

"The Imperial Elephant in the Room": British identification during the 2012 Diamond Jubilee and London Olympic Ceremonies [abstract only]

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“Narratives of Empire”: An investigation into the English national press coverage of the 2012 London Olympic Ceremonies’

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Abstract

In this presentation the mediated construction of ‘Britain’ and British identity during 2012 will be examined. While forming part of an ongoing doctoral thesis, this research sheds light on the relationship between Britain’s national and imperial history within the domestic and foreign press coverage of the 2012 Diamond Jubilee and London Olympic Games.

Arguably, if discussions on what constitutes Britishness and British identity in the twenty-first century are to be both historically reflexive and contemporarily accountable, the relationship between Britain’s largely imperial past and its fragmented present requires much closer investigation. In fact, despite recent attempts to invoke discussions on the British Empire, both academic and public, the relationship between the British Isles and the British Empire and its affects upon contemporary constructions of British identity, remain somewhat divorced from wider debates on the post-imperial decline of Britain.

Accordingly, this presentation will aim to address such issues by exploring how the English national press construct, frame and represent notions of Britishness in their coverage of the 2012 Diamond Jubilee and London Olympic Ceremonies. Theoretically guided by a process/figurational approach, the results of this research were obtained via a qualitative thematic content analysis of the printed press. Underpinning this analysis, two interrelated questions were considered. First, how has a history of British imperialism shaped perceptions of British identity in the English press' coverage of the 2012 Diamond Jubilee and London Olympic Ceremonies, and second, what does this reveal in regards to contemporary 'mediated' constructions of Britain? Consequently, from this sample of the data four interrelated themes were obtained: 'Imperial nostalgia', 'Imperial decline', 'Reinvented Britain' and 'Great Britain'.

Indeed, these themes reveal that 'narratives of empire', both positive and negative, remained prominent within the English press' construction of Britain during each event. In fact, despite the de-colonization of Britain's African colonies, the handing over of Hong Kong and the move towards devolution within the U.K., the press' portrayal of 'Britain' drew upon both national and imperial (re)constructions. To this extent, the British Empire continued to play a key part in the English press' framing of Britain 2012.