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Public Relations in Sporting and Leisure Events as Promoters of Social Change: A View from Portugal

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Els esdeveniments esportius de més interès tenen un gran potencial transformador i han evolucionat des de ser manifestacions culturals i esportives fins a convertir-se en oportunitats reals per canviar el panorama social. L'estreta relació entre esports, turisme i salut fa que aquest camp estigui ben situat per contemplar el paper que juguen les relacions públiques com a promotors del canvi social. En aquest article argumento que el camp de les relacions públiques ha de promoure una aproximació als esdeveniments que vagi més enllà de la mera "posada en escena de l'esdeveniment" i que consideri estratègies i tàctiques que pretenguin fer servir l'esdeveniment com a trampolí per canviar el context social i les relacions amb els principals accionistes. Això implica considerar els indicadors principals de rendiment més enllà de la publicitat o visibilitat de l'esdeveniment i incloure altres tipus de mètriques d'avaluació. Finalment, l'article presenta una perspectiva regional d'un país especialitzat a organitzar grans esdeveniments que s'han utilitzat per promoure canvis socials fonamentals.

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Nowadays it is scarcely possible to think about sporting events without invoking images of reporters, TV cameras, satellite broadcasts and lots of advertising. In fact, for advertisers, sports events have become a major business; and the recent strategies of companies like the betting company Bwin.com show how much business is still to be generated in and around sports activities and events. The last FIFA World Cup in Germany 2006 and the 2008 Olympics in China are examples of how profitable the business of sport is, with several million Euros involved just in the negotiation of broadcasting rights for the event. And this is only one dimension in the shift from the traditional spirit of sports to a more contemporary showbiz approach to sport which is also related to the fact that players have become major brands, sometimes more popular than the sport itself. All of this has brought many new challenges for the profession of Public Relations, and has even promoted the development of new areas of specialization, like the so-called “Celebrity PR”.

However, among the several areas of PR that are involved in the broad area of sports and event management, one is often less noted. This is the area of PR related to the fact that sporting events generate social change and produce diverse impacts in the social environments in which they take place. And even if this could be thought of as a simple “Community Relations” issue, I believe it can be something more. In this article, although adopting only a general view to this subject, I’ll try to review the origins of sporting events and their relationship with public spaces, particularly in the form of cities. I will also try to address the question of how can Public Relations can improve their participation in event management by focusing on other performance indicators rather than just the dimension of publicity or the mass communication.

THE ORIGINS OF SPORTING EVENTS: THE OLYMPIC GAMES

It is consensual that the most important and historically relevant sporting events are the Olympic Games which appeared in their modern form in the year 776 B.C. In ancient Greece, several sports competitions were organised in different city-states. The most important competition was organised at Olympia and became known as the “Olympic Games”.¹ This competition, named after

¹ For more about the origins of the Olympic Games, visit the International Olympic Committee web site at <<http://www.olympic.org>>.

its location, was held in the same place every four years, and the period between each event was called an Olympiad.

The ancient Games were initially a one-day event until 684 B.C., when they were extended to three days and later, in the 5th century B.C., the programs already covered five days of activities. These extensions also show how the Games, initially dedicated to the Olympian gods, became a wider competition intended to bring the Greek World together and included also cultural manifestations and social interchange. Some Games, such as, for example, those at Delphi, included mixed cultural and sporting events. Music competitions, singing competitions, poetry and drama competitions were included as part of the program.

It is also interesting to note that the Games were associated with a sacred truce, which meant that all conflicts taking place between Greek cities were to be stopped when the notice arrived that the Games were taking place.

The Games and the Greek City

In the Greek city, public spaces were used to discuss important issues for collective life. In spite of this openness, there was a rigid distinction between public space (Pólis) and the private sphere (Oikos) and only the Oikodéspotas, citizens who possessed a private sphere, could take place in the collective life. Nevertheless, decisions affecting collective life were discussed in the Pólis or in the city's public spaces.

The importance of the games for a city was clearly visible in this civilization since important commercial activities also took place in the city, which could receive thousands of visitors. But this relationship with the city was even more profound. To be able to receive the Games, the Greek city had to be shaped to create the several functional areas needed for the event. The main areas for the event included The Gymnasium, The Stadium, The Palaestra, The Hippodrome and several Temples dedicated to the Olympian Gods in a mix of sacred and secular (non-religious) areas.

The sacred areas included temples, altars and small buildings that held precious treasures and offerings. Regarding the secular areas, the Gymnasium was where the athletes practiced before entering the Games and where they prepared themselves for competitions. The equestrian sports were held in the Hippodrome, and all other competitions took place in the Stadium which was made of hard-packed sand with a rectangular shape. The spectators sat on the banks, except for the officials (organisers and judges, the

Hellandikes) who were provided with a stand. The Palaestra was used as an exercise place for wrestling, boxing and the jumps.

The Roman Empire brings the Games another philosophy

When Greece was conquered by Rome in 146 B.C., sporting events changed their philosophy. Romans understood sport much more as a show and they sought, above all, to satisfy spectators. The idea of competition as measuring oneself against others in a climate of excellence was threatened. For the Roman civilization, most competitions between athletes were replaced with amphitheatre ceremonies in which gladiators and animal fighters were involved.

During the Roman period, the city was also reshaped and the Amphitheatre and the Circus were the high places of popular and sports festivals. The amphitheatre, among which the Flavian Amphitheatre, or the Colosseum, in Rome, is the most well-known, allowed true theatrical ceremonies with a crowd of some 70,000 spectators enjoying wild beast hunts and gladiators' combats, sometimes even deciding whether to kill the gladiators or let them live. For its opening in 80 A.D., the Colosseum hosted a hundred day program where some five thousand wild animals were put to death. The Circus was the place for chariot racetracks in Roman times. The impressive numbers of Rome's Circus Maximus point out the importance of massive entertainment for the Romans. Some 300,000 people are believed to have been accommodated in this ancient Roman building of 600m in length by 200m in width.

CONTEMPORARY SPORTS EVENTS

One could argue that the Roman view of sports events as shows to satisfy spectators is more a reality now than ever before. Just think that media coverage is often considered to be one of the most important indicators of an event's success. If we take into consideration just a few statistics about recent events and compare the number of journalists present, we might have a clearer idea of this importance. For example, some 1600 journalists were covering the FIFA World Cup in German, while some weeks earlier the UEFA Under 21 European Championship in Portugal had attracted around 580 journalists, and the MTV Europe Music Awards in Lisbon had already brought in 700 journalists from all over the world. But in our times, sports events definitely need to be considered and evaluated by their implications on different levels.

To say that these kinds of events are promoters of social

change means that they have an impact on different social domains such as those of Sport, Health and Tourism. I agree with L'Etang (2005) when she argues that Public Relations needs to pay much more attention to the domains of Sport, Health and Tourism as they are closely intertwined. And I would like to add that in the context of the City, this is perhaps even more visible.

Interconnections between Sport, Tourism and Health

Although Sport is increasingly a very profitable commercial activity, it has other dimensions. As L'Etang (2005) points out, government regulation and funding of sporting activities, development of infra-structures to increase the practice of sport in schools or in other public spaces, the development of amateur sports practices side by side with professional sports practices are relevant topics to understand the importance of sport in modern societies.

But, for current life styles, sport is more and more seen as part of healthy living and connects with public health policies. It is thus related to the public health system, with the development of products by the pharmaceutical industry and with various types of disease awareness campaigns carried out by this industry.

And sport is also related to tourism insofar as it helps to generate direct foreign investment in the creation of tourism infrastructures and in attracting tourists that generate revenue. From a more strategic point of view, sports events can also help to promote the national or local identity. For example, the UEFA Euro 2004 Football Championship in Portugal or the FIFA World Cup in Germany 2006 were the *leit motiv* for many campaigns designed to present the countries as fun and attractive and to call attention to other cultural aspects that go beyond the game itself. Likewise, the recent Olympics in China represented a privileged opportunity to diffuse the culture and to project a desired new identity for this country.

Events are still promoters of change at various levels

A common denominator among the different stages of the evolution of sporting events is the fact that they concentrate the attention of social actors on one region / country / city. This massive social attention helps to explain why these events are potentially promoters of social change because interested parties are willing to carry out different types of investments and changes. However, and for the sake of this discussion, we should say that most event

management activities are oriented towards “staging the event” and that PR should innovate by promoting the need to manage social change produced from the event. The management of stakeholder relations in the context of these sporting events justifies a need for this type of approach.

But what kind of indicators should PR professionals keep in mind when trying to broaden the scope of analysis that we’re proposing? Or, in other words, how can it be shown that the staging-the-event attitude is different from a changing-from-the-event attitude? When “staging-the-event” is the only or the major preoccupation, professionals tend to emphasize the superficial or visible aspects of the event. This happens when, for example, media coverage becomes a success measure of the event. But as traditional PR literature shows, we should distinguish implementation criteria (for example, number of messages disseminated, amount of media coverage generated, number of people who saw those messages, number of journalists present at the event, etc.) from impact criteria (number of people who retain a certain message and change as a consequence) (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1994).

If we do want to go further, we should start by realizing that the “staging of the event” is not an end in itself but that it bares the possibility of creating changing possibilities from the event. These preoccupations are related to the evaluation activity of Public Relations:

Traditionally, evaluation research has been understood as ‘... the systematic application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation and utility of social intervention programs’ (Rossi and Freeman, quoted by Cutlip [et al.], 1994: 410). This approach configures the three main areas of evaluation: (a) program conceptualization and design; (b) program implementation; and (c) program impact and efficiency (Eiró-Gomes and Duarte, 2008).

So, and according to traditional assumptions in PR Theory, public relations are believed to obtain impact and efficiency from individual changes which lead to social change. However, social change is more than just a sum of individual changes of knowledge, attitudes or behaviours. It implies that changes are significant and oriented towards a common goal and that they are consistent and maintained over time. And public relations are pivotal in promoting the collective understanding of the changes produced by focusing on key areas which are to give us the dimensions of the changes produced. In what concerns the dimensions of social change produced

by sporting events, some possible key areas might be related to:

- increase of public investment (by the local and national administration) in infrastructures, including urban regeneration;
- generation of private investment that creates jobs and income (tourism boards, associations, private national and international tourism groups, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs);
- consolidation of the economic tissue by increasing private consumption during the period of the event period (tourists, event's participants, event workers);
- reinforcement of the identity of the region and its culture, increasing the sense of belonging to an important community;
- promotion of healthy lifestyles and non-competitive sports practices.

For example, in the PR campaign supporting the London Bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, specific benefits communicated included dimensions of social change. Specific communication topics mentioned that the Game would provide a lasting legacy and long-term effects, that they would improve transport and infrastructures, that a regeneration of East London would be possible thanks to the investment to be made and that the City would be provided with more sports facilities. These topics were used to explain the success of the campaign in achieving the support of the event by the city, which in turn was essential to win the bid for the event.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SPORTS EVENTS: PUBLICS AND CONTEXTS

Public Relations professionals might be involved in a wide range of activities in the area of events management. Just to mention a few of them, let me refer to research related to the community's needs and expectations regarding the event, to the design of campaigns oriented to develop grassroots support, to grass top lobby campaigns to obtain public administration support, to the monitoring of public affairs related to the event, to the development and management of the event's brand, to the communication with the event's team or to media relations.

But this wide range of activities should be seen in the light of the different stages in hosting a major sporting event. Because if we want to understand public relations as promoters of the "changing from the event" attitude instead of resuming their preoccupations to merely "staging the event", we should make an effort to explain how PR can act in each of the stages involved in hosting an event.

Stages in hosting a major Sporting Event

Contrary to what some might think, staging an event involves a wide range of complex activities which require specialized knowledge. It usually begins with the initial idea from a certain number of influential people who have the power to make it happen, but this idea requires a lot of work. Most of the time, it means bidding for the event by means of some kind of official application presenting the willingness to host the event and the specific existing conditions that make it possible. If the bid is successful, it's time to organise the event, probably the most complex stage in which a great deal of work is needed to take care of all the practical arrangements. Only after all of these steps do we have the running of the event, which in most cases is the most visible part of event management, but as we've already explained, it is by no means the only one.

The initial idea

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The initial idea often comes from a group of opinion leaders or influential people who promote the idea. This idea may take shape and become a serious proposition or be abandoned. Normally, an ad-hoc committee is organised to take care of all activities involved in this stage. The key PR activities might involve the development of different kinds of public opinion studies, uncovering perceptions related to the event. The basic idea is to research the possible implications of the event and to map the most important publics. It may also be necessary to develop presentations, speeches and other communication materials, and it may be requested that PR professionals draft a possible campaign to support the event as well as organising other media relations activities (media training, etc.). Amongst the most important publics in this stage are, of course, the Promoters of the idea. For example, the idea to host Lisbon's Universal Exposition in 1998 emerged from intellectuals and entrepreneurs in Portugal. António Mega Ferreira and Vasco Graça Moura, two eminent personalities, were working for the Comissão dos Descobrimentos (Commission for the Celebration of Portuguese Discoveries) when they had the idea of organising an event to celebrate the sea and the oceans. Other important publics are the Influentials, thus defined because they help give credibility to the idea. They can be presented in the form of "ambassadors-at-large" for the event as it happened with Carlos Cruz, a well-known TV presenter, who acted as an influential in

the primary steps of the idea that Portugal would apply for the UEFA Euro 2004. Of course, nothing can happen when you don't have adequate support from tourism boards, local and national government, other investors and potential sponsors, who might be seen as another kind of important public: the Supporters.

Bidding for the Event

It may happen that prior to this stage no formal organisation has been defined. However, when it is decided to bid for the event, this becomes a need. It can be a simple committee of people from the organisation (as happened with the UEFA EURO 2004 bid from the Portuguese Football Federation) or it can take the form of a firm or company. And if it's true that applying for the event is a key stage whose success conditions the happening of the event, it is also true that in this stage nothing is taken for granted and often there is not a significant budget to work with. That's also the reason why PR needs to have a lot of creativity to involve people in supporting and registering their support. PR activities, in most cases, involve developing a "face for the event", that is, creating a visual identity and declining it into institutional advertising campaigns or special events to announce the bid. In any case, it will probably be requested to develop a public campaign to support the bid, which means building dialogue activities to engage communities. In fact, involvement of "Public Opinion" is often seen as a sign that the event will have the interest that the commercial sponsors need to invest their money. On the other hand, it is often seen as a sign that the organisation is capable of building motivation and managing good relations with key publics. In this stage it is fundamental to get registered support, not relying only on polls and other kinds of inquiries. For example, it might be interesting to create a web site with background information about the event or a weblog to identify emerging issues related to the event and where people can state that they back the bid. Amongst the key publics we can find Decision Makers or those that will evaluate the bid against competing propositions, for example, FIFA in the case of the World Cup or the International Olympic Committee in the case of the Olympic Games. Then we have a certain number of publics who can act as Routers and Multipliers of Enthusiasm. They can be small sports clubs, non-profit organisations, municipalities, corporations, activists, or other citizen's groups who help to engage other citizens. This is where community relations become a pivotal activity by helping to promote what some Health Communication specialists call

“peers communication” which they are increasingly using in their campaigns. The idea is that people might be better involved by communication from peers who have credibility and willingness to act as multipliers of messages. And we also have another key public which are the possible Bid Sponsors. These are the most immediate beneficiaries of hosting an event and they are normally involved as potential sponsors of the Bid. For example, the London 2012 Olympic Bid was sponsored by the Mayor of London and the London Metro.

Organising the Event

If the bid is successful, then the event starts to be prepared. This is a long-term stage in which the event is being prepared in terms of venues, infrastructures, official sponsors’ contracts, media agreements, etc. Many public investments take place at this stage, and this is also the moment to expect the voice of the critics to be heard. Key PR activities include developing the official communication materials, starting with the event logo, the web site and other background information to be used by the media. Continuous evaluation is present at every stage, but now it really starts to be important in order to map the emerging issues and anticipate possible problems. This stage may start with a major celebration or other small events. This is the case of the so-called countdown events which are always very important to engage people and give them milestone references until the beginning of the event. It may also be necessary to run public consultation campaigns in order to give citizens a voice in deciding how they want to implement decisions. This is an effective way to prove the real democratic value of a symmetric communication as well as an effective defence for dealing with critics and / or prevent criticism. Key publics include grassroots supporters including volunteers from several associations, citizens, possible attendants, and others; issue influencers, or those that can influence media perceptions and shape how issues enter the media agenda and develop; and beneficiaries, those who will benefit from the event.

Running the Event

The event should be run by professionals with problem-solving capabilities, resilience and a lot of data-processing resources to produce important knowledge for event managers. If the organisation behind the event is to be capable of working as an open sys-

tem, then PR is essential. The key activities include making a good first impression. As psychologists believe, one doesn't have a second chance to produce a good first impression. That's what happens with opening ceremonies in major sporting events, which are often seen as sub-events inside the big event. Additionally, PR should help develop the organisation to run an effective information-sharing structure, promoting regular media conferences, press releases, fact sheets, tips for stories, event web site, etc., which allow regular flows of information that help people to follow the event. Several protocol activities will also be essential in this stage as many formal meetings and actions will take place. Key Publics include, of course, the participants, those involved in making the event happen, including all background staff and the competitors. But there are also the attendants who represent the success of the event and give colour to the event by attending the competitions. One other major public in this stage is represented by Media / Broadcasters who disseminate the message and create additional publics of the event. In this field, many developments have been witnessed in the last years, but one must be specially mentioned. The Peer to Peer broadcast (P2P) is a multiplier phenomenon with spectacular possibilities. It consists of delivering live video and audio streaming to Internet forums where people can log on and watch whatever contents are being delivered. A lot of those P2P networks became quite well known during the FIFA 2006 World Cup in Germany as in many European countries the games were being broadcasted on pay-per-view channels and were available in free live streaming through the Internet.

CHALLENGES IN EVENTS MANAGEMENT

As we've just seen, events are complex realities that require a long-term vision as they develop through many stages with different PR activities involved and different Publics to communicate with. In this view, events should be seen as more than just media products. However, although events started as a mix of cultural and sports activities, they have become more "show biz" for spectators than social gatherings for the communities involved.

If Public Relations officers are to help reverse this situation, they should reinforce the idea that sporting events are producers of social change and connect the domains of health and tourism with sport itself. By promoting a "changing from the event" attitude and not only limiting themselves to "staging the event",

Public Relations can help the City to continue to be a space for citizens, and sporting events might help the City regain centrality in the collective life.

As we've also said, PR conditions the event's success even before it happens. Making a strong case for the bid, engaging citizens and creating a common goodwill about the event are of pivotal importance. In this regard, one of the main tasks of PR is to legitimize public investments made and show its benefits for the city and the community.

In conclusion, we might stress that PR in sporting events needs much more communitarian strategies than mass media efforts, and "Peer to Peer" is more and more important.

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