

Media get on right side of history with gay NFL player coverage

Fewer than 24 hours after University of Missouri football player Michael Sam officially announced he was gay, Sports Illustrated placed a story online using unidentified sources saying this would hurt his chances to be drafted in the National Football League.

And fewer than 24 hours after that report came a barrage of media reports and opinions unequivocally supporting Sam.

While the Sam furor slowed down, the question of homosexuality spends more than its fair share of time in the media spotlight. The Sam story was just weeks old when the state of Arizona tried to pass a law that allowed people to refuse service to gays because it interfered with their religion. Again, media were quick to take a stand against this law.

Most numbers tracking support of gay marriage put the percentages somewhere between 53 percent and 59 percent in favor of gay marriage, with a March 2014 Washington Post poll putting the number at 59 percent favoring gay-marriage rights. That's still more than 40 percent of people opposing gay marriage, yet a quick and statistically unreliable Google search shows media support at a much higher rate (even Bill O'Reilly came out in favor of gay marriage).

Is this an example of a liberal media? Is this an example of a godless media? Or is this an example of media coming down in favor of civil rights?

Some of the coverage – and the consistent stance of media – comes from a natural fear of being vilified in the Twitterverse for making an uneducated or homophobic statement

in print. In May 2013, NBA player Jason Collins came out. Most reactions were positive, though one writer, from a small Illinois daily, wrote a homophobic, ill-conceived article about Collins. Jim Romenesko picked up the article on his website within a day, and soon people were piling on the writer from across the United States.

It was an example of how anything a person can do something stupid enough in print to make people pay attention. So, maybe some writers were afraid to let their homophobic sentiments make a public appearance in Sam's case, knowing the ramifications of such statements. Call it a spiral of silence or a bandwagon effect, but some reporters might shy away from making negative statements about Sam or gay marriage. Most appear to be ready to make the statement that a gay man on an NFL squad, or a gay married couple living next door, isn't going to harm anybody.

One man, Dallas sports anchor Dale Hansen of WFAA (an ABC affiliate) gave the best response to the Sam story. Hansen mentioned the Sports Illustrated story that said some men would be "uncomfortable" playing on the same team with an openly gay player, and then said, "You beat a woman and drag her down a flight of stairs and that's perfectly OK, you kill people while driving drunk, that guy's welcome." Hansen followed with a list of current NFL player transgressions, including rape, attempted murder, prostitution, and more, and followed that with: "But if you love another man -, well, now you've gone too far."

Hansen framed the story perfectly. Why worry about a person's sexual preferences when we have so many other things that are wrong with the NFL and college sports? And he framed the story in a powerful way, placing love, gay or straight, on one level, and comparing that to a completely different level, the true issues that face a league such as the NFL. In addition, he looked at the issue and wondered why the NFL wasn't concerned with real problems, because Sam certainly doesn't

qualify as a problem.

In fact, the same University of Missouri football players who were praised for being so accepting of Sam were mentioned in a story by ESPN about the possible rape of Sasha Menu Courey, a Missouri swimmer who claimed to have been raped in 2011. Her story was ignored by Missouri officials. She later left the school and committed suicide. Media should have paid more attention to this story than Sam but rape stories are too common.

The first openly gay NFL football player, now that's news. Maybe it should be. Media chronicle changes in society. Accepting that an openly gay man may be playing in the NFL marks a change in our cultural attitude. That change is the Hansen captured so well in his editorial. Sam's story is important because of how people reacted. Sure, there was the Sports Illustrated side, saying that the league wasn't ready for change. But there also was the other side that said that it didn't matter if the NFL was ready for change; society has already changed, and the league should catch up.

Sam is a story. Gay marriage is a story. Our culture is changing. Maybe the media noticed and are trying to be more accepting.

Jack Burkman, a lobbyist in Washington, promised to talk of Congress into passing a bill that would make it illegal to have a gay man in an NFL locker room. He promptly lost a number of clients, including conservative lawmakers.

Politicians have been inundated with a phrase from those who support legalizing gay marriage. They're told to "get on the right side of history." The media have done that with the Sam story, and with the Arizona religious freedom bill. This isn't about a liberal media, or even a fear of saying the wrong thing. Media, on the whole, have decided to get on the right side of history on this one.