

Citizen Media as a Platform for Olympic Culture

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This paper was presented to the IOC in December 2010. It considers the ongoing plans around London 2012 to build a community of citizen journalists who will create media content in the lead up to and around Games time. It focuses on the way that culture is infused within these plans to foreground the non-sporting dimensions of the Games. It also discusses the trajectory towards this new media community over the course of the last 10 years, identifying ways in which non-accredited media have become an increasing presence in the Olympic city and an opportunity to increase the visibility of parallel and culturally significant Olympic narratives.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, I have argued for the need to revisit the framework for cultural activity and representation during the Olympic Games. Building on the original aspirations of Pierre de Coubertin and the ongoing vision for the Modern Games as a holistic experience aspiring to balance sporting achievement with culture and education, I have identified cultural and arts programming, the 'Cultural Olympiad', as an important part of the Games hosting process and an essential dimension of the Olympic ideal (Garcia 2002, 2008).

I have also discussed that there are ongoing operational challenges to maximise the potential of Olympic cultural programming, particularly during Games time. These include ambiguous governance structures, conflicting branding requirements and inappropriate media infrastructures which, combined, have resulted in extremely poor public recognition for such activities as well as ongoing frustration for ever growing communities of interest (Garcia 2000, 2001, 2008).

This is the result of the current operational model for Games delivery which, while it has been successful in securing the financial viability of the Games as a global sports event, it has failed to fully address the wider humanitarian agenda and aspirations of the Olympic Movement. At the heart of this challenge is the apparent conflict of interest between the Games as a commercially lucrative media event (relying on exclusive broadcast and sponsorship rights worldwide) and a symbolically meaningful, inclusive and flexible approach to the hosting process which can touch and involve local as well as distant grassroots communities.

In this paper, I argue that current changes in the media landscape and dramatic transformations in the way the general public (and youth in particular) utilises technology provide a platform for alternative models of media representation which, without necessarily diminishing the commercial value of the Olympic brand, are also more sensitive to the needs of communities and individuals. New media environments, in particular, community-led social media platforms, offer an opportunity for greater diversity in cultural representation and can help showcase the wealth of cultural practices that surround the Games and make it, beyond a media event, a lived festival which can have profound effects

on people's understanding of the world.

The following section offers an overview of the ongoing attempts at establishing alternative media structures in the lead-up-to and during Games time in order to expand the Olympic narrative, and the different degrees of success of these initiatives to enhance the visibility of the Games cultural dimensions.

Non-accredited media centres (NAMC) as platforms for cultural representation: a history

In an attempt to expand the narrative of the Games, the last decade has seen the growth of what have been termed 'non-accredited-media-centres' (NAMC), that is, centres for media organisations or free-lance journalists not accredited by the IOC and not entitled to document the official Olympic sport competition programme. These Centres have grown out of the initiative of local stakeholders in order to maximise the profile of narratives other than those exclusive to right holders. From a small University-led unit in Barcelona 1992 to a large-scale government and business-led operation in Beijing 2008, NAMCs have acted as a hub to highlight business, political and cultural stories for the respective hosts (Miah and Garcia 2008).

From Sydney 2000 to Torino 2006, these Centres have also become a focal point for the presentation of non-competition Olympic stories such as the Cultural Olympiad. Notably, the appointed culture teams for the organising committees in Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens and Torino all had a special media unit and a marked profile at the NAMC rather than the MPC or IBC. In the official Olympic media centres, the visibility of the Games cultural programme was minor or, in the case of the IBC, non-existent (see Garcia 2002, Miah and Garcia 2008).

An important advantage of the NAMC for Olympic cultural narratives has been the apparent flexibility of their operational structure. These were spaces open to a very wide range of media types, not just those representing large and established media corporations, but also independent journalists representing smaller specialist units and the growing contingent of so-called new-media and citizen journalists (Miah and Garcia 2008). For small-scale media representatives, meaningful cultural angles and unique community and grassroots-led Olympic related stories were their core interest. This provided a very strong opportunity to improve the visibility of the Cultural Olympiad and other aspirational Olympic value initiatives, from the high profile Olympic Truce

presentation in Athens 2004 to Aboriginal reconciliation advancements and wider multicultural understanding in Sydney 2000 and innovative Olympic design stories in Torino 2006.

The NAMC has operated at the margins of official Olympic structures, however, and no common vision has been established, relying instead on the goodwill and expectations of local stakeholders. As a result, despite interesting advancements as a platform for culture-led Olympic media stories, this principle has not necessarily remained central to the initiative. In Beijing 2008, the NAMC became an extremely large-scale operation, focused on business and other economic-related imperatives. This meant that it did not provide an environment for small or independent media outlets to present the kinds of aspirational and grassroots Olympic stories that had a strong presence in previous Centres.

Vancouver 2010 provided yet another marked change in orientation for non-accredited media spaces. This Games provided at least five different venues for alternative media stories, ranging from the most professionally-led environment, hosted at the heart of the city with facilities for press as well as broadcast journalists and including information units for nation-wide quangos¹ such as

'Legacies Now' or 'Own the Podium', to purely grassroots led initiatives mainly populated by independent writers, artists and social activists. The one phenomenon that became evident in Vancouver was the unstoppable raise of new media platforms and citizen-journalists as a strong presence within the Olympic city and a clearly influential source of Olympic narrative.

Vancouver also provided an interesting example of how these new media narratives were also an essential part of the cultural framework for the Games. One of the most innovative and successful exponents of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad was CODE (Cultural Olympiad Digital Edition), an initiative that made it possible to connect the whole of Canada in the journey towards the 2010 Games (via its Canada CODE programme²) as well as provide a myriad opportunities for real-time artistic innovation and community self-expression during Games time (CODE Live). However, local stakeholders also indicated that there were some important limitations to this initiative in terms of real community engagement. Although CODE was successful in its artistic expression, its Canada CODE programme was not as popular as other established social media sites as a venue for the sharing of user-led creative content. This was because a formal contribution to

the official and VANOC branded CODE programme imposed a series of limitations for the ownership and sharing of content which clashed with the aspirations of a large part of the very social media community it aspired to serve (Job 2010).

By 2011, in the context of rapid technological advance and widespread appropriation of mobile media, it has become quite apparent that this is a time to re-think, not only how many Olympic media frameworks can exist, but what the cultural story of the Games should actually be about and who is in the best position to tell it. London 2012 is providing an interesting laboratory to test these possibilities.

Towards London 2012: rethinking the Cultural Olympiad and its narrative

Following a trend that can be traced back to the Barcelona 1992 bid, London presented an ambitious proposal for its Cultural Olympiad and established an influential network of cultural representatives to ensure its original vision and aspiration was maintained. As it is also usually the case, this network, including a high-powered advisory group, was progressively disbanded once the appointed London Committee for the Olympic Games was fully functional and a

Culture, Ceremonies and Education team created.

The aspiration to make London's Cultural Olympiad more timely, visible and influential than had been previously the case was, however, retained. This involved a commitment to place youth at the heart of the cultural programme (thus ensuring it is fresh and in touch with contemporary issues); to make it UK-wide, (to ensure maximum engagement with the Olympic idea); to give it time to grow as organically as possible (thus exploring the whole Olympiad period), and to maximise opportunities for the inclusion of as diverse a range of cultural organisations as possible (thus overcoming the traditional branding and exclusivity rights challenge, as noted by Garcia 2001, 2008, 2010).

The UK-wide proposal was made possible by ensuring, from the outset, additional funding from national and regional quangos towards the creation of purpose built posts throughout the country. This has resulted in the establishment of thirteen Creative Programmers, one for each region and nation in the UK, plus two in London, operating in addition to LOCOG's core culture team. These Programmers have been given the opportunity to liaise and develop distinct and strongly rooted cultural programmes within their respective geographic environments. Such

structure has brought a double benefit: it provides space to encourage cultural exploration inspired by the Olympic idea throughout the UK, while offering LOCOG's culture team much needed breathing space to ensure that Games-time cultural activity is as well coordinated and as present within the Olympic mainstream narrative as possible. On the down side, there has been a risk to underplay the synergies between activities managed by these Programmers regionally, and the centralised cultural vision presented by LOCOG.

The commitment to a four-year build up period has resulted in multiple incubation initiatives for new festivals that are inspired by Olympic related concepts but aspire to survive post 2012, thus adding to the Games medium to long term legacy. Some of these initiatives have become operational as early as 2008 and, by 2010, have secured strong local community following. Interestingly, some of the most innovative and active initiatives pre-Games time are regionally rather than nationally focused and are taking place outside of London (see London 2012 Creative Programmers, 2010).

Finally, the branding challenge was addressed with the creation, for the first time in Olympic history, of a parallel 'brand', clearly identified with London 2012, but devoid of the use of the

rings and Olympic terminology to avoid infringing TOP sponsors exclusivity rights. This is the 'Inspired by 2012' trademark, which is managed by LOCOG exclusively, without the direct involvement of the IOC, and has a focus on supporting new initiatives throughout the UK which can demonstrate having been inspired by Olympic values, have clear cultural or educational aspirations at heart and operate as non-lucrative ventures.

Despite the above accomplishments, a pending issue for the Cultural Olympiad to maximise its visibility was still the need to attract media attention and get its story told. The BBC, key media stakeholder and a world-wide respected institution, is focusing its contribution towards the Cultural Olympiad mainly as a partner for what has been termed the 'Olympic Proms' (a programme of classical and contemporary music concerts) and an as yet ambiguous role within a nation-wide programme of LiveSites or 'Big Screens'. However, it has not committed to national reporting on Cultural Olympiad activities in the lead up to the Games as most of these are considered to be small in scale, locally rather than nationally based, community oriented and not sufficiently identified with the Games (personal interview with BBC spokesperson, 2009). As with previous Games, in order to attract nation-wide media

coverage, traditional media groups require activities to operate on a grand, spectacular scale. Most of BBC coverage on the Cultural Olympiad is thus expected to occur during 2012 and focus on the most high profile activities.

As an alternative, a network of cultural, education and media entrepreneurs, led by an established Olympic scholar and supported by London 2012's Creative Programmers network have created a new media framework : #media2012.

#media2012 as an opportunity to broaden the Games cultural mission

#media20123 builds on the experience of previous Games as hubs for non-accredited media centres and, particularly, on the experience of the growing community of self-appointed Olympic 'citizen journalists' dedicated to share their daily Games experiences with the use of mobile technologies and social media platforms. It consists of a network of institutions and individuals who have the expressed desire to facilitate opportunities to engage communities through media participation in the lead up to and during the London Olympic and Paralympic Games. The latter will involve the creation of regional media centres, including a base in London, which will be operational during Games time

and act as spaces for Olympic inquiry, creative production and journalistic reporting. Each centre will be associated with the regional 'Inspired by London 2012' cultural and artistic programme and aims to provide an opportunity for stories that are often not told by traditional media to be heard locally, nationally and globally. These centres will draw on the use of social media environments which provide eases of access to publish content, and will focus on issues relevant to the Olympic Movement. The project's constitutional values are articulated in the 'Media Blueprint for London 2012', written by Professor Andy Miah.

The main goals of the initiative are articulated as follows:

- i) augment the Olympic media narrative towards portraying broader dimensions of the philosophy of Olympism;
- ii) Create [broader] public engagement around Games time;
- ii) Promote community legacy for the [UK] nations and regions
- iii) Develop an 'open media' policy to the Games"

(Miah 2011, points 3.1 to 3.4)

#media2012 presents itself as a timely initiative, following on the

IOC's indication at the 2009 Olympic Congress that it would look into expanding its new media and social media strategy, as well as the current UK emphasis on digital and new media infrastructure development. The main underlying argument about the importance of such initiative at this point in time is the realisation that stories about the London 2012 Games will no longer be dominated by traditional media outlets but also produced by ever growing numbers of non-accredited journalists and citizen journalists. Although it is to be expected that the major media organisations will still reach the largest number of simultaneous and worldwide audiences at any one time, these alternative journalist communities have the capacity to establish more meaningful and sustainable relationships with their followers and provide a voice for previously under-represented stories of the Games and the Olympic Movement at large, such as the Cultural Olympiad.

The project's blueprint has been developed and presented at a range of events reaching out to communities of interest throughout the UK in the arts and culture, academic and policy fields. This blueprint emphasises its underwriting of the Cultural Olympiad which, it claims, should be "at the heart of [the Games, understood as a] festival of ideas" (op.cit, point 1.4). The

implications of such aspirations are manifold and have clear currency in the current media climate. From a Cultural Olympiad point of view, the initiative offers an interesting opportunity to maximise Olympic cultural engagement amongst young people, provide greater opportunities for creative collaborations throughout the UK and, importantly, enhance the visibility of such initiatives not only at a local level, but nationally and internationally. In particular, this initiative could help ensure that Olympic cultural activities are 'tagged' as such, and found by those seeking information about London's Olympic Games either in the lead-up to 2012 or in the years to follow.

A claim to support the cultural value of this experiment is that it can offer some grounds to move from an understanding of the Olympic Games as a media event to the Games as a media festival. This is articulated in terms of the initiative's commitments towards creating media centres that, beyond acting as spaces of information and mediation as is the case for the MPC and IBC, can also become "factories for creativity, collaboration and engagement, which can amplify the Olympic mission" (point 1.5). Some of these aspirations were tested in Vancouver 2010, where several of the self-appointed NAMCs were also active community arts centres

providing a space for artistic expression, hosting discussion forums about the Olympic experience and related cultural legacy and, ultimately, offering a hub for community gatherings that often resulted in local and international collaborations during Games time and beyond.⁴

Beyond the opportunity to maximise the visibility and engagement with Cultural Olympiad activities, the #media2012 proposal also aspires to advance other dimensions of the Olympic ideal. The main claim here is that by expanding opportunities for media participation during Games time, it will be possible to increase the presence of stories about the Games and the Olympic Movement that have traditionally been ignored by journalists. These could range from stories about Olympic education accomplishments in schools, the benefits of hosting a Youth Camp, the values of the Olympic Truce initiative, or the many opportunities for international exchange that are made possible in connection with NOC delegations and the activities they host in their National Houses or more informal environments. Some of these stories were explored by a wide range of independent blogs in the context of Vancouver 2010. The challenge that #media2012 aspires to tackle is establishing a broader framework to connect and maximise interaction between

these otherwise disperse communication platforms.

Supporters of #media2012 feel that this initiative is just making manifest and providing a structure for a phenomenon that is taking place anyway, as has been made apparent in Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010. The challenge for the IOC and key London 2012 partners is how to relate to such phenomenon in a way that is mutually beneficial and contributes to the Games legacy both in the UK and the Olympic Movement at large.

Beyond the NAMC: an alternative model for non-accredited media coverage

While the trajectory of the NAMC suggests an emphasis on creating a parallel structure for media reporting that focuses on furthering business opportunities or economic impact for the local host, regardless of (or exclusive of) any direct Olympic link, the #media2012 initiative aims to ensure the establishment of a media environment that advances not-for-profit cultural and educational opportunities with the Games or Olympic values at its centre. Further, the aspiration is not to create a parallel but equally exclusive media platform, but rather, to support “broader media participatory culture” (point 1.10). To accomplish this, there is a need for an extended “media network for Games time

reporting, which builds on the strategic development of non-accredited media centres at previous Games” (point 1.10) but also ensures direct linkage to citizen media projects. According to the blueprint,

Such a network would be founded on principles of ‘open media’ and will facilitate community legacies and build stories about London, the [UK] Nations and the Regions that reach an international audience. It will focus on reporting all non-sporting legacy stories, locating culture and art at the heart of its practice. Its work will transcend national boundaries in ways that no other Games has achieved before, by promoting peer-to-peer conversations. (point 1.11)

Another point of difference with previous NAMC experiences is the ambition to make these centres a resource for future research by making them act as real-time documentation hubs, providing focal points for understanding the social media community in the lead-up to and during Games time. The blueprint claims that #media2012 users,

will produce the largest volume of Olympic content and influence trending topics on social

media platforms, creating the largest Olympic and Paralympic archive of any Games. (point 7.6)

Olympic stakeholders in London as well as future Olympic cities would benefit from accessing the information stored via #media2012 centres in order to better understand the politics or, simply, wide diversity of interests of citizen journalists. Further, accredited media are also likely to benefit from this structure when looking for Games legacy stories or nation-wide community related stories. This can be particularly useful during the Torch Relay. Ultimately, the aspiration of this initiative is to ensure that “the full story of the London 2012 Games” can be told and fully documented (point 11.3).

Achievements and challenges

The initiative has so far secured the creation of six media hubs around the UK in locations as diverse as Scotland, England’s North West, South West, West Midlands and East Midlands along with London. These are consortia of institutions who have committed to developing #media2012 ideas as part of their Games time communications strategy. Most of these institutions are also committing to provide physical spaces where citizen journalists can gather and creative work can be displayed.

The latter will involve direct crossovers with Cultural Olympiad activity.

This initiative also faces some important challenges. The other most complex of all is that of actual association with established Olympic stakeholders, in particular, the Olympic Family. At the moment, London 2012 Creative Programmers are acting as the main point of contact between this initiative and the Games Olympic and Paralympic organising committees. It is however unclear how much presence official Games programming not coordinated by the Creative Programmers will have within these environments. Maximising the presence and opportunities for appropriate coverage of Olympic stories not currently owned (and not considered priority) by media right holders would require some level of coordination between #media2012 representatives, London 2012 and other Olympic Family representatives dealing with ongoing cultural and educational programmes that may be relevant during Games time but progress well beyond 2012 (for example, Olympic Solidarity stories, stories about Olympic studies centres etc.)

Recommendations for the future

Citizen journalists – the ultimate answer to ensure diverse Olympic narratives?

In the aftermath of Vancouver 2010 and in the wake of London 2012 there is no denying that the use of mobile technologies is an essential dimension of the Olympic experience, particularly for young people and a new generation of media-savvy public. It is no longer possible to assume that traditional unidirectional, professionally-led and highly editorialised Olympic narratives will prevail. The IOC, OCOGs and related Olympic stakeholders have embraced this challenge in their presentation of the main Olympic media properties, that is, the sports programme and selected highlights such as the ceremonies, athletes life-stories etc. However, given the flexibility and pervasiveness of these technologies, there is also a need to address how to deal with other dimensions of the Olympic experience that have been traditionally underrepresented. The #media2012 offers a parallel model of media operations that could fill this gap.

With limited resources, time and areas of specialism, traditional Olympic media structures have no capacity to engage and cover the full range of possible Olympic experiences, particularly not

when they take the form of four-year nation-wide programmes and involve active media participants or ‘citizen journalists’. At the moment, the #media2012 blueprint recommends a shift in the focus of Olympic media centres. This may not be necessary in the medium term, as the MPC and IBC still fulfil an essential function and are at the heart of the current IOC business and communications model. However, it clear that this model is no longer sufficient to cover all **Olympic media needs and media user expectations.**

The type of structure being explored via the #media2012 project should be seen by the IOC as a useful model that is worth replicating or building on by future Games hosts. This is because it offers an expansion of the Games media profile without undermining the established IOC media right holding requirements. Rather than compete with what is covered by right holders, it offers an opportunity to enhance the visibility and relevance of other long established and important Games dimensions that have so far struggled to gain recognition. These dimensions have strong communities of interest around them, both locally and internationally. They have been small so far, due to lack of appropriate media and communication platforms, but they can and will grow.

Ultimately, advancing the case for initiatives such as #media2012 offers also interesting grounds to recover the Games festival atmosphere and grow its public ownership. This ties in with previous discussion about the dangers of the Olympic Games losing its festival dimensions due to the ongoing shrinking of genuinely public space within the Olympic city and the many challenges to spontaneous Games-time celebration that have resulted from tight security regulations and crowd management restrictions (see Garcia 2010b).

In my 2010 paper I argued that the Cultural Olympiad and related Olympic cultural programmes offer an opportunity to expand the Games lived festival experience. The #media2012 experiment offers, in fact, a step further, by exploring the possibility of using the media not only as a transmitter of information, but rather as core component of the Olympic festival as well – thus complementing its localised live form (exclusive to the privileged few that can actually be there) with a potentially worldwide, mediated but equally personalised and individually meaningful experience.

Through citizen journalist and social media platforms, it is possible to establish a community-led Olympic narrative. If this narrative can

emerge and be linked to the Cultural Olympiad, this is also an opportunity to expand awareness of the Olympic ideals that contextualise and enrich the appreciation of what is achieved via the sporting competitions.

To conclude, as has been made apparent within the first edition of the Youth Olympic Games in 2010, new technologies have much to offer to capture the stories of Games participants and document the synergies between sporting, cultural and educational achievement (see Doll-Tepper 2010). The Olympic Games require a sound business model to survive and the selling of media and sponsorship rights provide a useful framework. However, times are changing and media narratives can no longer be centralised or owned by established corporations alone. The #media2012 experiment offers a rich model forward to embrace the challenge, maximise openness and make the most of these unstoppable media trends while also placing Olympic values and cultural aspirations at the heart of this process.

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