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# #NBCFail: A Qualitative Review of the Shared Experience as a Social Movement

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# #NBCFail: A qualitative review of the shared experience as a social movement
## by Brendan O'Hallarn and Stephen Shapiro

## Abstract

The XXX Olympic Games in London, England was the most–watched event in U.S. television history, with more than 219 million viewers tuning in during the Games. However, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) elected to show a number of events to U.S. audiences in prime time via tape delay, rather than broadcasting them live. As a result NBC encountered a great deal of criticism about its coverage, particularly on the online microblogging site Twitter. This research surveyed a sample of Twitter users who participated in the Twitter protest via the #NBCFail hashtag, to understand how being part of a shared protest affected their feelings about the Olympics, and NBC, both during, and several months after, the Olympic Games. The results suggest the feelings of #NBCFail participants were amplified significantly by being part of a movement, and that the protest network, while dormant outside of the Games, could be reactivated very quickly, with more participants, in future Olympics.

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**Introduction**

According to host broadcaster NBC, the XXX Olympic Games in London, England, was the most–watched event in United States television history. More than 219 million viewers in the U.S. tuned in during the 17–day sport and culture festival, topping the record 215 million viewers for the 2008 Beijing Olympics (BBC News, 2012). NBC, through its family of networks and online platforms, provided 5,535 hours of coverage, for which it paid the International Olympic Committee US$1.2 billion to be the sole U.S. broadcaster (Wilson, 2011).

Part of NBC's U.S. broadcast strategy involved tape–delaying high–profile events, including swimming, track and field, gymnastics, diving and select beach volleyball games, and airing them in a packaged form in the prime time television block (8–11 p.m.). This practice is not new. The upset U.S. victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympic hockey tournament in Lake Placid, N.Y., known as the "Miracle on Ice," was shown in tape delay (Allen, 2012).

In 1980, however, sports fans didn't have such ready access to real–time sports results. That's what made NBC's decision to tape delay events somewhat anachronistic, as it was made in an era when sport consumers are conditioned to receiving information in real time through new media devices such as

smartphones. NBC defended the practice of tape–delaying and packaging key events. Mark Lazarus, NBC Sports Chairman, commented:

> "I think what we've proven is that the American viewing public likes the way we tell the story and wants to gather in front of the television with their friends and family — even if they have the ability to watch it live either on television or digitally. I inherently trust that decision is the right one and that people want to see these events." (Ourand, 2012)

This decision was quite unpopular amongst U.S. audiences and the discussion was intensely critical on the social networking site Twitter. Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text–based messages of up to 140 characters, known as "tweets." From the moment the Games began, fans of the Olympics used social media platforms, specifically Twitter, to voice their displeasure with NBC and its Olympic coverage. By Day 2 of the Olympic Games, a "hashtag" had been popularized, #NBCFail, as a way for Twitter users to join in the criticism of NBC's broadcast strategy. The protest spread rapidly among a segment of Twitter users, with more than 750,000 tweets containing the hashtag #NBCFail being used during the two weeks of the Olympic Games.

Twitter created hashtags in 2007 as an effort to collate conversations of interest. It has evolved into a form of commentary, where users type a phrase — beginning with a "#" — to either label or comment on the preceding tweet. Hashtags are a unique aspect of Twitter. Any word or words preceded by a hash sign are used in Twitter to note a subject, event or association. Hashtags are an integral part of Twitter's ability to link the conversations of strangers together (Murthy, 2013) and have become immensely popular. Today, approximately one in eight tweets includes a hashtag (Turner, 2012). Accordingly, the #NBCFail hashtag functioned as a vehicle for Olympic viewers to connection, associate and commiserate with one another as they rallied around a shared contempt for NBC's broadcast strategy. This study seeks to analyze this instant, online gathering as a movement, using established theories such as social movement theory (Della Porta and Diani, 1999), and resource mobilization theory — a subset of social movement theory (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011).

Social movement theory has rarely been used in the academic study of sports, and never, as far as the authors can tell, from the perspective of the creation of an instant online community or network of sports fans. This study is an effort to explore the actions of #NBCFail participants through social movement theory and resource mobilization theory, analyzing the formation, actions and follow–up thoughts of participants in the protest. With a relative absence of scholarship on the role of sports as an enabler of social movements, the authors look to the role that social media played in the so–called Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Following the Summer Olympics, this study is an effort to offer a well–grounded consideration of whether the shared experience manifested itself as a true social movement, and whether it has created lasting impressions of the Olympics and NBC for the participants. The study also assesses the power and durability of the organic protest community that developed online.

## The implementation of #NBCFail

Twenty–four hours before the London Olympics began, Steven Marx, a 48–year–old Web designer and stay–at–home dad from Peoria, Ill., tweeted the following about NBC's Olympic coverage: "Interesting how NBC never mentions you need a cable/satellite subscription w/MSNBC/CNBC to view any coverage online. We're screwed. #NBCFail." Marx was identified as "Patient Zero" of the #NBCFail protests by the online aggregator site Mashable, and subsequently interviewed by CNN and other media outlets. The editorial sentiment spread quickly. #NBCFail was used 212 times on 27 July, the day of the Olympic opening ceremony, and

more than 20,000 times two days later (Laird, 2012). By the end of the Olympics, more than 750,000 tweets had been typed that contained the hashtag #NBCFail, almost uniformly savaging NBC. The hashtag commentary about NBC's failings has continued on Twitter; during the week of 3–9 February, there were 54 tweets that included the #NBCFail hashtag. "#__Fail" is a familiar form of commentary on Twitter. For example, upset viewers tweeted #CBSFail during the 2013 Super Bowl, and critiques ranging from #GOPFail (for politics) and #winterfail (for the weather) are common (Turner, 2012).

What made the #NBCFail protest unique and somewhat controversial is that Twitter had formed a corporate partnership with NBC to use the microblogging platform to promote the Games. Broadcasters like Ryan Seacrest were active on Twitter throughout the Games, interacting with fans and reading select tweets on the air. Twitter suspended the account of Guy Adams, a Los Angeles–based reporter for British newspaper *The Independent*, for 72 hours after he tweeted the e–mail address of Gary Zenkel, the president of NBC's coverage, urging his followers to write Zenkel and complain (Shapiro, 2012). In an e–mail interview with the author, Adams said Twitter apologized to him for advising NBC to seek his suspension. He was not convinced that the actions of protesters like himself would have any effect, long–term, however. Adams said Twitter:

"reached out to personally apologize to me for what they broadly regard as a teachable moment. NBC have said and done absolutely nothing, and so far as I can make out intend to carry on giving Americans awful, time–delayed, advert–strewn coverage of Olympic Games for years to come." (Adams, 2012)

NBC attributed its broadcast decisions to research that indicated that tape–delayed coverage was more likely to make television viewers tune in to prime time broadcasts, not less. A month before the Olympics, NBC was forecasting a loss of US$200 million, but said it ended up turning a profit on the Games (Bauder, 2012). The company said that fewer than one percent of the tweets related to the Olympics worldwide contained the #NBCFail hashtag. As a result, the network has not ruled out the concept of tape–delaying key events to show in prime time during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, regardless of the online protests that may occur.

Common complaints by #NBCFail participants included anger about tape–delayed coverage, critiques of the NBC broadcasters, and disgust at frequent promotions for new NBC shows. By the night of the closing ceremony, 12 August 2012, hundreds of #NBCFail–hashtagged tweets were being sent every minute. The tweets ranged from humorous and whimsical — "It's as if the entire world enjoyed some really cool party, & the USA could only look in through a dirty window called #NBCFail;" and "Hey Bob Costas? STOP TALKING. It's ok to not talk. #NBCFail," to anger and threats of action against the network — "After watching the first 20 mins of the BBC broadcast of the closing ceremonies, I can say we got ripped off, America! #NBCFail;" and "I have officially reprogrammed my DVR so that NO programs from NBC will ever be recorded again. #NBCFail."

Nightly during the Olympics, Twitter became an "appointment" for active participants in the #NBCFail Twitter protest. The thousands of participants became part of a "virtual public space," sharing humor and critique in a rapid exchange of ideas.

## Review of literature

*Social movement theory*

Social movements are unclear in their creation, boundaries, goals and accomplishments. They can change quickly, expanding or shrinking, or disappearing altogether, depending on myriad factors. Social Movement Theory is one way to explain the creation and life–cycle of social change efforts. A social movement refers to

a network of individuals, groups or organizations who, based on a collective identity, aim at social change by means of public and collective protest (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). Social movements rest on a collective identity, which is based on a shared worldview, value or claims, emerging in interaction with the movement's environment, which in turn, helps shape the movement's identity (Rucht and Neidhardt, 2002). Social movements frequently follow some or all of a four–stage life cycle: (a) emergence; (b) coalescence; (c) bureaucratization; and (d) decline (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). Despite the wide divergence of motivations underlying social movements, sociologists have distinguished some similarities, including the preceding life cycle. Not all social movements follow this process, however. Some may stop at coalescence, and fail to grow into a formal oppositional organization. Additionally, the fourth stage, decline, does not necessarily connote failure, as social movements end for a variety of reasons, including success in achieving some or all of their goals (Della Porta and Diani, 1999).

As a field of study with nearly 50 years of scholarship, social movement theory has expanded. Its earliest uses were in trying to characterize efforts such as the anti–war movement during the Vietnam War. In the 1980s, a field of scholarship known as new social movement theory (NSM) emerged, to try to explain social movements against the backdrop that modern society no longer has one "central conflict" such as an anti–war movement, but rather is segmented and fragmented into specific problems, acted against by many protest actors, yet still brought into being by external forces (Eder, 1985). In modern societies, these forms of protest are secularized into established countercultures. Seppälä's (2012) critical analysis of the power of social movements through the study of four anti–war movements in England considered the "effectiveness" of social movements as an instrument for influencing power, arguing that they can have modest success by executing "moral interventions" against entrenched networked and hierarchical power structures. The hoped–for result in these modern movements is smaller, less sweeping change. Social movement theory has been used to study movements across disciplines, including a study of the outcomes of sport–related social movements, such as efforts to convince teams to stop using mascots considered culturally insensitive (Davis–Delano and Crosset, 2008). The study of Twitter as an enabler or supporter of a movement is a relatively new field of scholarship. From the use of Twitter in the Occupy movements, Gleason (2013) wrote that Twitter:

> "supports multiple opportunities for
> participation in the Occupy movement —
> from creating, tagging, and sharing content
> to reading, watching, and following a
> hashtag — which may facilitate learners
> becoming more informed, engaged citizens."

A significant body of scholarship has developed applying social movement theory to the recent uprisings in the Middle East. This unrest started in Egypt in 2008 (suppressed by government of Hosni Mubarak at that time), proceeding through reaction to the Iranian election, to the protest that toppled the Tunisian government, to the fall of Egypt's Mubarak, and continuing today. In those citizen–led protests, social media — blogs, videos, tweets and Facebook posts — were seen as playing a crucial role in the process. In his book *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*, Manuel Castells (2012) writes that social networks played an important role in the Egyptian revolution. For example,

> "Demonstrators recorded the events with
> their mobile phones, and shared their videos
> with the people in the country at large and
> around the world via YouTube and Facebook,
> often with live streaming. They deliberated
> on Facebook, coordinated through Twitter,
> and used blogs extensively to convey their
> opinion and engage in debates." [1]

The mantra that Twitter played a pivotal coordinating role in the Arab Spring protests is repeated often in the literature (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Fahmi, 2009; Khondker, 2011). These studies, and many others,

speak at length about the "virtual public space" that was occupied by protesters, which, when combined with protest in actual public spaces like Cairo's Tahrir Square, set in motion the actions that led to the replacement of despotic governments (Castells, 2012).

Lerner (2010) looked at the role that social media played in enabling for the expansion of social movement theory in the Muslim world. A subset of social movement theory known as resource mobilization theory (which asks what makes protest possible, rather than why it happens) was used to examine the role that social media played in organizing and facilitating the uprisings (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). These examples are meant in no way to equate the online protests during the Olympics to the life–and–death events of the Arab Spring uprisings, but as the below literature illustrates, the active role social media played in online organization does share some similarities with #NBCFail.

There has was been a strong pushback from some observers to the characterizations of the revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere in the region as "Twitter revolutions." For instance, Rosen (2011) compiled links to numerous articles debunking the claim that without Twitter, the Arab Spring might never have happened. Another study examines the "fuzzy causes" of the Arab Spring and suggests it's a massive oversimplification to equate tweets with revolution (Hussain and Howard, 2013).

Although there are opposing views on social media's influence in these events, Twitter facilitated the international spotlight focusing on the events and enabled participants to disseminate timely, personal and relevant information, generating more mainstream media coverage worldwide. Shirky (2008) maintains that the "astonishing complexity" of society members' online social networks can be a hugely powerful tool [2]. Shirky also noted that the progression "to increasingly social and real–time uses of text messaging from Beijing to Cairo shows us that we adopt these tools that amplify our capabilities, and we modify our tools to improve that amplification." [3] Twitter's role in political movements has been well–documented. It has also become an increasingly important player in the sports world (Kassing and Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2011b). In that vein, it was not surprising that Olympic viewers turned to Twitter to voice their criticisms about NBC's U.S. broadcast strategy.

*Twitter and sports*

Sports fans are extremely active on Twitter. During Super Bowl XLVII on 3 February 2013 24.1 million tweets related to the game were transmitted, one–third more than during the six hours of election night coverage of the 2012 Presidential election (Farber, 2013). The rapidly evolving ranking of top Twitter events, measured in tweets per second, includes several sports contests, such as the 2011 Women's World Cup soccer final and the 2011 Champions League Final between Chelsea and Bayern Munich in soccer (Larson, 2011). The list of top–tweeted events frequently changes as the microblogging site grows in popularity. Twitter exceeded 500 million users in June 2012, and the site now sees more than 340 million tweets every day (Twitter, 2012). The rapid growth of Twitter, along with the immediacy of the comments on the site, has made it a growing area of study among scholars of communication, popular culture and sports.

The connection between sporting events and the microblogging site Twitter has strengthened rapidly in the almost seven years of the social media Web site's existence. The connectedness and interactivity of sports fandom, coverage and promotion — along with the fact that sports is frequently a live, shared experience — have attracted millions of Twitter users, and the interest of academic scholars. This scholarship is particularly evident at the intersection of sport and media.

The study of the interconnection of Twitter and sports has broken into discrete research thrusts, such as analyzing how social media has changed interactions between fans and teams (Sanderson, 2011a), how professional and collegiate athletes use Twitter (Browning and Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick, *et al.*, 2010; Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011; Pegoraro, 2010), and how Twitter has changed sports media practices (Sanderson and Hambrick, 2012). This work has frequently taken a top–down look at the phenomenon, analyzing Twitter use by sports organizations, the media and professional athletes. However, there have been relatively few studies that have taken a bottom–up approach, analyzing the content provided by thousands of autonomous actors as it relates to a particular event or athlete.

Norman (2012) took such an approach in his study of tweets pertaining to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's promotion of the annual Hockey Day in Canada celebration. Norman uncovered three usage themes: (a) the sociocultural importance of hockey to Canadians; (b) the corporate sponsorship of Hockey Day in Canada; and, (c) the role of controversial commentator Don Cherry on the Canadian public

broadcaster. Norman posited that Twitter was an ideal forum to discover new "knowledge communities," drawing on and aggregating the collective intelligence of their members, pertaining to particular issues or ideas. Another bottom–up study was done analyzing the content of hashtags during the 2011 World Series (Blaszka and Burch, 2012). Collecting a random sample of tweets that contained the hashtag #worldseries, the study authors found that fans were using the hashtag to express fanship, as well as interact with fellow Twitter users.

*#NBCFail as a social movement*

The shared experience of sporting events routinely leads to the creation of virtual public spaces on Twitter, where fans can exchange ideas and opinions, especially when an issue that evokes passion or causes disruption in the regular flow of an event occurs. A recent example of this instant ecosystem is the 231,500 tweets per minute connected to the 34–minute power outage in Super Bowl XLVII (Farber, 2013). #NBCFail created nightly communities of participants, sharing contempt and disappointment with NBC. It became a virtual public space, but was it a true social movement? Did the collective identity of its participants, and their enthusiastic participation in the protest, during and after the London Olympics, lay the groundwork of a collective call for change, in this case from NBC? How will the clearly defined identity of the #NBCFail protest manifest itself in the future? Given the shared experiences inherent in sports viewing, along with the permeation of Twitter into the sports world, we suggest that the shared experience of protest against NBC is worthy of study. To that end, we propose the following research questions:

## RQ1: In what way were #NBCFail participants' feelings about the Olympics, the coverage, and NBC affected by being part of a shared protest?

## RQ2: Three months later, do their feelings suggest that #NBCFail is a true social movement, with lasting negative effect on their impressions of the network?

**Methodology**

*Participants and procedure*

The current study utilized a purposive sample of Twitter users; only active participants in the #NBCFail phenomenon were sampled via an online survey. Subjects 18 years of age or older, who sent multiple #NBCFail tweets on more than one day during the 17 days of the Olympics, were eligible for the study. Institutional review board approval was received for the list of questions and methodology before subject recruitment began. The six, open–ended questions were written by the author in an attempt to encourage study subjects to write detailed answers, yielding rich data pertaining to the two research questions. Study subjects were located via the #NBCFail hashtag; the lead researcher located researchers employing the hashtag in tweets sent during the Olympic fortnight (27 July–12 August 2012). Prospective study subjects were sent an "@" inquiry by the study author, gauging interest in their participation in the study. After receiving interest and exchanging e–mail addresses through Twitter's direct message function, #NBCFail practitioners were sent the survey via an e–mail link. The researcher also snowball sampled #NBCFail participants, asking for referrals to the study from those who had taken it. Finally, following an interview with Guy Adams, the Los Angeles–based correspondent for *The Independent*, Adams sent out the following tweet: "People of Twitter: [Twitter ID] (the lead study author's Twitter handle) is writing a (research paper) on #NBCFail. Do reach out to him if you've got something to say on the subject."

The six questions asked to study participants were:

(a) In general sense, what did you think of the Summer Olympics, and how did the television coverage affect your enjoyment of them?

(b) You have been selected to participate in this survey because of your active participation in the #NBCFail protest on Twitter. What was your motivation to send tweets about the Olympic coverage on NBC?

(c) What did you think of the online community that developed around the protest, and how did the online protest affect your opinion of NBC and the Olympic coverage?

(d) How much did you interact with other Twitter users sending #NBCFail tweets? What was the effect on your impressions from participating, both about #NBCFail and the Olympics itself?

(e) How much feedback did you receive from your Twitter followers? How would you characterize that feedback? How did that make you feel about #NBCFail?; and,

(f) It's been more than two months since the Olympics have ended. What are your feelings now about NBC, the Olympics, and NBC's Olympic coverage, and how (if at all) have you acted on these feelings?

At the end of the three–month survey period, 22 useable surveys were received from active #NBCFail protest participants. Fifteen surveys were received from males, seven from females. The vast majority of participants (20 of 22) ranged in age from 25–54. Seven surveys each were received from ages 25–34 and 45–54, while six surveys were received from ages 35–44. A single survey respondent was between ages 18–24, and one survey respondent was aged 55–64. Surveys consisted of six questions, which could be answered as expansively or briefly as participants wished. On average, each of the six questions received an answer of 80 words from the survey participant. Depending on the survey subject, the length of the answers ranged from five words to more than 400 for a single question.

For data analysis, a qualitative approach was selected because detailed analysis of the responses of #NBCFail protest participants could allow for close examination of their online actions, and to deduce

whether their shared actions constituted a true social movement. Also, while both quantitative and qualitative research seeks to understand natural phenomena, qualitative research seeks to understand action and experience as a whole. It also perceives the role of the investigator as integral to the data, not simply an objective scientist looking through a microscope (King, *et al.*, 1994).

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## Results and interpretation

*Respondents' feelings about the Olympics, the Olympic coverage and #NBCFail*

Using content analytic methods, the author sought to reduce and make sense of the volume of survey material, an attempt to identify core constituencies and meanings (Patton, 2002). After reading responses as they came in to the online survey site through the survey period, the lead author immersed himself in the data (12,000 words), reading responses several times, looking for patterns and shared thoughts between the participants. Organizing the data into categories, the author repeatedly compared the information received to answer the research questions. In terms of broad themes, the bulk of the survey responses suggested that #NBCFail (a) provided an outlet for respondents to express frustration about coverage; (b) proved a useful tool to protest and provide feedback; and, (c) gave participants a feeling they were part of a collective action.

As a supplemental analysis tool, the author took the responses and, using the free online program Wordle, made word "clouds" that illustrated the frequency and dominance of certain words and phrases in the response of the study subjects. The use of word clouds shifts meaning away from the formal language constituted of sentences, so that words matter, not stories and not narratives (Dean, 2010). But for the authors, the Wordle added a layer of visual context to the data analysis that sought to answer the research questions, providing a useful "first step" in data analysis. It helped insulate the author from drawing intuitive false positives during initial screening of the data, drawing out a digital representation of themes most commonly represented in the 12,000 words of data collected during the #NBCFail study survey. In a Wordle word cloud produced using every word received from the 22 surveys (see Figure 1) the most prominent words (aside from NBC, #NBCFail and Olympics) are "coverage," "Twitter," "protest" and "feedback."
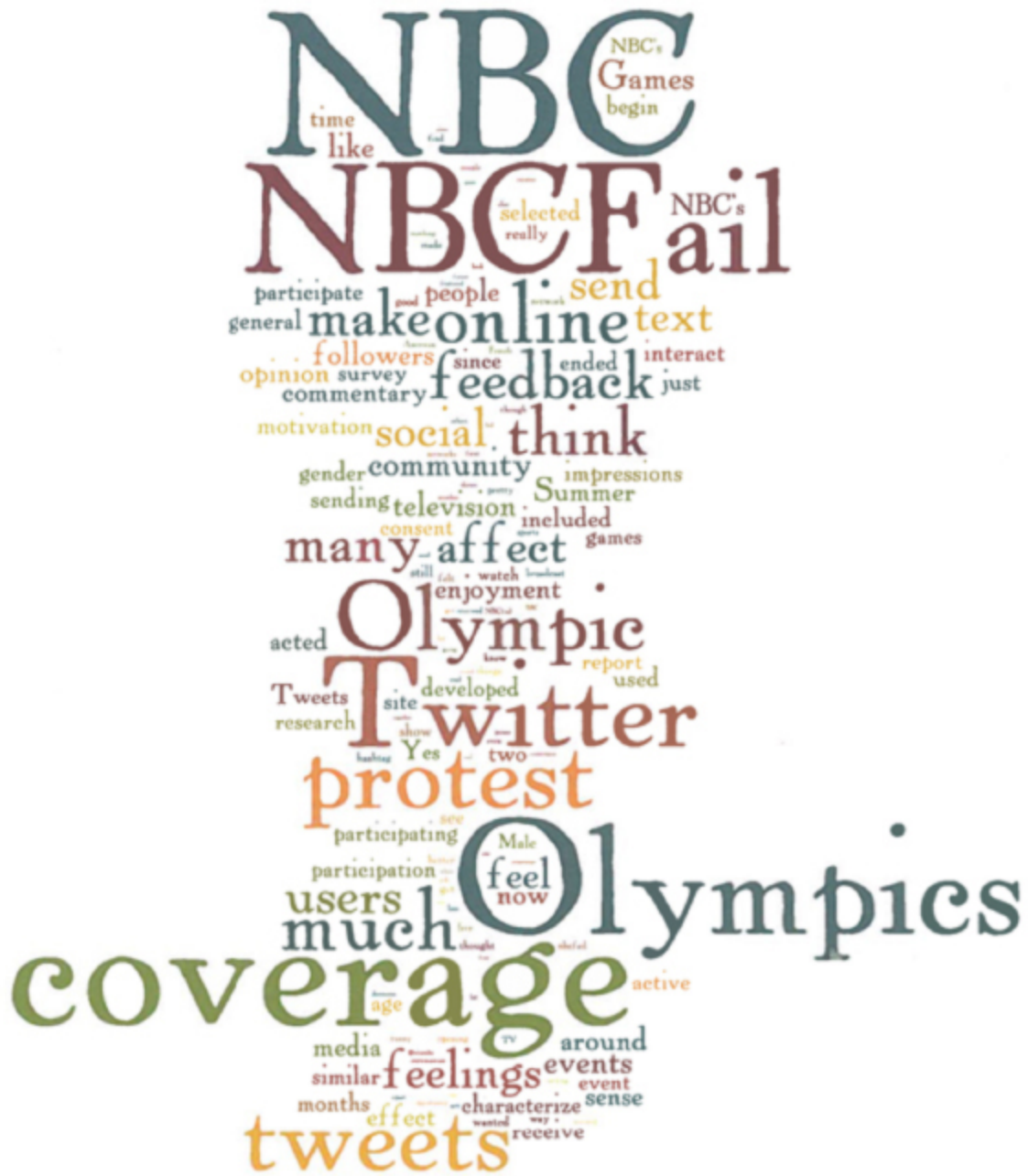
**Figure 1:** A graphic representation of the survey responses from #NBCFail participants.

*Frustration about coverage*

Among the survey respondents, there was a clear separation between the work of lead broadcaster NBC, and the Olympic Games themselves. Almost uniformly, survey participants professed a deep affection for the Olympic Games. When it came to the NBC coverage, however, responses were unanimously negative. The purposive sample of #NBCFail participants, admittedly motivated to express displeasure, was unsurprisingly dismayed with the coverage from NBC. Examples of these sentiments included:

(a) "I LOVE the Summer Olympics. But tape–delayed and truncated coverage was highly frustrating";

(b) "The television coverage impacted my enjoyment of the Games very much. From the ceremonies to the coverage of the events, I was extremely disappointed in the options available to me without having to pay extra for the privilege"; and,

(c) "The Summer Games were spectacular, a real 'global' event. Unfortunately, NBC decided to make this the American games and just totally ignored other nations and the less than 'glamorous' games."

*Use of Twitter as a protest vehicle*

The shared experience of being part of the online protest against broadcast giant NBC appeared to strike a chord with many survey respondents. They articulated a sense of purpose about the Twitter protest and appreciated being part of a collective action:

(a) "#NBCFail showed how a genuine set of issues can be expressed by a large number of people and crystallize — online, under a common digital flag — but also how such concerns can simply be ignored";

(b) "NBC incorrectly assumed that the online community would either not notice or not care about some of their broadcasting decisions … Such borderline arrogance only fans the flames of the Twitter community. Once #NBCFail was born, the story was no

longer the Olympics, but NBC's failure to
meet viewers' expectations"; and,

(c) "I felt that as a group, we were a pretty
credible indicator of where the NBC coverage
failed and why. I didn't think that it would
turn the ship, so to speak, during the Games
itself, but I did hold onto the hope that it
would be hard for NBC and future networks
to ignore what people thought about this
year's coverage."

*Protest and feedback*

Survey respondents articulated a deep sense of injustice in the forced tape delay of events by NBC. They
drew solidarity from their growing numbers:

(a) "I began tweeting with the best
intentions, to share in the excitement of the
Olymoics with a worldwide audience. I
quickly realized we were being shortchanged
by NBC and their coverage"; and,

(b) "It solidified my belief that there are
many out there who wanted the same thing
— access to sporting events, uncut and
complete. Olympics fans want to see
competition on all levels and not have NBC
pander to the folks who care about a few
sports."

However, not every survey respondent felt emboldened by being part of a shared protest. A few claimed to
be making their commentary completely independent of the online community. A few others felt the
characterization of #NBCFail was overstated.

(a) "I find the term 'protest' to be very
overblown. People were complaining. This
wasn't an Occupy movement."

*Respondents' feelings about NBC a few months later*

Among the sample surveyed for RQ2 of this study, there appears to be a split in feelings about NBC after a
few months. Many respondents who were active participants during the Olympics had moved on from the
protest, their hard feelings having subsided:

(a) "I still feel negatively about the Olympic coverage. I do not feel negative about the Olympics or NBC in general necessarily;"

(b) "The constant tape delay was annoying, but not to the point that it would keep me from watching. I still love the Olympics and I still feel like NBC Sports puts out a quality product."

For other #NBCFail protest participants, the negative feelings are more durable. In their responses, they maintain they are still holding a grudge against NBC, and some claimed to continue to use it to guide their television consumption decisions:

(a) "Still hate their coverage, still annoyed by it, still feel I missed out. I actively avoid NBC now;" and,

(b) "I try to avoid watching NBC at all costs. I will occasionally make an exception for Sunday Night Football, but the Olympic coverage makes them unwatchable for sports. The Today Show hosts were HORRIBLE covering the Olympics, just a terrible network."

Finally, there was a common expression among survey respondents that their online statements, no matter how powerfully expressed, were unlikely to sway NBC from its course of action. Despite expressing pride in being part of such an active protest, there was a sense from many survey respondents that change was not imminent:

(a) "I remain angry at NBC's poor coverage of the Olympics, and wonder if the outrage will have any effect on future coverage"; and,

(b) "I haven't acted on it because there's not much point. I'm pretty sure NBC would only listen if I was an advertiser."

## Discussion

This study explored the feelings of active participants in the #NBCFail Twitter protest three months after the 2012 Summer Olympics. Studying #NBCFail as a social movement is important because it is an attempt to gauge whether social media activism connected to a particular event maintains durable cultural currency after the event is finished. In qualitative surveys, respondents overwhelmingly felt empowered, and that their feelings about NBC's Olympic coverage were sharper and more negative, because of participation in a shared experience online. For the vast majority of survey respondents, #NBCFail took on the form of a protest movement for the two weeks of the Games. Three months after the end of NBC's Olympic coverage — which had caused the unrest — it is far less clear whether the negative feelings persist in protest participants.

As the literature about social movements suggests, the participants in the #NBCFail protest were predisposed to care about the Olympics, and therefore be adversely affected by the decision–making of NBC (tape delay, event packaging, over–commercialization, frequency of promotions). Some clear trends emerged in the data suggesting the foundation for a social movement was created with the nightly Olympic protests. The #NBCFail community provided a sense of connectedness, humor and solidarity for many respondents in the survey sample. The growth and increasing strength of feelings online is consistent with the resource mobilization theory aspect of social movements. Resource mobilization theory alters social movement theory by changing its focus from why people participate to what makes such participation possible. The authors also point out at some length that the creation of social movements through resource mobilization theory has been pointedly assisted through the advent of new, interactive technologies such as social media sites and smartphones (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011).

Did those actions constitute a true social movement during the Games? Repeatedly, survey respondents indicated the accessibility and interactivity of the #NBCFail hashtag on Twitter acted as a virtual public space for aggrieved NBC viewers, amplifying the feelings of discontent, making participants feel like part of a movement. These findings were consistent with resource mobilization theory because of its emphasis on the practical tools needed to facilitate social movements. #NBCFail allowed participation in a global protest with a grievance about NBC Olympic coverage, a Twitter feed and the Internet.

The life cycle of a social movement suggests a precipitating event can cause it to decline. That doesn't mean the movement is a failure, rather that conditions simply have changed, and there may be a rationale for the movement to cease activity. Social movement theory posits that the end of the Olympic Games on 12 August, and the end of the online virtual network created every evening during the prime time coverage, could have one of two effects — the protest could fizzle and people move on with their lives — or the protest can cause long–lasting effects to feelings of the protesters (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). There was a relatively even split among survey respondents, with some maintaining, and even acting on, their grudge against NBC, and others simply moving on with their lives. Since the irritant of NBC's Olympic coverage was no longer a part of people's day–to–day lives, it was easier for even active #NBCFail protest participants to be more sanguine in their reactions. However, it's instructive to revisit the protests in North Africa and the Middle East in examining the future of the #NBCFail movement. In those instances, unsuccessful attempts at liberty from oppressive rule acted as a dry run for later insurgencies. In Egypt, protesters referenced previous events such as the 6 April Youth Movement, where citizens had been beaten or killed by security forces, as rallying cries online for future action. And once the habit of rallying support online for a cause had led to the fall of the Mubarak government, a cabal of military leaders that attempted the same draconian tactics was met by a forceful protest that mobilized almost immediately, ultimately helping pave the way for democratic elections that brought Mohamed Morsi to power (Khondker, 2011). During the London Olympics, the #NBCFail protest was at its most vociferous at the end of the Games, with the number of #NBCFail tweets dropping rapidly after the Closing Ceremony. Presently, the online community created organically in protest of NBC's Olympic coverage is not incredibly active.

However, the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia are weeks away. With signature Olympic events like figure skating, downhill skiing and snowboarding being held in the morning or afternoon in Eastern Standard Time, NBC is considering continuing its practice of tape delaying these events until the prime time–viewing block (Cohen, 2013). Resource mobilization theory suggests that the online protest community will spring to life in a flash if that occurs. And with Twitter gaining more than 10 million active users every month, it's likely that tape delayed, American–centric, overly commercial, pre–packaged Olympic coverage will be met with organized, vociferous protests, in far larger numbers than during the XXX Olympiad.

It could be argued that the #NBCFail protest "failed," because NBC boasted record television ratings for the Summer Olympics, broke even on the Games, and pledged to continue its policy of using the expensive resource of rights to Olympic broadcasts in whatever way it chooses, even if it means tape delaying popular events to maximize its prime time viewing audience. As a phenomenon, however, #NBCFail has tremendous utility for study. It's an instant, bottom–up, visceral reaction to a shared experience; no focus group was required to gauge the feelings of the broadcast decisions made by NBC. The spectacular speed in the growth of #NBCFail — at least during the 17 days of the 2012 Summer Olympics, also demonstrates the power of connectivity in today's world, and underlines the importance of understanding real–time interaction with viewers like never before. And other sport organizations or broadcasters, perhaps seeing the immense demand via social media for real–time results and interactivity, could possibly adjust their own staging and broadcast strategies to harness this energy for publicity and promotion, rather than protest.

### Limitations and suggestions for further research

An important limitation of this study is that Twitter is not user friendly for bottom–up research about events that have occurred days, weeks and months earlier. While hashtags provide a portal to every Twitter user who has opined on a particular subject, the tweets aren't easily searchable beyond that point. The lead researcher was left to comb through thousands of #NBCFail tweets to find participants in an online protest that had occurred earlier. And without a huge roster of followers, the researcher was compelled to send unsolicited "@" messages to #NBCFail participants, gauging their interest in participating in the survey, actually getting his Twitter account suspended once on suspicion he was sending spam e–mail. As a result the pool of respondents ended up being smaller than hoped for, leading to a less rich collection of data. This study ended up being more exploratory in nature, rather than categorically determining whether #NBCFail met the standard of a bona fide social movement. In addition, some of the survey respondents answered the questions quite briefly, despite it being stressed that they could write as much as they wanted in response to the six questions, meaning there was little useable data in their responses.

Since #NBCFail was an organic protest that picked up steam during the Olympic Games, it will be more accessible as a phenomenon for academic study in future Olympics. The organized nature of the protest against NBC (provided the network adheres to the current broadcast strategy, which proved unpopular among the Twitter audience) will mean a larger, more motivated online event with more participants. Also, as NBC pointed out, the protest participants, while nearly uniform in their criticism of the network, represented a small portion of the Twitter users commenting about the Games online. A comparative study between #NBCFail participants and Olympics consumers who did not participate, comprised of larger sample sizes, might yield interesting demographic data about who participated in #NBCFail.

More broadly, the creation of an instant online community in social media, a "virtual public space," appears to accompany any large, live shared experience, most recently during the Super Bowl blackout. It would be worth studying similar online Twitter hashtag mobilizations as a point of comparison, to see if the elements of protest and social movement manifested themselves in the same way. An ethnographic study of social movement participants — whether for #NBCFail or another unifying event — could yield broad insight, quickly, into the collective mindset of social media consumers, and as social media grows in popularity, society at large. ▆

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**Notes**

1. Castells, p. 57.

2. Shirky, 2008, p. 14.

3. Shirky, 2008, p. 187.

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**Editorial history**

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