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Digital cultures, acceleration and mega sporting event narratives

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Mega sporting events, as with the evolution of human progress, continue to be marked by trepidation and awe over the transformational power of technology. Today, mega sporting events like the Olympic Games and World Cup are increasingly the captivating spectacles of consumer capitalism. Whereas, since the 1980s, established media organisations have exerted a significant influence over the production of mega sporting event narratives, the mass availability of everyday digital technologies democratises media making, changing the way events are conceived, planned, mediated and reported. Citizens, living digitised and social mediated lifestyles, are now important co-creators, shaping the design, delivery and dissemination of events to a wider audience. This article explores the emergence of digital tools and technologies and their impact on mega sporting event media narratives. It highlights how social media and ubiquitous digital technologies augment accelerated identities. As a means of illustrating the acceleration agenda and its impact on mega sporting event coverage, the author presents a case study of a citizen media initiative #citizenrelay, which focused on the Olympic Torch Relay on its journey around Scotland, UK in the summer of 2012. The article concludes by suggesting that the digitally democratised citizen has power in their pocket to make media that, when brought together as part of a collective, can present alternative narratives to those offered by the established media frame.

Keywords: citizen media; acceleration; #citizenrelay; Olympics; social media

Introduction

Speed, like power, is everywhere in the era of new mobile modernities and mobile city cultures ... especially evident in sporting cultures and more specifically in mediated sporting events. (Redhead, 2007, p. 226)

This article firstly reflects upon the development of technologies and how they shape the socio-economic conditions of leisure before proceeding to discuss the current era of accelerated leisure cultures of communication and creation prevalent in an age mediated through digital lifestyles. Secondly, the article focuses on how the established media is responding to the threat posed by the democratisation of smart technologies and the proliferation of alternative and mobile platforms that function beyond and offer the potential to circumnavigate traditional media forms. Finally, the article draws on an action research study of an Olympic Games-related citizen

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media initiative to consider the extent to which the widespread availability and acceleration of media making and news circulation can empower a wider public to produce content that alters the established media narrative.

Leisure time, digital technologies and acceleration

Those adhering to a modernist perspective on the role of technology in society suggest that the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth century set in motion intellectual, social and political changes based on a belief in the ‘faculty of human reason and agency as the keys to unlocking, and bringing under the domain of a unified humanity, all the mysteries of the natural and social universe’ (Hancock & Tyler, 2001, p. 12). This philosophical revolution challenged the paradigms of the day, foregrounding the power of reason and science to deliver emancipation and, ultimately, liberate humanity from the conditions of nature and mysticism. Within this perspective, centrality is given over to science, technology and the expansion of industrial capitalism to produce modernisation across the Western world. Technology is the child and champion of enlightenment; the material manifestation of the project of modernity charged with the inevitable taming and transformation of the natural, social, political and cultural order (Cooper & Burrell, 1988).

Proponents of the liberating potential of technology, cyber optimists (Castells, 2004), argue that social progress can be achieved through the harnessing of nature and the extension of technology – albeit recognising that technology is governed by social values and, crucially, commercial interests. Green (2002), for example, argues that the state and capitalism drive technological progress and suggests that there is a need to problematise the interests that govern technological innovation (e.g. armed forces, bureaucracies and corporate interests). On the cyber-pessimistic side is the critical modernist position in which scholars reject the uncritical acceptance of science’s neutrality and association of reason (and technology) with progress and freedom. Those subscribing to this position express concerns at how the principles of science are appropriated in order to dominate both the natural and human worlds. They argue that instead of producing only positive social benefits, control of technology can be misused to produce dystopian outcomes, including those associated with control, surveillance, exclusion, alienation and dehumanisation. An example of these outcomes includes the way that global corporations harness technologies to exacerbate control mechanisms and structuring factors which restrict freedom (e.g. lack of convergence in leisure technologies).

Whether you subscribe to a cyber optimist (or cyber utopian) or cyber pessimist perspective, there is broad agreement that technological innovations problematise taken-for-granted understandings of ‘time’ and ‘space’ as fixed concepts in the period of hyper capitalism (Graham, 2002). Fixed understandings of time, space, geography, localised identity and the structuring of life chances are more difficult to sustain in a technologically mediated world where, it is proposed, more people can escape the restrictions of geography and the everyday to engage in new experiences and create new identities as never before. Ubiquitous consumer technologies including laptop computers, tablets and smartphones are now embedded in everything from gyms to games, cars to clothes and watches to workstations. Mass ownership of these consumer devices reflects the subtle allure of technology with its promise of convenience, immediacy, interactivity and mobility. To communicate, purchase, learn and even vote all that is required is the press of a button, click of a mouse or

swipe of a touch screen. These are velocity interactions (Virilio, 2000) made at speeds beyond comprehension, yet demonstrating time-space compression as content is communicated and circulated across continents and a contracting globe. Moreover, the trajectory of acceleration, affordability and simplicity of digital cultures is breaking through the traditional barriers of age and competency. As digital trends highlight, people over 55 represent the fastest growing user network (Fox, 2012). Digital democracy appears to be spreading.

Yet, whilst the techno-centricity of modernity promised potentiality over prohibition, it also always produces its resistant ‘other’ – the more problematic, or darker, social outcomes that cyber pessimists point to (Norris, 2001). The darker side of extended technological influence includes the atomised existence associated with urban life, the stilted sociability of new generations or the digital divide between the techno-intelligentsia and the digitally excluded. With the proliferation of so-called smart digital technologies, the sociocultural dynamic is constantly transformed by a tsunami of ‘push’ notifications that buzz and break the family meal or the office meeting. At work or leisure, at home or abroad, the smartphone or tablet constantly dazzles and distracts (Rushkoff, 1997). New digital technologies permeate every crevasse of work and non-work to the point that these arbitrary divisions are no longer sustainable. As Turkle (2011) has recently argued, we are increasingly *alone together*, creating, analysing and performing our emotional lives through the medium of technology. In a critique of the emotional detachment created by technological ‘advance’, Turkle questions whether technologies serve our human purposes: our values and direction. She is sceptical of the implications of ‘continuous connection: always on, and always on them’ (p. 17), stressing the worrisome implications of accelerated mobilities which see people ‘often talk to each other on the move and with little disposable time’ (p. 18).

Turkle’s fears are not new, however. Acceleration has been the subject of academic debates in the fields of tourism, leisure studies and other field for a number of years (Bell & Lyall, 2004; Bertman, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Rosa, 2010; Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). Much of this debate has focused around the extent to which social existence is speeding up as instantaneity, simultaneity and interactivity become emblems of our time. Many of the speed innovations we now take for granted were invented by the military–industrial–scientific complex (e.g. the Internet) but have been increasingly de-territorialised, entering the domestic market for consumer goods (Castells, 2004). The media landscape has also undergone significant change since the invention of the telephone, film, radio and television as ‘objects of mass consumption and essential tools for the conduct of everyday life’ (Silverstone, 1999, p. 5) in the twentieth century. Today, digital media technologies have produced remarkable changes in a short period of time (compared with TV and radio) in the way audiences consume and, increasingly, produce media content:

we are now confronted with the spectre of a further intensification of media culture, through the global growth of the Internet and the promise (some might say the threat) of an interactive world in which nothing and no one cannot be accessed, instantly. (Silverstone 1999, p. 5)

Silverstone’s (1999) interactive world mirrors that of Turkle, whereby always on, ‘always on them’ digital tools distort, destabilise and dehumanise modern life.

Although digital acceleration runs the risk of ‘over stimulating and exhausting minds and bodies’ (Virilio, 2000, p. 21), it continues to capture the consciousness of a mass public through the opiate of vicarious consumption. Of concern in this article are the wider consequences of accessible leisure technologies as a force for social good or social ill. Increasingly ubiquitous, digital technologies are more accessible, affordable and powerful than ever before. However, a cultural gap remains between those that are comfortable using mobile devices, social networks and other online environments to participate in civic life as consumers and citizens and those that are not. This article is interested in the potential of digital tools and technologies to flatten hierarchies, enabling a wider range of citizens to participate in leisure cultures (particularly around mega sporting events) to subvert controlled narratives and created alternative, localised readings outside of established commercial media platforms. Participating in media production is now an everyday leisure culture made possible by the availability of self-publishing platforms and its evolution, and future direction is in need of further critical exploration.

New media, acceleration and the mega sporting event

Several authors have identified that mega sporting events like the Olympic Games are essentially media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992) that provide ‘a space for representation to take place – often contested – between sender and receiver’ (Horne & Whannel, 2010, p. 761). Mega sporting events are now perceived as effective media vehicles through which hosts promote their city’s assets to a watching world, sponsors activate their brandscapes (Pavoni, 2010) and technology designers promote their most recent inventions. The production and consumption of mega sporting events are now frequently subject to the transformations wrought by an accelerating leisure and media culture. First, there is acceleration in the way mega sporting events are reported to an increasingly globalised audience. The 1936 Olympic Games was the first truly mediated mega sporting event utilised by Adolf Hitler to spread his Nazi propaganda (Girginov & Parry, 2005). Since then, the acceleration of mega sporting event documentation (or reporting) has gathered pace, with greater availability (and democratisation) of media-making technologies and a more sophisticated network of distribution. For the Olympic Games, this has developed to the point where nations without sophisticated enough broadcast networks can now access Olympic Games coverage on YouTube from their mobile devices.

Mega sporting events are now also subject to (and the subject of) accelerating representations. Since the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has realised the media value of the largest multi-sport event in the world and how important the media is in managing representations of host cities, games organisers, sponsors, sporting federations and the IOC itself (Miah & Garcia, 2012). The IOC (and its soccer counterpart, FIFA) now exerts tight control of its lucrative media rights, tying local organising committees contractually within the Host City Contact to return significant profits to the sanctioning body. However, as new user-generated content (UGC) has proliferated over the last two decades a multi-dimensional and contested media space has grown emerged around the Olympic Games and, to a lesser extent, the FIFA World Cup. This is not to suggest naively that the corporate media complex has voluntarily ceded any control. In fact, as Horne and Whannel (2010) have suggested:

The Olympic Games is a media platform with an assumed dominant narrative; the IOC, Games organisers, sponsors and athletic federations attempt to defend the narrative against counter narratives. Today this involves intense management of the narrative, although this does not guarantee success ... a problem for the Olympics is that there is some ambiguity over the ownership of the Olympic Games platform and the narrative. Who owns it? Is it the IOC, the organising committee, the host city or nation, or the sponsors? (p. 762)

The ambiguity Horne and Whannel identify represents an opportunity for official representations and discourses of mega sporting events to be challenged and (re) formulated. New (mobile) media appear to permit the ‘fan’ (soccer) or ‘citizen’ (Olympics) to offer up into the public domain, alternative messages, though this can only be achieved by paying careful attention to the rights, power and influence of the IOC and its commercial partners. These agencies robustly protect their commercial assets, attempting to restrict unofficial third party associations, ambush marketing and other activities which can lead to legal action against those who seek to secure commercial benefit from their association with the Olympic Games brand. Horne and Whannel (2010, p. 767) believe that the ‘power and influence to shape the agenda – and construct the story – remain tied to large media organisations despite the internet and the emergence of heterogeneous voices’. Dart (2009) agrees, arguing that the democratising potential of new media did not transpire during the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals in Germany, mainly because corporations became advanced in using consumer-generated media to further their commercial imperatives. He argues that the established media essentially appropriated and incorporated fans’ desire to feed the sporting event discourse and sought ever more complex ways to monetise these interactions. The established media, although coming later to the digital and social media space, now uses its significant resources to direct traffic to their content, ‘borrowing’ principles of UGC and participatory media cultures:

Given the trends towards convergences and consolidation of ownership, the likelihood of a spiral of silence emerges, in which fringe minority voices get less hearing and are gradually brought into conformity ... the hegemony of the privileged over web content and values will marginalise less powerful groups as it has in other media. (Real, 2007, p. 182)

Over recent years, both the IOC and FIFA have had to deal with the threat posed by digital and social media acceleration that has transformed the landscape for media and communication around their event assets. Having previously been preoccupied with the management, control and protection of all media, these sanctioning bodies are now faced with an audience of confident digital media users keen to produce their own content and share it instantly across their social networks without ever having to interact with established media platforms, or adhere to the strict licencing and brand protection guidelines governing the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup. The concepts of speed and acceleration are important here. New media tools and technologies allow for the participation, distillation and instant mediatisation of experiences at, and distant from, mega sporting events. As Redhead (2007, p. 238) suggests, using mobile devices (whether smartphones or tablets) enable participants to take pictures or videos and ‘instantly send those photos to either friends who are absent from the stadium or, increasingly, to new media companies that request fans’ pictures of events at games as part of their UGC news gathering’. Redhead

associates the emergence of new media and its accessible tools with the notion of accelerated modernity (Redhead, 2007) evident in mediatised sporting events. This speed creates challenges of control and management for event owners and corporate sponsors alike in providing selective reformulations of events that suit their dominant narrative. For example, the IOC was, until recently, vociferous in their protection of official Games venues to the point where only rights holders could distribute photographs taken in these spaces. However, once the IOC eventually realised the power of social media in 2008, it quickly reviewed its approach to image distribution recognising the fallacy of trying to lock down a community of (young) audiences it really needed to reach and bring into the (so-called) Olympic Family.

Since as long ago as 1996, the Olympic media landscape has had to contend with another threat to its monopolistic control of the media narrative – the emergence of a broader participatory media culture with a special interest that extends beyond the sporting component of the Olympics. Citizen media, using ubiquitous mobile devices, freely available and shareable web platforms and a do-it-yourself ethos are now deployed by various interest groups to subvert established representations in the mainstream media, offering a space where media can be actively created as much as passively consumed. Participants utilise what Bakardjieva, Svensson, and Skoric (2012) term hybrid media environments, including blogs and social media, to mobilise, organise and discuss issues pertaining to restricted media frames around mega sporting events. They operate on the basis that ‘digital infrastructures offer citizens new channels for speaking and acting together and thus lower the threshold for involvement’ (Bakardjieva et al., 2012, p. i). The potential of digital tools to decentralise, empower, mobil(e)ise (Hands, 2011) and organise is well rehearsed, though also contested (Morozov, 2011). Since the 2006 Winter Olympics, there has been evidence of new media activism (Miah & Jones, 2012) in operation which reflects the emergence of an alternative and additional element of the media landscape, driven by the interests of host city and nation populations – ‘the unvoiced’ – which uses the proliferation of new media digital platforms to focus attention on those issues left out as the world’s accredited media focus their efforts on the sporting competitions. Vying for attention with saturated mass media sports coverage, the unvoiced and the unpopular (e.g. displacement, environmental concerns, human rights agenda, housing) require different spaces, support and the capacity to produce media content and have it communicated in such a way as to amplify the message to a wider audience, locally and internationally. The global proliferation of smart phone technology, widespread internet usage and the mobile revolution presents a unique opportunity for more direct communication between media producer and consumer. Allied with the growth of citizen journalism practice and the power of UGC to redefine newsgathering and reporting, the potential to deliver mass participatory communicative opportunities is significant.

These developments in the mainstream media landscape have been mirrored in the coverage of mega sporting events. Starting from the Winter Olympics in Torino 2006, a growing demand from ‘unaccredited’ media participants (e.g. bloggers) has brought pressure to bear on the governing agencies to consider how their events can respond to the challenges of web 2.0 and a commitment to collaboration, sharing and interactivity – whilst protecting a lucrative media rights process. In response, the IOC and host organisers have faced pressure to create specific facilities or spaces for the unaccredited media – so that they can access the necessary broadcasting

facilities to enable them to cover (predominantly) the non-sport elements of the Games. However, more recently, aggregations of citizen journalists, bloggers and social media users have utilised the aforementioned hybrid media environments to make it easier for the general public to become media makers and commentators on the social, cultural and political dimensions of mega sporting events. For the London 2012 Olympic Games, there were forecast to be 13,000 broadcast journalists, 7000 print journalists, 12,000 non-accredited media and, more importantly for the potential of accelerated media, millions of people in possession of camera phones ready to shoot and report. Again returning to Bakardjieva et al. (2012), ‘mass media and institutional gatekeepers are being circumvented by citizen reporters and commentators who provide first-hand, real-time coverage and non-hegemonic interpretations’. Crucially, the real-time coverage of offline mega media events is separate from the interests of corporate sponsors and their brand activation strategies. They may use corporately owned social media channels (though not always) to amplify their messages, but the ethos is one of collective action, mobilising and empowering civic action – it is the politicisation of a wider public through the exploitation of everyday leisure technologies.

In a more complex media environment, the politics of citizen media need not be limited to radicalism, opposing the established media (Goode, 2009). Rather, the forces of new and established media increasingly coexist, occupying at different times each other’s traditional spaces and using similar newsgathering and distribution techniques. They occupy a hybrid media environment, which can complement existing media outlets. One example of the use of hybrid media environments, citizen reporting, mobilisation, organisation and collective action is the #citizenrelay project which followed the Olympic Torch Relay on its journey around Scotland in the summer of 2012. This action research oriented project provides the empirical focus of this article.

Methodology: participatory action research

The #citizenrelay project was a participatory arts and media initiative led by the author, focused on the uses of citizen media as a means of opening up channels of debate and discussion and offering a space for critique around major sporting and cultural events. The project took as its focus the London 2012 Olympic Torch Relay which travelled the length and breadth of the UK for 70 days from mid-May to the end of July 2012 entering Scotland on the evening of 7 June and departing on 14 June. The Olympic Torch Relay was chosen as the event most amenable to a citizen media initiative in Scotland because it visited a large proportion of the country and, for that reason, was likely to generate significant public interest and established media commentary across the range of geographical and interest-based communities.

The #citizenrelay project adhered to both the principles and practices of action research in its participatory and democratic ethos, bringing together ‘action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). Committed to knowledge as socially constructed and to the notion that research ‘is an explicitly political, socially engaged and democratic practice’ (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 13), the project was built on the foundations of collaborative working with individuals and groups taking on the role of research co-creators. Following an action research approach, the project contained significant researcher involvement,

justified in the belief that a more involved, empathetic approach to the issues at hand is productive rather than deleterious to the quality of research outcomes. The #citizenrelay project was also committed to the idea that theory can and should be generated through practice and be an embodied intellectual practice. As Brydon-Miller et al. (2003, p. 21) suggest, ‘we never leave our corporeality; we are engaged in ongoing cycles of reflection and action in which our bodies and ourselves and those of our collaborators are not only present but essential to the very process of understanding’. Emphasising the spirit of collaboration, #citizenrelay was conceived and operationalised by an interdisciplinary team, bringing together academics, community activists, artists and community media specialists into dialogue with a variety of publics. The author played the role of an observer of, and participant in, the research project and put in place a number of safeguards to enable trust to be built with project participants that ‘have every reason to be wary of outsiders and especially of academic outsiders doing research’ (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 19).

Firstly, those individuals participating in the project as reporters provided written consent for their media content to be shared with the research team during their training and those involved as the subjects of interviews were informed that the content would be uploaded to a web environment and shared widely to a public audience. Secondly, on completion of the project, participants were invited to a debrief session, where the author discussed plans for research outputs and reassured individuals that their data would remain confidential. Finally, observations made throughout the process were captured on audio and video (a central feature of archiving the process of delivering the initiative), acting as a real-time visual and auditory research diary. These ‘texts’ were reviewed to ensure accuracy of recollection.

The forthcoming findings and discussion relate primarily to the process of undertaking the project, and the outcomes produced over the course of six months viewed through the conceptual lens of acceleration, digital culture and mega sporting events developed in the preceding discussions. For the purposes of this article, there are two main meta themes emerging from the #citizenrelay project that are discussed in the forthcoming sections, each linked to digital cultures and acceleration to a greater or lesser extent. Within these two meta themes, the sub-themes of immediacy, connectedness, locality, empowerment and participation will be the subject of further discussion.

Discussion

Connected immediacy: the ‘other’ Olympic torch relay

In designing the #citizenrelay project, the author was acutely aware that the established media had invested significant resources in technology and personnel on the ground to provide ‘live’ content for their various media platforms during the London 2012 Olympic Games. The official media partner for the Olympic Torch Relay in the UK was the BBC, and they provided wall-to-wall coverage using a range of different formats. Television viewers could follow the Olympic Flame via daily live broadcasts (aligned with the main news bulletins) and by using the interactive red button for rolling live coverage all day. Online viewers could access live coverage of the Torch Relay on a video player and interact via Facebook, Twitter (@BBC2012) or SMS. In order to create a niche space within the wider Olympic

Torch Relay media landscape, the #citizenrelay project emphasised the importance of *immediacy* – of content generation and upload – to provide a real-time representation of the stories emerging from the villages, towns and cities visited without relying on a fixed or externally imposed editorial line that the established media is expected to produce. A team of citizen reporters (60 reporters and 8 interns) was recruited to support content generation before and during the visit of the Olympic Torch Relay to Scotland. These reporters received basic training from community media specialists on how to point and shoot a digital camera or smartphone quickly with minimal editing and upload through 3G or wireless networks within minutes. To complete the circle, that content was then pushed instantaneously through integrated social media channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and a specially designed project blog. The speed of upload and circulation enabled the #citizenrelay initiative to break new information before the established media were on the ground and to establish an alternative narrative or discourse about the Olympic Torch Relay on its journey around Scotland. This approach enabled a fairly significant audience to be reached and information to be shared real time, producing a loose collective that, at least, demonstrated to the established media that citizen media could provide a challenge to existing media power structures – if even for a fleeting moment. Over the course of eight days in June 2012, 20,000 web hits were secured on the #citizenrelay website (www.citizenrelay.net), with a total in excess of 25,000 recorded since January 2012. Crucial to this ‘success’ (small though it is compared with a media conglomerate like the BBC) was the creation of a hybrid media environment (Bakardjieva et al., 2012) and the low threshold of involvement which led to the co-production of in excess of 110 YouTube videos, 215 audiobook short podcasts, 1009 Flickr images and over 300 Instagram filtered images.

Significant content, allied to the speed of communication and representation, reflects the tenets of accelerated modernity proposed by Redhead (2007). From Stranraer in the south-west to Stonehaven in the north-east, immediate, and largely unmediated, responses to the arrival of the Olympic Torch Relay activation convoy were circulated online, diluting and at times disrupting the imposed narrative aired by official media partners. For example, #citizenrelay reporters played a role in drawing attention to the prevalence of corporate torchbearers in the Olympic Torch Relay through the Help Me Investigate the Olympics (HMIO) project (<http://helpmeinvestigate.com/olympics/>) which eventually led to the production of an e-book titled *8000 Holes: How the 2012 Olympic Torch Relay Lost Its Way*. This investigation received significant established media coverage once brought to the attention of a wider public, demonstrating the potential of citizen media activity to influence the news agenda. Moreover, using audiobook, a free tool for recording, uploading and sharing audio produced a number of ‘trending’ interviews (1000 + listens) that attracted the attention of print and broadcast media.

Whilst the argument proposed in this article is not that one small initiative can circumnavigate mass media and institutional gatekeepers (Bakardjieva et al., 2012), the philosophy and chosen action research approach did generate interest from the established media and general public in reporting public celebrations of this sort. Though the project did not set out to generate controversial stories or undermine established media narratives per se, at several points on the #citizenrelay journey requests were received from local news agencies, radio stations and national press to use content generated by project volunteers. In particular, the project highlighted the failings of the established media to secure widespread geographical coverage and

the potential of the general public to produce and circulate content themselves, often using their own mobile devices. Moreover, despite attempts by the sanctioning bodies to privatise and securitised public space around the Olympic Torch Relay route, the availability of good quality, cheap mobile devices enabled citizen reporters and the wider public to capture both front and back stage footage, highlighting what public investment in an mega sporting event of this type entails (e.g. the cost to local authorities of Olympic bunting and policing of the Olympic Torch Relay itself).

However, instantaneity is only a force for good in reporting an event when aligned with a wider set of collective practices. To that end, another hugely significant part of the success of #citizenrelay was its *connectedness*, both physically and virtually. The project started out by reaching out to partners interested in community media, social media for social good, community engagement or even the Olympic Games themselves. Mutually beneficial relationships were formed with universities and colleges and a wide range of community organisations (often from the third sector) by developing a shared vision for involvement, however, limited. An online community was then formed around #citizenrelay, embedding the notion of a participatory, citizen-owned media environment where anyone with a smartphone could contribute their views on what the Olympic Torch Relay and the Olympics meant to them. From January 2012 onwards, this established physical community was animated through the use of a hashtag (#citizenrelay) through which stories, pictures, weblinks and other multimedia content about the project and the Olympic Torch Relay itself were shared. Participation in this social space on Twitter increased each and every month on the lead up to the Olympic Torch Relay itself, culminating in its use by a wide range of public agencies, media organisations and individuals from the 7–14 June as an ‘official unofficial’ collective space through which to offer stories free of commercial imperatives. By the end of the project, 600 individuals and organisations had used the project hashtag and, through sharing across their own networks, 7000 relationships were formed. The depth and quality of these relationships is demonstrated by the creation of a follow-up Digital Commonwealth project supported by the Big Lottery Fund, the Media Trust and several community media organisations. Further discussions have also taken place on establishing mechanisms for celebrating and amplifying community events around the UK, and overseas. Small community events and festivals represent a fertile terrain for citizen media to enable organisers to take back ownership of their own media representation rather than relying upon the vagaries of local and national media. Projects like #citizenrelay demystify the ‘media’ through practice. They contribute to a movement called Celebration 2.0, which focuses on empowering people to create their own content, and this has great longer term potential. That said, though open to be digitally democratic, public and private events face the obstacle of ever tighter media tie ins that can limit the ‘space’ for ticket holders and the like from sharing their content for fear of commercial rights infringement.

The project intentionally adopted a decentralised and distributed structure, where heterogeneous actors could network and amplify their shared values through a shared communication platform. Despite the project having a declared ‘national’ ambition to aggregate content during the Olympic Torch Relay’s visit to Scotland, foregrounding *locality* was also at the heart of the vision of #citizenrelay. The commitment to a more bottom-up, place-specific agenda was built into the recruitment of volunteer reporters from four regions of Scotland (Glasgow and the west,

Inverness and the north-west, Dundee and the north-east, and Edinburgh and the east) and investment in driving a mobile community media centre around the country to help support citizen media makers in each locality. The commitment to localness also extended to the use of a variety of wireless-enabled venues across Scotland to upload and amplify content simultaneously. Community venues including bars, coffee shops, libraries and hotels were utilised to download, edit and upload content when the 3G signal was unsatisfactory. To ensure local relevance, connectivity and immediacy, cards containing links to the project website and social media channels were distributed to local people in each area so that they could easily access multimedia content about their community. This tactic helped drive traffic to the website and provided communities not covered by the established media on their limited TV coverage to be represented as part of the nationwide event.

Relating back to Turkle's (2011) critique of people being alone together, in the case of the #citizenrelay initiative, people running local events, school pupils and those populating the route of the Olympic Torch Relay were given the opportunity to comment, and commentate, collectively on this high profile event using the digital tool of their choice. They could put their community on the map whilst also drawing attention to their concerns about excessive local authority spending on Olympic branded bunting or the overly heavy security presence accompanying the Olympic Flame. If even on a small scale, the ethos of this citizen media initiative highlighted the potential of digital tools to decentralise, empower and mobil(e)ise (Hands, 2011).

Empowering public participation: citizens as media makers

At the heart of the emergence of citizen media, or 'small' media as some commentators have termed it, is that of *empowerment* (to become media makers) and participation (the ethos of accessibility). The empowerment of individuals to take on the role of media makers was central to the ethos of #citizenrelay. Volunteers, with little or no previous media production experience, were trained in how to use basic audio and video equipment, how to go about interviewing and how to produce short unedited videos which could be uploaded online within minutes. #citizenrelay operated on the basis that a vast number of citizens now have access to quite sophisticated technologies in their pocket (e.g. the smartphone) but rarely understand the power of that device, when networked with others, to influence the production of news itself. Whilst the established, or 'big' media often claims the moral high ground because of its perceived trustworthiness (and status as official rights holder to report on major sports events), citizen media offers the general public the opportunity to test this quality through capturing stories in real time and reporting them via their chosen social infrastructure. #citizenrelay generated significant amounts of daily content whilst following the Olympic Torch Relay around Scotland and worked hard to ensure credibility and trust from its audience by aggregating data without the imposition of a strict editorial line with which to filter the critical commentary emerging from the communities involved. Bringing in locally created content, allied to the technical skills developed through training, acted as a way to demystify the process of media production. Within hours of picking up a flip camera or smartphone, volunteers were capable of producing short videos, podcasts, blog posts and social media updates, uploaded to their own broadcast hubs

(i.e. YouTube, audioboo and Flickr) and shared widely to an online audience watching the #citizenrelay newswire. The project exploited the prominent leisure phenomenon of digital storytelling, whereby people feel increasingly comfortable with capturing their everyday lives and landmark events and sharing them with friends and other networks. In creating an informed and empowered cadre of reporters, participants were encouraged to share content with #citizenrelay, whilst retaining the ownership rights to their photos, audio and video. Training empowered volunteers to understand intellectual property rights, including the use of Creative Commons licences, which give the public permission to share and use the creative work of the individual on the conditions of their choice. Moreover, the #citizenrelay project also empowered its participants to be able to navigate the complex legal arrangements governing the protection of Olympic assets. Fear of falling foul of the Olympics police acts as a deterrent for active participation in critical debate online about this worldwide movement.

That is why the #citizenrelay project also set out to foreground *participation* as a key objective. In the digital environment which provides the focus of this article, participation is a hotly debated topic. Some argue that a focus on online participation (or online activism) erodes physical or embodied participation (Turkle, 2011 is a good example), but in the case of #citizenrelay they were inseparable and mutually beneficial. Using ubiquitous digital technologies, project volunteers participated in content generation before and during the Olympic Torch Relay in Scotland. To avoid the danger of isolation and atomisation, the project facilitated real time, physical meet-ups across the country to help foster reciprocal and trust-based embodied relationships. This trust, and collectively aligned objectives, then provided the basis of significant online participation, where boundaries between the producer and consumer of digital content were blurred. For project funding reasons, convenient administrative boundaries were constructed around those officially 'involved' in the project, but in practice involvement extended well beyond the original core, encompassing people from across the country and with little or no interest in the Olympic Games or the Olympic Torch Relay. The project operated on the basis of increasing participation in mediating a large-scale event like the Olympic Torch Relay, but in the most accessible way possible. It was intended to be democratising, emphasising the power of possibility rather than the restrictions on access to the established media world.

It is difficult to access data that demonstrate the extent of audience engagement beyond the quantitative data generated on website traffic. However, the extensive levels of social media engagement suggest that content was being shared actively, based on local relevance (where the Olympic Torch Relay was on its journey) or in relation to newsworthy stories (e.g. Help Me Investigate information about corporate torchbearers). In comments on the blog which hosted content and on social media there was a recognition that the environment created by the project was different, more accessible and not imprisoned by its editorial policy. It enabled creative ways of expressing locally relevant content and people were attracted by its rich multimedia content.

Conclusion

The current era of digital and ubiquitous technologies reflects an unprecedented process of transformational change. Messages are being transmitted at an exponential rate, blurring boundaries between new and established media, as each extends

reach into others' territory. Consumers (or more accurately, citizens) enjoy the play of liberation such technologies bring whilst media institutions, authorities and governance mechanisms struggle to cope with an amorphous and deterritorialising medium. In response, increased governance increasingly accompanies the evolution of accelerated leisure and media cultures. The corporate media response to the potential of small, alternative or citizen media is firstly, to dismiss as 'amateurist' in comparison with 'professional' media practice. Second, it is to borrow from the assets that small media possesses, appropriate and control it for commercial return. At a local level, this can be in the form of using citizen-generated data without proper acknowledgement but it can also be in the form of saturating social media and other platforms to dilute the uniqueness of small or citizen-produced media. The institutional arrangements that drive and support the mega sporting event circuit actively seek to massage or manage alternative discourses.

Yet, the corporate paranoia to assimilate and align themselves within this common web may act as a catalyst for the very counter movements and citizen narratives they wish to control. As digital and ubiquitous technologies and accelerated lifestyles mature, the strategic, directed and institutional message has come under a counter gaze that organises, mobilises and amplifies locally derived content. Initiatives like #citizenrelay reflect this process and illustrate how acceleration shifts the power of scale, demonstrating the active mobilisation of citizens. Citizen media, evidenced in #citizenrelay, reflects a discursive transition as the digitally empowered citizen is first to break stories, becoming media makers and storytellers of the now – the individual as an agent of acceleration.

Although the #citizenrelay project was, in itself, a small cog in a much larger wheel, its focus on content production, immediate circulation and sophisticated amplification through the vehicle of social media has already influenced those practicing community media and participating in the hyperlocal media environment. It provides sustenance for those who have invested in the promise of flattened hierarchies and active citizen involvement, exploiting the power of readily available consumer technologies to enable anyone to become a publisher of content.

Notes on contributor

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