
*Olympic Flames: Analysis of an Olympic Internet Newsgroup**

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The Games of the XXVI Olympiad were held in Atlanta from 19th July until 14th August, 1996. 197 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) sent a total of 10,332 athletes to compete. Two million on site spectators witnessed the events. This number of primary consumers was minute in comparison to the Games' cumulative television audience of 19.6 billion, itself an 18% increase on the 16.6 billion viewers of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

While television has been the most common medium by which people access the Olympic Games' information and results, other forms of communication technology are increasingly playing an important role. At the forefront of this media diversification is the internet. The growth in this form of technology resulted in a plethora of Olympic-related web sites emerging in 1996. To gauge this expansion the authors used the World Wide Web (WWW) search engine *Alta Vista* and searched the terms "Olympic Games". This investigation yielded approximately 70,000 "hits", each hit representing a page on the WWW. Many of these were based on the Atlanta Games, including home pages set up by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) and IBM, the official sponsors of information technology for the Games. IBM claimed that its Games web site would be the "largest ever, with 20,000 images and pages by the end of the Games.... There were 70 people working on the server . . . preparing it to handle a load of one million hits per hour" (Stone, 1996:42). The official ACOG home page was accessed 187 million times during the period of the Games. The home page of the Nagano Olympics Organising Committee (NAOC) exceeded this number in the first six days of the 1998 Winter Games, recording 222 million hits between February 7 and 12. From these figures it is predicted 'that the Internet will be a major force in the 2000 Olympics' (Moore: 1998: 3).

These Olympic web pages are indicative of the recent proliferation of sports web sites. For the most part they are being "launched by businesses and organisations - including television networks, professional sports league associations, magazines, newspapers, as well as dedicated web sports ventures" (Noak, 1996:49). Such sites provide sports fans with almost instantaneous access to results, statistics and analysis on a world wide basis. As well, the internet provides another, more interactive, format. Discussion, interest and newsgroups allow subscribers to communicate with other fans on general, or specific sports-related topics. One such newsgroup is *rec.sport.olympics*, which caters to those interested in the Olympic Games.

Usenet provides the platform by which people can establish special interest groups, or newsgroups, which are then accessible to everyone on the internet. To access it, a news reader, which is essentially a client software that interacts with PCs and Usenet, is required. These are commonly available; many are shareware and can be obtained through anonymous file transfer (ftp). They include *Newsatcher*, *Nuntius* and *Trumpet*. WWW browsers such as *Netscape* also contain a newsgroups reading program. Like most products, news readers vary in quality and sophistication.

The subject matter covered by internet newsgroups is immense, as are the equivalent variations of seriousness and scholarship that they display. Some are academic groups, some are purely commercial, some are recreational, some even cater for activities that verge on the illegal. The longevity of newsgroups differs. If interest in a group wanes, it will cease. Some newsgroups may have a moderator, someone who acts as a gatekeeper for checking incoming messages (posts) for relevance or other standards. Most groups are moderator free, so any message, no matter how inflammatory, will be displayed for all subscribers. Many newsgroups have archive text files including *frequently asked questions* (FAQs) loaded on servers (computers that are dedicated to providing multiple networked users with data and other utilities simultaneously). FAQs may contain details about the group itself, or cover topics that are the subject of frequent inquiries to the group. They may be automatically posted to the newsgroup at regular intervals. *Rec.sport.olympics*, the subject of this study, has an FAQ page, titled *The Olympic Almanac* at the address www.andrew.cmu.edu/~mmdg/Almanac/. Before the Atlanta Opening Ceremony this FAQ noted that the readership of *Rec.sport.olympics* was estimated to be 16,000, with an average of 12 messages a day being posted.

The newsgroups are arranged on servers in an alphabetical and hierarchical manner, moving from the general to the specific and using universal abbreviations. The first extension is an established abbreviation such as *com* (for computing), *rec* (for recreation), *sci* (for science) and so on. Each extension following becomes more specific, although there is a range of other common abbreviations such as *d.* for discussion, *sport* for sports. Using a sports example, *rec.sport.water-polo* is a newsgroup that deals with the sport water-polo. Some others are less obvious. From the preceding, one may deduce what the group *alt.sex.bondage.particle.physics* may contain (if anything). The authors have not investigated it.

As previously mentioned, anyone with internet access can peruse any listed groups. As there are thousands of groups, users usually focus on, and may subscribe to, groups that support their interests. Subscription does not involve a fee. Generally the news reader will have a facility that enables the subscriber to “drag out” some newsgroups and place them in a personalised directory. This enables simple access, so that newsgroups can then be opened separately. When viewed, there will be a list of *headers*, that is titles of the postings, and a list of their authors, some of whom may be posting under pseudonyms. The reader can choose to look at any or all of the postings, and, if desired, reply to them. This reply will go to the group under the same header, but will contain a *Re* prefix, indicating that it is a reply to an earlier posting. Postings which result in numerous replies from various readers are termed *threads*. Some threads develop into *flames*, which are disputes or heated differences of opinion between readers, and may result in electronic abuse. More detailed information about the Internet and newsgroups can be found in sources such as Hoffman (1994), Nader (1992) and Smith & Gibbs (1993).

Because of the relatively recent arrival of the internet there has not been a solid body of research established which investigates its effects on society. This is especially evident in the context of sport and its relationship to the net. Hamilton (1996:24) notes that the internet is “perfect now” for research purposes. This study endeavours to investigate a newsgroup with an Olympic theme. *Rec.sport.olympics* can be classified as a non-aligned group, as it has no official links to any Olympic organisation and is open to anyone with internet access who wishes to subscribe.

Methodology

This study is informed and confined by methodology established by the authors in a previous study (Toohey and Warning, 1996). It specifically analyses the content of *rec.sport.olympics*. The rationale for conducting content analysis on a newsgroup is that the internet has become an integral part of the Olympic media network as well as a burgeoning source of home based leisure and information. While a virtual publishing empire has grown up around how to navigate or “surf” the net, to date there have been relatively few studies on its subject matter.

Yet Usenet already contains an enormous quantity of data, and its potential for expansion appears to be limited only by the range of interests of individuals who have access to it. This appears to be an ever increasing segment of the population. In a 1994 study by Harry Bruce, seventy-nine Australian academics were surveyed on their use of the Internet. 44% of them used newsgroups, with 6% ranking it their most important internet service.

The research methodology utilised for this study is that of content analysis. This technique has been defined as ‘a term used to describe a variety of research techniques, all of which are used for systematically collecting, analysing and

making inferences from messages' (North *et al.*, 1963). Later definitions have indicated further refinements in the technique, viz "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980) and "a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audiences of the message" (Weber, 1990). Veal (1996:84), notes that "the text becomes a focus of research in its own right rather than being merely a report of research."

Although the terminology 'content analysis' was coined just over fifty years ago, the process originated much earlier. It has been documented as a research technique as early as the eighteenth century. Since this time its development has been varied, ranging from purely quantitative studies of newspaper texts to qualitative analyses of Nazi propaganda speeches by Allied military personnel, in order to predict upcoming events in Germany (Krippendorff 1980). While content analysis originated as an empirical methodology, it is now most currently utilised in the social sciences, frequently with a qualitative focus, through the post modernist tools of deconstruction and textual analysis. Such qualitative studies are known as hermeneutics.

Content analysis procedures require words or symbols in the examined texts to be classified or coded into categories. It is essential that such classifications are reliable, ie. consistent, to enable researchers to make valid inferences from the results obtained (Weber, 1990). This is especially critical when more than one person codes the data. For this study coding was piloted by the researchers in order to obtain consistent results.

Rec.sport.olympics was monitored over the month of July, 1996, the month in which the Atlanta Games began. For the period of analysis all postings were recorded. The thread with the greatest number of postings during this duration was 'Unfair treatment of Chinese swimmers'. It contained 347 postings representing approximately 1.3% of all postings during the period. This proportion was calculated on the basis of file size. Collection mechanisms do not facilitate the calculation of numbers of postings in different threads. Generally, the researchers would expect the Pareto or 80/20 rule to apply. Clearly this was not the case, indicating the wide range of topics generated within the newsgroup. This thread was then chosen for an in-depth analysis, which enabled the authors to identify and trace the diverse and at times controversial discussion that this topic generated.

All postings in this thread were: recorded; indexed; flagged for gender, country of origin and domain; coded by subject content; and numbered. The numbering system was determined by batch, followed by running number, for example (1: 12) is the twelfth posting in the first batch. As a general rule each batch represented a day's postings. These figures were then placed in an *Excel* database. The authors applied a maximum of three indexing codes for each posting. Each posting was then grouped more broadly, based on its major index term. The authors have a combination of subject expertise and technical indexing expertise, facilitating this function.

Limitations

There are various limitations in applying content analysis to Usenet groups in general, and these are applicable to the *rec.sport.olympics* group. Investigating a finite period invariably means that some contributions to a thread that began prior to the period analysed were omitted, as well as those that were posted subsequently. This restricted the authors' ability to draw some conclusions (such as the relative importance of identified categories, which is determined by the number of postings each contains) beyond the period surveyed.

It is impossible in some instances to identify the country of origin if the poster's address is from a *com* domain, as country indicators are not always attached to a *com* domain. Similarly, it is not always possible to ascertain the gender of a poster, due to the researchers' lack of knowledge of all foreign names and lack of unambiguous pointers in the name of the poster and/or in the text. The provision of internet access through commercial suppliers, such as America Online, which end in a *com* domain make it impossible to identify the type of organisation that the poster belongs to in all cases. These limitations mean that the totals of each of these demographic categories (gender, country and organisation) differ, because of the inability to identify all subjects' origins and thus do not equate to the total number of postings.

In analysing the thread it was clear that there was not a sequential logic to the postings. In some cases two or more group members responded to an earlier posting without seeing each other's posting. Also, host servers do not perform at identical levels. This means that some will relay postings to readers more slowly than others, resulting in varying delays in responses.

Results

During the period of the Olympics, as one would expect, there was a voluminous amount of traffic in this newsgroup. The topics discussed ranged from adulation and criticism of individual athletes (eg. a posting with the header

“Sexy Alexei”), to assessment of the Games’ organisation, to the procurement of tickets. During the period we monitored postings, the most prolific thread was one which began from a posting that expressed an opinion that the Chinese contingent was being treated unfairly by the media - “Then why are Chinese athletics (sic) continuously being ridiculed, being hound (sic) after. I will tell you why. It is racially motivated hate to cause distraction and frustration and you know how damaging that can be for top rank athletics (sic)” (1:21). As previously mentioned, this posting led to three-hundred and forty-seven responses, comprising 1.3% of the total material throughout the period monitored. This thread developed into a series of sub-topics, often somewhat removed, but all related to the original posting.

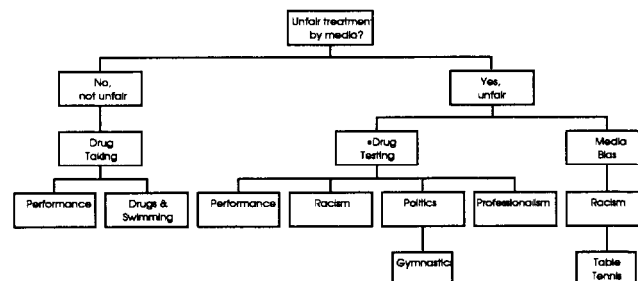
Indexing the subject matter of these individual postings resulted in ten major areas of discussion. This division simplifies the situation somewhat, as topics are all interdependent to some extent. Also, individual postings often covered more than one area. Even so, the division of topics provided in Table 1 below serves to display an accurate representation of how the thread developed.

Table 1: The development of the thread

TOPIC	NUMBER OF POSTINGS	PERCENTAGE
professionalism	15	4.3%
performance	15	4.3%
racism	46	13.3%
media	55	15.9%
gymnastics	16	4.6%
politics	13	3.7%
table tennis	10	2.9%
drugs	101	29.1%
drugs in swimming	32	9.2%
netiquette	33	9.5%
other	11	3.2%
TOTAL	347	100.0%

A flow chart depicting the topics’ development during the month monitored is presented in Figure 1 below. Some of these topics, such as racism, appear in more than one branch.

Figure 1: Development of Subthreads



Discussion of Topics

Media Bias

This sub-thread started out as a criticism of the US media sources covering the Olympic Games, primarily the NBC television network, which had secured the American television rights at a cost of \$US456 million. There were a number of different accusations ranging from the network's ethnocentricity, to racism and the perceived quality of commentary.

"The sheer arrogance of the American TV coverage is beyond belief The IOC should ban NBC from ever covering another olympics after this debacle (sic)" (1:12).

"There is no doubt that NBC coverage is the most provincial, inept, unprofessional and stereotyping probably in the whole world" (19:18).

"Free press doesn't equal to (sic) slandering others in their highest point of life. Can you imagine me asking your wife on your wedding day, 'I beg your pardon, are you a virgin by the way'" (18:11).

There was also the contrary view:-

"Well standby: the American press criticism has been criticism of NBC for not showing ENOUGH American-Interest sports events" (18:4).

As the sub-thread developed discussions regarding the Games' media coverage in other countries was introduced. As a general observation, most posters were critical of the media. Also it was noted:-

"However to be fair; when other networks (CBS, ABC) 'covered' Olympics, their 'coverage' was as insulting and incompetent as NBC'S" (19:18).

Racism

There were two main branches of this sub-thread. One argued whether or not media biases were racially motivated. The other discussed the issue of drug testing programs being racially motivated and thus unfair. As one would predict, this sub-thread became very emotionally charged. It developed into tirades accusing various national groups, be they American, Australian or indeed Chinese, of being racist in matters outside the Olympic arena. For example the treatment of indigenous peoples in the USA and Australia were discussed.

"Ethnic cleansing of the aboriginal tribes has continued while USA turn on (sic) a blind eye" (18:3).

"This [Australia] is the most multi-cultural society in the world, and there is a high degree of acceptance of people from all countries. There are also racists, but they are fortunately in a small minority" (12:6). To which it was responded:-

"It is a pity that your native population do not enjoy more of this acceptance that you say your countrymen have towards other nations" (18:10).

"Considering the fact that China is rated one of the more racist, corrupt countries on earth.... It's funny to think that you could not write a similar message in China, because their government controlled media won't allow dissenting views" (1:8).

There were a number of flames in this sub-thread which involved allegations of racism directed towards other posters.

“Fighting racism with racism is the only solution. You expect us to sit down peacefully and allow you to wallop us as you please (like what you whities (sic) have done hundreds of year ago)” (20:22)?

Table Tennis

As the distinctions between ethnocentrism and racism blurred, it was suggested that the US media and officialdom were only concerned with sports in which the USA had strong chances of winning gold medals. The argument was made that there had been no accusations of drug use against Chinese table tennis players, because this was a sport in which the USA had no pretensions to winning medals. In other words, accusations regarding drug taking were racially/politically motivated, because the alleged cheats represented a threat to US medal tallies. Opponents of this argument listed leading US table tennis players and their world rankings.

“Furthermore, I don’t recall the USA having any world class table tennis players. (or have you imported a few in)” (12: 11). To which it was responded:-

‘Amy Feng? She’s pretty world class to me. Most Olympians are, you know’ (19:27)).

Drugs in Swimming

There were two clearly identified camps in this major sub-thread. The first argued that the Chinese deserved suspicion and criticism because their swimmers had been detected using drugs, China’s rise in women’s swimming was dramatically rapid and implausible without the use of systematic drug taking, and that they employed former East German coaches who had a tradition of drug use.

“After the fall of East Germany, East German coaches were hired by the Chinese national (sic) team -- and suddenly women who looked erily (sic) llike (sic) the doped (this is now a matter of public record) East German women began to appear. The fact that a large number of the swimmers tested positive pretty much clinches it. There is no comparison between the state sponsored doping in East Germany and China and the occasional cheating athlete found anywhere” (19:5).

The opposing camp cited evidence that the number of Chinese detected using drugs was small and that more US athletes (in other sports) had been convicted of drug use. Another issue to surface was whether individual cases of drug use should be generalised to cast suspicion on national programs. As the sub-thread developed, the arguments became less rational and more emotional.

“Hey hey hey, there is no proofs (sic) that it was state sponsored doping. Be careful of the shit that you have spewed (sic)” (20:26).

“Team USA had the most doping cases throughout Olympic games history. Look at the mirror, sir” (21:28)!

Professionalism

This sub-thread began with an argument that athletes from the USA, in particular, were more professional, in terms of financial remuneration than their rivals from other countries. The sub-thread then developed along two lines. Firstly, the contention that the Olympic playing field was not level, with or without drug use, so why concentrate on this issue rather than exploring other factors. Secondly, the extreme professionalism of US sport encouraged the use of drugs because prize money, endorsements and medical technology increased the likelihood that athletes would cheat to gain a competitive advantage.

“Just as a matter of fact, the Americans had the most doping cases in the Olympic games, even with their superior technology for doping” (20:7).

Drug Testing

There were a number of elements to this sub-thread. One discussed the penalties that accrued to athletes detected using drugs. Individuals detected, or under suspicion, of using drugs were mentioned by name.

“More recently Australians and US athletics (sic) were caught (sic) on drug offences. It was really easy to forgive them when he or she is from USA or Australia. The speed at which they were forgiven is another world record whereas for the Chinese it may take 10 years or more” (9:5).

The other main area of discussion in this sub-thread was that of the effectiveness of drug testing programs.

“The major problem with the Chinese is their closed system of government. In most other countries the IAAF or other sporting bodies would feel they could enter a country with the co-operation of those governing the country. Therefore, this has caused major problems with testing athletes out of season where the actual drug taking would occur. If the Chinese governing bodies would co-operate fully then perhaps the doubts would not be so great (meanwhile ban them!!)” (12: 11).

Gymnastics

This sub-thread developed from the suggestion in a posting that the entire Olympic Games were politicised along national lines. It was argued that sports involving judging, as opposed to sports where performance is mechanically measured, show biases towards the USA. The sport of gymnastics was cited as an example. It was argued that a US gymnast received unfairly high marks for a vault in which she fell.

“I was simply appalled by the kind of judging standards. When that American girl had a bad fall twice, she still get around 9.1+ points. What kind of standard do you call that? Well this is USA. I do not expect anything fair from them (sic)” (20:12).

This sub-thread brought comments from those who had a more detailed knowledge of gymnastics and its judging formulae, as well as more emotive responses from those without specialist knowledge of the sport.

“What this guy does not realize is that each vault is a separate score in no way related to each other and you keep the highest score” (19:2).

“Duh. There are several judges (seven?) from different countries. The US judge is only one of them. And even if the American judge gave her a high score, the highest and lowest scores are dropped before the others are averaged” (19:8)

Politics

This was a predictable sub-thread. The original argument was that various nations were manipulating the Olympic Games for their national/political interests. The sub-thread developed along a number of paths. First, the position that there was ample evidence that the Olympics had always been politicised. Even conceding that point, it was then argued that the USA was influencing Olympic activities to the detriment of their political opponents. On the other hand, it was argued that China was using athletic success to support its ideology. What's more, their detractors claimed that China was using banned drugs on a systemic basis to enhance their athletes' success.

Arguments were made that other countries' athletes had been accused of systemic drug use, that it was not solely the Chinese who had been singled out. The counter argument was that these countries, such as the former East Germany and USSR, had been political enemies of the USA, and furthermore, the People's Republic of China had not participated in the Olympic Games until 1980, when they were perceived to be of little threat to US medal tallies.

“It appears to me that the Americans needed an enemy to focus on, and now that the Soviets no longer exist and the Russians are now our friends, why not focus on the Chinese? It may not be racism, but, to me, it’s definitely discrimination. It’s really funny to hear how during the Olympics, politics is supposed to be put aside. It looks to me that politics are just magnified” (8:31).

There was also the suggestion that if they could not be eliminated through accusations of cheating, Chinese participants would be penalised in other ways.

“I have no doubt that the present Chinese athletics (sic) are the cleanest in the world but will they be judged fairly by the judges in events where the criteria is not objective eg diving or gymnastics” (19:19)?

The sub-thread then moved back to the question of whether the accusations of systemic drug use were justified.

Drugs

This sub-thread was something of a catch-all. As the posters divided into the two opposing camps, the issue of whether the accusations directed against the Chinese were unfair was argued on the basis of whether or not they had indeed used drugs. One major argument was that there were non-Chinese athletes who had tested positive for banned substances. So, for consistency, the national programs from which these athletes were part should be equally suspect. Examples were cited such as Australian athletes Dean Capobianco and Samantha Riley, and the American, Jessica Foschi. It was also contended that the official treatment meted out to these athletes was overly lenient, compared to the penalties given to Chinese swimmers who had been detected using drugs. This, of course, led back into the racism sub-thread.

The issue of “drug technology” was also discussed:

“Since Australia and the US are more advanced in pharmaceutical technology than China at this moment; and since they have better techniques of detecting banned drugs; it is totally reasonable to assume that US and Aust. also have better cheating technology. The US knows how to cheat and get away with it. And they are probably doing it” (1:3).

Performance

This sub-thread centered around arguments based on the perception that Chinese female swimmers and middle distance runners had achieved unrealistic performances. It was proposed that their rise in world rankings was unprecedented, and could not plausibly be achieved by conventional training programs. This stance was strengthened by comparison of times of female Chinese middle distance runners to those of young Chinese male competitors. It was argued that the women’s times, relative to the young Chinese men, were disproportionately fast, compared to these two similar age groups in other countries. The contrary opinion was that the rapid gains in Chinese performances were due to: their unique training programs and techniques; willingness to train harder; and differences in diet. There was some debate on the properties of ginseng and other traditional Asian foods and tonics, and indeed there was discussion over whether some of these substances should be identified as drugs.

The unprecedented performances of athletes from other countries was also raised. Examples included the gold medal winning swims of the Irish woman Michelle Smith, a previously unheralded swimmer from a country with little tradition in competitive swimming. The nation does not even have a fifty-metre pool. It was argued that if detractors applied the same logic to her as they applied to the Chinese then it could be concluded that she must have used performance enhancing drugs. As aspersions on her performances had been raised in the press, their fairness was discussed in the sub-thread.

“Incidentally, I hear that Janet [Evans] and other Americans are now accusing Michelle Smith of taking performance enhancing drugs. It seems that when someone unexpectedly beats the Americans, it must be because he/she has taken drugs, regardless of the actual test results” (18:9).

Netiquette

A category that cut across the ten subject areas described above was that of netiquette, a term users describe as the etiquette of the internet and newsgroups in particular. Netiquette can be formal, in the case of moderated newsgroups, or informal in unmoderated ones. At times some of the postings analysed in this study were flames, ie, abusive criticism of the previous poster's comments, often with a personal attack on the poster's character.

"Oh, you just pulled this one out of your ass? I understand. Typical" (19:26).

"<crap snipped> You could have snipped your own. In any case, yours is the sort of nonsensical excuse with which cheaters face themselves in the mirror in the first place" (21:10).

Newsgroup communication makes this type of behaviour convenient, because of the detached nature of the medium, as correspondents are physically separated. Also, posters can, with little difficulty, remain anonymous by adopting pseudonyms and concealing their actual internet addresses. While this behaviour occurs, on an unmoderated newsgroup there are usually some self-appointed guardians who will highlight netiquette infringements and try to bring the discussion back to treatment of the issues. This was the case in the thread under investigation. The percentage of flames in this study was significantly higher than the results of the authors' previous content analysis of a fitness newsgroup (Toohey & Warning, 1996). There were 33 (9.5%) postings which referred to netiquette violations.

"This is not a good way to do the discussion (sic). It is better use some real fact to support your point rather than use something you don't know After you did this kind of thing and was caught by others, it is better to apologize rather than call others' statement idiotic (sic)" (18:7).

Characteristics of Posters

As noted earlier it is possible to identify certain characteristics about newsgroup posters. Their email address is appended to messages. This may indicate the country of residence and the type of institution through which they are emailing. Often their signature can identify gender. Depending on the intentions of the poster, these characteristics may or may not be evident. Our analysis of these demographics is based on the data that we could verify, ignoring data that was missing or ambivalent, such as surnames with only initials.

Country of Origin

Matching our previous research (Toohey & Warning, 1996) the findings indicated a strong North American geographical presence. Australia figured as the second most prolific country of posters. This is an English language based newsgroup and this is reflected in the origins of the postings.

Table 2: Countries of Posters

Country	No.	%
USA	175	55.6%
Australia	45	14.3%
Canada	24	7.6%
Singapore	22	7.0%
United Kingdom	17	5.4%
Malaysia	16	5.1%
Germany	7	2.2%
Denmark	4	1.3%
Hong Kong	2	0.6%
Japan	1	0.3%
NZ	1	0.3%
Austria	1	0.3%
Total	315	100.0%
unidentified	32	

The only impression that the authors had of posters' ethnic origins, as opposed to the country from which they were posting, was from their names. To quantify this is obviously an imprecise activity. Nevertheless, it was possible to state with a high level of confidence that a significant number of posters from the USA and most of those from Asian countries who appended their names to postings had names which were apparently Chinese. This was confirmed by a Chinese colleague.

Gender

It was only possible to identify the sex of 197 of the postings. Of these, 15 postings (7.6%) could be identified as coming from females and 182 (92.4%) from males. From these data the thread would appear to be male dominated. This is consistent with other aspects of the Olympics, for example higher percentage of media coverage of male events, a greater number of male athletes and officials and the gender balance of IOC membership (Toohey, 1997).

Domain

Table 3: Domain of Posters

Domain	No.	%
edu	148	46.7%
com	130	41.0%
net	38	12.0%
gov	1	0.3%
Total	317	100.0%
unidentified	30	

Posters from educational institutions provided the largest source of postings. 98 (66.2%) of these were from the USA; 17 (11.5%) from the UK; 12 (8.1%) from Canada; 9 (6.1%) from Australia; 7 (4.7%) from Singapore; 4 (2.7%) from Germany; and 1 (0.7%) from Japan. The com domain is somewhat problematic in identifying a poster's country. Com can designate international commercial organisations with internet access or commercial online providers. Similarly, net will signify that the poster is from some network group.

Conclusions

From their inception to the present, the Olympic Games have been influenced by politics at both intra-national and international levels. Just as other international sporting events organised similarly along national lines (such as the Commonwealth Games and the Soccer World Cup) are influenced by the ideologies, rivalries and policies of competing nations, and become political currency, it would be unrealistic to expect the Olympics to be an exception to this exchange. Yet, we still hear that hackneyed and illusory phrase "politics should be kept out of the Olympics", ironically often voiced by politicians. According to Clarke and Clarke (1982:62):

This is a proposition which assumes that politics and sport are two clearly separated fields of life.... But to describe politics in this way is to leave out a different level of political relations. These relations lie outside the formal arena of party politics, and operate in the maintenance of social patterns of power, domination and subordination throughout the whole of society. It is this aspect of politics that is involved in 'managing' a society composed of divided and conflicting classes and groups. It is... a level of political activity that stresses the importance of ideology, particularly, in the role of presenting a divided society as if it was an harmonious unity.

The IOC states that 'the goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity' (IOC, 1995:10). This mission (itself a hotly contested claim) can be literally and figuratively hijacked in internet discussion groups by zealous and/or ignorant posters. Logically and ethically it would be impossible and undesir-

able to censor all correspondence. Yet, this study has demonstrated that these groups have potential to exacerbate the discord surrounding the political aspects of the Games. As the internet becomes increasingly a part of the official Olympic media, then this possibility will amplify.

Because the Olympics have pre-eminence as an international sporting event and festival, they have become the perfect medium for nations, groups and individuals to appropriate and thereby demonstrate and exploit their political power and causes. The overtly political organisational structure and rituals of the Games themselves exacerbate the event's political construction. They draw upon and provide symbolic capital to various interest groups, despite the fact that the rhetoric and philosophy of the IOC suggest the opposite and portray the movement in terms of its potential as a mechanism for achieving world peace, reconciliation and concord. For example, the *Olympic Charter states*: 'any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on the grounds of race, religion, politics, sex, or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement' (IOC, 1995:10) and: 'the goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play' (IOC, 1995:10).

Olympic protocol itself is highly ritualistic and replete with political symbolism and overtones. When, during the Olympic medal ceremonies national anthems are played and the flags of the victors' countries are raised, when team sports are organised on national lines, and, during the Opening Ceremony athletes march into the stadium nation by nation, these practices are overtly creating nationalistic tensions, self-regard and rivalries. Such discords don't dissolve at the perimeters of the Olympic venues. Indeed, it is often events outside the Games' control and jurisdiction and the media's subsequent interpretation and mediation of them that precipitate and serve to incite the Olympics' political tensions.

Athletes (and sometimes spectators) are the living, breathing representatives of national or racial characteristics... sporting competition is invested with, and helps to keep in circulation, a whole repertoire of national and racial mythologies- myths of 'their' strangeness, difference, peculiarity, which help to reinforce the ethnocentrism of our own culture.... These may... draw on past or present resentments, hostilities and conflicts of their own experience- experiences which lie outside sport (Clarke & Clarke 1982:66).

With the ever increasing media coverage of the Olympic Games and its subsequent availability to more of the world's population, first through the advent of satellite TV and now interactively through the internet, the Games have become a potent mechanism for individuals with no affiliation to the Olympics whatsoever to draw attention to issues which may also be essentially unrelated to the Olympic Movement, but vital to themselves.

Olympic internet discussion groups have the potential to become a conduit for those with little knowledge or interest in sport to air their views about the political nature of the Games, as well a medium for those who are more informed in such matters. This can result in opportunities for constructive debate about issues that are potentially divisive, or conversely fan emotive arguments debated on illogical and/or biased lines. This was evident in this study.

It has been argued by Clarke & Clarke (1982) that, within a sports related context, groups or individuals who display a set of values incongruent with Western fair play ideals are perceived to be "beyond the pale". Relating this proposition to *rec.sport.olympics* it was evident that those with opposing viewpoints were often dismissed and vilified by flaming. There were few, if any examples of posters changing their original positions on the basis of new arguments or data. (If you disagree with me, you are "beyond the pale"). The ethical, philosophical and national divisions that were evident at the beginning of the survey period were intensified over the month studied, despite opportunities to communicate and exchange ideas. While it is naive to suggest that censoring opinions contrary to one's own, or restricting the way in which people express their ideas to conform to Western ideals of netiquette would improve constructive dialogue, this does not mean that there should be no strategies sought to encourage productive interaction.

The dynamics displayed by the posters on *rec.sport.olympics* epitomises the passion with which many people view the Olympics. It also reflects the inevitability that the nexus between politics and the Games is enduring, with little likelihood of diminishing. It may be that the internet exacerbates such political discord, rather than mollifying it. Thus, the term 'Olympic flame' has now taken on a whole new meaning.

Perhaps the IOC needs to explore the impact of the internet on community perceptions of the Games and also recognise its potential for education in a more encompassing way than merely its creation of an IOC home page (www.olympic.org/) and its current financially motivated investigation of the 'potential application of Internet television to the Olympics. At the moment the IOC has a complete ban on any moving pictures on the Net. With TV rights bringing

in almost half the Games operating revenue, the IOC fears the internet could undermine its whole economic structure' (Moore, 1998:3).

Rec.sport.olympics is beyond the control of the IOC, however, the effects of this and similar discussion groups may have an impact significantly on the Olympics in the future. Proactivity in identifying areas of educative potential as well as any potential negative impacts could be of great value to the Olympic Movement.

'It is... too dismissive, not to mention foolhardy, to write off the moral precepts of Olympism, its commitment to international peace and such, given the precarious state of the present world.... What must be done, then, to obtain greater currency for moral notions like internationalism? The answer... is to submit them to the scalpel of critical reflection . . . a thorough and careful articulation of the higher ideals they stand for so that we might come closer to realising them' (Morgan, 1994: 11).

To return to the present however, perhaps the final word on the significance of international dialogue through *rec.sport.olympics* should be given to one of the participants who conducted his own survey of the thread:-

"After reading postings, there is a survey of the quality of the discussions I made:

- 1) *Everybody is a racist to everybody;*
- 2) *'I am not living in a racist country';*
- 3) *Doping is OK because other have done it;*
- 4) *It is not doping because it is not in the rules;*
- 5) *'I am a fidel citizen, so the other are wrong';*
- 6) *'You are a fidel citizen so you are wrong';*
- 7) *'My country's human right report card is better than yours';*
- 8) *'My father is stronger than yours';*
- 9) *etc...(sic)" (22:33).*

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