

## **THE OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY**

### **Activating Citizen-Consumer Discourses**

**David McGillivray**

University of the West of Scotland, Scotland

**Matthew Frew**

Bournemouth University, United Kingdom

**Abstract:** The article opens with a discussion of the evolution of the Olympic torch relay, culminating in the London 2012 Olympics. This is followed by an examination of the corporate power and politics that surrounds the Olympics. Here, the values of the Olympic movement are contrasted with moves toward the brandscaping of host cities and nations compelled by the contractual agreements that are put in place once the rights to host the Olympics are secured. Empirically, the article focuses on the Scottish leg of the Olympic torch relay, a mobile 'event' that travelled across the UK in the summer of 2012. Through the lens of the #citizenrelay action research project, the Olympic torch relay is opened to scrutiny as a vehicle for brand activation, secured and protected by the local state at significant cost to communities across the country. The role of citizen media in enabling playful, ironic and, at times, provocative comment on the extravagance of the Olympic is then discussed before conclusions are drawn. The article concludes by arguing that the Olympic torch relay overtly promotes the spirit of the Olympics (peace, harmony and friendship) whilst at one and the same time, using its reach and popularity to extend the tentacles of brandscaping to buildings, landscapes and spaces previously protected from the vagaries of commodification. Institutionally engineered experiences are choreographed for the benefit of national and international media, leaving citizens as passive bystanders, performing their pre-conceived role as flag wavers and raucous cheerleaders for corporate sponsors. However, we also stress the incompleteness of the corporate-media nexus and emphasise the potential of citizen media to subvert established representations enabling a participatory space where media can be created and distributed widely rather than passively consumed. The normalisation of existing power relations between mega sports events and commerce may come under threat from the weight of locally produced, digitally connected and shareable stories.

**Keywords:** citizen media; Olympic torch relay; brandscaping; #citizenrelay; Olympics; social media.

### **Introduction**

Although many cities and nation states now host a year-long calendar of major and hallmark events, it is mega sports events, such as the Olympics and World Cup, that represent the zenith of these global spectacles. The importance of these events in producing economic and political capital is accompanied by a shifting economics of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Mega sports events provide the ultimate platform to blend notions of citizenship and collectivism with commerce and consumerism. This article focuses on the London 2012 Olympic torch relay and critically unpacks how the

discourse (Foucault, 1979) of mega sports events navigates a path between commerce, citizenship and convergent consumerism.

The article opens with a discussion of the evolution of the Olympic torch relay, culminating in the London 2012 Olympics. This is followed by an examination of the corporate power and politics that surrounds the Olympics. Here, the values of the Olympic movement are contrasted with moves toward the brandscapes of host cities and nations compelled by the contractual agreements that are put in place once the rights to host the Olympics are secured. Empirically, the article focuses on the Scottish leg of the Olympic torch relay, a mobile 'event' that travelled across the UK in the summer of 2012. Through the lens of the #citizenrelay action research project, the Olympic torch relay is opened to scrutiny as a vehicle for brand activation, secured and protected by the local state at significant cost to communities across the country. The role of citizen media in enabling playful, ironic and, at times, provocative comment on the extravagance of the Olympic is then discussed before conclusions are drawn.

### **1. Peace, Friendship and Unity meets Politics and Protest**

This article draws on understandings of Foucauldian discourse to explore the competing narratives present in the modern Olympic movement, brought into being through its torch relay event. Foucault's writings on discourse offer a useful means to critically unpack the wider discursive (and power) relations evident in the activities of the Olympic movement and in its relationship with a series of political and economic actors. First, it is important to explore the discourse of supranational values enshrined within the philosophy of the torch relay.

The modern Olympics are full of ritualistic and symbolic acts which their founder Pierre De Coubertin felt important in establishing the political and cultural significance of this multi-sport event and in differentiating the Olympics from other sporting events (Toohey & Veal; Roche, 2000; Miah & Garcia, 2012). The most well known rituals, symbols and ceremonial acts are those included within the opening and closing ceremonies, including the parade of athletes, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) presidents' speech, the playing of the Olympic anthem, the raising of the Olympic flag, the last leg of the torch relay and the lighting of the Olympic cauldron. Although each element is now established as part of the protocols handed down to each host city to preserve the spiritual significance of the Olympics, these modern forms of ceremony have an uncertain relationship with the traditions of the ancient Games.

Elsewhere (Foley, McGillivray & McPherson, 2011) it has been argued that many of the Olympic symbols are thoroughly modern, representing the invented traditions

(Hobsbawn, 1983) of the late 19th century - a pivotal period in the development of modern sport as we know it. The modern Olympics were themselves a product of modernity (Roche, 2000) in their association with progress, scientific discovery, cultural citizenship and the need for a secular alternative to capture the attention of populations. While the lighting of the Olympic flame can be traced back to the 1920s, the first documented example of the flame being transported around a host nation as part of a torch relay was for the Berlin Olympics of 1936 (Eitzen, 2000). In the IOCs own Olympic torch relay fact sheet, they confirm that 'the Olympic flame's modern history begins with a proposal by Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Organising Committee of the Games of the XI Olympiad... Diem suggested that for the 1936 Summer Games a Flame be lit in Olympia and transported to Berlin for what would be the first Olympic torch relay' (IOC, 2011). So, although the Olympic torch relay is a relatively recent tradition, it is now recognised as one of the most visible symbolic (and commercial) platforms associated with the Games.

In line with many other Olympic assets, the torch relay is governed by the Olympic Charter and is accompanied by a series of protocols that detail what each Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (OCOG) must deliver. However, the creative ways that hosts have sought to interpret these values to lever local, national and international ambitions makes this particular Olympic event quite unique. There are slightly less prescribed elements of protocol within the torch relay or, at least, the boundaries appear to be more fluid and malleable than found in some other Olympic events (e.g. the flame lighting). The creative scope offered to hosts once the flame has been transported from Olympia to Athens (this is very tightly controlled) has led to some memorable torch relays in the post-war period. In 1948, the torch relay for the XIV Olympiad was dubbed the relay of peace, marking the end of warfare and commemorating the sacred truce observed in Ancient Greece (IOC, 2011). The Korean relay of 1988 celebrated harmony and progress across the divided nation and showcased the traditions of Korea. The values of peace, friendship and unity are at the heart of the Olympic torch relay reinforced by the IOCs statement that 'runners who carry the Olympic flame carry a message of peace on their journey' (IOC, p.1).

Despite the almost spiritual rhetoric and commitment to universal values, the Olympic torch relay has not been without its political controversies, in part because of its extensive reach nationally and internationally and its attractiveness to media narrativisation. As with most elements of the Olympics, the host invariably wants it to be associated with positive social, political, cultural and (increasingly important) environmental values. However, in the 75-year history of the torch relay there have

been a number of high profile socio-political embarrassments for the Olympic Family and for host nations. Controversy accompanied the relay from the start because of its original association with the 1936 Berlin Olympiad and Hitler's Nazi regime. More recently, the Olympic torch relay for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games generated significant (negative) media attention because of international concerns over human rights and environmental abuses in China and ongoing doubts about China's suitability to host the world's most high profile event. Whilst the Chinese organisers were eager to promote their People's Olympics vision, human rights protests accompanying the torch relay as it visited cities around the world made a mockery of these claims. The intense scrutiny that this media scrum created for the IOC and BOCOG contributed to the London 2012 Olympic torch relay eliminating the international relay in favour of a solely national event.

Despite the torch relay becoming a site for expressions of resistance, protest and dissent, often related to wider global anti-capitalism and environmental concerns in recent years, it has also played an important role, historically, in overcoming pre-Games negativity by bringing the nation together in a unique celebration. In Sydney 2000, Haynes (2001) has argued that it was only with the start of the torch relay that the host populations' doubts about the tickets for the rich, international and national bribery scandals, budget overruns, security and transport were silenced. She suggests that the torch relay played a crucial role in encouraging Australians to embrace the Games over its 100-day journey across the country. Taking the Olympics outside the host city to parts of the country geographically (and psychologically) remote from the epicentre in Sydney united the nation and dissipated many earlier concerns about the concentration of benefits to the few rather than many.

In 2012, London's Organising Committee (LOCOG) itself recognised the importance of the Olympic torch relay for bringing people together to celebrate the spirit of the Games, stating that it 'may be considered the second most important communications tool after the Games themselves' (LOCOG, 2011, p.3). That the term communications is used with reference to the Olympic torch relay provides an insight into the second main discourse evident – that of the market and the inescapable presence of brandscaping.

## **2. Peace, Unity and Friendship meets Brand Activation**

While the discourse of peace, unity and friendship has great symbolic value to the IOC, its host city partners and the international media, there also exists another important discourse shaping the policy and practice of the Olympic torch relay. Drawing on the language of commerce, like most Olympic assets, the profit motive has never been far from view in recent Olympic torch relays. It is worth drawing on Klingmann's (2007) concept of brandscaping to frame how the Olympic torch relay facilitates the entry of commercial language and activities into areas of public life previously free of commodification. As the author suggests, brandscaping acts to freeze space, to capture and tame its multiplicity, to make it static, organised, predictable...through affective strategies, by producing, managing and securing 'atmospherically enriched experiences' (Klingmann, 2007, p.6). Pavoni (2010, p.9) extends this definition to include the 'institutional engineering of material and immaterial, visible spaces'. In both perspectives, the management or engineering of a scenario is what defines brandscaping, especially when it involves institutional actors. For this article, we consider the Olympics event sanctioning bodies (or representative), host governments (national and local), corporate partners and sponsors to be the institutional actors who act to freeze space previously free (or relatively so) of produced experiences. It is also our contention that the institutional engineering we talk of refers to the introduction and extension of corporate aims and ambitions as part of a more generalised neo-liberal narrow framing of alternatives towards a market orientation. There is a growing literature pertaining to the commercialisation of the Olympics and the role of mega sports events more generally in opening up opportunities for companies to exploit commercial rights. As Cornellsen (2011, p.3223) argues, 'a feature of all present-day sport mega events – is largely explained in terms of the increased corporate structuring of these events and the imperative to generate profit'. Brandscaping strategies and tactics certainly support increased corporate structuring and atmospheric management as experiences are now frequently clustered into 'spatio-temporal enclosures' (Pavoni, 2010, p.10). Cities create entertainment zones, permanent and temporary, and contain audiences in venues where they can be encouraged to participate in experiential consumption practices.

Starting in earnest from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, the IOC has understood and exploited the fact that economies across the world have advanced and consumers have become more demanding and sophisticated. Consumerism has shifted towards offerings that tap desire for memorable experiences and fantasy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Jensen, 1999). Mega sports events are recognised as one of the most potent modern

mass spectacles where experiential consumption functions as a platform for brand promotion and the more generalised advancement of the discourse of consumerism. In fact, the growth of the modern Olympics is symbiotically bound to consumerism. The excitement and emotion of athletic endeavour is easily mediated to entertain a global audience. The reach of the Olympics also now extends beyond traditional venues and television viewing. Since 2000, the Olympics have actively encouraged the wider expansion of its activities into civic space via Live Sites and other forms of public viewing (Frew & McGillivray, 2008). Interestingly, these are presented as free, open additions to the Olympic offer, intending to underline the avowed inclusivity of the Games. The Olympic torch relay is a mobile spectacle that can, similarly, be associated with an extension of Brand Olympic to places and spaces (buildings, landmarks and landscapes) previously out of reach of the tentacles of brandscaping.

Olympic host cities and host nations have little choice but to accept all branding conditions, commercialisation interests and security demands even before they have been awarded the event (Eick, 2010). The IOC, through its host city contracts and stretching technical requirements (many involving the rights of corporate partners) compels them to regulate 'urban space as a market and commodity' (Eick, 2010, p.293) and this extends to the requirement for the local state to control traffic, curtail normal trading practices and ease the means of consumption for (often) global brands to access their much valued target markets. Continuing with the thread of choreography and management, others have suggested that mega sports events (of which the Olympic torch relay is a part) also require adequate security to ensure the state (who picks up the cost) delivers the expected returns to the sanctioning bodies. While security is difficult to argue against in times of increased (apparent) terrorism threats around the world, it is more problematic when used to justify the unnecessary securitisation of space or to curtail civic freedoms normally available to citizens of liberal democratic countries. As Cornelissen (2011, p.3225) suggests, 'labelling mega events as security risks provides the discursive legitimation for governments and extra-national or supranational entities to assert certain extraordinary rights in the name of ensuring people's safety'. Eick (2010, p.285) agrees, arguing that in the case of FIFA (but also relevant to the IOC) that a business-oriented non-profit 'takes over the control rights of public space from the respective local governments during the event'. Around the Olympic torch relay, special provisions are put in place to protect the Olympic flame so that corporate partners and sponsors' rights are policed (by the state and private security) to ensure maximum coverage and unfettered exposure.

The Olympic torch relay, as a vehicle for brand activation, then appears to be more than simply an important symbolic element of Olympism. The remainder of the article focuses its attention on one illustrative case, the London 2012 Olympic torch relay, to investigate the legitimacy of the brandscaping claims posited in the opening discussion.

### **3. Methodology**

The Foucauldian notion of discourse (Foucault, 1979) provides a means to critically read multiple, rich and competing voices. Discourse centres on uncovering those events or relations that reveal the dual poles of knowledge, or what can be said and seen and so truth claims made, about any socio-cultural process (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). For Foucault, discourse is how modern power or ‘networks of power’ work (McGuigan, 1999, p.41). Through mechanisms to repetitively articulate what can be said and seen about a given socio-cultural process, such as the corporate-media nexus of the Olympic torch relay, truth claims are made and reinforced in a mutual conditioning cycle that produces the domination of discourse (Kendall & Wickham, 1999).

In response to criticism that fixed theoretical positions tend to ‘formalize the properties of the events and rob them of specific content’ (Horne & Whannel, 2010), it is important to investigate the lived reality of the Olympic torch relay. The empirical study that informs this article was designed to access the Olympic torch relay from the perspective of both producer and consumer. Elsewhere, McGillivray (2013) explains the participatory arts and media initiative #citizenrelay ([www.citizenrelay.net](http://www.citizenrelay.net)) that provides the empirical focus of this article. This initiative used the tools of citizen media (audio, video, photosharing sites and social media) as a means of opening up channels of debate and discussion and offering a space for critique around major sporting and cultural events. The #citizenrelay initiative was action focused (Reason & Bradbury 2001, p.1), bringing together theory and practice with a collaborative, participatory ethos that empowered its participants to become research co-creators. #citizenrelay also involved an interdisciplinary team of researcher-practitioners including academics, community activists, artists, community media specialists and, crucially, the wider public. Amateur (or non-specialists) media practitioners – also known as citizen journalists – participated in training with the project team to learn techniques for telling stories digitally and having these aggregated in an online environment with others across Scotland to produce a rich, diverse, ironic, provocative and playful representation of the Olympic torch relay event over the course of seven days in the summer of 2012. In total, 60 ‘reporters’ were recruited and trained to support content generation before and during the visit of the Olympic torch relay to Scotland. These

reporters were recruited by regional leaders to ensure extensive geographical coverage. The training focused on the instant capture and circulation of audio and video content and powerful network amplification processes through social media channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and a specially designed project blog. As McGillivray (2013, p.9) highlights:

Over the course of eight days in June, 2012, 20,000 web hits were secured on the #citizenrelay website (www.citizenrelay.net), with a total in excess of 25,000 recorded since January 2012...and in excess of 110 You Tube videos, 215 audioboo short podcasts, 1009 Flickr images and over 300 Instagram filtered images

The #citizenrelay project was designed to encourage wider public participation in the media landscape. Networked social media 'lowers the cost of becoming a speaker, meaning there can be more speakers and it's easier to perceive oneself as a possible speaker' (Baym & boyd, 2012, p.326). Although recognising that an unequal distribution of power exists in the media and especially with where academics interact with a non-academic public, during #citizenrelay there was a deliberate attempt to allow the narrative to develop without the imposition of strict editorial direction.

Whereas other publications have focused on the process of producing citizen media and its influence in shifting the mainstream media narrative (see McGillivray, 2013) the forthcoming findings and discussions relate primarily to observational data garnered as an outcome of the #citizenrelay initiative. These observations focused on the production of the torch relay event itself, the extent of corporate structuring evident and expressions of creative communities of resistance. It also draws on the audio, video and social media data produced to illustrate and support the observational data. Interviewees are identified by their first names and the place name where their content was produced (e.g. Stuart, #citizenrelay, Glasgow). In summary, a Foucauldian lens opens up the dynamics of discourse made visible through the rich seams of digital data captured by #citizensrelay.

## **4. Discussion**

### ***4.1 Activating Olympic Assets***

From the perspective of organisers of the London 2012 Olympics the torch relay was undoubtedly a success, measured in terms of the number of flag waving spectators and positive media coverage for this pre-Games event. Official figures estimate that 14.9 million people saw the flame on its journey around the UK and there were few instances of protest or dissent, at least not on the level of the international torch relay



for the Beijing 2008 Olympics. The data generated via audio and video interviews and through visual ethnography during the #citizenrelay also paints a picture of genuine public excitement around the torch relay in Scotland, however distant residents of that country felt about an event primarily hosted in London, in the South East of England. Large crowds amassed around the country as the torch relay travelled through Scotland's villages, towns and cities for a week in the summer of 2012. The mobility of the torch relay gave it a 'community' feel that engendered a constant 'delight' and 'gratitude' for this 'great opportunity... to feel part of the Olympics' (Scott, #citizenrelay, Glasgow). Numerous interviewees spoke of the 'once in a lifetime opportunity' afforded by the torch relay coming to their community and the importance of being included in the route for the event:

We'll never get to see it again, it is a once in a lifetime opportunity because it will never come back to the UK again in our lifetime so we've really got to see it while we can (James and Sharon, #citizenrelay Ayr)

It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the torch because it's not going to be in this area, or in Britain again for a very long time (Gayle, #citizenrelay, Largs)

It's nice to be included in these things. Ayrshire tends to be bypassed as everything goes straight up to Glasgow. So it's inclusive. I think it's the sort of thing we'll be able to look back at in a few years time and say, 'I was there' to say to your children and grandchildren (Liz, #citizenrelay, Kilmarnock)

The aura of the Olympic Flame arriving in small communities engendered emotional responses from some spectators. Euna (#citizenrelay, Luss) suggests that 'it was great...you could get really close to it. It was very emotional to see it'. However, despite the emphasis in established media narratives of inclusion, benevolence (bringing the Olympics to you) and joyous national unity, the #citizenrelay project produced ample evidence that the torch relay was also inseparable from the overarching discourse of consumerism and brandscaping. The spectacle of the torch relay travelled from city to community repetitively articulating a self-sustaining discourse, carefully woven and orchestrated (Klingmann, 2007). While the structuring and operation of each torch relay leg followed a prescriptive format (LOGOG, 2011) and rationalised method befitting any well-oiled event (Bladen, Kennell, Abson & Wilde, 2012), the branding strategies were subtle. The #citizenrelay project drew attention to the way 'Presenting Partners' (i.e. Coca Cola, Lloyds TSB, Samsung) seamlessly offered promotions, merchandise and mementoes for a willing carnival audience. Brand gifts were personalised as 'keepsakes rather than throwaways' (LOCOG, 2011). While local narratives were peppered with praise, thankfulness and enjoyment over this 'once in a

lifetime experience' for many the torch relay represented a manicured commerce and an illustration of the power of the corporate media nexus:

I have some reservations about how the torch relay has been conducted in terms of the commercialisation of the event...My own take on it is that it's a commercial venture for sponsors really (Ollie, #citizenrelay, Glasgow)

I think it's all a bit odd...I appreciate the symbolic significance of this but it's all a bit Big Brother. I do understand the cultural significance. I think symbols are powerful things and somebody has thrown 9.5 billion at making this very significant (Stuart, #citizenrelay, Ayr)

I think it all seemed like a bit of a circus and I realise now that it's not a relay being run around but just looked like a horribly stage managed thing (Jim, #citizenrelay, Tomintoul)

One of the most overwhelming feelings that #citizenrelay participants experienced in travelling the length and breadth of Scotland following the torch relay was the sheer (over) produced nature of the event. Although travelling hundreds of miles from the South West to the North West and beyond, across diverse terrain in urban and rural settings, the actual relay 'event' itself was invariably contained, managed, and mediated in a relatively consistent manner. It followed the same format, the route was dressed with the same (corporately provided) decorations (called 'bunting') and though 'unique' in terms of its ability to extract local stories, actually reflected a generalised sameness. This sentiment was expressed effectively by two interviewees:

In some respects it's terrific to see so many people congregated for a public event – it's a real community thing. But on the other hand you've got bunches of kids wearing flags with Samsung written on them – what does Samsung have to do with the Olympics? You have to become a bit dispirited about the whole corporate thing. The whole procession is headed by a massive Coca Cola bus and kids on top of it drumming up the crowd – basically drumming up support for Coca Cola I suppose. It's hard to keep in mind the Olympic ideal when you're watching that (Bill, #citizenrelay, Ayr)

I have seen a lot of adverts for Coca Cola, even the bollards have these triangular Coca Cola things on them (Jo, #citizenrelay, Aberdeen)

Though a number of cultural celebrations were integrated to the torch relay event as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad (Scotland's national cultural agency supported a Summer of Song initiative) these were often peripheral to the overtly corporate focus of the Olympic torch relay convoy. Local singers and performances

were drowned out by the pop culture entertainment provided by the Presenting Partners.

Of course, the titled Presenting Partners pay handsomely for the right to secure unfettered access to Olympic real estate, prime sites and spaces (buildings, online, venues) from which they can derive surplus value from their Olympic investments. In official parlance, the 'activation convey' (i.e. brand activation) was given a prime position, relegating the symbolically important 'flame convey' to the background. Handing out merchandise on the way the activation convoy operated as a noisy, colourful procession of product promotion, a vivid encapsulation of the Corporate Olympic Games during this oft-cited 'community event'. Organisers retort that the Olympics would not be in the UK without the investment made by corporate sponsors and other forms of private capital but the torch relay is promoted as being about supranational values in keeping with the main tenets of Olympism – yet the overriding feeling when observing the event was of corporate sponsors securing privileged access to the public realm (and public spaces) to sell their wares whilst exploiting the emotional currency associated with universal values of peace, unity and friendship.

In sum, it is worth restating that the Olympic torch relay clearly has supranational ambition, extending understanding of Olympic values beyond the confines of the host nation but also offering up opportunities for national and local cultural practices to be given space and showcased to a national audience. However, the dynamics of how the Olympic torch relay is produced as an event and its increasingly managed and corporately controlled format draws attention to the unequal distribution of power between corporate and civic interests. One way in which this is evident in practice is in the requirement for the local state to protect and secure Olympic assets, the focus of the next section.

#### ***4.2 Securing and Protecting Olympic Assets***

In earlier discussions, Cornelissen (2011) and Eick (2010) drew attention to the security and risk discourses that now permeate mega sports events. They both argue that by framing these events as a security risk governments (local and national) and extra-national entities are afforded 'extraordinary rights' (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 3225) to protect corporate interests. The #citizenrelay project drew attention to the extensive policing as part of the Olympic torch relay, legitimated on grounds of risk and public safety but also clearly to protect the interests of corporate partners. For example, framed through discourses of risk and security, LOCOG provided each local authority in the UK with clear guidelines on techniques to avoid the apparent 'scourge' of ambush

and guerrilla marketing, stating that ‘we could not do this without them’ (LOCOG, 2011, p.6). This led to a format adopted across the UK whereby the titled Presenting Partners secured exclusive space on the torch relay convoy (protected and enabled by the police authorities and others) to promote their commercial interests as the relay traversed the country.

The preservation of commercial rights was enshrined contractually for each local authority when the UK secured the right to host the London 2012 Olympics. Local authorities signed up to a local celebration agreement (LOCOG, 2011), committing them to providing ‘overall event coordination, which will include the provision of stewards, implementation of security arrangements’ (p.9). As LOCOG goes on to stress:

An important part of the Relay partnership is respecting their (Presenting Partners) commercial rights and brand. Together it is our responsibility to safeguard their investment to deliver the Relay and to protect them against ambush marketing (LOCOG, 2011, p.6)

Participating in the #citizenrelay project, the extent of securitisation evident as the torch relay passed through large and small communities was significant and the extent of visible policing was noted by one interviewee in a small rural village:

There’s a lot of money been spent on this obviously, with the policing and everything else. You don’t see as many police around here normally – you’ll be lucky if you see one (Jim, #citizenrelay, Tomintoul)

In this same village, the #citizenrelay team observed people realising their right to protest (by waving Scottish Saltire flags) being moved on by police forces fearful of negative media coverage for the event that represents peace, harmony and friendship. During the London 2012 torch relay, the protection of corporate partner, sponsors and IOC commercial rights was also enshrined in by-laws and other temporary measures to regulate trading activities such as retail, entertainment, and traffic flow. The torch relay celebrations, promoted to local state actors and their constituencies as the opportunity for local and community involvement in a mega sports event actually resembled a controlled zone of security and policing designed to produce a collective viewing experience and open up avenues to protect the rights of approved vendors to extract maximum profit from their association with the event. A good example of how this operated in practice was the daily Evening Celebration Events held to showcase the arrival of the flame in its overnight destinations. Each local authority in the UK was contracted to LOCOG to ensure their support for the torch relay was guaranteed following prescriptive technical requirements and at great expense to the local state,

that was expected to absorb the costs associated with event management As Gerry (#citizenrelay, Inverness) suggested:

They (LOCOG) gave us the opportunity to buy it (city decorations). Places that decorated the city have spent a fortune. It was extortionate the price of stuff... we couldn't afford it and it's a very expensive operation for councils to run...it's very disappointing at how much councils had to absorb. From my perspective I would have liked LOCOG to actually pay for the relay, for money to have stayed in our community

Information produced by the Press Association under the Freedom of Information Act (London Evening Standard, 2013) found that a dozen local authorities spent in excess of £100,000 on Olympic torch relay celebrations, including road closures, marshalling and stewarding, setting up safety barriers and managing crowds.

Beyond the cost burden falling on local authorities in the UK to managing the Olympic torch relay, the #citizenrelay project also uncovered evidence of the activities of what we term the 'branding police' during the event. For example, LOCOG were successful in closing down the Twitter account of Space Hijackers, a protest group which parodies the commercial imperatives of LOCOG. Even in the small village of Tomintoul in the North East of Scotland, villagers were warned by their local authority that wearing unofficial sponsors logos as the torch relay passed through could lead to sanctions including the wearing of a white t-shirt to hide the offending garment. Patricia (#citizenrelay, Tomintoul) picked up on this commercial emphasis and implicitly questions the managerial relation between LOGOC and local authorities:

if you are advertising something that is not to do with the official sponsors, you are going to be asked by the local authority to wear a white T-shirt to cover it up! I think it's good that it's coming through our community but I don't think it should be regulated as much as we are. Surely if you want to advertise, if it's something local, then why not. If it's a charity then why not

Protecting and securing Olympic assets also extended beyond the rights of Presenting Partners to include other Olympic symbols. Perhaps the most precious element of Olympic real estate is the internationally recognised five rings. In preparation for the Olympics coming to the UK, a number of five ring installations were erected in UK cities. In Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh, the five rings were 'guarded' (Batansova, #citizenrelay, Edinburgh) to ensure they remained in pristine condition for easy broadcast to an international audience. Moreover, the Edinburgh Torch Relay Evening Celebration Event was hosted in the grounds of the city's iconic Castle esplanade, further emphasising the extension of brandscaping whereby natural and built

landscapes were organised and made available for dressing with corporate paraphernalia.

In sum, given the symbolic purity, peace, collectivism and continuity of life represented in the 'positive values' of the Olympic Flame (Olympic Studies Centre, 2007), the protection and promotion of the exclusivity and individualism of brand interest and consumption is ironic.

### ***4.3 Resisting Rituals through Digital Discourse***

Across the period of the torch relay being in the UK there was little evidence of expressed resistance, violence or obvious antagonism as the flame passed from Torchbearer to Torchbearer and community to community. Given the preceding discussion of security and protection of Olympic assets, peaceful scenes were to be expected as LOCOG and its local authority partners carefully managed the torch relay event. The dominant official media narrative was that the nation was being united each day as the torch relay passed through and it was the most inclusive event the country had seen for some time. Unity was the name of the game and the torch was said to be serving its purpose to encourage peace, unity and friendship.

However, drawing on Foucault, one discourse is never complete. Instead in subsuming and suffocating competing discourses, others are produced, constructing their own resistance. Foucauldian discourse allows us to unpack the components, or discursive relations, between the officially sanctioned Olympic torch relay, its truth claims, knowledge and power to produce and impose a particular reading, which can be held against its reception, reading and resistance at the local level. The #citizenrelay project uncovered numerous examples that challenged the officially sanctioned spectacle around the Olympic torch relay and in this final discussion a number of examples will be used to illustrate the inherent incompleteness of dominant corporate discourses.

Citizens in Scotland, one of four nations of the UK, felt significant levels of detachment and distance from the main Olympic events being hosted in London and the South East of England. #citizenrelay was a project borne out of disaffection and the need for representation and desire for a space where alternative narratives were welcomed against the dominant discourse propagated by the corporate media-nexus. As part of the project, from Aberdeen to Ayrshire and Girvan to Giffnock, local people authored their own digital stories about an event bid for and delivered in their name. The Olympic torch relay, regardless of its inclusive, participatory 'once in a lifetime' rhetoric, ironically, triggered local reflexivity on the Games, that accentuated its distance from the concerns of their everyday reality.

The theme of contested national identity provided a fascinating subtext to the Olympic torch relay. Promoted as a UK Olympics, LOCOG provided partners with Union Jack flags to wave as the torch procession passed through. Following less than a month after the uniquely British Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in early June 2012, #citizenrelay drew attention to the promotion of sanctioned messages with the placement of 'English Union Jacks' that were openly seen to replace or 'overruling the Scottish Flag' (Claire, #citizenrelay, Glasgow). This theme was not unique to the Olympic torch relay as there was also an outcry at the Saltire flag being banned from Hampden Park, Scotland's National Football Stadium, during the Olympics. Again this attempted dilution of Scottish identity was not the first time Olympic organisers had come up against important symbolic issues. When the Olympic torch relay began in Cornwall, in the South West of England, expressions of Cornish national identity were curtailed, most publicly when a Cornish flag was removed from a Torchbearer in full glare of the media. This flag grabbing incident illustrated how disunity, division and alternative narratives had to be suffocated in favour a dominant discourse of peace, harmony and friendship. Of course, this runs counter to the ethos of the London 2012 Olympic Games which were sold to the nations and regions of the UK on a utilitarian 'our Games, your Games' promotional mantra.

However, while the two preceding examples evidence a feeling of national cultural insensitivity, others saw the Olympic torch relay and its media entourage as an opportunity to advance their own political causes:

this is a chance to raise the Syrian liberation flag and because the Torch is freedom and hope we wanted to say that Syria has hope to live a better future...the most important decision was made yesterday when the Olympic Committee banned a Syrian General from entering the UK (Atanasova, #citizenrelay, Edinburgh)

Nevertheless, even though an avenue to raise awareness of international crises, the torch relay also opened up resentment, in a time of economic austerity, of the daily struggle of local lives. Like the Olympics itself, the torch relay was seen as an ostentatious event 'a choir...they're spending £10000 on that – I thought they could have spent it on something else. The entourage is 3 miles long' (Patricia, #citizenrelay, Tomintoul). Again, Chris (#citizenrelay, Ayr) highlighted how the use of public monies deflected from deeper local issues, 'I think there are bigger issues in Scotland today than this circus over a sporting event. It's just a distraction from the bigger issues that there are in the country.'

The mode of operation of the #citizenrelay project, networked through the use of social media and aggregating content on one online environment, enabled the dynamics of discourse to be opened up. It provided people from across Scotland with an opportunity to express sentiments about the Olympics without having this shaped by the interests of a media conglomerate contractually tied (as official media partners) to LOCOG. One of the most powerful expressions of the power of connected user generated media to affect change and shine a light on the misuse of power was the Help Me Investigate website (<http://helpmeinvestigate.com/olympics/>, accessed 20/11/2013), a crowdsourced resource for those interested in investigating questions relating to the Olympics. Citizens were urged to investigate the presence of significant numbers of Corporate Torchbearers amongst the 8000-strong cohort and to ask questions about the costs to local authorities in hosting their leg of the Olympic torch relay. #citizenrelay helped draw attention to the number of corporate executives participating in the torch relay and to the extent of local authority spending on dressing their communities for the arrival of the Olympic Flame. In both cases, the use of a hashtag (#citizenrelay) enabled the project to reach out to larger audiences, including the established media, who ran stories originally produced by #citizenrelay reporters.

#citizenrelay then provided a reading of how dominant discourses work in and through assimilation and resistance with alternative narratives. It also demonstrated the power of the digital platforms readily available to a wider public to contest dominant discourses. Today the citizen-consumer is armed with smart technologies. The power is now in their pockets and, as show in #citizenrelay, a lone voice can rapidly build into a cacophony of voices trending on Twitter or converging on Facebook, Instagram or personal blogs. The #citizenrelay project and the participative arts and media culture it promoted, and responded to, provided a creative response to the overly determined, corporately structured and institutionally engineered torch relay brandscape. It is interesting that through the simple device of a hashtag, that anyone with access to a (free) Twitter account could use and follow, encouraged challenge, irony and a playfulness around so-called sacred Olympic motifs and symbolism. This is the age of acceleration where mega sporting events, such as the Olympics, are now brought under the gaze of a digital discourse. Under the weight of such a focused and funnelled digital gaze, such as #citizenrelay, even these Leviathan discourses, with all their institutional power and corporate-media nexus, are de-territorialised, de-stabilised and held to account (Pavoni, 2010).



## Conclusion

This article has focused on the Olympic torch relay as a media event that provides space for representation to take place - often contested - between sender and receiver. Olympic organisers describe the torch relay as the second most important communications tool after the Games themselves and we have shown how this mobile event overtly promotes the spirit of the Olympics (peace, harmony and friendship) whilst at one and the same time, using its reach and popularity to extend the tentacles of brandscaping to buildings, landscapes and spaces previously protected from the vagaries of commodification. Corporate rights to exploit public space are protected and secured by the local state that absorbs the cost burden for the reward of hosting local events that have to adhere to a template designed and policed by the Local Organising Committee. Institutionally engineered experiences are choreographed for the benefit of national and international media, leaving citizens as passive bystanders, performing their pre-conceived role as flag wavers and raucous cheerleaders for corporate sponsors. The manufactured celebrations that accompany the spectacle of the Olympic Flame itself, when mediated, become a powerful symbolic flame and carrier of a discourse that transforms citizens into consumers.

However, we have also shown how the power and domination of the corporate-media discourse is far from complete. Rather, the dynamics and inherent resistance to the discourse of the Olympic torch relay is revealed in the embodied actions, uncovered and captured through the #citizenrelay project. Citizen media, using ubiquitous mobile devices, freely available and shareable web platforms and a do-it-yourself ethos, offer the potential to subvert established representations enabling a participatory space where media can be created and distributed widely rather than passively consumed. Rather than securing and protecting the dominant corporate Olympic discourse such a reading, reception and resistance opens the biggest event in the world up to greater challenge. It is here that the normalisation of existing power relations between mega sports events and commerce may come under threat from the weight of locally produced, digitally connected and shareable stories. However, while new technologies enable and empower digital connectivity, unless the cacophony of voices is funnelled and focused alternative readings will be lost in the digital dust and the corporate media nexus will mobilise its vast financial and marketing resources to render contrary voices invisible.

## References

- Baym, N.K. and boyd, D. (2012). Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56, 3, pp320-329.
- Bladen, C., Kennell, J., Abson, E. and Wilde, N. (2012). *Events Management: an introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Cornelissen, S. (2011). Mega event securitisation in a third world setting: Glocal processes and ramifications during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, *Urban Studies*, 48, 15, pp3221-3240.
- Danaher, G., Schirato, T. and Webb, J. (2000). *Understanding Foucault*, London: Sage.
- Eick, V. (2010). A neo-liberal sports event? FIFA from the *Estadio Nacional* to the fan mile, *City*, 14, 3, pp278-297.
- Eitzen, S. (2000). Social Control and Sport. In J. Coakley and E. Dunning (Eds.). *Handbook of Sports Studies* (pp370-407) London: Sage.
- Foley, M., McGillivray, D. and McPherson, G. (2011). *Event Policy: From Theory to Strategy*, London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, London: Allen Lane.
- Frew, M. and McGillivray, D. (2005). Health and Fitness Clubs and Body Politics: Aesthetics and the Promotion of Physical Capital, *Leisure Studies*, 24, 2, pp161-175
- Frew, M. and McGillivray, D. (2008). Exploring hyper-experiences: Performing the fan at Germany 2006, *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 13, 3, pp1-18.
- Haynes, J. (2001). Socio-economic impact of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games [online article]. Barcelona: Centre d'Estudis Olímpics UAB. [accessed: 14/09/2012] [http://olympicstudies.uab.es/pdf/wp094\\_eng.pdf](http://olympicstudies.uab.es/pdf/wp094_eng.pdf)
- Hobsbawn, E. (1983). Introduction: inventing traditions. In E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger (Eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (pp1-14) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Horne, J. and Whannel, G. (2010). The 'caged torch procession': celebrities, protesters and the 2008 Olympic torch relay in London, Paris and San Francisco, *Sport in Society*, 13, 5, pp760–770.
- IOC (2011). *Factsheet: The Olympic torch relay - update October 2011*, Château de Vidy, 1007 Lausanne, Switzerland
- Jensen, R. (1999). *The Dream Society: How the coming shift form information to imagination will transform your business*, London: McGraw-Hill.
- Kendall, G. and Wickham, G. (1999). *Using Foucault's methods*, London: Sage.
- Klingmann A. (2007). *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, London: MIT Press.
- LOCOG (2011). *Olympic Torch Relay Evening Celebration: Host Community Guide*. London: London Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.
- London Evening Standard (2013). <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/new-figures-reveal-6m-cost-of-olympic-torch-relay-8622587.html> (accessed 20/11/2013), May 19th.
- McGillivray, D. (2013). Digital Cultures, acceleration and mega event narratives, *Leisure Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2013.841747, pp1-14
- McGuigan, J. (1999). *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Miah, A. and Garcia, B. (2012). *The Olympics: The Basics*, London: Routledge.
- Olympic Studies Centre. (2007). *The Olympic Flame and Torch Relay*, Lausanne: Olympic Studies Centre.
- Pavoni, A. (2010). Erasing Space from Places: Brandscapes, Art and the (de)valorisation of the Olympic Space, *Explorations in Space and Society*, 18-December 2010.
- Pine, J. and Gilmore, J. (1999). *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business is a Stage*, New York: Harvard Business Press.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001). Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury (Eds.)

*Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (pp1-14) London: Sage.

Roche, M. (2000). *Mega-events and modernity: Olympics and Expos in the growth of global culture*, London: Routledge.

Solis, B. (2013). *What's the Future of Business? Changing the Way Businesses Create Experiences*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Toohey, K. and Veal, A. (2000). *The Olympic Games: A Social Science Perspective*, Oxford: CABI.

Professor David McGillivray holds a Chair in Event and Digital Cultures at University of the West of Scotland (UWS). His research interests focus on the contemporary significance of events and festivals (sporting and cultural) as markers of identity and mechanisms for the achievements of wider economic, social and cultural externalities. His current research focuses on the value of digital media in enabling alternative readings of major sport events to find currency within the saturated media landscape. He is co-author of *Event Policy: From Theory to Strategy* (2011) and co-editor of *Research Themes for Events* (2013) and sits on the Executive Committee of the Leisure Studies Association.

[david.mcgillivray@uws.ac.uk](mailto:david.mcgillivray@uws.ac.uk)

Dr Matthew Frew is a Senior Lecturer at Bournemouth University who comes to academia with a range of work experience that extends across sports management, personal fitness, outdoor adventure education and organizational and personal development consultancy. His eclectic academic and experience portfolio drives and informs his passion for applying a socio-cultural analysis to digital, social and transformational technologies to inspire and develop innovative products and practices across the creative and cultural industries.