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How sport became a vehicle for far-right conspiracy theories

Narratives concerning “Cultural Marxism” – portrayed as a threat to Western society and its values – have been gaining ground largely thanks to their ability to circulate rapidly through online platforms. In recent years, sport has also become a vehicle for spreading such conspiracy theories – with far-reaching consequences for society.

The “take the knee” protest during Euro 2020 was a symbolic act of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, signalling, primarily, a call for an end to racial injustice. Aside from the competition on the pitch, the decision by specific national teams to “take the knee”, and the subsequent wave of online hostility aimed at members of the English national team, meant that the protest faced not only vocal support but also a barrage of criticism. With [some](#) questioning its political efficacy, its influence on the world of sports, and its broader implications, the protest and the tournament reflected the various complexities encompassing sport’s relation to contemporary political issues, as well as ongoing and future discussions surrounding athlete activism and social justice. [The online criticisms](#), circulating mostly on X [formerly known as Twitter], targeting the concept of “wokeism” and the BLM movement, were driven by alt-right conspiracies, which sought to expose an assumed Cultural Marxist “woke agenda” in the organisation of the tournament and the mainstream media’s coverage of it.

While these criticisms fed into broader political and social issues, highlighting the interconnected nature of online discourses, the alarming ease with which the Cultural Marxist theory found fertile ground in online discourses on sport raises serious concerns. By undermining the legitimacy of social justice movements, such as BLM, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes and prejudices, racial conspiracy theories were shared and reposted, with instances of racism amplified unchecked.

“Cultural Marxism” – a conspiracy theory with legs

In the digital age, conspiracy theories can easily spread online, with alt-right conspiracies taking root in the fertile ground of online discourse and social media platforms. Alt-right conspiracies have frequently denounced BLM and the “take the

knee” protest by suggesting that the movement and its symbols represent a guise for promoting anti-white bias. Much of the scorn directed at BLM was fuelled by assertions that the movement’s fundamental goal was to advance a Marxist political agenda. Critiques of the Marxist nature of BLM were aligned with alt-right conspiracy theories concerning Cultural Marxism.

The purported objectives of Cultural Marxism usually involve undermining and ultimately obliterating traditional Western, Christian values, as well as propagating a radical social agenda that destabilises the foundations of Western society by promoting multiculturalism, political correctness, and social justice. It is essential to note that these theories are widely discredited and rejected by scholars, experts, and, to some extent, mainstream media. Nonetheless, they are used to promote fear, division and hostility, rooted in misinformation, misunderstanding and prejudice. They serve to delegitimise social and cultural movements, and to undermine the causes of feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice.

Worryingly, Cultural Marxist conspiracies can normalise extremist views and ideologies. When these narratives portray a vast conspiracy working against Western society, they make extremist views seem plausible and even justifiable. The normalisation of extremist ideologies can lead to radicalisation and the acceptance of harmful beliefs, further dividing communities and propagating discord. Accordingly, what becomes evident from the connections established between claims of the alt-right, and the inclination toward conspiracy theories among proponents of the anti-woke agenda, is the depth to which these narratives have become entangled in conversations about sport.

Spreading suspicions

In accordance with BLM’s apparent influence over both the tournament and the English national team, the decision to take the knee was likened to a “cult”. These concerns followed a trajectory of racialisation that often aimed to portray the protest as fostering anti-white biases. What was unmistakable from tweets directed at the protest was the underlying suspicion that hidden ulterior motives were at play, and the “public” was not being informed of the “real” reason behind the adoption of the symbolic gesture. Such

convictions can prove comforting to those privy to the conspiracy, asserting that they indeed possess “knowledge” of *the* Truth, a Truth that remains “beyond” the comprehension of the general public.

As a result, the promotion of the Cultural Marxist conspiracy was attributed to a variety of actors operating “behind the scenes” to push a decidedly “woke” agenda. In this strange scenario, certain political figures, such as former prime minister Boris Johnson, prominent media outlets like the BBC and Sky Sports, and team officials and media personalities, notably England manager Gareth Southgate, were perceived as intentionally endorsing the protest as part of their compliance with “woke demands”.

[Infiltrating public discourse](#)

By placing sport in the broader context of political discussions concerning the “take the knee” protest, as well as examples of athlete activism, we can begin to emphasise the specific mechanisms through which the alt-right garners increased prominence in public discourse. In a protest aimed at spotlighting racial inequality and discrimination, sport emerged as a primary platform for the dissemination and sharing of conspiratorial narratives online. This sheds further light on the nexus between far-right ideologies and sport within the context of major sporting events, underscoring the pivotal role of conspiracy in the broader dissemination of alt-right ideology across popular cultural realms.

This lends further claim to the contention that the very structure of digital media platforms facilitates the appropriation and propagation of conspiracies, whereupon the organised nature of online spaces can serve as breeding grounds for racial conspiracies. In these spaces, certain theories are proposed, discussed, and, unfortunately, amplified, thereby perpetuating the dissemination of harmful narratives and prejudices. Major social media platforms’ algorithms have [frequently been criticised](#) for favouring controversy over accuracy. As long as this remains the case, any work to censure specific conspiracy theories circulating is addressing the symptoms of the problem and leaving the root causes unaddressed.

In a world marked by increasing polarisation and distrust, it is vital to critically assess and dissect the narratives we encounter online. Initiatives, such as Google's '[Be Internet Legends](#)', have sought to promote responsible and safe internet use among children, empowering them with the knowledge and skills to navigate the online world safely. However, as is evident in this case, and other alt-right conspiracies, government campaigns and well-meaning tech initiatives can, very easily, be subsumed within the conspiracy narratives that they seek to tackle.

For this reason, it is essential to recognize that addressing conspiracy theories requires a multifaceted approach, involving collaboration between policymakers, educators, technology companies, and the public. Developing media literacy work that raises awareness by focusing specifically on the dangers of conspiracy theories remains essential. This can involve working with schools, media organizations, and online platforms to develop and promote educational resources that help develop online critical thinking and digital literacy skills.

Certainly, while policymakers will need to continually adapt their approaches in order to keep abreast of an evolving digital landscape, the success of this relies primarily on social media companies for whom encouraging great transparency regarding their content moderation policies can help towards promoting accountability for the content they host. This requires taking action against misinformation and the spread of far-right conspiracies, such as, identifying and flagging misleading content or removing online sources or users that function as an authority for conspiracy theories. Holding such companies to account can only ever be achieved through rigorous regulation. [Social media platforms have the ability to structure themselves in a manner that fosters accuracy and criticality in their users](#), it is imperative that they are encouraged to do so by government.

Accordingly, where the U.K. government's [Online Safety Act](#) seeks to regulate online platforms by addressing various forms of online harm, including misinformation and disinformation, a greater understanding of conspiracy theories and their spread across international events, including well-known sporting events, can help to provide greater understanding of the ways in which such misinformation is spread.