Sacred Flame: 100 Years Later Still Bringing Communities Together

Xu Xiao, University of Illinois
Carla Costa (Advisor), University of Illinois

Socio-cultural Abstract 2011-157

Many host countries’ priorities and concerns regarding hosting a mega event such as the Olympic Games or FIFA’s World Cup relate directly to social legacy. Understandably, given the level of investment, the host country wants the mega event to have a positive enduring impact on the nation’s social development. Yet in many instances, challenges commonly associated with these mega events and reported by the media include a low level of support and engagement with the event from local communities. This low level of support and in some instances resistance to the event and associated activities logically makes sense given human beings tendency to resist change. However, as pointed out by several researchers (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Cornelissen & Swart, 2006; Misener & Mason, 2006; Ziakas & Costa, 2010) community involvement is necessary for host communities to fulfill their social objectives. The general question then becomes: how can local involvement in these events and associated activities begin early on, facilitated and sustained?

This study looks at one specific event: the Olympic Torch Relay. The Olympic Torch Relay precedes each Olympic Games and the process for selecting the torchbearers can start as early as 18 months before the Games. Selection of the torchbearers as well as the torch relay itself creates an enormous opportunity for community involvement and engagement if properly leveraged. We have used the 2008 Beijing Olympic Torch Relay to illustrate, learn from, and explore potential leveraging possibilities for social capital benefits.

The Olympic torch relay conveys a message of peace, goodwill and friendship (Durantez, 1985) and is a symbol of Olympism (Liponski, 2008). After the Olympic Games resumed in 1948, in one format or another, the torch relay has been a part of every summer and winter Olympic Games (The Olympic Museum, 2007). Starting in the 1990’s sponsors of the Olympic torch relay began nominating torchbearers in an attempt to fulfill different objectives. For example, for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, AMP selected some of its own employees to carry the torch in an attempt to enhance morale within the organization (Brown, 2002) while the Australian Tourist Commission invited a group of journalists to become torchbearers in order to facilitate broader news coverage (Brown, 2007). For the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Torch Relay, Coca-Cola selected 2,500 “local citizens” who “had demonstrated courage, dedication, passion or a deep concern for others” (Tomlinson, 2005). During the 2008 Beijing Olympic torchbearer selection process, the three sponsors of the torch relay, Coca-cola, Lenovo and Samsung, conducted public selections which aimed to nominate local ordinary people. Coca-cola and Samsung both organized online selections while Lenovo implemented a mass-based national selection process named “You are the Torchbearer” in cooperation with the sports channel of China Central Television (CCTV). The process started 17 months before the Games. According to the official report provided by Lenovo, the campaign drew over one million registrants online and the selection TV show enjoyed a high rate of viewership. The selection process culminated with 70 individuals from local communities nominated as 2008 Beijing Olympic torchbearers (Lenovo, 2008).

Our intention with this study was two-fold. First, we wanted to learn what the experience of being an Olympic torchbearer really means to ordinary individuals and the impact it had on their lives, those directly around them and their communities. By doing so, we can better understand and locate the social centrality of the torch-bearing experience. Second, from a strategic perspective we wanted to explore how the Torch Relay ‘process’ can be leveraged to involve and engage nationals both individually and collectively in the celebration and therefore be an intentional agent of social development. Because the Torch Relay happens on a cyclical basis there are many opportunities for learning and improving.

We started with a convenience sample of 40 available personal connections from the first author, who herself was a torchbearer nominated through the TV show process; we then utilized a stratified sampling method (Bernard, 2000) to maintain a gender ratio that reflected the torchbearers’ population. In line with the study’s intentions all study participants had been selected to be torchbearers through public processes and none of them had enjoyed regional or national media coverage prior to the process (i.e., ordinary people). Semi-structured interviews (n=15) lasting between 60 and 90 minutes were conducted with each subject in their first language. These were recorded and later translated verbatim to English. All data was manually coded for themes, patterns, commonalities, and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

From the data we have learned that having an opportunity to participate in the process and become an Olympic torchbearer made a tremendous difference for ordinary people both individually and at the collective level. Participants revealed that through the very publicly held and lengthy process they became ‘local heroes’ and that newly earned position propelled them to willingly (and with much honor) become ambassadors of the Olympic spirit—which is something that all of them never imagined.
possible. In addition most referred to this ‘newly felt increased individual capacity’ to make a difference in their communities and regions, as if they were experiencing themselves as change agents for the first time.

Findings imply that the type of process (i.e., focus on selecting ordinary people, process publicly and visibly held and the fact that it started more than 1 year before the Games) chosen by the Torch Relay sponsors may in fact have contributed significantly not only to increase their brand awareness, spread the Olympic Spirit but also to increase social benefits. Additionally, this study has furthered our understanding of the Torch Relay as a potential win-win-win tool (for sponsors, the IOC and the Olympic Spirit, and the host community) as well as our understanding regarding what it means to become an Olympic torchbearer. The results of this preliminary study present an opportunity for further inquiry into how events like the Torch Relay can be leveraged in ways that create business and marketing opportunities for sponsors and the IOC as well as social development opportunities for host countries and local communities.