

Social media spotlight shines on London Olympics

July 25 2012, by Marianne Barriaux



A man walks past Olympic rings outside the Aquatic Centre at the London 2012 Olympic Park in east London on July 18. The London Olympics are set to be liked, tweeted, pinned and shared with more people than ever before as athletes, fans and organisers interact online in the first-ever social media Summer Olympics.

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Sportspeople and those overseeing the event are using social networks to communicate with legions of netizens -- mainly on Twitter, which has 140 million active users, and the 901-million-strong Facebook.

But the sheer scale of this relatively new medium has brought up a host

of challenges for organisers and national teams.

Already athletes have been given [social media](#) bans and juicy details of the opening ceremony have leaked online.

"This is going to be absolutely huge," said Ian Maude, an Internet analyst at research group Enders Analysis.

"Pretty much every event is going to be broadcast live, streamed to the Internet and a lot of that is going to end up being shared with friends, linked to, discussed on social media platforms -- far more so than anything before."

In the four years since the Beijing Olympics, the global number of [social media users](#) has exploded, as has the amount of people with smartphones.

As such, the London event will generate unprecedented scrutiny -- a fact the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is capitalising on with initiatives such as a social media hub that links Internet users with athletes.

Olympians themselves are commenting online in real time on their social media pages, allowing regular netizens to get an insight into their lives -- and sometimes characters -- in a way that was not previously possible.

US hurdler Lolo Jones, for instance, is huge on [Twitter](#) thanks to a mix of funny comments, interaction with her 168,500-plus followers and juicy announcements -- such as her revelation that she is a virgin.

"Sports fans are behaving in a new way -- they are increasingly using social media to follow sport," said Charlotte Lesage, spokeswoman for Synthesio, a social media monitoring firm.



A sponsored area where athletes can use computers and laptops in the London 2012 Olympic Athletes Village in the Olympic Park in east London on July 12. The London Olympics are set to be liked, tweeted, pinned and shared with more people than ever before as athletes, fans and organisers interact online in the first-ever social media Summer Olympics.

"It brings a certain proximity to and intimacy with the athlete."

But the very public medium has its flipside and already athletes have blundered.

Australian swimmers Nick D'Arcy and Kenrick Monk have been slapped with a one-month social media ban by their country's delegation after they posted photos of themselves posing with guns while training in the United States.

The pair will be sent home right after their events at the Games, with the Australian Olympic Committee ruling "their conduct brought themselves into disrepute."

Swimming star Michael Phelps also caused a stir when he criticised the new Olympics swimming cap on his social media account.

US hurdler Kerron Clement, meanwhile, got more than he bargained for when his tweet complaining that it took hours to get to his London living quarters from the airport went viral.

"Athletes are sleepy, hungry and need to pee," he complained on July 16.

Darryl Seibel, spokesman for Team GB, conceded that communication blunders may be made during the Games, adding that while athletes had for the first time been briefed about social media, they had not been given do's and don't's.

"We're taking a fairly liberated approach, with the full knowledge that it will be imperfect, there will be some bumps and bruises along the way. But generally speaking, we think it will be positive," he said.

For organisers too, social media has caused a headache.

Details and photos of the opening ceremony were leaked online after the show's technical rehearsal Monday, despite director Danny Boyle's plea for spectators to "save the surprise."

"Whatever your expectations are, forget them! It's beautiful," said Mims Reilly in one of the less-revealing posts.

The IOC has had to lay down some rules, partly to protect official Olympic sponsors.

Participants have been told not to promote non-official brands for one month, prompting a rush of online praise for sponsors just before the ban kicked off last week -- all of which was covered by an amused press.

In one such example, Lucy Macgregor, Annie Lush and Kate Macgregor -- who represent Britain in sailing -- thanked a host of brands on their

[Facebook](#) page before the ban began.

Overall though, organisers and sporting delegations are banking on social media to promote the Olympics like never before.

"We think it's a very powerful medium to reach new and different audiences, in particular to reach young people," said Seibel.

"And of course the long-term growth and health of the Olympic movement is contingent in part on our ability to reach out to young people."

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