

# The Olympic Games and Zika: Finding the Right Balance Through Communications



By Peter Land, Partner, [Finsbury](#)

Among the many traditions of the [Olympic Games](#) – the spectacle, the parade of nations during the Opening Ceremonies, the athletic excellence, the triumph of the human spirit – are the issues and concerns that can consume media in the lead-up to the Games.

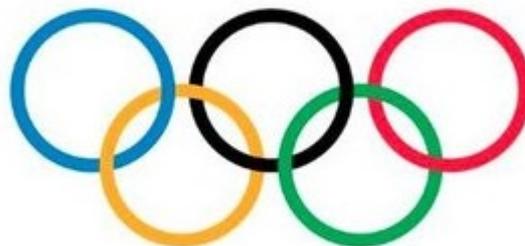
Every Olympic Games host city in recent memory has had to deal with multiple communications issues. Often the politics of the host nation dominate the news cycle, as was the case in Sochi and Beijing. In cases where politics aren't as much of an issue, there have been concerns that the venues won't be completed on time.

This year, the story heading into 2016 Rio Games is the [Zika virus](#). The global health crisis – in February, the [World Health Organization](#) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern – is of particular concern to many planning to attend the Games.

As a result, there has been a steady stream of stories in recent weeks and months citing the concerns of many regarding the virus. Some athletes have suggested they might not compete due to fears about the virus, while recent reports show many

more tickets available for the events than is typical this close to the Games.

In today's fast-moving media landscape, these stories can snowball out of control, with many observers losing perspective in the process. It is incumbent on the International Olympic Committee, the local Organizing Committee and other Olympic officials to



strike an appropriate balance between recognizing the seriousness of the Zika threat while assuring the athletes, media and the general public that measures are being taken to protect all involved and that it's safe for travelers to come to Rio for the Games.

Fortunately, the IOC has seen and done it all when it comes to [communications crises](#) – with detailed plans years in advance covering health, security, politics, natural disasters and everything in between – so they are certainly well prepared to handle the communications challenge posed by Zika. Just as important, there is not – nor will there be – a plan to move the Games elsewhere.

Specific to the question of attendance concerns in Rio, there are a few points worth considering. First, the overwhelming number of people who will attend the Games have already made their decision, bought their event tickets and arranged for their travel. Sponsors at the global and local level continue to move forward with their plans to attend the Games; and most other tickets are claimed by citizens of the host country. Even if the ticket market remains stagnant, there could be an opportunity to turn that into a positive by giving more local fans a chance to attend the Games.

It's also worth remembering and keeping in perspective that the overwhelming majority of the world experiences the Olympics on television – and their mobile devices. The venues for the marquee events – swimming, track & field, gymnastics – will be filled to capacity; so, the viewer at home will not feel the impact of attendance issues.

Overall, while Zika is certainly a legitimate health concern, history tells us that the IOC is well prepared to deal with the communications challenges it presents and that the show – the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games – must go on.

*About the Author: Peter Land is a Partner at Finsbury, a global strategic communications firm that counts Toyota and Citi among its clients with ties to the Olympic Games. A 30-year veteran of the sports, entertainment and corporate communications industries, Land has worked six previous Olympic Games and has held senior leadership positions at PepsiCo, Edelman, the NBA and AOL.*