



**Communication Gold:  
The Media Centre behind the Scene**

**Amie Mills and Tomas Barrett**

Email: [amie.mills@tokyodigital.co.uk](mailto:amie.mills@tokyodigital.co.uk)

Email: [tomasllbarrett@gmail.com](mailto:tomasllbarrett@gmail.com)

**Keywords**

Main Press Centre

International Broadcast Centre

Journalists

LOCOG

Logistics

## Contributor Notes

Amie Mills is a freelance journalist and Head of Digital Production at Tokyo Digital in London. She is interested in the changing shape of journalism in the age of new media and in 2005-2006 she conducted an independent ethnographic research study looking at the consumption of New Zealand blogs. She is particularly drawn to the effect that new media technologies has had on the way news coverage is now produced and disseminated globally. As Head of Digital Production at Tokyo Digital she specialises in designing and delivering digital strategies that help clients such as Google, Channel 4 and Guinness World Records engage and interact with audiences online.

Tomas Barret will be assuming his new role as Public Relations Officer for Cardiff University in December, having come from Gocompare.com, where he worked in the press office designing and delivering insight-driven integrated PR campaigns and mitigating fallout from the odd crisis. Despite having embarked on a brief stint in journalism following his graduation from Cardiff University with an MA in International Journalism, he has for the past four years worked in a number of in-house communications roles. He cut his teeth working in Virginia (US) for a Swiss-owned global equine distributor - the oldest saddlery in the world - where he worked in its Public Relations department for just over a year. For the next two and half years he worked as Press Officer for the beleaguered University of Wales and gained a wealth of crisis management experience.

## Communication Gold:

### The Media Centre behind the Scene



Main Press Centre (Source: LOCOG)

The numbers and magnitude of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympic Games are staggering. More than 1,000 sporting events took place and 5,000 staff supported by 70,000 volunteers worked to ensure it was a remarkable success.<sup>1</sup> Around £9bn of public money was spent on the Games with over 14,000 athletes and sporting officials and 800,000 spectators taking part in the world's largest global sporting event to date.

As the single biggest media operation in history<sup>2</sup> however, it is the effort to bring 24-hour media coverage to an audience of four billion people<sup>3</sup> across the globe that marks one of the greatest achievements of the 2012 Games. To cater for the approximately 26,000 accredited reporters and broadcasters, London built the most extensive media hub the world has ever seen. The International Broadcast Centre (IBC) and Main Press Centre (MPC) was the epicenter of news in and around the Games and the sheer scale of

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<sup>1</sup> Delivering the Olympics: Six months to go, *Building*, January 4, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Olympics: Media's biggest ever event? *BBC*, July 26, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> 2012 things to remember the London Olympics by - Part 1, 1 to 1108, *The Independent*, August 14, 2012.

planning and delivery it took to produce the 2012 Games' coverage was nothing short of Olympian.

In the lead up to the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympic Games we asked three of the key players behind this effort, Jayne Pearce, Head of Press Operations at The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG), Paul Radford, Global Sports Editor of Reuters and Steve Wilson, European Sports Editor of Associated Press (AP) to describe the almighty task of covering the Olympics. As this was the first Games that press and broadcasters were based in the same area we started by asking about the roof over their heads.

### **The International Broadcast Centre and Main Press Centre**

The impressive IBC and MPC complex is nestled on the northwest corner of the Olympic Park, renamed Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park after the Games, and at almost 90,000 square meters of studio and office space the IBC/MPC is roughly the size of the Canary Wharf tower turned on its side. Both the IBC and MPC were officially opened on the 27th of June 2012 and from the 16th of July 2012 onwards they were open for 24-hour occupancy. In only ten short weeks in the summer of 2011, at a cost of £292m, both structures were assembled by a small army of builders and engineers who utilised over 4,500 tonnes of steel on the 52,000 square meter foundation of the IBC building alone.<sup>4</sup>

The 31,000 square meters MPC structure was specifically designed with press conference facilities and workspaces for journalists and photographers stretching across four floors of office space. The first floor consisted of a vast working area for written press with help desks providing live information and updates. The next floor up was reserved for photographers who had ready access to specialist equipment and workrooms. As well as these dedicated press and photography floors there was myriad media conference rooms spread throughout the MPC building where all the media conferences took place throughout the Games. Another two floors on top of that was filled with private offices

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<sup>4</sup> The Olympic Park's media centre: 11 football pitches of space, *London Media Centre release*, August 4, 2012.

because media organisations from all over the world set up their office space there as a base to report from.

With the IBC big enough to house five jumbo jets placed wing-tip to wing-tip and the MPC sporting six football pitches' worth of office space it's no wonder LOCOG began working with the key media agencies over five years before the Games began to ensure that capacity would be met for the 6000 accredited press granted access to the MPC and approximately 20,000 broadcasters granted access to the IBC.

As Wilson explains: 'We've been dealing with LOCOG for years. They come to the meetings, we discuss with them the various issues so we know from years ahead how the planning is going and we give our suggestions about recommendations that they should take into account as well. So there's kind of a back and forth intake that starts very early in the process, which is useful ... Their job is to prepare the best facilities and conditions possible for the world's media, which is a huge job'.

The onus is not lost on Pearce who placed ease and accessibility at the heart of LOCOG's pragmatic planning of the IBC/MPC. 'Our purpose is to enable the journalists and photographers to perform their duties efficiently and effectively. So my job – whilst of course I want everybody to write great things about London and about the Games – my job, strictly speaking, is to enable them to write the story', she says.

### **Catering for the world press**

Enabling journalists to cover the events and tell the stories required a certain level of amenable working conditions and minimising the strain on journalists was central to LOCOG's development and build of the IBC/MPC. One way they addressed this was to build a temporary 200 meter-long 'High Street' adjoining the two buildings.

'We've tried to create a real street here in London, which runs between the two buildings and has everything from travel and tourist information to a courier to a post office to massage to faith room to medical station to general store to bar to café ... and for the High Street grooming we have hairdressing through the middle of the complex', explains

Pierce. A separately built 12,000 square metre catering village was included in the complex. That was the place where 4,000 journalists could sit and eat at the same time.

It was estimated that during the course of the Games, the media was served at least 500,000 meals and 1.6 million cups of tea over the 52-day period that the complex was open.<sup>5</sup> All IBC/MPC complex facilities were exclusively available to accredited members of the press and the importance of these amenities and their ease of access cannot be underestimated. Radford, who led the entire Reuters team at the last five Olympics and is a veteran of 15 Olympics, believes that one of the most important things you need when you're in a press centre is the ability to get to press conferences quickly. Food and hydration are equally crucial to the survival of journalists during the Games. 'You also don't have a lot of time to go and refuel so they've put the catering in a very good place and there's a High Street where you've got shops and a couple of bars as they are very important to journalists as well', jokes Radford.

### **Making it in the Mix Zone**

Perhaps the most powerful of all the media spots in the Olympic Park however, is the Mix Zone. Both Wilson and Radford describe this as the spot where the real press action takes place and where LOCOG worked particularly hard to ensure journalists had access to the athletes after they competed. The Mix Zone in sports stadia is a fenced-off area the journalists stand behind where athletes walk through straight after they come off the field of play and where journalists are waiting to talk to them. Wilson describes the Mix Zone as, at times, resembling some kind of elbow-flying chaos with hundreds of journalists packed into a small area, all clamouring and fighting their way to the front to talk to the athletes or simply to hear and see them.

The key priority for press in the Mix Zone is to grab a few quick notes and sound bites. 'It's crucial to get this information because everyone's on deadline. You want to hear from the athletes as soon as you can and this is where you do it ... It can be pretty sweaty,

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<sup>5</sup> The Olympic Park's media centre: 11 football pitches of space, *London Media Centre release*, August 4, 2012.

pretty smelly and a lot of elbows flying between the journalists just to get here and ask the questions of athletes as they go by', explains Wilson.

LOCOG tackled the challenge of improving the 2012 Games Mix Zone by working with media agencies early and planning the infrastructure to work better for both sides. This included installing microphones so journalists stuck at the back could still hear and providing risers for the athletes to stand on so they could be seen more easily from anywhere within the Mix Zone. Controls were later implemented enabling athletes to move more easily down the line so they could speak to a greater numbers of journalists without spending too much time stuck in a particular spot.

In a controlled environment like the IBC/MPC, where constant press conferences and endless updates provide journalists with the same pre-packaged information, the Mix Zone becomes one of the few places where the unexpected stories of the Olympic Games are given air time.

As Radford points out, 'The Mix Zone is a very important area because during an Olympics there's a press conference with the medallists afterwards but some of the best stories come from people who won't appear at that press conference... If the favourite falls over – if Usain Bolt falls over in the 100 meters – he won't appear at the press conference but he's going to be the big story'.

Radford shares the story of plucky and experienced Reuters athletics reporter, Gene Cherry, who landed one of the biggest media scoops of the Beijing Olympics after Usain Bolt won the 100 meter final and Cherry found himself with the first official sound bite from the Jamaican Prime Minister about his countryman's win by grabbing Bolt's mobile phone in the Mix Zone when he realised who the athlete was speaking to.

### **Granting accreditation and access**

Negotiation begins early for the various levels of accreditation and access granted to media agencies at each Olympics. 2,685 organisations received accredited press access to report the Games and around 80 different international newspapers and agencies had their own private office set up in the MPC, which meant that accreditation acted as a visa

for countries who needed one and Heathrow Airport became the primary point of press accreditation as media agencies entered the country.

LOCOG posted agencies their accreditation passes in advance and from the 27th of June 2012 onwards they set up validation points at each of the terminals at Heathrow Airport so that all that remained for media agencies to do upon their arrival into London was to have their passes validated.

In the eyes of Wilson, accreditation equates to access. 'As an accredited journalist with a pass that entitles us to go to any sports competition venue, we can witness first-hand every event, every press conference, every race with our own eyes and talk to the athletes and the officials right afterwards. Without the credentials to do that you can't get all the inside information that you need', he explains.

The ultimate responsibility for Olympics media accreditation lies with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). There are three internationally recognised news agencies, AP, Agence France Presse (AFP) and Reuters who receive accreditation directly from the IOC. All the other news organisations receive accreditation through their National Olympic Organisation (for Britain this is the British Olympic Association) and each National Olympic Organisation has a certain quota to allocate. Similarly, the individual allocations given to AP, AFP and Reuters are negotiated each time with the IOC. As London was the host this year, British-based agencies such as Reuters received more accreditation than past Games whereas AP received a similar accreditation number as they did for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

As well as greater accreditation, and therefore access, AP, AFP and Reuters are given official status and receive preferential treatment throughout the Games. 'Why are we favoured?' asks Radford, 'Because we are the biggest distributors of Olympic news and the IOC, rightly in my opinion, thinks that if they give priority to the three big agencies, we'll distribute to all the rest of the media'. As Radford argues, there simply is not enough accreditation for all newspaper and media agencies to cover every event, which leaves the international agencies to cover all the sports and the remaining agencies to concentrate on more focused coverage. This allows The Daily Telegraph, for example, to concentrate on the British athletes competing, which is their main focus and receive the big picture stories from the main news agencies.

'When there's a drug break ... and somebody's found guilty of taking drugs, that's the sort of story that the agencies will get into first because we've got more people on the ground and we get priority positions in stadiums', says Radford, who toured all the stadium venues himself to review 'where my guys should sit to get the best view' and donned a hard hat to assess press logistics and planning on the ground. This level of pre-planning with media agencies led to the £500m stadium having 14 lighting towers installed to ensure provision of a sufficient degree of lighting that would enable broadcasters to capture action with enough clarity for HD TV freeze-frame coverage, used for the first time in the 2012 Games.<sup>6</sup>

Accreditation extends beyond the journalists and broadcasters on the ground however, as the full picture of delivering comprehensive Games coverage emerges. Media accreditation breaks down into various coded categories including written press journalists (Code E) reporting from the events, to editors and sub-editors inside the press centre editing and filing the copy, to photographers (Code EP), to radio and television teams, to support staff, and technicians, the latter of whom are responsible for providing 24-7 technical support.

'That can mean going down into the stadium where say the photographers are there with their laptops filing stuff and something goes wrong ... they have to go in and fix it', explains Radford who is quick to point out that the logistics of running press operations for an Olympic Games is staggering, 'We have drivers, we have translators, we have people helping administer and making sure we have everything we need. It's actually a big staff. I think we'll have over 200 people there basically'.

Despite appearances, accreditation does not grant access-all-areas passes to agencies reporting the Games. This is where the coded categorisation comes into play as it dictates where agencies are allowed to venture and report from. For example, unlike written press journalists, photographers are allowed access to specific photo positions within the stadium such as the 100 metres finish or alongside the long jump pit.

There is a further accreditation distinction still between rights holding companies for television and non-rights holding broadcasters (Code ENR). Broadcasters like the BBC

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<sup>6</sup> 2012 things to remember the London Olympics by - Part 1, 1 to 1108, *The Independent*, August 14, 2012.

and NBC (who owned the rights to broadcast the 2012 Olympics in America) are rights holding companies and were therefore the only agencies entitled to shoot the action. This is not the case for agencies like Reuters, 'who don't pay millions and millions of pounds for the privilege',<sup>7</sup> says Radford. As non-rights holders Reuters were not allowed to bring cameras into the stadium. They were however, allowed to show highlights that were supplied to them by the rights holding broadcasters and they were allowed to show six minutes of Olympic highlights per day. To get around this restriction, Reuters did their own broadcasting of the press conferences with their approved allocation of cameras in the Olympic Park. This allowed them to talk to people walking through the area. Accreditation did not grant media the access to the athletes changing rooms and the athlete areas so instead Reuters sought out the athletes off site to interview them and as Radford explains, 'There are opportunities – very often through sponsors – to interview people who have won, say a gold medal the previous day and are a good story. They'll hold a meeting off site where we can go and film them and talk to them and we can watch their fellow countrymen celebrating ... it's a different sort of meat for us as a non-rights holding broadcaster so the action itself is not the focus of what we do in that sense'.

### **Accommodation during the Games**

Alongside the 24-hour IBC/MPC roof over their heads, LOCOG invested significant time and energy working with the bigger media agencies to organise accommodation for press during the Games. Radford argues that good accommodation planning is crucial. 'I mean, you have to put your journalists somewhere. They have to be in a location where they're going to be able to get into work easily and the East end of London obviously is not a place full of accommodation', he says. Which is why the central London location of Bloomsbury was selected this year as LOCOG worked alongside agencies such as Reuters up to two years in advance of the Games to provide guided tours and identify suitable venues within the area.

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<sup>7</sup> The BBC is reported to have paid between £40m and £50m for the TV rights to the Games (2012 things to remember the London Olympics by - Part 1, 1 to 1108, *The Independent*, August 14, 2012).

'At past Olympics they've often built an Olympic media village where there's not space to accommodate journalists in hotels and bear in mind that if you count all the broadcasters ... it's a lot of people. So what LOCOG did was decided to put journalists in hotels around Bloomsbury and they're good hotels, there's some student accommodation there as well but for us, we need to try and keep our team together ... it keeps team spirit', argues Radford. From the early planning stages, LOCOG is then responsible for the booking of all the required press accommodation.

Pearce describes LOCOG's role as facilitation. LOCOG did not pay for the accommodation but they found and sourced the rooms in 30 hotels around the Bloomsbury area and just fewer than 4,000 journalists took up accommodation in roughly 3,500 hotel rooms.

### **Getting to and from Olympic venues**

Next to press accreditation and accommodation, one of the largest planning operations for LOCOG in the lead up to the Games was how to transport the press to and from Olympic Park. Transport planning was inextricably linked to accommodation planning. As Wilson points out, it's a simple equation. 'So because many of the media hotels are based around the Bloomsbury area, that's where they've centered the media transport hub. Anyone staying in the hotel there in the morning will go over to Russell Square, and get on a media bus which will take them directly to the press centre in Stratford ... and many other venues', he says. LOCOG planned the transport system so media could be easily and efficiently transported to and from Heathrow and Paddington on the Heathrow Express.

A car service was set up to take press directly to their accommodation and media buses operated throughout the Games traveling regularly between Bloomsbury and the Olympic venues as well as some of the outlying Games venues for events like the football and sailing. Reuters capitalised on the benefits of preferential press treatment by selecting a hotel on Russell Square, which was situated right next to the Olympic bus hub where media buses travelled straight to the IBC/MPC on Olympic lanes. Radford estimated it was a 25-minute trip each way, which in London transport terms is something of a miracle.

## Communicating the challenge

The briefing, design and set up of the communication, data and information systems infrastructure of the IBC/MPC was equally challenging. A press operation of this size required the circulation of a vast amount of data in a variety of mediums and in real time. Therefore the IBC/MPC became one of the best-connected media hubs in the world, sporting ISDN circuits for commentators, fibre optic connections, 900 servers, 1,000 network and security devices as well as more than 9,500 computers, which was enough capacity to broadcast the events throughout the world.<sup>8</sup>

For over three years LOCOG produced daily newspapers updating media agencies across the globe on every step of the operational planning. Three world press briefings took place between 2010 and 2012, inviting press and photographers from around the globe to be briefed on what to expect from the London 2012 Games. LOCOG produced a major printed publication that was sent out to all media agencies in October 2011. This tome included information about everything from shipping and freight logistics, to visas, to accreditation codes, to transport and travel information.

Upon arrival and receipt of accreditation, media agencies were supplied with detailed media and photo handbooks produced by LOCOG. 'They include a tour of all the venues, information on technology, information on how you get...say to Wimbledon via media shuttle bus or whether you get a train...that sort of thing so it's practical information', argues Pearce. The Games website itself was so huge it required its own department and web team and it carried extensive information, live results, and facts on the Games.

LOCOG worked closely with technology departments and invested heavily in creating state-of-the-art information and communication systems for the media to use throughout the Games. This included an Olympic News Service and InfoPlus, both of which, Pearce argues, were there to assist the journalist who was on his own covering all of his athletes and who couldn't physically be in all places at once. 'We have a television feed coming live from every competition venue so you can sit in the Main Press Centre ... indeed

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<sup>8</sup> The Olympic Park's media centre: 11 football pitches of space, *London Media Centre release*, August 4, 2012.

some people never move from the Main Press Centre because you can keep an eye on all of the feeds', she explains. The Olympic News Service included information on every media conference and included quotes from athletes after they had finished their events. The service also provided previews and reviews of every event.

### **Making reporting easier with InfoPlus**

InfoPlus was LOCOG's own data information system, which was only accessible to accredited media and provided users with up to the minute information on exactly what and when anything was happening throughout the Games. InfoPlus contained 15,000 biographies of the athletes, horses, officials, National Olympic Committees and more, which was all researched by LOCOG in the lead up to the Games. Radford is effusive in his praise of InfoPlus. 'It can be anything that happens that affects the way journalists do their jobs', he explains. 'It's an indispensable tool because if you think about it, you're a journalist at the Olympics ... there are 26 sports, there are 36 venues, you know, there's so much going on at any given time you can't possibly know everything that's happening so you need a tool that helps you do your job and the info system provides that'.

In the past, a system like InfoPlus was available to press via screens set up in media centres but for the first time, this system was tapped into via the Internet and mobile devices allowing reporters and broadcasters to receive email and SMS reminders of events they were interested in or updates on press conferences or event changes and postponements. As a web-based system, InfoPlus had a web-based feel allowing reporters and broadcasters to create their own pages. Radford says this created a radical shift in the way that the press received updates. 'You can access it on your laptop and customise it to what you want ... you can say, 'actually I'm only interested in Greek athletes and I'm only interested in three or four different sports so just provide me with all the information about that' and it will filter it ... It's a great boon. Most sports events don't actually have this but the Olympics is such a big thing that internally getting the news of what's going on inside the Olympic Games is so important to everybody you just have to have this service'.

## The question of legacy remains

In the wake of such a monumental media effort, the legacy of the IBC/MPC remains unknown. A reported four billion people around the world witnessed at least a moment of the Games on television, a figure that includes 90% of the UK population.<sup>9</sup> The stadium itself and the IBC/MPC are the last two Olympic Park venues (out of a total of eight) to have not yet secured a long-term future as part of the regeneration plans for this part of London. There are suggestions that iCity will take over the space and transform it into an expansive technology hub with media studios, university facilities and office space to support the growing Tech City presence stretching from Shoreditch across East London but it remains to be seen whether the golden communications infrastructure of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympic Games will continue to breathe life beyond the event itself.

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<sup>9</sup> 2012 things to remember the London Olympics by - Part 1, 1 to 1108, *The Independent*, August 14, 2012.

**This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal***

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To submit a paper or to discuss publication, please contact:

Dr Paul Bowman: BowmanP@cf.ac.uk

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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