

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

“Those Guys Aren’t Allowed to Have Any Fun: What The Sport’s Guy’s Departure from ESPN Can Teach Us About Censorship in Sports Media”

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For decades, conventional wisdom in sports media promulgated the belief that broadcasters and journalists must remain objective, balanced, and above all else, neutral and fair-minded. Any brand of creative license or showmanship was reserved squarely for prose in between the margins of newspapers, while codes of professional conduct historically refrained sports writers from moving astray from the world of athletics and spectatorship. As sports media became more round-the-clock and pervasive by 1980s, most clearly symbolized by the creation and overnight success of ESPN, sports reporters often overshadowed the events they were assigned to cover. Whether this was a direct result of the uneasy merging of sports and entertainment is questionable; but what is certain is that as media platforms continue to expand in sports journalism, so does the potential for public clashings and even censorship.

No figure in the sports media world better personifies this than Bill Simmons, who from 2002 to 2011, served as ESPN’s Sports Guy and later served as editor-in-chief for the website Grantland, operated under ESPN’s complex media umbrella. Simmons was not merely a sports journalist, but a pioneer in burgeoning online platforms for entertainment and commentary. His podcast, *The BS Report*, was ESPN’s most popular podcast, and routinely ranked among the most downloaded podcasts in any category; he served as producer for ESPN’s acclaimed *30 for 30* documentary series; and he even filled as an occasional talking head on ESPN’s television programming. But where Simmons distinguished himself from other members of the sports media was his writing – not bombastic and hyperbole-laden, but thoughtful, passionate, unafraid, sometimes crude and exceptionally long (often with word counts exceeding 10,000) and full of witty and cynical insights between the worlds of sports and pop culture. He did not interview athletes or cover events – at least not in a traditional way. Instead, his podcasts gleefully inserted his own opinions, while segments alternated interviews with diverse luminaries such as Al Michaels, William Goldman, and Malcolm Gladwell, and impromptu phone calls to his college buddies and his father.

As Simmons’ cult-like status among readers and listeners increased, so did the discomfort for ESPN, faced with the task of publically promoting a talented and well-liked personality while privately objecting to his crass demeanor and unfettered sentiments. Simmons wasn’t immune to publicized disputes; in 2008, he went on an extended leave after ESPN refused to allow a porn star to take part in his fantasy basketball league. A similar two-week Twitter ban ensued in 2010 when Simmons labeled an ESPN-affiliated radio station “deceitful scumbags.” In spite of the bad blood, the creation of Grantland in 2011 appeared to be a mutually beneficial option, giving Simmons his own space to vent while no longer under the direct auspices of his ESPN editors. But perhaps inevitably, Simmons’ public sentiments, so beloved and encouraged by his fans, became the tipping point in May 2015, when he called NFL commissioner a liar and later dared ESPN to

suspend him. Only days after, Simmons' contract was not renewed, the *B.S. Report* sacked, and the promise of Grantland and *30 for 30* seriously bludgeoned.

Simmons proceeded on a media blitz against ESPN, calling out the media behemoth as frequently engaging in censorship practices and unethical ultimatums to either stick to the script or lose your job. Of course, Simmons' vocal condemnations can be read as somewhere between justified and wholly unsurprising. However, I believe that Simmons' testy relationship with ESPN and the downfall of Grantland represent something far more consequential than merely a bitter employee airing his dirty laundry. Namely, how do media conglomerates retain viewership and unique hits if the product becomes sanitized, scripted, and uncritical? Furthermore, is it possible that the Simmons fiasco signals a broader shift toward corporate concealment of the voices of not only journalists and writers, but athletes themselves, many of whom have become more candid and empowered through the advent of social media? Simmons may be a provocateur and lightning rod, but he was also undeniably pivotal in the construction of ESPN's public interface and following. However, when faced with the choice between brand (Simmons) and product (NFL), ESPN ultimately opted for the latter, demonstrating that short-sighted corporate ideology has little room for the personal loyalties and creative freedom that were once so integral to its popularity among fans.