NEW NARRATIVES IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES: SPORT, HEGEMONY, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

By Michael Real and Diana Beeson

Michael Real
E. W. Scripps School of Journalism
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701
740-593-9850
real@ohio.edu

Diana Beeson
External Communication and Alumni Relations
College of Arts and Sciences
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701
740-597-1663
beeson@ohio.edu

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“There is also, from the experience of social practice, a notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures.”
-Raymond Williams, 1980

The role of sport as a cultural and ideological force focuses attention on how the meta-narratives of sporting competition operate hegemonically within the public sphere. The dominant discourse around a major international sporting event like the Olympic Games or the World Cup can exert hegemonic force (Gramsci 1971) both in the larger ideological context in which the dominant discourse is articulated and in the popular consciousness which engages with and is shaped by that discourse. In this sense, Olympic narratives “take sides” by defining what major conflicts, players, issues, and ideals shall dominate public discourse and which sides will be portrayed as good or bad.

Hegemony and Meta-Narratives

Olympic discourse is not directly determined by its base in international political economy and the mythology of global power politics, but it is influenced by them. Raymond Williams (1980) argues that the superstructure of (sporting) cultural expression is “determined” by the materialistic base, not in a mechanical, predetermined way, but in a way that sets limits and exerts pressures:

There are….quite different possible meanings and implications of the word “determine.” There is, on the one hand, from its theological inheritance, the notion of an external cause which totally predicts or prefigures, indeed totally controls a subsequent activity. But there is also, from the experience of social practice, a notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures.

This is the heart of our question: How does contemporary ideology set limits and exert pressure on Olympic meta-narratives, and how do Olympic meta-narratives, in turn, help to set limits and exert pressure on discourse in the public sphere?

Sporting narratives and discourse are important in that they play a part in the formation of public opinion in the “public sphere” (Habermas 1989). Olympic meta-narratives insert themselves into discourse in the public sphere in such a way as to “determine” how the public will perceive and interpret the social practices of these sporting events. The public sphere, that sphere between the formal workings of the state
and the private workings of individuals, is the crucial arena where public opinion is formed and where the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion. It is not the state, that realm where laws are formally designated and enforced, nor is it private life where individuals think and act alone. It is a space of institutions and practices between public and private interests. Without a vigorous public sphere there cannot be real democracy in which people confer together, debate, and shape opinion. Media became the instruments of opinion formation, first, in post-feudal bourgeois liberal democracies and, second, in the more current “social welfare state mass democracy.” Habermas (1989, p. 136) notes, “Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.” The Olympic family, as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), operates in the public sphere and plays a larger-than-life role in facilitating how the public envisions nations and struggles on the global stage because of the massive presence of the Olympics in worldwide media representations.

Narrative theory underscores how individual and group existence are experienced and explained as a sequential story with its mixture of continuity and change, predictability and surprise (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Riessman, 1993). Narratives exercise social control (Mumby, 1994) and are instrumental in reproducing culture and society (Van Dijk, 1993). Fisher (1984, 1985) even argues that the human person should be defined as *homo narrans* rather than *homo ratio* because storytelling is more widespread and fundamental than reasoning capacity. Bordwell & Thompson (1993, p. 65) define narrative as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space.” Christian Metz (1974, p. 17) notes “a narrative has a beginning and an ending…[and a] basic requirement of closure.” Metz defines narrative as “a closed discourse that proceeds by unrealizing a temporal sequence of events” (p. 28). Information theory defines information as that which reduces uncertainty. A narrative works similarly by reducing uncertainty as we move forward through it finding we guessed rightly or wrongly about which of the many possible plot threads would win out. Why is narrative so compelling? Brooks (1984, pp. xiii-xiv) finds the answer in the dynamic of “the motor forces that drive the text forward, of the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make the textual middle a highly charged field of force.” Nash (1990) argues for the importance of narrative to philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, science, law, economy, and numerous other fields.

A “meta-narrative,” for our purposes here, is the more generalized story that lies behind the particular narrative stories of individuals, teams, rivalries, and triumphs. These meta-narratives operate in the sub-texts, back plots, deep play, consensus narratives, story patterns, and overlapping story lines of Olympic media coverage and public discussion. The meta-narrative is, underneath it all, the assumed side-taking and priorities present in what the media and public most speak about, care about, and wish for in the Games.

Our argument here is that the first Olympic meta-narrative emerged within the modernist idealism of the founders of the modern Games. Eventually, the Olympic meta-narrative that became most pronounced and was dominant through most of the second half of the twentieth century was one of Cold War oppositions, an East-West ideological
power struggle. These meta-narratives, we argue, have been replaced most recently by (1) the dominant meta-narrative of Postmodern consumerism and (2) an oppositional meta-narrative around the North-South conflicts of a re-ideologized world. These Olympic meta-narratives both reflect and reinforce the assumptions and priorities structured in the base of international political economy and global power distribution. Our analysis is necessarily impressionistic as well as historical and invites debate on its particulars.

Olympic Meta-Narratives

Athens 1896. In the beginning, ideologically, the original official meta-narrative of the Modern Olympic Games in 1896 was an idealistic one in which healthy amateur bodies engaged in gentlemanly competition as articulated by the founders of the Games, most notably Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Olympic idealism has long preached dedication, self-sacrifice, and love of sport over against any self-interest and profit seeking. Rallying support more than a century ago for the re-birth of the Games of ancient Greece, Baron Pierre de Coubertin gave to the Olympics an idealistic fervor. He proclaimed: "Healthy democracy, wise and peaceful internationalism, will penetrate the new stadium and penetrate within it the cult of honor and disinterestedness which will enable athletes to help in the tasks of moral education and social peace as well as of muscular development."

Only gradually did the print media take on the role of storyteller of Olympic meta-narratives. Press coverage in newspapers and magazines, the only mass media of the time, was very slight for the first four Olympics – Athens, Paris, St. Louis, and London. But, by the 1912 Stockholm Games, 500 accredited journalists attended and heard the King of Sweden proclaim Jim Thorpe “the greatest athlete in the world.” Following World War I, the Olympics began to gather momentum as a major international event with increasing public recognition. The "old boy" aristocracy became more and more supplanted by other forces. In particular, competitors came more frequently from outside the leisure class creating tensions of race and ideology captured in Chariots of Fire, the popular film about the 1924 Paris games.

Berlin 1936. By the 1936 Berlin Games, the Nazi subtext brought symbolic power politics to the forefront more than ever before in the Olympic meta-narrative. And the Berlin Games brought new storytellers into the narrative picture. Television was employed for the Games for the first time, in a simple demonstration that relayed pictures from inside the stadium to a kiosk in the city. Film was employed for the first time in a systematic way in the historic Olympic of Leni Riefenstahl. It is a relief to view her film and find that the meta-narrative concerns the ancient roots and pre-eminence of achievement of the physical human body and not racial superiority or Naxi ideology. The domination of high-profile track and field events by non-Aryans like Jesse Owens helped to shape the meta-narrative in that way.
The Cold War. In the height of the Cold War from 1956 through 1990, the meta-narrative of the Games became a fundamental binary opposition, Communism versus Capitalism. In the heyday of the Cold War, the meta-narrative made it easy for fans to choose sides. There were collective ideological goals in the Games as well as individual ones. Patriotic impulses and Cold War identities underlay the motivation to cheer or compete for the nation. Nationalistic forces were marshaled in acting out the struggle between capitalism and communism. Tallies of medal counts of the Americans and the Soviet Union were constantly set side by side in press coverage. Likewise, the medal counts of NATO and the Western alliance were matched against Warsaw Pact nations and the Eastern alliance.

Television as the Olympic Storyteller. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1958 passed a regulation establishing that the local organizing committee shall sell television rights, with the approval of the IOC. With that policy, the principle of commercial Olympic television was established for the 1960 Games, and the Olympic storytelling would never again be the same.

Since 1960, television rights fees for the Olympics have increased several hundredfold.

(Figures: Olympic TV Rights Fees)

These rights fees paid by the United States commercial networks have comprised about two-thirds of the world television rights fees for both the Winter and Summer Games since 1976. By 1972, television revenues had replaced Olympic ticket sales as the principal commercial source of income from the Games. Television rights began to dominate Olympic budgeting. In 1960, television provided only one of every 400 dollars of the cost of hosting the Summer Olympics. In 1972, one of every 30 dollars was from television; in 1980, one of every 12 dollars; and by 1984 one of every three dollars of Olympic host costs were paid by television revenues. In these same years, the number of accredited media representatives grew tenfold. In 1960, only 296 of the 1,442 accredited media representatives were from the non-print, electronic press; that is, only one in five was from television. In 1988, more than two out of three came from television, that is, 10,000 of the 15,740 media representatives were from the electronic, audiovisual world (Moragas, Rivenburgh, and Larson, 1995).

Television brought other changes with it. The IOC, which was near bankruptcy in the late 1960s, simply claimed ALL television money and solved its problem. In 1978, when no one but Los Angeles and Tehran were willing to bid to host the Games, the IOC was forced to accept the LA plan for commercially sponsored Olympics, and another revenue stream became a permanent part of the Olympics. To maximize the commercial potential of television viewing and increase the notoriety of the Games, in 1981 the IOC dropped the requirement of pure amateurism. From the beginnings of the modern games, amateurism had served as a way for the aristocracy to avoid competing with the lower-status professional class. The following year the IOC created The Olympic Program
(TOP) to sell corporate sponsorships of the Olympics. The profits from telling the Olympic story were multiplying.

New Post-Cold-War Olympic Meta-Narratives

The passing of the Cold War’s clear-cut bipolar worldview left commentators in many spheres without a simple filter, lens, or plotline through which to view and explain the world. Max Frankel (2002, p.16) speaks of this in regard to political commentators; the same is true of Olympic sports commentators:

Take pity on our foreign policy wonks. Gone are the blessedly simple, bipolar days when containment of Soviet power governed and defined American diplomacy and military action. Now the analysts strain to describe the world’s chaos. National laws and frontiers are failing to contain not only terrorists but also global corporations, financial speculators, industrial polluters, illegal migrants, drug smugglers, disease bearers. The very idea of sovereign geographic control has lost much of its meaning.

Multilateralism and Omission in Meta-Narratives. The Cold War bipolar meta-narrative in the Olympics seemed to be replaced by a meta-narrative in which many countries again played significant roles and their success was measured only in terms of what they contributed to one side or the other in a single global conflict. In contrast to the Cold War, more recently, the Sydney and Salt Lake City games seemed to feature multilateral narratives in which audiences saw their nation’s athletes pitted against others throughout the world but without a single arch-narrative. The current implicit meta-narrative of the Olympics thus appears more multilateral, rather than bilateral, pitting nation against nation in less absolutized oppositions and groupings. But, contrary to Frankel’s anxiety, the idea of sovereign geographic boundaries, “nations,” remains secure, however difficult their control may be.

With the “Axis of Evil” and other alleged terrorist states of the War on Terror not playing significant roles in Olympic competition or featuring media coverage of the Games within their countries, the new Olympic narrative lacks the surrogate warfare of the world stage that was implicit in the meta-narratives of the Nazi or Cold War Olympics. Since September 11, 2001, global power conflicts have dominated the stage with the War on Terror heading the production. The Bush administration has identified of itself with traditional NATO allies set in opposition against Palestinians, Taliban, international Arab organizations, Saddam Hussein, and others, especially those from the Muslim world. This Muslim world historically has been included in “the South,” those poorer, underdeveloped countries of the Southern Hemisphere, also frequently identified as the Third World. But the world of Islam is hardly present in the Olympics. There is no sense of super power surrogate warfare. The Games are dominated by non-Muslim athletic powerhouses, leaving current world tensions largely on the sidelines of the Olympics.
The Postmodern Olympic Meta-Narrative

Historically, another change in meta-narrative was building from mid-century on. This change is the subtle but profound shift from the Olympics as a modernist project to the Olympics as a postmodern spectacle. The grand narratives of science and reason, the very ones loved by de Coubertin and identified by Lyotard as the cornerstones of modernism, were being replaced by postmodernist relativism. The modernist idealism that had guided the rebirth of the Olympics disappeared into commercial sponsorships, billion dollar television contracts, advances in technology and drugs, athlete endorsements and mega-salaries.

(Figure: Discuss Thrower)

The Olympics became big money and big media, as well as big competition, in ways they were not a half century earlier.

The shift from modernism to postmodernism profoundly influences the meta-narrative and implicit ideology of the Olympics. The history of the modern games, 1896 to 2002, coincide with the historic transformation from the modern to the postmodern eras.

(Figure: Modernism and Postmodernism in the Olympics)

Television and now the Internet have brought the discontinuous, fragmented, pastiche style of postmodernism into the way we experience the Games. The complex narratives of the Games are distributed via large-scale communication technologies and reproduction. They are imbued with the consumer culture of late capitalism, built around commodification. Viewing is motivated by the pleasure principle, infused with advertising and celebrity, while multicultural diversity careens through it all. Sexual diversity has brought us from the first modern Games in which no women participated to the present in which approximately 25% of the competitors are female. Racial and ethnic diversity brought us from the entirely white European-American 1896 Games to a 1912 U. S. team that featured an African American, a Hawaiian, and two Native Americans, one of whom was the legendary Jim Thorpe. By 1920 a Japanese and a Brazilian won the first medals for Asia and Latin America respectively. Curiously, when Tommy Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a black power salute on the winners' stand during the playing of the national anthem in 1968, the affront received far more publicity than had the killing of 300 Mexican students in the weeks of preparation that preceded those Mexico City games.

The modern Olympic Games in 1896 were imbued with all the culturally narrow ideals of modernism, while the current games have all the diffuse characteristics of postmodernism. In this vein, the televised Olympic Games from Salt Lake City, as from Sydney, Nagano, Atlanta, and before, were prototypical examples of postmodernism.
For example, what is the mini-narrative about the television financial records set at Salt Lake City this February? NBC television paid $545 million for television rights, the most ever for Winter Games. They sold $720 million worth of advertising time, also the most ever, and generated $60-$75 million of direct profit. Perhaps more important to the NBC network, they bounced back from the low TV ratings of the Sydney Summer Games, the lowest since 1968, and won every hour of primetime for the 17 consecutive nights of the February sweeps, allowing NBC to maximize the rates it charges for all primetime programming for months to come.

What were the mini-narratives of the Games themselves this year? Fortunately for the news media, there were enough controversies to create the mandatory buzz: Was there North American bias? Should there have been two sets of Golds in the pairs skating? Was the Korean flinging his flag on the ice really cheated out of the Gold? How real was the Russian threat to pull out of the Games early in protest? And lots more in the “Who Won? Who Lost? And Who Whined Olympics.”

The NBC network with the Olympics was lucky. The weather was favorable, a variable than can wreak havoc on the Winter Games. The Americans won lots of medals – Jim Shea, the third generation Olympian, Sara Hughes, out of nowhere with one unpredictably perfect performance at the perfect moment, the sweep of the oh-so-rad halfpipe medals, a hockey finals showdown, victory by sexy Apolo Anton Ohno of the flowing hair and winning smile, and more, for a total of 34 medals, ten of them Gold, for a country that had never won more than 13 medals in a Winter Games. The security story went well: 10,000 officers, $300 million, and five years of planning handled only 604 “unattended items,” 141 bomb threats, and one anthrax scare, in a country gun-shy from the 9/11 tragedy.

From Luxury to Leisure: New Sports in the Olympics

The first modern Games featured sports of the aristocratic leisure class: yachting, tennix, archery. The two World Wars brought more militaristic sports into the Olympic narratives. The most publicized sports in the Cold War meta-narrative of the Olympics tended to be head-to-head competitions in which the most points or the best time or height or length won, without the intervention of judges. The Summer Games especially became surrogate warfare around events in track and field, followed by swimming, soccer, basketball and others. The 1960 Winter Games, in the trough of the Cold War, first introduced the biathlon, a curiously militarized form of skiing combined with shooting.

Contrast those with the sports that have been introduced and become popular since the demise of the Cold War. They tend toward the more elite, leisure-oriented, and extreme sports favored by a consumer culture of Western capitalism. Think of beach volleyball, snowboarding, and the skeleton. These are sports played by more privileged classes and favored by cable sports networks. These are activities of the wealthier North,
with the poorer and more populace countries of the South (and Asia) as marginalized as ever. Why was bowling not incorporated instead? It has been lobbying for Olympic status for years, has immense grassroots participation, and has popular and successful professional competitions. Many suspect it lacks the postmodern sensationalism and sex appeal of snowboarding or beach volleyball. The “martial arts” of judo and taekwondo have been accepted into the Olympics, but they play a very small role in American narratives about the Games. The Olympics of the capitalist West no longer have to be seen only over against the communist East, but the resulting meta-narrative of the Olympics is not thereby universal and inclusively globalized. The Olympics appear to favor the luxury consumer sports of the postmodern West.

Meta-Narratives, Hegemony, and Power

There is clearly an intriguing interplay between the meta-narratives of the Olympics and the global distribution of power that “determines” the superstructural expressions in Olympic narratives. Even in the relative absence of the Muslim world, the Olympics remain implicated in current world power struggles. The Olympics act out and reveal the major divisions in the world. The Olympics retain their traditional storylines of glorifying idealistic athletic competition, but they do more. Will the “more” be reminiscent of the past in modernist idealism or Aryan claims of power, in the gameplaying of the bipolar Cold War or of multilateralism, or will the entirety of the Olympic story be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of postmodern commercialization?

When the dominant meta-narratives embedded in major mediated sports events shift, they play a supportive “hegemonic” role in similarly shifting opinion in the public sphere. The shifts in world power are reflected in the meta-narratives of these events. In turn, their celebration in these events serves to reinforce the determining quality of that definition of world relations. The ideology is reflected, reinforced, and extended throughout the public sphere. This study has attempted to address questions of the Olympics, ideology, and media representational practices. As the Jacques Rogge era of the IOC evolves, it will be revealing to watch which further major meta-narratives develop from and within Olympic discourse and ideology.

(Note: Figures referred to the in the text are not available in electronic form.)
REFERENCES


