

Tweetkeeping NBC's Rio Olympics

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This study qualitatively and quantitatively examined the @NBCOlympics Twitter account's gatekeeping practices during the Rio 2016 Olympics. NBC used Twitter in one-way communication with its audience to promote and hype its programs, or inform about the results of competition rather than interacting with its followers. The network served as a gatekeeper of results and video highlights. Most significantly, the coverage of women lagged behind the television broadcast with men's sports (n=810) receiving a slightly greater focus than women's (n=807) sports. Tweets were overwhelmingly about Team USA (n=745, 35% of all tweets) and focused on the most popular sports (swimming, gymnastics, beach volleyball) and athletes (Simone Biles, Michael Phelps).

The Olympic Games are a major media event, described as a spectacle and “mega-event,” in large part because of its partnership with television (Billings, 2008). The National Broadcasting Company (NBC), now owned by Comcast, has broadcast most of the games in the U.S. since the first Olympic telecast on American TV in 1960, including every Summer Olympics since 1988. NBC paid \$12.13 billion for the exclusive broadcast rights to both Winter and Summer Olympics from 2012 to 2032 (Sandomir, 2014). But the current media landscape, led by the rising popularity of over-the-top media services, also prompted the network to bet on more platforms than television: as soon as 2012, NBC partnered with Twitter to officially present the Olympics on social media for the first time.

Following the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, NBC found 67% of people surveyed said the Olympics were more enjoyable because the audience had more ways to consume the Games (Sandomir, 2014). NBC put more resources than ever into their social media strategy for the Rio games because, as NBC Olympics' late night host Ryan Seacrest said, the competition was expected to be “the most social games” ever (Spangler, 2016). As such, with so many people desiring to experience the Olympics through multiple platforms including Twitter, and NBC's outspoken wish to reach a larger audience through social media, it is worthy to study how NBC used social media throughout the Games. This paper focuses on the ways in which NBC used Twitter, as a gatekeeper, during the 2016 Olympics through qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Literature Review

Studies over the years (Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003; Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Bryant, 1980; Duncan & Messner, 1994; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Messner, 1992; Tuggle, 1997; Tuggle & Owen, 1999) have found that coverage of men in sports trumps coverage of women in sports. However, the Olympics give women an opportunity for more exposure. Indeed, Alexander (1994) found female athletes competing in the 1992 Olympics were covered more extensively than in non-Olympic sporting competitions. This trend in coverage continues. Billings (2008) noted “that women have not been showcased adequately if comparing their relative successes at the Olympics over the past several decades to the clock-time they receive or the number of times they are mentioned” (p. 70). According to Tuggle and Owen (1999), men's team competitions in the 1996 Olympics received significantly more coverage than women's team events and competitions that involved power or hard physical impact. Davis and Tuggle (2012) noted the differences in how traditional media (print and broadcast media) covered men and women athletes:

This difference manifests itself in several ways: (1) total column inches and running times, (2) persons quoted, (3) placement of articles and stories, (4) presence and size/length, (5) placement of an accompanying photograph or videotaped highlight, (6) the range of sports depicted in photos and tapes, and (7) the size and content of newspaper headlines and magazine article titles. (p. 54)

In fact, coverage of women's sports has been almost exclusively concentrated on individual swimming, diving, and gymnastics competitions (Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Davis & Tuggle, 2012). Yet, for the past two Summer Olympics in 2012 and 2016, NBC featured women more than men in their primetime coverage, something they had never done before (Coche & Tuggle, 2016; 2018). Similar trends have been found in studies regarding nationalism in NBC's Olympic broadcasts since the 1980s (Angelini, Smith, & Billings, 2017; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; 2003; Duncan, 1986; Tuggle & Owen, 1999).

Billings (2008; 2009) found not only that preproduced profiles typically focus on American athletes, but also that primetime broadcasts feature more name mentions of American athletes than all other nations put together. With colleagues, Billings has also noticed differences in how athletes are portrayed by NBC based on their nationality. While American athletes were more likely to be described succeeding because of their concentration, composure and commitment (Billings & Angelini, 2007), non-American athletes succeeded because of superior athletic skill and experience (Billings & Eastman, 2002; 2003). Most of the research points to the fact that NBC has focused its coverage of American athletes competing at the Olympics in a biased, nationalistic way in an attempt to draw in the widest possible audience possible.

Broadcasting the Olympics

As the Summer Olympic broadcaster in the U.S. for three decades, NBC has historically relied upon a dual-product revenue model that draws upon charging advertisers the highest rates possible for prime-time spots when ratings are at their highest (Billings, 2008). By 2012, Twitter and other social media platforms were beginning to challenge NBC's longstanding revenue model by generating revenue through live-streaming content online. But streaming and social media proved to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it offered new revenue streams for NBC; on the other hand, it threatened the network's organizational gatekeeping strategies. Since 2012, NBC's Olympic coverage has attempted to balance the network's economic interests when deciding what content will appeal to the widest range of audience members and advertisers, including multiplatform viewing options, such as live streaming and Twitter coverage.

NBC sits in a unique situation as the exclusive broadcaster of the Olympics in the U.S. It is the sole broadcast gatekeeper, with zero competition from other broadcast or video platforms because of the strict protections the International Olympic Committee (IOC) puts in place to protect paying broadcasters' rights. Even in this position of power, NBC relies on a business model that generates revenue by delivering audiences to advertisers (Picard, 2005). Consequently, NBC must produce content that appeals to both advertisers and the audience. Indeed, Picard (2005) noted that products that appeal only to the audience fail because advertising alone does not generate profits. Technological advancements have helped broadcasters, NBC included, in creating content that appeals to audiences and advertisers alike. Turner and Tay (2009) argued, "the major ratings successes of the twenty-first century have been multi-platform, multimedia events" (p. 7). Events such as the Olympics, Super Bowl and NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament have altered how events are covered: broadcasters are now using multiple platforms to create various viewing points (Tang & Cooper, 2013).

These multiple online channels of distribution are a small sum of what Aslinger (2009) calls the post-broadcast era, which is "defined by the ways that television industries make use of multiple distribution methods, potentially reducing the power of traditional broadcast television and opening up debates about how audiences are composed, segmented, and targeted" (p. 109). With these distribution methods in place in 2012, NBC made an undisclosed small profit from the London Games, highlighting the significance of social media and post-broadcasting offerings, despite the enormous cost of exclusive broadcasting rights in the U.S. (Sherman, 2012). NBC generated an even larger profit in 2014, in large part because of increased online advertisement sales that coincided with the popularity of the network's post-broadcasting options, social media and live-streaming coverage (Clarke, 2013). Yet, even with Olympic live streaming and Twitter coverage since 2012, NBC has consistently continued to employ organizational gatekeeping strategies.

Gatekeeping

Guided by gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950; 1964), which explains how gatekeepers can facilitate or prevent the diffusion of information, as well as how much information will be

allowed through the gates to the public, this study examines NBC's Twitter gatekeeping practices during the 2016 Rio Olympics. According to Tandoc and Vos (2015), "Traditional gatekeeping prioritized editorial autonomy" (p. 1) while protecting the content from outside influences.

Yet, gatekeeping in the digital age no longer depends upon the standard of the newsworthiness of information and content (Tandoc, 2014), as it is more complex than just selecting items for dissemination. Gatekeeping in today's social media age is also about making content more appealing (adding value) to the audience, particularly for an event as large as the Olympics (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Biddle (1986) argued that organizational gatekeeping assumes the normative roles of gatekeeper and consumer, in which the gatekeeper aims to generate economic profit from its content. NBC's coverage of the Olympics falls within this perspective of organizational gatekeeping: the network must make decisions based upon economic factors (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping, in a social media world as an organization, can be challenging. NBC not only must gatekeep its content on Twitter, but also attempt to expand its reach to as many people as possible. Billings (2014) noted that a developed network of followers is not the only important thing, however:

Thus, the power of a tweet is not primarily derived from the number of followers who receive it but the number of media gatekeepers (traditional and new) embracing it in some ancillary format...the power is in all of the major sports media outlets, making it a point of discussion to millions of viewers and readers over the course of the following weeks (p. 110).

It takes people within an organization to manage both its Twitter coverage of the Olympics and the interaction with its followers, while ensuring the ancillary formats of content are engaging the followers. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2011) referred to this type of organizational gatekeeping as collaborative gatekeeping because it includes the audience as well. But even as NBC has exercised traditional and organizational gatekeeping over its television Olympic coverage, it has recognized the value of Twitter coverage during the Games. As Lebel and Danylchuk (2012, p. 462) argued in a study exploring professional tennis players' self-presentation on Twitter: "There is power in the direct communication that Twitter affords." As an institution, NBC thus incorporated both traditional organizational gatekeeping and a restrictive collaborative gatekeeping into its coverage.

Lebel and Danylchuk's (2012) coding scheme includes five categories that are significant for the purpose of this study: (1) *Publicist* is for tweets meant to promote sponsors and upcoming events; (2) *Conversationalist* is for tweets that constitute direct interaction with athletes, celebrities, family, and personal friends; (3) *Fan Aficionado* is for tweets that directly interact with fans; (4) *Informer* is for tweets containing general information about results or current events; and (5) *Analyst* is for tweets that include opinions or commentary about a piece of information. These five categories ground the purpose of a tweet unit of measurement into gatekeeping theory and were adapted to examine the types of information NBC allows through its Twitter gates to its audience.

Twitter and Sports

The inclusion of Olympic coverage on social media platforms such as Twitter was a significant development for broadcasting, traditional broadcast television and online post-broadcasting. For the first time, network executives took notice of an untapped resource to expand coverage (Ovide, 2012). According to Smith (2016), more than 300 million active users were sending a half-billion tweets daily on Twitter by 2013. Twitter has grown as a social media platform and become a permanent part of sports coverage because users can post tweets, share information (report), and interact with others in real-time (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

Twitter is one of the most significant new sources in collegiate and professional sports (Sanderson, 2011). Sports are particularly well-suited for information sharing on Twitter because fans generally are active in the discussion of the events, results, analysis, and interviews following the conclusion of the event and allow for sports organizations to maximize communication efforts (Fisher, 2009). In fact, sporting events are often among the most discussed and often shared topics on Twitter (Golbeck, 2012), and sports journalists are key participants: they use Twitter as a means to share information with their followers immediately, not as a story, but as notes in their notebook (Roberts & Emmons, 2016).

Interest in sporting events can be measured by the volume of posts on Twitter—known as tweets (Lanagan

& Smeaton, 2011). Activity usually centers on key moments. For instance, almost 620,000 tweets were posted within a minute of the final whistle during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil (Lynch, 2016). With social media's popularity, traditional broadcasters have encouraged audience interaction by including Twitter feeds as part of their broadcasts (Fixmer, Lee, & Edwards, 2014; Hutchins, 2011). Twitter's ability to stream video footage, along with consumers' ability to use their mobile devices has also changed the ways in which sports are watched by fans. Roberts and Emmons (2016) found that the second screen experience that Twitter offers to sporting events is appealing for multiple reasons:

Part of Twitter's appeal is its ability to be part of "second screen," the concept of watching television while using a smartphone, tablet, or other computer device to gain additional information and/or to converse with others about what is happening on television (p. 99).

It was that second screen experience that made the Olympics so popular among viewers in 2012; in the words of Tang and Cooper (2013), "significant positive relationships existed between and among Olympics viewing on television, on the web, and via mobile portals" (p. 862).

Because experts predicted the Rio Olympics to be the "most social games" ever (Lui, 2016; Spangler, 2016), this study examines NBC's gatekeeping practices through textual analysis and quantitative content analysis to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What events, athletes, sex/gender, and countries did NBC cover the most?
- RQ2: What roles (publicist, conversationalist, fan aficionado, the informer, analyst) did NBC's Twitter account play most often?
- RQ3: What themes emerged from the gatekeeping practices of NBC's Olympic Twitter coverage?
- RQ4a: In what ways did NBC ask for Twitter audience participation with their Twitter content?
- RQ4b: Did this interaction have an influence on gatekeeping practices?

Method

The researchers used a multiple methodological approach—a quantitative content analysis to analyze tweets sent from NBC's official Olympics Twitter handle and a textual analysis. This combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for both descriptive understanding of the content and the organizational gatekeeping functions of the @NBCOlympics Twitter handle over what is disseminated. Multiple methodological approaches have become increasingly popular in studies concerning Twitter, according to Roberts and Emmons (2016). The tweets analyzed were compiled from the day before the opening ceremonies of the 2016 Rio Olympics, August 4, to the day after the closing ceremonies, August 22. The researchers compiled tweets from the @NBCOlympics Twitter account, the official NBC gatekeeping account of the Games, throughout the day, each day of the Olympics. A total of 3,877 tweets were collected and a simple random sample of 1,978 tweets was analyzed.

Data collection and sampling. The 3,877 tweets from @NBCOlympics were collected using a Google Docs add-on, Twitter Archiver. This premium version of this add-on collects tweets every 15 minutes. The researchers set up a protocol with Twitter Archiver to ensure the only tweets captured originated from the @NBCOlympics Twitter handle. The data collected through Twitter Archiver was then transferred to Microsoft Excel for analysis. Microsoft Excel was then used to randomly sample 1,978 tweets (51%), which were all coded and analyzed.

Procedure for quantitative analysis. The researchers drew upon previous studies at the intersection of sports and Twitter for the categories for the content analysis. The unit of analysis for this present study was each individual tweet.

Seven variables were coded for the quantitative part of the study: five pertained to the athletic content within the tweet and two were about the tweet itself. The five pertaining to the athletic content within the tweet were: (1) the Olympic sport(s) mentioned in the tweet, if any; (2) its scope (individual or team sport); (3) whether it involved physical power or hard body contact as a primary component; (4) its athletes' sex (men, women, both or "neutral" if no specific sport or athlete were mentioned); and (5) whether American athletes were in contention

or not. The last two variables were the type of the tweet and its purpose. Type was measured at the nominal level with eleven possible categories: *Preview*, *Live Event*, *Feature*, *Recap / Results*, *Awards Ceremony*, *Other Athletic News*, *Non-Athletic News* (e.g., the “Lochtegate”), *Photo Essay*, *Retweet from athlete*, *Retweet from celebrity other than an athlete*, or *Other* when the tweet did not fit in any other category. Purpose of tweet was also measured at the nominal level through six categories based on Lebel and Danylchuk’s (2012) study on tennis players’ self-presentation through Twitter:

1. Publicist: NBC promotion, publicity regarding their shows, upcoming events, tweetups, etc.
2. Conversationalist: direct interaction with athletes, celebrities, family, and personal friends.
3. Fan Aficionado: direct interaction between NBC and viewers.
4. The Informer: general information sharing, results, current events, etc.
5. The Analyst: sharing opinions about information
6. Other (explain)

The researchers completed a coding training session, then coded 10 percent of the sample, totaling 200 tweets, for intercoder reliability. Krippendorff’s alpha showed strong intercoder reliability across the board. The lowest value was 0.91 for the sex of the tweet. All other variables had a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.93 or above.

Procedure for qualitative analysis. The researchers drew upon Aronson’s (1995) study to develop an open-coding process that inductively created tweet categories. Following Aronson’s four steps for thematic analysis, the tweets were collected using Twitter Archiver, identified through close reading, combined and cataloged, and categories were constructed as a result of the open-coding process. In following this process, the researchers constructed four categories for NBC’s tweets: (1) NBC as a gatekeeper of results and medal counts; (2) NBC as a gatekeeper of highlights through 2-3 minute videos embedded in tweets, taken directly from the network’s television broadcast; (3) NBC as a gatekeeper of promotional content to hype events in prime-time, whether by formal journalistic tone or in a tone that more closely resembles a fan; and (4) NBC as a gatekeeper of Twitter interactions between or among athletes, athletes and celebrities, athletes and/or celebrities with NBC itself, NBC talent, and NBC with its Twitter audience.

Quantitative Results

RQ1: What events, athletes, sex/gender, and countries did NBC cover the most?

@NBCOlympics tweeted about most sports, but five sports represented 62% ($n = 1,224$) of the sample, and each were tweeted about more than 100 times: swimming ($n = 368$), athletics ($n = 353$), gymnastics ($n = 252$), basketball ($n = 148$), beach volleyball ($n = 103$).

Table 1

Number of Tweets by Sex of Athletes and Scope of Sport

	Men	Women	Both	Neutral	Total
N/A	6	5	11	106	128
Individual Sports	536	449	30	12	1027
Team Sports	256	347	60	16	679
Both	12	6	59	67	144
Total	810	807	160	201	128

Overall, @NBCOlympics tweeted as much about men’s sports as it did about women’s sports (810 tweets vs. 807 tweets, respectively). Another 160 tweets either were about a mixed competition (such as equestrian or mixed doubles in tennis) or mentioned at least one athlete of each sex, and 201 tweets were neutral, mentioning neither men’s sports nor women’s sports (Table 1). Three of the 35 sports that included male events were not mentioned—only trampoline, equestrian and taekwondo were never mentioned; and five women’s sports were not mentioned—canoe slalom, table tennis, archery, rhythmic gymnastics, and badminton. Further, some differences were detected in how sports were covered for each sex. While NBC tweeted heavily about gymnastics, it highlighted primarily the female gymnasts: Only 39 of the 252 tweets were about men’s events while 194 were about women’s events (Figure 1). Similarly, the account included more tweets about women’s beach volleyball and soccer compared to their male counterparts. Walsh-Jennings’ attempt at a fourth gold medal in beach volleyball and the status of the national women’s soccer team were important variables as neither had male counterparts of the same level. In contrast, in athletics, swimming, and basketball, the men’s events were covered with more frequency.

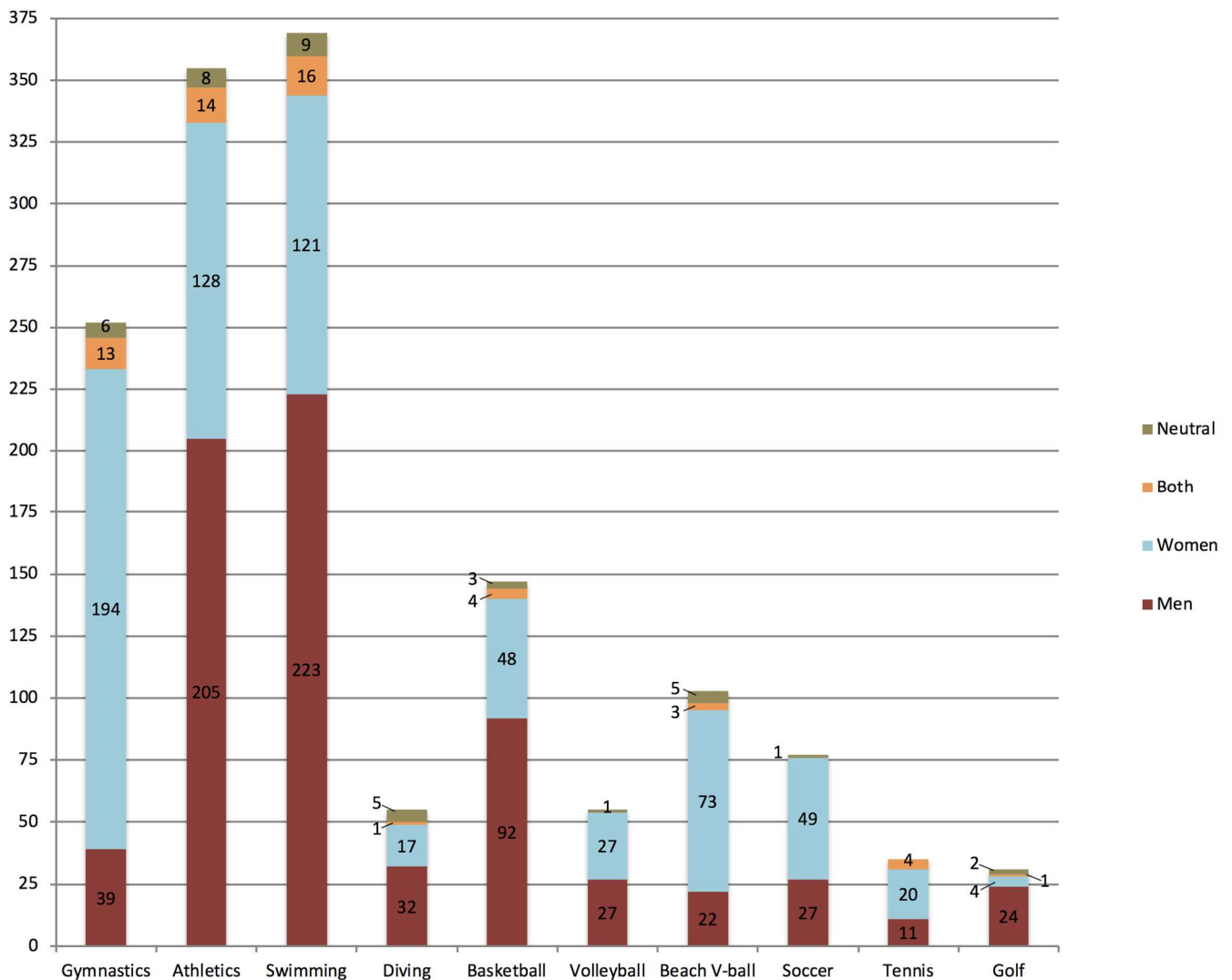


Figure 1. Number of tweets by sex in the most mentioned sports.

Overall, athletics and swimming were largely covered for both sexes – 31% of women’s sports and 53% of men’s sports (Figure 2), confirming these two sports as staples of the Olympic games. About a quarter of women’s sports tweets were about gymnastics.

Regarding the scope of the sports, more than half of the sampled tweets ($n = 1,027$; 52%) were about individual sports; women's team sports were tweeted about more than men's team sports. The top three women's team sports in the data were beach volleyball ($n = 73$), gymnastics ($n = 65$) and soccer ($n = 49$), i.e., a mix of a traditional team sport (soccer), an aesthetic sport (gymnastics), and a ball sport that has been criticized for confining female "players to established gender roles" (Sailors, Teetzal & Weaving, 2012, p. 468). Meanwhile, the top three men's team sports in the data were traditional team sports—basketball ($n = 92$), soccer ($n = 27$) and volleyball ($n = 27$).

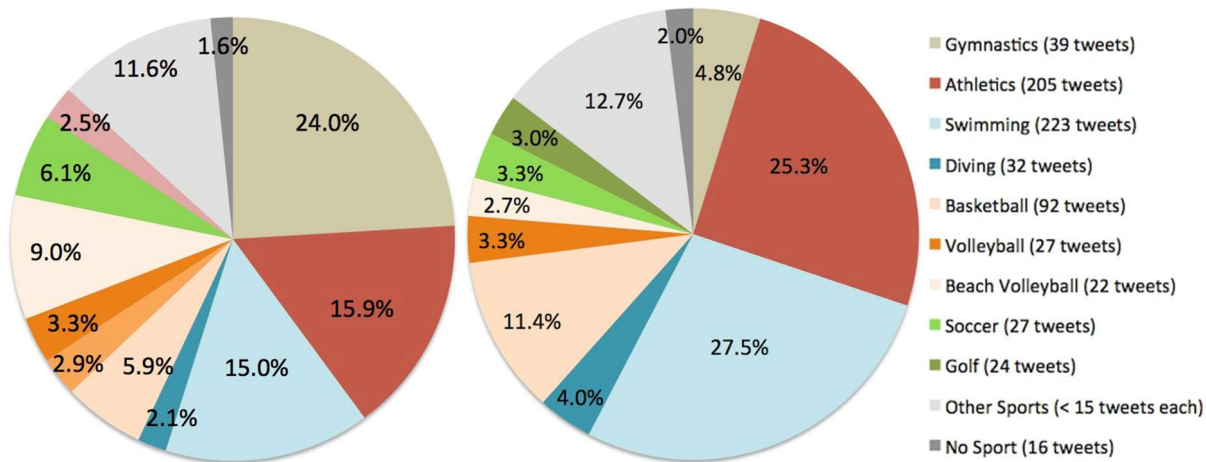


Figure 2. Distribution of tweets by sports of each sex: men's sports and male athletes (left), and women's sports and female athletes (right).

The large number of tweets for individual men's sports is in part because of Michael Phelps, who was mentioned in more than 15% of men's sports tweets ($n = 125$), Usain Bolt and Ryan Lochte. More than a quarter of men's sports tweets ($n = 222$) mentioned at least one of the three star athletes. While they all participated in relay events, which were coded as team sports, the majority of their events were individual ones.

Power or hard-contact sports were rarely discussed by @NBCOlympics ($n = 124$; 6%), including 8 tweets that mentioned both power and non-power sports. The majority of these tweets ($n = 63$; 51%) were about men's sports or male athletes, 52 of them were about women's sports or female athletes (42%), and the remaining 9 mentioned both sexes (7%).

Moreover, less than a quarter of tweets about power or hard-contact sports did not include Americans in contention ($n = 28$; 23%). This figure is only slightly lower than the overall figure—only 528 of all sampled tweets (27%) did not pertain to Americans. The majority of those were either about men's sports ($n = 211$, 40%), often because of Usain Bolt and soccer (the men's national team did not qualify for Rio 2016), or neutral in gender ($n = 159$, 30%), because of the 142 neutral NBC promotions. In contrast, women's sports and female athletes were the main subject of only 113 of tweets with no mention of an American athlete (21%).

NBC's coverage was unsurprisingly U.S.-centered: Team USA was specifically referred to 745 times (38% of all tweets). The second most represented country was the host nation, Brazil, with only 87 occurrences (4%). Jamaica with 52 (3%) and China with 48 (2%) followed.

The distribution for the type of tweet was similar across sexes, except for two categories (Table 2): men's sports were previewed more than women's sports ($n = 101$ vs. $n = 86$, respectively), but male athletes were retweeted fewer times than female athletes were ($n = 76$ vs. $n = 49$).

Table 2

Number of Tweets by Sex of Athletes and Type of Tweet

	Men	Women	Both	Neutral	Total
Preview	101	86	45	52	284
Live Event	181	180	20	26	407
Feature	63	58	18	17	156
Recap/Results	303	301	33	13	650
Awards Ceremony	13	16	-	-	29
Other Athletic News	11	13	2	3	29
Non-Athletic News	27	15	6	31	79
Photo Essay,	29	32	8	24	93
Retweet from athlete	49	76	17	18	160
Retweet from celebrity other than an athlete	14	14	7	9	44
Other	19	16	4	8	47
Total	810	807	160	201	1,978

Table 3

Number of Tweets by Sex of Athletes and Purpose of Tweet

	Men	Women	Both	Neutral	Total
Publicist	199	184	70	87	540
Conversationalist	84	91	23	28	226
Fan Aficionado	31	25	14	29	99
The Informer	390	392	41	38	861
The Analyst	84	95	6	12	197
Other	22	20	6	7	55
Total	810	807	160	201	1,978

RQ2: What roles did NBC's Twitter account play most often?

The bulk of NBC's tweets reflected the network's traditional role of informing its audience (Table 3): Almost half of the tweets sampled ($n = 861$; 44%) filled that role. The second category was that of *Publicist* ($n = 540$; 27%), showing that NBC heavily used Twitter to get audiences to watch their programs whether on television or online. In line with the "preview" findings aforementioned, men's events were slightly more promoted by @NBCOlympics than women's events, but opinions were shared slightly more often on women's events than men's events. Additionally, the handle is far more interactive as a conversationalist ($n=226$) with the athletes, their family, and friends than as the fan aficionado ($n=99$) with the general Twitter audience.

Qualitative Results**RQ3: What themes emerged from the gatekeeping practices of NBC's Olympic Twitter coverage?**

Four themes emerged from NBC's Olympic tweets: (1) NBC as a gatekeeper of results and medal counts; (2) NBC as a gatekeeper of video highlights, in which the text component of the tweet provided context to the video highlight from the network broadcast that was embedded in the tweet; (3) NBC as a gatekeeper of promotional content to hype events and drive audiences back to the network broadcast; and (4) NBC as a gatekeeper of interactions between or among athletes, athletes and celebrities, athletes and/or celebrities with NBC itself, NBC talent and NBC with its Twitter audience.

Tweets for the gatekeeping of results were composed in two ways: just the facts or as an enthusiastic nationalist fan. The "just the facts" approach merely noted the results: "#USA downs #CHN 3-1 to go 5-0 in pool play! #Rio2016 #volleyball" (August 15). Whereas the "enthusiastic nationalist fan" approach cheered athletes on while providing results: "Winning 5 Medals in Rio calls for a CELEBRATION! Congrats @katieledecky! #Rio2016" (August 13). In this way, NBC served as a gatekeeper of results—letting the most popular content through the gates—and tweeting about content that NBC's social media team thought would appeal to the most people on Twitter.

The Rio Olympics featured the use of video highlights embedded in tweets as part of NBC's Twitter coverage. These highlights skewed heavily in favor of the most popular sports such as women's gymnastics and swimming. The text of the tweets fulfilled legacy media gatekeeping functions by setting up context for the video embedded in the tweet. For example, following Aly Raisman's floor routine NBC tweeted: "That floor routine made us all cry. Exhale Aly Raisman! You did what you needed to do" (August 11). Embedded in the tweet was the entire floor routine that had aired on NBC's television broadcast. NBC followed the same formula in setting up context for other tweets with video highlights. According to the retweet and like numbers, these video highlights tweets were among the most popular of the Olympics. The higher interaction rate with Twitter users, through likes and retweets, demonstrated NBC's Twitter account effectively adding value to its legacy gatekeeping functions by providing content across multiple platforms to reach a wider audience. According to Billings (2014), the power of tweets is not derived from the number of followers an account has, but how many adopt the tweet in some ancillary way. The tweets from NBC that featured videos were the most popular and widely shared of the Games. The use of video in tweets is significant and displayed the network extending its reach to an even wider audience.

NBC also used Twitter as a platform to generate hype for promotional events such as interviews and late-night programming for its television broadcasts. A variety of language, hashtags and events were used to further spotlight the network's Olympic programming. One such way was to mesh pop culture with the Olympics as seen with a video featuring swimmer team members appearing with Late Late Show host James Corden in his Carpool Karaoke: "MUST WATCH: @USASwimming takes on 'Carpool Karaoke' #Rio2016" (August 5, 2016).

Throughout the course of the Rio Olympics the @NBCOlympics Twitter account posted or retweeted many interactions between athletes, celebrities and athletes, and fans and NBC. As a gatekeeper, NBC selected specific interactions that brought even more attention to athletes. However, some of the tweets promoted sports and teams that do not usually receive much attention. For instance, there were multiple interactions between the U.S. water polo team and celebrity Leslie Jones throughout the Olympics that NBC retweeted: "RT @USAWP: .@Lesdoggg your robe has arrived in Rio! We need you @ our next game on Wednesday. #Olympics" (August 16, 2016).

Similarly, NBC also spotlighted high profile athletes and their Olympic experiences. For instance, NBC retweeted gymnast Simone Biles' experiences with celebrities during the Games: "RT @Simone_Biles: he kissed

me on the cheek just letting y'all know @ZacEfron 🍷" (August 17, 2016). These retweets also included congratulations offered by celebrities to Olympians: "RT @SHAQ: Congratulations Ladies on your 100-meter hurdles win #PodiumSweep" (August 18, 2016).

RQ4a: In what ways did NBC ask for Twitter audience participation with their Twitter content? RQ4b: Did this interaction have an influence on gatekeeping practices?

The data revealed that NBC rarely used Twitter to ask for its followers' participation or to interact with them. Instead, the network fell back to the traditional role of legacy news media by informing its audience without appearing to expect anything in return. The network also used the Twitter as a venue for promoting its broadcasts. Overall, when NBC asked for the Twitter audience's participation, it did so in limited ways, using the platform as a one-way communication channel more often than not. When NBC took advantage of the two-way communication capabilities of Twitter, it did so with close-ended questions allowing for only limited ways for the audience to respond, such as a name of an athlete, or answering that, yes, indeed, they are ready for gymnastics or swimming. On occasion, NBC asked for the audience to like or retweet.

Overall, NBC provided little opportunity to the fans to share what they wanted to see. It also ignored some Twitter tools all together, including the poll option, which could have provided the network some opportunities to find out what its audience (both followers and viewers) wanted covered, what video highlights to tweet about, or athletes to interview. By not incorporating such elements into its tweets, NBC applied traditional one-way gatekeeping practices of legacy media, thus seeking feedback in highly restricted ways.

This did not keep NBC's viewers and media critics from speaking up on Twitter and other social media over their discontent with the network (e.g., Glines, 2016; Jenkins, 2016; Jhaveri, 2016), including in responses to NBC tweets. For instance, when NBC promoted its August 7 primetime broadcast, it used a picture of the U.S. women's gymnastics team, prompting the viewers to watch with their "whole squad." Many followers responded with dissatisfaction over NBC's tape delay. @WhitleyParker for example replied: "my whole squad wants to know why if you insist on tape delay you also spoil the results ON THE SAME TWITTER ACCOUNT" [*sic*]. While it does not seem that such responses made NBC change its strategy during the Rio games, the network did finally decide to follow its audience's wishes for the 2018 Olympics by ending its tape delay practices. It should also use all tools at its disposal to know what these wishes are, which obviously includes interacting with social media followers.

Discussion

Overall this study reveals that NBC's Twitter gatekeeping practices reflect the growing body of literature of Olympic television coverage, finding that women ($n=807$) and men ($n=810$) athletes are receiving about the same quantity of coverage from NBC (Coche & Tuggle, 2016). Though women are receiving nearly the same quantity of coverage as men on Twitter, there was more focus on women's team sports than men's team sports, which seems to counter long-standing findings from television and newspaper studies of women's sports coverage (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Tuggle, 1997). Antunovic (2016) asked longtime former Chicago Tribune international sports reporter Phil Hersh about the phenomenon. Hersh said that "women are every bit as important in the Olympic arena as men," implying that "nationalism makes space for women in sports media coverage," Antunovic concluded (p. 9).

However, this finding of equal coverage for gender results more from the inclusion of beach volleyball and individual sports with team events, such as gymnastics, than the increase in coverage of traditional team sports, such as basketball. Much like the television coverage (e.g., Billings, 2008; Coche & Tuggle, 2016; 2018), NBC's Twitter content about female Olympians seems to focus on non-contact sports featuring women dressed with bikinis and leotards. By doing so, NBC encourages women to practice only some socially-appropriate sports, and indicates that individual men's events and athletes are more important than women's individual events and athletes.

In addition, NBC's Twitter gatekeeping practices coincide and reinforce its television broadcast gatekeeping practices by tweeting about the same events and athletes as those featured in the promotions that air on television. Consequently, the tweets represent the network's nationalistic, American storytelling that is seen throughout its Olympics coverage.

Indeed, and unsurprisingly, the United States and American athletes were omnipresent in the data, which corroborates other scholars' findings (e.g., Antunovic, 2016; Billings & Eastman, 2006; Bruce, Hovden, & Markula, 2010) that "historically, [the Olympic games] have been as much a forum for fervent nationalism as they have been about peaceful competition" (Butterworth, 2007, p. 187). While NBC often tweeted about a few famous international athletes—especially Usain Bolt, as the Jamaican became the first sprinter to ever win three gold medals in three consecutive Olympics,¹ it mainly relied on the star power of American male swimmers, female gymnasts, and female beach volleyball players.

Regarding the roles NBC played on Twitter, the primary functions it took on show its dedication to the journalistic craft. The data show that the two main activities the NBC account engaged in were to inform and to promote, similar to Kim's (2002) findings that American television journalists, or in this case social media specialists, are most likely to uphold business objectives to meet an organization's goals. As such, NBC most often assumed the roles of the informer ($n=861$) and publicist ($n=540$). This is particularly noteworthy, as the social interactions with the general Twitter audience were only the fifth role the NBC account embraced ($n=99$), after the conversationalist role with the athletes and their sponsors, friends or family ($n=226$) and the analyst role ($n=197$), which, much like the informer role, is deeply related to the journalistic roots of the network's history as a legacy news outlet.

Perhaps the reason why NBC is most likely to engage with the athletes, their sponsors, or their friends and families (instead of the Twitter audience) is because the former are more likely to uphold the stories NBC wishes to tell through its gatekeeping practices. Tandoc and Vos (2015) noted that traditional gatekeeping maintains editorial control. By not engaging with, and allowing the Twitter audience to shift the focus through its gatekeeping, NBC is able to keep the focus on its narrative and attempt to meet its organizational goals financially.

The findings in how NBC used its Twitter account are particularly helpful in understanding what the network values and how that is applied in its gatekeeping practices. The Twitter account's role as publicist and informer ideally drive the Twitter audience back to the television broadcast, or encourage a multiple screen viewing experience using NBC's Goldzone live-streaming and television broadcast.

Conclusion

The Olympics continue their role as "the biggest show on television" (Billings, 2008), but viewers of the multi-sport event desire to experience the games through modern tools (Sandomir, 2014). This study offers an initial look at how the U.S. Olympic broadcaster covers the Summer Olympics on social media by examining the type of content NBC lets through its Twitter gates. Although the network uses its social media quite well as an informer and publicist, NBC has not fully adapted its gatekeeping decisions to the latest trends and tools available to connect with its followers. A major advantage of Twitter and other social networks is that they support dialogue and interaction (Tang & Cooper, 2018), but NBC rarely uses these functions with athletes and celebrities, and uses them almost never with viewers. While it is important for NBC to provide information about the Olympics through all platforms at their disposal (especially considering their exclusive contract in the United States), the network must evolve from the traditional one-way communication it has used historically as a radio station and television network. It should use all available tools possible through Twitter, such as video, polls, and live-streaming, to reach the most expansive audience possible, especially in light of the network's research that indicates the audience wants to experience the Olympics in as many ways as possible (Sandomir, 2014). Future research should not only analyze how NBC adapts to new tools available on social media, but also the interaction the network partakes in with its audience on social media.

¹ Usain Bolt and the Jamaican team were subsequently stripped of the Beijing 2008 4 x 100m relay gold medal because their teammate, Nesta Carter, tested positive for a prohibited substance.

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