

“Burned at the Stake”: Unpacking Disinformation in the Story of a Coach Allegedly “Terminated” For Expressing Anti-transgender Beliefs

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Abstract

On August 29, 2023, just as a new fall semester was getting underway at many colleges and universities, a short documentary just over 8 minutes in length entitled ‘Burned at the Stake’: One NCAA Coach’s Battle to Protect Women’s Sport was released. The film was part of a “female athlete storytelling series” developed and funded by the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF). The film was part of a larger media campaign designed to support the IWF’s stated agenda to “fight to save women’s sports and counter the radical agenda that seeks to erase women ” by allowing trans gender girls and women on teams that match their identities. The central figure in the film is then head women’s lacrosse coach at NCAA Division III Oberlin College, Kim Russell. Much of the visual background in the film was shot at various locations around the Oberlin athletic complex including Knowlton Stadium and the lobby of Phillips Gym. Interwoven into the narrative dominated by Russell’s verbal account are short, selected clips from secret recordings she made of meetings with administrators and athletes on her team. Positioned as a coach who was breaking her silence to expose the pressure she experienced from administrators and athletes to apologize for comments made on social media opposing transgender athletes on women’s teams, Russell claimed that administrators were unable to point to any policy she had violated and yet she feared for her job after learning that members of her team were uncomfortable with the position she took. The story was carried in national and international media outlets such as the Daily Mail, GB News, USA Today, NY Post, Daily Mail, and Vancouver Sun, Washington Times as well as publications covering higher education such as Inside Higher Ed. On September 5, 2023 Russell appeared alongside IWF attorney May Mailman on the Fox News program the Ingraham Angle, commenting that steps had been taken to limit her access to her team and that the prospect of a lawsuit was a possibility. In an op-ed published September 8, 2023 in the New York Post, Russell characterized herself as a “hippy coach” who was proud of creating an open environment where athletes could come talk to her and where she let it be known that she loved her athletes like they were her children. She also elaborated further on her belief that her right to free expression was being stymied by officials and athletes at Oberlin. She wrote, “Oberlin — like many higher-level institutions these days — only seems to support the First Amendment if your values align with theirs,” she wrote. “Disagree, and you will be verbally and emotionally attacked, bullied, shunned, and vilified. Perhaps even ultimately forced out”. By September 11, 2023 Russell had not lost her job in the athletic department at Oberlin but she had been reassigned to work as a manager in the Employee Wellness Program, a position that fit with her background in fitness and wholistic lifestyle but removed her from interacting with students. In a statement explaining the decision, the College noted that it was not Russell’s stance on trans women athletes in sport that prompted the change but the breach of trust between Russell and her team after recording them without their knowledge or consent and then sharing those recordings with the media. As stated by the College, the violation of the trust between Russell and members of her team was “irreparable” and it was “This breach of trust — not her posts, feelings, or beliefs about trans athletes — is why she has been removed from her coaching duties” (as quoted in Kim, 2023, para. 13). As revealed in an editorial written by one transgender member of the Oberlin women’s lacrosse team who was on the team at the time these events occurred, “”Trans women face a terrible situation wherein they must meet nearly

impossible regulations while still facing backlash from the public once they finally do get the opportunity to compete as their gender” (RB, 2024, para. 18). By December of 2023, Russell was no longer working at Oberlin and had taken on a new role as an ambassador for the IWF, testifying before a U.S. House Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services about preventing transgender women from participating in women’s sports. In this presentation, the “Burned at the Stake” documentary will be considered within the larger anti-transgender athlete movement which has promoted claims of protecting and saving women’s sports, preserving fairness for women athletes, and preventing men from invading women’s sports. The IWF’s position in relationship to other women’s sports organizations and sport governing bodies will be examined in light of the IWF’s historical stances opposing Title IX’s application to athletics (Gavora, 2002) and the National Women’s Soccer Team’s efforts to gain equal pay (Demihran, 2022). Further, the strategic manipulation of information in media vehicles such as the IWF’s documentary “Burned at the Stake”, will be examined from the perspective of “computational propaganda” and its intended design to amplify a selected message in such a way that those who believe the story on its face are not inclined to question why the story was released when it was; whether a more complete story would affect how all parties are viewed; and whose agenda is being served (McIntyre, 2023).