances of the three newspapers suggest that two publications, SFC and WP, dedicated far more coverage to the protests in 2016, accounting for nearly 84% of
the articles within the corpus. The SFC’s extensive coverage is expected given its role as the local newspaper for the San Francisco 49ers. Meanwhile, WP, though a nationally prominent newspaper, has considerable involvement in covering contentious NFL issues as the local newspaper for the Washington Football Team (formally the Washington Redskins). The disparity in the quantity of NYT reports is consistent with other scholars who researched this topic, e.g. Coombs et al. (2020). The analysis highlights that, generally, SFC displayed a more sympathy attitude towards Kaepernick during his protest. Whilst the newspaper focused heavily on his action, notions of disrespect to the military were less frequent compared to the other newspapers. The publication’s close ties with Kaepernick’s team could be a reason for this, whereas WP and NYT by their very nature as national newspapers are consumed across America and therefore have little affiliation with Kaepernick or the San Francisco 49ers. Furthermore, the media generally express feelings of national patriotism that overwhelms local society (Maniou, Photiou, and Ketteni 2016) and it would be reasonable to deduce that concerns over nationalism would be more prevalent in national press. An irregularity on this topic is that just 9% of NYT articles included the moral outrage to a discrete action frame. The newspaper presented some, albeit limited, discussion surrounding others who engaged in similar protests to Kaepernick (e.g. Borden 2016; Morris 2016), appearing more objective in their reporting compared to WP.

These findings both support and challenge other scholar’s research into Kaepernick’s protest. Schmidt, Frederick and PԷgoraro (2018) also established patriotism, termed nationalism in their paper, as a prominent debate point amongst Facebook users discussing Kaepernick, demonstrating that this discussion extended beyond the press. Their research also emphasized race related debate occurring on the social media platform, with differing perspectives represented within the comments section. Irrespective of allegiance to the discussion, the conversation was taking place, which rarely occurred within our analysis. Boykoff and Carrington’s (2020) conclusion of a largely positive response from the print media contrasted with our findings. Although their research also analyzed WP and NYT, they included football related reports in their collection, whereas this investigation focused exclusively on the protest. This could go some way to explain a more positive response to Kaepernick in their conclusions. We found parallels in our findings with Graber, Figueroa, and Vasudevan (2020), identifying arguments concerning the flag, the National Anthem and the military as a means to avoid the larger issue. Similarly, two identified frames here had similarities with two uncovered by Coombs et al. (2020) - the action, not the issue (their method vs message) and moral outrage to a discrete action (their individual action).

RQ2 explored how the identified frames supported, or challenged, the protest paradigm. Through the analysis, characteristics of the protest paradigm were clearly evidenced, supporting the findings of Coombs et al. (2020), though some were undoubtedly more prevalent than others. The widespread emphasis on Kaepernick’s action dismissed the issue of racial injustice, thereby delegitimising the protest. This echoes a conclusion made by Boykoff and Carrington (2020, 844) who, although not addressing the protest paradigm within their research, acknowledged attempts by the media to neutralize protests by a process termed ‘discursive delegitimisation’. The reliance on official sources contributed to the portrayal of Kaepernick as anti-American and anti-military, and even those sources who supported him generally focused on his constitutional right to protest rather than promoting the reason behind it. The media invoked public opinion, particularly when framing their narrative around moral outrage to emphasize contempt towards Kaepernick by using opinion polls
and reader comments. Finally, demonization, though ubiquitous in some capacity, was less dominating in its traditional sense. Questions surrounding Kaepernick as an authentic figure to engage in such complex and contentious conversations disparaged him to the point where he has not played professional football since, however, demonization was not as forcefully implemented as in the case of more radical protesters.

This research extends our understanding and application of the protest paradigm against a single individual, as opposed its historical application to a movement or situation. In this paper we establish the consequences for Kaepernick, as the individual at centre of the protest, rather than a wider collective of activists. This affords greater reflection into impact of activists whose careers afford them the public exposure unavailable to others. It also highlights that despite similar acts across American in 2016, this was still deemed Kaepernick's protest and he remained a central figure to in the discussion of taking the knee. This paper also develops the association between the protest paradigm on peaceful protests. Kaepernick took the knee on the field of play, in his place of work, not in an open public space where many protests occur. Although the media and key figures were responsible for creating conflict in their discourse, Kaepernick's action was innately peaceful, as was his reaction when challenged.

RQ3 addressed how the media's reporting of Kaepernick in 2020 compared to that of 2016. The analysis provides evidence that reporters reflected on his protest in a more appreciative and understanding manner, echoing the experiences of other activist athletes such as Muhammed Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith. The same journalists who chastised Kaepernick in 2016 acknowledged his justification in the wake of George Floyd's death. Whilst discussions of race and social justice were limited in 2016, there appeared a push for these difficult conversations to take place four years later and Kaepernick was recognized as a social activist, rather than a social deviant. Though it should be noted there remains significant scope for progression as, whilst 2020 reporting applauded Kaepernick, meaningful reporting on racial injustice and police brutality lacked depth, with rhetoric suggesting that conversations needed to happen, as opposed to them actively happening.

As with any study, there are limitations in this paper which should be documented. By focusing on a small selection of US media outlets, we have not allowed for discussion into the international perspective of the protest. Questions could be raised whether Kaepernick faced such critical scrutiny outside America, where feelings towards America's own National Anthem and military would be presumably less patriotic. This paper criticized the journalist's response to Kaepernick's activism in 2020, highlighting examples of backpedalling and hypocrisy. However, we failed to explore when and why this perception of Kaepernick changed. Whilst we hypothesize that the video of George Floyd's death created a worldwide awakening to racial injustice and police brutality, there was ample opportunity between September 2016 and May 2020 when the media's perception of Kaepernick could have softened, and exploration into why this occurred could provide an interesting insight into how the protest paradigm develops when focusing on an elongated protest, or one protester.

**Conclusion**

During the early stages of Kaepernick's protest claims circulated that he was fracturing his team's harmony. He faced continuous dialogue questioning his standing as a ‘good’ American and had his legitimacy as a social activist challenged. Whilst rhetoric of this nature
undermined his protest at the time, Kaepernick was later celebrated for his efforts. At the end of the 2016 season, his teammates nominated him for the Len Eshmont Award, their most prestigious honour, presented to the most courageous and inspirational player. In 2018, Kaepernick was bestowed Amnesty International’s highest honour, the Ambassador of Conscience Award. When accepting the award, Kaepernick said:

> 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 a convergence of my moralistic beliefs, and my love for the people (Gregory 2018).

Whilst post-career support for Kaepernick is evident, and despite almost unanimous calls for the quarterback to make a return to the sport, at the time of writing he has yet to secure employment from one of the 32 NFL teams.

There remain questions surrounding the media’s response to race issues, and we would encourage other scholars to continue exploring this. A gap in current research is the examination of journalist’s response to protests through social media. Using platforms such as Twitter, they are likely to experience increased freedom to express subjectivity and this may offer interesting insight. Further avenues of enquiry could address the unique problems faced by athlete activists, particularly if researchers were to compare amateur athletes, who don’t possess the same platform or economic security, with high-profile stars. A final suggestion might focus on why the protest paradigm is implemented by so many within the media. As identified within this paper, sports journalists are habitually ill-equipped to examine issues of race (supported by Schmidt 2018). The findings in this paper illustrate that several reporters circumnavigated this deficiency by adopting a more aggressive approach of criticizing the protester’s action and concentrating on more extraneous topics. Future research would benefit from examining how this dominant paradigm becomes the natural response from journalists. The media’s approach to Kaepernick’s protest forcefully rejected the opportunity for a necessitated discussion concerning racial inequality in America in 2016 and created a sideshow of derisive debate. The media possess considerable power in shaping the narrative of protests and, as such, scrutiny into their tactics should continue.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**


