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Roseanne Tweet Controversy: A Case Study

On May 29, 2018, Roseanne tweeted the following about former Obama Administrative Aide, Valerie Jarrett



This was a sudden and unforeseen nail to close the coffin of the 2018 reboot of the much loved 90s series “Roseanne”. It came as a surprise for all the people who had long awaited the remake, as well as to the 200 plus people involved in the production of the show.

The hashtag #CancelRoseanne started trending almost immediately, as accusations of racism were leveled at Roseanne, as well as at the ABC, the company which produced the reboot.

NBC Response

"Roseanne's Twitter statement is abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with our values, and we have decided to cancel her show," ABC Entertainment president Channing Dungey, before canceling the show on May 30th, 2018

Valerie Jarrett Response

* “its everyday racism. I'm worried about all the people out there who don't have a circle of friends and followers who come right to their defense -- the person who's walking down the street minding their own business, and they see somebody cling to their purse or run across the street, or every black parent I know who has a boy, who has to sit down and have a conversation, 'the talk,' as we call it. And as you say, those ordinary examples of racism that happen every single day."

Roseanne Barr’s Response

* After widespread condemnation on social media, Barr initially denied accusations of racism by insisting that "Islam is not a race."
* Eventually, though, she apologized, tweeting, "I apologize to Valerie Jarrett and to all Americans. I am truly sorry for making a bad joke about her politics and her looks. I should have known better. Forgive me-my joke was in bad taste."
* After calling off twitter for several weeks, she tweeted: “Don’t feel sorry for me, guys!!- I just want to apologize to the hundreds of people, and wonderful writers (all liberal) and talented actors who lost their jobs on my show due to my stupid tweet. I will be on Joe Rogan's podcast Friday.”

Joe Rogan podcast

* Discussed her long history of mental Illness, as well as a history of head injury (she was hit by a car, and her head spiked off the hood mount and she was in the hospital for a year.
* Explained a possible misunderstanding the less discussed, but arguably more
* Stated that she didn’t know Valerie Jarret was black, saying “I thought she was Jewish. She looks like me”. Also saying it wasn’t about her looks, it was about the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia
* Discussed how it takes a bit of insanity to be a really good comic

How I would have handled it

The public takes the tone of how to handle something from the top. The fact that the company was so quick to condemn Roseanne as “Abhorrent”, gave the green light to all the people opposing.

If I were on the PR team for ABC, I would have issued a statement saying the following:

“ABC has always valued people from all ethnicities, religions, orientations and sexes. We have always prided ourselves on welcoming people from all walks of life. The Tweet in question was extremely regrettable and tasteless, and that is all we have to say at this time”.

Then, I would have done next is the following:

* Have ABC donate to a charitable organization promoting black causes and welfare.
* Ask Roseanne Barr to make a similar donation.
* Change the topic from whether or not Roseanne (and by proxy ABC) is racist, to the fact that Roseanne is openly mentally ill and has been for almost all her adult life (perhaps by drawing attention to her erratic behavior in the past, and the fact she has been open about her mental illness.)
* I would also draw attention on these media platforms that Roseanne was incredibly intoxicated at the time of the tweet, on top of being mentally ill. I would call attention to the long, sordid history of Ambien, and how it is a medical fact that is a potent dissociative. I would cite many of the specific examples of Ambien triggering murders, sleep walking, and bizarre behavior, especially when combined with alcohol as it was the night Roseanne made the infamous tweet.
* WAIT. Do NOT condemn the actions too specifically, and wait for another, juicer scandal to hit the presses.

Changing the conversation

I would have mental health experts go onto friendly news networks and podcasts to discuss how Roseanne isn’t responsible. It is very important that these people aren’t overt representatives for ABC. They should appear to be independent professionals that the news networks have aboard to offer an expert opinion, and a counterpoint in the discussion of the Roseanne scandal.

I would drive home the point that holding a mentally ill woman with a history of brain damage fully accountable for her actions, is another form of discrimination. I would also point out that in many ways, discriminating against someone for their mental illness is currently far more socially acceptable than discriminating against someone’s race.

Make the conversation about the visibility of mental health, not about racism.

I would also mention at any possible point that Roseanne is a Sephardic Jew, and that the tweet was connected to Valerie Jarrett’s dealings with Saudi Arabia, and the way Saudi Arabia treats women. Make that connection in the public’s mind that due to Roseanne’s heritage, such treatment is deeply personal.

The goal of all this is to change the story from “a white conservative lady who made a racist tweet” to a “a chronically mentally ill, Jewish woman who made a bizarre tweet while on a dangerous cocktail of mental health medication, Ambien, Alcohol, and Marijuana”

Changing the conversation in this way makes Roseanne Barr’s actions appear more forgivable in the public eye.

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