Public Opinion and Reputational Risk

The defining features of both contemporary democratic government and corporate governance share important similarities with respect to their exposure to institutional and societal pressures for responsiveness, trust and accountability (e.g. Dahl 1971; O’Neill 2002; Power 2004), with shifts in power to consumers and the wider public. This is of consequence for the governance of mega-events since it shapes the political calculus for project initiation and planning and the degree to which public concerns are taken on board (or are otherwise ignored). Further, it fuels a general expectation that vote-seeking political actors and profit-seeking corporate interests have similar incentives to gauge and respond to public opinion in their decisions and managerial practices. This applies in democratic settings at least, though has much less weight in the governance of mega-events under authoritarian regimes – even if public support and legitimacy remain an issue.

The prevailing climate of opinion towards the Olympics – among local populations as well as the global public – has the potential to have serious repercussions for event planning and governance. Public support is an important precondition for wider societal and political legitimacy of the event, especially required in light of large commitments of public funds and the upheaval of urban environments, local populations and services. Organising committees and host governments that lack support in the polls or in public referenda can come under pressure to renege on their commitment to host the Olympics (as has been the case in the past), or to either re-launch or scale back their plans. Surprisingly little is known, however, about the individual-level factors behind support for the Games and the Olympic movement. Past studies of public opinion have tended to be context- and time-specific, focusing upon local experience of the event and retrospective
evaluations: as such, there is little potential for drawing general inferences about social, economic or political factors that shape public support or opposition for the Games and Olympic movement, whether there are systematic determinants of trust in planners and how these attitudes respond to shocks to the political, economic or administrative context. Despite the relative shortage of systematic evidence, surveying of public attitudes has become an influential evaluative tool for the IOC and cities during both the candidature procedure and preparations for the Games. Further, threats to public trust or societal legitimacy, sometimes inflamed by episodic crises or scandals, have motivated organisational attention to the management of reputational risk. This is of specific interest in the context of the previous chapter, since it represents a shift to management of the public perception of performance and risk communication, rather than direct mitigation of risk itself. In light of this, this chapter seeks to map out why public opinion matters to the main stakeholders in governance of the Olympics – including elected institutions, unelected bureaucracies and private firms – and how the assessment of public attitudes increasingly is a managerial tool in the selection and oversight of host cities and in maintaining support for preparations during the lead-in to the event itself.

Public support in the host city and nation has long been a factor affecting the local popularity of the Games and the number of spectators willing to purchase tickets and attend events. Since the 1970s, as the Olympics has grown in profile as an international event and in the scale of the financial and organisational undertaking required of host cities, public opinion has exerted increasing influence over the bids of applicant cities, as well as affecting the political climate – and bureaucratic politics – during the planning, delivery and operation phases. Not all Games are popular with their host populations, while discord over the state of preparations can give rise to political infighting. On occasion, the vote outcomes of public referenda have led cities to withdraw their bids or to abandon their status as the designated host, and in other instances have imposed terms on which the Games are to be financed and governed. Risks attached to public opinion are, then, real for decision-makers. In recognition of the increasing importance of public opinion to successful organisation of the Games, since the 1980s both the IOC and OCOGs have taken a particular interest in the measurement and monitoring of public attitudes. Further to attempts to manage uncertainties related to public opinion, the attention of decision-makers to risks to reputation reveal growing concern with protection of the intangible assets of both the Olympic and host city