



## The Olympics and TV

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## Contributor Note

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## The Olympics and TV

The 2012 Olympic Games have been hailed as a major success – in terms of sporting achievement, organisation, and for the TV coverage. The BBC, as the host country's national broadcaster, brought new levels of technical, editorial and scheduling innovation to its coverage of the Games. Seeing London 2012 as the biggest live event in its history, the BBC committed to seven years of planning and an as yet undisclosed financial investment in technology and programming. As the world's largest publicly funded broadcaster it was appropriate they set new creative parameters – enabled by guaranteed funding and a remit to serve the public interest.

Whether future Olympics broadcasters will be able to match this is open to question. A tougher commercial strategy by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) seems likely to ensure more commercial broadcasters, and fewer public broadcasters, secure the rights in future – with a possible impact on the character of coverage.

The Olympic Games is very much a television event. It may be the largest sporting gathering with more than 200 countries participating in 26 sports over more than two weeks, but for hundreds of millions of people in the global audience it is only experienced through TV. As such, it has the requirements of all good TV – narrative, emotion, drama, jeopardy, triumph, defeat, combining to influence how deeply viewers engage. There also has to be a carefully managed balance between the commercial interests of the Games – with huge global audiences of value to sponsors and brands – and the public purposes and mission of the Games.

Paradoxically, every country's experience of the Games is different as their domestic TV coverage favours home athletes or the sports at which they excel. If you watched the 2012 Games in the USA you will have seen a lot of swimming and track events and, strangely, archery; in the UK there was a lot of cycling, rowing and sailing. In Croatia, water polo was dominant. Yet behind these different biases and narratives sits the common idea of a global festival of sport celebrating excellence, fair play and community, symbolised with the Olympic flame and extravagant opening and closing ceremonies. The challenge for TV broadcasters is to meet the audience's appetite for news of their own team while continuing to reflect the wider story of the Games. They have to do so within tight rules set by the IOC to protect their own, and sponsors, investment.

Part of the BBC's remit is to invest in innovation, stimulate creativity and cultural excellence. In planning coverage of the 2012 Games it sought to meet these ends.

First, the scale of coverage: 2,500 hours across two weeks on 24 live feeds. These were available online, on digital TV and on mobile devices. 'We wanted to give people every venue, from first thing in the morning to last thing at night' said Roger Mosey, the BBC's Director of London 2012 (Pfanner 2012). In audience terms, it was a major success. All 24 feeds were accessed by at least 100,000 people, including even the most niche sports, with some 22 million people accessing the 'red button' feeds at some time during the Games – about half the total TV audience. Engagement was amplified by social media discussion with, for the first time, 2.7 million people reading or posting about the Games on social media sites at the same time as watching them on TV (O'Riordan 2012).

These were the first properly digital, multi-platform, multi-screen Olympics – reaching significant numbers of viewers with live video via not only TV, but PC, mobile and tablet as well.

Many audiences were introduced to these new digital functions for the first time. The ease of navigation and success of the digital coverage will lower resistance to audience use in the future and raise expectations of choice for future Games and other multi-location events.

Some commercial broadcasters, however, made less investment in technology and innovation. For them, maximising peak time mass audiences to serve premium advertising opportunities was a priority.

It's not surprising. Nielsen IAG in the USA analysed the performance of commercials which ran in both the Olympics and in non Olympic programming. Commercials in Olympic programming delivered 67% higher brand recall, 96% higher message recall and 31% higher likeability (Kafka 2012). In other words the Olympics feel-good factor had a significant commercial benefit.

The American TV network, NBC, was heavily criticised for failing to recognise the opportunity of integrated TV and digital live coverage (Serjeant 2012). Critics suggest NBC were covering these games by the 'old rules' of mass audience TV rather than the 'new opportunities' of niche broadcasting offered by digital technology. ARD and ZDF in Germany, which although public broadcasters are also advertising funded, drew similar criticism from their audiences (Roxborough 2012).

NBC's response was that the 2012 games were still the most watched TV event in US history. In other words, that the 'old rules' of mass viewer experience still apply. Reacting to criticism, NBC Sports Chairman Mark Lazarus said 'It's not everyone's inalienable right to get whatever they want'. In other words, commercial concerns take precedence.

The BBC managed to offer a disparate choice of 'narrowcast events' and multi-platform viewing opportunities while holding together the broader narrative of the Games on their main channel. This successfully combined satisfying niche interests with delivering the overarching story of the event to a mass audience. There seems little doubt that viewer expectations are changing and will do so more rapidly with the take up of digital

technology. As the BBC's Roger Mosey put it, 'It's hard to see how we can go backwards in terms of coverage when we get to Rio' (Gallagher, Strauss, Brinnand and Plunkett 2012). For the IOC, it means their objectives for future Games will develop from overall size of audience and rights revenue to breadth of exposure of minor sports as well.

The BBC may be confident of covering future Games – but other public broadcasters are not. One question is whether less well funded broadcasters seeking to acquire future rights can make the same commitment to niche sport and narrowcast channels that the publicly funded BBC managed in 2012. The example of NBC suggests perhaps not, although in 2011, NBC agreed to a \$4.38 billion to broadcast the 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 Olympics, the most expensive television rights deal in Olympic history.

The Games are heavily funded through the sale of TV rights. Broadcasters around the world strive to reflect the Olympic ideals of pride, community and excellence in the way they present the games – not least because decisions on who wins the rights to broadcast them, with their huge audiences, potential advertising revenue, and prestige for host channels, depends on the view the International Olympic Committee takes of their programmes. In turn, the IOC can only deliver its mission to promote good practice and excellence in sport, and promote the global Olympic movement, through TV coverage. It is a relationship of interdependence. If the interests of broadcasters, organisers or audiences conflict, difficult tensions can arise.

In awarding the TV contract for the 2012 games collectively to public broadcasters in Europe (via the European Broadcasting Union) the IOC declared it had selected the union over the highest bidder 'to ensure the promotion of Olympic values (and) achieve the widest possible audience' (IOC Latest News 2004). An EBU website aggregating coverage from 40 broadcasters around Europe generated 2 million live streams a day (O' Carroll 2012).

Subsequent to the 2012 TV rights, the IOC declined to sell rights to the 2014 Winter Games and 2016 Rio Games in to the EBU preferring to opt for a country by country strategy to maximise rights value. These are still being negotiated, but the IOC strategy seems set on maximising the value of the TV rights which is likely to mean more commercial rather than public service broadcasters securing the Games in the future. Reconciling the different and demanding expectations of the IOC, official sponsors,

advertisers, commercial network shareholders and the audience may require scheduling dexterity of Olympic standards.

A further innovation in the BBC's coverage was its scale of commitment to the Games across all TV genres – in advance as well as during the events. Viewer engagement depends on familiarity with the games, sports and athletes taking part. To a greater extent than for any previous games, the BBC brought together drama, comedy and documentary in advance of the live events to ensure viewers were familiar with the personal stories of key athletes and the history of the Olympic movement building a sense of occasion outside of sports programming as well as within it.

Comedies like *TwentyTwelve* – a spoof fly on the wall look at hapless fictional organisers – brought a warmth and sense of self deprecation in the run-up to the Games; series like *World Olympic Dreams* and *British Olympic Dreams* brought out the struggles and personal narratives of athletes in advance of key events; documentaries on great moments in Olympic history helped to build a sense of expectation. When the Games actually opened, audiences in the UK were already deeply immersed in the moment, the history, key individual athletes and their back-stories. This brought colour, personality and drama which appealed to audiences beyond regular sports fans. Again, the BBC's publicly funded status and level of integration supported such an approach which other broadcasters may struggle to emulate.

The 2012 Games were notable not only for sporting and organisational success. They broke new ground with the breadth of digital TV coverage - multi-platform and multi-screen. The host nation's coverage was technologically ambitious and set new standards for future games. It was also imaginative in breaking out Olympics coverage into non-sports genres to a greater extent than seen in earlier Games. However these achievements may largely be due to the status of the BBC as a well funded public broadcaster.

As the IOC embarks on maximising future rights deals it is likely that fewer public broadcasters and more commercial broadcasters will secure the coverage of Games. Whether the same levels of innovation, investment and cross genre commitment can be delivered by commercial broadcasters in Rio 2016 and beyond is far from certain.



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