Sports Journalism, dissemination and innovation. A case study of the international news coverage of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games

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Abstract
Olympic Games give journalism an opportunity to show people sports that are usually out of media scope and require an explanation of their rules, techniques, terminology or competition formats in order to get much more engagement from audience, who feel like watching new medals being won for their country. Journalism may take advantage of this event to innovate by reinforcing visually driven content and searching new ways of storytelling and displaying results. This research is a study of the main coverages made by media during the Winter Olympics held from 7th February to 23rd February in Sochi (Russia).

Keywords: Sports Journalism, online journalism, innovation, educational journalism, specialised journalism.


1. Introduction

Today, Sports Journalism can be seen as a distinguished informative area because of its excellent social projection and its great ability to mobilise citizens’ interest. In addition, it constitutes an strategic product for big communications companies: from audio-visual media enterprises, which invest millions every season in order to acquire the broadcasting rights of big events, to digital and print media firms, which put their efforts into innovating and offering a thorough coverage of one of the most popular topics that create great expectation among the audience.
This fact, recreated in most countries, is not only confirmed by the data obtained regarding attendance in sports stadiums but also, and especially, by the main audience measurement studies concerning the media in sports competitions and the consumption habits of sports enthusiasts. One of the latest reports found thereupon is the Global Sports Media Consumption Report 2013. This annual research, of which its third edition was released by consulting firm KantarSport and sports digital media company Perform, revealed that sport matters in the fourteen largest global media markets (Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Russia, Spain, United States, Japan, India, Indonesia and Turkey) are increasingly being followed by their citizens in a growing diversity of platforms and digital mediums.

The success of sport in contemporary societies has largely been possible thanks to the role played by journalistic enterprises, which have found in this social and cultural phenomenon a «real gold mine» since the appearance and rise of spectator sport early in the 20th century (Alcoba, 2005: 49). Therefore, the media has been developed in line with the evolution of the different modalities and has contributed decisively to their professionalisation (Álvarez Pedrosa, 2013: 255) by boosting or sponsoring the creation of competitions, thus raising awareness about the changes made to the regulations and expanding the lexicon of the readers with new words, expressions and meanings. The interrelationship between the media and sport, once it has been consolidated over the years, has been decisive even for the creation of national identities in states and territories (Rowe, 2013).

Given the characteristics of the subject it deals with, Sports Journalism is, as a matter of fact, a diverse and complex area of specialisation inasmuch as it deals with a large and diverse number of modalities. As stated by Esteve and Fernández del Moral (1999: 280), «sports information can be seen as a huge area which consists of as many subareas as sport activities exist» and with different levels of specialisation, a fact that is more firmly expressed in the sports media than in the sports sections featured in the general media.

Certainly, specialisation in this journalistic area is divided into different modalities to the extent that it is difficult for an editor to be a jack of all trades and still be able to write with enough fluency and depth about any other sport or discipline. In fact, thematic specialisation is usually classified in two big categories: football and the rest of modalities, which tend to be generally tagged as «Multi-sport».

Similarly, the organisation of sports newsrooms tend to respond to these priorities in such a way that most sports journalists focus on football, which usually constitutes around 70% of the daily volume of information in this specialised field (Rojas, 2013: 209), whereas fewer of them are in charge of those modalities that have acquired a secondary meaning in the media schedule. This way, there are specialists in basketball, cycling, tennis, motor racing, motorcycling or golf, and in sports with less impact but of great federative and social importance, such as athletics, handball or volleyball.

Nevertheless, the extent of the world of sports makes it an unmanageable de facto area for journalism, which can barely offer contents about a limited number of sport disciplines in a frequent basis. Suffice it to say that in Spain, according
to information provided by the Spanish National Sports Council, 66 sports federations have been officially recognised, which in turn comprehend more than 400 disciplines or areas. In the international scene this number is even higher, as Sports Accord, with 90 sports federations, shows. Despite the obvious difficulty that Sports Journalism faces in order to be able to report about a wide variety of events and statements, critical voices have emerged towards its thematic slant over the past years, which are not always related to the application of news criteria when selecting and establishing a hierarchy of the contents. This is true to such an extent that the dissemination of anecdotes or rumours about the private life of the professionals displaces the achievement of goals or the pure transmission of results from sports slots. Ultimately, one may ask if this kind of journalism meets its social requirement and reports about sport in its diversity, thus doing honour to its name or, on the contrary, dismisses and obscures stories about the physical exercise of the professionals, whatever their modality is, in support of entertainment.

The footballisation of sports information, the trivialisation of the contents, an insufficient verification work of the sources, sexism and the establishment of racial or cultural stereotypes, the incitement to violent behaviour through the use of visual or textual language or the prevalence of extra journalistic formats in the audiovisual sports scene (Paniagua: 2006) are vital issues that affect the quality of information and on which a debate should be reopened from time to time with regard to professional ethics and to the social responsibility this kind of journalism fulfils because of its special impact and the great interest it arouses in society. Rivero and Tamburrini reflect, in this regard, on the behaviour of this kind of journalism in an ethic context, stating that «sport is a useful space for the public, a socialisation and protection process» and occupies «a significant place in many sports initiatives that take place far from the spotlight and media coverage today» (2014: 17). In addition, the authors inform of the dangerous spectacularisation of contents, especially in television formats, where information becomes more redundant and biased.

What is certain is that in the audiovisual media, sport has become a real mass show where news are relegated to entertainment as a means of expression, and this has favoured the inclusion of elements outside the journalism scope in its discourse. All of this constitutes a marketing strategy aimed at achieving economic profitability and creating a business.

In addition to the contradictory perception that Sports Journalism arouses, its nature attracts attention due to the fact that it is considered an informative typology whose social impact deals with both the universality of the subject it focuses on and its deep local or national popularity, therefore it represents a riveting subject of study from which it is possible to understand how the media interacts with the audience in contemporary societies (Boyle, 2006: 3). Indeed, the attractiveness of sport has been effectively used by journalism, which has shown the achievements of the sports professionals and teams to the community they represent at the same time it has awakened the need of consumption of this kind of information in the audience, who want to be a part of the fulfilment of a shared success. «In such a way, Sports Journalism has become a cohesive element for the contemporary societies to whom it provides a public service and with whom it
identifies in a cultural and emotional way» (Rojas, 2011: 17), thus serving as «an instrument that civilises and develops the social network» (Zapata, Hernández y Osorio, 2013: 219).

Evidence suggests that, for social groups, Sports Journalism contributes effectively to the enhancement of the feeling of belonging to a certain community and of mutual understanding with the rest of citizens, who are highly involved in the celebration of the success of their national sportsmen and teams. This fact becomes apparent mainly during international and popular events such as the Football World Cups or the Olympic Games, occasions that are highlighted every four years in the media schedule and that are often followed by remarkable media displays.

In contrast to the Football World Cup, which draws attention to the most followed and universal sport, the hosting of the Olympic Games offers journalism the opportunity to play an educative role and to fulfil its social mission: to cover sport in its diversity. This event, organised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), serves, because of its global impact and diversity of sports, as an opportunity for the media to bring the audience closer to disciplines that are not often included in its schedule and whose regulation, techniques, terminology or competition format need to be explained in order to involve the audience, whose hope is placed in this competition because of the possible win of medals for their national teams, in a greater extent.

The informative potential that Sports Journalism has is even greater during the Winter Olympic Games, also hosted every four years and in which a limited number of modalities are included. These modalities are not popular among the general public primarily because there are fewer countries with a history in snow or ice sports. Moreover, some changes tend to take place in every Olympic cycle with the addition of new disciplines or events to the schedule, which also require an explanation from the journalists.

Thus, an event such as the one hosted in 2014 in Sochi (Russia) is considered a real challenge for the media, who must be able to generate a thorough and correct coverage of the tournaments derived from the different modalities and disciplines that they do not tend to inform on.

What's more, the Olympics constitute a great opportunity for Sports Journalism to prove its creative ability and innovative urge, as it has been happening throughout its history. Today, Sports Journalism is one of the most progressive areas of specialisation from a technical point of view due to the fact that it has always set trends in the way they provide information through an attractive and universal language, based on the visual representation of the sports professionals and their results, with the introduction of a flexible and adaptable design, or through the use of a certain colour and typography in the layout of special pages and rather sensational front covers.

In a universal event such as the Olympic Games, the challenge Sports Journalism faces is also based on knowing how they have contributed to the innovation of the way they report and visually represent their contents in both the design and use of new mediums and digital tools to tell stories and the required elements to graphically provide data, which are cumulative and must be shown in the most attractive and original way in order to attract the attention of the readership.
2. Sample and methodology

This research constitutes an in-depth study of the most outstanding online sports coverage during the Winter Olympic Games held in Sochi, Russia, from 7th to 23rd of February due to its wide display and the innovative and informative nature of its news contents.

Thus, the main goal of this article is to determine to what extent the media and the international sports sections have introduced innovative elements concerning the use of mediums and new digital narratives in the news coverage of the Winter Olympics. Furthermore, this study intends to prove whether Sports Journalism carried out an informative task because of the processing of the information and the way it was reported in the context of the competition.

Before explaining the sample obtained and the methodology used to carry out this study, we must focus on the characteristics of this big sports event, in which almost 2,900 sports professionals from 90 countries competed, in order to understand the degree of complexity faced during the Olympics and the behaviour of the international sports media that covered it. The Winter Olympics held in Sochi comprised 98 events regarding 15 Olympic disciplines in seven different sports or modalities (the relevant international federations are the following: biathlon, bobsleigh and skeleton, curling, skiing, ice hockey, luge, and ice skating). Concerning the 2010 Winter Olympics, twelve new events were added (three in the mixed category, four in men’s and five in women’s): women’s ski jumping, team figure skating, mixed relay luge, mixed relay biathlon, parallel slalom, slopestyle snowboarding, slopestyle freestyle skiing, and halfpipe freestyle skiing.

In order to carry out this research, we will use the case study scientific method with the objective of providing more rigorous, valid, and reliable results. In addition, the case study method allows carrying out an in-depth research in order to analyse the context and the processes involved in the phenomenon represented as the subject of study. Therefore, it can be seen as an intensive research of selected samples in which the context of the phenomenon must be taken into account.

The case study method is especially valid when questions referring to «how» or «why», rather than «what», «who», «where» and «why», are posed, due to the fact that the former are more explanatory and allow us to carry out a qualitative analysis of the behaviour observed in different media, thus providing a larger contextualisation of the facts when following the news coverage on a daily basis.

All in all, this can be the most suitable methodology to explain, from the observation of data and from the organised gathering of results, the causative mechanisms (journalistic planning or production) that have favoured the management and exposition of the contents in the advanced media and their relationship with the coverage of similar events in order to determine whether they have contributed to journalism with innovative elements, and if the said elements have been informative due to the way the contents were reported.

We have designed a research study of seven cases, a sufficient number of samples from which the development of a valid thesis can be possible, inasmuch as it is based on easily verifiable facts. In such a way, contents featured in international media websites about the Olympics have been monitored from an informative
point of view from 1st of February, a week prior to the opening ceremony, to 28th of that same month, a day after the closing ceremony.

The representativeness of the selected media has to do, in the first instance, with the magnitude of distribution in their respective countries. The United States is the delegation with the utmost number of athletes (230, 17 more than Russia), and some other countries have been traditionally aiming at winning the largest number of medals (the US finished fourth in the medal table with 28 of them, preceded by Russian, Norway and Canada; France finished tenth in the ranking with 15 medals). Moreover, the uniqueness of the media which covered the events almost exclusively for their respective countries has been taken into account. This is the case of two state televisions that acquired the broadcasting rights and devoted a relevant part of their schedules, as well as a renowned sports newspaper (which featured a specific microsite apart from its paper version), to Sochi.

Thus, the media included in the samples section of this study are the digital versions of two of the television networks that covered the Winter Olympics (BBC, and Spanish RTVE through sports channel Teledesporte), three of the general newspapers that devoted most of their space to the event (The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal), and two top multisport journals (American magazine Sports Illustrated and French journal L’Equipe). Within a month we have tried to analyse a sufficiently large and internationally relevant sample with the only purpose of obtaining valid results that could show the innovative and informative extent in which Sports Journalism has reported the contents during the event.

We have chosen to focus on texts, images and multimedia contents obtained from the websites in order to follow the news coverage by the media in a simpler way. Nevertheless, the analysis of the content has been possible thanks to the different accounts that the media have arranged on Twitter, some of which were created specifically for this occasion. This has eased the recording of the number of pieces of news concerning the sports event.

In order to boost mediation, it is important that we take into account what is published on the microblogging network, which has become the preferred platform for news services, which are then able to anticipate the results and share information and images that will later be developed and enlarged on their respective websites. The daily routine of sports journalists has changed because of Twitter, which provides more opportunities to interact with the audience and receive more feedback, and is useful when in need of news and new stories to tell, which must be reported in the most appropriate way in order to increase audience numbers and generate more traffic towards their websites (Matthews and Anwar, 2013: 304).

The analysis of the news coverage of the Sochi Winter Olympics comprised the evaluation of 13 Twitter accounts owned by the seven media mentioned earlier, three accounts specifically created for the coverage of this event, and three accounts started by the Graphics and Interactive Media departments from some journals, which must develop multimedia material regarding the previews, reports and articles that constitute our subject of study as well.
We analysed the following websites and Twitter accounts:
— Websites
http://www.rtve.es/deportes/juegos-olimpicos-invierno/
http://www.washingtonpost.com/olympics/
http://olympics.wsj.com/?mod=olympics_banner_homepage
http://olympics.si.com/olympics/sochi-2014-winter-olympics
http://www.lequipe.fr/Aussi/Jo-2014-sotchi/
— Twitter accounts
@BBCSport
@JJOOOrtve
@teledeporte
@nytimes
@SochiNYT
@nytgraphics
@washingtonpost
@PostGraphics
@WSJ
@WSJGraphics
@SInow
@lequipe
@lequipe
@lequipeSOTCHI

3. Results

The case study on the news coverage during the Sochi Winter Olympic Games provides one main result: the seven media analysed made a thorough coverage of the event, with a large number of textual and graphic pieces and interactive multimedia material that followed the previews, reports and articles.

3.1. BBC

Just as what happened during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, the British Broadcasting Company complemented its broadcast of the event in Sochi with an outstanding digital coverage, which was proclaimed to be the most ambitious during the Winter Olympics and was preceded by one of the most impressive promos for a sports event.¹ A total of 650 hours of broadcast were devoted to the online streaming of the events in six simultaneous channels on its website. The entire content of the BBC Sports website was also available on tablets and other kinds of mobile devices through applications specifically designed for iPhone, iPad, Android and Kindle Fire.

¹ Winter Olympics 2014 BBC Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4b9Jl7Dvj#t=20
The BBC website was structured in five big sections: medal table, daily schedule of the events, results (news and instant monitoring of the events), videos, and reports and articles. Between 12 and 14 daily pieces of news and 8-10 videos were featured on the home page. The interactive media guides, created to monitor the competition on a daily basis and to understand the regulations and key aspects of each discipline, stood out due to their informative nature. Furthermore, the video gallery, which featured videos on sports science and was named ‘Science of Sochi’, focused on issues such as technological innovation in the winter modalities, speed physics, production of artificial snow or the difficulties athletes find when competing under extreme weather conditions.

3.2. RTVE

The website of the Spanish public television provided up to eight simultaneous broadcasts for the audience to be able to watch all the competitions live with the possibility of combining up to four simultaneous broadcasts in one single viewer, in addition to the 14 daily hours of broadcast in sports channel Teledeporte. What’s more, the +TVE app allowed users to interact actively and share their opinions and best images of the events on social networking sites.

In addition to the updated contents, which were shown via the Twitter accounts @JJPPRtve and @teledeporte with an average daily rate of tweets (most of them including images), the special coverage on RTVE.es was complemented by a daily schedule in an interactive media guide, the medal table, blogs by other experts, and media archives in which videos and image galleries were featured on a daily basis. All the contents and services are available on demand.

3.3. The New York Times

The New York Times provided one of the most thorough and innovative information displays in Sochi. With a website and a Twitter account specifically created for this occasion, in which 5,010 tweets regarding the Olympics were generated (around 60-65 tweets every day), the American newspaper based its informative objective on the visual representation of the contents through graphics, displays, interactive and explanatory videos, and, above all, great stories (articles, interviews and profiles).

The Graphics and Interactive Media department displayed their work through their Twitter account (@nytgraphics) and gathered a number of pieces\(^2\) that showed new kinds of digital narrative. Their six interactive multimedia materials, created with parallax and scrolllytelling, have become a different way of explaining the techniques and characteristics of the winter disciplines thanks to the use of subjective cameras, 3D graphics, and interviews with top professionals. The videos are displayed in full screen, with outstanding low motion images that are given the sense of depth and allow users to enjoy the moment and get closer to what the

athletes see and feel. The New York Times created 14 photo composites in order to show in just one image the entire performance of an athlete during an event, thus serving as a graphic analysis in order to better understand what had happened.

Furthermore, the complete work comprises six outstanding interactive graphics aimed at understanding the contents about the events. Four of the most remarkable graphics are «How Close They Came to Winning», which shows the distance between the winners and the rest of the competitors from the finishing line in each event in Sochi; «Hanyu Wins Men’s Figure Skating Gold», which covered the men’s figure skating final competition by displaying graphics that showed both the good and poor jumps made by each competitor; «Giant Jumps», an original preview of women’s figure skating based on graphics; and «Is that a Luge in Times Square?», which recreates how the Winter Olympics would be if they hosted in the very heart of Manhattan.

One of the main innovations introduced by this newspaper in the news coverage of such a sports event was the addition of the ‘Sochi Ohoto Firehouse’ service in their website, which served as a constant succession of images, either taken by them or by international news agencies, in real time.

All these works were made possible thanks to the creation of a Graphics and Interactive Media department in this newspaper from New York, which consisted in approximately 50 professionals: journalists, programmers, publicists, and producers (Pilhofer: 2014); and, above all, to a long-term planned work that took months to develop. According to Wilson Andrews, one of the Graphics editors at New York Times, five workgroups were organised six months prior to the beginning of the Games, in which the coverage of each discipline was distributed. They collected information, looked for sources and film locations, and travelled to the training grounds to film, shoot and record interviews in such a way that, by the time the events started, the Graphics department had everything ready, thus focusing on the complementation of the reports with new graphics and displays (Krishnakumar, 2014).

3.4. The Washington Post

Similarly to The New York Times, The Washington Post chose to centre the attention on articles and analyses rather than in a mere commentary of the results. What’s more, they did so with a remarkable presence of graphics and displays, therefore creating a much more developed section than the one they designed for the London Olympics hosted two years before. This new section constitutes a part of the newspaper’s digital strategy. As expressed by editor Marty Baron (2014), «Most importantly, we are focusing on the kind of journalism that works on the Internet, with more informal and understandable information, and displaying all the tools we have access to, such as videos or social networking sites; this is a different way of telling stories.»

Again, the Twitter account of the Graphics department was used (@postGraphics) in order to show these works to the audience, in such a way that 11 different works were tweeted and retweeted: 10 interactive graphics and one video multimedia resource.
Among the most outstanding works created by this department are: “Evolving sports”, which explains the evolution of the different disciplines throughout the history of the Winter Olympic Games and that took part during the preview of the event; “Winter speed demons”, in which the speed reached by the competitors in each Olympic discipline are compared; and “Keys to Skis”, which shows the difference in size and shape of the skis in the different disciplines and snow events.

3.5. The Wall Street Journal

This journal, based in New York, designed a microsite, whose design was different from their website, in order to boost the coverage of the Games. This rather visual microsite, devoted to the Sochi Games, featured headlines and images in some quick-read sub-menus. News videos, reports, articles, and a live streaming of the breaking news were particularly remarkable.

Eight interactive graphics, which were displayed on the Twitter account of the Graphics department (@wsjgraphics), were also created for this purpose. One particular work stood out: “Primer: Olympic 500m Speedskating”, an animated graphic that shows how the elevation of the venue affects the sprinters in Speedskating and the records in Sochi in comparison with past competitions.

Another curiosity of this section was the “Putin-o-meter”, a special software program that includes images and graphics and measures the mood of the Russian president depending on the number of medals obtained by the athletes from the host country.

3.6. Sports Illustrated

The American sports magazine designed a visually attractive microsite, with a simple homepage that featured the medal table and that included images and headlines. Both the photo galleries (30) and the news videos or video reports (31), along with the articles and reports, had a notable presence on the Internet.

Among the latter, 8 longform pieces excelled, thus constituting a new narrative typology that reinforces itself in the new digital mediums, which is characterised by the display of extended stories divided into different chapters; and, above all, by the addition of multimedia and interactive elements that open themselves when we scroll, aimed at enlivening the reading and creating impressive effects in order to catch the attention of the readership, thus involving them in this experience (Hiatt, 2014). Most of these longform pieces, which were hosted in a webpage specifically created by Sports Illustrated in 2013 for this kind of multithematic articles, complemented the preview of the Games and covered the participation of the American athletes, a look back to historical moments, and the explanation of the disciplines and events.

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4 http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/longform/
3.7. *L’Equipe*

The French sports journal created a specific and complete website as well, featuring news, articles and a collection of historical data in interactive graphics. As many of the analysed media, *L’Equipe* created a Twitter account (@lequipe-SOTCHI) on the occasion of the Winter Olympics, from which they provided detailed information about the results and special reports for the launch of their website during the preview of the event. Thanks to this account, which was used for the coverage of the Winter Paralympics from 7th to 16th of March as well, the French journal sent 1,095 tweets, which translates into an average rate of 60-65 daily tweets that included links but few images attached.

**4. Conclusions**

The media that had the best resources to cover the Sochi Winter Olympic Games at their disposal made the most of their great display in order to innovate in journalism, thus offering new services and tools with which they were able to report, and using the latest technological advances to search for new digital narratives and make their stories more appealing. This was revealed in the results obtained from our sample, collected from the informative monitoring of the websites and Twitter accounts owned by the channels that broadcast the Games, general journals and renowned sports publications whose innovative results were reflected in both the design of the microsites and the addition of a large number of graphics, videos, photo galleries and interactive multimedia materials to their previews, commentaries and articles.

The work done by the international media analysed in this case study reveals that the tasks carried out by sports journalists to report in this kind of events has changed for good. Reporting in this new digital environment requires better contents that go beyond the results and priorities that directly surround top-level sports; in other words, it requires learning how to make a more comprehensive coverage and to develop primary sources aimed at paving the way for articles, profiles or interviews while adjusting their formats and genre to the new consumption habits of the users and to the new mediums.

However, the coverage made by the media in Sochi was rather uneven, being determined by the level of popularity and historical roots of both the event and the sports comprised in its schedule in different countries.

On the other hand, apart from diversifying their contents with the inclusion of unpopular sports in the media schedule, the informative treatment developed by the international media in Sochi, which explained the unknown disciplines to the audience, also represents an informative work from the social environments linked to sports.

The Olympic Games constitute, without a doubt, the ideal occasion to spread a bit of sporting culture among the citizens, primarily in those countries that are less familiar with the winter modalities, own a smaller number of federative forms, have not historically achieved international success, and are not often sup-
ported by international institutions when trying to develop themselves in a near future and finally taking significant steps in launching the athletes.

In these sort of cases, the media can play a decisive role in improving and diversifying the sports situation of a country, sometimes only occasionally, giving visibility to these Olympic athletes, their stories and achievements, and their modalities, regardless of whether or not they win medals.

Certainly, journalism finds in the coverage of the Olympic Games a ‘breeding ground’ for the fulfilment of its social, informative, educational and entertaining role and for the evidence of its informative potential by the display of the positive values derived from sports and the creation of a culture about the diversity of existing modalities and competitions.

5. References


