

Human Rights and Olympic Games in Beijing: A Study of 20 Prestigious Newspapers from Different Continents

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Abstract

This article deals with the problem of the human rights in the context of the Olympic Games in Beijing. The goal of this media study is to show how different newspapers from different countries, representing different cultures, languages and political backgrounds, presented and commented this problem at the moment of the opening of the Olympic Games that politically were considered controversial, because of the human rights abuses of the Chinese regime. 20 prestigious newspapers from different continents were analysed, demonstrating a global perspective and global pluralism. This article is based on a paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research dedicated to the problem of the human rights and communication, held in 2009 at UNAM in Mexico City.

Key words: China, human rights, newspapers, Olympic Games, press freedom.

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Introduction

When in the antiquity the Olympics took place (in Ancient Greece) there were no mass media, and the news about those athletic contests held in honour of gods were surely transmitted by words of mouth, like many other news and stories at that epoch (Wolert, 2005: 1-12). Modern Olympism, conceived by Pierre de Coubertin, emerged in June 1894, when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was constituted, and the first Olympic Games of modern times were celebrated – naturally – in the Greek capital, Athens, in 1896. It was also the epoch of the developing modern press, distributed widely in different modern countries. In Great Britain the

press at that time was free and industrialized already, after the abolition of the advertisement duty (1853), the stamp duty (1855), the paper duty (1861) and the security system (1869). New generation of newspapers appeared with such dailies like: *Daily Mail* (1896), *Daily Express* (1900), *Daily Mirror* (1903), that began to play the prominent role in British journalism (Curran, Seaton 2003: 22-24). Other newspapers, that could be called “mass papers”, appeared also in France (*Le Petit Journal*) and in the U.S.A. (*The World* and *The New York Morning Journal*), where they reached the distribution of about 1.5 million copies (Mrozowski, 2001: 89-90), other countries were following suite as well. So, the epoch of the development of the modern mass press and the emerging of the modern Olympism were simultaneous phenomena.

After the First World War sport events were transmitted by radio. In 1936 the Olympic Games took place in Berlin, and the first television transmissions from the Olympic arenas were viewed, although only on few black-white screens in the (then Nazi) German capital. Only in 1964 the global transmission of the Olympic Games from Tokyo was possible thanks to the satellite television (Goban-Klas, 2001: 146-148). Four years before, the Olympic Games from Rome were watched on TV screens in different countries. In that year (1960) the International Olympic Committee earned 1 million dollars from the broadcasting rights, and in 1964 1.6 million dollars. Next Olympics were consequently much more profitable for IOC (Kishan Thussu, 2006: 116) as shown here:

No.	Year	City	Budget US Dollar
1.	1968	Mexico City	7.5 Million dollars
2.	1972	Munich	17.8 Million dollars
3.	1976	Montreal	32 Million dollars
4.	1980	Moscow	101 Million dollars
5.	1984	Los Angeles	287 Million dollars
6.	1988	Seoul	403 Million dollars
7.	1992	Barcelona	636 Million dollars

8.	1996	Atlanta	898.2 Million dollars
9.	2000	Sydney	1331.5 Million dollars
10.	2004	Athens	1476.9 Million dollars

Every time, next Olympics have been more profitable for IOC because of the revenues from broadcasting rights as a result of the widening audience viewing these sport competitions in different parts of the world. Hafez (2007: 26) wrote: “Sporting events such as the Olympic Games are transmitted simultaneously to many countries in the world. They enable the mass media to unite people the world over, beyond national, cultural or religious borders, as they watch the same images on television”. Indeed, the Olympic Games are the most international mediatized event, because of the representatives of almost all countries competing in one city during several weeks. Nevertheless, as Hafez (2007: 26) underlines: “The content of international reporting is however often moulded by national viewpoints and stereotypes, that is, by particularistic rather than global perspectives. Rather than ‘The Olympics’, little ‘national Olympics’ are constructed on screens and in newspapers al over the world, in which national sportsmen and women are the centre of attention”. So, even the most boring sport will be transmitted and viewed with emotions by mass audience in one country if a representative of that country is supposed to win a medal. The national points of view impact the media reports from the Olympic Games, and this impact depends on different factors.

When it was decided that China would be the host of the Olympic Games in 2008, many protest voices were heard throughout the world, especially in the Western world, because of the human rights abuses in the most populated country on Earth. Western activists underlined the lack of democracy and press freedom, the problems with Tibet (that, anyway, reminded about itself shortly before Olympic Games) and other issues related to human rights. And the idea of the Olympic Games is strongly connected to the human rights – it seems clear after reading the Fundamental Principles of Olympism, expressed in the official Olympic Charter, Point 2. It reads: “The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human

dignity”. Point 4 stress more: “The practice of sport is a human right (...)”. finally, point 5 reads: “Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement” (*Fundamental Principles of Olympism*, “Olympic Charter”, in force as from 7 July 2007, IOC: 11).

To sum up, it was the International Olympic Committee that decided to give China’s regime the honor to organize the Olympic Games in 2008. Many heads of states (especially Western world heads) did not participate in the opening ceremony, just because of controversies concerning human rights abuses, and the problems with press freedom, in particular. Thomas L. McPhail (2006: 11) stated: “Yet beginning in March 2001, Chinese authorities banned *Time* magazine for several months for carrying a favorable story on the Falun Gong movement. Cybercafes are closed frequently. In 2004 Chinese authorities arrested a *New York Times* researcher for doing political research involving criticism of China’s human rights record. But on the positive side, China has joined the World Trade Organization, the newest Disney theme park in China, and the 2008 Summer Olympic Games was held in Beijing, with NBC holding the US broadcasting rights”.

In 2007 a special report of the Committee to Protect Journalists, titled “Falling Short”, appeared to show that “as the 2008 Olympics approach, China falters on press freedom”. In different chapters many problems concerning press freedom (jailed journalists, censorship, limits of expression, the bureaucrat’s tyranny and others) in China were analysed, and in the Appendix I, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one could read the Article 19. While article 35. of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (adopted on December 4, 1982) reads: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession, and of demonstration” (CPJ, *Falling Short. As the 2008 Olympics Approach, China Falters on Press Freedom*, August 2007: 52).

Although this excerpt from the Chinese constitution is close to the principle of the press freedom, it seems to be differently interpreted by the Chinese regime and by the Western political leaders. However, Shelton Gunaratne explains the sense of these differences, underlying the East-West

dichotomy in perception of democracy and, among others, the West-centrism in communication theory, seen in Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's "Four Theories of the Press". (Gunaratne, 2005: 166). In conclusion, Gunaratne states: "Some have argued that Habermas' concepts presented as part of a theory of democracy are more universally applicable than the press theories we have analyzed. However, elsewhere I have pointed out that Habermas' concept of the public sphere, associated with the rise of the European bourgeoisie and the resulting emergence of civil society, ignores the developments in non-Western history (...). Habermas' concept of communicative rationality also conflicts with the principles of infinite interpretation and intuition associated with Eastern philosophy".

And in China the Confucian philosophy and values, and no liberal ideology, are the foundation of social life. And one of the principles of the Confucianism is the peace that is strongly related to the peaceful idea of Olympism. Qing Cao, who researches, among others the western representation problems in China, states that despite progress, "there exists a wide and even dangerous gap between how China sees itself and how others see it. (...) As an innovative discourse, Confucian values could ever be transformed into a truly viable alternative to liberal democracy, and if that could be viewed positively and may be accepted abroad. Whether Beijing is willing to accept it or not, internal politics does have a bearing on external perceptions and therefore foreign relations" (Qing Cao, 2007: 447).

In this environment of incomprehension gap, the Summer Olympic Games 2008 took place in Beijing, and the opening ceremony was boycotted by different heads of states. However, it seems interesting and relevant how one day before and the exact day of the opening ceremony the prestige newspapers from various countries (from several continents) related the issue of the Olympic Games in China in the context of human rights mixed with this truly international great sport event. As H. Denis Wu (2004: 96) states in the introduction to his article finalizing a big project of analysis of 44 nations' international news coverage: "different countries have many different, if not oppositional, windows in which they see the world, resulting in widely varied understandings and interpretations of identical events". This statement should be treated as "up-to-date" also during reports from Olympic Games, and as a good introduction to the analysis of

the press news and articles that appeared just before Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing, in August 2008.

Methodology and Design

The present study used the descriptive qualitative and content analysis approaches to assess the human rights in the context of the Olympic Games in Beijing. The study sample consists of 20 prestigious newspapers all over the world which focus on the topic of the study; selected randomly, in order to represent a global perspective. Using the Internet as a tool of research, I have analysed the first-page news and editorials published on 7-8 August 2008 on the pages of the prestigious newspapers from various countries (and various continents), representing different cultures, languages and political backgrounds. The selected newspapers are: *El Comercio* (Peru), *El País* (Spain), *El Tiempo* (Colombia), *El Watan* (Algeria), *Folha de São Paulo* (Brasil), *Globe & Mail* (Canada), *Granma* (Cuba), *Hindustan Times* (India), *La Libération* (France), *La Libre Belgique* (Belgium), *Mail & Guardian* (South Africa), *Milenio* (Mexico), *Rzeczpospolita* (Poland), *The Australian* (Australia), *The Daily Nation* (Kenya), *The Jakarta Post* (Indonesia), *The Moscow Times* (Russia), *The Nation* (Thailand), *The New York Times* (United States) and *The Times* (Great Britain).

Analysis and discussion:

The most prestigious and influential daily in the U.S.A, *The New York Times*, the day of the Olympics opening ceremony, published a report from Beijing, titled “Bush Praises China but Continues Rebuke During Embassy Dedication in Beijing”. In the first lines of the text one could read that: “President Bush rebuked China over political and religious freedoms for a second day on Friday, though he tempered his criticism with effusive praise for the country’s history and embraced its hosting of the Olympic Games”. The newspaper underlined the Bush’s words concerning importance of the US-China relations, but also reminded that: “Mr. Bush’s remarks came a day after China pointedly rebuffed his criticism of the country’s record on human rights” (S. Lee Myers, *Bush Praises China but Continues Rebuke During Embassy Dedication in Beijing*, “The New York Times”, USA, 08.08.2008).

Less political, but more idealistic, was the article published on the Canadian daily *Globe & Mail*. The sport ideals were mixed with others: “Sport as a form of human expression, and the Olympics as a worldwide spectacle of athletic expression, deserve respect. But Olympic sport does not deserve the pedestal on which some would place it. To place it on such a pedestal, especially in the context of an Olympics hosted by a repressive, authoritarian state, is virtually to ask for it to be knocked down. ‘Olympic values’, as described on the IOC’s website, are that sport brings out ‘the best of us’, and inspires youth everywhere to turn to athletics to reach their potential as human beings. It’s a nice ideal, though it asks people to forget all the doping scandals and the constant policing effort to make sure that athletes don’t cheat. But even if the ideal has some reality, sport for sport’s sake lack the moral force to blind people to other important matters: the suppression of the Tibetan people, the choking pollution, the limits on free speech and assembly, and so on” (*Sport is good, but it’s not pure*, “Globe & Mail”, Canada, 07.08.2008).

The Australian published an article by David Bandurski, who received a Human Rights Press Award in 2008 for an investigative piece on China’s use of professional associations to enforce Internet censorship. His text, titled “Failing the real Olympic test”, began with these words: “When the Chinese Government last week reneged on its pledge to offer unfettered internet access to foreign journalists in Beijing to cover the Olympic Games, the flashpoint issue of press freedom in China moved once again to centre stage” (D. Bandurski, *Failing the real Olympic test*, “The Australian”, Australia, 08.08.2008). The press freedom and the problems with internet access was, however, only one of the issues touched by the *Hindustan Times* from India. This newspaper underlined the growing Chinese economy, but also wrote about “Buddhist riots in Tibet” or “huge environmental burden”, and concluded that “the Games will remind us the gaps that still exist in the Chinese nation” (*Welcome to China’s coming out party*, “Hindustan Times”, India, 07.08.2008).

The prestigious newspaper from Thailand, *The Nation*, published an editorial titled “A day to celebrate and remember the past”, remembering that 08.08.2008 it was not only the day of the Olympics opening ceremony, but also the 20th anniversary of the so-called “8888 movement” in Burma and the democratic struggle that took place there on 08.08.1988, as well as the Asean

Day, linked to the founding of Asean in 1967 in Thailand. The Olympic Games in China are – in *The Nation's* opinion – “the pride of Asia, just as they were when Japan and South Korea hosted them in 1964 and 1988 respectively. In both countries, the games spurred further economic and political reforms that have made their countries vibrant today. Of course, the international community is hoping that the games will have a similar impact on China, particularly in the area of civil and political rights. Obviously, China is freer today than it was 30 years ago, but the situation is far from sufficient in relation to the country’s growing status in the international arena” (*A day to celebrate and remember the past*, “The Nation”, Thailand, 08.08.2008).

The Jakarta Post from Indonesia published an editorial titled “Good luck, athletes”, and it was dedicated above all to sport, “East-West rivalry” (represented in Olympics specially by China and U.S.A.), the olympic business, the moral discipline promoted by the founder of the modern olympism, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, also to the pollution and other issues, but not to human rights abuses in China (*Good luck, athletes*, “The Jakarta Post”, Indonesia, 08.08.2008). Also the daily *El Watan* from Algeria underlined, in the editorial titled “De Mao aux JO” (“From Mao to OG”), the rivalry of the “two world ideologically opposed” in the sport and political context. The newspaper remembered the Olympic Games in Moscow (1980), boycotted by Western countries, and in Los Angeles (1984), boycotted by Soviet countries, though underlined also that now “la bataille est moins frontale”, meaning: “the battle is less frontal” (*De Mao aux JO*, “El Watan”, Algeria, 08.08.2008). The human rights were treated there rather as “Western rights”. *The Daily Nation* from Kenya focused on different aspects of the Olympic Games in Beijing (opening ceremony, state leaders – with G. Bush among them – joining spectators, an olympic slogan “One World, One Dream”...), and among lines the human rights problem was introduced delicately (*Resurgent China readies epic show to welcome the world*, “The Daily Nation”, Kenya, 08.08.2008). The South African daily *Mail & Guardian*, however, suggested the problem already in the title of the editorial: “Olympic scene set for spectacle and controversy”. These controversy meant pollution, security and human rights, although: “the organizers are promising a 16-day extravaganza of sport” (*Olympic scene set for spectacle and controversy*, “Mail & Guardian”, South Africa, 08.08.2008).

In the European press, the sport and political aspects were mixed in different texts published just before the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing. *The Times* from London finished its editorial with the words: “Let the Games begin”, but also pointed in the text that: “Outside the sporting arena, political arguments are already racing a pace. A day before arriving, President Bush delivered a speech voicing ‘firm opposition’ to China’s detention of dissidents, human rights advocates and religious activists. Mia Farrow, the American actress, is planning to broadcast from a Sudanese camp in Chad on the plight of the Darfour refugees, accusing China of arming and backing the Sudanese Government. Other Darfur campaigners have had their Chinese visas abruptly cancelled. And in Paris the French authorities have caused outrage by banning demonstrations outside the Chinese Embassy planned by press freedom lobbies” (*Olympic Games: the world comes to China*, “*The Times*”, Great Britain, 08.08.2008). The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was criticized for his plan to participate in the Olympics opening ceremony by the leftist newspaper *La Libération*, in the editorial titled “Promesses” (“Promises”) about the not fulfilled promises of the Chinese regime in the issue of democracy and human rights (F. Sergent, *Promesses*, “*La Libération*”, France, 08.08.2008). The newspaper *La Libre Belgique*, edited in Brussels, published even the photos of the heads of states that would participate in the opening ceremony and those that would not. On the one side there were George Bush, Nicolas Sarkozy and Vladimir Poutine, among others, and on the other side: Angela Merkel, Silvio Berlusconi and José L. Zapatero, among others (*Funambulisme diplomatique*, “*La Libre Belgique*”, Belgium, 08.08.2008).

The Spanish leading newspaper *El País* published an editorial in which it could be read that the Olympic Games are a test of the Chinese model of development without liberties (*China se pone en pie*, “*El País*”, Spain, 08.08.2008). Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* was asking if the politics would overshadow the sport. In the lead of the article published on the first page, one could read that “the most controversial Olympics from the period of the Cold War begin” (P. Wilkowicz, *Pekin 2008: czy polityka przyćmi sport*, “*Rzeczpospolita*”, Poland, 08.08.2008). *The Moscow Times* published an article by Boris Kagarlitsky, who is director of the Institute of Globalization Studies (in Moscow), titled meaningfully “Pyrrhic Olympic Victory for China”. He concludes his text with such words: “By destroying homes in old Beijing to pave the way for new Olympic projects, China’s leaders have demonstrated that creating a pleasing facade for foreigners is more

important than the welfare of their own people. But sooner or later, these silent masses will find their voice and force Beijing to respect their rights” (B. Kagarlitsky, *Pyrrhic Olympic Victory for China*, “The Moscow Times”, Russia, 07.08.2008).

The tone of the press in Latin America was rather not so uniform like in Europe. First of all, the main Cuban regime daily *Granma* published on the first page (August 8th, 2008) a photo of the Birds’ Nest Stadium in Beijing with some images from rehearsal activities before the opening ceremony, and above it a title “Hoy es el día 8” (“Today is the day 8”) with big “8” appeared. On the page 15th a text titled “El sueño chino ya es realidad desde hoy” (“The Chinese dream is reality from today”) was published, but without any sentence concerning the human rights problem. The article focused on the positive aspects of “the best Olympic Games in the history” that would be start that day in the People Republic of China as a first nation from the Third World – in accordance with the *Granma*’s words – that became one of the biggest world powers, despite of the recent earthquake and “different political campaigns against [China] accelerated by the West” (M. Hernández, R. López Hevia, *El sueño chino ya es realidad desde hoy*, “Granma”, Cuba, 08.08.2008).

In contrast, the Mexican newspaper *Milenio* focused on the human rights in the text titled “Occidente incomoda a Pekín” (“The West inconvenient for Beijing”). In the lead of the article one could read that G. Bush criticized China for the human rights abuses and that dozens of Europeans organized protests for Tibet (*Occidente incomoda a Pekín*, “Milenio”, Mexico, 07.08.2008). The Colombian prestigious newspaper *El Tiempo* published an editorial with a neutral title “Olimpiadas en China” (“Olympics in China”), where the political aspects, as well as sport one and others were touched. Finally, the daily underlined that China would be making “a big business of image” (*Olimpiadas en China*, “El Tiempo”, Colombia, 07.08.2008). The Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio*, however, dedicated its before-Olympics-editorial to the sport aspects, though protests concerning Tibet were mentioned as an element that disturbed the ceremony of the Olympic torch inflammation and the route it was carried by different sportsmen or sportswomen before the Olympic Games (*Todo quedó listo para encender la antorcha olímpica de Beijing 2008*, “El Comercio”, Peru, 08.08.2008). The same problem of the protest for “free Tibet” or against human rights abuses and the violence towards Tibetans, was

mentioned in an article published in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. Nevertheless, the first lines of the text were dedicated to the number “8” as a symbol of prosperity, fortune and happiness for China and the Chinese people, in accordance with their convictions (*Superstição, segurança e tecnologia se misturam na abertura de Pequim-2008*, “Folha de São Paulo”, Brazil, 07.08.2008). Finally, despite of all the protests, the Olympics opening ceremony began in the Birds’ Nest Stadium in Beijing on 08.08.2008 at 20.08 (08.08 p.m.).

Conclusion

In spite of some limitations of this study (above all, the limited number of newspapers and the principle that only one newspaper from one country was analysed), it is possible to indicate some clear results of the research. First of all, the problem of the human rights abuses in China was mentioned before the Olympic Games in Beijing by majority of newspapers in different countries as well as various continents. Not only North American and European ones, but also dailies from Latin America, Asia (for example, India) or Africa (Kenya or South Africa) focused on the human rights problem. The political bias of the newspaper is relatively relevant, because the leftist ones (like *La Libération* or *Hindustan Times*) as well as the liberal or conservative ones (like *The Times* or *La Libre Belgique*) were interested in the human rights abuses of the Chinese regime. Rather the lack of democracy in one country means that the problem is ignored, for example in Cuba, where the official daily of the communist party, *Granma*, treated the protests only as ideological attacks from the West side. Also in the case of the Muslim countries, like Algeria or Indonesia, the newspapers – respectively *El Watan* and *The Jakarta Post* – treated the human rights rather as “Western rights” in the context of the East-West rivalry. However, 60 years after the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly, it is clear that the press from different continents focuses on the human rights abuses, though the democratic background is needed to give more freedom to express it for the sake of humanity.

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