

Ambush Media & the Olympics

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The International Olympic Committee is the legal guardian of one of the world's most lucrative sports brand: the Olympic rings.

For those companies which compete for the right to associate their brand with the rings, the benefits are extensive and include exclusive visibility within the Olympic programme, privileged access to the Games for staff and guests, and allegiance with a much-coveted identity. So great is the appeal, that the International Olympic Committee shares the use of its emblem with some of the biggest transnational organizations – McDonalds, VISA, Xerox, Coca-Cola, Johnson and Johnson, Lenovo, Samsung, Xerox etc.

Many of these Olympic Partners – 'The Olympic Partners is their official collective name – have been involved with the Games for decades. Coca-Cola alone has been a sponsor since 1928, while many others have at least a 30-year history of Olympic involvement.

Host cities are required to take these relationships very seriously



Figure 1: Coca-Cola place, a downtown temporary venue during the Beijing 2008 Games

as a condition of hosting the Games. For example, all Olympic venues – including any Olympic retail shops – are required to provide credit card payment services *only* with Visa, an extraordinary restriction on consumer freedom that is unheard of in most other circumstances. Moreover, the commitment to protect these loyalties can even extend to prohibiting any non-Olympic commercial organization from utilizing billboards within the city during Games time, in order to avoid ambush marketing.

As well, Olympic sponsors even build their own Games time village, which become enormous showcases (figure 1) for their new products and even sometimes include gallery exhibitions celebrating the company's

relationship with the Olympic movement.

Yet, despite these benefits from Olympic partnership, the IOC places clear limitations on a sponsors' visibility, which stops abruptly at the entrance to the sports arena. The Olympic rings are the only emblem or logo that is visible inside the venues. Within the wings, one may find Coca-Cola and McDonalds providing services, or other sponsor merchandise for sale, but once fans get into the sports ground, it becomes a space where only the Olympic identity are present.

For the last thirty years, this policy has worked reasonably well, though many have questioned the dominance of sponsors in the host city. However, the arrangement may soon be coming to an end, as there is now a new kind of billboard in the sponsors' armoury: augmented reality via handheld devices.

Already, the IOC can do little to prohibit spectators from streaming high definition footage inside arenas directly onto the web – although it is forbidden as a condition of holding a ticket. Indeed, most of what happens within Olympic arenas – ie. sports competitions – is protected by the IOC and, should its legal watchdogs find such content online, the user may quickly receive a 'cease and desist' letter,

asking for the removal of the content.

Alternatively, the Internet platform may be requested to police its own site for Olympic content, either directly or via a third party. This work has become even easier, as the IOC has begun to build relationships with digital media companies, like YouTube, through which it now broadcasts to a number of territories.

Yet, for the official sponsors and media providers, it is a different story altogether and distributing their content via mobile devices is already becoming part of their core business. One of the leaders for Vancouver 2010 was Bell, which delivered Olympic themed computer games to mobile phones, along with live television and a range of additional multimedia content. The rise of GPS enabled augmented reality will bring a wave of new experiences to sports fans.

The technology is still quite limited in terms of sports applications, but as it becomes more widely used, the possibility of adding layers of content to what is happening in the sports field will give rise to a new era of sport spectatorship. Interactivity will take on new meanings and new opportunities to experience sport will be possible – as will new ways of commercializing sport.

A typical Winter Olympics spectator may spend up to three quarters of their day waiting for the sport to happen. This time can be filled by accessing content about the upcoming event, using augmented reality to learn about the Olympic city, experience information that would otherwise be invisible, such as data on the architectural features of venues or the key statistics about training runs.

Beyond this, the use of augmented reality within competition could permit spectators to investigate their favourite athlete or interact with each other from around the arena. It could even be a great help to navigate a foreign city, which is especially important in an Olympic city where the visiting population may speak over 200 languages, especially when a lot of the information about what's going on around an Olympic city doesn't make it to print - like trying to find the national houses of Olympic committees.

By the London 2012 Olympic Games begin, most new mobile phones will come packaged with GPS and software to run a range of augmented reality applications. The challenge for the Olympic family will be to retain the sports field as a sponsor-free zone. As new media technology is made available to end users, previous concerns about ambush marketing may be replaced with *ambush media* campaigns, possibly jeopardizing the financial stability of the Games.

However, the appeal of bringing new experiences to the Olympic audience, coupled with the potential to construct new streams of revenue through such applications may be far too great for the IOC to resist, especially in an era of fragmented television audience numbers and growing online experiences. The key task for organizers will be to expand these experiences, while protecting the Olympic programme.