



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

THE MEDIA'S OLYMPICS: How the News Media Have Covered the Games in Beijing

Sunday morning August 10, the Washington Post offered readers a front page story about US swimmer Michael Phelps' gold medal victory in the 400-meter individual medley, the first of eight he would earn at the Beijing summer Olympics.

“There might have been a more spectacular and thoroughly dominant manner in which Michael Phelps could have begun his Olympics on Sunday morning,” the piece began, “but that seems unlikely.”

The following morning, on NBC's Today show from Beijing, Ann Curry reported on Phelps' second medal victory with a fixation on numerology. “In a country where eight is a lucky number, Michael Phelps' improbable quest for a record eight gold medals hinged on teammate Jason Lezak's anchor leg swim...By eight lucky and dramatic hundredths of a second, Lezak out-touched the trash-talking French, shattering the world record, and delivering Phelps his second gold of the games.”

The mania only grew from there. And by the time the week was out, Michael Phelps would dwarf all other American athletes multiple times in media attention.

How has the U.S. press covered the Olympics Games? To what extent did the news media take the opportunity to cover the country of China while they were there? And how has U.S. coverage differed from that in other countries?

To get answers, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a special analysis of coverage of the Olympics and China generally in the week leading up to the Games and during the first week of competition.

The study finds that the coverage has been heavily tilted toward just three areas of competition—swimming, gymnastics and track and field. No other sport has attracted much news coverage at all. The games were also dominated by a single athlete, Michael Phelps, with virtually no one else really emerging as a major figure, including the star female gymnasts.

In general, in the final days leading up to the Olympics and the first week of the competition, the press focused primarily on the Games rather than life in China or its political matters there.

And NBC News, which is in somewhat of a more complicated situation journalistically because of the financial stake its corporate parent has in Olympic ratings, has devoted three times as much of its newshole to the Games as has its journalistic competitors.

These are some of the findings of the study, which is based on an analysis of more than 390 news stories about China or the Olympic Games that appeared from August 3 through August 17, 2008—the week leading up to the Games and the first week of the Games themselves. The majority of data is drawn from 48 different news outlets that make up PEJ’s weekly News Coverage Index, including outlets from newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio. The study also looked at the Web sites of popular papers in three foreign countries: Russia, China, and Great Britain (Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Komsomolskaya Pravda from Russia, The People’s Daily and Yangtse Evening Post from China and The Sun and Daily Telegraph, from England).

The study examined news coverage of the games, not the live coverage of the Olympic events themselves carried on NBC and its various TV channels.

Lead Newsmakers for Olympics Coverage August 10 - 17: First Week of Competition	
Person	Percent of stories
Phelps, Michael	26.6%
Liukin, Nastia	4.0%
Spitz, Mark	2.3%
Bachman, Barbara	1.2%
Johnson, Shawn	1.2%
Jones, Cullen	1.2%
Whitfield, Mal	1.2%

Among the findings:

- Overall, the Olympic Games in Beijing as a news story ranked No. 2 during the two weeks studied, well behind the race for president but roughly equal to the two military conflict between Russia and Georgia. In all, 14% of the newshole studied by PEJ was about China and the Games, compared with 13% for the war in Georgia, and 23% for the election. But that did represent a drop of more than 20% from the amount of election coverage seen in the six weeks prior to the Games.
- NBC, the network that has the exclusive rights to air the games, devoted roughly triple the amount of coverage to the Olympics as did other news outlets in the United States PEJ examined. Its two main news programs on NBC, the Today Show in the morning and the NBC Nightly News together have devoted nearly half their newshole (48%) to the games or to stories about China.¹ The news talk shows on the network’s cable channel, MSNBC, in contrast, stuck to their usual diet—politics.

¹ PEJ’s weekly News Coverage Index examines the first 30 minutes of the Today Show and the two other network morning television broadcasts because those are usually the segments of the shows that are devoted to the leading news of the day.

- News coverage of the Games at the halfway point was heavily tilted toward just three types of competition. Swimming and diving filled 38% of the news coverage—and that was four times the next nearest sport. And other than gymnastics and track and field, (which were tied but far behind), no other sport received even 1%.
- During the first week of the Games, only one athlete has emerged as a major news figure, and he has thoroughly dominated the coverage. Michael Phelps was the focus of more than one out of every four stories studied. That, in turn, was nearly seven times the coverage of the next nearest athlete, all-around gymnastic star Nastia Liukin. All of Phelps' fellow male swimmers combined made up just 3%.
- The week leading up to the games created an opportunity for the U.S. media to focus on China as a country. During that time, the media used that opportunity largely to talk about preparations and Olympics security. Stories about the opening ceremonies and Chinese preparations for the games both made up 18%. China's political system made up just 2%. The one political issue that did get sizable attention the week prior was human rights (13%), though there was no coverage of the issue once the games began (for a total of 7% of Olympic coverage). This does not include whatever coverage of China American media did in the months preceding.
- Some past Olympic storylines have been largely absent. Only 1% of the coverage, as an example, focused on steroids or doping.

The Olympics as a Major Story

How big a story have the Games proven to be? The week running up to the launch of the Games on August 8 and through first week of competition, the Olympics and stories about China filled 14% of the newshole studied. That was enough to make it the No. 2 story in the American media, as measured by PEJ, just slightly ahead of the military conflict between Georgia and Russia (13%).²

The bulk of Olympics-related news was straight coverage of the games themselves (12%). Another 2% was made up of stories about China.

That was still well behind the race for president (23%). Thus the notion that the race for president would be blotted out by the Games, or go into some kind of hiatus, was not the case, at least not in the news media. The campaign, during those two weeks, filled nearly twice the airtime on TV and radio and space in print and online.

² Of the coverage of the presidential race, 6% of it was devoted to the responses of the candidates to the events in the Russia-Georgia conflict, meaning that taken together, the coverage of the Georgian dispute along with the presidential responses to it made up 15% of the media newshole.

Top Stories for All Media August 3-17, 2008	
Story	Percent of Overall Newshole
Presidential Campaign	22.7%
Georgia/Russia Conflict (added 8/11)	12.7%
Olympics - 2008 in Beijing*	12.2%
John Edwards Affair	4.2%
U.S. Domestic Terrorism	3.6%
U.S. Economy	3.1%
China*	2.0%
Gas/Oil prices	1.9%
Anthrax Case	1.9%
Russia	1.6%
Caylee Anthony, Missing Two-year Old	1.4%
Afghanistan	1.3%
Pakistan	1.3%
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Dies	1.2%

**Combined, Olympics and China stories made up 14.2% of the overall Newshole.*

Nonetheless, the Games did seem to cause some drop in election attention. In the six weeks running up to the Olympics (June 21 through August 2) the election was 29% of the newshole—roughly 20% more than during the two weeks of the Games studied. And for the year, the election has filled 36% of the newshole studied, a third more than during these two weeks.

The games were also a boon to attention to sports. Normally, sports barely registers in the mainstream press coverage by jumping off the sports pages onto the front page, or off ESPN onto general news cable channels. For the year so far, sports has filled just 1% of the newshole. For these two weeks, sports jumped to 9% of the overall news coverage—and that is subtracting the Olympic coverage that was not strictly about athletics.

Were other stories bumped from the news agenda by the Games, and if so, which ones? Knowing that for sure, of course is difficult. But several stories that have generally averaged more of the newshole did drop during this time. The coverage of the U.S. economy (at 7% during the previous six weeks), was down by more than half to 3% during these two weeks. Stories about gas and oil prices, which had been at 5% was also down by more than half, to 2%. Coverage of the Iraq war also dipped slightly, going from 4% in the previous six weeks to 3% during the two weeks examined around the Olympics.

Interestingly, anticipation of the games was almost as big a story as the games themselves. The amount of coverage of the Olympics and China was virtually the same the run-up week to the Olympics (14%) as the first week of the games (15%). What did change, perhaps naturally, was the extent to which China vs. the Olympics themselves were the story. The week prior to the Games, 11% of the coverage was about the games and 3% about the nation. After the competition began the mix was 14% and 1%.

NBC's News Leads with the Olympic Games

The NBC television network paid \$894 million for the exclusive rights to televise the Beijing Games. On its multiple platforms, NBC's planned to broadcast a staggering 3,600 hours of live event coverage. Outside of that event coverage, the two primary news programs on NBC's broadcast channel, the Today Show and the NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, also devoted immense resources to covering the games.

Together, during the ten weekdays of NBC News programming studied, the two shows devoted almost half (48%) of the airtime to stories about the Games or China. That is more than 3 times as much coverage as the media overall. Forty percent of all NBC News coverage was about the Games, while another 8% was about the country of China.

Between the two NBC News programs, Today spent more time on the Games than its nightly sibling. The Today show devoted 54% of its newshole to China and the Olympics, while the NBC Nightly News devoted 42%. The anchors of both programs, Brian Williams for the Nightly News and Matt Lauer and Meredith Vieira for the Today Show, broadcast from Beijing.

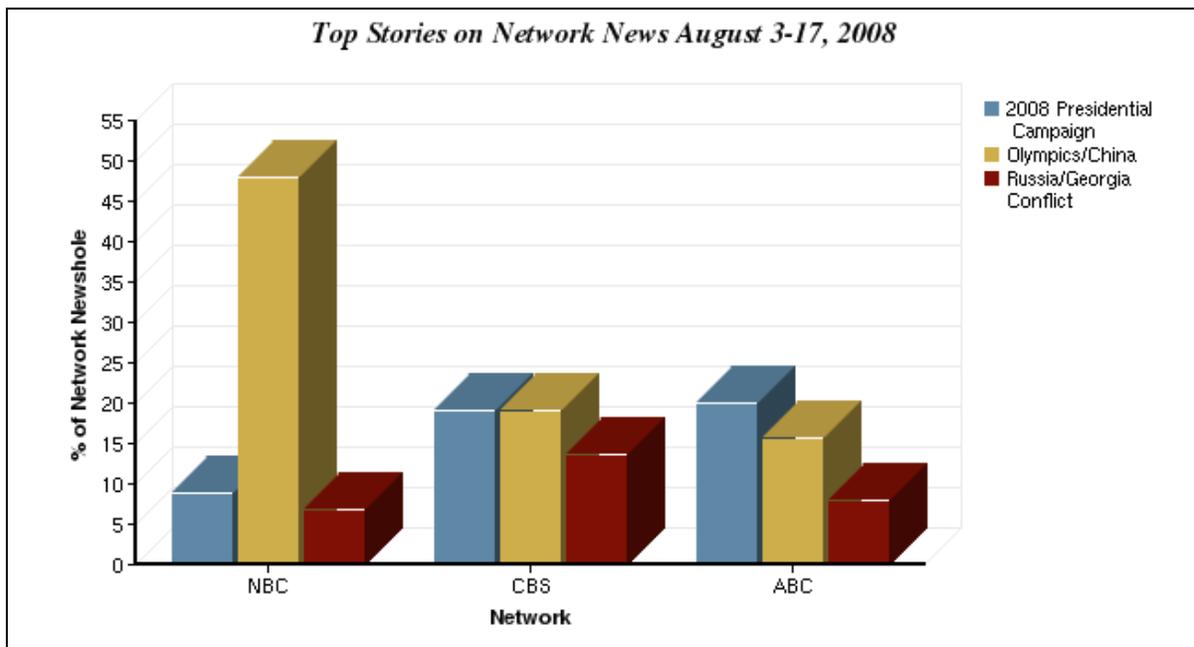
NBC's rival broadcast networks gave considerable attention to the Olympics as well, but not nearly as much as NBC. ABC's two main news shows, Good Morning America and ABC World News with Charlie Gibson, devoted 16% of their airtime to the Olympics and China while CBS' two main news shows, the Early Show and CBS Evening News, spent 19% of their newshole on the games. Unlike NBC, CBS and ABC did not send its morning or evening anchors to China to report on the games.

The financial contract with the Olympic Games puts the journalists of NBC in an unusual position. Its parent company has a financial interest in people watching the Games and, gambling hundreds of millions on it. Journalists, generally, try to avoid financial conflicts of interest with those they cover. Their professional norms call on them to judge events for their news significance, not exploit events to serve their corporate strategy. This is arrangement, inevitably but perhaps unavoidably, adds unique cross currents.

To get a sense of the difference in NBC coverage vs. others, consider the night of August 11, the first Tuesday of the Games. That evening, NBC Nightly News ran six stories on the Olympics and China (69% of their news coverage). That included a brief tour of Tiananmen Square by host Brian Williams and an update on the gold medal-

winning exploits of U.S. swimmer Michael Phelps. In comparison, that same night CBS Evening News ran no stories on either, forgoing even a recap of the day's results. ABC's World News Tonight offered a profile of Michael Phelps and how many in China are becoming his fans, along with a brief mention of the fact that China is set to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest manufacturer, which is to happen four years ahead of schedule.

What has NBC devoted less time to during the period, at least relative to its competitors? The answer is a little bit of everything. Take the two biggest stories. The two NBC news shows devoted 9% of the newshole studied to the presidential campaign, less than half that of the media generally (23%) and than its network TV rivals (20%). NBC also devoted 7% of the airtime studied to the conflict between Russia and Georgia. That was also roughly half than that the media overall (13%) and about a third less than its broadcast competitors (11%).



MSNBC Cable

What about MSNBC, the main general-interest NBC-owned cable news channel? From 5:00 am ET to late afternoon MSNBC aired Olympics event coverage, making full use of the 12-hour time difference. But in prime time, MSNBC went back to its regular programming.

When it was not airing the Olympics, MSNBC's programs, which already have canted heavily toward politics this year, did not mimic their broadcast sibling and orient themselves to the Games. Overall, the MSNBC news programs studied devoted just 2% of their time to stories about the Olympics. And during the first week of the games themselves, the prime time news shows that appeared on MSNBC (Hardball with Chris

Matthews, Countdown with Keith Olbermann and Verdict with Dan Abrams) devoted less than 1% of their time to the Games.

Instead, the cable channel stuck to its regular formula. During the two weeks studied, two-thirds of MSNBC's news airtime (66%) was devoted to the presidential campaign.

The two other major cable networks did not have the rights to show any of the Games, and spent little time covering the events. Both Fox News and CNN devoted 3% of their airtime to the Olympics and China. While the Olympics were being shown live elsewhere, in other words, the cable news universe was counter-programming.

MSNBC.com

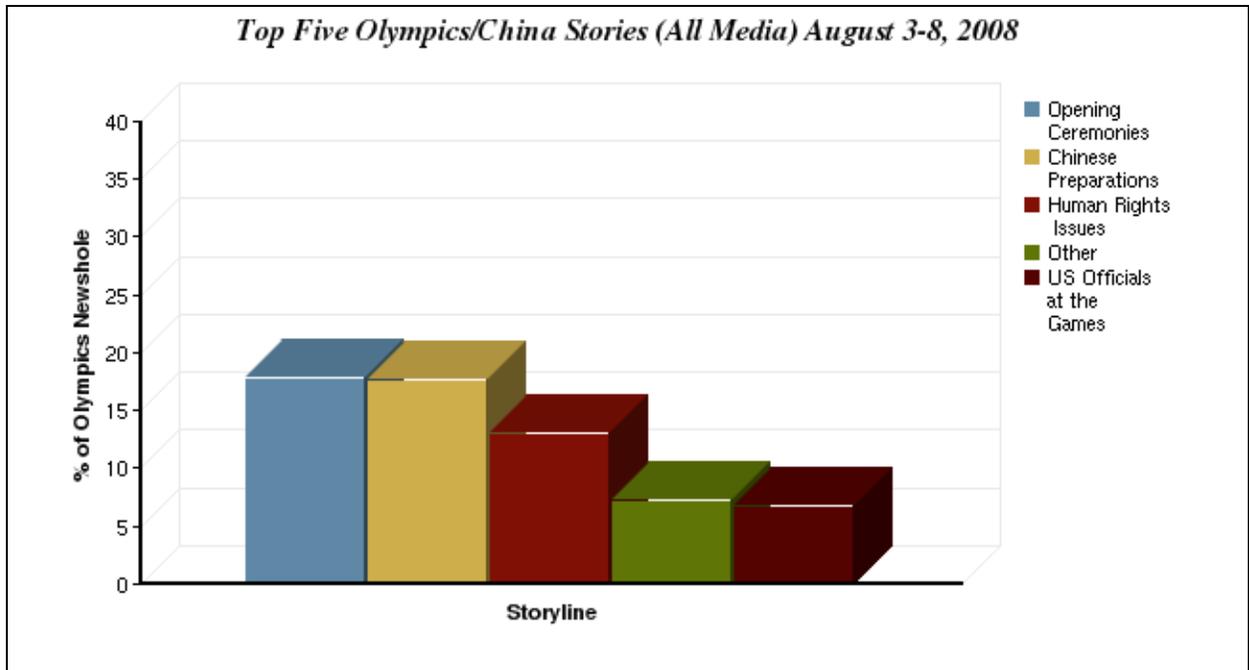
While the news shows on MSNBC in prime time stuck more to their usual guns, MSNBC.com, the popular news Web site that is associated with NBC News and MSNBC, did highlight the Olympics within its top news stories. Of the top coverage on that site, 29% of it was about China and the Olympics.³

For example, one of the lead stories on the site on the morning of August 14 was a roundup of a basketball victory for China and its star Yao Ming over Angola, a win that gave the host country their first victory in that sport. The Web site also had a prominent link on their homepage to another page that was focused solely on the Olympics which included videos, highlights, scores, and standings.

Attention Begins Early: August 3 – 8, 2008

Although the Olympics officially began on August 8, the press was in full swing the week before. From August 3 to 8, 14% of all media coverage was devoted to the Olympics and China. In general, these stories were dominated by Chinese preparations and the opening ceremonies, and sports received comparatively little coverage.

³ PEJ's weekly news index studies the top five stories on each web page, a number generally equivalent to the number of stories on a newspaper front page.



The top storyline of the week leading up to the start of the Games focused on the elaborate opening ceremonies (18% of the Olympic and China newshole) and how the Chinese had prepared for the Games (another 18%). This included stories on how China was preparing for a large influx of tourists and how Beijing was going under a significant “makeover” as the games approached. The question of China’s human rights problems came next (13%). Security concerns filled 6% and environmental concerns, largely pertaining to the effect on athletes, 4%. Taken together, those five storylines made up 59% of the Olympic and China coverage.

During the lead-up week, there was also increased coverage of China and its internal workings and culture, even in stories that were not directly related to the Olympic Games themselves. The Games, in other words, afforded journalists an opportunity, access and a news hook for viewers to learn about the new China. These stories about China, not directly related to the Games themselves, made up 3% of the overall media newshole that week

Stories about Chinese trade and business, however, were limited, just a fraction of the Olympics and China coverage (2% of the newshole) as were stories about Chinese politics and government, also just 2%.

Top Ten Olympics/China Stories	
August 3 – 8, 2008: Run up week (All Media)	
Storylines	Percent of Olympics Newshole
Opening Ceremonies	17.8%
Chinese Preparations	17.7%
Human Rights Issues	13.0%
Other Olympic Stories	7.3%
U.S. Officials at the Games (including Bush)	6.7%
Security Concerns/Preparations	6.2%
Other China Stories	4.5%
Aquatics	4.0%
athlete profiles	2.8%
results/summaries	<0.1%
controversies	0.0%
other	1.1%
Environmental concerns	3.9%
Basketball	3.0%
athlete profiles	0.0%
results/summaries	1.6%
controversies	1.4%
other	0.0%

Sometimes, these stories about preparing for the Games were eerily similar. On Wednesday, August, 6, on the CBS Evening News, Barry Petersen reported on how, “From kids to cabbies, there is an Olympic push to learn English.” And not just the language, Peterson says. “Beijing is a city where rudeness rules. People litter, push or spit. So these students are giving a dose of polite, and handing out ‘good ways to act’ cards. ‘Line up properly,’ or ‘don’t be so loud.’”

Two nights earlier, a piece by correspondent Ian Williams on NBC’s Nightly News covered similar territory, though this one included noting the removal of cars to help with pollution. Williams described Beijing as, “A city charged-up, brimming with nationalistic pride.” He adds, “Nothing has been left to chance. The weather has been improving, but 32,000 scientists have been hired to try and keep it that way for Friday’s opening.”

One storyline that did receive substantial attention was President Bush’s controversial decision to appear at the opening ceremonies. Stories about U.S. officials appearing at the Games made up 7% of the Olympics newshole. President Bush was the lead newsmaker in roughly 15% of Olympics and China stories in the lead-up to the Games, far more than any other individual during that week—including any athlete or Chinese official.

The Bush storyline also intersected with human rights. A Today Show piece on August 7 illustrated how. Anne Curry reported that, “The President, who has been criticized for agreeing to attend Friday’s opening ceremonies bluntly condemned China’s handling of human rights.” The Chinese foreign ministry responded by saying, “China is firmly opposed to any words or acts that use human rights to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs.”

Of all the major storylines leading up to the games, only two sports gained any measurable attention, aquatics (swimming and diving) and basketball, and even that was limited to 4% and 3% of the Olympic newshole, respectively.

Top Ten Olympics/China Stories for the Two Weeks August 3 - 17, 2008 (All Media)	
Storylines	Percent of Olympics Newshole
Aquatics	21.4%
athlete profiles	9.1%
results/summaries	9.5%
controversies	0.5%
other	2.3%
Opening Ceremonies	11.3%
Chinese Preparations	9.6%
Human Rights Issues	6.7%
Gymnastics	6.2%
athlete profiles	0.7%
results/summaries	4.7%
controversies	0.8%
other	<0.1%
Track & Field	5.2%
athlete profiles	4.1%
results/summaries	0.6%
controversies	0.5%
other	<0.1%
Other Olympic Stories	4.6%
U.S. Officials at the Games (including Bush)	3.4%
Security Concerns/Preparations	3.1%
Environmental Concerns	2.9%

The Games Begin: August 10 - 17

Once the competition began, following the opening ceremonies, it turned out that the news media were not so much covering the Olympics competition as mainly covering a few sports in particular and offering results of the rest.

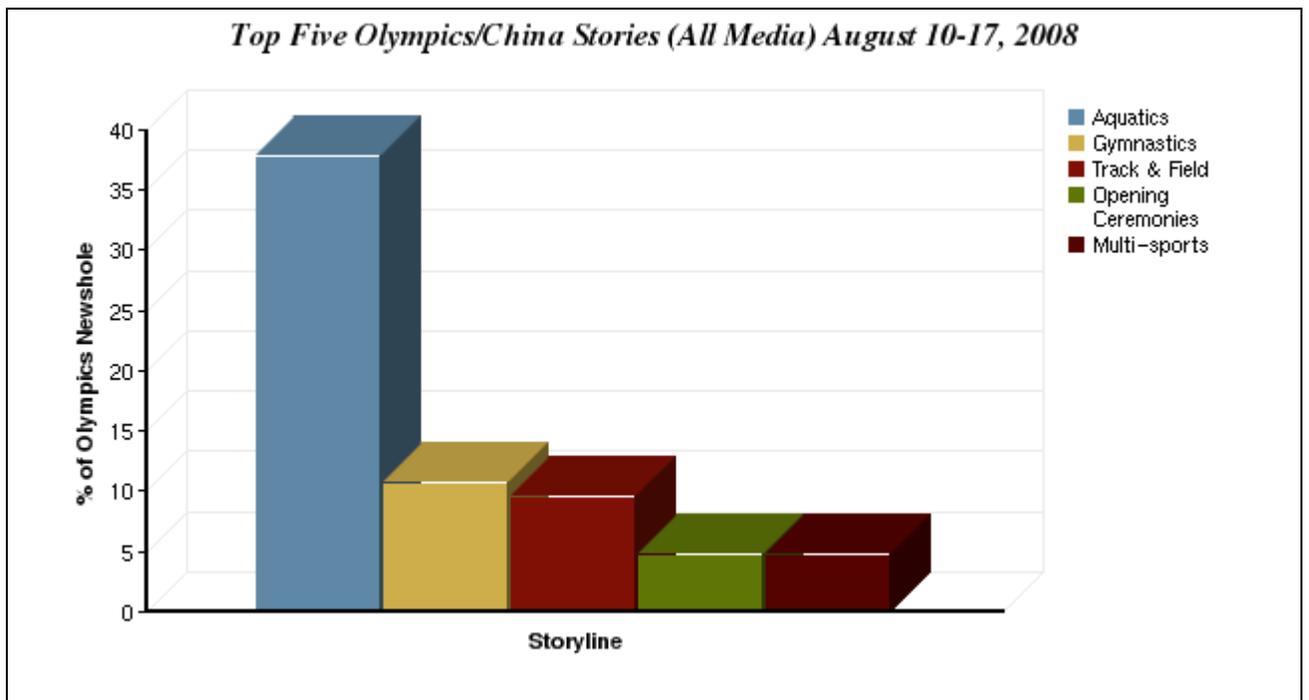
Indeed, just three sports made up 58% of all the news coverage of the Games.

The sport that dominated above all others was one that attracts virtually no attention outside of the Olympics. Swimming and diving accounted in the first week of

the games for fully 38% of all Olympic coverage. Swimming and diving alone, indeed, filled 6% of the entire newshole for the week, more than the John Edwards affair (4%) or the U.S. economy (3%)

This, indeed, was more than three times the coverage of the each of next biggest contests, gymnastics (11%) and track and field (10%).

After these three sports, no other specific sport attracted even 2% of the Olympics newshole the first week of competition. Even profiles of gymnasts, often the darlings of the Summer Games, registered just 0.3% of the Olympic coverage.



Top Ten Olympics/China Stories August 10 – 17, 2008: First Week of Games (All Media)	
Storylines	Percent of Olympics Newshole
Aquatics	37.8%
athlete profiles	15.5
results/summaries	18
controversies	1
other	3.3
Gymnastics	10.7%
athlete profiles	0.3%
results/summaries	8.8%
controversies	1.5%
other	0.1%
Track & Field	9.6%
athlete profiles	8.3
results/summaries	1.2
controversies	0
other	<0.1
Opening Ceremonies	4.8%
Multi-sports (within the same story)	4.8%
athlete profiles	0.0%
results/summaries	4.2%
controversies	0.2%
other	0.4%
Trade/Business Practices	4.0%
Stabbing of Olympic Volleyball Coach's Parents	3.3%
Other Sports	3.2%
athlete profiles	2.3%
results/summaries	0.0%
controversies	0.0%
other	0.9%
General Recap of Day's Events	2.5%
New China/Socio-political Changes	2.4%

Even these numbers are in way misleading. For it was not so much the sport of swimming as a single swimmer—Michael Phelps—who was the focus of the coverage. Fully 27% of all Olympic stories studied—better than one in four—were primarily about Phelps, U.S. star swimmer who became the first person to win eight gold medals in a single Olympics.

Phelps was many lengths ahead of any other athlete in attention. The next most-covered athlete was gymnast Nastia Liukin, a Russian-born, American-raised Texan who won the gold medal in the all-around competition and would ultimately take five medals, making her the second-most decorated female American gymnast in a single Olympics in history. Phelps attracted nearly seven times the amount of coverage of Liukin (4%) the first week of competition.

Indeed, Phelps’ story so dominated the coverage that the third-most covered athlete in the first week was not even there and not even competing. It was Mark Spitz, the swimmer whose 36-year-old seven-gold-medal record Phelps was breaking.

Phelps also received nine times the attention of all other male swimmers combined in the first week: Fellow swimmers Ryan Lochte, Jason Lezak, Cullen Jones and the U.S. Men’s Swim Team as a whole were all a lead newsmakers in a combined total of just 3% of all Olympics stories.

Lead Newsmakers - Olympics Stories August 10 – 17, 2008: First Week of Games	
Person	Percent of Stories
Phelps, Michael	26.6%
Liukin, Nastia	4.0%
Spitz, Mark	2.3%
Bachman, Barbara	1.2%
Johnson, Shawn	1.2%
Jones, Cullen	1.2%
Whitfield, Mal	1.2%

A look at this coverage suggests that much of this attention was about heroism and accomplishment rather than tugging emotional stories of sacrifice. Consider the USA Today article that appeared on August 15 with the headline, “Can Phelps Ever be Topped?” That same article quoted US basketball superstar Kobe Bryant as saying, “This can’t be normal.”

ABC’s World News Tonight ran a story on August 13 that called Phelps’ talent ‘mystifying,’ and analyzed detailed qualities of the swimmer including his stroke, body, strength, and even diet. The piece noted that the he world had become “fascinated” with Phelps with even the Chinese marveled at his accomplishments.

Top Stories of the Week (All Media) August 10 – 17, 2008: First Week of Games	
Top Big Stories in Media Overall	Percent of Overall Newshole
Georgia/Russia conflict (added 8/11)	25.0%
Presidential Campaign	21.0%
Olympics - 2008 in Beijing*	13.9%
John Edwards Affair	3.9%
U.S. Economy	3.1%
Shooting at Arkansas Democratic Party HQ	1.5%
Caylee Anthony, Missing Two-year Old	1.5%
Energy	1.5%
Gas/Oil prices	1.4%
Pakistan	1.4%
Russia	1.2%
Immigration	1.0%
Clark Rockefeller, Kidnapping Charges	0.9%
China*	0.9%

**Combined, Olympics and China stories made up 14.8% of the overall Newshole.*

Negative Storylines

Not all of the coverage of the Olympics was positive once the Games began. The story of the U.S. men’s volleyball coach whose in-laws were stabbed the day following the opening ceremonies made up 3% of the Olympics newshole in the first week.

And even as sports coverage began, the ample coverage of the opening ceremonies from the previous week (18%) spilled over into the first week after it was revealed the Chinese girl who sang the Chinese “Ode to the Motherland” had actually lip-synched the song because she was deemed “not cute enough” to participate in the ceremonies herself. As a result, the opening ceremonies still received 5% of the Olympics coverage during the first week of the athletic competition.

The story of the dubbed singing voice was often portrayed as an illustration of official Chinese manipulation and control, a kind of proxy for stories about government authority that were apparently otherwise difficult for the media to do. On the August 12 edition of Fox News’ Fox Report with Shepard Smith, Trace Gallagher reported on the “trickery” employed by the Chinese during the opening ceremonies which included not

only the lip-synching child, but also the faking of the firework footprints and Chinese officials' employment of citizens as seat fillers. Of the little girl, Gallagher stated, "The Chinese decided she had a great voice, but not a great face." Shepard Smith followed Gallagher's comments with, "I can't believe the Chinese called her, like, openly buck-toothed. This is a little girl we're talking about."

In subtler fashion, the front page of the New York Times suggested similar themes. "Under pressure from the highest levels of the ruling Communist Party to find the perfect face and voice, the ceremonies' production team concluded that the best solution was to use two girls instead of one."

Stories That Haven't Been Covered

Some storylines that have been significant in other recent Olympics have not received much coverage during these games. Stories about steroids, for instance, received less than 1% of the news coverage about the games studied during these two weeks studied. The business, sponsorship, and advertising elements of the games have also received less than 1% of the coverage. And protests about the games and questions of China's human rights record have received slightly more than 1% of the news coverage focused on the Olympic Games.

Differences by Sector

Not all media sectors have given the same amount of attention to these games. Television, both network and cable, has devoted more time to the games than the front page of newspapers or than radio outlets have.

Morning network television is the news sector that has devoted the most attention to the Olympics. The three network morning shows collectively devoted more than a third of their airtime (34%) to coverage of the Olympics and China during their first news half hour. Their evening siblings, three network nightly newscasts, have been further behind, but still high, 23%.

The news programs on cable television did not cover the games heavily. Only 3% of the cable news programming during this 2-week period was devoted to China and Olympic coverage.

Radio, while still a broadcast medium, has not devoted as much time to the games. News radio programming including NPR's Morning Edition along with ABC and CBS syndicated radio headlines have devoted 13% of their time to this coverage while talk radio hosts have spent even less time. Only 5% of the talkers' airtime has been about the games.

Newspaper have devoted 15% of the space from their front pages to the games while the lead stories on prominent news Web sites have given 19% of their coverage.

Olympics News Coverage Internationally: A Snapshot

How is all this different from what a consumer might have learned from international media? During the first week of Olympics sporting events, PEJ took a two-day snapshot of high-circulation papers in Britain, China and Russia to give readers a qualitative look at the differences in coverage. The papers were the People's Daily and Yangtse Evening Post for China, Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Komsomolskaya Pravda for Russia and the Sun and Daily Telegraph for Britain. We studied the top five Olympics articles on the newspaper websites each day, for a total of ten articles per newspaper.

Overall, the sports that received the greatest attention depended heavily on the performance of the home athletes, just as they might in the U.S. media. But the tone of the coverage differed depending on the country.

The British press, for instance, stood out for being the harshest toward those who don't succeed. The Chinese press was among the more forgiving.

The Russian papers seemed to cut both ways, offering explanation, frustration and condemnation all at once.

On August 11, for example, in the English press, Britain's Rebecca Adlington earned headlines for having beat out U.S. swimmer Katie Hoff the day before.

In the Chinese papers that day, on the other hand, weightlifter Yanqing Chen garnered much attention after she won the gold in the 58 kilogram category and broke two Olympic records in earlier finals.

That same day, China showed a tendency to be sympathetic to their unsuccessful athletes and more philosophical in their coverage. China's The People's Daily devoted a prominent front page article warning against the obsession with winning at all costs, citing what it deemed the 'Ron Clarke phenomenon,' a reference to the 1956 Olympics when the runner Ron Clarke tripped, only for his greatest rival John Landy to stop, run back and help Clarke back to his feet.

In a similar vein, the Yangtse Evening Post lauded the Chinese bronze in archery, and did not criticize their equestrian athlete for falling off his horse.

The British papers, in contrast, tended to be as harsh on those who didn't win as they were worshipful of those who had. The Sun and Telegraph, for instance, ran eight laudatory profiles of UK medal winners alongside six more critical pieces that singled out "completely outclassed" tennis disappointment Andy Murray (Sun, August 13) and the perceived failure of the much-hyped diver Tom Daley and his partner Blake Aldridge, who was berated for "refus[ing] to take any of the blame for the pair's showing" (Telegraph, August 11).

The Russian papers, also dealing with the outbreak of war with Georgia relegated most of its Olympics coverage to the sports pages. They also had to contend with the fact that Russians weren't winning medals on those particular days. In reaction, the Russian papers during these two days offered by frustration with not winning and some rationalization for why there weren't more Russian medals.

On August 13, for instance, Komsomolskaya Pravda quoted former Olympic speed skater Svetlana Zhurova saying, "So far we're only seeing the 'Chinese' events, like diving...And the whole stadium is cheering them on, sometimes rudely....So let's wait for the golds in 'our' events—wrestling, track and field. Soon we'll get a surge."

At the same time, some coverage could be quite cutting. Another story in that same Russian paper that day described of Russian shooter Mikhail Nestruev as he walked through the stadium some time after his lack-lustre finish: "Holding a telephoto camera in place of his rifle, Mikhail Nestruev looks more like a tourist curious to see Beijing than a sportsman focused single-mindedly on victory. The Olympics don't forgive that kind of attitude."

Crossover Appeal of Michael Phelps

Even if one country's hero was another country's small news item, one athlete did have crossover appeal—Michael Phelps—at least in the Russian and English press.

The British Daily Telegraph called Phelps "the greatest of all" in the wake of his overall Olympic 11th Gold medal (13th).

In the Russian papers, the coverage of Phelps had an explicit and decidedly nationalistic flavor, a reflection of an approach to journalism far less wedded to American notions of independence or objectivity. Consider the article entitled "We Need a Michael Phelps", that ran on August 13th in the Rossiyskaya Gazeta. The story was a mixture of envy and admiration: "When the Americans arrested the Soviet spy Colonel Rudolf Abel, the head of their secret service, Alan Dulles, declared: "I wish we had at least one like him inside Moscow right now". Well, if only we could now find ourselves a Misha Phelps."

The tone of Komsomolskaya Pravda's profile of Phelps had a similar flavor. "While the American swimmer Phelps churns out record after record, Russia must make do with just one bronze from Vyatchanin," the article declared. However, it went on to unequivocally, and somewhat apologetically, embrace the American swimmer: "Of course, Russian athletes are our priority. But let's be honest—we are passionately rooting for Phelps. Genius has no nationality. The great Michael is set for even more success...We hope he breaks all the records. If only to give us someone to look up to."

The two Chinese papers, at least on those days, however, did not give Phelps the same kind of attention. There was not a single story about the American hero.

Political Issues within Olympics Coverage

The Chinese, British and Russian press also differed markedly in their treatment of political issues and in the space they allotted to political matters. None of the articles coded in the UK newspapers dealt with anything other than pure sports. However, both Russia and China allocated some space for the political aspects of the games. The Russian papers ran six politically oriented stories. The Chinese papers ran two. All of these tended to be highly positive.

The Russian paper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on the August 11, for instance, hailed the opening ceremonies as a celebration as representing the possibility of modernization without sacrificing national essence: “The ceremony expressed the credo of the whole country: to no longer seal itself off from the changing world by a Great Wall, but rather to actively participate in globalization. Not globalization through the wholesale adoption of all Western norms, but a symphonic synthesis in which each nation retains its individuality, its own voice akin to a musical instrument playing in a harmonious orchestra”.

There was a similar thread about China’s growing sophistication running through the some of the Chinese stories as well. The reporting of the opening ceremonies stressed the global nature of the affair: The *Peoples Daily* on the August 12 wrote about Hu Jintao’s meeting with visiting heads of state, reiterating that the Olympics would enhance Chinese friendship and cooperation with the world.

Russia-Georgia Conflict

The Chinese and Russian papers both prominently covered the emotional hug on the pedestal between Russian and Georgian sports shooters Natalya Paderina and Nino Salukvadze at a time of war between their respective countries. Both articles portrayed the hug as a vindication of the Olympic spirit and the possibility for peace.

The Russian paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* used the words of the Georgian shooter to illustrate the point, “I have many friends all over the world, but nowhere more than in Russia. And our hug with Natasha today was completely genuine. War is on the conscience of the politicians”.

The story on the same event in the *British Daily Telegraph*, by contrast, carried a more skeptical spin on the Olympic power of peace-making. It focused on a fight between Georgian and Russian beach volleyball players that began with Russian Alexandra Shiryayeva “blaming Georgian ‘stupidity’ for starting the war” and questioning the Georgian citizenship of the team’s Brazilian-born players.

In short, if the Olympic Spirit is about international unity, the press coverage of the games is far more of a cultural artifact. Winning, hometown heroes and national pride play a big role, and the tone of how that plays out differs a good deal based on the culture of each country’s media as well.

Olympics Report Methodology

As a special report for PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI), The Media's Olympics: How the News Media Have Covered the Games in Beijing is primarily based on the aggregated data collected as part of the NCI from August 3, 2008 through August 17, 2008. This timeframe includes the week leading up to the beginning of the Olympic Games and the first week of competition.

The complete methodology of the NCI is available [here](#).

Examining the news agenda of 48 different outlets in five media sectors, including newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio, the NCI is designed to provide news consumers, journalists and researchers with hard data about what stories and topics the media are covering, the trajectories of major stories and differences among news platforms.

Following a rotation system outlined below, PEJ monitors 48 different news outlets each week: 34 or 35 outlets each weekday as well as 7 newspapers each Sunday. From that content, PEJ analyzes all stories with a national or international focus that appearing as follows:

- On the front page of newspapers
- In the entirety of commercial network evening newscasts
- During the first 30 minutes of network morning news and all cable programs
- During a thirty minute segment (rotated daily) of the PBS evening news and NPR's Morning Edition
- As one of the top 5 stories on each Web site at the time of capture

Capture and Retrieval

All outlets included in the weekly index are captured and included in PEJ's media archive.

For newspapers that are available in print in the Washington, D.C. area, we have hard copies delivered to our office each day. For newspapers that are not available for delivery, digital editions of the paper are retrieved either through the newspaper's own web site, or through the use of digital delivery services such as [pressdisplay.com](#) and [newsstand.com](#). When necessary, the text of article are supplemented by the archives available in the LexisNexis computer database.

Radio programs are captured through online streams of the shows. Using automated software, we record several local affiliates that air the program in various markets throughout the country. The purpose of this method is to ensure that we have a version of

the program in case one of the streams is unavailable on a particular day, and so that we record the show in a manner that represents the way a typical listener would hear the program with commercials and newsbreaks.

Online websites are captured manually by a member of PEJ's staff. The capture time is rotated between 9 am ET and 4 pm ET. The home pages and pages with the top articles for all five sites are saved so that when we reference the material, the format is the same as it appeared online at the time of capture.

Finally, all television shows are recorded digitally and archived for coding purposes. PEJ is a subscriber to DirectTV satellite service and all programs are recorded onto multiple TiVo recording units before being burned onto DVDs for archival purposes.

All television and radio programs are then coded by a member of PEJ's staff who watches or listens to the archived version of the program.

List of Outlets and Rotation Schedule

The most current list of outlets and rotation schedule is available [here](#).

Story Selection

Stories were considered to be about the Olympic Games if 50% or more of the story was on that topic. If a majority of the story was about the country of China, but not specifically the Olympics, then the story was coded as a story about China. For most data in this report, the stories about the Olympics and China were combined to determine the components of the overall coverage.

Coding Team

The universe of stories was coded by a team, which is made up of 12 trained coders, a coding administrator, and a senior research methodologist. The [complete methodology](#) for the weekly NCI has further details on the coding system and coder reliability.

International Coverage

In addition to the data derived from the NCI, PEJ conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses of Olympic coverage in the most popular papers of Britain, Russia and China. This took place over two days – the 11th and 13th of August. To accurately represent the coverage in Britain and Russia, where strong divisions exist between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, we collected the top five Olympic stories from the Web sites of the most popular tabloids (The Sun; Komsomolskaya Pravda) and broadsheets (Daily Telegraph and Rossiyskaya Gazeta). In China, where newspapers are divided regionally, we selected the top circulation national paper (People's Daily) and the second most read paper, the locally-based Yangtse Evening Post. It should be noted that People's Daily and Rossiyskaya Gazeta are editorially controlled by the Chinese and Russian governments,

respectively. Each day, PEJ captured the top five Olympics stories on the homepage of the newspapers selected. In cases where five Olympic articles were not available on the homepage, we moved to the Sports section of the Web site.