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Social Media: What it is and Why it Matters to Women's Sports

It's hard to avoid hearing about social media these days. From Twitter to YouTube, Facebook to Flickr, not to mention blogs, MySpace, and wikis, the list is growing while the impact, especially on traditional media, remains largely unexamined. Numerous scholars—including Tucker Center Director Mary Jo Kane—have documented the countless ways in which mainstream media ignore and marginalize female athletes. But the rapid and unprecedented growth of social media has meant that scholarly inquiry of this new phenomenon has lagged behind. Key questions for sport media scholars include: Will this technological development undermine or simply reproduce stereotypic representations of athletic females, and will these alternative ways of communicating alter how we think about and view women's sports? The Tucker Center is tackling such questions from multiple perspectives, including dedicating our Fall Distinguished Lecture Series to this important topic. As part of the lecture we will explore what social media is and why it matters, especially to women's sports.

According to Wikipedia, social media are highly accessible publishing techniques that use Internet- and Web-based technologies. Social

media can take many forms, including shared bookmarking, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, instant messaging and Twitter. The dizzying pace surrounding the growth of social media has silenced critics who once dismissed it as a fad. Consider the scope and reach of two of the most popular social media platforms: Last June alone, Twitter had 23 million individual users and Facebook had more than 250 million active users. Given these mind-boggling statistics, the potential upside for sport teams, athletes, and sport marketers is endless. Interestingly, market research indicates that women are at the forefront in adopting and using social media. Because of this, many advocates believe the advantages of social media are potentially greater for women's sports. Ann Gaffigan, Co-Founder of the *Women Talk Sports Network (WTS)*, argues that social media enables athletes to go directly to the fans: "Social media puts the power in the athletes' hands so that they can better control the message they want to send and the image they want to project. It also allows them to connect personally with fans and be available as a role model, which is what the fans miss out on when mainstream media fails to cover women's sports." In sum, as WTS Co-Founder Jane Schonberger

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Letter from the Director

Happy Fall 2009! As the new school year gets underway, we've got a number of exciting initiatives and new endeavors we'd like to share with you. Over the summer, we were busy using social media to expand the Tucker Center's digital presence. For example, we created a multimedia archive, Twitter account, and Facebook page. Developing and implementing these innovative technological forums have energized the Tucker Center staff and allowed us to share the important work we do with new audiences around the globe.



Dr. Mary Jo Kane

The topic of social media takes center stage in mid-October when we devote our Fall Distinguished Lecture to the opportunities and pitfalls of this Brave New Media World, particularly as it impacts women's sports. A panel of experts will explore the intersections of gender, sport, and social media from a number of different perspectives. Professor **Marie Hardin**, sport media scholar from Penn State University, **Rachel Blount**, sports journalist from the *Star Tribune*, and **Angela Ruggiero**, University of Minnesota hockey player and four-time Olympian, will analyze how social media platforms such as Twitter and MySpace can both challenge and reproduce how female athletes are portrayed in more traditional sport media venues. Come join us in what I'm sure will be a most thought-provoking event.

Beyond the Distinguished Lecture, I'm excited to point out that a number of Tucker Center graduate students are using their critical thinking skills—not to mention their tech-savvy insights—to conduct their own research on new media and its potential influence on women's sports. The findings from their investigations are highlighted in the "Research Updates" section on page 2. I'm also excited about the new projects underway at the Tucker Center as well as the many accomplishments of our students, staff, and research affiliates. One I'm particularly proud to announce is the creation of *We Coach: Educating and Empowering Through Sport*, an educational initiative dedicated to increasing the number of female coaches in youth and interscholastic sports. The reason this initiative is so important is that despite the passage of Title IX in the early 1970s, there has been a dramatic decline nationally in the number of intercollegiate female head coaches in women's sports, from 90% in 1972 to 43% currently. This trend is also evident across Minnesota. While historic data from our state are unavailable, according to the Minnesota State High School Coaches Association, today's percentage of female interscholastic head coaches is only about 20%. To learn more about this timely, cutting-edge program see the callout box on page 3.

Finally, to get up to date on all the latest Tucker Center news be sure to read "Kudos & Announcements" on page 3 and visit our homepage at www.tuckercenter.org. In the true spirit of social media—and creating more dialogue about the world of women's sports—we invite you to offer your own perspectives by visiting the new Tucker Center blog, tuckercenter.wordpress.com.

—Mary Jo Kane, Director



RESEARCH UPDATES

TUCKER CENTER ON THE FOREFRONT OF SOCIAL MEDIA, GENDER & SPORT RESEARCH

Austin Stair Calhoun and Emily J. Houghton, Kinesiology doctoral students, presented their research on social media at the sixth Conference of the European Association for the Sociology of Sport held in Rome, May, 2009. Their exploratory study—“Examining Elite Sport Representations in Social Media: Conceptualizing Twitter”—captured baseline usage data on Twitter. For those unfamiliar with the term and concept, Twitter is a popular social networking service where users send 140-character micro-blogs to their “followers,” meaning those who track their activities. User names on Twitter are designated with the @ symbol (e.g., the Tucker Center’s Twitter username is @TuckerCenter). One of the most popular Web sites worldwide, Twitter remains relatively unexamined by scholars and educators despite its exponential growth and extensive media buzz. This gap in scholarly inquiry persists despite widespread Twitter use by professional athletes (e.g., Lance Armstrong and Dara Torres), professional sport organizations (e.g., WNBA and NFL), and well-known coaches such as Gail Goestenkors and Tim Brewster.

In their study, Calhoun and Houghton documented baseline Twitter presence (e.g., how many teams in the WNBA had Twitter accounts) and number of followers from a random sample of professional teams/leagues (N=147) and professional athletes (N=113) over eight weeks during the spring of 2009. Preliminary results indicate there was exponential growth among teams, leagues, and athletes. For example, from March to May of 2009, the percentage of WNBA teams with a Twitter presence rose from 62% to 84% (an August 2009 follow-up revealed a 100% presence), while the number of



WNBA followers grew from 661 to 3,809 (August 2009: 9,018 followers). Based on these findings, the need for continued research on the impact of social media in sport—particularly for female athletes who have been marginalized by traditional media—and the implications for how gender, class, and race are portrayed in social media is clearly warranted.

Heather Maxwell, former TC Research Assistant and currently serving as Senior Research Associate of Consumer Insights at General Mills Inc., completed her doctoral work on sport, gender, and new media. Dr. Maxwell’s study—“Women’s and Men’s Intercollegiate Basketball Media Coverage on ESPN.com:



A Mixed Methods Analysis of a Complete Season”—examined whether patterns of under-representation and marginalization of sportswomen long documented in traditional media also existed in new media, specifically the Internet. Confining her analysis to ESPN.com, Maxwell employed a mixed methods approach to collect data on feature photographs and headline articles related to Division I women’s and men’s college basketball home pages during the 2006-07 season.

Maxwell compared the number of feature photographs and headline articles, and also analyzed the individuals who were featured in the photographs (e.g., coach, player, staff member), as well as how those individuals were portrayed (in/out of uniform; on/off the court; in action/posed). She used content analysis to describe which themes were present in the feature photographs and headline articles. Her results indicated that notions of male power and dominance routinely found in traditional sport media were both challenged and reproduced on the Internet. For example, male and female basketball players were equally as likely to have feature photographs and be presented *in uniform* and *on the court*. Interestingly, female basketball players were significantly more likely to be shown *in action* than were their male counterparts—a finding which directly challenges patterns of male dominance present in mainstream media. In contrast to this unexpected result, male dominance continued to be reinforced in that men’s basketball received significantly more headline articles and game-reporting articles than did women’s basketball. Maxwell’s findings illustrate that Internet sport media coverage can simultaneously challenge and reproduce portrayals of female athletes.

Alicia Johnson, undergraduate at Minnesota State University-Mankato and Tucker Center summer intern, helped Calhoun and LaVoi expand their research project, “Examining Online Intercollegiate Head Coaches’ Biographies: Reproducing or Challenging Heteronormativity and Heterosexism?” The initial study, which included only Big 10 coaches, was expanded to include a nationwide sample of Division I head coaches. Results from the initial study will be featured in the fall newsletter of *It Takes A Team*—an educational program sponsored by the Women’s Sports Foundation and designed to end homophobia in sport.

SPECIAL GUEST BLOGGERS

In the spirit of highlighting the significance of social media, the Tucker Center has invited Marie Hardin and Dave Zirin to weigh in on the intersections of sport, social media, and gender.



Professor Marie Hardin is Associate Director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University. Her research examines issues related to diversity, ethics, and professional practices surrounding sport media. Hardin is a panelist in this Fall’s Tucker Center’s Distinguished Lecture.



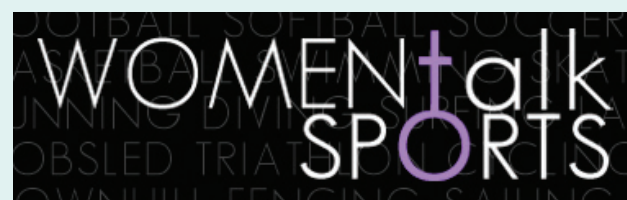
Our other guest blogger is Dave Zirin, sportswriter for *The Nation* magazine. Zirin—a fierce advocate of women’s sports—is also the host of XM Satellite Radio’s popular weekly show, *Edge of Sports Radio* (www.edgeofsports.com), author of two books, *Press Action’s* 2005 and 2006 Sportswriter of the Year, and called by Robert Lipsyte “the best sportswriter in the United States.”

To read and respond to insights from these two leading voices, visit the Tucker Center blog at tuckercenter.wordpress.com.

DID YOU KNOW?

A WOMEN TALK SPORTS NETWORK EXISTS!

On February 1, 2009, the Women Talk Sports Network (WTS) was launched. Its purpose is to bring together the world’s best Web sites covering women’s sports while promoting and empowering female athleticism. Conceived by three enterprising women—Ann Gaffigan, Megan Heuter, and Jane Schonberger—WTS is an online network that connects bloggers, scholars, female athletes, and fans from around the globe, and also provides high-quality news, opinions, resources, video, podcasts, blogs, and other social media tools pertaining to women’s sports. Given that female athletes receive only 6-8% of all coverage throughout traditional sport media, WTS provides a much-needed venue for voices in the women’s sports community to be heard and for information to be shared. During its inaugural month the site recorded 54,239 hits—a number that grew exponentially to 1.1 million hits only six months later! This stunning statistic demonstrates an interest in and demand for news about women’s sports. Be sure to check out WomenTalkSports.com, follow WTS on Twitter @womentalksports, or become a WTS fan on Facebook. As of this printing, WTS features 64 bloggers and close to 170 female athletes in the Twitter Lounge. Traffic to the site increases daily. Visit WTS today!



... "Media" continued from page 1

points out: "Social networks allow female athletes to play the 'media game' on their own terms."

Unfortunately, with every upside is the potential for misuse or even exploitation. For example, women's professional sport leagues such as the WNBA have encouraged athletes to use Twitter *during an actual game* in order to give fans immediate "up close and personal" access. Though well-intentioned, such an approach downgrades the seriousness of the competition itself, not to mention women's sports overall. Imagine a similar scenario where the Vikings ask Brett Favre to "tweet" during a game. Not happening! It is also possible that some female athletes may not be sensitized to how sportswomen have been marginalized and sexualized in traditional media—or even agree that they are—and thus reproduce stereotypic images and messages found throughout mainstream sport media.

Finally, this brave new world of social media may open a Pandora's Box of controversy well beyond any particular media image. Perhaps you've heard of some recent examples that arose out of the use of social media in sport. Athletes have been suspended or charged with crimes from photos they have posted on Facebook or MySpace portraying underage drinking or hazing. Coaches

have violated NCAA rules through tweeting about potential recruits. And the University of Colorado's athletic department was horrified when a football player they asked to guest blog on behalf of the team wrote about his sexual conquests. Though we are unaware of a similar incident in the world of women's sports, the pitfalls and dangers of using social media are ever present.

Needless to say, we have only scratched the surface of the opportunities, dangers, and complexities that surround social media. We have purposefully raised more questions than we have answered. As social media continues to grow and change the landscape of traditional sport media—and scholarly inquiry catches up—some questions will be laid to rest but many others will remain. In the meantime, those who care about women's sports should think about how social media can be used to create real social change, change which leads to positive and realistic portrayals of female athletes, as well as a deep and abiding respect for women's sports. Our Fall Distinguished Lecture in mid-October (see page 4) is a first step in that direction. Let us know what you think about the issues raised in this column by visiting the Tucker Center blog. We would love to hear from you!



STAFF UPDATES: AUSTIN STAIR CALHOUN

Austin Stair Calhoun joined the Tucker Center in the fall of 2008 as a Research Assistant under the guidance of her academic adviser, **Mary Jo Kane**. Currently, Calhoun is a second-year doctoral student and Instructional Technology Fellow in the School of Kinesiology. In 2003, Calhoun earned a B.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication from Washington and Lee University. She served as a Summer Intern for U.S.A. Water Polo at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs before receiving her Master's degree in Sport Administration from the University of Miami in 2006. She then returned to her alma mater, Washington and Lee, to serve as Assistant Sports Information Director before coming to the Tucker Center to begin her doctoral work. In addition to her academic background, Calhoun has amassed a great deal of "real world" knowledge beginning with her experiences as a D-III basketball player as well as her unsurpassed technology skills. In the latter instance, Calhoun's social media savvy greatly enhances the work of the Tucker Center. For example, due to her efforts the Tucker Center now has a Facebook page and regularly updates its Twitter stream.

It would be an understatement to say that Calhoun "hit the ground running" when she arrived at the U of M last fall. Her interests in sports information, media studies, and gender led her to



initiate two research studies. The first investigation—conducted with **Dr. Nicole LaVoi**—examines the online biographies of intercollegiate head coaches to determine if patterns of gender representations documented in traditional sport media are challenged or reproduced throughout the vast Internet landscape. The second investigation—"Examining Elite Sport Representations in Social Networks: Conceptualizing Twitter"—is a collaborative effort with fellow doctoral student **Emily Houghton**. (You can learn more about this cutting-edge social media study on page 2, "Research Updates.") A self-proclaimed "nerd," Calhoun's work ethic, creativity, critical thinking, collaborative spirit, and dedication to examining gender issues in women's sports make her an invaluable and exceptional member of The Tucker Team.

The Tucker Center, in collaboration with the Minnesota Youth Sport Research Consortium (MNYSRC), is launching *We Coach: Educating & Empowering Through Sport*, an educational and networking resource for women who coach (or want to coach) youth or interscholastic sports. We Coach workshops—delivered by women for women—will be offered throughout the year. Check the Web site for updated information: www.mnysrc.com/wecoach.html.

we coach
educating & empowering through sport

KUDOS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Honors & Awards

- Co-director **Maureen Weiss** has been elected President of The American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education (AAKPE), the premier national organization recognizing outstanding scholars in the field of sport and physical activity. Professor Weiss has been an AAKPE Fellow since 1994.
- Associate Director **Nicole LaVoi** and Research Assistant **Chelsey Thul** received the 2009 Outstanding Staff Award and Graduate Student Award respectively, from the College of Education and Human Development's Women's Philanthropic Leadership Circle.

Scholarly Activities

- Affiliated Scholar **Beth Lewis** was awarded a \$400,000 grant by the National Institute of Mental Health for her study, "Efficacy of an Exercise Intervention for the Prevention of Postpartum Depression."
- Affiliated Scholar **Daheia Barr-Anderson** was awarded a \$75,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to examine perceived and objective environmental influences on physical activity among high school girls. This grant will complement her NIH Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) grant to study environmental influences of obesity among African American adolescent girls.
- **Mary Jo Kane** will be an invited panelist to discuss a presentation by noted sports economist Andrew Zimbalist. The panel is part of the third annual Scholarly Colloquium on College Sports held in conjunction with the NCAA Annual Convention in Atlanta, GA, January, 2010.

- Affiliated Scholar **Heather Maxwell** and **Kane** will present their research—"Critical Analysis of Consumer Responses to Representations of Women's Sports"—at the annual North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference, Ottawa, Ontario, November, 2009.
- **Weiss** gave a keynote presentation this summer at the Developmental Coordination Disorder International Conference and delivered the Senior Distinguished Scholar Lecture at the annual meeting of the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity.
- Affiliated Scholar **Diane Wiese-Bjornstal** gave an invited paper on risk, consequences, and recovery of sport injury in high intensity athletes at an International Research Conference on "Performance in Top Sports Involving Intense Exercise," at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, September, 2009.
- **Weiss** and **Wiese-Bjornstal** published a manuscript titled, "Promoting positive youth development through physical activity" in the *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest*, September, 2009.
- **Dr. Maria Josefa Camacho Miñano**, the Tucker Center's visiting scholar from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid in Spain, is conducting an international review of physical activity interventions for adolescent girls while in residence this fall.
- **Kelly Blankenship**, Kinesiology undergraduate, women's hockey team member, and McNair Scholar, completed her research project, "Not All Sport Parents Are 'Out of Control': The Happy Side of Youth Sport," while working as a summer intern in the Tucker Center.

For more information, visit the Tucker Center news blog at www.tuckercenter.org or follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/tuckercenter

FALL 2009 DISTINGUISHED LECTURE

“Facing Off Over Facebook: The Impact of Social Media on Women’s Sports”

Monday, October 19, 2009, 7:00-9:00 pm
 Cowles Auditorium • Hubert H. Humphrey Center
 University of Minnesota West Bank Campus
 Free and Open to the Public



Marie Hardin



Rachel Blount



Angela Ruggiero

Over the past 30 years, scholars have documented numerous ways in which traditional sport media marginalize and sexualize female athletes. Into this vast—and influential—media landscape appears the recent and exponential explosion of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Will this technological paradigm shift challenge or reproduce the ways in which female athletes are traditionally portrayed in mainstream sport media? Will the unprecedented popularity of social media—and the alternative “ways of knowing” it provides to traditional media—fundamentally alter how we view women’s sports? Panelists with diverse experiences and perspectives will “face off” and take on these important and largely unexplored questions as we move into the Age of New Media.

About the Panelists

Marie Hardin: Associate Professor of Journalism and Associate Director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University, Professor Hardin’s research explores diversity, ethics, and professional practices in sports media. She has published extensively in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, and *Sex Roles*. In 2006, Hardin received the Mary Ann Yodelis Smith Award for Feminist Scholarship from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Her recent research focuses on social attitudes of

sports journalists and bloggers, as well as career paths of women in sport journalism.

Rachel Blount: Sports reporter and columnist for the *Star Tribune*, Blount has covered a wide range of sports including the NHL, NBA, WNBA, college hockey, and the last six Olympic Games. One of the few female sports columnists in the country, Blount has won numerous journalism awards including national recognition from the Associated Press Sports Editors and state-wide honors from the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists for her sports features and columns. Blount graduated from the University of Notre Dame and has a Master’s degree from the University of Missouri’s prestigious School of Journalism.

Angela Ruggiero: One of the most accomplished women’s hockey players in the world, Ruggiero is a three-time Olympic medalist and World Champion, leader of the 2010 U.S. Women’s Hockey National Team, record holder for most games played for Team USA, and Hockey Hall of Fame inductee. Ruggiero graduated *cum laude* with a degree in government from Harvard University, where she was an NCAA First-Team Academic All-American. She is currently pursuing her Master’s degree in Sports Management at the University of Minnesota. Ruggiero uses multiple social media platforms to promote her individual career as well as women’s hockey.

Visit the **Tucker Center’s** online multimedia archive of past Distinguished Lectures including streaming video, PowerPoint presentations, and other informative resources from a variety of topics related to gender and sport.

www.tuckercenter.org/lecture/media_library.htm

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