

Sport vs arts in the struggle for visibility

Addressing culture and education in Olympic documentation and information systemsⁱ

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From the mid 1980s, there has been an increasing amount of media coverage and academic publications related to the Olympic Games. This has revolutionised the amount of information and documents available worldwide.

However, there are many dimensions of Olympism and the Games celebrations that are still hardly known and poorly documented around the world.

This is the case for many Olympic education programs and other cultural projects directly run by the IOC. It is also true for many of the non-sport programs, such as the Cultural Olympiad, Youth Camps and school activity projects, which accompany the staging of sporting competitions in each Olympic host city.

This lack of visibility is inconsistent with the IOC Charter, which states that, what

makes Olympic sport unique is its intrinsic relation to culture and education (IOC, 2000: 8). As such, any information system intending to diffuse an accurate portrait of the principles of Olympism or a representative view of the Games and their legacies, should cover these three areas on an equal basis and work towards their complete fusion from the perspective of public perception.

Olympic education and information

Olympic education encompasses many dimensions. Its fundamental aim is to use sport as a vehicle to promote human values and the appreciation of distinct cultural backgrounds. However, issues of a non-sporting nature have a sparse presence in current Olympic information networks.

The limited profile of non-sporting Olympic activities seems to be partly a result of the way the media have traditionally

approached their coverage of the Games. Typically, the Games have been treated as a sports spectacle rather than as the expression of a humanist movement engaged in an educational project.

Furthermore, established information and research centres about the Olympic Games tend to overlook those aspects of the Games that are not directly associated with their sports dimensions, be it in economic, social or political terms.



Centres distributing specialised information on the Olympic Movement range from Olympic Study Centres to Olympic Academies, Olympic Museums, specialised libraries attached to universities or private foundations, municipal archives in past Olympic host cities, documentation networks such as the International Association of Sports Information (IASI), and an ever growing amount of websites and E-mail listings.

These centres have differing levels of specialisation and influence on scholars, researchers and journalists. However, they all tend to share a focus on sport information that is often identified with their dedication to Olympic research. Such focus has resulted in an emphasis on sports activities to the expense of the non-sporting dimensions of Olympism.

The IOC has taken some action to change this trend and encourage discussions about culture and education to make them more widely acknowledged both within and outside Olympic circles. An important year in this process was 1993 with the foundation of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne and the dedication of both the 100th IOC Session and the 33rd International Olympic Academy (IOA) Session to discussions about Olympism and culture (see IOC Culture Commission, 1997: 38).

Following these initiatives were a Forum on Culture and Sport in 1997, the establishment of an Arts and Sport Contest in 1998 and a Forum on the IOC Cultural Policy in March 2000. Nevertheless, these enterprises have not led to an increased awareness of Olympic cultural activities during the staging of the Games.

This is significant considering that, from a mass communication perspective, the sixteen days of sporting competition could

deliver the message of Olympism and Olympic education to a global audience.

Information on Olympic education at Games time. The case of Sydney 2000

There are a number of reasons for the limited appreciation of educational and cultural activities at Games time. One important explanation is the tendency of Organising Committees (OCOGs) to relegate them to a secondary position and rarely integrate them within the abundant promotion of Olympic sport (García, 2000). Müller and Messing (1997) offer evidence about the poor awareness that German tourists, Olympic spectators and athletes had about the cultural program (Cultural Olympiad) set up for the Barcelona'92 Games, and have reinforced these findings by signalling the remarkable lack of promotion and impact of the Atlanta Olympic Arts Festival. Research undertaken on occasion of the Sydney 2000 Games has strongly corroborated these impressions.

Following existing IOC media guidelines, Sydney created a Main Press Centre (MPC) for all accredited media and an International Broadcasting Centre (IBC) for television and radio right holders. The centres were set up to distribute information about sporting competitions

schedules, sports results, competition venues and athletes biographies amongst other issues. The IBC was exclusively dedicated to assisting in the coverage of sport, while the MPC included an office to inform about the Sydney Olympic cultural program and an office run by the Centre for Olympic Studies at University of New South Wales to provide background information on Olympism, Games history and Olympic education initiatives.

Interestingly, interviews with those in charge of the offices suggest that most accredited journalists were unaware or uninterested in the information their offices had to provide (Couttie, 2000; Hughes, 2000, pers. Comm.) and an analysis of consequent press coverage by accredited media has revealed that references to non-sporting activities taking place during the Olympic period were almost non-existent (García, 2000).

In an attempt to encourage media attention on non-sporting activities, a non-accredited media centre was also created to promote Australian culture, tourism, technology and business. However, this centre was not related to any Olympic institution and as such, was not devoted to inform on Olympic values, principles or initiatives. In that sense, although including an office to promote Sydney's Olympic cultural program and

being successful in making announcements and delivering cultural information, the focus of the promotions were not related to Olympism nor to Olympic education.



Multi-ethnic performances at the Sydney non-accredited media centre

As a result, the official culture and education Olympic programs were not sufficiently associated with the Olympic sports competitions. Rather, they were considered as independent initiatives of the host nation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Experiences within the Sydney Games and, according to Messing, the cases of Atlanta'96 and Barcelona'92, demonstrate that there is a need for a better promotion of Olympic cultural and educational activities accessible to the media and, more significantly, that there is a need to promote their intrinsic association with Olympic sport. This task requires the support of existing Olympic information

centres, including those that intend to be specialised on sporting issues exclusively.

In this sense, the Internet could become an ideal means to achieve these ends, provided that an effort is made to include links and references to culture and education within all Olympic websites. At a different level, better coordination among Olympic institutions is also desirable, particularly between National Olympic Committees and National Olympic Academies and between the actors composing respective OCOG's so that a more equilibrated amount of resources are dedicated to promote sports within a cultural and educational frame during Games time.

In conclusion, it is worth recognising that Olympic values are not a direct synonym of sports values alone but a compendium of cultural and educational values, of which sport is a significant but not exclusive component. As such, a way of improving opportunities for information projects endorsing Olympic education in a manner representative of the Movement philosophy would be the inclusion of documentation about non-sporting initiatives through the very same information structures that promote Olympic sport. Such an attempt would be a considerable advance of present marketing strategies for any host city.

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