

Olympic broadcasters gear up for the biggest show on earth

December 2 2018, by Mathieu Gorse



The Olympic Broadcasting Services are close to finalising plans for Tokyo 2020

Clock-watching is an integral part of any Olympic Games but even the most eagle-eyed sporting anoraks might be forgiven for missing the fact that Sunday marks 600 days until the start of the 2020 Olympics in

Tokyo.

For most people, it is not actually a particularly [significant milestone](#) but for 160 people of 35 nationalities beavering away in a building overlooking a highway in Madrid, the pressure of organising the biggest television show on earth just went up a notch.

These are the people of the Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS), a wing of the International Olympic Committee responsible since 2008 for providing the pictures of every competition which are beamed around the world.

The size of the audience is phenomenal as is the money that is generated.

Over five billion viewers tuned in for the last Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 as opposed to 3.4 billion for this year's football World Cup.

Television stations from around the world have dished out more than six billion dollars for the rights to the Games in Tokyo—broadcasting the event is a complex, lucrative business managed from the Spanish capital.

"Preparing and planning for the games is an ongoing function, so as we speak we are obviously very close to the finalisation of our plans for Tokyo," says Yiannis Exarchos, the imposing Greek boss of the OBS.

"But we have already started quite detailed planning for the winter games in Beijing (2022) and we have already started engaging with Paris (2024) and Los Angeles (2028)."

A 'burden' on host cities

The first time pictures were beamed live from the Olympics was Berlin in 1936. It wasn't until the 1964 Games, also in Tokyo, that pictures

went live around the world.

Back then it was the responsibility of the host nation to provide the coverage and that is how it stayed until 2008.



Yiannis Exarchos, CEO of the OBS, says the Olympics were becoming a burden for host broadcasters

"During the games we employ a team of more than 7,000 professionals coming from 90 different countries, we have 1,000 cameras, hundreds of thousands of kilometres of cables," says Exarchos.

"This started to become a big burden for the organising committee as the Games grew bigger and more complex.

"As early as the Games of Atlanta (1996), it was made clear that the IOC should do something to support the cities."

So it was that the IOC created OBS in 2001 to provide coverage of all Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Infrastructure

Beijing 2008 marked the OBS' first outing and it comes as no surprise to discover that Sotiris Salamouris, who is in charge of technology at OBS, was back in Beijing last month to discuss the next Winter Olympics in 2022.

"We need to have a good number of discussions with the organising committee in terms of the infrastructures they need to make available for us," says Salamouris. "The IBC, that is the priority."

The IBC is the International Broadcast Centre, a bustling hub set up in each host city where [television channels](#) from all over the world get the signal from OBS to broadcast back home.

"We need to work quite early with the organising committee to find this facility, to secure it, to agree about timelines, additional works necessary.

"This is what we have begun with Paris," says Salamouris looking ahead already to the Summer Olympics of 2024.

Given that the IOC is based in Lausanne, it may raise an eyebrow to see that the OBS is centred in Madrid.



One hundred and sixty people work at the OBS headquarters in Madrid

"It does not come from heaven, it comes from (Manolo) Romero," jokes IOC member Juan Antonio Samaranch Salisachs whose father served 21 years as president of the IOC.

A Spaniard and in charge of radio and television coverage of the Games since Mexico in 1968, Romero was appointed head of OBS when it was created and insisted on the headquarters being in Madrid, where he lived.

'Lifeline' for sport

"Major sports events remain the holy grail of broadcasting," says Exarchos.

Demand for television rights is constantly on the increase, and this, he points out, will continue with the emergence of new digital players in the market.

"Ninety percent of the TV rights go for the support of the Olympic movement and the development of sport," he says.

The IOC keeps the rest.

"The funding that comes from the television rights of the Games is a lifeline for the support of sports."

"The vast majority of the sports which are in the Olympic programme would have a hard time surviving if it were not for revenues coming from the rights."

And with that, Exarchos returns to work, ticking off another day on the road to Tokyo.

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