Whether Brian Windhorst wants to be or not, he's a celebrity by association.

If Paul Hoynes left The Plain Dealer's Indians beat to cover the Florida Marlins or Tony Grossi traded in his Browns credentials for a Dolphins press badge, it would be nary more than fodder for blogs and message boards -- and short-lived fodder at that.

You may love their work, hate their work or be completely apathetic toward their work, but the point is, a good beat writer is supposed to be like a good waiter. As a reader, you're only supposed to notice them when they mess up. When they're on, the team is the story and the writer is just a byline.

I write that from personal experience. I covered sports for newspapers all throughout my college years, and I worked a city beat as a young reporter. Nobody is supposed to care who you are as a reporter. You're the conduit between the news makers and the news readers, nothing more.

But Windhorst is something more. His newshound mentality and reporting talents landed him the Cavaliers beat reporter job as a young reporter at the Akron Beacon Journal in 2003. That also happened to be the year that ping-pong balls dropped LeBron James into the Cavs' lap.

Windhorst is an Akronite like LeBron. He graduated from St. Vincent-St. Mary High School six years before LeBron. He honed his journalism skills at nearby Kent State. Like any basketball-following Akronite, he knew about LeBron before the rest of the state and country took notice.

But when LeBron and Windhorst ended up on different sides of the microphone in the same locker room, their stories became intertwined. And it will stay that way, with Windhorst following the news trail of LeBron and his handlers, probably until LeBron retires from basketball.

That is why Windhorst is leaving The Plain Dealer, his employer since 2008, and Ohio in his rear view mirror to cover LeBron and the Miami Heat for ESPN.com. And that is why Windhorst is experiencing his own form of local backlash -- a mere fraction of the venom spewed in the direction of LeBron in July, but a startling level of fan anger aimed at a departing beat reporter.

This week, message boards and other internet outlets have been ablaze with fan opinion on Windhorst's departure for Miami. Some accused him of being an unabashed LeBron shill. Some accused him of being a willing participant in the ESPN pro athlete public relations machine. Some have accused him of sacrificing his journalistic integrity, assuming that he will head to Miami to write fluff pieces on LeBron in exchange for an ESPN-financed pay bump.

Admittedly, the last point did enter my mind. If ESPN was offering Windhorst a large sum of money to head south and pen articles lionizing the Heat's collection of star talent, it could still be difficult to say "no." Being totally honest, I know I'd find it difficult to turn my back on more money and winters in Miami in exchange for writing pieces that are less than completely objective. It's human nature.

But that's pure speculation. For Windhorst's part, he made the media rounds this week, talking to WTAM, WKNR and Scene Magazine about his impending departure.

He called it "a difficult decision." He admitted that this might not end well for him, but he wanted to get out of his comfort zone as a reporter. He told Tony Rizzo on WKNR that he's walking into "a buzz saw" in Miami, carrying the double-edged burden of having covered LeBron in Cleveland -- where he wasn't a favorite of LBJ's handlers due to his objectivity -- and working for ESPN.com, at which LeBron's is reportedly spitting mad over a tell-all story on an allegedly wild party LeBron threw in Las Vegas over the summer. A story that was pulled by ESPN soon after it was published.

Windhorst told Rizzo he could have been perfectly happy staying in Cleveland and covering the Cavs' rebuilding process, but he is taking the route that allows him to cover the bigger stories.

From that standpoint, I can understand Windhorst's departure. Windhorst covered the Cavs for seven years, but he is really in the business of covering LeBron. He cultivated sources around LeBron and was at the center of the throng analyzing LeBron's every word, gesture and action for his entire Cavs career. Leaving the LeBron sphere to remain in Cleveland and cover Ramon Sessions is a waste of the sources that Windhorst has worked hard to develop and keep.

Obviously, it's a perspective that ESPN was willing to pay for. But the logic of the situation still doesn't do a lot to smooth over an often-rejected fan base that is watching yet another sports scene pillar leave for greener pastures.

We don't handle rejection well in Cleveland. And Windhorst's departure feels like rejection. He might be ESPN's go-to guy on LeBron, but for us, he was the voice of reason, perspective and inside information for seven years when we were hanging on every morsel of Cavs news. Windhorst's blog, first at the ABJ and later at the PD, became required morning reading from October through May, and anytime in the offseason when trade rumors became thick.

His Twitter page was refreshed thousands of times each day by office workers around Northeast Ohio, looking for trade deadline news or reassurance that Delonte West was emotionally right and ready to play that night.

I'd like to say Windhorst was a print version of Ernie Harwell or Vin Scully, painting a picture of the action for his audience. But he was more like FDR giving a fireside chat over a crackling speaker of a World War II-era radio. He was Winston Churchill giving reassurance to glass-nerved Britons bogged down in the London Underground tunnels during The Blitz.

In the trying times of sports contention for a city that hasn't seen a title trophy in 46 years, when the national scribes and talking heads had LeBron signed, sealed and delivered to destinations from the Hudson River to Hollywood, Windhorst was the voice that pulled us back from the ledge and gave us logical reasons to keep the faith. And maybe teach us a thing or two about the ultra-complex NBA salary cap while he's at it.

That's why we feel like we're losing someone this week. That's why we feel, in some form, a degree of the hurt we felt when LeBron left.

It's not enough that LeBron had to leave. Now his gravitational pull is causing us to lose the one person who could, more than anyone else, help us make sense of it all.

And the worst part (or best, depending on how you look at it) is that we can't fault him for doing it.