

New Media Activism at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Gamesⁱ

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As the cities of Vancouver and Whistler prepare to host the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, new media activism promises to take the Gold medal, but will anyone outside of the cities notice?

In a few days, the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games begins, amidst a cloud of local controversy. Strictly speaking, Olympic Games often start out this way, but, by the time the Olympic flame has touched the glowing hearts of the entire region's population, locals are so giddy with excitement and moved by the experience that they briefly forget the previous seven years of prolonged agony arising from city-wide disruption, endless public expenditure and broken promises. This temporary amnesia lasts about 17 days – the Olympic Games fortnight – just long enough for the media to focus on the celebrations.

Having spent a lot of my life working around and with the Olympic movement – that's right; it's a movement – there's a lot to



Screenshot from the British Columbia Media Centre website

be said for this almost spiritual enlightenment that occurs on the days approaching the Opening Ceremony. The collective, ritual experience, created by the flame's arrival, the spectacular ceremony and the athletes' journeys makes for really powerful drama and these experiences are often once in a life time moments.

For the athletes, they certainly are once in a lifetime and our vicarious experience of their success and failure touches us in profound ways. Our real-time experience of their competitions quickly become folklore that is past down through the generations, like that of Jesse Owens in Berlin 1936, or Tommie Smith and Juan Carlos with their

black power salute in Mexico 1968.

So, is it reasonable to claim that Vancouverites are really very about their Games and, if so, how would we know? Even if they are, will this disquiet extend throughout the Games period? Predicting the mood of Olympic city inhabitants during Games time is an extremely risky business, as they are an incredibly fickle lot. In 2009, Vancouver Councillor Geoff Meggs reports on a city poll claiming that 21% of Vancouverites are planning to boycott the Games, while 60-70% of the population consider them to be a complete waste of money. Yet, he also notes that Games supporters outnumber opponents by two to one. A similar poll taken in a couple of days from now may tell a quite different story.

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As well, we might not find out what's going on simply by watching television or reading the papers, as these media forms also behave quite peculiarly during an Olympic Games. It is common for a host city's national media to report considerable anger and anxiety about an

Olympic Games on its approach, as these are the headlines that generate the most attention. However, as the Games begin, this agenda shifts towards being the good host, welcoming the world and celebrating the sports achievements. Indeed, given that the mass media pay for this privilege, nearly all of their resources are dedicated to sports stories and very little else can catch their attention. To this end, the disenfranchised communities of Vancouver will need alternative media allies if they hope to reach the attention of both their local and global audiences.

Fortunately for them, these new media allies are already in place in the form of the citizen journalist population of Vancouver. The Vancouver 2010 Games are unique in at least one important aspect: they are the first genuinely digital and mobile Olympic Games. At the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the Games may have been broadcast in HD and online, but the widespread use of Internet ready cell phones, drawing on the power of user generated content, combined with the platforms to deliver mass participation communicative opportunities, was not evident.

Vancouver has these conditions in place and the city will see the creation of six media centres to facilitate this vast level of engagement. These environments will radically transform the

terrain of reporters who are covering the Olympic Games, which may serve as a model for all future Games, transforming how the Olympic Games are financed.

First, there will be two accredited media centres set up by the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC). At these venues, sports journalists will all hang out, drinking Coca Cola and eating McDonalds, waiting to report historic sporting moments. These are known as the International Broadcast Centre and the Main Press Centre – collectively called the Main Media Centre – and will host around 20,000 journalists in total.



Accreditation from British Columbia Media House, photo by Jennifer Jones.

Additionally, the city of Vancouver and Whistler have constructed two non-accredited media centres – British Columbia Media House and Whistler Media House. These environments will host around 5,000 non-rights paying journalists, along with

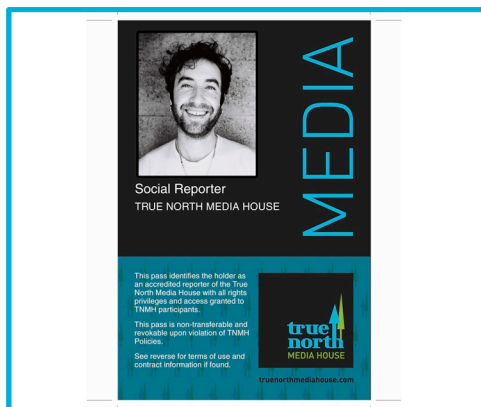
considerable spill over from those broadcasters that brought more people than it had accreditations. These centres will focus on stories related to the non-sporting dimensions of the celebration.

Their programme is constituted by the city's stakeholders and, to this end, will be promotional rather than critical. Yet, their task is also a struggle during an Olympic Games period, as capturing the attention of journalists who are mostly focused on sport is no simple feat. Even people they have accredited will turn up expecting to have access to the sport, much to their disappointment, and may end up spending most of their days watching the television screens in the media centre, rather than covering stories.

Despite these interventions, perhaps the most interesting dimension of Vancouver's media culture is the rise of three other media entities, the first of which is the W2 Centre on Hastings, led by Irwin Oostindie. W2 is a cultural and arts infrastructure, serving the independent sector. It will run an extensive programme of art, debate and cultural experiences, some of which will have buy in from the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC), while other elements will be more independent.

To this end, W2 will serve as a bridge between the privileged participants and the critical commentators around Games time. For example, they will host the Legal Observers programme, headed up by the Pivot Legal Society and BC Civil Liberties Association, which will monitor the operations of Olympic security during Games time. It will also host a cultural collaboration between the London 2012 and Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiads, as part of the UK's Abandon Normal Devices festival [<http://www.andfestival.org.uk>], led by England's Northwest.

In addition, there is True North Media House a strictly online media centre, with a DIY accreditation – literally, anyone can print their own pass using their template and bring their own lanyards.



True North Media House accreditation, photo by Kris Krug



Olympic Resistance Network press conference, photo by Kris Krug

Finally, there is the Vancouver Media Co-Operative, a more overtly anti-Olympic programme of activity. A quick look at the website of the Co-Op reveals the range of protest activities that are expected to take place during the Games, organized by such groups as the Olympic Resistance Network, No2010.com and 2010watch.com, to name but a few. In particular, various networks have called upon their communities to descend on Vancouver from 10-15 February, just around the period of the Opening Ceremony.

Collectively, these communities and the mixture of professional and citizen journalists who will inhabit them are likely to be the dominant players in new media terms. If you are of the opinion that Twitter and Facebook are our new primary communication channels, then these guys will be posting most of the content and telling most of the stories – not the rights-paying mass media.

However, as the Games progress, these new media communities will need to lure the mass media to their destinations in order to disrupt the global media coverage of the Vancouver Games. This need not be difficult. Providing they are boasting good connection speeds, engaging stories and, more importantly, good food, their central locations will encourage journalists to spend time there, but it will be necessary to be proactive and strategic during Games time.

The political spectrum of Vancouver is diverse and its people should be, both, permitted to enjoy their Games, as well as draw attention to the perceived social injustices the Games process has highlighted and even augmented. Beyond these media structures, there will also be activists campaigning on behalf of their own non-Olympic interests, such as PRIDE House, one of the progressive spaces set up during Games time to celebrate GLBT lifestyles.

In short, the more engaging competitions at the Vancouver Olympics may be between these various media entities, rather than the sports, as they all attempt to occupy the centre stage. While this is not the first

Olympic Games where such activism exists, the degree to which these communities are now networked and their causes amplified by the tactical deployment of new media, places them in a much stronger position to effect change than has ever been possible at an Olympics. As such, compared to the Beijing 2008 Games, Vancouver 2010 will be a much more visible and open source protest culture.

Time will tell whether the cloud of controversy turns out to be a small puff of smoke, but the Vancouver Olympic Games will signal a step change in terms of how it is reported, with citizen media quickly outpacing the professional journalists. As long as none of them try to cover the exclusively protected sports content, this can remain complementary rather than combative, though, without some tension, it may remain just a local story.

Yet, if just one athlete fails to make it to their competition as a result of a protest, then this disruption will become global and, potentially, the only story that people remember about the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

ⁱ Paper originally published in the Huffington Post (2010, Feb 8).