

Recommendations

For cultural influencers and those working directly with cultural influencers:

1

Center the voices of those directly impacted and traditionally marginalized groups

Take a Knee, Me Too, and Time's Up demonstrate the potential of high-profile influencers to not only bring attention to an issue, but also help center people of color and traditionally marginalized communities in discourse related to social justice. The Me Too movement made significant strides to account for early accusations of co-opting and quickly acknowledged Tarana Burke as the originator of the term and hashtag. The Time's Up movement has also incorporated the voices and experiences of low-income women and women of color into their campaigning and storytelling. Those working directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should take extra steps to incorporate the voices and perspectives of those traditionally overlooked and excluded from public discourse and ensure that credit is given to grassroots activists and/or community organizers who are already leading the charge in social change efforts.

2

Partner with organizations and those directly impacted by the issue/s

There are many ways to center the people who are working or living on the frontlines of an issue. During the 2018 Golden Globes, actors invited activists to be their "plus ones" as a way to highlight the issues they work on. Among them, Michelle Williams invited Tarana Burke, creator of the #MeToo movement, and Meryl Streep invited Ai-jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Politicians invited sexual assault survivors to attend President Trump's State of the Union Address. Developing partnerships and uplifting frontline voices can bring important expertise into the discussion and help keep attention on the issue rather than on the influencer. Partnering with organizations who themselves have an activated audience can provide a base of support ready to defend and take action on behalf of influencers in the event of any backlash or reprisal.

3

Work with influencers who are seen as having firsthand knowledge of an issue.

Our finding shows that the individual storytelling from those directly impacted featured prominently in news media coverage. In sharing their stories, survivors were better able to spread the reach of the network of solidarity and empower people inside their network by giving a face to the movement. Jimmy Kimmel was also seen as a relatable “expert” when it came to the healthcare debate due to his first-hand experience as a parent of a child with a congenital heart disease. Kimmel in no way would be directly affected by a change in the ACA, but because of his ability to tell the story of his lived experiences as well as champion stories of families directly impacted by changes in the American healthcare system, he was viewed as an authentic and reliable source of information, particularly in news media coverage. Kimmel also made sure to update viewers on a regular basis with accurate information and sought the opinions or recommendations of well-known organizations such as Children’s Hospital LA, American Cancer Society, ALS Association, AARP, etc. Advocates seeking to work directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should consider the benefits of working with influencers who can speak directly to particular social issues or prioritize partnering with organizations led by or serving directly impacted communities.

4

Recognize the power of numbers.

Kaepernick’s protest has sparked a national movement and is redefining many Americans’ relationship with the National Football League. As of October 2018, many current NFL players continue to take a knee, despite threats of fines and other punitive actions from league owners and upper management. While backlash and reprisal are to be expected, particularly when openly challenging racial and gendered hierarchies, Kaepernick’s decision to begin his protest alone made him a target of NFL owners seeking to soothe the anger of anti-Kaepernick fans. The findings from our research indicate that Kaepernick’s ousting played a significant role in the success and continued engagement with the Take a Knee protest; however, the symbolism of the kneel itself has also been influential. High-profile cultural influencers wishing to speak out or begin a protest/long-term campaign should consider coordinating with other high-profile influencers in the same field as a means to minimize the likelihood of one individual being targeted for reprisal.

5

Consider the power of symbolism and imagery.

The power of imagery played a central role in the effectiveness of Kaepernick's protest and emerged as a key organizing tool that kept the protest in the public eye and also enabled other professional and amateur athletes to signal support for both Kaepernick and the wider movement. Our analysis of social media content revealed the image of Kaepernick and others kneeling was widely connected to civil rights imagery and enabled engagement from the public in a creative way. Those working directly or indirectly with high-profile influencers should consider incorporating some form of symbolism into their change strategy and using imagery to uplift core values or visualize a concept. Symbolism should also be paired with specific actions for fans. Advocates should consider connecting fans and online audiences with a small set of actions they can take, such as contacting decision-makers, making donations, and sharing content with friends and/or networks.

6

Provide supporters with something they can replicate.

Closely connected to the use of symbolism is the need to create an avenue for widespread participation. Kaepernick's kneeling and the simple but powerful #MeToo hashtag are examples of the effectiveness of replicable social action. Those working directly with high-profile influencers should prioritize incorporating some element of participatory culture. Participatory culture is defined as "content or actions that have relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, encourage strong support for new creation and sharing, include some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices, members believe that their contributions matter, and members feel some degree of social connection with one another."^[14]

7

Lead with values.

Attention was driven by broad values shared by large segments of their audience, not by facts or rhetoric standing alone. Advocates working with influencers should center communication on the values at stake.

¹⁴ Jenkins, H. 2006. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, 5–7, 19–20, 3–4.

8

Be prepared to talk about policy reform.

Jimmy Kimmel's intervention was predominantly focused on a short-term policy change that had a concrete start and endpoint. Although the fight to create a better healthcare system is far from over, the push to end the Graham-Cassidy Bill started with the introduction of the bill on September 13, 2017, and ended on September 25, 2017, when the decision was made not to advance the bill to the Senate floor. While the Me Too and Take a Knee movement did not outline specific policy reform goals, both movements have resulted in a series of policy changes in a range of industries. Our own existing research indicates that now more than ever, Americans are eager for clear solutions to our nation's problems. As such, high-profile influencers and those working directly with influencers should be ready with a few facts that reinforce the values and problem statement and clear policy or institutional reform solutions.

9

Link a personal story to the larger story.

Even if an influencer is not directly impacted by the issue they care about, it is important for them to name their connection to the issue and to reinforce their framing of the issue as often as possible, whether by making public statements, by sharing their spotlight with frontline activists, or through their artistry and cultural platforms. If influencers don't frame their own story about why they are speaking out about an issue, then media or trolls will frame it for them. Personal stories can be impactful and persuasive, and it is important for influencers to take steps so that their stories center on the issues rather than themselves. Jimmy Kimmel provides an excellent example of how this can be done well when he used his experience with his son's health as the foundation to have a larger conversation about the importance of all people being able to access healthcare.

10

Understand and account for the role of the trolls, bots, and other oppositional influencers.

A plethora of new research is being published on the coordinated and widespread online strategies of white supremacist groups in recent years.^[15] The use of paid trolls, bots, and other techniques has become an effective strategy to target social justice advocates. Our analysis revealed a vocal and coordinated digital effort to derail and attack Colin Kaepernick's protest and the Me Too movement. Narratives falsely conflating Kaepernick's protest with Anti-Americanness featured prominently in social media discourse and news media coverage. Although the derailment and co-opting of social justice movements is not new, it is important for advocates working with high-profile influencers to understand and account for this new layer of complexity. For instance, in the case of Kaepernick and Take a Knee, a significant portion of both news media and online discourse focused on patriotism and disrespect of the flag. All social media accounts attached to a protest, movement, or individual should be assigned an administrator to monitor for bots and, when needed, block troubling or offensive content. Digital strategies training for all campaign staff should also be prioritized.

11

Draft a clear and concise mission statement.

In media coverage, requotes of Colin Kaepernick's original statement and Jimmy Kimmel's monologue against the Cassidy-Graham bill accounted for a significant portion of news media quotes. These original position statements laid the foundation for subsequent debate and highlight the centrality of having a clear and concise mission statement at the outset of a social or policy change effort. In the drafting of a mission statement, feedback should be sought from various sources, with priority placed on incorporating the feedback of those directly impacted and individuals and communities regularly excluded from national discourse.

12

Fit message to medium.

Kimmel had a big stage and platform for his monologues and interviews. He used his existing platform, including social media channels, effectively to weave in specific facts and calls to action that were not available to Kaepernick or many early Me Too proponents. Kaepernick used the largest platform he has (the sideline of NFL games) to send his message in a powerful way.

15 See Marwick, A. and Lewis, R. "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online." Data & Society, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf, 2018.

Recommendations

For those seeking to leverage/support an influencer's movement

1

Keep the drumbeat going.

Unlike short-term policy solutions, longer-term cultural and narrative change efforts are not only harder to realize, but also will likely face greater and more coordinated resistance. The significant and coordinated resistance to both the Me Too movement and Take a Knee—specifically, attempts to redefine the narrative sounding these protests—points to the considerable threats these movements present to the current status quo. Social media discourse revealed a vocal opposition to both movements but also an equally vocal and coordinated base of support. To ensure these movements continued to have an impact, those seeking to support the advocacy of high-profile individuals must keep the drumbeat going.

2

Expand the conversation.

When influencers draw attention to an issue, it is an opportunity to insert expertise and help frame the conversation. Through the context of talking about the influencer's actions, uplift your own expertise and experiences through social media engagement, with traditional media (op-eds), and by any other means available to you.

3

Publicly support the influencers who are speaking out.

It can be risky for public figures to take a stand on issues that matter. The larger their vocal base of support, the more likely other influencers will find the courage to speak out. If an influencer faces reprisals, it is important for supporters to take action on their behalf. This can help protect the targeted influencers from further harm and can signal to others that their bravery will be supported.

TACTICS INCLUDE:

- Continue engaging with popular hashtags such as **#TakeaKnee**, **#WhyWeKneel**, **#MeToo** and **#TimesUp**.
- Recirculate content.
- Specific to Kaepernick, use **#Thisiswhywekneel** following instances of police brutality.
- Uplift the names of images of athletes continuing to take a knee, such as Eric Reid.
- Create your own content that links to the cultural moment (blog, memes, etc.).
- Engage on social media during the moments (i.e., awards shows, NFL games, award season) influencers are expected to take action or speak about the issues.
- Specific to Colin Kaepernick, continue to hold the NFL accountable for Kaepernick's blacklisting.
- Continue to support survivors of sexual violence by sharing their stories online and by holding elected officials and other high-profile influencers who undermine the efforts of the Me Too movement accountable.