Social Media, Newsgathering and the Olympics

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Contributor Note

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London 2012 was always going to be billed as 'the first social media Summer Olympics.' When the 2008 games took place in China, a country known for internet restrictions, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook were still in their infancy. The BBC demonstrated real innovation by showing tweets by reporters on a map of Beijing but some of the language just goes to show how new this all was, with an instruction page explaining 'what is Twitter?'

Back in 2008, Twitter was generating a mere 300,000 tweets per day (now up to 340 million a day). News companies still had to explain what YouTube was, even as users uploaded 10 hours of video per minute. That has grown to 72 hours per minute in 2012, with three billion hours of YouTube watched every month. Facebook hit 145 million users in 2008, and in 2012 it's closer to one billion users.

In the relative internet freedom of London, with four more years of smartphone development in the bank, the Olympics were always going to produce a deluge of online content and commentary.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had been taking social media very seriously in the lead up to the games with a professional, well resourced social media presence on all of the major platforms (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube).

But while showing a nuanced understanding of the platforms in terms of the potential they have to raise awareness and build community, they appeared naïve in their belief that social media was something that could be controlled, when they published their very stern social media guidelines. They included detailed instructions about the types of content athletes, visitors and volunteers could post, and also how the media could use any of that content.

Even though the guidelines were detailed, they resulted in a great deal of confusion about how they would work in practice.

In a blog post I wrote just before the Olympics, I re-created conversations I'd overhead in many newsrooms around the world in the previous 6 months:

'This is going to be the first really social Olympics. All those camera phones? We're going to be drowning in UGC!'

'Haven't you read the IOC guidelines? No one is allowed to use social networks'.

'Yes, but it won't stop anyone. How can they police it? Don't worry…we'll have loads of material'.

'Yes, but haven't you read? This year for the first time, the whole Olympic park is a venue, and therefore people can't post, and even if they did, as a news organisation we can't use it'.

'Yes, we can. It's the uploader's responsibility to know whether or not they can post. We're just using what's up there'.

'No, we can't'.

'Yes, we can'.

'We need to talk to Legal'.

In this article, I will be discussing the role of social media as a newsgathering tool within mainstream newsrooms, using the Olympics as a case study[1]. Ultimately, social media provided a stunning amount of content, but newsrooms had few occasions to turn to those guidelines. There were enough cameras pointed at every aspect of the Games. Where social media had an impact was opening up the experiences of the athletes in the village (a place previously hidden from outside eyes), and documenting the enthusiasm of spectators watching at home or at the Olympic venues, or in very large numbers talking directly to their athletic heroes.

History of social media and newsgathering

The rise of UGC and social media as a newsgathering resource within newsrooms has been well researched, but the body of literature is relatively small, (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Jonnson and Ornebring 2011; Paullssen and Ugille 2008; Reich 2008; Wardle and Williams 2008 and 2010; Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgenson 2011a, 2011b) probably because academic publishing timelines aren't conducive to writing about a landscape changing at such speed. The best considerations of all of these changes appear in blogs[2].

The BBC are considered pioneers in this space because of their UGC Hub which was developed as a six month pilot project directly after the 2004 Tsunami, when camera phone footage revealed aspects of the disaster that would have been otherwise left undocumented. Just as the pilot project was being evaluated, the 7/7 bombings occurred, and the use of camera phone footage of people walking through the tunnels to

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[1] For full disclosure, I'm a former academic, who led a year long research project on UGC and BBC news in 2007-8, left to design and deliver the BBC News' social media training programme, and am now the Director of News Services for Storyful, a startup that works with some of the biggest news organisations in the world delivering verified social media content.

[2] See: http://onlinejournalismblog.com/; http://www.reportr.net/hermida, http://niemanlab.org; http://poynter.org; http://bbc.co.uk/journalism; http://blog.storyful.com

safety led the evening bulletins; the first time non-professional footage had been used in this way.

In 2007, myself and a research team at Cardiff University, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, undertook a year long research project (co-funded by the BBC and the AHRC) trying to understand the motivations for people contacting the BBC via text and email, with opinions, experiences, pictures and videos, along with the barriers that prevented others from contributing. In addition, we looked at the attitudes of journalists across the BBC towards this type of content being submitted by the audience.

It was very clear from the research that journalists understood that, for certain stories, the fact that someone could capture footage on a mobile phone before they could get a camera or journalist there, was clearly a 'good' thing. The fact that the audience was able to share opinions via commenting systems, text, and email was less welcome by most journalists, (excluding local radio journalists who understood their audience extremely well and appreciated the audience had always been central to their output).

Just as we published our research, social networks were starting to take off. While our research was mixed-method including a nationally representative survey, an online survey, 12 focus groups, 10 weeks of ethnographic research, and interviews with senior BBC managers, unbelievably only one survey question mentioned people's use of social networks, because it still seemed such a niche activity.

Just as camera phone footage from the tunnels of the London underground made newsrooms take audience content seriously, the tweeted picture of the plane in the Hudson River was the moment where newsrooms woke up to the power of Twitter and other social networks. The Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 was the first major story where journalists saw that they could find real-time updates about a breaking news event, and contact people directly, but only very technically savvy journalists had started to appreciate these networks as serious spaces for newsgathering.

So it was the Hudson river plane crash news event that encouraged the BBC Newsgathering Unit to ask the BBC News training department, the BBC's College of Journalism, to design a day long course on social media specifically for newsgathering. I

was asked to design it, and to date over 3,000 BBC journalists have gone through the course.

I was a freelance trainer during this time and as a result undertook training around the world for different news organisations, radio, television and web reporters. I recently wrote a blog post entitled State of the (News) Nation where I outlined where many news organisations are, in terms of using social media for newsgathering. It was relatively negative, blaming poor, outdated technology, managers who are not using these tools themselves, a culture of fear that journalists might share an opinion on Twitter and Facebook, which might threaten their jobs. I also blamed a culture of using social networks for simply 'broadcasting' content that had already been created: 'Listen again to our report from Homs'; 'Our 6.30 bulletin starting in 5min. Make sure you tune in'.

Examples of journalists really using social networks to collaborate are becoming less common. Ironically, 2009 was a year when there were a number of innovative examples of using social media to work with the audience to create stronger, more relevant content. I collected examples here and was disappointed to see how the potential offered by these tools has actually been diluted as more journalists have started using them.

One of the major barriers to social media is the fact that they're considered frivolous. They have silly names, and 98% of content on social networks would not be considered newsworthy. They also change their features on a very regular basis and for a busy reporter, keeping on top of all these changes can feel like a full time job. In the last couple of months, for example, Reddit.com has joined the ranks of being a valuable news source, leaving journalists scrabbling to learn the details of another platform.

It's taken years for Twitter to become somewhat mainstream in most newsrooms, but that means a majority of journalists have an account and when a story breaks, they'll leap on to their stream to see what they can find. They might run a search, but they probably don't know they can do an advanced search that will allow them to search simply for people tweeting in a certain language from a certain location.

During the Aurora movie theatre shootings, a Reddit user published live updates minute by minute. Although not a trained journalist, this person showed all the skills necessary to cover a story. One month later, President Obama went to Reddit so users could ask him

questions. Reddit is a hugely successful platform, but has previously been ignored as a news source, as Twitter was, before the Hudson River plane crash.

While my experience has been far from scientific, from training 3,000 journalists, I am convinced that journalists need different skills. To have the ability to use social media for newsgathering, journalists need to display certain type of qualities. Some journalists pick these tools up and fly. Others struggle, and struggle hard. It doesn't matter how many times they go on a training course, they will never seamlessly sprint between open tabs, connecting key words like clues to a mystery, and understand the nuances and sensitivities of newsgathering in public.

I now work for a social media news agency, which has professionalised the systems and routines being offered in training courses. Storyful doesn't create content for an audience, it scales the process of newsgathering from the social web so that 200 journalists in 200 different newsrooms don't have to find the same piece of content and run the same verification checks. This is clearly useful for news organisations on any given day, but particularly useful during big global events like the Olympics.

Storyful

Storyful was founded in 2010 by Mark Little, a former foreign correspondent with RTE (Ireland's public service broadcaster). He had reported from war zones around the world, and for him the turning point was the Iranian uprising in June 2009 when he realised he was learning more from social network updates from people on the street than his foreign correspondent friends who were holed up in hotels, unable to leave because of safety concerns.

At that moment, he realised the opportunities raised by these real time updates from people on the ground, coining one of the founding principles of the company– someone is always closer to the story. However, the problems and dangers were also quickly made apparent. How do you filter through all the content on social networks? How do you sift through the news within all the noise? But also how do you know who and what to trust when anyone can pretend to be anyone online and post anything they want?

Storyful has grown from a team of three, to a team of over thirty, twenty-five of whom are professional journalists who have worked for newspapers and broadcasters all over the world. They are based on the two coasts of the US, Dublin, London, Delhi and Hong Kong.

The team are monitoring social networks around the clock, discovering news breaking, and then following up by looking for witness content from the ground, and then running that content through very vigorous verification checks before posting that content along with additional context (maps, translation, supporting information) behind a paywall for clients to access. Storyful is not a public facing news organisation. It acts as a partner for other news organisations, providing usable, trustworthy content.

Storyful constantly monitors the social web for stories and as a result unearths stories that might not have been picked up by 'mainstream' news organisations. But most news organisations turn to Storyful during the major events, when newsrooms come alive. Many major news organisations have included social media training, so most journalists have a basic knowledge that twitter can offer additional content: contacts or content. However, many journalists don't have advanced knowledge of how to do geo-located searches, combining multiple search terms, run verification checks, or reach out to the uploader to determine usage rights etc.

Expecting journalists to have these skills, at the advanced level they need to in order to run searches and verification checks under the intense pressure of a breaking news story, is a significant ask.

Storyful has a verification checklist that demonstrates the sophisticated checks needed before news organisations can use content found online.

- Where is this account registered and where has the uploader been based, judging by their history?

- Are there other accounts—Twitter, Facebook, a blog or website—affiliated with this uploader? What information do they bear to indicate recent location, activity, reliability, bias, agenda?

- How long have these accounts been in existence? How active are they?

- Do they write in slang or dialect that is identifiable in the video's narration?

- Can we find WHOIS information for an affiliated website?

- Is the person listed in local directories? Do their online social circles indicate they are close to this story/location?

- Does the uploader 'scrape' videos from news organisations and other YouTube accounts, or do they upload solely user-generated content?

- Are the videos on this account of a consistent quality?

- Are video descriptions consistent and mostly from a specific location? Are they dated? Do they have file extensions such as .AVI or .MP4 in the video title?

- Are we familiar with this account—has their content and reportage been reliable in the past?

These skills are developed through practice and when major news breaks, journalists struggle to use platforms they don't use every day, so many fail to see what is available on these networks.

As well as coverage of news events around the world, Storyful also focuses on other 'beats', such as US politics, weather (always a treasure trove of UGC), and viral video. Most news organisations now understand the 'spinach and chocolate' analogy and recognise that for every hard-hitting video from a bombing in Damascus, many audience members want that to be balanced with more light hearted content. The 'and finally' section has, for many news organisations, been moved up the agenda, especially for online news organisations, as viral videos mean eyeballs.

So for Storyful, the Olympics was a natural event to find content that might not be captured by the traditional cameras, knowing that our perpetual searches might turn up the athlete announcing an injury the night before a race, or local shopkeepers complaining about poor security in their neighbourhood, or the event no-one wanted to think about—a terrorist attack.

Olympics as a case study for Storyful

We monitored the Olympics as we monitor global events every other story—using a mixture of discovery techniques: hand curated twitter lists of athletes, sports journalists, sports federation representatives, London institutions (Police, Fire and Ambulance Services, the Mayor's office, London Councils etc), keyword searches, extracted content from those lists based on what was being shared, Facebook interest lists and key word searches, keyword and geographical searches on YouTube, searches on Reddit and other video viral sites. We use a mixture of technology that alerts us to early warning signals within communities, as well as old-fashioned hard work.

When content is discovered, we check the content isn't scraped, and then do the standard verification techniques. Only then is it posted for news clients to use. We were looking mainly for video but we were also interested in stand out photographs and memes that were developing.

We started monitoring during the Torch relay, and as you would expect, there was a large amount of content as people filmed with their camera phones at the side of the road.

In the week leading up the games it was all about people defying the IOC restrictions, such as the bagel shop owner who was forced to take down a display of five bagels shaped as the Olympic rings. It was also about realising that the athletes were going to be tweeting, and it wasn't always going to be on message. A Greek athlete was sent home for sending a racist tweet.

The fact that details of the opening ceremony did not leak would suggest the IOC guidelines worked, when really it was a testament to Danny Boyle that he convinced his volunteers that it was better to #savethesurprise. Journalists weren't quite as good and there was a great deal of discussion on social media of journalists hassling volunteers for information. In fact the biggest social media story from the opening ceremony was MP Aidan Burley's tweet that the ceremony was 'leftie multicultural crap', which caused hours of social media outrage.

The opening ceremony was the night when it became clear that the 'good news' element of the Games would win out. That same night a Critical Mass Cycling protest in Stratford resulted in the police kettling a number of protestors and arresting a large number. We had footage of this and shared it with news clients, but it was soon apparent that the 'good news' filter of the Olympics was too powerful a narrative for negative stories to find a place, and there was little coverage of the incident.

The 'bad news' story that snuck though the dominant narrative was the athletes themselves complaining about being bullied. Rebecca Adlington faced abuse from Frankie Boyle, and Tom Daley had abuse that ended up in a young man being arrested, but ultimately these incidents supported the dominant narrative.

Overall, there was quite high levels of awareness by the journalists of the content being shared widely and it was clear people were looking for the feel-good and quirky, such as the Rwandan athletes sitting at a bus stop, or the Metropolitan police recreating 'the Bolt'.

For the Storyful's clients, they wanted the same. Some of the most popular content was the New Zealand welcome to other athletes by performing the Haka, and the hilarious games maker who made the most of her time with the megaphone (unfortunately the YouTube video has now been taken down).

Implications for future major events

According to the three main platforms themselves, 116 million comments and pieces of content were shared on Facebook and more than 150 million tweets about the Olympics during the Games. People watched 231 million videos on YouTube during the Games, and 72 million were from the official IOC channel.

This visualisation shows the moments of the games that caused people in the UK to take to Twitter, and it shows people took to these platforms to share in 'the moments' of the Games.

It is clear that the guidelines didn't stop visitors posting from the venues, but it did stop (with a few exceptions) broadcasters using that content. However, as Jon Jacobs posted in a reply to a tweeted question about people's thoughts about the IOC guidelines, 'those guidelines didn't stop people – equally I don't think it was a news source anyway. Olympics [were] a rich photo sharing opportunity'. And I think this is a critical point, the news media were obsessed about what they could and couldn't use from the Olympics, but in fact the 21,000 accredited media caught most of what they needed. Instead social media allowed the 'crowds' at home to partake in exactly the same behaviour as people were doing in the stadia – cheering, supporting, sharing tears, and asking questions of the athletes they were watching. The posting of a picture of 'your view' at an Olympic venue became one of the most popular social media 'things' to do.

The question remains, what would have happened if the unthinkable had happened and a bomb had gone off in the Olympic Park. No guidelines would have stopped journalists using social media as a crucial tool for finding people who were there, from looking at FourSquare check-ins, and looking for video and pictures on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Social media has changed forever the way journalists undertake their newsgathering. The Olympics were no different. But what also needs to be considered is the way that mainstream news outlets use social media. They are looking for content to support the narratives already laid out. The desire for content from frustrated local business owners who couldn't display the Olympic logo fit the narrative of the all powerful IOC, the plea for Storyful to put intensive searches out for G4S security guards asleep in their van from one of our news clients was understood. That story appeared to be 'the' story as the Olympics preparations developed.

Recent Research by social media monitoring company, Radian6 shows of the 68% of all the Olympic related commentary was positive, 32% was negative. Sentiment analysis has real issues, most significantly, the difficulty of picking up sarcasm, so it's difficult to know how real this is. The #NBCFail hashtag documenting American's frustration at NBC's decision not to live stream events, could account for a major part of the negativity.

But ultimately these games followed the pattern outlined by Dayan and Katz in their *Media Events* book (1992); while the build-up to a national event might include

challenging coverage, from the Opening Ceremony a pattern emerges with the media playing a crucial role in supporting the positive narrative of the event. Even in an age of social media, the same applied in this case. The relative absence of the Critical Mass bike protests and the police response, and in fact the absence of any story that threatened the hegemonic vision of the Games as nation-builder, shows that while social media provided an additional and new form of newsgathering, it had to fit within the traditional news structures, routines and agenda.

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