



## GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EP# 157: OLYMPIC  
COMMUNICATIONS, PREPARING  
FOR PARIS 2024 AND LESSONS  
FROM TOKYO 2020

- WITH STRATH GORDON

TRANSCRIPT

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Strath Gordon:

We've done all that planning. It is very exciting. We are getting very, very close now. It is nervous, but I think our plans are in place. We want to introduce all of these people, these 460 athletes to the Australian community, and then really tell their story as we get into the games. Because there will be people emerge from Paris that no one's heard of before, who will become household names in a heartbeat.

I've got to tell you, David, it was probably the most challenging thing I've ever done from the time the games were postponed in 2020 through to 2021, having to learn and relearn how to do those basic communications functions in a volatile environment. And I think that's where we really strengthened our connection with the Australian community because then they saw these athletes and they saw what they're achieving.

Voiceover:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to GovComms, a podcast that since 2016 has been exploring the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from which I am broadcasting today in Canberra, Australia, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and region. And indeed, I'd like to recognise any First Nations people who are listening to the podcast today, or indeed any First Nations people and elders on any of the lands from which this broadcast is being listened to. So start your engines, ladies and gentlemen. It is now just 72 days until the Olympic Games opening ceremony in Paris.

Every four years, the Summer Olympics captures the imagination and attention of the world as 10 and a half thousand of the world's very best athletes in 32 sports compete over 16 days for 329 gold medals. So as the athletes and the coaches and their support staff put the finishing touches to their preparation, they're not the only ones. In support of those athletes are the thousands of team officials who are burning the midnight oil to make sure that the athletes have the best possible opportunity to compete to their potential at the games. Now, one area that is working away furiously to ensure that they meet the needs of the 6,000 members of the global media who will be in Paris is Strath Gordon, the Chief of Public Affairs and Communications at the Australian Olympic Committee.

Now, I declare an interest. Strath is a good friend of mine and I'd once had the great pleasure of working for him when he was the Head of Media and Communications at the Australian Rugby Union. Now, Strath is a great bloke, but he's also one of Australia's most experienced and accomplished communications professionals, having worked in radio, in television, in politics, and as the Director of Public Affairs for the New South Wales Police Force for 11 years. Now, the Olympic Games, it's not strictly GovComms, but it does share many similarities, and government at all levels is clearly a key stakeholder. But I thought it would be interesting for all the communications professionals out there to get the inside view on how the AOC is thinking about telling Australia's story at the Paris Games, how they're staffing it, what skills are on the team, and how they will implement their plan. So joining me from AOC headquarters in Sydney is Strath Gordon. Strath, welcome to GovComms.

Strath Gordon:

Thank you, David. That's a very generous introduction.

David Pembroke:

Well, all true.

Strath Gordon:

Glad to be here.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen mate, as I say, 72 days to go, it'll disappear in a flash. As the person in charge of the communication function, what is sitting on your plate today that it is your most burning issue?

Strath Gordon:

Well, right now I think our priority is to announce our team to the world. I mean, it's the athletes who the Olympic Games is all about. We are going to take a team of around 460 athletes. One of the beauties of the Olympic movement is that not everyone knows who these people are before the games. There's always about 60% of the team are debutants. So our job right now is to introduce these people to the world. We're doing that through team selection announcements right now. We've had a number of sponsor announcements. We take sponsors to the games with us, and right now a lot of them are around dressing the team, our sponsor, ASICS. Our team will be wearing ASICS gear SportsCraft. We'll be looking resplendent in SportsCraft as we go to the opening ceremony.

But I think the key thing for us now is to get the planning right around how we will operate on the ground in Paris when it comes to communicating with all of those media that you mentioned and that we give all of those athletes, whether they're world-famous basketball players who are professionals, right through to those people who are paramedics, people who are scraping to pull their funding together to go and have their moment at the Olympic Games. They're all important to us, and ultimately we want them to have their best day on the right day for them. And part of the communications role, as you would know, David, it's a high performance focused objective. If communications goes awry, then high performance can be affected.

So we've done all that planning. It is very exciting. We are getting very, very close now. It is nervous, but I think our plans are in place. We want to introduce all of these people, there's 460 athletes to the Australian community, and then really tell their story as we get into the games, because there will be people emerge from Paris that no one's heard of before who will become household names in a heartbeat.

David Pembroke:

So with that, how are you and the team and obviously the other media liaison officers who work for the different sports, how are you going about compiling and assembling those stories and perhaps trying to understand what are some of those great stories that will be told that not only if they're success, but even some of the great backstories of these athletes is as often as remarkable as someone who may win an Olympic gold medal? But even just to be there competing, how do you go about bringing those stories together and understanding what those stories are so when the moment's right you can really introduce those people, as you say, to the media?

Strath Gordon:

Well, that involves working very closely with our member sports. We've got something in the order of 33 member sports who are seeking to have their athletes qualify for the games. So we work very closely with

them. We follow the progress of those athletes as they attempt to qualify and go through that process because not everyone qualifies, and even people who qualify may not get selected. So we work very closely with the sports to follow those journeys. And in doing that, we pick up those stories along the way. We have a digital team who banks those stories. And just like any media organisation would, you're putting these stories in the can to roll them out and tell them in an ordered way during the games. And, of course, we mentioned that example of an athlete who may seemingly come from nowhere to achieve something. We already know all about them.

And so when people want to know more about their story, we can tell that story because we've been working with their sport, with that athlete for some time to be able to do that. So what we've able to do is get to games time and discover there's someone we haven't thought about. So they're all important to us. We need to understand all of their stories. And when we go through that team selection announcement process too, you learn a lot of the stories in those moments. That's the exciting part of doing this job. I started my career in radio, but very quickly as a sports reporter. That was my first job when I started in the television industry. And so the storytelling part of this is the exciting part. Of course, there's some other parts that are more challenging, but ultimately it's that narrative and the storytelling that really connects those Olympians with the Australian community because people like their stories. They like to connect with someone who has overcome adversity to find their fulfilment in doing something that's meaningful.

And I think that's where the real connection comes from in the Olympic storytelling compared with perhaps the big commercial sports where there's more of a rockstar approach to who these individuals are and those teams. I think people understand there is something special and different about the Olympic movement in the way that these people come from small communities, their suburbs, their local clubs, and then emerge. And I think people connect with that, and they're the stories that also we love telling.

David Pembroke:

So we're coming through to the end of another four-year cycle where we have the Paris Olympics, but going back and thinking about the delayed, the COVID-compromised Tokyo Olympics, it was an incredible success. And perhaps at the time there was some speculation whether it was going to be or not, but certainly the games were a success, Australia was a success, the way that the AOC operated at those games was a success. I think it was your first games in charge. What did you learn at the Tokyo Olympics which has helped you to prepare for the Paris Olympics?

Strath Gordon:

Well, I learned a lot. It was very difficult. I mean, I think as a community, we all went through difficult times in that COVID period, so that wasn't unique to the Olympic movement, other than we were taking a thousand people to Tokyo in the middle of a pandemic. I think what we really learned was the value of constant communication because things were so uncertain. You mentioned that the games themselves, could they not go ahead? We were constantly dealing with that speculation. The athlete cohort and our sports were a major stakeholder group. And I think their peace of mind, their wellbeing was very front of mind for us in terms of communicating constantly to them with what was going on in the planning for these games in this difficult circumstance, dealing with extraneous events and speculation because if you're an athlete that spent the last three years preparing for this moment, that may be your only Olympic moment, and then someone is telling you via the news media or social media that these games may not be going ahead, that has a terribly detrimental effect.

So we set about making sure that the communication from us was reassuring, that they were up-to date, and keep training, keep competing, keep doing what you have to do, and keep your head up because the games are going ahead and we're going to take you to Tokyo and you're going to have your moment. And that was very important I think for the psychology of the athletes who were competing. I've got to tell you, David, it was probably the most challenging thing I've ever done. The year from the time the games were postponed in 2020

through to 2021, having to learn and relearn how to do those basic communications functions in a volatile environment. So you have another 50% of the task is added on because it's happening in a COVID world. That was draining. And then, of course, you get to the games, and I know you've been to an Olympic Games in a communications role, you're working very long hours for 30 days in a row.

So it was difficult. But as you pointed out, the games were very successful. Our team did very, very well. We did have a captive audience back in Australia with large portions of the community in lockdown, and the Olympic Games brought them something special. It brought them a sense of hope and achievement. And I think that's where we, I won't say reconnected, but I think really strengthened our connection with the Australian community because then they saw these athletes and they saw what they were achieving. I think it's always that thing around communication. You don't communicate with people just when it suits you. You've got to communicate constantly. So I think, if you like, that stakeholder and internal communication was equally important as what we're telling the community every day of the week leading into the games because it was very important that the athletes had that confidence that what they were doing in preparing was going to be worth it.

David Pembroke:

It's interesting you raise that opportunity perhaps or the challenge of COVID. A couple of weeks ago, I interviewed Bevan Hannon, who's the General Manager of communications at Services Australia here in Canberra, and he raised the point about COVID and the impact of COVID on the value or the perceived value in the importance of communications. And he was making the case that there's been almost a step change, that people really started to understand the value of communication through COVID. As someone who's been around a while, would you agree that the communication profession and function has taken on additional responsibility and perceived value post-COVID?

Strath Gordon:

Absolutely. And I think what's aided that has been technology that's around now that wasn't around some time ago. And certainly what we found is when we wanted to communicate with athletes through a mechanism such as Teams, people clicked on, they were interested, they were engaged, they needed them, they wanted that information, but very importantly, they had the technological opportunity to dial in, ask questions, and participate and have a two-way exchange. Obviously, we've come a long way in terms of digital and social media in the last 10 and 15 years. I remember starting my career, social media wasn't a thing. When it arrived, it was like, oh my God, there's this tool that just wasn't available to us. It's much better than email groups in terms of how you're going to communicate to the community.

But a little point I might make from the AOC's perspective that we were somewhat fortunate, and you won't believe this, but we did an office renovation sometime before 2020 in, say, 2019. And that required all of us to work remotely for four to five weeks and maintain our communication both internally within the office and our communication with all of our various stakeholders, including government sponsors, sports, whoever. And so we had to learn this new way of working because the office here in Sydney was being renovated. And when it came to the COVID period, we were match fit. We'd been through this interesting micro experience of working from home or working in remote groups or whatever. So we were match fit going into that. But we certainly made a conscious decision that the key for us with the games postponed and living in a COVID world was this constant and relevant communication.

And I think there's an altruism, let's call it a crisis. You can't over communicate enough in a crisis. You just can't do that. I think we took that as our mantra, and I completely agree with that statement. And now we find ourselves communicating in this way and using that philosophy and using those technologies in such an easy and well understood way.

David Pembroke:

So listen, obviously, the Olympic Games themselves, the 16 days is the big show, and there's three and a half or three in however many years preparation leading up to it. Can you give us some indication as to what that cycle looks like? So post-Olympics in Tokyo, probably lessons learned sitting around working it all out. But what are some of the tasks that you as Head of Comms and your team are doing in that interim period as you're getting ready to go to the next games?

Strath Gordon:

Well, strangely enough, and I hope this is not a surprise to the people who subscribe to your podcast, David, but there's not just one Olympic Games every four years. So for a start, there's a lot more activity that is taking place. There is, for a start, a Winter Games every four years that [inaudible 00:18:31]. Summer Games two years later, Winter Games. So straight away, not on the scale of the Summer Games, of course. The Winter Games, we have about 45 to 50 athletes, smaller support team, closer environment. But nevertheless, same thing. Storytelling, providing access to media, doing all of the things you would do at games time, working with a broadcaster, et cetera. So there is that. We also run Youth Olympic teams. We send up and coming athletes who are selected to Youth Olympic Games that take place in both our summer and our winter format.

The most recent Winter Games was held in January and February this year. And in late 2023, we sent a large team to the Pacific Games in Solomon Island. So again, that's giving young athletes experience. It was actually a qualifying event for a number of sports, particularly boxing and also archery. And it's also an opportunity for us to train up staff to get used to that games environment. You've got all of those things going on. So we're actually doing other games. All the way through though we are planning for what Paris will look like in reality for us. What are our broadcasters requirements? We're discussing with all of the major media stakeholders, "This is how the games will operate. This is the service levels that you will get. These are the games rules. This is how we'll meet your expectations." And that planning happens down to quite a micro level in advance and in anticipation, obviously, understanding too that you need to be agile when things happen quickly.

But the other thing I'd also emphasise is we do a lot of work in the community space. So we have athletes going into schools principally in our Olympics Unleashed Program constantly. So that's a whole program that rolls out, and this is not just school visits where an athlete goes in and talks about how good they are at their sport and why don't you all participate in my sport, whether it's paddle or a football code, or whatever it may be. The athletes go into the schools with an education hat on, so this is a ploy for this program, but they have an education hat on, and we train the athletes in doing that, and we pay them to go to the schools and deliver messages about how to be resilient, how to overcome those problems, how to set goals. Education departments across the country love that because it's hard for teachers to teach that.

But Olympians understand that because they've been through that difficult journey. They do know how to set goals. They do know how to overcome obstacles and not let that defeat them. So conveying those messages to kids, that's a good thing. So we roll out that program and hundreds of thousands of kids are experiencing those programs. And, of course, we're an advocacy body, David, so we do work with government because government intersects with every aspect of what we do. And if you're talking about constant communication, we understand that when you are communicating with government, that's not just going to government when you need them, that's about having that relationship with them and understanding their needs at all times.

David Pembroke:

So interestingly in the answer there, a couple of answers actually, you've spoken about the broadcaster and the relationship with the broadcaster. And I'm interested to get your views on the role of the broadcaster at a time of such great change and transformation as we see the rise of streaming, the ability to be able to go direct, the importance of YouTube, probably the decline in traditional free-to-air television. How are you

thinking about the broadcaster and what's your view on this evolving television landscape and where the AOC fits in that?

Strath Gordon:

Well, I think, first and foremost, a simple answer to that question is in terms of our role. We're there to assist the broadcaster to enhance the experience that they're going to be delivering. And that's around access to content, all of those things that will play out in a free-to-air television role. It will play out through the digital channels of those entities, and also in the streaming services and pay-for-view world. So I guess we come at that from very much a content provision perspective, but we understand that the dynamics are changing in the world. But the Olympic Games has really been built on the backing of global broadcasters. I mean, people ask why are the Olympic Games always in July? Well, they're always in July because that school holidays time in the United States and NBC, who funds the Olympic movement to a greater degree than any other single entity, wants that slot.

So that's why Brisbane 2032 got the gig, because it's not so cold in Brisbane in July compared with Sydney or Melbourne. So broadcast is a reality, but I think you'll find that the IOC particularly is looking at, how does it deal with the real world going forward? Is that dynamic changing and, therefore, are there other things to be examined in the Olympic movement that can be challenging? And I think one of those things is, and they've made no secret of the fact that the IOC is looking at something like e-sports right now. And how does that connect with the Olympic ethos? Because they seem to be very different worlds. And so there's this eye on the future, but I think from an Australian Olympic Committee perspective, we play to our strengths. We've got a very good relationship. We've got a new broadcaster in Channel Nine.

We're working with them to make sure that their investment not just for Paris, but for LA 2028, and then ultimately Brisbane 2032 is going to realise benefits for them, and then how can we assist them in that landscape? And there's no doubt Brisbane 2032 is eight years away. A lot's going to change in the next eight years. I'm not going to be there, David, I can assure you for Brisbane 2032 at this job. Someone much younger and dynamic can come in and take up the reins for that. But I think, yes, you have to be conscious that the broadcaster is a major stakeholder. They've invested a lot, they are looking for a return on that investment, and what do we bring to the table to assist them in getting that return?

David Pembroke:

So listen, in the few minutes that we have remaining, one of the features of this program is really about the transfer of knowledge, and I'm sure people will have already learnt from you this notion of relevance, the importance of regular and consistent communication. But as someone who has had such a distinguished career and had the opportunity to work as a director of the police force communications, as a radio host, as a sports reporter, producer, heading up comms at Rugby Australia, you've seen a lot. What makes the best communicators?

Strath Gordon:

Well, I don't think it'll be a surprise to you or, again, your podcast audience. Some things don't change. In being agile around technology, in being agile around changing environments, I think I still believe fundamentally that the building of relationships, particularly across your stakeholders, is essential, and you don't do that sitting in an office on the end of a phone. I still think good relationships means you have information coming to you that you need to do your job, you are providing information that assists others to do their job, and you've got to get out from behind a desk to do that. And I think if there's one thing that I would emphasise is sitting at the desk on the phone or sending people emails doesn't cut it. You need to move among people. And I still think that, that will never change.

I don't think that will happen. I think the capacity to empathise and put yourselves in someone else's shoes is critical, and an obvious example is actually working with government. You need to know what they understand. If you've got a problem and you need government or any stakeholder to assist you to solve that problem, then you need to present them with a solution that will assist you. I know that for a fact in our advocacy with government. Don't go to them with your problem. Go to them with your solution. But I think, again, don't go to people only when there's a problem or only when you want something. That constant relationship and that constant communication, we're not getting into a subject here, and I know you're winding up, but media strategies are media strategies. Stakeholder strategies are critically important. When I started, it was all about creating narratives. It was all about meeting the needs of media.

It's one of the things I had to learn on the job. I didn't have a PR mentor in life. I had to invent it, and I had to play catch-up. I'm sure the young professional people now coming through PR streams understand this innately. I've had to learn it, that stakeholder management has been the critical thing that, once I got into my first PR role, I understood that, okay, I need to understand how I can keep communicating with these people and not just when I've got a problem or I need something done. So my last bit of advice, David, is don't take things personally. I've been doing this for 45 odd years. You could get some terrible things happen along the way, but I think the key to me is not to take things personally, but more so to make a personal commitment to what you're doing. And as I wind up, probably after Paris I think that would be the best bit of advice I could give people.

David Pembroke:

So listen, let's go to the end of the Paris Games. Let's travel into the future. It's been a successful games. Obviously, hopefully, Australia's won lots of medals and other things. But from your perspective with your team, how are you going to measure success? What is a good games for the media team?

Strath Gordon:

Well, and I'm sure you understand this, I was aligned with our communication objectives with the objectives of the business. You do that when you start a plan. You do that when you look at the results. So for me, obviously, we would share in the glory of a medal count or a great number of personal bests and records and things like that. That means that everything has worked, including communications. Obviously, we would take heed of the TV numbers, the digital numbers, all of those things that, so we know that people were engaged. If I've still got a job when I get off the plane, I know that we've probably done well.

And ultimately, though, the other measure that's important to me, which is a measure for our business, is that people are playing Olympic sports. We would want to see an uptick in registration across all of those Olympic sports and that the community gets behind our athletes and sports going into the next quad, which will be Los Angeles, and then ultimately the great excitement of the home games in Brisbane in 2032, where I will be definitely a spectator being wheeled in with a blanket, possibly dribbling. But they're the measures. They're the measures from my point of view that are top of mind for me.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well, listen, Strath, thank you so much for giving up some of your time to share your experience and your knowledge and wisdom and insights with the audience. Very much appreciated. I think the other thing is that it's so much fun being a part of the Australian Olympic team. I had, as you've mentioned, the personal experience of being lucky enough to be there in 2008 in Beijing looking after the rowing and canoe kayak section. And it is such a privilege to be amongst these great athletes and with the responsibility of telling those great stories. So I'd also encourage people to listen, to get involved in sport, and get involved. You never know, you may have the opportunity to one day join a team like the Australian Olympic Committee. How many people have you got going, by the way? How many have you got heading in the Media Centre and the media liaison officer content roles? How many have you got.



Strath Gordon:

Yeah, so we've got 24 media liaison officers who are assigned to the different sports. Some will do multiple sports. Others will require two officers for the one sport, so the big sports like swimming and athletics. We try and work with as many of the communications managers for the sports, but we also rely on very, very experienced Olympic veterans who just love working at Olympic Games and they volunteer their time, so it comes out of their PR professionals in other industries. A friend of mine described it to me as, it's like the Coe March. You're joining the corps. It's a really cohesive team, and you've reflected on that, that people love working in that team environment. And then obviously the digital teams now are much, much bigger, more sophisticated. So there's about 15 in the digital team.

But, again, a real combination of skills and experience there doing what has become a very sophisticated industry in such a short space of time. So it's not just about getting the hat and the uniform. I think the constant reflection is that people enjoy that team environment that happens within a team. When you've got a designated event like an Olympic Games, you do feel part of the greater good that the team is doing.

David Pembroke:

No question. And so I really would encourage people who are listening that if you'd like to do it, it is a once in a lifetime experience or more times till you get the opportunity to do it. But as Strath said, to be able to be a part of an Olympic team, and for the athletes to value the support that you can provide for them, and you can apply your knowledge, your skills, your behaviour, your attitude, and you can contribute to great success. So think about it. Think about it. It's something worth doing. So listen, Strath, thank you so much. Godspeed to you and the rest of the team. Best of luck. Hope Julie Dunstan does another magnificent job there supporting the media, as she has done for many, many years as part of the Olympic Committee there. I think you said before, she's now 30 years in the job.

Strath Gordon:

Unbelievable, and has done an outstanding job, yep.

David Pembroke:

An incredible service to Australian sports. So congratulations to you, Julie, once again on that contribution. Fantastic. And yes, best of luck to you and the team, Strath, and to you the audience, thank you for coming back once again. Great insight there by a guy who really has done it, does know it, and really the simple advice, again, how many times do we hear, get out behind your desk, go and build relationships. It is the key. It is the key to being very good at communications. Yes, you've got to have other skills, but those people skills, being interested, being curious, get to know what's going on, and as Strath said, empathetic. Be in their shoes, understand their world, understand their pressures, solve their problems, and good things happen. So wonderful advice there from Strath and a great story. And let's see what happens with the Australian team this time round, and I'm sure the French will put on a magnificent Olympic Games.

Now, listen, before we go, if you could take the time for a rating or review, it does help the program to be found. So if you did have time to do that, I'd be very grateful. Again, five stars helps. So let me know how that gets on. But listen, as I said before at the beginning of the program, we've been going since 2016 bringing great guests like Strath Gordon to you today. And there are so many, many more people to bring to you into the future because it's a great role. It's an important function in government and public affairs. And yeah, it's so good and enjoyable to speak to so many talented, wonderful, credible, authentic individuals like Strath Gordon. So a big thanks to Strath again today. A big thanks to you for coming back once again. I'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another episode of GovComms. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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