

Facebook, Twitter brace for World Cup fever

June 10 2014, by Barbara Ortutay



This undated image provided by Facebook shows the social network's "Trending World Cup" special feature. Available on the Web as well as mobile devices, the hub will include the latest scores, game highlights as well as a feed with tournament-related posts from friends, players and teams. (AP Photo/Facebook)

This year's World Cup will play out on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and messaging apps like WhatsApp just as it progresses in stadiums from Sao Paulo to Rio De Janeiro.

Nearly 40 percent of Facebook's 1.28 billion users are fans of soccer,

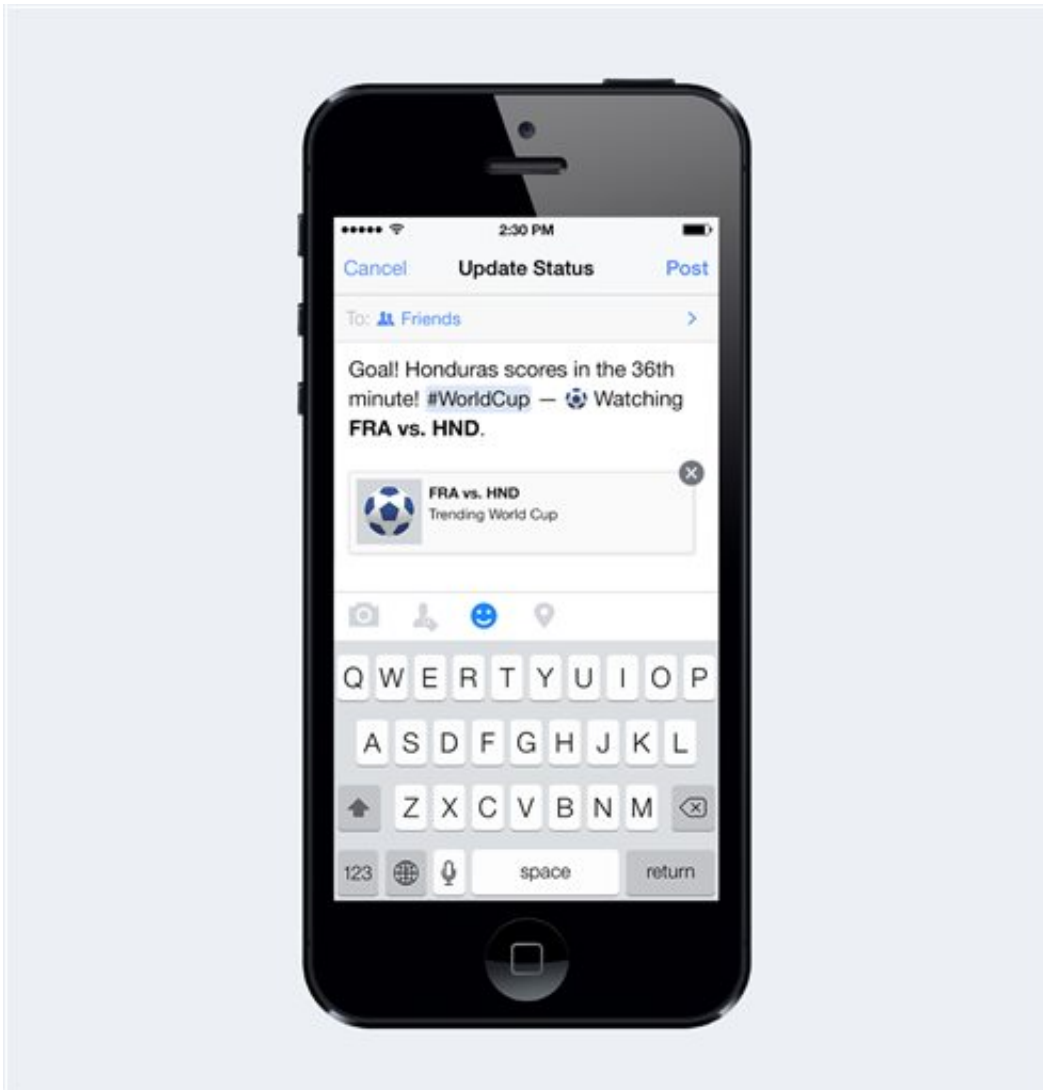
better known as football outside of the U.S. and Australia. On Tuesday, the world's biggest online social network is adding new features to help fans follow the World Cup—the world's most widely viewed sporting event—which takes place in Brazil from June 12 to July 13.

Facebook users will be able to keep track of their favorite teams and players throughout the tournament in a special World Cup section, called "Trending World Cup." Available on the Web as well as mobile devices, the hub will include the latest scores, game highlights as well as a feed with tournament-related posts from friends, players and teams. In addition, an interactive map will show where the fans of top players are located around the world. The company is also launching a page called FacebookRef, where fans can see commentary about the matches from "The Ref," Facebook's official tournament commentator.

Social media activity during big sporting events such as the Olympics and the Super Bowl has soared in recent years and should continue as user numbers grow. In 2010, when the last World Cup took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, Facebook had just 500 million users. Now there are just that many soccer fans (people who have "liked" a team or a player) on the site, the company says.

Facebook has recently focused on making its mobile app usable on simple phones that use slower data speeds since many of its newest users are in developing countries. As a result, Rebecca Van Dyck, head of consumer marketing at Facebook, said the World Cup hub will also be available on so-called "feature phones." Here the section will be "little less graphical" than what's shown on smartphones and on the Web, she said, but will include the same information.

Users can get to the World Cup hub by clicking on "World Cup" in the list of trending topics on the site.



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In a nod to Twitter, Facebook, earlier this year, began displaying trending topics to show users the most popular topics at any given moment. The feature is currently available in the U.S., U.K., India, Canada and Australia.

"This is our first foray into this, especially for a big sporting event like this," Van Dyck said. "We're going to see how this goes. If people enjoy the experience it's something we'd like to push on."

Facebook, which counts 81 percent of its users outside the U.S. and Canada, is unveiling its World Cup features at a time when the company is working to become a place for more real-time, public conversations about big events— a la Twitter. Such events attract big advertising dollars, though the company is not saying how much money it expects to make from World Cup-related ads.

Not to be outdone, Twitter touted in a blog post last week that the "the only real-time #WorldCup global viewing party will be on Twitter, where you can track all 64 matches, experience every goal and love every second, both on and off the pitch."

Fans can follow individual teams or players and use the hashtags #WorldCup to tweet about the matches, and follow official accounts such as @FIFAWorldCup, @ussoccer for the United States team and @CBF_Futebol for Brazil's soccer governing body, for example. Clicking on the #WorldCup or #WorldCup2014 hashtags, meanwhile, will take you to Twitter's hubs for the event.

Twitter is also bringing back the "hashflags" it introduced in the 2010 World Cup. Users who tweet three-letter country codes for participating nations—such as BRA for Brazil or ESP for Spain—will see the country's flag appear in their tweet. Twitter says it will then tally the mentions in its "World Cup of tweets."

Olympics. On Twitter, more than 24.9 million tweets were sent out during this year's Super Bowl, up from 13.7 million just two years earlier.

Because it takes place over several weeks, marketers are gearing up for "a marathon, not a sprint," said Debra Aho Williamson, an analyst for research firm eMarketer.

"Developing countries will be a key target for global brands," she said. "They will work hard to capture the attention of soccer fans in Latin America, Asia, Africa. The challenges (include the fact) that all the games are taking place in one place and the customers and marketers are in multiple time zones. This will require around the clock marketing."

For fans traveling to Brazil for the game and hoping to tweet and post about it on Facebook, the country's mobile communications services might pose their own challenge. Dropped voice calls are common even without the hundreds of thousands of soccer fans descending on the country. Accessing the Internet can be incredibly slow, and there's even some worry about network blackouts.

"World Cup visitors won't be able to communicate the way they want to," Christopher Gaffney, a visiting professor at Rio de Janeiro's Federal Fluminense University whose research focuses on Brazil's preparations for the World Cup and Olympics. "Instagram, Twitter, social media will not function at world class levels but at Brazilian levels, so people visiting Brazil will experience the frustrations we face every day."

More information: Facebook: www.facebook.com/worldcup and www.facebook.com/FacebookRef

Twitter: [blog.twitter.com/2014/follow-t ... up-action-on-twitter](http://blog.twitter.com/2014/follow-t...-up-action-on-twitter) and [blog.twitter.com/2014/gearing- ... -all-things-worldcup](http://blog.twitter.com/2014/gearing-...-all-things-worldcup)

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