

The Use of Social Media in the Coverage of Sports Events: The Case of the Olympic Games

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Abstract: *The Olympic Games, once simply the most important global event covered by traditional media, have now evolved into a premier transmedia phenomenon. Their modern “incarnation” unfolds dynamically and multidimensionally across the internet, mobile devices, and social media platforms, significantly amplifying their global reach. The way in which the Games are broadcast and experienced by a worldwide audience has been fundamentally changed. Thus, the need to analyze this new digital reality is truly imperative. The present study aims at examining the transformative role of social media in the coverage of the Olympic Games. Through a comparative and chronological analysis of the editions from Beijing 2008 to Paris 2024, the research highlights how social media evolved from a supplementary tool into a central pillar of Olympic communication, radically reshaping the global Olympic experience. The study illustrates the shift from the traditional, unidirectional model of media transmission to an interactive and polyphonic environment, which fosters direct communication between athletes and fans and promotes active audience engagement. It explores the key opportunities arising from this evolution, such as increased global reach and the democratization of the Olympic narrative. At the same time, it addresses the critical challenges that accompany this digital dominance – most notably, the rapid spread of misinformation, the exposure of athletes to online harassment, the complexities of protecting commercial rights, and the mounting pressures on contemporary sports journalism. In conclusion, the research underscores the need for the Olympic Movement to navigate this new landscape strategically – leveraging the immense potential of social media regarding the dissemination of the Olympic values, while simultaneously confronting the emerging threats to the integrity and sustainability of the institution.*

Keywords: social media, sport journalism, Olympic Games

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments have led to changes in the ways the public receives information, communicates, and seeks entertainment. This phenomenon began with radio and television, but it

was the rise of the internet that brought about the most important changes, significantly transforming the communication landscape and the way the media now cover the news (Triantafyllou, 2020 & 2025). The internet has shaped –and continues to shape– an entirely new communicative environment, which Leandros (2011) describes as the emergence of a new communication paradigm within the global media industry, with key characteristics such as the digitization of information, newsroom convergence, mobile platforms, social media, and audience fragmentation. Rigou (2014), while discussing the new media, speaks about the blistering technological progress of digital systems and adds that text, image, sound, and moving image are unified into a whole that differs from traditional media. All these factors shape a new communication landscape, especially through social media, which Rigou (2014) defines as applications that enable people to connect on specific platforms and interact by sharing content in the form of text, photographs, videos, hyperlinks, or even applications (Triantafyllou, 2020 & 2025). Social media are also defined as the set of online platforms and applications that facilitate communication, networking, and interaction among individuals and groups through the creation and exchange of content within virtual communities and networks (Manning, 2014). They constitute a technological and social ecosystem in which users are not merely passive consumers of information, but active participants. They can create personal profiles, connect with other users (friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or people with common interests), and produce, publish, comment on, and share diverse content, such as text, images, videos, links, and opinions (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021). This active participation in the creation and spread of content fundamentally distinguishes social media from traditional mass media, where the flow of information is primarily one-way – from sender to receiver.

Social media as a source of information

Social media have been established not only as a communication channel, but also as a central hub in the daily flow of information for millions of citizens worldwide. Their influence on the way people access information has come to play a leading role. The dissemination of news through social interaction has always been important, but with the emergence of social media, news sharing appears to play a decisive role in how people get and stay informed. The annual *Digital News Report* (2025) shows that social media have now become the primary source of information for citizens globally (Newman, Arguedas, Robertson, Nielsen & Fletcher, 2025).

The advent and consolidation of social media in the contemporary communication landscape marked a pivotal change, resulting in a profound, multifaceted, and irreversible transformation in the field of journalism (Newman et al., 2025). Their integration goes far beyond their use as solely content dissemination channels; they have redefined fundamental journalistic practices, everyday workflows, and the very nature of the relationship between professionals, their audiences, and news organizations (Pathak, 2018). Initially, the introduction of social media was associated with the promise of a new era of immediacy, transparency, and pluralism in information. They offered unprecedented opportunities for citizens to produce their own content and act as “citizen journalists,” challenging traditional mechanisms of information control

(Hamada, 2018). This dynamic allowed for the emergence of critical issues and the uncovering of events that conventional mass media might have underplayed, censored, or failed to cover effectively. The Arab Spring in 2011 and the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013 serve as emblematic examples of this early phase, during which social media operated as crucial channels for recording and disseminating the truth. Consequently, they quickly established themselves as a primary –and, in some cases, a leading– source of information for millions of citizens worldwide, particularly among younger age groups, a phenomenon also particularly observed in Greece, despite growing and well-documented concerns regarding the widespread dissemination of misinformation and fake news through these platforms.

The coverage of sports events

The advent and dominance of social media have significantly transformed the ways in which sports are produced, distributed, journalistically covered, mediated, and consumed worldwide (Bradshaw, 2021; Daum & Scherer, 2018; Edmondson, 2018). In contrast to the analog era, where newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations constituted the primary spaces for mediating and experiencing sports news, social media have opened the gates to an explosion of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2015), experiments in “participatory journalism” (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021), and journalism of the citizens. These changes have disrupted the news media in terms of production, consumption, and business models (Santos & Mare, 2021). Adopting Franklin and Canter’s (2019) definition, “disruption” here refers to the radical changes accelerated by the potential of digital technologies, occurring at a pace and a scale that challenge established perceptions and traditional methods of creating value, interaction, and communication, both socially and professionally.

Especially, in sports journalism, a true battle is increasingly unfolding over the control of sports and the ways in which they are delivered, covered journalistically, and interpreted for readers, listeners, and viewers (Boyle, 2006). The adoption of social media has reshaped the way journalists interact with news sources, audiences, editors, and advertisers (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015). The immediacy offered by platforms, such as Twitter/X, continues to transform sports news into an almost live, continuous flow of information, with journalists using these platforms for real-time updates, breaking news transmissions, and immediate commentary, adapting their routines to the demands of instantaneous information dissemination. Twitter/X, Instagram, and other social media platforms now function as primary information channels, allowing both journalists and athletes, teams, and organizing bodies to directly transmit content, shape narratives, and bypass traditional mediation mechanisms (McGehee et al., 2019; Hull, 2014; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010; 2013).

This new dynamic has eroded the traditional role of the journalist as the exclusive intermediary. Athletes, clubs, and leagues are leveraging their own social media channels to communicate directly with fans, shape their image, and provide content, creating a more complex tripartite

communication relationship between athletes, media, and supporters (McGehee et al., 2019). Athletes with millions of followers, clubs with professionally staffed communication departments, and official leagues actively use their social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) to engage directly with their audiences. Through these channels, they actively craft their image, manage public perception, bypass journalistic critical look, and provide exclusive content (e.g., interviews, training footage, announcements). A striking example is the case of the legendary swimmer Michael Phelps, who chose to announce his official retirement from competitive swimming via a live broadcast on Facebook Live during the Rio Olympics. Instead of following the traditional route of a press conference, Phelps spoke directly to millions of his fans, emphatically validating the ability of athletes to act as the primary source of news about themselves, while having the full control of both the message and its timing. Consequently, sports journalism in the digital age faces pressure from “adjacent fields,” such as media developed by the teams and athletes themselves, which perform many functions, historically attributed exclusively to sports journalism, intensifying the competition and the struggle for control over the sports narrative (Perreault & Bell, 2022).

The evolution of Olympic Games coverage by traditional media

Since their revival in Athens in 1896, the modern Olympic Games have evolved into the largest global sporting, political, economic, and social event. Since only a small part of the world’s population can attend the Games in person, the media have played a crucial role in the global dissemination of the Olympic ideal. Eagleman, Burch & Vooris (2014) emphasize the crucial role of media coverage in shaping perceptions of the Olympic Games, particularly for those unable to experience them firsthand. They further emphasize that the way the Games are presented by the media can have a profound impact on citizens’ views regarding issues, such as gender, nationality, and the perceived significance of certain sports over others.

From the very beginning, the press closely followed news related to the Olympic Games, communicating information about the conduct of the events and the results, initially through articles illustrated with engravings and later with photographs. Even after the emergence of moving images and faster means of dissemination, the press never ceased to devote significant editorial space to sports. Alongside the press, early short film recordings (newsreels) from the very first modern Olympic Games were screened in cinemas, offering the public an initial glimpse of the events outside the stadium (Larrosa, 2016). Those initially brief and often delayed recordings gradually evolved into more comprehensive coverage of the competitions. Already by 1912, the events of the Stockholm Olympic Games benefited from the exceptional –given the time– coverage, with images available just a few days after they were recorded. These film recordings, initially mute and black-and-white, profited from the technological progress, such as the invention of more flexible cameras, synchronized sound, and color. All subsequent Olympic Games were documented in this manner until the decline of the medium in the 1960s.

The history of traditional radio and television coverage begins with radio, with partial live coverage taking place for the first time at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games (Larrosa, 2016). At that time, organizers expressed concerns that radio broadcasts would negatively affect ticket sales, a factor that initially hindered their development. However, those fears proved unfounded, and radio coverage of the Games expanded, with the 1936 Berlin Olympics being broadcast in 28 languages through 2,500 programs. The major shift, however, came with television. The first attempts to televise the Olympic Games took place during the 1930s, coinciding with the establishment of the first state television networks in various countries, including the United States, Japan, and several European nations. The 1936 Berlin Games were the first to receive television coverage, although in an experimental and limited scale. Coverage was conducted using three television cameras, with the footage transmitted to 25 German cinemas via a closed-circuit system. It is estimated that approximately 160,000 viewers watched the 138 hours of programming that were broadcast (Billings et al., 2017).

The 1948 London Olympic Games were the first to be televised to a relatively broad audience. The broadcast was carried out through the BBC network, which paid 3,000 USD for the rights. At that time, the BBC counted roughly 80,000 television receivers (Haynes, 2010). Although the coverage was recorded rather than live, it is estimated that about 600,000 viewers in Great Britain watched the total of 138 hours of programming. In the next two editions –Helsinki 1952 and Melbourne 1956– the television audience remained limited, as efforts to sell broadcast rights to major European and American networks were unsuccessful. The Olympic Games were still regarded primarily as a news event rather than an entertainment spectacle.

The television broadcast of the 1960 Rome Olympic Games crossed national borders for the first time, with simultaneous transmission to 18 European countries, while in the United States, Canada, and Japan the coverage was recorded and aired later. However, the 1964 Tokyo Games were the first truly international television broadcast. In addition, eight sports –as well as the opening and closing ceremonies– were transmitted in color, marking the gradual shift of interest from a purely news-oriented to a more entertainment-focused framework.

Full-color coverage of the Olympic Games was achieved in 1968 in Mexico City. These Games are considered the first to be watched by a substantial global audience –an estimated 500 million viewers in about 70 countries– while athletes from 112 nations competed. The fact that athletes represented 112 countries while television coverage reached 70, underscored that the Olympic Games' global appeal had outpaced the contemporary development of television networks.

The 1984 Los Angeles Games marked a turning point. For the first time in many decades, the Games generated a profit for the organizing committee, primarily due to the successful management of television rights and the growing influx of private sponsorship (Dyreson, 2015). Despite criticism of excessive commercialization, those developments gave new momentum to

the Olympic Games, which, at the time, were facing challenges due to boycotts and economic difficulties. Notably, after 1984, interest in hosting the Games multiplied and revenues from broadcasting rights began to cover around 50% of each edition's total expenses, compared with only 2% in 1972 and roughly 10% in 1980. Thus, television broadcasting became a dominant factor, not only regarding the dissemination of the Games, but also their financial sustainability. By the 1980s, the increase of global interest in television coverage was outpacing the increase of the number of participating countries. The 1984 Olympics were a massive global event, featuring 140 participating nations. Their reach was striking: the Games were broadcast to 156 countries and attracted an audience of approximately 2.5 billion viewers.

The Olympic Games in the era of new media

Since the late 1990s, the Olympic Games have dynamically entered the era of New Media. The introduction of the internet marked the first major milestone in the digital transition of the Olympic Games coverage. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics are considered the first to integrate the internet into their coverage. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had launched its first website a year earlier, in 1995, and the Atlanta Organizing Committee followed with their own website. Although only about 55 million people had internet access at the time, the Atlanta website recorded an impressive total of 185 million visits during the Games. Over the course of 16 days, the site continuously provided updated information and photographs (Larrosa, 2016). At the same time, the Info '96 system –available at kiosks in the venues– offered an abundant amount of data to athletes, coaches, and members of the press, utilizing email capabilities for communication in the Olympic venues.

At the Nagano 1998 Winter Olympic Games, investment in technology was evident, aiming at avoiding the issues experienced in Atlanta. The Info '98 system, supported by IBM and Lotus, fully exploited the multimedia capabilities of the internet, providing key information about the host city and the event, live results, and groundbreaking forms of interactive and participatory communication.

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games enhanced their digital presence, with the official website, Olympics.com, emerging as the most popular online destination. During the 17 days of the Games, the site recorded a total of 8.7 million unique visitors and over 11.3 billion page views. Notably, even before the official opening, more than 24,000 websites were using Olympic content. The significant rise in visits to sites such as Australia.com (a 700% increase) underscored the internet's power regarding global exposure.

During the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, the internet was firmly established as a critical tool for both operations and organization. The official website, www.olympics.com, a collaboration between the Organizing Committee and U.S. broadcaster NBC, attracted around 3 million unique visitors per day, peaking at 5 million on the Games' 14th day. The internet was

equally pivotal from an operational point of view: over 80% of public ticket sales were completed online, and more than 90% of the 67,000 volunteer applications were submitted electronically, with subsequent communication largely handled through online platforms (IOC, 2002).

The 2004 Athens Olympic Games marked a new era, introducing video streaming on the internet for the first time. Viewers were able to enjoy live streaming and watch highlights of the Games directly on their mobile devices. In addition, they could access Olympic Games-specialized websites, view live video and follow broadcasts on high-definition television (HDTV). Many official broadcasters, such as the BBC and NBC, leveraged those services, attracting millions of visitors to their interactive platforms (IOC, 2004). The INFO2004 system provided over 50,000 pages of informational content in three different languages, including 11,000 athlete biographies and historical data dating back to 1896.

The 2006 Turin Olympic Games featured even greater coverage, with the partner television networks providing unprecedented coverage of the Games and ceremonies, totaling over 16,300 hours of broadcast – a 57% increase compared to the Salt Lake City Games in 2002. Those were the first Winter Olympic Games to be fully broadcast in high definition and offered more digital interactive viewing than any previous edition. For the first time in the history of the Winter Games, audiences were able to follow the event live via mobile phones and the internet, with access to both video and live streaming (IOC, 2006).

Social media at the Olympic Games

During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, we experience the first use of social media. The Vancouver Games in 2010, and especially the London Games in 2012, highlighted the tremendous influence of those new tools. This trend of increasing integration and impact of social media continued and strengthened in subsequent Olympic Games, including Rio 2016, PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2020 (held in 2021), Beijing 2022, and Paris 2024, each Games edition showcasing new dimensions of that dynamic relationship. A comparative analysis by Games edition follows:

Beijing 2008

The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing marked a significant turning point in the way the IOC managed broadcast and content-distribution rights. For the first time, the traditional television rights were clearly separated from internet and mobile distribution rights – a strategic move aimed at reaching wider and younger audiences, expanding the Games' presence across new mediated spaces, and fostering a broader range of corporate partnerships. Within that framework, the Beijing Games enabled full online streaming. They also stood out for the unprecedented volume of information, which circulated on the internet, generated not only by traditional media, but also by bloggers and the athletes themselves. They are regarded as the starting point of IOC

collaboration with social media. A landmark initiative was the launch of the IOC's official Olympic YouTube channel prior to the Games. The channel initially targeted at 77 countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, regions where Olympic internet-broadcast rights had not yet been sold. Access to Google's YouTube platform was exclusively geo-restricted to those areas, ensuring that only users in those regions could view Olympic content through that channel. At the same time, that collaboration between the IOC and YouTube aimed at protecting the exclusivity of television rights acquired by traditional broadcasters, through the commitment to remove from YouTube any video that could infringe that exclusivity. Beijing 2008 were also the first Olympic Games to be broadcast live entirely in high definition (HD).

Multi-platform transmission and consumption of Olympic content at Beijing 2008 highlighted profound changes and new possibilities. Online platforms enabled the simultaneous broadcasting and consumption of every moment of the Games, both real-time and on-demand. It was also proven that the distribution of content from multiple platforms, like television, the internet and mobile devices, complemented and reinforced traditional television coverage. Time-zone differences became less of a barrier thanks to the global availability for on-demand coverage, both on television and online, whilst demand for online video remained strong even after the end of the Games. Key statistics underscored that the official Games website, beijing2008.com, recorded 105.7 million unique visitors during August 2008 alone, while the IOC's own site (olympic.org) attracted nearly six million unique visitors, more than double the 2004 figure. It is remarkable that more than six million Americans watched the Games on their mobile phones, and the IOC's official YouTube channel (youtube.com/beijing2008) received 21 million video views, with about 40% of that traffic coming from India and South Korea – even though the channel was available only in 78 territories across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (IOC, 2008).

Vancouver 2010

The 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver marked a milestone in Olympic broadcasting history, delivering the most extensive coverage in their history and reaching a record global audience of 3.8 billion people, including about 1.8 billion television viewers (IOC, 2010). Those Games not only set worldwide TV viewership records, but also became the first Winter Olympics to fully leverage digital platforms. In Vancouver, online and mobile coverage broke all previous Olympic records. More than 100 official websites, owned by partner broadcasters from all around the world, streamed the Games, while global rights-holding broadcasters and mobile platforms logged over 265 million video views and more than 1.2 billion page views during the event. In addition, roughly 6,000 hours of Olympic programming were transmitted via mobile phones. Overall, digital coverage reached unprecedented levels for Winter Games, with roughly half of all Olympic transmissions delivered via the internet.

At the 2010 Vancouver Games, the IOC and the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) made their first official appearance on social networking platforms, demonstrating a strong

momentum, by gathering over 2.5 million followers during the Games. That important shift toward social media took place only a few weeks before the opening ceremony, when the IOC and VANOC launched their official Facebook and Twitter accounts. Up to that point, social networks had remained a largely untapped channel for the organizers of major global sporting events.

London 2012

At the London 2012 Olympic Games, there was a significant expansion of the Olympic presence across a wide range of new social platforms, going beyond those already established. That included the active use of blogs, photo-sharing services, such as Instagram, specialized apps, and promotional tools, tailored to those emerging channels. In addition, the Games targeted specific local markets, such as China, with content adapted to local language and cultural contexts. Another technological world first was the introduction of 3D broadcasting, offering more than 300 hours of coverage in that format.

The event firmly established the Olympic Movement's presence on social media and was marked by the launch of the Olympic Athletes' Hub, a platform designed to facilitate direct interaction between athletes and fans. Olympic sports gained a strong voice through the personal social-media accounts of participating athletes. Overall, official accounts and related initiatives on platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus attracted 4.7 million new followers (IOC, 2012).

The experience of leveraging the internet, which had made an impressive start in Beijing, was further reinforced in London, particularly through the official Olympic channel on YouTube. That channel offered both live coverage and highlights of the Olympic ceremonies and competitions in 64 countries across Asia and Africa, where no broadcaster held exclusive transmission rights. YouTube provided 11 simultaneous high-definition streams for real-time viewing of the events. In total, the IOC made around 2,200 hours of televised content available through the YouTube platform during the Games.

The official website of the London Organising Committee (LOCOG), london2012.com, emerged as the world's most popular sports website, recording 431 million visits from 109 million unique users. At the same time, the IOC's own site, olympic.org, also set a new record, by attracting over 16 million unique visitors during the Games, surpassing the previous benchmark of 10.6 million achieved during the 2008 Games.

In the area of social media, webpages associated with the London 2012 Games (including Facebook, Twitter, and Google+) gathered, as mentioned earlier, 4.7 million followers. LOCOG reported that 150 million tweets related to the Games were posted, 1.55 million of which were linked to the "Support Your Team" campaign, targeting the 204 participating National Olympic

Committees (NOCs). The IOC's official Facebook page gained 700,000 followers during the Games, reaching a total of 4 million. Overall, the IOC's follower counts across all social media platforms increased by 4.1 million during the London Games (IOC, 2012).

Overall, the IOC created an extensive digital community, gathering approximately 20 million followers across their various online platforms. Particularly remarkable was the creation of the groundbreaking "Olympic Athletes' Hub" website, which served as a meeting point for over 3,000 athletes and around 300,000 fans, facilitating direct communication and interaction between them. Olympic athletes actively participated in online discussions and offered a unique, behind-the-scenes glimpse into life at the Olympic Village, sharing photos and messages via Twitter and Facebook.

Sochi 2014

The 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi marked a historic milestone, as for the first time in the history of Olympic broadcasting, the number of coverage hours on digital platforms exceeded those of traditional television. That development allowed Olympic fans worldwide to follow the action from anywhere, live or on demand, via the internet and mobile devices, with content distributed by the official rights-holding broadcasters (RHBs) in their respective regions.

The Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS) played a central role in that effort, deploying more than 450 cameras to produce over 1,300 hours of live coverage. That included 31 high-speed slow-motion cameras (compared to 16 in Vancouver 2010) and a range of other specialized camera systems that captured unique, innovative angles of the Winter Games. The OBS team expanded significantly, growing from 150 full-time employees to around 2,500 staff members at the start of the Games. In addition, OBS installed 532 commentary positions and provided a comprehensive suite of services to rights-holding broadcasters (RHBs) at the sports venues, to the International Broadcast Centre (IBC), and to the Mountain Broadcast Centre (MBC).

Regarding social media, the Sochi Games set impressive engagement records for both Winter and Summer Olympics up to that point. Approximately 2 billion visits were recorded across all Olympic digital platforms. During just the first week of the Games, Olympic social media pages attracted more than 2.2 million new followers. Facebook alone gained over 2 million followers, bringing its total to 7.7 million. Overall, the IOC experienced a massive increase in followers across their social networking platforms during the Games.

Interaction between the athletes and the fans through social media was also unprecedented. The IOC's "Hub" app was used by more than 1,500 Sochi 2014 athletes to connect with their supporters and with each other, by joining a wider community that included over 4,500 Olympians from previous Games. Olympic athletes and teams used the Hub to post more than 90,000 updates during the event. Equally notable was the success of the IOC's page on vk.com,

Russia's equivalent of Facebook, which became the most popular destination for sports content, totaling over 2.9 million followers.

Rio 2016

The Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games recorded the highest consumption of Olympic content up to that time, including broadcasts on both traditional television and digital platforms, as well as unprecedented interaction on social media. Coverage –both television and digital– surpassed all previous in scale and reach (IOC, 2016).

It is estimated that half of the world's population watched the Rio Olympic Games. Particularly impressive was the increase in digitally delivered content, which was more than double compared to the London 2012 Games. On social media platforms, official videos exceeded 7 billion views. Analytically, the total coverage of the Rio 2016 Games reached 356,924 hours across all platforms, marking a 96.7% increase compared to the 181,523 hours of London 2012. Of these, 113,455 hours were television coverage (a 13.5% rise from London), while 243,469 hours were digital coverage, showing an explosive 198.6% increase. Broadcasts were carried by 584 television channels, while Rights-Holding Broadcasters (RHBs) maintained 100 official social-media pages. Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS) produced an unprecedented number of content hours for Rio, while also testing new technologies such as Ultra-HD and virtual reality.

Regarding social media, Facebook significantly expanded the coverage of the Olympic Games. Users gained access to more information, audiovisual material, live event schedules, and interactive features through the News Feed and Instagram. The social media giant partnered with over 20 official broadcasters and National Olympic Committees to host enriched content on their platforms. That collaboration included content from local networks and athletes representing more than 10 countries participating in the Olympic Games.

The partner broadcasters provided live footage on their Facebook pages, using the Facebook Live feature, as well as video highlights and 360-degree videos directly from the Rio playing fields. The live videos included athletes and other Games participants, who had the opportunity to interact in real time with Facebook users. That feature proved extremely popular and was widely used even for conducting athlete interviews by major international media outlets, such as CNN, Reuters, the BBC, *The New York Times*, ABC News, and *The Washington Post*.

At the same time, Instagram hosted various channels dedicated to the Olympic Games, accessible through the app's "Search and Explore" section. Those channels featured detailed information flow, with videos from athletes and other participants in Rio. In addition, the IOC launched a special feature on Facebook Messenger, through which the network's 1.71 billion users could receive live updates and information about key Olympic events.

PyeongChang 2018

The 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games highlighted the dominance of the digital dimension in the Olympic experience, attracting the attention of billions of viewers worldwide. Approximately one-quarter of the global population watched the Games on television through various media platforms. Overall, the IOC's global broadcast partners provided more coverage than that at any previous Winter Olympics, reaching 157,812 hours of transmission – a 38% increase compared to the Sochi 2014 Games.

Particularly significant was the increase in available digital coverage through the websites, apps, and social media channels of the Rights Holders, which reached 97,041 hours – 62% more than what had been available for Sochi 2014. That expanded digital offer was met with positive audience response, making the PyeongChang 2018 Games the Winter Olympics with the highest digital viewership to date. Specifically, 670 million global online users watched the digital broadcast coverage, an increase of 120% compared to Sochi 2014. Overall, 3.2 billion video views were recorded on digital platforms, more than double the digital video views of Sochi 2014 and nine times those of Vancouver 2010.

In the realm of social media, the PyeongChang 2018 Games also emerged as the largest Winter Olympics up to that point, with the official content being consumed by 300 million users, resulting in over 1.6 billion video views. Through platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, partners, official organizations, athletes, and teams were able to shape their own narratives and provide an interactive glimpse into their Games experience, enhancing fan engagement and creating a more immersive experience.

Based on data analysis (from the report *The Social Winter Games* by Sportcal in collaboration with Hookit), Twitter was the most frequently used platform for posts, accounting for 50% of all content, but generated only 7% of the total interactions. In contrast, Instagram emerged as the leading engagement platform, capturing 53% of all interactions from just 24% of total posts and attracting four times more new followers than Twitter, despite having only half the number of posts. Athletes showed a clear preference for Instagram to share their experiences, with 39% of all their posts and 82% of their interactions coming from that platform, leveraging on its popularity and interactive nature. On the contrary, official organizations and commercial partners primarily used Twitter to share messages and news, suggesting that they may not have fully utilized Instagram's potential to gain audience's engagement.

Tokyo 2020

The Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games, held in 2021 due to the global pandemic, marked a turning point in the history of broadcasting the Olympics and the digital engagement. Despite the absence of audience in the venues, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and their broadcast partners responded to the unprecedented circumstances with an innovative, large-scale

digital strategy. There was a 74% raise in digital viewership compared with the Rio 2016 Games (IOC, 2021). Even more striking was the 139% increase in video views on digital platforms, making Tokyo 2020 the most-watched Olympic Games on digital media in history. Overall, the Games attracted a global television and digital audience of over 3.05 billion people, while official coverage on the IOC's broadcast partners' digital platforms generated 28 billion video views.

The influence of social media was decisive. The official Tokyo 2020 TikTok account, despite having the lowest number of followers compared to the other social media platforms, recorded 13.9 million views between July 22 and August 18, 2021, achieving the highest engagement rate. By contrast, the Facebook account, which had the largest follower base, registered the lowest engagement with only 570,000 interactions, while the Tokyo 2020 Instagram account also achieved high engagement, reaching 10.04 million interactions.

That success was driven by the IOC's advanced digital strategy, aimed at creating a closer connection with the global audience. The official Olympic website (Olympics.com) and the mobile app attracted over 196 million unique users, tripling the views compared to Rio 2016. At the same time, the IOC's official social media platforms, achieved an impressive number of 6.1 billion interactions, including video views, shares, comments, and likes.

For the first time, at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, social media accounts were managed in partnership with the IOC, which operated accounts in languages other than Japanese. A key innovation was the launch of an official account on the LINE social-networking platform, marking a first in the Olympic and Paralympic history. That account gained over 7.6 million followers during the Games, significantly contributing to the expansion of audience engagement. Those efforts demonstrated that communication through social media was an effective way to share information about the Tokyo 2020 Games and to deliver messages of support and praise to the athletes. However, during the Games, the issue of defamation through social networks was also highlighted and it was widely covered by the press. Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, the IOC implemented athlete-support measures, including establishing an advisory office within the Olympic Village to provide assistance.

The IOC's social-media guidelines continued to evolve, balancing the commercial opportunities for athletes with the need to protect official sponsors. For the Tokyo Games, the rules prohibited the use of Olympic content in thank-you messages to non-Olympic sponsors of athletes. However, following a legal case in Germany, the door opened for greater commercial possibilities for athletes and teams. The updated regulations also addressed issues, such as the use of NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) and metaverse interactions, explicitly banning the use of Olympic content in these contexts without prior authorization.

Beijing 2022

The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games were held in a special global context, still affected by the pandemic and characterized by a unique digital environment, as it was the first major sporting event to take place in a country with significant restrictions on access to popular Western social-media platforms. Nevertheless, those Games emerged as the “most digitally interactive Winter Olympic Games in history” up to that time (IOC, 2022). Overall, 2.01 billion unique viewers watched the coverage of the Beijing 2022 Games through linear television and digital platforms, a number 5% higher than PyeongChang 2018. Worldwide, viewers consumed a total of 713 billion minutes of coverage, registering an 18% increase compared to the previous Winter Olympics. The digital dimension was impressive, with the rights-holding broadcasters making more hours of coverage available than ever before, reaching the record of 120,670 hours via digital platforms.

The official Olympic website and mobile app attracted 68 million unique users during the Beijing Games, a figure more than double than that achieved in PyeongChang. In social media, the official Olympic Games accounts recorded 3.2 billion interactions throughout the Games and gained over 11 million new followers across various platforms. Focusing specifically on the performance of the National Olympic Committees’ (NOC) social media channels, the total number of followers increased by 1.5 million (from 39.4 million to 40.9 million, an increase of 3.7%). The largest contribution to that increase came from Instagram, which accounted for 46% of the new followers (679,400), followed by TikTok with 33% (481,900). Twitter and Facebook each contributed 9% (136,800 and 135,400 new followers, respectively). TikTok showed the highest growth rate (10.2%), with Instagram closely following (9.9%). In contrast, Facebook, although representing 48% of the total NOC followers (19.7 million), had the lowest growth rate (0.7%).

Regarding content and engagement, the NOCs published a total of 36,200 posts, which generated 65.7 million total interactions and 149.2 million video views. Facebook hosted 33% of the posts, accounting for 22% of video views (33.4 million) and 19% of total interactions (12.7 million). Instagram, with 8,800 posts, dominated the engagement, capturing 61% of the total (39.9 million) and contributing 19% of video views (28.9 million). Twitter was the platform with the largest volume of content (39% of posts, with 14,300 tweets), but produced only 9% of total interactions (6.1 million). TikTok’s performance was remarkable: despite representing only 1.2% of posts (452 posts), the platform accounted for 52% of total video views (77.4 million) and 10% of total interactions (6.8 million), highlighting its exceptional strength in video consumption and audience engagement (IOC, 2022).

The social media promotion strategy had to be adapted to the specific characteristics of the host country. Studies showed differences in the way the content was published and the engagement it generated between the official accounts who targeted domestic audience (e.g., via the Sina Weibo

platform) and those aimed at the international audience through Western networks (Kuang & Zhang, 2024).

Paris 2024

The Paris 2024 Olympic Games were among the most remarkable sporting events of the modern era, not only because of the athletic performances, but also for the unprecedented use of digital platforms and social media. The event captured the attention of a vast global audience, as a survey by the IOC reported that it was watched by the record number of 84% of the potential global audience, corresponding to approximately five billion people (IOC, 2024).

The coverage of the Games experienced an unprecedented surge, with the total volume of content viewed, increasing by 25%. The hours of material watched globally on mass media and Media Rights Holder (MRH) platforms reached 28.7 billion. This translates to an average consumption of nine hours per viewer, marking a 20% increase compared to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Indicative of the shift towards the new technologies is that approximately 70% of the global audience chose to watch the Games via a combination of television and digital media, while a significant 12% watched exclusively through digital channels, an increase from Tokyo's 9%. The hours of coverage on digital platforms increased impressively by 42% compared to Tokyo 2020.

The influence of the Paris Olympic Games also expanded dynamically across social media. The total number of followers of National Olympic Committees on social networks increased by 22% between 2020 and 2024, with Instagram and TikTok serving as the main drivers of growth. While Facebook remained the platform with the most users, it showed the slowest follower growth rate. The overall social media interactions for Paris 2024 surged by 77%, reaching 349.7 million compared to 197.7 million in Tokyo 2020. Meanwhile, video views saw an even more explosive increase, rising by 188%, reaching 843.6 million in Paris 2024, compared to 292.7 million in Tokyo 2020. Particularly noteworthy was the dramatic growth of TikTok, where interactions doubled from 19.4 million in Tokyo to 40.3 million in Paris, due to the increased volume of posts and ongoing user engagement. Furthermore, social interactions from Media Rights Holders (MRH) were 13 times higher than in Tokyo 2020, highlighting the clear shift of audience interest toward online platforms (IOC, 2024).

Marketing strategies and sponsorship utilization were fully adapted to this digital landscape. Sponsors invested in extensive advertising campaigns, leveraging television coverage, but primarily focusing on digital platforms for targeted and personalized audience engagement. The use of big data and artificial intelligence enabled dynamic adaptation of advertising messages, while social media campaigns included hashtag challenges, contests, and interactive polls to boost engagement. Sponsors integrated their content into live broadcasts and streaming platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram Live, while technologies like augmented reality (AR)

and virtual reality (VR) were employed to create innovative advertising experiences. For instance, more than 15 unique AR features were made available through Snapchat, offering interactive experiences both at competition venues and at iconic locations throughout Paris.

Influencers and content creators, even those without a conventional connection to sports, played a central role. Major broadcasters, such as NBCUniversal and Warner Bros. Discovery collaborated with creators on platforms like YouTube and TikTok to provide fresh and cultural perspectives of the Games. The athletes themselves emerged as powerful influencers, sharing authentic content from their daily lives in the Olympic Village and beyond the Games, through short-form videos on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, garnering millions of views and creating an immediate connection with the audience.

Table 1. Summary Overview of the Olympic Games: Features, Platforms, and Key Statistics

Olympic Games	Key Features	Platforms	Notable Statistics & Data
Beijing 2008	First collaboration between the IOC & social media.	YouTube, Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21 million video views on the official YouTube channel. • 105.7 million unique users on Beijing2008.com.
Vancouver 2010	First official presence of the IOC & the Organizing Committee on Facebook & Twitter.	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • >2.5 million followers on the official accounts. • >1 million fans on each of the two main Facebook pages.
London 2012	Creation of the "Olympic Athletes' Hub" for athlete-fan interaction.	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 150 million tweets about the Games. • 4.7 million new followers on the official accounts. • 431 million visits on London2012.com.
Sochi 2014	First time digital coverage hours exceeded television coverage hours.	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ~2 billions of visits on the Olympic digital platforms.

Rio 2016	Surge in digital coverage, featuring Facebook Live and immersive 360° video.	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • >7 billions of official video views on social media. • 198.6% increase in digital coverage hours compared to 2012.
PyeongChang 2018	Instagram emerged as the dominant platform for engagement, surpassing Twitter despite it having more posts.	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.2 billions of video views on digital platforms. • Instagram accounted for 53% of total interactions.
Tokyo 2020	Due to the pandemic, the digital experience became the norm, with TikTok experiencing a dramatic surge.	TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.1 billion interactions on the IOC's official social media. • 28 billions of video views on broadcasters' platforms.
Beijing 2022	The most digitally interactive Winter Games. TikTok dominated in views despite minimal posts.	TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.2 billions of interactions on the official accounts. • TikTok accounted for 52% of the National Olympic Committees' video views.
Paris 2024	Global audience record. Hybrid viewing (TV & Digital) becomes the norm.	TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ~5 billions of people watched (84% of the potential audience). • 60 millions of total followers for the National Olympic Committees.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

As billions of people worldwide watch the so-called Mega Events and most cannot be physically present, the consumption of the Games necessarily takes place through sports media. Research has shown that this experience has been radically transformed. Sports media consumption has shifted from a merely “passive, entertainment-focused activity” to a shared, social phenomenon (Lim et al., 2015). Viewers now consume content simultaneously on more than one device, a practice known as “second-screen usage” (Henderson, 2017), often participating in a “social co-viewing experience” referred to as social TV. Through a chronological review, from the Beijing 2008 Games to Paris 2024, and an analysis of the emerging opportunities and challenges, it becomes clear that social media are no longer a mere supplementary tool, but a central pillar of the modern Olympic communication ecosystem. The shift from the traditional, one-way media broadcasting model to a dynamic, interactive, and multi-voiced environment is definitive and irreversible.

The fundamental conclusion emerging from the study of social media’s impact on Olympic Games coverage is that social media –and new media, in general– have played a decisive role in democratizing the Olympic experience. The disruption of the monopolistic communication models that characterized the 20th-century Olympic Games has transformed viewers from consumers into active participants in shaping the sports narrative. As Byun and Leopkey (2020) argue, the formation of a new media ecosystem-based on the production, reproduction, and distribution of content by multiple stakeholders– replaces the outdated linear models of the traditional broadcast era. The publishing, distribution, and commentary of content is no longer an exclusive privilege of the official broadcasters. On the contrary, this new reality has allowed the collapse of the communication monologue that characterized traditional forms of broadcasting, replacing it with a polyphonic, participatory dialogue (Evans, 2012; Mayfield, 2008). In this new landscape, users are not limited to consuming content, but actively engage in its creation, curation, and dissemination – a process reinforced by the social and technological capabilities of social media platforms. The multiplicity of information sources, reinforced both by the official websites of sports organizations and the digital expansion of broadcasters, has created an environment where access to information and viewpoints is immediate and widespread (Gerhart, 2017). Particularly significant is the activity of the athletes themselves, who, through their personal accounts, provide fans with a direct and unfiltered channel of communication. The ability for direct and unfiltered communication between athletes and the audience, a trend introduced by initiatives, such as the “Olympic Athletes’ Hub” in London 2012 (IOC, 2012) and reaching its peak at Paris 2024, created an unprecedented sense of intimacy. Consequently, audience members transformed from passive receivers into active participants and co-creators of the communication process (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021), turning global viewership into an ongoing, digital conversation.

At the same time, the research highlighted a significant shift in power, as the internet now occupies a remarkable position with characteristics, such as interactivity, virtuality, and openness. Traditional news organizations, while retaining a critical role, have lost their exclusivity in mediating information, whereas online media have gained immense potential, functioning as tools for shaping public opinion. Their significance became even more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Tokyo Olympics serving as a prime example of increased digital activity (Horne & Whannel, 2020). During those Games, Facebook and Twitter were the most followed networks, while TikTok ranked last, although platform, such as the Chinese Weibo, also demonstrated growing momentum. The new reality is that the media market related to sporting events may undergo a dramatic shift in favor of making agreements with smaller organizations or even individual actors. The control of tech giants, which now act as the new “regulators” of the digital space (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019), largely determines the Olympic agenda.

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