

could be found in the streets of America, and it needed no amplification from N.B.A. players at Disney World.

14. I am not questioning the sincerity of these athletes or even discounting the steps they took to make sure that some message — however vague — of justice was delivered. But it should be noted that during this year's playoffs, the social justice messaging was mostly gone. LeBron James seemed perfectly content to use his platform to promote his film "Space Jam: A New Legacy," and when asked about vaccination, he said that he had gotten one but that it was not his job to promote it. "We're not talking about something that's political or racism or police brutality," James said. "We're talking about people's bodies and well-being." The platform, in other words, extends only to issues that James cares about, which apparently do not include getting people vaccinated.
15. James is wrong, of course: The pandemic is political, as are issues of public health and people's bodies. But he also shouldn't have to become a spokesperson for every progressive idea, even one as vital and as seemingly obvious as vaccines. We can be frustrated at James or even write off his political bona fides. We can even decide to stop rooting for him because of his seeming nonchalance about vaccine messaging. But we should also acknowledge that it ultimately doesn't really matter what he — or the N.B.A., for that matter — believes. Who cares?

Wait, but does anyone actually care?

16. The question of whether we should care about what a celebrity thinks about vaccines — we obviously shouldn't — is, of course, different from whether we do, which is what people are talking about when they claim that athletes have a responsibility to the public. If all athletes had some significant population of people who hang on their every word, this would be a bit more understandable.
17. The most compelling, best-known and probably most relevant example here is Magic Johnson*, who had a seismic effect on pretty much every aspect of the fight against H.I.V., from awareness to behavioral change to funding for research. He turned what previously was seen as a gay issue into a universal concern; in his later years, he has also shown that a person can live with H.I.V. and still lead a healthy and fulfilled existence.
18. Given his outsize contribution to the fight against H.I.V., it does seem reasonable to believe that professional athletes — at least the very famous ones like Johnson — can change people's minds and encourage them to engage in less risky behavior. But is that actually analogous to today's pandemic and celebrity culture? The evidence for whether celebrities influence people's decision making around questions of vaccines is decidedly mixed.
19. This year, a team of researchers in Switzerland published a study on which public figures were most likely to get their messages reshared during the pandemic. Perhaps not surprisingly, Anthony Fauci ended up having the most effect. Among the other people studied, the study's authors wrote, "celebrity spokespersons were least effective." (The two celebrities highlighted in the study were Tom Hanks and Kim Kardashian.)

20. It should be said: It's hard to tell how much to make of social media resharing studies. And having little effect, of course, is not the same as having zero or even a negative effect. A different study found that Hanks's early announcement that he had tested positive for Covid-19 did, in fact, lead people to take the virus a bit more seriously, especially when it came to their sense of personal risk. So celebrities can affect public health at the farthest edges of the margins; this, I imagine, more or less corresponds with most people's hold on reality.
21. But Irving is nowhere near as famous as Hanks. He's also no Johnson. I understand why N.B.A. players bristled when Laura Ingraham told James in 2018 to "shut up and dribble," but I'm not sure supporting an athlete's right to express a political opinion also means that we have to treat every single one of those opinions as if it were a matter of national importance.
22. By the way, if you're interested in how the N.B.A. thinks about vaccination, 95 percent of the league's players are vaccinated, a rate far higher than found in a large majority of industries. That makes the undue focus on a few stragglers even more bizarre; this isn't some significant portion of the league rebelling against a vaccine mandate. This is just a few guys sharing their opinions and weighing whether they want to have to sit out a lot of games. That's it.

What to make of all this?

23. Barkley was right. The athlete shouldn't have to be a role model, even if he desperately wants us to think of him as one. This doesn't mean that an athlete can't affect social change — Colin Kaepernick and the activism of the W.N.B.A.'s players are counterexamples — but it seems pretty clear at this point that today's professional athletes and celebrities just don't make for great political spokespeople. It's OK to just ignore them from time to time (maybe even most of the time!) and not create the conditions in which someone like Isaac can fashion himself into a popular figure of political resistance.
 24. More broadly, we should resist the assumption that every celebrity's opinion must stand in as some referendum on the issues of the day. We live in a country where 35 percent of the eligible population still has not been fully vaccinated. It is a public health emergency that requires big, maximalist thinking and not the fleeting yet ultimately powerless outrage we might feel over a celebrity with catastrophic opinions. Sometimes, they're just not that deep.
- Who is Magic Johnson? Considered one of the greatest basketball players ever to play the game, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, played from 1979 to 1991, when he retired from the sport after being diagnosed with HIV.