

Lights! Camera! Little Action: Television, Avery Brundage and the 1956 Melbourne Olympics

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A great deal could be written of the negotiations between the Organizing Committee in Melbourne [1956] and the proprietors of television networks and cinema news-reel companies. To write such a history would probably not be profitable, because at the end of the writing one would have to come to the conclusion that the whole operation was handled extraordinarily badly by both sides of the argument.

Lewis Luxton
Deputy Chairman,
Melbourne Organizing Committee
13 May, 1957

In recent years, staggering sums of money have been channelled to Olympic Organizing Committees and the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) through the sale of U.S. network television rights. The 1988 Seoul and Calgary Olympic Games attracted successful bids from the U.S. corporations which totalled \$609 million. For the upcoming 1992 Olympic festivals, the total has escalated to \$644 million. It is widely accepted that the revenue and world-wide exposure provided by television since the initial marketing of television rights in 1960 have had a significant impact upon the quadrennial Olympic tradition.

This paper shows that the debate between television executives and the Melbourne Organizing Committee (M.O.C.) pertaining to transmission rights for the 1956 Olympics contributed to the development of this reality. It acted as a springboard for the formulation of Rule 49 (Publicity), the I.O.C.'s initial legislation governing the marketing of television rights. The statement of M.O.C. Deputy Chairman Lewis Luxton accurately reflected the futility involved in the negotiations for television rights to the 1956 Summer Olympic Games. The breakdown and subsequent failure of the dialogue between the M.O.C. and the networks was significant. The refusal of international television networks and cinema newsreel companies to pay royalties for the privilege of showing Olympic newsfilm on a delayed basis resulted in a wide ranging boycott of the Melbourne Games by these organizations. Consequently, newsreel coverage of the Melbourne festival is limited. Although I.O.C. President Avery Brundage was aware of the stalemate between the Australian organizers and the networks, he elected to remain aloof. The threat of commercialism because of the sale of television rights and necessary involvement of advertisers troubled him.

In the years prior to the 1960 Olympic festivals of Squaw Valley and Rome, Brundage and his I.O.C. cohorts consulted with numerous television executives. He had concluded that the I.O.C. could no longer pass up the opportunity to recoup a portion of its expenditures from the marketing of television rights. In 1958, these deliberations resulted in the establishment of Rule 49.

Importantly, the enormous sums of money offered by U.S. networks for Olympic television rights in the 1980s and 1990s were not made possible until the upsurge in the popularity of sports television in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the I.O.C.'s gravitation toward the marketing of television rights

following the Melbourne fiasco was an important development. The U.S. television rights to the Games of Squaw Valley and Rome were sold for a total of \$444,000. Brundage was not satisfied with the amount of money offered as he considered the Olympics to be the pre-eminent sport spectacle in the world. And yet, one wonders whether Avery Brundage, the long-time soldier of anti-commercial Olympism, would have been any more satisfied with \$644 million?