

Thank you, Nicole. And thanks to the Tucker Center – of which I’ve been a big fan for years -- for putting together this important discussion about social media and its potential for empowering women’s sports.

First, I’ll tell you that I come at the issue of social media and sports a little differently than my colleagues. I’m not a journalist who covers women’s sports, like Rachel, or an athlete using social media, who can talk about it from a first-person perspective, like Angela. I’m a journalism professor who has looked at sports media in the new media environment – especially blogs -- so I’m going to be talking about it from that viewpoint. Tonight, I’m going to focus on the obstacles and potential in social media world to providing alternatives to some of images of women’s sports you’ve just seen – and still see on the screen. I’m going to talk a little bit about one blog network – the logo is also up there – where we see those alternatives emerging. I’m also going to provide some words of caution and -- just as appropriately – hope about what can happen through these venues.

I want to take a step back, though, and provide you with results of some of our research, in the Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State, on the sports blogosphere. First, some context: We’ve done a number of studies on media coverage of issues related to Title IX and to women’s sports in general. We’ve also talked to hundreds of sports journalists across the country about their attitudes toward women’s sports and Title IX. Of course, we all know that sports coverage has reinforced myths about Title IX and put a low value on women’s sports. Our surveys have found that this coverage mirrors the individual attitudes of media gatekeepers – who, in depressingly high percentages – believe women’s sports coverage is a loser. They also see Title IX as having hurt men’s sports.

*We cannot expect progressive coverage from mainstream outlets dominated by these values and beliefs. It’s not going to happen as long as the cultural environment stays status quo.*

Part of the problem, as our research also indicates, is the lack of women working in sports media – because we know – from our research -- that women cover Title IX differently. But social media have emerged in recent years as an alternative to institutional media. Here, there are no gates, and the news hole is literally bottomless. Anyone, then, can become reporter, editor, videographer, anchor, publisher or “media owner.” Our logical question, then, became: Is the sports blogosphere different from traditional or “legacy” media? Might we see more progressive attitudes and values among independent sports bloggers? In other words: Can we, right now, expect a revolution, or, simply, replication? Our survey of more than 200 independent sports bloggers – and it included many of the most-read blogs on the Web – found surprisingly little difference in the demographics, values and attitudes between bloggers and journalists. In fact, the lack of gender diversity among daily bloggers mirrors – almost exactly – what we see in sports departments – less than 10%. *Because we know that gender makes a difference in the ways men and women talk and write about sports, this fact alone almost ensures generally homogenous content that reinforces old-media patterns.*

And – a footnote here -- even among the small number of women we found, almost a third reported focusing solely on men’s – not women’s -- sports.

When we asked bloggers about their beliefs and attitudes toward issues like Title IX, again, we saw patterns similar to sports journalists. For instance, most bloggers told us

they believed sports fans would never embrace or pursue women's sports to the degree they do men's sports.

Does age make a difference? Were younger bloggers in our survey more progressive? In a word, no. They expressed more sexist and heterosexist views than their older counterparts.

The bottom line: *The blogosphere, for the most part, is not attracting individuals with attitudes and values that will change images of women's sports. Instead: It is attracting more of the same.*

In fact, four of every ten bloggers we surveyed told us they know the sports blogosphere is a sexist place. Not a single blog that focuses on women's sports is among the most trafficked blogs on the Web. Instead, the list includes blogs with names such as "Sharapova's Thigh" and "Kissing Suzy Kolber."

The only comfort might be that even these overtly sexist blogs – and their attendant Twitter feeds – still don't have the reach and influence of institutional media, which is arguably less overtly sexist.

Another footnote, from my perspective: I want to remove any notions that social media is going to flatten the 'big media' landscape' and create a great "democracy" on the Internet [where all voices are equal]. The sports media landscape – where ESPN is king and people turn to institutional sites for commentary -- will become flatter, but not flattened, because of the emergence of social media. As one journalist astutely noted: Legacy media is doing a lot less hand-wringing and a lot more co-opting of the best social media entrepreneurs these days – bringing them under the umbrella by hiring them. In other words, the most-consumed bloggers and content producers in the new-media environment will likely move to the payroll of Yahoo!Sports and ESPN.

That fact -- and our research on entrepreneurial bloggers – points to an important 'big-picture' takeaway: *We must be vigilant in resisting the suggestion that the Internet and social media platforms automatically "level the playing field," for women's sports. That notion, as far as I'm concerned, needs to be tossed in the same post-feminist bin as the idea, sold by women's sport apparel manufacturers, that achieving a certain "fit" look is somehow empowering for women as a collective. Not true.*

This is true: the space is unlimited, and, in many ways, so are the opportunities.

But the hierarchies are still intact in the new media world. They have not yet been ruptured, and Twitter, Facebook, blogging and the social media forms still to come are only tools.

So, with this backdrop, what should we be thinking about? Where are the possibilities, and what are the obstacles?

I suggest we need two things to happen. *We need more women in the conversation about sports.* Social media, as we know, gives us an opportunity we have never had. In this context, there are no institutional gatekeepers in the way. And we are seeing women get into the conversation. A site with tremendous potential is the one with the logo I showed earlier: Women Talk Sports. Co-founder Meg Hueter recently told me that the collective has about 60 contributors – and it has big plans to continue growing. We believe what is happening there – and in other pockets of new media – is important and encouraging. Ann Gaffigan, another cofounder, told me that when the site was founded in February, it had 550 unique visitors. Last month, it had 28,500.

In the big picture, though, the number of women who are talking about sports in these forums remains very small – and, in many ways, the conversation remains insular. We have to ask why more women – and men – aren't joining the communities around women's sports. They're just a click away. And that takes us back to the same questions that pioneers like Mary Jo Kane began exploring years ago. Maybe, the more things change, the more they stay the same, as the saying goes.

Part of the challenge is our unchanged dual agendas: We've got to work within the parameters and definitions of sport in U.S. culture while simultaneously challenging its ideology. *I'm convinced that the primary function of spectator sport in our culture is to reinforce traditional gender roles and norms.* And that function works against us. At the same time, sports are not perceived in mass culture as having that political function. They are seen as entertainment – a place where cognitive dissonance is not welcome. In other words, we don't want to think too hard when we watch, and we want to see images that match the scripts that have been drilled in since our parents handed us a doll – or a truck. People want media that relates to or reflects how they live everyday within the boundaries of invisible cultural norms – that's the appeal of the media we all consume. In building fan communities with wide appeal, then, an overt message appealing to social change – in other words, “cover women's sports because you should or consume because you should” – is as difficult as I imagine it is to sell sunscreen here in December.

We need numbers, *drawn because of the joy and pleasure and appeal of women's sports.* How do we draw more women to the public conversation about sports?

Well, it will take time. Social media encourages impatience – it's all about instant feedback. Social media is about speed -- that instantaneous message – but we have to take the long view. The Tucker Center, Women's Sports Foundation, Women Talk Sports and other networks are playing leadership roles. Female athletes at every level are also key. We also need passionate, and, much it unpaid, labor willing to lobby for seats in the press box and willing to write a line or two – or post video or audio -- about the local high school girls' soccer games. What I just described – put against the backdrop of the everyday lives of many women – shows how hard this task will be.

I said earlier that there were two things I think we need to do. The second – beyond numbers -- is to develop *empowering common agendas*. As we know, more voices in the choir doesn't guarantee the song that we hear is music to our ears. We know: there are issues involving the marketing and coverage of female athletes on which many advocates and athletes don't agree.

As a small example, look at the discourse on Women Talk Sports about the image of Serena Williams you saw earlier. First, let me say that the discourse is markedly different from the dozens of posts in the general sports blogosphere, most written by men – but I won't talk about that now. Within Women Talk Sports, the discourse fell on a continuum – from feminist to post-feminist. While several bloggers critiqued the image as presenting Williams in a “sexualized, passive, swimsuit-edition type way” – likely a response many of us would agree with – other women praised Williams for displaying an “athletically built, yet feminine” body.

This range of discourse could be seen as healthy. It could also be viewed as evidence that we aren't all on the same page. So, at the end of the day, it's not only about bringing more women to the conversation.

We must keep working on consensus about these issues, keeping in mind nuances involving race, sexuality and the neo-liberalist marketplace. Scholars, educators, female athletes, and journalists have to be in the conversation. Again: the work of the Tucker Center, including its seminal research on what fans think about sexualized images of female athletes, can and should powerfully inform the dialogue.

As I mentioned earlier, social media is delivering now, for the most part, more of the same. Did I also mention: More work for women's sports advocates? Social media offers great promise, as we work – over time – to make it work for us, and for everyone. We've got to build communities -- and then consensus.

*In the end, this is important: It's not the platforms. It's the voices and values that matter.*