

The Olympic Channel: insights on its distinctive role in Tokyo 2020



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The Olympic Channel was launched after the Rio 2016 Olympics Closing Ceremony to deliver “a continuous exposure of Olympic sports and athletes beyond the Olympic Games period and help create anticipation while providing opportunities to ‘re-live the experience’ after the Games.” For nearly five years, the Olympic Channel has functioned as a multiplatform destination, featuring its own website and mobile app, as well as multiple social media handles. Following the eighth recommendation of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 (“Grow digital engagement with people”), the Olympic Channel became a section of the Olympics.com website, which currently serves as a comprehensive digital destination for Olympic-themed content and news. In light of this recent development, it is worth investigating the role and output of the Olympic Channel in Tokyo 2020.

A diverse menu aimed at supplementing and enriching viewers’ experience

Before the start of the Games, the Olympic Channel provided global audiences with live coverage of the torch relay, which traveled through 859 municipalities across all 47 prefectures before it arrived at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo on July 23. Given that during the Olympic Games, live broadcasts of competitions are available from Rights-Holding Broadcasters (RHBs), the Olympic Channel has focused on offering fans a 24/7 stream of distinctive content aimed at supplementing their viewing experience.

During the 17 days of the Games, the Olympic Channel delivered 408 hours of original content, drawn from an extensive library of original programming that comprises series and documentaries. This library has experienced remarkable growth since the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. In March 2018, the Olympic Channel offered 50 series (with a total of 653 episodes). In Tokyo 2020, the number of original series had increased to 107, featuring a total of 1,062 episodes. Beyond offering a regular programming schedule, a redesigned interface allows users to freely browse content in 11 different categories: #StrongerTogether, Films, Road to Tokyo, Inspired by Friendship, In Pursuit of Excellence, Never Give Up, With Respect, Olympic Memory Lane, Together As One, Around the Globe, and Through the Years.

The Olympic Channel’s original content capitalizes on creative storytelling, in-depth research, and unique perspectives regarding Olympic sports. Through its extensive portfolio, the Olympic Channel offers many opportunities to transcend the nationalized approach and lacking diversity often found in sports media.

Beyond showcasing high-profile sports, the Olympic Channel provides wider visibility to minority sports, which usually remain off the radar in mainstream media, such as rowing, fencing,

climbing, table tennis, pentathlon, or weightlifting. Series such as *By Her Rules*, *Shakti: India’s Super Women*, or *Her Game* present empowering stories of female athletes, both focusing on their lives and challenges on and off the field. Alongside different series, the documentary *The Invisible Bond* lends space to the inspiring achievements of athletes with disabilities. The profiles of refugee sportsmen and sportswomen are also raised through productions such as *Camps to Champs* and *Taking Refuge: Target Tokyo 2020*. Overall, by embodying diversity and inclusiveness, the channel is instrumental in advancing the bye-law to Rule 48 of the Olympic Charter, which states that “the media coverage of the Olympic Games should spread and promote the principles and values of Olympism.”

The Olympic Channel’s productions also help relate the past and present. By blending contemporary and archival footage, originals such as *Time Machine*, *Legends Live On*, and the recently released *The Distance* allow audiences to revisit iconic moments in Olympic history, such as Naoko Takahashi’s journey to gold in Sydney 2000. A nod to Japan’s past and present is also accomplished by highlighting the rising Japanese Olympic hopefuls (*Heroes of the future*), the traditional festivals in the country (*Matsuri Japan*), and providing a daily behind-the-scenes look at the current Games (*Hello Tokyo*).

After August 9, the Olympic Channel turned its attention to Tokyo 2020 Replays. Confirming the Olympic Channel’s position as a place “Where the Games Never End”, the day after the Olympic flame extinguished, audiences were able to engage with content from 16 different sports, including taekwondo, shooting, archery, synchronized swimming and equestrian.

Concluding thoughts

As shown in Tokyo 2020, the Olympic Channel plays a distinctive role within the Olympic media ecosystem. This section of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)’s website allows audiences to engage with a broad range of Olympic-themed content that is non-rivalrous with the live, deferred, and on-demand coverage offered by RHBs. By lending additional opportunities for nourishing citizens’ understanding and appreciation of the Olympics, the platform contributes to “strengthening the uniqueness and universality of the Olympic Games,” highlighted as the first recommendation of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5. To sustain and reinforce its position, the Olympic Channel should further create high-quality content to relive the best moments of Tokyo 2020, engage with users in the run-up to the forthcoming events and experiment with innovative formats. Additional opportunities to expand the already wider lens of the Olympic Channel include enhancing collaboration with National Organizing Committees (NOCs) and International Federations (IFs).