The new role of the mass media in the construction of sport and Olympic values

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1.   Introduction

An interpretation of the cultural values of sport and Olympism in contemporary society cannot be made without considering the enormous influence that the media have on them. Such an interpretation is even more difficult to make if we bear in mind the wide range of new relationships that Sport, Olympism and the Media strike up between each other in what has been termed as the "marriage of interests", as the "coming together of interests" or, more recently, as "synergies", all of which serve to emphasise their new economic and technological relationships.

As a result of this new coming together of interests or "synergy", the media are no longer straightforward broadcasters or reporters on sporting issues. They themselves have now become actors and producers of a new cultural phenomenon that we could "media-sport".

To make this possible, both the media - television in particular - and sport have been forced to transform their respective organisation and production logic. In other words, their coming together has been possible by their prior adaptation.

To understand this phenomenon in depth, it is necessary to examine it from a double viewpoint. On the one hand, we could consider the transformation of sporting activities -and especially spectator sports- as a consequence of media influence. On the other, we could consider the influence that sport itself has on the media. This twin-edged analysis will allow us to reveal to what degree we are actually faced with a new phenomenon -that we have termed "media-sport"- which has multiple technological, economic, social and cultural implications.

2.   The role of "Media-Sport" in popular modern culture

Recent research proves that there has been a major increase -at least quantitatively- of sport in the media in countries all over the world, in the number of specialist newspapers, the number of pages given over sport in conventional newspapers, television sport channels, in the number of programming hours and the radio and television sport programmes' audiences, etc.

The increase in the number of references to sport and Olympism in advertising and sponsorship strategies of small and large advertisers alike stresses the financial importance that this phenomenon has acquired and is also an unquestionable sign of its cultural importance.

"Media-sport" is one of the major forms of entertainment in modern societies but, as the cultural theory has clearly shown, these forms of entertainment are also forms of production and a privileged vehicle for the broadcast of ideas about identity, social- relationships, cultural exchange, etc. What is more, "media-sport" has become one of the main settings for the exhibition (ritual) of social and intercultural relationships on a worldwide scale.

Sport is also a powerful "audiovisual" resource for television channels. "Media-sport" is so well adapted - even better than cinema- to the new conditions of the communication society which, dialectically speaking, attempts to draw cultural reference from the "global" (worldwide) and the "local" (national, city). "Media-sport" is so well adapted -even better than the "soap operas"- to the needs of group identification and symbolic participation in major public events.

The stars of sport, the athletes, have become never-ending sources of inspiration for the construction of stories to be told. Today, sport is a never-ending source of characters and plots for the mass media. Modern stories about good and bad, success and failure, luck and misfortune, victory and defeat, things native and foreign, group identity and emotion are all recounted in their most popular of expressions - sports narration.

The media select, prioritise, augment and silence the values (and counter-values) of sport and Olympism. And they do so ... for billions of people, for the new "tele-athletes" or, in other words, the "viewers" who have never done -and may never do- any sport in their lives.

The cultural importance of sport is unquestionable when we realise that "media-sport", besides satisfying the symbolic needs of the identification of groups and nations, also satisfies the needs of the "tele-athletes" fantasies and the identification.

3.   Media-Olympism

What we have said so far about sport is equally applicable to Olympism. In addition, the dimension of the Olympic Games, their unique "local-global" character, the wide range of sports represented and their universality are all aspects that turn them into the principal setting for the these new forms of "media-sport" where the mass media and the Olympic organisers share the same cultural responsibilities.

Our study of Olympic ceremonies as covered by 26 television companies from all over the world[1] shows that biggest televisual event in modern society is, to be precise, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. What is more, the ceremony is not just experienced by the spectators present in the stadium but by approximately 800 million viewers around the globe. We also discovered that many different ceremonies exist; the interpretation of the ceremony by each individual country's media depends on the criteria of quality and respect for Olympic values placed on it. These criteria were found to vary tremendously.

Why should we analyse the cultural aspects of the Olympic ceremonies if we stick to the scripted proposals produced by their creators? All contemporary sports phenomena, including the ceremonies, are the end-product of a new triangle formed by sport organisers, the media and viewers.

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[1]   De Moragas, M. and Rivenburgh, N., Television in the Olympics, John Libbey, London 1996

4.   Sport and its influence on the media. The importance of sport for television

It is generally recognised that modern sport can no longer do without the media and vice-versa.

As far as television is concerned, the interdependence is so great that when analysed we are able to reveal the general conditions governing the modern audiovisual industry. Analyzing the role of sport in television could be as representative as analyzing other major audiovisual phenomena such as television fiction, cinema, news programmes or advertising.

The influence that sport exerts over television affects several areas. Here we shall take a look at four in particular:

a - Programme scheduling

b - Audiences and the economy

c - Television companies' recognition and prestige

d - Technological development and the new stages of television

a - Programme scheduling

Regarding sport's influence on television programme scheduling, it should be pointed out that sport constitutes a never-ending source of programmes and broadcasts (live or recorded) that are gradually accounting for a higher percentage of time in relation to modern television's total broadcasting time.

Sport has many advantages and holds a great deal of appeal for television programmers given that programmes are relatively cheap, very varied and quite restricted in production complexity, and that the audiences constitute a source of high profitability because its easy adaptation to the advertising strategies.

b - Audiences and the economy

Sport manages to attract large audiences for television. We should also consider the fact that sport achieves large viewing ratings on international, national and local television in the annual sports programme scheduling.

A very significant part of such sports programmes is broadcast in prime time whilst other programmes are spread out over a wide range of times and thus manage to attract large segments of the (international, national and local) advertising market.

c - Television companies' recognition and prestige

The consolidation of some television companies and their popularity is due in part to the leading role they have played in the coverage of major sporting events. The fight ensures to get the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games is a good example of the synergy that exists at this point. Sport has a great deal of added value for the advertisers' and television companies' strategies,

d - Technological development and the new stages of television

In our analysis of the relationship between television and sport, we should not turn a blind eye to the fact that television - and the media in general - is immersed in a process of significant change. The change involved makes us think about even better synergies between sport and television in the future.

So, for example, sport, because of its global dimension, has been one of the major protagonists of the implementation of technology in contemporary communication (satellites, video, special cameras, etc.).

The Olympic Games are, thus, a field of fundamental experimentation in the history of technological innovation in the media in general and television in particular.

The conditions of a new ecology of communication demand greater speed and perceptive ease as far as advertising messages are concerned. Faced with this new situation, sport sponsoring may constitute a very important alternative solution to today's commercial breaks.

Sport manifests itself as a privileged instrument in the audience targeting processes which in the future will involve pay-TV and advertising.

High definition television (HDTV), the processes of digitalization and multimedia will shape new ways of seeing sport and the human body's movements, in addition to spectacularity and, probably, increasing the audiences of the sports broadcasts.

Sport will be a privileged field for competitive strategies between television companies and will provide the ensuing benefits. Besides, it will also provoke competition between the organizers of sporting events.

The cohabitation of different forms of pay-TV and free distribution may further strengthen the mutual economic relationship between television and sport.

5.   Television and its influence on sport

Although the media is influenced by sport, it must be said that sport is even more influenced by the media.

5.1. From sports information to the production of a sports spectacle

Until the 70s, sport was relatively independent from the mass media. The media exerted the same influence over sport as they did over social institutions like the economy, politics and culture.

However, these influences changed radically when the media went beyond providing "information about sport" as they themselves gradually became the stars of sport, with live broadcasts and the production of sports spectacles.

From that moment onwards, the mass media, and television in particular, were not just interpreters or informers of sporting activities but became true co-authors. Graphically speaking, the changes began to become radical when the stadia turned into television studios.

At that moment, a process of convergence between sports programming and the programming needs of a television company began. This process involved the following stages:

a - The adaptation of national and international sporting calendars to fit in with the demands of the television's calendar. Periodisation was sought and event overlapping was avoided.

b - The adaptation of sports timetables to the television's timetabling demands or priorities, especially as far as "prime time television" was concerned.

c - The internationalization of the sports spectacle. Without doing away with the sporting events' local or national references, the new international dimension was strengthened, not only on a worldwide level as for the Olympic Games and world-championships, but also on a continental level as demonstrated by the success of continental championships for football, athletics, car racing events, etc.

d - The changes in the popularity ratings for sports. Another important influence manifests itself in the new hierarchical ranking of sport. A sport's popularity is no longer solely determined by the sports spectacle in itself, but by the spectacularity of the television pictures. One example of this is diving, which managed to gain one of the highest viewing audiences during the Olympic Games.

e - The popularisation of Western sports in Eastern countries and the Third World. The Western-origin sports influence is growing as a consequence of the influence that Western television systems exert on a worldwide scale.

f - The regulations adapted to television. Leaving the influence that video may have on judges' decisions and the preparation of athletes to one side, television has already begun to impose its criteria on the length of competitions. One exemplary case of this influence is the break imposed in tennis matches whose length is not foreseeable because that unpredictable aspect of the sport in itself jeopardises their broadcast on television.

g - Stadia turn into "television studios". The architecture of new stadia must include spaces for television cameras, which may run into hundreds during large events. The television cameras' presence has an indirect influence on the iconography of the stadia because of the decoration and animation designed to satisfy the needs of television. Thus the presence of advertising hoardings is simply a part of a whole.

h - The sound reaching the viewers has begun to be manipulated by the media whose aim is to achieve the highest possible technical profitability from its broadcasts. A good example of this phenomenon is the use of pre-recorded soundtracks -even for applause- in numerous live sporting events.

i - Audience selection. Television also affects the composition of the audiences, making the presence of young people in the stadia gradually clearer and more exclusive, whilst more and older people follow sport on television.

j - Choice of host towns or cities for large sporting events. The presence and the demands of the mass media also affect the choice of host towns or cities when it comes to organising major sporting events because of the ever increasing difficulties involved due to technological limitations. The organisation of the soccer world cup by the United States in 1994, and the most recent choice of Olympic hosts (Lillehammer'94, Atlanta'96, Nagano'98, Sydney'2000) are but a few examples that bear out this new conditioning factor.

k - Still, the media offer sport something more than just conditioning factors. The media constitute sports' major source of finance. What city on Earth would be prepared to organise a major sporting event in exchange for a guaranteed private or public loss?
The relationship among television, audiences, direct (pay per view) or indirect (sponsoring) sale and sporting event constitutes the condition that makes modern sport possible, at least modern sport on a worldwide scale.

6.   Cultural changes. New types of relationship between society and sport

The new situation also affects the most deep-rooted cultural aspects of the relationship between the citizens and sport. The mass media have transferred some of their most conventional values to sport.

Thus, for example, we are able to see how "triumphalism" on victory and "dramatism" on defeat has increased considerably, which is now magnified to the extent of being on a national scale at least. Achieving fourth or fifth position in the Olympic Games, losing a football match, etc. may be taken as a national failure.

That is why it would now be extremely interesting to do a comparative study between the stories and values of soap operas and sports newscasting. Both are "story telling" techniques that presently affect sporting stardom. That is why individual sports are becoming increasingly more popular or why athletes' leadership is undergoing a great deal of development.

Remember, for example, the conflict between American skaters Nancy Kerrigan (good and kind) and Tonya Harding (bad and mean) in Lillehammer'94. Their performances managed to beat audience records, not only in the history of televised sport but also in the history of American television: a 64% share of the

viewers on a Wednesday during prime time television from a recorded programme. This amounts to a total audience figure of 126 million viewers.

It is significant to note that these audience ratings have only been beaten by other sports broadcasts - some Super bowl finals- and crucial episodes of major series like Mash or Dallas. It is not surprising, thus, to find that soap operas and sport head the television audience league of all time.

Sport analysis must be done within the context of contemporary culture analysis, as a phenomenon central to it and not as a phenomenon isolated from it.

7.   The role of media. Critical and educational responsibilities

Under these circumstances, we must demand a high degree of cultural responsibility from the media and sporting organisations.

We must demand the media to exercise their critical function with regard to sporting institutions and events. The media should report the mismanagement of sporting institutions (Federations, Clubs, Committees, governmental sport policy executives, etc.), the abuse of commercialisation, the use of drugs and inhuman training practices, antisocial (and unsporting) behaviour of the protagonists, etc. In this sense, they should not defend differences or privileges for sport over and should respect other social institutions (economic, political, educational, scientific, etc.).

On the other hand, we must also demand the media to be culturally and morally responsible in their coverage of modern "media-sport" events. Sports commentators and cameramen bear a great deal of cultural responsibility in terms of their commentaries and focus on sporting events.

The media bear their share of the responsibility: modern sport will only be able to fulfill its educational responsibilities if the media make a valid contribution to the strengthening of its positive values and avoid highlighting the negative ones.

For their part, sporting institutions - Federations, clubs, athletes, etc. ¬must be aware of the effects that their decisions and gestures can have because of their constant exposure to the media.

8.   The necessary independence between the media and sporting institutions

The synergies between media and sport being analysed here, as well the common interests stemming from them, may provoke a loss of independence between sporting institutions and the media. In fact, there are more and more cases of sports clubs going through financial crises which are purchased by large media companies, thus creating common television-sport businesses.

The combination of interests between the media and sporting institutions may cause the media's

necessary critical function of sport to weaken -or even disappear- and therefore lead to a loss of autonomy and independence.

However, an equally negative effect can be attributed to the loss of sporting institutions' independence from the media. In this instance, sporting institutions may give in to demands of the media at the expense of some of the values of sport itself.

Here are some examples. Athletes are starting to be affected by some undesirable changes in the scheduling of their sport or are being subjected to an unbearable pace of competition. This has occurred as a result of the pressure of the media which require a larger number of spectacles to make their investments profitable. The mass media's need for spectacularity has already begun to jeopardise minority sports and thus generally jeopardise sporting activity or the unique nature of the many local-interest sports.

To be more critical still, this loss of independence may neutralise sport's educational messages, making the counter-values of competition and rivalry prevail over and above the values of participation, fair-play and tolerance.

Faced with phenomena of such complexity it is hard to offer solutions, though it is possible to suggest some positive attitudes in favour of the upkeep of sport's positive function in modern society. In my opinion, this positive attitude involves suggesting negotiation whilst respecting the logic of both sport and communication. Such negotiation should take place from independent standpoints with each party having its own duties even though their cultural responsibilities are shared.

9.   Challenges for the Future of the Olympic Movement

In this context, one hundred years after the restoration of the Olympic Games by Pierre de Coubertin, we are in a position to demand the Olympic Movement to exercise a worldwide leadership to safeguard the educational values of sport[2] which now implies negotiation and the independence of the media.

The present-day reality of world sport with the ever-increasing number of international championships and competitions is very different from what Pierre de Coubertin would have experienced in his day. His ideas of universalism have become incredibly reinforced by 20th century communication technology and telecommunications. However, the unique character of the Olympic Movement cannot restrict itself to the upkeep of the values of physical education and that universality. Instead, it must now embrace issues that defend the educational and cultural responsibility of Olympism in the new context of "media-sport".

This leadership can and must be expressed in several highly significant aspects of modern Olympism like,

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[2] - "This leadership has already been recognised by the United Nations by encouraging all member states to respect the Olympic Truce and by praising the international Olympic Committee for its activity throughout the last century. (United Nations, General Assembly. "Creating, through sport and the Olympic Ideal, a better world where peace reigns". November 2, 1995).

for example, demanding the media to verbally and visually respect the content of the Olympic ceremonies, ensuring the organisers respect the uniqueness and priority of the athletes in the organisation of the Olympic Games, ensuring the media respect the scheduling of the competitions in line with the Federations' requirements, ensuring that respect for women's participation in the Olympic Movement is made patently clear (not just in the sport competitions but in the organisation of the sport itself) and ensuring that respect for the universality of participation over and above all competitive and spectacular interests is made patently clear and effective.

"This leadership has already been recognised by the United Nations by encouraging all member states to respect the Olympic Truce and by praising the international Olympic Committee for its activity throughout the last century. (United Nations, General Assembly. "Creating, through sport and the Olympic Ideal, a better world where peace reigns". November 2, 1995).

To achieve these objectives -even though we recognise that the objective is a difficult one- it will be necessary to find ways of meeting at least two conditions:

    a - Firstly, to retain the independence of the Olympic Movement, not only from often-mentioned specific political powers, but also from the financial conditions imposed by the new pressure groups formed by sponsoring institutions and the media.

    b - Secondly, to retain the capacity to negotiate the sport programming and broadcasting conditions with the above-mentioned media and sponsors.

However, the Olympic Movement, and in general the sports institutions, would be unable to reach these goals without the knowledge and understanding of the internal logic of the media which is difficult to alter. In our opinion, the following should be considered as the main approaches:

- So, for example, the spectacularity, as well as the seriousness and stringency, of the Olympic rituals during ceremonies must be retained.

- Facilitating television coverage (personalised) for the television companies of participating countries and not exclusively to the most developed ones. This means considering a new form of "Olympic solidarity" as far as technical aid for the television production and reception of the Olympic Games is concerned in the world's less developed countries.

- Accommodating the demands of the most popular sports (the ones with the highest viewing figures) whilst putting aside some time, a percentage, for less popular sports, especially those which are the most important from the promotion of a "sport for all" point of view.

Negotiation between the sporting institutions (with the Olympic Movement leading the way) and the media may also involve reaching agreements on the commitment to promote the essential values of sport as

described in several recent documents produced by the United Nations, the Council of Europe[3]- and the Olympic Movement itself, such as the ideals of peace, fraternity, cooperation and tolerance.

Demands must also be placed on the media to assume their new responsibilities within the whole "media-sport" context. It is also the media's responsibility to reflect the values of international peace and understanding inherent to the Olympic Movement. In addition, the media must also use and promote a new language which banishes the warlike, violent terms from its vocabulary and removes aggressive approaches from its narration. Television sports commentators should be able to construct the event and the joyous celebration of it with a positive approach without needing to scorn other contenders, using and constructing new symbols of understanding whilst removing racism and intolerance from all their productions.

The educational values of sport -in "media-sport- are now a responsibility shared by the media and sporting institutions.

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[3] Council of Europe, Resolution about Sport and Tolerance, May, 1995