



SPOTLIGHT ON SOCHI: Social Media Analysis Series

POOR SPORTS TAKE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

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.

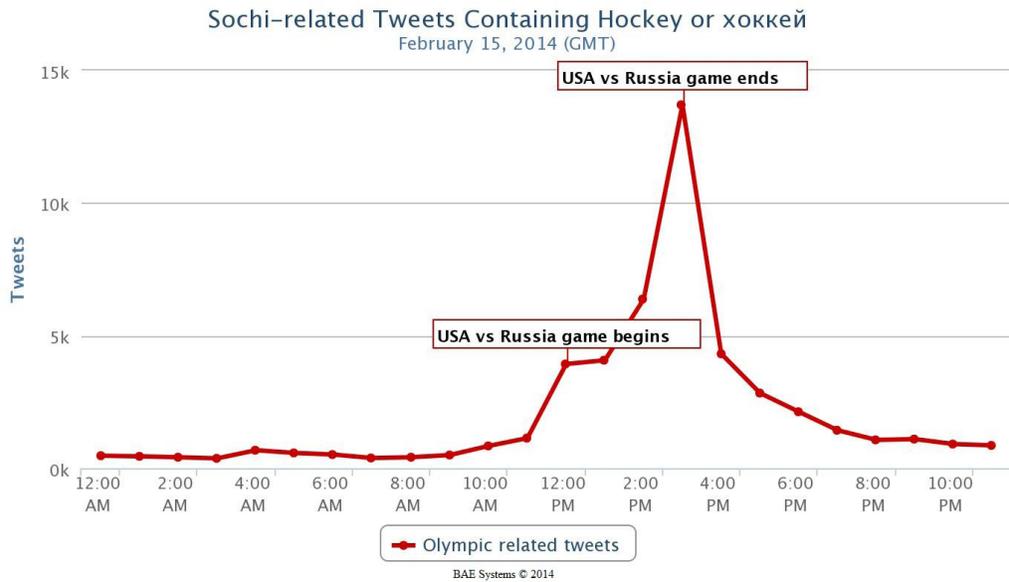
Much of social media's appeal comes from its free flowing nature. Users can communicate their every reaction to events, with no requirement for composure or self-censorship. While this can make the content even more valuable to those who have invested in it as a low-cost marketing tool, the lack of any built-in up-front controls on user's speech means that social media's less savory elements, from cyber-bullies to bigots to angry partisans, often permeate across the community. The same traits that have allowed social media to open societies, increase global communication, and fuel revolutions also make it a prime target for abuse and misconduct. Despite this risk, athletes and national organizing committees have fully incorporated their social media accounts into their broader marketing and publicity strategies.

In previous posts, we have noted that significant attention has already been paid to the use of social media to criticize the administration of the Sochi games (see our February 5 series opener, "Ready or Not?"). But perhaps equally disturbing is a report from The Independent this week that speed skater Elise Christie would be closing her Twitter account. Christie had received numerous abusive tweets from Olympic fans in South Korea following her disqualification from the 500 meter finals resulting from a crash that also disrupted Italian and South Korean skaters. The decision to close Christie's account was formally made by the British Olympic Association, which claimed it had received Christie's consent.

This is not the first time winter or summer games athletes, especially British ones, have been harassed on social media. Well-known British diver Tom Daley was sent tweets accusing him of disappointing his then recently deceased father after narrowly missing a medal at the 2012 London games.

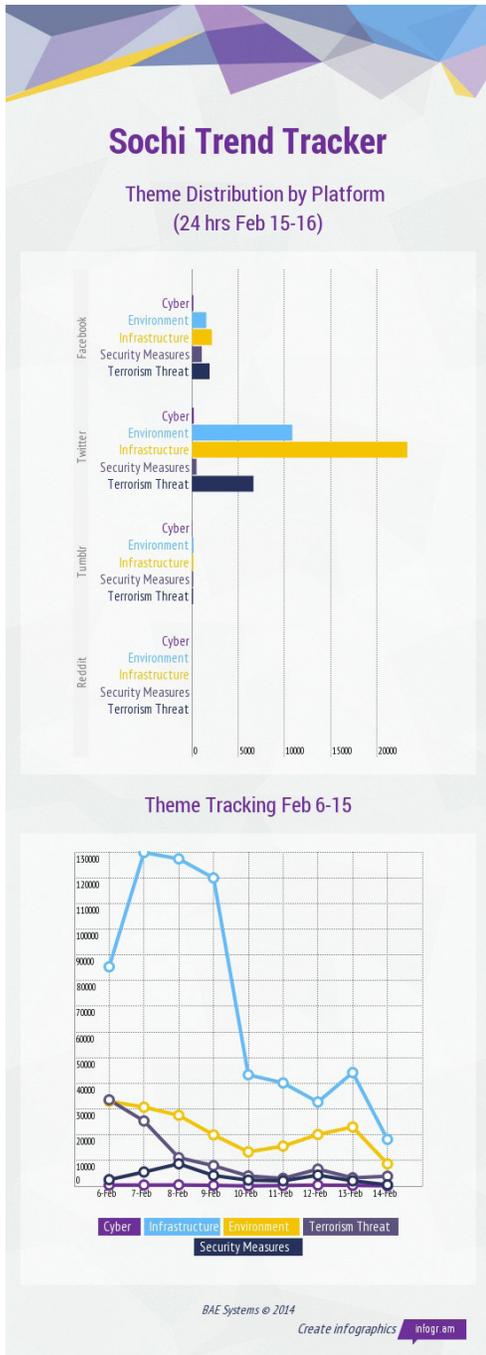
Female athletes seem especially frequent and attractive targets for social media abuse. British gymnast Beth Tweddle, medalist at the 2012 London games, deactivated her Twitter account last month after receiving crude and sexist tweets during an event highlighting women athletes hosted by Sky Sports News. Weightlifter Zoe Smith shot back at sexist and insulting tweeters on her blog during the 2012 games. Swimmer Rebecca Adlington chose to forgo Twitter for the London games after repeatedly being harassed on Twitter.

Christie's case is also not the only time sporting controversy has spawned social media vitriol in Sochi. Saturday's ice hockey match between Russia and the United States saw a strong following on social media. The hourly rate of Tweets containing "hockey" or "хоккей" rose to a games-wide high during the game, reaching its peak after the controversial end of regulation following the disputed invalidation of a Russian goal. Social media reacted strongly to the Americans' controversial win.



The contested call didn't rouse just the masses on Twitter. Alena Arshinova, a member of Russia's federal legislature, the Duma, posted several messages disparaging the American hockey team on Twitter, Facebook, and the Russian social network Vkontakte, all of which were repeatedly shared on their respective platforms. One such message read roughly "shame on the team of that country, which can't beat us without help from the judge," according to Time Magazine.

Social media brings viewers, profits, and exposure to the organizers and investors in Sochi. But it also brings the powerful, uncontrollable, and sometimes uncouth world of cyber discourse into an environment based on positive emotion and carefully crafted images. As parties look to leverage social media in the future, they must always consider the danger posed by the awkward and sometimes harmful elements lurking in the crowd. While athletes and fans can risk having their feelings hurt, teams, brands, and superpowers risk having their valued reputations abused and tarnished.



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 understand both the mood on the ground in Sochi and emerging concerns from the worldwide audience. For the 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.

Disclaimer: BAE Systems is not affiliated, associated, authorized, endorsed by, or in any way officially connected with Olympics Association or Official Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games.

BAE Systems © 2014