Chapter 13

Between Sports Event and Media Event: The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Italian Newspapers

Marica Spalletta
Link Campus University, Italy

Lorenzo Ugolini
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

Since its first edition (1896), modern Olympic Games have represented a far-reaching sport event, because they draw the attention of a wide audience and because their “festivity” breaks daily routines. According to Dayan and Katz (1992), Olympic Games are to be considered certainly as a sport event, but also as a media event. They also state that the affirmation of media events is strictly linked to their live broadcasting on TV. This chapter aims to understand if, referring to the Olympic Games, it is still possible to talk about “media events” in the shift between their representation in live broadcasting and their journalistic reports on printed news media. Through a qualitative media content analysis, the chapter examines the way in which two Italian significant newspapers (Corriere della Sera and La Gazzetta dello Sport) covered the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games. The research shows that the analysis of Sochi 2014 as a media event cannot abstract from the current main features of sports journalism, that are hybridization, mediatization and popularization. Therefore, Sochi has represented a break of journalistic daily routine because of a journalistic coverage strongly hybridized but, on the other hand, it can’t be fully considered as a “media event” because of the lack of mediatization and popularization.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9967-0.ch013
INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Since its first edition in 1896, modern Olympic Games have represented a far-reaching sports event, the most awaited by athletes competing in nearly all the different disciplines (Toohey & Veal, 2007; Horne & Whannel, 2012): every athlete aims even only for taking part to the Olympics, because it constitutes the successful completion of his/her agonistic career; at the same time, when he/she wins an Olympic gold medal, immediately he/she becomes a Hall-of-Famer of his/her discipline (Miller, 2012).

However, as Toohey and Veal state (2007, pp. 6-7) “the Olympic Games are no longer – if they ever were – just a sporting event: they are a cultural, political and economic phenomenon. Particular interest see them as a media event, a tourism attraction, a marketing opportunity, a catalyst for urban development and renewal, a city image creator and booster, a vehicle for ‘sport for all’ campaigns, an inspiration for youth and a force for peace and international understanding”.

Therefore, on one hand the Olympic Games are a very heterogeneous phenomenon, in which sports issues often blend with economic, social, cultural and political issues (Guttman, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2012). For example, concerning the relationship between sport and politics, over the last century it has usually taken shape in three different ways: the Olympic Games have represented a political topic (i.e. the American boycott of Moscow 1980 and the following Soviet boycott of Los Angeles 1984) (Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Toohey & Veal, 2007), a frame in which political issues emerged (from Berlin 1936, that is the so-called “Hitler’s Olympics”, to the Munich 1972 massacre, not to say about the Square of the Three Cultures protest in coincidence with Mexico City 1968) (Hilton, 2006; Large, 2012; Witherspoon, 2013), finally a useful tool to promote the image of the host country (recently, Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008) (Panagiotopoulou, 2012).

On the other hand, the Olympic Games have to be considered as one of the main media events: as Toohey and Veal (2007, p. 1) state, “every four years, in recent decades, some 10,000 athletes from 200 countries, with a similar number of coaches and officials, as many as 15,000 accredited media representatives and hundreds of thousands of spectators have gathered for more two weeks to participate in, report on and watch a sporting event which is in turn viewed on television, listened to on radio, read about in the print media and followed by Internet by billions of people around the world”. Therefore, according to Toohey and Veal all the media cover the Olympics, involving in the event a very heterogeneous audience, composed certainly by active participants and enthusiastic fans, but also by people generally not affected by sports, but interested in Olympics.

Over the last century, several authors have focused on the relationship between sport and media, highlighting the way in which the Olympic Games hybridity has affected and, at the same time, has been affected by the media and journalistic coverage (Spalletta & Ugolini, 2013). For example, McAloon (1984) states that Olympics are a hybrid meta-genre, composed of spectacle, festival, ritual and games, and this feature characterizes media reports about it. In the same way, according to Panagiotopoulou (2010, p. 233) “television has transformed the scope and the resources of […] the Olympic Games”, which “constitute one of the biggest mediated phenomena and a popular expression of our time”. Considering the Olympic Games not merely as a sports phenomena, but primarily as a media event is also one of the main topic explained by Dayan and Katz in their Media Events (1992). According to them, in fact, the Olympic Games constitute a media event because their “festivity” breaks the daily routines and, at the same time, because of their rituality and their capability to attract the wider media audiences in the history.