

THE U.S.A AND U.S.S.R BOYCOTTS OF THE OLYMPICS:
COVERAGE IN THE U.S. MEDIA
Umithevi Nathan

Purpose of Study

This paper explores the New York Times (NYT) coverage of the issue on the Olympics boycott during two periods. It is a comparative analysis of how the newspaper covered the issue in January 1980, and again in May 1984.

The boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 by the United States of America (USA) and the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) was based on very different reasons. The United States related its reasons to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when on January 4, 1980 President Carter announced that the U.S. might not take part in the Moscow Olympic Games if the USSR continued its "aggressive action." However, from the outset TASS, Soviet's new agency, informed the world that the proposed boycott was in accord with those circles which already long ago opposed the holding of the 1980 Olympic Games in a socialist country (Hazan 1982:125).

Similarly, the USSR, in announcing its withdrawal from the Los Angeles Olympic Games, on May 8, 1984, charged that the U.S. was not providing adequate security and that anti-Soviet groups had made it unsafe for Soviet and allied athletes to compete at the 23rd

Olympiad. Time magazine, however, interpreted "security" as a Kremlin term that includes protection against embarrassment, and that Moscow's leaders were concerned that anti-Soviet demonstrations in Los Angeles and even possible defections of athletes would be shown on worldwide television (Time May 21 1984:14-17).

It is a pity that nations of the world have and are politicizing the Olympics, a noble and sacred game, that began in the dawn of history in 776 B.C. in Athens, Greece. More frustrating is the fact that the media cover the issue with political overtones, favouring one nation against another, instead of highlighting the anxiety of the athletes, the stress and disappointment of the Olympic Committees, or the purpose of the Olympic Games itself. The writer, thus, was keen in examining if the New York Times was overplaying the political context of the issue, and one of the ways the writer decided to determine media slant was through a comparative analysis of the NYT in May 1984 and January 1980. Did the NYT take a different stand in 1980? Or was its stand similar to the one taken in 1984?

This study is thus based on the following assumptions:

1. The NYT gave a favourable coverage to the USSR in its stories of the U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980.
2. The NYT gave a favourable coverage to the U.S. in its stories of the Soviet withdrawal from the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984.

Background

"There is no greater glory for a man as long as he lives than that which he wins by his own hands and feet," Homer said in the *Odyssey*, the great epic poem of Greece (Durant 1961: 11). Nothing was more important to the Greeks than the Olympic Games. The year 776 B.C. is considered to be the date of the first Olympiad, and from that year on the Olympic Games were held every four years for nearly 1200 years without a single interruption. However, in A.D. 394, the Christian emperor of Rome abolished the Games on the ground that they were a pagan festival. The modern world owes much to the ancient Greeks who set the standard for fair play (Durant 1961).

The Games, however, were only revived in 1896 when Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a Frenchman, campaigned to bring the Olympic Games back to life. The first modern Olympic Games was held at Athens, Greece in April 1896. The games then were held every four years. However, though the games were getting larger, the true spirit of the Olympics was fading away. Instead of inspiring youth and promoting international goodwill, they became a sideshow, and then grew highly political (Johnson 1972:20-22).

The modern Olympics is only 88 years old, but its growth is impressive. The Olympics is so beautiful, so big-hearted, so open to everything on the earth, yet over the years, there has scarcely ever been a time when politics did not intrude and threaten to destroy the Olympic vision.

Politics and the Olympics

The Olympics aims to transcend nationalism and bring the sportsmen of all countries together in friendship, but the medal system and team sports make for patriotic pride and intense international rivalry. Only the most naive Olympian can still believe that governments and politicians will forget their differences once every four years, and stand aside to allow peaceful and friendly competition (Miller 1979:81-82).

In the earliest days of the Olympics the Finns had refused to march behind the Russian Imperial flag and the Irish had objected to marching behind the Union Jack. Petty international squabbles marred the Games in Paris in 1900 and London in 1908. The International Olympics Committee was under pressure to remove the 1936 games from Berlin when Hitler took power, just as some groups have clamoured for the transfer of the 1980 games from Moscow following the trial of Russian dissidents, the suppression of human rights, and the invasion of Afghanistan. The Nazi leaders saw the Olympic Games only as a parade ground for Aryan supremacy (Miller 1979).

At Munich in 1972, the Palestinian Organization raided the Munich Olympic Games in order to publicize the plight of Palestinian people, and attempted to use the hostage taking incident to force the Israel government to release 200 Palestinians. Subsequently, at Montreal in 1976, the African countries used the Olympics as a lever to try to isolate South Africa

still further from the international scene, and when they failed, staged a boycott of the games at short notice. The Canadian government of Pierre Trudeau had refused to allow Taiwanese athletes to enter Canada and to compete under the name of the Republic of China.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 27, 1979 had set in motion a train of 57 countries boycotting the Moscow Olympics, and consequently the Soviets have revengefully decided to withdraw from the Los Angeles Olympics. Already there is some talk among Soviet officials that the pull-out from Los Angeles is merely a prelude to the Soviet Union's not participating in the 1988 Summer Games in Seoul, South Korea (NYT May 8 1984:A26).

The spoiling of two successive games by the superpowers and the previous boycott by black Africans, starkly reveals the tension always surrounding the games - between nationalistic purpose and individual achievement. It also casts new doubts on the wisdom of shifting the games from one country to another every four years. There is no better place than Greece for the Olympics, stated the editorial in the New York Times (NYT Jan. 8 1980:18; Jan. 17. 1980:22; May 9 1984:A26).

Method of Study

A comparative analysis of the contents in the NYT of January 1980 and May 1984 was made. These months were chosen (31 days in each) because it was on 4 January

1980 that President Jimmy Carter announced of the U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympics, and it was on 8 May 1984 that the Kremlin informed of its withdrawal from the Los Angeles Olympics. Following these announcements and official threats, the media carried extensive coverage of the issue continuously for a month or more. In fact, in 1980 there were stories in the NYT starting from 2 January through mid July. In the month of January alone there were approximately 80 stories on the boycott. But, in 1984 following the Kremlin announcement, the NYT carried the stories from 9 May through 31 May. However, there were only 36 stories - less than half of that in January 1980.

In comparing the contents of both periods and checking for bias, the writer read entire stories, except for editorials and letters. A story's probable slant was determined statement by statement, that is, if a story had 20 statements, the writer placed a + or a - at the end of each, and finally these signs were added up, that is, if there were 9 -s and 11 +s, then the entire story was categorized as favourable. In fact, to determine if the story was favourable or otherwise of the U.S. or U.S.S.R, the +s and the -s had little abbreviations beside them that indicated if the signs referred to the U.S. or the U.S.S.R. Upon counting the signs, the largest number for a country was the determinant of the entire story. For example a statement as follows was considered negative for the U.S.S.R:

Charging that the USSR had long ago erased the

line between politics and sports, Mr. Mondale said the Kreamlin had been building up the olympics for propaganda purposes, purging cities of dissidents prior to the games and offering athletes in the 3rd World "expenses paid trips to Moscow" as an inducement to spurn the boycott." (New York Times, April 13, 1980, P. 18).

Likewise a statement as follows was considered negative for the U.S.

"The Carter administration is exploring the possibility of seeking international support for a Free-World Olympics" as a substitute for the regular olympics games in Moscow next Summer", White House officials disclosed today. (New York Times, April 17, 1980, P.A14).

Since there were no equal numbers of +s and -s in any one story, the neutral category was eliminated. Hence, this is an indication that the stories in their entire context favoured one nation against another. Altogether, 80 stories were analyzed in the month of January 1980 and 36 stories in the month of May 1984.

Some statements, however, made references to both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R, and in such cases statements would have two signs, a + and a - or sometimes both -s but hardly both +s. For instance the statement below had elements of bias for both nations:

"I would say that what happened in 1980 simply wasn't a factor at all," said a coach who gave his name as Mischa. "We see a difference between a boycott and what our authorities are doing now,

because yours was a case of your government saying "The athletes can't go because we don't like your politics," and ours is a matter of concern for the athletes' safety. They're entirely different things." (New York Times, May 11, 1984, P. A26).

This statement was classified as positive for the USSR and negative for the US.

Table 1: Direction of the Stories in the NYT of May 1984 - the USSR Withdrawal from the Los Angeles Olympics.

Country	Favourable		Unfavourable		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
USA	11	31%	7	19%	18	50%
USSR	3	8%	15	42%	18	50%
Total	14	39%	22	61%	36	100%

Table 2: Direction of the Stories in the NYT of January 1980 - the USA Boycott of the Moscow Olympics

Country	Favourable		Unfavourable		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
USA	29	36%	12	15%	41	51%
USSR	8	10%	31	39%	39	49%
Total	37	46%	43	54%	80	100%

Table 3: Direction of the Coverage of the USA in the NYT - A Comparison Between 1980 and 1984

	1980		1984	
	f	%	f	%
Favourable	29	71%	11	61%
Unfavourable	12	29%	7	39%
Total	41	100%	18	100%

Table 4: Direction of the Coverage of the USSR in the NYT - A Comparison Between 1980 and 1984

	1980		1984	
	f	%	f	%
Favourable	8	21%	3	17%
Unfavourable	31	79%	15	83%
Total	39	100%	18	100%

Interpretation of Findings

The results of the study were interesting and astonishing. Tables 1 through 4 describe how the NYT covered the issue during two periods. Table 1 shows that in May 1984, when the USSR announced its non-participation in the Los Angeles Olympics, the NYT gave the U.S. a 31 percent favourable coverage, but

only 8 percent favourable coverage to the USSR. In fact, 42 percent of the stories were unfavourable of the USSR.

Likewise in January 1980 when the U.S. threatened to boycott the Moscow Olympics, the NYT gave the U.S. 36 percent favourable coverage, but only 10 percent favourable coverage to the USSR. Table 2 shows that out of a total of 80 stories in the month of January 1980, 39 percent of it was unfavourable of the USSR, while only 15 percent was unfavourable of the U.S.

Both Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the U.S and the USSR did not receive more than 50 percent favourable or unfavourable coverage. This clearly explains that the NYT was not totally biased toward or against any one nation. However, it is obvious that the U.S. was portrayed in better light than the USSR.

For instance, a look at Tables 3 and 4 would show that both in 1980 and 1984 the U.S. was more positively covered, for example, out of 41 stories in 1980 that mentioned the U.S., 71 percent was favourable of the nation. Similarly, in 1984, out of 18 stories that mentioned the U.S, 61 percent was positive. On the other hand, both in 1980 and 1984, the USSR was portrayed negatively, that is, out of 39 stories in 1980 that mentioned the USSR, only 29 percent was favourable of the nation, while in 1984 out of 18 stories hardly 17 percent mentioned the USSR favourably.

Hence, the data indicate explicitly that despite the reasons behind the boycott/withdrawal, the

treatment of the stories in 1980 and 1984 did not vary.

Conclusion

The NYT during both periods portrayed the U.S more favourably than the USSR. In January 1980 the USSR was criticized for its involvement in Afghanistan and boycotts from 57 countries were covered extensively. In May 1984, again the USSR was criticized for using security as an excuse when in fact it considered revenge sweet. But in May 1984, boycotts from Communist countries and their reasons were only given few column inches. However, the editorials during both periods severely criticized the U.S and the USSR for politicizing the Olympics and suggested Greece, a neutral and permanent point for future Games.

It is reasonable to conclude, based on the obtained data, that the NYT portrayed the U.S in a more favourable light than the USSR, both January 1980 and May 1984. It may not be scientific to generalize this finding to the print media as a whole in the United States. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the NYT is a prestige daily and weekly that gives some of the widest coverage to national and international issues, thus making it representative of such dailies and weeklies that, in the first instance, are few in number.

REFERENCES

- DURANT, JOHN. (1961) Highlights of the Olympics - From Ancient to the Present. New York: Hastings House Pub., 1961.
- HAZAN, BARUCH. (1982) Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games - Moscow 1980. New Brunswick: Transaction Inc.
- JOHNSON, WILLIAM D. JR. (1972) All That Glitters is Not Gold. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- MILLER, GEOFFREY, (1979) Behind the Olympics Rings. Massachusetts: Zimman, Inc.
- NEW YORK TIMES. January 2-32, 1980 & May 1-31, 1984.
- STEMPEL, GUIDO H. (1981) Research Methods in Mass Communication. N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- NEWSWEEK. (Oct. 10 1983) "The Olympics: Boycotts Can Work".
- TIME (Oct. 17, 1983) "The Miracle of '32".
- (May 21, 1984) "A Soviet Nyet to the Games".