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ESPN is the leading sports network in the country. It has been around for decades and features some of the top analysts, hosts, writers, and announcers in sports journalism. When people come to places such as the S.I. Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse to pursue a broadcasting career in sports, many hope to secure a position at ESPN after they graduate. However, there have been moments in journalism, not just at ESPN, when people use their platform in a way that is not ethical or up to their company's standards. ESPN has demonstrated and made it clear that it is not a political program. It generally steers away from discussing or debating political topics or news. However, there have been moments in time when certain members of the network react differently to the overall message the company tries to communicate. Some commentators feel it is their right to convey their own political opinion to the public, no matter the consequences.

Jemele Hill was seen as one of the most prominent members of the ESPN program from 2006 to 2018. She was considered a high-energy, enthusiastic sports anchor who would display a significant level of charisma when she spoke on her shows. Hill first started off with shows such as *SportsCenter*, *First Take*, *Outside the Lines*, and *The Sports Reporters*. She was also a sideline reporter for many years for college football.

The momentum for Hill skyrocketed at ESPN when she and her good friend, Michael Smith, started their podcast, *His and Hers*, on ESPN Radio. The show's popularity went through

the roof and ESPN decided to move it to television when it introduced a show to ESPN2 in 2013 called *Numbers Never Lie*. The name was eventually switched back to *His and Hers* a year later.

In February 2017, Michael Smith and Jemele Hill co-hosted the 6 p.m. edition of Sports Center on ESPN, also known as “SC6.” This show wasn’t your typical *SportsCenter* with the basic highlights and analyses. This show aimed to provide a unique and at times, controversial take on sports news and highlights. Both of these highly qualified journalists provided their perspectives and personalities to the program while discussing sports and how it affected culture and social issues. The show’s main purpose was to blend the coverage of sports alongside commentary and analysis that was beyond the playing surface. Its main attempt was to modernize the traditional format of *SportsCenter* to appeal to a younger, more diverse audience by incorporating a wide range of topics involving or tangential to sports.

However, there was much criticism of the show’s production. Many fans of *SportsCenter*, or ESPN in general, look to the network for the simplicity of receiving highlights, facts, or analyses that have a clear and singular connection to the games. But SC6 was more than that. Many critics referred to “SportsCenter6” as “WokeCenter”. They believed that the problem was not that the show was too woke, or too black (the show featured two African-American hosts who generally mentioned issues during their program related to the topic of racial injustice), but that they were too new. (Koo) For many sports fans who work a daily, 9-5 job, as soon as they come back home to relax, all they want to watch are the top sports stories

and highlights. Many of the executives related to the show revealed that the show got away from them and that there was too much Micheal and Jemele, and not enough *SportsCenter*.

Andrew Marchand, a sports media columnist for the New York Post, covered Jemele's career at ESPN as well as what transpired during the final days before the show was taken off the air. He spoke about the criticism he has seen with *SportsCenter*. "They were trying to do something different and I think it could have been successful if it had the backing that it needed," Marchand said. "If you're going to have Michael Smith and Jemele Hill do a show, where their success came from was having opinions and talking about them. *SportsCenter* did try to have that, but they also tried to do the news of *SportsCenter*."

ESPN created a policy back in 2017 for how their employees should act in response to political news and opinions. "Writers, reporters, producers, and editors directly involved in 'hard' news reporting, investigative or enterprise assignments and related coverage should refrain in any public-facing forum from taking positions on political or social issues, candidates or office holders." (ESPN) Nearly three months later, Jemele Hill, who was seen as one of the program's top anchors, tweeted "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself with other white supremacists." This was seen as an alarming red flag amongst the program as one of its employees called out the president in an extremely condescending way. "It's a big deal," Marchand said. "Like it or not, you work for ESPN, you're representing them, especially when you say things publicly, so it's going to be associated with

ESPN, which is owned by Disney. She's a prominent employee, who has a big voice, and she felt that she needed to say that."

Right around this time, the NFL was in the middle of a controversy. Many players decided to kneel during the national anthem to raise awareness for police brutality and racial injustice. Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones is one of the few owners in the league who strongly discouraged his players from kneeling, threatening them with the punishment of not stepping foot onto the field if they did so. Soon, Hill went on Twitter calling out the Cowboys' owner with multiple tweets saying the fans should boycott the team's advertisers and stop buying its merchandise. ESPN had decided to suspend Hill for two weeks following this incident, stating that she violated the company's social media guidelines on multiple occasions.

Dr. Brian Moritz, a professor at St. Bonaventure University who teaches Sports and Digital Journalism, is an internationally recognized sports media scholar whose work examined the societal, organizational, and economic models of digital journalism, with a particular focus on sports journalism. Dr. Moritz mentioned how while what she said on air was shocking to many in the sports media world, it wasn't a surprise to him. "At the time, she was an active voice, and kind of the intersection of sports, race, and culture," Moritz said. "She was someone who was writing and talking a lot about being black in America and how black athletes are starting to find their voice."

Hill would later anchor her final show of *SportsCenter6* with Michael Smith on February 2nd, 2018, and would soon write for *The Undefeated*, ESPN's website for intersections of sports and race. She then left the program entirely a few months later to work for *The Atlantic*, ending her noteworthy, yet controversial tenure with the program.

While this was not an actual firing of an employee, there was mutual agreement from both Hill and ESPN that the partnership should not continue going forward, and it would be best for both parties to go on their separate ventures. But the question remains: does ESPN feel that they made the right move in parting ways with one of its best anchors? "In general, you should be able to say whatever you want," Marchand said. "But my thing would be you can say whatever you want, you don't necessarily get to take the check from the company. If they are telling you no, these are the rules, we want you to stay with it." ESPN has made it consistently clear within its ruling that while it may be tempting to voice your concerns on certain issues outside of the world of sports, it can jeopardize your chances of writing or presenting on TV the following day. Ever since Hill left ESPN, many of its staffers have been consciously aware of what they are allowed to say, and not say, on air as well as on their social media.

Joel Anderson, a staff writer at Slate Magazine, used to work at ESPN covering college basketball and football. While working for ESPN he attended multiple seminars detailing the rules and regulations behind working for the network. Anderson knew that the day he wouldn't be working for the company for long was when he was on vacation in June 2018. He got a phone call from his editor who asked if he had seen the news about Roseanne Barr's new show

being canceled due to a racist tweet about a former Obama senior advisor. Now, Anderson barely knew about Barr, her show, or how dangerous this tweet eventually turned out to be. However, he soon realized that his editor wasn't just calling to relay this news, he wanted to make it clear that Anderson shouldn't say anything about it, to not draw the wrath of some Disney executives. He now knew that part of the bargain of working at ESPN was to require constant reminders to understand his place in the company. He referred to it as "being constantly monitored like an overactive schoolboy." (Anderson)

Many would say that Jemele Hill did the right thing. She could voice her opinions, and do what she does best, at *The Atlantic* without being censored by ESPN executives. Hill eventually wrote a memoir, "Uphill," where she talks about her struggles during her childhood as well as her views about ESPN management and how they dealt with her suspension and resignation. She spoke about her thought process when she officially left ESPN. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about where I would go from *SportsCenter* until I eventually left ESPN altogether," Hill said. "I thought about all the reasons I'd gotten into journalism in the first place and the types of stories that excited me the most. At the time there were a lot of important conversations about race, gender, and culture taking place in sports. Not only did I want to participate in these conversations, I wanted to frame them." (Uphill)

According to the SPJ Code of Ethics, journalists should be able to explain their own ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content. This is what Hill intended to do. She knew

that while this may have cost her an important and lucrative position at ESPN, it was her moral choice to say what she needed to say. When she mentioned Jerry Jones and how fans should boycott the team's advertisers, she knew that it wouldn't look good in the eyes of her executives, but she felt that her words mattered during that period when leaders like Trump despised players kneeling for the anthem, and Jones, a Trump supporter, was one of the few owners who imposed such harsh rules if players intended on doing so.

Stephen A. Smith, one of ESPN's top anchors, is known as being energetic, but knowledgeable about almost all things related to sports. However, he too likes to voice his concerns on matters other than what is said on the air. His show, *The Stephen A. Smith Show* on YouTube, showcases himself interviewing others. They talk about issues in sports, but also sometimes veer off to other issues in the world, such as recent political news or even hot takes in general. Much of the criticism of the show is due to the fact that Stephen A. doesn't have much expertise on topics other than sports, so there is no need to hear what he has to say on such videos. When asked what's ultimately the difference between Stephen A. Smith and Jemele Hill in terms of voicing their concerns beyond the playing field, Dr. Brian Moritz spoke about how Stephen A. is allowed to be on ESPN while continuing his own YouTube show as well. "I think the time is shifting," he said. "2018 was a different period than 2023. That opens doors for talking about things that people wouldn't talk about back then on a sports network. We've had a pandemic, the George Floyd death, and all kinds of resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, I think there is a lot more recognition that this is a thing that can happen."

In terms of what could have been done differently, while ESPN and Jemele believe their mutual parting ways were beneficial for both, there could have been a better approach to *SportsCenter6*, which could have left a more positive mark on her tenure with the program. Andrew Marchand talked about if he were to advise the show, some changes could be considered in order to capture a greater audience. "If I were to advise that show I would add a newsreader to say, "Here's the story, what's your opinion?" Marchand said. He believes that creating a more hot-takes type of show would allow for audiences to be more captivated by a different opinion and how that relates to the overall sports world. As mentioned before with Joel Anderson, he was in a position where ESPN had to tell him constantly not to engage in social media regarding your own opinions on issues beyond sports, and while that may seem like the safer option in terms of ESPN's reputation, it could be demeaning to their employees who may feel threatened for their job security. By relaxing those protocols, certain employees will feel more welcomed and respected by the network and would not have to worry constantly about executives enforcing the network's strict policies so often.

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