



The Olympic Games, media, and the challenges of global image making

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1. The Olympic Games as a global image making strategy

Whether one calls them international events, mega-events, or global media events, hosting an Olympic Games is one of several strategies used by city and national governments and for image enhancement on a global stage. Deutsch and Merritt (1965) call this a 'spectacular event' approach (versus a 'cumulative' image strategy of lower profile behaviors over time). They also point out that staging a 'spectacular event' is a high-risk endeavor where the potential for success or failure looms equally large. One element of this risk is that a mega-event host must rely upon the whims and ways of a largely independent, global media network to project its desired image around the world. The goal of this lesson is to review the key influences on how international media construct images of an Olympic host. In this way, we might better understand the challenges faced by cities and countries that pursue this global image-making strategy.

1.1 The risks and rewards of hosting the Olympics

There are many reasons why cities and nations compete vigorously to host the Olympics Games. At the top of the list is to gain prestige and favorable world opinion. Hosts seek to be coupled with the positive image associations that the Olympic Games enjoy. In a series of studies commissioned by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) the Olympic Games were seen by international respondents as representing the world's top sporting event and associated with high standards and excellence, international cooperation, peace, and national pride (IOC, 1998:18).

In addition, the ability to stage a logistically complex international event is seen as a symbol of modernity. Tokyo in 1964, Mexico City in 1968, and Seoul in 1988 sought to host the Olympics Games in an effort to be recognized as 'advanced' nations in the global community. Olympic hosts may seek image enhancements that will increase tourism or solidify trade or diplomatic relations. As Larson and Park (1993) point out, a significant goal of the 1988 Seoul Olympics was to assist South Korea in establishing political and economic relations with Eastern Bloc countries and the Soviet Union. The infrastructure improvements that typically accompany Olympic host preparations are also used to attract domestic and foreign business and tourism. Barcelona was a tremendous success story of urban upgrades spurred by the 1992 Olympics. Atlanta became the most 'wired' city in the United States as a result of preparing for the 1996

Olympics and, as a result, boasts post-Games business expansions and new capital investments to boost the local economy. The decision to host a mega-event may also be to showcase to the world a political ideology, as with the Berlin Olympics in 1936 or Moscow in 1980. Roche (2000) offers a helpful literature review of research that documents the goals and outcomes for successive Olympics Games.

Whatever the economic and political reasoning may be behind an Olympic bid, the immediate goal of any Olympic host is to produce a successful sports and cultural spectacle that will garner favorable media coverage worldwide. Without question, an Olympic host steps dramatically - and alone - onto a world stage. The televised reach of the Olympics broadcast remains unsurpassed by other mega-events. The Atlanta Games were televised in 214 countries and territories. For Sydney, the figure rose to 220 (IOC, 1998:32).

As noted above, this global image-making endeavor comes with significant costs and challenges. Staging an Olympic Games is expensive - and only becoming more so in an era of heightened security concerns (e.g. Cashman, 2002). The budget for the 1996 Atlanta Games was \$1.7 billion. The Olympic Games are logistically complex. The Atlanta Games were 17 days, 26 sports, 271 events, 17,000 media personnel (Verdier, 1996; ACOG, 1996), 93,200 staff and volunteers, and 11,000 athletes, officials, and diplomats to house, feed, transport, and protect - not to mention the influx of two million tourists attending the event. While many Olympic host committees have tackled the complex planning and logistics of the Olympics Games with great success, even the most organized of hosts cannot control all aspects of the event - from weather to street demonstrations to the outcome of the sports competitions. Perhaps most significant is that the host organization cannot control the one thing it wants most to manage: international media interpretations of the event.

1.2 International media constructions of the Olympic host

Several decades of Olympics research have found that little new *knowledge* about a host city or country is remembered by international audiences as a result of an Olympic Games. There are, however, significant *impressions* and associations that audiences make with cities and nations that successfully host an Olympic Games. The most prominent of these is a common image of modernity. Beyond that, content analyses of Olympic Games media coverage have

demonstrated that this 'singular event' is constructed in multiple ways around the world, significantly influencing the variety of information, and thus impressions, international audiences receive about an Olympic host (e.g., Moragas et al., 1995; Larson and Rivenburgh, 1991; Rivenburgh et al., 2004; Brownell, 1995; Werder and Jung, 2001).

Taken together, this body of research has demonstrated that international media coverage of an Olympic Games varies, country by country, in the:

- amount and nature of pre-Games publicity given to an Olympic Games and host;
- amount of media attention given to the Games (broadcast and print);
- balance of attention within the event to specific sports, nations and athletes;
- depth and breadth of topic presentation about the host city, nation, and culture; and
- evaluation of host performance and Games success.

For the opening and closing Ceremony broadcasts, in particular, researchers have found differences in international television broadcasts of the:

- topics discussed during the opening and closing ceremonies;
- balance of attention given to Olympic rites, host cultural performance, advertisements; and specific nations during the parade;
- descriptions of other nations; and
- broadcast commentator style.

Thus, not only do media constructions of the Olympic host vary from country to country, they can vary significantly from the image the Olympic host organizing committee wishes to project. What follows is a review of the most prominent media-related factors faced by cities and countries that host the Olympic Games as part of an image-making strategy.

2. Media as cultural and national actors

2.1 Cultural, political, and geographic orientation to host nation

While comparative studies of international media content show an increasing convergence in media formats, production values, and even topic selection across national contexts, closer textual analyses consistently reveal how coverage of international news, sports, and feature content is “domesticated” in ways that promote a home nation perspective – one that is relevant, appealing, and favorable to home nation audiences.

This is no different for media coverage of the Olympic Games. Research shows that national media tend to cover the Olympics as members of the cultures in which they reside (Hargreaves, 1992, Riggs et al., 1992; Rivenburgh, 1995). In fact, the host production of the Olympics is designed in a way that encourages international media to tailor the event to their interests. The Olympic host broadcaster provides rights-holding broadcasters with an ‘international signal’ (visual, natural sound, and informational graphics only) upon which national broadcasters overlay their commentary and edit as they wish, adding specialized graphics, sound, advertisements, features, or footage from their own camera placements at the sports venues. Similarly, print journalists receive raw event results and background information on specific events, athletes, and the host setting to interpret and formulate into stories of interest to home audiences. Media take these raw materials and ‘construct’ the Olympic host through the unique lens of their home culture.

For example, research has demonstrated that international broadcasters tend to focus on relevant aspects of their country’s particular relationship with the host – whether cultural, political, military, or economic. Moragas et al. (1995) found that Latin American broadcasters spoke of Barcelona with an emphasis on cultural similarities. Rivenburgh (1992) documented how the NBC coverage of the Seoul Olympics tended to highlight the economic and military relationship between the U.S. and South Korea. In a comparative study of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games as presented in the United States, South Africa, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, researchers found that the political, cultural and economic relationship of those countries to Australia was an important factor in media constructions – and audience perceptions – of the host. For example, the shadow of immigration tensions contributed to a more negative construction of Australia as Olympic host in Malaysia than in the United States, where

Australia was presented more in terms of its cultural similarity (Rivenburgh et al., 2004). During the 1988 Seoul Olympics western broadcasters were more likely to focus on Korea's move toward democracy and western-style capitalism (Larson and Rivenburgh, 1991; Rivenburgh, 1992). Real et al. (1992) found that print media constructions of the Cold War era hosts (Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984) were steeped in opposing Cold War political rhetoric. Kinkema and Harris (1998:34-36) offer a helpful review of studies, such as these, that demonstrate the significant role of political and cultural nationalism in media presentations of sport.

2.2 Intercultural challenges

The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Olympic Games are, in large part, designed as the primary venue for the Olympic host to present itself to the world – in an idealized form. The ceremonies involve a careful (and highly negotiated) selection of music, dance, graphics, costumes, and personalities designed to showcase the host culture and setting. In line with the televised entertainment aspect of the event, the ceremonies are visually dramatic and necessarily employ abstract representations of the host setting within the Olympic stadium (e.g., creating a river out of flowing blue cloth). As in all interactions across cultures, however, there is an inherent challenge to understanding the cultural performances designed by the Olympic host. How did global media interpret the football cheerleader segment of the Atlanta Opening Ceremony? The lawnmower performance in Sydney? The 'bubble' women of Albertville? The mythical 'vetter' and Sami chants in Lillehammer? Here again, research has demonstrated that international broadcasters often struggle with their intercultural interpretations of the host culture. For example, Kang (1992) has written of the extraordinary cultural richness embodied in the design the Seoul Olympic Opening Ceremony, but Rivenburgh (1992) found that most of the cultural significance of that Seoul Opening Ceremony was largely ignored by western broadcasters – with performance segments described only as “a beautiful and traditional dance” by the television commentators.

At the Barcelona Closing Ceremony, the Atlanta 1996 organizing committee – as is traditional – introduced the mascot, *Whatizit?*, for next Olympic Games. The mascot's name was intended to be a humorous play on the English phrase “What is it?” The doughy, cartoon-looking creature met with immediate confusion by international broadcasters covering this cultural

performance. An analysis of broadcasts from 17 nations revealed that only English-speaking broadcasters understood the comic play on words and none of the on-air commentators could figure out what the odd creature, and accompanying dance segment, was supposed to represent. As a result, the mascot was called a worm, a bug, an astronaut, ant-like, a good luck symbol, and more (Rivenburgh, 1993). A pair of frustrated Greek announcers had this on-air exchange:

Announcer 1: Honestly, I cannot understand what this is supposed to be.

Announcer 2: It has five Olympic rings....Honestly, I cannot tell what this is [with an angry tone].

Announcer 1: Don't try to look it up in the book they have given us. [Then to the audience] We don't know what its name is. Maybe at sometime they will let us know.

Eventually the Atlanta organizers heard about the confusion and gave the mascot a more defined, athletic look and the name "Izzy". Despite this early lesson in intercultural misinterpretations, Atlanta then chose to greet the world in the Opening Ceremony by having dancers spell out the localism 'How Y'all Doin' launching a new round of confusion for non-English speaking broadcasters around the world.

2.3 Stereotypes and ethnocentrism

For many Olympic hosts, part of the global image strategy is to 'overcome' certain stereotypes commonly associated with the host city or nation. This is no easy task as most types of media – especially sports media – tend toward an over-reliance on stereotypes to efficiently get their points across in a way that is familiar to home audiences (Blain et al., 1993). Despite the Barcelona 1992 organizing committee's concerted attempt to distinguish Catalan culture from commonly held stereotypes of Spain, this did not prevent Japanese, British, and other international broadcasters from creating graphic images of flamenco, red carnations, and bullfights to represent the Barcelona Games (Blain et al., 1993; Moragas et al., 1995).

In Rivenburgh's (1992) study of NBC coverage of the Seoul Olympics, she concluded that despite its admirable effort to introduce Americans to Korean life through the expensive creation of close to 40 feature segments, NBC still fell back on many familiar and stereotypical

allusions within the feature content (e.g., references to “back-street tailor shops” and “dog soup” and “strange” religious rituals). She states:

The brief tour of South Korea hosted by NBC adhered to all the rules of a US media format....It relied on visual and verbal information that was accessible in terms of both physical proximity of Seoul and in understanding to US audiences. The need for visual quality drew cameras to people and sights exotic to American: piles of dried fish, a shaman's ceremony to protect a new car from evil spirits, and colorful hanbok dress. Beyond a visual penchant for the unusual, the topics and themes were selected more for their relevance to US audiences – US military presence, baseball, growth of Christianity – than to be most representative of Korean culture (p. 29).

In another example, the Atlanta 1996 organizing committee worked very hard to promote a distinctive image of the American South as part of its global image strategy: a combination of gracious hospitality, racial diversity and progress, musical arts, and high technology. International broadcasters, instead, focused primarily on the hit parade of American stereotypes. The ceremonies were labeled as “Hollywood orchestrated”; the Games were “plagued by excess commercialism”; the city was rife with racial tension; and the primary industry was Coca Cola (Rivenburgh, 1997). Manheim (1994) explains this tendency by arguing that countries with high international media visibility prior to hosting a mega-event – such as the United States or China – face a more difficult challenge if their goal is to change existing stereotypes. By contrast, Olympic hosts with lower international media visibility – such as Lillehammer, Norway – have a greater opportunity to promote new images by staging an Olympic Games.

3. Media resources

3.1 Financial resources and location of event production

As stated above, research has shown that there is an extreme disparity in the attention different international media (press and broadcast) give to the host city/country setting and culture – ranging from abundant to virtually non-existent – in turn affecting audience exposure

to new information. Much of this depends upon the financial and staff resources of broadcasters. Quite simply, wealthier international media have the means to produce more feature segments about the host city and culture and thus tend to give a more complex (although not necessarily representative) picture of the host city.

Larson and Rivenburgh (1991) compared telecasts of Seoul Opening Ceremony in three countries with rights-holding broadcasters characterized by differing financial commitments, staff sizes, and commercial imperatives. The authors found that these factors contributed directly to differing amounts of commercial interruption, level of reliance on international feed, the ability to do event and country research, and the ability to embellish the telecast using extra cameras, interviews, prepackaged segments, and specialized graphics, resulting in three distinctly different presentations of the Seoul Ceremony. This same finding was confirmed four years later in a much larger 28-nation comparative study of the Barcelona Olympic Games by Moragas et al. (1995). As just one example, those authors found that the wealthier, rights-holding broadcasters from the United States, Germany, and Japan had media personnel working at least a year in advance to develop feature segments on the athletes and host setting. They found that the majority of media covering the Games, however, arrived only days before the event began and, due to the fast pace and incredible demands of covering 17 days of sports, rarely left the Main Press Center (MPC), International Broadcast Centre (IBC), or sports venues to experience and report on the host setting. Even more extreme was the situation of a few national broadcasters that, because of costs, did not send media personnel to the Games at all, but covered the Games from a studio at home. Those broadcasts virtually ignored the host setting.

3.2 Journalists as guests in a foreign location

Another critical factor in media coverage of an Olympic host – often not considered – is the personal experiences of journalists on site. Research on mega-events such as the Olympics and United Nations summits have found that attention to hosting logistics (good and bad) make up a significant amount of media coverage (Rusiano et al., 1997; Zaharopoulos et al., 1995; Giffard and Rivenburgh, 2000). This should come as no surprise given that media personnel, under severe time and work pressures while covering these events, are directly affected by traffic jams, computer delays, lack of available translators, poor directions, slow

security checks, excessive heat, inflated prices, and more. When the media can't do their job as efficiently as they imagine it should be done, they often vent their frustrations in writing.

Giffard and Rivenburgh's (2000) study of news agency coverage of six U.N. summits found that journalists evaluated and criticized both developed and developing nation hosts by, at times, artificially high western standards for comfort and efficiency. During the December 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle several of the journalists who were blocked by protesters from getting to the press center went back to their hotel rooms to write pieces severely criticizing the host city rather than the trade issues at stake. In the same way, journalists' reaction to local, logistical problems can harm an Olympic host image. A survey of international print media coverage of the Atlanta Games – an event that was plagued with computer failures, excessive heat, and traffic problems during its first week – found that journalists on site were extremely critical of Atlanta as Olympic host (Rivenburgh, 1997). In fact, 56 percent of all article themes in this particular survey of international press (173 articles across 16 countries) were negative toward Atlanta and the United States as Olympic host with the greatest number of themes related to organizational and logistical problems (The 'Problem Games', July 23, 1996, A1; Turner, 1996).

3.3 Host organization materials

An important aspect of any Olympic image strategy is the large array of collateral materials the host organization provides to media describing, and promoting, the host setting and society. These materials are typically produced in the Olympic languages only (English, French, and the host country language) and distributed before and during the Games. Many Olympic host committees have done a superb job providing educational computer, video, print, and photographic materials about the host city and culture for use by international media.

However, for the Opening and Closing ceremonies – noted above as central to an Olympic host image strategy – media receive a detailed guide to the cultural performances only a few hours before the start of the ceremony (so the content won't be leaked in advance). There is an important downside to this practice. When the international media receive the cultural explanations of the ceremonies in limited languages and at the last minute this severely restricts their ability to translate, process, and prepare commentary for adequate home audience understanding. This works directly against host organization image goals and allows

more room for international media to craft their own interpretations of the cultural performances – if they bother to do so at all. To confirm this, research has shown that very few broadcasters use the official ceremony media guide in a meaningful way. Instead, most broadcast commentary of the Olympic ceremonies, so carefully planned as part of the host identity campaign, rarely moves beyond the titles of each performance segment listed in the guide (Moragas et al., 1995:88; Larson and Rivenburgh, 1991:85; Chalip, 1989).

One notable step to assist international media representatives in their understanding of the host setting was that taken by the Atlanta Organizing Committee (ACOG). ACOG organized a panel of anthropologists, historians and other cultural experts of the American South and held a press conference for international media in an effort to provide more detailed information, and answer questions, about the host culture, history, and location for international journalists.

Moragas (1992) discusses the importance of identifying the host city's 'visual identity' as critical to the host image planning process. He argues that this aspect of the host image strategy must go well beyond the selection of an Olympic logo and mascot to include identification of buildings, monuments, arts, popular culture, geopolitical references, economy, technology, individuals, and other urban or geographic attributes that represent the host locale in terms of values and personality. He insists that a successful strategy must promote these symbols in ways that are both visually appealing and accessible to international media. The aim, he cautions, should not be that of 'selling' the host city and country to the world, but rather to "offer the world ... a cultural display ... a meeting place of cultural values" (p. 24).

For example, the host city selection of 'beauty cameras' locations around the city can have a significant impact on the 'look' of the host city and culture. Images from these cameras – whether placed in a central plaza, looking at mountain peaks, or elsewhere – feed directly to the International Broadcast Centre and are made available for use by all rights-paying international broadcasters. The best locations, such as those of the five 'beauty cameras' placed around Barcelona in 1992, tend to teem with people, activity, and cultural ambiance that changes 'personality' throughout the day and night. Also important is the selection of

visually striking urban landmarks – such as Sydney's Opera House or the Sagrada Família in Barcelona. Research has demonstrated that repeated media presentation of key visual icons in the host city or Olympic "moments" (e.g., a dramatic lighting of the Olympic flame) do find their way into audience recall of the host city after the Games.

Less effective seems to be the promotion of 'issues' and 'values' as part of a host image strategy. For example, the Sydney 2000 Olympic organizers attempted to focus their ceremonies on multicultural unity within Australia, but one result, demonstrated in surveys from at least four countries around the world, was that global audiences were now more aware of racial problems in Australia than ever before (Rivenburgh et al., 2004).

4. Media norms and formats

4.1. Pre-Olympic reporting routines

As with international news coverage, media coverage of the Olympics Games is also guided by a set of common formats and formulas. For example, research reveals a fairly routine agenda of pre-Olympic themes that appear in the media discourse and can serve to color a host's image prior to the start of Games. These are stories about: security, the costs surrounding of the Games, commercialism, drugs, and – significant to the host's global image making goals – a constant evaluation of hosting preparation. The latter category is not always flattering to the upcoming host. Pre-Olympics 'preparation discourse' routinely gives attention to local protests, host government efforts to 'clean up' the lower income areas of the urban setting, and delays in construction/preparation progress (a "Will they be ready?" theme) (e.g., Kang, J., 1992; Rivenburgh, 1992). Chalip (1989) and Larson and Park (1993) discuss the importance of the pre-Olympics narrative fashioned by international media using the example of the Seoul Olympics. In the pre-Olympics period, international media focused largely on North-South tensions, terrorism, and security questions, creating a highly negative host image frame for the Seoul organizers to confront by the start of the Games themselves. The implication here is that Olympic hosts might do more to guide the pre-Olympics narrative well before the start of the Games.

4.2 Olympic and world news context

Once the Games begin, it is no surprise that the sports competition crowds out most time and attention, if any, given to the host culture leading up to the Games. It is truly an overwhelming sports extravaganza for media to attempt to cover. When media do venture out into the streets during the Games, broadcasters tend to film brief human interest or “man in the street” type nuggets that do little more than ask people if they are “having a good time” at the Games. MacAloon (1992) argues that the media have little appreciation for the popular festival embedded in the Olympic event at the local, cultural level. This is compounded by the fact that media personnel covering the Games are most often sports journalists who may be uncomfortable with providing cultural or political commentary.

At the same time, international media are more than willing to devote resources to ‘in-depth’ coverage of more dramatic or entertaining types of Olympics news – that will then be forever associated with the host’s image. During the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the Ben Johnson scandal drew attention away from the competitions, the host, and smooth flow of the Games. The Atlanta Games experienced the media frenzy over the Centennial Park pipe bomb explosion. For Lillehammer 1994, it was the Nancy Kerrigan-Tonya Harding ice skating debacle that kept global media busy outside the sports venues; this was repeated in Salt Lake City 2002 where media coverage became dominated by a pairs ice skating judging scandal.

And, of course, the earth does not stop spinning for 17 days. Therefore, any significant news occurring within or surrounding a mega-event may intrude on an Olympic host’s image goals. For example, during the 1992 Barcelona Games civil war raged in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only days before the opening of the Atlanta Games, TWA flight 800 crashed off the east coast of the United States, killing all passengers on board and raising concerns about terrorism. The Salt Lake City 2002 Games began with a world still shaken as a result of the September 11th 2001 terrorist bombing. Tomlinson (1996) argues that the images remembered from each Games – and associated with its host – are necessarily “moulded in the image of the time and place of the particular Olympiad...” (p 599).

5. Conclusion

There is little question that hosting a successful Olympic Games garners positive global image rewards. However, for an Olympic host to seek to promote a specific image, an image containing specific types of cultural knowledge or attributes, is a considerable challenge. Barcelona 1992 and Sydney 2000 are two examples of extremely successful Olympic Games in which the host image emerged as very positive in global media, yet the organizers fell short of meeting their specific image goals (see Moragas et al., 1995; Rivenburgh et al., 2004 for comparisons of host goals to outcomes for those two Olympic Games). As described in this Olympic Lesson, those 'planned' images necessarily traveled through the international media filters of culture, nationalism, intercultural confusion, routines, and resource constraints to emerge as a variety of host images in national media around the world. Some of the resulting media images were simple and stereotypical, others more complex and educational. All, however, were fairly predictable if one considers the full list of influences on international media presentations of an Olympic host.

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The Olympic Games, media, and the challenges of global image making

Cities and nations compete vigorously for the opportunity to host an Olympic Games in an effort to enhance their image on a global stage. While the rewards may be great, so are the risks. Olympic hosts can plan for many aspects of the Games, but ultimately they cannot control how they are presented to the world by international media. This lecture outlines the key factors that influence how global media 'construct' an image of the Olympic host for home audiences.

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