Talk radio needs to clean up its act

by Marc_H._Morial

Almost one year after radio shock jock Don Imus sent shock waves through the black community with his offensive and inflammatory remarks regarding the Rutgers University women's basketball team, it's as if a repeat of history is upon us, in an election year in which a black candidate has a serious chance of winning the White House.

Back in January, Golf Channel's Kelly Tilghman seriously botched an attempt at humor when she suggested that younger golf players might want to lynch Tiger Woods in a back alley in hopes of spicing up the tour.

The comment drew little ill will, at least publicly, from Woods, who reportedly considers the broadcaster a friend, but it prompted her employer to go into full damage control mode and suspend her for a few weeks.

"While we believe that Kelly's choice of words was inadvertent and that she did not intend them in an offensive manner, the words were hurtful and grossly inappropriate," Golf Channel representatives said in a statement.

The controversy precipitated yet another numbskull decision in the media, the display of a noose on the cover of Golfweek. There again, quick action rightly resulted - the sacking of the editor responsible.

But, believe it or not, it seems that the world of sports journalism seems to be aspiring to a higher standard in its response to embarrassing and offensive gaffes on air than the world of talk radio.

Earlier in February, radio commentator Laura Ingraham put her foot fully in her mouth and down her throat in her criticism of President George W. Bush's invitation of the Rev. Al Sharpton to the White House's recent Black History Month event. On her national syndicated radio program on Talk Radio Network, she said she had hoped that "they nailed down all the valuables."

Then, Fox News personality and radio talk show host Bill O'Reilly just had to invoke the phrase "lynching mob" in reference to Michelle Obama's comments regarding the United States on his syndicated radio show.

On MSNBC's "Countdown" in February, Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson expressed disgust over O'Reilly's comment. "There's certainly nothing at all funny or remotely appropriate about the use of a lynching reference about Michelle Obama," he said. "It's - I'm speechless."

As President Bush pointed out so eloquently during the Black History Month event, the noose represents "more than a tool of murder but a tool of intimidation" to generations of blacks.

"As a civil society, we must understand that noose displays and lynching jokes are deeply offensive. They are wrong. And they have no place in America today," he said.

Neither O'Reilly nor Ingraham were reprimanded by their respective employers even though the Fox News personality did offer a half-hearted apology.

At least Ingraham didn't drop the L-word but her suggestion that Sharpton, a former presidential candidate and respected member of the black community and beyond, is a petty thief reeks of race-baiting and negative stereotyping of African-Americans and black men in particular.

But it's hardly the first time either has ventured into questionable and offensive territory. How can we forget O'Reilly's less-than-informed comments regarding a dinner he shared last year with Sharpton at Sylvia's in Harlem? O'Reilly expressed surprise over how similar Sylvia's was to other restaurants in New York. "There wasn't one person in Sylvia's who was screaming, 'M-Fer, I want more iced tea,'" he said.

As the Washington Post's Robinson sadly observed on MSNBC in February, "All you can go by is his words and his actions. And he keeps saying these things that sound pretty darn racist to me."

Has talk radio learned anything from Imus' decline and fall? Of course not, because it didn't take Imus too terribly long to get a new gig.

Our nation's media outlets should not provide a platform for racial hostility and hateful speech now or in the future. What kind of message are we sending to our children, our nation and our world? In such an historic election year, we cannot stand aside and allow individuals to use the airwaves as an outlet for insensitive and misguided commentary. If you hear something that offends you, speak up.

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