

#SochiProblems: Ignorance or Arrogance? #SochiProblems: ¿ignorancia o arrogancia?

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Abstract

The study focuses on the twitter conversations about the XXII Winter Olympics Games in Sochi, Russia. Specifically, the study collects and performs content analysis of the tweets tagged with the hashtag #SochiProblems. This study draws a random sample of tweets from every day of the games to achieve a 99% confidence level with 5% confidence interval and uses the framing theory to analyze this sample. The results allow us to determine what substantive and affective frames dominated in the twitter conversations tagged with #SochiProblems hashtag and what was the main focus of the tweets' content.

Keywords: Communication, Public Relations, Twitter, hashtag, Olympics Games, framing theory.

Resumen

El estudio se centra en las conversaciones en Twitter sobre los Juegos Olímpicos de Invierno, Juegos XXII en Sochi, Rusia. En concreto, el estudio recoge y lleva a cabo el análisis de contenido de los tweets etiquetados con los hashtag #SochiProblems. Este estudio se basa una muestra aleatoria de tweets de cada día de los juegos para conseguir un nivel de

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confianza del 99% con intervalo de confianza del 5% y utiliza la teoría de encuadre o framing para analizar esta muestra. Los resultados nos permiten determinar qué marcos sustantivos y afectivos dominaron en las conversaciones en Twitter etiquetadas con el hashtag #SochiProblems y lo que fue el tema principal de los contenidos de los tweets.

Palabras clave: Comunicación, Relaciones Públicas, Twitter, hashtag, Juegos Olímpicos, Teoría del Framing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Just a few days before the XXII Winter Olympic games were set to launch in Sochi, Russia, twitter hashtag #SochiProblems appeared and immediately grew in popularity. In fact, Michelle Arrouas writing for *Time* notes: "Let's face it, hearing about Sochi's screw-ups is way more fun" (2014). The account created to aggregate all #SochiProblems tweets, @SochiProblems, appeared for the first time on February 4, and already had more followers on the first day of the Olympic Games, February 7, 2014, than the official Olympic Games account, @Sochi2014 (133,000 versus 178,000). Pictures of broken roads, unfinished

buildings, filthy tap water, and similar filled the Twittersphere and, from there, online, TV, and print sources.

The celebration of the expected disaster became so popular that #SochiProblems messages were mentioned more often than “Putin” or “Opening Ceremony”: “Instead of snowboarding, we’ve seen putrid tap water. Instead of skiing, we’ve seen dilapidated hotel rooms still under construction. Instead of bobsledding, we’ve seen toilets that can’t flush paper” (Laird, 2014). Consequently, #SochiProblems became a “photographic proof that Sochi is a godforsaken hellscape” (Johnson, 2014).

To better understand the phenomenon of the #SochiProblems hashtag, this study collects and content analyzes the tweets tagged with this hashtag. #SochiProblem posts, focused on the negative aspects of the Olympic games from the unpreparedness of the facilities to stray dogs roaming the streets of Sochi, are studied based on the framing theory. The study reports who posted the tweet, what the tweet was about, whether there were links or images included, what language the tweet was written in, what frame it used, and what topic the tweet focused on.

2. THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION’S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE

The Russian Federation is the largest country in the world by territory, spanning over 6,592,800 sq mi. Today the Russian Federation occupies an important role in international relations as one of the dominant energy superpowers with vast reserves of oil, gas, and coal. Russia has also rich reserves of many other mineral deposits.

Many of Russian resources and products are sold to other countries. As such, international trade, and international relations in general, are important for the country. However, just 20 years ago, Russia was the dominant part of the USSR, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a country largely isolated from the international trade by the so-called “iron curtain.” In fact, USSR and Western countries were in relations often referred to as “Cold War” where the image of Russia, the leading force in the USSR, was the image of the enemy (Steel, 1972; Robin, 2001).

Thus, it is important for Russia to overcome a certain stigma that exists and establish itself as an equal partner on the international arena. In 2006, for example, Russia, as the G8 host country, hired Ketchum, one of the leading international public relations agencies, to improve its image in several key countries, including the United States of America. Ketchum's report outlines the scope of the work: "A skeptical media environment has enveloped Russia for more than a decade. So, giving the country a fresh face as it hosted the G8 Summit in 2006 presented the challenge of shifting the perceptions of journalists and commentators, as well as think tanks and academics around the world" (Ketchum, n.d.). Some of the newspapers report that Russian Federation paid about 6 million US dollars for these services (Varshavchik, 2006). It is, however, unclear what was the influence of the campaign on the reputation of the Russian Federation as the results of the campaign were evaluated largely based on the amount of media coverage and how positive or negative that coverage was (Ketchum, n.d.).

It seems like a very logical next step is to host the Olympic Games as a chance to speak directly to the worldwide audience and to showcase Russia as a modern and advanced country. In fact, Olympic Games are known as a tool for improving an image of a country and claiming a place on the international arena. Needless to say, Russia is not alone in its desire to manage and improve its international image. Anholt (2011) notes that many countries' international images are based on oversimplified stereotypes: "Paris is about style, Japan about technology, Switzerland about wealth and precision, Rio de Janeiro about carnival and football, Tuscany about the good life" (p. 22). As a result, combating this stereotypes and expanding beyond general perception becomes the task that countries should take very seriously. In fact, Zhang and Cameron (2003) claim that "states are becoming increasingly preoccupied by their images and believe they deserve care and managing" (p. 13). These efforts gave birth to the whole new sub-field of public relations, commonly referred to as *nation-branding* or *place-branding* (Anholt, 2006).

3. FRAMING

This study uses a framing theory to analyze tweets from every day over the duration of the Olympic games. Framing is based on selective perception and interpretation of the events, thus shaping the meaning of the mental representation of the reality. Hallahan (2005) explaining the framing metaphor compares “message construction to drawing a border around a painting or picture” (p. 340).

As a result, a frame becomes “a schema of interpretation, collection of anecdotes, and stereotypes that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events.” Subsequently, framing “defines how news media coverage can shape mass opinion by using these specific frameworks to help guide their reader to understanding” (Cissel, 2012, p.67). Framing, thus, can help people interpret the information and help understand it – it is a step from communication to cognition (Bardhan, 2013; Hallahan, 1999; Entman, 1993; 2010; Nisbet, 2010; Reese, 2010). This makes framing critical especially for strategic communication efforts. Hallahan (1999) concludes,

“In developing programs, public relations professionals fundamentally operate as *frame strategists*, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable objectives. Framing decisions are perhaps the most important strategic choices made in a public relations effort “(p. 224, emphasis in original).

Previous research identified substantive and affective dimensions of framing (Ghanem, 1997). Substantive frames deal with the elements in communication messages that help cognitively structure various topics while affective attributes deal with the valence dimension. Six substantive frames that have been consistently examined in the literature are the conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames (de Vreese, 2003, 2005; de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Iyengar, 1991; Kiousis, Laskin, & Kim, 2011; Knight, 1999; Price, Tewksbury, & Power, 1997; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Shah, Domke, &

Wackman, 2001). Affective frames refer to the positive, neutral, or negative tone associated with communication messages (Kiousis, 2005; Kiousis, Laskin, & Kim, 2011; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

As a result, based on the framing theory tweets are coded into one of six framing categories: conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, or consequences assessment. In addition, affective dimension is also analyzed with tweets categorized as: positive, neutral, or negative.

Finally, the study analyzes the content of the tweets whether they focus on athletes, competitions, buildings, human rights, and so on. The results allow us to determine what substantive and affective frames dominated the twitter conversation tagged with #SochiProblems hashtag and what content the posts focused on most of the time.

4. METHOD

The study relied on content analysis as the main method of inquiry. Content analysis refers to unobtrusive research methods and, as such, protects the data from the influence from researchers or research instruments (Webb et al., 1981). Babbie (2004) supports this point by saying “Because the novels have already been written, the paintings have already been painted, the speeches already presented, content analysis can have no effect on them” (p. 324). In addition, content analysis enables researchers to process large amounts of information with relatively little costs as wells as modify and re-analyze data as research progresses. It also makes it possible to analyze processes occurring over time. This makes content analysis one of the dominant methodologies employed in mass media research (Frey et al., 1991).

The study saved all tweets with hashtag #SochiProblems posted during the XXII Winter Olympic Games from February 7, 2014, to February 23, 2014. The total amount of tweets collected was 405,935. Then, the study randomly picked 730 tweets from this database with a goal to have about 40 tweets from every day of the event. The amount of 730 tweets was needed to allow the study to achieve a 99% confidence level with a 5% confidence interval.

These 730 tweets were reviewed by two coders, who were graduate students in public relations. Both coders were trained in content analysis and used a detailed codebook to guide their coding process. The intercoder agreement was above 90%.

Following Kiousis, Laskin, and Kim (2011) conflict frame was used when coders saw messages describing issues in terms of disputes and confrontations among individuals, groups, and candidates. The human interest frame was coded if messages talked about how issues directly affect specific individuals and groups. The problem definition frame was used in messages that identify causes and antecedents associated with various issues. The responsibility attribution frame was used in statements to indicate what individuals and groups are in charge of causing problems or providing solutions. The moral evaluation frame was used in messages to describe issues in ethical and normative terms of right and wrong. The consequence assessment frame was used in messages identifying outcomes and results linked to various issues.

Similarly, the affective frame was determined by the presence or absence of a negative (1), neutral (2), or positive (3) tone (Kiousis, Laskin, and Kim, 2011).

5. RESULTS

The overall activity on Twitter using the hashtag #SochiProblems was quite strong – as presented in Table 1 over billion times a tweet with this hashtag appeared in the timelines of Twitter users. During the two-week period of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, from February 7 to February 23, more than 400,000 tweets were sent by almost 360,000 people. The activity, however, was not consistent – most of tweets were sent during the first days of the games – on February 7, for example, the first day of the games almost 100,000 tweets were sent. During the last week of the games on average day less than 10,000 tweets were sent. The most common mentioned issue based on the word counts was water (9,556), shower (8,419), bathroom (5,789), electrical (5,027), and toilet (4,263). The word “bad” was mentioned 7,638 times, the word “ring” was mentioned 6,561 times and the word “rings” 4,838 times, probably in connection with the ring failure at the opening ceremony, and the

word “awkward” was mentioned 5,288 times. Most commonly mentioned words, however, had nothing to do with any problems: Russia (29,155), USA (13,845), Canada (9,779), Sochi (182,546), Olympics (57,028) and Olympic (25,939), Games (24,109). The only individual with more than 10,000 mentions was Putin mentioned 11,553 times.

TABLE 1. #SochiProblems Activity

| | N |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| Total Contributors | 359,084 |
| Total Tweets | 405,935 |
| Total Reach | 704,952,302 |
| Total Timeline Deliveries | 1,095,406,743 |

TABLE 2. Type of tweets

| | N | % |
|--------------------------------|-----|-------|
| Original tweet | 639 | 87.5% |
| Re-tweet | 32 | 4.4% |
| Re-tweet with original comment | 59 | 8.1% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

730 tweets (about 40 tweets a day) were randomly sampled for a more detailed content analysis to achieve 99% confidence level with a 5% confidence interval. Out of these 730 tweets, the majority were the original tweets (n = 639; 88%), while the remaining 12% were

re-tweets: 8% were re-tweets with comment and 4% were simple re-tweets. Almost all of the tweets selected for analysis were in English (n = 686; 94%). Only 3% of tweets were tweets from the actual location of Olympic games (n = 20), most of the tweets were not from Sochi (n = 654; 90%).

TABLE 3. Language of tweets

| | N | % |
|---------|-----|------|
| English | 686 | 94% |
| Other | 44 | 6% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

TABLE 4. Location of tweets

| | N | % |
|----------------------|-----|-------|
| At Olympics/In Sochi | 20 | 2.7% |
| Other location | 654 | 89.6% |
| Cannot determine | 56 | 7.7% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

Most tweets contained just textual information, however, smaller amount of tweets had links (n = 159; 22%) and images (n = 180; 25%). Quite a few tweets (n = 335; 46%) in addition to #SochiProblems hashtag had additional hashtags such as #Sochi2014, #Olympics2014, or #SochiFail.

TABLE 5. Images, links, & other hashtags

| | N | % |
|----------------|-----|-------|
| Image | 180 | 24.7% |
| Link | 159 | 21.8% |
| Other hashtags | 335 | 45.9% |

TABLE 6. Who sent the tweet?

| | N | % |
|------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Athletes | 3 | .4% |
| Volunteers | 3 | .4% |
| Journalists / Bloggers | 55 | 7.5% |
| Other individuals | 544 | 74.5% |
| Media organizations | 14 | 1.9% |
| Sponsor organizations | 1 | .1% |
| Other organizations | 31 | 4.2% |
| Aggregators | 59 | 8.1% |
| Cannot determine | 20 | 2.7% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

TABLE 7. Sentiment

| | N | % |
|----------|-----|-------|
| Positive | 58 | 7.9% |
| Neutral | 345 | 47.3% |
| Negative | 327 | 44.8% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

TABLE 8. Framing attribute

| | N | % |
|----------------------------|-----|-------|
| Conflict | 6 | .8% |
| Human interest | 423 | 58% |
| Problem definition | 260 | 35.6% |
| Responsibility attribution | 2 | .3% |
| Moral evaluation | 10 | 1.4% |
| Consequences assessment | 12 | 1.6% |
| Unclear | 17 | 2.3% |
| TOTAL | 730 | 100% |

Most commonly the sender of the tweet was an individual not directly connected to the Olympic games (n = 544; 75%). Only three tweets in the sample were sent by the athletes and three tweets were also sent by the volunteers at the game. Most of the tweets analyzed

were neutral in sentiment (n = 345; 47%). However, there were significantly more negative tweets (n = 327; 45%) than positive tweets (n = 58; 8%).

TABLE 9. Most common content topics

| | N | % |
|----------------------------|-----|-------|
| Actual competitions | 128 | 17.5% |
| Olympic Games in general | 109 | 14.9% |
| Humor/Mocking | 99 | 13.6% |
| Condition of Russia/Sochi | 55 | 7.5% |
| Condition of facilities | 44 | 6% |
| Showing support/cheering | 37 | 5.1% |
| Opening/Closing ceremonies | 28 | 3.8% |
| Anti-gay laws | 22 | 3% |
| Stray dogs | 6 | .8% |

As for the framing attributes presented in Table 8, most tweets were framed as human interest stories (n = 423; 58%); many tweets also were framed as problem definition (n = 260; 36%). Only a few tweets used such frames as responsibility attribution (n = 2; .3%), conflict (n = 6; .8%), moral evaluation (n = 10; 1%), and consequences assessment (n = 12; 2%). Finally, the study evaluated the content of the tweets.

As displayed in Table 9, despite the fact that #SochiProblems hashtag is not an official hashtag of the games, most of the tweets in the sample actually focused on the Olympic competition (n = 128; 18%) and on Olympic games in general (n = 109; 15%); another 37 tweets were cheering on the teams and athletes (5%); discussions of opening and closing

ceremonies were also popular (n = 28; 4%). 44 tweets focused on poor quality of the Olympic infrastructure (6%), another 55 tweets discussed living conditions in Sochi or in Russia in general (8%), while another 99 tweets were simply mocking or making fun of the games (14%). Finally, 3% of tweets (n = 22) discussed anti-gay laws in Russia and another 1% of tweets (n = 6) focused on stray dogs in Sochi.

6. DISCUSSION

This study collected and analyzed tweets published during the XXII Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, that were tagged with #SochiProblems hashtag. #SochiProblems hashtag is used to identify tweets highlighting the problems in Olympic Games organizations. The study, however, discovered that although popular in early days in the Olympics the popularity of the hashtag significantly declined as the Olympic Games progressed. Perhaps it is a testament to the successful execution of the Games in Sochi, Russia, that were carried out without any major problems that could have potentially jeopardize the Games themselves or safety of the athletes and spectators. It is also possible that the organizing party was not ready by the start of the games and required a few extra days to take care of the final touch-ups.

Most likely, perhaps, is that popularity of #SochiProblems was due to the arrogance or ignorance of the Twitter audiences. Sarah Kaufman, for example, proposes that “sheltered ignorance” and, as a result, “cultural mis-understanding” are the root causes of #SochiProblems popularity (2014). The majority by a wide-margin of Twitter users is from the United States (Sysomos, 2014) and it may be difficult for an American twitter user to imagine that it is, in fact, a norm rather an exception not to drink water from a kitchen tap. As a result, #SochiProblems may reflect a certain clash of civilizations. Or perhaps it is similar to a study abroad program when foreign students suddenly learn about a foreign country more than they could have ever expected.

Thus, the popularity of #SochiProblems may reflect another level of Olympic Games’ success – educational success. The initial shock from an introduction of a Western, primarily US

audience, to a different civilization slowly gave way to a more normalized conversation without exclusive focus on sensationalism.

However, it is also possible that “there does seem to be something mean-spirited in all of this, as if Western press came *hoping* to encounter pillow shortages and rusty water” (Ioffe, 2014; emphasis in original). Instead of a surprise and a shock from a different culture, the author suggests that #SochiProblems may reflect *schadenfreude*, evil-reveling, malicious glee, and even Russophobia. One of the Russian officials, Vladimir Yakunin, loudly criticized all Sochi complaints: “It is a desire to befoul everything about the massive effort to prepare for the Winter Games, and to create a negative atmosphere for the athletes and Olympic guests” (as cited in Ioffe, 2014). However, if this, in fact, was the case of Russophobia, the successful execution of the Olympic Games without any major glitches seemed to help combat that Russophobia to some extent, as the amount of the tweets with #SochiProblems hashtag significantly declined as the Games went on.

It is also important to note that in addition to a high volume of posts, post with #SochiProblems also had a high level of engagement. More than 12% of posts tagged with #SochiProblems in the study’s sample were re-tweets. This shows that there were not as many original posts on this topic, yet it also shows a very high level of engagement. This engagement created a great opportunity for disseminating messages and perhaps could have been used by the Olympic Games organizers in addition the official hashtag #Sochi2014.

It also speaks to the high level engagement that the tweets tagged with #SochiProblems were very visual with many of them containing pictures or other images and almost half of all the tweets had additional hashtags, which suggests desire to expand the total reach of the post and join multiple conversations.

The fact that most tweets were in English comes as no surprise as the most active demographic on Twitter is from the United States (Sysomos, 2014). It also correlated well with the fact that almost 90% of all tweets were posted by people who were not actually at

the Games but rather sharing information found online and seen in other media sources or re-tweeting other posts. Less than half percent of tweets with this hashtag were sent by athletes or by volunteers at the games – showing that people who actually worked and competed at the Games either did not encounter any problems or chose not to share them on Twitter under #SochiProblems hashtag. There is also a rather large group of posts sent by individual journalists or news bloggers that were sent from their personal accounts rather than from the official accounts of their news organizations. That excessive complaining of journalists led Russian officials to complain about the “mockery worthy of tabloids and not serious journalists” (as cited in Ioffe, 2014).

The fact that hashtag collected posts describing problems allows one to expect negative tweets to be in majority – however, the results of this study reveal that most of the tweets were in fact neutral; thus, making ignorance as a more likely explanation of the #SochiProblems hashtag popularity rather than arrogance. The fact that there were hardly any positive tweets can also be explained by the nature of the posts focused on problems.

The dominant frames of the posts also do not seem to reveal any evil intent behind the tweets – in fact, the frames that could be expected to highlight *schadenfreude*, such as conflict, moral evaluation, responsibility attribution, and consequences assessment, were all employed very rarely. Most of the tweets were just written in the human interest frame, which correlates well with ignorance explanation – Twitter users seemed to be surprised by what they learned and wanted to share the information. Another third of the posts used problem definition frame simply stating and sharing the facts.

A look at the actual topics of the tweets analyzed leads to similar interpretations. Most tweets were not about anti-gay laws or animal cruelty; most of the tweets were not even about the condition of Olympic facilities or condition of Russia in general, they were in fact about the Olympic competitions and Olympic games above all.

7. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study had limitations caused primarily by budget and time constraints. The sample for the study was only 730 tweets out of more than 400,000 total tweets. Although 730 tweets can achieve 99% confidence level with a 5% confidence interval it still creates a possibility for a sampling error. The study relied on human coding and, thus, created a potential for coding error – machine-coding could have avoided that issue but it would introduce its own problems especially with understanding humor and indirect meaning. The study used live twitter feed to collect and save tweets for later analysis – it is possible some tweets were omitted due to software errors or some may be collected multiple times. Finally, the study relied only on Twitter message limited to 140 characters – it is difficult to make any certain conclusions about the senders' intended frames based on such a short message; the study did not take into account Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, blogs, or interviews to the media – adding these additional sources could significantly change the results of the analysis.

The study, however, was able to provide a more in-depth look at #SochiProblems phenomenon that seemed to surprise the game organizers and cause some tensions between the Russian organizers of the Games and the foreign audiences. The study suggests that #SochiProblems does not seem to be based on arrogance or any evil intent, but is a result of a sheltered ignorance, lack of knowledge and understanding of how other parts of the world live outside of the Western world, primarily the United States. The Olympics in Sochi served not just to establish the Russian Federation as a powerful and rich nation capable of hosting an international spectacle, but also to show its more modest side with real people living day-to-day lives and dealing with simple day-to-day problems. The problem with Olympic ring at the Opening ceremony – in fact, if it did not happen by accident, it could have been invented – and the response to this malfunction during the Closing ceremony also could serve the same purpose: showing the humility and greatness of the nation. These outcomes can lead to creating goodwill toward Russia among people of the Western countries. This assumption, however, should be tested using primary data collection via survey and/or interviews.

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