

Sports events in a transmedia landscape

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Sports and sports events are among the most popular media phenomena today. Television broadcasters invest heavily to secure exclusive live coverage rights for both their broadcasting and streaming platforms, while global tech platforms and live sports streaming platforms, like Amazon Prime, Facebook, DAZN, and Tencent, have intervened in the coverage rights markets (Hutchins et al., 2019). While television continues to have a primary anchoring role for both organizers and audiences of big traditional sports events (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017) social networking services extend the narration and experience of sports and events, making sports one of the most discussed topics on social network platforms. This in turn informs content in television programming.

Sports events in the digital environment must therefore be understood as a more diverse range of events, where audiences engage in new sports and in new converging practices that can be termed “participatory liveness” (Frandsen et al., 2022). They are *transmedia events*, as in the case of Tour de France, where a multiplicity of auditive and visual media are involved in both production and reception processes. Through their presence as spectators at the games and through television viewing and participatory practices online (Rothenbuhler, 1988; Jenkins, 2008; Gantz & Lewis, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014), audiences and fans actively contribute to the creation of major sports competitions as media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Moreover, while often constituting festive and ritualized expressions of imagined communities with shared values, sports events are increasingly used as vehicles of soft power (Nye, 2004) on the geopolitical scene and emerge as stages for public discussions and expressions of topical political and cultural themes including mental health, identity, gender, race, climate, and human rights. Issues of conflict and protests against hegemonic ideologies and structures seem to become more prominent in the mediated discourses creating the events as media events. In particular, the preparations for two mega-events in 2022 – the FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the Winter Olympics in Beijing – have been dominated by broader political controversies. These developments are underpinned by continued globalization and digitalization and point to a need for further discussion of the sport event as a media event (Hepp & Couldry, 2010).

This theme issue addresses sports events with particular attention to the role of media and platforms in the production of events and related audience strategies and practices. It consists of five articles addressing the global and local interests surrounding sports events and the political themes emerging through the diverse audience practices associated with large-scale sports events. Two important themes cut across the issue: the implications of the changing media landscape for 1) the structure and dynamics of transmedia sports events and 2) the options for audiences to participate and engage in identity negotiations.

The changing media landscape

Many sports events are calendarized media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Billings & Wenner, 2017), and as such, they are being planned and often used strategically by sports organizations, the media, and societal actors. Big sports events have been important instruments to attract audiences and brand both media, sports, and nations, for instance, by taking new production or distribution technologies into use in the coverage. In that sense, big sports events have recurrently played a key role when media and sports organizations have had to adapt to both minor and major technological and structural transformations in the media environment – not least due to changes in audience behavior and the related effects of fragmentation and cultural globalization.

This is also a theme recurring in several articles in this special issue, where processes of transformations in the media landscape, historically and currently, are explored in different cases and contexts. Due to its visual dimension and live format, the advent of broadcast television historically expanded the audience for sports events. Television became the primary medium for sports consumption; it transformed (some) sports and events into mainstream culture, and broadcast television's coverage of big sports events was turned into socio-culturally important content where national identities over the years have been defined and experienced. This picture already started to change from the late 1980s, where television markets were liberalized and expanded in response to the spreading of new distribution technologies like cables and satellites. As illustrated in Danilo Callea's analysis of the Italian public service broadcaster, Rai, this development had implications for public service television's coverage of big sports events and subsequently for the wider audience's access to these events. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, television remained "unquestionably the most important sport medium" (Rowe, 2011, p. 7). Still, coverage of sports events have come to take place in a more complex, multilayered media ecology – including not least social media platforms. The latter have enhanced discourses surrounding sports events and supported the experiences of audiences in different ways, as illustrated by Mogens Olesen's article on the uses of Twitter in relation to the 2022 Tour de France, Alice Tejkalova and colleagues' analysis of discourses surrounding an international club football match, and Neil O'Boyle's analysis of paratexts in relation to a boxing match.

Currently, the picture is changing again, as the television industry is now subject to a larger transformation due to digitalization. The triggering factor is a change in the distribution technology, as the internet increasingly becomes the new distribution platform for audiovisual content. This means that a range of new global streaming services has emerged, and established broadcasters must adapt to changing viewing habits, where viewers want access to their personally preferred audiovisual content on any device, at any time. Sports events' live dimension has, until recently, prevented it from being considered central strategic content driving this transformation. This is currently changing, as illustrated in the two articles by Kirsten Frandsen and Danilo Callea on sports events in

European public service television. Intensified competition on the streaming markets and ongoing transformation of television “from a broadcasting to an online medium” (Johnson, 2019, p. 7) has involved “the reinforcement of broadcasting logics” (Hutchins et al., 2019, p. 976), now making sports content and live sports coverage a strategic focus point for the attraction of broader audiences.

Audience participation and identity negotiations

Sports have always been a site for manifestations of identity and social divisions, especially in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For instance, sports have traditionally been infused with ideologies promoting “masculine” traits of strength and endurance. Such discourses of masculine hegemony have marginalized female athletes as well as male athletes not conforming to traditional notions of a “real man” (Horne et al., 2012; Giulianotti, 2015). Another central topic of identity in this themed issue is nationality. Media coverage of international sports competitions often highlight national constructions as local broadcasters aim to emphasize integrative and communal perspectives of large sports events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; O’Donnell, 1994; Vincent & Kian, 2014). Sometimes, prolific athletes are even presented as symbolic warriors and embodiments of “invented” nationalistic ideals and communities (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Whannel, 2002).

The interrelated processes of globalization and mediatization (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014; Frandsen, 2020) have further intensified socio-political discussions surrounding sports. In general, the participatory affordances of digital media enable pluralistic expressions of sports culture, including oppositional, fan-organized protest activities against corruption, homophobia, racism, and similar depraved outcomes of traditional hegemonic structures within sports. In addition, individuals, including well-known professionals, amateur athletes, and fans use social media platforms to enhance their personalized and sometimes marginalized approaches to sports, including female perspectives (Sandvoss & Ball, 2018; Toffoletti et al., 2019).

In the age of networked media, more and more sports events are broadcast around the globe, drawing attention from fragmented audiences that can share situated, local interpretations on any aspect of the events online. As pointed out by Frandsen and colleagues (2022), this shift from the broadcast era enables audiences to engage, negotiate, and ultimately co-produce media events on social media. For instance, the decentered, participatory media ecosystem involves a sense of unpredictability, as demonstrated in Tejkalova and colleagues’ analysis of a relatively low-profile UEFA Europa League football match that gained widespread attention and sparked intense discussions in the press and among online users following a controversial incident involving accusations of racism and stereotypical constructions of other nationalities. Elsewhere in this issue, O’Boyle applies a paratextual analysis to demonstrate how “entryway texts” (Gray, 2010) before a boxing match came to shape the narrative surrounding the match, which suddenly involved dis-

cussions of the sexual orientations of one of the boxers and subsequent challenges to the “compulsory heterosexuality” and dominance of masculine values relating to male boxing.

While the articles by Tejkalova and colleagues and O’Boyle examine conflictive media events involving nationalist otherings and discussions on attitudes towards homosexuality, respectively, Olesen’s article on audience responses towards the Tour de France Grand Départ in Denmark describes a case where local perspectives and displays of nationalism are constructively integrated into the context of the global event of the Tour de France. In this case, Twitter users’ expressions of “glocal” consciousness revealed situated, performative displays of their communal engagement with a spectacular event. In all, this themed issue demonstrates how the participatory affordances in the digital transmedia landscape can result in sports events being sites for tribal behavior, negotiations of sexuality, and enthusiastic engagement in communal joy.

Overview of themed articles

This issue consists of five themed individual articles offering diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives on large-scale transmedia sports events.

In “My sense of nationality goes totally berserk’: Expressions of glocal consciousness among audiences during the Tour de France Grand Départ in Denmark”, Mogens Olesen addresses how Danish and international audiences participated in the Tour de France Grand Départ that took place in Denmark in 2022. Applying a typology of four general discursive modes to a content analysis of Danish and international tweets, Olesen finds a stronger focus on themes surrounding the event than on the actual cycling and an ongoing expression of local identities and glocal consciousness.

In “Tour de France in a digital television paradigm”, Kirsten Frandsen similarly addresses Tour de France as a mega-event with an emphasis on strategic interests shaping television coverage. Her article offers a qualitative production analysis of primary stakeholders involved in the coverage of the event, not least the Danish public service broadcaster TV2’s strategic usage of the event for branding its digital platform.

In the mixed-methods study “One event, very different interpretations: The case study of the AC Sparta Praha vs. Rangers FC football match coverage in Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech media”, Alice Nemcova Tejkalova, Anna Hrbáčková, Veronika Macková, Ondřej Trunečka, and Kateřina Turková examine media coverage of a football game between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC that led to a heated discussion about racism. The authors find competing constructions of reality depending on cultural understanding.

In “The events before the event: Paratexts, liveness, and the extended presence of sports events”, Neil O’Boyle reflects on the “extended presence” of sports events across media and time with a recent boxing event involving the popular British boxers Chris Eubank Jr. and Liam Smith as his primary illustration. He focuses on the press conference

and weigh-in, and he suggests that these “entryway events” are paratextually significant in shaping expectations and attitudes towards the “main event”. The article was awarded “best paper” at the 2023 Sport and Discrimination Conference in Rotterdam.

In “Rai, public service media, and sports: Exploring the historical bonds and current challenges between Italian Rai and global sports events”, Danilo Callea examines the challenges facing the Italian public service provider Rai in relation to global sports events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup. On the basis of a historical overview of Rai’s coverage of sports events, he explores the challenges and opportunities posed by digital platforms as well as the new forms of engagement they involve.

Articles in the open section

In addition to the themed articles, the open section contains two articles. In the article “Is mental health normalised in Norwegian news media? How mental health was framed in VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021”, Ingeborg Hedda Paulsen addresses the framing of mental illness in Norwegian news media. On the basis of a quantitative framing analysis, she argues that mental health issues were normalized in the two most-read online news sources, *Verdens Gang* (VG.no) and *Norsk Rikskringkasting* (NRK.no), in 2018–2021.

In “I deres egen verden: Danske journalisters interaktioner på Twitter’ (In their own world: Danish journalists interactions on Twitter), Jakob Linaa Jensen and Jonas Dalbøge examine who Danish journalists communicate with on the social platform Twitter. On the basis of an analysis of 25 journalists’ interaction patterns and four qualitative interviews, they find that journalists primarily interact with other journalists and to a lesser degree with citizens, and that this state of affairs is paradoxically due to journalistic ideals.

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