

## COVER STORY

# STRAINED TO BURSTING POINT



JENS DRESLING

## Bureaucracy means some visiting journalists have had a frustrating time at Tokyo 2020, despite the efforts of overworked staff

ASGER RØJLE CHRISTENSEN

We are in a bubble - maybe the most famous bubble in the world right now. I am sitting here in the workroom at the Tokyo Media Center looking around at colleagues from all over the world with different degrees of mask-wearing, and feeling very much like I'm in a bubble.

The *Number 1 Shimbun* editor asked me to write about my experience re-entering Japan to cover the Olympics. I was a regular FCCJ

member for 13 years, but half a year ago I was forced to move back to Denmark by income losses caused by the pandemic. This is my first time in Japan since January.

I certainly feel qualified to write this, as I have not only had to find my own way through the jungle of testing, downloading apps and separate web systems; I have also helped most print media colleagues from my country to do the same. It has been quite a job, and I have learned a lot.

▲  
Asger in the  
workroom at the  
Tokyo Olympics  
Main Press Center

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As a political reporter for many years, I understand very well the need for a bubble. Japan has serious problems with the spread of the delta variant, and the authorities have not managed to get Japan's population vaccinated in time to avoid that, which is another important story to dig into. Japanese are infecting other Japanese, and the bad luck was that the numbers seemed to surge during the weeks leading up the Olympics, forcing the decision to hold competitions entirely without spectators.

But, based on the narrative - which is strong in Japan and in many other countries - that the pandemic is a disaster brought in from abroad, it's clear that the arrival of 79,000 foreigners at a time when the borders are otherwise strictly closed is bound to create uneasiness. That makes a bubble necessary - however troublesome.

Japan is a bureaucratic society, and the running of such a bubble in the name of infection control is unavoidably a bureaucratic affair. But many times during recent weeks, I have asked myself: does it have to be so unmanageably bureaucratic, with so many different systems, so many emails with the same message, which just makes the whole thing more difficult to operate?

The Tokyo 2020 office has created a bureaucratic mess. And with all the public awareness, with the prime minister promising that the media bubble will from now on be more effectively isolated, lowly staff members are obviously scared to make decisions that could lead to them taking the blame for any small infection outbreak. As a result, many do not dare to be flexible. Or, rather, they only give way at the last minute, as the resources to do otherwise are not there. That means it is far from fair, with some journalists frustrated by being on the end of strict - or unfair - decisions, while others seem to catch a break.

Everything is left to the very last moment. The system, website and applications were not ready by the original deadlines. When they were suddenly ready to go, we spring into action, and the Tokyo 2020 staff immediately fell behind in their effort to respond. That, in turn, led to complaints about late responses or no responses at all.

Also, for privacy reasons, there are many ways into the different Olympic-related websites. I understand that privacy is important. But those many different login sites make it impossible - or at least confusing - to remember which password is for which website.

In the end, we succeeded in getting at least everybody into the country. A few had their activity plans approved and their OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) app perfectly running at arrival, only to find others who hadn't bothered to do this but were still given permission to enter Japan with the stroke of a bureaucratic pen

the day before their flight from Denmark. And I understand the frustration of colleagues who diligently accepted three lonely days in isolation at a small Japanese hotel room, when others were more fortunate, avoiding isolation when organisers were rushed into processing them at the last-minute.

As I tried to complete my own procedures and help my Danish colleagues over the past few weeks, I often felt sorry for the stressed staff at the 2020 press relations office. They have been caught in the middle of a situation they had no part in making. I have often thought that they are doing their best in very difficult circumstances.

But, ultimately, theirs is an impossible job. As we all know from the news, the Olympic coronavirus bubble is full of holes. It's leaking every hour. They may have good intentions, but there simply aren't enough staff and other resources to keep the bubble secure.

Critical questions are being asked in parliament, the government is on the defensive, and ministers are promising to fix these problems. We receive admonishing emails asking us to behave and make our colleagues behave. But if the whole operation was stricter, it would create even more frustration among journalists who are just trying to do their job, and at an event their companies have paid a lot of money to send them to.

Sometimes it's hard to see the rationale behind particular bureaucratic arrangements. For example, limits on access to mixed zones - areas where reporters can have a quick word with athletes after their competitions - has caused a lot of frustration among my Danish colleagues. They wonder how, if they have already been granted access to a particular venue, these extra restrictions in the mixed zone improve safety?

The Olympics are now in full swing, and a rush of gold medals for Japan in the first week generated headlines that were about something other than the pandemic. But these will still end up being a much tamer Olympics than we had expected a few weeks ago, when we thought at least some spectators would be allowed to attend events.

That decision is a pity for the athletes, disappointed ticketholders and sports reporters visiting Tokyo. My job, however, is mostly to report on the various rules and regulations, and the strange atmosphere around the city during the Games. It's sad to say, but for someone like me, these Olympics have become a very good story.

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● Asger Røjle Christensen was a regular member of the FCCJ from 1989 until 1995, and again from 2013 until January this year. He is still an ex-Kanto regular member and looks forward to visiting the Club again as soon as Japan reopens its borders.