

Press Junkets as Tournaments of value

**Paper submitted for
13th International Marketing Trends Conference
Venice, Italy
January 24th to 25th, 2014.**

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The buzz surrounding the opening of a film on opening weekend can often influence a moviegoer's decision making. Although a film's promotional material, such as trailers and posters, appear interesting, if it is generating negative buzz, a potential viewer might be tempted to view a different film. It is therefore extremely important for distributors to generate and manage that buzz. A prominent method used by film distributors is the junket, an event where the media are invited to view the forthcoming film and interview its stars (director and actors). It is a potent marketing tool used to generate buzz within the industry for their film releases. The purpose of which is to generate increased opening weekend box office sales. The particularity of a junket as a buzz marketing strategy is that its organizers are not in control of the final message that is delivered with the buzz. The journalists invited to the junket are the one's entrusted with creating the much sought after buzz through television reports and articles. To counteract this lack of direct influence, junket organizers have put in place several control mechanism to indirectly influence the message.

This article takes an in-depth look at the junket and its effectiveness as a buzz marketing strategy. Appadurai's classical model of a tournament of value and that of the gift economy is used to better understand the control mechanisms in place and the social dynamics to control the buzz. Appadurai's concept of a tournament of value can be used to analyze the press junket system to better understand the process by which buzz is generated, in turn better enabling the film distributors to control the message they are trying to convey. Two types of junkets will be examined; the original American system and the Quebec system that has been adapted to the local market. Through a comparison of these two types, it is possible to see that although the format may change depending on the setting and structure, the purpose of the junket remains the same.

A brief description of Appadurai's concept of a tournament of value is presented; followed by a description of a film junket in the USA and Quebec. Following this, a discussion of a junket as a tournament of values will be presented as well as their effectiveness at creating buzz. Finally, the idea of the junket as a gift economy will be explored as a way of understanding how the power dynamics of the exchange relationship in the junket serves reinforces the control mechanisms put in place by the organizers.

Methodology

Several in-depth interviews with industry specialists such as journalists, distributors and producers, directors and actors were carried out over the course of 2008. In addition, we carried out observations of a junket held in Quebec. A case study of a junket during production in Rwanda is also presented to enable a deeper understanding of its inner workings.

Tournaments of Value

Arjun Appadurai first applied his concept of tournaments of value to the *kula* ring tradition from the Melanesian islands. It is a complex system that circulates valuables, usually necklaces and armshells, between men. The periodic nature of this system along with its symbolic and social ramifications relating to status, ranking, and value and power make the *kula* without a doubt a tournament of value (1986: 20-21). The use of his concept is not limited to premodern rituals and practices; in fact Appadurai argued his concept could be

applied to modern day practices as well (1986: 50). Moeran has taken on this work and has looked at competitive presentations by Japanese advertising agencies (1993) and international Book fairs (2008) as being tournaments of value. Moeran also affirms that “haute couture fashion shows, and certain types of auction, art exhibition, media awards (Grammy, Oscar), or film festivals (Cannes)” (1993: 87) are other forms of tournaments of value. In Recent years, the Olympic Games (Glynn 2008) film festivals (Barbato & Mio 2007; Evans 2007; Mazza & Strandgaard Pedersen 2008) and trade shows (Skov 2006) among others have been examined from this lens.

To get a better understanding of Appadurai’s paradigm of tournaments of value, it is necessary to look at each of the 5 elements of his definition separately. The best example of this comes from Moeran’s look at Book fairs. (1) A tournament of value is an event that is complex and periodic that is separate from everyday economic life in a culturally defined way. The Frankfurt book fair is the oldest and largest book fair and is held at the same time and place every year. It has several financial and social ramifications that connect its many actors. (2) Participation in these events is a privilege for those with power and way of defining status between them. Only established actors in the publishing world are present at international book fairs. These different actors must continually vie for the best place in the conference hall so that they can assert their status and relationship to other large players. The finished floor plan is a visual map of the resulting changes in status each year. (3) A different type of currency is used at these events; it is not money in the traditional sense. The currency is “set apart through well understood cultural diacritics” (1986: 21) or signs. The currency employed at book fairs is Rights, such as translation rights, movie rights etc. (4) The stakes at such tournaments go above and beyond status, fame or reputation; it is the allocation of the central tokens of value within that society or social setting. In the case of a book fair, the disposition of Rights is the central issue. (5) The repercussions of these special periodic events are felt in ordinary life with respect to power and value (1986: 21). During the few days of the fair, it is rare that deals will be signed for the allocation of Rights, but in the aftermath of the event, contracts are signed as a direct result of the social interactions at the book fairs.

Buzz Marketing

Buzz marketing can be defined as a multidimensional communications strategy that involves the sending of influential messages by a source that appears to be neutral and is aimed at a specific target, the message reaches the target through the generation of word of mouth online or offline (Ahuja et al. 2007). One example of buzz marketing is the distribution of a new Reebok running shoe to 90 individuals that are part of the target market so they could try them and generate word of mouth or a positive buzz about the product. The launching of the shoes was a success as a result of this buzz marketing campaign (Salzman et al. 2003). A junket is a type of buzz marketing where the journalist is used as a neutral third party. The junket is a particular type of buzz marketing since the organizers do not control the final message that targets potential audiences; the journalists control it.

Brief Overview of the Film Industry

There are three phases for the making of a film, production, distribution and broadcasting. Production of a film is the creative process that goes into filming a movie and editing it. It is

at the beginning of this process that financing for the project is secured. Once the film is finished, the distribution phase takes over and a distribution company acquires the rights to distribute the film. The company's role is first marketing; the junket is one aspect of this marketing. Their second mission is to find broadcasters, such as movie theaters that are willing to pay a certain price to broadcast the film to the general public. They must also manage the logistics of getting the film to the broadcasters. The final phase, broadcasting, is when the public watches the movie in theaters.

Junket

A junket is categorized as an event organized by a financially interested third party where the media are invited at a specific time and place, to meet with various artists that have worked on a project. In the case of the film industry, junkets are organized by a film's distribution company and producers and have a particular format depending on the location. The junket organizers cover the cost of transportation and lodging the invited media. The goal is to create a buzz about the upcoming film to encourage the public to view the movie. The opening weekend is key to the success of a film and therefore junkets are planned prior to the film's opening so that all the media coverage it generates will help create positive buzz to increase the attendance on that crucial weekend. This requires careful planning and management on the part of the organizers and the coming together of many stakeholders with different interests and objectives. Using the concept of tournament of values to the junket, it is possible to understand the underlying dynamics and ramifications of the junket.

American junkets

With a traditional American junket, journalists from around the world are invited to a hotel in Los Angeles, where they must first view the film, they then have a predetermined amount of time to meet with a number of the artists, the interviews can be anywhere between 2-5 minutes in length. Typically, journalist that are more established and have a larger audience will be granted more time with a larger variety of stars. In the case of TV journalists, their interview is recorded and edited by the junket organizers to remove any unfavorable parts before it is finally given to the journalist. Accepting the invitation to an American junket implies respecting the imposed structure and predetermined rules that are set up by the organizers. Journalists are briefed about which topics to avoid and if they disregard the warnings, the interview can be stopped and the journalist will leave empty handed. Usually a few movies come bundled with the main feature and a journalist must see each film during the same junket to be eligible to meet with the different stars. This is a cost saving measure and a way to ensure that less popular movies obtain needed coverage. Lussier notes "this is a very firm practice. If you don't screen the movie the previous night, you don't have access to any interview. You just can't participate. They even take attendance" (2008). In exchange for getting access to the stars of the film, journalist must provide a copy of their coverage, be it a televised report or a written article. For example, journalists in Quebec must get their French language articles translated into English to submit to the junket organizers to show that they have met their obligations.

The American junkets can be seen as a circuit, or a membership. It is an exclusive club with particular rules and such a membership must be maintained. A journalist cannot pick and choose which junkets they would like to attend, they must attend all the junkets the organizers

invite them to and give each film similar coverage regardless of quality or interest in order to ensure access to desirable films in the future and the good standing of their membership. “When you are part of it, you have to follow; even the boring ones. (...) You can’t decide to just attend one and not the other. You have to take the good and the bad” (Petrowski, 2008). Therefore, it is possible to look at the junket circuit over time as a continuous loop: before during and after the junket. If at any point during the loop, a journalist does not respect the strict guidelines, they run the risk of being blacklisted from attending any further junkets. Another negative sanction that distributors can impose to media that does not respect their part of the junket circuit, is the withholding of advertising in the future, which could mean a loss of revenue. These techniques can be a very effective tool for controlling output by the media and ensuring it is released at the appropriate time to maximum the buzz.

American junkets are highly organized and institutionalized. In order to present the film and its stars to the largest amount of journalists possible within a short period of time, the organizers tightly manage the event and timing is everything. Given the popularity of American stars around the world, they can be considered as rare commodities, and a junket represents an important opportunity for the media to gain access to that commodity. The junket organizers therefore have almost total control over the event since they control the commodity that is sought after (the stars). However, the organizers are dependent on the media for coverage of their movie to generate the buzz required to make the film a success. There is therefore a delicate reciprocal relationship that must be maintained between the two parties. The organizers must retain all control and access to the stars so that the journalist is forced to participate in the system to get the access they require. The end product is also heavily managed and monitored by the organizers so that the buzz can be better controlled.

Quebec junkets

The Quebec film industry is very different from the American industry. It is smaller, and caters primarily to a local market. The junkets it produces have been altered to fit this different reality. A junket has two components, the first loosely resembles the American system; a junket launch party is thrown the week before a film’s release. The second type of junket is quite different from the American way of doing things, it consists of the opening of the production set to the media for a set period of time.

The junket launch party is an event where the stars and media gather during a cocktail a week before the film premieres. A few showings of the movie are planned prior to the party, and in order to attend the party, journalists must have seen the film in its entirety. The party is a much more informal setting than with American junkets. Interviews are usually carried out casually during the cocktail. Since the Quebec market is small, the media and artistic community in Quebec are connected and interdependent. These launch parties have been described as a family get-together, with both parties often on a first name basis. There is therefore no blacklisting; there must be a communal will to work together, because the outcome of blacklisting a journalist will reflect on both parties both economically and socially. Additionally, the stars are much more available to the media than their American counterparts. As such, there is less potential for them to be commodified and used by the distributors as a control mechanism. Providing access to the production set and its stars while they are in the creative process is an alternative junket format developed by this local

industry. The setting and creative process become the rare commodity that the distributors use to generate and control buzz for the film.

The open set junket is usually done in the middle of the film shooting once the production team has had a chance to iron out any problems.

The objective is to create a rumor, and not only should this rumor generate some curiosity, but it should be positive. Therefore, it requires a lot of preparations. We don't want technical problems, we don't want people to fight, no drama...When the journalists arrive, everything should run smoothly' (Producer, 2008).

The media is invited to see a particular scene shooting and then they meet with the actors and director. In contrast to the American system, the length of the interviews are flexible, and there is little structure or rules to respect.

Case Study: A Sunday in Kigali

An extreme example of an open set junket was carried out during the shooting of the film *A Sunday in Kigali* (2006), a film about a journalist searching for his Rwandan fiancé after the 1994 genocide. Filming took place completely in Rwanda, a first for a Quebec production, and as such the junket was a unique event. A select group of journalists were invited to Rwanda for a week, all expenses paid. While they were there they observed different scenes being shot and were given tours of the country. The shooting schedule for the junket week was carefully planned so that they would be interesting for the journalist while not giving away key elements the director wished to keep secret. It was decided that the large action scenes would be shot that week, as they were visually stimulating. Additionally, the tours of the country were scheduled to allow for the more sensitive and secretive scenes to be shot while the journalists were away. The journalists wrote many different articles throughout the weeklong trip, not only about the production but also about the country in the present and its history. The junket was a success and created a lot of buzz and expectations for the film far ahead of its release date.

This type of junket presents certain problems that are absent with the traditional American model. First, an open set junket is carried out during production and the buzz generated has the potential to die down before the actual opening weekend if it is not managed carefully. There is also the potential of overloading the public with content while trying to maintain that buzz and alienating them.

Everyone interviewed agreed that with this format there is much more contact between the media and the stars, and the journalist felt less constrained. That being said, some journalists have mentioned that this format can sometimes make them feel like they are intruding in the creative process. The stars on the other hand, feel that it can cause high expectations since the media are not getting a complete picture of the production and that can lead to disappointing reviews later on. Another possible negative side effect mentioned is that an open set junket like this can create a backlash on the part of media that want to assert their independence and impartiality and shift the relationship's power balance. They therefore present an overly harsh review of the final product, an issue that will be discussed shortly. In the case of *A Sunday in*

Kigali nearly all the invited media gave the film poor or mediocre reviews despite their excitement during the open set.

Junkets as Tournaments of Values

We argue that junkets are a tournament of value following Appadurai's definition. Junkets are held at a specific time during the promotion of a film for a set period of time outside of everyday economic life. American junkets last typically 2-3 days and are held prior to a film opening in a hotel in Los Angeles. Quebec junkets are held at a specific time during filming and then typically a week before the release of the movie in theaters. The event is by invitation only and the distribution company pays for all the media's expenses. It is not possible for uninvited media to purchase entry to the junket. For these two reasons, junkets can be considered to be outside of everyday economic life.

Attending a junket is a privilege and serves as a way of defining status amongst journalists. Beyond acquiring the important invitation to attend, during the event the order of access to the stars, the numbers of stars available for interviews and also the length of time a journalist has access to them, all plays a role in reasserting and establishing a new hierarchy. A well-known Quebec journalist Penelope McQuade that has attended several American junkets notes that "not all journalists have access to the same people. The more media, a television program, a daily or a radio program is important, the more a journalist will have access to the important actors and to a greater number of people" (2009).

Access to the stars or to the set is culturally constructed as being valuable and desirable. If these culturally prized tokens were removed from their cultural setting they would have little or no value. As such, the currency that is traded at American junkets is the access to stars, specifically the length of time each media representative is granted. In Quebec, on the other hand, the currency used is the access to the set and the stars.

Appadurai argues that at stake during a tournament of values "is not just status, rank, fame, or reputation of actors, but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question" (1986:21). There is no question that in the case of a junket as a tournament of value, securing access to the stars (or the set in Quebec) is the primary motivation of all the journalists. The stars are therefore the token of value that is sought after and allocated to members of the junket circuit. If a journalist withdraws their participation they will not be able to gain access to the token of value.

The final element that clearly defines a junket as a tournament of value is that the outcomes of these junkets have consequences on power and value. The outcome is measured with the amount of buzz that a film generates prior to its opening weekend and in turn by the opening weekend box office sales. With print media:

The studios insist that not only the article is important, but where in the paper, the size of the picture, and the day of publication; this is their obsession. For them, if we publish the article the day after the launch, it's a disaster. They want a week ahead, a day ahead, even if there is less readership. (Lussier 2008)

Films with successful and well-controlled junkets are expected to create more buzz and do better during the opening weekend than films that have poorly managed junkets or that do not

have junkets at all. This means the outcome of the junket influences the value of the film and the future power and influence of the stars and the organizers.

There is a lot of money involved. [The distributors] are obsessed with the first week-end. They worry about the performance of the first week-end. We all know this; everything is done in function of that first week-end. Quebec films are the same, international films are the same. They are obsessed with the box office (Petrowski 2008)

Effectiveness of junkets

As mentioned previously, the junket organizers try to create positive buzz for their films, but they are not able to control the message entirely since it comes from the journalists. To counteract this, they have put in place several control mechanisms to indirectly manage the message. Given the scarcity of American stars, the American junket organizers are more effective at managing and guiding the message and consequently the buzz. Quebec junkets have less control mechanisms, since they do not participate in blacklisting and have a more interdependent relationship with the media and therefore have less control of the message.

Generally, the more publicity and buzz the junket creates, the happier the organizers are. As far as journalists are concerned, success is measured by their ability to meaningfully connect with and interview the stars to then present the results to the public. They also classify receiving good quality information that is new or surprising as an important factor for success. Another factor that affects a journalist's perception of the junket is the time limit restrictions. The Quebec system with few time limits is preferred over the American system that is highly controlled and limited time wise.

There is no objective way to measure the performance of a junket, in fact, several people interviewed affirmed that it is not possible to make a direct link between a junket and the performance of a film, as is evident by the case of *A Sunday in Kigali*. Some journalists even question the effectiveness of open set junkets in Quebec, stating that the junket parties are more effective at generating the all important buzz before the opening weekend than the open set junkets (O. Tremblay 2008).

That being said, there is no doubt that the junket is an effective marketing strategy for generating buzz for an upcoming film. Although its success cannot be measured directly in monetary terms, the output by the invited journalists has an influence on potential viewership.

Temporality

We argue that not only are junkets a tournament of value, they are tournaments of value given that they are recurrent events organized over time and one's participation in a tournament implicitly means that one will participate in others. As is demonstrated in figure 1, a junket has 3 phases pre, during and post. With each phase the distributors have certain control mechanisms and the journalists have certain obligations. Once the junket is complete and all the control mechanism have been exercised and the journalists have met their obligations, the circuit continues, there is a period in between that serves to highlight the scarcity and increase the value and demand of the central token of value. The dotted line between each junket, or tournament of value denotes the fact that a journalist's participation in the next junket is

conditional to their performance during the previous junket and also mandatory if they want to secure entry to future junkets

The distributors act as gatekeepers to the stars at every point of the junket, by separating the different phases of a junket the control mechanism employed become more visible. Table 1 separates each phase by stakeholder: journalist and distributor. The first point of control is during the preparation phase where the journalists are selected and invited to the junket. Throughout the junket, journalists have certain obligations such as attending bundled screenings, respecting the restricted topics for questions and the length of time they were granted for their interviews. The distributors control everything from the physical resources, (plane, hotel, and *per diem*), to the material available to the journalists (photos, scenes, edited interview tape) and in exchange grant access to the stars. The final phase of the junket requires that journalists provide copies of their articles or coverage to prove that they have fulfilled their part in creating the buzz for the film. They must also respect the publication embargo the distributors impose; it is usually lifted the week before the film opens in theaters. Failure to respect the obligations set up can result in a blacklisting of journalists in the American system. Within Quebec, relationships can become strained by a failure to meet obligations.

Junket as a gift exchange

Once the different elements of the junket are broken down and each stakeholder's responsibilities and controls mechanisms are laid out, it is possible to see the junket as an exchange relationship. An exchange relationship is characterized as when "benefits are given with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return or in repayment for a comparable benefit received in the past" (Clark 2007). In this case, the distributors organize the junket and provide the journalists with access to the stars as a benefit. In exchange, the journalists must deliver articles or television reports about the films they have viewed and the interviews they have carried out with the stars. They provide buzz for the film as a benefit in return for the access to the stars they received. On the surface the junket exchange relationship appears simple, however, there are social dynamics that transcend a simple transactional relationship between the two parties. The exchange at work with a junket is a gift exchange where expectations, reciprocity, indebtedness complicate matters.

Reciprocity is a key element in any gift exchange (Marcoux 2009). At first glance, the junket appears to be a balanced reciprocal gift exchange. As defined by Marshall Sahlins (1972) it constitutes a direct exchange, reciprocation must be equivalent and almost immediate. However, the junket circuit has an inherent asymmetry to the exchange. The organizers hold most of the power: access to the stars and by consequence reciprocation becomes vital for the continuance of the circuit. While the access to the stars is a gift from the distributors, there is an expected reciprocal gift that must be given by the journalist, the buzz. Marcoux (2009), and others (Giesler 2006; Joy 2001; Morales 2005) have researched the dark side of the gift and the negative effects a gift can have on either party. He argues, "the gift-giving process can produce negative feelings, embarrassment, and a sense of dependence" (Marcoux 2009). Consequently, the market can be used as a way of escaping the gift economy to free not only the potential gift recipient of the burden of reciprocation, but also the giver of his burden to give. In his look at moving in Montreal, he finds that individuals routinely decide to avoid the

gift economy and use the market as a means on escaping feelings of indebtedness, subjection, humiliation and oppression.

In the case of junkets, there is no escape to the market for journalists, even if they would like to purchase entry to gain access to the stars, it is not possible. The lack of an escape route to the market for access to the stars acts as a locking-in mechanism for the network, which is reinforced by the control mechanisms the organizers have put in place. Figure 2 shows this dynamic; it is an underlying structure of each tournament of value. The result is a gift economy that is characterized by an asymmetrical exchange between the organizers and the journalists that enables the control of the message produced by the journalists and therefore the buzz for the film. On this basis it is possible to say that junkets are an effective means of controlling the buzz surrounding a film.

One notable exception is the case of the junket for *A Sunday in Kigali*, the correspondent for Radio-Canada, a the national francophone channel in Canada, in accordance with their policies insisted on paying for their own expenses for the trip. This journalist was able to successfully escape to the market thanks to the more relaxed Quebec system and avoid the gift economy. Escaping to the market removes the obligation to reciprocate, however, the amiable nature of the relationships with the system acts as its own means of control. Overall, there is more freedom of expression and good will in the Quebec system because it appears to be more balanced. When exchange rules are respected and followed, each party is satisfied and considers it to be fair (Clark 2007). If the main goal of the junket is to manage the buzz, organizers have a vested interest in ensuring that the journalists, as the other primary stakeholders, are content and satisfied. The reason being that since it is an exchange relationship, the buzz they generate should be equal to the original benefit they received. The locking-in mechanism however, eliminates the need for an equal exchange; the journalists are dependent on the organizers since they seek a rare commodity.

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Figure 1

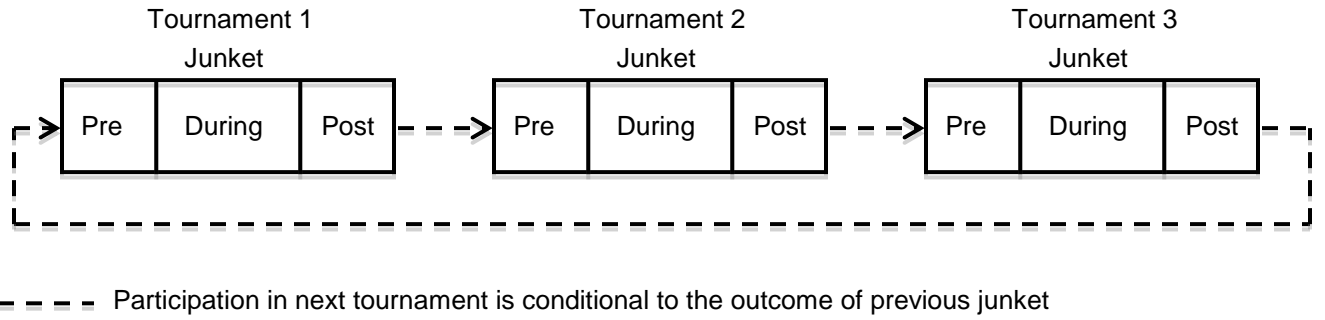


Figure 2

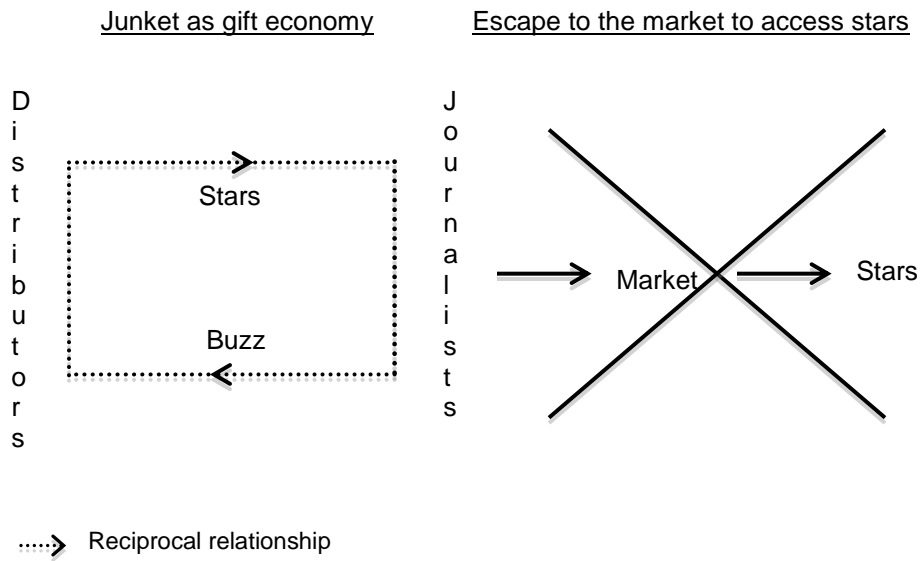


Table 1

Junket Network			
	Pre	During	Post
journalists	<p>Received invitation to junket‡</p> <p>Cannot purchase entry‡</p>	<p>Travel to location‡</p> <p>Obligation to attend bundled screenings‡</p> <p>Access to stars*</p> <p>Restricted topics‡</p> <p>Selection of available promotional material (photos, scenes)‡</p> <p>Time limited access*</p>	<p>Relinquish part of editorial control‡</p> <p>Provide copy of story to junket organizer‡</p> <p>Publication embargo‡</p> <p>Create buzz*</p> <p>Mandatory involvement in network‡</p> <p>Fear of blacklisting‡</p>
Distributors	<p>Selection of journalists‡</p> <p>Junket preparation</p>	<p>Control over physical resources (plane, hotel, Per diem)*‡</p> <p>Control over access to stars and content of interviews (pre-edited tape)‡</p> <p>Complete control over every aspect of junket</p>	<p>Review reports to make sure media fulfilled their part of the network‡</p>

Element of the tournament of values
 Control mechanism