



Media Events, Digitalization and Criticism – A Communication Studies View of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

Rainer Winter^a, Jörg-Uwe Nieland^{b*}

^a University Klagenfurt, Austria

^b University Klagenfurt, Austria

*Corresponding author

Abstract

The text analyzes media events, focusing on global sporting spectacles like the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, highlighting their lasting significance in communication studies. These events are seen as major social occasions that create public spaces where diverse groups converge, promoting social integration and cultural identity through shared values. They act as ritualized "high holy days of communication," fostering communal experiences that strengthen societal bonds. The rise of digital media has significantly transformed how these events are produced, distributed, and economically structured. Digitalization has broadened opportunities for public participation and extended engagement beyond the events themselves, enhancing the worldwide visibility of sport and reinforcing its dual role as a cultural phenomenon and economic force. The escalating costs of media rights have empowered international sports federations, affecting athlete pay and enabling detailed coverage across emerging formats and channels. Sporting mega-events are thus not only entertainment but also reflections of wider social dynamics, including neoliberal ideals centered on competition. They connect individuals globally through shared symbolic participation, reflecting sociological concepts of the sacred and communal ritual. Additionally, the text highlights changing journalistic practices and the tension between using sport for commercial or political ends versus its potential as a venue for protest and social critique in the digital age.

Keywords

Medialization, criticism, sports journalism, sports reporting, Football Word Cup, media event

Acara Media, Pendigitalan dan Kritikan – Suatu Perspektif Kajian Komunikasi Piala Dunia FIFA 2022

Abstrak

Teks ini menganalisis acara media, dengan memfokuskan pada temasya sukan global seperti Piala Dunia FIFA dan Sukan Olimpik, serta menonjolkan kepentingannya secara berterusan dalam bidang kajian komunikasi. Acara-acara ini dilihat sebagai acara sosial utama yang mewujudkan ruang awam sebagai tempat pelbagai kelompok masyarakat berhimpun, menggalakkan integrasi sosial dan identiti budaya menerusi nilai-nilai kebersamaan. Ia bertindak sebagai ritual "hari-hari suci komunikasi yang tinggi", memupuk pengalaman komunal sekali gus memperkuuh ikatan kemasyarakatan. Kebangkitan media digital secara jelas telah mengubah cara acara-acara ini dihasilkan, diedarkan dan distrukturkan dari segi ekonomi. Pendigitalan telah meluaskan peluang penyertaan awam serta memanjangkan penglibatan khalayak melangkaui acara itu sendiri, sekali gus mempertingkatkan keterlihatan sukan di seluruh dunia dan memperkuuh peranannya yang bersifat dwi sebagai suatu fenomena budaya dan kuasa ekonomi. Peningkatan kos hak penyiaran media telah memperkasakan persekutuan sukan antarabangsa, memberikan kesan terhadap imbuhan atlet dan membolehkan liputan yang terperinci merentasi format dan saluran media baharu yang kian muncul. Oleh itu, acara mega sukan bukanlah sekadar hiburan malah mencerminkan dinamik sosial yang meluas, termasuklah idealisme neoliberal yang berteraskan persaingan. Ia menghubungkan individu-individu secara global melalui penyertaan simbolik yang dikongsi bersama, mencerminkan konsep sosiologi berkenaan ritual kesucian dan komunal. Selain itu, teks ini menyerlahkan perubahan dalam amalan kewartawanan dan ketegangannya antara menggunakan sukan bagi tujuan komersial atau politik berbanding potensinya sebagai ruang protes dan kritikan sosial dalam era digital.

Kata kunci

Pengantaraan, kritikan, kewartawanan sukan, pelaporan sukan, Piala Dunia Bola Sepak, acara media

Acknowledgement

This article is based in part on the paper by Nieland (2023a) and the presentation „Media Events, Digitalisation and Criticism – A Communication Studies View of the 2022 FIFA World Cup” from both authors at the Pre-Conference: “The Legacies of Elihu Katz” before the “73rd Annual ICA Conference am 25.05.2023 in Toronto; May 25th, 2023.

Introduction

The death of the Queen Elisabeth II. and the coverage of her funeral in September 2022 brought to mind a classic communication studies concept which owed one of its initial premises to that same woman's coronation: *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* by Dayan and Katz (1992) not only represents a seminal piece of work in this discipline, opening up a new field of research by linking perspectives from the sociology of communication and from anthropology, but it is also still highly topical and relevant today, because events conveyed by the media have a significance that is perhaps even greater in the present. They produce public spheres that allow different “communities of discourse” to come together (Alexander, 2006). In the era of digital media, we see changing dynamics of media's production and economics (cf. Couldry, 2012), such public spheres communities that enable discourse and have a community-building effect are becoming increasingly central (Habermas, 2022). Publics that form around sporting events, especially mega sporting events, are ascribed such achievement.

In the following, we will discuss the media event-approach – one that has already been extensively discussed, criticized, and refined by the authors themselves (cf. Katz & Dayan, 2018) as well as further elaborated by others (cf., Liebes, 1998; Katz and Liebes, 2007;* Kepplinger, 2001;† Couldry, Hepp and Krotz, 2009; Kellner, 2011; Grineau and Horne, 2017) and has also been applied to major sporting events (cf., Roche, 2000; Rivenburgh, 2002; Horne, 2017) – and we will do so in the context of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar 2022.

Broadcasts of major sporting events have become what may be – possibly the last (?) – of our campfires. They connect us to communities ritually, possess an extraordinary character and allow us to become part of a much larger context. The fan zones and public viewing events that have been established since the World Cup in South Korea and Japan (2002) promote this process both in the host country and in other countries (not only

* The distinction proposed by Katz and Liebes (2007) between “media events” (the ceremonial Contests, Conquests, and Coronations) and “disruptive events” such as disasters, war and terror were particularly far-reaching (cf. Kellner, 2010, p. 78; 2011, p. 131).

† Kepplinger draws a distinction between three categories of events: genuine events, i.e. events that take place independently of media coverage, mediatized events, which happen without media coverage but are given a media-optimized character, and dramatized events, which only exist on the basis of media coverage (Kepplinger 2001, p.117ff.).

in the countries whose team is competing in the tournament). In addition, the fan zones and public viewing events themselves will be the subject of media coverage. Major international sporting events captivate a global audience because the suspense of sporting events is particularly high due to the potentially uncertain outcome of the matches. Coverage of major sporting events provides entertainment (including surprise), fun and affective pleasure. That is how it establishes patterns of identification and helps to specialise one's own identity (cf. Tomlison and Young, 2006). Digital platforms in particular serve as discursive arenas of debate that are essentially open to all and organised along egalitarian lines. On the other hand, global events continue to drive the commercialisation and commodification of sport and its ever more pronounced character as a spectacle (Grineau and Horne, 2017). According to Kellner (2010), a spectacle is characterized by an aesthetic and often dramatic dimension. Spectacles are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society's highest values (cf. Kellner, 2003; 2011). Football World Cups offer an outstanding opportunity to pursue interests and goals that go far beyond the sport itself (cf. Chadwick, Widdop and Goldman, 2003; Brannagan and Roockwood 2016; Grix, Brammagan and Lee 2019).

The starting point of the analysis presented below is the intense criticism of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which – we argue – calls into question the scope and future of major sporting events as sports media events and poses a particular challenge for the field of communication studies. The human rights debate (cf. Rook and Heerdt, 2023), the critique of authoritarian systems in general (cf. Flemming et al., 2017; Meier, et al., 2019) and Qatar in particular (cf. Beyer and Schulze-Marmeling, 2021), the poor and dangerous working conditions (especially the criticism of the kafala system), corruption, sexual discrimination, etc. dominated rival media discourses and even surfaced in expressions of protest on the pitch, which were banned by FIFA.

Indeed, while Qatar hoped to boost its “soft power” by hosting the World Cup, the numerous protests over human rights violations transformed the media event into a controversial spectacle (Brannagan and Reiche, 2022).[‡] Meanwhile, in Qatar itself, which is not a country with a strong football tradition, Western protests were viewed as colonial interference. Media events that give expression to diverse perspectives can render social grievances, conflicts and contradictions visible (Fiske, 1993; 1994). They are part of the ongoing struggle for meaning that – according to Gramsci and Foucault – defines our world (cf. Winter, 2017). Thus, they do not simply represent reality, but rather they create their own reality.

[‡] Hübl (2024) describes such debates as moral spectacles. Especially in the digital world, those who hold such debates hope for recognition and attractiveness.

The initial situation

Sporting events draw large crowds. According to Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 1), “high holy days of communication” are celebrated during the Olympic Games and the (men’s) Football World Cups. The events and their coverage entertain and generate a “feel good” atmosphere, provide ritual communion and social integration, and stimulate cultural identification with the values of sport (Billings and Wenner, 2017, p. 3f.). At the same time, the competitive nature mirrors the social orientation in a neoliberal society (cf. Grineau and Horne, 2017). Along the lines of Dayan and Katz, a media event is staged that places competition at its very centre. Our values connect us to the centre of society. We share the values and – in the spirit of Durkheim (1981) – we partake of the sacred.

Ultimately, the coverage that is available worldwide transcends the sport, lends it visibility, and facilitates a wide range of follow-up communications and points of view. Sport is a driver of globalisation and a significant economic factor. One of the reasons for this is that there has been a significant increase in the costs of media rights, which in turn has significantly expanded the scope for action and scope of action of international sports federations. The considerable sums that have recently flowed into sport have changed it on many levels - for example with regard to the salaries of the athletes, but also with regard to the general conditions such as increasingly detailed reporting with new formats and channels.

It is also evident that major sporting events are under scrutiny (cf. Nieland, Ihle and Mittag, 2016), provoke protests (cf. Mittag, 2011; Nieland and Ihle, 2018), articulate social conflicts, and increasingly serve as a vehicle for social or political activism (cf. Schmidt, 2018). But now, thanks to the 2022 World Cup, we seem to have reached a turning point: FIFA’s image, even that of football itself, has been badly tarnished and a great deal of good will credit has been squandered. Partially empty stadiums (at least in the preliminary stages) and the disenchantment of Qatar’s and FIFA’s PR strategies on the part of fans, NGOs and critical media representatives offer ample proof of this.

Digital media transformation and journalism

One of the basic assumptions of media sociology holds that the social, political and economic transformation of modern societies is driven by that of the media (cf. Fiske, 1994; Couldry, 2012). Media use in particular is changing radically within the context of digitalization (cf. Couldry and Hepp, 2018). We are seeing a rise in popular engagement and interventions: The audience is making itself heard, criticizing those in power, calling for protests and organising resistance. And they do this potentially twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and often in real time. As a direct consequence of the *digital structural transformation of the public sphere*

(cf. Eisenegger et al., 2021; Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022; Habermas, 2022), personalization, scandalisation and a resonance orientation are gaining increasing prominence (cf. Imhof, 2006).

Digital structural change is reshaping how journalism sees itself, how it works and the basis on which it does business (cf. Perreault and Bell, 2022). Conditions for sports journalism are exacerbated even further, as many sporting events require the acquisition of expensive broadcasting rights, and clubs, associations or event organisers prefer to provide coverage via their own media channels. As a result, most sports journalists struggle to gain access to the protagonists (athletes, coaches, officials), and the expectation is for a favourable kind of reporting which does not undermine the (positive) marketing of the “product” sport or football (Meyen, 2014). At the intersection of sociology, cultural studies and political science, what is of interest is the growing criticism of major sporting events, of the host countries or cities and the federations (cf. Nieland, Ihle and Mittag, 2016; Meier, et al., 2019) as well as how protests (and boycotts) have evolved into a global counter-movement.

Instrumentalization of sport versus protest

The degree of appropriation processes involving sport has increased significantly and diffused over the last few years (cf. Mittag and Nieland, 2007). Particularly well-known and striking are the pictures of politicians attending major sporting events (in the stands, in the locker rooms) or of honoring successful athletes and teams. Popular artists compose and present the World Cup songs or design the opening ceremonies of major events. After all, numerous companies use athletes as testimonials to benefit from the awareness and popularity of athletes and teams.

Both political objectives of the host such as strengthening national identity and international recognition and the use of economic advantages such as increasing tourism and improving infrastructure development. The social forms of influence include strengthening social cohesion, cultural promotion and physical activity. In addition, there are objectives of sports diplomacy, such as the use of World Cups as a platform for diplomatic efforts that promote intercultural exchange and build bridges between nations.

While the commercial and political instrumentalization of sport is intensifying on the one hand, protest and even resistance directed against it is growing on the other – especially on the part of the fans. Mittag (2011) distinguished two main streams of protest in sports. The first are protest activities that do not pursue any immediate sporting interests, but instead use sports as a surface onto which they project political and/or social protest. This includes, among others, human rights advocacy, which was reflected in the isolation of South Africa during Apartheid and, more recently, in the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement in the US and beyond (cf.

Schmidt, 2018). The second stream identified by Mittag (2011) involves protests where the grounds for the protest are directly linked to the sport. Chief among these are the distribution and contract disputes in the major American professional leagues, fan protests directed against excessive commercialization trends such as the extension of match days to between three and four days, soaring ticket prices, the reduction of standing space and the strict ban on pyrotechnics.

It should be noted that prior to the digital structural change of the public sphere, the individual forms of protest and protest events that can be observed in sport are for the most part rather localized. Moreover, protest is mostly situational, selective and has limited lasting impact. Now, however, underpinned by digital technology, a substantial range of popular protest is becoming increasingly common, and the motives for protest are driven by a variety of impulses. So far, these protests have primarily taken place in the realm of organised elite sports. The main target of criticism here is the national and international sports federations, specifically with regard to their practice of awarding contracts for major sporting events and the lack of transparency or internal control within the federations. The clearest manifestation of sports protests can be observed in the relation to fan protests against the commercialization of football: As such, the “ultra movement” – a facet of youth and protest culture – has developed to become a critical counterweight to the prevailing (understanding of) sport (Mittag, 2011).

Protests against major sporting events are consequently on the rise and are attracting more and more media attention. In Brazil, resentment against the upcoming major projects, the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, was articulated in violent large-scale demonstrations in the summer of 2013 during the Confed Cup (Ihle, 2017). In November of that year, Munich’s renewed bid to host the Winter Olympics failed – this time as a result of the popular vote (Nieland, Ihle and Mittag, 2016). It seems that confidence in sports organisations and (sports) politics is dwindling steadily.

Protests against sports clubs as well as national and international sports organisations can be observed predominantly in democratic countries of the global North. While the strategy of using major sporting events to bring about a positive image transfer in Germany during the so-called “Sommermärchen 2006” [transl.: summer fairy tale] and in Great Britain during the 2012 Olympic Games in London proved successful (cf. Grix and Houliban, 2014), similar effects could only be observed in a diminished form in the case of the major sporting events in Brazil in 2014 and 2016 and the football World Cup in Russia (cf Schallhorn and Häußlunger, 2019). The decision to award the World Cup to Qatar was already met with massive criticism, notably from fans, and for many years this constituted a heavy burden for FIFA and the national associations (cf. Beyer and Schulze-Marmeling, 2021; Brannagan and Reiche, 2022).

Qatar 2022 and Authoritarian Sportswashing

A central pillar of Qatar's soft power strategy is its comprehensive sports policy, which predates its successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The foundations of this strategy were laid as early as the British protectorate era, when Qatar established its national football association and secured FIFA membership, signaling a deliberate and strategic investment in global football (Qatar Football Association, 2022). Among Qatar's most high-profile ventures is the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), a club that has transformed into one of the most valuable entities in European football, culminating in its maiden UEFA Champions League victory in 2025. This ownership dramatically increased PSG's valuation, surging from approximately €100 million to €2 billion by 2021, illustrating the profound financial impact of Qatari capital in elite football markets (Paris Saint-Germain, 2021). Such investments served not only economic motives but were also aimed at positioning Qatar as a reliable and influential partner within European football, thereby expanding its international visibility and legitimacy in advance of the World Cup (Krzyzaniak, 2018).

Beyond direct sponsorship and ownership of European and transatlantic clubs, leagues, and associations, Qatar has aggressively pursued the hosting of a broad array of sporting events. Notably, in 2019 alone, Qatar organized over 50 events across diverse disciplines, an effort explicitly intended to demonstrate its capacity for managing mega-events and to strategically leverage the global sporting spotlight to enhance its international image (Grix et al., 2019; Brannagan and Reiche, 2022). This expansive mobilization of sport functions as a core instrument within the Qatari government's soft power architecture, designed to construct and promulgate a dual brand identity: one that asserts Qatar's modernity and progressiveness on the global stage, while simultaneously fostering national cohesion and pride domestically (Brannagan and Reiche, 2022; Delaney, 2024).

Within this context, sport operates as a strategic vehicle of communication, carefully calibrated to project Qatar's professionalism in sports governance, its economic attractiveness to international partners and investors, and its emerging political relevance in global affairs (Brannagan and Julianotti, 2015; Grix et al., 2019; Delaney, 2024). This approach epitomizes the phenomenon of sportsashing, which Boykoff (2022, p. 1) defines as "a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front." Qatar's staggering \$220 billion investment in the World Cup, conceived as part of its broader economic diversification strategy away from hydrocarbon dependency, has become a focal point for international criticism, particularly pertaining to systemic labor exploitation and the question of post-event infrastructure utility.

The media's role in this dynamic is pivotal. Media outlets serve as instrumental actors in advancing Qatari interests by not only representing the nation's image globally but also by establishing and sustaining transnational networks that reinforce the interactive dimension of public diplomacy integral to soft power projection. Consequently, Qatari authorities have prioritized stringent management of media narratives concerning both domestic affairs and the World Cup, creating an information environment where independent journalism faces substantial structural impediments. Despite these media controls, the 2022 World Cup attracted unprecedented global scrutiny not solely for its sporting spectacle but also due to a cascade of controversies: opaque and allegedly corrupt awarding processes, widespread human rights abuses targeting migrant laborers, institutionalized discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, pervasive sexism, accusations of greenwashing, lack of meaningful sustainability measures, and documented fatalities among construction workers. These issues attracted intensive international condemnation and media coverage, casting a long shadow over the event well before the opening whistle (Amnesty International, 2022; Beyer and Schulze-Marmeling, 2022; Brannagan, 2022).

In synthesizing these developments, it becomes evident that Qatar's deployment of sports as a soft power tool exemplifies *authoritarian sportswashing* at its most sophisticated. The interplay of financial investment, event hosting, and media control not only facilitates the crafting of a curated national narrative but also attempts to legitimize Qatar's political regime and socio-economic model within international arenas. At the same time, the heightened medialization of the World Cup has paradoxically enabled greater exposure of social grievances and institutional shortcomings, challenging the seamlessness of the sportswashing strategy. The resultant media landscape is one of contested meanings, where spectacle and critique coexist, underscoring the dialectical tensions inherent in contemporary mega-sporting events hosted by authoritarian states.

Thus, the case of Qatar 2022 obliges scholars and practitioners alike to refine conceptualizations of sportswashing, emphasizing the critical role of media as both a tool and site of contestation. It invites further inquiry into how authoritarian regimes exploit global sport mega-events to project power, while grappling with amplified transnational public scrutiny facilitated by digital media ecosystems. These considerations are essential to understanding the socio-political complexities and ethical challenges embedded within the contemporary mediation of sport in global authoritarian contexts.

From Major Sporting Events to Mega Sporting Events

Major sporting events are first and foremost major events, much like those in other areas of society, such as politics or culture. Following Müller (2015), major events can be defined on the basis of characteristics such as *visitor numbers, media coverage, costs* and the *extent of the impact on infrastructure and population*.

In view of the increasing economic, but also social significance of events and the “event culture” that has emerged, academic interest in major events now extends beyond tourism and leisure research. Roche (2000), for example, emphasizes the importance of major events within the capitalist economy. It defines major events as a largescale cultural events with a dramatic character, a mass popular appeal and an international significance. Major events are typically planed and realized “by variable combinations of national governmental and international nongovernmental organizations” (Roche 2000, p. 1).

The marketing objectives of major events are geared towards maximising public attention. This is accomplished through the national and international media – in the case of major sporting events mainly through media providers who own the (live) broadcasting rights. Given the immense impact on the event locations (i.e., cities, regions or countries) and the extensive media coverage, it is fair to assume that mega-events are always media occasions as well (Ihle, 2017). This raises the question whether, conversely, media events are also always major events. According to Dayan and Katz, political summits, royal weddings and state funerals also belong to the category of media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992).

Dayan and Katz are particularly concerned with the media-induced consequences of reporting based on (mega-) events. Consequently, they understand media events as a genre of (television) coverage that reaches a large number of viewers. In order to evaluate media events, Dayan and Katz propose eight aspects (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 265): first, *media events interrupt the routines of both media providers and the everyday life of the audience* (irrespective of whether it is the audience attending in person or the media audience); second, a media event “*monopolises*” coverage across “*all media*”; third, media events feature *live broadcasting (on television)*; fourth, media events are *not planned and controlled by media providers but by actors outside the media*; fifth, media events are *pre-planned events*; sixth, they are *ceremonies founded on reverence*; seventh, *media events celebrate reconciliation*; and eighth, *media events electrify a large, often global audience*. Hepp and Krotz (2008, p. 266) remind us that these eight characteristics are “*focused on the ritual media confirmation of social rules and values within a nation or society*.” Both Contest and coronation “*suggest that the rules shared in a society should be maintained because they are useful in the present or are traditionally relevant*” (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 266).

Dayan and Katz emphasize the interdependence of various actors. The actors provide witness and support for the media events in a multi-stage process:

“*The ceremony, combining the original ritual or event, its endorsements by state authorities, and the crowds' response to this endorsement is now adopted by television which transcribes it into a framed text. This framed text or spectacle, is itself adopted or endorsed by television audiences usually grouped into ad hoc viewing communities.*” (Dayan and Katz, 1985, p. 60)

A distinction must therefore be made between the support of, first, the *local audience*, second, the *audience of the broadcasting national TV station(s)* and, third, the *audience of the external media providers* (Dayan and Katz, 1985). While the viewers who “belong to the concerned society are not only spectators, but witnesses, bearers of the experience and, individually, potentially propagators of the experience” (Dayan and Katz, 1985, p.60f), the media event is primarily a spectacle for the audience of foreign media providers (*the secondary television audience*). As early as 1985, Dayan and Katz pointed out that the audience of media events “offered new and unexpected ways of participating in the ritual experience, new aesthetic avenues, which no longer stem from the need of exercising spectacle but from the decision of fully using its powers” (Dayan and Katz, 1985, p.61).

The growing relevance of media events also unleashes longer-term effects on social sub-sectors and society as a whole that reach far beyond the events themselves (Ihle, 2017). Hence, Dayan and Katz assume that the great prestige of the Olympic Games also reinforces public opinion about sport and its social position (Dayan and Katz 1992). Kellner sees an increase and defines media spectacles,

“thus includes media events and rituals of consumption, entertainment, and competition like political campaigns that embody contemporary society’s basic values and serve to enculturate individuals into its way of life” (Kellner, 2010, p. 78).

Along with the Olympic Games, football world championships can undoubtedly also be regarded as media events in the sense of Dayan and Katz (cf. Roche, 2000). The rise in the importance of major sporting events as media events can, indeed must, be seen in the context of research on the medialization of sports (Billings and Wenner, 2017).

The Medialization of Sports

Sports communication research uses the medialization approach to measure the increasing influence of media on sport (cf. Meyen, 2014; Frandsen, 2020). The term “medialization” refers to the basic increase in the significance of media, their routines and logics (Marcinkowski, 2015; cf. Imhof, 2006). Marcinkowski (2015) emphasizes, firstly, the *regularities of selection*, i.e. the deliberate selection of events, facts and conditions for public announcements, secondly, the *regularities of narration*, which refers to typical patterns of narration, structure and the course of media texts, and thirdly, the *regularities of interpretation*, i.e. the recurring patterns of assigning meaning and framing regardless of the topic.

Individual and collective actors are reacting to the increasing resonance orientation in modern (media) societies (cf. Imhof, 2006). Specifically, the rules of public attention practiced by the media are adopted into their own repertoire of actions (Marcinkowski, 2015). Meyen (2014) emphasizes that actors are now aware of the effect of media and therefore tend to make greater efforts to adapt to media logics.

The world of sport has become a prime example of medialization (Frandsen, 2020). This is reflected, on the one hand, in measures to enhance the visibility of sport in the media (changes in equipment and competition venues) and in the scheduling of events (extension of match days, staging of competitions in the evenings, for example in Formula 1), new rules and contests (such as biathlon hunting races) and, on the other hand, in the emergence of new providers and new marketing strategies, including the growing influence of non-media players (Dohle and Vowe, 2006). New distribution channels and new providers (such as streaming platforms or companies like Red Bull) open the door to new forms of reporting and marketing beyond traditional journalism or (sports) sponsorship.

With regard to the media marketing of football World Cups, medialization effects are undeniable, for example in the structuring of coverage, especially in Europe, football's core market, to coincide with attractive TV times and the expansion of coverage (Ihle, 2017). Meier and others (2019) have also identified the growing interest of (media) audiences in commenting on and criticizing major sporting events via social media channels. The reception of football World Cups and their effects on spectators have also been researched under various questions. It was shown that successful World Cup matches improve the mood of the spectators and that this has a positive effect on their self-confidence, but also on their assessment of the economic situation of the state. In addition, it has been shown that major football events can be reflected in the political mood as a "public mood", because international match results not only improve the mood of the (football-interested) spectators, but also influence their voting intention and candidate assessment (Ihle, 2017; cf. Schallhorn and Häußlinger, 2019).

The relationship between sports organizations and the media has so far been largely ignored (cf. Frandsen, 2016). In the context of the World Cup in Qatar, however, numerous documentaries and reports appeared with criticism not only of individual officials or of certain aspects of the awarding process, but as a critical discursive discussion. The approaches and findings briefly referred to here point to an increase. Football World Cups can no longer be seen only as media events, but as a media spectacle in a society of spectacle (Debord, 1976). Because Media Spectacles are in contrast to Media Events, "more defuse, variable, unpredictable, and contestable" (Kellner, 2010, p. 80).

Criticism of the 2022 World Cup as a Medialization Effect

The transformation of the media entails both the expansion and diversification of reporting (in addition to new providers and offers, many offers are also available online, irrespective of time or place) and changing media use. It was apparent that many of the debates that were initiated by traditional media shifted to social media and gained considerable traction there (cf. Perreault and Bell, 2022). Their platforms facilitate the communicative exchange of potentially large numbers of users who can discuss topics equitably and spontaneously (Habermas 2022). However, this can also lead to echo chambers where users reinforce each other's perspectives and fail to engage in truly deliberative exchange. This results in processes of self-empowerment, since every user can become an author, as Jürgen Habermas (2022) notes.

The conditions for a large sporting public were favourable, especially in the case of the Qatar World Cup. After all, large numbers of spectators continue to gather around screens during major sporting events – often doing so collectively and in public (public viewing in pubs, for example). The sporting events are also the subject of intense, mostly emotional follow-up discussions, which are held “face-to-face” or on various platforms. And finally, extensive and detailed statistics are available on the athletes, the teams and the matches, providing fans with a panoptic view and allowing them to observe, classify and evaluate the athletes. This type of grassroots power is a major appeal of sporting events (Fiske 1993).

From the very beginning, the World Cup in Qatar drew heavy criticism, and not only concerning the violation of human rights (cf. Brannagan and Reiche, 2022; Rook and Heerdt, 2023). The rescheduling of the event to take place in the winter months and the associated poor prospects for public viewing events that allow for ritual communities, as well as the disruption of the popular national and international leagues, are key factors behind the hesitant attitude of the fans. The limited attendance of foreign fans on the ground can be attributed partly to the high cost of flights, accommodation and tickets, and partly to the relatively poorly developed football culture in the Arab countries. Nevertheless, going to the matches has become vastly more expensive due to increasing commercialisation, and the media audience must also spend an increasing sum of money for access to live coverage.

The involvement of Arab sheikhs or sovereign wealth funds (as with Manchester City, Paris Saint Germain or Newcastle United) marks a further high point in the process of commercialization (cf. Krais, 2021; Busse and Wildangel, 2022; Delaney, 2024). But there is growing resistance to the commercialization of football – in some cases with considerable success. For instance, protests by football fans (particularly in England) led to the (temporary) halt of plans for a European Super League. This is clear evidence of the progressive

medialization of football, as fan protests received great media attention largely because fans had mastered the media logic and were able to apply it to achieve their objectives.

The World Cup in Qatar demonstrated that media events in the world of sport are always political at the same time (cf. Beyer and Schulze-Marmeling, 2021). They are at the very heart of a social struggle for meaning. Poor and dangerous working conditions, corruption, sexual discrimination, etc. dominate rival media discourses and even surface in expressions of protest on the pitch, which are banned by FIFA. Given the documented and widely discussed violations of international standards on freedom of expression, diversity and worker protection in Qatar, FIFA's actions do not represent a clear commitment to the values of sport (i.e., to symbolise and exemplify fairness, diversity, peace and understanding). What's more, footballers and teams who sought to take a stand and show their support for the values of the sport faced the threat of punishment by FIFA in the form of bans. This threat had the effect FIFA had hoped for, with players and national associations refraining from making political statements (such as wearing a captain's armband displaying rainbow colours).

Even so, Qatar's sports-washing only had limited success in the case of the World Cup. Numerous politicians cancelled their on-site attendance. Journalists emerged as a mouthpiece for criticism. Critical reports in the run-up to the World Cup provided as much evidence of the progressive medialization as critical comments made during the match broadcasts (and included the outfits worn by some of the reporters). The clubs and the federations – above all FIFA and the IOC – are both the objects and the drivers of medialization (cf. Nieland, Ihle and Mittag, 2016; Frandsen, 2016). They have, for example, drawn up detailed sets of rules listing what a sportsperson is allowed to say and what not. Many clubs and federations shield athletes from journalists, which makes the work of the latter more difficult. This is a worrying development, as it prevents the critical observation of sport. The FIFA World Cup in Qatar has demonstrated just how important it is to accompany the federations and (sports) politics in a critical manner that remains open to arguments.

Conclusion: The 2022 World Cup as a Contested Media Event

The 2022 World Cup indeed represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of global sport and major sporting spectacles, particularly when analyzed through the lenses of medialization, politicization, and commercialization. Building on the work of Kellner (2003; 2011) and the recent scholarly discourse on sport media events, we want to highlight the following key dimensions.

Firstly, the medialization of football has not only accelerated but also complexified the relationships between sport, politics, and global audiences. As outlined in the original text, football's progressive commodification parallels its increasing instrumentalization by political actors seeking "soft power" advantages, embodied in

attempts to leverage mega-events like the World Cup for international legitimacy and influence (Brannagan and Roockwood, 2016; Koiercki and Strozk, 2021). However, Kellner (2003) critically situates such spectacles within the broader context of media culture, emphasizing that these events function as ritualized high points that produce communal experiences but also serve economic, ideological, and hegemonic interests. The “infotainment society” described by Kellner intensifies this, as media conglomerates and digital technologies intertwine culture, commerce, and spectacle, rendering sport a critical site for the performance of neoliberal values like competition and consumerism. This convergence of cultural production and capitalist commodification transforms the event into a multifaceted spectacle that simultaneously captivates and pacifies diverse publics.

Secondly, the 2022 World Cup illustrates a marked shift in audience agency facilitated by digital platforms. Whereas Dayan and Katz’s (1985, 1992) concept of media events posited a largely consensual “reconciliation” between organizers and a “secondary television audience,” contemporary media ecology challenges this assumption. The Qatar World Cup’s contested reception shows that segments of the public actively reinterpreted, rejected, or protested the event, disrupting ceremonial authority and undermining hegemonic narratives. This resonates with Kellner’s argument that media culture creates contested terrains where spectacle and resistance coexist. Social media and online discourses thus transform passive spectators into engaged authors who critically intervene, contest meanings, and form fragmented “echo chambers” rather than unified publics. Such fragmentation reflects broader social polarization but also enables diverse voices to challenge and negotiate dominant discourses, thereby complicating the communicative dynamics traditionally associated with media events.

Thirdly, the role of sports mega-events as arenas for social and political conflict necessitates an expansion of the media event framework to include the dynamics of critical discourse, protest, and social justice debates. The conventional Durkheimian focus on social integration and shared values is inadequate in light of the overt politicization and critical scrutiny now surrounding global sport events. Digital public spheres facilitate deliberative exchanges on issues such as authoritarian governance, labor rights, environmental concerns (“greenwashing”), and human rights abuses linked to host countries. This development underscores the dialectic between spectacle and critique, in which mediated mega-events simultaneously reproduce dominant ideologies and enable oppositional interventions. In doing so, these events become sites where contestation over meanings and values is performed publicly, reflecting broader struggles over representation, legitimacy, and power in global society.

Furthermore, the 2022 World Cup foregrounds the increasing precarity of global sporting rituals amid a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape characterized by multipolarity and contested cultural hegemonies. FIFA and Qatar’s loss of “interpretive agency” and ceremonial authority signals a broader transformation in the nature

of media events, where the spectacle is no longer able to unilaterally frame its narrative. Instead, it is embedded within discursive conflicts reflective of colonial legacies, geopolitical rivalries, and competing cultural logics. Kellner's insight that media spectacles are contested cultural battlegrounds gains renewed relevance here, as power relations are continuously negotiated and challenged within and around these events. This erosion of ceremonially unified meaning challenges the efficacy of media events as mechanisms for social cohesion, exposing underlying fractures within global society.

In conclusion, the medialization of sport—and the 2022 World Cup in particular—demands a re-theorization of media events that foregrounds active audience participation, critical reception, and the interplay of spectacle with social contestation. The communication surrounding these events, including critique and protest, must be recognized as integral to the event itself, marking a transition from unidirectional ceremonial communication to dynamic, heterogeneous discourse within the global media-sport nexus. This shift calls for renewed conceptual frameworks that attend to the complexities of mediated power, audience agency, and ideological contestation inherent in contemporary sport mega-events, thereby enriching the understanding of their sociopolitical significance in a globalized and digitalized media environment.

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Biodata

Rainer Winter studied Psychology, Philosophy and Sociology. Since 2002 he has been Full Professor of Media and Cultural Theory at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria). He is the (co-)author and (co-)editor of more than 30 books. Research focus areas: Cultural Studies, Film Sociology, Television Studies, and Qualitative Research. Rainer.Winter@aau.at

Jörg-Uwe Nieland (1965), Dr., studied Political Science (with History, Philosophy and Sports Science as minor disciplines) at the Universities of Duisburg, Bochum, and Berlin; since 2022 he has been Senior Scientist at the University Klagenfurt, he is also associated staff member at the Institute for European Sports Development and Leisure Research at the German Sport University Cologne. Founder and currently deputy speaker of the group "Media Sport and Sports Communication" in the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPK); since 2012 board member of the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung e.V.. joerg-uwe.nieland@aau.at; joerg-uwe.nieland@gmx.net; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4158-819X>