



## Opening Ceremonies and Closing Narratives: The Embrace of Media and the Olympics

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## Abstract

Reflecting on media and the Olympics always involves much more than the technical quality of the coverage and the means of accessing it. There is now a considerable literature on the Olympics and Olympic media that engages with the enduring questions of socio-cultural power and politics, including social class, commercialization, indigeneity, 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexuality, urban conflict, citizenship, the state and national identity. Each successive Olympiad elicits additions to this literature that address both the general questions that historically apply to all Games, and the specific context of each host city and nation. This special issue of *JOMEC Journal* engages in a range of ways with the cultural politics of the mediated Olympics, focusing on the recent London 2012 Games that took place in the same country as the journal is located, and also raising issues that resonate with past and future Games in this and other places. As such, it contributes in its own way to the contested cluster of outcomes that preoccupies Olympic discourse from the moment that cities determine whether to launch bids to host the Games – the Olympic legacy.

## Contributor Note

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How do most people around the world come to *know* and *experience* the Olympics and the Paralympics?<sup>1</sup> Those who can be counted among athletic participants, their coaches and support staff at any single Games, such as London 2012, would barely fill half of a standard Olympic Stadium. A larger group of people has a direct connection with that same Games – organizing its events, running sports organizations, building facilities, supplying goods and services, making host arrangements, and so on. To this group we can add the paying spectators who physically attend Olympic events, usually within a stadium. Combining all those people who have had a close link to the London 2012 Olympics, we now have the population of a medium-sized city. There are currently seven billion people in the world. Connecting this small group of the

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<sup>1</sup> This article will concentrate on the Olympics, but it should be noted that the London 2012 Paralympic coverage was the most extensive ever. The free-to-air broadcaster Channel 4 garnered excellent ratings, and the BBC provided intensive online, radio and mobile coverage, with several international broadcasters also carrying more Paralympic content and discussion than ever before. However, NBC's U.S. coverage was criticized by the International Paralympic Committee for its decision not to provide live coverage in favour of blocks of highlights (Gibson, 2012).

Olympic-initiated to the rest of the world's citizenry are the media, without which the Games would be an intermittent sporting contest with a very spatially restricted footprint.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has estimated that the global audience for London 2012 was likely to have been in the vicinity of a record 4.8 billion, and that the Opening Ceremony audience approached 900 million (International Olympic Committee, 2012a; *The Independent*, 2012). Such 'Olympian numbers' alone demand attention, but there is much more of interest here than aggregate television audience size within what I call the 'media sports cultural complex' (Rowe 2004, 2011). This ensemble of institutions, practices and symbols has increasingly insinuated itself into everyday lives across the globe, ceaselessly finding new ways to relate and interpenetrate communication, media and sport in ways that have led, according to Lawrence Wenner (1998: xiii), to a 'cultural fusing' that has produced a 'new genetic strain called *Mediasport*.

What, then, do the media do with and to the Games, and for whom? How are the 'Media Games' represented to the world, and how does the world look when

glimpsed through Olympic media? Questions of this kind, produced more generally by the simultaneous, interactive development of media and sport under modernity and capitalism, have been posed for many decades, and were given particular impetus in 1936 when the Nazis sought to project the propaganda value of the Berlin Games, and Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia* garnered both political condemnation and aesthetic praise (Guttman 2006). Although this is a particularly notorious case, all modern Olympics since their revival in 1896 by the French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin have involved the use of the media to celebrate and denounce, project and promote, persuade and display.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though, the sheer scale of Olympic media is remarkable. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for example, mounted the most extensive Olympic coverage ever for London 2012. Its so-called 'Red button Olympics' (named after its digital multi-channels) brought the full panoply of digital media technologies into play. There were 2,500 hours of live coverage, meaning that for the first time every competitive moment of this multi-sport event could be seen (in high definition and sometimes in 3D). But it was also a

multiplatform event – the hegemony of broadcast television was eroded as Games action, commentary and information could be accessed by various means, including 'online, on iPlayer, on mobile devices, on apps, and on the BBC's 24 'red button' TV channels' (Spanier 2012). With the USA's Olympic broadcaster NBC having 'partnered with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Shazam to promote its coverage of the Games onto these popular social media platforms' and populating 'Google+, Instagram, Tumblr, and GetGlue with Olympic content' (NBC 2012), and the search engine Google customizing national medal counts for browsers and providing 'updates, news and photos from the Olympic Games on Google+', and trending topics by monitoring its search traffic (Google 2012), what we now regard as 'Olympic media' has substantially changed.

The arrival of this regime of 'networked media sport' means that we are beginning to glimpse the lineaments of 'sport beyond television' (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). By this I do not mean, *pace* those who proclaim that the 'legacy' medium of broadcast television is moribund, that sport television is rapidly passing into history. Its aforementioned viewer statistics highlight the unreliability

of such pronouncements. Of course, sport media long predated television in print and radio form, and the mediasport ecology remains rich and varied, embracing everything from sport-themed fiction films and novels to sportzines and quiz shows. But for over half a century 'live' broadcast television has been unchallenged as the principal economic and communicative engine of sport. Today, this power, while still formidable, is loosening, both because 'television as we knew it' is changing (Turner and Tay 2009) and because other media, especially those involving computing and mobile technologies, are supplementing, interacting with, and sometimes superseding it in a range of ways. The International Olympic Committee, which under its late President Juan Antonio Samaranch fully embraced television as both its most important economic resource and mode of dissemination, is well aware of these trends. But it is finding that digital, mobile and social media, although promisingly exploitable, are rather more difficult to control than were previous arrangements focused on analogue broadcast signals and written photographic print texts from a small number of producers to vast, predominantly home-based audiences (see, for example, Hutchins and Mikosza

2010; International Olympic Committee 2012b).

Reflecting on media and the Olympics, then, always involves much more than the technical quality of the coverage and the means of accessing it. There is now a considerable literature on the Olympics and Olympic media that engages with the enduring questions of socio-cultural power and politics, including social class, commercialization, indigeneity, 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexuality, urban conflict, citizenship, the state and national identity (see, for example, Billings 2008; de Moragas Spà, Rivenburgh, and Larson 1995; Horne and Whannel 2011; Larson and Park 1993; Lenskyj 2008; Luo and Richeri 2010; Price and Dayan 2008; Roche 2000; Schaffer and Smith 2000; Sugden and Tomlinson 2011; Tomlinson and Young 2006; Toohey and Veal 2007). Each successive Olympiad elicits additions to this literature that address both the general questions that historically apply to all Games, and the specific context of each host city and nation. This special issue of *JOMEC Journal* engages in a range of ways with the cultural politics of the mediated Olympics, focusing on the recent London 2012 Games that took place in the same country as the journal is located, and also raising issues that

resonate with past and future Games in this and other places<sup>2</sup>. As such, it contributes in its own way to the contested cluster of outcomes that preoccupies Olympic discourse from the moment that cities determine whether to launch bids to host the Games – the Olympic legacy.

Gill Branston's opening commentary piece, 'Spectacle, Dominance and "London 2012"', goes straight to the issue of the power of the Olympics and teases out some of the discursive interplay that constitutes its politics and ideological legacy. The green and pleasant land and industrial powerhouse depicted in the Opening Ceremony, with its artful dodging of the history of imperialism, provides one vivid opportunity to analyse Olympic spectacle. So, too, the assertion of, and resistance to, neoliberalism in the 'selling' of the Games to its host citizens, as well as through its organization and governance. Here the Olympic 'text' is shown to be open to multiple interpretations from diverse reading

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<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, Brazil, one of the so-called BRIC countries (the others being Russia, India and China) that are regarded as the main hopes for a world economy still struggling to recover from the 2007-8 global financial crisis, will host the world's two largest media sport events within two years of each other – the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Games.

positions, including for expatriates in the USA suddenly nostalgic about public service broadcasting. The following contribution by Richard Sambrook, 'The Olympics and TV', provides a short discussion emphasising the importance of the principal Olympic medium. It notes that the commercial value of Games' media rights, rapidly changing technologies and their associated audience/user practices, and national variations in media ecologies, work to create considerable uncertainties concerning the development of Olympic coverage. The BBC's premier position among the world's public service media organizations means that it – and, therefore, its media coverage of the London 2012 Olympics as host country broadcaster – is something of a globally atypical case. This means that, with an eye to the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games, some caution is counselled about predicting a linear progression in the quality and scope of Olympic media.

The national citizenship-identity nexus is at issue in Emma Poulton and Joseph Maguire's "Plastic" or "Fantastic" Brits? Identity Politics and English Media Representations of "Team GB" during London 2012'. As a festival of nations, the Olympics always operates as a vehicle for advancing particular readings

of nation, and this article examines the invention by Britain's right-wing press of the 'plastic Brit' – that is, someone perceived as a migratory sporting opportunist or mercenary who represents 'Team GB' but lacks the requisite national authenticity. There is some irony in such complaints given the prominent role of sport in the 'New International Division of Cultural Labour' (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, and Rowe 2001; Miller, Rowe, and Lawrence 2011), whereby athletes move around the globe seeking opportunities to perform athletic work and, indeed, are systematically scouted and recruited in dominant media sport markets from subordinate ones as relatively inexpensive athlete workers (Carter 2011; Maguire and Falcous 2010). In the case of the Olympics, calculations are made between seeking to maximize the national medal tally through sporting importation and advancing specific, restrictive national characteristics that can be trumpeted in victory. London 2012, therefore, operated as something of a popular forum for debate on British multiculturalism and its associated, multiple iterations of national identity, with the national media deeply implicated in its direction and rhetorical character. The nation is also to the fore in the analysis of Danish sport journalism

practices in 'Victory is Ours! Reconstruction of Victory and Spectator Exultation in Sports Reporting' by Jonas Nygaard Blom and Ebbe Grunwald. This empirical analysis of the match reporting by four Danish newspapers of women's handball at three successive Olympic Games (1996, 2000 and 2004) reveals how sport journalists negotiate individual and collective subjectivities in their sport narratives. This is a familiar practice in Olympic reporting, and the contending modes of engagement may be controversial – for example, during London 2012 it was reported that Mark Thompson, then Director-General of the BBC, issued an instruction that the corporation's commentators should 'tone down' what he apparently saw as excessive displays of hyper-nationalism (Halliday 2012).

A consistent subject of critical Olympic media research, in the light of other work on sport and gender (such as Aitchison 2007; Creedon 1994; Scraton and Flintoff 2002), concerns who produces Olympics media coverage, who is highlighted and marginalized in quantitative terms, and how the quality of their representation can be assessed in sex and gender terms (Bruce, Jovden and Markula 2010). As 'A Story of Absence and Exclusion: The Gendered World of Sports Reporting in

Australia' by Louise North notes, the Olympics does contain much more coverage of women than most other major sport events, such as its only rival in global media terms - the men's FIFA World Cup – although greater quantity does not necessarily mean enhanced quality. As North observes, empirical studies repeatedly find that media coverage of women's sport is generally overwhelmed by that of men, and this article's pre-London 2012 Games content analysis of two Australian newspapers reveals this depressingly familiar gender disparity in both general sport and pre-Olympic coverage – a gender gap that it also demonstrates is replicated in the bylines of sport reporters.

The quotidian work of sport journalists is the subject of an Olympic diary by Eddie Butler, who covered various aspects of the Games for the BBC, *The Guardian* and *Observer*, chimes well with this insider view of the Olympics. Allocated the rather unglamorous archery Olympic 'beat' for a week at the unlikely venue of Lord's Cricket Ground, Butler, despite his unease at having to relocate his temporary domicile to an outer part of east London that 'feels like Copenhagen', is entranced by the International Broadcast Centre (IBC). He remarks,

'This is the start of a new life, of sitting in the air-conditioned windowless box. I love it there. No, I mean it – the Olympics is all around, on screens, live feeds from just about every venue'. Thus, Butler does not only does reveal something of the less glamorous side of sports journalism, including having quickly to write numerous mini features that may well not be broadcast, but he also strikingly demonstrates how much contemporary sports (including Olympic) journalism relies on watching multiple screens rather than 'being there' at the event itself. The role of journalists in the manufacture of Olympic legacy is also readily apparent – he spends much of his time as the event unfolds contributing to the preparation of a *Review* that will be released as soon as possible after the Games' conclusion.

As Butler shows, the major organizations that dominate accredited media at the Olympics are very well catered. This has been especially the case since the 1996 Atlanta Games, which vividly saw the punishment of poor Games publicity that can be meted out by an international press contingent that is hindered from operating with appropriate efficiency and not a little indulgence. 'Communication Gold: Media Centre behind the Scene' by Amie Mills and Tom Barrett reveals the

remarkable lengths to which the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) went to, to keep some of the most important of the over 20,000 accredited media personnel happy. Apart from the massive IBC and Main Press Centre (MPC) complex adjacent to the Olympic Stadium and the Athlete's Village, with its 'High Street' providing all manner of goods and services and the 'Mix Zone' in the stadia offering journalists easy access to athletes, LOCOG assisted almost 4,000 journalists to find accommodation in a part of central London close to a media transport hub, from which they could be rapidly conveyed to the main Olympic site by means of designated Olympic lanes. Journalists at the Olympics may be very busy, and are now required to multi-task using multi-media, but it is not surprising that the fight for media accreditation is so fierce in view of the 'rich pickings' available to anyone who can get passed Olympic security's rings of steel.

Claire Wardle's 'Social Media, News-gathering and the Olympics' demonstrates how social media are now supplementing and enhancing institutional journalism in a variety of ways, while also noting the BBC's innovative role in London 2012. It is often claimed

that this breaking down of barriers between professional journalists employed by media organizations and an array of others who can contribute to the newsgathering process diversifies and improves news across the board, including Olympic news and journalism. Notably, though, Wardle points to recent research that indicates that most of what appeared on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube concerning London 2012 did not depart substantially from the positive, nation-building tone adopted by most mainstream news media organizations.

Several subjects concerning the Olympics raised above, and more, are covered in Andy Miah and Beatriz García's, *The Olympics: The Basics* (2012), which is reviewed here by Richard Haynes. This book now takes its place among the substantial Olympic library discussed and exemplified earlier. It is followed by Wayne Hope's review essay of Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp and Friedrich Krotz's edited work *Media Events in a Global Age* (2009), which remarks that the Olympics is but one manifestation of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's influential analysis of 'media events' published two decades ago. As has similarly occurred with critiques of Pierre Bourdieu's conception of cultural

fields and taste, the book's editors argue that the process of globalization disturbs the mainly national-societal framework of analysis, although many of the contributions plainly re-instate the significance of the national in qualified form. The Olympics may not be the only media event with global reach, but it is difficult to think of a rival in terms of its combined regularity (every two years when the Winter Games is taken into account) and mythological grandeur. Nonetheless, Hope argues that mega events' relationship to global capital should not be lost among the forest of rituals and symbols. Thus the final contribution to this theme issue re-asserts strongly the requirement to place questions of power at the heart of any analysis of media and the Olympics.

Taken as a whole, these articles reveal that the battle between commercial interests and cultural citizenship rights with regard to sport media is a particularly keen one (Scherer and Rowe, 2013), and the Olympics is shown to be one of its most important fronts in determining who will have access to Olympic media texts and at what (if any) cost. The astonishing media blitz that occurs around every Games provides a remarkable opportunity not only to explore and analyse a media event, but

to understand the ways in which that event is used to tell us a great deal about the contemporary world and its socio-cultural trajectories.

This author needs little encouragement in trying to unravel the sometimes bizarre mysteries of the media sports cultural complex, but not all Cultural and Media Studies scholars and researchers share this predilection. Certainly, a sense of the absurd is a useful attribute when seeking to understand Olympian iconography. Garry Whannel (1992: 1) recalls his separate encounters in lifts with 'Sebastian Coe, Gina Lollobrigida and a tap dancer dressed as a moose' while among 'over 1000 journalists and 55 camera crews' covering a 1986 meeting of the International Olympic Committee. Intrepid researchers of Olympics and the media are always likely to unearth such fieldwork gems, but one of the great advantages of engaging intellectually with Olympic media is that the subject comes to the researcher, rather than the other way round. That is, it is particularly difficult, and takes considerable planning and trouble, to *avoid* the mediated Olympics - especially when, as was the case for most of the contributors to this issue of *JOMEK Journal*, they are interpellated in some way, willingly or otherwise, as Olympic

hosts. There is a common binary response to this state of affairs in either embracing the spectacle with critical faculties largely suspended, or rejecting it *in toto* as so ethically and ideologically compromised as to be irredeemable. It is to be hoped that the various articles published here indicate some of the many fruitful ways in which the vibrant subject of media and the Olympics can be approached in a manner that produces a valuable legacy that usefully departs from the skewed legacy

propositions of host cities, media corporations and the Olympic family.

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