

The London 2012 Social Media Olympics

Andy Miah

By the end of the London 2012 Olympic Games, one medium had brought news to people's attention and it wasn't the rights holding broadcasters or the accredited press, it was social media.

Whether it was the latest gold medal for Sir Chris Hoy, or the abuse Team GB diver Tom Daley faced after his competition, Twitter, Facebook and other social networks played a central part in many breaking stories during the London 2012 Games and this alone may give credit to the claim that London 2012 was the first social media Olympics.

For while previous Games can advance a similar claim if we are talking just about the use of social media platforms, what distinguished London is the complete occupation of traditional media platforms by social media content.

To some extent, Olympic commentators foresaw the tidal wave of social media that would dominate communications at London 2012, but they might not have expected that the main social media story of the Games

was how it functioned as a news source for broadcasters and the printed press. Regularly, television presenters would use direct quotes from Twitter within their transmission to explain what was happening around the Games.

The first story broke a long time before the Games opened, when USOC athlete Nick Symmonds auctioned part of his body on eBay, the winner of which would have their Twitter handle (temporarily) tattooed on his arm during the Olympic Games. This sparked a wave of discussion about the limits of advertising within sport, the independence of athletes to seek sponsorship, the exclusivity of team sponsorship within the Games, and the creative challenges that arise from new media forms to traditional advertising principles.

As it turns out, Symmonds knew at the time that the IOC would never permit him to show the tattoo when in the playing field, but it provoked questions also about what constitutes advertising – is a Twitter handle part of a brand identity or, if it is just someone's name, does that become a new sub-brand for an advertiser that it may seek to manager?

As the Games approached, the stories began to broke. First, there was the Greek athlete Voula Papachristou, who was excluded from the Olympic team for what was deemed to be a racist tweet.

At the same time, Lord Coe expressed his concern that he could see a negative correlation between social media activity and athletic success.

A few nights before the opening ceremony - perhaps, for the first time in Twitter's history - a hashtag was trending about nothing, as artistic director Danny Boyle encouraged the lucky few within the rehearsals to use #savethesurprise within tweets and tell people nothing about the ceremony's content until after the final event. Thousands of messages were sent by spectators in the stadium deliberately misleading people about content with humorous claims about what was happening.

On the night of the opening ceremony itself, the inventor of the world wide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee had a role, thus foregrounding the dominance of computer culture within contemporary British life and articulating the role of its innovators in this area. Berners-Lee was even tweeting live from the stage within the Olympic Stadium and one of the final acts within the ceremony reinvented a Charlie Chaplin film following the social media love story of a

young British couple. All of this was both celebrated and criticized for its being directed for a television audience, while members of the live audience may have been left wondering what was going on.

The following day, Tory minister Aiden Burley created a storm after he tweeted that the ceremony was "leftie multicultural crap". Prime Minister David Cameron later said - but not via Twitter - it was an "idiotic" thing to say.

The ceremony also gave birth to the hashtag #NBCfail as criticisms of the USA's broadcast coverage began to emerge. The British journalist Guy Adams also fell victim to this debacle, after tweeting the email address of NBC Olympics president, Gary Zenkel, and encouraging people to email him their complaints. Twitter temporarily suspended Guy's account as a result, reinstating it a day later with an apology.

Just one day into the Games, the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) head of communications, Mark Adams, asked tweeters to limit their output, as he said a failure in broadcasting during the cycling road race was due to a throttled GPS signal on the streets of London, which negatively affected the radio-frequency identification chips within the bikes.

Last but not least, after Tom Daley's disappointing performance at the synchronised diving, a Twitter troll criticised him saying how his performance had let down his deceased father. The reaction by other Twitter users was immense, and showed it does no good to abuse others in social media.

Where does this leave the Olympics? It was only two years ago that the IOC seemed on track to embrace social media, but London 2012 has offered so many damaging examples, that even a die-hard Twitter user would have to advise athletes to avoid paying too much attention to what was happening online, at least until after their competition.

From a fan perspective, it may be the most interesting social media Games yet. London 2012 is certainly the most mobile Games ever, with 60% of access to the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games's digital assets being accessed by mobile devices - according to its new media guru, Alex Balfour, who - of course - tweeted this data.

There have also been creative projects to help visualise what was happening on Twitter, such as Emoto, which displayed emotional reactions on Twitter to London 2012 content, or EDF's Energy of the Nation, which did something similar, projecting the results onto the London Eye.

So what did London teach us about the role of social media at the Olympics? Perhaps most surprising is that the headlines were not about how many people are using social media. At least, they were not the most interesting stories.

Instead, social media usage at London 2012 re-defined the public sphere and become a place where serious issues are played out and become integral parts of the discussion about what is going on in the world.

It was also an Olympics where many of its key staff played an active role in relaying information about what was going on at the time. For instance, following the Twitter account of Ruth Mackenzie (@ruthmackenzie), Director of the London 2012 Festival, was a really good way to find out what was happening during the Games in terms of a cultural programme. This may present a challenge for future organizing committees as thinking of their individual figureheads as assets may lead to a desire to manager their social media profiles. However, what also seems to work best in the world of social media is that such people are simply left to their own devices and allowed to share their impressions and experiences of the Games in a very personal way. This is what people within social media communities desire from their medium. It is also what separates it from other media.

London 2012 may not technically be the first social media Olympics, but it is the first where what took place online has genuinely become part of the news cycle in politically important ways.

Unfortunately, the more prominent examples of London 2012 may breed greater conservatism from Olympic officialdom, as many people have been caught out saying things they are likely to regret, or being on the receiving end of harassing messages.

However, given the age range of many Olympic athletes, it is inconceivable that social media will not play an ever-greater part in their own journey through the Games.

So, a stronger step forward would be to promote social media education for people within the Olympic movement, to prepare them for the challenges it can throw up and to promote a stronger connection with their fan base, but it has to start from the top.

One of the most prominent Olympic tweeters is Dmitry Chernyshenko, chief executive of Sochi 2014, site of the next Olympic Games. With Sochi integrating its URL into the logo, theirs may be the most advanced social-media Games yet.

*Professor Andy Miah is Director of the Creative Futures Institute at the University of the West of Scotland. He is also co-author of *The Olympics: The Basics*.*