

Jemele Hill: How Sports Journalists Can Be a Beacon for Social Consciousness

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The landscape of sports journalism is defined by an emphasis on entertainment rather than a need for social consciousness. Sports media has routinely prioritized sensational stories and game highlights over an in-depth analysis of social issues, due to the constant demand for a broad audience appeal. Jemele Hill, a pioneering sports journalist, has instead decided to use her platform to address critical social issues, thereby redefining the role of sports journalism in contemporary media.

In sports media, black women are a rarity. According to the 2021 Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card from the Associated Press Sports Editors, 77.1% of reporters in the profession are white (66% male, 11.1% female). Black women only make up 1.1% of reporting positions, compared to 10.7% held by Black men.

The marginalization of women, especially Black women, in sports media is well-documented. Women's sports receive less airtime and inferior wages compared to men's sports. Female sports journalists face double standards and gendered affective labor, constantly needing to prove their expertise. Racial and gender biases are pervasive, with Black women being significantly underrepresented in sports journalism.

For Hill, this lack of opportunities in sports journalism made it more difficult to break into the industry. However, her audacious insights and direct approach to important social topics have led her to have a pivotal role in the evolution and diversification of sports journalism.

Hill made the most of her status as a Black woman in sports writing early in her career. She was the only Black woman to write a sports column for a daily newspaper in North America when she started writing for the Orlando Sentinel at the age of 28.

“I don’t mind being considered a ‘Black columnist,’ because I bring those experiences to my column,” Hill said to the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) about her role at the Orlando Sentinel. “On the other hand, it’s sad. What does it say about our business that I’m the only one? I also won’t deny there is some pressure on me because I am the only one.”

Hill's major breakthrough came when she signed on as a national columnist for ESPN in 2006. She quickly became an established fixture on several ESPN shows due to her engaging demeanor and perceptive analysis. But her status as a trailblazer in sports journalism was cemented by her work with Michael Smith on the podcast "His & Hers" and later the ESPN2 program "Numbers Never Lie." The program, which eventually evolved into the television program "His & Hers," was distinguished from standard sports programming by its distinctive fusion of sports analysis and conversations about social and cultural issues.

Hill, with her many roles in ESPN, was a pioneer in social consciousness when discussing sports and their impact on culture and society.

“I think [social consciousness] is all buried into the genesis of the league. ... Athletes like Bill Russell and Oscar Robertson, who, as much as they were part of the league, they were also civil

rights activists,” Hill said to the [Los Angeles Times](#) about the NBA and its impact on pop culture and activism.

Beyond her many achievements as a journalist, Hill is most well-known for her outspoken stance against former President Donald Trump, which has led to immense hate and racial harassment from right-wing individuals. On Sept. 11, 2017, Hill tweeted that President Trump was a “white supremacist,” which led to an online reaction from public figures and sports fans alike.

Despite her successful career, it was this politically charged tweet that drew widespread attention. The reaction was polarized: many athletes and media members supported Hill, while others, including White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, criticized her and ESPN. ESPN issued a statement distancing itself from Hill’s comments, yet the online debate persisted.

According to the research paper “[The ‘Angry Black Woman’: How Race, Gender, and American Politics Influenced User Discourse Surrounding the Jemele Hill Controversy](#)” by Guy Harrison, Ann Pegoraro, Miles Romney, and Kevin Hull, there was a theme in the hate directed to Hill regarding race and gender, proving that it led to a hate train driven by racism and misogyny.

The persistent battle of Black journalists in the sports media industry was brought to light by this incident. In his work "[The Journey of the Black Sports Journalist: Past, Present, and Future](#)," NBA writer for the Boston Globe Gary Washburn pointed out that Black sports journalists frequently have to balance supporting Black athletes with battling for their own acceptance in the

field. Hill's work exemplifies this dual advocacy as she consistently utilizes her position to speak out on behalf of larger social concerns.

Despite Hill's unwavering nature to change social norms in the realm of sports journalism, it is difficult to change the marginalization of women in sports, especially with the onset of social media. That was evident in how ESPN and the media handled Hill.

“The unfortunate part is that in sports there's always going to be this faction where people believe that women just don't belong,” Hill said in a Q&A interview with [Forbes Magazine](#). “That mentality is going to be out there and unfortunately, it's something that women in the business have to put up with.”

Hill's work has paved the way for future journalists to address critical societal issues within their reporting, fostering a more inclusive and socially conscious media environment. Her autobiography, "Uphill: A Memoir," published in 2022, provides an intimate look at her journey and the challenges she has faced, offering inspiration to aspiring journalists and advocates for change.