LEISURE STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2019.1698648

Event bidding and new media activism

David McGillivray[a], John Lauermann[b] and Daniel Turner[a]

[a]School of Business and Creative Industries, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, UK; [b]Medgar Evers College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article we draw upon three case studies of American cities bidding to host the Summer Olympic Games to explore the role media, particularly new media, plays in the formation of anti-bid protest movements. Using data gathered from in-depth interviews with leaders of several activist campaigns and a content analysis of related websites and social media accounts, the paper demonstrates the increasing role new media plays in enabling resistant movements to form and articulate messages oppositional to boosterist coverage of mega sport event bids. However, it also highlights the limits of such new media activism in terms of both reach and capacity to effect change in isolation. Rather, the paper demonstrates that new media activitsm is at its most potent when it links and interacts with other actors, including legacy media outlets. The paper therefore concludes by highlighting the need for connectivity to both legacy media and physical acts of resistance and protest in order to generate meaningful impact and generate change.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 October 2019
Accepted 21 November 2019

KEYWORDS
Event bidding; new media activism; Boston 2024; Olympics; protest

Introduction

In recent years, public concern over the role played by mega sport events (MSEs) in skewing urban development priorities (Broudehoux & Sanchez, 2015; Müller, 2015), violating human rights (Horne, 2018), and providing the environment for corruption and poor governance to flourish (Hover, Dijk, Breedveld, & van Eekeren, 2016) has increased. This concern has been accompanied by increased evidence of protest and dissent around bidding, planning and delivery processes for the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup, in particular (Lauermann, 2015; Lauermann & Vogelpohl, 2017; McGillivray & Turner, 2017). Expressions of protest and dissent have gone together with the hosting of MSEs for decades, but these have primarily been concerned with the planning and delivery stages, as opposed to the bid phase itself. However, since the mid-late 2000s, there has been a growth in activist activity around the bid process for MSEs, which has led to a reduction in candidate cities bidding for the Olympic Games between 2022 and 2028 as well as the FIFA World Cup of 2026. The increased visibility of bid activism has coincided with the emergence of new media platforms which have been used successfully to garner support, mobilise opposition and amplify dissent to MSE bids.

In this paper, we draw upon three case studies surrounding bids from American cities for the Summer Olympic games and consider the importance of the media in MSE bid activism, reflecting on the role of 'legacy' media, historically, and the role (and limits) of new media in the professionalisation of opposition that now accompanies these mega spectacles. We also consider the extent to which bid protests interact with more conventional forms of opposition, making use of the urban

CONTACT Daniel Turner Daniel.Turner@uws.ac.uk School of Business and Creative Industries, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, UK

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here.

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

landscape to express discontent. The paper is guided by a desire to question the role new media plays in protest movements surrounding peripatetic sporting mega-event bids and how such new media interacts with both legacy media and other forms of protest and activism. The paper demonstrates that new media activism plays an increasingly prominent role in the protest movements surrounding sporting mega-events. Increasingly, with each bid cycle, such activism plays a part earlier in the protest movement and has greater reach when employed. However, as the cases examined here also highlight, despite this amplified role and reach, such activism is most effective when integrated with both traditional legacy media and as part of a broader campaign of protest and resistance.

Legacy media, boosterism and bidding

Historically, the mainstream media has played an important role in making the case for a city or nation bidding to host one of the world's MSEs. The broadcast and print media worked closely with the civic boosters responsible for conceiving of the bids to get the message out early, with good news stories focused on the economic benefits of city X hosting the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup. Walmsley (2008) has suggested that bid committees understand that influencing media coverage is arguably the most effective way to influence public opinion on the value of a bid. Furthermore, Waitt (2001) has suggested that the media played a significant role in the 'propaganda exercise' of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games bid, seeking to imbue social consensus through the vehicle of spectacle. He highlighted how the promotional campaign accompanying the bid resembled a product launch, backed by mainstream media 'partners'. Lenskyj (2010, 2012), a long-term critic of what she calls the 'Olympic Industry', has also highlighted how the 'terms of the debate' are framed by Olympic boosters and their media partners, leaving those most affected by the proposed bid invisible and powerless. She holds the mainstream media culpable for signing up to support bids, creating friction between two roles:

> as objective reporters of the Olympic Games and as participants in 'Olympic Spirit' promotional events. Similar conflicts existed when major television networks, newspapers and sport magazines paid millions of dollars for the honour of calling themselves Olympic suppliers, donors, sponsors and/or rights holders (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 376).

In signing up to 'back the bid', mainstream media partners have compromised their ability to represent the views of dissenting voices, including activists, human rights defenders, community representatives and critical elected representatives (Shaw, 2008). Securing the rights to exclusive coverage of the MSE itself has led some mainstream media organisations to prioritise potential circulation or viewership increases over scrutiny of bid promotional claims. In a limited-option media environment, securing the support of a national or regional broadcaster or high circulation newspaper provided bid committees with a powerful mechanism to frame the narrative, emphasising opportunities over threats and creating, as McGillivray and Turner (2017) highlight, a near hegemonic narrative that the bid in question is a 'good thing' As Pavoni (2015) has suggested, civic boosters require event-generation to arouse interest in the host locale for having an event, but they also need event-neutralisation to avoid reputationally-damaging expressions of opposition and protest. Managing the message through partnerships with the mainstream media certainly provides an easy route to event generation, represented in the now ubiquitous 'Back the Bid' campaigns. Having media partners contribute to event generation also acts as a neutralising force as fewer column inches, or broadcast minutes are given over to dissenting voices, in what McGillivray and Turner (2017) call a 'denial of discursive space'.

One of the noticeable outcomes of the mainstream media denying discursive space to oppositional interests is that their impact has been limited, in respect of their ability to prevent MSE bids from going ahead. The diverse tapestry of interest groups, including those representing women's rights, anti-poverty movements, disability rights and housing and civil liberties protections has

sought to contest MSE bid narratives but with limited success. Watchdogs and anti-Olympics committees have been in existence since at least the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico, though they have tended to be formed once the bid is won, impacting on their ability to bring about much change. As Shaw (2008) suggests with reference to the unsuccessful No Vancouver 2010 movement, once the bid is successful the space for meaningful opposition is much more constrained. The mainstream media has, at times, provided a space where oppositional voices have been heard in event bidding campaigns – but the time and resources given over to dissenting voices has, historically, been much less.

There are at least two principal reasons why the relationship between oppositional movements and the mainstream media has been unsuccessful. The first relates to the quantity of coverage and the second to the timing of protest movements. In terms of quantity of coverage, in a pre-internet and social media age, there were simply fewer platforms available for oppositional movements to get their message out to a wider public. Control of the news agenda predominantly lay with broadcasters and the print media, who were courted by prospective bid committees from the inception phase. In terms of the temporal dimension, oppositional movements were often simply too late to (oppose) the party, often because those pro-growth coalitions initiating bids developed their thinking and garnered support from business and government away from the public glare. The significant work in establishing a bid committee prior to a mediatised launch and formal statement of the intent to bid itself creates a momentum which then becomes difficult to stop through subsequent protest. This is one of the reasons that Boykoff (2014) calls for oppositional groups to transition from a 'moment of movements' (often post-bid) to a 'movement of movements', where the politics come earlier – at the bid stage – if MSEs boosters are to be effectively held to account for their plans. In the case of the bid process for the 2024 Olympic Games, in particular, it appears that the idea of the politics coming earlier was evident, aided by the emergence of new media platforms that alter the power relations between bid promoter and potential audience. It is to this new trend that the paper now turns.

Changing the modus operandi: locally rooted, globally mediated

Despite the conditions for public protest around MSEs being constrained, historically, since 2008 there has been a noticeable increase in both the number of oppositional campaigns in operation and, crucially, their modus operandi. Additionally, there is both a global and local element to these intimations of opposition that require further consideration. At the macro/global level, the legitimacy of MSEs (the Olympics and the World Cup, in particular) in achieving positive political, economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts has been subject to intense critique, since the 2008 Summer Games were awarded to Beijing (Boykoff, 2014; Coaffee, 2015; Raco, 2014). Central to this trend is a growing body of evidence, in academic, policy and activist/independent media circles, of the adverse effects generated by MSEs for a variety of, often vulnerable, publics (see, for example, O'Bonsawin, 2010).

Of principal concern to those people who oppose event bids is the false premise on which support is secured, the under-estimated costs and over-estimated benefits referred to by Whitson and Horne (2006). Prospective event hosts submit a bid book detailing the outcomes the sanctioning body can expect should they be successful in their application to host. Many commentators have likened the bid book for MSEs, in particular, to be a work of fiction (Müller, 2015), a glossy prospective for what a host might wish to do to transform its urban fabric and economic ambitions. And yet, back the bid campaigns invariably set out to secure public support without providing full information to those who will bear the brunt of the associated costs.

In recent years there has also been a change in the way opposition, dissent or protest towards event bids has been organised and mobilised, which is having some potentially significant impacts on the bidding process itself (what awarding bodies require) and on the practices of prospective host bidding teams, thereafter. No longer is it possible for a potential host (in the advanced liberal democracies, at

least) to attract powerful influencers externally with promises of extravagant spectacles without having to account for this investment to an increasingly sceptical, and social media savvy, public.

One important change is in the emergence of what we call a 'new media activism' in relation to MSE bids, seeking to extend the reach and effects of protest or oppositional movements. In terms of reach, the barriers to entry are much lower for campaigners in a new social media-oriented environment than in its legacy media counterpart. While Shaw (2008) bemoaned the power of the Olympic frame to prevent opponents from securing airtime on mainstream media outlets during the Vancouver 2010 bid process, the availability of new media platforms including Facebook and Twitter now provide near barrier-free access to audiences, unimpeded by strict editorial guidelines, political and commercial interests. That said, social media does not sit in a vacuum, separated from its 'mainstream' rival. Rather, broadcast, print and online media outlets and are now deeply entangled with social media, informing and influencing the agenda from within. Bid media partners still, in theory, dilute the effects of new media activism through integrated multi-platform campaigns.

In terms of effects, the influence of new media activism on MSE bid processes stems from several shifts evident in recent years. On the one hand, as legacy media (especially local newspapers) lose market share, MSE boosters have lost what was historically an important bullhorn. On the other hand, new media fosters new kinds of journalistic relationships which activists can exploit, as detailed in the forthcoming case study of Boston. The involvement of non-traditional media outlets like Around the Rings (ATR), GamesBid.com, Games Monitor, and the Counter Olympics Network also contributes to a growing body of critical commentary on bid campaigns that finds its way to mainstream media outlets.

Moreover, the increasing presence of bodies with an interest in human rights and related issues, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights, and Transparency International further strengthens the case of oppositional movements and activists in effecting change around the bid process. These actors now frequently combine to draw attention to potential human rights abuses in prospective bid cities or nations and lobby governments, awarding bodies and others to hold bidders to account. Crucially, they have become increasingly effective at media monitoring and applying pressure through concentrated campaigning strategies. Though the influence of these campaigns is difficult to assess, there is already some evidence that the main MSE actors are being forced to adapt their policies and practices because of the pressure exerted by advocacy organisations using a blend of legacy and new media platforms. Part of the bid process for the 2026 World Cup was a requirement to bid nations to include a human rights policy and provide governmental contractual guarantees akin to those related to financial matters. Advocacy organisations have also successfully lobbied FIFA to produce a policy that strengthens the protection of human rights defenders in host nations for the World Cup.

Case study: US new media bid activism

In the remainder of this paper, we assess the growing role of new media activism by analysing the recent history of anti-Olympic activism in the United States. The US has a long Olympic bidding history. Since 1901, American cities have bid on Summer or Winter Games 57 times (and have hosted nine), making the US the most frequent bidder in the history of the modern Olympics. Not surprisingly, there is also a long history of anti-Olympic protest in American cities (Burbank, Heying, & Andranovich, 2000, Cottrell & Nelson, 2011). Lenskyj (2006), in an early piece on 'alternative media' highlights how since the turn of the millenium, such protests have engaged with the web as a tool for holding those in positions of power surrounding the Games to account. However, it is with the most recent American bids in Chicago (failed bid for the 2016 Games), Boston (cancelled bid for the 2024 Games), and Los Angeles (successful bid for the 2028 Games) that new media has played a significant role, making for an interesting case study. This recent activist history has included innovation in protest tactics, in which new media activism has supported new forms of coalition building and new types of relationships between media and civil society.

We analyse this recent history using six in-depth interviews with leaders from activist campaigns in Chicago (No Games Chicago), Boston (No Boston Olympics, No Boston 2024), and Los Angeles (NOlympics LA), asking these representatives questions about their organising and media engagement strategies. We also conducted a qualitative content analysis of websites and social media accounts associated with these same organisations to assess the principal messages and mobilising tactics employed. Specifically, these included the Chicago campaign's website (https://nogames.wordpress.com/), the Boston campaigns' Facebook and Twitter accounts (@NoBosOlympics, @No_Boston2024) and websites (https://www.nobostonolympics.org/; https://www.noboston2024.org/), and the Los Angeles campaign's Twitter account (@NOlympicsLA) and website (https://nolympicsla.com), and the Twitter accounts of 13 individual activists involved in the campaigns. We used these data to assess the role of new media in the professionalisation of opposition movements, focusing on how activists engaged with new and legacy media environments. We also analysed how these media practices facilitated coalition building with broader activist networks (both networks related to MSEs and to other urban political issues).

Chicago

The protests against Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics provide an early example of new media activism, occurring in the early years of social media before its political power had been fully demonstrated. Developed between 2007 and 2009, the Chicago bid was relatively conventional by American standards. The bidders proposed a $5.7 billion project involving a variety of new and renovated venues along the city's waterfront, primarily financed by private sector investors (Chicago 2016, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 117–121).[1] The bid promised to produce a number of general economic catalysts and to support sustainable development, in particular in low income neighbourhoods on the south side of the city.

The bid experienced political backlash, however, over the question of whether the mayor should sign the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) standard host city contract. The host city contract is a template document, updated during each bidding cycle, which requires cities to make legal and financial commitments during the bidding and hosting stages. Until recent reforms (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2018), the mayors of bidding cities were required to pre-emptively sign the contract as a pre-requisite to enter the bidding competition. One of the most contentious clauses in the contract was a commitment by the city to cover future cost overruns – a commitment which will almost certainly be invoked, given that every single Olympics since 1960 has run over budget (Flyvbjerg, Stewart, & Budzier, 2016). Under pressure from activists and members of the city council, Chicago's mayor initially refused to sign the contract, offering instead to purchase an insurance policy against cost overruns. The IOC bluntly rejected that approach, with the organisation's president insisting that 'We have only one host city contract. There is no amendment to the host city contract whatsoever from the IOC.' (Jacques Rogge quoted in Heinzmann & Blake, 2009). The mayor eventually gave in to IOC demands and signed the standard contract, but Chicago's bid ultimately failed in the very first round of IOC voting. This, coupled with significant local concerns regarding the general lack of transparency and opportunity for public participation surrounding the bid (see Mowatt & Travis, 2015), led to the emergence of a sustained protest movement.

The political backlash was inspired in part by a protest organisation called No Games Chicago. In the early years of the bid (2007 and 2008), several small-scale protest campaigns emerged surrounding isolated issues, for instance a neighbourhood campaign to protest impacts against Lincoln Park on the city's north side. These various protests later converged into a more coordinated No Games Chicago campaign, which ultimately asserted itself through a variety of activities up until the failure of the bid in October 2009. The protests encompassed a disparate range of themes, the most prominent of which was concern over municipal spending in the midst of the Great Recession. The anti-Olympic protest was closely linked to a critique of Chicago's uniquely authoritarian brand of municipal politics. The city's mayor at the time – Richard Daley Jr. – inherited control of Chicago's Democratic Party machine

from his father, the legendary Richard Daley Sr. These two long-serving mayors consolidated significant urban regime power through 'the Daley machine' (Simpson & Kelly, 2008), creating a tight-knit coalition of civic boosters including much of the city's legacy media. That mayoral coalition strongly backed the bid.

No Games Chicago was able to gain ground in legacy media because they filled a niche within Chicago's political media. After a few months of organising events which received minimal media attention, they abruptly became legacy media's default source for critical commentary, because so few others were willing to challenge the mayor. As one No Games Chicago organiser explained, the bid received broad support from the city's boosters, including from legacy media:

> So originally the whole city is for the bid, all the newspapers were backing it, the media outlets. And it turns out that quite a few media outlets gave money and donated services to the bid, including CBS, Chicago Magazine, ABC and NBC, you know. The Chicago Tribune is owned at the time by a billionaire named Sam Zell, who was listed in the [bid's donor list] at the $100,000 minimum level. So the owner of the Chicago Tribune was giving who knows how much money to the bid ... The media buckles down and everyone becomes a booster for the bid and it was very common and therefore the opposition – the voice of opposition – has very little space.

However, that monopoly of pro-Olympic voices in legacy media helped to amplify the voices of a relatively small protest campaign, as described in one anecdote from a No Games Chicago organiser:

> We managed to shoe-horn into the media and started putting cracks in the armour. And the more we did it, the more people would come to us [for interviews]. The third time a local television station drove to my house to do a pickup for me in front of my home, I asked the reporter 'Look, I'm flattered that you're seeking us out and you're listening to No Games Chicago, but isn't there anyone else you can go to?' And she said 'No, no there isn't.' I said 'Well why is that?' She looked and me and said 'Well, because the mayor has everyone terrified'. I said, 'Isn't that a story you'd like to cover?' She looked at me, she says, 'Are you kidding me? I want to keep my job.'

The activists thus received a much broader platform than their numbers would have otherwise supported. They did this with relatively little use of new media. They published a blog and maintained a Facebook group, but were not particularly active on social media (which is perhaps unsurprising given the early state of social media platforms at the time).

Instead, No Games Chicago activists used more traditional methods gleaning media attention, by protesting at public events and organising publicity stunts (see Mowatt & Travis, 2015), following an approach similar to that identified by Gerbaudo (2012, p. 5) which understands: 'the crucial element in understanding the role of social media in contemporary social movements is their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gatherings and in particular the mass sit-ins which have become the hallmark of contemporary popular movements'

Two examples of this stand out. The first was a response to a bid initiative called '50 wards in 50 days'. This was a public relations campaign in which the bidders organised a public meeting in each of the city's neighbourhood wards. No Games Chicago sent protestors to each event and made themselves available to any reporters who happened to be in attendance. Their strategy was a simple one – to insert anti-Olympic talking points into the conversation through the public comment session:

> We were able to be at all those meetings and actually help. We had facts, we had people there, supporters who were able to help push the anti-Olympic agenda ... And they [the bid organisers] ended up hating us so much. We were a real thorn in their side.

A second example was a publicity stunt in which a group of protesters travelled to IOC headquarters in Switzerland and held a press conference while bid officials were meeting with the organisation. In June 2009, three activists used donated airline miles to fly to Switzerland. They printed copies of a 'book of evidence' composed of newspaper clippings and other research, and arrived at the IOC's front gate requesting to distribute the books to IOC members in an effort to dissuade interest in Chicago. As one of the protest participants explained, the spectacle sparked the curiosity of journalists who were already at the location covering the event:

> And nationally it was a sensation. Nothing like this had ever happened before and we spent the next seven hours doing immediate follow up – updating websites, Facebook, answering questions, doing interviews from all over the world *except* Chicago. [original emphasis from the interview]

The Chicago press corps covering the event was less amused, and the activist described being avoided by annoyed Chicago reporters covering the event:

> We had one radio interview with public radio here in Chicago, but we were pretty much blacked out. We were asked to comment by the reporter for the [Chicago] Tribune and the [Chicago] Sun Times, but honestly, when we'd get into a story, it would be like two sentences. I guess it's better than nothing, but I mean, we could never believe there was never any profile on us. If the story had the Olympic bid with 10 paragraphs and we had a sentence in there, that would be a victory for us.

These media strategies continued until the bid failed in October 2009, with Bennett, Bennett, Alexander, and Persky (2013, p. 374) ascribing part of this failure directly to 'the lack of broad support among rank-and-file Chicagoans for the Olympic bid'. After that, however, the activists intentionally disbanded. One of the No Games Chicago founders explained that the campaign was built on an ideologically diverse coalition of activists. They were able to maintain cohesion while focusing on the bid, but once the bid failed the group's raison d'être dissipated. A handful of activists remained loosely engaged in anti-Olympic politics, travelling to Vancouver and Rio de Janeiro to speak at protest events. They have also communicated periodically (in person and online) with activists protesting bids in other cities, but they mostly avoided joining in broader international networks.

Boston

The protests against Boston's bid for the 2024 Olympics offer an example of what is arguably a successful application of new media activism. Developed between 2013 and 2015, the Boston bid aimed to leverage the Olympics to manage the city's historically exceptional growth. The bidders proposed a $8.6 billion project involving a variety of temporary and permanent venues, primarily financed through public-private partnerships (Boston 2024 Partnership, 2015, vol. 6). The bid promised to alleviate some of the pressure on the city's existing residential and commercial real estate markets, by building commercial and residential projects in relatively disadvantaged neighbourhoods on the south side of the city. The bid was also intentionally linked to broader planning initiatives, and was promoted as a rough draft for the city's 2030 master plan.

As in Chicago, the bid experienced political backlash over the question of whether the mayor should sign the IOC's standard host city contract, thereby committing the city to cover cost overruns. In a post-Recession climate of fiscal austerity, the question of public subsidies was a politically toxic one. In an effort to preclude criticism, the bidders repeatedly promised that no public funds would be used to support operational or capital budgets (Kassens-Noor & Lauermann, 2018). This was questionable rhetoric from the start, because the bid plan assumed free or low cost acquisition of public land in inner city Boston (worth tens of billions of dollars if privatised) and relied on $14.6 billion of public transit investments – investments which were approved through separate legislation shortly before the bid (Boston 2024 Partnership, 2015, vol. 6). The public subsidies debate became especially heated when officials from the US Olympic Committee pressured the mayor to sign the host city contract; again, this was a necessary step before the IOC would consider the city's bid. As in Chicago, the mayor sought to avoid signing the contract by instead offering to purchase an insurance policy against future cost overruns. And just as in Chicago, Olympic officials flatly rejected the offer, providing the mayor with an ultimatum to sign the standard contract or cancel the bid. The mayor chose the latter option, withdrawing municipal support – and effectively killing the bid – in August 2015.

The political backlash was coordinated by two protest organisations called No Boston Olympics and No Boston 2024. In the early stages of the bid (2014), No Boston Olympics began organising a handful of activists – many of whom were not previously politically active. The group began to attract public attention when more than a hundred people turned out for its first public meeting in

January 2015. No Boston 2024 emerged in parallel over the early months of 2015, assembling a larger coalition of activists who were already engaged in local social movements pertaining to issues like gentrification and homelessness. The two groups loosely coordinated, though No Boston Olympics presented itself as a coalition of centrist 'establishment' figures while No Boston 2024 adopted a more confrontational and explicitly leftist position. The protests focused on three issues: the potential for cost overruns (and the city's fiscal exposure through the IOC host city contract), a lack of transparency in bid planning, and concerns about the opportunity costs of hosting.

The anti-Olympic campaign relied heavily on new media activism. This stemmed partly from necessity: the city's legacy media – in particular the *Boston Globe* newspaper – were firm supporters of the bid, at least in the beginning. But new media also provided the protesters with a strategic advantage, in the sense that they were better able to respond quickly to events in the news and to generate online outrage. This provided a stark contrast to the public relations team in the bid corporation, which was significantly less nimble when engaging on social media. As one No Boston 2024 organiser put it,

> One thing that helped is social media, which we always used a lot. And it was always interesting to see because Boston 2024 was very bad at it! An example I often like to cite is when they accidentally told people to get inspired by Nazis [by tweeting about the 1936 Olympics]. That was very easy to mock and we were hounding them for the whole afternoon. I think it was something like eight hours afterwards that [a Boston Globe journalist] ended up noticing. And when journalists – actual journalists – noticed, Boston 2024 took it down.

In fact, social media was so central to the anti-Olympic protests that the mayor derisively referred to the protestors as 'ten people on Twitter' (Clauss, 2015), a small but loud cohort of keyboard activists accused of hijacking public debate through the sheer volume of their social media posts. Not surprisingly, a satirical #TenPeopleOnTwitter social media campaign emerged in response. Years later, a number of anti-Olympic activists still reference the hashtag in their social media profiles, and occasionally tweet with it to mock the mayor's office on the anniversary of the bid's cancellation (and in reference to other non-Olympic failures and scandals at City Hall).

Beyond satire, the protesters employed two more serious – and arguably more impactful – forms of new media activism. The first was muckraking: sending out a flurry of FoIA requests for correspondence by public officials related to the bid, forwarding leads to a small group of legacy media journalists, and promoting those journalists' stories on social media when a scandal broke. By providing informal background research for journalists already known to be writing critically about the bid, activists were able to expand the range of critical topics covered in legacy media. One activist explained that his FoIA requests were much broader than that of a typical journalist, for this very reason:

> It's just such a useful strategy, because there's only so much that journalists are going to do. Part of that is because you don't want to use public records across your journalism [when] you can just ask a question. And then part of that is – if you're a journalist and submitting a request – there's normally knowledge of a specific document that you know about. Only one of my requests is targeted at something that I believe exists. Everything else is "I don't know what's there." I don't know what I don't know and that's what I want to find out.

The second form of new media activism was live-tweeting public hearings on the bid. City and bid corporation officials held a number of public hearings in neighbourhoods that would be impacted by the Olympics. The meetings generally followed a standard formula: the meeting would be introduced by a sympathetic local official or celebrity, bid staffers would present the same PowerPoint presentation at each hearing, and then they would answer questions from the general public. Activists discovered a way to commandeer these otherwise staid events, transforming them into virtual and in-person spectacles. Virtually, the activists live-tweeted the events, posting hundreds of tweets per hour while hashtagging topics of local concern and tweeting at journalists in local and national media. In person, activists would place themselves in the queue for the public microphone, asking questions that diverted the hearings towards topics related to anti-Olympic talking points. As one frequent participant in these meeting protests explained, the strategy allowed activists to recruit likeminded citizens from the general public:

> It's also a way of engaging with other people who were at the meetings, as well as dispelling things in real time. It was useful because you can keep records of those comments and then share with people who want to know but weren't there. You also get things trending at times.

Just as importantly, online commentary on real-world hearings was a way to shape media coverage on those events:

> Influencing media coverage is one thing that social media helps to do. We have some connections [to journalists], but social media is one thing that really helps to do that. It helps you actually shape what the press is seeing by being at the community meetings. We never expected the mayor or Boston 2024 to change, but you can make them look bad to the press.

These media strategies continued until the bid was cancelled in August 2015. After that, the activists continued to engage with anti-Olympic protests in other cities. One founder of No Boston Olympics collaborated with a local scholar to write a book on anti-Olympic politics (Dempsey & Zimbalist, 2017). Others met informally with activists in other bidding and hosting cities, for example Hamburg and Rio de Janeiro. Some of the digital resources they created were passed on to other campaigns (e.g. a No Boston Olympics database of Olympic research). But as in Chicago, the national and international reach of the campaign is somewhat unclear.

Los Angeles

The protests against Los Angeles' plans for the 2028 Olympics provide an example of a campaign that did not fully form until after the city won its bid, but which has subsequently amplified to protest the planning process. After Boston cancelled its bid for the 2024 games in 2015, Los Angeles stepped in to become the American bidder. As other bidding cities dropped from the competition due to negative referendums or local protests, Paris and Los Angeles eventually emerged as the sole bidders for the 2024 games. Given the paucity of interest, in September 2017 the IOC made the unprecedented decision to award two Olympics in one bidding cycle: 2024 to Paris, and 2028 to Los Angeles.

Partly due to the complexity of the bidding cycle for the 2024 version, Boston's withdrawal, and successful promotion by city boosters of the Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Games as a commercial success, there was minimal organised protest before the hosting contract was awarded to LA in 2017. The anti-Olympic coalition, NOlympics LA, emerged out of discontent with the US Presidential cycle in 2016. The left and centre left, supporters of Bernie Sanders, felt disenfranchised by the Democratic party. Alongside discontent with the existing party political system, a new political and activist movement, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), grew in importance across the US. Tied to the DSA LA chapter, current members of the NOlympics LA coalition had been campaigning since 2014/15 about social issues including gentrification, wealth inequality, militarisation and endemic levels of homelessness in LA. The proposed Olympic bid, supported by the ambitious but controversial Democratic Mayor, Eric Garcetti, became a focal point for DSA activists, radicalising a broad coalition of housing and homelessness organisations, Black Lives Matters activists and other group concerned with racial justice. In early 2017 it became clear that a dual award for the next Olympics was likely and Paris was the favourite to get the 2024 version. As one NOlympics LA activist explained:

> it wasn't really a question that LA would get 2028 so we found ourselves in a very unique situation where we have 11 years to organise against this – which is different to most other places

However, the unique nature of the IOCs decision also meant that the coalition of DSA activists that became NOlympics LA was unable to stop the bid committee from being awarded the 2028 games. There was a recognition that a new organisation was required if the 11 year opportunity to halt the Olympics going ahead was to be a realistic proposition, though maintaining close links to the DSA. As the NOlympics LA coordinator explained:

> It branched out from the (DSA's) homeless and housing committee to be launched on 9 May 2017 – it became kind of its own thing, but still under the umbrella of DSA. We then started going round all these

> groups and officially getting them to sign on to our coalition and starting our press and social media awareness and presence and agitation, and all that stuff. Then we started doing actions in the summer of 2017, elevating our game.

Significantly, politically, NOlympics LA exploited its association with the national DSA movement, which differentiates it from other anti-Olympic organisations. It also recognises that it is part of a long-term political process that relies as much on power shifts within national and local politics as it does on the Olympic bid per se. In contrast to the other cases examined here, the Los Angeles protest therefore demonstrates greater coherence between protest in the spheres of new media, traditional local activism and a broader national movement. So, as the coordinator explains:

> Our approach was that we always thought it would be a several year process – a three to five year process to actually unseat and run out the bid, waiting for some other power shifts to happen. We don't have a lot of official political support though behind closed doors I think there's a lot of doubt and a power shift. Two of the 12 city council members who signed off on this are now out of the picture. And the math says that so many of these people are going to get termed-out and there's going to be an actual power shift dynamic happening in the next couple of years. And what separates us from other anti-Olympic movements is that we're part of a larger movement – we're part of a larger national organisation that consistently funnels new people to our organisation. There's no other anti-Olympic group that's trying to run politicians in three to five years – which is something our group is actively talking about.

In terms of key messages, and narratives, NOlympics LA has focused on reaching local elected officials who originally voted for the bid, despite there being no budget agreed. They believe that the failure to undertake meaningful polling or agree on a budget is the weak spot of the bid committee which can be targeted. As the coordinator explains:

> I'm surprised they signed off on it without a budget which I think ultimately might be the flaw that undoes this whole thing. Because as you know the issue of taxpayer guarantee moves the most people across the political spectrum no matter what city or decade we're talking about … we've been doing a lot of research – power mapping research across DSA on our locally elected and people hoping to be locally elected and I think we can exert a lot of pressure and way more force on a council member than the Mayor who is a lot more buffered, with more handlers and with more money, so he's insulated.

NOlympics LA generated grassroots funding to undertake polling on LA citizen's attitudes towards the bid in late 2018 and utilised legacy and social media to communicate the results. Their objective was to generate credibility, change the conversation, cast doubt and capture the attention of mainstream media outlets. With only one newspaper, the LA Times, existing in LA, information about the Olympic bid and post-bid planning has been scarce. The bid committee has money, influence and establishment power which enables it to purchase broadcast TV and radio ads but NOlympics LA has been effective at using the strength of its coalition, access to a national organisation and an integrated media strategy to cast doubt on the claims of the bid committee. Their organising has taken physical and online forms, depending heavily on direct action and classical activist tactics, accompanied by creative digital and social media activity. One of the best examples of their direct action was in December 2018, when they ambushed Mayor Garcetti's address at UCLA on the 70th anniversary of the publication of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. As the coordinator explains:

> So we effectively shut his whole speech down in a way that had never happened before. I think that direct action gets the goods. Doing stuff in real life is still the most important thing. And it's the hardest thing to do in a culture and an economy where we're crushed by capital. The LA Times covered our action and bunch of other sites too. I think the press coverage was fair and people online were really excited about it.

Striking a balance between direct action, on the ground, and exploiting the affordances of new media online has been crucial to the activities of NOlympics LA, with the intention of being more nimble, versatile and responsive than the bid committee machine. This strategy was carefully crafted to generate as much attention as possible and be viewed as credible:

> we like to make sure we have a lot of balance to what we're doing. So we never have too much online just being snarky or attacking people, or just agitating. Or just making videos or podcasts. We also have a big teaching and screening series where we're physically in communities – because LA is so sprawled out and dispersed that it's red lined and segregated and it's sprawling and we're organising against that too.

In a similar vein to Boston, social media activity has been deployed to agitate, share information and, perhaps most crucially, garner the attention of other media outlets that can take their messages to new audiences, in and outside of LA. For example, after publishing their citizen poll in late 2018, they successfully generated coverage in New York Times, Deadspin and Sports Illustrated and some other big national media brands. This credibility is also associated with their expertise on the Olympics, transnationally, something the mainstream media struggles to replicate. As the coordinator explains:

> We also found out through that process (the poll) just how uninformed most journalists were – whether on the sport side or sport justice or even on the housing side – how unequipped were to talk about these things or compare these things or deal with these things with nuance and that's because newsrooms have been so drastically underfunded.

Finally, though unsuccessful at stopping the bid from going ahead, NOlympics LA has actively benefitted from collaboration with a broader international anti-Olympic movement and continues to inform other prospective bidders about effective strategies and tactics to contest bid committees. Early on in the process they talked to and visited campaigners in Boston, Tokyo and Paris. They have also participated in discussions about strengthening anti-Olympic solidarity, in person and online. As the coordinator explains:

> They [the Olympics] didn't plan for having a more threaded together, international, transnational movement and I think that's where this is headed and I hope we can put those pieces together. I think in the next year you'll see some more direct actions where we'll be in different parts of the world, shooting some films and doing different actions in addition to strategic meetings. You'll also find other groups covering these issues like Around the Rings, Gamesbids.com. We've even talked about the idea of a shared collective space where oppositional movements to the Olympics, internationally, might host their content, including past bid/host cities. The stories never really end.

In sum, NOlympics LA has a very clear, long term strategy to unsettle the bid committee, cast doubt on their claims and exploit a shift in local and national US politics to suspend LA's Olympic candidacy. Classic direct-action tactics, complemented with online agitation and information circulation, has produced some short-term success but it remains unclear as to whether this activity can be sustained and with what effect on the planning and delivery process itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent history of anti-Olympic protest in American cities demonstrates the growth – but also the limits – of new media activism for contesting MSEs. In Chicago, activists experimented with new media but largely focused their efforts on gaining a foothold in legacy media otherwise monopolised by Olympic boosters. In Boston, activists aggressively deployed new media to facilitate coalition building and develop mutually-beneficial relationships with the press. In Los Angeles, activists lost the bid but have since sought to use direct action, mediated via new media channels to undermine preparations for the 2028 Olympic Games, on the basis that fact checking, polling and information circulation will pressure city leaders to suspend their hosting plans. Across these recent cases, new media has allowed activists to circumvent the legacy media monopoly over public debate and Olympic boosters' monopoly over local legacy media. It has facilitated the growth of networks of protest and enabled otherwise marginal voices to combine and amplify, countering the boosterist legacy media coverage of bids. However, the case studies above also demonstrate that there are significant limits to the political influence of new media activism. On its own, keyboard activism may generate significant noise but does not necessarily change policy. Instead, it is clear from this analysis, that new media activism is more likely to be successful when combined with a broader urban

politics, embedded within existing political parties or social movements, and speaking to broader urban debates (over housing, gentrification, fiscal responsibility, etc.). Similarly, it is most likely to succeed when aligned to more traditional, albeit critical, media outlets which can provide a wider mainstream audience and legitimacy for its critical discourse.

Note

1. All financial figures in the text are inflation adjusted to 2018 USD.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

David McGillivray (University of the West of Scotland, UK), Chair in Event and Digital Cultures, focusses on the contemporary significance of events and festivals as markers of identity and mechanisms for the achievement of wider economic, social and cultural externalities. He is co-investigator on a UK / Canadian project exploring the role of sport events for persons with a disability and the European Union-funded project *EventRights*. He is co-author of *Event Policy: From Theory to Strategy* (2012) and *Event Bidding: Politics, Persuasion and Resistance* (2017), as well as being Deputy Editor of *Annals of Leisure Research*.

John Lauermann is an urban geographer and Assistant professor at the City University of New York (CUNY). He researches the planning, impacts and politics of urban mega projects, focussing in particular on sports mega events. He is the co-author of *Failed Olympic Bids and the Transformation of Urban Space (2017)*, and has published recent work in *Environment & Planning A, Journal of the American Planning Association, Progress in Human Geography* and *Urban Studies*.

Daniel Turner is the Deputy Dean of the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). His research interests focus upon the socio-cultural exploration of events and sport and the use of such activity to generate economic, social and cultural impacts. He is co-author of *Lifestyle Sports and Public Policy* (2017) and *Event Bidding: Politics, Persuasion and Resistance* (2017).

ORCID

John Lauermann http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9114-3864

References

Bennett, L., Bennett, M., Alexander, S., & Persky, J. (2013). The political and civic implications of Chicago's unsuccessful bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *37*(4), 364–383.

Boston 2024 Partnership (2015). *Boston 2024 bid to the US Olympic Committee*. Boston, MA: Boston 2024.

Boykoff, J. (2014). *Activism and the Olympics: Dissent at the Games in Vancouver and London*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Broudehoux, A.-M., & Sanchez, F. (2015). The politics of mega event planning in Rio de Janeiro: Contesting the Olympic city of exception. In V. Viehoff & G. Poynter (Eds.), *Mega event cities: Urban legacies of global sport events* (pp. 109–123). London: Routledge.

Burbank, M. J., Heying, C. H., & Andranovich, G. (2000). Antigrowth politics or piecemeal resistance? Citizen opposition to Olympic-related economic growth. *Urban Affairs Review*, *35*(3), 334–357.

Chicago 2016. (2008). *Chicago 2016 candidature city*. Chicago: Author.

Clauss, K. (2015, July 27). Mayor Walsh: Boston 2024 opposition is 'ten people on Twitter'. *Boston Magazine*. Retrieved from www.bostonmagazine.com/

Coaffee, J. (2015). The uneven geographies of the Olympic carceral: From exceptionalism to normalisation. *The Geographical Journal*, *181*(3), 199–211.

Cottrell, M. P., & Nelson, T. (2011). Not just the Games? Power, protest and politics at the Olympics. *European Journal of International Relations*, *17*(4), 729–753.

Dempsey, C., & Zimbalist, A. (2017). *No Boston Olympics: How and why smart cities Are passing on the torch*. Lebanon NH, University Press of New England.
Flyvbjerg, B., Stewart, A., & Budzier, A. (2016). The Oxford Olympics Study 2016: Cost and cost overrun at the games. *Said Business School Working Papers*. University of Oxford.
Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the Streets*. London: Pluto Press.
Heinzmann, D., & Blake, D. (2009, June 28). Daley's verbal gymnastics. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from www.chicagotribune.com/
Horne, J. (2018). Understanding the denial of abuses of human rights connected to sports mega-events. *Leisure Studies*, *37*(1), 11–21.
Hover, P., Dijk, B., Breedveld, K., & van Eekeren, F. (2016, January). *Integrity and sport events*. The Netherlands: Muller Institute.
International Olympic Committee. (2018, February). *Olympic Games: the New Norm – Report by the Executive Steering Committee for Olympic Games Delivery*. Retrieved from www.olympic.org/
Kassens-Noor, E., & Lauermann, J. (2018). Mechanisms of policy failure: Boston's 2024 Olympic bid. *Urban Studies*, *55*(15), 3369–3384.
Lauermann, J. (2015). Boston's Olympic bid and the evolving urban politics of event-led development. *Urban Geographies*, *37*(2), 313–321.
Lauermann, J., & Vogelpohl, A. (2017). Fragile growth coalitions or powerful contestations? Cancelled Olympic bids in Boston and Hamburg. *Environment and Planning A*, *49*(8), 1887–1904.
Lenskyj, H. (2010). Olympic impacts on bid and host cities. In V. Girginov (Ed.), *The Olympics: A critical reader*, pp. 373-386. London: Routledge.
Lenskyj, H. (2012). *Best Olympics Ever? The social impacts of Sydney 2000*. New York: Suny Press.
Lenskyj, H. J. (2006). Alternative media versus the Olympic Industry. In *Handbook of sports and media,* (pp. 205–216). New York: Routledge.
McGillivray, D., & Turner, D. (2017). *Event bidding: Politics, persuasion and resistance*. London: Routledge.
Mowatt, R. A., & Travis, J. (2015). Public participation, action, and failure: A case study of the 2016 Olympic bid. *Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure*, *38*(2), 249–267.
Müller, M. (2015). The mega-event syndrome: Why so much goes wrong in mega-event planning and what to do about it. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *81*(1), 6–17.
O'Bonsawin, C. M. (2010). 'No Olympics on stolen native land': Contesting Olympic narratives and asserting indigenous rights within the discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Games. *Sport in Society*, *13*(1), 143–156.
Pavoni, A. (2015). Resistant legacies. *Annals of Leisure Research*, *18*(4), 470–490.
Raco, M. (2014). Delivering flagship projects in an era of regulatory capitalism: State-led privatization and the London Olympics 2012. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *38*(1), 176–197.
Shaw, C. A. (2008). *Five rings circus: Myths and realities of the Olympic Games*. British Colombia, Canada: New Society Publishers.
Simpson, D., & Kelly, T. M. (2008). The new Chicago School of urbanism and the new Daley machine. *Urban Affairs Review*, *44*(2), 218–238.
Waitt, G. (2001). The Olympic Spirit and civic boosterism: The Sydney 2000 Olympics. *Tourism Geographies*, *3*(3), 249–278.
Walmsley, D. (2008). *Sport event bidding: A strategic guide for bidders and sports property owners*. London: Sport Business Group Limited.
Whitson, D., & Horne, J. (2006). The glocal politics of sports mega events: Underestimated costs and overestimated benefits? Comparing the outcomes of mega sport events in Canada and Japan. *The Sociological Review*, *54* (Supplement s2), 71–89.