On 2 July 2003, I was working as a radio reporter on Vancouver Island. This was no ordinary on-air shift, though—it was on this day that I got to announce that Vancouver and Whistler had won the bid for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. From that point on, I was fascinated by the prospect of the Games coming to Vancouver, though my relationship with the Olympics has deeper roots.

I was just a kid when the 1988 Games came to Calgary, where I lived at the time. Unfortunately, I was too young to take in the experience properly; the only memory I have is an Andy Moog shutout against Poland. Growing up in and around Calgary, however, I was surrounded by the legacies of the Games: the Oval, Canada Olympic Park, and Canmore Nordic Centre are all constant reminders of what was. When I announced that the Games were coming to Vancouver, I knew that I would need to be there: I knew I needed to create some lasting memories. As the 2010 Games drew closer, I set out to expand my knowledge of the Olympics, which included writing a master’s thesis about social marketing strategies for the Vancouver Games. In the period leading up to the Games, I also stayed in close contact with a friend of mine, Regan Lauscher, a luger who had already competed in two Olympic Games. Vancouver 2010 would be her homecoming and retirement ceremony all in one. So I was determined to get myself to the Games. In late 2009,
I managed to secure a volunteer opportunity at the International Media Centre at Robson Square—the place where representatives of media outlets that hadn't received press accreditation from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) would gather to get stories and share them with the masses.

I flew from Calgary, where I was now teaching at Mount Royal University, to Vancouver on 12 February 2010, putting me on the ground a day before the start of the Games. En route to Vancouver, I learned that Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili had crashed in a training run at Whistler Sliding Centre. The coroner subsequently determined that the luger had died on impact. Before I even stepped off the SkyTrain, the Games, which had not yet officially started, had suffered a serious blow. As details about the fatal accident were reported, I found myself wondering how Kumaritashvili’s death would affect my friend Regan. As a public relations educator, I was also keenly interested in the official response to the event and the subsequent media coverage.

While the coroner eventually ruled the death accidental, following the crash the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC) and the International Luge Federation (FIL) made modifications to the track, moving the men’s start to the women’s start and the women’s start to the juniors’ start, as well as padding the steel girders near the finish line. As with any tragedy of this magnitude, fingers were pointed at those in charge. However, given the global stage and international media attention, this particular news story moved quickly. Was the media coverage positive, negative, or neutral? The answer depends on whom you ask, but I will say this: the attention on luge, a sport not well known to audiences outside of Europe, was unprecedented, if not completely overwhelming, for the sport and its athletes.

In what follows, I will examine the media coverage immediately after the accident to better understand why the story was told a particular way and why certain storylines were ignored. In the process, I will also reflect on Lauscher’s perspective and my own feelings about the situation.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Immediately following the crash, I witnessed an explosion of tweets and Facebook posts, with many people sharing the link to the video of the accident. And, of course, the traditional media carried numerous stories about Kumaritashvili’s death. Reviewing the coverage in the Vancouver Sun, Marianne van Oosten found that stories following the crash expressed sympathy for Kumaritashvili while being critical of the track and VANOC. Sun columnist Cam Cole wondered out loud
whether Canada, in “its zeal to protect its athletes’ home-course advantage,” might have “inadvertently contributed to the likelihood of crashes involving lower-ranked athletes who hadn’t had sufficient opportunity to train on such a wild, fast run.”

Comparing the Globe and Mail’s Olympic coverage on 13 February 2010 with that of the Sun, van Oosten found that, although the Globe ran roughly the same number of articles, “the focus was not on the death of the Georgian luger”: only two articles referred to the accident, as opposed to “more than a dozen” in the Sun. Some of those column inches in the Globe were filled instead with articles on Canada’s Olympic Broadcast Media Consortium (of which the Globe was a member), including one article featuring promotional comments from the head of the consortium that, van Oosten noted, made the story read like a news release. This is perhaps an indication that members of the consortium were—consciously or otherwise—focusing more on the positives, while other, unaccredited media followed the tragedy. At one point, a reporter asked VANOC officials at a news conference whether this was the “worst start to any Olympics ever?” I was asking myself the same question.

As I looked further into the media coverage, I found an Associated Press story from 12 February 2010 that highlighted the safety concerns associated with the speed of the track but also included a comment about the Whistler track from three-time Olympic luger Georg Hackl: “My opinion is that it’s not any more dangerous than anywhere else.” Hackl’s thoughts seem to echo Lauscher’s comment, in the previous chapter, that the media’s relentless focus on details of track design created the false impression that Whistler officials had ignored standard safety measures, making the track unusually dangerous. Yet the coverage, on balance, did not seem to reflect the perspectives of Hackl and Lauscher.

Also on 12 February, journalist Rob Longley wrote, “There is outrage from many athletes and officials who blame Canadian organizers for not allowing other sliders extended pre-Olympic access to the course.” In April, Lauscher, probably the most vocal of all the Canadian sliders, argued in a Calgary Herald column that the coverage was neither fair nor balanced—two principles she had learned as a journalism student at Mount Royal University:

Conveniently absent from news reports was the success of the World Cup held there last season [2009], which is more than can be said for the track in Italy leading into the 2006 Games, when the World Cup was postponed after a host of problems, including track safety and accumulating injuries. Also, nothing was mentioned about the top sliders dropping out of the 2000 Goodwill Games in Lake Placid, N.Y., after the track raised eyebrows about “safety concerns.”

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As Lauscher observed, the media framed the issue in a way that showed Canadians denying others access to the track for their own competitive advantage. But, she pointed out: “Of course, we have more runs on our own track. So did the Italians in 2006, the Americans in 2002 and the Germans every single year with four out of the nine World Cup races being on their home tracks.”

While many of the articles I looked at cited the dangers associated with luge and other sliding sports, there was very little mention of the one previous death in luge, at the 1964 Innsbruck Games (though it was noted by the Prince George Free Press’s Allan Wishart). Furthermore, as Lauscher argues in the previous chapter, the biggest missed opportunity for the media was in telling a story about athlete eligibility for luge—specifically, the fact that just because an athlete has qualified for a race does not mean that they are qualified to race. Harry Hiller, in chapter 8 in this volume, argues that the Olympics are a heavily mediated event and that the media have the power to “create a sense that the Games are a huge success, but they can also create images of an event filled with controversy and conflict.” Lauscher notes in the preceding chapter that moving the start gates down was “a response in part to the media’s pressing scrutiny” and that the change “not only had an irreversible and devastating effect on the Olympic race but also perpetuated an image of luge and the Whistler track as ‘unsafe.’”

In reflecting on this tragedy, I was left pondering two questions: Did the media tell the right story? If not, what prevented them from presenting a fair and balanced account? While these questions have no simple answers, a variety of factors can be considered—starting with the immediacy, power, reach, and impact of social media.

“THE FIRST TRULY DIGITAL OLYMPICS”

CTV’s Marc Dinsdale proclaimed Vancouver 2010 to be “the first truly digital Olympics.” Indeed, the VANOC website had 275 million online visitors; in comparison, Beijing 2008 had 105 million visitors to its site. The television audience worldwide for the 2010 Games was an astounding 3.5 billion, but the social media implications are perhaps even more far reaching. As noted earlier, immediately after the death of Nodar Kumaritashvili, footage of his fatal accident was spread far and wide online. In fact, the video went viral before media could even confirm the death and collect biographical information on the luger.

Historically, the International Olympic Committee has maintained tight control of its Olympic content, but social media and the events of 12 February 2010 challenged that control. As traditional media and the broadcast consortium tried
to catch up with the story, it was moving fast on Twitter. Some outlets, such as the Vancouver Sun, chose not to post the video to its website, while others did. CTV—which, like the Globe, was part of the Olympic Broadcast Media Consortium—decided it was “proper” to run the video of the accident, a choice that seems to run counter to the Globe’s very scant coverage of the death. A complaint regarding CTV’s use of the video was filed with the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, which subsequently found that CTV had not violated any standard codes and had given viewers proper warnings. All the same, some, like Gillian Shaw, dubbed the sharing of the video “death porn.” Further consideration of the video reveals what is perhaps the more fundamental issue for journalists, one that concerns traditional codes of ethics and good taste.

In her thoughtful analysis of media coverage of the 2010 Olympics, Leanne Ritchie notes that traditional media follow written and unwritten rules. According to one of the most important unwritten rules, once reporters’ questions regarding the luge tragedy had been answered and officials had made changes to the track, there was no justification for continuing to air the original video. In other words, “anyone who went on airing the video after that was not following the norms of traditional media.” According to Ritchie, social media users who continued to share the video were breaking with traditional media and “showing evidence of having no ethical standards to apply to their content.” As the line between traditional journalism and online reporting continues to blur, this debate gets tougher to moderate. It is becoming harder and harder to separate traditional media from so-called new media and trained, ethical professionals from amateurs. According to Sada Reed, the growth of social media has challenged journalism at its very core: “Journalists struggled in the last decade to see how a profession based on selecting and vetting information before disseminating it might fit in a world where anyone can easily and instantly publish anything.” This is also a problem for consumers of media—who should we trust in times of crisis?

Are these ethical challenges, coupled with the immediacy of social media, to blame for the lack of context (real or perceived) related to the death of Nodar Kumaritashvili? As with most debates, the answer is not black and white, as was illustrated in a study of tweeting during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. If, as noted above, social media adhere to standards that are less ethical than those of traditional media, then the difference should be visible in the ways in which social media users engaged with this particular video. What Anatoliy Gruzd, Sophie Doiron, and Philip Mai found in their analysis of forty-six thousand Twitter messages during the Games is surprising. As they discovered, although “sad” messages
were tweeted during the 2010 Olympics, most of them relating to the death of Kumaritashvili, the majority of the tweets relating to the Games were positive, with three positive tweets for every negative one. Positive tweets are not always the norm when it comes to mega-events and Twitter, specifically in the area of presidential elections. Gruzd, Doiron, and Mai also found that “positive messages are 3 times more likely to be forwarded than negative messages.” This suggests that Twitter users would be more likely to retweet positive news than the “death-porn” footage of Kumaritashvili’s death. Personally, I find this conclusion somewhat counterintuitive, given what I see as Web 2.0 society’s voyeuristic tendencies, to which gruesome images such as these so often appeal.

The immediacy associated with online news has also affected accuracy, specifically in relation to posting a news story online and then making modifications throughout the day. Michael Karlsson has studied the issue extensively:

It will probably prove difficult to convince an audience that the news is accurate if they read conflicting drafts of news or witness a news anchor reading one thing from a script while simultaneously seeing something that contradicts their statement. If this occurs several times a day, it is not difficult to imagine the impact that this can have on the perceived trustworthiness and associated authority of the news outlet. On the other hand, users’ appreciation of immediacy indicates that they are willing to trade accuracy for speed, although users’ tolerance zone for errors needs to be investigated.

Even in conventional news coverage, of course, accuracy is an ideal that is not always met. William Wary Carney cites a Columbia School of Journalism study that found that close to 20 percent of news media stories “were viewed by the reporters who wrote them to be defective either because the headline was inaccurate or because errors had occurred in the editing process.” As this finding suggests, and as Carney goes on to point out, while “journalists do make errors, they are also very reluctant to concede them.” The reluctance of media personnel to concede—and correct—errors is probably one factor that contributed to the silence of the Canadian luge team in the aftermath of the accident.

In Carney’s view, inaccuracy consists in a reporter making a factual mistake, not simply interpreting the fact in a way that differs from the reader’s preferred interpretation. Lauscher argues, however, that the media narrative surrounding Kumaritashvili’s death was inaccurate because it focused on certain details to the exclusion of others and failed to contextualize the incident adequately. In other words, even though the information presented in the media may have been
accurate, the coverage was not balanced: it did not convey the whole story. One must ask, then, at what point the omission of information becomes an act of interpretation, one that creates a misleading impression.

Social media and new information technologies certainly affected the coverage of the luger’s death at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. However, other factors need to be analyzed before determining why media focused on a “faulty track” instead of addressing such issues as eligibility rules within the sport of luge.

THE CHANGING FACE OF SPORTS JOURNALISM

Over the years, I have witnessed a decline in the importance of sports coverage, especially from a local perspective. Jeffrey Halliday’s study of sports on American television confirms this. He found that three-quarters of the sports reporters interviewed agreed that their roles are diminishing and that there is a high level of anxiety within their profession.11 Globe and Mail TV critic John Doyle agrees: “Olympic TV coverage is what it is—traditional sports TV on a gigantic scale. It’s not the TV news. It’s not a vehicle for investigative journalism.”32

Except during the Olympics, luge is not a popular sport in Canada. Having been to World Cup races in Calgary, I can tell you that crowds are small and media coverage minimal. Every four years at the Olympics, however, journalists are tasked with covering sports, like luge, that they know little about. Similarly, every four years, fans of the Olympics are viewing sports, like luge, that they also know little about. Developing true fans (and, for that matter, knowledgeable journalists) for a sport that receives media attention only every quadrennial is challenging. While, in my experience, journalists generally seem to strive to get the story right, no matter what the topic, US broadcaster Bryant Gumble provides a counter perspective: “Try to blot out all logic when announcers and sportswriters pretend to care about the luge, the skeleton, the biathlon and all those other events they don’t understand and totally ignore for all but three weeks every four years.”33 As figure 19.1 shows, luge was most frequently mentioned in newspaper reports on 13 February 2010, the day after the Georgian luger’s death. Moreover, it appears that luge’s popularity in Canadian media is linked directly to the Olympic cycle. A search of the Canadian Newsstand database, which archives the text from approximately three hundred of Canada’s newspapers, revealed that, in 2010 (the year of the Olympics), luge was mentioned in newspapers almost twelve hundred times; in 2011, that number was less than two hundred, and, in 2012, just thirty-seven.
Even in sports that journalists do cover consistently in this country, like hockey, the narrative is changing and diminishing. As Globe and Mail columnist Roy MacGregor notes in chapter 1 in this volume, now more than ever before sports media are interested in statistics and injuries and not in true storytelling. Of course, comparing luge to hockey is not fair, given that one is a fringe sport with minimal Canadian participation while the other is firmly entrenched in our national identity. Still, the luge coverage, the argument goes, becomes more about numbers, injuries, and even death and less about the will and skill of the athletes. Furthermore, there were significant layoffs in “Canadian traditional media just prior to the Winter Olympics in Vancouver.” As Lauscher explains in the preceding chapter, a lack of understanding of luge and an appetite among reporters for simple, superficial stories—the “low-hanging fruit on the tree”—left her feeling frustrated: it was not possible to “demystify the complexities” of a sport like luge in a media sound bite, especially when the narrative had already been written. A lack of resources contributes to a lack of depth in coverage and a diminished understanding of a fringe sport, but the power dynamics among journalists, media organizations, and the governing bodies of the Olympics also play a role in the type of story a journalist is willing—and able—to tell.
Why didn’t the media question the moving of the start line or address the issue of qualification standards for luge? For a reporter to question the IOC or FIL is challenging from two perspectives. First, the convergence of media in Canada “allows large companies more control over journalists and encourages journalists to practice self-censorship.”\(^\text{35}\) Second, for reasons of revenue, the International Olympic Committee is extremely protective of broadcasting rights and the overall message.\(^\text{36}\) Ritchie notes that it can even be career ending for a journalist to openly criticize the Olympic Games.\(^\text{37}\) Given these challenges, credit should be given to any reporter bold enough to question the governing bodies of sport. However, it is also important to ask how much influence, if any at all, this power dynamic can have on a story. Additionally, these challenges fit hand and glove with the desires of the nation hosting the Games. In Canada’s case, as in the case of other host countries, there is a desire not only to win but also to be seen in a positive light. As Ritchie observes, “It has been well documented that control over media content during the Olympics is not just important to the IOC, but also to countries looking to enhance their reputations, also called soft power, at the global level and traditional media corporations looking to capitalize economically off the Olympic frame.”\(^\text{38}\) If the local media are seen as overtly challenging the Olympic movement, they are essentially biting the hand that feeds them.

**Conclusion**

This chapter outlines one micro-level 2010 Olympic story relating to the tragic death of Nodar Kumaritashvili. Inevitably, more questions than answers arise, and I still ask myself, What if members of the Canadian luge team had come out and spoken their minds to the media? Would that have changed the narrative? While the answer will never be known, what is known is that the media, Canadian and otherwise, gave our lugers little encouragement to speak out and challenge the narrative. Many factors contribute to this finding, including lack of media resources, lack of understanding of luge, the immediacy of social media, and the complicated power dynamic among the IOC, the FIL, the Olympic Broadcasting Media Consortium, and the host country.

While this chapter focused on media coverage immediately following the crash, it is worth noting that as the Games went on, the coverage became much more positive, a change that I witnessed firsthand. After Canada’s Alex Bilodeau’s gold medal performance, it seemed like the tide changed and a wave of excitement and goodwill rolled in. Steve Burgess, writing for *The Tyee*, sums it up rather succinctly:
It was the Olympics of the streets. The narrative that was building in early media reports—a tale of tragedy followed by comic screw-ups—got swamped by the massive grassroots buy-in that was evident every day around the epicenter of Robson Court. Add to that the mysteriously long queues for even the crappiest pavilions and the eternal willingness of the idle to jump up and down behind TV reporters, and you were seeing solid evidence of the public verdict on the 2010 Olympic Games.  

As Hiller says in chapter 8, this wave of goodwill, community participation, and medal success could make the Vancouver Games “a watershed moment in Canadian history.” The day before the Games officially started, it certainly didn’t feel that way. To give credit to the media, though, as the tone of the Games changed from the tragic to the triumphant, so did the coverage.

I have not watched the video showing the terrible death of Nodar Kumaritashvili, nor will I. My memories of the 2010 Olympics are still crystal clear. I, like many, mourned the loss and then went on to celebrate a true Canadian success. Like the organizers of the Games and the athletes themselves, my relationship with the 2010 Games was long, personal, and sometimes trying, but extremely worthwhile in the end.

I feel for my friend Regan, though. Despite the energy she dedicated to luge and to the Olympic movement, whenever she tells someone which sport she competed in, they almost invariably ask her about the events of 12 February 2010. It is a sad irony that, when luge finally came to the attention of the media, it was only because someone died, and that made a good story.

NOTES


4 Cam Cole, “With Heavy Hearts, the Show Had to Go On,” Vancouver Sun, 13 February 2010, A6.
6 Ibid., 97–98.
11 Ibid.
13 Quoted in van Oosten, “Canadian Pride During the Vancouver 2010 Olympics,” 85.
14 Ibid., 86.
15 Ibid., 83.
18 Ibid.
20 Shaw, “Death Porn or Just Sharing the Latest News?”
21 Ritchie, “Social Media Enter the Stadium,” 56.
22 Ibid., 57.
23 Ibid., 60.
26 Ibid., 5.
27 Ibid., 1.


30 Ibid.


32 Quoted in van Oosten, “Canadian Pride During the Vancouver 2010 Olympics,” 80.

33 Quoted in Steve Berry, “Sportscaster’s Comments Take a Turin for the Worse,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 15 February 2006, 8C. Gumbel was speaking about coverage of the 2006 Winter Games, held in Turin.

34 Ritchie, “Social Media Enter the Stadium,” 39.

35 Ibid., 40.

36 Ibid., 23.

37 Ibid., 24.

38 Ibid., 23.