

NESTA Hot Topics

Social at scale: The challenge of digital media for the 2012 Games

Introduction

Our ninth [Hot Topics](#) event looked at the challenge of using social technologies at scale, and explored how the Olympic partners are working alongside a new set of 'content creators' to capture the London 2012 story.

The event featured presentations from **Alex Balfour**, Head of New Media, London 2012 (LOCOG), **Lewis Wiltshire**, Editor of the BBC Sport Website and Social Media lead for BBC Sport and **Tom Uglow**, Creative Director for Google and YouTube, Europe.

The changing digital landscape

The 2012 Olympic Games were awarded to London on 6 July 2005. Alex Balfour was recruited as Head of New Media soon afterwards in 2006. He has one of the most challenging jobs in digital media: a five-year run up to a one-off, six week event, with the whole world watching, amid a rapidly changing digital landscape.

In 2005 when the Games were awarded, broadband usage had only just overtaken dial-up for consumers, with six million homes, and 3G was still in its infancy, with less than three million 3G subscriptions out of a total of 60 million.¹ Social networking was a phenomenon confined mainly to the 16-24 age group, and the big social networks were MySpace and Bebo.

Contrast that with the current landscape: 28 per cent of people use their mobile phones for internet access and 40 per cent of the 81 million UK mobile connections were 3G at the end of 2010. There are 19.6 million homes with broadband, and 74 per cent of adults have a broadband connection. Social networking has become thoroughly mainstream, with half of households using social networking sites, accounting for one fifth of time spent online. Mobile visits are now overtaking desktop visitors for several sport's official sites, including the hugely successful Major League Baseball site [MLB.com](#). The idea that more people are likely to visit the Games websites from mobile devices than fixed line connections was hard to imagine five years ago. Virtually everyone attending the Games will have a computer in their pocket, many of them capable of recording and uploading live video.



Hot Topics is a series of NESTA events driven by ideas and technologies. They aim to introduce the technological tools that will change how we do things in the coming years, and are designed to bring together the best of business, academia, start-ups and investors.

Find out more at:
[http://www.nesta.org.uk/
events/hot_topics](http://www.nesta.org.uk/events/hot_topics)

1. Ofcom Communications Market Report 2005. Available at: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/>

“Now the sociology is more interesting than the technology.”

Back in 2005, it was reasonable to expect that the London 2012 New Media team might build their own social network, but, as Alex pointed out, white-labelled social media platforms have declined in popularity. They have realised in the past few years that you can't force people to use your platform: *“People do want to be social but they want to be social in their own spaces, on their own terms ... an object lesson for us was that scale means going to the scale players, and there are still only three or four scale players that can reach the size and range of audience that we have for the Games.”*

They have now changed their focus, and aim to shape conversations, while still respecting that people want to have those conversations at arm's length. Last summer, they worked with Twitter and YouTube to create the [#1yeartogo](#) campaign. This spread a simple message across traditional media and social media, and encouraged a tweeting competition to express support for your country's team. This trended globally on Twitter throughout the day, and [created 167,000 tweets](#). What they did was to make sure everything linked to a core communications message, seeking conversation starters, and make sure that it worked in the way people were already using social media. They were surprised at how a simple idea engaged people, and got them talking in a positive way.

Scale of the Games

Alex said the scale of the Games would shock people in London and around the world next year. Not only are the Olympics a huge global event, with many different parallel activities, but there will also be unprecedented amounts of data generated next year.

As a comparison, the World Cup has 32 teams and around 750 athletes competing – the Olympics plays host to potentially 204 countries and 14,400 athletes. There are 26 key sports, broken down into 36 disciplines (Aquatics is a sport, swimming, diving and water polo are all disciplines) and 305 events. In video terms, it amounts to 4,500 hours, or *“six months of viewing without a loo break.”*

At this sort of scale, you need a great deal of confidence in how things will be delivered. There is a limit to how much innovation you can have – many contracts with sponsors and broadcasters were in place from very early on. They need to use things that will reach people at scale, and that can rule out the most novel ideas, or those only known to early adopters. For example, many people who work in digital use and like Flickr. At the Vancouver Winter Olympics, there were around 120,000 photos uploaded to Flickr from games events. During 2012 they expect one billion visits from 200-300 million users, so will it be worth uploading 100,000 photos to a separate platform that may not have the same sort of reach? Compared to a network like Facebook, the 2012 site will not have quite the same reach, but it will be close – and they start to be limited in their innovation as well, because of this scale.

In addition to the New Media team, which sits within the larger Communications team, there is a wider technology team responsible for the infrastructure. They are already testing during the test events, but they will also go through three or four rounds of intensive testing next year, checking such things as plugs being accidentally pulled out, because there's no room for failure during the Games. Within the New Media area, people use social technologies as they see fit, and the team can't control what people will do. Although they can now be fairly confident about the devices that will be used, how people will use them is unknown and could change very fast. Alex was keen to point out that they are still open to new ways of thinking about things, but they are increasingly closed to new ways to deliver.

Another factor that constrains the team is that the London 2012 web audience is global. It's incredibly easy to offend one of the countries participating, or simply to use British idioms that don't translate well, so new ideas need to be considered in that light as well.



Alex Balfour, Head of
New Media, London 2012

The digital Olympics experience

Alex Balfour and Lewis Wiltshire gave us a flavour of what London 2012 and the BBC have in store for us during the Games. Both organisations are aiming to offer 'digital tickets' to the Games. Demand for 2012 tickets has far exceeded supply, so most of the country is likely to participate through TV and digital channels.

The New Media team at London 2012 looks after the ticketing and information websites, as well as those supporting the torch relay and the Paralympics. Alex described two mobile apps that they will produce for the Games. The first will have the 'full-fat' results service – all results from all sports, for users worldwide.

The second 'experience' app will be a 'mobile ticket to the Games'. This app will launch earlier, cover a longer timespan and engage with all the Games-related activities; from those lucky enough to have tickets, to the torch relay, which will come within ten miles of 95 per cent of the population, and more than 20,000 cultural events around the country. You can have a Games experience wherever you are – and not necessarily in the UK.

The BBC Sport website will be relaunched in 2012 and is ambitious in its scale. They will stream all Olympic events both live and on-demand, with up to 24 video streams on the busiest days. Some on-demand clips will still be edited by hand, but most will be created using metadata.

They are also planning a page for every Olympic athlete – all 14,000 of them – to update on their events, as well as providing updates directly from their Twitter account.

They are also aiming to provide data along with the video content: allowing you to have rich data on screen while you're watching, changing sport much the same way as you do on a TV with a selection of different sport 'channels'.

Wimbledon and Euro 2012 will allow the BBC to try out some of these changes ahead of the Games, and test the new ideas to ensure that everything goes smoothly.



Lewis Wiltshire,
Editor of the BBC Sport
Website and Social Media
lead for BBC Sport

Always room for innovation

Both Alex Balfour and Lewis Wiltshire described the limitations of innovating with a one-off event and no room for failure. But within these limitations, there is still room for new thinking. Tom's view was that there is *"still scope for innovation two days before the Games ... there's always room for innovation."*

Lewis described a page on the BBC website for every athlete that would feed in their own messages from twitter and other platforms. However, he pointed out this is an old editorial idea on a new platform; it is still just an individual broadcasting their thoughts, not a conversation. And as Tom pointed out, *"if you're not having a conversation, it's not social."* People have been able to do this with the BBC for decades – by calling into a radio programme, or writing a letter (or even baking a cake for Test Match Special – the original User Generated Content – User Generated Cakes). The BBC is keen to move social media integration on from old editorial ideas on new platforms.

"If you're not having a conversation, it's not social."

The bigger challenge is to aggregate many people's views to understand sentiment on a larger scale. This presents its own problems, because social is chaotic. Tom's analogy was that broadcast PR and publicity is like controlling a wave, sending out messages at

intervals, looking at peaks and troughs. Social is many people sending many waves which interact – what you get is choppy water.

Tom made a compelling argument that by really putting people first – not the games, not the athletes, not the brands, but the users – you can create remarkable shared experiences. This is a different sort of scale.

Life in a Day asked people to film part of their day, all on the same day, and put it on YouTube. There were 80,000 submissions and 5,000 hours of footage. It took “two months in a cupboard” to edit down to an amount you can use to make a film.

What happens when you can identify all these videos as data points, with a time, geography and emotion, you can cluster them through three dimensions, and move through the data. This is an opportunity to experience the data in new ways. Tom Uglow: *“We’re very good at organising, very good at collecting; we’re very poor at visualising and allowing the user to experience that data. We’re still putting it in tables, which is crazy.”*

The YouTube Symphony Orchestra was another project creating scale from many small pieces of participation. They asked people to audition using YouTube. About 3,000 people did, and then a community of around 30,000 people were actively engaged in commenting on the videos. Another 300,000 watched those videos, although they didn’t comment. Finally, 40 million people watched a classical music concert performed by amateurs, five million watching it livestreamed to mobile devices. *“People love the idea of a shared live experience, knowing everyone else is watching at the same time you are. That persists even if you’re not in the same concert hall or stadium.”* Those moments, watching live, and knowing that everyone else is watching live as well, are incredibly important. *“This is going to be one of the incredibly profound things about the Olympics – that we come together and do this one thing at that time.”*

“Global desire to experience same thing at same time is very powerful.”

@goodgym, via twitter



Tom Uglow, Creative Director at Google Europe