

Memo to All Boxers: Get on MySpace!

Written by Eddie Goldman
Wednesday, 05 July 2006 19:00

It was late Sunday night (actually early Monday morning) in that historic dive of dives, Yogi's on Manhattan's Upper West Side, when the conversation inevitably turned to how the patrons and bartender could maintain contact in the unwelcome but inexorably approaching daylight hours. Someone mentioned something about MySpace.com, the social networking web site, to which the bartender Andrea replied, "Everyone has MySpace."

Bars are often stages for exaggerated dialogue, although far less so than, say, any political body or corporate boardroom. In this case, Andrea was not that far off: Sometime earlier that day, the number of accounts on MySpace had passed the 90 million mark. (Her profile, by the way, is at <http://myspace.com/pythonicbeauty> while I am at <http://myspace.com/nhbnews> . So much for phone numbers scribbled on beer-stained napkins.)

One person who gets it is a fellow about the same age as the septuagenarian promoters Don King and Bob Arum, the 75-year-old Rupert Murdoch, chairman and chief executive officer of the international media giant News Corporation, which owns The Times of London, the New York Post, the Fox Network, and so much more.

Last year, on April 13, Murdoch addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors and admitted that he was a "digital immigrant," i.e., someone whose media and information gathering habits were established long before the computer and Internet ages. He then warned his ink-stained colleagues that they must change their ways lest "we will, as an industry, be relegated to the status of also-rans." He quoted from a Carnegie Corporation report by Merrill Brown which stated, "consumers between the ages of 18-34 are increasingly using the web as their medium of choice for news consumption. While local TV news remains the most accessed source of news, the internet, and more specifically, internet portals, are quickly becoming the favored destination for news among young consumers."

Three months later, on July 19, Murdoch's News Corporation purchased a company called Intermix for \$580 million. Most parts of that outfit were not exactly hot takeover targets, as the company had been accused by New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer of deceptive business practices and using spyware, and had paid \$7.9 million to settle a suit on these issues without, of course, admitting wrongdoing. The real and only prize in this purchase of Intermix was one of its companies: MySpace.

Murdoch soon stressed his new focus on the Internet and MySpace in an Aug. 10 conference call with investors in which he stated, "There is no greater priority for the company today than to meaningfully and profitably expand its Internet presence and to properly position ourselves for the explosion in broadband usage that we're now starting to see."

The Alexa.com web traffic rankings have MySpace ranked number five in the world among all sites. MySpace.com is only behind, in order, Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com), Microsoft Network (MSN, or www.msn.com), Google (www.google.com), and the Chinese language search engine

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Baidu.com (www.baidu.com). It also gets more traffic, according to Alexa, than sites such as AOL.com, eBay.com, Microsoft.com, and BBC.co.uk.

You wouldn't know any of this about staying relevant or attracting younger people from boxing, however. This is a sport where one of its main TV shows, ESPN2's "Friday Night Fights," has found a willing main sponsor in a company which sells coloring for men to cover up their gray hair.

Go to MySpace and try to find, among the 90 million-plus accounts, Don King Productions, Top Rank, Golden Boy Promotions, Main Events, HBO boxing, Showtime boxing, or ESPN boxing. You won't be able to do so. (You might, though, find an account under the name myspace.com/toprank owned by someone who says he is a 16-year-old boy from Kentucky and loves basketball.)

The music industry has wisely jumped all over MySpace, with countless profiles both from major artists, which are usually administered by the staffs of the records companies, all the way down to unsigned indie artists, doing their own profiles and looking for that big break.

It is not that boxing is absent from MySpace. Hardly. In fact, there are many boxing people, including some active fighters, on it. What is absent is any equivalent of the corporate support the record labels give their artists on MySpace.

I will also admit that, even though I have been using computers virtually every working day for the past two decades, and have been working online in providing media content for the past decade, I was caught off-guard last year by MySpace.

When I was editor for the now-defunct Boxingranks.com site, I was contacted by one of the writers, Tom Luffman, about linking to the boxing forum he ran on MySpace. At that time I had never heard of it, but he told me that there were already 20 million people on that site and over 300 in his boxing group. I signed up, albeit reluctantly, merely expecting to observe that group and do nothing much more.

After signing up in April 2005, for various personal reasons I didn't have much time to explore MySpace. Some months later I did get that time, and I now use my profile (the page you are given to describe yourself and interests, and also get comments from others) for all sorts of purposes, including publicizing articles such as this one. My list of friends (people or accounts which link to your profile) has grown from two guys named Tom – everyone is given MySpace co-founder Tom Anderson as a friend at the start, and Tom Luffman – to a group which now numbers over 900.

Tom Luffman, who is at <http://www.myspace.com/tomluffman>, has also seen a rapid growth in the boxing group, which is at <http://groups.myspace.com/boxing> (these groups can only be joined by MySpace members, but it is free to sign up for MySpace, and continues to be so even under Murdoch). Now this group has over 3,700 members. And he still sees great potential for MySpace to help boxing, especially with attracting younger fans.

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“MySpace allows them to get fans in touch with a fighter,” he said in a phone interview. It provides boxers with “one-on-one time with the fans.” And he added, “Boxing doesn’t understand that fact.”

He cited the noteworthy one-on-one, in-person skills of Don King, both with the public and the media. “Don King is so good at this,” he said. “The first time I met him, he asked my name. The second time, he remembered it.”

He then urged more boxers to learn from this, and take the time to speak with the fans and sign autographs. “They’re doing themselves a favor,” he argued.

MySpace can in effect supplement those face-to-face meetings: “It makes them accessible, which is really big in a fan’s eye.” He went on to stress how important contact with the fans through MySpace would be to fans, “Especially 14-15 years old.” If, for example, fighters would “Swap e-mails with those kinds of people, they’d have a fan for life.”

Some fighters are already doing just that. The undefeated super welterweight prospect Vanes Martirosyan (9-0, 6 KOs), who next fights Aug. 12 in Las Vegas on the Rahman-Maskaev undercard, maintains his own profile.

“It is a great promotional tool and lets you stay in touch with fans,” he wrote in a MySpace message to me. The 20-year-old Martirosyan, at <http://www.myspace.com/vanesboxing>, gets it.

And so do several other boxers, mostly younger fighters trying to work their way up the ladder, such as Allan Green (<http://www.myspace.com/allansweetness>), Peter "Kid Chocolate" Quillin (<http://www.myspace.com/thekidchocolate>), and Frankie Figueroa (<http://www.myspace.com/gatofigueroa>).

For more prominent boxers, however, it is harder sometimes to figure out if the profiles set up under their names are started with their consent or are just fake sites set up by fans. There are already, for example, numerous profiles for Mike Tyson, as well as ones for Oscar De La Hoya, Bernard Hopkins, and others, some of which even claim to be the “official” site. These profiles may be well-designed, and look almost like what an official site might just look, so sorting all this out can be confusing, especially to fans.

One top boxer whom we do believe runs his own profile is undefeated WBC junior flyweight champion Brian Vilorio. His profile is at <http://www.myspace.com/bvilorio>.

There are already people working on compiling a list of boxers who at least oversee their own MySpace profiles. Bernadette Robinson, a social service worker from Harlem who is also an amateur boxing judge, has been communicating with many of these boxers on MySpace and has been putting together such a list. She has also been regularly sending out bulletins on

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MySpace (messages sent to all your friends at once) with news from these boxers about when their next fights are, how their training has been going, and more. Bernadette's profile is at <http://www.myspace.com/bern april20>

Both she and Tom Luffman have offered through the boxing group as well as their profiles, bulletins, and messages, to help boxers spread the word of their activities, and of course also gain fans, through MySpace.

Just like with any other form of publicity, many boxers may need some assistance in designing their profiles and writing and editing their content. For that, however, these fighters will need to enlist people around them, including their often technophobic managers and promoters. People like Tom and Bernadette are just doing this on MySpace to help the boxers and boxing in general, but not for now as a job, so they can help only so much.

But the boxing group is open to all MySpace members to join, all of our profiles can be read and posted on by MySpace friends, and all of us are accepting new friends, especially from people in the boxing world. Plus, a site like MySpace offers an almost unlimited platform for creative minds to get their stories told.

What is key is that the boxers must begin to do this for themselves, and not wait for the boxing establishment, which has already long since missed the digital boat.

This may be a decentralized effort, but that is how the media, publicity, and marketing are evolving in this online era.

Using MySpace, of course, is not the only online way to accomplish these goals of publicity and marketing as well as attracting younger fans. Not using it, however, will only mean that those men's hair coloring commercials will soon be replaced by ones for Social Security, nursing homes, and funeral assistance.

Both the sport and business of boxing have already been "relegated to the status of also-rans," as Murdoch fears newspapers will soon be. The boxers themselves have to try to do what the graying and complacent boxing establishment has not, can not, and will not. And that means creating a situation where we can one day say, "Every boxer has MySpace."