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Social media has made it more challenging for athletes, sports organizations, and media companies to control messages and easier for fans to laud and criticize them. Tweeting enables athletes to communicate with their fan base instantaneously and unfiltered, compared with the polished product of a recorded interview or press release. Using Twitter enables organizations as well to promote their products (tickets, paraphernalia, websites, programming) to an enormous audience. Two recent moments in sport – The Decision and the #NBCFail meme – have revealed how uber-controlled messages can elicit unfavorable fan reactions and produce negative effects on personal and corporate brands.

Just before Linsanity and Tebowing dominated sports media coverage, we witnessed The Decision: with the aid of handpicked reporter Jim Gray, NBA superstar LeBron James orchestrated a live television event through which he would announce where he would sign his next contract. On July 8, 2010, the Akron, OH native declared on ESPN that he was leaving Cleveland to “take [his] talents to South Beach” and play for the Miami Heat.

The Decision was an overhyped spectacle that converged television, journalism, publicity, advertising, and social media, and demonstrated how a star athlete, a leading cable network, and an established sportscaster could join together to compromise their professionalism, emblemizing today’s contentious, mediated relationship between celebrity athlete and fan.

Gray, who initially proposed the idea of a televised announcement special, peppered James with more than 15 questions (many frivolous) before asking him where he would be playing basketball in the fall of 2010. ESPN donated one hour of programming time to the event and generated \$6 million in advertising revenue that would be donated to charity. Nevertheless, fans and critics vilified ESPN for tossing aside its journalistic principles in favor of paying for access to a news story. The Decision immediately became The Derision. Due to the TV special (and because he abandoned his hometown team), James became anathema to indignant fans—(in)famously including Cleveland Cavaliers’ owner Dan Gilbert—who turned to social media to spew invectives and vitriol. Gilbert wrote a letter to fans, which he posted online and promoted through Twitter, in which he condemned James, promised Cleveland would win an NBA championship before Miami would, earned a fine from the league’s commissioner, and won the support of fans who offered to help pay the \$100,000 penalty. The public outcry against James has continued through 2012, when he won his first NBA title and his second Olympic gold medal.

Coverage of the 2012 Summer Olympics by NBC, which paid more than \$1 billion for the games in London, yielded unexpectedly high ratings. Yet one of the phenomena that gripped the Twittersphere during the late summer was #NBCFail, the hashtag that was used to criticize NBC’s delayed broadcasts of the more popular events, including the opening

and closing ceremonies. Viewers took to Twitter and used #NBCFail to lambaste the network. NBC made matters worse when it complained to Twitter about Guy Adams, *The Independent's* Hollywood correspondent, for posting the corporate (but not private) email address of NBC Olympics President Gary Zenkel and encouraging fans to complain to him about the delayed broadcasts. Twitter, which had an Olympics partnership with NBC, suspended Adams' account. Following user outrage directed at the TV network and the social media website, NBC retracted its complaint and Twitter reinstated Adams' account. Twitter also apologized for alerting the network and encouraging it to report Adams.

Adams and other journalists used social media to express their indignation that Twitter and NBC worked together to stifle a critical voice, whereas sports fans and viewers Tweeted their disappointment in the self-proclaimed "worldwide leader in sports" for relinquishing one hour of its programming to facilitate a celebrity athlete's self-promotion.

Social media might make sport (international and domestic) smaller and more immediate, but it also has revealed a coarser culture as well. Joel Ward, a black winger for the Washington Capitals, became the target of numerous racist Tweets after he scored the series-winning goal against the Boston Bruins in the 2012 National Hockey League playoffs. Fans used the n-word to express their displeasure, and the Bruins organization condemned such Tweets.

Sports fans and social media users can hide behind perceived walls of anonymity as they champion their teams and badmouth their rivals. Athletes and media companies can (and will) make mistakes in this arena as well through promoting themselves shamelessly, silencing critics, and not giving the fans what they want. Despite the explosion of emerging media, the age-old freedom of speech debates might remain the same; however, the platforms through which controversial messages are distributed certainly have changed, adding a complicated dimension to how celebrity athletes, companies, and fans interact.