

# FRAMING THE OLYMPIC ELITE ATHLETE FUNDING ISSUE: A CASE STUDY OF CANADIAN MEDIA COVERAGE

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## Abstract

The Government of Canada has invested heavily in funding elite athletes for the Olympic Games. For example, the federal government invested \$66 million in the "Own the Podium" program—a national initiative established in 2005, dedicated to placing Canada first in the total medal count at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games (Canadian Heritage, 2009). Moreover, the federal budget in 2010 earmarked \$44 million for Canada's elite athletes, including \$10 million over two years to renew funding for the identification and development of elite athletes and \$34 million over two years to help finance training programs for athletes planning to compete in the next Summer and Winter Olympics (Department of Finance Canada, 2010). These efforts show the Canadian federal government's commitment to the pursuit of Olympic medals through the strengthening of funding support for elite athletes; however, the decision to fund elite athletes to win medals has led to significant debate in Canada. In this context, media coverage of this issue provides a platform to frame the debate.

Media frames select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a news article, in such a way as to declare the underlying causes and possible consequences of a problem and establish criteria for evaluating the potential treatment of the problem (Entman, 1993; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). As such, media frames organize presentations of facts and opinions and construct specific discussion base for social or political issues (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997).

This is a work-in-progress study that investigates how the media frame the elite funding issue in Canada. More specifically, we examine the discourse in media coverage

of the Olympic Games surrounding funding for elite athletes. We also sought to examine frames in newspaper coverage over two time periods—leading up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games and during/after the Games themselves. In doing so, we sought to examine if the results of the Games may have influenced the manner through which media coverage focused on the importance or value of elite athlete funding.

We conducted a qualitative media content analysis, "briefly contrasted with conventional modes of quantitative content analysis to illustrate the usefulness of constant comparison for discovering emergent patterns, emphases, and themes" (Altheide, 1996, p.32) (Altheide, 1996). As we focused on Canada's experience as a host nation of 2010 Winter Olympic Games (February 12-28, 2010), we confined the time scope for news article collection from January 1, 2009 through November 4, 2009 (a pre-Olympic period) and from February 12, 2010 through March 29, 2010 (during and post-Olympics). About three hundred relevant news articles were collected from various newspaper organizations such as the Globe and Mail, National Post, The Vancouver Sun, and Toronto Star through Canadian Newsstand Database. All of the articles were chronologically organized through Microsoft Word and were then assigned into two case files based on their publish dates: (1) pre-Olympics, and (2) during and post-Olympics. The news articles in each case file were then sorted by format (news, editorial/opinion/column, and letter). We analyzed the data in four steps. First, we developed three code categories answering the question "should federal government spend tax dollars on supporting Olympic-bounded elite athletes?" (yes, no, and neutral – articles discussing funding but taking no clear position in the debate). Second, we flagged each news article in each case file by attaching specific code category tags to the article using the program ATLAS.ti 6, then counted the article number under each code category and sorted format in each case file. Third, we studied the media content of articles under each code category to examine the themes underpinning the debate. For example, some news articles under "yes" category linked funding Olympic elite athletes with national pride; some emphasized the benefits for mass sport participation. Frames then emerged from these arguments in each case file. Finally, frames generated were compared between the two time periods, to see whether and how frames changed before and after the Games.

Data analysis is still in progress; thus, we do not include results and discussion here. However, we feel our study can make three contributions: (1) the examination of frames and frame changes in the Olympic context contributes to the broader literature on media framing; (2) understanding frames sheds new light on the issue of government support for elite athletes; and (3) based on the media frames and frame changes, government policy makers could have an understanding of various opinions toward their funding elite athletes behaviour and thereby develop related strategies to facilitate their funding policies.

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