A pall was cast over this year’s Winter Olympics before they even started, when Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili lost control at 88 miles per hour during a training run and flew over a corner at Whistler Sliding Centre. His death, at age 21, was unquestionably a tragedy, as well as a reminder that the risks of life can be awful -- it seems now that we’re incredibly fragile creatures, all just a freak accident away from the end. The sadness is immense, as it is anytime someone dies so long before the expected time.

But all of those emotions are amplified tremendously by the fact that the accident happened during one of the most watched sporting events in the world. An international spotlight was trained on Vancouver to begin with, and today’s right-now social media climate, with our constant news-as-it-happens updates, refracted the horrifying news and sent out it through so many prisms. The result was hard to take your eyes off of. For a few hours last Friday afternoon, it was a story we were all riveted to.

In 2010, news unfolds in real time. We know what’s happening as it happens. Organizations can’t hope no one learns what’s going on, nor can they spin their way out of anything. In the immediate aftermath, the International Olympic Committee seemed to do all right. It called a press conference and announced that an investigation into the safety of the track was under way within hours, and it quickly posted a statement of “great regret” on the Vancouver 2010 website. John Furlong, head of the Vancouver Organizing Committee, said in that press conference: “Kumaritashvili came here to be able to feel what it’s like to be able to call yourself an Olympian. We are heartbroken beyond words... When we know the substance of what happened, you will know it.”

But as SportsIllustrated.com points out, it turns out there’s much to be investigated. Many experts have criticized the excessive speed of the track, and a member of the U.S. Luge Association told SI that Olympic organizers had told him, privately, that the track was not meant to be so fast. Christoph Schweiger, secretary general of the Austrian Luge Federation, suggested in a press conference that the course’s speed and difficulty are unsuited for less experienced athletes from smaller countries. He said, “Georgia is not a nation like Canada, Germany, USA, Italy or Russia.”

But with 82 countries participating in the Games this year, shouldn’t the course have been designed to be safe for all of them? Where were the safety wardens? Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili is asking the same question.

Another, arguably bigger, question is what happens to the adage “the show must go on” when the show includes social media. I’m sure no one thought the Games should have been canceled -- what about the lifetime of work the thousands of other athletes put in to get to Vancouver? But was the fanfare necessary?

The opening ceremonies reflected the organizers’ struggle with this question. The show went on as planned, with a daredevil snowboarder
jumping through a giant set of Olympic rings, then hit what CNN called a “somber note” as the remaining seven members of the Georgian delegation entered wearing black armbands. But after that sad intro, the next country was upbeat.

And by late Friday night, the IOC had changed its tune, releasing a coldhearted statement that blamed Kumaritashvili because he “did not compensate properly to make correct entrance into curve 16” and said officials had “concluded there was no indication that the accident was caused by deficiencies in the track.”

This set the stage for the IOC’s show to go on and prompted one angry sports reporter to write that the officials treated Kumaritashvili’s death as “less a tragedy than an inconvenience.” Instead of the promised investigation, they made quick changes to the track--contoured ice to direct sleds toward the middle and put up a high wooden wall near the fatal curve and padding on beams near the finish line--and announced that the men would start at a lower, slower point on the course. However, they positioned these changes as steps to accommodate athletes’ emotional state, not to improve safety.

On Saturday afternoon the first round of the Olympic luge contest got underway as scheduled. The cable news coverage of the accident wound down. The sport fell off Twitter’s trending topics. In real time, we too zipped past and kept going.