

THE JOHN CURLEY CENTER FOR
SPORTS JOURNALISM
AT PENN STATE

Assessing Coverage of Serena Williams' Outburst at the U.S. Open

*A report of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism
October 2009*

Introduction

In an incident that likely ranks as the most replayed moment from the 2009 U.S. Open, defending women's champion Serena Williams lost her cool after a foot-fault call that put her opponent, Kim Clijsters, one point away from winning. Because it was Williams' second offense of the match (earlier, she had slammed her racket),¹ her response to the call cost her the final point. Clijsters was awarded the match and entry to the final round of the Open, which she went on to win.

At the post-match press conference, Williams was asked whether she wanted to apologize to the linesperson. She responded, "Apologize for? From me? How many people yell at linespeople? Players, athletes get frustrated – I don't know how many times I've seen that happen." A statement she released through a public relations agency the following day sought to explain her outburst. "Everyone could truly see the passion I have for my job," the statement read in part. Williams released a formal apology Monday, however, on her Web site. "I handled myself inappropriately and it's not the way to act," Williams wrote.

Williams was fined \$10,500, the maximum fine that can be levied on site, for the incident. She was allowed to play in a doubles match with her sister, Venus Williams, on Monday.

Microphones also picked up top-ranked men's player Roger Federer's use of an expletive during an argument with a line judge at the Open two days later. Federer was fined \$1,500.

This analysis focuses on coverage of Williams, whose offense received far more media attention than did Federer's. Sports columnist and social critic Dave Zirin criticized media coverage exacting a "double standard." "If Williams were a man, would her behavior have been met with similar outrage?" Zirin wrote. He wasn't the only commentary to raise questions about response to the incident; *New York Times* columnist Bill Rhoden also wondered whether Williams may have been subject to scrutiny through a "sexist prism."²

¹ According to the video and media accounts, Williams walked over to the linesperson and said, "If I could, I would take this [expletive] ball and shove it down your [expletive] throat." Earlier in the match, Williams was penalized after slamming her racket and breaking it.

² See Zirin's column, "Double Standard for Serena Williams," *The Nation* Web site, Sept. 15, 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090928/zirin>; see also Rhoden's column, "One Standard: Over the Line is Over the Line," *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2009, Section B, p. 11.

This analysis, of coverage of newspaper, television and Internet coverage of Williams' outburst, finds that a subtle-yet-apparent "sexist prism" frame was used in accounts about Williams. This framing was visible in news accounts through comparisons of her to other athletes (male and female) in ways that presented her negatively and in the positioning of Williams against Clijsters, whose status as a mother was often mentioned.

Procedures

The questions guiding this research centered on whether and how Williams was compared to Roger Federer, who also was fined for an outburst at the U.S. Open; Kim Clijsters, her opponent in the match; and other athletes (male and female). Content analysis was also used to determine how the Williams incident was contextualized within tennis, the world of sports, and wider U.S. culture. Other coding variables were used to examine how Williams' statements and her punishment were presented in coverage. (See Appendix.)

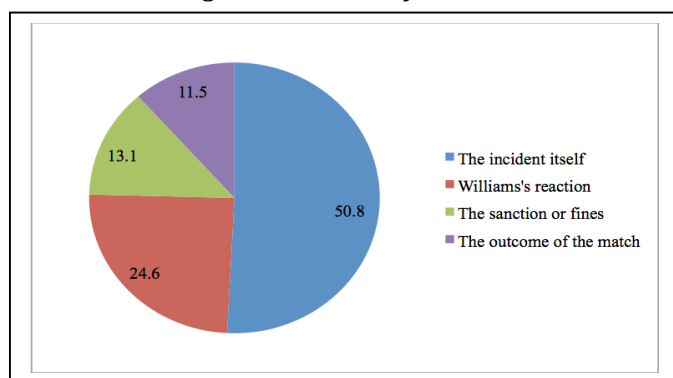
Stories were collected from both traditional and new-media outlets. These outlets included national and local newspapers, magazines, network newscasts, sports media Web sites and prominent sports blogs. Articles, transcripts and Web posts were included if they used the terms "Serena Williams" and "outburst" and were published within a week of the incident, which took place Aug. 12 (See Appendix). After duplicates were removed, a total of 61 original stories were included in this analysis. (Many of these stories were reproduced on blogs and other sites across the Web.)

Stories were coded using a coding scheme that was developed to answer the research questions. Two coders conducted the analysis; intercoder reliability across all categories on 15 percent of the sample was 92 percent.

Findings

Of the 61 articles, the majority (64%) came from traditional media. The majority of articles (61%) were published in newspapers. About 30 percent of all stories were published on sports-focused Web sites (ESPN, Yahoo!Sports and Fox Sports). The remainder of stories were from network newscasts or prominent sports blogs.

Figure 1: Article focus



Most of the coverage (82%) appeared within three days of the incident. The focus of about half (50.8%) the articles was the incident itself; 24.6% focused on Williams's reaction; 13.1% on the sanction of fines; and the remainder (11.5%) focused on the outcome of the match. See Figure 1.

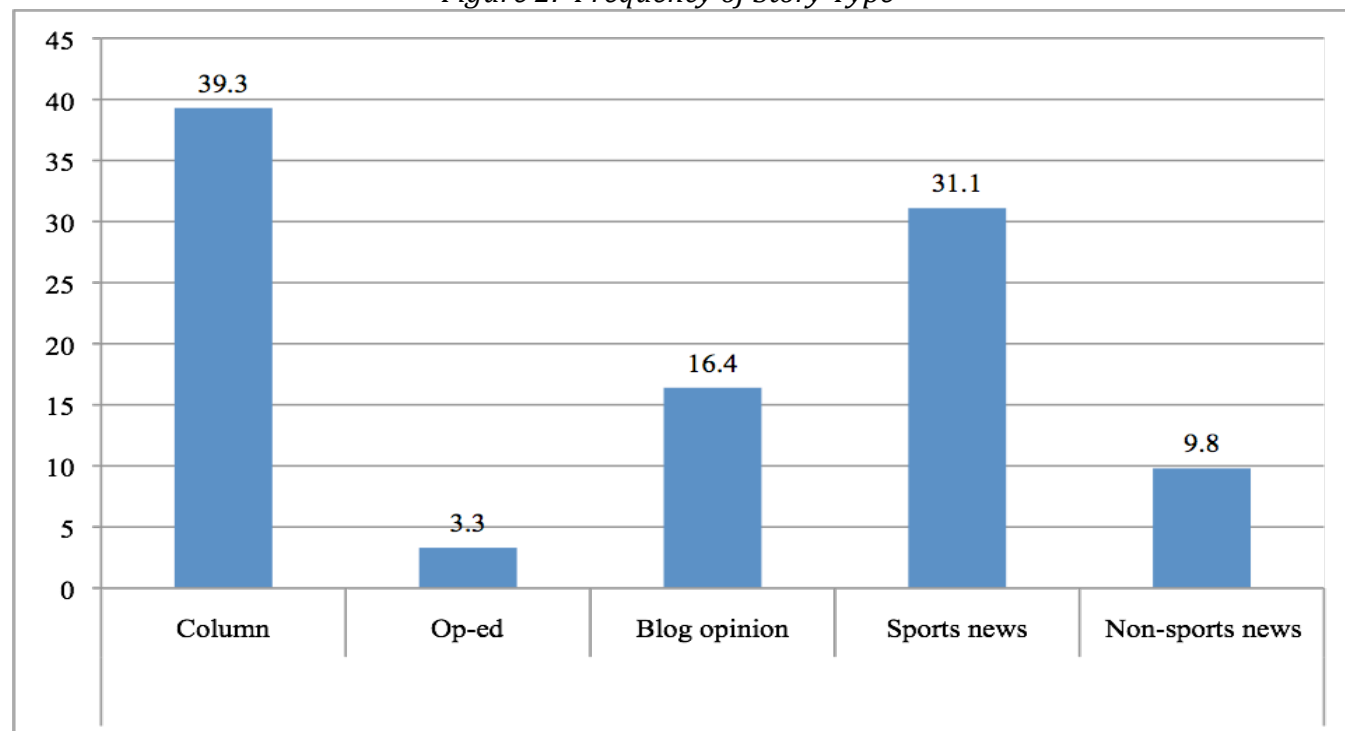
Nearly two thirds (64%) of the stories were written by men. Twenty-one percent of the coverage was provided by women, and the remaining 18% either did not include a byline or could not be determined.

Serena Williams herself (43%) was the most prominent source in the stories. Another 33% had no individual as a prominent source. A tenth (10%) of stories featured other athletes as the most

prominent source, followed by journalists and media commentators (5%) and tennis officials (3%). The remainder had a prominent source that did not fit these categories.

More than two-thirds (70%) of the newspaper coverage appeared in the sports section, in the form of a column or story. More than half (59%) of the articles, including blog posts, were opinion pieces. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Frequency of Story Type



Note: Articles that were news-oriented but not found in the sports section were coded "non-sports news."

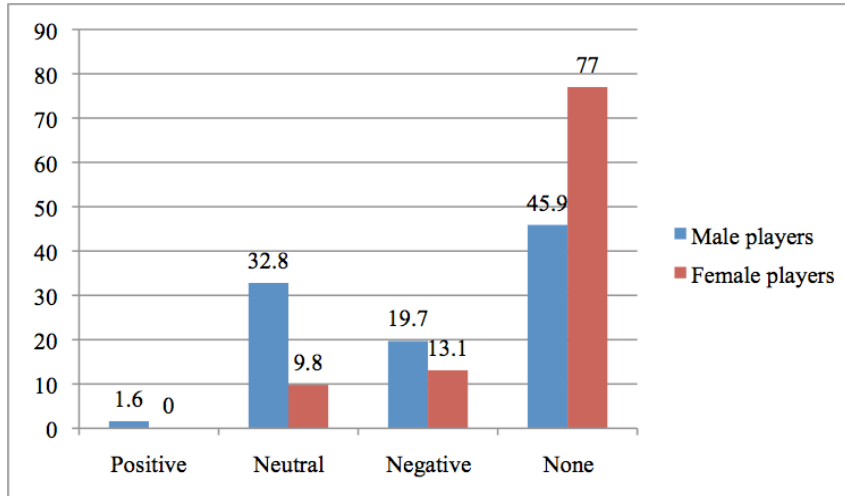
Comparisons between Williams and other athletes

Ninety percent of the coverage of Williams' outburst did not mention Federer's offense (a small part of the Williams sample was published *before* the Federer outburst). Five percent of the articles that did mention Federer compared Williams and Federer neutrally; the other 5% compared Williams negatively to Federer. For instance, one Yahoo!Sports blog opined, "Getting mad at officials happens in every sport every day. Threatening to shove sports equipment down the esophaguses said officials does not. Big difference."

Williams' opponent in the match during which the outburst occurred, Kim Clijsters, was mentioned in two-thirds (67%) of the articles. The match was Clijsters' first major since retiring from tennis to have a child. Clijsters went on to become the second mother to win a U.S. Open. Her maternity was mentioned in almost one-third (30%) of stories.

More than half of the stories compared Williams to male athletes. Of those that compared Williams to athletes such as John McEnroe, most did so in neutral fashion, and about one-third were negative. Only one story made a comparison that was positive for Williams.

Figure 3: Comparisons to male and female athletes



Fewer than one-fourth (23%) of the articles compared Williams to other female athletes. Of those, most cast Williams negatively. See Figure 3.

Examples of negative and neutral comparisons between Williams and other athletes:

“The incident, which lasted only a few minutes, was reminiscent of Ilie Nastase’s chaotic match against John McEnroe at the

1979 Open... But even then, Nastase did not threaten bodily harm against the umpire or a linesman.” (Negative)

“Tennis tirades with players like John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors were once as much a part of the sport as the game itself.” (Neutral)

Articles that made negative comparisons between Williams and other female athletes were more likely to mention Clijsters’s recent maternity. A chi square test demonstrated that this difference is significant, $X^2(2) = 10.828$, $p < .01$. For instance, a Yahoo!Sports article stated:

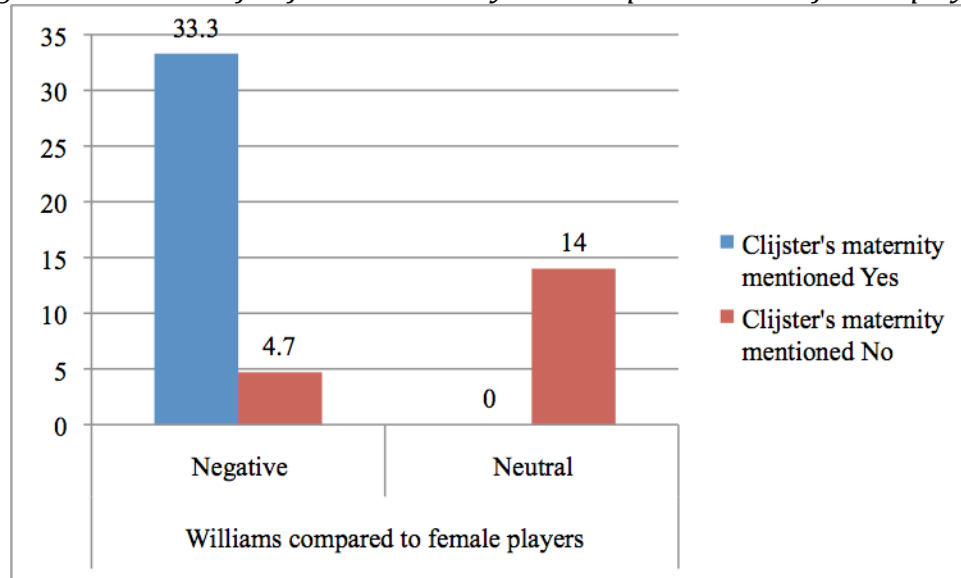
The purity and innocence of the love between mother and child...was perhaps the only thing strong enough to cleanse the deep wounds Serena Williams inflicted upon the sport of tennis and the U.S. Open on Saturday evening.

Articles were also more likely to mention Clijsters’s maternity when they made reference to Williams’ background, $X^2(1) = 5.43$, $p < .05$. An example of background in a story was discussion of previous matches for Williams and Clijsters, for instance, or references to Williams’ reputation on the court (Background was operationalized as any mention of Williams’ history, excluding simple mention of her win/loss record. See Appendix.) See Table 1 and Figure 4.

Table 1: Mention of Clijster’s maternity, comparisons

	Williams compared to female players		
	Negative	Neutral	No
Clijster’s maternity mentioned	33.3%	0%	66.7%
Clijster’s maternity NOT mentioned	4.7%	14%	81.4%

Figure 4: Mention of Clijster's maternity and comparisons with female players



Williams's outburst and civility

Williams' outburst toward a line judge came the same week as two other outbursts that received national coverage: U.S. Representative Joe Wilson's shouting "You lie!" during President Obama's Congressional address and singer Kanye West's interruption of a fellow musician's acceptance speech during the MTV Video Music Awards. About one-fourth (23%) of the articles implied larger cultural problems with incivility and explicitly mentioned one of the other outbursts; 20 percent mentioned both. For example, one article stated:

Of course bad behavior knows no historical bounds. Still this recent spate of spats has raised eyebrows and has some wondering whether new depths are being plumbed.

Traditional media were more likely to imply cultural problems with civility and mention the other outbursts. Chi square tests showed that these differences are significant, $X^2(1) = 6.59$, $p < .01$ and $X^2(2) = 8.61$, $p < .05$, respectively. It is important to note, however, that this may be an artifact of the publications that were sampled. Traditional media outlets were more general in nature (i.e. national newspapers), whereas new media outlets were sports-oriented in nature. However, some of the articles that implied a lack of civility did appear in sports sections.

Some articles also portrayed Williams' outburst as a threat to the unique role of tennis in the sports world (13%) and/or signaled a breakdown in the civility of sports (5%).

Response to Williams' statements and to her fine

Williams was fined \$10,500 by tennis officials. About one-fifth (21%) of the articles implied that she deserved a harsher punishment. Many of those articles pointed to the fact that she was awarded around \$400,000 at the tournament. Only about one-quarter (25%) made some mention of Williams' background in the article. Those articles that mentioned her background were more likely to imply that Williams should face stricter punishment. A chi square test determined this difference is significant, $X^2(1) = 7.62$, $p < .01$. See Table 2. Background mentions

were often neutral-to-positive; for instance, an ESPN.com article said, “The irony to those who have watched Williams ... is that she is known for near-impeccable on-court etiquette.”

Examples of coverage that imply Williams deserved harsher punishment include a sentence in one article that read, “Serena Williams’ outburst Saturday in any other sport would have resulted in suspension.” Another sentence coded as framing Williams as deserving more punishment read, “Thus far she has suffered a mere \$10,000 fine.”

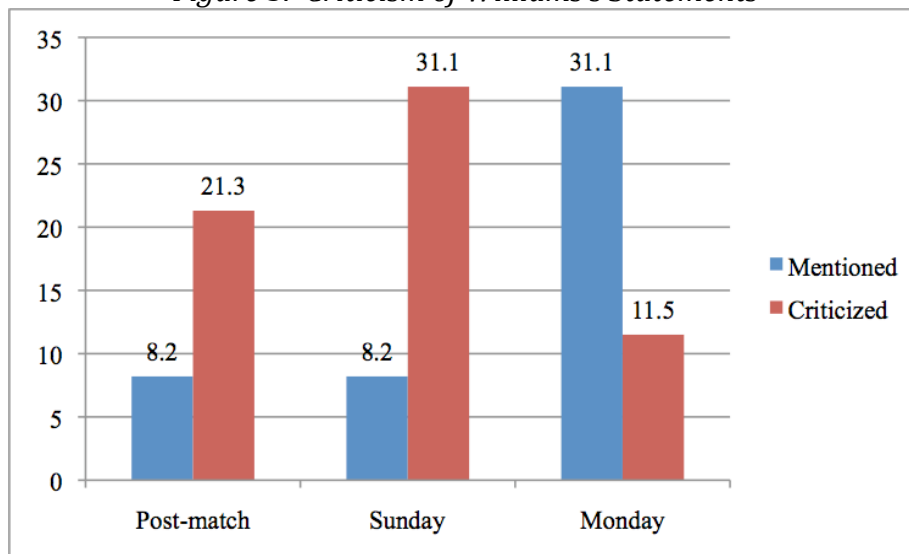
Williams also drew criticism for her reaction to her outburst. At a post-match press conference, she did not apologize and made statements that suggested she did not believe she had acted inappropriately. She released a statement on Sunday after the outburst

through public relations agency in which she, again, did not offer an apology, but instead talked about the passion she has for her job. She made an apology through a written statement before her doubles match with her sister the next day, however, and verbalized this apology at a press conference following her victory in that match.

Her statements during the after-match press conference on Aug. 12 immediately following the outburst were mentioned in almost one-third of the articles; of these, four-fifths were critical of her statements. The statement she released Sunday was mentioned in about 40 percent of the articles and criticized again in four-fifths of the stories that mentioned it. The apology that came Monday was mentioned in slightly more (42.6%) articles, however, and only about one-quarter of its mentions were accompanied with criticism. See Figure 5.

	Williams deserved harsher punishment	
	Yes	No
Background mentioned	46.7%	53.3%
Background NOT mentioned	13.0%	87.0%

Figure 5: Criticism of Williams’s Statements



Note: These are percentages of the entire sample; the “not mentioned” category is not included for each day so numbers do not add to 100.

The following are examples of coverage that mentioned (the first quote) or criticized (the second quote) Williams' reactions to the outburst:

"Then she turned the lens on herself, issuing an unequivocal apology to the lineswoman whose foot-fault call sent her into a rage one point from defeat in Saturday's semifinal..."

"She had a chance to apologize, or maybe even fake some remorse. She did neither. Instead, we got the usual, phony, sing-songy deflections and silly answers..."

Interpretations and Discussion

New York Times columnist Bill Rhoden and others suggested that media coverage of Serena Williams may have been presented through a "sexist prism." Our findings seem to indicate that there is at least some truth to the idea that her gender influenced the way writers and commentators presented her.

Analysis of the articles demonstrates that Williams was compared to male and female athletes; although she was more often compared to male athletes, the likelihood that the comparison would be negative was greater when she was compared to female athletes. Williams was also more often negatively compared to other female athletes when Clijster's status as a mother was mentioned. These findings suggest that Williams was viewed as clearly behaving outside of acceptable norms and ideals for female athletes; her behavior seemed to be more acceptable in comparison to male athletes. Still, however, she was also criticized in comparison to male athletes with reputations for emotional displays in competition.

Almost a quarter of the articles implied that Williams deserved harsher punishment for her behavior. These implications were more likely in articles that mention Williams' background, such as those that mentioned that Williams had faced Clijsters before in a controversial match or that Williams has traditionally been a crowd favorite. A closer reading of the articles is needed to determine what specific elements of Williams' background might have appeared in articles that framed Williams negatively.

It is also noteworthy that Williams' emotional response to a call at a critical point in the match was -- in a significant proportion of stories -- positioned as having implications beyond this moment in the U.S. Open. Her response was discussed in articles with headlines such as "Is rudeness 'the new norm' in public discourse?" and "High-profile outburst: Do we hit new lows?"

The attempt to link Williams with social issues and practices outside sports may also be a function of the media where this most often happened: traditional news outlets. "Legacy" media outlets such as newspapers, with a more general focus, may attempt more often to place sports in cultural context. Sports-specific new media may be less likely to speculate about the relationship between sports and the larger culture on any story. This isn't always the case; for instance, a post on the popular entrepreneurial blog *The Big Lead* was headlined, "Let's Stop Pretending Serena Williams Scandalized Society."

Williams was largely criticized for her public statements (and lack of apology) following the match on Sunday. Her formal apology, issued that Monday, was the statement most frequently mentioned and was not criticized to the extent of the other statements. This finding supports research suggesting that athletes who seek to repair their image with the public will find the surest route in an apology for the behavior that has been criticized; explaining or attempting to deflect blame are generally ineffective.

Limitations, further research

Of course, the findings of this study are limited. The analysis here does not, for instance, include commentary on cable news networks or commentary on many blogs and in regional newspapers across the U.S. Articles that mentioned the outburst in major newsmagazines (such as *SI*) fell outside of the one-week window for collection.

This study is also limited by its failure to address *race* as a factor in the coverage of Williams. Again, as Dave Zirin and other sports critics have suggested, the fact that Williams is African-American may also have inserted a “racist prism” on coverage. A limit of quantitative content analysis is that it often fails to overturn subtleties in stories that reflect institutional racism. Another type of analysis would be more useful in addressing that factor.

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Appendix: Methodology

Research questions

The specific questions that guided this project were:

1. Is Serena Williams compared to Roger Federer, who also had an outburst at the Open, and Kim Clijsters, her opponent in the match, in the articles? Are comparisons negative or positive for Williams?
2. How is Serena Williams compared to other athletes in general, both male and female, in coverage of her outburst at the U.S. Open?
3. Is the outburst placed in a larger context of problems with civility in tennis, sports, and our culture as a whole?
4. How is the punishment Williams received for the outburst framed? Is it implied that the punishment was not harsh enough?
5. How are Williams's public statements discussed in the coverage?

Sample

The search terms for collecting the sample were first selected. This was done by reading a handful of articles and determining which words or phrases appeared most frequently. The search terms chosen were "Serena Williams" and "outburst." To test the validity of these terms, we conducted two searches of two prominent sources, *USA Today* and *The New York Times*. In the first search, the selected terms were used, and in the second "Serena Williams" only was used. It was determined that no articles regarding the incident were missed using the original search terms; therefore, they were used for all sources.

We next determined the date range for our sample. We decided to begin our sample on the day Williams' outburst occurred, September 12, 2009. Our sample stretches from September 12 to September 19.

The sample consists of articles from a variety of sources, including electronic media. We wanted to collect a sample that was representative of all the coverage garnered by this incident, and not limited to coverage in print media. We looked for coverage of the Williams incident at the 2009 U.S. Open in the most popular newspapers, magazines, broadcast television transcripts, sports Web sites, sports blogs, and local newspapers.

The top five circulation newspapers in unique media markets and *USA Today* were used for this study. We collected articles from *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Houston Chronicle*. Each of these publications, with the exception of the *Chicago Tribune*, was searched using the LexisNexis Academic database. The *Chicago Tribune's* content was not available through LexisNexis and, therefore, was searched using the database Newsbank. The top local newspaper in the media market where the event occurred, New York, was also searched. *New York Post* content was also searched using Newsbank. The magazine sources used for the study were the top two circulation general sports magazines,

Sports Illustrated and *ESPN the Magazine*.³ These publications were searched using hard copies of the magazines. The prime-time news program of each network television station, *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, were all searched using the LexisNexis database.

We were able to use the search terms to collect articles for the sample from ESPN.com. However, searching for articles on Foxsports.com, Yahoosports.com, and CBSsports.com proved to be more difficult. Entering the search terms on these Web sites produced thousands of results. Therefore, we collected lists of all of the contributors from these sites and searched their archives for articles that matched our search terms and date range. General sports blogs appearing in the list of the top ten most frequently visited sports blogs⁴ were searched for the selected terms. Those blogs at the time of sample collection, September 2009, were Deadspin.com, TheBigLead.com, and TheSportingBlog.com.

Coding and reliability

Beyond basic data such as byline gender, publication type, story placement and source prominence, coding variables were designed to answer the research questions for this project. Thus, variables coded included: the focus of the article (the incident, the outcome of the match, the sanction or fines, and Williams' reaction), whether Williams was compared to Federer or other male athletes, whether Williams was compared to female athletes, whether Williams' background (beyond simple win-loss records) was mentioned or discussed, whether the article speculated on civility issues in tennis, in sports, or in U.S. culture, whether Kim Clijsters was mentioned, whether her maternity was mentioned, and whether Williams' various statements were mentioned in a positive, negative or neutral manner.

Two coders each coded approximately 15 percent of the sample using the codebook. They agreed, across all variables, 92 percent of the time. After agreement was reached on the reliability test, a single coder finished coding the sample.

³ Sports Illustrated did publish a story about Serena Williams' outburst but it was not published within our date range and, therefore, not used in this study.

⁴ List provided by Wikio.com