

Corporate sponsors tighten grip on the Olympics

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The accumulated impact of corporate sponsorship on each successive games is choking to death whatever remains of the original Olympic ideal.

The Daily Telegraph quoted Marina Palomba, for the McCann Worldgroup agency, who said the sponsorship rules this time were “the most draconian law in advance of an Olympic Games ever.”

The London Olympics commercial sponsors include Visa, Coca Cola, McDonald’s, Cadburys, Heineken, Samsung, Nature Valley, Adidas, Lloyds TSB, BT, Proctor & Gamble and EDF energy. Organisers have drawn up a list of things banned in the Olympic park, including “any objects or clothing bearing political statements or overt commercial identification intended for ‘ambush marketing.’”

Sponsors have paid £1.4 billion of the £11.4 billion games budget. In return they have secured an economic dictatorship at Olympic venues and external trading zones around main venues. They also insisted on and received large corporate hospitality ticket allocations. A lot of this seating has remained empty, leaving embarrassing gaps in stadiums infuriating genuine sports fans unable to secure tickets.

Soon after London won the Olympic bid in July 2005, the Labour government agreed with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as part of the Host City Contract, to pass through parliament the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Act (LOPGA) 2006. This expanded the Olympic Symbols Act of 1995 and provides a specific legal framework to prevent sponsors’ competitors from gaining any advantage from the games.

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) and the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) had to present the IOC with an anti-“ambush

marketing” plan, issuing a list of symbols and combinations of words that are banned for use except by official sponsors. These include “gold”, “silver”, “bronze”, “summer”, “2012” and “London”!

This will be enforced by a special squad of 300 uniformed “brand police” who began operations all over Britain on July 16. Recruited from local councils across the country, they can enter premises and take offenders to court, with fines up to £20,000. Paul Jordan, an expert in brand protection at Bristows solicitors, remarked, “No other brands would have people walking the streets being their eyes and ears, protecting their interests.”

A further 400 trading standards officers are being mobilised in all London’s 32 boroughs, as well as an unnamed number of LOCOG staff working with police and trading standards officers. Victims of the “brand police” describe the level of monitoring as akin to a “police state”, especially those located in and around Olympic venues.

A butcher who displayed sausage links in the shape of the Olympic rings was visited and told to remove the display. A sandwich shop in Plymouth advertising a “flaming torch baguette” was ordered to remove it from the menu. The owner of an old café, called the Olympic Café, in Stratford, the borough in which the Olympic Park is based, was forced to change its name. He was reduced to painting out the O.

Reported around the world was the extremely vindictive treatment of Ravelry, an online knitting group, who decided to organise an event to celebrate the games, “Ravelympics.”

After being forced to change the name, organiser Donna Bowman said, “The cease-and-desist letter seemed to go out of its way to suggest the events we were doing—like an afghan marathon or a hand spun

heptathlon—were somehow jokes that were intended to parody or disrespect the Olympics... People feel like the Olympics don't just belong to [broadcaster] NBC and to the committees and the people that license stuff... It's a part of culture, not just a part of commerce."

For their sponsorship money McDonald's have built inside the Olympic park their biggest outlet in the world—3,000 square feet, two floors—expected to serve 1,200 customers per hour. It is the only branded cooked food product that can be sold at Olympic venues. McDonald's also secured exclusive rights to sell chips/fries—banning 800 other retailers from doing so. It evoked so much opposition—including an injunction that fish and chips must be sold together to avoid the ban—that the rules had to be relaxed.

Spectators inside Olympic venues can only use Visa card cash points, as Visa has exclusive rights over the Olympic system of payments. As a result 80,000 spectators attending the Team GB soccer match against United Arab Emirates at Wembley in London found they could not buy food or drink, after the Visa payment system at the stadium crashed.

Spectators have been warned not to upload pictures onto Youtube or Facebook from inside the Olympic park. This warning has been extended to athletes, who have been banned from posting messages from the Olympic park thanking their sponsors.

In a new departure the IOC has made an agreement with Twitter to remove postings that contravene the LOPGA 2006. They are working to extend their reach through other social media sites.

As well as the main sponsors, who use the association with Olympics health and well being to present their products in a better light, there are other more sinister sponsors. The Dow Chemical Company, who acquired Union Carbide in 2011, are desperate to shake off an association with the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster in India when tons of poison gas leaked from the pesticide plant killing up to 25,000 people and leaving 558,125 with injuries. These are only the official figures. An estimated 10,000 later died from its fallout and hundreds of thousands have been maimed subsequently in the still polluted district.

Bhopal residents have staged an alternative Olympics to protest the company's sponsorship, featuring children suffering from cerebral palsy, partial paralysis and other disabilities.

Another sponsor is British Petroleum (BP), fresh from its responsibility for the greatest oil spill catastrophe visited off the coast of the United States.

The poisoned grip of the global elite has been felt in the London 2012 more blatantly than any other more recent games. When the Olympic torch toured Britain, London Tory Mayor Boris Johnson said it was an opportunity for the population to make the games their own. In fact, at each stop on route those attended were overwhelmed by inflatables and flags covered in sponsors' names and logos.

Even nominations to carry the torch became the occasion for shameless self promotion by the super rich.

Britain's richest man Lakshmi Mittal financed the construction of the tallest structure in the UK, a public sculpture created by artist Anish Kapoor, situated in the Olympic Park. The work, for which the company donated £20 million, is called ArcelorMittal Orbit, has two observation floors, a 455-step spiral staircase, a lift and restaurant.

Studiously avoiding false modesty in his remarks on accepting the torch, Mittal declared, "When I think about parallels between myself and an Olympian, I believe that success in the world of business is underpinned by very similar principles of perseverance and hard work... I hope that by carrying the torch I will be representing many other people who share these ideals with me... As a global company we are truly delighted to be associated with this global sporting event."

Mittal's son, Aditya, 36, also carried the torch through the plush Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. His application notes that he was nominated as European Business Leader of the Future 2008 and in 2011, "was ranked 4th in the '40 under 40' list of Fortune magazine." It concludes by saying he donates to charity and likes sport.



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