

Civility on the Airwaves

I try to avoid commenting on the obvious. No one needs to hear one more criticism of Kirk Minihane's behavior on the radio. Keith Olbermann may have called him out well enough. He has been suspended for one week by his bosses at WEEI. But my thoughts go beyond the fact that Minihane behaved like an angry, ignorant, frat boy. I think his comments reflect a lot more about us, and how far our civic dialogue has fallen.

Kirk Minihane was perhaps justified in his frustration. Journalism has lost its quest for truth. When given an opportunity to grill pitcher Adam Wainwright for claiming to pitch easy to Derek Jeter, FOX reporter Erin Andrews allegedly let up. She accepted his answer and gave him a neat little exit: "Thanks for clearing that up?don't you love social media!" she quipped. This was, admittedly, a missed opportunity for Andrews to sink her teeth into a controversy. She could have begun a conversation about the hypocrisy of an All Star game that is a meaningless exhibition that *also* determines the home team advantage for the World Series. She could have questioned the wisdom of using social media in the midst of an athletic event, or the media's need to invite players and managers comments in the middle of competition. She might even have started a fire storm by questioning the worship of Derek Jeter. But she didn't. But it's not entirely her fault, because that is not what she is asked to do. That is not in her job description, nor is that what she was hired for.

Of course, Minihane has demonstrated how far we still need to come in our treatment of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. His shocking criticism of Erin Andrews and her soft journalism at the MLB All Star game crossed so many lines, that even those who have only recently begun to tolerate "feminism" can see how bad he is. He is left looking like an ignorant and hateful nerd.

His word choice was shocking, but the level of *hatred* he has for Andrews was unsettling. He is either a violent and hot-tempered man or a troglodyte, completely incapable of expressing his opinion in grown-up words. Or, he is an entertainer in journalist's clothing who is required to be shocking and crass as a part of his profession.

Perhaps Andrews is over matched in her job. Ironically, Minihan's outburst make him also seem under-qualified. His hatred of Andrews shows his inability to put together a coherent criticism of athletes or journalists. All he could come up with is "I hate her" and "What a bitch." These surprising playground words are imprecise, overly personal, and don't address his complaint about her *work*. When given a chance to truly criticize a member of the sports media, Minihan could only call her a bitch. When presented with a chance to call for sports conversations to be a little more intelligent, Minihan could only say "I hate her." He later "apologized" claiming that he used a word that he shouldn't have. Lost in this apology was that he also said he hated her and that she should "Go away. Seriously, drop dead." His apology was an embarrassment. He implied that he used the word at a time when he shouldn't have when really it was the *sentiment* that was most disturbing. In his apology, he in no way stepped back from what he said. In fact, he dug a deeper hole. He claimed that "if

she was 15 pounds heavier, she'd be a waitress.? At this point, his bosses suspended him for one week.

Andrews certainly missed her chance to be a true journalist. But she was educated in broadcast journalism at the University of Florida and has been paying her dues in the business for many years. She has been criticized for being a self-promoter (she appeared on dancing with the stars, which implies that she might think of herself as a ?star? and not a journalist). She is a beautiful and charming woman, which is what many networks want on the sideline. But in her work, she is doing exactly what the industry?and audiences--ask of her. Minihane is no different. In his criticism of Andrews, he did no better than Andrews did with Wainwright. He might claim to be part of a hard-hitting team of sports journalists who are there to ask the tough questions. When faced with the Andrews incident, Minihan could have criticized the faux seriousness of the All Star game. He could have wondered out loud why our sports commentary has devolved into pleasantries (or venom). He could have started a conversation about how we can get journalistic integrity into sports. But he didn?t. Because that is not what he is asked to do. He spouted off, using the language and vitriol that his bosses at WEEI love?the shock radio recipe must be followed. Shock radio substitutes snark for intelligent analysis. Sarcasm wins over sincerity every time. Crude is considered funny and inside jokes make the listener feel like one of the guys. Minihane is allowed to make comments that we might read in the ?readers comments? section on WMUR.com because that is what listeners want? and it?s what our attention spans can handle.

It sounds like I am continually criticizing one man for his repeatedly poor choice of words and is nasty sentiments. But the real problem is deeper. Minihane is, unfortunately, the radio host rule, rather than the exception. The reason he won?t be fired from his job is not because he is ?entitled to his opinion.? It?s because he?s doing exactly what the listeners want him to do. Listeners continually tune in and give their radio ears to these angry, crass men (and they are, across the board, men). Today, one hears such nasty words all the time, often when they?re not even needed. This is, in part, because we listeners confuse such words for passion. We don?t demand anything smarter. We don?t listen to deeper conversations. When the consumers demand higher standards, it may change. When listeners call their bluff, radio management will be forced to have a smart conversation. They can?t hang up on smart people forever.

The worst part about this story is the sexism behind Minihane?s comments. The implication is that Andrews was only hired for her looks, not for her journalism resume. The troubling double standard: most baseball analysts employed by ESPN and most local MLB affiliates (and really in most sports) are former players with no training in journalism or broadcast communications. Once again, in a time when we celebrate how far women have come, we resort to the ?she?s pretty? argument in criticizing her work. Andrews is trapped. If she were a little heavier or had crooked teeth, she would be facing endless cracks about her looks. I could write more about this, but I'm trying to focus on the problems with the world of journalism and our civic dialogue. These analysts repeatedly criticize the sports-journalism world for their failure to truly ask the tough questions. Harold Reynolds is slayed for his wooden, 12 year old boy analysis. Tim McCarver has been a whipping boy for years for his old-fashioned, sentimental, pedantic, sanctimonious, master of the obvious views. But then the radio hosts are no more qualified. They may have journalistic training, but they surrendered it long ago to be the annoying, ?irreverent? host that they have become. Well I, for one, am sick of irreverence. "Irreverent" used to mean we ask tough questions and don?t accept the party line. Now it means we are loud, and rude, and crass, and mean. It can?t be irreverent if it is just what everyone else is

doing. Talking heads pander to their audiences and become the simplistic grouch that we all love to hate. They sell their integrity for ratings. They go for superficial pleasures rather than tough questions and interesting observations. Just like Erin Andrews did, they substitute depth with fluff. But they aren't going to stop unless we ask them to stop. Let me be the first. Let there be peace on the radio, and let it begin with me. I agree that sports should be fun and full of passion. But to me, it is fun to be smart, and measured, and thoughtful, and well-informed, and eloquent. It is NOT fun to be hateful, stupid, trite, condescending, and misogynistic. If you agree, perhaps you'll consider sending a message to sports radio along with me?

I actually pity Minihane. He is trying so hard to stay relevant in a world where it is so easy to miss him. He works in a supersaturated media with 100s of people just like him. He doesn't stand out for his looks, his "takes," his stature, or his history. He presumably has a home and a family and he wants desperately for this career to work out. He is far less relevant than Erin Andrews. In our consumer culture, he has to sell himself so that people will buy him—and in the process, he is *consumed*. He is one of millions of entertainment choices in a sea of digital and broadcast entertainment options. And it's not easy to compete with the prurient option on the internet or the sound bites on YouTube. He has to play the game in order to stay relevant—just like Erin Andrews had to.

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