Agenda Setting in the Age of Instagram: A Multinational Examination of the 2018 Olympic Broadcast Partners

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The evolving broadcast media environment has been significantly impacted by the onset of social media technologies (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). Traditional broadcasts have necessarily adapted to this changing media landscape by attempting to integrate social media platforms into both their program promotion and consumption strategies. The spotlight of the Olympic Games brings this new media relationship into particular focus. In addition to the Olympics being one of the most viewed sporting events in the world, television networks enter into multi-billion dollar broadcast agreements with the International Olympic Committee for the exclusive rights to provide Olympic coverage (Sandomir, 2014). While there is a significant body of research that has examined the framing of Olympic broadcasts in traditional media outlets (e.g., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Walsdorf, 2004), the purpose of this study is to explore agenda setting through the context of social media. Specifically, this research will examine the Instagram feeds of the official Olympic broadcast partners in Britain, Canada, and the United States.

Agenda setting theory was first conceptualized by McCombs and Shaw in research that investigated the 1968 presidential campaign (1972). Through their analysis, McCombs and Shaw discovered a high correlation between the issues covered in the media, and the perceived salience of political issues among constituents. The authors concluded that the media may not be overtly telling audiences what to think, but they certainly held great power in telling viewers what to think about. Past analyses of traditional sport media have similarly used agenda setting to shed light on how Olympic coverage is framed and presented to the world. Researchers have found that male athletes tend to receive greater coverage than their female counterparts (e.g., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings et al., 2008; Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003; Greer, Hardin, & Homan, 2009; Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008, Tuggle et al., 2002; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). It has been contended that this increased attention has the power to impact public perception by reinforcing the impression that men’s sports are more important than women’s sports. Agenda setting has alternatively been used to examine the context of nationalism within Olympic broadcasts. Through this lens, studies have consistently found that broadcasters tend to align their coverage with the achievements of athletes from their own country, potentially causing audiences to have a skewed view of their country’s Olympic successes (Angelini, Billings, & MacArthur, 2012; Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012; Billings, 2008; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings, Angelini, & Wu, 2011).

Social media provide a new context with which to examine media effects. Frederick, Burch and Blaszka (2012) first investigated the presence of agenda setting via Twitter and conversations around the 2012 Olympic Games. The official @London2012 account was cast as the official news source and measured against the #London2012 official hashtag. Based upon their analysis, the authors concluded that agenda setting had not occurred. In the following 2016 Olympiad, the use of social networks to follow the Games experienced exponential growth, including a reported production of 187 million tweets on Twitter, 116 million posts/comments on Facebook, and 916 million interactions on Instagram (Hutchinson, 2016).

Building upon past research and the momentum of social media consumption, this study plans to examine the official Olympic Instagram accounts of three broadcast networks during the upcoming 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea. The Instagram accounts of The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) will all be preserved using a screen capture function. Content analytic methods will then be used to categorize all Instagram posts by each respective network. Emergent coding will be used to allow for the inductive creation of themes that are representative of the data. Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and cross tabulations will then be conducted to...
interpret and report the results. The findings are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how Olympic broadcast partners are presenting the Games to their Instagram audience and generate meaningful insight into the negotiation of media influence in the digital era.