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The Social Media Games: An Analysis of Paralympic Athletes' Tweets

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(including questions)
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The 2012 Olympic Games may forever be known as the "Social Media Games" due to the means by which Twitter and Facebook were used for reporting and communicating on the events (McGowan, 2012). Social media sites offered an instant outlet for media professionals to report news, but Twitter particularly secured a globalized platform for athletes and fans to deliver commentary and interact. These characteristics are among the reasons Twitter is the social media choice of the sports world and has "redefined how the sports business communicates with itself and its fans" (Fisher, 2009, para. 6). Previous research has explored how professional athletes use Twitter (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010) and how followers interact with athletes (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). More recent research has focused on how journalists use Twitter in large-scale sports reporting (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Yet, in many cases, the general public and athletes themselves are in charge of news distribution through social media outlets (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Such was the case during the 2012 Paralympic Games.

Twitter served as an unofficial messenger of news for the London Paralympic Games, particularly in the United States where there was no live television coverage and viewers relied on Internet live streaming, video highlights, and social media for information (Francella, 2012). In fact, prior to the Paralympic Games, the United States Olympic Committee used its official Twitter account to publicized Twitter handles of Paralympic athletes. The official U.S. Paralympics Twitter account (@USParalympics) published a list of U.S. Paralympic athletes to follow. Due to a lack of live media coverage in the United States, fan consumption of Paralympic performances turned from traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television to social media such as Twitter, a shift that has been a recent phenomenon (Kian, Burden, & Shaw, 2011; Sanderson, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore how U.S. Paralympic athletes used Twitter during the 2012 Paralympic Games. This research was modeled after Sanderson and Hambrick's (2012) case study of Twitter's role in crisis sports reporting. Framing analysis was used to guide this study. Media consumers classify, organize, and interpret life experiences to make sense of them, and these interpretations, or frames, enable people to perceive, identify, and label events or information (Goffman, 1974). Framing can shape the reader's interpretations by presenting only a piece of the full representation of an event, issue, or idea (Entman, 2007; Riechert, 1996). While framing has traditionally been used to examine media consumption (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012), the researchers argue in this study that due to the lack of U.S. media coverage on the Paralympic Games, the athletes themselves were the primary distributors of information. This is somewhat a twist on the basic model of communication first proposed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949 and later modified by Laswell to add the dimension of media effects (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004). This basic model of communication is linear in nature with an information source sending a message through a transmitter to a receiver. This would be a media professional interviewing an athlete and sending a message to media consumers with the consumers interpreting that message. Twitter and Facebook have basically eliminated the mediator of a media professional in delivering a message to consumers. Social media has allowed direct communication with consumers and also has allowed for consumers to directly communicate with athletes. This has changed the nature of framing in that now there is no interpretation by a media professional of the message to consumers. It also has allowed athletes to respond directly to consumers' questions and messages.

Data were collected from Twitter accounts of the 96 U.S. Paralympic athletes who were on the U.S. Paralympics Twitter page members list. Each tweet from the 96 athletes from August 29-September 9, 2012, was downloaded and tweets were analyzed using the constant comparative method to compare "one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 30).

Results of this study were closely aligned with the study by Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) in that U.S. Paralympic

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athletes used Twitter for (1) reporting news, (2) interacting with fans, (3) linking to content, and (4) promoting disability sport. In reporting news, athletes used Twitter to disseminate facts and results about their respective events during the Games. Athletes often interacted with fans by responding to direct tweet messages. Athletes also used Twitter to link to content, although in a deviance from Sanderson and Hambrick (2012), the content athletes posted consisted primarily of photos that offered an insider's glimpse to the athletes' world during the Paralympic Games. Finally, athletes used Twitter to promote disability sport through tweeting about their teammates or the Paralympic Games by using visuals and content.

This study builds upon the work of Sanderson and Hambrick (2012) regarding the use of Twitter to disseminate news about a sport-related event, although this study focused on amateur athletes' use of Twitter. The researchers argue that these athletes were transformed into pseudo-journalists on assignment, reporting on the 2012 London Paralympic Games through tweets. A lack of traditional media coverage in the United States shifted the fan consumption of the Paralympic Games to news and information disseminated through social media. Athletes, then, became a direct source of information during the Paralympic Games. This research emphasizes the importance of educating athletes, even at the amateur level, on the messages they construct through social media due to the potential audience as well as the importance placed upon the message.