PRIDE AND PREJUDICE:

A five-nation comparative study of Olympics television news coverage

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*The Olympic Games are one of the most popular global mega-media events. However, the ways in which the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games in London were reported varied significantly from one country to another. In order to compare how different countries represented this event, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of three days of television news coverage from 10 channels in five countries: the US, China, Japan, Germany, and the UK. We explored whether different locations, political systems and television systems affect how the same event is reported. We found that while European public service broadcasters (BBC and ARD) were more serious, critical, and political than their commercial counterparts (ITV and RTL), the Japanese commercial broadcaster’s coverage of the event was more critical than that of the public service broadcaster, which was popularized and nationalistic throughout. In China, the more market-oriented Dragon TV was more evaluative in its reporting than the state-run CCTV. NBC, which monopolized the broadcast rights in the U.S., emphasized the universal values of the Olympics and avoided nationalism. In light of our results, future attention should be directed towards the role of commercial broadcasting in a contemporary globalized world in which ideological constellations are changing.*

**Keywords:** Olympic Games; comparative media studies; media system; news framing; mega-media events; sporting nationalism

**Introduction**

The Olympic Games are one of the most popular global mega-media events (Roche 2000, 2006; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006; Dayan and Katz 1992; Dayan 2008). Not only do individual athletes seek success, but entire nations also aspire to victory on the global stage. Watched by billions of viewers worldwide, the Olympic opening is regarded as a particular highlight, presented with reverence and ceremony, in the spirit of universal values such as peace, fairness, goodwill, and sportsmanship (Panagiotopoulou 2010; Dayan and Katz 1992).

However, despite the global scale of its audience, to many participating nations it is also admittedly a national project, elevating national prestige and affirming national identity. In addition, there has been a tendency towards increased centralization of the planning powers for Olympic Games, involving both governments and other social actors such as local developers, industries, civil societies, and citizens. In this respect, the Olympics are not just a sports event, but rather an important item on national agendas, with a high news value.

To date, most studies concerning Olympic television coverage have addressed live telecasts of games and ceremonies, but how television “news” covered the event has rarely been analyzed, and even less often from a comparative perspective1. Considering that the Olympics are often discussed in the context of political news such as political games among various actors in the political system, or of power relations among different countries and regions, it is worth examining how news related to the Olympics is selected and presented in different countries through respective journalistic conventions, professional values, and organizational logics (Hallin and Mancini 1984; Lee et al. 2002). However, compared with conventional political news, the ritual of sports-cum-politics affords media organizations greater latitude in infusing nuances of national emotion and sentiments into the fact-based norms of journalism. Therefore, examining how the Olympics are conveyed in major national evening news programs across nations from a comparative perspective offers an important contribution to media studies.

In this international comparative study of Olympic news coverage, we intend therefore to uncover how national media interpret and represent this international event for domestic audiences in five culturally and politically diverse nations: China (former host/emerging world power), Germany (Continental European nation), Japan (Asian industrial nation), the United Kingdom (host/world power), and the United States (North American nation/world power).

We focus on two particular aspects. First we focus on the domestication of the coverage of the Opening Ceremony by examining how and to what extent each nation denotes their national pride and prestige in the news, and the ways in which particular cultural understanding's of the each nation's relation to the host country structure the representation of the event. Second, we focus on the possible impact of structural differences between media. The five countries have different media systems with different relationships to the public, ranging from a part of the state organ (China) to a liberal commercial system (the US). There are also differences among the media organizations in each country, between public service and commercial broadcasting, for example, or more and less official media.

Our research questions therefore include:

1. Are there cultural or political differences in the role of media in reporting a globalized mega-media event? In what ways do culture, history, nation, and nationalism bear significance in producing news programs?
2. Are the financial or political structures (commercial funding, reception fees, relation to the state) of media outlets and relevant to the reporting styles of “mega-media events” like the Olympics? Can we find any patterns across different media systems?

With these questions in mind, we pursue our cross-national research on the 2012 Olympics. By closely examining how the same global mega-media event is reported as news around the globe, we hope to advance the literature on media events, and illuminate new aspects of the much-debated phenomena of divergence and convergence of reporting styles in various media systems around the world. With our analysis, we also hope to contribute to illuminating contradictory functions of contemporary *national* media that are intended to address and inspire *the nation* on the one hand, and to fulfill a normative function of “*objective reporting*” on the other. Conflictive relationships of these diverse functions are all the more evident in the age of globalization, and increased attention to global mega-media events will continue to lead to certain countries being grouped together in terms of convergence and divergence of reporting styles.

**Literature Review**

*The Olympics and Nationalism*

Many studies concerning Olympic media coverage have thus far focused on the relationship between nationalism and sport. The Olympics and other global sporting events are indeed a sphere in which nationalism and national sentiments are prominently preserved. The nation-state and national identity have been “a key point of reference and context” in media studies analyses of the Olympics (Roche 2006). Bairner (2001) discusses the link between nationalism and sport, which are, according to him, “two of the most emotive issues in the modern world” (xi). He notes, “Sport is frequently a vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment to the extent that politicians are all too willing to harness it for such disparate, even antithetical, purposes as nation building, promoting the nation-state, or giving cultural power to separatist movements” (xi).

The kind of nationalism found in sporting events is called sporting nationalism, which Cho defines as “nationalist sentiment or ideology that is configured and promoted through sporting events” (1999, 349). It is “an efficient cultivator of confidence and a sense of national prestige, whose narratives often emphasize national development or national pride by identifying the winning of sporting events with national victory” (349).

But more than any other sporting event, the Olympics have been explicitly linked to the concepts of nation and nationalism. Monroe and Dayan (2008) argue that China regarded hosting the Olympic Games as part of its soft power strategy in public diplomacy. Lee (1990) points out that the history of the modern Olympics is closely related to nationalism and domestic/international politics, although how nationalism is embodied in the Games has varied over time. According to him, the Games have always functioned as “a political showground for nationalistic purposes of participating nations” (1990, 191). According to Larson and Park (1993), the structure of the Games (based on nation-states), the design of Olympic ceremonies, and media organizations in participating nations all contribute to reinforcing nationalism in the Olympics. Billings notes that “the Olympics have historically been a channel for the construction and display of nationalisms, and the foregrounding of national identities within the overall construct of the Games” (2008, 90). He also contends that the Games “highlight political tensions between different countries, usually exacerbating situations more than mollifying them” (90).

Furthermore, the Games present an opportunity to introduce national culture and national pride to global society. To many countries, international sporting events like the Olympics are “opportunities to raise the political standing of their nation” (Espy 1979, as quoted in Billings 2008). The Summer Games held in Asia—Tokyo 1964, Seoul 1988, and Beijing 2008—were understood as the moments that the host nations entered the international political and cultural scenes (de Lisle 2008; Collins 2011). To these nations, hosting the Olympic Games represented the symbolic completion of modernization (Hamada 2014).

Nevertheless, nationalistic elements in media coverage of the Games are expressed differently and to differing degrees from one country to another. In his analysis of newspaper coverage of the 1984 Games, Real found that the “index of nationalism,” or “what percentage of each country’s coverage was devoted to reporting that country’s own athletes and teams” (1989, 237), varied from less than 20% in Mexico to more than 75% in South Korea and the US. Not only do the percentages of nationalistic elements vary, but the manner in which nationalism is expressed also differs. In their comparison of American NBC and Chinese CCTV, Billings, Angelini, and Wu found that telecasts’ attributions of success or failure and descriptions of athletes’ personalities and physicality differ according to the country represented by the athletes, suggesting that “the Olympics offer different nationalistic narratives” (2011, 263). From European and North American examples, Bairner shows that “American sporting nationalism puts relatively little emphasis on international success” compared to Ireland and Canada (2001, 167). While “domestic competition in ‘American’ games” is important for American sport fans, for Irish and Canadian fans, “the promotion of the nation” is more significant, and international sporting events such as the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, and Gaelic games are therefore more important than in the US (168).

*Domesticating Global Media Events*

International scholarship demonstrates the diverse ways the Olympics are presented in different nations. In this regard, Dayan contends that the Olympics, which are prescheduled and occur every four years, are no longer “events-on-their-own,” but rather a medium or vehicle of expression themselves. They can be “used as blank slates, as empty stages available for all sorts of new dramaturgies besides their own” (Dayan 2010, 23). Following the logic of “calendar journalism,” sports coverage can be ideologically loaded (van Ginneken 1998). This means that descriptions of the Olympics can depend upon multiple factors, ranging from political, economic, or cultural circumstances to practical journalistic conventions. A substantial amount of literature therefore illustrates cross-national divergence and domestication in the way the Olympics are presented. Domestication is an important factor in how a global media event is framed, as Lee et al. (2002) poignantly demonstrate with the case of the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong. National interests and cultural assumptions tend to “domesticate” foreign news, and global media spectacles like the Olympics produce an international discursive battle to win a hegemonic position in the formation of global public opinion.

The 2008 Games in Beijing were the most recent example, generating diverse narratives and conflict in international discourses on the event. Gao identifies different frames employed by the *New York Times* and the *South China Morning Post* from Hong Kong in their coverage of the Games, and suggests a close link to political issues: “international politics, nationalism and ideology were deeply involved in the newspaper coverage” (2010, 88). He contends that ideological differences between China and the US were an important factor affecting the *New York Times*’ unfavorable representations of the Chinese government and authorities. Similarly, de Lisle analyzes the official and counter-narratives surrounding the Beijing Games, and found that the Chinese regime’s preferred narratives presented a “prosperous, orderly, normal and globalized China,” alongside narratives of Chinese nationalism and culturalism (2008, 19). On the other hand, oppositional narratives were circulated by various actors, “including groups that fall within the loose rubric of ‘global civil society’; foreign governments with China policies and issue-specific foreign policies; and other organizations, industry associations and firms, and individuals in China and elsewhere” (37). These counter-narratives were based on “appropriating Olympic ideals” (36) in order to raise questions about issues such as human rights, press freedom, and environmental concerns in China.

Other global comparative studies confirm such representational practices, demonstrating how the Olympics were used as a stage to contrast China and its liberal capitalist rivals. For example, Luo et al. (2010) show similar disparities in the coverage of the 2008 Opening Ceremony. Chinese CCTV’s telecast “focused on the expression of the traditional values of Chinese culture and the Olympic movement,” and “all political topics were skillfully avoided” (1630), while American, Brazilian, and British channels paid more attention to non-Olympic topics. Political and social issues were frequently explained in the coverage by the American NBC and British BBC, and Brazilian channels merely reinforced “recurrent stereotypes [of China] and belittl[ed] the value of the Chinese and Eastern cultures” and highlighted the negative aspects of the Ceremony (1612). Similar divergences according to political ideologies were also observed in the coverage of the torch relay (Haberland, Heyer and Schulz 2010; Feng 2010).

**Methods**

In order to compare how different countries represented the first days of the 2012 London Games, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of three days of television news coverage from 10 channels in five countries. The five countries were selected from the six largest economies in 2012. The selected countries differ in that they organize their television systems differently: the US has a predominantly commercial system, China is dominated by a state-run system, and the remaining three countries (Japan, Germany, and the U.K.) all have mixed public and private systems. The countries analyzed also have different political systems, most notably communist (China) and democratic (all the others). Moreover, these countries are geographically diverse, located in different parts of the globe: Asia, Europe, and North America. We will explore whether these differing locations, political systems, and television systems affect how the same event is reported (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012).

Table 1 lists the programs we examined2.

[Table 1 here]

To analyze the coverage of the Opening Ceremony and related topics, we examined material from three days: July 26 (the day before the Opening Ceremony), July 27 (the opening day), and July 28 (the following day). For China and Japan, we also included coverage on July 29, to account for the time difference3.

Given the different characteristics of mainstream television news discussed above, we also included online news sites in our analysis as supplemental sources. Two to three websites were selected for each country, and we accessed these websites at 6 p.m. local time on each of the three days from July 26 to 28, the same dates analyzed for the television coverage. For each website, the front page and the articles linked from the front page were analyzed. The websites we analyzed are: the websites of the state-run publications, the People’s Daily (www. people.com.cn) and Xinhua News Agency (www. Xinhuanet.com), as well as the commercial Sina.com (China); *BILD.de*, *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, and *FOCUS Online* (Germany); *Asahi Digital, Sponichi Annex, and Yomiuri Online* (Japan); *BBC Online, The Guardian Online, and Mail Online* (U.K.); and *The New York Times, CNN, and NBC* (U.S.).

**Analysis**

*Olympic News and Nationalism*

As previous literature has shown, national sentiment is often highlighted in the representation of Olympic games. In case of the Opening Ceremony, national identity is typically manifested most strongly in the coverage of the host country, whose national media present their collective national experience. In case of the UK in 2012, the nationalism associated with the Opening Ceremony was expressed in a self-congratulatory manner. The British television coverage overall praised the event’s presentation of multiple understandings of Britishness: (1) a traditionalist, conservative conception of Britain and its glorious past, symbolized by a flyover of war planes, the Queen, and a celebration of past industrial might; (2) a social democratic conception, symbolized by suffragettes, trade union protestors, the state health system (though the BBC deemed this controversial), and a pre-industrial, rural idyll; and (3) a modern conception characterized by youth, multiculturalism, and creativity.

The BBC declared the Ceremony a success, describing it as “spectacular,” emphasizing its “British” sense of humor and music choices, and declaring a positive worldwide response. According to ITV, the Opening Ceremony was “fantastic” and “very British,” but in such a way that the outside world “would get it.”

The previous Summer Games host China interpreted the Opening Ceremony of the London Games in a different manner. Although Chinese television news programs virtually never reported the London Olympics as the top story, when they picked the theme up, they affirmed their own country’s growing power, and highlighted the presence of Chinese politicians and the state-run CCTV station. Chinese media attributed the “people’s touch” of rock and roll and popular culture in the British London ceremony to the fact that Britain had neither enough money nor the same kind of historical depth as China.

“Britain, having only several hundred years of history, is no match for 5,000 years of Chinese civilization; therefore, the opening ceremony of the London Olympics is definitely not going to be as historically deep as that of the Beijing Olympics.” (Sina.com, reprinted from Guizhou Metro Daily, July 27, 2012)

While China showed explicit rivalry towards Britain, Japanese coverage did not make such comparison and stayed relatively distanced, or almost indifferent to such disputes of the London Opening Ceremony. Instead, Japanese television programs focused on Japanese athletes marching into the stadium “in a stately manner” as well as famous foreign athletes and celebrities. On July 27, the day before the Opening Ceremony, NHK’s coverage was almost entirely devoted to the Japanese athletes’ performances, except for a very brief informational segment regarding live broadcast of the Opening Ceremony and sprinter Usain Bolt’s press conference. Broadcasting highlighted the result of a women’s pre-event soccer game, in which Japan defeated Spain, and then discussed how many medals the nation could expect to win. The coverage on July 26, while including footage of the final rehearsal of the Opening Ceremony, focused on the country’s victory in women’s soccer, including the personal history of one player who was then a four-time Olympian.

Similarly, the German commercial broadcaster RTL reported as a highlight of the day that a young German athlete was selected as the third most attractive male Olympic athlete by British newspaper readers (July 27); he was referred to as a “bronze medalist.” This distinction between a mass-market popular approach and an upmarket elitist approach was also reflected in Germany’s online publishing: the tabloid BILD adopted an ethnocentric, sensationalist perspective and that focused on German athletes, whereas the upmarket news magazine SPIEGEL was minimally nationalistic and the most international in its approach to Olympics reporting.

The U.S. coverage in this particular case was less nationalistic in the sense that did not focus primarily American athletes’ performances in competition with those from other countries. (Since previous research [Real 1989] has shown a strong emphasis on American athletes in the US coverage, it may be that an analysis beyond the period surrounding the Opening Ceremony would paint a different picture). Both NBC and ABC did end their stories on the 27th with references to American athletes. NBC focused on the rivalry between two American teammates, swimmers Lochte and Phelps, and ABC showed pictures the American athletes had posted of themselves on Twitter. Both also showed footage of U.S. "First Lady" Michelle Obama. NBC also introduced the South African athlete who is “the first ever disabled athlete to be in the Olympics,” and the South Korean archer who was “legally blind,” "a smile-inducing story line," as the reporter put it. As this last comment suggests, the US television networks, reflecting their strongly commercial orientation treated the Opening Ceremony primarily as entertainment, emphasizing the spectacle, the enthusiasm of ordinary people for that spectacle, and the presence of celebrities, including Michelle Obama and Britain's Queen. NBC held exclusive broadcasting rights to the Opening Ceremony and its coverage on the evening news was essentially a promotion for the full "live taped" broadcast later in the evening.

*Domestication of Olympic Ideals and Geo-Politics*

Global divergence was a prominent theme identified in discourse analyses relating to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Our research discovered continued diversity in news coverage of the 2012 London Olympics, with each country’s coverage framing the event in relation to the self-esteem of the host country and collective feelings about geopolitics and political ideologies.

In this regard, Chinese television news programs expressed an explicit rivalry toward London. Their coverage clearly tried to affirm China’s growing power. Both television channels boasted that Beijing’s opening ceremony was “grandiose” and “extravagant,” while London’s was “thrifty” and “economical.” Online news outlets also communicated a theme of London “lacking money” in contrast to Beijing’s abundance of financial resources. Because financial hardship forced London to spend as much as one-third of Beijing’s expenditure, Chinese news media reported that London’s Opening Ceremony abandoned an air of grandeur and chose a more “popular touch” around the theme of British pastoralism. On July 28, Xinhuanet quoted Wang Ning, director of the Operations Center of the Beijing Olympics, as saying that London’s Opening Ceremony “displayed the images of a modern and lively Britain,” but “its artistic technique was somewhat deficient.” He gave the event a score of 90 out of 100, implying that London’s presentation was adequate but not as skillful as Beijing’s. Altogether, Chinese coverage of the London Olympics lionized China as an emerging world power not only in sports, but also in politics and the global economy.

Throughout their coverage, Chinese media outlets tended to present a negative image of London. Despite London’s “best efforts,” Chinese media presented soft but negative stories regarding canceled strikes at Heathrow Airport, stifling security measures, weather issues, and protests against an official sponsor of the Games. CCTV reported, “Although a lot of questions were raised, London said that everything was ready” (July 28). Shanghai’s Dragon TV quoted the London mayor as admitting that the police could not “really guarantee 100% [security].” Even the deterioration of the British health care system was partially blamed on money siphoned off to host the Olympics:

The Olympic Games negatively affected their universal health care system that the British people have been proud of. Due to the economic downturn and the need for capital for hosting the Olympics, the government reduced the investment in health care, some public hospitals closed, many health care workers were laid off, and medical services that ordinary people can get were greatly reduced. (Dragon TV, July 29)

Both channels showed footage of protesters “lying on the ground, covered with white cloth on their body... protesting against the London Olympic sponsor, Dow Chemical Company.” Dragon TV reported:

The development in East London is also questioned. An opponent said, “The Olympic Games should be for the people, but it has been led by large global corporations and financial institutions since it provides huge markets for their brands.” (July 29)

In contrast, the US coverage of both the Opening Ceremony and London’s preparations was highly positive. On July 27, just before broadcasting the videotaped ceremony, NBC described it as a “massive global event kicking off in spectacular style, as our viewers in the US are about to see.” NBC's broadcast had a brief reference to China; "Beijing's opening was so spectacular," the reporter commented, that Britain was waiting to see whether Director Danny Boyle could "top it." But reported as it was primarily as a commercial promotion, the story downplayed political interpretation, as did the other U.S. networks on that day. It was primarily in *The* *New York Times* that ideological differences between American and Chinese media representations could be seen. The Times online edition emphasized that the London ceremony was something for the “common” person, and not for state elites:

Outdoing anyone else, particularly the new superpower China, was never the point for a country that can never hope to recreate the glory days of its empire. Cameron, the prime minister, said this week that London’s are “not a state-run Games—it is a people-run Games,” and Boris Johnson, the London mayor, noted sharply that Britain was not planning to “spend our defense budget” on “pyrotechnics” but would take pride in being “understated but confident.” (*New York Times*, July 27)

CBS, although it was not part of our original sample, did also air a story the day after the opening ceremony focusing drawing an ideologically-laden contrast with the Beijing Games. The general tone of the story was clearly negative regarding China’s achievement since the Games, mentioning that the “economy slowed … jobs are harder to find … [and] the property boom may be going bust.” The reporter noted, “China spent about 40 billion dollars more than any country before or since,” but seems to suggest that the money was not properly used, such as how the Bird’s Nest, one of the “new expensive buildings,” was “barely used.” The story even quotes a Chinese artist who provided ideas for the Bird’s Nest but later became “an outspoken critic of the government” as saying that “the Olympics brought new buildings but not new freedoms.”

While the conventional ideological rivalry of liberalism versus socialism is a significant factor in explaining the disparity between the U.S. and Chinese interpretations of the London Opening Ceremony (see Hallin and Mancini 1992), the news coverage of ARD, the German public service broadcaster (PSB), sought to pose a more fundamental question about the Olympics as a sporting event. During a special “Commentary” piece on the excitement upfront, ARD’s *Tagesthemen* news program addressed problems relating to the management of the Olympics, particularly concerning corruption, political interference, doping, and commercialization. However, viewers were urged not to doubt the sportsmanship intrinsic to the Olympic Games as such. Demands for more democracy and transparency in the Olympic Committee are important, but—as the senior *Tagesthemen* editor concluded in his 90-second “thought of the day”—“I am tired of letting people [officials] ruin my sport highlights, and so are the athletes” (July 26). No reference was made to the Beijing Games.

Similarly, Japanese television coverage did not make any comparison with Beijing. In fact, the news coverage was almost indifferent to global disputes concerning the London Opening Ceremony. Instead, Japanese programs—both the public broadcaster, NHK, and its commercial counterpart, TV-Asahi—were primarily interested in the Japanese athletes representing the nation.

*Contestants and Allies*

TV-Asahi *did* report on problems concerning the development of the East London area, but from a different angle than their Chinese media outlets. The Japanese commercial channel’s extensive coverage on July 27 began with the title, “Lights and shadows surrounding the Olympic Stadium in East London.” After showing the excited responses of tourists and the optimistic expectations of executives, the story introduced London’s reconstruction plan for East London and the area’s history of mixed ethnicity and poverty. The reporter introduced both positive and negative aspects of the reconstruction. Vox pop interviews ranged from positive (“the area has been refurbished, new flats, apartments … [we] benefit in that way”) to negative (“everybody here hates the Olympics [due to rapid changes and developments]”). Gavin Parker, professor of planning studies at the University of Reading, was quoted as saying that “the regeneration of the area may have taken much longer without the Olympics.” Concluding the segment, the reporter suggested the area is impoverished and serves as a home for immigrants from all around the world; “Doing something about these social problems is a challenge for this Olympics.”

After this report, the topic was discussed further in the studio, in relation to poverty issues in Japan. A guest commentator, the popular leader of an anti-poverty non-governmental organization, discussed the difficulties of fighting poverty in “matured societies such as the United Kingdom and Japan, so-called developed countries,” as compared to “developing countries.” Here, London’s problems were framed as similar to Japan’s problems: the United Kingdom and Japan are grouped together under the category of “advanced nations,” reinforcing Japan’s position in the international economic hierarchy. In short, to the Japanese, the United Kingdom is an ally and equal partner, and no longer a country that should be envied.

While Japanese news emphasized Japan’s equal standing with the United Kingdom, U.S. coverage treated Britain as a friend and ally throughout, sharing in the joy and exuberance of the Olympics. Reporting concentrated on the event’s attractions and festivities, rather than its problems, as in the following report from NBC:

It is no secret that Brits had complained about everything from noise and traffic to the cost in these tough economic times, but today it seemed a distant memory. The city threw itself a party. (NBC, July 26)

NBC, of course, had an economic stake in the success of what they called a “spectacular global show;” its de-politicized positivity, however, was consistent with ideological constructions of the Atlantic Alliance which came out more explicitly in the *New York Times* coverage. Other networks similarly downplayed logistical or political problems, and the *New York Times* framed the Opening Ceremony within a historical and ideological context, making reference to Britain’s successful renegotiation of its identity since World War II—from a great power to a “quirky,” humorous, populist center of entertainment. The *Times* drew explicit contrasts between the Chinese ceremony, which it portrayed as emphasizing state power, and the populist character of the British ceremony, making a clear reference to the liberal individualism that it understood as the basis for the special historical relationship between the US and Britain.

The German media made it clear that there was a different type of alliance between Germany and the United Kingdom. In general, both commercial and PSB news adopted a sober and matter-of-fact approach. Broadcasters expressed their appreciation for a successful and typically British Opening Ceremony, and even praised its organization (which is quite remarkable coming from a German source). However, this praise did not come without pointing out mishaps and deeper problems. For instance, on July 27, both RTL and ARD showed footage of a hand bell breaking after being swung too hard by Culture Minster Jeremy Hunt, which was presented as a tongue-in-cheek reference to British clumsiness. However, German news programs also presented a common European concern: security. Both channels emphasized the security aspects associated with organizational preparations, showing uniformed soldiers and police on London’s streets. In addition, both channels gave viewers the impression that Europe and the European order must confront the challenge of possible terrorism, particularly at such a significant mega-event. This angle can be interpreted as embracing a common European identity, or that of an advanced industrial nation threatened by “unknown others” in an increasingly globalized world—a perspective that was almost entirely absent in Japanese news coverage.

*Divergences among Public, Commercial, and State-run Broadcasting Systems*

Effects of market forces, state influence, and social expectations had an impact on news contents differently. Among the five countries we investigated, the German coverage on July 27 demonstrated the largest discrepancy in news contents between public and commercial broadcasting. The commercial broadcaster RTL spent much time hinting at the Ceremony’s events by showing recordings of rehearsals and mentioning celebrities like David Beckham, Mohammed Ali, and the character James Bond. Instead of showing footage of the London mayor or the German president, like ARD’s *Tagesthemen*, RTL’s *Aktuell* news program inserted more vox pop interviews with British and German tourists for human interest. Also, as we mentioned before, it was the tabloid BILD and RTL which focused heavily on German athletes.

Similar differences between PSB and commercial broadcasting were observed in the UK coverage. Although both channels proudly presented British identity in every phase of the event (torch relay, Opening Ceremony, public viewing of the Games, etc.), the BBC paid more attention to politicians such as the prime minister and the London mayor, while ITV focused on the royal family and the event organizers, ready and proud to present the nation. On July 26, ITV quoted Prince William as saying, “… to hold the Olympics and Paralympics today in London, is a great moment for our nation,” followed by a statement from Sebastian Coe, the chairman of the Organizing Committee, demonstrating his hard work.

In the US, our sample included only commercial television. Because NBC had purchased the American broadcasting rights to the Olympics through 2020—at the amount of 4.38 billion dollars, the most expensive television rights deal in Olympic history (Crupi 2011)—NBC news was essentially a promotion of its (taped) coverage, especially on July 27, the day of the Opening Ceremony. The other networks, which did not have the rights to use the images from the Games, had limited coverage. Considering that NBC held exclusive broadcasting rights, the network’s intention in emphasizing the significance of the Games was to increase viewership to pay off their large expenditure and generate profits. Indeed, during the Olympic period, NBC broadcast all news items from its London studio, decorated with the Olympic logo, which transformed the entire news program into a promotion of the Olympics. On July 29, when the actual competitions commenced, news reports provided limited information about event results. Instead, the anchor urged viewers to watch the prime time coverage or visit NBC’s website: “If you need to know now ... [the result is] at NBColympics.com … It will all be on tonight’s NBC coverage in prime time.” NBC also carefully differentiated their Olympic coverage. For example, a “gaffe” by Presidential candidate Mitt Romney—who had questioned security preparations for the games and the support of the British public for the event and was seen as having clumsily insulted an ally—was reported strictly as political news, as a part of his election campaign.

In Japan, the sole PSB channel, NHK, devoted itself to covering the performance of their national athletes—event results and anticipated medals. NHK’s total devotion to the performance of Japanese athletes differs from the coverage of its commercial counterpart, TV-Asahi, which, as mentioned above, elucidated the social background of the London Games and the city’s intention to develop East London. This divergence conforms to the historical understanding in Japan that the PSB is responsible for covering everything that is relevant to national interests, while the commercial channels can be more liberal and free from national interests in determining what is newsworthy (Matsuda 2005). In addition, those who pay the reception fees—to whom NHK feels they should be accountable—comprise almost entirely of Japanese nationals born and raised in Japan, a highly homogenous group of people.

Nevertheless, TV-Asahi still emphasized the victory in soccer, and how foreign media reported on “Japan’s victory.” On both channels, newscasters were overtly excited when describing foreign media’s responses. One NHK’s reporter shouted, “Japan’s victory surprised the world!” The newsreader, reporter, and commentators of TV-Asahi also exchanged excited comments.

In Chinese news programs, the Olympics were relatively less important overall, because domestic news—domestic politics in particular—was the priority in every news program. Unlike Japanese, British, and American channels, during our three-day period for analysis, Shanghai’s Dragon TV coverage on July 28 provided the only example that presented the Games as its top story. For CCTV, an organ of the Central Communist Party, domestic politics always take precedence over any other kinds of news. Particularly important is *Xinwen Lianbo,* CCTV’s flagship news program that is required to be broadcast daily by the nationwide network of television channels, featuring content that strictly reflects party perspectives and priorities. Despite its central importance as a party-state instrument, however, CCTV has also counted popular sports coverage among its major sources of revenues, and devotes a special channel to it. This is why *Xinwen Lianbo* went to some length on July 27 to explain how CCTV went about preparing for the coverage of the Games, boasting it was “the exclusive rights holder” and “the world’s one and only one channel that covers the complete events of 5,600 hours.”

However, CCTV’s coverage focused primarily on how Chinese athletes performed or were expected to perform, particularly once the competition events were underway. Chinese supporters, the national anthem, and the national flag were frequently shown in stories describing Chinese athletes’ victories. In a one-minute story on July 28, approximately half of the duration was devoted to the Chinese national anthem playing at a medal ceremony, accompanied by visuals of the medal-winning athletes and national flag.

CCTV also framed the Olympic Opening as an opportunity for political diplomacy. On July 28 and 29, CCTV reported that Dai Bingguo represented the Chinese government at the Opening Ceremony, attended the reception hosted by the Queen, met the IOC President Jacque Rogue, and voiced the Chinese government’s support for the Olympic Games. Together with images of CCTV officials’ meetings with the IOC, this coverage gave the audience an impression of China’s strong standing in the politics of the Olympic Games, as well as in international politics more broadly. In sum, this news coverage demonstrated that the channel is run by the state.

**Discussion and Outlook**

As we have shown so far, the ways in which television news programs (and selected online news) reported the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games varied significantly from one country to another.

The two Asian countries included in our study, China and Japan, tend to take advantage of the Games as a tool to reinforce their country’s international status and power, and hence nationalism. For these countries, state representatives (including athletes) were identified with the strength of the countries themselves, and their performances in the Games was associated with the achievements and pride of the nation. However, how such identification and connections were established was somewhat different. While the discourse of the Japanese coverage mostly remained reserved from or avoid explicit political advocacy or connections with the government, primarily in order to gain popular audience support as well, Chinese coverage tried to extend their interpretations explicitly to hard power, including politics and economics. Both the coverage of NHK and TV-Asahi (with an exception of the TV-Asahi’s report on East London’s development issues) focused on the performance of Japanese athletes, their team spirit, and possible medal expectations. In contrast, both CCTV and Dragon TV clearly cheered for China’s national pride and the outstanding performance of its athletes, while commenting unfavorably on London’s transportation, security, strikes, and protests. CCTV treated Chinese officials and athletes as symbols of the country’s rising international status.

The different international political and economic statuses of the countries examined in this study—together with their differing political ideologies—engendered different ways of relating the nation to a global media event in domestic media. The coverage of the Olympics thus can also implicitly become a showcase of international alliances and partnerships, or identity in a globalized world. Such differences become clear when we see how Japanese TV-Asahi covered issues regarding East London’s development with an assumption that the Japanese audience could identify themselves with the British as members of an advanced industrial nation, while German RTL and ARD sympathized with London’s security issues to remind the audience that they belong to the advanced industrial nations that are constantly potentially threatened by different “others.”

We also discovered that the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which was an event designed to demonstrate the power and pride of China, also had a significant impact on the 2012 coverage in the UK, and even to some extent in the US. Since the next two Olympics will occur in Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo, locations outside Europe and Western countries, it would advance comparative media research to see how these events will be reported, with what they will be compared, and how the achievements will be interpreted.

Acknowledging such diversities in the coverage analyzed, we also discovered common *dynamics* at work across all five countries; namely, all are required to cope with escalating costs to purchase the rights to broadcast and the Olympics. The key to addressing this requirement was to strengthen the role of either market or state. These two dynamics appeared as commercialization and nationalism, respectively, and each television channel we examined seemed to emphasize one aspect or the other. One approach was that adopted by the Chinese CCTV, which, together with the central government, explicitly attempted to establish a national consensus on the importance of the Games. By contrast, the American NBC—which controlled the broadcasting rights for the Olympics and approached Olympic reporting from the perspective of private enterprise—promoted the opening ceremony as entertainment and downplayed political themes. Its coverage emphasized spectacle, the involvement of fans, and personal stories and achievements of athletes, including Americans but also athletes―whose stories were judged particular appealing to the mass audience, in this case because of "disability."

Between these two extremes was, for example, the Japanese PSB, whose entire coverage focused on Japanese athletes and the events related to them. Their commercial counterpart, TV-Asahi, on the other hand, appeared to be more relaxed as a private news media organization, delivering instead reports on sideline issues concerning urban planning and poverty related to the Olympics. Another example was the dynamic we discovered between the more market-oriented Chinese Dragon TV and CCTV. Dragon TV was less propagandistic in its reporting, focusing on the events and athletes, whereas CCTV framed the Olympic Opening Ceremony as an opportunity for political diplomacy. Thus, Dragon TV could afford to be “softer” and more “fluffy” in its coverage; it pursued many sideline stories (such as protests in London) that knowingly or unknowingly developed into criticism of the Games’ commercialization. Therefore, within the two East Asian countries, it can be stated that broadcasters’ commercial backgrounds served to undercut or weaken nationalistic or populist ideology in their coverage.

Therefore, one important insight we obtained in this study was that conventional understandings of the roles of the non-commercial PSB for harder and political, and commercial channels for softer and popular news was an argument limited to Western Europe. Our study confirmed that European PSBs (BBC and ARD) were noticeably more serious and political than their commercial counterparts (ITV and RTL); the PSBs broadcast footage of political figures such as the prime minister and London mayor, while ITV and RTL frequently showed popular figures such as the royal family, celebrities, or the chairman of the Organizing Committee. However, this divergence can be understood as a product of the unique history and tradition of the public service broadcasting system that was designed to avoid blatant associations with nationalism and commercialization. By comparison, the coverage of the Japanese commercial broadcaster was more distanced from the event than that of NHK, which was highly popularized and nationalistic throughout. In China, the more market-oriented Dragon TV showed at least evaluative, if not critical, attitudes towards the Olympics, unlike CCTV. NBC, which monopolized the broadcast rights in the US, emphasized the universal values of the Olympics and avoided nationalism.

Given our findings in this study, future attention should be directed towards the *contemporary role of commercial broadcasting* in an increasingly multilateral globalized world where ideological constellations are changing. Therefore, global comparative research into the impact of the increased commercialization of media institutions is needed. In this regard, it will be also meaningful to conduct a longitudinal comparative study, since it is likely that these trends are linked to the historical development and cultural understandings of democracy and the broadcasting system.

**Notes**

1 Exceptions include de Moragas Spà, Rivenburgh and Larson (1995) and, more recently, Luo and Richeri (2009).

2 We selected two channels from each country: one public and one commercial, if applicable. For the US, we selected two commercial channels instead: NBC (the broadcast rights holder of the Games) and CBS (which did not have broadcast rights), as we expected that the dynamic created by exclusive broadcast rights might affect the channels’ news coverage. For China, we analyzed the Beijing-based national channel, China Central Television (CCTV), and Shanghai-based Dragon TV. Dragon TV has a regional focus, is more market-oriented, and places second to CCTV in size and audience reach.

3 It should be noted that in Japan most nightly news programs are aired only on weekdays. Therefore, NHK’s *News Watch 9* and TV-Asahi’s *Hōdō Station* were not aired on Saturday, July 28 or Sunday, July 29. To supplement this lack of the data, we instead analyzed weekend news programs from the respective channels: NHK’s *News 7*, which is broadcast at 7 p.m. daily, and TV-Asahi’s *Hōdō Station Sunday*, which airs at 10 a.m. on Sundays. For the American coverage on CBS, July 26 was excluded from our analysis because the full episode on that day is not available on the program’s official website.

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