

Mega-Sporting Events and the Media in Attention Economies

National and International Press Coverage of the IAAF World Championships in Helsinki 2005

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Abstract

The present article examines the IAAF World Championships as a commercialized mega-sporting event and an expression of the contemporary experience industry. The focus of the empirical analysis is on the national and international press coverage of the World Championships in Helsinki, Finland, 2005. Eleven Finnish and six foreign newspapers were analysed. Finnish pre-Championship publicity saw the games mostly as a tool for achieving international media attention and economic profit. The coverage of the international press was strikingly similar. The newspapers focussed mainly on the sporting events and their perspective was strongly national – perfectly in line with traditional sports journalism. This finding challenges the belief expressed in Finnish newspapers and by proponents of the *attention economy* that mega-events are powerful tools for urban marketing.

Keywords: mega-event, sports journalism, IAAF, attention economy, urban marketing, identity

Introduction

The IAAF World Championships, held every other year, is the third most widely covered sporting event in the world. Only the Summer Olympics and the FIFA World Cup in football receive more media attention. When the IAAF World Championships were held in Helsinki, August 6-14, 2005, they were described as receiving more press coverage that year than any other sporting event in the world. Today, mega-sporting events mean much more than just sports. Application for the events is usually based on a competition, in which the international sports federations accept bids from cities and other interested local organizers. The applicants have to make far-reaching commitments in terms of public funding, among other things. Therefore, the application for Championships implies extensive political manoeuvring and lobbying, including making a strong case for the beneficial effects of the events, such as international media coverage.

The present article examines how the 2005 IAAF World Championships were covered by both Finnish and international newspapers. Besides providing facts, the media also create images, in this case, images both of the sporting events and of national and local identities. The media also create a moral order in society by deciding what topics are

worthy of publicity. A combination of Finnish and foreign press material also provides an opportunity to compare differences and similarities in journalism at the national and international levels and between the leading newspapers of various countries.

Already before the actual event, the Finnish press was writing a good deal, both for and against the Helsinki Championships. Much was said about the international attention that would be brought to Helsinki and to Finland by the games. In this discourse, sports were seen mostly as a tool for achieving visibility and economic profit. The way in which the press presented the Championships could be linked to the concept of attention economy (Liedman 2001: 334), which refers to a modern information-saturated society, “where attention is scarce, exposed to competition and (believed to be) related to appreciation”. As states, cities and regions try to attract investments, places of work, tourists and taxpayers, they also increasingly rely on various publicity strategies, image-making, marketing, branding and advertising (see Falkheimer 2006).

Foreign newspapers, on the other hand, focused mainly on the sporting events. What caught the attention of the international press was the sports rather than the host city or country. This finding challenges the common belief within the attention economy – as expressed in the Finnish press – that the World Championships are a powerful tool for urban marketing.

The Finnish press material used here consisted of 413 articles collected during six months (January-July 2005) in eleven newspapers appearing in Helsinki. The material includes news, news portraits and opinions (columns, editorials and letters to the editor). The aggregate circulation of the newspapers was 1.7 million, addressed to what could be called a metropolitan area public. The international material was selected from leading newspapers of six countries during roughly a two-week period both before and after the Championships, for a total of five weeks in all (23 July – 28 August 2005). The papers were chosen from the countries from which the largest number of tourists came to Helsinki. The papers were *Asahi* (Japan, circulation 12,235,000), *Izvestia* (Russia, 234,000), *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden, 368,000), the *Daily Telegraph* (UK, 895,000), *USA Today* (USA, 2,617,000) and *Die Welt* (Germany, 592,000). The international material included a total of 368 articles.

The research method for the Finnish material was a content analysis, the objective of which is to produce a systematic, quantitative and reliable description of the content (see, e.g., Pietilä 1973). This means that the method tries to avoid subjective and value-loaded interpretations. It is true, of course, that any method will imply a certain degree of subjective interpretation at some level, and the “meaning” of a text may not necessarily be the same as its “content”. The objective of specification of the content is, above all, to form a general picture of a large amount of material. The analysis of the foreign newspapers was based on close reading. The purpose was to pay attention to similarities and differences regarding the sports coverage, on the one hand, and news commentary and descriptions concerning the host nation and the host city, on the other.

The IAAF World Championships as a Mega-event

In recent years, the number of events, festivals, fairs, conferences and sporting events has been growing throughout Europe (Kainulainen 2004). Increasing leisure and tourism are important background factors that help to account for this trend. For a very long time,

commercialism has been a significant part of top-level sports. In fact, sports can be seen as part of today's experience industry, where sporting events are produced, marketed and consumed just like any other consumer goods (Kuokkanen 2006). The consumption of experiences, and the 'experience hunger' that characterizes late-modern society, is related to some of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy (Richards 2001:57). The experience industry is often discussed in relation to tourism, but it also includes many forms of cultural attractions, from sports events to rock concerts, from fun fairs and night life to museums and art galleries. Various forms of media culture can also be seen as a part of the experience industry. However, in the experience industry, passive consumption shifts towards more participatory forms of consumption – interaction, learning, doing (ibid., 66). What the consumer pays for is excitement and adventures, something to look forward to and something to remember.

For promoting the consumption of sports and sporting events, television and other mass media are in a key position. This is exemplified by the participation of the Finnish public in the IAAF World Championships. The great majority (91%) followed the events through the media, and roughly only three percent of Finns actually saw the Championships in Olympic Stadium (Kuokkanen and Nylund 2005).

Large sporting events, particularly the Summer Olympics, have been studied mostly from an economic perspective. Because such mega-events usually require extensive public investment, there has been a need to measure how much the events cost the state and the area, and which of these repay their costs. Expectations are often far too high (Hall 2005: 206-207; Horne & Manzenreiter 2004). A significant problem with economic analyses is that different actors make different kinds of calculations, which in turn produce very different findings. Before the Helsinki Championships, the organizers estimated that the economic effects of the event for the area would amount to 130-150 million euros. A survey conducted after the games arrived at roughly half these figures (Laakso et al. 2006). The most important economic measure, however, is the net effects of the event, which were even smaller than the figures shown in the media. The games definitely brought Helsinki some economic profit, but given the size of the local economy, their importance was minor.

An important dimension in the study of mega-events is the tension between the global and the local (Tajima 2004). Another important question is whether the ownership of the event is local or international. The IAAF World Championships are owned by the International Association of Athletics Federation, IAAF. Matters of sales, marketing and sponsorship are managed by the world's biggest marketing company, the Japanese company Dentsu (Soini 2004: 93). The IAAF puts the games out to cities for tender and sets elaborate conditions in terms of government guarantees for economic liabilities. The IAAF's own finances are subject to business secrecy.

The largest revenues of the IAAF World Championships come from international television and sponsor contracts (cf. Solberg 2002), all of which go to the IAAF itself. The local organizers have to content themselves with ticket revenues and national sponsor contracts. The local organizer also has to pay for the expenses of the event and take on the economic risks.

The IAAF World Championships have been organized since 1983. The division of work between the IAAF and the local organizers changed fundamentally after the 1995 games, when the IAAF stopped participating financially in the games' organization. The

reason was that the games were considered such good business for the cities and regions involved that there seemed to be no point in IAAF exerting itself financially (Laakso et al. 2006: 95-96; Soini 2004). In the case of the Helsinki Championships, however, the financial effects were so small and the economic risks so great that the task force evaluating the economic impact decided to propose that a role for the IAAF in financing the World Championships should be discussed (ibid.: 96). According to those investigating the idea, the IAAF would cover a reasonable share of the games' expenses and also participate in the economic risk. But despite the questionable role of the IAAF, there have always been willing applicants for the games. An important reason is the belief that the games will bring international attention to cities, regions and countries.

No doubt mega-events are at least some means for bringing the spotlight and publicity to small and unknown cities (see Jansson 2004: 136). One good example would be Nagano, a medium-sized city in the Japanese mountains, which became world famous with the 1988 Olympics (Tajima 2004: 242). Calgary too is an example of how people's ideas about a place can change (Richards and Wilson 2004: 1935). Likewise Waitt (2004: 210) describes how residents of Sydney, who were interviewed before the Olympics there, brought up the subject of publicity for the city. The Olympics put us on the world map, one interviewee is supposed to have said. When people in Helsinki were asked about the benefits of the IAAF World Championships, international publicity for Helsinki was mentioned most often. This would suggest that the belief that mega-events are capable of changing other people's ideas is one reason for welcoming World Championships to your home town.

Although people seem to be confident that large sporting events bring welcome international publicity, there is little research-based evidence for such a notion (see Hall 2004: 205). One exception would be Christine Green's research (2003) on the publicity San Antonio received for hosting a national basketball tournament. Green studied the television coverage of the tournament and ended up questioning the notion that sporting events are tools for marketing a place.

A Good Narrative

The profits of the television broadcast and international sponsoring contracts go entirely to the IAAF. For this reason, the economy of the Finnish Championship organization was highly dependent on successful ticket sales. A vital part of the publicity strategy of the Championship organization was to use the widespread interest in the games among the Finnish media to promote ticket sales (Eteläaho 2006: 105). The Finnish press had great expectations of the IAAF games, expectations that for the most part had nothing to do with the sports themselves. Especially those news items coming from the press department of the Championship Bureau presented the games as a *great promise* (cf. Väliiveronen 2002: 111) in terms of regional economic success and international publicity.

The interesting thing about the pre-championship publicity was that it created images of something that did not yet exist. The future does not exist, but unlimited images and narratives can be constructed about it by organizations that want to achieve a specific outcome and justify their own actions (Väliiveronen 2002: 119). From the perspective of the championship organizers, the publicity was partly about convincing people that this was a jackpot for Finland and a shared interest for the whole nation. Partly as a result, ticket sales were a success.

One way of boosting the appeal of the event was to emphasize its *size*. The press releases repeatedly presented figures showing how big the event would be: The 2005 IAAF World Championships were the largest sporting events ever held in Finland. They were to bring together some 3,000 athletes from over 200 countries. According to preliminary estimates, the games would be broadcast on television to some four billion spectators in 187 countries, an audience second in size only to those for the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup.

Because the data were repeated in every press release, it was obvious that description of the size was not a matter of mere information distribution. The size of the event was emphasized because size itself is appealing. Obviously, the organizers in Helsinki were by no means the first to have boasted about size. According to Fredrik Schougin (1997: 131), who analysed the 1995 IAAF World Championships held in Gothenburg, Sweden, the Swedes too emphasized the size of the event in their brochures. The games were “watched by the whole world” and “everybody’s there”. In many contexts, the proportions of the games were presented as the primary reason why each and every fan should be present. If, however, in the case of Helsinki, the proportions are studied from inside the walls of Olympic Stadium, a different picture emerges of the games’ size. A comparison of visitor statistics from the World Championships in 1983, 1995 and 2005 shows that the proportion of tickets going to the media, VIPs and other special groups has grown sharply over the years, which means that the proportion of ordinary people in the crowd is decreasing (Soini 2004: 101).

Finnish media attention before the games mostly amounted to headlines about how the preparations and organization were proceeding. Sports were the second most common topic in the press. Of the entire press material studied, 21 percent concerned sports. The third-most common topic was quite in tune with the present time – security. Much was also written about the importance of the games for tourism. Only 12 percent of the texts focused mainly on negative phenomena. The most common target of media attention was the local Championship organization and especially its managing director, Antti Pihlakoski.

The general tone of the news items was usually friendly. The closer the Championships came, the more favourable the news became. The press announced the World Championships as a “feast for the whole nation”, and showed how the event could be of help in marketing cities. Stylish articles portraying key persons were also clearly in favour of the games. It is remarkable that these portraits hardly ever mention anything negative or even slightly critical about the person. It is hardly a coincidence that the publicity strategy of the Championship organization before the games was partly based on spectacular visits by star athletes to Finland and on their life stories.

The second largest category of articles was the neutral group, i.e., those containing both positive and negative elements. They were almost as numerous as the clearly favourable ones. They typically pointed at something negative initially, but then showed the nice, positive and encouraging aspects. Short articles especially were often neutral.

This finding is interesting because news often tends to focus on something negative. We may imagine that three interrelated factors influenced the publicity in a favourable way. First, the organizers produced an abundance of material for the press, which free-of-charge newspapers in particular could use. Second, the Championships were often seen as a project for the “whole nation”, and the press has a habit of dealing with their

own nationality in a friendly way. Third, one may point at a phenomenon called the “good narrative of sports” (Ilmanen et al. 2004). The concept simply refers to the fact that sports are usually seen as something positive in many contexts. This applies to modern top-level sports as well, despite the fact that people know that top-level sports are not the same thing as fitness sports or exercise and despite the negative phenomena sometimes associated with top-level sports.

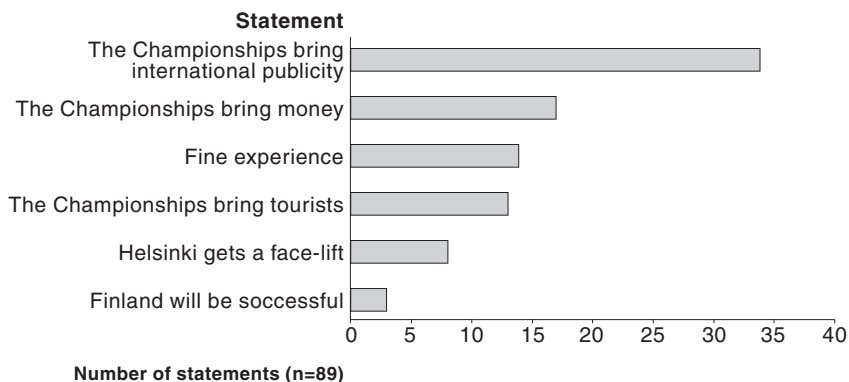
Of all those who commented on the Championships, 81 percent were men and 19 percent were women. This finding supports the idea that sports publicity is dominated by men. According to a Finnish study (Finnish Sports Federation 2005), women athletes are seldom the leading topics of sports news. Also, women are still rare among sports reporters. Thus, despite the fact that the percentage of women and girls among athletes is approaching fifty percent, sports are followed publicly through the eyes of men. In this respect, the work done by women is often invisible.

Expectations and Threats

Articles about the World Championships contain a great deal of redundant information. This is partly due to the fact that articles are based on the same press conferences. In some cases, the same stories, which come from either the organizers or the news agencies, are published in several newspapers. Also, the articles repeat the same kinds of statements in favour of or against the games, about the opportunities and threats of the games, and the strengths and weaknesses of the organizer, the host city or the host country.

In the public discourse, repeated positive statements work as direct or indirect arguments in favour of the games, arguments that convinced the public that it would be worthwhile and profitable to organize the games in Finland (Figure 1). The alternative to profitability was not so much that it would not be worthwhile to set up the games, but rather that there might be questionable or even negative features about them.

Figure 1. *The IAAF World Championships as an Opportunity*



I noted earlier that articles about the World Championships were often written in a positive tone. The Championships were seen as a tremendous and unique mega-event, an opportunity that Finland might have for the first and last time. A more detailed argument analysis would seem to support such an interpretation, because the Championships were

consistently seen as more of an opportunity than a threat or a problem. However, this does not mean that threats faded completely: speculation about threats and sometimes even grim jokes, such as “Coke may turn into cocaine” (*Demari* 7.4.2005), were a visible element in some articles. In any case, the picture conveyed by the press was that Finland and Helsinki had more strengths than weaknesses as the Championships’ hosts. Figure 1 shows the most common positive explicitly evaluative statements about the championships.

The opportunities that the IAAF World Championships provided Finland were chiefly about international publicity. Newspapers often repeated the organizers’ estimate that the games would be watched by some four billion people in almost 200 countries. The articles also described how the organizers and the City of Helsinki deliberately tried to use international attention for their own marketing purposes. A conscious effort to achieve visibility in the media was seen in the planning of the marathon course. The course was supposed to show the beautiful sides of Helsinki, a verdant waterfront city. The members of the Championships organization stressed on several occasions that media coverage was of value in itself, and the chairman of the organizing committee, Ilkka Kanerva, noted that “There is no other event even in sight that would capture the same kind of international attention” (*Demari* 30.6.2005)

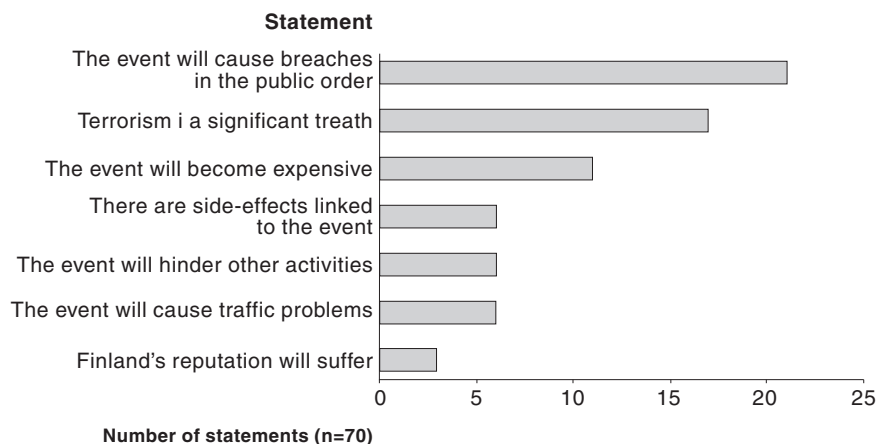
Another oft-repeated statement was that the Championships would bring money to Finland. At least they would imply indirect income in terms of tourists’ consumption and a temporary increase in jobs. According to *Kauppalehti* (13.7.2005), a daily, the IAAF World Championships in Helsinki 2005 created thousands of jobs for professionals in various fields, especially in construction and restaurants. The press also expressed hopes that foreign reporters and tourists would bring tens of millions of euros to Finland. In its editorial on 20 March 2005, *Hufvudstadsbladet* wrote how the state, as well as city and business communities were expected to profit economically from the World Championships and how the resulting tax revenues would amount to more than the public investments in the event, which were estimated to be minor. The issue was also raised as to whether there would be sufficient hotel capacity for all the tourists. A large influx of tourists was largely seen as something positive, but side effects were expected, too, such as increased prostitution, drug sales, pickpocketing and swindlers.

Yet money was not the only aspect mentioned. The Championships were also described as a fine and even a unique experience. The anticipations of organizers, volunteers and citizens were widely reported. One example was the feelings expressed in *Helsingin Uutiset* by a group of girls volunteering as hostesses at the Championships: “Volunteering at the world games is a unique opportunity” and “When you’re out there doing your job with all the crowd cheering, it feels like you are competing yourself”.

The press was very realistic about Finland’s chances of success in the games. With a few exceptions, great Finnish success was not expected. Many opinions were expressed about the cityscape in Helsinki. The city had prepared for the Championships with face-lifts in public places. These measures were reported in the press to some extent as something positive brought about by the event. And whereas some articles blamed Helsinki for growing dirtiness, others mentioned Helsinki’s beauty and cleanliness as particular strengths.

A great threat posed by the Championships was security (Figure 2). Much was written about terrorism, but articles mentioned disruptions caused by drunks and drug addicts as the more probable threats.

Figure 2. Possible Threats to the World Championships



Demari (7.4.2005) wrote that money and tourists are usually followed by prostitution, drugs, pickpockets, swindlers and other scourges. Fears were also expressed that cocaine, the “jet-set drug”, would enter the Finnish street market. Almost all the papers that wrote about security said that public order might suffer in Helsinki. Disruptions were usually mentioned in news items that convinced readers that terrorism was a minor threat. The security discourse accelerated in early July 2005, after the terrorist attacks in London, only a few days after London had been selected to host the 2012 Summer Olympics.

Terrorism and the World Championships received considerable attention in editorials as well. And although the risk analyses of the security policy reassured the public that there was no reason to fear major terrorist actions in Finland, the unpredictability of terrorism was seen as a realistic risk factor, which in turn escalated the demands on security. But no one went so far as to propose relocating the Championships for reasons of security. A more usual view was that the change in the whole concept of security should be acknowledged as a fact in a modern, uncertain society.

Thus, the Championships were seen as a huge economic opportunity, but the press also wrote about their costs. In the spring of 2005, the press repeatedly focused insistently on advance ticket sales, and the organizers repeatedly assured the public that everything was going according to plan. Besides security and economy, some minor problems were occasionally mentioned before the games. *Presso*, a weekly, (9.4.2005) reported how, according to one interviewee, the World Championships were going to undermine the summer rock music season, chiefly because Olympic Stadium, where rock music events are often held in Helsinki, was under repair until time for the Championships. *Helsingin Sanomat* (10.7.2005) reported that the World Championships meant closed public access to some of the city’s sports venues.

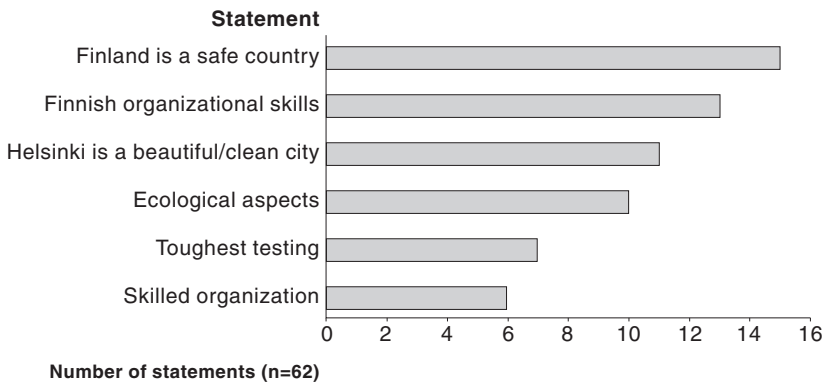
The World Championships did not seem to inspire very much thought about the deeper meaning of sports or the problems in top-level sports. Columnist Hannu Raittila of *Helsingin Sanomat* (9.3.2005), however, talked about the commercialization of sports, and sharply criticized the metamorphosis from playful sportsmanship to formatted profit optimizing, which leads to a rationalization of sports, to division of labour and to commercialization of venues. But there were very few such instances of philosophizing about the present state and meaning of sports.

Before the World Championships, there was a debate about the suitability of Helsinki and Finland to host the games, that is, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the place chosen? Why did Finland get the championships? These questions were asked in many contexts. The questions not only concerned the organizers, but also the whole nation: What is characteristic of Finland and the Finnish identity? Thus, the public discourse also conveyed an image of what is typically Finnish, a story about “us” and “them,” and about how Finnish national identity is defined.

The 2005 IAAF World Championships were the second of their kind in Helsinki: the first IAAF World Championships were held in Helsinki in 1983. Lotta Soini (2004), who compared the grounds on which the application committees made their applications both in 1983 and in 2005, found that the applications were very similar. Both emphasized the short distances in Helsinki, the high level of security in Finland, and the knowledgeable nature of the Finnish athletics audience. But Soini pointed out (2004: 20) that the application for the games in 2005 had dropped the Finnish modesty shown in 1983 and instead competed for the hostship using the superlatives and assurance typical of our time.

Security was seen as Finland’s greatest asset (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Statements about the Assets of the Organizers*

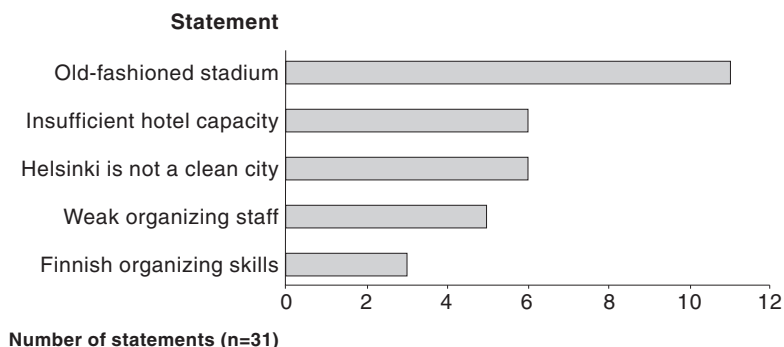


Already at the time the application for the Championships was made, there was a feeling that security was Finland’s greatest asset for hosting the games. The safety and massive security arrangements needed were stressed in many articles. Another characteristic of the Finns was their reputation as good organizers and, above all, their ability to keep to a schedule. The press found examples of bad organization in earlier Championships, such as the mildew problems in the lodgings of some athletes during the 2002 European Championships in Munich and the delays in completing construction work for the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

Other assets promoted in the publicity materials included ecological efficiency, tough anti-doping tests and a skilled organizational staff. A comparison shows that assets were clearly mentioned more often than weaknesses were, the latter showing up partly as counter-arguments in newspaper stories (Figure 4).

Some thought Helsinki was clean, others thought it was not. The organizational staff was usually described as skilled, but some articles pointed out that the big decisions were made by others, above all, the IAAF, which made the local organization

Figure 4. Statements about the Weaknesses of the Organizers



appear weak. Finnish organizational skills were largely considered an asset, but some concerns about cooperation problems also surfaced. Olympic Stadium was seen as a problem throughout the preparation period, but its beauty was also mentioned in many articles. Worries that the city’s hotel capacity would not suffice were often linked to a belief that there would be an exceptionally large number of tourists, which was seen as something positive.

The roof of the stadium became a recurring topic as soon as Helsinki’s application had been approved. Had the Finnish application committee promised to roof the entire stadium? That is what the IAAF seems to have understood. Mr. Harri Holkeri, chairman of the application committee, admitted that “someone may have gotten the wrong idea” (Wallen 2002), but the final outcome was that only a part of the stadium was covered. The roof was also the biggest single investment in the Championships. The costs were shared by the City of Helsinki and the Finnish state. The original host city, London, had lost its hostship because it did not receive the state support it had promised the IAAF.

The new stadium roof was completed in the summer of 2005. Many believed that the World Championships would be the last big championships for the stadium, even with the new roof. Among them, Ilkka Kanerva, chairman of the organizing committee, said in *Suomenmaa* (26.7.2005) ”Given the present conditions we simply won’t be able to arrange another World Championship. Other applicants have arenas modern and big enough, which we don’t have, although of course, Helsinki Olympic Stadium built in 1938 is in many ways a beloved and nostalgic place to Finns”.

Cleanliness was an important issue, with pros and cons. Many thought that Finland’s entire reputation hinged on this issue. *Ilta-Sanomat* (13.7.2005), a tabloid, claimed in headlines that prominent places in Helsinki were “untidy and dirty”. Although the city invests in the cleanliness of public places, continued *Ilta-Sanomat*, littering in the parks and on the waterfronts of Helsinki again beat all records. One reason mentioned for littering were the “beer picnics” popular among young people.

In sum, it might be said that the Championship organization had a very strong say in what was written about the World Championships and what aspects were brought before the public. Often the press also neutralized and changed the statements of the Championship Bureau into general information and something of a prevailing truth. The papers seldom alluded to the fact that the Bureau had a strong interest in presenting the Championships as an attractive mega-event and that so-called truths were mostly just more or less well-grounded assumptions. From a gender perspective, one may also

note that the publicity was very male dominated. Eighty-one percent of those quoted in newspapers were men.

Pre-championship publicity “constructed a future” by defining the nature of the event before it even existed. This “future construction” became pronounced, particularly in situations where flimsy assumptions and opinions were turned into facts due to the pressure of news production and the habits of interpretation inherent in our culture.

The Foreign Press

The pre-Championship publicity often mentioned that the games would be seen by television viewers all over the world. After the event, the World Championship organization announced that 6.5 billion people in 187 countries had watched the games. This is an impressive figure. On the other hand, it is hard to judge its reliability, not least, because there is no information available to the public at least about the estimation methods. Yet it seems clear that the figure of 6.5 billion refers to sessions watched rather than to the number of spectators. This is something the Finnish press overlooked several times. As an example, we may assume that if each spectator watched the games 6.5 times on average, then one billion spectators would have seen the games. The figures were collected and computed by an international consulting firm, which worked on commercial rather than on scientific grounds. We also have reason to question in how many countries such data could be collected and what a viewing session is. Also, neither the estimated number of spectators nor the contents of newspapers say anything about how the public at large felt about the event. On the other hand, one good thing about a press analysis is that it tells how sports reporters have experienced the event.

Unlike the Finnish press, the international press focussed strongly on sports. Newspapers wrote about the success of athletes from their own countries or about the big athletic stars. Thus, the material suggests that the newspaper articles were (1) focussed on sports and especially top-level results and (2) strongly nationally oriented.

The foreign newspaper that wrote the most about the Championships was the Swedish daily, *Dagens Nyheter* (201 articles). The relatively extensive coverage by *Dagens Nyheter* was probably due to Sweden’s geographical proximity to Finland and to the success of the Swedish squad on the tracks. The German daily *Die Welt* published 60 articles on the Championships. In *Die Welt*, the IAAF World Championships competed for space mainly with the national German football league, whose tournament began on the same weekend as the Helsinki Championships. Football turned out to be the clear winner. The German newspaper also wrote about the 2006 FIFA Championships, which Germany was to host. The British paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, published 58 articles on the IAAF World Championships during the period studied. Athletics was not the number one topic on the sports pages in the UK during the period studied. An international cricket tournament received more coverage than the World Championships did. The English Premier League, whose season began on the same weekend as the IAAF Championships ended, also competed for space. Yet athletics was the big topic besides cricket and football during the week of the World Championships.

At exactly the same time that the IAAF World Championships were taking place in Helsinki, the popular national NHB baseball tournament was underway in Japan. This tournament sometimes took up half the sports pages of the Japanese daily *Asahi* and

clearly overshadowed the Helsinki Championships. Nevertheless, *Asahi* wrote something about the IAAF World Championships almost every day while the games were going on. The paper published 26 articles in all on the events. *USA Today* featured 14 articles on the IAAF World Championships. Its sports pages were overwhelmingly devoted to American football. Baseball and European football, or soccer, also occupied important positions in the U.S. media. Articles on the World Championships in Helsinki played only a minor part in *USA Today's* sports coverage. Attention was paid chiefly to the success of American athletes in the games, which made the first sports page only on two days, when U.S. athletes had been successful. The Russian daily *Izvestia* published only nine articles on the IAAF World Championships during the five-week period, and all were traditional sports reports. *Izvestia* usually devotes one page daily to sporting events. During the World Championships, roughly between one-quarter and one-half of the page concerned the games. Football events, that is, the Russian league, the Champions' League and the UEFA Cup, received roughly the same amount of space as the IAAF events.

The majority of the international news reports before the Championships focussed on the preparations by the national squad. A great proportion of the articles that appeared before the games were portraits of primarily national athletes, but there were also profiles of athletes from other countries. As the Championships approached, the number of articles grew, and during the games, there was daily reporting.

At least to judge from the newspapers, the Championships did not noticeably function as advertisements for Finnish tourism. Helsinki and Finland were not emphasized in the articles, which were mainly focussed on the sporting event. The host city and country were shown relatively little, typically in short stereotypical glimpses. Most news items were about the much-vaunted Finnish audience or the cold and rainy weather. It would not be too strong to say that often it was as though there was no Helsinki or Finland outside Olympic Stadium. Therefore, despite the wide publicity, I may join Green (2003) and question the importance of the sporting events as an advertisement for the city.

Also, the pictures accompanying the articles were conventional sports photographs and showed nothing characteristic of Finland or of Helsinki. Some pictures showed a glimpse of the audience or of the stadium. Others showed signs of the weather such as a wet track. A few articles used graphics to show Olympic Stadium and its wind conditions.

Nevertheless, some articles briefly mentioned the 1983 World Championships in Helsinki, Finnish athletes or the great interest in javelin throwing among Finns. Also, Finns were without exception described in a favourable tone. Several times the Finnish audience was referred to as fantastic, devoted and fair. "The Finnish audience loves the athletes. In a stadium almost sold-out every day you can feel the incredible enthusiasm with which every athlete is welcomed, regardless of nationality" (*Die Welt* 11.8.2005).

Finnish athletic history was represented by Lasse Virén, whose successful career was mentioned in several articles. Tommi Evilä, the long-jumper, was presented as the new hope for Finnish athletics and the one who saved Finland's reputation as a nation of athletes. Finland was described as the "Mecca" of javelin throwing and the javelin was portrayed as the national event of Finland, the practice and training methods of which have almost been turned into a science in Finland. The *Daily Telegraph* described the Finns' passion for the javelin, and two articles even called it fanaticism: "The javelin is

taught at school ... The natural assumption here is that every able-bodied male Finn can throw a javelin. Their fanaticism knows few bounds". (11.8.2005.) (Incidentally, this statement would hardly be endorsed by "every able-bodied Finn".)

During the World Championships in Helsinki in August of 2005, it was exceptionally rainy. Among comments on things other than sports, bad weather was mentioned most often. The articles on the weather struck a negative chord. Many articles were unhappy about delays, cancellations and poor performances caused by the bad weather. On 11 August, *Die Welt* wrote that it was clear the World Championships were being held in the wrong country. Olympic Stadium and other conditions were not worthy of the World Championships. The Finns "had cheated" to get the hostship: The organizers had promised a totally covered stadium and a professional set-up, but "promises have been broken in every respect, the stadium and other conditions are not worthy of a World Championship". On the other hand, the paper also mentioned that Helsinki got the Championships after London, which did not keep its promises to the IAAF either, had lost the hostship.

Daily Telegraph also expressed some bitter criticism: "Track and field was never intended to be a winter sport. Soaking athletes, including the hardnuts from the javelin throw, were walking around the packed Olympic Stadium like survivors from an air-sea rescue mission, clad in thermals and space blankets. Such conditions rarely make for a great sporting spectacle". (11.8.2005.)

As noted earlier, the City of Helsinki had hoped that the verdant and maritime settings along the marathon course would catch the attention of sports journalists (Lehtonen 2005). The Helsinki City Tourist & Convention Bureau even printed a brochure on the sites located by the marathon course, addressed above all to Japanese reporters, partly because the Japanese had hopes of winning a gold medal. Yet nothing at all was written about these things in *Asahi*. The main interest in one article on the marathon was focused, not on the beautiful setting, but on the profile and surface of the course: "There is less than 20 meters of difference in altitude, although there are many small ups and downs. Streets are narrow and there are numerous curves. The course is difficult, because the asphalt is rather hard and contains stones" (4.8.2005). Articles about the marathon mentioned that "temperatures in Helsinki don't rise above 20 degrees, even in summer". This was considered good for Japanese runners. The beauty of Helsinki along the marathon course was something the *Daily Telegraph's* reporter, too, missed. The only comments concerned practical matters such as differences in altitude and paved streets.

No articles whatsoever on Finland or tourism in Finland were published. Descriptions of Finland and the Finns were most common in the *Daily Telegraph* article about the Championships' opening session. Finland was described as an exotic place. Finns do funny kinds of sports from a British point of view, such as ski-jumping, ice hockey and javelin throwing, in all of which people shout, swear or fight. 'It is noise and self-expression the Finns crave. "I am here and I am alive" seems to be the sub-text to everything they do'. (8.8.2005.) The article described how the rather odd Finns bathe in saunas and lakes in winter and ski in artificial skiing tunnels in summer. Due to the winter darkness, statistics on suicide and alcoholism make sad reading, according to the reporter, but in summer there are "eighteen hours of daylight every day, and an overwhelming need to pack a year's worth of living – sport, culture, wine, women and song – into three months" (8.8.2005).

The IAAF World Championships had been announced as the world's largest sporting event. Judging from our material studied here, however, the Championships were the number one sports topic only in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*. In the other newspapers, the games were clearly overshadowed by national events, such as football (soccer), American football, baseball and cricket. Thus, the World Championships did not appear to be "the big sports event of the year", but rather one big event among others, national and international.

Sports journalists report on international events from a national perspective. The most important thing is the success and results of their own national squads. The perspective on the sports pages of the leading newspapers from the six countries studied here bears out this statement. There were differences mainly in the importance attributed to the World Championships. The more the newspapers wrote about the event, the more speculations there were about future success. Due to its patriotic aspect, sports news diverges most from the ideals of journalistic neutrality.

The city or the country in which the competitions took place was not essential. The findings also show that reports about the organizers were not necessarily very friendly. In the case of the Helsinki Championships, the weather prompted harsh criticism. *Die Welt* and the *Daily Telegraph* both painted a stereotyped picture of Finland as a country where it is cold even in the summer, without bothering to find out that the conditions that August of 2005 were very far from ordinary.

Conclusion

The Finnish press and the international press wrote about the 2005 IAAF World Championships in Helsinki in very different ways. However, a common feature among journalists from all countries was their national perspective. The Finnish press wrote especially about the organization and arrangements and what the event would mean in terms of international publicity and visibility for Finland and Helsinki. Other issues frequently mentioned were economy and security. The findings here clearly illustrate that a mega-sized sporting event like the World Championships means much more than just sports.

From a critical viewpoint, we might apply Lash and Urry's (1994: 13-15) concept of "emptying out". The important thing is not sporting events themselves but the way in which they are used. The original meaning of the contests is emptied out and replaced by new, secondary meanings.

Sports have traditionally been used to help build up a national identity. The present findings point toward nationality and commerciality, but also to the belief in the importance of visibility. The important thing is not the sports contests but how they can be used for marketing. The reason mentioned most often for organizing the World Championships was the international visibility they would bring to Helsinki and to Finland. The international visibility was also the aspect that received the most support when people were interviewed about the advantages of the Championships. This would suggest that there is a firm belief among reporters and citizens in the crucial elements of the attention economy.

However, foreign sports journalists did not come to Helsinki to support the local tourist business. Their perspective was strongly national – perfectly in line with traditional sports journalism. In this respect, the approach was strikingly similar in the newspapers

of all six countries studied. The important thing was the success of the national squad. Articles were also written about the international stars. The sports journalists contributed thereby to the birth of new national and international sporting heroes.

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