How did the word 'woke' become weaponized?
Diyora Shadijanova

Piers Morgan has become the latest person to weaponize the word woke, hot on the heels of Laurence Fox. But wokeness is about waking up to the social injustices of the world – so how did the phrase lose its original meaning? Diyora Shadijanova investigates.

It's a frustrating fact of life that the word "woke" has become weaponized. We only need to look to Piers Morgan for evidence of this, with the columnist tweeting about the "worst, wokest Oscars in history".

Author Malorie Blackman recently highlighted the problem with weaponizing the word woke in a viral tweet, writing: "'Woke' means alert to social injustice.

"Watch as those with a negative agenda try to spin 'woke' into a pejorative term, an insult."

No one who is "woke" takes woke seriously any more. A word that once symbolized awareness of social and racial injustice has been painfully commercialized and eventually weaponized, whitewashing its original meaning.

Nowadays, woke has become a buzzword for right-wing hate-preachers – it's the new "snowflake." Laurence Fox, who is infamous for his appearance on the BBC's Question Time, has been all over the internet for saying he "won't date woke women".

Toby Young, a right-wing columnist, branded Prince Harry and Meghan Markle "the oppressive King and Queen of Woke".

And Piers Morgan tweeted: "The tiny but very vocal woke brigade are trying to suck all the joy out of life & cancel everyone & everything that doesn't share their absurd world view."

Woke has been hijacked and capitalized by people whose rhetoric can contribute towards the perpetration of hatred towards minorities. The appropriation is ironic, but hardly surprising.

How David Schwimmer proved himself the ultimate antidote to Laurence Fox So how did we get here? Wokeness is generally accepted as the idea that you've woken up to the social injustices around you, seen how oppression has been institutionalized and now are unable to un-see this truth. Essentially, once you're woke, you can't fall asleep.

The phrase "stay woke" can be traced back to 40s America. Black folk and blues singer Lead Belly sang in his song Scottsboro Boys: "I advise everybody to be a little careful when they go along through there, stay woke, keep their eyes open."

Twenty years later, William Melvin Kelley wrote an article called "If You're Woke You Dig It" in The New York Times. A variation of the phrase was used by black American musicians and writers through the years.

"'Stay woke' entered popular culture, becoming the latest "cool" word to use. This not only erased all the socio-political connotations, but made it gimmicky"

The most recognized origin of "stay woke" in contemporary music comes from Erykah Badu's song Master Teacher which was written in 2008. Throughout the song, the soul singer repeats the phrase: "I stay woke." A few years later, Badu tweeted #StayWoke in support of the Russian feminist group Pussy Riot.

Gradually, as #StayWoke became clearly politicized, it started to gain traction across Twitter and other forms of social media. It was popularized by the Black Lives Matter movement, an international activist movement which began in 2013, when neighbourhood watchman George Zimmerman was cleared of killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.

In the following years, people began demonstrating in the streets as more and more black Americans died at the hands of the police or while in custody. One such notable event was the Ferguson protests which went on from 2014 to 2015. The phrase "stay woke" often accompanied the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe, also appearing on signs in the protests.

So how did a term that's strongly embedded in black history and social justice get appropriated by the masses? "Stay woke", like many other AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) expressions, entered popular culture, becoming the latest "cool" word to use. This not only erased all the socio-political connotations, but made it gimmicky.

In 2016, MTV referred to the phrase as "teen slang." During this time, the culture around wokeness was at its height. Everyone was getting cancelled and wokeness became performative and commercialized, with brands getting it wrong all the time.

Remember that embarrassing Kendall Jenner Pepsi advert? Set at a protest, white saviour Kendall saved the day by handing a police officer a Pepsi can. The ad was pulled the day after airing, after it was criticized for exploiting the Black Lives Matter protests.

The overuse of wokeness in the wrong context not only erased the etymology, but also paved a way for it to be capitalized on. Google "woke T-shirt" and you'll find 71 million results as well as an independent fashion label called Woke selling woke T-shirts for around $30 each. Unfortunately, this is the kind of disingenuous culture that's been created around it.

Pepsi responds to backlash over protest-themed ad featuring Kendall Jenner
Right-wing politicians and commentators picked up on the rise of wokeness in popular culture and co-opted it to suit their own agenda. For them, woke has become the perfect umbrella term to encapsulate everything people who hate the left associate with the left, especially cancel culture and political correctness.

The Piers Morgans of the world have convinced their followers that the "woke brigade" is the thought police George Orwell warned us about. All this does is cause moral panic from both sides, causing even more divide in our already polarized world.

A word that came about to protect minorities now symbolises a threat to free speech, a way to ruin lives. It means hating everyone who disagrees with you.

Yet if this was true, don't you think their careers would have been over a long time ago? As far as I know, people who hate wokeness so much still manage to hold onto their careers and get big spreads in newspapers.

"Anti-woke": Laurence Fox became an overnight sensation because he caused such a divisive reaction.

Whoever uses the term woke nowadays is perfectly aware that it's a shortcut into creating outrage. Sadly, there's money to be made from this as it's an easy way to generate clicks and engagement online.

Take someone like Fox, an actor and singer who became an overnight sensation because he caused such a divisive reaction. Whether people shared the clip of him out of anger or support, they still helped spread his "brand". As a result, he was invited to loads more appearances, articles were written about him and now he's firmly in the public eye.

These people know what they're doing; they know weaponizing woke pushes all the wrong buttons in people and only widens their platform. Unfortunately, this is how 'woke' has fallen victim to the PR machine.

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