
Changing Partners: The Relationship Between the Mass Media and the Olympic Games

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Introduction

In 1896 Baron Pierre de Coubertin had to plead for media coverage of the first modern Olympic Games. Journalists were invited as honored guests at the closing banquet. A century later journalism organizations world-wide lined up to pay nearly US\$900 million for the privilege of covering the 1996 Atlanta Games. An American television network-NBC-paid more than half that sum for the U.S. rights alone.¹

How has the relationship between the mass media and the Olympic Games changed over time? What brought about these changes?

The relationship between the mass media and the Olympic Movement has long been of interest to researchers. The conventional view is that the media and the Games have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, one of mutual interdependence and mutual advantage.² The primary goal of this study is to demonstrate that, while the mass media and the Olympic Games both needed and used each other in the early years, the media held the upper hand. It takes the view that the relationship only recently has evolved into one in which the Olympic Movement has become the dominant partner. Labeling the relationship “symbiotic” tended to ossify our perception of the relationship and to allow important changes to go undetected. A second goal of the study is to identify some of those changes, documenting a number of different periods in the relationship. The study’s final goal is to identify the point in time at which the relationship entered its current period, in which the Olympic Movement is very much in command.

Setting aside the notion of symbiosis allows us to consider the relationship as complex and fluid. It is complex because of the number of partners involved. Even in the beginning there were more than two partners, and the relationship has come to encompass newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cable, the Internet, the International Olympic Committee, some 200 National Olympic Committees, a growing number of International Sports Federations, and the public opinion of much of the world’s population. It is fluid because the needs and expectations of each of the principals in the relationship have changed again and again over time.

In this study I will discuss the relationship during four distinct time periods-pre- television (from the beginning through 1932), television before satellites (1936-1964), satellite television before the Internet (1968-1988), and the era of Olympic dominance (from around 1992 into the future). Although the study will present the relationship in an international context, most of the data will be drawn from U.S. sources, reflecting the central role played by U.S. television.

It is worth noting that the margins that separate the first three periods are defined by technological innovations resulting from media initiative; the media

have always brought their most advanced technology to the Games. The end of the third period and the beginning of the fourth is marked by a new kind of boundary. This boundary consists of the introduction of a new, non-television technology reinforced by a series of economic and administrative decisions taken, not by television, but by Olympic officials. Notice that the periods grow shorter in time, an indication of the accelerating pace of technological development. Notice, too, that once television enters the equation, it quickly becomes the dominant medium. Although each of the earlier media has continued to cover the Games as thoroughly as ever (see Table 1), it is television that engages our attention.

Table 1: Cumulative Time Line of Olympic Games and Media Coverage

Year	Place	Media
1896	Athens	Newspapers, magazines
1900	Paris	Cinema
1904	St. Louis	
1908	London	
1912	Stockholm	
1920	Antwerp	
1924W	Chamonix, France	
1924	Paris	
1928W	St. Moritz, Switzerland	Radio
1928	Amsterdam	
1932W	Lake Placid, New York	
1932	Los Angeles	
1936W	Garmisch-Partenkirchen	
1936	Berlin	Television
1948W	San Moritz, Switzerland	
1948	London	
1952W	Oslo, Norway	
1952	Helsinki	
1956W	Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy	
1956	Melbourne	
1960W	Squaw Valley, California	
1960	Rome	Videotape
1964W	Innsbruck, Austria	
1964	Tokyo	Satellite television
1968W	Grenoble, France	
1968	Mexico City	Color television

Pre-Television (from the beginning through 1932)

At the beginning of the modern Olympic Games, the Olympic Movement needed public awareness, attention, and support, which could only be realized through coverage by the mass media in the forum of newspapers and magazines. The movement hoped the media would spread the message of Olympism. The media needed current events that could be presented in such a way as to interest their readers, and sport was beginning to be interesting. The media were willing enough to publicize the Games, but they would do so only on their own terms. They chose, by and large, to ignore Olympism and, instead, to create heroic myths. They had a different agenda.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic Games, is variously referred to as an educational reformer, a writer, and a journalist.³ He was all of these, but he was also a consummate promoter, one with “a gift for publicity.”⁴ In the late 1880s, as he prepared the ground for the revival of the Olympic Games, Coubertin began using speeches and articles to tout the advantages of the English school system regarding the place of sport.⁵ Using all the persuasive tools at his command—speeches, letters to the editor, subsidized articles in magazines, and elaborate public meetings—Coubertin set about transforming public opinion. He believed his intended public had to be, in his words, “seduced...and charmed” into supporting athletic competition. Coubertin was an effective charmer. He once claimed that he had collected 71 newspaper clippings reporting his speeches and other promotional activities for sport during the period May 15–August 15, 1887.⁶ In 1890 Coubertin began editing the monthly *Revue Athlétique*, writing 14 articles for it during the two years he served as editor. By 1894, Coubertin had published some 41 articles in *Les Sports athlétiques*, the weekly publication of the Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques.⁷ A full two years before the first Games of the modern era, he was already seeking to establish a link between the press and Olympism.⁸ In 1895, in an attempt to make up for what he thought was inadequate press coverage of the Congress of the Sorbonne, Coubertin began publishing a series of bulletins to serve as press releases.⁹

A biographer of Coubertin’s early years wrote, “In his enthusiastic advocacy of sport, Coubertin was lucky. At the time, all kinds of athletic activities—amateur and professional, individual and organized—were booming in the Anglo-Saxon world.” In the United States, an “athletic craze” swept the country during the early 1890s. Some American newspapers began to hire “sports writers” for “sports pages,” although they paid scant attention to Coubertin’s activities or the preparations in Athens.¹⁰

At the 1896 Athens Games, Coubertin was cast in the role of journalist. He became the authoritative source of news about what happened in Athens, and his account in the American magazine *The Century* remains a primary source for historians.¹¹ How well did Coubertin do at eliciting coverage? He apparently persuaded 12 journalists to cover the Athens Games,¹¹ although the resulting worldwide coverage was minimal.¹³ U.S. athletes did well at the Games, and news of their achievements found its way back to a few American newspapers in New York, Boston, and the Midwest.¹⁴ The *New York Times* ran 14 stories about the “Olympian games” during March, April and May 1896, including individual profiles of all the U.S. athletes—not bad for an event that was later assessed as “a fin-de-siècle curiosity of regional interest.”¹⁵

The Games of 1900 and 1904 were nearly submerged in international expositions, and Coubertin was kept busy struggling to attract press attention. In 1900 he launched his *Bulletin du comité international olympique*, and from 1901 to 1914 he edited and published *Revue olympique*, which served as the newsletter of the Olympic Movement.¹⁶ The Games of 1908 and 1912 came closer to Coubertin’s ideals of how the Games should be conducted, and by the end of the 1912 Games, he had succeeded in nursing the Games through their infancy. The Games by then merited a great deal of attention in newspapers worldwide.¹⁷

It had required all of Coubertin’s public relations expertise to keep the Olympic Movement afloat during its early years. The Games had been in desperate need of public attention and support, and the only way to get it was to enlist the assistance of the mass media, even if that meant giving up the idea of spreading the ideals of Olympism. Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the IOC since 1980, recently acknowledged the media’s contribution. “Since its creation in 1894,” he wrote, “the International Olympic Committee has been aware that the Olympic ideal could not be promoted without the support of the press...Over the decades, the contribution of the press to the development of the Olympic Movement has been highly appreciable. The fact that Baron de Coubertin was a great writer and a talented journalist was an undeniable boon for Olympism.”¹⁸

And what of the press? What were its goals in the early years of the Olympic Movement?

The press is traditionally viewed as having four principal functions: to inform (the news function), to persuade (the advertising function), to entertain (the features function), and to pass on the cultural heritage (the educational function). But the line between informing and entertaining has never been perfectly drawn, and, especially in sports writing, considerable latitude is allowed for lesser functions to find an outlet. Among these lesser functions is that of creating myths. The mythmaking function is not well elaborated in the literature, but it is very real in the field of journalism. It

derives in part from the desire of every journalist to be working on a story that is bigger, more important, and more exciting than the story that actually presents itself. If that means embroidering on the story, well, it might be excused in the interest of making things more enjoyable for the reader.

One of the press's needs in 1896 and the years that followed was simply to make myths of the Olympic material to render it of greater interest to readers. One Olympic historian tells us that "in literature--as in newspapers, folklore, proverbs, and gossip--Olympic performances are retold in a way that typically...accrues mythic, historical, literary, and religious motifs."¹⁹ Another writes, "In the sports pages, particularly in sports columns, Americans read about a world far removed from the grubby, daily grind. Not only did athletic heroes perform amazing feats; they did it with a superhuman grace and courage."²⁰

Rufus Richardson, the former director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens who attended the 1896 Athens Games and wrote an account for *Scribner's Magazine*, preserved some of the early myths. After the Princeton athlete Robert Garrett upset Miltiadis Guskos, the Greek favorite in the shot put, Richardson told this story:

...Greek papers began running the story that, after his victory, Garrett had telegraphed Princeton: 'Guskos conquered Europe, but I conquered the world.' A reporter subsequently confessed that he had invented the telegram, but he took great pride in it; for he said it was what Garrett ought to have said.²¹

Perhaps the best-known example of mythmaking at the 1896 Games is the case of Spiridon Loues, the Greek who won the first marathon. Journalists who were desperate for story material made up biographical facts about Loues that subsequently called into question every account of his background and his preparations for the race.²² A historian later tried to rationalize the practice:

The journalism of the Olympics has served to make Olympians considerably larger than life, far more interesting in newsprint than they are in reality. From the first Olympiad, the fourth estate was doing its damndest to help the Olympics transcend mere mortal facts and become the stuff of a penny-dreadful romance.²³

Richardson, a classical scholar who watched the journalists "transcending mere mortal facts," was fascinated. Speaking of the Loues episode, he said, "A cycle of myths is already growing up about him. It is not uninteresting to be present at this genesis of myths in which the newspapers play a considerable part."²⁴

Even reputable newspapers took part in mythmaking practices. After only the second day of the 1896 Games, the *New York Times* trumpeted, "One thing is believed to have been established, and that is that the future of the Olympian games has been decided, and that they will henceforth take their place among the noted events in the athletic world..."²⁵ That this forecast has come true beyond its author's wildest dreams demonstrates one of the powers of the press--that of creating something from nothing. Newspapers and magazines continued to make myths about the Olympic Games, often to the chagrin of Olympic officials who wanted another kind of coverage, one that would emphasize Olympic ideals.

The mass media--the press--was clearly the dominant partner during these early years, and the Olympic Movement went to great lengths to cater to the needs of the press. As an example, radio made its first Olympic appearance when Radio Bern broadcast the opening ceremonies of the 1928 Winter Games at St. Moritz.²⁶ Radio sought to cover the Summer Games in Amsterdam later that year, but "So significant was the print media to the promotion of the festivals that the executive committee for the Amsterdam Olympics preserved the exclusive domain of the world press by not allowing the results of contests to be radio broadcast."²⁷ Radio was used at the Amsterdam Games, but the transmissions were encoded, and they were used only to notify newspapers of the outcome of the competitions.²⁸ Complete radio coverage had to wait for the 1936 Winter Games at Garmisch-Partenkirchen.²⁹

By 1932 the Olympic Games had become the darling of the media. An Associated Press poll in that year found that 56 percent of sports writers and editors would rather cover the Olympic Games than any other feature on the year's calendar. A hypothetical Dempsey-Schmeling title bout was second, followed by the World Series and the Kentucky Derby.³⁰

Clearly, the Olympic Games had arrived.

Television before Satellites

When television entered the picture, the Olympic Movement was well established, albeit impoverished. The movement turned to television to provide revenue. Television balked at first, but once it realized that viewers would tune in in greater numbers than usual to watch the Olympics, network executives were happy to pay ever-increasing fees for the right to televise the Games. What television wanted was more viewers. The increase in viewership justified the growing costs.

The story of Olympic television broadcasting begins on August 1, 1936, in Berlin, the opening of the “TV age of sports.”³⁰ But the age didn’t spring into being at a single stroke, and television’s effect on the Olympic Games wasn’t immediate. Television at the Berlin Games was just a curiosity, and World War II and the cancellation of the 1940 and 1944 Games represented a setback to the development of television, at least in Olympic context.

The trouble began in 1948, when the BBC paid one thousand guineas, about four thousand dollars, for the right to televise the Games in Britain.³² While the payment seemed innocuous at the time, little more than a half-hearted gesture to shore up the Games’ paltry post-war budget, it established a precedent. In 1956 the organizers of the Melbourne Games put a \$500,000 price tag on American television rights to the Games. U.S. television networks refused to pay, arguing that the event was news, and access should be free.³³ The IOC put Avery Brundage, its president, in charge of finding a “friendly solution” to the impasse.³⁴ Brundage said the question hinged on whether television was an entertainment medium or a news medium, adding that many sports organizers complained that television coverage of sports events reduced attendance at the events themselves.³⁵ Negotiations ensued. The Melbourne committee knew that television had used an average of two minutes a day of newsreel footage of the 1952 Helsinki Games, and they offered the Americans three free minutes a day.³⁶ CBS, NBC, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company demanded nine free minutes a day and asked the IOC to call a halt to Olympic television monopolies.³⁷ When Melbourne refused to budge, the world newsreel television pool declared a boycott of the Games.³⁸ After the Games, *The New York Times* noted that television viewers had not been the only losers: “The Olympic Games as an institution, Australia as a nation and television as a communications medium of the free world all have suffered from the consequences of the extensive blackout.”³⁹ The Melbourne Games represent a “key turning point” from news to entertainment for both television and the Olympics.⁴⁰

Even before the Melbourne boycott, Olympic officials realized that the Olympics could be a source of profit. IOC President Avery Brundage had tried unsuccessfully to interest American television companies in buying the exclusive rights to the 1948 American Olympic trials and the 1952 Olympic Games. He was infatuated by the possibilities for revenue and worldwide exposure that television could offer the Games.⁴¹ The IOC was, as usual, in desperate need of revenue. Coubertin had spent his own fortune and part of his wife’s in the service of Olympism, and every IOC president that followed him bemoaned the lack of funds to conduct IOC business.⁴² In 1960 the entire budget for running the IOC was less than \$10,000 a year.⁴³ After Melbourne, the IOC added to its charter a new rule governing publicity. Rule 49 provided strict controls on bona fide news coverage. It also read, in part:

The direct, or what is commonly called Live Television Rights, to report the Games, shall be sold by the Organizing Committee, subject to the approval of the International Olympic Committee, and the proceeds from this sale shall be distributed according to its instructions.⁴⁴

This simple sentence “suggests that almost accidentally and as early as 1958, the IOC prepared the way for high future rights payments” because of the exclusivity of rights.⁴⁵

By the time of the Squaw Valley and Rome Games in 1960, the principle was established that the Games were entertainment and, as such, could be sold. The IOC instructed the Organizing Committee in Rome to sell the television rights to the Games for “the highest possible tariff.”⁴⁶ Television was ready to respond to public demand. “For the first time television covered this scene in force,” wrote one observer of the Rome Olympics. “More than 100 television companies seized on the spectacle to present the games to a massive international audience.”⁴⁷

CBS paid \$394,000 for the right to broadcast the Rome Games in the United States. The network used two innovations that had not been available in Melbourne—videotape and jet airliners—to accomplish same-day coverage in the United States. CBS fed its coverage by microwave to the Rome airport, where the signal was converted to the U.S. standard of 525 lines, videotaped, and placed aboard a plane to New York in time for the 11 o’clock news.⁴⁸ Arthur Lentz, assistant executive director of the U.S. Olympic Association, was happy with the result. Of the Rome Games, he said, “Coverage by the nation’s press, radio, and television was widespread and did more in four years to focus attention upon Olympic affairs than had been accomplished in the previous sixty.”⁴⁸

The sale of television rights resulted in a financial profit for the Rome Games and, as one scholar has noted, the money altered the Olympic Movement forever. "After Rome," he said, "everything changed as commercialism took over the sporting world."⁵⁰ The Summer Games in Rome marked a turning point in another sense, since for the first time live, international television broadcasting was possible. Viewers in 18 countries were able to watch live coverage from Rome.⁵¹

In the United States, the 1960s brought a fundamental shift in television network policies, which began when The American Broadcasting Corporation decided to make sports a centerpiece of their programming. Within a decade, the number of hours American network television devoted to sports doubled.⁵² Much of the change is attributed to the vision of Rooney Arledge, who served as president of ABC Sports. Arledge "rightly saw the entertainment possibilities of the Olympics," and he changed the way Americans viewed the Games.⁵³ Since good sports promoted good ratings, then good sports also were seen as a way to increase corporate profits. Arledge's ideas worked, and both winter and summer Games became prime-time successes.⁵⁴ The networks seemed sports mad.⁵⁵

During this period the Olympic Movement was able to wrest much-needed revenue from the mass media, or at least from television. But the price-forgoing television coverage of the Melbourne Games was high. And accepting money from the media opened the door to media influence on the Games.

Satellite Television before the Internet

The arrival of communication satellites in the early 1960s marked a turning point in the relationship between television and the Olympic Movement. As one observer noted, "It was from the Tokyo Games of 1964 that the relationship between television and the Olympics really began to transform the Games."⁵⁶ The refinement of satellite capability permitted transoceanic broadcasting, which increased both the value of television rights and the number of hours of Olympic programming.⁵⁷

Satellite transmission was responsible for extending the real-time reach of the Olympic Games worldwide. The technology for placing the U.S. communication satellite Syncom III in stationary orbit over the Pacific was developed just in time for the Tokyo Olympics, and observers in New York were able to watch the opening ceremonies live on NBC.⁵⁸ The CBC videotaped the Games and sent all the programs to Canada via satellite. Television pictures for Europe were transmitted via satellite to Los Angeles and from there sent terrestrially to Montreal, where they were recorded and flown by charter plane to Hamburg for transmission on the European network.⁵⁹

The cost of the 1964 Tokyo Games signalled two trends that would continue for many years: a continuous increase in broadcast rights fees, and the pattern of valuing Summer Games about two and one-half times the value of Winter Games.⁶⁰ Increased accessibility to real-time sports programming spurred the growing demand for sport, including Olympic sport, on television, and the cost of television rights skyrocketed (see Table 2).*

Table 2: Worldwide television broadcast rights revenue

	YEAR	PLACE	REVENUE	% CHANGE	% OF OCOG REVENUES
Summer	1960	Rome	\$ 2,880,000		N/A
	1964	Tokoyo	N/A		
	1968	Mexico City	9,750,000		9.6
	1972	Munich	\$ 17,600,000	+80.5	3.7
	1976	Montreal	\$ 32,622,200	+85.3	5.2
	1980	Moscow	\$ 101,000,000	+209.8	8.2
	1984	Los Angeles	\$ 287,000,000	+178.2	37.3
	1988	Seoul	\$ 403,000,000	+40.4	24.7
	1992	Barcelona	\$ 636,000,000	+57.8	27.7
	1996	Atlanta	\$ 869,000,000	+40.9	N/A
	2000	Sydney	\$ 1,100,000,000	+22.7	N/A
	2004	Athens	\$ 1,237,000,000	+12.4	N/A
	2008	TBA	\$ 1,401,000,000	+13.2	N/A

	YEAR	PLACE	REVENUE	% CHANGE	% OF OCOG REVENUES
Winter	1960	Squaw Valley	N/A		
	1964	Innsbruck	\$ 936,667		
	1968	Grenoble	\$ 2,612,822	+178.9	
	1972	Sapporo	N/A		
	1976	Innsbruck	N/A		
	1980	Lake Placid	\$ 21,000,000		
	1984	Sarajevo	\$ 101,000,000	+380.9	
	1988	Calgary	\$ 325,000,000	+221.8	
	1992	Albertville	\$ 292,000,000	-11.3	
	1994	Lillehammer	\$ 353,000,000	+20.8	
	1998	Nagano	\$ 509,000,000	+44.2	
	2002	Salt Lake City	\$ 677,000,000	+33.0	
	2006	TBA	\$ 763,000,000	+12.7	

In 1960, television provided only one of every four hundred dollars of the cost of hosting the summer Olympics. In 1972, one of every fifty dollars was provided by television; in 1980, one of every fifteen dollars; and by 1984, one of every three dollars of Olympic host costs were paid for from television revenues.

In 1972 the sale of television rights replaced ticket sales as a principal source of income.⁶¹ At first the IOC chose not to retain any of the revenue from the sale of television rights. It stayed clear of television, even to the extent of allowing the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to carry out negotiations with the television networks. But in 1966 it adopted a formula for distributing the wealth: The first million dollars would be divided equally among the IOC, the NOCs, and the International Sports Federations (IFs); of the second million dollars, one-third would go to the Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (OCOG), and the remainder would be divided equally among the IOC, the NOCs, and the IFs; anything above two million dollars would go two-thirds to the OCOG and one-third to the IOC.⁶²

As soon as money began flowing into the Olympic Movement, everyone wanted some. Television revenue created strained relations among the IOC, the NOCs and the IFs. Brundage, who had once seen TV money as a way to save the Olympic Movement, became disenchanted with its effects.⁶³ He viewed the attempts of the International Sports Federations and the National Olympic Committees to get a bigger share of television money with “trepidation.”⁶⁴ By the time he stepped down from the IOC presidency in 1972, Brundage believed the IOC “should have nothing to do with money.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the members of the IOC Finance Committee, with the approval of the General Session, pursued a policy of “maximum profit” from television negotiations.⁶⁶ In 1971 the IOC amended its charter, making clear that the revenue from the sale of television rights was the exclusive property of the IOC and that it would determine how to divide such revenue among the OCOG, NOCs and IFs. The Munich OCOG got around this provision when it negotiated the rights for the 1972 Summer Games, by dividing the payment from ABC into a \$7.5 million rights fee and another \$6 million in “production costs.” The IOC, in time, closed that loophole.

By 1974 more than 98 percent of the IOC’s income was derived from the sale of television rights,⁶⁷ the bulk of which came from American television networks (see Table 3).^{*} The great disparity between U.S. and non-U.S. broadcast rights fees is due to the fact that the U.S. is served by advertiser-supported commercial television, whereas most other nations utilize government-owned, non-commercial systems that face no real competition for the rights.⁶⁸

The triple-digit inflation in worldwide broadcast rights fees that prevailed during the ‘60s and ‘70s has been attributed to a number of factors. Among them are the increase in worldwide audience figures and the volume of Olympic programming,⁶⁹ the willingness of the U.S. network ABC to expend large sums of money to achieve identification with the Olympic Games,⁷⁰ the kidnapping and massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Games,⁷¹ and the competitive nature of U.S. television networks. The Olympic Movement took advantage of this competitive nature by conducting auc-

tions, sometimes open and sometimes closed, for the U.S. television rights.⁷² The auctions, a natural outgrowth of the IOC's basic policy of exclusivity,⁷³ often produced a "fierce bidding war"⁷⁴ that caused Olympics rights fees to jump wildly.

Table 3: U.S. television broadcast rights fees as a percentage of worldwide fees

	Year	Place	Network	Cost	% Change	% of worldwide fees
Summer	1960	Rome	CBS	\$ 394,000.00		13.7
	1964	Tokyo	NBC	\$ 1,500,000.00	280	N/A
	1968	Mexico City	ABC	\$ 4,500,000.00	200	46.1
	1972	Munich	ABC	\$ 13,500,000.00	200	76.7
	1976	Montreal	ABC	\$ 25,000,000.00	85	16.6
	1980	Moscow	NBC	\$ 87,000,000.00	248	86.1
	1984	Los Angeles	ABC	\$ 225,000,000.00	158.6	78.3
	1988	Seoul	NBC	\$ 300,000,000.00	33.3	74.4
	1992	Barcelona	NBC	\$ 401,000,000.00	33.6	63
	1996	Atlanta	NBC	\$ 456,000,000.00	13.7	50.9
	2000	Sydney	NBC	\$ 705,000,000.00	54.6	64.1
	2004	Athens	NBC	\$ 793,000,000.00	12.5	64.1
	2008	TBA	NBC	\$ 894,000,000.00	12.7	63.8

	Year	Place	Network	Cost	% Change	% or worldwide fees
Winter	1960	Squaw Valley	CBS	\$ 50,000.00		N/A
	1964	Innsbruck	ABC	\$ 597,000.00	+ 1,094.0	63.7
	1968	Grenoble	ABC	\$ 2,500,000.00	318.8	95.7
	1972	Sapporo	NBC	\$ 6,400,000.00	156	N/A
	1976	Innsbruck	ABC	\$ 10,000,000.00	56.2	N/A
	1980	Lake Placid	ABC	\$ 15,500,000.00	55	73.8
	1984	Sarajevo	ABC	\$ 91,500,000.00	490.3	90.6
	1988	Calgary	ABC	\$ 309,000,000.00	237.7	95
	1992	Albertville	CBS	\$ 243,000,000.00	-21.3	83.2
	1994	Lillehammer	CBS	\$ 300,000,000.00	23.4	85
	1998	Nagano	CBS	\$ 375,000,000.00	25	73.7
	2002	Salt Lake City	NBC	\$ 555,000,000.00	48	82
	2006	TBA	NBC	\$ 613,000,000.00	10.4	80.3

The bidding process was unpopular with the networks. "They want us to be like three scorpions fighting in a bottle," Roone Arledge complained during the particularly virulent bidding for the 1980 Moscow Games. "When it's over, two will be dead and the winner will be exhausted."⁷⁵ On another occasion, Arledge maintained that, from a financial standpoint, "the IOC has treated us very badly."⁷⁶ There were periodic complaints by the networks. In 1972 NBC protested to the IOC over what it called "secret and noncompetitive procedures,"⁷⁷ and both NBC and CBS complained about the bid procedure used by the organizing committee of the Lake Placid Winter Games in 1980.⁷⁸ There even were allega-

tions by a member of the Canadian Parliament that ABC had made a political payoff to the Quebec Liberal party in order to win the U.S. coverage rights for the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal.⁷⁹

The auction process drove up the costs to the network with the winning bid, thereby achieving the IOC's goal of maximum profit; it also ensured that the network would expect a degree of control over decisions about the Games. "In effect," wrote one observer, "United States television pays for the Olympics, and plays a major role in influencing how they are run, including the layout of site and stadia, the nature of ceremonies, the choice of events and the timing of events."⁷⁹ Another source provides a laundry list of U.S. television influence:

In 1972, the Olympic basketball final in Munich was played at 11:30 p.m. to put it in early evening time in the States. In 1988, the Seoul Games were dubbed 'the breakfast games' when more than half the track and field finals were held in the morning to fit U.S. television schedules. The Winter Olympics have been stretched from 12 to 16 days and spread over three weekends to maximize television appeal.⁸¹

The Winter Olympics also were bumped to another year. In 1986 the IOC agreed to stop celebrating Winter and Summer Games in the same year, after 1992. Starting in 1994, Winter Games would be held in even-numbered years when no Summer Games were scheduled. The decision "was prompted by the intervention of American television, who made clear their desire to spread the burden of raising advertising revenue over two separate years."⁸² The 1988 Calgary Winter Games were moved forward from late February to early February, reportedly to allow the Games to coincide with the February "sweeps," the period when U.S. television undergoes detailed audience ratings.⁸³

Even the site of the Games has been linked to television's influence. Of the first fifteen Summer Games, only two—St. Louis in 1904 and Los Angeles in 1932—were held in North America, but once U.S. television rights became multi-million-dollar affairs, three of the next five Summer Games—Mexico City, Montreal, and Los Angeles—were held there.⁸⁴ Since the 1964 Tokyo Games, half of the television-spectacle Summer Olympics have been staged in North America.

The U.S. networks' rising costs also meant that they scheduled more commercials during Games coverage to try to recover the amounts of money they had bid. The first complaints by reviewers over the number and frequency of commercials during Olympics broadcasts on American television were recorded during the 1976 Montreal Olympics.⁸⁵

As the rights continued to escalate, seemingly out of control, many observers became nervous. "The acquisition of broadcast rights has become an end unto itself," argued one account, "a virtual test of management's manhood, rather than a carefully designed element in the overall business plan."⁸⁶ Another wrote, "The networks have allowed the Olympics to become so emotional an issue, so much a matter of pride and self-importance, that they no longer measure it by any reasonable business standard normally applied to programming decisions."⁸⁷ Selling the American rights for a record sum had become the ultimate status symbol for organizing committees.⁸⁸ Many observers predicted that prices simply couldn't go any higher: "...the selling price of broadcasting rights to the Games in the United States has no doubt reached its peak."⁸⁹

This nervousness spread to the IOC itself, which must have realized that putting all its eggs in one media basket left it vulnerable. "Since television has been the backbone of the IOC's new wealth its leaders have become understandably nervous lest the market collapse and leave the movement in unaccustomed poverty," wrote one scholar.⁹⁰ The IOC revealed some of its apprehension in the May/June 1985 edition of *Olympic Review*. In that issue it introduced a new section called "Media Life," intended "to reinforce the link between this essential element in the understanding and spreading of the Olympic ideals and the Olympic Movement as a whole."⁹¹ The first column recounted two shake-ups in the U.S. television industry—the acquisition of ABC by Capital Cities Communications and Ted Turner's bid to take over CBS.

Some even questioned how much control the IOC had: "The Olympic movement, economically dependent on television, needs to offer a good, star-laden show, and is not in a good bargaining position. Ever since television began its global expansion, the IOC has been less and less able to define the nature of its own spectacle."⁹² Kim Il-sung, former president of South Korea, noted in connection with the Seoul Games, "The development of television has made television no more a spectator, but one of the main organizers of the Games."⁹³

After the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics the IOC imposed stricter controls and negotiated television rights jointly with the Organizing Committee, but this arrangement led to difficulties when differences of opinion arose between the IOC and the Seoul OCOG. For the Barcelona Games, the IOC negotiated in consultation with the OCOG and reserved final judgement.⁹⁴ This position absolves the OCOG from taking any active role whatsoever in acquiring television rights.⁹⁵

If the 1964 Tokyo Games had been a technological turning point, the 1984 Los Angeles Games proved to be an economic landmark. Even with ticket revenues and a share of the broadcast rights, hosting the Olympic Games represented a financial risk that few cities were willing to take on. Only two cities, Tehran and Los Angeles, bothered to bid to stage the 1984 Games, “such was the scale of the financial liability.”⁹⁶ Los Angeles was awarded the Games and its OCOG met the financial liability challenge by resorting to commercial sponsorship. The Los Angeles OCOG limited the number of sponsors to 35, and introduced the model of exclusivity that later became a central part of Olympic sponsorship programs. The concept not only succeeded brilliantly, but Los Angeles turned a profit on the venture. A later study noted:

The Los Angeles Games in 1984 brought about a radical change in Olympic budgets and the way in which resources were managed. Television rights and sponsors became the two pillars on which the Olympic Games were organized.

The same study concluded, “...it was in Los Angeles that the potential ‘value’ of the Olympic Games as a vehicle for commercial sponsorship became clear.”⁹⁷

Then, in 1985, the IOC’s fears came to pass. The American television sports market collapsed, after having become “fragmented and saturated.”⁹⁸ The advertising industry began switching to non-sport programming to reach the audiences it was targeting.

In 1980 the Miller Brewing Company spent 95 percent of its advertising dollars on televised sports; by 1985 that figure had dropped to 70 percent. A Miller spokesman noted: “Sports programming used to be a bargain compared with prime-time. Now it’s as expensive or more.”⁹⁹

The networks were caught between the rising costs of television rights and falling ad revenues. ABC, which had positioned itself as the Olympics network, suffered the most. In 1985 ABC Sports lost between \$30 million and \$50 million.

Some analysts claim that the free-spending era ended after ABC acquired the rights to the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary.¹⁰⁰ Those rights were acquired in February 1984. When the bidding process for the 1988 Seoul Games began in September 1985, the bids were too low and the IOC rejected all of them. The *New York Times* found a message in the rejection. The IOC’s inability to award the rights, it said, “may signal a turning point in the relations between the networks and those who hold rights to major sporting events.”¹⁰¹ The story quoted Barry Frank, group vice president of Trans World International, a sports promotion company that served as a consultant to the Seoul OCOG. “The networks are really scared,” Frank said. “They have experienced a loss of market share and a loss of advertising dollars in the past 18 months that no one anticipated. In fact, we are facing a television marketplace that is not ready for major risk taking.” The story also quoted Rooney Arledge, who called the Koreans’ expectations “unrealistic.”

Even after the U.S. rights to the Seoul games were awarded to NBC in October 1985, the network continued to negotiate with OCOG, refusing to sign a final contract until March 1986. The final fee of \$300 million was about half what the OCOG had hoped for. It also represented the smallest percentage increase in rights fees in the history of the Summer Games.

The location of the Seoul Games—fourteen hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time in the U.S.—was a complicating factor in the negotiations. An NBC executive suggested that “the difference between the value of a rights package with a lot of prime time finals coverage and a package without such coverage could be \$100 million or more.”¹⁰² Live coverage was deemed so important that NBC brought pressure to schedule the final rounds of competition in the Korean morning, when it would be prime time in New York. The network even persuaded the government of South Korea to implement daylight savings time to minimize the difference.¹⁰³

The Jeremiahs were quick to respond to the lower rights fee. “The evidence, to date, suggests that the historic geometric progression of exclusive U.S. television rights has come to an end,” said one group.¹⁰⁴ Another said:

I think what you’re going to see in the future is a reduction in rights if the revenues are not there to support the higher rights fees. And that’s certainly what the indications are right now. The rights fees will not escalate. If anything, they will decline at this point.¹⁰⁵

The American television industry began making “very bearish” noises about the future of Olympic broadcast rights, noted one observer:

However, the bearish noises of American television had two significant effects. First, the IOC became intent on raising the proportion of fees paid by the rest of the world...Second, Samaranch was quick to realise the danger of having all the Olympic eggs in one basket, and the IOC began to investigate new sources of finance.¹⁰⁶

In May 1985 the IOC launched a new corporate sponsorship program, the “TOP” program, that allowed companies to promote their associations with the Olympics on a worldwide basis.¹⁰⁷ The new program allowed companies to bid for a global monopoly on Olympic sponsorship in 44 separate categories. The first company to join was Coca-Cola, whose president, Donald R. Keough, praised the new package. “We spend a helluva lot of money,” Keough said, “and we want more mileage and more control.”¹⁰⁸

The new program offered advantages all around. It brought in more money, since worldwide sponsorships went for two to three times what sponsors had paid at Los Angeles. Since the Winter and Summer Games were sold as a package, it assured the smaller Winter Games their share of corporate support. And it helped lessen the IOC’s dependence on television rights.¹⁰⁹

As this period in the relationship between the Olympic Movement and the mass media came to a close, the movement was still dependent on television for the bulk of its revenue. It had become wealthy during the period, but it had done so in a grasping kind of way that did nothing to endear it to the media. And, for the first time, it seemed that its golden goose might have quit laying. It was a time of transition. But the IOC had taken the first tentative step toward freeing itself from television’s tyranny. As one Olympic scholar put it, “If the Olympics between 1964 and 1984 were shaped according to the needs of television, the Olympics from 1988 may increasingly be shaped by the promotional needs of corporate capitalism.”¹¹⁰

The Era of Olympic Dominance

When the IOC made its move to establish a healthier relationship with television, it started down a path that would lead to its period of greatest prosperity. But the turnaround did not occur overnight. There would be at least one more symbolic genuflection to television.

One of the principle tenets of the Olympic Movement had always been to make the Games available to the widest possible audience. But Olympic officials were prepared to violate even that tenet in the interests of placating the network moguls. NBC Sports President Richard Ebersol explained why the network experimented with pay-per-view:

Traditional advertising revenues in 1992 could not have possibly covered the \$400 million in rights that we were to pay to COOB [the Barcelona OCOG] and the \$100+ million that we were to pay for the production of the Games. So pay-per-view was thought to be the only way...for NBC to make up the difference.¹¹¹

I have not found an explanation of why the IOC permitted the use of pay-per-view, but, since the rights to the 1992 Games were awarded in December 1988, it seems likely that NBC was still feeling the sting of its low ratings in Seoul. By all accounts, the pay-per-view experiment was not a success. Since then the IOC has reaffirmed its widest-possible-audience policy.¹¹²

Having recovered from the pay-per-view misstep, the IOC appears to have entered a new period in its relations with the mass media, one that places it in a position of strength. All indications—the success of its marketing strategy, its new approach to television rights, and the still-growing worldwide love affair with the Olympic Games—point to a new era of unprecedented dominance for the Olympic Movement. The best evidence suggests that this new era began during the XXV Olympiad, the period between October 1988 and July 1992.

For one thing, the IOC’s new marketing strategy bore its first fruit during that period. Sponsorship and licensing revenue outstripped broadcast rights fees for the first time at the 1992 Barcelona Games.¹¹³ At its Centennial Olympics Congress in August and September 1994 the IOC further revised its already successful marketing strategy. The goals of the new strategy include: 1) securing known financing for the Olympic Movement and host cities while avoiding fluctuations in the marketplace, 2) forging stronger links among sponsors, broadcasters and the Olympic family to promote an

agenda that goes beyond the Games, 3) strengthening the ongoing legacy of sponsor and broadcasting support from one Games to the next, and 4) establishing long-term contracts for broadcasting rights fees that include profit-sharing arrangements and commitments to provide additional Olympics programming.¹¹⁴

The IOC explained one benefit of the new strategy:

Included in the broadcasting agreements are the rights to broadcast Games for which host cities have not yet been chosen, a clear indication that choice of city is in no way influenced by the commercial considerations of broadcasters...Previously there used to be extended debate over broadcasting time-zones and the value of the local market to sponsors. All of this is now of minimal importance as broadcasters and sponsors focus on the global nature of the Games.¹¹⁵

Another sign of the Olympic Movement's new dominance is the revenue-sharing arrangements that the IOC now includes in its contracts with the networks. The agreements guarantee the Olympic Movement a share of network profits above and beyond the stipulated rights fee. When NBC sold more than \$615 million in ads for the 1996 Atlanta Games, for example, a 50-50 revenue-sharing arrangement automatically kicked in, netting the IOC an additional \$36 million.¹¹⁶ And even though the rights fees for Atlanta set new records, advertising sales records soared even higher. "NBC is so far ahead in their projections that it's ridiculous," said Bill Sheehan, vice president of Zenith Media.¹¹⁷

Yet another sign of Olympic strength is the reaction of cities around the world that have been watching the growing power of the Olympic Movement. In 1981, only five cities submitted bids to host the 1988 Olympic Games,¹¹⁸ but a record eleven cities bid to play host to the 2004 Summer Games.¹¹⁹ One analyst said the Olympics has become "for cities the biggest single economic event on the planet,"¹²⁰ replacing the World's Fair as "the new gimmick of city building."

But the most dramatic results of the new strategy came in 1995, when NBC cemented its claim as the Olympics network. In August NBC offered \$1.27 billion for the rights to the 2000 Sydney Summer Games and the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games. NBC convinced IOC officials to accept its offer on the basis of a triple-barrelled television distribution deal: The Games will be televised on NBC-TV. Lesser-known Olympic events will be covered on NBC's two cable networks, CNBC and America's Talking (now MSNBC). And the network agreed to run a weekly half-hour program on the Olympics from August 1995 to February 2002.¹²⁰

Olympic officials in Sydney and Salt Lake City expressed delight at the offers, which were some 40 percent above their expectations. The deal was so big that Robert Wright, president and chief executive officer of NBC, joked, "As part of the arrangement, we'll also be selling NBC to the IOC."¹²²

Richard Ebersol defended the move:

You're talking about numbers that are within the capability of G.E. [General Electric Co., NBC's parent company] to absorb. But it's time to stop evaluating every sports deal on a dollar-by-dollar basis. NBC's presence at places like Atlanta, Barcelona and Wimbledon is used for NBC's and G.E.'s corporate purposes. G.E. is a \$50 billion company. Does it matter if they make \$10 million or lose \$50 million?¹²³

The sports world had barely recovered from that news when, in December 1995, NBC stunned everyone by signing the largest ever sports-rights deal, paying \$2.3 billion for the rights to the 2004, 2006, and 2008 Olympic Games. "We've carved out a love affair with the IOC," Ebersol said. "In August, we got engaged. Now it seemed reasonable to get married and open up a joint checking account."¹²⁴

The amount broke down to \$793 million for 2004, \$613 million for 2006, and \$894 million for 2008. The figures were arrived at by adding a three-percent inflation adjustment to the rights fees for the Games four years earlier.

Industry analysts gave the move cautious approval. "If NBC earns money on the Olympics, that's great," said Betsy Frank of Zenith Media. "But you can't quantify the side benefits, including keeping your stations happy and promoting your new primetime fall schedule all summer long while the competition has repeats."¹²⁵

Another said:

The stakes are huge for NBC, which hopes to parlay the world's premier sporting event into much more-happier affiliates, stronger owned stations, more powerful cable networks and, yes, impressive ratings and ad sales-while achieving unparalleled dominance in sports programming.¹²⁶

The Economist has declared that “NBC alone holds more big sports rights than any other body has held in the history of television.”¹²⁷

In March 1998, NBC took the unprecedented step of creating its own company division-NBC Olympics-devoted to the Games. One observer noted, “For NBC, Olympic TV is becoming a full-time business.”¹²⁸ The Olympic Movement was finally having a significant influence on television.

The IOC’s new strategy is not limited to the United States. The IOC reached similar agreements elsewhere, awarding the European broadcast rights for the Games from 2000 to 2008 to the European Broadcast Union for \$1.4 billion plus a 50-50 profit-sharing arrangement, and granting similar rights to Australia’s Seven Network.¹²⁹ The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation bought the Canadian rights to the same five Games for \$160 million and profit-sharing.¹³⁰ In some cases the IOC turned down higher offers that did not offer the widest possible audience, another sign of its growing strength.

The Olympic Movement is riding high, perched atop a wave of growing interest in sports and sports television. Since 1980, the number of hours devoted to sports programming in the United States has increased by 200 percent. In 1990 alone, sports programming on European television increased by 11 percent.¹³¹ Sports programming now occupies more than 10 percent of the television broadcast day, and it’s constantly on the rise. In 1995, sport generated \$3.5 billion, or 10 percent of the total advertising revenues in the United States, according to *Broadcasting & Cable*, a trade publication.¹³² The sports market is increasing by 10 to 20 percent annually, according to an estimate by Laurence Cook, product manager for NTL Occasional Video services.¹³³ Bill Rasmussen, who founded the American cable sports channel ESPN in 1979, said, “I’m amazed at the appetite for TV sports. It’s staggering.”¹³⁴

The compulsion to offer sports programming is so great that U.S. networks will go to extraordinary lengths to meet the demand. NBC and Turner Sports are said to be in the midst of an intense effort to launch a new professional football league, a rival to the National Football League. Both were “shut out of the league in frenzied bidding that yielded NFL contracts valued at a record \$18 billion over eight years.”¹³⁵

This frenzied effort on the part of the media, chasing after the Olympic Games and other sports events, is a far cry from the relationships in earlier periods. But perhaps the most compelling evidence of the current dominance of the Olympic Movement lies in its paternalistic and protectionist posture toward television. The IOC successfully tested a “Video on Demand” system at the 1998 Nagano Games. The system allows users to access broadcast footage of sports events and press conferences on the Internet. But in April 1998 the IOC announced that Video on Demand would not be available at the 2000 Sydney Games, to protect the rights of host broadcasters.¹³⁶

Conclusion

Of all the world’s sporting events, none can equal the Olympic Games. An IOC broadcast report published after the 1996 Atlanta Games¹³⁶ says it best. “Television continues to be the medium through which the world experiences the Olympics. More viewers in more countries watched the Centennial Olympic Games than ever before, making it the most watched sports event ever” (p. 3). “Global audience for the Atlanta Games rose to a cumulative 19.6 billion viewers, an 18 percent increase over Barcelona” (p. 3). “An estimated 214 countries and territories around the world televised the Games, an increase of 21 over the 1992 total of 193” (p. 4). “Nine out of ten potential viewers worldwide tuned in to watch at least part of the Centennial Olympic Games” (p. 6). “Audience ratings broke all previous records in many major countries, notably Brazil, Australia, Japan, South Korea, U.S.A. and Italy” (p. 6). “In the U.S.A....the Atlanta Games became the most watched event in U.S. television history...Approximately 92 percent of the nation’s households with television tuned in” (p. 10). “The Olympic Games is the premier world event in terms of viewer interest” (p. 11).

Perhaps no better homage has ever been paid to the Olympic Movement than the respectful admiration of a television giant. When he was president of ABC Sports and at the peak of media power, Roone Arledge said, “The Olympics is the biggest sports event on earth and it is worth every penny-every single million bucks-you have to spend to get it.”¹³⁸

Endnotes

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