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Border Patrol

In a time when the news is available through any avenue of communication at all hours of the day, it is vital for a reporter or news media outlet to keep the audience interested without involving personal matters that interfere with their report of the news. Recently, the murder of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old from Florida, has spurred quite a debate in the country. Every news station has covered this story, but there is one reporter who has gone beyond the limits of journalism and mixed personal matters into his coverage of the murder. Reverend Al Sharpton, host of “Politics Nation” on MSNBC, has taken an additional role as lead activist for the Martin family, seeking justice against the accused murderer, George Zimmerman. Due to the fact that Trayvon was African American and Zimmerman is white, some people, as well as Rev. Sharpton, believe that this is a case of racial profiling and therefore, racial injustice. Sharpton’s dual role as reporter and lead activist for the Martin Family has caused other news outlets to speak out about the boundary between journalism and activism.

One news reporter, Howard Kurtz of “The Daily Beast”, “Newsweek”, and CNN’s “Reliable Sources”, outright states in the title of his article that Sharpton has a “conflicting role” in the case. In the beginning of the article, Kurtz discusses how Sharpton spearheaded a rally for Trayvon, shouting “arrest Zimmerman now!” at five p.m., then hosted his show, “Politics Nation” at six p.m. with Trayvon’s parents as his

main guests (Kurtz). Kurtz added this quote from Sharpton from that night's show, "I want us to get some money out. I want some of you business types, some of you preachers...And now, I'm going to start off with twenty five hundred dollars," (Kurtz). Kurtz provides a comparison argument to the situation Sharpton is in, prompting, "Would it be okay if [Sharpton] attended a rally for President Obama, asked the crowd for money and then interviewed Obama immediately afterward?" (Kurtz). Howard Kurtz, though he does not believe Sharpton is a true journalist, believes he should not be "playing on both sides of the camera" as a commentator. The quotes that Kurtz includes in his article proves his bias against Sharpton's dual role, especially when he quotes his own show, CNN's "Reliable Sources". Eric Deggans, a media critic for The Tampa Bay Times, made this comment on Kurtz's show: "Is [Zimmerman] going to feel like he can talk to NBC news or MSNBC and be treated fairly when one of their signature on-air personalities has spent weeks talking about how he should be arrested and he should be in jail?" (Kurtz). In addition, Kurtz further proves his bias by saying Sharpton's name informally. Only once does Kurtz address him as "Rev.", and even then he calls him "Rev. Al." These reasons collectively demonstrate the bias that Kurtz's report has against Sharpton disregarding the boundary between journalism and activism.

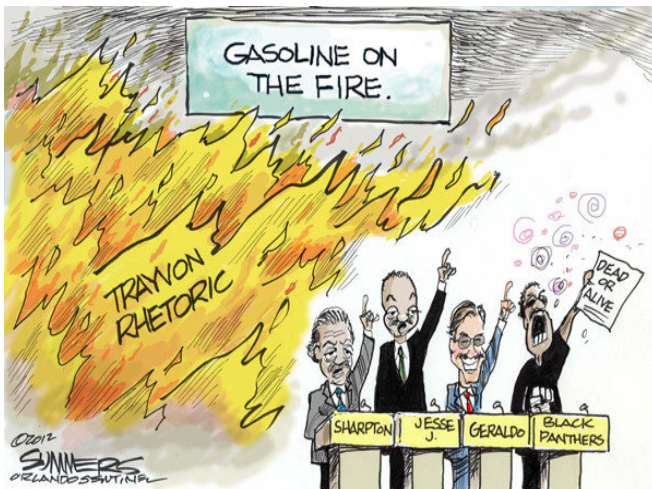
On the other hand, the Los Angeles Times has reported how Sharpton has again taken to the civil rights stage, without mentioning his disregard of the boundary between journalism and activism. This article by Rene Lynch, titled "Trayvon Martin case: Rev. Al Sharpton takes civil rights stage", paints Rev. Sharpton in a more positive light than the previous article. Lynch states that Rev. Al Sharpton awoke Thursday morning to the death of his 87-year-old mother. However, the civil rights activist had no time to

privately grieve, because he must speak at a rally for Trayvon and then begin his show on MSNBC (Lynch). Lynch composes this observation, “[Sharpton] will be preaching to the choir -- an audience made up of men and women of all races and ages and religions who stand with Sharpton in demanding justice on behalf of Martin and his family” (Lynch). However, Lynch’s observation is not thorough. Though many people do wish for justice for the Martin Family, a journalist cannot come out and say that everyone wishes for justice. What about Zimmerman’s family and supporters? A journalist must question and inform, and like Sharpton, Lynch has used persuasion as a bridge to also cross the boundary between journalism and activism.

An article from “The Christian Science Monitor” by David Bauder, Associated Press, begins with a questioning title: “Should Al Sharpton be Trayvon Martin activist and MSNBC host?” (Bauder). From the beginning, this article seems to stand on “the border” because unlike the last two articles, which had definitive stances on the subject, this title questions Al Sharpton’s dual role. Similarly to the last two articles, the quotes that Bauder uses strongly demonstrate his take on Sharpton. Bauder includes a quote by Kelly McBride, an ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute. McBride says, “It certainly represents a change in our traditional view of the boundaries between journalism and activism...Al Sharpton is clearly an activist,” (Bauder). However, Bauder then added a quote by Eric Deggans on CNN’s “Reliable Sources”, just as Kurtz did in his article, which voted against Sharpton’s roles. At the end of the article, Bauder quotes McBride again by saying, “I’m not saying this is without problems... I think it’s very confusing. But it’s certainly the way we are moving in the journalism industry” (Bauder). By ending with this quote Bauder may lead readers towards believing it is ok for

Sharpton to have both roles; However, because he does not say it personally, he may be ending with this quote from an objective point of view. For these reasons, Bauder represents a contemplative stance on Al Sharpton's dual role and the boundaries of journalism and activism.

One cartoon created by Dana Summers of the Orlando Sentinel captures the



“fuel” that reporters and activists have added to the Trayvon Martin case, including Al Sharpton.

Sharpton is the first out of four figures consisting of Jesse Jackson, Geraldo Rivera, and the New Black Panthers (collectively), who are

featured at a panel set-up with the caption above reading, “Gasoline On The Fire”. Inside the raging fire are the words, “Trayvon Rhetoric” (Summers). This cartoon depicts each man having a say in the case, and mentally fueling the fire that is the Martin/Zimmerman case. Sharpton appears first, propelling the cartoonist’s argument that he is the lead instigator in the media’s overexaggerated portrayal of the case.

Sharpton’s dual role as journalist and activist has indeed caused a conflict among other news and media outlets. The Trayvon Martin case is a tragedy, but should be reported fairly with both sides receiving an equal say in the matter. Sharpton’s involvement with the Martin family should not be carried onto his show, if he plans on reporting news justly. The boundary between journalism and activism has been crossed, and Al Sharpton is leading the news outlets across.

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