



Through the Minds of Billions: Identity Construction in the Ultimate Megasporting Event

Andrew C. Billings

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1. Introduction

Sport communication covers a great deal of intellectual terrain. Various epistemologies and disciplines must be consulted with a wide array of methodologies to achieve even a partial understanding of the various interplays that are relevant to understanding sport and, in particular, international sports such as the Olympics. Social scientists inevitably revert arguments to the numbers game, particularly when assessing concepts such as significance, impact, and effect. With the Olympics, those figures underscore the relative import of research surrounding it. The number of people who participate in an Olympic Games is dwarfed by the numbers who attend it, and that number is dwarfed by the number of people who watch it at home.

Olympic media scholarship ultimately focuses on those who witness the Olympics in second-hand ways, through various forms of traditional and new media as it is critical to analyze the difference between what happens at the Olympics and what happens on televisions screens in what are now billions of homes. At its core, it is the study of gaps between the authentic and the scripted, performance and the pageantry, the masculine and the feminine, the domestic and the foreign. The work is frequently grounded upon impact factors. Some media researchers pursue worthy aims in trying to show how media offerings can have dramatic impacts on small segments of people; Olympic researchers tend to focus on how media can have subtle impacts on much larger numbers of people.

The study of sport is advancing rapidly in the United States, but it is also fair to say we still encounter people who attempt to trivialize it, declaring sport as “just fluff” or “the cult of distraction”. However, we should not underestimate the power of distraction. Especially when it is wrapped in the Olympic rings and a wide array of national flags.

What does sports media scholarship bring to the equation? One of the most foundational contributions surrounds what we learn about different genders, racial groups, and nations when watching sports. Communication scholars have long-since abandoned the notion of the hypodermic needle theory, which argued that messages conveyed on television are directly received and wholly accepted by viewers. Instead, one theory that is referenced today is agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1974), which, in a nutshell, argues that people such as

yourselves can't tell us what to think, but you can be quite good at telling us what to think about. More recent work employs concepts of Irving Goffman's (1974) framing theory, particularly within subsequently established understandings of frames in terms of selection, emphasis, and exclusion. These interrogations essentially become a question of how the stories are told. The modes of media transfer of information will change, but the ultimate reliance on storytelling will not. The games themselves are still likely to be rendered in narratives conveyed through a person calling it as he or she sees it, speaking simply with a microphone. There is more to a story than simply setting the agenda—it is the visual and narrative that surrounds it, giving it meaning. Applying identity in light of selection, emphasis, and exclusion provides a nexus for understanding a portion of the work done by social scientific media scholars.

2. Nationality in the Olympic Telecast

When I constructed my proposal for what ultimately became my book, *Olympic Media: Inside the Biggest Show on Television* (2008), I had three identity variables that I wished to devote entire chapters to analyzing. The order seemed to naturally flow: gender, ethnicity, and nationality. However, when I was in the midst of writing the book, that order seemed much less natural. Nationality seemed to be the first variable—really the primal variable—that must be explored before delving into other notions of identity.

Why nationality above all else? Because that is the way the overwhelming majority of Olympic viewers consume it (Jarvie, 1993). As much as we separate ourselves in other ways—gender, race, and religion—all that really matters is the nation an athlete is representing (see Lee & Maguire, 2009). The United States certainly has a complex history and understanding of race relations, but the truth for almost all of America is that they root for American athletes regardless of skin color, hometown, or gender. The sport being played does not even really matter that much. We'll watch something we never dreamed we would watch if there is a chance of a medaling U.S. athlete. The flag trumps all.

This is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Study after study has shown that promoting nationalism is central to hosting an Olympics and certainly to competing in the Games. George

Orwell argued that sports are “war minus the shooting” and it’s fair to say that we still view the Olympics at least partially through this lens. When applying social identity theory, it becomes quite simple. There is an “us” and there is a “them”, replete with a protagonist and an antagonist. Additionally, there is a medal that will make us happy and a group of people trying to block us from this vicarious experience of happiness. That is the way nationality has largely been coded. While there are certainly nations in which we are more familiar than others, the Olympic telecast is about showing the athletes from a home nation and seeing how they compare to this nebulous group of “others.”

First, we examined a simple measure of salience: the frequency in which all athletes are mentioned within a telecast. Keep in mind that we now have thousands of hours of coverage in the U.S. that is conveyed on seven different television networks. Still, there is one major broadcast network (in this case, NBC) culling all of the best events and footage for their primetime evening telecast, when the large majority of viewers will tune in. If it is an event of the highest presumed importance, NBC determines a way to show that during that primetime telecast. And, with that telecast, we found that Americans were shown about 50% of the time in the Summer Games and about 40% of the time in the Winter Games. When you refer to the medals table to see who’s winning the medals (and, presumably, who is most worthy of airtime) Americans win about 11% of the medals but are highlighted at rates about four times that. This should not be that surprising; every nation does it to some extent. If NBC had shown American athletes just 11% of the time, ratings would plummet, advertising rates would decrease, executives would be terminated, and a new network would soon have the Olympic contract with an immediate aim to show American athletes more in order to make the telecast profitable.

Real (1989) once offered a “nationalism index” measuring the degree in which different countries made the 1984 Olympics into a stage for national pride. Tendencies toward the bolstering of “self” was prevalent in all of the 11 nations mentioned in the television index, but the degree of it was quite sporadic from country to country. Still, all contained rampant nationalism and the question is one of balance: is the objective to show the “best” athletes or the most “appealing” ones? Any network would likely say both, but at some point a tradeoff

must be part of the bargain. Airtime is a finite commodity and resources and cannot be parsed within a time slot such as each primetime telecast. Something must give.

Secondly in regard to nationality, every descriptor spoken by a network employee was transcribed and entered into a database. So, that means if someone from NBC was interviewing swimmer Michael Phelps, what Phelps said was not part of the database. These comments naturally fell into these descriptive categories, ranging from the directly observable with issues of athletic skill to externally attributed factors, such as courage and composure. Some categories obviously had much larger concentrations of comments, but significant differences could still be statistically determined. Over the course of time, a bifurcation of two overarching frameworks has emerged for how we describe the “us” (in this case, Americans) and the “them” (in this case, every other nation on the planet.) For describing athletes from the U.S., dynamic dialogues fit into more interpretive modes. Athletes are depicted as being more courageous, determined, and composed than Olympians from other nations. Meanwhile, foreign athletes are more likely to be described in objective terms—past accomplishments, direct attributes of their athletic performance. American athletes are conveyed with a great deal more nuance than other athletes.

The reasons for this can be deduced fairly directly. For instance, U.S. commentators know American athletes more (they even cover them in earlier Olympic trials), consume more media about these athletes, speak a common language (English) with these athletes, and find backstories more relatable since they have lived within that culture. In contrast, foreign athletes can be largely unknown and are harder to get to know because of barriers related to language, culture, and media accessibility.

Still, the contrast is stark and the implications are inherent. We see images on film such as 1985’s *Rocky IV*, where there is an American “hero”, Rocky Balboa, who excels because of superior work ethic and courage while the “anti-hero”, Ivan Drago is depicted as a one-dimensional physically superior specimen. Ultimately, the audience is expected to marvel at comments about how Drago turns out not to be a “machine” while Rocky Balboa becomes so likeable because of his pluck and determination that fans watching the fight in Moscow change allegiances to root against their country’s hero. In the Olympics, these contrasts are not nearly

as blatant, but also are conveyed about more than just a pair of athletes. Rather, they are subtly inferred toward hundreds of high-profile athletes over the course of 17 consecutive nights of coverage.

This segways directly into a common question that surrounds the Olympic telecast: to what degree is a macro-level competition occurring, where results in every sport ultimately are used to create a medal table that some tacitly believe imparts meaning on the status of your nation in the world order? Newsweek's Mark Starr notes that rivalries now have evolved, such as one between the United States and China, which are "contested primarily on an abacus, not in a sports arena." Consequently, it is not surprising that countries such as Canada, who develop programs entitled "Own the Podium" to utilize new technologies and advancements, spending great sums of money to move up the medals chart.

Until quite recently, NBC had a policy to not show the medals table within their telecasts, feeling it would breed overt nationalism to an even greater degree. Now NBC does show the medal chart. The game within the game. They likely realized it was of compelling interest to the viewing audience and that, perhaps, they could at least provide more accurate information in regard to it.

More accurate information certainly was warranted. One must consider evidence such as what was reported from U.S. respondents after the 2006 Torino Games. When people were asked what percentage of the medals they thought the U.S. won, guesses were nearly three times the actual number. There was a substantially overinflated sense of success about the American athletes. Consider this respondent, who felt the U.S. won 30% of the medals and comments later on in the survey that the showing was "a poor reflection of America. A sad display." Perhaps a closer examination of a medals table could get people to think a little more, especially in team sports, where even a team that wins a gold medal only wins 33 1/3% of all medals and, presumably was contributing to this "sad display." So nationalism is as complex as it is malleable, both in Olympic content as well as the effects demonstrated on the masses.

3. Gender in the Olympic Telecast

A second area: gender in Olympic media, is another double-edged sword if ever there was. Again, there are multiple ways to measure gender equity and treatment in the Olympic telecast (see Daddario, 1994; Wenner, 2006), but the most basic of these is clock-time, a measurement of pure exposure. Other measures of salience and dialogue analysis all are predicated on the amount of time devoted to men and women's sporting events and that inevitable gap in between, so pure exposure is the foundational measure when assessing gendered depictions and equity issues. Rudimentary glances (see Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2010) make some insights abundantly clear: (1) men athletes always receive the majority of the coverage, (2) the gap between men and women's coverage is much wider for a Winter Games (where splits typically are 60/40) than for a Summer Games (where splits are a much slimmer 52/48). This is the point that some critics begin to argue that, given that more men compete in the Olympics than do women, these splits are justified or, at a minimum, explainable. However, keep in mind that we are only looking at the spectacle events that make it onto the primetime telecast. For instance, in the Summer Olympics, NBC now devotes 94% of its primetime telecast to five sports: gymnastics, swimming, track and field, beach volleyball, and diving. All five have men's and women's events and all five are shown during their final elimination rounds. So, there are, indeed, more preliminary heats in the men's 100 meters than the women's 100 meters? However, NBC does not show the heats in prime time and when we get to the semifinals that are shown, 16 men and 16 women are left to compete. Hence, the gender gap is still quite real in terms of exposure.

Now, a different argument can be made in terms of whether the gender gap should be regarded as deplorable or progressive. The critic would maintain that women athletes have won the majority of U.S. medals during this time. Thus, if NBC is promoting U.S. athletes above all, it is a paradox that women win more frequently but are still shown a minority of the time. However, the flip side to this coin occurs when we compare Olympic exposure to all other forms of women's sports media exposure in the U.S. From newspapers to television sports news, women are often still being shown less than a tenth of the time. Compared to those realities, the Olympics represent a wealth of women's athletics. A shining beacon in an otherwise almost exclusively masculine domain.

When turning to the spoken word, we get different profiles for men and women athletes. Such measures involve the utilizations of chi-square analyses, attributions of success and failure, and statistical expected frequency rates. However, for the sake of both brevity and clarity, they can be simplified. It is important to note that in any Olympic telecast we are watching the best the world has to offer in a given sport. Thus, we are more likely to have sportscasters describing amazing performances than substandard ones. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to study the attributions attached to these athletic performances and whether they differ significantly depending on the gender of the athlete.

First, men athletes are more likely to be said to have succeeded because of their experience and superior athletic skill. They do not usually “will” themselves to victory as much as they attain a gold medal as the inevitable outcome of many years of dedicated practice and finely-honed skill. This is not, of course, to say that women are never depicted in this fashion; rather, it merely indicates that it does not happen as frequently. Some explanations for this can even be offered. For instance, the average age of a male Olympic gymnast is about five years older than that of a female Olympic gymnast.

Another trend may not be that surprising but is nonetheless substantial. We talk about the bodies and fitness of athletes, but with men athletes, it is in terms of strength and build. These athletes are locomotives or, as NBC described swimmer Michael Phelps:

“His size fourteen feet might as well be flippers. Dinner plate sized hands grab water like a pair of paddles...a long upper body forms a sculpted ‘V’ shape that begins with wide shoulders and concludes with narrow hips and a flat backside. Put it together, and you’ve got a human speed boat skimming the water’s surface.”

In contrast, women athletes are viewed as physically fit, but in a different way as they are portrayed in terms of their attractiveness. Thus, we have athletes who “take our breath away” or who are “easy on the eyes.” Yes, when considering that many events, particularly in the Summer Games, feature women in swimsuits and leotards, there will be a sexualized nature to the athletic performance, but men compete in swimsuits and leotards as well and yet studies have demonstrated that comments specifically about their attractiveness do not happen as often as for women. In essence, it becomes a matter of perspective. Both men and women

ski, but the media can take a photo one way that is physically dangerous, adventurous, and exciting, and another way that connotes something a bit different, such as a Sports Illustrated cover of skier Lindsay Vonn. Content analysts could conclude that the picture is conveying a woman athlete in appropriate athletic attire and an athletic pose--both supposedly good things. Yet, we ultimately are left with a different feeling about the depiction—seeing it in a more sexualized nature.

The overarching point in regard to gender is not that overtly sexist things happen, but rather a much more subtle sense of difference that occurs based on the biological sex of the person competing. It is fair to say that some differences could be natural and expected. It is fair, for instance, to say that a different set of attributions for success may be attributed to a women-only gymnastics event like the balance beam than a men-only event such as the rings. However, issues such as work ethic and attractiveness do not seem to fit into that category.

4. Race and Ethnicity in the Olympic Telecast

The third area which has been analyzed a great deal has been race and ethnicity. Work has been done in the States for decades that, in a nutshell, concludes that Black athletes are more likely to be depicted as natural athletes, born to excel in sports, whereas White athletes are born to be leaders but must demonstrate superior work ethic to keep up (see Birrell, 1989; McCarthy & Jones, 1997). While there is still modern evidence supporting these claims, we increasingly must question these distinctions that form the foundation for racial biases in sports media.

We still judge race largely based on perceived skin color rather than actual blood heritage. That happens naturally in sports media with the visual image providing cues for a conclusion. However, the typical viewer increasingly finds these guesses to be wrong and, moreover, finds clear-cut classification systems such as Hispanic or Black to be far too reductionist in an increasingly mixed racial reality. Research must reinvent the wheel if attempting to apply racial characterizations using isolated variables for social scientific purposes.

The concept of sport selection must connect to these findings. It is obvious to everyone that the racial makeup of the 100-meter sprint is different than that of the 100-meter breaststroke. Thus, it is not really that surprising when we find athletes of different perceived races are depicted using different descriptive phrases. Often they are segregating themselves by sport and those sports require different skill sets for participation. This is not to argue that the importance of race and ethnic research is diminished. Instead, we must redouble our efforts if we wish to draw meaningful conclusions about the complex cocktail that is race in sport.

5. Conclusions

There are so many more worthy areas to explore identity in sports media. In many cases, the lack of a necessary sample size for generalizable results thwarts analyses pertaining to many worthwhile concepts. For instance, disability is of great import to sport, but is largely relegated to the Paralympics and consequently, neglected in the mainstream Olympic Games and coverage. Similarly, there is a great deal to cull from analyzing the treatment of the gay diver, the Muslim female runner, or the aging competitive swimmer. Still, they are stories because they are largely anomalies and, as such, a social scientist does not have large numbers of athletes who fit into these categories for comparison.

All of these interwoven concepts revert to underscoring the import of what sport tells us about identity. With the Olympics, we process images and dialogue for 17 consecutive days through the lens of a media entity. Sport as a double-edged sword; identity in sport even more so. Sports scholars find themselves in the midst of debates among people--some who tout the incredible transformative power of sport, others who see a tremendous harm in the escalation of perceived importance of what they see as silly games. Both sides ultimately argue the same thing: sport wields power. In terms of identity, that power takes many forms. There is power in watching a man with no legs nonetheless try to compete with the nations best. There is also power in sport when a South African man recently chose to watch the World Cup over a religious program and is killed by his wife and children. There is power in sport.

Sport is one of the few things we still witness en masse. We discuss the Olympics in myriad languages, and yet, in a primal sense, we discuss it in one. When Spain won the World Cup,

celebrations and analysis was not relegated to Madrid or Barcelona. The world watched. The world rooted. The world consumed. The world judged. My sport media-based identity research is about what happens when we judge people that are perceived to be the different or the same than us and make classifications and attributions unwittingly. It is about gaps both cavernous and miniscule that convey notions of difference. Olympic media is a vehicle which allows these issues to bubble to the surface.

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Andrew C. Billings
Clemson University, South Carolina, USA



Centre d'Estudis Olímpics
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Edifici N. 1a. planta
08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona)
Espanya

Phone +34 93 581 1992
Fax +34 93 581 2139

<http://ceo.uab.cat>
ceoie@uab.cat