

Non-Accredited Media, Olympic Games and the Host City

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Introduction

Since their inauguration in 1896, the Modern Olympic Games have been researched through various academic traditions. With the formalisation of cognate research areas such as media, cultural studies, and sport and leisure studies in the 1970s, social research into the Olympics has developed steadily. Anthropologists and sociologists have considered the Games to be a rich source from which to study the playing out of national identities and cultural politics. Often referred to as the biggest event in the world, the Olympic Games has become a site for historic political expressions, such as the time in Mexico (1968) when athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested the treatment of African Americans in the USA by raising black-gloved hands on their medal podium.

In recent years, research has focused on social and economic impacts and the role of the media in transforming the Games into a globally shared experience. This research demonstrates that media coverage of the Games plays a vital role in projecting an image of the local host, but that the current structures of Games organisers and media providers undermine the representation of culturally diverse voices. By focusing on reporting the sporting competitions and official ceremonies, the media fails to reflect the particularities of each Olympic festival. As such, the cultural context of the Games, including street activity and other cultural programming, is often lost or misrepresented.

Today, this trend is in the process of transformation with the emergence of alternative and new media, a phenomenon that has evolved since the creation of the first official ‘non-accredited media centre’ (NAMC) at the Sydney 2000 Games. The NAMC is distinct from the accredited media centres (comprising the Main Press Centre and the International Broadcasting Centre), which are reserved only for the official media right-holders under exclusive national arrangements. The main function of accredited centres is to provide facilities and information for the reporting of sporting competitions. In contrast, the NAMCs are open to any media representative (including freelance journalists) and offer a significant amount of material on human-interest stories, local activity groups, and the Olympic cultural programme.

In this context, our paper builds on research from the four most recent Olympic Games where the NAMCs have developed to inquire into how such journalists might transform reporting about the Olympic Games. We consider what stories of the Olympics “non-accredited” journalists tell and what role they play in terms of defining and affecting the meaning of the

Games? The issue of defining who is a journalist, what rights they have, how they are served and managed is an important aspect of determining control of the platform. It is also of particular importance to organising committees whose work relies on managing the media. Indeed, the development of new media and a range of 'Web 2.0' platforms raises new questions about how the notion of control should be approached in the era of Internet journalism where, potentially, every spectator might be counted as a journalist of the Games.

As the Beijing 2008 Olympics approaches, the future of the non-accredited journalist is in the balance. The non-accredited journalists (along with the unaccredited or 'citizen journalist') could present an ideological challenge for the Beijing government generally and for the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) specifically. However, non-accredited journalists – rather than the accredited – could also be crucial at re-positioning Western media within China.

Overview

This research emerged alongside other research practices at the Sydney Olympic Games, where it appeared that the non-accredited media centre was fulfilling an intriguing role as part of the Olympic proceedings. Sydney was the first Olympic city to provide a substantial NAMC, though the concept developed first in the Barcelona 1992 Games. In Sydney, it was evident that a range of journalists – both non-accredited and accredited – were using the facilities and that the space performed numerous functions during the Olympic weeks. In Salt Lake City and Athens, we formalised a research process with the following aims:

1. Understand the operational structure and function of the NAMC in contrast to the accredited Olympic media centres, managed by the organising committee of the Games under IOC regulations.
2. Identify the needs of local cultural groups to secure appropriate media representation during Games time.
3. Understand how journalists and local promoters make sense of the NAMC and how they could utilise it better.

These questions were further developed in relation to the Torino 2006 Olympic Winter Games and initial investigative work in relation to the Beijing 2008 Olympics, during field research in July 2006.

Methodology

The project methodologies were fundamentally qualitative, consisting of:

- interviews with key NAMC stakeholders, registered journalists and representatives from local cultural organisations presenting their work during the Games;
- review and analysis of relevant documentation about the NAMC and cultural programming during the Games;
- participant observations at the NAMC and selected cultural activities in Athens and key Olympic venues.

The research data was collected during the Olympic Games fortnight, with the exception of Beijing, which took place two years before the Beijing 2008 Games.

For Salt Lake City, Athens and Torino, the first week of Olympic fortnight was spent within the press room, planning the identification of key contacts and remaining within the facility to observe what took place. During this time, key information was also collected. Concurrently, time was spent becoming familiar with the city and developing a broad awareness of how non-accredited media might undertake their work at the Games.

During the second week we gathered information about the main cultural promoters within the NAMC. Throughout the Olympic fortnight, documentation was gathered on daily news releases, monitoring of journalist participation, and promotion of other cultural activities. During the final days, the remaining interviews were undertaken, and we dedicated time to engage with local groups at cultural events.

Main Findings

Operational Structure and Function of the NAMC

The NAMC is an active centre of information for the media, attracting a wide diversity of journalists representing not only mainstream media (as is the case in the accredited centres) but also smaller outlets such as specialist culture and trade magazines and community radio stations. The majority of registered journalists represented domestic media (national and local) but there was a clear effort to attract international journalists, whom appeared to be treated with extra special care and attention. The NAMC provided daily briefings about the political, social and cultural issues surrounding the Games, while the accredited centres focused on the sporting competitions and IOC related matters exclusively.

The NAMC is generally located in a central city location¹ to ensure maximum representation of daily city-life stories. The NAMC offers a relaxing and comfortable environment compared with the accredited centres. It makes a point of offering good quality food and refreshments, representative of the local gastronomy; it showcases stands sponsored by the main public agencies representing tourism, heritage, the arts and offering related services to journalists; it offers daily afternoon and evening functions providing a taste of local cultural heritage. The NAMC has no official link to the accredited centres but ensures representation of the Olympic organising committee in all non-sporting related issues such as the official cultural, educational and environmental programmes.

Our stakeholder interviewees, representing key governmental and corporate groups, insisted that the NAMC provides a good platform to present their work. This is because the management team is easily accessible to public agencies and related organisations compared with the strict regulations of the Olympic organising committee within the official media centres. The NAMC provides a venue for high profile presentations that were not featured in the accredited centres, as the latter tend to be consumed by news concerning the sporting competitions. For example, in Athens, the NAMC was the venue for the Olympic Truce initiative, attended by the Greek and UK PMs, Royal family of Spain, etc.

¹ In the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games, a second, mountain-based NAMC was created. This was to provide background information to the journalists based around the main sporting venues - the ski resorts. With this development, not only the cultural background of the host city life, but also its mountain life - in particular, the tourist offer - was being projected to visiting journalists.

However, the media value of the cultural stories was not always optimal. Despite its diversity, information about its purpose was not always made clear to journalists. Furthermore, the amount of local guests linked to special presentations sometimes outnumbered that of journalists. As a result, some events seemed to act more as private parties than international media opportunities. Also, the range of activities presented was unbalanced, as the main emphasis was to project the interests of the key NAMC stakeholders (mainly, tourist and economic development agencies and some corporate sponsors). As such, although the NAMCs are open to contributions from all sorts of cultural groups, the majority of presentations addressed the interests of key local public agencies in terms of tourism and business attraction rather than the local artistic community and wider population. This was evident in the tone of many cultural presentations, where traditional forms - more in line with tourist promotions - predominated over contemporary expressions.

Journalists were pleased with the setting and the diversity of activities on offer. However, there was a lack of understanding about the purpose of the NAMC and how it differed from the accredited centres. Mainstream journalists using the NAMC because of its convenient location often complained about the lack of sporting information (a function it did not intend to serve). Furthermore, due to the emphasis on the tourist and economic agenda of most NAMC stakeholders, staff members are not always equipped to inform about the NAMC facilities and other media operations but rather the activities on offer in the city. This was noticeable in the Torino centre, where the most prominent information desk was entirely dedicated to the organisation of city tours but could not address any questions relating to upcoming press conferences or the hiring of spaces for interviews or recordings. Despite these complaints, in Athens, approximately 300 out of the 15,000 *accredited* journalists ended using the NAMC as their main base. Also, eight out of ten journalists representing alternative and specialist media were interested in the stories on offer at the NAMC rather than sporting stories. Their angle was more diverse and inclusive than that of the mainstream Olympic media. They covered the political and social issues surrounding the Games hosting process and portrayed the stories of local cultural groups including ethnic minorities and marginal communities.

Conclusions: From Non-Accredited to *New-Media* Centres

The presence of the NAMC occupies an ambiguously regulated zone within the Olympic infrastructure. Emerging from the host city local government rather than the official organizing committee, the operational space for non-accredited media does not permit the use of Olympic iconography (such as the Olympic rings). Neither does it provide complimentary access to sporting competitions for journalists, unlike the accredited facilities (the International Broadcast Centre and the Main Press Centre). Instead, it offers an opportunity for journalists to report on anything other than the sports events, which includes, for instance, performances and activities related to the Olympic Cultural Programme. It also offers information about 'human interest' stories, which generally includes information about the local culture and region. For instance, at the Salt Lake Winter Games in 2002, there was an emphasis on promoting the ski and snowboarding resorts; in Athens, the centre promoted Greek heritage as well as project country's role and aspirations to protect the philosophical traditions and contemporary diplomatic potential of the Olympic Movement; in Torino 2006, the emphasis was on promoting the gastronomy and design industries in the Piemonte region. To this extent, we have identified that there are, potentially, competing aspirations between the host city and the International Olympic Committee. For the latter, the Olympic Games is an opportunity to re-establish and showcase the Olympic brand. For the former, the Olympic

brand is a catalyst for drawing attention to the cultural identity of the city/region, which is expected to translate into economic investment over a number of years. Yet, each aspiration competes for scarce media coverage during the intense period of the Olympic fortnight.

The development of non-accredited media at the Olympics presents an interesting set of circumstances for Beijing, particularly given recent developments in online publication and broadcasting. At the Torino 2006 Olympic Winter Games, there was a noticeable presence of new media journalists at the non-accredited facilities, which was significantly different from the Athens 2004 Summer Games. Indeed, the Torino Games was perhaps the first in Olympic history where low-budget journalistic operations could broadcast effectively through the Internet. For instance, many of the increasingly pervasive platforms such as You Tube came online around the end of 2005. Torino demonstrated some further challenges posed by non-accredited media, given the capacity to publish multimedia content through diverse online platforms. In fact, some of the new media journalists felt constrained by the concept of having a physical 'centre', which implies a restriction on movement during the chaotic Games time period. There is also a challenge for the organisers to determine how to provide accreditation to online journalists, many of whom would not fit into traditional definitions of what it means to be a journalist. For instance, many of the journalists present in Torino were neither professionally accredited nor professionally free-lance reporters. Rather, a considerable amount of those present had extensive followings of viewers to their weblogs (blogs) or online magazines. This raises problems since the accreditation process for the non-accredited media centres has typically required formal evidence of professional journalism status. However, some NAMC hosts have been happy to accept evidence of publishing as the only requirement for entry. In our view, it is crucial that future NAMCs learn to accommodate the non-professional journalist in order to maximise the impact of this investment.

The dual challenge of a) non-accredited and b) new media suggests the possibility of re-constituting the established model of media representation at an Olympic Games, which also offers greater potential for the Olympics to acknowledge more fully its fundamental values. From one perspective, new media publishing, particularly as it is characterised as 'citizen journalism' is wholly consistent with the principles of Olympism. However, the non-accredited media presents a challenge to the financial structure of the Olympic Movement, which is reliant upon the sale of intellectual property (ie. broadcasting rights). As such, if they continue to grow in prestige and influence, then one could foresee Olympic sponsors seeking to curtail or absorb its function. Moreover, the pressure to manage media narratives on the Games might lead to its abolition through a contractual stipulation between the IOC and the host city. We conclude that this would be devastating from the perspective of the ideals of Olympism, which should, more broadly, be characterised as the public charter through which the social role of the Olympic Movement is ensured.

Future hosts of the Olympic Games will benefit from exploring how to harness the role of the non-accredited journalists and consider strategically how best to furnish them with opportunities to tell stories about the Games. While there is often a focus on coverage during Games time, many of the non-accredited journalists are working on features which will be published soon after the Games, but which are not competing for publication space or have pressing deadlines. The NAMCs provide a dynamic setting and can deal with queries in a more flexible way than the official accredited centres. Most importantly, they offer alternative stories that allow a greater understanding of the Olympic host and can ensure a fairer representation of local communities.

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