

A Shift in Set: An Examination of Agenda-Setting During the 2012 London Olympics

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Twitter has become a key news source within both collegiate and professional sports (Sanderson, 2011). While sport-specific Twitter research has examined usage patterns among athletes (Author (in press); Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), fans (Author (in press); Clavio & Kian, 2010), and organizations (Sanderson, 2011), little attention has been paid to the salience of news dissemination on Twitter. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine agenda-setting on Twitter during the 2012 London Olympics. Specifically, tweets from @London2012 and tweets containing #London2012 were analyzed for agenda-setting effects.

Review of Literature

Conceptualized by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting states that the media may not have the ability to tell individuals what to think, but they do have the ability to tell individuals what to think about. This is accomplished through a positive correlation between the amount of coverage an issue receives and the perceived salience of the issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). There is a body of Olympic based research that has employed agenda-setting to examine the effects of the broadcast coverage of the games (e.g., Angelini & Billings, 2010a, 2010b; Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2009; Tarantino & Carini, 2010; Zeng & Kolmer, 2011). Additionally, agenda-setting has been employed to examine the content of online platforms (e.g., Burch, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2012; Burch, Frederick, Zimmerman, & Clavio, 2011; Lee, Choi, & Lee, 2003). While a substantial body of research exists, this study was one of the first known attempts to apply agenda-setting specifically to Twitter communication during the Olympics.

Study Rationale and Research Questions

Social media outlets provide a unique opportunity to examine not only the agendas of media organizations, but also the effects of those agendas on their constituents. While sport-specific research has begun to explore agenda-setting on online platforms (e.g., Burch et al., 2011; Burch et al., 2012), little attention has been paid to agenda-setting effects on Twitter. Therefore, the following research questions were employed:

RQ1: Are there similarities or differences between @London2012 and #London2012 in terms of tweet focus (i.e., topic)?

RQ2: Are there similarities or differences between @London2012 and #London2012 in terms of sport focus?

RQ3: Are there similarities or differences between @London2012 and #London2012 in terms of country focus?

RQ4: What is the primary affiliation of individuals utilizing #London2012?

RQ5: Are there similarities or differences between affiliation and the foci of #London2012 tweets?

Methodology

The current study utilized content analysis as its methodological approach. This methodology allows for systematic and objective analysis of pre-existing content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). In this particular content analysis, tweets from @London2012 and tweets including #London2012 served as the unit of the analysis.

Collecting online data often presents a methodological issue related to coding, as online information is constantly updated and removed (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2010). Therefore, NVivo10 was used to collect tweets. NVivo10 is text analytic software that allows researchers to capture web content directly from web pages and import it as a static data set (NVivo10). Utilizing NVivo10 ensured that all coders were analyzing the same data set during the coding process.

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Coding

Tweets from both @London2012 and #London2012 were collected throughout the entire Olympic Games from July 27 – August 12, 2012. A total of 697 tweets were collected from @London2012 and 29,938 tweets were collected from #London2012. Due to the amount of tweets collected, systematic random sampling of every 25th tweet was employed to construct a sample of 1,199 #London2012 tweets. The entire data set from @London2012 was analyzed (i.e., 697 tweets) for a total sample size of 1,896 tweets. This sample size was consistent with previous sport-specific Twitter research (Hambrick et al., 2012; Pegoraro, 2010).

Multiple variables were adopted and modified from previous content analytic research specific to the Olympic Games (Burch et al., 2012). Specifically, coders considered tweet focus, sport focus, and country focus. Additionally, sender affiliation was coded. This variable was adopted from previous sport-specific research that analyzed Twitter usage patterns (Author (in press)). Each tweet was also coded on whether it contained a link or additional hashtags.

Intercoder reliability was established prior to coding the entire data set. According to Riffe et al. (2008), an overlap of 10-20% is acceptable for the purposes of intercoder reliability. A 10% subsample, including 200 tweets was randomly selected and provided to each coder in order to establish intercoder reliability. Fleiss kappa coefficients ranged from .75-.89, which was deemed acceptable based on previously established standards (i.e. Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

Results

Thus far, intercoder data has been analyzed. With regard to RQ1, the chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the two groups in terms of topic of focus ($\chi^2 (7) = 34.51, p < .01$). Specifically, @London2012 tweeted most frequently about sports (45%), while #London2012 tweets focused primarily on athletes (32.6%). As for RQ2, the chi-square test indicated significant differences between the two groups in terms of sport focus ($\chi^2 (27) = 66.88, p < .01$). The tweets from @London2012 were more well-balanced, referring primarily to no sport (16%), swimming (11%), or gymnastics (7%), while a majority of #London2012 tweets mentioned no sport (51.6%). In terms of country focus (i.e., RQ3), significant differences were found ($\chi^2 (10) = 34.31, p < .01$), with @London2012 focusing on a combination of countries (25%) and #London2012 tweets focusing on no country (31.8%). With regard to RQ4, the primary affiliation of individuals utilizing #London2012 was lay persons (83.2%). Finally, in answer to RQ5, lay persons discussed athletes (34.2%), with no sport focus (48.1%) and no country focus (63.3%).

Discussion

Emphasis was placed on social media utilization during the London Olympics, with the IOC creating a website as the central point for digital media (Ward, 2012). Additionally, an official Twitter account (i.e., @London2012) was established. However, thus far, the results indicate that efforts to centralize the media message were not successful as significant differences were found between @London2012 and #London2012 suggesting no agenda-setting effect was present. Although sport organizations can utilize social media to facilitate interactions with various constituencies, initiatives to drive the media message may not be effective to pursue.