Ambiguous Twitter Monitoring Leaves Athletic Departments Open to Embarrassment

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By Brad Wolverton

The call came at 6 a.m. “Take that s*** off Twitter,” said the position coach. “What the hell are you thinking?”

The scene, recounted in a new study by two social-media researchers, is an apt description of how some athletic departments handle players’ faux pas on social-media sites. In some cases, the study found, colleges are more likely to spend time monitoring their players’ comments and waiting for them to slip up than educating them about potential problems.

Findings from the study were published online in a report, “Training Versus Monitoring: A Qualitative Examination of Athletic Department Practices Regarding Student-Athletes and Twitter,” on Tuesday in the journal Qualitative Research Reports in Communication.

The report, which includes interviews with 20 football, basketball, and baseball players at one midsize, private Division I university, says most athletes receive no training about Twitter. And although many players assume that rules exist about their use of the site, they are not sure of the boundaries because their institution did not make them clear.

In the absence of clear guidelines, some athletes said they operated under “common sense” assumptions such as “no cussing” or “don’t say anything stupid.” They felt that training on Twitter was unnecessary.

But the authors of the report—Jimmy Sanderson, an assistant professor of communication studies at Clemson University, and Blair Browning, an assistant professor of communication at Baylor University—argue that such a “reactionary and ambiguous” approach to Twitter has done little to mitigate controversial tweets.

“Student-athletes are left to guess at the boundaries for using Twitter,” they write. “Expecting student-athletes to interpret terms such as ‘inappropriate’ in the same fashion as administrators is naïve and shortsighted.”
Instead, the authors urge athletic administrators to devote time and money to front-end training, and to define clearer boundaries for Twitter use.

“Whereas ambiguity enables athletic departments to be the final arbiters of Twitter content,” the authors write, “a more troubling outcome of ambiguity is that it eschews the educational obligation of the university.”

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