

London Games to be first social media Olympics

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This Monday April 16, 2012 file photo provided by LOCOG shows an aerial view of the Olympic Park showing the London 2012 Olympic Stadium, foreground and the Aquatics Center, white building at left. London will be the social media Olympics. For all the history and tradition associated with London, a very modern-day phenomenon will play a prominent role at the upcoming Summer Games. Tweet this: These will be the first Olympics told in 140 characters or less. The London Games will be the most tweeted, micro-blogged, liked and tagged in history, with fans offered a never before seen insider's view of what many are calling the social media Olympics, or the "socialympics." (AP Photo/Anthony Charlton/LOCOG)

(AP) — Tweet this: The London Games will be the first Olympics told in 140 characters or less.

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calling the social media [Olympics](#), or the "socialympics."

Hash tags, (@) signs and "like" symbols will be as prevalent as national flags, Olympic pins and medal ceremonies. Some athletes may spend more time on Twitter and Facebook than the playing field.

Mobile phones have become smarter, laptops lighter and tablet devices a must-have for technology lovers — meaning social-savvy fans, whether watching on television or inside the Olympic stadium itself, will be almost constantly online.

Organizers expect more tweets, Facebook posts, videos and photos to be shared from London than any other sports event in history. The 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver offered just a small glimpse of what's to come.

"Vancouver was just the first snowflake," said Alex Hout, the International Olympic Committee's head of social media. "This is going to be a big snowball."

Twitter is already braced for a surge of traffic. Launched in 2006, it has become a key outlet for sports fans to trade messages during live events.

Users sent 13,684 tweets per second during a Champions League match between Barcelona and Chelsea in April, a record volume of tweets for a sporting event — busier even than the 2012 Super Bowl. Chances are that will be one of the records broken in London.

"It could be the 100-meter final or something unexpected," said Lewis Wiltshire, Twitter U.K.'s head of sport.

At the last Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008, Twitter had about 6 million users and Facebook 100 million. Today, the figure is 140 million

for Twitter and 900 million for Facebook.

"In Sydney (2000) there was hardly any fast Internet, in Athens (2004) there were hardly any smartphones, in Beijing hardly anyone had social networks," said Jackie-Brock Doyle, communications director of London organizing committee LOCOG. "That's all changed. Here, everyone has all that and will be consuming the games in a different way."

Later this month, at trials in Calgary for Canada's Olympic track and field team, athletes will even wear Twitter handles on their bibs — encouraging fans to send messages of support as they race.

Sponsors have also taken their Olympic campaigns online. Coca-Cola, Cadbury, Visa and BP are among those using Facebook to reach younger consumers. Samsung is even offering to paint the faces of Internet users with their national flag — virtually, of course.

"The key difference from four years ago is that now almost everyone has a smartphone, which means everyone can participate in real time," said Adam Vincenzini, an expert at Paratus Communications, a London-based PR and social media marketing agency. "You used to have to be sitting at your desk to access various social media platforms. Now you can have your phone or tablet on your lap while you watch, whether that's at the pub or the stadium."

The IOC, with 760,000 Twitter followers and 2.8 million on Facebook, will host live chats from inside the Olympic village with athletes, allowing the public to pose questions using social media accounts. It has already created an online portal, called the Athletes' Hub, which will collate posts from their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Under IOC rules, athletes and accredited personnel are free to post, blog

and tweet "provided that it is not for commercial and/or advertising purposes" and does not ambush official Olympic sponsors and broadcasters. Social media posts should be written in a "first-person, diary-type format."

What about spectators using their phones and iPads to take photos and video?

"There is no problem with photo sharing," Hout said. "We encourage it. But monetizing is not allowed."

"People are allowed to film. They're allowed to do that on their phones," he said. "The thing that we ask is that content is not uploaded to public sites."

The reason is to protect the exclusivity of the broadcasters who shell out big money for the rights. NBC, for example, paid more than \$1 billion for the U.S. rights to the London Games.

"We encourage the use of social media. We encourage athletes to engage and to connect," Hout said. "There are some rules to follow, there's no question about it. But we don't police the fans, we don't police the athletes. We don't do that. What we do is we engage."

LOCOG plans to announce new Olympic tie-ups with Twitter, Facebook and Google in coming days. Facebook is launching an Olympic initiative in London on Monday that will group teams, sports, athletes, broadcasters and others in one place.

However, LOCOG has drawn up strict rules for its employees and the 70,000 Olympic volunteers. They have been told not to share their location, any images of scenes in areas that are off limits to the public, or details about athletes, celebrities or dignitaries who they find

themselves in contact with.

"We are not stopping people from using social sites," Brock-Doyle said. "We say there are lots of things about your job — procedures, places you'll be and do — that remain confidential. There are elements of your job you can't share with wider groups of people."

Athletes, too, will need to navigate the social media world carefully.

Australian swimmers Nick D'Arcy and Kenrick Monk have already been punished after posting photos of themselves on Facebook in which they cradled pump-action shotguns and a pistol in a U.S. gun shop.

The Australian Olympic Committee ordered them to remove the photos immediately. The swimmers have been banned from using social media for a month starting July 15 and will be sent home the day the Olympic swimming program finishes.

The British Olympic Association has offered advice to its own athletes, suggesting that "a few smiley faces and LOL's (online speak for laugh out loud) will make you seem more approachable and encourage more people to talk and ask you questions." What not to do: "Don't get into disputes with your audience."

British swimmer Rebecca Adlington, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and a leading medal contender in London, has spoken out about abuse she has received about her physical appearance from some users on social media sites. She has already blocked the worst offenders from being able to contact her, but insists she won't stop using Twitter, where she trades dozens of messages a day with more than 50,000 followers.

"I'm insecure about the way I look and people's comments do hurt me," Adlington said in a message posted on Twitter.

While some athletes prefer to tune out from [social media](#) to concentrate on their competition, others embrace the opportunity to interact with their fans.

"Letting people know what I'm eating, how I'm sleeping, what the venues are like — people want to know what we're going through," U.S. gymnast Jonathan Horton said. "They want to know what it's like going through the experience and what we're up to."

All in 140 characters.

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