A Longitudinal Study of #NBCFail and Active Consumers

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The rapid growth of social media has contributed to an increasingly complex media landscape (Jenkins, 2006). Considering the influence of social media on sport consumption, consumers now have the ability to use social media in conjunction with watching a sporting event on television. In instances where consumers have been dissatisfied with television coverage of sporting events, many have taken to social media to express discontent. One particular instance where this has continually occurred is with the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC) coverage of the Summer Olympics in the United States, and active consumers’ use of “#NBCFail” on Twitter. In this longitudinal study, we examined NBC’s broadcasting plans for the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics before qualitatively analyzing statements and actions of both active viewers and NBC representatives surrounding the #NBCFail movement on Twitter.

Literature Review

Convergence has given consumers the opportunity to interact and share information with each other (Jenkins, 2006), contributing to a need for access to and exchange of information instantaneously (Redhead, 2007). Consumers’ need for immediacy has contributed to the transformation of a traditionally passive media consumer into an active consumer. Whereas passive media consumption generally assumes power lies with the media producer, active media consumption encourages a ‘participatory culture’ where individual consumers share power with producers of media (Bechmann & Lombard, 2013; Jenkins, 2006). As Rosen (2006) explained, while traditional media allows for a vertical flow of content from conglomerates to isolated consumers, new media allows for the flow of information horizontally between media and consumers. This sideways flow of information allows consumers to share information and pool their knowledge collectively (Jenkins, 2006; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewel, & Hughes, 2013).

The emergence of new media has allowed for the cultivation of virtual communities comprised of individuals tied together by a shared interest. Such communities are particularly evident on Twitter, where users can connect with others outside of their immediate social network by using a hashtag. In Twitter’s relatively brief history, a division of hashtags in regard to their organic or inorganic nature has become increasingly visible, with the former typically constructed by consumers and the latter by organizations for promotional reasons. Twitter has drastically changed the way sport is consumed. For example, the London 2012 Summer Olympics and Rio 2016 Summer Olympics generated 150 million and 187 million games-related tweets, respectively (Clarke, 2012; Filadelfo, 2016), illustrating that consumers have increasingly taken to Twitter to discuss the mega sport event as it occurs (Hutchins, 2011).

Traditional media has historically exhibited great control over its content, however social media has allowed the consumer to contest the control. In what Jenkins (2006) describes as grassroots convergence, consumers have the ability to choose when and how to use media to best meet their wants and needs. At the same time, consumers have become more influential media producers, as new media platforms have provided them the space to share news, opinions, and unique content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe a modern media environment where traditional media producers have become ‘mere observers’ of this increased consumer activity.

The intersection of traditional and new media with both producers and consumers has been particularly evident in the United States during the past two Summer Olympic Games. In both 2012 and 2016, media conglomerate NBC sought to provide a comprehensive, multi-platform viewing program to consumers while simultaneously prioritizing its revenue-maximizing business objectives, thus resulting in tape-delayed television coverage of select events. Concurrently, active consumers sought to experience the games in real-time and on their own terms, interacting with fellow fans through social media outlets as the events happened. Use of the #NBCFail hashtag on Twitter, which was initiated organically by a consumer during the 2012 Olympics, resurfaced during the 2016 Olympics; in both instances, it allowed active consumers to express dissatisfaction with NBC’s coverage of the games (Alexander, 2016;
Method
To understand how active consumers used #NBCFail over time in conjunction with the Summer Olympic Games and NBC’s reaction to it, we conducted a longitudinal study, qualitatively examining statements and actions of Twitter users and NBC representatives during the London 2012 Olympics and Rio 2016 Olympics. As Flick (2009) noted, longitudinal studies are ideal for studying a phenomenon at multiple points in time, particularly in instances where there is a sufficient enough amount of time between data collection to make change visible.

Due to the rapid technological change characteristic of the present era, an adaptive research and data collection method was utilized. During the London 2012 Olympics, tweets containing #NBCFail were collected in real time or post hoc from Twitter and transferred into a file for analysis. Between 2012 and 2016, social media data collection and analytics software became readily available, including programs such as DiscoverText. DiscoverText was used to collect tweets containing #NBCFail during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Tweets were collected every 15 minutes for a period of time one week before, during, and one week after the 2016 Games. Tweets were analyzed using open coding, a technique used to analyze qualitative material whereby the researchers review and compare data (in this instance, tweets) multiple times in their entirety (i.e., constant comparative method) to derive themes based on the properties and dimensions of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Themes from the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics were considered separately and then together to understand similarities and differences.

Findings and Conclusion
During the London 2012 Games, it was apparent that while active consumers publically (via Twitter) expressed discontent with the games’ coverage, NBC simultaneously suppressed this active audience, instead highlighting its traditional measures of a successful broadcast (i.e., television ratings and advertising revenue). The actions of NBC in 2012 highlighted the conflict between corporate and consumer media convergence, and NBC’s resistance to look beyond traditional measures of a successful broadcast. A complete analysis of findings regarding the use of #NBCFail and NBC’s reaction during the Rio 2016 Olympics is currently underway, however initial analysis suggests that consumers were again dissatisfied with coverage of the games, and NBC executives similarly justified their broadcast approach.

As new media adds dimension to and increases the capabilities of media corporations in terms of their offering, it is simultaneously giving voice and authority to a traditionally passive consumer audience. The continued #NBCFail movement from the London 2012 Olympics to the Rio 2016 Olympics suggests that rather than intersecting, the actions and interests of media producers and consumers have continued to travel alone. Nonetheless, it also exemplifies the ability of social networking sites to foster communities comprised of individuals who hold common interests or opinions. If organizations can prioritize listening to and engaging with active consumers rather than discounting them, it may be conceivable to establish meaningful and long-lasting relationships with consumers.