

The University of Washington's football team recently hired a new coach, Steve Sarkisian. As part of their communications strategy, the football team launched a website called CoachSark.com to provide "behind-the-scenes" type footage for fans looking for more than the standard media view of the Husky football team. For our project with the University of Washington's CoachSark.com, our group looked to explore the challenges and opportunities using social media in a big-name NCAA football program. This paper provides some background behind social media in NCAA athletics, outlines challenges the group faced while working on the projects, and offers recommendations for improving CoachSark.com's social media strategy. Finally, the paper concludes with some general discussion about social media use in the NCAA.

Background

Social media has been a disrupting force across all American markets. The NCAA is experiencing particularly rough growing pains, as it has traditionally enjoyed a very controlled market.¹ The NCAA has enormous market power over its inputs (athletes) and outputs (sporting events). With social media applications, athletes now have the power to promote themselves outside current NCAA restrictions, reducing the power the NCAA has over them. Moreover, the NCAA makes very large sums of money from media outlets paying for exclusive rights to show NCAA sporting events. As social media creates more avenues for fans to consume NCAA events, these exclusive agreements with media outlets become less valuable.

¹ "Calling the NCAA's Heavy Hand | Technos: Quarterly for Education and Technology | Find Articles at BNET." *Find Articles at BNET | News Articles, Magazine Back Issues & Reference Articles on All Topics*. Web. 16 Dec. 2009. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HKV/is_1_8/ai_65014453/>.

Losing Control Over Athletes

The NCAA has enjoyed monopsony power over athletes for decades.² With this power, the NCAA successfully caps salaries for athletes (in this case salaries are called scholarships) and limits what athletes can do with their image (special permission is needed to use the likeness of an athlete's image). These rules are in place to protect the "amateurism" of college athletes.

Social Networks like Facebook and Twitter disrupt the NCAA's model of control over athletes' images. Before the advent of social media, college athletes were limited in their ability to promote themselves, since it is against the NCAA rules to hire an agent or have your name or image used commercially. With Facebook and Twitter, however, athletes are empowered to promote themselves on new channels that are yet to be regulated by the NCAA. While there are legitimate reasons to attempt to protect the NCAA's images as well as the images of universities, it is clear the administrators and coaches in college athletics are still uncomfortable with athletes using these mediums for reasons beyond safety. This discomfort has certainly led to some of the resistance from college football programs using social media.

There are many examples of NCAA football teams attempting to regulate their athletes' use of social networks. After a couple of incidences of students posting inappropriate pictures on Facebook, Kent State banned the website, citing reasons of safety and protection of the University's image.³ More recently, Texas Tech's head football coach Mike Leach banned the use of Twitter on Texas Tech team.⁴ Kent State's Facebook ban was eventually reversed due to public pressure.⁵ However, both of these examples demonstrate the strong reactionist measures universities are taking in response to social media.

² Harrison, Jeffrey Lynch and Harrison, Casey C., The Law and Economics of the NCAA's Claim to Monopsony Rights. University of Florida Levin College of Law Research Paper No. 2009-31. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1465714>

³ "Kent State bans student athletes from Facebook." *Ars Technica*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009.

<<http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2006/06/7133.ars>>.

⁴ "Texas Tech Football Coach Calls Twitter Users Narcissists." *Social Media News and Web Tips - Mashable - The Social Media Guide*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009. <<http://mashable.com/2009/09/29/texas-tech-coach/>>.

⁵ "Facebook ban reversed for student athletes - News." *KentNewsNet.com*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009.

<<http://media.www.kentnewsnet.com/media/storage/paper867/news/2006/07/05/News/Facebook.Ban.Reversed.For.Student.Athletes-2120404.shtml>>.

Traditional Media

Social media also disrupts the business models of traditional media outlets like ESPN and CBS. In the past, these major networks would sign exclusive contracts with teams, conferences, and the NCAA itself to secure media rights over specific sports and tournaments. Modern mobile and social technologies make exclusive rights less valuable, however, since each individual watching a game becomes a potential news outlet. Instead of only being able to experience a football game by watching it live on television, fans can follow Twitter and Facebook feeds online for scores. Real-time photos from fans are instantly available, as well as video and other commentary. If an athlete or coach is Tweeting from the bench during a game, fans might turn their attention to their Twitter feed instead of ESPN. Traditional media outlets see these new forms of communication as a real threat to their business model.

Attempts to limit social media at NCAA Football games have taken place. In August of 2009, The SEC essentially tried to ban social media at football games to help keep CBS, the owner of the SEC's media rights, happy.⁶ Their original new media policy included a rule that stated ticketed fans couldn't "produce or disseminate (or aid in producing or disseminating) any material or information about the Event, including, but not limited to, any account, description, picture, video, audio, reproduction or other information concerning the Event." After receiving sharp criticism, however, the SEC revised their policy, allowing "Personal messages and updates of scores or other brief descriptions of the competition throughout the Event."⁷

Despite the push-back social media has received from many college football programs, there have been times when NCAA teams have embraced the medium.⁸

⁶ "Social Media Banned from College Stadiums." *Social Media News and Web Tips - Mashable - The Social Media Guide*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009. <<http://mashable.com/2009/08/17/sec-new-media-policy/>>.

⁷ "Common Sense Wins: Social Media to Be Allowed at SEC Games." *Social Media News and Web Tips - Mashable - The Social Media Guide*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009. <<http://mashable.com/2009/08/18/sec-social-media-policy/>>.

⁸ "Twittering Basketball Superfan Gets Courtside Press Credentials." *Social Media News and Web Tips - Mashable - The Social Media Guide*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009. <<http://mashable.com/2009/08/25/st-johns-press/>>.

St. John's basketball team recently gave Peter Casey, a St. John's basketball fan with 50,000 Twitter followers, an all season seat in the press row for this year's basketball season. St. John's basketball is certainly a much smaller program than University of Washington football, but their recognition of the value of Twitter shows that NCAA sports programs are starting to recognize the value of social media.

Work Done

Over the course of the CoachSark.com project, my primary focus was on creating content for the CoachSark.com website. The content I created included shooting video and photographs at three football games and editing content from these games and an away game. The following is a summary of the content I created:

- **USC (home)** – Took photos of the game. Created a photo montage using Sark's post-game press conference for audio.
- **Arizona (home)** – Shot video of the game. Created video montage of game to music.
- **Oregon (home)** – Shot video of the game. Gave video to classmates for editing.
- **Arizona State (away)** – Used footage provided to me by Jared Blank to edit a video together to Sark's post-game press conference.

Challenges

While working on this project, the group experienced some challenges implementing social media for CoachSark.com. These challenges included access to "behind-the-scenes" materials.

In early meetings about the project, it appeared we would have some access to Coach Sarkisian. While we were working on the project throughout the quarter,

however, we found it was hard to meet with Coach Sarkisian. Without being able to actually talk to Coach Sarkisian, it was difficult to create any content that felt authentic and “behind-the-scenes.”

The group also faced access challenges during the games we photographed and filmed. The passes we received were standard press passes, which meant we weren’t allowed any more access than other press at the game. This made it particularly hard to get any good shots of the players and coaches during the game, and took away many options for “behind-the-scenes” footage.

Access to social media accounts such as YouTube and Twitter also proved to be a challenge. Once again, while we were told at times we would have access to these accounts, we were never actually given the passwords to access them.

Social Media Recommendations

Coach Sark currently has a presence on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Coachsark.com also acts as a blog for fans to post comments. The following is a breakdown of Coach Sark’s presence on each of these websites:

Facebook

Coach Sark currently has a standard facebook profile, but not an official fan page. The profile is connected to the Coach Sarkisian Twitter account, and most of Coach Sarkisian’s updates to the page are done through Twitter.

Recommendations:

- **Use a fan page instead of a personal page** – A fan page is easier to manage because you don’t have to accept friend requests. Fan pages also show up in the news feed, allow fans to post pictures to albums, and are customizable to include Twitter feeds and additional tabs.

- **Post pictures and videos from practice and games** – After each game, update your fan page with a new album with pictures and/or video from that week. The more “behind-the-scenes” these pictures are, the better.
- **Remove the link between Twitter and Facebook** – While it is convenient to have your Twitter updates automatically feed to your Facebook fan page, Facebook users have a different tolerance for constant updates. Additionally, updates with @ symbols and hashtags don’t make much sense on Facebook.

YouTube

The YouTube account currently has 66 videos, 132 subscribers, and 64,135 total video views. The account itself isn’t customized, doesn’t have a profile picture, and none of the videos contain meaningful tags.

Recommendations:

- **Add photo of Coach Sarkisian** – Adding a photo is important for authenticity and branding purposes.
- **Make look-and-feel to match UW Colors** – YouTube pages are easy to customize. The page should share the same basic look-and-feel as Coachsark.com for branding purposes.
- **Add tags to videos** – Tags help people find videos and pull related videos on the right sidebar. 4-5 tags should be used in the same order at the beginning of each video to make sure all of Coach Sarkisian’s videos show up as related videos on the right sidebar. After that first group of tags, other tags describing the video more specifically should be used. Recommended tags: football, Washington, huskies, uw, college.
- **Add descriptions to videos** – Video descriptions provide context for the video and aid in searching for videos.

Twitter

Coach Sarkisian currently has 9,095 followers on Twitter. Jared Blank does most of the status updates during football games to provide updates on the score of the game.

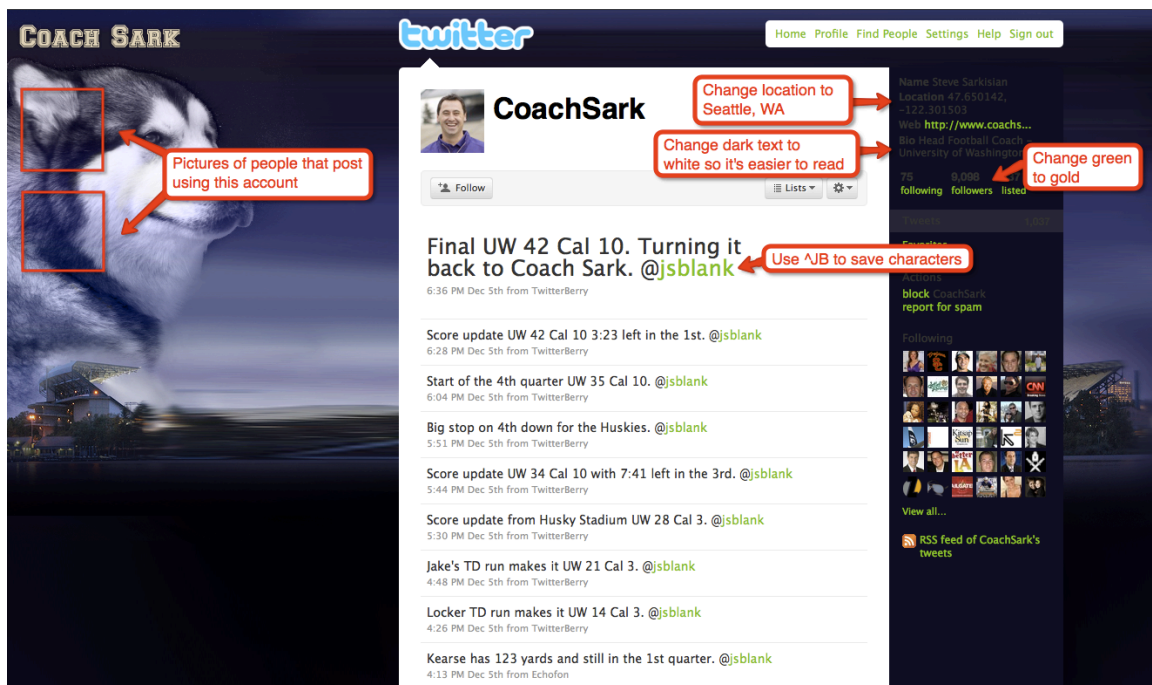
Recommendations:

- **Create and use a specific hashtag for UW Football** – A special hashtag will encourage conversations around the program. It will also help Twitter users filter these conversations and may even lead to trending topics during big games. Recommended tag: #uwfootball
- **Use an application such as TweetDeck to filter hashtags and keywords to help keep track of conversations** – Desktop applications make it easier to organize Tweets and listen to conversations going on about the program. Recommended applications include TweetDeck, Tweetie, and Twirl.
- **Answer questions or criticisms about UW Football** – There are a lot of conversations going on about UW Football, and Coach Sarkisian should be a part of them. Participating in conversations about the UW Football team will build trust and loyalty around Coach Sarkisian.
- **Add a picture of all the people that post to Coach Sark's Twitter account on the background of the Twitter profile** – Adding a photo of who is actually posting to the account adds transparency to the account. Microsoft uses the model successfully.
- **Sign all tweets with your initials** – Currently tweets posted by others are signed with @jblank is good because it adds transparency, but you can save characters with the initial method.
- **Tweet blog post updates** – Twitter is a great way to push out updates from the website. Tweet updates to help drive traffic to the website and promote content sharing on Twitter.
- **Provide live pictures and video from behind the bench during games, practices, and during travel** – Distributing real-time photos and videos from Twitter is one of the best ways to provide “behind-the-scenes” content that traditional media outlets don't provide fans. It also gives people a good

reason to follow Coach Sarkisian on Twitter since followers are now experiencing exclusive access that they cannot find elsewhere.

- **Change the color of the text on the sidebar to white and the color of the links on the sidebar to gold** – The basic text on the sidebar is hard to read and should be changed to white. The links on the sidebar are currently green, which doesn't match with University of Washington's colors.

The following image is a screenshot with recommended changes to the CoachSark Twitter profile page:



Website

The current website is built on a custom platform. It includes blogging, video, and photo gallery features, but lacks social sharing capabilities.

Recommendations:

- **Build CoachSark.com on a better blogging platform** - A more robust blogging platform would help I recommend Wordpress. Wordpress is a

powerful open source blogging platform that has a large number of free plugins that expand functionality, is search engine friendly, and easily handles comments and track-backs.

- **Include Twitter feed on sidebar of website** – Adding Coach Sarkisian’s Twitter feed allows for more social connectivity.
- **Link to other Blogs and use Trackbacks** – When you link to another blog, you leave a “trackback” on the blog you linked to. This alerts the blog owner that you are talking about their post and let’s other people see you are linking to them. This is a good way to build a community by taking part in other blog conversations.

Discussion

Overall, the University of Washington appears to be very open to the idea of social media, but it seems to view it as a low priority compared to their traditional media and communications. Coach Sarkisian appears to like the idea behind social media but isn’t quite ready to participate personally. This is understandable, especially due to time constraints, but it makes a project like CoachSark.com very difficult to be successful. I believe for this project to be successful in the future, a more formal agreement should be made at the beginning of the project, including full access to social media accounts. Without this access, the MCDM class is at the whim of the football team’s staff, which can be difficult when they are busy working on other projects.

While researching for this paper, I also made some observations that warrant further research and discussion. Many big-name coaches such as Pete Carroll have active Twitter accounts and Facebook fan pages, but athletes are generally discouraged from participating on these social media websites.⁹ This athlete-coach divide in acceptability of social media use is similar to the divide in freedom of

⁹ Pete Carroll’s Twitter account: <http://www.twitter.com/petecarroll>
Pete Carroll’s Facebook fan page: <http://www.facebook.com/coachcarroll>

professionalism. Athletes' salaries are capped at a very low wage while coaches see exceedingly high paychecks (Coach Sarkisian will make \$1.7 million his first year, which will steadily rise to \$2.3 million in 2013).¹⁰

In 2002, Robert Barro of BusinessWeek made an interesting argument for why the NCAA is such a strong monopoly.¹¹ In his article titled "The Best Little Monopoly in America," Barro states:

"The NCAA is impressive partly because its limitations on scholarships and other payments to athletes boost the profitability of college sports programs. But even more impressive is the NCAA's ability to maintain the moral high ground. For example, many college basketball players come from poor families and are not sufficiently talented to make it to the National Basketball Assn. Absent the NCAA, such a student would be able to amass significant cash during a college career. With the NCAA in charge, this student remains poor. Nevertheless, the athletic association has managed to convince most people that the evildoers are the schools that violate the rules by attempting to pay athletes rather than the cartel enforcers who keep the student-athletes from getting paid."

The same behavior of regulating athletes' pay is being applied to what athletes can say and do with social media. During my time on the University of Washington track team, we were never trained about how to use social media in a way that promotes the University or ourselves. We were simply told not to use it. The same appears to hold true for other Universities. Rather than teach their athletes proper uses of social media, the services are being restricted or banned. Coaches and the program as a whole, however, are free to use social media to promote the University's brand as well as the coach's brand. Not only does this do a disservice to students by censoring them and not letting them promote themselves, it hurts universities that

¹⁰ "Washington Huskies introduce new coach Steve Sarkisian - ESPN." *ESPN: The Worldwide Leader In Sports*. Web. 16 Dec. 2009. <<http://sports.espn.go.com/ncf/news/story?id=3754668>>.

¹¹ "BW Online | December 9, 2002 | The Best Little Monopoly in America." *BusinessWeek - Business News, Stock Market & Financial Advice*. Web. 15 Dec. 2009. <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/02_49/b3811038.htm>.

could benefit from well-trained student storytellers. It's as if Universities have chosen the abstinence approach rather than comprehensive social media education.

The question remaining is whether or not social media will actually break down the walls the NCAA has set up, or if the NCAA will in fact maintain their current moral high ground and be able to control athletes to the same extent they have been able to for decades. The NCAA appears to be fighting it, but I have a feeling they won't adapt quickly enough.