

ESPN and the Changing Sports Media Landscape

Edited by Greg G. Armfield,
John McGuire, & Adam Earnheardt



PETER LANG
New York • Bern • Berlin
Brussels • Vienna • Oxford • Warsaw

**LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING
LARAMIE 82071**



9. *Jemele Hill, Twitter, and ESPN: Thinking Inside the (Potter) Box*

DAVID STATON

This above all: to thine own self be true ...

—Hamlet act 1, scene 3

ESPN traverses a news-entertainment tightrope. It has outspoken strong personalities with opinionated takes on the issues of the day, a commitment to high quality sports journalism, as well as the straight ahead 24/7 business of box scores. As a \$28 billion business (“Trefis Team,” 2018), it also has an equally strong commitment to the financial bottom line. However, in the age of social networks and digital immediacy—an anytime, anywhere atmosphere—the “Worldwide Leader” appears to be struggling to find its balance. The colliding worlds of sports, culture, politics, and ethics have proven to be a sticky entanglement for the network and a few highly visible instances played out on social media have garnered some raised eyebrows in recent years.

Perhaps none of these incidents has been as visible as when the White House entered into the fray regarding Jemele Hill’s use of social media, particularly her Twitter posts. When the ESPN personality described Trump as a white supremacist in a tweet on September 11, 2017 (a “fireable offense,” said White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders) a firestorm of attention erupted and Hill was reprimanded by the network, which distanced itself from her remarks (Nakamura, 2017, para. 2). Less than a month later, Hill took Dallas Cowboys’ owner Jerry Jones to task on Twitter for his public position on National Football League (NFL) players kneeling during the National Anthem. In that particular series of tweets, noted below, she called for viewers to stop watching the Cowboys and cease patronizing the team’s advertisers. In this instance, following a public rebuke of Hill via a company tweet, ESPN suspended her for a two-week period, as she had violated the

network's social media policy (Amatulli, 2017). This chapter will interrogate the ethical implications and dimensions of this situation—did Hill, ESPN, and the audience behave within ethical norms?—by using an ethical decision-making framework known as the Potter Box (Potter, 1969).

Jemele Hill and the Twitter Storm

When Hill came to work for ESPN in 2006, she did so as a national columnist for the network's website, ESPN.com. Prior to her employment with ESPN, she was a beat writer at the *Detroit Free Press* as well as the *Orlando Sentinel*, where she was a sports columnist; columnists differ journalistically from a reporter in that they offer opinions or editorialize, whereas journalists hold steadfast to the ideal of objectivity. In a 2006 interview with the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the publication noted that Hill, then 30 years old, was the sole female African-American working as a sports columnist in the United States (Barrett, 2006). The insights she offered in her role of opinion sharer/shaper were often provocative. For instance, in a description of the ice dancing at the 2006 Winter Olympic games, she wrote "I know ice skating requires coordination, skill and timing, but so does picking your nose and that ain't a sport" (Barrett, 2006, para. 9). When WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes came out, Hill wrote "Lesbians don't pose a threat and have a certain appreciation in a male-dominated culture" (para. 9). ESPN hired Hill with awareness of her ability to be at minimum thought provoking and at most to be controversial.

Writing commentary pieces for the website's "Page 2" column and *ESPN The Magazine*, she retained those qualities as provocateur. In her debut column (November 14, 2006), in which she interviewed herself, she wrote "I also would ask: If former Miami Hurricanes announcer Lamar Thomas were white, would he have ever been given a broadcast job in the first place? His criminal sheet is so long he could have been a foot soldier for Tony Soprano" (Hill, 2006, para. 30). In the same column she noted, "as a columnist, I hope to make you think, piss you off, make you laugh, make you reach for Advil, and make you cry. Mostly, though, I hope to make you read" (Hill, 2006, para. 31). Five years later (December 28, 2011), she began an *ESPN The Magazine* column with this opening salvo, "I don't know why I keep hoping that one day Michael Jordan will grow a conscience" (Hill, 2011, para. 1). Her role with ESPN began to expand to include TV appearances and in 2013 she joined Michael Smith as co-host of *Numbers Never Lie* later rebranded as *His and Hers*. In a press release dated October 27, 2014, ESPN touted the duo and the show's new title:

Since the entertainment world and social dialogue are a passion of the duo, the revised format will be adjusted to allow for the organic inclusion of related topics. The change from *Numbers Never Lie* to *His & Hers* is truly a natural evolution for the program as it has grown over time to showcase more of their opinions while moving away from a focus on data. (Christie, 2014, para. 2)

On September 11, 2017, Hill, who by this time was co-host of the network's SC6, offered up some of these opinions. In the late afternoon that day, Hill took to her Twitter account to share this tweet with her 1.02 million followers: "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/other white supremacists" (Hill, 2017a).

She followed this tweet almost immediately with "The height of white privilege is being able to ignore his white supremacy, because it's of no threat to you. Well, it's a threat to me" (Hill, 2017b). Four minutes later she tweeted: "Trump is the most ignorant, offensive president of my lifetime. His rise is a direct result of white supremacy. Period" (Hill, 2017c). Within the next two minutes, as detailed in an article in Uproxx (Kalland, 2017), she responded to interjections by various other Twitter account holders, noting:

- "No the media doesn't make it a threat. It IS a threat. He has empowered white supremacists (see: Charlottesville)."
- "He is unqualified to be president. He is not a leader. And if were not white, he never would have been elected."
- "Donald Trump is a bigot. Glad you could live with voting for him. I couldn't, because I cared about more than just myself."
- "And it's funny how you cling to Benghazi but I bet you didn't give one thought to what Trump said about the Central Park 5." (para. 4)

By the next afternoon, ESPN responded via Twitter: "The comments from Hill regarding the President do not represent the position of ESPN. We have addressed this with Jemele and she recognizes her actions were inappropriate" ("ESPN Public Relations," 2017a).

On Wednesday, September 13th during an afternoon news conference, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders called Hill's tweets, "a fireable offense" (Nakamura, 2017, para. 2). Later that same day, Hill offered up a *mea culpa* via a message to Twitter followers, which reads in part: "My comments on Twitter expressed my personal beliefs. My regret is that my comments and the public way I made them painted ESPN in an unfair light. My respect for the company and my colleagues remains unconditional" (2017d).

All remained well for about a month, then the Hill controversy began in earnest. The uproar from her tweets about Trump had barely subsided when Hill again took to Twitter to opine. This time her target was Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who had made statements to the press concerning NFL players kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem. Hill took to Twitter to respond to Jones' remarks as detailed by Amatulli (2017):

- "Don't ask Dak, Dez & other Cowboy players to protest. A more powerful statement is if you stop watching and buying their merchandise" (para. 9).
- "This play always work (sic). Change happens when advertisers are impacted. If you feel strongly about JJ's statement, boycott his advertisers" (para. 16).
- "Just so we're clear: I'm not advocating an NFL boycott. But an unfair burden has been put on players in Dallas & Miami w/anthem directives" (para. 19).

Here, Hill referenced edicts by both Cowboys owner Jones and Dolphins owner Steve Ross that players stand for the National Anthem. Hours later, ESPN announced the two-week suspension of Hill in a tweet:

Jemele Hill has been suspended for two weeks for a second violation of our social media guidelines. She previously acknowledged letting her colleagues and company down with an impulsive tweet. In the aftermath, all employees were reminded of how individual tweets may reflect negatively on ESPN and that such actions would have consequences. Hence this decision. ("ESPN Public Relations," 2017b)

Contextually, it is important to remember that when the calendar on the NFL season had flipped to week four, NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem controversy was in full blossom. During that weekend's (September 24, 2017) slate of games, there were protests league-wide by professional football players prior to taking the field. Members of the 32 teams kneeled and/or linked arms in a show of solidarity; some simply did not take the field during the playing of the anthem. Trump, who had previously weighed in with his sentiment concerning such protests, pronouncing during a September 22nd political rally: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired!'" (Jenkins, 2017, para. 4). Two days later Trump took to Twitter to echo his sentiment: "Sports fans should never condone players that do not stand during the National Anthem of their Country. NFL should change policy" (Trump, 2017).

For his part, Dallas Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones shared his opinion a few weeks later in widely-shared post game remarks. On October 8, 2017 Jones told journalists that the league "can't in any way give the implication that we tolerate disrespecting the flag" ("Jerry Jones," 2017, para. 8). Of his own players, he added, "If we are disrespecting the flag, then we won't play. Period" (para 8).

How and why ESPN came to the decision to suspend Hill was not made transparent. However, precedent for such action had previously been established with suspensions of ESPN personalities Curt Schilling and Linda Cohn for speaking out in ways the network considered ill- advised. The Hill suspension raises a slew of research questions with ethical dimensions.

1. If Hill was ostensibly hired to be a provocative host, why would the network publicly censure her for doing what she was being paid to do?
2. If she was doing what she was hired for, did she owe her company an apology for posting tweets to a Twitter account bearing her name?
3. Was Hill acting in the official capacity of a journalist and thereby bound by ethical considerations of the profession when she tweeted?

A framework for ethical decision making may lead to answers to these thorny questions.

The Potter Box

Black and Roberts (2011) offer a number of frameworks for making ethical decisions. They note, "Moral philosophy and normative ethics involves going beyond rules and codes, and utilizing *justification models*" (p. 49). These are ethical formulas or decision-making matrices that can be followed to logical ends. They point to the rotary four-way test, Bok's test of veracity, the TARES test, and particular to the case at hand, the Society of Professional Journalists Model among other justification methods. Stevenson and Peck (2011) suggest a version of Cavanaugh's Double-Effect reasoning model based on the norms of doing good and avoiding evil. Jones (1991) calls for a framework that supplements, but does not replace, other similar models. He dubs this structure the "issue-contingent" model and it explicitly "includes characteristics of the moral issue itself as either an independent variable or a moderating variable" (p. 371). This variable considers the moral intensity of the dilemma; a "construct that captures the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation" (p. 372).

While Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel, and Woods (2016) point out no single ethical perspective or decision-making tool is universal or even transnational. He and other scholars who *do ethics* note the Potter Box's use can "steer media practitioners toward socially responsible decisions that are justified ethically" (p. 31). Watley (2013) champions the Potter Box because its application does not require any advanced formal training in ethical philosophy. As one of the most frequently cited justification models it provides a clear and concise way to examine (and re-examine) ethical issues such as the Hill-ESPN situation (Black & Roberts, 2011).

The Potter Box was designed by Dr. Ralph Potter of Harvard Divinity School between 1958–1963 when the then-PhD candidate was writing his dissertation (Parsons, 2008). The topic of his work concerned how Christians should view nuclear weapons and, via his examination, he created four categories for ethical evaluation. The categories he considered universal to all ethical decisions. For example, imagine two sets of two boxes stacked atop one another side by side forming a quadrant (see Figure 9.1). These are the four boxes, or steps, one navigates while working their way through ethical quandaries. First, the ethical dilemma must be objectively defined in detail. This box is called *definitions*. The second box requires the values related to the situation be identified. What values are in operation that drive the situation? This box is called *values*. Next, a moral principle must be prescribed. Are the values guided by the principles of utilitarianism? The Golden Mean? A professional code of ethics? Some other guiding code? This box is called *principles*. Finally, the definition of loyalties and responsibilities must be addressed. What loyalties exist and why should they be adhered to? This box is called *loyalties*. Following this, a decision can be made as to whether an agent behaved ethically. Given feedback, the decision may be re-evaluated and, once again, the Potter Box may be navigated to refine one's position (Parsons, 2008)

When Potter designed this tool, he proposed that users could mix these steps in order to further fine-tune their decision-making process (Potter, 1969). For instance, one might consider defining the situation whilst identifying the moral principle(s) involved. Or, conversely, one might consider the moral principle(s) involved then define the situation. This sort of cross-examination of the issue might also find one using this framework identifying the values inherent in the ethical dilemma then choosing loyalties or, in reverse order, choosing loyalties to assist in identifying the values of the case (Potter, 1969). An application of the Potter Box to an actual ethical dilemma the researcher has dubbed *The Hill Affair* might clarify the particular fashion in which this decision-making tool might be applied.

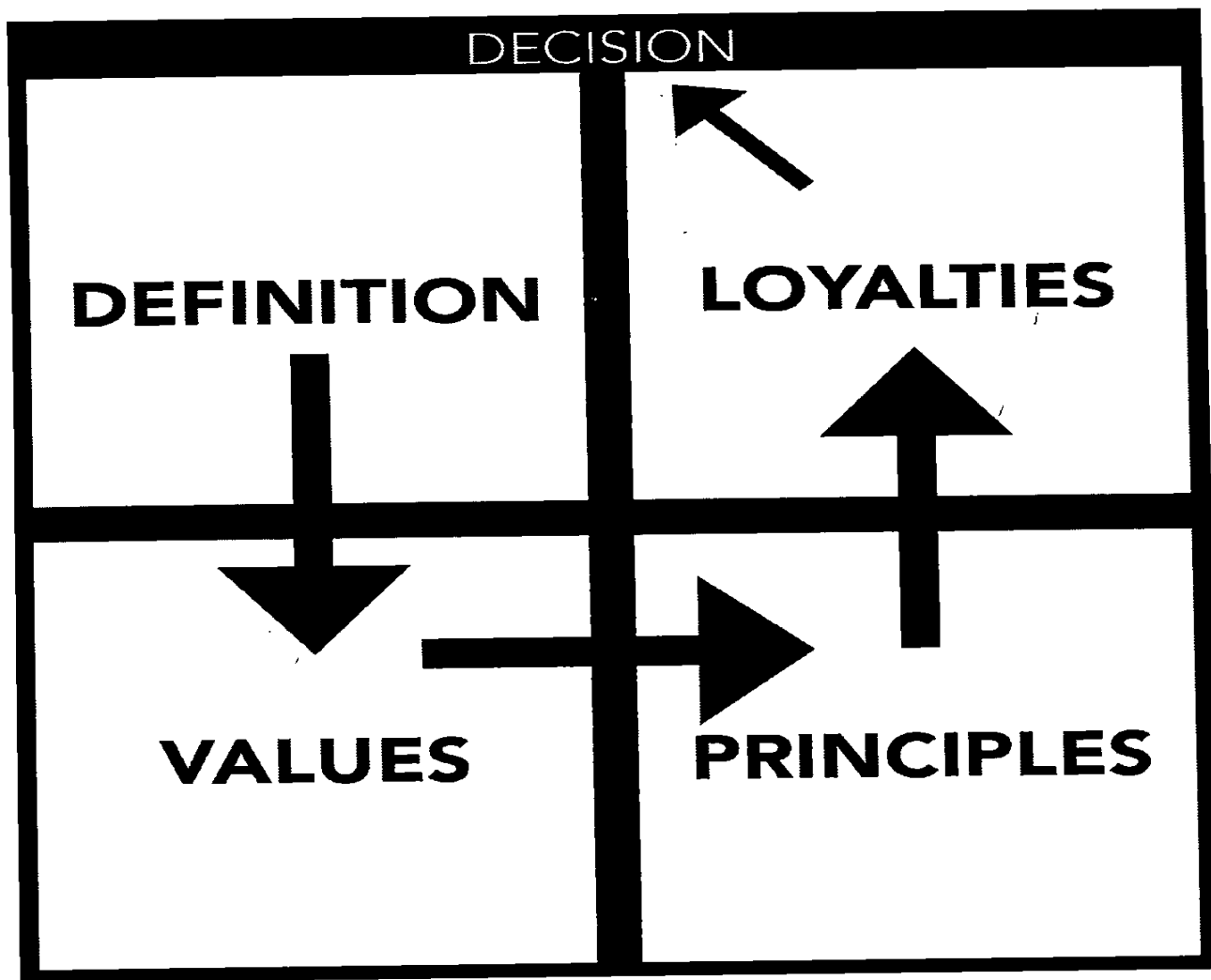


Figure 9.1: The Potter Box.

Source: Kathleen M. Ryan.

One of the significant features of the Potter Box is that it allows for consideration and reconsideration of the ethical dilemma from varying vantages (Parsons, 2008). In this examination, the researcher viewed the situation through a variety of lenses while moving through the quadrants of the framework and interrogate the ethics from the perspective of ESPN, Hill, and the audience.

Ethical situations often demand the sort of multi-faceted approach available by using the Potter Box, which despite the rigid formula or geometry its name might imply, is quite fluid allowing for cross-pollination. A change in ethical principles for instance—moving from the utilitarianism perspective that considers the greatest good for the greatest number of people to consider the same situation from Aristotle's Golden Mean (the balance between

extremes)—might shape, reshape, or otherwise inform values or loyalties. Similarly, a change in values can have a bearing on one's loyalties (Parsons, 2008). In the case of *The Hill Affair*, the definition of facts (Hill fired off a series of tweets) that surround the situation remains fairly constant as does the applied principle (an ESPN policy regarding social media use by its employees). What remains in flux in this particular case are the values, loyalties, and ultimately the ethical outcome. What follows are several passes through the Potter Box from the aforementioned stakeholder positions (Parsons, 2008).

The Potter Box and the Hill Affair

The Potter Box begins by establishing the *definition* of the case. These facts remain largely undisputed from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. Hill was an employee of ESPN. Her tweets concerning President Trump and the NFL kneeling controversy resulted in a large public outcry, both in favor and in opposition. She was initially reprimanded by the network after a series of tweets about the President, and then later suspended for two weeks after a second series of tweets concerning NFL players kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem.

The Potter Box next asks for *values* to be determined and evaluated. For the first pass, I consider this from the perspective of ESPN, the self-described "Worldwide Leader in Sports." Because of its reportorial content, ESPN holds among its values those of professional journalistic codes. The network, in fact, has a social media policy, which serves to function as the *principles* section of the Potter Box. At the time Hill made the tweets, she was governed by a policy established in August 2011 with slight revisions made in 2012. ESPN again revisited its social media policy in November 2017 (Steinberg, 2017).

The language of the earlier code, the one that Hill was prescribed to follow, addressed to "talent and reporters," begins:

ESPN regards social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, message boards, conversation pages and other social sites as important venues for content distribution, user engagement, newsgathering, transparency and the amplification of talent voices. As such, we will hold all talent who participate in social networking to the same standards we hold for interaction with our audiences across TV, radio and our digital platforms. ("Social networking," para. 1)

These guidelines apply to all ESPN talent, anchors, play-by-play, hosts, and analysts. The policy continues:

Think before your tweet. Understand that at all times you are representing ESPN, and Twitter (as with other social sites) offers the equivalent of a live microphone.

Simple rule: If you wouldn't say it on the air or write it in a column, don't post it on any social network. ("Social networking," 2011, para. 2)

The guidelines concluding admonition is; "We realize this is a fast moving space and these guidelines will be amended as warranted. Any violation of these guidelines could result in a range of consequences, including, but not limited to, suspension or dismissal" ("Social networking," 2011, para. 12). This stated policy will be revisited as it remains a guiding principle governing the various stakeholders in this scenario. It, along with the definition category, largely remain constants in this particular application of the Potter Box.

There is an intangible here in that employees and employer alike may apply or interpret the principle from a varying ethical perspective (e.g., it does not apply to me or the policy is in effect in this instance). Because of this variant factor I will examine that perspective through the lens of ethical egoism. Ethical egoism calls for a moral agent to do what is in their own self-interest. Ethical egoism claims that the promotion of one's own interests is always in accordance with reason. According to the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Nagel, 1995):

Egoism can seem true on the basis of a general argument which shows that all these apparently distinct motives, if properly analyzed, are really examples of self-interest after all—that any motive must be. The argument is that every voluntary act is something the person on balance wants to do, something he does because he desires to do it; therefore, he does it in order to satisfy his desire to do it; therefore the act is really self-interested. (p. 220)

Rand (1964) may be the most well-known and outspoken proponent of ethical, or rational, egoism. In the introduction to *The Virtues of Selfishness*, Rand notes, "To redeem both man and morality it is the concept of 'selfishness' that one has to redeem" (p. X).

This Potter Box then has one remaining box in its quadrant, *loyalties*. ESPN's loyalties in this instance were to its viewers/readers and its parent companies, The Walt Disney Company and Hearst Communications. As an employer, ESPN also must consider loyalty to its employees. In this instance, by disassociating itself from Hill's tweets through public admonishment and suspension, the network acted to protect and preserve its loyalties to viewers and its financial bottom line. ESPN's social media policy clearly contains a section that explains violations may result in consequences including suspension or dismissal. Having navigated one pass of the Potter Box, ESPN—acting within its own self-interest or from a vantage of ethical egoism—seems to have acted ethically in accordance to its values, principles, and loyalties.

Hill and the Potter Box

Taking a second pass through the Potter Box—considering Hill as a stakeholder—may result in a different perspective. The definition of the case remains the same: Hill was an employee of ESPN. Her tweets concerning the NFL kneeling controversy resulted in a public outcry, both in favor and in opposition. She was initially reprimanded by the network after one series of tweets and later suspended for two weeks after the second series of tweets.

The values portion of the Potter Box might now be considered. Hill was an employee of ESPN. Ostensibly she was hired as a journalist by the company and should, accordingly, abide by its social media policy for “talent and reporters.” Hill’s role as an employee of ESPN fits into the definition (but not clearly or cleanly) of “talent and reporters.” There is, after all, a difference in editorial scope of a reporter and one who travels in (thought-provoking) opinion or commentary as Hill demonstrably did. She was hired for her outsized personality and had a journalistic record of having strong takes on sports, politics, and culture. In a “be your brand” social media mindset, Hill was often outspoken and this was known by her reading and viewing audiences and her employer alike. Hill had worth to the network as an outspoken person. Herein, obviously, lies a tension that underscores ESPN’s market position as both journalistic and entertainment enterprise. Toward serving her audience and being true to herself, Hill appears to have acted ethically:

When do my duties to my job end and my rights as a person begin? I honestly don’t know the answer to that. I do know that we’re clearly living in a time of blurred lines. The president’s recent inflammatory attacks on NFL players, his choice to disinvite the Golden State Warriors to the White House are just the latest examples of silence being impossible. This is not a time for retreating comfortably to a corner. (Hill, 2017e; para. 15)

ESPN’s social media policy does not expressly forbid the voicing of opinion; it merely asks the employee to think before they tweet and not tweet what they would not say into a microphone. Her utterance, in this case a series of tweets, appears in harmony with the network’s social media policy, which advocates for the use of social media for “the amplification of talent voices” (para. 1). As well, it appears congruent with her identity at ESPN as an outspoken personality. The principle, as previously stated, remains the same in this instance: The company had a social media policy implemented as a guideline for employee conduct. Loyalties, along with this change in stakeholder position from network to Hill, vary accordingly. Hill was loyal to her public by being loyal to self. Was she loyal to the social media policy? To this extent it allows for “amplification” of her voice, yes she was. As such, Hill

acted ethically, particularly within the parameters of ethical egoism, in which self-interest is the dominant decision-making factor.

Audiences and the Potter Box

Taking a third pass through the Potter Box—considering the audience as a stakeholder—may, again, offer a different perspective. The definition portion of the Potter Box remains the same as previously stated, but is augmented by the audience's broader sense of history. It collectively recalls ESPN's handling of previous, high profile employee suspensions.

To wit, Major League Baseball analyst Curt Schilling was suspended in 2015 from the network for posts on social media comparing Muslims and Nazis. The former Big League pitcher was later fired for a Facebook post viewed as transphobic. Longtime ESPN *SportsCenter* host, Linda Cohn, was suspended for remarks made on *The Bernie and Sid* radio program in April, 2017, which included comments about the network overpaying for sports TV rights and its perception as left-leaning (McCarthy, 2017). Naturally, there was a segment of the audience that decried Cohn's reprimand when it became public and offered it as further proof the network was, indeed, left-leaning.

Given Hill was not suspended following her politically-oriented tweets, Fox News declared ESPN maintained a double standard when it came to the Hill and Cohn transgressions (see Flood, 2017). Days later, Schilling, in an interview with CNN's Michael Smerconish claimed, "I wasn't fired for speaking my mind. I was fired for being a conservative" (Delk, 2017, para. 1). And, in such fashion, the worlds of politics and sports collide. It is nothing new noted the network's Public Editor, or Ombudsman, Jim Brady (2017b) who wrote, "The desire to draw a boundary between sports, culture and politics is a fool's errand. Sport has always intersected with culture and politics. It isn't a recent phenomenon" (para. 4). Rather, what is new is the "perilous" intersection of traditional and social media (Brady, 2017a, para 1). This sticky situation informs the values portion of the Potter Box.

Particular values are expected by the ESPN audience. There is an expectation of the news value of the profession or some adherence to journalistic or objective codes when the network is presenting news-oriented programming. Here again, there are tensions between expectations of the value and its realization. ESPN offers hybrid programming of news and sports, often delivered by employees with opinions, and those opinions may be at variance with those of the audience. As such: is it necessary to be rigidly governed by a journalistic code of ethics such as that offered by the Society of Professional Journalists? Is it necessary to be apolitical? Or, in a crowded marketplace, is it necessary

to have a strong take so that one's voice is heard above the din of competing voices? Again, ESPN's Ombudsman Brady weighed in with a relevant column.

The world—and journalism—continues to evolve rapidly. The classic media model of objectivity has taken significant body blows in the digital age, accelerated in recent years by social media. And with an increasing number of athletes taking political stances, journalists are increasingly finding themselves wading into political waters. (Brady, 2016, para. 19)

There is also an audience expectation of logical values of consistency and competency. In the Hill Affair, this value would apply to the audience's view of her treatment by ESPN officials. The first series of controversial Trump tweets did not result in a suspension whereas the second, which raised the potential of a boycott of advertisers did. This does not seem consistent with ESPN's suspension of Schilling and Cohen, who were each suspended upon their first offense. It is worth noting ESPN is a major broadcast partner of the NFL. With a contract worth \$1.9 billion, it is in the network's best interest if the relationship runs smoothly. Hill's tweets may have been interpreted as not acting in the best self-interest of the company's bottom line.

The principle, as with previous stakeholders, remains the same. ESPN had a social media policy in effect that governed "talent and reporters." The specifics of this policy are likely not widely known by the public. However, this did not stop audience members and members of the press from weighing in, both pro and con, once Hill was suspended. Everyone seemed to have a take on her take and this leads to the loyalties quadrant of the Potter Box. The audience's loyalties are driven by individual loyalties. There are those who have an allegiance to the network and, in their eyes, ESPN can do little wrong. Others have taken exception to what they see as the network's lean to the left of the political spectrum. As such, the audience acted neither ethically nor unethically. Rather, the audience acted in its own self-interest.

Sticky Situations and the Hill Affair

Though many viewers, readers, and journalists weighed in on the Hill Affair by referencing the Schilling and Cohn precedents, this is not an apples to apples comparison. Schilling's social media gaffe resulted in his firing; Hill was suspended. Cohn's remarks were made on air (she was interviewed for a radio program). Hill was suspended for her posts on social media. It is worth noting this was, in fact, Hill's second suspension. The other suspension, in 2008, garnered far less fanfare and controversy. In that incident, Hill wrote in a *Page 2* column, "rooting for the Celtics is like saying Hitler was a victim"

(Hill, 2008, para. 9). She was suspended for a week and her offending words were scrubbed from the column. So, along with Cohn, there was precedent for a one strike and you are out type of suspension. The viewing and reading public as well as a White House employee, who claimed a double standard existed for Hill when she was not initially suspended (or fired), largely ignored news of her prior suspension.

Although Schilling's suspension and firing focused on his airing of opinion concerning hot button issues, it appears the Cohn and Hill suspensions do hold in common a reason—they talked about financial decisions made by ESPN. In Cohn's case, she mentioned during the radio interview that she felt the network had overpaid for its licensing contracts including those of the NBA, the Pac-12 Network, and the SEC Network. In the Hill Affair, the tweets she posted concerned viewers tuning out commercial sponsors associated with the NFL. So, fewer eyes on the games could mean fewer advertising dollars. Hill and Cohn's comments directly dealt with the company's financial bottom line. This appears to be a sensitive subject for the network, which has seen its fortunes decline in recent years via a decrease in viewership and advertising sales along with an increase in expenditures for programming (Trefis Team, 2017). For his part, ESPN President John Skipper weighed in with a memo released four days after Hill's Trump tweets that is revealing. After reminding employees there existed social media guidelines, he continued, "We had a violation of those standards in recent days and our handling of this is a private matter. As always, in each circumstance we look to do what is *best for our business*" [emphasis added] (Holloway, 2017, para. 4).

Decidedly, what is not good for business is having employees question what is best for business as both Cohn and Hill did using public channels, radio and social media respectively. However, suspending the two was compatible with ESPN's social media guidelines and ethical egoism, in which self, or business, comes first. The action was neither deserved nor undeserved; it was self-serving. Further, Hill acted in her own self-interest, taking and giving voice to an ethical stance, whilst not specifically violating any of the company's social media codes that were in existence at the time. The audience members for her tweets, naturally, included both critics, those who considered Hill out of line and fans, those who thought Hill's assessment was correct. They spoke their minds and this too is ethically compatible with self-interest, which is at the core of ethical egoism.

The Potter Box offers a way to negotiate ethical meaning(s) and outcomes from a variety of perspectives until a decision regarding those ethics can be arrived upon. In this instance, the outcomes appear to justify the behavior of various stakeholders. Ethical behavior appears to have been observed by

all parties. ESPN retained its appearance of being in control of its employees while protecting its own assets. Hill, in a testament of being true to self, stood by what she said, telling TMZ Sports in late October, 2017: "I put [ESPN] in a bad spot the truth of it is I regret the position [I put] the people I work with in, the position I put the show in. I put them in a bad spot. That's the truth. I will never take back what I said" (Callahan, 2017 para. 6). Finally, the audience was able to voice its opinion of vested self-interests.

With a different application of an ethical interpretation of the principle, say a utilitarianism perspective in which the greater good is central, the Potter Box findings might turn out differently. If the guiding principle was the revised social media policy—as noted, it has been reworded since the Hill suspension—the outcome might change. If one were to adopt an ethical perspective differing from the ethical egoism offered here, again, a different outcome might unfold. However, what likely is not going to change is the public's watchfulness and handling of ESPN's next *Hill Affair*. Will ESPN take bold, decisive steps when the next offender of its social media policy becomes a public controversy? Self-interest, or the bottom line, likely will dictate how it reacts. However, if it navigates the Potter Box to inform its decision, ESPN may well come up with a reasoned response. For example, the network might examine its own social media policy, which lies at the heart of the issue herein, as an ethical test case. In a hypothetical situation utilizing the Potter Box, the initial step requires that the definition must be set forth. In this imaginary case, an ESPN on-air personality has posted an item to a social media platform that invites public controversy. The facts, or definition, of the case can be simply established. It is the next steps in the Potter Box where things become more complicated. In identifying the values that define its social media policy, the network seeks to impose a unilateral policy applicable to a variety of journalists. The values of a color commentator are not those of a host of ESPN's *SportsCenter* and those values differ again for an employee such as Hill, who is, effectively, paid to be a provocateur and paid to have an active public, social media presence as such. In short, ESPN might question whether a one-size-fits-all policy is really on brand. Different social media platforms carry with them different expectations.

There are further complications moving on to the next step in the Potter Box, principles. The social media policy, as written, allows for only the self-interest of the network and, thereby, could curb or cripple personally held beliefs or moral positions held by its employees. The final step in the Potter Box, loyalties, poses nearly identical problems as encountered in principles. Loyalty to whom and by whom? The ultimate loyalty—to oneself—may be compromised by these guidelines. And, what of loyalty to an audience that

expects a certain tone and angle from a specific personality? They, too, are due a loyalty that again may clash with the stated social media policy

In order for ESPN to remain a dominate force in sports network programming the social media policy needs to be revisited. The hyper competitive tone set by the 24/7 news cycle requires the social media policy to be more fluid and less rigid. It also should allow for its personalities to retain their personality.

References

- Amatulli, J. (2017, October 9). Jemele Hill suspended from ESPN for 2 weeks after social media "violation." *HuffPost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jemele-hill-suspended-from-espn-for-two-weeks-after-social-media-violation_us_59dbccb6e4b0208970ceeaf2
- Barrett, L. (2006, July 7). Jemele Hill on being black, female, young—and on the sports page. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/jemele_hill_on_being_black_fem.php
- Black, J., & Roberts, C. (2011). *Doing ethics in media: Theories and practical applications*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Brady, J. (2016, December 1). Inside and out, ESPN dealing with changing political dynamics. *Espn.com*. Retrieved from http://www.espn.com/blog/ombudsman/post/_/id/767/inside-and-out-espn-dealing-with-changing-political-dynamics
- Brady, J. (2017a, February 13). The common sense approach to social media. *Espn.com*. Retrieved from http://www.espn.com/blog/ombudsman/post/_/id/805/the-common-sense-approach-to-social-media
- Brady, J. (2017b, April 12). Like it or not, ESPN isn't sticking to sports. *Espn.com*. Retrieved from http://www.espn.com/blog/ombudsman/post/_/id/831/not-sticking-to-sports-the-right-move-for-espn
- Callahan, Y. (2017, October 21). Jemele Hill on ESPN suspension: "I put ESPN in a bad spot." *TheRoot*. Retrieved from <https://www.theroot.com/jemele-hill-on-espn-suspension-i-put-espn-in-a-bad-spo-1819741779>
- Christians, C., Fackler, M., Richardson, B., Kreshel, P., & Woods, R. (2016). *Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Christie, J. (2014, October 27). ESPN's numbers never lie will change to his & hers with Michael Smith and Jemele Hill on November 3. Retrieved from <https://espnmediazone.com/us/press-releases/2014/10/espn2s-numbers-never-lie-will-change-to-his-hers-with-michael-smith-and-jemele-hill-on-november-3/>
- Delk, J. (2017, September 16). Curt Schilling says it's frustrating ESPN fired him and not Jemele Hill. *The Hill*. Retrieved from <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/351009-curt-schilling-cnn-host-spar-over-political-correctnes>
- ESPN Public Relations [ESPNR]. (2017a, September 12). The comments from Hill regarding the President do not represent the position of ESPN. We have addressed

- this with Jemele and she recognizes her actions were inappropriate. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/espnpr/status/917469637033512960?lang=en>
- ESPN Public Relations [ESPNPR]. (2017b, October 9). Jemele Hill has been suspended for two weeks for a second violation of our social media guidelines. She previously acknowledged letting her colleagues and company down with an impulsive tweet. In the aftermath, all employees were reminded of how individual tweets may reflect negatively on ESPN and that such actions would have consequences. Hence this decision [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/ESPNPR/status/917469637033512960/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F
- Flood, B. (2017). ESPN's double standard shows when hosts speak out. *Foxnews.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2017/09/13/espn-double-standard-shows-when-hosts-speak-out.html>
- Hill, J. (2006). I'm hearing voices. *ESPN.com Page 2*. Retrieved from http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:9v1w_ZGFL4YJ:www.espn.com/espn/page2/story%3Fpage%3Dhill/061115%26lpos%3Dspotlight%26lid%3Dtab-2pos1+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-b-1-ab
- Hill, J. (2007, December). The Celtics' rise fuels feelings of old times. *ESPN.com Page 2*. Retrieved from <http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=hill/071226&sportCat=nba>
- Hill, J. (2008, June 15). Deserving or not, I still hate the Celtics. *ESPN.com Page 2*. Retrieved from <http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=hill/080614>
- Hill, J. (2011, December, 28). Jordan, Nike need to stem violence. *ESPN, The Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.espn.com/espncommentary/story/_/id/7393317/michael-jordan-nike-do-more-stem-violence
- Hill, J. [JemeleHill]. (2017a, September 11). Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/other white supremacists. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/jemelehill/status/907391978194849793>
- Hill, J. [JemeleHill]. (2017b, September 11). The height of white privilege is being able to ignore his white supremacy, because it's of no threat to you. Well, it's a threat to me. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/jemelehill/status/907392229290934272>
- Hill, J. [JemeleHill]. (2017c, September 11). Trump is the most ignorant, offensive president of my lifetime. His rise is a direct result of white supremacy. Period. [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/jemelehill/status/907392229290934272>
- Hill, J. [JemeleHill]. (2017d, September 13). My comments on Twitter expressed my personal beliefs. My regret is that my comments and the public way I made them painted ESPN in an unfair light. My respect for the company and my colleagues remains unconditional. [Tweet] Retrieved from https://twitter.com/jemelehill/status/908173152370520064/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F
- Hill, J. (2017e, September 27). Jemele Hill on doing the right thing: A lesson from her grandmother; Be better. No matter what. *The Undeclared*. Retrieved from <https://theundefeated.com/features/jemele-hill-on-doing-the-right-thing/>

- Holloway, D. (2017, September 15). ESPN's John Skipper says Jemele Hill violated social-media policy with Trump tweets. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/john-skipper-jemele-hill-1202560723/>
- Jenkins, A. (2017, September 23). Read President Trump's NFL speech on national anthem protests. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4954684/donald-trump-nfl-speech-anthem-protests/>
- Jerry Jones: Cowboys "will not play" if they disrespect flag . (2017, October 8). *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2017/10/08/jerry-jones-nfl-cant-tolerate-players-disrespecting-flag/106456604/>
- Jones, T. (1991). Ethical decision making by individuals in organizations: An issue-contingent model. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(2), 231-248. doi: 10.2307/258867
- Kalland, R. (2017, September 12). ESPN released a statement following Jemele Hill's Twitter tirade about "bigot" Donald Trump. *Uproxx*. Retrieved from <https://uproxx.com/sports/espn-jemele-hill-twitter-donald-trump-white-supremacist-statement/>
- McCarthy, M. (2017, April 28). "SportsCenter" anchor Linda Cohen: Politics hurting ESPN. *SportingNews.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.sportingnews.com/us/other-sports/news/linda-cohn-sportscenter-espn-layoffs-new-york-post-the-bernie-and-sid-show-wabc/xti6exskx6wpl9v8pegqu7quz>
- Nagel, T. (1995). Egoism, psychological. In T. Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to philosophy* (p. 220). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Nakamura, D. (2017, September 13). White House: ESPN's Jemele Hill should be suspended for calling Trump "a white supremacist." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/13/white-house-espn-jemele-hill-should-be-fired-for-calling-trump-a-white-supremacist/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e0ff736f0de9
- Parsons, P. J. (2008). *Ethics in public relations: A guide to best practices*. Philadelphia, PA: Kogan Page.
- Potter, R. (1969). *War and moral discourse*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Rand, A. (1964). *The virtue of selfishness*. New York, NY: Signet Press.
- Social networking for talent and reporters. (2011, August). *ESPN Front Row*. Retrieved from <http://www.espnfrontrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/social-networking-v2-2011.pdf>
- Steinberg, B. (2017 November 3). ESPN unveils new social media guidelines for staff after Jemele Hill controversy. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/espn-social-media-guidelines-jemele-hill-1202606411/>
- Stevenson, S., & Peck, L. (2011). "I am eating a sandwich now": Intent and foresight in the twitter age. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26(1), 56-65. doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2010.512823
- Trefis Team. (2017, November 10). ESPN remains a drag on Disney. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2017/11/10/espn-remains-a-drag-on-disney/#71f361f62f79>

- Trefis Team. (2018, March 15). With subscriber declines continuing, how much is ESPN worth? *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2018/03/15/with-subscriber-declines-continuing-how-much-is-espn-worth/#7ec9cfabe3c9>
- Trump, D. [realDonaldTrump]. (2017, September 24). Sports fans should never condone players that do not stand during the National Anthem of their Country. NFL should change policy! [*Tweet*] Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/912080538755846144>
- Watley, L. (2013, Dec. 9). Training in ethical judgement with a modified Potter Box. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 23(1), 1–14. doi:10.1111/beer/12034