

Social media still a puzzle

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FULL TEXT

If there's a sports media person of the year for 2017, it's probably ESPN's Jemele Hill, who exemplifies a very 2017 struggle.

The idea is that people who work in sports media are supposed to be themselves, be accessible and interact honestly with their audiences.

Just not too much.

Employers expect them to engage on social media because being open and authentic strengthens the bond with viewers/readers/listeners and is good for business.

Media people also have been warned that engaging on social media can be bad for business because being open and authentic threatens to weaken the bond with viewers/readers/listeners and drive them away.

One obvious takeaway here is that outlets are worried about business.

These companies are eager for their staffs to tap into the passions sparking interest among the masses but terrified when that spark catches fire because the issues that inflame people these days are often so divisive.

Hill, you'll recall, is the "SportsCenter" anchor who got into a heated discussion on Twitter about President Donald Trump. (She's not a fan.) Bosses at Disney-owned ESPN warned her not to do that again.

Then Hill got into a discussion about NFL protests. She suggested those who objected to the stance of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones threatening to punish players protesting racial discrimination might consider a boycott of Cowboys sponsors. This got her suspended.

Public response was divided about the views Hill expressed but nearly unified in the opinion that ESPN botched its handling of the matter.

Some, including the White House press secretary, felt the punishment was insufficient. Others felt the punishment was too harsh.

A few even cited the need for objectivity in sports coverage.

That remains an ideal, and both the media outlet and audience have a right to expect it. But, alas, it's a concept that often is rendered quaint when argument-driven shows proliferate despite the obvious strain of coming up with rational, substantive matters on which to disagree. Never mind the way hot takes tend to draw more interest than thoughtful analysis.

Somewhere along the line, despite the oft-repeated credo that there be no cheering in the press box, it apparently became OK for many sports journalists to cop publicly to being fans.

For their hometown team. For their alma mater. For an underdog. For all of the above.

(You may not have known how many alumni of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications were gainfully employed until the Wildcats earned their first NCAA men's basketball tournament berth. As a Wisconsin grad, however, it wasn't much of a surprise to me.)

J.A. Adande, a Northwestern graduate and TV and newspaper veteran who is director of Medill's sports journalism program, said as the NCAA tournament opened that "the landscape has changed so much in that it is acceptable and allowable" to express a rooting interest.

Many contend this is because sports is seen as less important than -- cough -- so-called real news.

There are many problems with that stance, but one is that there is considerable overlap between what typically is

dismissed as sports' fun and games and the more substantial matters such as politics, public policy and crime. This can make it difficult for those covering sports simply to "stick to sports," and there always will be a faction of the audience that won't shrug off perspectives on those matters when it conflicts with their own views. So when Mark Giangreco of ABC-7 expressed his distaste for Trump on Twitter with the same vehemence he or another fellow sports media person might criticize Bears coach John Fox or offer an opinion about a referee's call, it ended in a suspension.

Some thought Giangreco had every right to express his opinion and were angry at the station. Others were angry the punishment wasn't more severe. The station, which can and does place restrictions on its employees -- in the office and out -- concerning any number of issues, was left to worry its news brand was damaged.

(In the long term, it probably wasn't.)

Expressing oneself, whether a TV personality, movie or music star, athlete, CEO, politician or anyone else in the public eye, is always a risk.

Following the Hill controversy, ESPN set about revising its social media policies.

It called for those directly involved in hard news, investigative pieces and enterprise reporting to "refrain in any public-facing forum from taking positions on political or social issues, candidates or office holders."

For others, it warned that what they post must be relevant to the audience and on "a current issue impacting sports, unless otherwise approved by senior editorial management." Posts are supposed to be respectful of opposing views while refraining from "overt partisanship" and "personal attacks and inflammatory rhetoric." Save for a requirement that producers and editors be consulted before commenting on "any political or social issues," it would seem Hill should have gotten into more trouble for her remarks about the president than the Cowboys owner.

What makes all of this problematic is Hill, like many stars ESPN has cultivated, is valuable to the network in no small part because of the person her audience sees her as.

What Hill expressed was a reflection of the person she is.

That may drive some potential audience members away, but it will strengthen the bond with others. ESPN's belief it can rein her in on social media is not the real calculation here.

Ultimately the bet, as always, is that the fans are more valuable than the detractors.

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CAPTION: Photo: "SportsCenter" anchor Jemele Hill was the center of a social media firestorm this year. JOE MURPHY/GETTY

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