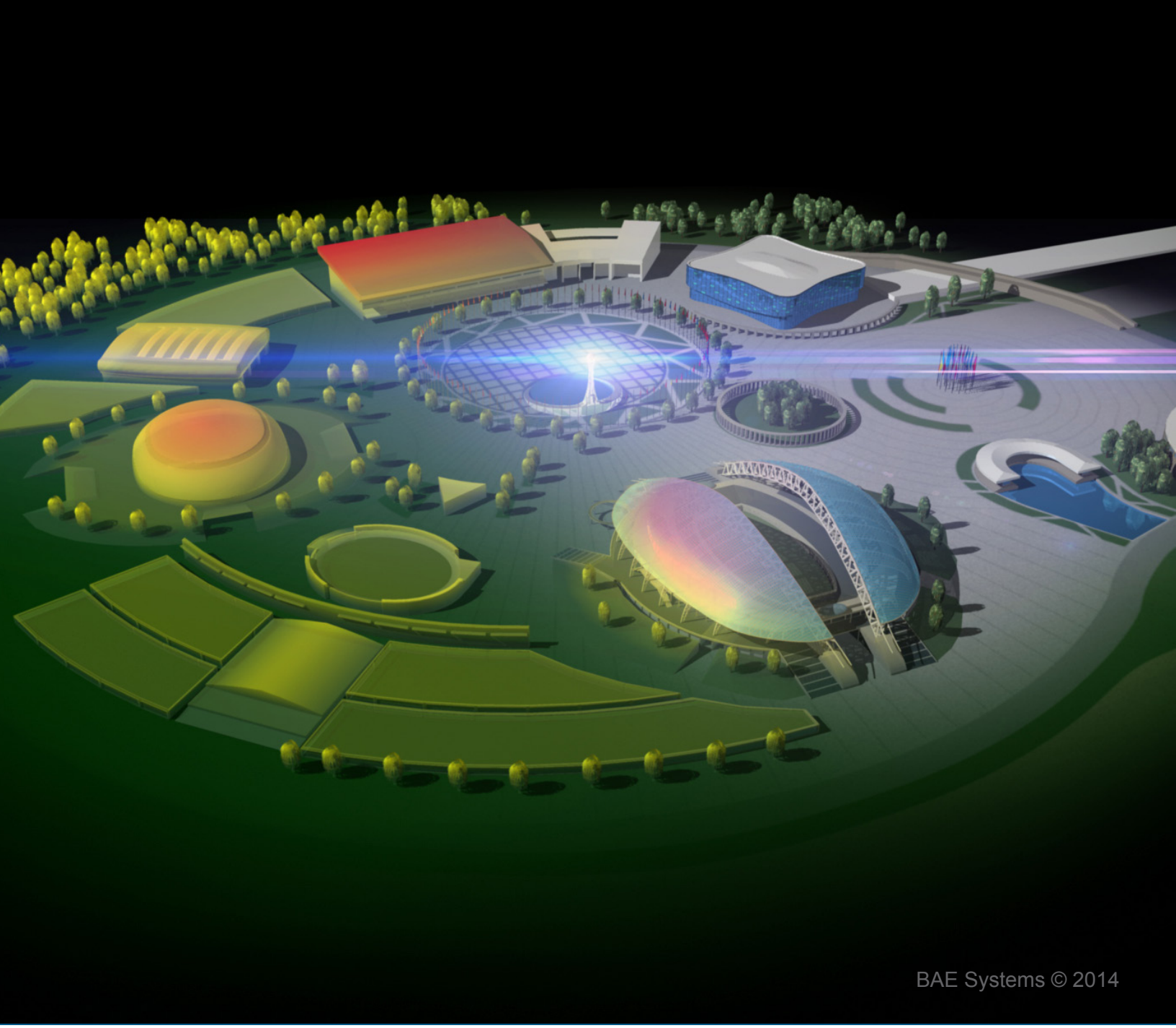

SPOTLIGHT ON SOCHI:
Social Media Analysis Series

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HASHTAG HIJACKING

BAE Systems is partnering with Homeland Security Today magazine to produce a daily report that provides a unique perspective on the 2014 winter games in Sochi, Russia.

There's no question the Sochi games, like many international sporting events, can be a marketing boon. Broadcasters pay millions of dollars for the rights to airtime, and retailers follow suit to become official sponsors. We discussed a similarly symbiotic relationship between the games and journalists in our February 12th post, "Tonal Shift". Within this paradigm, social media platforms can be considered a relatively low cost alternative to launch a messaging campaign, be it for professional or personal interests. On Twitter, where one's message is reduced to 140 characters among hundreds of thousands of other messages, a catchy hashtag is the currency that buys the hype that drives success. One week into the winter games, we have already seen how quickly a campaign's intended message can fall victim to what is known as "hashtag hijacking".

What is hashtag hijacking?

"Hashtag hijacking" is the act of intentionally misusing a hashtag to redirect attention to another issue, or to draw negative attention to its originator (and sometimes, both). Although use of any hashtag will attract a few a few unrelated posts, effectively hijacking a hashtag requires a significant number of tweets to completely redirect attention from the intended issue.

Who's hijacking hashtags?

The users involved in hijacking hashtags vary by their motivation. It is generally considered poor etiquette for one company to hijack another's hashtag in such a public atmosphere, especially considering most companies' marketing efforts are equally vulnerable to the same tactics. Instead, this kind of "information operation" is typically launched by political activists either

seeking to raise awareness of their cause or taking steps to inflict reputational damage on an organization in conflict with their cause. This was clearly evident in the hijacking of McDonalds' #CheerstoSochi takeover this month. As Russian laws regarding sexual orientation were brought to light, McDonalds' sponsorship of the winter games began to draw controversy. Since January 31, LGBT-related tweets have made up one-fifth of the #CheerstoSochi tweets- an impressive shift considering the breadth of McDonald's brand recognition. Looking closely at the hashtags being used in conjunction with #CheerstoSochi, we see an even more striking imbalance of dialogue:

Hashtags used in conjunction with McDonalds' #CheerstoSochi on Twitter (Jan. 31-Feb 13)
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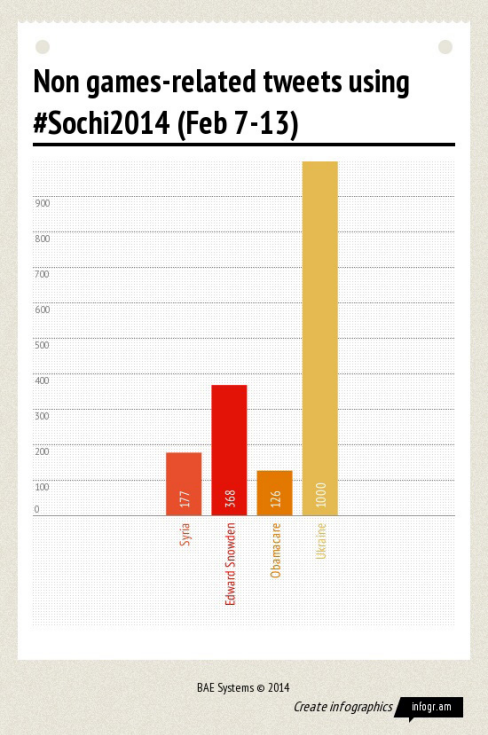
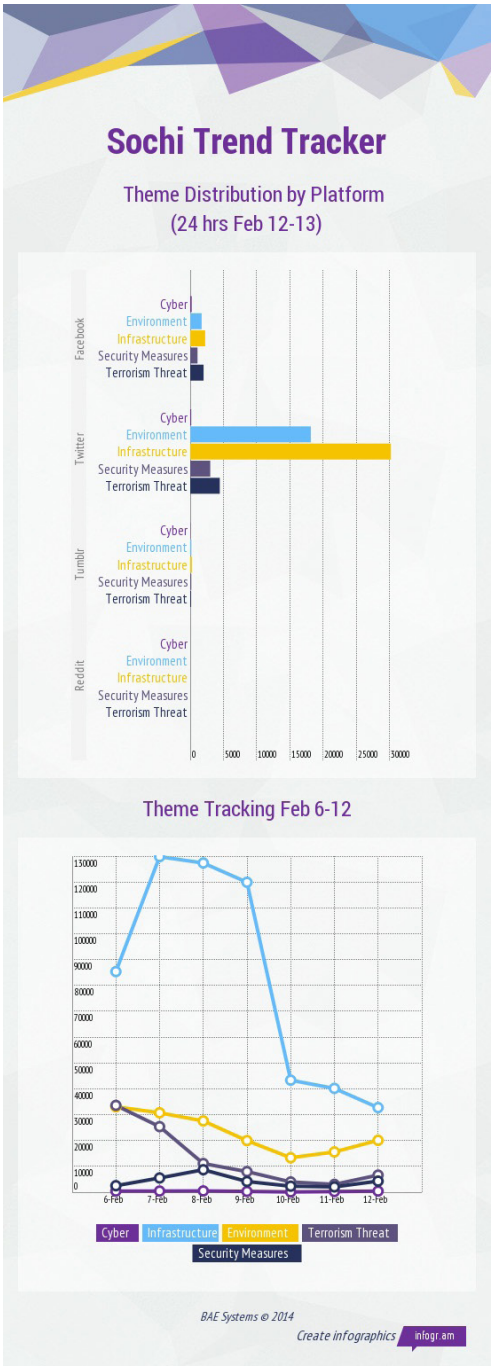


Other companies have since been ensnared in this movement, including Visa, Coca-Cola, and Proctor & Gamble, some of which have issued public statements in an effort to separate their brand from the host country's stance on the issue. For McDonald's, however, it appears #CheerstoSochi will remain forever politically entangled.

The Advanced Analytics Lab took a look at other high-profile issues to see how prevalent they were among the #sochi2014 tweets. According to our data, none of the issues we searched for compare to the level of coverage the LGBT/McDonalds event received. Of the 1 million tweets using #sochi2014 since the games began on February 7, the other issues we searched made up only a fraction of the count (see chart). Unrest in Ukraine, not surprisingly, led the pack – likely a result of its proximity to the Sochi games.

Because hashtags serve as a way to bring large groups of social media users together online, they may also be vulnerable to hijacking by spammers or cyber criminals. In this scenario, the hijacker would post tweets with content relevant to a hashtag like #sochi2014, but include a masked or malicious link..

We have observed how quickly certain topics can take hold of the social media environment, and just as quickly disappear, but a hashtag lingers as long as it is being used. Two years after its heyday, references to #London12 are still cropping up. As we move into week two of the games, we will continue to monitor for hashtag hijackings, and any other emerging trends.



Concerns about security issues, and likewise the social media chatter about them, change constantly as the environment around the winter games evolves. Understanding how and why those changes occur will help us better duration of the games, the BAE Systems Advanced Analytics Lab is tracking dynamic social media activity related to common security issues by category and will report daily on how that discussion progresses.

The BAE Systems Advanced Analytics Lab integrates analytic expertise, technology and tradecraft to make sense of big data and support critical customer missions. Much of the data analyzed in this series was processed and visualized using cutting-edge BAE Systems Applied Intelligence solutions, such as the Open Source Intelligence Product. All geospatial images were produced using BAE Systems' enterprise solution suite of Geospatial eXploitation Products®.

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