Social media in the UK sports industry

From live-streaming to eSports, social is changing how people experience and engage in sport. This report delves into some of the big trends.
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Introduction

In the four years since London hosted the Olympics, Britain has seen a revitalised national interest in sport. The Olympic Legacy has helped fuel growth in sports participation, and campaigns like “This Girl Can” and “Like a Girl” have also helped boost the number of women taking part in a wide range of sporting activities.

At the same time Britain’s professional sports industry has gone from strength to strength and is now worth over £20billion, supporting nearly half a million jobs. As national stalwarts like football, tennis and rugby continue to boom, we’ve also seen sports like cycling and MMA rise in popularity.

While all this happened, we also saw social media revolutionise how people and brands communicate. The way people spectate, participate in and talk about sport is driven by an ever evolving spectrum of social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat.

The world of sport currently seems to be at an inflection point, as online live-streaming challenges established broadcasting models, clubs seek new ways of attracting the social media generation to live events, and previously niche sports find new global audiences.

As home to some of the world’s best known sports brands and leading international events the UK is at the heart of the industry and is leading in many of the key innovations.

In this report we’ll look at the role social media plays in some of the sports industry’s biggest trends, and what that means for sports marketers.

The above timeline shows the volume of tweets about Wimbledon during the 2016 tournament, peaking at over half a million on the day of the final.

This buzz-graph shows the most commonly correlated words in tweets about the tournament. It’s clear that the Twitter conversation was dominated by mentions of star players in the men’s and women’s singles.
Sports is winning at social media

Just like any other consumer-facing industry, the world of sports has been changed by social media over the past decade. Dr Ann Pegoraro PhD, Director of the Institute for Sport Marketing at Canada’s Laurentian University, says “Professional leagues have adopted and adapted fairly fast and grassroots organisations have followed suit. Fans are living in social media. Teams know this and are, for the most part, seeking to engage fans where they live.”

For large sports brands social has given them a new way to build relationships with their fan base, while smaller clubs have arguably seen a greater benefit. Often overlooked by the media, and always struggling to make themselves heard with tighter budgets, small clubs have been able to exploit social channels to take their message directly to the fans.

The increasing popularity of sport amongst women in particular may owe a lot to social media, says Dr Pegoraro. Like the overlooked smaller clubs, women’s sports organisations have previously suffered from a lack of exposure through conventional mass media, but social media has enabled them to find an audience and get their message out.

When we think about how, specifically, social media has impacted the world of sports there are two significant threads:

1) Owned Media Networks – it’s now inexpensive and technically trivial to build your own media network using social platforms. Whatever format of content you want to create (written, photography, graphics, audio, live or pre-recorded video) there are plenty of powerful tools available to help you share it with the world and build an audience. No matter how small your organisation (even if you’re just a single individual) or budget, social media empowers you to build your own media channels and connect with your fan-base.

This table provides an overview of the Twitter accounts for the top five most valuable sports teams in the world.

Spotting new trends and opportunities in social media

In order to spot new trends and opportunities, you need to understand what the fans are talking about in social media. Sysomos MAP helps you do just that by providing the world’s largest database of social media conversations on Twitter, blogs, discussion forums and other channels, along with intuitive analytics tools that help you uncover the insights you need to crack new markets.

https://sysomos.com/products/map
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2) Stronger Fan Relationships – not only does social media make it easy for you to publish/broadcast content to attract an audience, but it also enables you to more easily create a dialogue with that audience. Through commenting, sharing, and other engagement mechanisms on social channels, fans can interact with sports brands more directly, which helps them to feel more connected and involved than they would by passively consuming content. When managed well these capabilities can be used to build stronger and more valuable relationships with fans.

Gary Watters, a sports blogger at InTouch Rugby, says “This has been evolving for around ten years and over that time I’ve seen clubs develop followings of hundreds of thousands of social media fans. It impacts on all areas of the game. The clubs, fans, players and sponsors have all embraced social media and it’s become integral to the way they experience rugby. That’s bound to continue in all kinds of interesting ways.”

Social media has revolutionised the way that fans experience sports, enabling them to interact with their favourite clubs and athletes in a much more direct and rewarding way.

And it also means that it’s easier than ever to enjoy the action, says sports sponsorship specialist, Lizzie Archer “If your TV provider doesn’t hold the rights to the event you want to watch, social media provides all the action with commentary, point by point action, photos and even video snapshots. Everyone can feel part of the atmosphere, often with behind the scenes information, interesting stats and insights from the players.”

Most large sports organisations now run their social media activity in much the same way as any other business would, with teams of professionals tasked with creating regular content, engaging with fans, community management and managing paid social campaigns too.

Using social media management tools like Sysomos Expion can help clubs and brands streamline their social activity and get better ROI from the resources they commit to social.
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As well as the organisations running their branded social media channels, it’s now common for players and other team members to have individual social profiles. While this provides a great way for the athletes to engage directly with fans and to help enhance their own status (which can obviously benefit the club) it also presents a number of challenges, particularly for younger players who might not be so careful about what they say or publish on public channels.

Lizzie Archer explains: “Clubs usually provide training and guidance on social media use as sports people are not always aware of how to best communicate with fans, or of their club’s sponsorship agreements. I have seen players announce associations with brands, not realising that they conflict with their club’s existing sponsors.”

The English and Welsh Football Associations have both published social media guidelines for teams and players, and there have been several examples of players being fined by their clubs for misbehaviour on social media.

The relationship with sponsors is yet another area of sport that has been turned upside down by social. Whereas in the past brands would rely on expensive above the line marketing campaigns to promote their relationship with the teams they sponsor, social channels now provide a much more interactive and cost effective platform for this.

For this reason it’s important that both teams and sponsors to pay close attention to the social media element of any agreement when entering into a partnership. It’s also a good reason for teams or clubs to put plenty of effort into building their social media profiles, as commanding a large and active online community will certainly make them a more attractive proposition to potential sponsors.

Simplifying social media management

Managing a large social media footprint across all channels with thousands, possibly millions of fans is a complex and time consuming job. It becomes even more difficult if there are multiple profiles to manage, for example, if the team is also managing its players’ social accounts the workload can quickly outstrip the available resources.

Sysomos Expion is designed to solve this problem, providing a dashboard which makes it simple for small teams to manage large, complex social media footprints.

https://sysomos.com/products/expion
The Revolution Will Be Livestreamed

The ability to stream live video over channels such as Twitter and Facebook has been one of social media’s more exciting developments in recent years, and it’s already being adopted in the world of sport. In 2016 we saw the first high-profile, global example of this when Twitter live-streamed the Wimbledon tennis tournament, and also announced streaming deals with the NBA and NFL, as well as getting into the eSports market. Meanwhile, Facebook made a number of similar announcements, including a livestream of Wayne Rooney’s testimonial match between Manchester United and Everton.

Facebook and Twitter aren’t the only games in town. Snapchat is also capturing a lot of attention from big sports brands, as Ann Pegoraro explains, “Snapchat Stories, which provide exclusive behind the scenes looks are emerging as very important, with the NFL recently announcing it is hiring a full time person to create and manage Snapchat stories for the league.”

At the top end of the sports industry, this development means that the traditional model of distributing live sports content through deals with broadcasters is in the process of being disrupted. This could have significant consequences for the way major sports work on a global level. But it also has implications for sport all the way down to the national, regional and grass roots level.

The important point here is that this means the ability to broadcast live video content is now in the hands of anybody, not just the big clubs or leagues with huge budgets. While written content and images can be extremely compelling when done well, there’s little that can compete with video, particularly live video, in terms of sheer engagement. Any individual or organisation of any size can use tools like Facebook Live or Twitter Periscope to stream live video to a potentially global audience, at very little cost. The possibilities are enormous.

Using a combination of analytical techniques, Sysomos is able to infer the gender of Twitter users tweeting about Team GB, and found that the split was almost 50/50, leaning very slightly in favour of women.
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Connected Stadiums

The latest generation of sports fans has grown up in the digital world, they’ve never known life without smartphones or social media. This presents an interesting new challenge for sports venues, which often have inadequate mobile phone reception and no public Wi-Fi, which means fans aren’t able to stay connected or share their experience online.

In an age when people can watch sport in large-screen high definition at home, it’s harder to convince fans that it’s worth spending money to experience a live event. In that context, providing good quality connectivity is absolutely essential to win over young people who view internet connectivity as a necessity.

Sharing updates with their social networks is a big part of how many people enjoy events now, and if they’re not able to get a reliable connection at a sports venue that’s going to have a detrimental effect on their experience. Providing better connectivity at their venues can also help create new revenue streams such as advertising or WiFi-sponsorship deals.

While this issue is primarily of concern to organisations which manage venues such as stadiums or race circuits, everybody in the sports industry should take note of.

Fans want to use social channels to share their love of sport, and that doesn’t stop when they’re at a live event or watching it on TV – quite the opposite in fact. They’ll want to use social channels even more during those times.

So the big challenge for sports marketers is how to get value from these spikes in activity during live events; that could mean offering real-time shareable content during events to increase visibility, amplifying the best fan posts during events by sharing them on official channels, or tying in rewards or promotions into these periods of intense social media activity.

Understand your fans better with Facebook data

Facebook is the world’s most popular social network with over a billion active monthly users. As such, it provides a goldmine of insight for sports-marketers who want to better understand their audiences. Sysomos Scout can help you understand what Facebook users think about your brand, what content they share, and what other affinities they have.

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**eSports Rising**

In Asia and the US, eSports (professional competitive video-gaming) have been popular for a while, but here in the UK the scene hasn’t enjoyed the same profile. That could all be about to change.

In May 2016 West Ham became the first UK club to sign a professional gamer by signing Sean “Dragonn” Allen, one of the world’s best Fifa players. 24 year old Allen will represent the club when he plays at Fifa tournaments.

Other European clubs have made similar signings, hoping to expand their reach into the lucrative world of video gaming. Research from Deloitte predicts that global revenues from eSports will enjoy a year on year increase of 25 percent to $500million in 2016.

While this shrinks into insignificance alongside the billions of dollars generated by European football, it’s worth bearing in mind that eSports events can net tens of millions of online viewers. So while current revenues are relatively low, there’s clearly a lot of potential.

Because of the very nature of eSports, it’s an activity that is very closely aligned with the world of social media. Although there are live events, much of the activity takes place online and the big personalities usually build large social media audiences, so any brand that wants to make a play in this space will want to get under the skin of those online communities.

This means being able to identify who the key influencers are around particular eSports, what the main themes of discussion are, and understanding the sub-communities within the market. Acquiring the skills and technologies to unearth these insights will help sports brands to identify the biggest opportunities in this evolving business, and react quickly to take advantage of them.

Sysomos MAP’s Influencer Communities tool helps you identify different communities talking about any topic. This graph shows the different clusters of Twitter users who are sharing the same content and influencing each other within the broader topic of eSports.
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Sports & Social – Five Lessons

1) **Understand the importance of social to your fans/customers:** Whether you’re a club, venue operator, or a sponsor, it’s important to understand what social media means to your customers. That might mean ensuring they have good connectivity at venues, or enabling them to engage with your organisation more easily through social, but you should accept that these channels matter a lot to people these days.

2) **Learn from social:** Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can provide a rich source of insight into what your fans and customers think about your own organisation and related topics. Social media can be a massive, constantly updated focus group, it can help you spot problems before they get out of control, or identify new opportunities so don’t ignore it.

3) **Embrace new opportunities:** We can do so much with social media these days it’s hard to know where to begin. But take the time to understand what you can do with the different platforms and map out how your organisation might benefit from those features. Live streaming video is a great example of a new technology that is revolutionising a lot of media businesses. Live streaming used to be incredibly expensive, but now it’s widely accessible the possibilities are huge.

4) **Take control of your social presence:** No matter how large or small your organisation is, if you have just one social media account or dozens for your brands, it’s important that they are managed properly. Make sure you know which official channels exist for your organisation, who is responsible for them and what the guidelines for managing them are.

5) **Have a crisis plan:** In any organisation with a high public profile, there’s always potential for a communications crisis to happen, and these days it’s almost guaranteed to be amplified (if not ignited) by social media. The about all potential PR crises that your organisation might have to deal with, and then make sure you’ve included social media in your plans for those situations. Remember that social can be a great tool for dealing with a crisis, but you need to be prepared.
About Sysomos

Sysomos is a world leader in social intelligence, offering a suite of powerful products that help companies measure and articulate social media success, harness the power of community and influencers, and find the conversations and topics that matter most to their business.

With nearly 2,000 customers and 10 offices worldwide, Sysomos gives businesses the power to turn actionable insights into bankable intelligence, and equip today’s social customer with the information, products, and services they need, in real time.

Learn more at sysomos.com

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