

## Towards a Social Justice Disposition in Communication and Sport Scholarship

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### **Abstract**

In this introduction to a special issue on sport communication and social justice, we offer some reflections on the state of the discipline as it relates to social justice. We bring attention to the role of sport communication scholars in the advancement of social justice goals and articulate a set of dispositions for researchers to bring to their practice, predicated on internalizing and centralizing morality, ethics, and the political. Identifying the epistemological (under)currents in the meaningful study of communication and sport, we offer a set of challenges for researchers in the contemporary critique of the communication industries based on “sensibilities” or dispositions of the research to those studied. We then introduce and frame the 13 articles that make up this double special issue of *Communication & Sport*. Collectively, these articles begin to demonstrate such dispositions in their interrogation of some of the most important and spectacularized acts of social justice campaigns and activism in recent decades alongside investigations of everyday forms of marginalization, resistance, and collective action that underpin social change—both progressive and regressive. We hope this special issue provides a vehicle for continued work in the area of sports communication and social justice.

## Introduction

Throughout its relatively short lifespan, *Communication & Sport* has acted as an intervention of sorts; debating, deliberating, theorizing and developing the epistemological borders of, and indeed the very existence of, the field of communication and sport. Led by example by its Editor — Lawrence Wenner — the journal has questioned, critiqued and offered directional purview for a field in healthy, yet constant, tension. In his 2016 editorial, Wenner offered an engaging critique of the *sport and communication* and *communication and sport* positionalities. He reflected on how scholars could begin thinking about bridging the gap between two dispositions: the *media, sports and society* on one side, and the *sport communication as profession* on the other. Despite their often competing goals, and with differing conventions, habitus, methodological, axiological, epistemological and ontological frames, Wenner (2015, p.258) surmised there existed good reason to think that there may be “a temperate middle between the equities and rights that we have and seek as citizens and the role of the consumer that is always responding to a communicative and sporting market that is constantly seeking advantage and market growth”. In so doing, Wenner challenged each of us as scholars to *know where they stand* with respect to their dispositions and how that frames the contours of a coherent and developing field.

This challenge is perhaps one of our entry points to this special issue. As Editors, we are drawn from differing disciplines: Sociology, Gender Studies, Disability Studies, (Physical) Cultural Studies, Political Communication and Journalism Studies. Penning this introduction, as well as in shaping the issue has, in and of itself, been a useful exercise in thinking about where we

collectively stand and where we as individuals stand (and have stood). We are certainly of the belief – as Wenner (2015, p. 259) pointed out in his reflective review of the first three years of the journal – that there exists a possibility for ““a” field that can successfully meld critical engagement, scientific observations, and the advancement of practice”. We hope that our focus herein, if nothing else, fosters productive debate and critique; with all of us challenged to ask the question: what type of social inquirer do I want to be? (Schwandt, 2000). With Wenner (2016, p. 258), it remains timely for scholars to take an honest look at “where they stand in relation to *what fuels their interest* in the communication and sport nexus, to assess what their core dispositions *really are*, and, in a way, what they *should be*.”

So, what are our core dispositions and how does this play out in and through the pages of this special issue? We are perhaps most influenced by two, as yet divergent, streams of thought; physical cultural studies and new currents in communication and social change. Whilst divergent, both are predicated on ‘people’, a focus that Wenner (2015) suggested as a useful ‘heuristic’ to temper and meld sensibilities in approaching inquiry into communication and sport. We briefly outline below the type of dispositions—and convergences—these approaches might bring to communication and sport, and indeed, communication, sport and social justice.

### **Physical cultural studies and social justice**

Whilst perhaps embryonic and certainly contestable, the physical cultural studies turn in relation to the sociology of sport (see e.g. Andrews & Silk, 2011; Silk, Andrews & Thorpe, 2017) has put

forth dispositions predicated on internalizing and centralizing morality, ethics, and the political. Drawing on a range of historically established and emergent ethical, political and theoretical positions, this is a stance that has challenged scholars to rethink the civic and political responsibilities of academics (Giroux, 2001). In many ways, and drawing on Said's (1994) notion of intellectual amateurism, this is a disposition that connects with the political realities of society and in which we are encouraged to maintain critical distance from official or institutional bodies—the communications industries for example—in speaking truth to power (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006; Said, 1994).

As such, this is a stance that encourages 'taking sides'; scholarship that suggests an alternative ethical approach that does not search for neutral principles to which all parties can appeal, does not see people as mere subjects, as outsiders excluded from the research process, and, that breaks down the role of researcher as "expert". It proffers instead a reciprocal or social ethical approach that erases any distinction between epistemology, aesthetics and ethics, and is located within a feminist communitarian model that rests on a complex view of moral judgments as integrating into organic whole various perspectives—everyday experience, beliefs about the good, and feelings of approval and shame—in terms of human relations and social structures (Christians, 2005; Denzin, 2005). In practical terms, this is an ethical approach that is based on interpretive sufficiency rather than experimentalism and participates in a community's ongoing process of moral articulation. It also works towards a representational adequacy free from racial, class, and gender stereotyping and the generation of social criticism that leads to resistance and empowers those who are interacting (Christians, 2005).

From this stance, we imagine a communication and sport field centered on an ethics of care, one that identifies subtle forms of oppression and imbalance, is the opposite of an individualist utilitarianism in that it is compassionate and respectful of the mosaic of particular communities and ethnic identities, and, teaches us to address questions about whose interests are regarded as worthy of debate (Christians, 2005). These are epistemological (under-)currents sweeping through *meaningful* communication and sport studies; a field *measured* with regard to a politics of resistance, hope, and freedom, and in which the researcher's responsibility is toward those studied. In this way, epistemology becomes both dialogical and aesthetic, involving a give-and-take and ongoing moral dialogue between persons. In addition, it also enacts an ethic of personal and community responsibility (Collins, 1991) and, politically, the aesthetic embodies an ethic of empowerment enabling social criticism and resistance (Christians, 2000). With Fine and colleagues (2000), this would be a disposition that would ask us to consider whether we have connected the voices and stories of individuals back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations in which they are situated. It includes the describing of the mundane (as opposed to the unique or startling) and provides the opportunity for some informants/constituencies/participants to review the material and interpret, dissent, or challenge (dominant) interpretations.

### **New currents in communication, social justice and social change**

There has also been a discernable and growing emphasis on collective action and social movements in the field of communication. Obregon and Tuft (2017) offer an important

contribution here, pointing out that the dynamism of social media, expansion of digital social networks, and the rapid emergence of social movements at a global scale have made the role of communication in movements more visible than ever. In so doing, they argue that communication scholarship needs to broaden its interdisciplinary nature, looking at both how collective action and mobilization is driven by social actors embedded in institutional settings. In particular, participatory online platforms have important implications for the intersection of communication, sport and social justice. Social media have supported the emergence of innovative forms of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which take off more organically than traditional forms of collective action through the rapid diffusion of personalized action frames on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and are less reliant on strong leadership. Emotions - particularly anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) - are central to the constitution of online publics and counter-publics, which are tied together not by ideology but by affect (Papacharissi, 2015). Twitter in particular has enabled counter-publics to coalesce around consequential hashtags related to gender discrimination and sexual violence (#MeToo), as well as race relations and police brutality (#BlackLivesMatter) in recent years (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault-Welles, 2020). This and other technologies have also supported new forms of activism for communities that are often completely excluded from political debates and affected by high levels of social isolation such as people with disabilities (Trevisan, 2016; Mann, 2018).

In light of this, following Brunner (2017) and Obregon and Tuft (2017), we suggest that there is a need for greater and more in-depth examination of the communicative complexities of social movements and increased efforts to trace how movements form, evolve and change across multiple networks. Most telling, however, is that Obregon and Tuft (2017) outline that the

emerging communicative dimensions of social movements have yet to receive wide scholarly attention. This is especially important in the context of sport, where participatory platforms and user-generated content have the potential to disrupt traditional relationships between important constituencies including athletes, sports teams, governing bodies, the news media, and fans. As this special issue shows, Colin Kaepernick's activism and the #TakeAKnee digital counter-public that coalesced around it are but one example of how social media platforms are transforming these processes between the emergence of new voices in sport that challenge the status quo and attempts by elite actors to retain influence and power.

### **Asking difficult questions**

In holding these two strands together, we can begin to conceptualize our own collective disposition. At this stage, it is important to note this is not *the* disposition; it is *a* disposition that we have collectively arrived at through our own different journeys, pathways, and influences as we coalesced around this special issue. As such, it is perhaps a disposition that is ephemeral, malleable and perhaps requires compromise and concession relational to the particular conjunctural and contextual moment we are attempting to unpack. Indeed, as we write, our social justice disposition is perhaps questioned (or arguably strengthened) as we think through our positionalities as scholars in responding to the temporal nature of our current pandemic crisis. Yet, we seem to have arrived at some form of consensus, or at least some principles, over a social justice disposition that converges around the two key theoretical influences that frame our differing disciplinary backgrounds. We are sure some will agree, others will certainly not, and some may find it perverse, at odds with established and orthodox methodological and ethical

positions. Indeed, each instance of communication and sport scholarship will be different, will appeal to different constituents and will therefore likely be subject to situational, academic, aesthetic, and moral scrutiny—in different ways, and indeed, we hope, for a blurring of criteria across this range.

Our lens in this special issue is sharply attuned to social justice, to questions of power and resistance, of platforms and activism. This fostered a particular set of dispositional principles that coalesced around theory, context, epistemology, ethics, politics and morality; such are the nature of the issues being addressed. Yet there exists diversity in our collective body of work, and dependent upon where our lens is fixed and with whom we talk, our dispositions might shift; there are certainly circumstances, moments, places and contexts that might call, if not necessitate flexibility and malleable scholarly positionalities. However, despite such malleability, we would continue to advocate for a universality of principles across the topics we research, our motivations for studying them, the questions we ask, the voices we privilege, the interpretations we make of data, and, always, what our research tells us about the exercise and distribution of power. Such a disposition then allows for inevitable flexibility without compromising our integrity as researchers, and indeed of the disposition we advocate in this special issue.

Thus, in the interests of stimulating debate about what the communication and sport field *might* look like, and based on the emergent disposition sketched above, we can begin to sketch the types of questions we can, and should, ask and the standards to which the field should be held. Is the field, for example, offering stories that promote identification, inform intelligent decisions,



and encourage citizens to take public action on private troubles? Does it present a civic discourse, decloaking the seemingly race-neutral and color-blind ways of administrative policy, political discourse, and organizational structures and experiences? Does it create a space for meaningful dialogue among different hearts and bodies, and enact an ethical obligation to critique subject positions, acts and notions of expertise and justice (Denzin, 2000; 2002; Holman-Jones, 2005)? Furthermore, how well is the field addressing the increasingly influential role of communication dimensions in social movements, in collective mobilization, in activism and social change? And, how are digital technologies transforming the speed through which networks and citizens can communicate and amplify grievances in the context of sport and social justice (Obregon & Tuft, 2017)? Further still, how are the performative, experiential and corporeal impacting upon social movements, activism, and social change? What is the role of body experience in emphasizing citizens' interests and actions (Obregon & Tuft, 2017)? While the field of communication and sport has a long history of interrogating questions of sport, politics and power, we argue that it also needs to be attuned to the 'noisy' activism (Tufte, 2017) of mobilization, protest and dissent and of activist-oriented scholarship to aid our understanding of the growing importance of social movements, collective/connective action and social justice. We would suggest that whilst this has received greater attention in our parent discipline(s), this has, to date, been less pronounced in communication and sport.

That said, there is clearly momentum afoot within the work of a number of scholars who have begun to focus work in communication and sport within such a disposition—intentionally or not. The strong response to the call for papers for this special issue (over 40 submissions) is one such indicator. To take one of the themes of this special issue as an example, until 2010, there were

only 16 scholarly outputs mentioning ‘athlete activism’ according to Google Scholar. Since 2010 there have been 348, with 269 of these since 2017. Many have been published in this journal. Colas (2016), for example, has examined the politics of the ‘ball don’t lie’ phrase—utilized by former NBA athlete Rasheed Wallace—as a pragmatic intervention that countered authoritarian speech within the racial politics of American society. Schmidt and colleagues (2019) showed how user comments on the Facebook pages of athlete activists Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe offered insight into the very constitution of, and complexities within, American values. Further, Fischer and McLearn (2020) centered on the voice of transgender mixed martial arts fighter Fallon Fox. In so doing, they were able challenge interlocking discourses of racism, (cis)sexism, and transphobia in sporting worlds and offer a space for us to imagine queer modes of undoing and challenging societal binarisms. Collectively, these examples demonstrate the importance of the everyday, of voice, of dissent, of challenge, of compassion, resistance, hope, of voice and *people*; they have begun to show how communication and sport can critically engage and ask difficult questions of those in power so as to advance and influence practice. Yet, we would aver there is a great deal more to be done and achieved. This special issue is our modest attempt to add to this small, yet growing, body of work.

We feel it is perhaps best to think of this particular juncture, given this momentum (and indeed given the wider political and economic context within which we operate), as an invitation of sorts to communication and sport scholars to think through the parameters of how our work should be judged. This is a challenge that asks us to reflect on the field; is this one that produces scholarly inquiry into the most pressing social problems of our time and produces a politics that offers nothing but more of the same (Giroux, 2001)? Or are we making a difference, in which

case, to whom, and who might benefit? As is clear, and as frames this special issue on sports communication and social justice, we feel that the field should not be silent—the voices of the silenced, the marginalized, the oppressed, have been silent for too long within the critical interrogation of communication and sport. In short, and following Lincoln and Denzin (2005), we advocate for a field that, at its heart, throughout its capillaries, and ingrained as the essence of its bones, is characterized by a sense of interpersonal responsibility and moral obligation on the part of researchers; responsibility and obligation to participants, to respondents and to consumers of research (including undergraduate and graduate students), and, to ourselves as field workers and scholars. Our disposition is one that is “democratic, reciprocal, and reciprocating rather than objective and objectifying” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005, p. 1118), a *meaningful* communication and sport with the intent to *displace, decentralize, and disrupt*.

Our collective disposition, then, led us to this special issue; one in which we aimed to center scholarship that is meaningful, oriented around issues of social justice and which, we intended, would aid in shaping—sharpening—the focus in the developing field of communication and sport. We were interested in unpacking tensions inexorably embedded in power, politics and issues of social justice, especially those fostered on normative ‘accepted’ production practices by dominant organizations and the (in)visibility and marginalization of non-normative groups. Further, we were increasingly aware of a small, but growing groundswell in communication and sport of athlete activism. Framed by bell hooks (1990, p. 341), we wanted to provide a space to understand marginality not simply as “a site of deprivation” but instead, as “the site of radical possibility”. Whilst sport per se is replete with examples through history of leading athletes from traditionally marginalized groups seizing on their visibility to highlight issues of inequality and

discrimination through innovative, mediated and highly symbolic forms of protest—from Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s Black Power Salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics to Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest in 2016—we wondered about how this was coming to the fore in our scholarship. Indeed, given the ever-unfolding prevalence of social media, these iconic moments have started to transcend individual athletes’ activism, and communities have formed around hashtags such as #TakeAKnee and the U.S. women's soccer team’s high profile “Equal Play. Equal Pay” campaign.

In short, we wanted to provide a space—an intervention of sorts—to understand more about how scholarship on activism and social justice can enhance the potential of the field to displace, decentralize and disrupt. This is, we believe, especially pertinent, given (save for the handful of examples alluded to earlier) discussions of activism, civic agency and social change have largely been the domain of the political sciences, sociology and political communication. Only relatively recently has the field of communication and sport began to contribute to such debates, stimulated in part by the rapid expansion of digital and social media which has led to new ways of communicating in sporting cultures, a new visibility of cultural (counter / resistant) narratives, and mediated forms of democratic renewal. Importantly, this shifting sport media landscape has led to articulations of seemingly old issues and cultural debates in new relatively distinct ways, bringing to the surface *original* critical questions in *new* emerging contexts. These are questions that focus on the nature of power, the way in which communication and sport serves to uphold, challenge, contest, and negotiate dominant narratives within socio-political structures. These are questions of social justice, of power, of *people* and of the role and function of communication and sport in effecting progressive social change.

## **Introducing the special issue**

We were rather overwhelmed with the response to our call for papers for this special issue; it was certainly beyond our expectations and suggested that maybe we had underestimated the depth of the interest in the field. Quite quickly, it became apparent that we needed to prepare for a double issue. Here, we are especially grateful to Editor in Chief, Lawrence Wenner, for his flexibility in the shaping of the special issue, as well as his advice, knowledge and guidance which has been crucial in its timely publication. Given the volume of submissions, we are also extremely grateful to more than 100 scholars who acted as anonymous reviewers for this issue. The resulting issue is, we hope, a vibrant collection of articles that both elevate the importance of social justice discourses in communication and sport, and inspire further work in this area.

This double special issue contains articles by an impressive array of established and talented early-career researchers. But this issue – we must say – also reminds us of some of our limitations as a field. Clearly, research addressing sports communication and social justice could benefit from more international comparative studies, developing new theoretical inquiries and advancing knowledge about the role of different media and political systems. We also need to find more effective ways of de-Westernizing our field in order to produce a more global understanding of the relationship between sport, communication, activism and power. In this special issue, we bring together contributions from Australia, Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, the U.S. and UK. But there remain many parts of the world - representing a wide range of political and cultural regimes - where these debates remain in their infancy.

Throughout the process of assembling this double issue, a number of important themes began to emerge across submissions, including those that we were unable to include. Donald Trump, or more accurately, his selected version of patriotism, emerged as a theme especially as enacted and embodied by the social justice protests of Kaepernick. Further, and linked to the semblance of an imagined collective / nation were discussions of values, unity and claims to unity that were peppered with the intersections of race (especially race and state-sponsored violence), disability and gender. However, overriding such themes, two organizing principles emerged; as such, we have organized the articles into a double special issue; one part is focused on platforms and the other on athlete activism.

The first part of this double issue focuses on *platforms*. Here, we take a liberal definition of platforms to include not just media platforms as sites of protest, but how places, spaces, commercial entities, and institutions become platforms for issues of social justice to be narrated, framed and contested in the sporting context. Through these contributions, the tensions and contradictions of various platforms become apparent. As contributions by Cavaiani and Mirer and Grubic demonstrate, platforms (physical and virtual) owned by sporting franchises for example, can become occupied and overwhelmed by protest, forcing platform owners to decide on which side they stand. News media platforms, on the other hand, have always had a contradictory relationship with power: offering a space for marginalization to be challenged, while often guilty of othering, stereotyping, and perpetuating societal power relations. Both of

these roles are evident in this special issue, in the contributions by Watson and Sherwood and colleagues.

The special issue starts with a provocative essay by Michael Butterworth, which takes aim at the ‘logic of consensus’ that surrounds sport. Like many articles in this special issue, his entry point is the political protest of NFL player Colin Kaepernick and subsequent controversial comments from President Donald Trump. On this issue, Arthur Blank of the Atlanta Falcons pronounced that “We are at our very best when we are working together, building unity and including everyone's voice in a constructive dialogue.” Such a sentiment is commonplace in sport, whether it is about race, political affiliations, or responses to tragic events, and it quickly became an organizing theme for NFL owners as they sought to defuse the issue. Meanwhile, sports media and others echoed the call for unity and largely dropped discussion of the commitment to social justice that had originally animated Kaepernick’s protest. Butterworth’s essay argues that claims to unity are rooted in the logic of consensus, a value in democratic theory that offers an illusion of peaceful cooperation while denying important conflicts and differences. For him, this logic reveals a profound misunderstanding of politics, sport, and the relationships between the two. His essay therefore challenges the prevailing wisdom that sport necessarily “brings people together” and privileges instead a perspective that balances sport’s unifying potential with its inherent comfort with conflict. Viewed this way, athletic activism in the NFL has been important precisely *because* it disrupts the illusion of unity on which the national anthem ritual rests.

Following from Butterworth, Anthony Cavaiani’s contribution explores the stadium as a performative space which gives meaning and resonance to athlete protests. Taking seriously the

role of material place in rhetoric, or ‘place-as-rhetoric’, Cavaiani draws on the Botham Jean and O’Shae Terry protests outside of AT&T stadium in Dallas to explore how the physical environment of the stadium amplified the protest message of racial injustice in a number of ways. Firstly, through the pre-existing socio-political meanings and power relations attached to specific nationalized and sporting spaces that provide already powerful platforms for protest messages; and secondly, in the positioning, proximity and affect of bodies *in* space that (re-)constructs and/or (re-)produces meanings in ways that amplify protest. As Cavaiani explains, understanding the rich socio-political history of the AT&T stadium in Dallas as part of American sports culture within the context of Dallas’s complicated history of race relations enhances our understanding of how the Botham Jean and O’Shae Terry protests connected with a specific ‘local’ consciousness that, in turn, connected fans with the protest. Indeed, the position and movement of protesters affected the power of rhetoric by reconstructing the stadium as a memorial site. In light of this, occupying a position outside the stadium symbolically illustrated the protest’s focus on racial exclusion and marginalization. This paper brings an important dimension to the study of social justice in placing materiality, rhetoric, and protest in dialogue.

Moving from the physical to the digital space, Michael Mirer and Adrienne Grubic’s article interrogates the role of team-controlled media platforms in the wake of recent athlete activism episodes in the National Football League (NFL) that drew incendiary responses from U.S. President Donald Trump and from social media users. In addition to analyzing news feeds across 32 NFL team websites, Mirer and Grubic also crucially examine the responses that these stories drew from fans by analyzing comments on the teams’ Facebook pages. This is an original approach that helps illuminate the terms of engagement in team media between site producers



and their audiences. Perhaps surprisingly, their analysis of team-produced content shows that in-house media may serve to amplify messages of social protest, particularly when writers are able to express more personal views and attempt to build a relationship with the audience through the sharing of opinion content. However, their examination of Facebook comments reveals that this approach tends to generate significant backlash from fans, who use their power in this space to contest messages that emphasize unity and collaboration on team-controlled media. In doing so, Mirer and Grubic highlight the current dilemma of in-house team media, which see themselves drawn into political conversations that they were not originally designed to host but at the same time can contribute to redesigning their content and role as less overtly promotional and potentially more credible platforms for commentary and information.

In the first contribution on disability sport and media in this special issue, Carolyn Jackson-Brown interrogates the use of “branded meanings” by the UK broadcaster Channel 4 to help resonate habitual feelings for digital consumers and reinforce mainstream cultural acceptance of disability during the 2012 London Paralympic Games. Through the analysis of corporate documents and a unique set of 23 interviews with Channel 4 executives and production personnel, Jackson-Brown illuminates the rationale and decision-making processes behind partnerships with major UK brands including British Telecom (BT) and supermarket chain Sainsbury’s to give disability sports the “Nike” treatment. This article highlights how using these household brands alongside unexpected visuals crucially served to reassure audiences about unfamiliar aspects of disability and enabled producers to promote new ideas on a scale they had never done before. As Jackson-Brown notes in her conclusion, this research reveals an innovative meaning-making practice that charts a promising path forward for marginalized

groups to gain positive exposure and visibility in “normalized” mainstream coverage. Future work should investigate the effects of these powerful branded messages on relevant publics to better understand how they are contributing to new understanding of disability and other marginalized groups.

Staying with the theme of disability sport, John Watson’s contribution is to focus on the representation of wheelchair basketball in news sources. But quite uniquely for this kind of study, this also includes a comparative analysis of non-disabled basketball news coverage, and a focus on college news sources rather than mainstream journalists’ portrayals of the disability sport (which have dominated the literature, to date). While the site of study was different to most that have gone before, the major findings are depressingly familiar. Watson finds that the framing of wheelchair basketball players as high-performance, physical athletes was scarce when compared to the coverage of non-disabled athletes. When performance of wheelchair basketball players and teams was noted, references to performance statistics, emphasis on the physical and psychological demands of the sport, and the use of literary devices (e.g. metaphors, idioms, puns, clichés and other colorful and descriptive language) were scarce. In contrast, non-disabled players were framed as talented, legitimate athletes and warriors fighting important battles for their teams. Much like recent Paralympic and Olympic comparisons then, Watson’s study found a tendency in wheelchair basketball coverage toward progressive coverage but a drastic lack of depth and breadth in comparison to the non-disabled articles, thus contributing to the marginalization of disability sport.

Similarly drawing on the concept of media framing, Merrin Sherwood et al's. paper explores the print and online media responses to the first Pride Game in Australian professional sport in support of the LGBTIQ community at and through a major sporting event. While sport has long since been a largely heterosexual normative space – particularly in representations of masculinity - many sporting organizations have supported Pride initiatives, with the Australian Football League (AFL) being one alongside a number of professional sports leagues and teams.

Incorporating multiple media platforms in their analysis of public responses, Sherwood et al. highlight the dominance of positive and supportive media narratives indicative of a trend toward more inclusive discussions and representations of sporting masculinity. Although explicitly homophobic responses were present – composing 6% of the public responses include in the study - Sherwood et al. note the prevalence of negative comments framed on a wider narrative of 'stick to football'. On the surface, this ambivalent narrative is, they argue, suggestive of a McCormack's (2011) "fag discourse" which, while not necessarily intended as pernicious, has a negative social effect in continuing to reinforce sports structures of exclusion of non-normative bodies and groups. Indeed, in highlighting some of the tensions in the media framing of the AFL's first Pride Game, Sherwood et al's. paper reminds us of the power of the media as a platform for challenging, contesting and subtly reinforcing cultural exclusion and dominant relations of power.

The second part of this double issue focuses on *athlete activism* as it relates to sports communication and social justice. In this way, it contributes to a rapidly expanding literature in this field, which has been reinvigorated by recent acts of resistance by prominent North American athletes such as LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. But where

most previous research has examined athlete activism through the lens of either athlete action or fan responses to activism (Smith, 2019), contributions to this issue open up new modes of analysis, from organizational reputation management in response to activism, to corporate activism and new definitions of “sports media” through which athlete activism takes place.

Taking a closer look at activism in the context of U.S. collegiate sport, the paper by Yannick Kluch highlights the situational, complex and nuanced conceptualization of activism as shared and practiced by collegiate athletes for social justice causes. Indeed, in the U.S. context, collegiate athletes have gained increasing attention, particularly so following the Missouri football team’s nationally staged boycott in 2015 following a number of racially charged incidents, as well as the relative power of student athletes as a social group within the University campus. Drawing on interviews with 31 National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I collegiate athlete activists from across the U.S., Kluch highlights five overarching definitions of activism. These were: *activism as social justice action* and seeking opportunities to promote social justice agendas across campus; *mentorship* and building relationships with other individuals who shared similar identities and worked toward shared activist causes; *authenticity*, perceived as being open and visible in how they self-identified within certain minoritized groups; *intervention* through intervening in social justice campaigns via social media platforms; and, *public expressions of resistance* through engaging with public protests and campaigns. These overarching perceptions of athlete activism through the eyes of collegiate athletes were underpinned by an emphasis on caution and deliberation grounded in a systematic and organized effort in the promotion of social justice and enriched by their relative power and social capital within the University community. Certainly, Kluch’s work contributes to our understanding of

athlete activism in important ways in demonstrating how community capacity can be harnessed across different institutional and sporting structures.

Shaun Anderson's contribution continues the theme of athlete activism but shifts the focus to its relationship to organizational reputation. As a result of Colin Kaepernick's anthem protest, the NFL found itself at the center of a political storm and reputational crisis, potentially prompting outrage from both sides of the debate. Consequently, the NFL decided to implement a national anthem policy to discipline players who continued to protest. Anderson's study therefore examines public perceptions of the NFL's crisis responsibility in handling the anthem protest and how it affected their reputation, with particular focus on national identity and patriotism as mediators between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation. His findings indicate that national identity does not serve as a mediator and that only one level of patriotism mediates the relationship. This has important consequences for governing bodies and sports organizations seeking to communicate in times of crisis. Further, it reminds us that eliminating politics from sport is wishful thinking, and so sports organizations need to better understand this important relationship if they wish to maintain their reputation with fans.

Following on from studies of the NFL's short-term crisis response to the kneeling protests, is Adam Rugg's analysis of the NFL's "Inspire Change" campaign. This campaign - launched in the light of the anthem protests - was a partnership between NFL owners and a group of NFL players focused on social justice, and was immediately controversial given the NFL's subsequent attempts to mandate players and staff to stand for the anthems. The campaign, which would serve as the umbrella under which the NFL's \$89 million social justice partnership with the

players would be housed, launched with its own website, hashtag, commercial, and documentary series. Rugg's article seeks to understand the complex and contradictory movements of the NFL as it sought to position itself as both active agent for social change, while simultaneously working to minimize displays of unsanctioned protest from players. His article textually examines the "Inspire Change" campaign and its associated media materials, contextualizing it against the kneeling protests carried out by Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players as well as the NFL's reactions to those protests. In doing so, he argues that NFL's response to its players' call for social justice is at once a strategic expansion by the league that seeks to capitalize on the emergent activist power of professional players to build the league's brand as an authoritative and inclusive American institution contributing to social good. At the same time, however, under withering criticism from President Trump and conservative media, it reestablishes league control over the voice of rebellious black players by subsuming their social justice efforts under the auspices of a campaign that evades the ideological confrontation of the kneeling protests in favor of a more positive, market-friendly version of "justice" based in calls of unity.

Another important angle on the Kaepernick protests is provided by Bumsoo Park, Sanghyun Park and Andrew Billings. Kaepernick's stated motivations were to highlight the issues of racial injustice felt by people of color in the U.S. In so doing, he aimed to uncouple his *persona* from the *topic* of his protest. This study aimed to test whether he was successful in doing so, while also examining whether people would respond in the same way if the vessel of the protest was someone other than Colin Kaepernick. Through two experiments, Park and co-authors examine the role of news media framing in this process, looking at how people perceive athlete activism relative to news media framing and whether there are spillover effects of athlete activism on

endorsed brands. Their results indicate that news media was influential to the individual's attitudes toward the protesting athlete. Additionally, prior perceptions of the protesting athlete and the brand were significantly associated with attitudes toward the protesting athlete and the endorsed brand regardless of the news media framing conditions. A strong positive relationship between the protesting athlete and the endorsed brand was also found. Here, participants with more positive attitudes toward the protesting athlete had more positive attitudes toward the brand endorsed by the athlete. Resultantly, this article gives us important insights into aspects of sport, celebrity, endorsements, as well as between scripted and unscripted forms of protest.

The shift in focus away from the U.S. context marks an important contribution to the special issue with Shahrzad Mohammadi's paper that explores gendered forms of fan activism in Iran. Drawing on feminist cultural studies, Mohammadi's work explores the extent female Iranian sports fans increasingly use social media and online spaces as enabling platforms in the campaign toward social justice against a cultural backdrop of restricted democracy and public voice. As Mohammadi explains, in the Iranian context, social networking sites - such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube - have provided spaces for an expression of diverse opinions for Iranian feminist activists to communicate and disseminate information about various social, cultural, and legal issues. No more so than in the context of sport where females are banned from attending male sporting competitions; a ban emblematic of the wider patriarchal system under the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). For Iranian female sports fans, online activism remains a challenge given the strict controls of online content by the IRI; yet, the subtle subversion of patriarchal governance through the 'connective' action of social media directed toward international sporting federations and the mobilization of international social justice groups has

led to some changes. Mohammadi's contribution to the special issue provides an important cross-cultural analysis of the multiple and intersectional forms of inequality that structure social justice campaigning and the importance of social media in navigating/subverting structural inequalities.

Similarly exploring the role of online media platforms in feminist activism at the intersection of sport and religion is Nida Ahmad and Holly Thorpe's paper. Utilizing a Feminist digital ethnography of 50 different social media profiles of 26 Muslim sportswomen across four different platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter) and interviews with 20 Muslim sportswomen, Ahmad and Thorpe document the ways Muslim sportswomen are using social media to self-represent as a form of activism and challenge dominant media narratives of Muslim women. Often represented as 'in need of saving' or 'out of place', Ahmad and Thorpe highlight how Muslim sportswomen have typically been framed as the 'other' in mainstream sports media; or as "space invaders" (Puwar's 2004) in their participation and visibility in a space structured by unequal gendered, racial and ethnic power relations. Ahmad and Thorpe's study details the ways Muslim sportswomen use the participatory power of social media platforms to reframe dominant representations through presenting culturally situated narratives, alternative voices and empowering images. In so doing, Ahmad and Thorpe demonstrate how online spaces present a flexible frontier from which the previously 'othered' identity -- or "space invader" -- can gain power over mediated representations and religious, racial, gendered and ethnic exclusion enabling, following Harris (2008), a "new direction of activism".

In the final contribution to this special issue, Cheryl Cooky and Dunja Antunovic offer a thought-provoking perspective on the role of sportswomen in contemporary instances of athlete



activism. Through the analysis of social media content, official statements from athletes, and online news media coverage, this article locates feminist narratives in networked communication, specifically in the Women's National Basketball Association's activism as it relates to #BlackLivesMatter and the U.S. women's soccer equal pay lawsuit. In doing so, this work examines articulations of feminism in the context of athlete activism and re-centers the role of sportswomen. In addition, this article also contributes to methodological innovation through an approach that looks beyond the traditional boundaries of "sports media," in which women's roles are rendered invisible in narratives that instead privilege sportsmen or men's professional leagues, and is attuned to how feminism circulates in an economy of visibility where certain feminisms tend to become more visible than others. In particular, Cooky and Antunovic's analysis shows that narratives of solidarity and collectivism are informed by articulations of intersectional and neoliberal feminisms. In so doing, they demonstrate that challenging established epistemological hierarchies of what constitutes "sports media" can be a powerful strategy to facilitate the emergence of new knowledge from under-represented perspectives that are essential to fully illuminate the contemporary intersection of sport, communication, and social justice.

In bringing together this collection of fine contributions from scholars across the field of communication and sport, our hope is that this special issue helps both consolidate what we know about sport communication and social justice, but also stimulates future scholarly inquiry. Looking at this growing field, we are excited at the potential for telling new stories, for expanding our knowledge beyond those countries most-studied, and for developing theory that can best make sense of what we observe. But amidst this excitement, we remain cognizant of the

fact that campaigns and actions for social justice are still rooted in sites of injustice, pain, suffering, humiliation and marginalization. As scholars, our challenge is to approach such research with a moral, ethical and epistemological disposition that allows us navigate the tensions that inevitably arise. In outlining one such disposition, we encourage – without judgement or prejudice – scholars to reflect on their own dispositions in relation to their research.

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