

Portraying Britain's past: English national newspaper coverage of the 2012 London Olympic ceremonies

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Portraying Britain's Past: English National Newspaper Coverage of the 2012 London Olympic Ceremonies

Introduction

In commenting upon the decline of the British Empire, the historian Brian Harrison noted:

Although between 1970 and 1990 the winding up of the British empire was almost complete, the story did not end there. The empire, having grown by evolving from informal influence to formal control reverted in its decline from formal to informal - retaining many of its original cultural, economic, and demographic features. [...] The empire's relatively peaceful demise ensured that its slowly fading cultural palimpsest persisted long after formal imperial structures had vanished. (Harrison, 2010, p.46)

In accordance with Harrison's (2010) remarks this chapter will explore how the former British imperial 'imagination' can provide a valuable insight into mediated constructions of Britain.¹ Specifically, this will be achieved by examining how English national newspaper coverage served to construct, frame and represent 'Britain' during the 2012 London Olympic Ceremonies.² Indeed, while notions of imperial prestige have formed an important part of British identity and British society, it has also shaped its post-imperial decline (Darwin, 2012; MacKenzie, 1998; 1999; 2001; Thompson, 2005). By locating contemporary newspaper discourses within a historical context, critical examinations of the national press can expose how

¹ For further work on the relationship between Britain and its imperial history see: Darwin, 2012; Howe, 2008; 2010; MacKenzie, 1998; 1999; 2001; Maguire, 1993; Owen, 1999; Pocock, 1975; Thompson, 2000; 2005; Wilson, 2006.

² A qualitative thematic content analysis method was used to analyse the English national press (Mayring, 2000). In total 6 national newspapers were chosen: (*Broadsheet*) The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Guardian, The Observer; (*Tabloid*) the Daily Mail and The Mirror. Sunday editions and sporting supplements were also included. Articles referenced with a 'S.' before the page number refer to a sporting supplement. Newspapers were collected on the day prior to, the day of and the day following the Olympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies. Accordingly, the data ranges were: Opening Ceremony - 26th, 27th, 28th July 2012 and Closing Ceremony - 11th, 12th, 13th August 2012.

representations of Britain, during the 2012 Olympic Ceremonies, were constructed and (re)constructed within a historical conjecture that served to discursively frame Britain in relation to its imperial past. Before this, however, the following section will consider how the historical significance of the nation forms an important part of the mediated sporting spectacle.

The Mediated Sporting Spectacle: Representing the Host Nation

Although some have argued that national cultures are undermined by processes of globalization (Appadurai, 1996; Featherstone, 1990; Hardt & Negri, 2000), others have examined how the mediated sporting spectacle stands as part of a complex interplay between the global and the national (Lee & Maguire, 2004; Maguire & Falcoux, 2005). That is, while the hosting of international sporting events are coordinated in order to provide compelling significations of the host nation (Hogan, 2003; Panagiotopoulou, 2010a; Tomlinson & Young, 2006), such events take shape within a particular ‘space where nationalisms, internationalisms, and transnationalisms interact in complex and frequently potent and emotive ways’ (Silk & Falcoux, 2005, p.450). Subsequently, while the Olympic Games operate under a global rhetoric of peace, humanitarian ideology and international unification (Tomlinson, 1996; Panagiotopoulou, 2010b), at the same time, embodiments of nationalism remain a prevalent part of the Games’s presentation, organisation and associated media coverage (Hargreaves, 2002; Lee & Maguire, 2004).³

For the host nation, the Olympic Games present a valuable opportunity to represent the nation and its national identity to a global audience (Price & Dayan, 2008). Indeed, the prospect ‘of a right of passage into a certain “elite” of nations’ (Dayan, 2010, p. 30) offers the chance for unknown nation-states to garner unprecedented world attention, both positive and negative (Collins, 2011; Curi et al., 2011; Tomlinson & Young, 2006). One important opportunity to achieve such attention is during the Olympic Games’s Opening Ceremony. Aside from the athletic competition, the Opening Ceremony stands as a ‘symbolic space’ (Silk & Falcoux, 2005) through which the host nation’s culture, identity and history is theatrically

³ Similarly, Panagiotopoulou (2010a) highlights how a ‘compulsory [Olympic] program’ is given ‘a specific national interpretation’ by the host nation (2010a, p. 240).

presented across a series of choreographed performances (Tomlinson, 1996).

For example, Hogan (2003) illustrates how the Opening Ceremony for the 2001 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics provided American patriotism an opportunity to pay homage to the 11th September terrorist attacks through layered performances of sound (choir) and symbolism (the use of the World Trade Center United States flag). Acting as ‘a global nationalist forum’ (Lee & Maguire, 2004, p.6), the presence of presidents – both national and sporting – along with members of the American services, added to a sequence that powerfully represented the triumph and resolution of the United States to an international media audience (Silk & Falcoux, 2005). Similarly, the 1992 Olympic Games afforded Barcelona the opportunity to internationally promote Catalanian pride, culture and commerce (Hargreaves, 2000).

With this in mind, particular attention can be given to exploring how the Olympic Games act as a powerful signifier of national prestige for the host nation (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000; Price & Dayan, 2008). With regards to China, Wood (2014) argues that ‘a drive for supremacy at the Olympic games and staging China’s own in Beijing are examples of a relentless obsession with national prestige’ (2014, p.11). Similarly, desires for national prestige can be allied with claims for political legitimacy and national revival. Indeed, in commenting upon the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, former IOC President, Avery Brundage, stated:

We can learn much from Germany. We, too, if we wish to preserve our institutions, must stamp out communism. We, too, must take steps to arrest the decline of patriotism. Germany has progressed as a nation out of her discouragement of five years into a new spirit of confidence in herself. (Mosco & Mahoney, 1985, p.xiv)

Certainly, Brundage’s acknowledgment of the ‘new spirit of confidence’ within Germany coalesced with the Nazi’s attempts to use the Berlin Olympic Games as an opportunity to portray a ‘New Germany’ (Keys, 2006, p.135).

Consequently, while the successful hosting of a sporting mega-event may serve to encourage a sense of national pride amongst the host nation (Ismer, 2011; Tomlinson & Young, 2006), such desires can prove particularly important for those nations who

have witnessed a decline in their global status. In fact, the work of Norbert Elias (1996; 2010) has emphasised how a nation's decline from global power can result in a 'consequent lowering of their self-esteem' (Elias, 1996, p.4). In such instances, nations may seek to claim national prestige 'by invoking a purported greatness of the past' (Wood, 2014, p.13). An important part of this process relies on linking the national past and present and constructing important national occasions with historical meaning (Zerubavel, 1997). Through collective social memories, ideas and symbols from the past are (re)constructed in daily practices and media discourses (De Cillia et al., 1999; Maguire, 1999; van Daalen, 2013; Wood, 2014).⁴ To this extent, journalists and newspaper editors play an important role in representing the national 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006).

Therefore, while the global mediated sporting spectacle can provide an opportunity for the host nation to celebrate its national culture and historical past, in the case of Britain, such attempts remain somewhat contradictory (Falcous & Silk, 2010; Gott, 2011; Owen, 1999). The following section will aim to briefly highlight how Britain's own 'continuing history of imperialism, colonialism and immigration' (Rowe et al., 1998, p.123) forms an important, and, indeed, contested, part of contemporary Britain.

'An Imperial People': The British Empire and British Identity

There is not the potential to do justice to the full history of the British Empire in this chapter. Yet, in order to understand contemporary media constructions of Britain 'there is a need to look not just at comparatively recent developments, alignments and pressures, but also at much longer and deeper histories' (Colley, 2014). In fact, Ho (2013) has argued that the London Olympic Games provided a notable opportunity to assess the effects of Britain's colonial history, both within Britain and the former colonies. In order to follow up on this opportunity, however, a 'brief' understanding of the development of the nation-state in Western Europe is required.

Drawing upon the work of Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Diaz-Andreu (2004) notes that

⁴ Conboy (2006) highlights how for tabloid newspapers in Britain and, in particular, England, the Second World War continues to be 'particularly important to popular historical memory as [...] [it] coincide[s] with the lived experience of a significant number of people, directly or vicariously, through the many popular cultural re-imaginings of this period.' (Conboy, 2006, p.71).

‘From the 1830s to the 1870s the criteria to define a successful nation were transformed’ (2004, p.227). In doing so, notions of ‘Civilisation’ became a dominant expression amongst the Western European states and were closely aligned to imperial projects (Dunning & Hughes, 2010; Kumar, 2003). As a result, ‘It increasingly became crucial not only to be an instituted, large state and have long-established cultural elite with a literary and administrative tradition in the vernacular language, but also [...] to have the capacity for conquest, to be an *imperial people*’ (Diaz-Andreu, 2004, p.227 [italics added]). Indeed, in the wake of the Seven Years War, Britain’s capacity to become ‘an imperial people’ (Diaz-Andreu, 2004, p.227) was largely secured, emerging from the war as the triumphant imperial power (Anderson, 2000; Bumsted, 2008). As such:

Its achievement as the main shaper of the modern era was manifested in naval and trade predominance. Indigenously, that encouraged pride and self-assurance; exogenously, it stimulated awe, admiration, fear, envy and, for some, a heightened, antagonistic national feeling. (Wood, 2014, p.6)

Consequently, despite the loss of the 13 colonies during the American Revolution (1775-1783) (Bumstead, 2008), Britain’s political and economic agendas were largely imperial both in their outlook and administration (Colley, 2005; Reid, 2013). Here, the relationship between Britain and its empire was fundamental to Britain’s sense of self as well as to its constitutive nationalisms (Dawson, 2006; MacKenzie, 1999; 2001; McGregor, 2006).

However, after 1945, the British Empire, and, more importantly, its significant control over large areas of the world, was undermined by a new world order based upon the ‘super-powers’ of the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, over the course of the twentieth-century, the governance of the Commonwealth Secretariat, led by Canadian diplomat Arnold Smith, sought to distinguish itself as independent to Britain and the former British Empire (Porter, 2007). Correspondingly, while ‘Britain disentangled from the entrails of Empire’ (Porter, 2007, p.439) new relations were being forged with Europe (Harrison, 2010).

Accordingly, despite Britain’s closer alignment with Europe, a history of imperialism had ‘resulted in a diverse commingling of ‘British’ national culture and identity with

other cultures' (Maguire, 2011, p.989). Indeed, this movement of people from the former British territories did not decline during the post-war period. In fact, 'Despite the demise of the Empire – and the crisis of identity that this itself presented – this movement of people continued. [...] citizens of Britain's former colonies not only visited, but stayed and made Britain their "home"' (Maguire, 2011, p.989). In such instances, Britain's post-imperial decline remained closely entwined with the former British Empire, revealing particular insecurities in the English/British identity (Kumar, 2003).

Subsequently, by the end of the twentieth-century Britain's former empire was now a Commonwealth of Nations and its own internal state structure was being redefined through devolution. The (re)establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1997 and the opening of the Welsh assembly provided the national cultures of Scotland and Wales political legitimacy (Finlay, 2001). Later, in 1998, the Good Friday Agreements signaled a growing move towards 'peace' in Northern Ireland. Within England, however, its own political governance would remain tied to the British parliament in Westminster. Indeed, it seems that it is against this system that calls for Scottish Independence, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), have served to highlight the growing disillusionment with the political status quo within Britain (Perryman, 2009). Such disillusionment has often been reinterpreted in questions related to what it 'means' to be 'British'.

Taking this into consideration, Thompson (2005) argues that Britain's 'cultural, structural and institutional explanations of decline can all be said to have an "imperial" component' (2005, p.6). Subsequently, while opinion remains divided on the merits of the British Empire (Ferguson, 2012; Gott, 2011; Owen, 1999), Britain's post-imperial decline has been marred by problems with the welfare system, a persistently precarious economy and a lack of confidence in a political establishment that is perceived to be out of touch with the British electorate (Harrison, 2010; Richards, 2014). Indeed, amidst a global recession and a Euro-zone debt crisis, continuing security concerns and the prospect of an Independent Scotland, the pre-Olympic media coverage remained skeptical of London's ability to host the 2012 Olympic Games (Poulton & Maguire, 2012). It is against this backdrop that the following sections will examine how the English national press served to frame

Britain's past in their coverage of the 2012 Olympic Ceremonies. Specifically, attention will be given to exploring how the former British Empire functioned as a source of historical prestige as well as a lingering reminder of Britain's imperial decline.

'What kind of nation are we anyway?'

The post-war image of Britain as a nation beset by decline and 'where nothing works' (Freedland, *The Guardian*, 27/07/12, p.1) was frequently drawn upon in reports before the Opening Ceremony.⁵ Indeed, uncertainties regarding Britain's ability to host the games were seen as a reflection of the British 'national malaise' and characteristic of its contemporary problems (Hayward, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27/07/12, p.S2). According to Freedland (2012a), such problems bared a similarity with Britain's recent history and its 'troubled political past':

Even up to the last minute, in the final days of preparation, the question of whether Britain can actually pull this off has seemed in doubt. A wearily familiar narrative is already in place: the Britain of the Daily Mail and Crap Towns, the Britain where nothing works any more. If it wasn't the failure of G4S to provide security staff, it was the threat by the PCS to call border guards out on strike. One an incompetent company made rich by privatisation, the other a militant-led trade union, the two seemed to spell out twin aspects of our troubled political past: Thatcherism and the winter of discontent uniting to ruin the Olympics. (*The Guardian*, 27/07/12, p.1)

Similar sentiments were shared by Hayward (2012) who made a clear distinction between Britain's 'past' and 'present'. For Hayward (2012), Britain was 'a country that has always imposed its view on the world, *through imperial adventure*, culture and commerce' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 27/07/12, p.S2 [italics added]), however:

now the Games open in east London in an age of mass insecurity and collapsed assumptions, stemming from last summer's riots, the Leveson inquiry, double-dip recession and the banking scandal, which has shaken all our senses of what Britain really is. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 27/07/12, p.S2 [italics added])

⁵ In regards to the referenced articles by Freedland (2012a) and Hayward (2012), please note that these were released on the morning of the 27th August 2012. The Opening Ceremony began at the carefully chosen time of 08:12pm (20:12) in the evening of 27th August 2012.

As such, Hayward's (2012) confident portrayal of a nation who once 'imposed its view on the world, through imperial adventure' was *now* characterised by a number of recent crisis and scandals. Consequently, 'the story of a nation in decline' was one that was often contrasted with Britain's former imperial status (Paxman, The Sunday Telegraph, 12/08/12, p.11). Here, the decline of the British Empire was compared with Britain's lack of sporting achievements, a narrative which for Paxman (2012), 'fitted comfortably into the story of a nation in decline, a country that has lost an empire and failed to find the goal net' (The Sunday Telegraph, 12/08/12, p.11). As such, Bradley (2007) has argued that, 'Where once British identity was about feeling superior, there is now perhaps something of an inferiority complex, allied to a culture of low expectations, an acceptance of the second-rate and a lack of drive and dynamism' (2007, p.63).

However, whereas, Bradley's (2007) remarks allude to concerns regarding the British sense of self, correspondingly, such concerns were closely aligned with anxieties regarding its 'place in the world' (Freedland, The Guardian, 27/07/12, p.1). Accordingly, Freedland (2012a) noted that:

these Olympic weeks will offer answers to a clutch of questions that have nagged at us since the last time London hosted the Games in 1948. *What exactly is our place in the world? How do we compare to other countries and to the country we used to be? What kind of nation are we anyway?* (The Guardian, 27/07/12, p.1 [italics added])

Here, Freedland's (2012a) remarks reveal how concerns regarding the national self were closely allied with Britain's wider global position and the belief that Britain was a country that 'used to be' *something* (The Guardian, 27/07/12, p.1). Such remarks correspond with Ward's (2004) assessment that Britain's 'world position' formed an important part of its identity. As a result, the subsequent decline of Britain post-1948 had clearly affected the British sense of self ('What kind of nation are we anyway?') and its place within a global order of nation-states ('What exactly is our place in the world?') (Freedland, The Guardian, 27/07/12, p.1).

In fact, determining exactly *who* the British were proved to be a prominent feature of the press' discourse. Indeed, Lott (2012) noted, 'over the past several generations we

have been a nation obsessed with “who we are” (The Independent on Sunday, 12/08/12, p.42). This was shared by Adams (2012), who argued that ‘the Games [...] would be an opportunity for *us* to tell the world what *we* were about’ (Adams, The Observer, 29/07/12, p.2 [italics added]). Here, it is evident that for the English press, a decline in British self-respect and its location within a global order of nation-states had resulted in an uncertain understanding of who the British were.

However, despite examples of British decline and insecurity, recollections of Britain’s past could also serve another important function within the press’ discourse. That is, while popular and theatrical representations of the nation serve to glorify the national past ‘through a shared sense of descent and destiny’ (Rivera, 2008, p.622), such representations can also be used to provide ‘evidence of a country’s superiority’ (Rivera, 2008, p.622). In doing so, (re)constructions of British history provided a powerful reminder of Britain’s former global hegemony. To this extent, references to the former British Empire, provided a notable example of what Britain *could* achieve:

From the moment we knew that the Olympics were coming to our shores, there was a symphony of self-loathing. It would be rubbish compared to Beijing. They would be too expensive. London would grind to a humiliating halt. The poor old British can no longer organise a drink-up in a brewery. Wrong, wrong, wrong. *The British ran an Empire covering the world for three centuries - why the hell did we ever doubt that we could run a sporting event for two weeks?* (Parsons, Daily Mirror, 11/08/12, p.10 [italics added])

Evidently, the empire was chosen as a particular period where British achievements were at their greatest and its global power was at its zenith. In accordance with Parson’s (2012) remarks, Wood (2014) has highlighted how a sense of imperial prestige provided Britain the ability ‘to govern a vast, far-flung network of colonies.’ (2014, p.2). In the above examples, however, this sense of ‘imperial prestige’ continued to command both a historical and contemporary importance. In fact, The Independent on Sunday (2012a) echoed such sentiments when it cited a New York Times article, which had stated that ‘Britain offered a display of humour and humbleness that can only stem *from a deep-rooted sense of superiority*’ (29/07/12, p.41 [italics added]). Here, Britain’s history and global influence acted as a powerful signifier of its established position within the world. This was exemplified by Collins (2012):

We dislike being instructed on how to behave by people wholly unqualified to offer such instruction. It is one of our oldest and most endearing traits. In any case, our history has earned us the right to exercise our own choice on these matters. Again, it is central to who we are. (The Mail on Sunday, 29/07/12, p.9)

Similarly, Phillips (2012) noted that:

We recognised our history with pride and unashamed acceptance that it has made us the country we are today, a country still able to put on such an extraordinary event with style and to welcome visitors from around the world with open arms and with open minds. (The Mirror, 28/07/12, p.9)

Such accounts were closely tied to a ‘British system of national beliefs [which] had, since time immemorial, legitimated their claim to superiority at least partially through Britain’s service and achievements for others, for humanity and civilisation’ (Elias, 1996, p.348). Subsequently, The Mail on Sunday (2012) argued:

We have no need to assert ourselves. These small islands have influenced the world in countless ways for centuries. No other capital has hosted the Games three times, or is likely to do so. (29/07/12, p. 31)

Such positive sentiments were echoed in reports of the Opening Ceremony, which according to Reade (2012a), served to highlight ‘*our* genius, tolerance, humour, and all *we* have given to the world’ (Reade, Daily Mirror, 28/07/12, p.2 [italics added]). Indeed, representations of what Britain had ‘given to the world’ were clearly evoked in the Opening Ceremonies depiction of the Industrial Revolution as well as more recent cultural icons, such as the Beatles and popular childrens’ literature (Brown, 2012; Gibson, 2012; The Sunday Telegraph, 2012). In regards to the Closing Ceremony, Gibson (2012) highlighted how the set featured ‘London landmarks covered in newsprint bearing quotations from Shakespeare, Dickens and other luminaries’, adding that ‘the show was a camp, joyous romp through pop culture’ (The Guardian, 13/08/12, p.3). Accordingly, references to Britain’s history and its culture served as a notable reassurance of its prominent role in global popular culture (Mangan et al., 2013). In contrast to all ‘the doom-mongers who said it was all a costly distraction’ (Reade, The Mirror, 13/08/12, p. 2), Reade (2012b) added:

That's what sport, music and culture is all about. We've reminded the world, and more importantly ourselves, that we are still blessed with wealth in all those fields. (The Mirror, 13/08/12, p.2)

Underlying Reade's (2012b) remarks was a sense that despite its decline from empire, Britain could still maintain a global role, not as an imperial power but as a dominant figure in global popular culture. As such, Mangan et al. (2013) note that whereas 'Britain, [...] had once been called an "Empire on which the sun never sets", arguably in a very different way, was still an "Empire" as an innovator in the contemporary global popular culture industry' (2013, p.1848).

'A spirit regained' or 'another kind of Britain'?

Evidently, references to Britain's past proved to be a prominent part of the press' framing of Britain (Conboy, 2006). Indeed, while recollections of British history served to underlie concerns regarding its sense of self and its political, cultural and economic instability (Freedland, 2012; Hayward, 2012; Paxman, 2012), paradoxically, Britain's global influence was predicated on a history that served to remind the British of its continuing global importance (Parsons, 2012; Phillips, 2012; Reade, 2012a; 2012b; The Mail on Sunday, 2012). Consequently, in regards to the Games success, Lawton (2012) noted:

We came so fragile and, let's be honest, fearful into the 30th Olympic Games that ended here last night with all the poignancy of the sweetest parting. Already it seems like an impossible stretch of memory but it is true and it is why the closing rites were filled with so much pride and emotion and, maybe above all, a feeling not so much of a job well done but a spirit regained, a sense of ourselves and the world around us that might just defy, for a little while at least, the bleakest forecasts. (The Independent, 13/08/12, p.8)

Indeed, the sense of a 'spirit regained' (Lawton, The Independent, 13/08/12, p.8) posited a poignant 'reminder of what Britain [could] still achieve, even in the most testing times' (Daily Mail, 27/07/12, p.14). In these instances, echoes of Britain's past were once again drawn upon in order to contextualise Britain's newfound confidence. The former British Athlete, Sir Roger Bannister, expressed similar feelings when he stated, 'how thrilling it is that I can see again today, on the Olympic track, the spirit that I recall from another era' (The Mail on Sunday, 12/08/12, p.28). Here, Britain's

renewed 'spirit' was entwined with a belief that contemporary Britain had reconnected with a Britain 'from another era' (Bannister, *The Mail on Sunday*, 12/08/12, p.28).

Accordingly, while the success of the Olympic Games were represented as reconnecting Britain with its past, references to Britain's post-imperial decline were also re-framed as a particular 'turning point' (Lott, *The Independent on Sunday*, 12/08/12, p.42). Lott (2012) noted:

For me, the Olympics feels like a turning point, a moment in which for the first time since our decline from empire, we felt genuinely self-confident. For the first time I can remember, we like ourselves. (*The Independent on Sunday*, 12/08/12, p.42)

Consequently, 'no longer was Britain casting itself as the imperial power, which once came to the countries of others, determined to shape their futures' (Freedland, 27/07/12, *The Guardian*, p.1), instead the Olympic Opening Ceremony 'celebrated modern Britain, a post-imperial nation, still half in and half out of Europe but surprisingly comfortable with its role' (*The Independent on Sunday*, 29/07/12, p.41).

Elsewhere, Falcous & Silk (2010) have observed how 'contemporary concerns' can be superimposed 'onto reconstructed versions of the past' (2010, p.175). Indeed, they argue that 'these narratives are mythologies that point to the capacity of the media to tell us stories about ourselves' (Falcous & Silk, 2010, p.175 see also Barthes, 1972). However, as highlighted in the above examples, media discourses could also serve to reveal dis-continuity with the national past, especially in regards to those examples that sought to highlight that Britain had traversed its post-imperial decline in order to present a united and largely confident depiction of its present self (Lott, 2012; *The Independent on Sunday*, 2012a; 2012b). As such, it was during the Olympic Games that 'we got a glimpse of another kind of Britain' (Freedland, *The Guardian*, 11/08/12, p.32). In addition, *The Independent on Sunday* (2012b) stated:

We may not be galvanised by the Olympics into suddenly transforming the economy or curing the ills that tainted our streets last summer. But we'd like to think that more than a passing feel-good factor has been generated by London 2012 - not just the immediate luster of gold, silver and bronze, but *the*

knowledge that this was a triumph not of old Britain, but new: competitors in their teens or fifties, black, white and shades in between; ageing rockers, young rappers; women, contributing nearly half the glory and more than their shares of the smiles; volunteers from every background; the witty, the imaginative, the accomplished. The knowledge of that, the confidence to be drawn from it, could be the real legacy of these Games. (12/08/12, p.41 [italics added])

As can be seen from the above examples, it was the transference from an ‘old’ to ‘new’ Britain which served to characterise the press’ discourse. Here, references to Britain’s past provided an ‘orientation in time and space’ (Sindbaek, 2012, p.1010). That is, via discourses pertaining to Britain’s imperial history, historical ‘time’ served to reconnect contemporary Britain in both positive and negative ways. Indeed, while Britain’s present problems and sense of decline were highlighted, the relative success of the 2012 Olympic Games heralded contemporary Britain as one ‘from another era’ (Bannister, *The Mail on Sunday*, 12/08/12, p.28). Such sentiments were echoed in Sandbrook’s (2012) declaration of a ‘rekindling of Britishness itself’ something that had been ‘in danger of dying out’ (*Daily Mail*, 11/08/12, p.16). In these instances, legacies of the past served to be (re)constructed in accordance with the present.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this chapter to explore how the national media coverage of sporting mega-events seeks to discursively construct the host nation in relation to its national history. In this instance, English national press coverage of the 2012 London Olympic Games was considered in order to examine how constructions of British history were related to contemporary constructions of Britain. To this extent, it was found that Britain’s imperial history afforded the press ‘a set of meaning-producing practices’ (Pietsch, 2010, p.426) that formed part of, and were related to, the wider social, cultural and historical context of the event. Indeed, it is through such practices and in such contexts that interpretations of the past can have an important role in shaping contemporary mediated constructions (De Cillia et al., 1999).

This chapter’s analysis of the English national press reconfirmed this importance, yet at the same time, provided an alternative perspective on the use of national history in mediated discourses. Accordingly, while examples of ‘continuity’ with the national past were identified, corresponding examples of ‘discontinuity’ could also be found

(c.f., Alabarces et al., 2001; Falcous & Silk, 2010; Mihelj, 2008). That is, while national memories and histories are based upon the historical continuity of the nation (Alabarces et al., 2001), operating as a form of ‘orientation’ (Sindbaek, 2013), for a changing or fragmenting society they can also reveal moments of ‘disorientation’ (Boyle & Monteiro, 2012; van Daalen, 2013). This was exemplified in those examples that questioned ‘who’ the British were (Adams, 2012; Collins, 2012; Freedland, 2012a; Lott, 2012; Phillips, 2012) and what ‘they’ had subsequently become (Freedland, 2012b; Lott, 2012; The Independent on Sunday, 2012a; 2012b).

Consequently, by exploring how Britain’s ‘imperial history’ was used within the press’ coverage, it was possible to see how constructions of Britain stood precariously ‘between two identities – the imperial and the post-imperial’ (Colls, 2012, p.111). That is, while the English press served to frame Britain in relation to its imperial decline (Hayward, 2012; Paxman, 2012), the subsequent success of the Games revealed discourses that reflected (Bannister, 2012; Lawton, 2012; Lott, 2012), reinvented (Sandbrook, 2012; The Independent on Sunday, 2012b) and reimagined (Freedland, 2012b; Reade, 2012b) Britain’s past within the present (Healey, 1997).

Based on the examples presented here, it is evident that the mediated framing of the nation’s past remains an important feature of international sporting mega-events. Indeed, examinations of these discourses expose how recollections of the nation’s past can act as both a facilitator of national unity and pride but also foster feelings of decline and anxiety. Accordingly, critical consideration of the ways in which the nation’s history is discursively constructed as well as contested will continue to be of relevance for a ‘British’ sporting future that, for the moment, remains uncertain.

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