

# Twitter, Facebook, and Professional Wrestling: Indie Wrestler Perspectives on the Importance of Social Media

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When most people hear the words “professional wrestling,” they tend to think of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), possibly the most well-known and high-profile wrestling promotion of all time (at least in the United States, though the company has made footholds in several international markets). Yet an entire world of pro wrestling exists beyond the confines of Vince McMahon’s massive “sports entertainment” empire. This is the world of independent or indie (alternately “indie”) wrestling, a term often applied to smaller independently-operated regional professional wrestling promotions (for more see Heppen and Beard; Mathewson; and Roberts and Sevieri, all in this volume). Examples include AAW (Berwyn, IL), Bar Wrestling (Baldwin Park, CA), Beyond Wrestling (Worcester, MA), and Ring of Honor (Bristol, PA). Independent wrestling has exploded in recent years, thanks in large part to the influence of social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

While preparing this special edition of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, we reached out to indie wrestlers and promoters and asked them how social media has changed the wrestling landscape. We received responses from the following individuals:

1. Actor, podcaster, and indie wrestling legend Colt Cabana, host of the popular *Art of Wrestling* podcast, and fixture of dozens of indie wrestling promotions, including AAW, Chikara Pro, Pro Wrestling Guerilla, Ring of Honor, and more.

2. High-flying indie sensation and self-proclaimed “Leader of the Pack” Stephen Wolf, a staple of such indie promotions as AAW, Glory Pro, Impact Wrestling, and Funky Munky Wrestling.
3. Hard-working indie wrestler Greg Skipper (aka Mr. Excellent), known to fans of CZW, Ground Breaking Wrestling, Xcite Wrestling, and Maryland Championship Wrestling.
4. AAW promoter Mike Petkovich, an essential member of the thriving Chicago indie wrestling scene.

They each told us about how social media has helped indie wrestling become more popular than ever in the 21st century, as well as how new communication technologies have impacted both their careers and the professional wrestling industry. Their comments are collected below without editorializing or theorizing to present their perspectives on social media and professional wrestling.

### How Would You Describe the Landscape of Professional Wrestling Today?

Colt Cabana (CC): This is such a broad question that it’s hard to answer. Wrestling will always be the red-headed stepchild of pop culture. Even when it’s the hottest, coolest thing, it’s never really given the respect it truly deserves by mainstream media. There always seems to be a chuckle behind pro wrestling’s back. The wrestlers and performers aren’t always in love with that notion, but we love our industry and what we do, so we don’t let it bother us too much.

Stephen Wolf (SW): Professional wrestling is at an all-time high right now. People are making a living not only from the WWE but in the independent scene as well, and it’s crazy to me how many different companies there are.



**Image 1: Stephen Wolf (Image courtesy of Stephen Wolf)**

Greg Skipper (GS): I think the landscape of the industry has mirrored the changes in society to some degrees. Wrestling fans are consumers and consumers want what they want right now. They search out the information on their favorite performers via the numerous social media platforms and feel more connected with the athletes on a more personal level than ever before. Business is on the upswing considering that so many products are available to be viewed instantaneously.

Mike Petkovich (MP): Busier than ever. There is more pro wrestling to consume than ever before.

### What Role Does Social Media Play in Professional Wrestling Today?

CC: I think it's parallel to the role it plays in any other mainstream [media]. When used correctly and wisely, it raises the profile of the individuals and the genre.

SW: Social media is the biggest way to market yourself and get your name out there for fans and promoters alike. As well as being in contact with everything that's going on in the wrestling world.

GS: Just as I had mentioned in the previous question, social media allows fans to be more involved and personal with the wrestlers than ever before. They can follow, "like," and engage with performers, which couldn't be done in the 80s and 90s. From the perspective of the wrestler, it allows us to use social media platforms to promote ourselves and create drawing power to promotions and drive consumers to purchase our merchandise as a secondary avenue of income.

MP: Social media has opened the world to so many promotions. You can literally find content from all over the world. Not only can you find the promotions and their content, you can interact with them because of social media.

### How Has Social Media Changed Professional Wrestling?

CC: For one, it's given so much more access to the fans. The performers are much more than just people you occasionally see at a show or see for 5-20 minutes on your television screen. Social media has made wrestlers three-dimensional. Fans can now not only decide who their favorite wrestlers are from their performance, but they can also see if they like who they are as people. I think this is really important because it's an avenue of that performer's personality that maybe wasn't able to shine in one aspect, but social media has allowed different ways to be presented.

SW: Social media has been a great and terrible thing. It's great because, like I said earlier, it's a great way to branch out and connect with fans. But on the same token it makes it a lot easier for fans to find your personal information. As wrestlers we love our fans but we also love our privacy as well.



**Image 2: Mr. Excellent (Image courtesy of Greg Skipper)**

GS: It has changed the industry in many ways. Marketing and merchandising are just other words for follows and likes. It's made storytelling more difficult in the grand scheme of things as the fans can easily investigate our friends to see if "Wrestler A really hates Wrestler B." It's opened the performers up to easy criticism. Pre-social media you would have to actually say these things to the wrestlers. Would they? No. They didn't want to feel the wrath of someone 6'4", 285 lbs. Now, behind the computer screen and with a few hashtags, fans can say anything they want. That's the negative. The positive side of that is if you can control your social media profile, you can really drive followers to creating buzz about you. And there are tons of independent wrestling promoters that will book talent with that all important "buzz." So, in that aspect, social media creates more opportunities for the performer.

MP: It has made everything accessible to the consumer. You can now interact with promotions, wrestlers, and merchandise companies from all over the world. It adds a personal touch and gives the fan something more than just watching a match on TV.

### How Important Is Social Media for Your Career and in What Ways?

CC: It's another extension of who you are. It's also important because it's that very individual who's using it. In modern wrestling we see a writing team or someone else helping build a personality for a wrestler. Social media takes all those crutches away and shows what that specific person is all about and if they can use it for their career.

SW: In a nutshell, it's the best way for people to see who you (or your character) do/stand for. Also, it makes it a smoother process for people to find you and who you are.

GS: As it relates to my career it's important in several ways. The most important is marketing. Creating a brand and likeability about myself that makes people want to support me and whichever promotions that are booking me. If a promotion can see that I have fans tweeting about me, they are more likely to put some steam behind me in that promotion. Further up the card usually equates to

more money in my pocket. Another way I find it important, at least for me, is to keep a pulse on the wrestling fan base. As a wrestler, I'm a salesman. I need to know what my customers are buying. If I can utilize social media to follow what they are interested in, what they like about certain other performers, trends, etc., I can utilize that and adapt it to my own character thus making me even more appealing and keeping the fans yearning for what I'm selling (which will probably equate to increased merchandise sales as well).

MP: Social media is our access to the fans that support the AAW product away from the venues. It means everything to us.

### How Does Social Media Impact the Notion of Kayfabe?

CC: In the 1920s, the book *Fall Guys* was written as a tell-all exposé on pro wrestling. They didn't have Twitter then. Some people can use Twitter to do that and some can't. It's just an easier and faster way to expose whatever someone wants to expose.

SW: We, as wrestlers, try to maintain kayfabe as much as possible. On our character Twitter pages/Instagrams we post about how much we hate Bad Guy #1 because he beat up our buddy Good Guy #2, but on a personal Facebook page you'll see Bad Guy #1, Good Guy #2, and myself hanging out watching sports (Go Cavs). So social media really does take a toll on keeping private and public lives separate.

GS: In short, it destroys what was left from the advent of the internet. I find it increasingly difficult to "work the fans" using social media. It can be done, but it's becoming ever more difficult. It takes a strict commitment to do so. I try to promote stories that I'm involved in thru social media but not to an excess. I treat this like I'm a true athlete that's brought in to perform and treat it like a real competition. Whether I like the guy or not, I'm brought in and my mindset is "If I make these people believe that I'm trying to win because it benefits me in any way (perhaps financially), they will not care if myself and my opponent are Facebook friends."

MP: It has taken the idea of kayfabe from black and white to this huge gray area. Sami Callihan is the perfect example of this. There isn't a whole lot of good in Sami Callihan in AAW, but because he is so active on social media and so accessible, people respect his hustle, talent, and effort. He gets cheered just as much as he gets booed. Social media has made it hard to have a true "bad guy" in pro wrestling.

### If You Could Change One Thing About Social Media and Professional Wrestling, What Would You Change, and Why?

CC: I don't like how some wrestlers tweet. That's subjective though, just like wrestling. So, I wouldn't change anything. People will use it the same way that people wrestle. Fans will follow those wrestlers or not depending on what they like about the social media they consume.

SW: If I would have to change anything about the connection it would be that fans stay away from the personal accounts of wrestlers. I love my fans, but I want you guys to know Stephen Wolf, not Stephen (insert last name). That's why a lot of wrestlers (myself included) have fan pages set up for fans to follow us on. Tweet, comment, and double tap all of your favorite wrestlers' material and support them 100%. Just don't be discouraged if they don't add you as a friend. Facebook is personal, and personal material should stay just that.

GS: Wow. This is a tough question. I think the only thing I would change is the level of transparency between the business and the viewing public. If we could go back in time and change how we, the wrestlers, treat these platforms and utilize them to the fullest as a new, ever expansive platform to tell stories, promote ourselves, and the places we will be performing without giving away the "reality" of the situation, we truly could have rebuilt the business and kayfabe could be alive and well again. Don't get me wrong. I really think as the technology progresses, if we as wrestlers continue to adapt, we will find ways to use what is out there to tell our stories and build our brands. Adapt or be forgotten.



MP: I honestly don't think I would change anything. I'm sure there are some wrestling purists out there that will argue with me but look at what it has done for AAW. Social media has exposed our product to fans across the world and made us a household name. Social media has allowed us to find and use the best talent on the planet for our fans.

### Future Directions on Social Media and Professional Wrestling

The comments collected here suggest different directions for research on social media and professional wrestling. First, increased scrutiny should be paid to the various ways in which professional wrestling has adopted social media as the means to manage the relationship between wrestlers, promoters, and fans, particularly on the independent circuit. For instance, social media allows indie wrestlers and smaller promotions to build an audience without the assistance of the WWE's massive marketing machine. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media have granted indie wrestlers and promoters the ability to connect with audiences and therefore thrive. Indeed, indie wrestling's "acrobatic moves and daredevil stunts are tailor-made for the age of YouTube and GIFs, while streaming services such as New Japan World, Fite and Twitch have made it easier than ever to binge on wrestling" (Zimmerman). In addition, these sites have granted fans increased access to their favorite wrestlers, but especially those who perform on the indie circuit and use social media to aggressively build their own brands. As such, fans sometimes develop a more intense relationship to these performers and characters due to what sometimes seems like a more intimate form of interaction. All this becomes particularly important when considering that professional wrestlers are often characterized as independent contractors, both within the WWE but especially on the indie circuit. Self-promotion and building relationships with promoters and fans can help performers land gigs. Social media provides space for such branding work, and therefore its impact on indie wrestling deserves further consideration.

At the same time, the WWE routinely encourages interaction during its live shows through hashtags and tweet scrolls, as well as having their wrestlers (known as Superstars) engage with fans through a variety of social media sites. For instance, the WWE recently unveiled the Mixed Match Challenge, a tag team tournament featuring intergender pairings competing for charity that airs

exclusively on Facebook Watch (Oestrieher), and the company urges fans (aka the WWE Universe) to interact with the Superstars during the bouts via Facebook's commenting feature. Interactions such as these serve two primary functions. First, they allow the WWE to advance transmedia storylines across multiple media platforms (for example, wrestlers can taunt one another on Twitter, and commentators can mention these interactions while calling the in-ring action). In addition, these interactions can sometimes allow fans a previously-unheard-of peek behind the kayfabe curtain and grant them a glimpse of the personalities that exist behind the characters. Conversely, by demonstrating their true personalities, some wrestlers can break free from the strict oversight exercised by Vince McMahon and WWE Creative and thereby get "over" with the members of the WWE Universe—see Zack Ryder as just one example (Aitken). Thus, it becomes vital to consider how social media serve to shape and reshape the most powerful pro-wrestling (or "sports entertainment" in Vince McMahon's preferred lingo) promotion in the world.

In addition, some wrestlers use social media to build their own personal brands and promote other projects—sometimes kayfabe, sometimes not, but perhaps always as part of a larger performance. For example, during his run with Impact Wrestling (formerly NWA TNA: Total Nonstop Action), Matt Hardy used social media to develop the Broken Universe, and now uses his various platforms to recreate this narrative for the WWE. Meanwhile, Xavier Woods created a new platform for himself via his YouTube channel, *Up Up Down Down (UDD)*, which gave him and the rest of the New Day (as well as other members of the WWE roster) increased visibility and allowed them to get over with fans (as evidenced by the *UDD* signs appearing in the crowds at WWE shows, and the fact that the WWE now sells officially-licensed *UDD* merchandise). Tomasso Ciampa also used social media during his NXT run to advance his feud with Johnny Gargano and develop his Blackheart persona (which in turn became his new Twitter handle, replacing his previous identity as Project Ciampa). These examples all serve to illustrate that social media have become an integral part of the wrestling landscape in the 21st century, and demonstrate the need to explore, examine, and interrogate the various ways they have changed the face of pro wrestling and sports entertainment.

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