

To Marty Baron and Tracy Grant:

We write to share our alarm and dismay that our newsroom leaders have chosen to place Felicia Sonmez on leave over a social media post, and to urge The Post to take immediate steps to ensure the safety of our colleague.

Felicia received an onslaught of violent messages, including threats that contained her home address, in the wake of a tweet Sunday regarding Kobe Bryant. Instead of protecting and supporting a reporter in the face of abuse, The Post placed her on administrative leave while newsroom leaders review whether she violated the social media policy. Felicia had to leave her home out of fear for her safety and has gotten insufficient guidance from The Post on how to protect herself.

We understand the hours after Bryant's death Sunday were a fraught time to share reporting about past accusations of sexual assault. The loss of such a beloved figure, and of so many other lives, is a tragedy. But we believe it is our responsibility as a news organization to tell the public the whole truth as we know it — about figures and institutions both popular and unpopular, at moments timely and untimely.

This is not the first time that The Post has sought to control how Felicia speaks on matters of sexual violence. Felicia herself is a survivor of assault who bravely came forward with her story two years ago. When articles attacking her were published in other outlets, The Post did not release a statement in support of one of its respected political reporters. Instead, management issued a warning letter against Felicia for violating The Post's vague and inconsistently enforced social media guidelines.

The Post's handling of this issue shows utter disregard for best practices in supporting survivors of sexual violence — including the practices we use in our own journalism. Assault survivors inside and outside this newsroom deserve treatment that is fair and transparent; that does not blame victims or compromise the safety of survivors.

This case also reflects fundamental flaws in The Post's arbitrary and over-broad social media policy. We have repeatedly seen colleagues — including members of management — share contentious opinions on social media platforms without sanction. But here a valued colleague is being censured for making a statement of fact. Felicia did nothing more than what The Post's own news stories have done when she shared an article about the past allegation against Bryant.

Even now, after numerous conflicting reports have been published about Felicia's situation, The Post has failed to offer a clear explanation of why she was placed on leave — to Felicia or to anyone else. We are concerned by The Post's unwillingness to be transparent about this issue, and alarmed by the implication that reporters will be penalized for talking about any topic not on their beat.

We urge The Post to immediately provide Felicia with a security detail and take whatever other steps are necessary to ensure her safety, as it has done in the past when other reporters were subject to threats. The company should issue a statement condemning abuse of its reporters, allow Felicia to return to work, rescind whatever sanctions have been imposed and provide her with any resources she may request as she navigates this traumatic experience.

We also hope that Post management will work with the Guild to educate themselves on treatment of assault survivors and improve the social media policy so that employees can get back to the work we all want to be doing: journalism.

Sincerely,

The Washington Post Newspaper Guild

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