



FOLLOWING THE AGENDA OF OTHERS: IOC COMMUNICATION IN THE OLYMPIC POSTPONEMENT

Abstract – World news in the first three months of 2020 was dominated by information about the progress of the pandemic caused by COVID-19. The theme left the pages dedicated to health and invaded the news in all the editorials. As the disease progressed around the world, the International Olympic Committee, in a posture of isolation, maintained its media channels with information on the preparation for the Tokyo Olympic Games, initially planned for 2020, as if the disease was not related to the Olympic movement. The attempt to maintain a parallel agenda, however, was overcome by the facts and the interest of the traditional media in reporting on the feasibility of holding a worldwide event during a pandemic. This article analyzes two official IOC channels - the entity's official portal and the Twitter profile, and discusses, based on the scheduling theory, the position adopted by the entity. Based on the data collected, it was possible to observe that the COI, while ignoring COVID-19 for a long time, opened space for the media to guide the debate and to report private information about the COI even before the official channels of the entity.

Keywords: Olympic Games; Tokyo 2020; journalism; agenda-setting; communication.

SEGUINDO A AGENDA ALHEIA: A COMUNICAÇÃO DO COI NO ADIAMENTO DOS JOGOS OLÍMPICOS

Resumo - O noticiário mundial nos três primeiros meses de 2020 foi dominado por informações sobre o avanço da pandemia causada pelo COVID-19. O tema deixou as páginas dedicadas à saúde e invadiu o noticiário em todas as editoriais. Enquanto a doença avançava pelo mundo, o Comitê Olímpico Internacional, em uma postura de isolamento, manteve seus canais de mídia com informações sobre a preparação para os Jogos Olímpicos de Tóquio, inicialmente previstos para 2020, como se a doença não estivesse relacionada ao movimento olímpico. A tentativa de manutenção de uma agenda paralela, porém, foi superada pelos fatos e pelo interesse da mídia tradicional em noticiar sobre a viabilidade da realização de um evento de caráter universal em meio à uma pandemia. Este artigo analisa dois canais oficiais do COI - o portal oficial da entidade e o perfil do Twitter, e discute, com base na teoria do agendamento, a postura adotada pela entidade. A partir dos dados coletados, foi possível observar que o COI, ao ignorar o COVID-19 durante muito tempo, abriu espaço para que os meios de comunicação pautassem o debate e pudessem noticiar informações internas do COI antes mesmo dos canais oficiais da entidade.

Palavras-chave: Jogos Olímpicos; Tóquio 2020; jornalismo; agenda-setting; comunicação.

SIGUIENDO LA AGENDA DE OTROS: COMUNICACIÓN DEL COI EN EL APLAZAMIENTO DE LOS JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS

Resumen - Las noticias mundiales en los primeros tres meses de 2020 estuvieron dominadas por información sobre el progreso de la pandemia causada por COVID-19. El tema dejó las páginas dedicadas a la salud y invadió las noticias en todas las editoriales. A medida que la enfermedad progresó en todo el mundo, el Comité Olímpico Internacional, en una postura de aislamiento, mantuvo sus canales de comunicación oficiales con informaciones sobre la preparación para los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio, inicialmente planeados para 2020, como si la enfermedad no estuviera relacionada con el movimiento olímpico. Sin embargo, el intento de mantener una agenda paralela fue superado por los hechos y el interés de los medios tradicionales por informar sobre la viabilidad de celebrar un evento universal en medio de una pandemia. Este artículo analiza dos canales oficiales del COI: el portal oficial de la entidad y el perfil de Twitter, y trabaja, en base a la teoría de la programación, la posición adoptada por la entidad. A partir de los datos recopilados, fue posible observar que el COI, al ignorar COVID-19 durante mucho tiempo, abrió espacio para que los medios de comunicación guiaran el debate y reportaran información interna del COI incluso antes de los canales oficiales de la entidad.

Palabras-clave: Juegos Olímpicos; Tokio 2020; periodismo; agenda-setting; comunicación.

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Introduction: Sports world vs. the real world

First held in 1896 in Athens, the Olympic Games of the Modern Era were born in a period of universalist effervescence. The advancement of means of transport and communication made distances shorter - in this period, several entities of an internationalist nature were created, such as the International Telegraph Union and the International Meteorological Organization, to name a few examples. Concomitantly, sport became a worldwide phenomenon. Coubertin points out that during the 20th century the sport became popular: starting with Germany and Sweden, having its heyday in England and arriving in France and the Americas in recent years.

Almeida and Rubio¹ point out that one of the tools used by Baron Pierre de Coubertin to make disputes viable was diplomacy, with the presence of nobles from around the world.

Between the years of 1896 and 1920, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had six royal family members, 35 noblemen, one president, one minister, three ambassadors, one member of the parliament, 26 intellectuals, eleven military men, one businessman, and only two sportsmen. (p.36)

Since the beginning, the proposal to hold a multi-sport competition with an internationalist character has gained prominence in media outlets around the world. Not only during the disputes but also the preparations for the Games were themes of the periodicals of the time. Rubio²

The Olympic Games of the Modern Era were designed by Pierre de Coubertin at the end of the 19th century to institutionalize physical activity practices that transformed the sports into an educational, moral and social enterprise, aimed at producing reflections on the level of individuals, societies and are considered the public face of the Olympic Movement. (p. 6)

Therefore, when thinking about the Olympic Movement, one cannot take into account only the Games, but the whole context. One of the key elements is precisely the temporality: since the first Olympic edition, the Games are held every four years, with three editions canceled: 1914, 1918 and 1940, due to the two Great World Wars. Rubio³ points out that

The Olympic Games of the Modern Era passed through the 20th century and survived two Great Wars, two overt boycotts and some in disguise, but it did not support the strength of the financial power that prevailed over the spirit of amateurism after the Los Angeles Games (p. 64).

These changes resulted in making a spectacle of the Games, which through a great marketing project managed to give a new configuration to the Olympic Games. Along the same lines, Rocco Jr⁴ points out that

The culture of world sport, with the support of the mass media, has experienced, in the last three decades, dizzying financial growth. Sports-related businesses are now an important part of the entertainment industry. Sportainment also benefits related segments, such as the tourism, civil construction, communication, and advertising industries (p. 5).

One of the fundamental elements in this process of spectacularization and transformation of the Games into a product with high marketing potential is the media. Almeida and Francheschi Jr.⁵ points out that the coverage of the last summer edition, in Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, had more than twenty-five thousand accredited journalists. Also according to the authors, the IOC received more than the US \$ 4 billion refers to the broadcasting right of the event in the Olympic cycle between 2012 and 2016. The gigantic nature of this issue exposes the important role of the financial aspect related to broadcasting rights, but it is still I must emphasize: to follow the work of so many media professionals, the IOC also needs a grand structure, with several professionals trained to monitor the work of journalists from all over the world.

As Rubio pointed out, the Games are just the public face of the Olympic Movement, so the task of monitoring and supporting the media is not limited to the daily competition, but it is something continuous. In addition to monitoring the work of the media, the IOC is also a content producer. Fernandez-Peña⁶ highlights that the official IOC page was created in 1995. Besides, the International Olympic Committee also maintains pages on the main social networks.

Freitas⁷ points out that since the 1980s the IOC has adopted an attitude of absolute control over its symbols. According to the author, the official profiles and page of the Committee are tools that seek public loyalty and also the search for new fans and the strategy put in place requires strict control of what is published, always having an

institutional character and the search for creating an image of the committee. Citing examples, the author points out that

Bringing youth and renewing the public necessarily involves incorporating the virtual world into its agenda of actions. The Youth Olympic Games (with the participation of athletes aged 15-18 years in modalities with experimental formats and with many competitions open to the public) and the Olympic Channel are still initial attempts to integrate something that, for a long time, has been associated with past and to a distant and economically privileged elite (p. 82).

However, despite maintaining its channels, the year 2020 started marked by a major challenge for the IOC. A disease caused by COVID-19, a new type of coronavirus, started to spread. Initially, the first focus was on China, but the disease spread across Asia. At the beginning of the year, the first fears about the feasibility of bringing together the main athletes in the world between July 26th and August 11th, the date scheduled for the Olympic Games, began.

This fear, however, took time to appear on the official page of the IOC, which only made the first reference to the disease - at the time already classified as a pandemic, on March 17. From the 1st of January, with the New Year's message, until the first text about COVID-19, which happened only on the 17th of March, the IOC published on its official website the amount of 89 articles on the 32nd edition of the Olympic Games. Among the subjects, infrastructure, preparation of participating countries, mascot, the launch of new products, technological innovations and focused on the environment; in addition to interviews with idols and references to the modalities that make up the Olympic calendar, newsletters, and highlights about executive meetings.

In the same period, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and news media, with strong representation on the Internet, reported on the Tokyo-2020 edition, while increasing information on the proliferation of the disease caused by COVID-19.

This article aims to discuss the communication strategy adopted by the IOC between January 1st and March 31st, 2020, a period before and immediately after the official announcement of the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games. As tools, we will analyze the publications in two official channels of the committee - the page maintained on the internet and the entity's profile on Twitter. Also, we will have a discussion based on the agenda-setting theory, showing that the IOC, despite being

directly influenced by the pandemic, preferred to try to impose its communication agenda, ignoring the issue for a long period. The consequence of this stance disconnected from reality, without an efficient crisis management plan and amid its authoritarian stance of attempting to impose a parallel agenda, the IOC announced the decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic edition, an unprecedented feat in the history.

Who controls the agenda-setting?

MacCombs⁸ points out that, despite breaking with some traditional communication paradigms, the internet has not annihilated all existing communication theories. According to the author, the massification of this new platform was responsible for a dramatic change in communication, with the expansion of more dynamic channels and forms of communication, which allowed an exponential growth in the number of content producers trying to impose their agendas on an audience that has also been amplified.

According to the agenda-setting theory, the mass media interfere with the topics that are discussed by society. But then the question remains: who guides the media? For MacCombs, the answer can be found both in the media itself - with a dependency on the minor vehicles of the issues addressed by the major ones, as well as by organizations that have great political power or influence in society. MacCombs⁸ highlights that

The pattern of news coverage that defines the media agenda results from the norms and traditions of journalism, the daily interactions among news organizations themselves, and the continuous interactions of news organizations with numerous sources and their agendas. And because journalists routinely look over their shoulders to validate their sense of news by observing the work of their colleagues, especially the work of elite members of the press (p. 548-549)

Given the economic and political power of the International Olympic Committee, and the relevance of the Olympic Games, a dispute that involves athletes from all over the world and whose base is the symbolism of national representations, it is natural for the media to be interested to address everything that involves the competition.

Despite being a private institution and responsible for the Olympic Games, having control over marketing actions, and all property rights related to the Olympic movement, the IOC was unable to dominate the narrative about the Olympic Movement and the feasibility of holding or not the Tokyo Games in 2020. The IOC's communication, which

could be proactive and actively participate in the agendas on the debate on the feasibility of carrying out the dispute, found itself hostage to a highly controlled system, in which only communications officers were relayed, with absolute control and without openness to dialogue. The defensive and hesitant posture reflects a cornered and denial behavior, which can be observed with the attempt to maintain a natural speech and maintain the Olympic routine apart from all the problems that the advance of the pandemic caused worldwide. However, the media's agenda was not limited to the IOC's official discourse: other stakeholders involved were frequently asked about the feasibility of holding disputes.

As a host country, Japan and its organizing committee have become the main focus of the press, but sponsors and sports organizations have also come under frequent questioning. This question has also reached several international sports federations, which have also adopted a passive stance in "giving back" to the IOC the responsibility for such responses, avoiding positions. However, some dissonant voices started to emerge. Athletes, some of them with high power to engage the public on social networks, and the media themselves - which are an important part of the productive chain and maintenance of the Olympic economic system - started to question the IOC's silent stance, which no longer had how to control the discourse - as a trigger for the agendas, the entity found itself out of control and in need of responding to media demands. The media agenda started to dictate to the IOC and demand a speed of return to which the communication structure of the committee was not prepared.

Brosius and Weimann⁹ explain that in the theory of two steps flow, the power of imposing the agenda does not only pass through media discourse, but also through opinion leaders, who help to amplify the media discourse and reproduce content, thus influencing the formation of the opinion of other people and giving greater weight to the discussion. According to the authors

The existence and activity of certain individuals, the opinion leaders, should not be regarded as replacing the role of interpersonal networks but, in fact, as reemphasizing the role of the group and interpersonal contacts. It is through social discourse, personal contacts, and social networks that these more active individuals can collect, diffuse, filter, and promote the flow of information. (p. 564)

In this way, what we can see today with social networks is precisely an increase in the power of repercussions of the speech of some individuals, the influencers, who replicate media content for their base of contacts (their followers). However, forming a cycle, the media also takes advantage of the discourse of these influencers to generate more content - which will be reproduced by the influencers and followers, generating more and more audience and mobilization for the theme.

When discussing the role of opinion makers on social networks, Santos and Saldanha¹⁰ point out that

Traditionally, communication processes were considered asymmetrical: there is a media agent, who emits the stimulus, and a receiver, who is reached by this stimulus and reacts. Today, this system is modified, the receiver has also become an emitter, explaining the reverse movement in the communicational process. (p. 4)

Athletes and even fans of the sport, previously limited, now have powerful communication channels, which gain even more strength when replicated by their followers and by the traditional media. It was in this way that the discourse of several sportsmen gained resonance and started to be increasingly used by the media as a way to pressure the IOC and the Tokyo Games Organizing Committee on the feasibility of maintaining the Olympic Games in 2020.

Nogueira¹¹ highlights that, with the advance of internet communication, it is increasingly relevant for content producers - whether they are media or other organizations, to monitor the behaviour of the public, considering that this new platform allows the construction of a dialogical discourse, in which it is possible to identify the stakeholder posture. The author points out that

The 'interaction' element becomes increasingly prevalent. The internet allows a continuous conversation between the sender and receiver. Millions of fans can now participate in countless ways in the communication process in different ways, whether by giving feedback on a sports website, buying merchandise, participating in online games, or chatting with other fans. As a result of these developments, we are witnessing an explosion in the popularity of the sport on the internet every day. (p. 22)

Barbeiro¹² points out that crises can be internal or external. Obviously, in the case of a pandemic, the IOC found itself in an external crisis, in which it did not have control of the facts related to the disease. The conduct of the communicative process, however, was silent in underestimating the relationship between the disease close to the Tokyo Olympic Games deadline, leaving the committee at the mercy of criticism for the delay in taking action and, mainly, in positioning itself about what occurred in the world. Being prepared for the crisis would make it possible for the entity to communicate more proactively. The author points out that

Leadership in the dissemination of news is not simply an instrument to manipulate public opinion, and therefore has limits on both sides. Leadership is never an end in itself, but it is in the service of effective communication (p. 102-103)

As we can see below, the IOC sought the interaction of fans and the imposition of an agenda. But the disconnected discourse with the reality of the pandemic ended up being overcome by the agenda imposed not only by the media, but also by the advance of COVID-19.

The official website

The unpredictability of the result in sport and the uncertainty of future events are phrases loaded with meaning for an athlete, who should never celebrate a victory before the final result. In the first publication of 2020, IOC President Thomas Bach states¹³

As we stand on the threshold of this Olympic Year 2020, we can look back with pride and satisfaction on a memorable 2019 which has set the course for our future. [...] United in our Olympic values and building on the solid foundation of the continued strength and stability of the Olympic Movement, we look to the future with great confidence and in eager anticipation of memorable and successful Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. In this Olympic spirit, I wish you a happy and prosperous Olympic Year 2020.

However, Cortella¹⁴ warns that, despite the predictability of some facts, it is necessary to be cautious and ready for setbacks. “The worst thing about building the future is to think that the past already holds. Do you know what the biggest sin is for those who want to create the future? To think that it is ready, to think that it already knows, to

think that it is already good. (p. 81 and 82). Understandably, the IOC president was looking for a message of optimism, but it was necessary not to detach the concern from reality.

On the same day, January 1st, the *China Daily*¹⁵ press vehicle alerts its more than 200 million readers that 27 people are quarantined in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province, due to viral pneumonia, with seven of those infected in critical condition.

Counting a universe of 68 publications from January 1st to March 31st, the IOC official portal remained throughout January with the basis of its information, about the Tokyo 2020 edition, based on institutional and promotional actions of the Olympic Movement. Among the 25 articles published during January, topics such as sustainability, change of nationality, 2024 winter games, Agenda 20 + 20, technology, annual executive board meeting, death of Pilar de Borbón (honorary member of the IOC) were addressed), anti-doping activities, the election of new members of the institution, cybersecurity and awards given to coaches Malcolm Arnold (coach of three Olympic track and field champions) and Ulla Koch (who led athletes to 34 international medals), both from Germany.

In addition to the articles, the IOC publishes bulletins on its portal, sometimes weekly, sometimes fortnightly, with summaries of the institution's acts and main events in the Olympic universe, carried out by committees and federations around the world. In January he published three editions, in February four, and in March, two.

The January 13, 27 and 31 newsletters featured the following highlights, respectively: The Opening Ceremony of the Winter Youth Olympic Games in Lausanne 2020 held at the Vaudoise Arena, where 8,000 spectators enjoyed stories emphasizing the Olympic spirit and the theme "Home"; the participation of President Bach in the "China Red" exhibition by Chinese artist He Jialin, at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, in which the opening coincided with the celebration of the Chinese New Year (the works of the exhibition were produced for the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022); and a posthumous tribute to Kobe Bryant - Olympic gold medalist in basketball and five-time NBA champion, the athlete tragically died in a helicopter accident at the age of 41.

Meanwhile, the respiratory syndrome caused by the new coronavirus was advancing in countries like Thailand, Japan, the United States, France, Germany, and Finland. Until then, the fact was not informed to Internet users, athletes, and followers of

the IOC website, who are expecting a positioning by the institution. Hesselben et al.¹⁶ point out that omission and detachment from reality are attitudes that endanger the image of an entity, even if it takes other actions directed to its target audience.

The responsibility for social results is long-lasting. For a company, contributing to the arts for one year and higher education the following year, and when the times are lean, not contributing, has meaning. However, the meaning is entirely different when the organization's position with customers, shareholders, and society, demands a positive and constant response to the expectation of the public good. Failing to meet this social expectation can be as dangerous as failing to meet the expectations of shareholders or customers (p. 367).

In the case of the Olympic Movement, the frustration at the lack of information and positioning straightly affected athletes and technical commissions, who lived with insecurity about the feasibility of hosting the Games, and also the public, who awaited a positioning by the entity.

On January 22nd, the city where the first cases of patients suffering from the new coronavirus were reported, Wuhan initiated its quarantine, canceled flights, and banned crowding. This situation forced the IOC to take an emergency measure, released on January 24th. The Olympic boxing match for Asian athletes, scheduled for the city of Wuhan, has been moved. With the title "IOC Boxing Task Force: Asian / Oceanian Tokyo 2020 Boxing Qualifying Event To Be Held In Jordan In March", the IOC made the first citation of the disease. The event had been initially planned to take place in Wuhan, China, from February 3rd to 14, 2020, it was rescheduled after yesterday's joint decision by BTF (Boxing Task Force) and the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) to cancel the competition due to developments related to the coronavirus outbreak reported in the Chinese city.¹⁷

The event, originally planned to take place in Wuhan, China, from 3 to 14 February 2020, was rescheduled after yesterday's joint decision by the BTF and the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) to cancel the competition due to the developments regarding the coronavirus outbreak reported in the Chinese city. After a careful review of all alternatives, the BTF approved the proposal of the Jordan Olympic Committee (JOC) today, in order to confirm the competition dates and location as soon as possible, in the best interest of the athletes preparing for the qualifier. Logistical and operational details will be shared with National Olympic Committees (NOCs), National Federations and officials in the coming days. The BTF would like to thank all the NOCs

that offered their support to re-organize the competition at such short notice.

Oblivious to events that were not related to the Olympic universe, the IOC continued with the communication on its website, in most of February, with publications focused on its institutional line and appreciation for the Olympic Movement, except for an allusion to the disease in one of the newsletters, to be highlighted later. Issues such as the opening of a competition space, the definition of the Olympic torch leader, a story about Pierre de Coubertin, podcast, pictogram presentation, sustainability, the motto of the 2020 games, the launch of sponsor products and a call for a qualifying event with a live broadcast, opened the Tokyo 2020 agenda, they were among the 12 articles of the month.

With four editions in February, the first bulletin on the 7th informs about the new date and place of the qualification test, transferred from Wuhan to Amman, Jordan, from March 3rd to 11, 2020 and gives a note in which the Organizing Committee of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games (Tokyo 2020) celebrates six months for the Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Games. The February 14th bulletin highlights the rules attributed to athletes, according to the Olympic Charter. It discusses the manuscript of original plans to relive the Olympic Games, donated to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, almost 130 years after Baron Pierre de Coubertin wrote it. The donor, Alisher Usmanov, President of the International Fencing Federation.

At a time when the city of Wuhan has become a feature in all the world's press, and the coronavirus is spreading around the world, the IOC cites the disease in the February 21st bulletin. Through a six-line note, it reveals a meeting held with IOC Executive Council member and United World Wrestling (UWW) president, Nenad Lalovic, in which President Bach discussed the challenges of the Olympic qualification tournament in UWW concerning the coronavirus outbreak and congratulated Lalovic for finding a solution for the Chinese fighters who were hosted in Serbia. In the last bulletin of the month, nothing about Covid-19, among the subjects, the press conference held on February 24th at the Hellenic headquarters of CON, where information about the Olympic flame ceremonies and the torch relay were presented.

Between the period of the four newsletters, countless media outlets began to talk more and more about COVID-19. Regarding the Chronology of events of the epidemic,

the *Jornal de Notícias de Portugal*¹⁸ (jn.pt), relates the dates with the spread of the epidemic around the world, as highlighted below.

- February 11th, the World Health Organization (WHO) officializes the name COVID-19 to infection caused by the new coronavirus.
- February 14th - register of the first death in Japan
- February 23rd - President of China, Xi Jiping, admits that the outbreak is the most severe health emergency in the country since the founding of the communist regime in 1949, Italian authorities ordered the suspension of the Venice Carnival celebrations
- February 23rd - International Monetary Fund (IMF) considers that the epidemic puts the global economic recovery at risk and is willing to help the poorest and most vulnerable countries financially.
- February 24th - WHO director-general warns that the world must prepare for an 'eventual pandemic' considering the 'sudden increase' of cases in Italy, South Korea, and Iran 'very worrying'.
- February 25th - an expert who led the WHO team sent to China says the world 'just is not ready' to face the epidemic.
- February 26th - first case of contagion in South America. It is in Brazil, a 61-year-old man from São Paulo, returned from northern Italy.
- February 28th - WHO raises the threat level of the new coronavirus to 'very high'.
- February 29th - first death by COVID-19 in the United States of America.

At the end of the second month of 2020, with just one quote about the coronavirus, the IOC reaffirms its concern about the speed of change in the frames related to the disease, which now accounts for human losses around the world. Likewise, it misses the opportunity to act before its audience, with the agility and responsibility expected from an internet vehicle.

In the third month of analysis of the news published on the COI portal, despite the severity of the disease and the increase in cases of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, the institution does not give up its agenda. During the first 15 days of the month, it publishes information about pets, infrastructure completed for the competitions, G-Satellite, and call for the Olympic torch lighting ceremony.

However, the direction of the news changes from the second half of March, after the statement on the suspension of boxing qualification and all sports competitions until May (not to mention the words pandemic, coronavirus, or COVID-19). On the 17th, in a new statement, the sports institution speaks of the pandemic openly for the first time, as excerpt¹⁹

The situation around the COVID-19 virus is also impacting the preparations for the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, and is changing day by day. The IOC remains fully committed to the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, and with more than four months to go before the Games there is no need for any drastic decisions at this stage; and any speculation at this moment would be counter-productive. The IOC encourages all athletes to continue to prepare for the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 as best they can

The day after the statement recognizing the situation of the disease, the news on the portal presents some support for the Tokyo 2020 in the calendar scheduled for July, through speeches by representatives of Olympic councils around the world in Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania and the president of PanAm Sports. The following days recorded messages from investors, athletes, the Olympic torch ceremony (without an audience), and the arrival of the torch in Japan.

In its two editions of newsletters in March, the highlighted guidelines remain for news about the Olympic Movement, with two quotes related to the pandemic. On the 6th, during its second meeting in 2020 at the Olympic House in Lausanne, the IOC Executive Council (EB) discussed the coronavirus situation given the upcoming editions of the Olympic Games; this issue also included guidelines on gender equality and sustainability and institutional issues. On the 16th, the story about the Olympic flame of the Tokyo 2020 Games, lit on March 12, speech by the IOC president.²⁰

This ceremony demonstrates once more our commitment to the success the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. Nineteen weeks before the Opening Ceremony, we are strengthened in this commitment by the many authorities and sports organizations around the world which are taking so many significant measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

With the pandemic spreading around the world and from the height of its supreme sovereignty, the IOC does not manifest the possibility of alteration in the Tokyo 2020 games. A surprising and contradictory posture to Olympic ideals, as according to Payne²¹

The power of the Olympic Games is fabulous. The IOC has to be more than just the Olympic administrator. The question that the Olympic Movement must ask itself is whether the IOC is using its resources to take its mission beyond the games themselves (p. 297).

While the IOC refrains from abroad and informative disclosure about the interference of the pandemic in the Tokyo 2020 edition, media outlets from the world press publish statements by delegations from some countries registered in the Games, examples from Norway, Australia, and Brazil. On March 22, the IOC president issues a letter to Olympic athletes announcing that the committee is monitoring the progress of the pandemic around the world and asking for a four-week deadline for defining the event but rejecting the possibility of cancellation.

Long before the deadline, however, the official decision had already been taken and was announced informally. In an interview with the American newspaper USA Today, Dick Pound, a Canadian who is a member of the International Olympic Committee, said that the Games would be postponed to 2021 due to the pandemic.²²

Veteran International Olympic Committee member Dick Pound told USA TODAY Sports on Monday afternoon that the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games are going to be postponed amid the coronavirus pandemic. ‘On the basis of the information the IOC has, postponement has been decided,’ Pound said in a phone interview. ‘The parameters going forward have not been determined, but the games are not going to start on July 24, that much I know.’ Pound, a Canadian who has been one of the most influential members of the IOC for decades, said the games will likely be moved to 2021, with the details to be worked out in the next four weeks. He said he expects the IOC to announce its next steps soon.

Even with a direct channel of information to the public, the IOC was not responsible for notifying firsthand the postponement of the Games. The day after the information published by USA Today, the committee confirmed that the Games would be postponed for one year. The latest publications in March on the entity's official website are restricted to reactions from participants in the Olympic universe, postponement of the Olympic torch exhibition and messages from athletes to the new Olympic calendar dates, from July 23 to August 8, 2021.

During the evolution of the pandemic, the IOC adopted a posture of creating its agenda, trying to detach itself from reality. The communication project made the fundamental mistake of not monitoring what was happening in the world. As Bueno²³ points out

Whoever is in the eye of the hurricane needs to take urgent measures, with high precision, so as not to be swallowed by the circumstances. Disaster communication is always a heroic struggle against time, weather, and fatalities. Transparency, professional training, and proper planning have allowed, despite the inevitable tensions and upheavals, that communication managers are left unharmed when critical situations happen. (p. 64).

What can be seen, however, was an official communication disconnected from reality, adopting a passive stance and being run over by traditional media.

The IOC on Twitter

Twitter, the fourth most accessed social network in the world, according to the Alexa²⁴ portal, has an essential role in the dissemination of information. Silva²⁵ defines the tool as follows

It is widely known and publicized, used by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. It presents asymmetrical and directed network characteristics, allowing anyone to have access to what others post, without the need for additional authorizations or permissions. Due to the ease in spreading information, it has been used both for the dissemination of ideas and for news and rumors, allowing visibility of a post for large audiences. (p. 14)

Although it is not the first social network to access, it appears as an indicator of the most relevant subject at the moment. It is not uncommon for its Trending Topics (ranking of most commented subjects) to be used as a marker in several discussions, including guiding journalists around the world. Therefore, it is natural for institutions to use this tool for faster and more extensive notifications, combined with the most discussed topic at the moment.

Considering the Olympic universe, the Rio 2016 Olympic Games handled 75 billion impressions during the 16 days of the event. “Impressions” is understood as the number of times that a message posted on this network was seen, either through the web or through applications. In all, 187 million tweets (messages) were published.⁷

The period in which the COVID-19 epidemic was consolidated, coincided precisely with one of the competitions sponsored by the IOC: The Winter Youth Olympic Games, in Lausanne, Switzerland. The competition took place between 9 and 22 January

2020. Throughout January 2020, the main Twitter messages of the COI* were directed to this competition (246, of the 248 messages between 01 and 22/01 were about the Youth Games). No mention of the disease (at the time still limited to China) was posted. Shortly after the end of these Games, there were a large number of posts referring to the birthdays of Olympic athletes, Olympic Channel posts and memories of remarkable moments of the Winter Olympic Games (which match the period).

Two posts were made about the death of former basketball player and Olympic champion Kobe Bryant. It draws attention to a post of 1/30, just over a week after the closure of the Youth Games. This post shows a moment of overcoming a Chinese athlete at the Lausanne Games, who, despite a fall, recovered and won two gold medals. It may be an indication of the mention of overcoming the Chinese by the disease. Nevertheless, the mention was not straightforward.

Then, on the 1st and 4th of February, posts were made concerning the 2022 Winter Olympics, which will be held precisely in China. Individually in the post of February 4 (a specific two-year milestone for the Games), the first comments appear directly in the post referring to COVID-19.

On February 1st, a post was also made about the birthday of British singer Harry Styles. Styles participated with his musical ensemble (One Direction) at the Closing Ceremony of the London Olympic Games in 2012. It is not common to post in honor of non-personalities directly related to the Olympic Games itself. However, there is a possible explanation: both the singer and the musical group (which is on hiatus at the moment) mobilizes social networks a lot. The COI's Twitter profile moves an average of 300 to 400 likes per post. In this particular post, there were more than 8 thousand likes and 2 thousand reposts.

The same occurred on 02/14, when a souvenir of a Japanese figure skating athlete, Olympic champion in 2014, and 2018 was posted. This post had more than 4 thousand likes, well above the average of 100 to 300 likes from previous posts. Still, on the same day, another post about skating earned approximately 3 thousand likes. Coincidentally, after this post, several posts about "Figure Skating" were made.

Both in the case of the singer and the skater, they reveal engagement strategies. It means that, when citing celebrities with a high level of influence on the network, the

* See [Twitter.com/olympics](https://twitter.com/olympics)

audience reached ends up being higher than those affected naturally, exposing the profile to a more significant number of people. Silva²⁵, states that part of this strategy consists of retweeting (sharing the message) by the most significant number of people: “One of the most common ways to measure the importance that a post has achieved is by looking at the number of retweets. Furthermore, to measure the popularity of a user, one observes the number of retweets that their posts have reached (p.20).”

Then, some posts were made about the lighting of the Olympic fire in Olympia, Greece, already aiming at the Tokyo Olympic Games in July. As the firing date approached, comments about COVID-19 in the posts came up with more intensity. Due to the importance of the event and the pattern and intensity of posts in similar situations, more posts about the Olympics event were expected.

In February, several publications on Olympic history followed, focusing on the Winter Olympic Games. On March 3, the IOC’s first official mention of COVID-19 appears, retweeted from the profile of its profile aimed at media professionals. From that date on, posts about Olympic history and memories of athletes’ birthdays began to decline. Messages about the lighting of the fire started in the days before the event (held on March 11) but were less intense than, for example, the period corresponding to the Lausanne Games in January. Probable fear of messages contrary to the event, since the comments of related messages posted in February, are already above average precisely because of COVID-19.

This period coincides with the worsening numbers of infections and deaths in Italy and Spain. The profile initiates a series of posts about sports practices at home, mainly by Olympic athletes. On 3/17, a post about the Tokyo Games received more than 100 messages, most of them against the Games. The next day, a post about ‘Uncertain Times’. Moreover, posts grow with the request for people to ‘stay at home’ and ‘Be Strong’.

On March 22, the IOC announces that it will decide in a month whether the Tokyo Games will be held. This statement sparks a series of protests and complaints, including the announcement of the withdrawal of some teams if the Games are held this year.

The first country to announce that it would not participate in the Olympic Games if they were held in July / 2020 was Canada²⁶. He announced on his official website and used Twitter²⁷ for the spread on the network: “#TeamCanada will not send athletes to Games in summer 2020 due to Covid-19 risks.”

The subject quickly became one of the main topics, with repercussions among specialized journalists, researchers, and fans. As a comparison, the Canadian ad's post had 11,800 likes. The most liked COI post in the three months analyzed (the birthday of singer Harry Styles) had 8 thousand.

After the IOC profile announcement, posts about staying at home follow. Let athletes continue training in whatever way they can. With pressure from several countries, on March 24, the IOC finally announced the postponement of the Games to 'sometime in the summer of 2021'. From this, only messages of support for the postponement are posted, including the highlight for several athletes giving testimonies about the relief with this postponement.

Final considerations

When analyzing IOC's stance, whether in its posts on Twitter or in the news published on its official website in the first three months of 2020, what is perceived is a detachment from reality. The advancement of COVID-19 around the world is ignored for a long time, as if the Olympic movement took place in a separate universe, in which this was not a relevant topic. The search for interaction with the public, seeking communication in two stages, as foreseen by the two steps flow, occurs with the attempt to guide other themes. However, the reality, day after day, began to impose itself on the IOC that was forced to position yourself on the topic.

Since the days of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the IOC has announced itself as an internationalist entity that promotes a dialogue between nations and the interaction between them. However, what happened in the first months of 2020 shows that, despite the opening speech, the committee closed in a posture of an entity apart from the real world, ignoring the advancement of COVID-19 by various places in the world, directly affecting countries and athletes who form the Olympic Movement.

It is not by chance that the traditional media made evident the IOC's vacillating stance. The confirmation of the information on the postponement by a communication vehicle before the official IOC networks highlighted the flaws in the committee's communication plan, which was unable to maintain a leadership and transparency position in the information. Without control of the media news agenda, and unable to slow down the communication of decisions, the IOC showed that, despite having as one

of its base documents for the future, a report with the title "Agenda 20 + 20" and the entire greatness of its marketing department, still suffers from communication failures that remind us of the beginning of the last century, when the Games were again taking their first steps.

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