

Role of the Media

The Olympic Games are a global mega-event and sport has a universal heritage and appeal. The Olympic Games do not cater for all sports but between the Summer and Winter Games they provide international competition in a range of popular sports for teams and individuals.

The Olympic Games have been used to introduce new communication technologies and production techniques which then have wider commercial use away from sport presentations. The first televised Olympic Games were the ones held in Berlin in 1936 but only within Berlin in public viewing rooms and the Olympic Village.

Look at aspects of the role of the media in the Games of Melbourne 1956 and Sydney 2000.



Media passes at the Melbourne Olympic Games

Source: Official Olympics Report, p57.

Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games

The Melbourne Olympic Games had to provide facilities for hundreds of journalists and radio broadcasts. But in 1956 television was the 'new media' for the Melbourne Olympic Games. The organization of equipment at venues was one issue but the Melbourne Olympic Committee had to sort out who had the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games on television.

Role of television

Australia's first TV broadcast was made by TCN Channel 9 in Sydney on September 16 1956 to about 2000 television sets. By 1956 there were only about 5000 television sets in Australia.

Australia and the Olympic Games

1956 Melbourne Olympics and 2000 Sydney Olympics

The Games



The Australian government granted GTV 9 the rights to use the 1956 Olympic Games for test transmissions. The 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games was broadcast as a test transmission by all three television stations operating in Melbourne at the time. Regular broadcasts didn't begin until January 1957.

Television demonstration 1948 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nk8-vuapgjk&feature=related>

Television studio camera used in 1956 to transmit the first regular television program in Australia from the studios of TCN Channel 9, Sydney - <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/display?irn=29510>

The Olympic Games was a way to use television to promote Australia and its sporting achievements.

Melbourne Olympic Games Media overview - http://www.terramedia.co.uk/media/change/olympic_Games_1956.htm

National Media Post Script 1956

This clip gives an overview of the setting up of telephone, telegraph and broadcast equipment prior to the commencement of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. The Duke of Edinburgh opens the Games on 22 November - <http://aso.gov.au/titles/sponsored-films/australia-post-olympic/clip1/>

This clip illustrates the workings of the OTC, telegraph and press offices. This is followed by footage from various athletic events, and of the special post offices, purpose-built to serve the public at the 1956 Olympic Games - <http://aso.gov.au/titles/sponsored-films/australia-post-olympic/clip3/>

Introducing television to Australia Fact Sheet ABS

<http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/publications/fact-sheets/fs115.aspx>

Television battles

The major international television broadcasters at the Olympics were the NBC, CBS, BBC, United Press and Eurovision. These broadcasters argued that the Olympic Games events were just a series of news features rather than an event. Unlike the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games there were no satellite facilities for direct broadcast overseas so it would take days before the videotape would reach America or Europe. The Australian authorities considered the argument and decided that a fee would be charged for the right to the footage.



Focus

The battle for Olympic television broadcast rights in 1956.



Activity

Using the following extract and your own research, list 4-5 points which support or refute the argument the Olympic Games were not a news event.

This could be the starting point for a group discussion or debate.

Considering all the trauma, domestic and international, which had pre-



ceded them, the Games were generally free of hitches. One nagging problem during the build-up had concerned the televising and filming (mainly for newsreels) of competition: television was then, in Olympic terms, in its infancy, and Kent Hughes rightly perceived his organising committee as having a guinea pig role in this field of negotiation. He stressed that the Games opened up the possibility of providing TV coverage to vast audiences, and that there was a need to safeguard the interests of future organisers." He and the committee refused steadfastly to give way to demands from major overseas networks that they be given free access to coverage of events; even in the face of boycotts from major organisations like the BBC, NBC, CBS, United Press and Eurovision, they insisted on the principle of payment for rights. They did allow local TV channels to cover the Games live for just a nominal fee, on the basis that there were only 5000 sets in existence and their audience could not possibly affect attendances. The committee finally signed contracts with Sports TV in the United States, film companies in Britain, France, and "other countries not controlled from New York". The revenue involved was comparatively modest, but it more than covered costs of official filming of the Games, estimated at up to £40,000. The pressure on Kent Hughes and his committee throughout this argument was immense. No guidelines had been established, and the IOC made it clear that it had no intention of intervening. The television networks, one of whose local spokesmen was the film pioneer Ken G. Hall, argued that the Olympics constituted a news event, not an entertainment package for which a price should be paid. The Australian news media lobbied the organising committee aggressively to grant TV and news-film coverage gratis, arguing that to do otherwise would be to rob Australia of valuable international publicity. Not once though, in the face of hostile criticism at home and abroad, did Kent Hughes waver in his attitude that any capitulation to the demands of major international companies would prejudice the interests of future organisers. (When he learned in 1960 that the European Broadcasting Union had bought TV rights to the Rome Olympics for \$US750,000 and that CBS had paid more for non-European rights, he wrote to the prime minister: "The organising committee ... felt they had a very definite responsibility as regards the future, and this had been borne out by what has happened in Rome." Kent Hughes was rewarded for his Olympic role with a knighthood in 1957.

Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, Queensland University Press, 1996 (3rd edition), p223.

Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

The scope of the broadcast organization for Sydney in 2000 compared with Melbourne in 1956 is clear from some of the details in the official Olympic Report. The commercialization of sport had begun by 1956 but not for the Olympics. Individual athletes, like Shirley Strickland, Dawn Fraser and Ron Clarke became media celebrities because of their sporting achievements but sport wasn't the television phenomenon of 2000. It really wasn't until the 1970's that television sport audiences made it feasible to cover international events.

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Sydney Olympic Games Media overview:

http://www.terramedia.co.uk/media/change/olympic_games_2000.htm

Also:

As host broadcaster of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the Sydney Olympic Broadcasting Organisation (SOBO) was responsible for televising the Games to an estimated cumulative global audience of 30 billion people. SOBO's role was to provide coverage of every Olympic competition for more than 200 television and radio Rights Holders.

SOBO was responsible for producing the international television and radio coverage of every Olympic event as a service to Rights Holders, broadcasters who purchased the Olympic broadcast rights from the IOC to broadcast the Games in their respective countries.

Early in its operations, SOBO distinguished between unilateral production, produced by individual broadcasters, and multilateral production, which was produced by SOBO. Services and support structures were created for each type. SOBO production and technical staff transmitted the International Signal back to the International Broadcast Centre (IBC), where Rights Holders could tailor the pictures and sound to fit their own unilateral requirements. The International Signal included the camera and audio signals and graphics generated at each venue as well as for non-competition events such as the Opening and Closing Ceremonies....

Rights holders were provided with the necessary facilities and services to operate efficiently, including all unilateral requirements at the IBC, for example, office space, construction, video and audio circuits and venues including commentary positions, compound space and camera positions.

Official report of the XXVII Olympiad, Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Volume One, Preparing for the Games p228-30

Olympic Television Rights

NBC acquired the TV rights to the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia, and the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City for \$1.27 billion. This was five times more than the TV rights for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games.

Activity

Analyse the NBC promotional video, mixing fantasy with promotion of United States athletes and Thorpe and Perkins in 'a place where winter is summer and day is night.' What is the style and emphasis of this 'pitch' to US TV viewers?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAV_R0RoQxU&feature=related

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Other sources

The Olympics on television:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympics_on_television#2000_Summer_Games