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One of the biggest threats to modern civilisation? The weaponisation of "wokeness" in the UK press and political discourses.

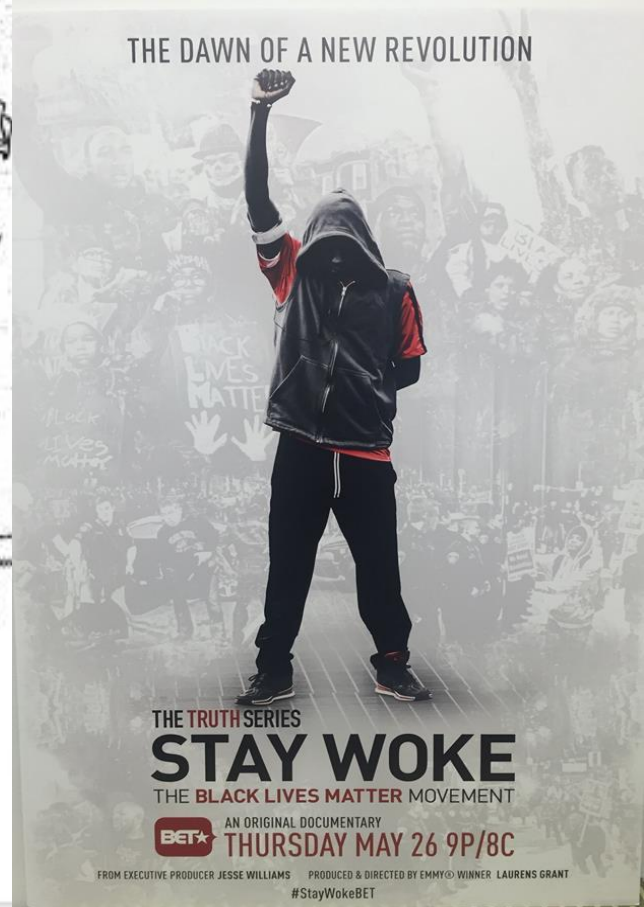
SMITH, D.S.

2023

"One of the biggest threats
to modern civilisation?"
The weaponisation of
"wokeness" in the UK press
and political discourses

Dr. David S. Smith





Origins of wokeness

To be a socially conscious Black American
Marcus Garvey (1923), Leadbelly (1938): activism
William Melvin Kelley (1962): “if you’re woke you dig it”
2014: BLM, following murder of Michael Brown – “stay woke”
Google Trends: surge in USA searches since 2014, UK since 2019

Esther McVey to lead 'anti woke agenda' in major role as Sunak appoints her 'Common Sense Tzar'



NEWS | UK

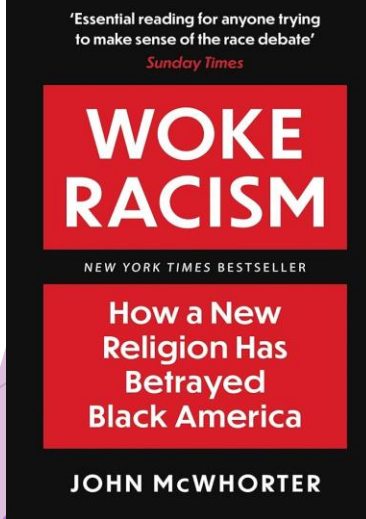
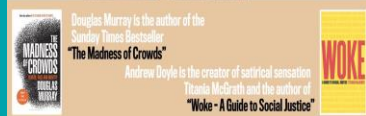
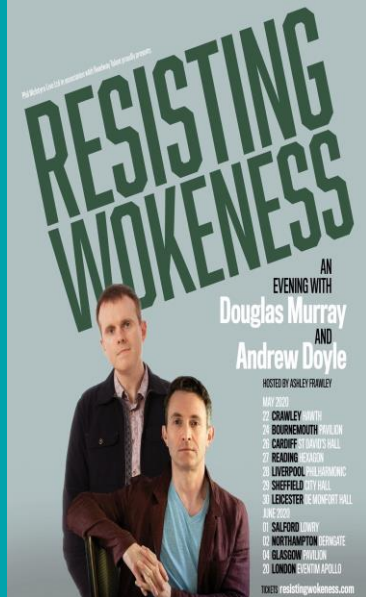
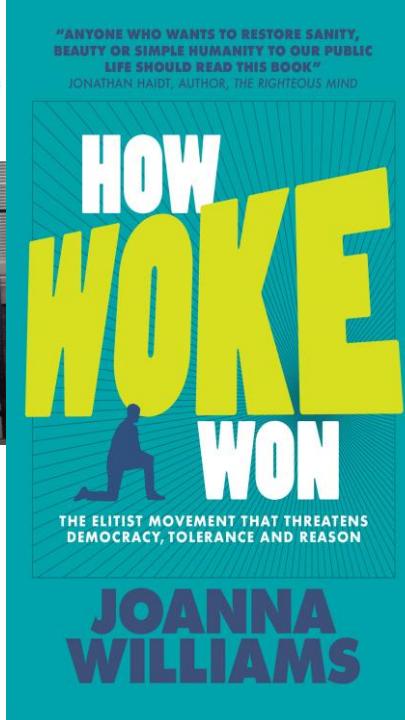
Suella Braverman blames 'Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati' for disruptive protests



TV > News TV

PC REX Sir David Attenborough's BBC1 dinosaur show presents softer 'woke' version of the T-Rex

Rod McPhee
23:35, 13 Apr 2022 | Updated: 23:35, 13 Apr 2022



Wokeness today

Minister for common sense: to take on the threat

War on wokeness: shows, books, films, news channels

Conflating topics: critics can dismiss all simultaneously (Cammaerts, 2022)

Centre for Policy Studies (2021): third most concerning ideology, > homophobia

YouGov (2021) 12% of the UK identify as woke, but 60% do not know what it means

What is wokeness?

Current use

Positive

- Crucial for pedagogy (Babulski, 2020)
- Aspirational: not achieved (Whiteout, 2018)
- Essential part of holding others to account despite the online discourse (Atkins, 2020)

Negative

- Anti-racist religion (McWhorter, 2021)
- Basking in work being complete (Boyce, 2019)
- 'Madness' taking over educational institutions (Peterson, 2021)
- Elon musk: "woke mind virus" = biggest threat to human civilisation
- Perpetuated by privileged few elites for moral authority (Zizek, 2023)
- Rhetorical style, upholds white power structures (Zavattaro & Bearfield, 2022)



The present study

Land of woke and glory?

- How is wokeness conceptualised by the press and public?

Research questions

1. How is the concept produced? (press)
2. How is the concept reproduced? (social media)
3. How is the concept maintained? (general public)

Method

- Press analysis: items using the term in May 2022
- Social media analysis: subset from Twitter scrape in May 2022
- Survey: open/closed questions, distributed to the general public

Triangulation

- More holistic picture (Ayoub et al., 2014)
- Increases probability findings are credible (Nowell et al., 2017)
- Reduces overgeneralising, e.g., low trust in the press (Smith, 2023)

Analysis

- Thematic analysis: salience vs frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2019)
- Latent coding: facilitates insight beyond standard semantic groupings

Press analysis

Method

- Lexis library 'news' articles
- May 2022, search term: woke
- Ordered oldest to the newest
- Every tenth article download
- Filter for relevance/duplicates

Sample

- Final yield: 64 articles
- From regional/national newspapers

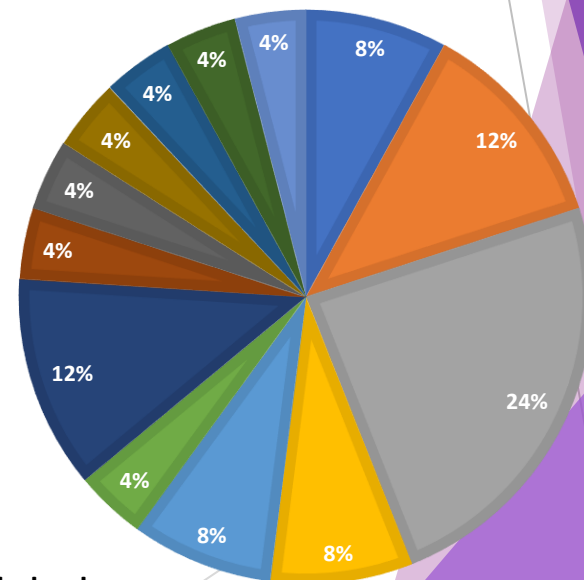
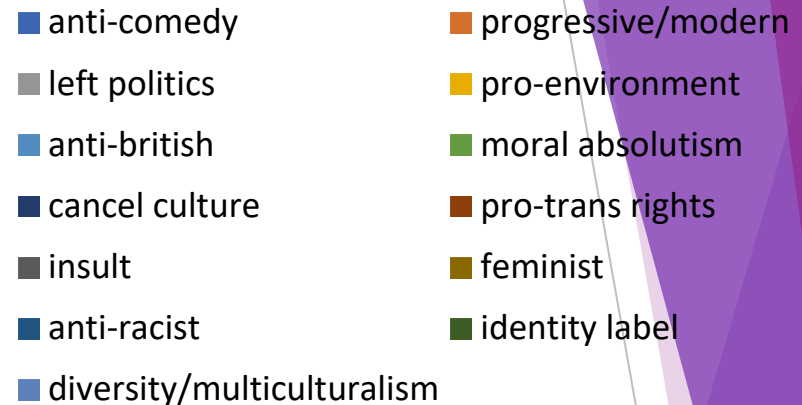
Analysed for:

1. Specific term used
2. Meaning ascribed to the term
3. General context of the article

Summary of use

- Used more by right-leaning press – derogatory label
- Byword for left-wing: gender identity, environmental, anti-racism, cancel culture
- Sometimes woke framed as anti-British, i.e., national identity = anti-woke

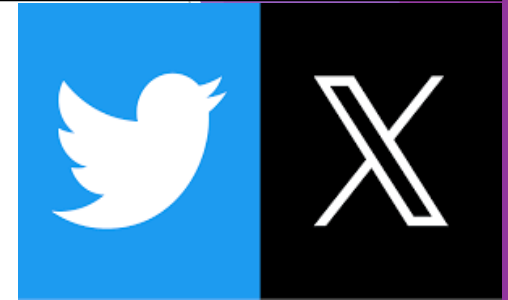
Meaning of 'woke' in news articles



Twitter analysis

Method

- Data gathered via Python + two modules:
 1. Snsrape: collects data from social media
 2. Pandas: exports data to Excel for examination



Sample

- May 2022 – search “woke” on Twitter
- Separate samples for each week – approx. 50,000 PW
- Randomised order of Tweets per week: cover range of topics
- First 300 relevant used tweets used in analysis, i.e., 1200 total
- Paraphrased: meaning and metaphor retained (Smith et al., 2022)
- No Geotags: Twitter = international platform
 - Only allows miles from post-code
 - Cannot control who is a visitor

Summary of use

- Very negative: 79% anti-woke (based on week 1)
- Trolling: sincere and sarcastic use – easy to tell apart (Aspray, 2019)
- Post-musk: increase in hate speech/decrease in moderation (Hickey et al., 2023)

Survey analysis

Findings

- 116 participants recruited via social media

Wokeness:

- I am woke (M = 3.2, SD = 1.3)
- I would openly identify as woke (M = 2.6, SD = 1.3)
- I do not think my society is woke enough (M = 3.1, SD = 1.4)
- Total (M = 8.9, SD = 3.6)

Anti-wokeness:

- I am anti-woke (M = 2.1, SD = 1.2)
- I would openly identify as anti-woke (M = 2, SD = 1.2)
- I think my society has gotten too woke (M = 2.6, SD = 1.4)
- Total (M = 6.8, SD = 3.6)

Patterns:

- No significant gender or age diffs $p > .05$
- More woke vs. anti-woke $t(115) = 3.43, p < .001$
- Less likely to openly identify by label: both sides
 - Wokeness diff: $t(115) = 6.40, p > .05$
 - Anti-woke diff: $t(115) = 3.02, P < .004$ - sig

Identification with anti-woke < strong disagreement with woke: apathy?

Characterising wokeness

Woke as a positive trait

The aware woke

Woke as a non-existent or neutral trait

The anti-woke agenda

The corporate woke

“Awareness of the often-concealed structures of power in society and how they reinforce and maintain patriarchal white supremacy in Western cultures.”
(Survey)

“I won’t EVER forgive white conservatives for stealing and bastardising the word.” (Twitter)

“Corporate wokery Self-righteous HR training is not going to have any effect on Westminster’s behaviour.”
(Daily Telegraph)

Woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Disliked by woke & anti-woke alike: varied in perceived sincerity
Detachment between a company’s purpose/values/practices and messaging

Characterising wokeness

Woke as a negative trait

The weak woke

“Having been taught words can be violence, it is unsurprising that students campaign to have statues torn down or speakers banned from campus.”
(Sunday Express)

- “Bleeding heart”
- Can’t take a joke

The privileged woke

“Privileged white people who profess to empathise with POC but don’t recognise the harm their policing of words/tone/opinion has.” (Survey)

- Pushed by elite unis
- No material analysis

The woke agenda

“A Marxist tool to destroy western culture, society, values and standards” (Survey)

The authoritarian woke

“Walk the woke line or the SJWs will cancel you” (Twitter)
Parallels: McCarthyism/fascism

The religious woke

“Witch hunts, denunciation of heretics, and demands for penance” (Survey)

Woke institutions or groups

Activists, NGOs, LGBT+ communities, media, education (social sciences), social workers, young people, digital vs. real world, the establishment?

Discussion

Conclusions

- Multi-faceted: individuals/groups/corporations
- Awareness, compassion vs. weakness, puritanism
- Cultural vs. political agenda: insurgents, not legal
- Imprecise: pressures facing different communities stripped of nuance
 - May reflexively dismiss all “woke” topics, e.g., trans rights, homophobia, climate change
 - Intentionally shrinking debate to woke vs unwoke (Cammaerts, 2022)
- Survey: Participants mostly identified as being woke – sampling bias?
- Further research: Can woke vs. neutral framing impact support for policies?
 - ‘Privilege’ drops white support for renaming (Quarles & Bozarth, 2022)

Acknowledgements

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