



*IWF's Podcast Series  
Interview with Naomi Schaefer Riley*

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Hi, I'm Sabrina Schaeffer, Executive Director of the Independent Women's Forum. Welcome to a special series of IWF's Working for Women Podcast focusing on technology. During this series we are speaking with leading experts on technological issues about how innovation is impacting our economy and American society for both better and worse.

I am thrilled to welcome as our first guest in this series, Naomi Schaefer Riley. Naomi is a columnist for the New York Post, a contributing editor to Acculturated.com, and a senior fellow here at IWF. Naomi is also the author of a forthcoming book on how the internet affects families, to be published by Templeton Press. Naomi, thank you so much for [1:00] joining me today.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Thanks for having me, Sabrina.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

So I think it goes without saying that technology has refashioned our world. The very fact that we are having this conversation today, you in New York, me in Washington, making a recording that will then be available to millions of potential listeners on the internet, it's really kind of an amazing place that we're at. But I'd love to hear from you on what do you see as the biggest benefit of technology for our world today.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Well, I mean there are so many it's hard to know when to start. But when you are thinking about technology in the context of families I certainly think from my personal experience that the amount of work that we can do from home on a more flexible schedule, it has been a huge boon to families and in particular to working women. It gives us a lot more of the flexibility that we've always wanted with our careers and the ability to spend the time with our families.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

It's so interesting, Naomi. Certainly at IWF we run a virtual office and it allows us to attract talent from all over the country and it allows us to be much more efficient with our time. And then the plus side, of course, is you see these articles that pop up that say telecommuting means that women are working more. How do we, as women, and working moms, sort of set boundaries and not allow technology to ensure that we're working twelve hours a day?

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Well I think that's a hard question. I do think that it's worth taking a step back and being a little bit appreciate of what we have. I mean that is to say that we do have these choices and it may seem overwhelming and it may seem like all the mommy blogs are just complaining constantly about all the pressures on us, but it's great that we have these choices in front of us.

In terms of trying to set boundaries, I think there are a lot of people out there who are giving great advice about this sort of thing. Laura Vanderkam, who has written a lot about time management, is very good on this subject. But I think for the most part, we just have to be more honest with ourselves about how much time work is going to take, about when we actually do need childcare and when we don't, I think you see a lot of women trying to do work and childcare at the same time. A lot of the research suggests that multitasking is not good for us, it's not good for our children, it sends the wrong message to them about what our priorities are, and so when we choose to be at home with our family to the extent that we can, put the phone away, put the computer away and really kind of focus on the task at hand. I think eventually, that can make us more happy and satisfied. It will probably make our work improved because I know—I don't know about you—but once I had kids I became much more efficient at getting the work done in the amount of time that I had.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right. It's amazing what you can do in four or five hours as opposed to, you know, an eight or nine-hour workday now, right?

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Oh, yes. I mean I've talked to mothers, and I've talked to fathers - I think this is true for everyone, once you have real deadlines you spend a lot less time, chatting, going back and forth and getting coffee, and I think everything gets done, in the allotted time for a lot of people.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

And for a lot of moms and dads, having that time to spend with your kids is really the dessert, right there. Very often I find myself rushing to get everything done so I can take my kids to the park or to swim practice. It's the dessert after I have eaten all my vegetables, it's motivating. One thing with technology is on one hand, the official media sites like Facebook and Twitter brings us together and it sort of restores long-lost friendships and family connections and that's such a wonderful thing. But at the same time we can at times feel we're all bowling alone, that none of these relationships are substantive. We are all just looking at what people are cooking for dinner, or their kid's birthday party, but we don't pick up the phone and actually talk. How much of it do you think is overblown or do you think this is a real problem?

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

I think it is a problem to the extent that people get carried away. You can sit down with your computer at 8:00 at night or 9:00, after your kids go to bed, and Facebook is up: Suddenly, you've lost an hour or two hours just looking at exactly that. You can look at what they've cooked for dinner or where they've been on vacation and you can feel like, oh, I'm interested kind of in the way that you are interested in gossip. But no, you're not getting a sense of connection with that person, you're just sort of getting this like weird bird's eye view into their lives. But it's not a real connection. I guess I would agree with that.

When I first graduated from college, cell phones were becoming very popular and my friends and I used them, in the way some people find obnoxious. You know, I'd be waiting in line and be talking to my friends on the phone, but they would be across the country and I thought this is a great thing. And I still think it's so important, for us to connect, by phone or in person to the extent that we can because you just get a much better sense from people's voices about what's really going on in their lives and I, for one, find that much more satisfying in the end than just looking at my Twitter feed.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right, and it's interesting because the anonymity that you have on some social media sites allows people to really be kind of nasty. You and I both are writers and in the public eye and sometimes I take a look at some of that comments section at the bottom of an article and I think...

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Never read the comments!

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

People say some pretty nasty things when they don't have to look at you face to face, so...

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Yeah. There are a number of prominent people who have recently announced, they are quitting Twitter or taking a break from Twitter because of all the horrible things that people

have said about them. I have certainly gone through that. I had, a few years ago, I don't know, *six thousand* professors calling for me to be fired from a blog position at the Chronicle of Higher Education, so I've definitely been through that. I think you really have to think about the people whose opinion you care about, but find a way to shut out a lot of the nasty comments. ...Anonymity has provided people with this amazing ability to say things they would never say in person and, I'm sure we are going to talk about this soon, but I think it's really provided an unfortunate context for kids who really don't know any better, in terms of interacting with their peers. It's provided them with this really powerful and dangerous way of interacting with others.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Do you have some advice for parents on how to protect their children? My children are just getting to the age now where they are beginning to use computers and potentially go online for school. What is your sort of two cents on that? Any advice? I know every family has to make their own decisions and rules.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Right. There are a number of different things to worry about, but I try to think about the internet and its dangers in terms of the three Ps: Things that kids do online are total private, in the sense that they can be anywhere in your house and on a computer and you won't know about it. But that is also totally public in the sense that lots of people can find out about it afterwards and that's a big concern, and totally permanent in the sense that it's very hard to erase where you've been and what you've done. Parents need to keep those three things in mind.

With regard to just doing internet searches, there is nothing like just looking over your kid's shoulder, making sure they are in a public place when they are working on the computer... what I've found through all my interviews is that there is no effective filter out there. For all the money that we give to tech companies, there is no filter. Some people will say it's because the goal of the internet is to make everything free and open and so a filter doesn't work in that kind of system. And other people would simply say you are not going to be able to find a filter that will reflect your values exactly.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

It's very important to have the computer in a public place and then, the second thing to think about is in terms of communication. Your kid may come home and say all my friends are on Facebook or all my friends are on Snapchat. Unless you actually have the time and the inclination to monitor their communications, don't do it. I find so many parents, they say look I have a job, I have all these other things to do and now, in addition to that, I have to look through my kid's text messages and Snapchat at the end of every night to make sure that I know what's going on? If that's what you're doing, I think don't drive yourself unnecessarily—just say no.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Just say no, I think that's an important one. Well before we get to children, Naomi, there's another area where technology is really changing our relationships and that is in the world of dating and marriage. Now, I have to admit to you and to others, I met my husband the old-fashioned way, in a bar.

So what do we think about how technology is changing this? It has really gone from being a fun thing that people scoffed at a little bit to widely accepted. This is how people meet one another today and this seems to be completely okay.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

Yeah, the problem that I see with internet dating and meeting people online are not that I worry about stranger danger or some psychotic killer that you don't know anything about that who you are going to meet on one of these dates. What I worry about are two things that researchers refer to now as the paradox of choice and decision fatigue. So the paradox of choice essentially everybody knows now: If you go into a store and there's lots of different kinds of jams, sixty different kinds, you are likely to go home without any jam. If there's three different kinds, you are much more likely to pick one and go home with it. So I think it's very similar to dating and men, in this case.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

There's too many options.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

There are. This is people swiping through Tinder or even, overtly sexual sites... I think it will always seem to you that there's something better out there and so how can you possibly commit? And of course, as you know, commitment is going to be the key to your future happiness and the future of stability and happiness of your family.

And the second aspect of this is decision fatigue, which is that you just get into this cycle where basically all day, throughout your work life, throughout your personal life, you're just making this constant series of decisions about what kind of shampoo to buy and where to shop for things and what to do at work, and who to e-mail, and who not to e-mail ...when it comes to our personal life, for people in their 20s and 30s, that can often even come last.

So how do you make these kind of decisions especially when, in the back of your mind, there's the sense of there's something always better out there? To the extent that we can attach ourselves to communities and think harder about the parameters that we want to set for ourselves and really kind of remind ourselves that, it's okay to not have total freedom for everything, that we can impose restriction on ourselves about the way that we treat other people, the way that we date, I think that will ultimately lead to better outcomes for our personal lives as well.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Some of those restrictions is what has raised some red flags with some of these dating sites. Often they are providing people, who are both truly looking to meet someone, with opportunities, but I recently read an op-ed written by Linda Chavez that the company, The Match Group, which owns dating sites like match.com and OkCupid recently bought up Princeton Review and Tutor.com, which are businesses that cater to kids and young adults, which takes us back again to this question of security. Do alliances like this, where businesses see an opportunity, do they create potential problems that parents should be concerned about? You know, that dating might be mixed with study skills?

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

New study partners, that's what you're looking for.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right, partners...

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

No, I think obviously these companies see a market. They want to get on the radar of teenagers as soon as they start thinking about dating. The problems that occur as we've seen... there were a couple of cases where, younger adolescents were on these sites and they were actually having regular interactions with adult men... that presents this huge problem because in a couple of cases, the parents had no idea that is how their kids were using the computer or using the phone. It's not a message that parents want to hear but vigilance is really the only way around this. I don't think you can regulate companies out of merging just because their interests seem a little weird or creepy in some way...

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right, right.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

I think you really have to, as a parent, not depend on big tech companies or tutoring companies or dating companies to have the best interests of your children in mind.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

So I don't want to end this conversation on a scary or down note...but I think that technology has really changed my life for the better but what do you think we can do - is there a way that we can sort of maximize the good things? What is the takeaway from all of this—what's the good news?

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

The good news is so obvious that we often focus on the bad news...the good news is that we have this amazing access to information. We have this amazing flexibility to work from home. We have this amazing ability to be in the park and when your kid asks you a random question you actually have the ability to answer it at your fingertips.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Right.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

We have the ability to share photos with everybody and share these moments that normally would have taken us much more time and effort to put together. Our kids obviously, everything from Khan Academy to Map It!, which is a game my kids are into on the iPad, memorizing American geography and thinking that that's fun. I think that there's a great deal to be said for technology, but I think it has certainly created a lot of things that parents need to learn more about and understand better.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

It's so funny because I think very often while on our drive to school the kids will bring up some kind of animal, some parrot from the tropics, and we are able to in three seconds pull up a video they can watch and learn about that animal or whatever question it was that they are answering and it's so much fun, not just for them but for their mom and dad to really be able to engage with them and answer those questions.

**Naomi Schaefer Riley:**

It feels like magic.

**Sabrina Schaeffer:**

Yeah, it is! It makes it much more important. Naomi, this is obviously a conversation that can go on and on, and I hope that we can talk again after your book comes out, but thank you for being our guest today. And to our listeners, I hope you have enjoyed this special edition of the Working for Women Podcast. Thank you for tuning in and if you want to learn more about the Independent Women's Forum or listen to more podcasts like this one, visit [IWF.org](http://IWF.org).

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