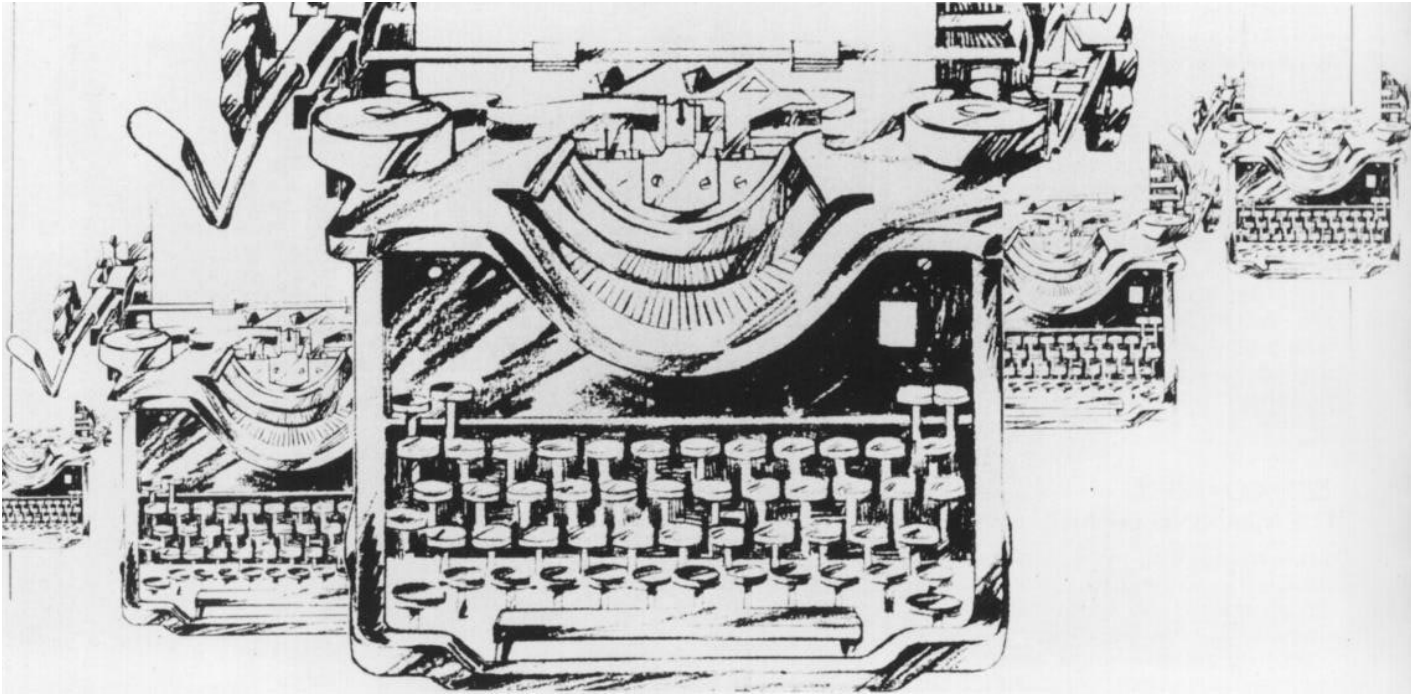


PROGRESS OF THE PRESS OR TECHNICAL PROGRESS ?



By Frank Taylor

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Those of us who can remember when sports writers arrived at an Olympic Games armed with a pencil, a notebook and perhaps a portable typewriter, found the Press set-up in Seoul an electronic expert's paradise. Such is the March of Progress.

When I asked colleagues what they thought of the Main Press Centre, the reply was almost unanimous : "very efficient".

I am not surprised. I noted the battery of 20 TV monitors, and I lost count of the number of computers giving biographies of the competitors and the latest news. A far cry this from the days when each reporter carried his own typewritten file of Olympic competitors and their records.

I think the list of typewriters supplied by the sponsor Brother, for the use of the media in Seoul, tells its own story.

They issued 3,400 typewriters of which 2,545 were manually operated, and the other 855 were electronic.

Interesting to note, that in days gone by, the typewriters were either in the English, French, German, Spanish, Russian or Italian languages.

In Seoul, the following 22 languages were available on typewriters : English, Korean, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Danish, Greek, Finnish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Norwegian, Persian, Portugese, Swedish, Turkish, Thai, Yugoslavian, Arabic, Russian, Italian and Japanese.

I think these statistics tell the story of the kind of back-up modern sports journalists expect to be available for their work at the Olympic Games. I am sorry, I do not have the figures for word processors and direct input facilities. The fact is, the number of media personnel covering the Games has shot up from a few hundred specialist sports writers to 12,000 (including about 5,000 technicians from TV & radio) in Seoul.

WORDS V. PICTURES

The original sports reporters were well-known, and respected, well-versed in their sport, who like Victor Boin, and Frantz Reichel, who founded the AIPS in Paris, felt they had a mission to spread the Spirit of Olympism around the world. We face a far different situation today. The sweet simplicity of the past has been swept away. The modern sports journalist has to face an undeniable fact that many of the big stories at the Games occur outside the running track... the boxing ring and the swimming pool. The reporting of the Games changed dramatically, when TV first focused on the Olympic competitors.

At the colourful Opening Ceremony, how can the descriptive writer (no matter how brilliant he may be) compete with the TV camera ? TV has brought the Olympic Games to a far wider world audience. But the public still likes to read what it sees on TV. It is the writing Press, which maintains interest in the Olympic Movement by the millions of words written; the interviews with President Samaranch and leading IOC members ; in the four year period between the Games. It is this dialogue with the public, through the medium of the writing Press, which keeps the interest alive in all Olympic matters. During, and after the Games, the writing Press can, and does, complete the picture to give a full and comprehensive survey of what happened at the Games. In short, TV... radio... and the writing Press need each other, and the Olympic Movement surely gains by this world-wide publicity.

A NEW APPROACH TO REPORTING

The boycotts... drug scandals... and threatened terrorist activity have forced dramatic changes in the reporting of the Games. Quite clearly the necessity of Security against Terrorism affects all members of the Olympic Family. But it is this, plus drug scandals and boycotts, which have brought into being a new type of Olympic reporter... The Cynical... Hard Bitten News Reporter, whose brief is simply to find and to write or broadcast news stories. He holds no affection for the Spirit of Olympism. He treats an Olympic Story as he would a murder... or a kidnap... or an air crash.

The arrival of the hard-bitten news man on the Olympic scene, would, I am sure have caused old-time Olympic specialists great heart ache. But, with such a world-wide audience, it is clear an Olympic star has only to cough twice and we have an Olympic scare story.

To listen to, or to read some of the stories about Olympic stars, one would think they had one foot in the grave instead of being very fit and active young people.

More and more efficient working conditions.



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO OBJECTIVE REPORTING ?

I think we have reached the stage where we have to ask whether or not this kind of reporting has become an absurdity. At AIPS seminars and workshops, we always emphasize the aims of the founders of our organization, that sport, by definition, requires fair, honest and objective reporting.



Live copy.

It is in my view, a philosophy as relevant today, as it was when Baron de Coubertin revived the Games in 1896.

We should rejoice that the media has played such a major role in popularising the Olympic Movement, which in Seoul reached its triumphant pinnacle with 160 nations taking part.

Yet, the very success and interest in the Games, should not blind us to the fact there is sometimes a tendency to hysteria in the coverage of the Games.

In Los Angeles for instance, I am not alone in thinking that there were many occasions, when the United States host broadcaster kept their cameras on US competitors, to the anger and frustration of viewers in many countries, when the leaders in a particularly thrilling race were not being shown.

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE STORY

The question of what to feature, during the Olympic Games, is a matter for personal judgment whether in newspapers or the electronic media. For example, the Ben Johnson drugs story was a very serious matter, which had to be dealt with properly. But was there hysterical overkill ? I noted in one important British weekly newspaper, that they had allocated 290 column inches on the Ben Johnson case, a week after it had occurred ! Yet they gave only 170 column inches for coverage of the sports events in the Games. The Johnson story included big contributions from the science man ; the chief news diary columnist and the chief political writer as well as the entire leader column in that newspaper. Was this overkill ? Were the public really interested in the opinions of the diarist; the political columnist and the leader writer who were not even in Seoul but expressing views 7,000 miles away ?

Those deeply involved in sport — like Sebastian Coe for instance — have gone on record pointing out that the firm treatment of Johnson, reflected only credit on the IOC and the medical teams. It was positive proof that the IOC had declared war on drug taking in sport.

Surely that kind of informed opinion, is the type of objective comment I was referring to.

in other words, all the technical efficiency of word-processors does not change the basic requirements in the reporting of any sport, and that is : a basic training in journalism, plus a good specialist knowledge of sport, and a dedication to use experience and expertise in providing the public with accurate news and information... and it should be unbiased information and opinion ! We welcome all these new and progressive means of speedier dissemination of news from the Olympic venues. But let us also remember, word processors are only a tool. So is the hand-held mobile TV camera. It is how those tools are used which matters. After all, great writers like Goethe, Shakespeare and Victor Hugo needed only quill pens to get their messages across.

F.T.