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## Commentary: The use of press releases A case study of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games

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*Organising committees for Olympic Games face multi-level problems before, during, and after the Games. The recent summer Olympics in Athens was closely watched by a wide variety of interested parties, including the IOC and international media. The Athens 2004 Organising Committee (ATHOC) experienced difficulties, mostly associated with re-occurring negative media coverage. Media outlets were extremely critical of the slow pace of facility preparations and general infrastructure problems. During the Games, ATHOC had to confront several international media reports of low spectator turnout. This paper reports on an exploratory pilot study examining potential links between ATHOC's media relations techniques and media outcomes in Games coverage. The paper evaluates ATHOC's use of press releases and statements issued from June 2003 until August 2004, and uses content analysis to critically examine the tone of selected newspaper articles published during the same time period. Overall, ATHOC's press releases seem to have little correlation with media coverage tone. However, there is evidence suggesting that timely press releases and statements did correlate with positive Olympics coverage in some areas.*

### **Background**

Organising an Olympic Games is in many aspects a huge undertaking for any country. The recent Summer Olympics in Athens is estimated to have cost a record-high US\$11.6 billion (Quinn, 2004). At most if not all recent Olympic Games several branches of government and private sector mobilisation has been necessary to fulfill the tasks of venue building, participants' and visitors' accommodation, ticketing and security. In most cases an ad-hoc

organisation has been entrusted with all aspects of Olympic preparation. Those organisations, usually referred to as Organising Committees (preceded by the host city's name), are provided with facilities, personnel, and building support, as well as a government-issued budget. The degree of the committee's independence varies from country to country but in most cases there is close co-operation between high-level government officials and the committee's executive officers.

It is not surprising, given the international scope of an Olympic Games, that the financial, infrastructure, and other challenges faced by organising committees receive close scrutiny from global media. Organising committees therefore invariably establish communication offices to deal with the media on issues related to organisation. In general, organising committees could be expected to have issues management and crisis communication mechanisms already developed so they can be implemented if needed, and for media relations to be a small portion of this strategy.

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2000), define issues management as being "concerned with identifying and communicating about and influencing an incubating set of organisationally relevant public perceptions and attitudes" (p. 156). According to Heath (1997), all companies must reach a convergence of their interests with those of key stakeholders, a process requiring identification of the key trends of public opinion. Heath (1990) also argues that an effective issues management campaign can help the organisation deal with high levels of criticism. In short, issues management could be viewed "as a response to performance gaps", that is spaces between public expectation and organisational performance (Heath, 1997, p. 265).

Media relations is a crucial element in an issues management campaign, with the media often mentioned in the literature as one of the key stakeholders to whom organisations must respond and provide information (e.g. Heath, 1990). As Heath (1997) comments, media stories not only “reinforce opinions”, but enable audiences and potential markets to be reached, and “play a formative role in the public issues agenda” (p. 265). At an Olympic Games, this importance is heightened, given that most countries offer to host a Games with positive media exposure, reputational gains, and tourism potential in mind.

The Athens Olympics Organising Committee (ATHOC) presented a good case study for evaluating the way media management techniques were implemented during the recent summer Olympics (2004), because the author’s then role working for NBC Olympics during the games provided ample access to ATHOC’s media outputs. This paper critically examines the way that ATHOC issued press releases and tests a qualitative methodology to see if it can indicate correlation between press releases and the tone of critical media coverage.

### **The issue**

Long before the opening ceremony of the Games, a large number of worldwide news reports criticised ATHOC’s venue construction progress (see Appendix 1). In addition to repeated reports of construction delay, the media cited concerns regarding ATHOC’s organisation of security, accommodation, traffic, and preparations for hot weather conditions, all of which could potentially disrupt the Games. The critical news reports continued until August 2004, the month of the Games. Those news reports resulted in widespread concern among spectators, International Olympic Committee (IOC) members, and other interested parties, who wondered whether Athens would be ready in August 2004 (e.g. Jenkins, 2003; Michaelis, 2003; Orkin, 2003). Once the Games began, news reports criticised the large number of empty seats in the venues.

ATHOC responded to the worldwide negative media reports with press releases and

press conference statements. This pilot study explored a possible methodology for assessing whether these releases were effective in yielding more positive media coverage for ATHOC.

### **Methodology**

In order to assess the effect of ATHOC’s press releases on media coverage of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, worldwide newspaper articles written in English between June, 2003 and August, 2004 were examined (see **Appendix 1** for a list of the chosen articles) using a methodology previously tested in a range of articles (Levin, 2002; Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer, & Harrison, 1995). Due to the space and time constraints of a pilot study, research focused on newspaper coverage of the Olympic Games. These still gave a good indication of the overall media agenda, as from working experience it was clear that many television news updates were prompted by news reports that first appeared in print media. Most of the chosen newspaper articles dealt with the subject of preparation progress for the Games. While the term ‘progress’ was usually used in reference to venue preparations it sometimes included areas such as accommodation, transportation, and others.

Based on analysis of the articles, newspaper discussion of the preparation progress for the Athens 2004 Games most clearly emphasised security issues. Security considerations received wide media coverage, perhaps not surprisingly given Athens was the first summer Olympics after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, and took place while the US was engaged in military operations in Iraq.

For clarity of research purposes, the newspaper articles under examination were grouped into quarterly time periods; Summer 2003, Winter 2003, Spring 2004, and Summer 2004. It was necessary to include articles published as early as a year before the start of the Olympics given the research focus on the pace of preparations, which as discussed was also the main focus of the media coverage. Three articles were randomly selected from each of the time periods Summer 2003, Autumn

2003, and Winter 2004. Five articles from the time periods of Spring and Summer 2004 were randomly selected. The overrepresentation of the articles published in the last two periods was deemed necessary because the closeness of the Games opening resulted in increased media coverage of ATHOC's readiness level. To facilitate the sampling process, coverage was chosen from four English speaking countries, two of which in previous studies (e.g. Swain, 2003) have been considered representative of Western media culture.

Using content analysis, the selected newspaper articles were assigned a numerical value on a scale between 1 and 5, where 1 represented a clearly negative article towards the organisation of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games (in areas such as venue building, ticket sales etc), and 5 indicated a clearly positive article. Scaling of the coverage took into consideration factors such as overall article tone, whether there were cynical references such as suggesting ATHOC needed 'luck' if it was to organise a successful Olympics, presence of sarcasm, and whether the article ended on a positive or negative note. Although numerical values were assigned, the assessment was in the nature of a qualitative content analysis, a methodology that has been used previously by, for example, Levin (2002). For each quarterly period an average indicating the approximate tone of the selected articles based on the scale discussed above was calculated.

Assessing the tone of a journalistic article in this way is subjective. However, in the press coverage of the Athens 2004 Games, it was clear that a strongly negative position emerged from the majority of news reports. This may be a result of initial negative coverage setting an agenda, which subsequent coverage followed. Glascock (2000), who also used content analysis to examine the role that AT&T's public relations campaign played in press coverage of the company's breakup found evidence that the press was influenced in the coverage of the story by their own perspective on the story (Glascock, 2000).

During the same time-period discussed above (Summer 2003-Summer 2004) the press releases and official press statements issued by ATHOC

were also examined. The press releases and statements selected were those which directly dealt with the subjects of venue building, security, accommodations, ticketing, transportation and general organisation issues. The classification of the press releases and statements into subject categories followed ATHOC's own classification on its website (<http://www.athens2004.org>). The press releases and statements were grouped into identical quarterly time slots in order to make comparison with the newspaper articles easier and more evident. In addition to a table showing the totals of the relevant press releases issued during the period under examination, supplemental tables grouping the releases into the subject areas highlighted above were compiled. The supplemental tables allow for an additional analysis of potential media release impact on particular topics. Cross-referencing the newspaper articles and ATHOC's press releases and statements enables assessment of correlations between the tone of the coverage (positive vs. negative) and media relations activity. I considered it noteworthy if coverage tone scale shifted one point or more on the five point scale from one quarterly period to the other as this would signify a 20% movement in the scale.

## Results

**Table 1** indicates that, initially, the overall tone of the selected articles was in the middle point between positive and negative. Primarily neutral tone articles in Summer 2003 were replaced in Autumn 2003 by a series of news reports clearly indicating concern over the state of preparations for the Games. The impact of those news reports is clearly reflected in the coverage tone score in that quarter, which is the lowest for the time frame under examination (1.67). As coverage entered the year of the Olympics there was a marginal improvement news report tone (the score raised to a 2 in the Winter 2004 period). The Spring period also reflected cautious optimism regarding the success probability of the Olympic Games, as reflected in the newspaper articles of that period. In fact the Spring quarter yielded the

most positive coverage score of all the time periods considered in this paper (3.40). Once the Summer Olympic Games began, however, concerns over spectator turnout resulted in additional critical articles which brought the coverage tone score down to 2.20 in Summer 2004.

**Table 1: Newspaper coverage tone score (Stories about Athens Summer Olympics 2004)**

Quarter	Average coverage tone score
Summer 2003 (n=3)	3
Autumn 2003 (n=3)	1.67
Winter 2004 (n=3)	2
Spring 2004 (n=5)	3.40
Summer 2004 (n=5)	2.20
Overall Average: (n=19)	2.53

Table 2 shows the numbers of press releases and statements issued by ATHOC directly dealing with one (or more) of the areas which worldwide media had highlighted as possible areas of concern. Between Summer 2003 and Winter 2004, ATHOC issued an average of four press releases/statements per quarter, while in the Spring and Summer periods of 2004, ATHOC issued an average of 15 press releases/statements per quarter. In total, ATHOC issued 42 releases/statements dealing with the various aspects of preparations and infrastructure noted above. It is important to highlight the difference in the average of press releases/statements issued between Summer 2003 and Winter 2004 and Spring/Summer 2004, which changed from 4 releases per quarter to 15 releases per quarter, given the coverage tone in the press reports.

**Table 2: ATHOC's releases and statements (Totals)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Totals)
Summer 2003	5
Autumn 2003	4
Winter 2004	3
Spring 2004	13
Summer 2004	17
Total:	42

Tables 3 to 8 show a per subject classification of ATHOC's press releases and statements from Summer 2003 to Summer 2004. It is important to highlight the high number of press releases and statements issued regarding the subject of transportation (13) as well as the relative low number of releases and statements issued about the status of venue building/works (5).

**Table 3: ATHOC's Releases/Statements by Subject (Transportation)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Transportation)
Summer 2003	1
Autumn 2003	1
Winter 2004	0
Spring 2004	4
Summer 2004	7
Total:	13

**Table 4: ATHOC's Releases/Statements by Subject (Works/Venue Building)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Works)
Summer 2003	0
Autumn 2003	0
Winter 2004	2
Spring 2004	2
Summer 2004	1
Total:	5

**Table 5: ATHOC’s Releases/Statements by Subject (Security)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Security)
Summer 2003	3
Autumn 2003	1
Winter 2004	0
Spring 2004	4
Summer 2004	2
Total:	10

**Table 6: ATHOC’s Releases/Statements by Subject (Ticketing)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Ticketing)
Summer 2003	1
Autumn 2003	1
Winter 2004	0
Spring 2004	2
Summer 2004	4
Total:	8

**Table 7: ATHOC’s Releases/Statements by Subject (Accommodation)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (Accommodation)
Summer 2003	0
Autumn 2003	1
Winter 2004	1
Spring 2004	1
Summer 2004	1
Total:	4

**Table 8: ATHOC’s Releases/Statements by Subject (General Organisation Issues)**

Quarter	Releases/Statements Issued (General Organisation Issues-ATHOC)
Summer 2003	0
Autumn 2003	0
Winter 2004	0
Spring 2004	0
Summer 204	2
Total:	2

### Discussion

A quick comparison between **Tables 1 and 2** could lead to the conclusion that there was no apparent co-relation between ATHOC’s releases and statements and the coverage tone. By simply cross-referencing the aggregate number of issued releases/statements and the overall coverage tone score it could be argued that the increase in press releases between Spring and Summer 2004 actually correlated with a drop in coverage tone of more than a point. Furthermore, an examination of coverage tone score displayed on **Table 1** indicates a noteworthy shift in the score between the following periods: Summer and Autumn of 2003 (negative), Winter and Spring of 2004 (positive), Spring and Summer of 2004 (negative), and these do not appear to match consistently with more or less press release activity.

However, a closer look at ATHOC’s press releases/statements when classified by subject table suggests releases may have correlated with increased positive tone in press coverage on particular topics. For example as indicated by **Table 3** ATHOC issued 13 press releases/statements regarding transportation issues. Those releases/statements discussed the Olympics transportation network (spectators, athletes, and Olympics personnel getting to and returning from the venues), as well as traffic arrangements for Athens residents. The transportation plan encouraged residents and spectators to use an improved and expanded

public transportation system, and for the most part worked well in practice. The release of the transportation plan by ATHOC in early spring of 2004 correlated with almost none of the sampled articles published during that time expressing concerns for the Games' transportation aspects.

ATHOC only issued five releases or statements regarding venue building, a questionable tactic given this was the major area in which press articles published before the opening of the Games considered the organising committee to be behind schedule. Based on the transportation issue, it seems likely that additional press releases on the topic may have correlated with more positive tone in specific coverage of the venue building issue. The relationship between media relations and media coverage may be more complex than volume of releases alone, however. Possibly, if press coverage claiming that venue building was behind schedule was based on factual evidence, ATHOC's communications team may have decided that press releases and statements regarding that particular subject should be limited in number. Instead, ATHOC may have used the releases/statements to highlight areas where the communication team felt that significant progress was being made. For example, **Table 5** indicates that ATHOC issued a total of 10 press releases/statements about security, of which 4 were issued in 2003, the year before the Games. In other words, because security was an area of great interest, ATHOC ensured that security precautions, including the security budget, were made available early to the press. The sampled press reports published immediately before the opening ceremony exhibited a positive tone towards the security preparations.

Once the Olympic Games began, some press reports criticised low spectator turnout. As indicated by **Table 6**, ATHOC was quick to respond to those reports by issuing press releases indicating that the Organising Committee had reached ticket sales targets. However, this approach did not seem to correlate with improved coverage, as reporting of empty seats in several sport events continued to create an unpleasant Olympics image.

Perhaps ATHOC could have improved or minimised negative publicity from low spectator turnout by issuing more releases prior to the Summer 2004 period. If ATHOC had lowered expectations by stating that not all seats on all venues were expected to be filled then possibly negative coverage as a result of empty seats would have been more limited.

In short, it seems that no definite conclusion can be drawn from this preliminary pilot survey in regards to a possible overall correlation between ATHOC's press releases and statements and media coverage tone. The total number of releases issued in any period does not seem to consistently correlate with coverage tone score. The fluctuations in coverage tone could be influenced by other factors such as IOC reports and individual reporters' visits. The increase in the coverage tone score during the Spring of 2004 could be attributed to a more optimistic media outlook as a result of statements made by IOC officials in support of ATHOC's efforts, rather than ATHOC's own media releases. The overall low score in Summer 2004 resulted primarily from numerous media reports of empty seats during the Games. Again, ATHOC's reactive press releases/statements seem to have little or no impact in influencing the press coverage in a positive way.

Nevertheless, in some areas the correlation between releases/statements and coverage tone should not be overlooked. In terms of transportation and security issues, ATHOC's releases/statements were timely, and highlighted positive aspects of the preparation. In those two areas press coverage did improve over the course of the period under examination. The effective use of press releases/statements by ATHOC was potentially a factor, although more detailed and sophisticated research would be required to confirm to what degree and in what ways, and rule out other variables. The conclusions able to be drawn from this pilot study are limited by small sample size, a subjective approach to assessing tone, and the small number of variables able to be considered. Nonetheless the pilot research has identified an issue for further exploration: organisations issuing media releases cannot necessarily

assume that increased overall media activity will correlate with improved coverage tone. More research is needed to better establish the relationships between media relations, media coverage, and other factors.

### Conclusion

Organising an Olympic Games is a challenging task. As the recent Summer Olympics in Athens illustrate, the planning and execution decisions of the Organising Committee come under close media scrutiny. Consequently, it is crucial from the Organising Committee's perspective that its viewpoint is reflected in media coverage. ATHOC's case study, as presented in this article, demonstrates that the overall impact of press releases/statements in the press coverage is hard to assess. As this paper constitutes a pilot study in the influence of press releases in press coverage of Olympic Games, an important limitation needs to be considered. Even though the press release is a major communication tool for most public relations campaigns, it is possible that other public relations materials not considered here could have also influenced the media coverage of the Games. Further research is required in the area of the impact of press releases in media coverage. Although some general studies are available (Ohl et al., 1995; Levin, 2002; Walters, Walters & Gray, 1996) further research is needed to determine the role of press releases in influencing Olympics coverage. In this paper some evidence indicates that the Olympics press coverage was more positive for some areas on which multiple on-target releases and statements were given by ATHOC.

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## APPENDIX 1: Newspaper articles used in the analysis

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