

Media Narratives And The Olympic Ideology: Coalescent Tales And/Or Competing Ideals?

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Abstract:

The Olympics certainly enjoyed substantial benefits from the symbiotic relationship between media and sport, which flourished in the 1920s. This paper aims to highlight and analyze confluent and/or competing narratives between the proposed Olympic ideology in the early decades of the XX century. Specifically, it focuses on the Canadian media coverage of the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games. One of the greatest expressions of sport's linkage to ideology is the Olympic Movement and its Games. Ideology refers to a systematic set of arguments and beliefs and can be concretely encapsulated through a variety of social practices, including sports organizations and their structural and functional transformations. This analysis might add to the understanding of the symbiotic relationship between media and the Olympic Movement from a historical perspective, based on the Amsterdam 1928 Games and the Canadian media context.

Materials and Methods: For capturing Canadian media narratives about the 1928 Amsterdam Games, data was drawn from the press coverage of the 1928 Olympics from three Canadian newspapers: The Montreal Daily Star (MDS), Toronto Daily Star (TDS), and Vancouver Sun (VS). The time selection for this analysis includes the daily coverage from July 28 (when the opening ceremony occurred) to August 12 (date of the closing ceremony).

Results: The major ideological themes that emerged from the data analysis were: the (un)sacred aspects of the Olympic ceremonies; the meaning of participating at the Olympics; the athlete as a model of behavior; and nationalist narratives versus the international Olympic ideal.

Conclusion: During the XX century the contradictions within the Olympic Movement itself emerged (or at least became more visible) and surely generated contestations of its credibility and the effectiveness of its ideological messages.

Key Word: Ideology; Olympic Games; Media; Nationalism.

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I. Introduction

Sports historians and sociologists have extensively documented the development of physical activity from the very early practices (associated with rituals and pastime activities) to modern sports models, which are present in several cultures all around the world. These types of interpretations have provided meticulous examinations of both structural and functional transformations that surround the phenomenon of sport, by identifying some features that seem to be feasible for analyzing and having an understanding of this phenomenon such as secularism, bureaucratization, etc. Some of these academic works attempt to, or at least lead to the discussion of what is known as “ideology” either within the context of sports and its institutionalized

expressions and/or in articulation with broader contexts. Although the term ideology sounds abstract, the notion of a systematic set of arguments and beliefs can be concretely encapsulated through a variety of social practices, including sports.^{1,2,3}

Undoubtedly, sport became one of these “traces” through which one can put some fragments together to interpret different societies through the surrounding ideologies that shaped and established “patterns of behaviors” and their multiple interactions. One of the greatest expressions of sport’s linkage to ideology is the Olympic Movement and its Games.

In fact, from the motivations until the materialization of plans for the revival of the modern Olympic Games, they were meant to be more than “mere” Games. The French Baron Pierre de Coubertin – who is referred to be the “father” of the modern Olympics – claimed that those Games were attached to a broader movement with a set of values, beliefs, and principles, which were meant to be shared by an international audience. In general, the Games were planned to be a celebration of the humankind.⁴

As they evolved, the Olympics certainly enjoyed substantial benefits from the symbiotic relationship between media and sport, which flourished in the 1920s. In this investigation, our general interest is to examine the juxtaposition of media discourses and the Olympic ideological messages. Precisely, this paper is aimed to highlight and analyze confluent and/or competing narratives between the proposed Olympic ideology in the early decades of the XX century and the Canadian media coverage of the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games.

As the specific objectives of the study are to analyze and discuss the media narratives by contrasting and comparing them with the ideological messages of “Olympism”. We tend to argue that the case of Canada might be close to other countries’ media approach in regards to covering the Olympics. Thus, this analysis might add to the understanding of the symbiotic relationship between media and the Olympic Movement from a historical perspective. The discussions presented in this paper may also provide insights to raise new questions about how this dynamic articulation between media and sports might have impacted the Olympic Games’ structure and dimensions, the public expectations on them, as well as the public perceptions of the event.

It seems to be fairly documented that the early years of the Olympics both in practical and theoretical terms were “blurred” regarding its future and outcomes. The early decades of the XX century marked several changes in the Movement’s prospects of internationalization, and the Game’s survival to the World War I was a sign of significant structural consistency and reasonable stability within the Movement, despite the turmoil atmosphere that surrounded the world. Guttmann’s historical account about the Olympic Games points out that the 1920s was the period when the Olympic Games reached maturity. In this paper, we argue that the Olympic Movement, as an ideology – not only as a multi-sports organized event –, reached maturity. This argument is mainly based on the evidences related to the International Olympic Committee’s actions regarding the creation of Olympic protocols, ceremonies, etc.

When looking back at the Olympics in the 1920s to contextualize this analysis, it is possible to notice that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its organizing bodies made significant efforts to link the Olympics to a broader ideology by integrating some “ritual” aspects to the Games and its ceremonies, for example: the Olympic flag (created in 1914) was first flown during the 1920 Olympic Games; also in the Antwerp Games an Olympic oath was taken by the athletes for the first time; the Olympic Motto “Citius, Altius, Fortius” was officially established at the 1921 IOC session; for the first time the Olympic flame was lit in 1928; and also during the 1928 Games, the parade of participant nations started with Greece for the first time – linking the Movement back to the appealing aura of the Greek ancient times. These symbols are aimed to communicate ideological messages by producing invented traditions. One can easily observe that these “additions” to the Games (symbols, protocols, ceremonies) are still present at today’s events, and this certainly make them strong symbolic ideological constructions.⁵

Having looked at that, besides a significant body of theoretical ideological assumptions produced by Coubertin, and documentation edited by the IOC, such as session reports and IOC regular publications, we consider that by 1928 the Olympic Movement had fairly well-structured means to display its ideological messages through its symbols and rituals. But were these messages embraced by media narratives? Maybe a deeper, but intangible question is: Did the Olympic ideological messages meet the media interests/purposes?

II. Material And Methods

For capturing Canadian media narratives about the 1928 Amsterdam Games, we looked at the press coverage of the 1928 Olympics from three Canadian newspapers: The Montreal Daily Star (MDS), Toronto Daily Star (TDS), and Vancouver Sun (VS). These newspapers are among those identified and analyzed by Morrow (1987) as major Canadian metropolitan newspapers. Although official events from the Olympic program of the 1928 Amsterdam Games started in May (with hockey and football events) and went through June (with art competitions and exhibitions), the time selection for this analysis includes the daily coverage from July 28 (when the opening ceremony occurred) to August 12 (date of the closing ceremony).

Building upon methodologies applied in sports historiography, the study will categorize common themes present in Canadian media discussions. Key comparisons will include official Olympic rhetoric versus media interpretations of Canadian achievements. Finally, the analysis will situate Canadian media coverage within broader historical trends in Olympic communication. Modern sports narratives are deeply entwined with political and cultural shifts. Although we do not intend to explore the newspapers' political bias or other conundrums that surround the narrative construction process, it is important to emphasize that the newspapers' narratives analyzed in this study are not understood as "neutral" or "objective" observations on what was happening.

In the following section of this paper, we will address and briefly explain how the Amsterdam Games potentialize the analysis of the Olympic ideology's status in the beginning of the XX century. Then, it will be presented the media narratives surrounding Canadian participation at the 1928 Games stating as underlying questions to data analysis: Which were the major confluent and/or divergent narratives between the proposed Olympic ideals and Canadian media narratives about the 1928 Games? How did they articulate?

III. Results And Discussions

When looking at the Vancouver Sun narratives about the opening ceremonies, it is possible to assert that the appealing sentiments of what the ceremonies should represent according to Olympism are not captured or, at least, are not embraced by the newspaper, as one can see: "The athletes marched round the track [...] The crowd cheered continuously. There were many groups of tourists and they applauded with extra ardor as their fellow countrymen filed by."⁶

The TDS reporting on the Canadians' march into the stadium demonstrates the series of narratives embedded by national pride that prevails in the coverage of the three newspapers: "The Canadians presented a compact mass and marched with true military precision, which caught the fancy of the discipline-loving Dutch people."⁷

The dominant impression of Canadian newspaper journalism surrounding the 1928 Games is "reflected glory". In fact, Pierre de Coubertin believed to be right in restoring, from the very beginning, a religious feeling around Olympism, transformed and extended by internationalism and democracy. The ceremonials were supposed to combine diverse cultural forms to frame the Games from this perspective. Notoriously, the International Olympic Committee attempted to link the Games to a "religious sentiment" through a variety of strategies. The idea of "sporting classic" certainly positions the Olympic event in a special standard. Coubertin praised the ethos of excellence, but, at the same time, he prescribed participation for the sake of sport (linked to the noble attitude of the amateur gentlemen).

In general, media emphasis on wins and losses framed the 1928 Olympics in ways that privileged the performance of nations against nations and the good results. In general, the media projected Canadian Percy Williams's victories highlighting national pride. Percy Williams was the winner of both the 100 and 200 meters at those Games. As his triumphs were surprising, they fueled a nationalistic enthusiasm in the newspapers' narratives. A newspaper front page publication announced: "Percy Williams, Vancouver's youthful hero of the Olympic Games".⁸

However, Percy Williams' athletic performances were not the only focus. He was modeled as hero in narratives that reflected the expected characteristics of a national idol: "Williams, winner of the traditional Olympic Laurel wreath was born, raised, schooled and trained here – has lived all of his life in Vancouver – and, what is more, is regarded not only as a model-athlete, but a model youth and scholar in every sense of the word."⁹

But, if the Olympics offer only a limited temporal and physical setting for celebrating the glorious athletic achievements with a few minutes on the podium, media can offer its embellished stories and prolong the excitement through its narratives, which sometimes are the way of viewing the Games. The symbiotic relationship of international sports performance, national competitiveness, and national pride became ingredients that yield a good profit to media and sports organizations. As the economic outcomes of this relationship certainly stand out, it is important to consider that these sporting events serve also the opportunity to media vehicles to tie their political and social messages.

The issue of women's participation at the Olympics emerged from the data analysis as the Canadian newspapers reported these events from a very peculiar context. In fact, women's participation in the Olympic program has its space in the Olympic ideology since the very early years of the movement as a topic of discussion, including by Coubertin himself, who made acknowledgeable in many of his writings his reservations regarding this subject. In 1928 it was the first time that women's events were officially integrated in the Olympic program; women representing Canada did very well at those Games as they "won" the competition; and, despite the good results obtained by the women in the competition, Canadian sport authorities voted against the maintenance of the women's events in the Olympic program. The Montreal Daily Star provides, at least superficially, a positioning perspective: "Move to stop Women's Olympics, Sponsored by Canada, Fails in

Amsterdam – Those opposing the retention of women's events in the Olympics were headed by a country whose women athletes won the present women's track and field meet".¹⁰

The Toronto Daily Star positions itself with an enthusiastic tone both in regards to the aftermath of the voting process as well as for the women's achievements: "The decision of the International Amateur Athletic Federation to retain the women's track and field events on the Olympic program will mean a lot to Canada. This country will go down on the records as the first winners of the women's championship. The six girls with the Maple Leaf certainly did themselves proud at Amsterdam."¹¹

As Coubertin can be considered a powerful and influential figure as the "creator" of the modern Olympics, it is interesting to assess how the media reacted to his proposal of limiting the Games to the ideal of an exaltation of male athleticism. The newspaper announced: "Father down on Ladies' events – Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games and sole honorary president of them still poses the admission of women to the Olympiad saying, 'it is against my wishes that they have been admitted to an increasing number of contests.'"¹²

IV. Conclusion

The major ideological themes that emerged from the data analysis were: the (un)sacred aspects of the Olympic ceremonies; the meaning of participating at the Olympics; the athlete as a model of behavior; and nationalist narratives *versus* the international Olympic ideal. It was also uncovered the issue of women's participation at the Olympics as a non-promoted ideal. There is a delicate interplay between nationalism and internationalism within the Olympic Movement. In practical terms, the Olympic Movement does not eliminate the possibility of demonstrating nationalist sentiments as athletes are supposed to compete under National Olympic Committees, they have their national flags raised, and their national anthem is played in a number of situations. Thus, the mediation of this interplay by the newspapers' narratives analyzed in this paper is pushed toward nationalism to serve the press purposes, which is mainly to sell itself.

As for future investigations about the topic, it is important to acknowledge that during the XX century the contradictions within the Olympic Movement itself emerged (or at least became more visible) and surely generated contestations of its credibility and the effectiveness of its ideological messages mainly by scholars, media representatives and activists (e.g. the involvement of politics in the Games, and the scandals linked to misconducts of IOC members in Salt Lake City bidding process). Building upon this idea, it is crucial to recognize that the contradictions within the Olympic Movement not only became more apparent during the XX century but also played a significant role in shaping critical discourse around the Games. These episodes and contestations must be considered for further analysis as they probably impacted the way the Olympics' ideals have been internalized, embraced and/or portrayed by the media and the public.

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