

## **CAUGHT IN THE SPOTLIGHT: MEDIA THEMES IN THE BUILD- UP TO THE BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES**

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### **Abstract**

As the global mega event par excellence, the Olympic Games commands attention around the world not just in the two weeks of the Games themselves but for several months beforehand. This period of months before the Games begin is often a challenging one for the press office of the Organising Committee. In the case of the Beijing Olympic Games, the torch relay and associated protests made headlines around the world. The formation of the news agenda, the processes of gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing and constructing the news a complex process in which power and influence is unevenly distributed. Clearly though news is the site of a continuing struggle over meaning, perspective and interpretation. Through an analysis of media representation of the events surrounding the torch relay, this paper explores the ways in which key social actors compete in the media to try and ensure that their interpretive frames become the dominant ones.

“The Modern Olympic Games symbolize the struggle between man’s ideals and the reality within which he must live”. Richard Espy<sup>1</sup>

The torch took about a year to design to the specifications that would keep it burning on its varied journey around the world, said David Hill, vice president of corporate identity and design for Lenovo, the computer manufacturing firm that designed the torch and a main sponsor of the torch relay.  
*San Francisco Chronicle* 7/4/08

The torch relay and its representation in the media offers an invaluable focused case study through which to examine politics and journalism. As the global mega event par excellence, the Olympic Games commands attention around the world not just in the two weeks of the Games themselves but for several months beforehand. Two media themes are often prominent during the build up: the view (often justified) that the Games cost far too much and the fear (usually unwarranted) that the facilities will not be ready. Often too, other global political themes – environmental concerns, regional tensions, treatment of indigenous minorities, disparities of wealth, human rights - become condensed onto coverage of the Olympic Games. This period of months before the Games begin is often a challenging one for the press office of the Organising Committee.

The context in which these developments occur has shifted during the last few decades. The Olympic Games provides ground on which symbolic struggle takes place between nations, and images of power and competence are at stake. From 1948 to 1988 this symbolic struggle was dominated by Cold War politics. Since 1988 though, the city has challenged the nation as the symbolic focal point. The Olympic Games, like other mega events, has been utilised as a means of advertising a city as a modern dynamic venue for business, and as a an attractive and exotic destination for tourists. These goals may or may not fit neatly with the political priorities of the host nation. For example, the balance of

tradition and modernity, stability and change, heritage and innovation, may well be cast differently at city and at state levels.

The formation of the news agenda, the processes of gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing and constructing the news has been extensively examined by media analysts for decades, and is well known to be a complex process in which power and influence is unevenly distributed. The rise of digital communications media, and the internet, is seen by some as allowing a more heterogenous range of voices to be heard, yet existing media organisations remain clearly dominant. Clearly though news is the site of a continuing struggle over meaning, perspective and interpretation. In the case of Beijing, many groups and individuals will be seeking to push the issue of human rights to the forefront of the agenda. Motives will vary, some caring passionately about sport, some disinterested; some engaged in the future of China, others simply anti-communist by conviction; some campaigners on human rights around the world, others focusing exclusively on China. As in the case of previous Games such as Moscow 1980, some had been campaigning for a boycott as soon as the site was chosen, in advance of any specific issue such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Given that many nations, including the USA and UK, can be accused of some human rights violations, and that comparisons need to take size and history into account, the issue is not as simple as it may appear. The human rights issue will, however, be a significant part of the symbolic battle around the build up to the Olympic Games.

The first site of struggle in the build up to an Olympic Games is often the very concept of “politics” and its relevance to sport. The insistence that politics should be kept out of sport varies in intensity according to circumstances – the very people who thought the anti-apartheid movement were illegitimately bringing politics in sport, were prominent

among those calling for a boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. Some people in the west were agitating for a boycott of Moscow even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> It is the position of this paper that all public events and institutions, all decisions to allocate resources, and indeed all social interaction has, inevitably, a political dimension. The central questions concern the distribution of power, the process of struggle, and the issue of who gains. In this sense then, sports administrators, athletes, public officials, celebrities, sponsoring companies, campaigners and demonstrators, media organisations, and readers and viewers are all political actors, struggling to impose their frame of reference on a situation. The power to define, to make ones own frame the dominant one, is a crucial aspect of this struggle. In a media saturated world, impression management is central to this process. The question for the torch relay is not really about what happened, but rather what impression did it make in the media.

The Olympic Games could be understood as the intersecting point of a number of elements. One of the products of modernity it was also one of the earlier manifestations of globalising processes. Conceived of in festive terms, it has become a media spectacle. In the television era it has become a vortextual media mega-event<sup>3</sup>. Founded on an ideology of peace and internationalism it has being restructured by risk society into a disciplined, controlled and heavily surveilled event. Invented to bring the youth of the world together, the competitors are now outnumbered two to one by both the media and the Olympic Family - the IOC, their corporate sponsors and guests.

The various rituals of the Olympic Games are best understood not as recoveries of Ancient Greek ritual but as inventions of tradition. The Olympic Oath taking ceremony and the Olympic flag were not introduced until 1920, and the first Olympic Village in 1924. The torch relay is a case in point. It was first introduced in the 1936 Olympics – the “Nazi”

Olympics, as a means of linking symbolically the project of constructing a Germanic culture rooted in proclamations of Aryan supremacy to the Hellenic culture of the ancient Greeks. The torch relay became a permanent fixture. It was subsequently regarded by the London 1948 organisers as expensive and thus took the most functional of routes in almost a straight line from Olympia to London. Since this time it had gradually expanded both its form and its function. It has served to advertise and promote the games, the host city the host nation and the IOC.

More recently, however, it has acquired a new purpose. Olympic sponsors, unlike almost all other sponsors, do not gain arena advertising, barred by the IOC. The expansion of the torch relay gives them a whole series of media events in a range of countries, around which to promote their brands. In 2008, the Torch was lit in Olympia on 24 March and taken on five-day relay around Greece to Athens. After a handover ceremony, it was taken to Beijing on 31 March to begin a worldwide journey. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08). Given the existence of a range of campaigning groups eager to raise issues of human rights, Darfur and Tibet, the media prominence of the torch relay, its symbolic value, and the vulnerability of the relay to disruption, subsequent events were all too predictable.

I spent a day observing the torch relay when it visited London, partly on television and partly on the streets where I took a large number of photographs. As a staged and planned event, the presence of official banners and slogans was ubiquitous, along with the balloons, banners and leaflets of sponsors. The battle between pro-Tibet and pro-Chinese demonstrators was striking for its intensity, and its discipline – coming close to but eschewing physical violence. It took on some of the character of a medieval battle as rendered in 18th century romantic painting. The key symbolic actors were players in a political drama being acted out before the cameras. It provided a perfect stage for displays

of symbolic heroic body-language. The non-Chinese section of the crowd were more puzzling – which were bystanders, which tourists and which plain clothed police ?

Even the actors were uncertain of their impact. Smiling figures with sponsors balloons had the distracted air of actors wondering if they should sidle unobtrusively out of the frame. It was political theatre – but played out on television and in the press

After the relay came through London, the *Independent* front page sardonically proclaimed

#### OLYMPIC SPIRIT COMES TO BRITAIN

Below this there were three pictures of police struggling with demonstrators headed:

Faster ! Officers rush to prevent protester from extinguishing the flame  
Higher ! Additional security called in after man attempts to grab torch  
Stronger ! Police get tough to keep the relay on course for Beijing  
*The Independent* 7/4/08

The general verdict of the British press was damning:

“the event descended into chaos” *Evening Standard* 7/4/08

#### OLYMPIC MAYHEM

*The Sun* 7/4/08

“Organisers hoped for a feelgood day of fun. Instead there was an atmosphere of tension, indecision and a siege mentality...Celebrity torch bearers ran a gauntlet of abuse and threats...Millions worldwide saw shocking scenes unfold”  
*The Sun* 7/4/08

#### OLYMPIC RUN TURNS INTO FARCE

“Angry demonstrators turned the Olympic torch procession into a farce yesterday as Britain’s Olympic prestige was damaged by scuffles on its route through London”  
*Daily Express* 7/4/08

our Olympic showpiece ended in violence and farce...a combination of sinister and slapstick...bizarre scenes...embarrassing fiasco...was beamed around the world...surreal circus...Chinese goon army...The burly minders  
*Daily Mail* 7/4/08

The *Evening Standard* linked events to a negative view of the UK. The front page headline THE SHAMING OF LONDON over a picture of a Malaysian family sleeping in a cardboard box in Terminal 5 was above three sub heads which read:

T5 travellers forced to spend night in cardboard boxes  
Olympic torch fiasco descends into a war of words  
No wonder these visitors swore: 'Bloody England'  
*Evening Standard* 7/4/08

In editorials the perspective varied. The *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard* blamed the IOC for choosing China

When it awarded the Games to China it extracted a number of commitments from the Chinese government over human rights. It has done nothing like enough to make clear that, particularly in respect of Tibet, these commitments have not been honoured.  
*Evening Standard* editorial 7/4/08

the real embarrassment is that the International Olympic Committee seems to have no moral compass in deciding who gets the Games. China's regime doesn't deserve this honour. Can the IOC be surprised when the public says so ?  
Editorial, *Daily Mail* 7/4/08

*The Sun* regarded it as a victory for the traditions of protest and for the police

#### FREEDOM WINS

"we are lucky to live in a country that values its citizens right to hold lawful peaceful protests. And police must be congratulated for their skill in allowing that to happen while preventing those with unlawful intentions from putting the flame out or injuring torch bearers."

*The Sun* 7/4/08

An oft quoted aphorism states that success has a thousand fathers whilst failure is an orphan, and the key actors were represented as blaming each other for the problems

#### OLYMPIC POLICE ARE ATTACKED OVER TORCH PROTESTS

Police were last night accused of heavy handedness...

*Daily Mirror* 7/4/08

#### OLYMPIC OFFICIAL AND POLICE BLAME EACH OTHER OVER TORCH RELAY FARCE

“Olympic officials and the Metropolitan police are locked in a row over who was to blame for the torch relay farce which brought embarrassment to London. Both sides claimed the other was in charge of the 31 mile parade”...“Sources at Scotland Yard said all the decisions were made by BOCOG and maintained the police only offered an advisory role” An insider close to the organisers said today ‘BOCOG would seriously refute any claim that they were trying to call all the shots. The lesson was learned in Athens. The police were in charge. The buck stops with them.’... ‘Tory Metropolitan Police Authority member Richard Barnes called for a urgent review over how the Met police public order events. He said ‘It all seems to be a shambles.’ ...Commander Jo Kaye of the Met said... ‘As we clearly stated in advance of this event – we would facilitate lawful protest, which we have, but where people attempted to breach the safety security and safe passage of the torch, we would take appropriate and proportionate action. This we have done”

*Evening Standard 7/4/08*

...critics accused the police of heavy-handedness. Stephen Green, director of Christian Voice, said: "They were grossly over the top and certainly not in line with our British values of free speech and the right to protest." He went on: "The police shouldn't be used as a free security service in the first place and then to see them wrestling protesters to the ground is simply unacceptable."...But Met Police Commander Jo Kaye hit back: "People cannot just come in and cause havoc and the officers have stopped them. They know quite well that they shouldn't be trying to get in at the torch and they've been stopped."

*Daily Mirror 7/4/08*

The role of the blue tracksuited torch guards was particularly controversial:

The Greater London Authority, which co-organised the event, said: "They were brought over by the Beijing organising committee. They were the responsibility of Beijing." A spokesman insisted it was the British Olympic Association which was responsible for dealing with the Chinese. But the BOA's spokesman said: "They were nothing to do with us. The relationship they had with the Met and the GLA was the responsibility of the GLA." The Met Police said the Chinese guards had "no executive powers" in Britain and were simply there to protect the torch. Privately, police were said to be furious as officers were made to look ridiculous, jogging along in cycle helmets and holding hands to form a chain around the bearers. MPs said the fiasco made Britain a laughing stock. But Olympics Minister Tessa Jowell said: "I don't think it made us look bad. The police did the best job they could."

*Daily Mail 8/4/08*

When the torch continued on its journey in Paris, amidst “waves of chaos” according to the *International Herald Tribune* (8/4/08) there was an almost tangible sense of relief in the manner in which the British press suggested the French had done no better and possibly worse in policing the protests:

### TORCH IS PUT OUT IN FRENCH FARCE

Olympic Flame extinguished twice by officials just because of some boos  
*Evening Standard* 7/4/08

### SACRE BLEU

THE Olympic torch was snuffed out four times yesterday as it was relayed through Paris – before eventually being put on a BUS to shield it from anti-Chinese mobs.  
*The Sun* 8/4/08

### MORE OLYMPIC CHAOS AS PROTESTS SNUFF OUT TORCH

THE Olympic torch relay descended into French farce yesterday as protesters forced officials to abandon the Paris leg of the parade. Chinese minders extinguished the “eternal flame” four times in as many hours so demonstrators could not get near it.  
*Daily Express* 8/4/08

Yesterday the mayhem continued in Paris. Security officials extinguished the torch four times before putting it in a bus for the final stages.  
*Daily Mail* 8/4/08

the flame had to be extinguished three times amid safety concerns. (BBC News  
bbc.co.uk 11/4/08)

The relay was now being subject to ever enhanced security and growing restrictions in scale. By the time it arrived in San Francisco it had become a running story in the world’s media, a soap opera in which the next episode was keenly anticipated. The *Guardian* (9/4/08) reported that “All police leave has been cancelled” and said “...officials in San Francisco brace themselves for a repetition of the tumultuous scenes in Paris and London”. The *New York Times* (8/4/08) reported that a heavy law enforcement presence was expected, and that there would be a low-altitude, no-flight zone over the route. By the time the flame headed for South America, the BBC reported that protesters promised “surprise actions” (BBC News bbc.co.uk 11/4/08). One striking absence from the British press was a lack of discussion of the composition of the crowd. My own impression was of a relative disinterest on the part of Londoners – the crowd was mostly pro and anti demonstrators who were largely Chinese, and detached, if curious bystanders, most of

whom looked like tourists. There was very little evidence of a large scale enthusiastic welcome from Londoners.

In the immediate wake of high profile media events, the key actors battle to establish their own frames and definitions as dominant. Famous names were reported as supporting the protests. Richard Gere attended a vigil in San Francisco and said that by parading the torch in Tibet China was trying to give a false picture of peace and harmony there. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 9/4/08) Tanzanian Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai withdrew from the relay (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08)

Celebrities were also participants in the torch relay and the British press emphasised their encounters with demonstrators:

### **Stars are pounced on by protesters as London Olympic torch parade turns ugly**

TV's Konnie Huq was set upon by a Free Tibet campaigner who tried to rip the torch from her hands. Olympic champ Denise Lewis was charged at by several activists while Sir Clive Woodward had his path blocked a mob. Cricket star Kevin Pietersen had to be ushered away when campaigners threatened to swamp him.... Amid endless booing and hissing, the stars - including Denise Van Outen, Paula Radcliffe, Arsenal's Theo Walcott and the Sugababes - were continually interrupted along the route.  
*Daily Mirror* 7/4/08

Politicians came under public pressure to respond, many of them caught squirming to tread a line between antagonising the public and offending the Chinese. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu urged world leaders not to go to the Games. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd called for dialogue between Beijing and the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 9/4/08) British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced they would not be at the Opening Ceremony, while French President Nicolas Sarkozy was still deciding. US President

George W Bush came under pressure from the Presidential candidates of both parties not to attend. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told China he might not be able to attend the opening ceremony because of scheduling issues (!) and had told China this months ago. The Dalai Lama said China deserved the Games but activists were entitled to non-violent protests. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08)

The Chinese reactions ranged from reassurance to anger. Beijing officials reassured the IOC that the troubled torch relay “will now go smoothly”, after being marred in three countries by anti-China protests, and the IOC said it hoped the relay could go ahead with "many more cheers and smiles". According to the BBC, though, IOC president Jacques Rogge urged China to respect its "moral engagement" to improve human rights and Beijing told the IOC to keep politics out of the Games. The IOC, it was reported would consider restricting future Olympic torch processions to host country territory. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08). China reaffirmed its commitment to take the Olympic torch through Tibet despite strong international pressure and Tibet's Chinese-backed governor said he would take personal responsibility for the torch's safety and "severely punish" all who tried to obstruct it. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 9/4/08) China refused permission for the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, to visit Tibet. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08)

The Chinese subsequently have tried to combat the bad impression left by the torch relay by vigorously promoting the slogan “Tibet is and always has been part of China”, a fair if debatable point, but the damage has been done. And it was not so much the words but the images that were crucial. The abiding image from the torch relay was of the torch surrounded by an escort of fit unsmiling Chinese men in tracksuits. We did not quite know who they were although we soon realised their function. In turn, they were surrounded by a

second cordon of local police. It produced the impression of the torch as an immensely provocative symbol of power that should need such protection from the public.

To examine how this image might have worked otherwise, imagine replacing the Chinese male guards in tracksuits with women, possibly in traditional costume. The torch would have become both symbolically and actually, harder to attack. Replace the torch guards with people of all nationalities, and suddenly it is symbolically the people of the world who are defending this great symbol against a small minority. Replace the guard with two columns of happy schoolchildren from the nation in which the relay is taking place, and it becomes a symbol of national rejoicing and demonstrators who interfered with the innocent pleasure of our schoolchildren would surely be demonised. In short, the fiasco of the torch relay, from the point of view of image management might have been averted with more adept planning, built upon a sophisticated analysis of how media representation will work in specific instances.

Of course part of the art of the spin doctor is to know when to remain silent. The torch relay passes, the world moves on. Many of the protesters are passionate long-term campaigners but some have been caught up in a temporary high profile issue. The build up to the Olympic Games is always problematic for the press office of the Organising Committee. The media eyes of the world have turned to the host city but there is nothing to report – so stories develop. Will the stadia be ready in time? Are the organisers up to the challenge? Is there a terrorist risk? Will any famous names fail a drug test? All the negatives of a society – poverty, criminality, political repression, pollution – are liable to be caught briefly in the media spotlight. Media managers try desperately to feed positive stories to the journalists, who know that anodyne celebratory press releases are not what their editors require of them. Yet, once the Games begin, there is a massive turning

inwardness to the arenas and stadia. Much of what has occurred in the pages and screens of the world's media is rapidly forgotten. In September, how far down the news agendas will Tibet be?

There is a tendency in the west to produce an over-monolithic view of China. This tends to mask a number of elements of the Chinese political terrain. First that while having a Communist Party leadership, the cultural influence of Confucianism remains strong, and there is an intense strand of only partly latent nationalism that could easily become stronger in response to external events. Second, that there is now and has been throughout the period since the communist revolution a tension and a struggle between progressive and reactionary, liberalising and conservative, elements. The society is far from static and while there have been swings between the authoritarian and modernising impulses, the general direction over the last decade has been towards a slow opening up of society. The media whilst still subject to strict control, has clearly become a valuable resource for those within Government at national, provincial and local level to combat corruption amongst officials. The monolithic image acts as an obstruction to clear analysis that endeavours to understand the forces for change within China.

Beijing says Tibet is an integral part of China and what happens there is an internal matter. (BBC News [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) 11/4/08) In this sense Tibet is analogous to Northern Ireland, Catalonia, Corsica and the Basque region of Spain. Yet as the most rudimentary knowledge of European history makes clear, borders are not fixed entities, are constantly and typically contested, and change more frequently than we might like to believe. The British media have portrayed the Chinese as over sensitive to external criticism of their position on Tibet (which, simplifying, is that Tibet is and always was a part of China, and

that it is an internal matter.) Yet the British were never particularly responsive to the views of other voices from North America over the Northern Ireland situation

The general tone of the coverage indicates that the structure of difference between occidental and oriental worlds, is still strong. Ien Ang refers to the “entrenched dichotomy between Asia and the West”..<sup>4</sup> The western media still draw upon a rather limited and stereotypical set of images and preconceptions. It is a sharp and distinct difference that is arguably problematized by the processes of diaspora and hybridity. These processes are a counter to the neat schematic imaginary coherences of the nation state, and thus serve to problematise the nation-state based contestation of the Olympic Games itself. In an era of social and global mobility, when people may live in one nation and be eligible to compete for 2-3 other nations, the whole neat notion of national belongingness is necessarily troubled.

The Chinese who attended the relay in London were clearly from diverse backgrounds. Some were students from mainland China but this fact in itself does not allow us to assume a political position. Some would have been Chinese-British second third or fourth generation, with parents possibly from Shanghai or Hong Kong, or Chuangzhou or anywhere, with China only an abstract object of no direct familiarity. Some may have been business people, international, cosmopolitan sophisticates to greater or lesser degree. Some, doubtless, were Embassy staff and some from the shadowy world of the espionage. Equally the relatively low visibility of delighted cheering and celebratory British people reminds us that sport, even in its mega event form, is not hegemonic and many people are entirely indifferent to its appeals. There is though, I believe, a significant gap between the multiple hybrid complexities of lived experience and the symbolic constructions of media representation.

How are we to understand these processes. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games are not best understood simply as empty spectacles, products of what the Frankfurt School dubbed “the affirmative culture”. Neither can they effectively be analysed as, in Boorstin’s term, “pseudo-events”. It is not useful to view them as part of, in Guy De Bord’s term “the society of the spectacle”.<sup>5</sup> The problem with these three approaches is that they tend to drain events of content and context and to treat them as merely formal phenomena. The Olympic Games are perhaps more usefully conceptualised as mega-events and as media events.

In this context they constitute a point of condensation onto which, inevitably, a whole range of discursive elements will be condensed. Social concerns over nation and identity, competition and success, tradition and modernity, extravagance and thrift, richness and poverty, pollution and ecology, freedom and constraint are all likely to surface in the discursive field that develops around an Olympic Games. Powerful institutions- Governments, Organising Committees, the IOC, will endeavour to manage and control the way this process happens, but these attempts never occur without there being other alternative perspectives, frames and definitions in circulation. It is at those moments of heightened focus, vortextual intensity and enhanced symbolic significance, such as the torch relay, that the tensions between different conceptions can come to the fore.

So what does all this tell us about the nature of politics and journalism in the age of media saturation, digitalisation and globalisation? Firstly, lessons that Greenpeace learned some time ago – that most of the time, the media representation is more central to political effectivity than what happens on the streets; that impression management is the new battleground. Second, the effect of vortextuality, the tendency for some major events to occupy, briefly, centre screen, often on a global scale, and to pull in all media attention is a

dangerous phenomenon for the world of the powerful, because public relations experts, spin doctors and media managers cannot control the intensity of attention. Third in a world increasingly dominated by fear, risk and security, the likelihood is that spectacle will become more closely managed, policed and subject to surveillance. The torch relay may well disappear back inside the stadia behind the high fences and security gates. Political protest, though, will always find new resources to work with.

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<sup>1</sup> Espy, Richard, *The Politics of the Olympic Games*, (USA: University of California Press, 1979), vii

<sup>2</sup> Hella Pick suggested that a boycott campaign may be mounted over the jailing of Soviet dissident Yuri Orlov (*The Guardian* 16/5/78), The Liberal Party agreed on a campaign to get the Games moved (*The Guardian* 2/8/78), David Owen, then Labour Foreign Sec, says Russians should not take it for granted that the Games will take place in Moscow, ITN News, 24/8/78). At the end of August 1978, Begin called for a boycott over Soviet treatment of Jews. In New York, the *Daily World* (6/9/78) reported that a number of US Representatives had asked the IOC to move the Games from Moscow because of the Soviet treatment of dissidents. The *Economist* (9/9/78) reported that the Daily Telegraph and Peter Hain both favoured a boycott. All cited in Trory, Ernie, *Munich, Montreal and Moscow: A Political Tale of Three Olympic Cities*, (Hove, Sussex: Crabtree Press, 1980), 33-4

<sup>3</sup> The impact of the erosion of the public-private distinction, the declining powers of regulation and censorship, and the growth of celebrity culture, combined with the expansion of the media and the increase in the speed of circulation have produced the phenomenon of a "vortex" effect, "vortextuality". The various media constantly feed off each other in a process of self-referentiality and intertextuality. In an era of electronic and digital information exchange, the speed at which this happens has become very rapid. Certain super-major events come to dominate the headlines. It becomes temporarily difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else. They are drawn in, as if by a vortex. Even columnists with no abiding interest in an event feel impelled to comment. There is a short term compression of the media agenda. Other topics either disappear or have to be connected to the vortextual event. In the midst of a vortextual moment, cartoons, radio phone-ins, celebrity columnists, news magazines, cultural commentators, and letter pages, are all drawn into the central topic. Among examples of this effect are the death of Princess Diana, the verdict announcement in the Michael Jackson trial, and the wedding of David Beckham and Victoria Adams (Posh Spice). See Whannel, Garry, *Media Sport Stars, Masculinities and Moralities*, (London: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Ang, Ien, *On Not Speaking Chinese* (London: Routledge, 2001), 193

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, Theo, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979)  
Boorstin, Daniel, *The Image* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1961)  
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