

THE OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY IN EUROPE:

A time-space for the European
public sphere to appear?

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Abstract

The Olympic torch relay on the European continent, since its ignition in Olympia, until its departure from Paris to San Francisco, USA, offers a textbook case to examine, concretely, the emergence of an European public opinion, verily of an European public sphere, even though temporary. Organizers of the Beijing Olympic Games conceived the Olympic torch relay as a global media event. The reference frame was ready-made for the media, besides stakeholders of the Games. The outbreak of the civil society on the media stage, widely supported in the European countries by the public opinions, imposed another reading of the event.

The Olympic torch relay, as a prelude to the Beijing Games, indeed crystallized the criticisms towards the Chinese regime. Initiated by journalists to the heart of the media coverage of the event, and giving simultaneously to see the work of censorship taking place during the broadcasting of the event, this contesting amplified the diverse initiatives carried by European citizens. As a consequence, for the European media, it was all the less possible not to report recurring demonstrations during the relay, so that the networks of citizens invested the Web to spread them widely.

This exceptional configuration contributed, during the transit time of the torch relay, to the representation in the media of a public European sphere and a European citizenship all the more legitimate as they were facing a Power and its institutions of control, embodied in the "Men In Blue". As a consequence, China could only get down to the construction of an internationalized Chinese public opinion, which for lack of public sphere could take shape for the television channels in the world, the time-space of a globalized demonstration, on April 19th, 2008.

Keywords

Olympic Games; China; Torch Relay; *Media*; Europe; Public Sphere.

The Olympic torch relay was widely covered by the media in western countries. The incidents that happened in Olympia during the ceremony of lightening, then in different European cities, indeed aroused an expectation and a curiosity, as well as numerous discussions.

The intervention of RSF (Reporters Sans Frontières) during this ceremony, gave the first interpretive frame of the Beijing Olympics games. Associations that support human rights and public freedoms, as well as defenders of free Tibet, had announced their presence along the torch relay: it was well attested that they had planned to organize actions in order to call out to the public opinion and the political leaders.

The discussion that relates to the participation of athletes to the games, and to the participation of the representatives of western states in the ceremonies, was very lively, from the first incidents in Olympia.

This context, which prepared the way to the torch in Paris, indisputably reinforced the interest that French people expressed for the event. This interest was quite similar in others European countries. Then, how to explain this global phenomenon of protest to which we were witnesses? Can one infer the existence of a European public sphere?

First, we would like here to present a few elements in order to understand how the torch relay, as a global media event, has been counteracted.

Then we will discuss the perception of the existence of a “European” public sphere linked to the expression of public opinions during this relay: we will point out some elements showing its transient and fragmented structure.

This analysis is based on a *corpus* of reportage and features broadcasted on French TV channels and on electronic newspapers, photos and on-line videos from France, Germany, Great Britain and Spain. These documents were collected from the 1st of March to the 8th of August, which was the first day of the Beijing Olympic Games. Some of these focuses more specifically on the western part of the torch relay, which benefits from a high level of *media* coverage.

I. The torch relay: a media narrative

If we consider the torch relay as a media narrative³⁵, we may ask ourselves: *how do the media tell the story of the relay in the main European countries?* Indeed the storytelling was coherent and converging.

The *media* delivered a homogeneous vision of the torch relay.

As a few examples from France, Germany, Great Britain or Spain show, the description of the torch relay is, from one country to another, almost similar. *Media* share and broadcast the same images: the globalization of the press agencies partly explains it, but, moreover, the framing of the relay is a lot alike because at each stage, the events that occurred were similar.

Different countries, different websites, different press agencies, and same images

The *media* coverage focused on same issues.

The key words of the papers and features are: repressive order, censorship, and human rights, Tibet.

The common feeling, as *media* described it, is that the China's Olympics involves a political and military organization and a repressive order, of which the democratic countries suffer too long during the torch relay.

Repression:

The news is focusing on the huge police plan that has been set up for the torch relay, and on its negative consequences. For instance, journalists mention the fact that no popular celebration can occur because the spectators are strictly contained along the journey. The presence of police forces goes with violence against protesters (many of them where peaceful) and against journalists. The *media* coverage gives the feeling that the public demonstrations of dissenting opinions are declared as illegal, and that public freedom of speech and expression is restricted.

Censorship:

The *media* underline the fact that Chinese televisions never broadcasted the torch relay *live*: In Olympia, the ceremony of lightning was censored on Chinese networks,

35. See Marc Lits, who defines the media narratology as the study of dynamic stories or narratives, which are considered in their process of mediation. Researchers from the *Observatoire du Récit Médiatique* develop an analysis of the great stories that our societies build through their media.

and, in Paris, once again, the media take much of censorship and show the truncated images that were broadcasted on Chinese TV channels.

Chinese policy in Tibet:

It appears as a symbol of the negation of civil liberties and human rights that prevails in China. The presence along the torch relay of defenders of free Tibet besides protesters that were marching for freedom of press and public freedoms in general, gives some consistency to this perception. The *media* insists on the role of western civil society that is allowed to demonstrate, while Tibetan demonstrations are crushed and Tibetan people arrested or put in jail.

These facts and reporting, substantiate the perception that China is a totalitarian regime, which, all along the torch relay, sells abroad its political model.

The media stages the opposition between western society and Chinese society

The *media* narrative relies on the opposition between eastern and western countries. This opposition is embodied in the “men in Blue” who represent an archetype of impersonal, alien people, some kind of robots or clones. This group is compared to individuals who are diverse even though they’re forming a “civil” society that is considered as the symbol of western societies.

The torch relay gives, thus, the opportunity to express a conflict of values, and points out different ways to “build a community”. For example, the Chinese conception of order (and disorder) differs from the western one. The principle of freedom of public displays collides with the police intervention during the relay.

So, which order shall be kept? The western democratic order, that goes along with the expression of conflict? Or the Chinese order that doesn’t tolerate the vision and the presence of any opposition? These different definitions of the public order send us back to antagonistic conceptions of citizenship in the public sphere.

The torch relay leads also to a reconsideration of the Chinese legitimacy to support the Olympic values. The political nature of the regime partially explains this, but it is also a matter of hierarchy of values. Could the Olympic values, be defended by a country that disregards the human rights? Could the Olympic order be situated above the democratic values on which the western countries rely?

This issue was questioned because it was an important concern of the humanitarian associations.

II. The torch relay:

a global operation of communication that has been counteracted

When we consider the Olympic torch relay as global media event, and if we admit that it was conceived so, we notice that the principles of its organization and the political aims of its promoters, in the specific context of the Tibetan affairs, provide the main mechanism of its subversion. Why? How?

We can suggest 3 hypotheses: because of the intrinsic characteristics of the event; because of a tense geopolitical context; because some stakes, which are specific to the *media*, converged with the expectations of public opinion.

1. The torch relay: some characteristics

The torch relay is a worldwide trip

The Olympic flame was carried through 130 cities of the 5 continents, and covered a distance of 137 000 kilometres: it was the longest and the highest trip for the flame that reached the mount Chomolungma (Mount Everest). The route was supposed to be, as the silk road of the past, a link between west and east. This trip was also an opportunity to bring the flame into different countries, mostly Asian countries, which had never seen it before. This is related to the slogan "Light the flame, share the dream". In a way, the torch relay, as a prelude to the games, gives a first reading of the event.

The torch relay is a long lasting event

During four months of peregrination, the flame travelled outside of China from the 24th of March to the 29th of April 2008, then inside China, from May 2nd to August 8th.

This period is long enough to let the opponents of the Games and of the Chinese regime organize their protest. The duration of the trip is convenient to build media narratives and to "solidify" the reading of the event. It gives time enough to set up some recurrent characters, to create archetypes, to define social roles, to focus on political problems: in a few words, to frame and to stage the event.

The torch relay is a global communication project

The torch relay is designed as a part, a chip of the global media event that the Olympic Games are. The relay is a concrete declension of the key concept of the Beijing Olympic Games, "One world, one dream", and it is supposed to create a link be-

tween continents, nations and people. China symbolically associates countries and people that are not usually involved in the Olympic celebration: the flame is a simple and easily understandable symbol, and people around the world are just invited to “light the flame, share the dream”.

The torch relay was also a big political issue. One of the goals of China was to build unity around the event, in foreign countries as in China. The Beijing Olympic Games had to turn into China’s Olympics and to become the games of Chinese people, then of the whole world. Thus, with the torch relay, China aims at establishing its position and its role in the world.

Before anyone, China has changed the torch relay into a political event because it was helpful for its communication. Many associations and people in the world shared the perception of this political dimension: obviously, it leads to a political response and to convergent actions in the public sphere.

Indeed, the link that is established on behalf of the ideals and values of the games is double-edged. Critical public opinions will support these values; each protest will nourish the following one and create a kind of contagion of the opinions. The torch relay, which was widely broadcasted by the *media*, benefits from high audience ratings, and as a consequence, protesters gain a global audience too.

Finally, this project of communication, launched at a planetary level, will be turned over against its promoters.

2. A specific geopolitical context

The torch relay takes place in a very unfavourable context from a Chinese point of view.

The Tibetan question acts like a catalyst. The crackdown in Tibet is the beginning of a huge movement of protest against the Chinese regime, and of questioning the Chinese legitimacy to organize the games. For most of the protesters, there is a contradiction between the Olympic values and the nature of the Chinese political regime. The difficulties that journalists encounter to inform their audience about the situation in Tibet increases the feeling of manipulation and of untruth.

China in the world: is China a super power that jeopardizes the planet?

In European countries, the *media* usually describe the Chinese super power as a danger from many points of view: economic competition is hard, the rules are not

always observed (fakes, etc), and this is a threat for the welfare of European countries and for the western hegemony. At a political level, Chinese interests override the democratic model: human rights, freedom of the press, civil liberty etc., are not ensured.

The feeling in France was that of an undisputable Chinese supremacy: the management of the torch relay gets away from the authority of the French state, and defies the sovereignty of France. The opposition between a world economic power – the one of China – and a weak national political power reappears: and the domination of economy on politics collides with the French representation of sovereignty.

3. Some stakes that are specific to the *media*

The relay provides a common deadline – the Beijing Olympics, and a shared agenda.

Considering that point, the media can initiate their narrative and set up an anticipatory interpretative frame of the event, since, by metonymy, the torch relay symbolizes the Olympic Games.

The torch relay is a predictable event because it is a scheduled event and that provides a homogeneous space-time. At each stage, media enrich the narrative, introduce some variation in the story with specific features, and actualize the initial version of the event while respecting its global unity. The torch relay is like a TV series with episodes, bringing some uncertainty, and finally leading to the apotheosis: there is suspense (will the torch be switched off?, etc.) and all this arouses the interest of people who are waiting for incidents and for unexpected facts. This configuration is ideal: the media can manage unplanned events within a scheduled event.

The torch relay as an operational testing for the media before the Games

Media networks know that they will probably encounter some difficulties in China during the games, as it was the case when they tried to inform about events in Tibet. The torch relay gives them an opportunity to reassert their role and their position. The journalists remind the Chinese authorities of the respect of principles such as freedom of press. The media coverage of the relay is an amplifier for these claims. Journalists anticipate difficulties for their job during the games and they try to obtain some guarantees: the free movement of people, the possibility of getting in touch with Chinese people, etc.

The second point is that the credibility of journalists as professionals is at stake with the media coverage of the torch relay. They must forestall the critics that focus on their indulgent reports of the games.

Media can't stand back when more and more information and initiatives are broadcasted on the web apart from their own networks; nor can they stay in the mainstream and adhere to an official vision of Olympic institutions. If they do so, they risk to miss the expectations of their audience and to lose it.

The media heavily invested in the torch relay coverage during the first period of the trip. Their attention got weaker as soon as the probability of incidents was reduced or when the suspense wore off. The media coverage of the relay, indeed, focused on western countries: as soon as the torch reached China, little information was broadcasted except during the Mount Everest ascension, the crossing of Tibetan areas and of the earthquake zone.

The narrative of the torch relay was filtered by the Tibetan situation and the human rights issue.

III. A transient public sphere for the expression of the opinions

1. Global media event? Worldwide public opinion?

So far, can one speak about a globalized public opinion?

When some journalists initiate the contesting of the torch relay, they made it possible more widely. From that moment media were, in a way, involved next to the citizens as they contribute, simultaneously, to the visibility of public opinion, and to the creation of a global discourse about the event. The trip by a chain reaction, contributes to create this perception of a unified public opinion. The ritual of protesters in front of national police forces and of Chinese military forces, repeated itself. Thus, the interpretive frame of the event becomes more and more coherent because the images, the features, the narratives are converging gradually. When world press agencies provide photos and videos quasi simultaneously on the web, on newspapers, on TV networks, the feeling of a European or western public sphere appears. Public opinion, shaped by the circumstances, is materialized through the images and the narrative of the event that the media broadcast.

People, mainly, are reacting against an event that they consider as a symbol of what is occurring elsewhere, but they also criticize the consequences of this event here and now. This phenomenon of protest is strengthened by the fact that people reject the policy of a country, which is politically, culturally and geographically different. The torch relay and the demonstrations along, give indeed the opportunity to the media to represent, to embody this difference and to shape a western vision of China.

Media, then, rely on stereotypes (men in blue vs. civil society, etc...) to symbolize the opposition between east and west, totalitarianism and democracy, repression and freedom, uniformity and diversity. They remove the contradictions inside China and between European countries: the vision, however, will become subtler when the Chinese government will briefly open the country to the western media in order to cover the consequences of the earthquake. But one ceases speaking about the flame as soon as it penetrates in China.

The globalization of public sphere remains a transient phenomenon, *ad hoc*.

To face this representation of a “collective” character composed with defenders of human rights and liberties, China had many difficulties. After the Paris episode of the relay, which was highly chaotic and negative for its image, China had the measure of the protest, and launched into the battle of public opinion.

2. The battle of public opinions

Is a Chinese public opinion possible? Believable?

This question appears when it became obvious that Chinese people disapproved the demonstration all along the relay and began to show it. The difficulty is ontological: the nature of the Chinese political system makes the existence of a Chinese public opinion unconvincing, from a western point of view. The perception of the majority is that the Chinese opinion is manipulated and controlled by the Chinese authorities.

Therefore, for China, the stakes were to shape a believable Chinese public opinion, to make it visible in the media and to build an alternative discourse. There is a paradox, here, because any autonomous organization is usually regarded as a real threat for the Chinese system. The Chinese communist party is wary of spontaneous demonstrations because they mean that the mechanisms of control that the party set up are not able to solve dysfunctions.

A tested know-how in the field of propaganda

The Chinese regime benefits a high experience in propaganda techniques. The first step was to organize counter-demonstrations: many Chinese people were attending the torch relay and some incidents occurred. Then, pro-Chinese demonstrations were organized on the 19th of April in Paris, London, Manchester, Berlin and Vienna to denounce the misinformation of western media about Tibet and the calls for the boycott of the Beijing Olympics.

In Paris, according to AFP: “Many demonstrators wore tee-shirts, with inscriptions “One China, One family” and “Let us make Olympic Games a bridge not a wall”. They distributed booklets to bystanders in the aim “to know the real China”. The same day, demonstrations were organized in five towns in China. They aimed in particular the supermarkets Carrefour, very present in China, to protest against the attitude of France on Tibet. In Los Angeles (US) and in Nagano (Japan), protests and incidents occurred on the 19th and on the 20th of April.

All these demonstrations were well coordinated. The feeling was that China government and embassies had planned, then organized demonstrations that were far from the western conception of free expression of individual opinions.

The *media* as a battlefield

The counter offensive in the media was the second step. Chinese authorities took advantage of all types of media: TV, radio, newspapers and online media. A huge campaign was developed on Internet: videos and blogs were set up to show the Chinese standpoint. This staging of the Chinese public opinion relied on a strong nationalist feeling and was going with charges of partiality in the coverage of the torch relay. Reciprocal charges were brought by western media about censure in Chinese media and propaganda and manipulation of the Chinese community abroad. Thus it became a conflict of legitimacy.

A conflict of legitimacy

From now on, the western public opinion was facing the Chinese one. The staging of the public opinions was organized in a symmetrical device: it consists of a double opposition, and the roles were reversed. EAST is opposed to WEST at the geographical, cultural and political levels (democracy against totalitarianism for example). The Diasporas face each other: Tibetan Diaspora vs. Chinese Diaspora. This opposition exists inside China as well as outside China: the torch relay was an amplifier of what was going on inside China.

This divide (them / we) operates in the Chinese communication as well as in western media like a positive/negative film: western protesters against China, Chinese protesters against Western countries; Tibetan protesters against Chinese people and reciprocally.

In this battle for public opinion, China had to disarm the critics and to make sure that the games will go smoothly; citizens, associations, NGO wanted to write down in the media agenda the question of Tibet and human rights. Media and journalists had to keep their freedom, and the control on the information they will have to broadcast.

As a conclusion, the torch relay provides an opportunity to examine how a global event can lead to the emergence of a public sphere that relies on a public opinion involved in common debate and actions.

The first remark is that this public sphere is fragmented and is build up from an object of which content and duration are restricted. Thus a public sphere may be formed because of a temporary convergence of interests between media, states and civil societies. But, this phenomenon supposes that the event is partly external to the societies which receive it, so that public opinions may more easily be convergent to criticize the event.

We must also notice that the public discussion between pro and anti Chinese policy, did not take place on the field of argumentative debate: the confrontation remains symbolic when demonstrators are clashing in the public space. Indeed, the opinions of the Chinese mainland people or of the Chinese Diaspora, considered as a whole, globally, do not reach the western public sphere because they were *a priori* discredited.

This may be one of the reasons of the huge investment of Chinese individuals on the web: they have to communicate on what must appear as a personal opinion because they have to be considered as individuals, not as a group. In this configuration of communication, only then they can compete with western opinions on line.

The web appears as a bypass (a shunt) of the traditional public sphere shaped by newspapers, radio and TV.

The traditional techniques of propaganda have to move on the web because they can't be used, by China, on western mass media. Light backfires on the web; produces a mass effect and diffuses a high volume of online contributions; stages the mobilization of the Chinese students living in western countries with videos, etc... these are some of these techniques which were massively applied during this period.

But this public sphere remains transient and related to a specific configuration. Its apparition is linked to the existence of a conflict of values, and to the convergence of diverse interests: the ones of the media that have to reaffirm their position between opinion and institutions, the ones of countries involved in a struggle for hegemony, and the ones of citizens or ethnic minorities. This hegemony is not only economic: the battle has moved on the field of ideology and of culture through the media. That is why the main stake was for China to build or restore an image, which remains still negative. This could explain also why the media were highly invested by the protagonists.

With the torch relay, China experienced as far as possible the western media devices: forgetting the institutional speeches, China started to mobilize the mass communication resources on the Western field; she played the chart of her public opinion in-house but also outside, in the Western countries.

This strategy was also at work during the Olympic Games: thousand of Chinese people were involved in various communication tasks and massively invested on Internet communication.

The torch relay was also, in a way, a test for the communication of China.

More generally, this case study invites us to deepen the analysis of relations between event and public sphere, defined as a space of mediation, of communication and of participation.

The public sphere is also the place where individuals take part in a political act: they get involved through communication, by civic or militant participation. Is a mediated public sphere, nowadays possible without a specific event?

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