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Culture Posts: Basketball Diplomacy in CNN's Court ^[1]

Sports diplomacy is often presented as a slam dunk approach for building relations across political divides. Last week veteran NBA star Dennis Rodman took a shot at “basketball diplomacy” in North Korea and showed how professed good intentions can go afoul. It also demonstrated the deft role of the media as the tables turned on the NBA players following a confrontational interview between Rodman and CNN New Day anchor Chris Cuomo. The NBA players not only lost control of the ball but became the ball on CNN’s court.

By coincidence I happened to be serving jury duty Tuesday morning, arriving shortly after the fateful interview. I sat along with 200 members of a captive audience in the juror’s lounge as we watch the five TV monitors – all set to CNN – replay the interview repeatedly over the next four and half hours. I watched how the veteran CNN players spun the story from an initial interview, to confrontation and controversy, to what would become by the next day, a bad and bizarre story gone viral.

Taking the Political Bait

From the outset the North Korea basketball initiative was controversial and political North Korea, after all, was the third spoke in what former President Bush called “the axis of evil.” There are the nuclear tests, human rights, and an American who has been detained for over a year. High stake political issues. Sports diplomacy is supposed to be apolitical.

Initial clips of the Cuomo's interview with the 10-man NBA team began on the familiar up-beat note on the benefits of sports diplomacy. NBA player Charles Smith talked about "bringing people together through basketball" and "putting smiles on people's faces." Highlighting the apolitical nature of playing basketball, he said, "Basketball is not that complicated to us. That's what we do."

"I get why you're there ... all the relational," but said Cuomo, "It is more complicated than basketball." He raised the ante with charged language, telling the players, "you're giving a birthday present to a despot who just had his uncle executed."

In a clip from the 8:25 minute interview that was not played, Charles caught on to what the CNN anchor's goal. "It is baiting to get us into politics and we don't want to get into politics." Yet that is precisely what happened.

Just when it looked as if Cuomo was closing the interview, the players let down their guard.

Cuomo began, "Let me end with this ... " And, then Cuomo pressed Rodman about intervening on behalf of the detained American, Kenneth Bae. Rodman, decked in sunglasses and waving a cigar, flew into an emotional and incoherent tirade. He appeared to implicate Bae, "if you understand what Kenneth Bae did ... "

Cuomo had scored big time.

CNN Full Court Press

The NBA players soon found themselves playing on CNN's court and by a new set of rules. In some ways sports analogies carry over to media conventions. However, the strategies for scoring differ.

Television thrives on drama and emotion. The Cuomo created tension between himself and the players by hard hitting political questions that undermined the integrity and credibility of the player's apolitical motives. While the players were good at fielding the apolitical questions of basketball diplomacy, they appeared as novices in CNN's political arena.

Once CNN had footage of Rodman's emotional outburst, the network was able to re-play it over and over – not so much for the substance of the content, but the emotional hook for viewers.

The CNN reporters passed the interview like a ball from to one another. With each pass, a new angle on the story emerged. By the noon hour it was no longer a story about basketball, cultural understanding, or sports diplomacy, but a "dramatic confrontation," "bizarre meltdown," and "incoherent rant."

As the day progressed, CNN anchors kept the story alive by playing the footage for high-profile, on air guests to comment on. Coincidentally the guests seem to take sides with CNN in attacking Rodman, sometimes personally. On CNN's *Newsroom*, Wolf Blitzer brought on Ambassador Bill Richardson, who had made several trips to North Korea to secure Bae's release, said Rodman had "been drinking the kool aid" in North Korea and had "crossed the line" by suggesting Bae committed a crime. Later that evening, CNN Anderson Cooper interviewed Bae's sister

, who said her family was “shocked,” “outraged,” and “appalled” at Rodman siding with the North Korean leader against her brother. That interview was followed by CNN's *Piers Morgan Live* interview with Senator John McCain who personally attacked Rodman, saying “I think he’s an idiot ... a person of not great intellect.”

Momentum inevitably grew. By the next day the major media outlets had joined in on the feeding frenzy against Rodman.

Game Over

It turns out that Rodman was not drinking kool aid but imbibing a more potent substance. On Thursday he apologized for his behavior and statements and particularly to Bae’s family. His dream of basketball diplomacy was unraveled by the politics he had sought to avoid.

I want to first apologize to Kenneth Bae’s family. I want to apologize to my teammates and my management team. I embarrassed a lot of people. I’m very sorry. At this point, *I should know better than to make political statements.* I’m truly sorry.
Dennis Rodman

Sports diplomacy seeks to score beyond political points. But in this story, the only points scored were political. Once the initiative became a political ball in the hands of seasoned CNN veterans it was, unfortunately for the NBA players, game over.

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