



Coverage of a large-scale sporting event in an era of disparate values: an analysis of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympics

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Abstract

Objective of the study is to identify the key content characteristics of media accompaniment related to the general tone and theme of the ceremony's assessments.

Methods and structure of the study. The article contains a theoretical overview summarizing the research results of foreign scientists. These studies have revealed different and even contradictory audience responses in different countries. The empirical part of the work is devoted to the analysis of media coverage of the opening ceremony in the Russian information field.

Results and conclusions. The analysis revealed four groups of critical comments regarding the sports event in question. Unlike the previous opening ceremonies, the fourth category of negative reviews, which has an axiological and political character, stood out clearly. These assessments are caused by the desire of France, as the organizer of the 2024 Olympic Games, to link the universal ideals of Olympism with a global neoliberal and ideologically biased program. Some of the symbols, images and narratives presented at the Paris opening ceremony come into direct conflict with the principles of the Olympic movement and serve the function of separation rather than unification in public policy.

Keywords: *sports event, Olympism, mediatization, philosophy of the Olympic movement, values of sport and Olympism, risks of forming a value split.*

Introduction. Sport has a powerful consolidation potential: it involves and thereby unites, through its principles and on its platforms, people with different beliefs, education, religious views, economic status, etc. The Olympic movement and the values of Olympism are an example of just such a positive non-political, but value-based consolidation, which allows for the formation of a basis for inter-country cooperation and intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, as A.O. Naumov notes, the mass character and popularity of the sports movement turns it into an effective tool for popularizing the political and economic system, prevailing values, and justifying the state's foreign policy [1].

In this case, consolidation can be replaced by indoctrination of specific ideological narratives. This leads to a confrontation no longer between athletes (which corresponds to the principles and values of Olympism), but between the states, value systems, ideological models, etc. that stand behind them [6].

In the scientific discourse, we see examples of attempts to transform universal Olympic values: for example, the position of D. Saini [8], according to which the Olympic Games promote such social goals as gender equality, environmental protection and inclusiveness, seems controversial. In our opinion, the listed values are not directly related to sports and the philosophy of the Olympic movement and do not have a conventional (generally accepted) interpretation, and in the ideological framework of neoliberalism they often take radicalized forms.

From the point of view of event management, the opening ceremony of the Olympics can be understood as a specially organized event (event) with dual functionality [5, 10]. It represents the values of sports and Olympism, and also contributes to the image promotion of the host country, which has undertaken the obligations to organize and hold the competitions. In accordance with the Olympic Charter (2024, paragraph 55), the programs of



the ceremonies are checked and approved by the IOC, including for compliance of the presented subjects and concepts with the spirit of Olympism and Olympic values.

The opening ceremony includes both traditional symbols (flags, Olympic rings, Olympic flame, parade of athletes, etc.) and nationally specific ones, referring to the culture and image of the host country. The combination of these symbolic elements can be built in different ways, depending on the goals of the organizers. A situation is possible when the hierarchy of these symbolic elements levels out the values of Olympism. In our view, this is exactly what happened at the Paris opening ceremony, which combined a traditional concept with a radical neo-liberal agenda (including inclusive and transgender issues, as well as a disrespectful attitude towards religious values), which was perceived by many groups in the public as a challenge to traditional values [9].

Objective of the study is to identify the key substantive characteristics of media coverage associated with the overall tone and theme of the ceremony assessments.

Methods and structure of the study. As the researchers note, the opening ceremony, which took place in Paris on July 26, 2024, caused sharply negative emotions, even disgust, in many countries [2, 3, 7]. The Olympic Games are a social phenomenon of a high degree of mediatization. Here we mean mediatization as the mediation of social practice by media technologies and media logic in accordance with the approach of Couldry, Hepp [4]. Obviously, the overwhelming majority of viewers, unable to attend the games in person, see the Olympics as represented by the mass media, through broadcasts, reports, news, and social networks.

Analysis of the communication message of this ceremony, as well as its media display in the Russian information space, is the subject of our study. In doing so, we will rely on both the methodological foundations of the sociology of sport and the general theory of public communications and public relations.

To identify the accents of media coverage of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games, we turned to the corpus of media texts published in the Russian information space on July 26-28, 2024.

The empirical base consisted of publications for the specified period, posted in social media, social networks, electronic versions of federal newspapers, collected by the Semanticforce.net system using the keyword "Olympics 2024". Next, a manual selection of materials dedicated to the opening ceremony was made, and their content was processed.

The hypothesis was that the Russian media discourse that formed around the opening ceremony of the Paris

Olympics would actively represent negative assessments associated primarily with the value-based content of the generalized message addressed to the global audience, which is not in line with the spirit of Olympism, and is fundamentally Atlantic-liberal.

We will not reproduce in detail the stories shown to the audience of the ceremony in this article. Recordings of the ceremony are available online, and brief content has been described in a number of scientific publications. Thus, we will cite a quote from the work of Miller B. "Crisis at the Summer Games: How Organizers Responded to Controversy at the Paris 2024 Olympics": "The ceremony featured transvestites and universal love was promoted, and at the culmination of the ceremony, a short song was performed by a man painted blue from head to toe, in imitation of the Greek god of wine Dionysus. Because he sang in support of the opposition to the war, some members of the Christian community claimed that the scene was a deliberate mockery of Leonardo da Vinci's painting The Last Supper, which depicts a key moment before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as described in the New Testament." [7] We believe that even from this brief description it is clear that the messages being conveyed had little to do with the ideals of Olympism, but they clearly challenged and even mocked traditional values.

Results and conclusions. It is important to note that Russia was excluded from participation in the games and media coverage of the 2024 Olympic Games in the Russian media space was characterized by a number of circumstances: the ceremonies were not broadcast by state media, while individual elements of the ceremony contained references to ideological narratives prohibited by the legislation of the Russian Federation. This imposed certain restrictions on the coverage of this event in the Russian information space and determined the relatively low number of publications devoted directly to the opening ceremony. The basis of the sample of media texts was materials with an overview and assessment of the ceremony, published in the media, reviews and comments from popular bloggers, as well as secondary materials in social media, the informational reason for which were the same comments from famous bloggers, politicians, athletes. Among the sources of evaluative information cited in the media, only 14% gave a positive assessment of the ceremony. The remaining speakers conveyed a pronounced negative reaction, including the use of expressive lexemes: "hellish bad taste", "the most acute crisis", "the era of cringe multiplied by trash", "the degradation of world Olympism".

Journalistic materials contained a large number of negative assessments of the French organizers, which



can be grouped into the following categories: 1) conditionally objective circumstances (weather conditions, water quality in the Seine);

2) technical errors of the organization (the inverted flag of the Olympic Games, the incorrect announcement of the South Korean team, shortcomings in the filming process);

3) the artistic and aesthetic concept of the ceremony (from the choice of plots and locations to the costumes of the participants);

4) ambiguous ideological narratives that do not correspond to the values of Olympism (a parody of the Last Supper, the promotion of the neoliberal agenda).

It should be understood that the first three categories of negative information reasons are typical for a mediated sports event of this level and scale. The organization of any special event is accompanied by risks and miscalculations of this kind. And given the intercountry competition, negative publications highlighting organizational blunders are almost inevitable.

The interpretation of the artistic and aesthetic component is of a taste nature and can become a subject of discussion; as a rule, aesthetic concepts collide here. But a discussion in this substantive field attracts attention and rather provides additional opportunities for mediatization, ensuring a more stable position of the mediatized event in the information agenda.

As for the fourth category of negative assessments, it has a special nature. Both value and political. And therefore deserves special attention. The conscious actualization of the value conflict inevitably provokes negative reactions in an acute form. This closes the mediatized event from the audience: both literally (for example, the refusal of broadcasters to buy broadcast rights) and figuratively (activation of internal resistance in the audience that adheres to other value systems). And as our analysis has shown, it is this component that has taken an important position in the assessments of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in the Russian media discourse. And this is understandable, since the values that are not simply broadcast, but aggressively imposed at this ceremony, directly contradict not only the traditional values of the multinational and multi-confessional Russian people, but also the classical international values of the Olympic movement.

Conclusions. Ultimately, with the aesthetics and meanings broadcast during the opening ceremony, France and Paris promoted themselves not as the capital of Olympic ideals, where athletes achieve victory in a fair sporting competition, but as a herald and propagandist of the global neoliberal Euro-Atlantic agenda. And thus,

they did a disservice not only to themselves, but also to the entire Olympic movement. The audience of many countries, including Russia, considered this message, and they did not like it.

Mixing the values of sport and Olympism with a certain ideology carries serious risks of forming value splits and exacerbating value contradictions. Moreover, the neoliberal agenda itself does not at all correspond to the criteria of universality and generality, and is actively criticized, including in the West. In general, such practices harm the authority of international sports institutions and discredit high-performance sports.

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