Media Sporting Events as Platforms for 'Soft Power' and Digital Activism

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Mediatic sporting events are increasingly used in the geopolitical arena to gain consensus, at the same time emerging as platforms for the discussion of social issues, such as human rights and sustainability. This article presents an investigation into the role of mediatic sporting events and digital platforms in sparking political debate and social engagement to bring about change, including discussions on global and local interests and the performances of activist fans to promote debate on specific issues. The investigation employs a quantitative methodology. The initial inductive analysis uses a matrix of cultural key-frames of the empowerment and protest that accompany media sporting events, verifying their presence and effectiveness in different communication milieus. An analysis of the representation of protests on social media was performed through content analysis. The results of the investigation show that mediatic sporting events are to be understood as a diverse range of generators of multiple political effects: from the exercise of power to mass mobilization and media criticism.

Keywords: sporting events, mainstream media, social media, soft power, digital activism

Introduction

Media Events

Since its publication in 1992, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* has been a point of reference for social scientists studying media events. This book has become a classic and is considered fundamental to understanding how large events constructed by the media constitute shared experiences and interpretative frames. Today, it is more difficult to adopt this paradigm for analysis and discussion in a fragmented and hybrid media landscape characterized by "eventization" (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 8), i.e., a plurality of constantly evolving small and large events.

For example, with respect to the Dayan and Katz's approach, the notion that media events communicate hegemonically from the center to the peripheries of the social and geographical landscape is challenged by various forms of decentralized communication as well as the expansion of the media arena and acceleration of the speed of circulation, both of which increase the intensity of events. The idea that the main effect of the mediatic communication of events is to unite the public in a shared set of values is also questionable; rather, establishing moments of shared attention between fragmented publics appears to be the dominant aim.

A consequence of this new vision of media events is that, as we move away from the original theory of Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 45) centered on the conception of media events as narratives functional to the

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maintenance of the existing social order (*affirmative/integrative events*), the reformative and renewing nature of media events is affirmed. Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg (2022) pointed to a particular element mostly overlooked in the original work by Dayan and Katz (1992) and introduced later (Katz & Liebes, 2007; Dayan, 2008), namely the concept of *transformative media events*. Bolin and Ståhlberg go on to discuss how this concept is expanded in subsequent conceptualizations of media events that are referred to as *disruptive events* and can be applied not only to terror, disasters and wars, but also to protests and revolutions.

The power of media events and their social force appear increasingly based on their ability to shape the processes of building trust or distrust in governance, as they are capable of impacting citizens' views, opinions and perceptions of institutions (Memoli, 2020; Klein & Robison, 2020). Institutional trust plays a key role in democracy and the sustainable development of institutions because it guarantees public acceptance of political decisions, while institutional distrust undermines existing institutions, laying the groundwork for change (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Dahlgren, 2012). In *Communication Power* (2009) Castells defines the media not as a holder of power, but rather, as the place where power is decided and constituted. The web becomes the ideal space for protests and social movements with effects on offline life. Zaynep Tufekci, in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017), defines online spaces and social media as a public sphere, and the Internet as a space for protesters and activists to rapidly coalesce, expanding decentralized protests and giving rise to real online movements that can impact political fates and democracy.

Media Sporting Events

Nowadays, the barriers between sport and public power have definitively collapsed with the systematic refutation of their separation by the theorists of power games (Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Sgueo, 2018; Boykoff, 2022), who argue that public power increasingly takes on the character of a game, often a sports game.

We can see this process at work in the attempts of politicians and citizens to innovate the decision-making process and its related procedures through the inclusion of elements of the sports game, and in efforts to exercise political power by using the sports game to play a role in the public arena according to the integration model (De Knop, Engström, Skirstad, & Weiss, 1996) or the protest model (McLeod, 2007; Boykoff, 2016).

> Picture a government that measures civic value on a numerical scale, with civic performances tallied in standings, like a soccer game. Imagine if civic value were viewed as a game played by everyday citizens, at times competing against one another, and at other times working in harmony towards a common goal. And imagine the winners being celebrated (and the losers blamed) collectively. 'Gamified' public power is much closer to reality than it might appear at first glance… (Sgueo, 2018, p. 78)

Ludic-sporting events can be seen as both "soft power" vehicles (Nye, 2005; Dubinsky, 2019) able to promote democratic representation, debate and participation, and as mobilization tools (Tufekci, 2017; Darnell, Razack, & Joseph, 2021) supporting the activist practices of social movements that influence the factors responsible for social change.

The object of this study are media events—with a particular focus on sports events—in relation to public power. The aim of the study is to investigate the new role of mediatic sporting events as settings/platforms in which the public:

• brings together new practices of involvement defined as "participatory life" (Frandsen, Jerslev, & Mortensen, 2022);

• produces a sort of "peaceful resistance" in support of the most pressing issues (sustainability, inclusion, global health) (Couldry, 2003; Bennett, 2003; Couldry, 2004; Bennett, 2004);

- engages in unprecedented "social activism" such as protests against hegemonic ideologies and social stereotypes (Tufekci, 2017; TePoel & Nauright, 2021; Darnell et al., 2021);
- challenges "the protest paradigm" of the mainstream media (Literat, Boxman-Shabtai, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023).

The theoretical framework for the study is the frame theory and its extensive use (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 2007) in the protest paradigm theory (McLeod, 2007; Anderson, 2023; Doehler, 2023).

> Framing involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more 'salient' in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular definition of the problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and/or a therapeutic recommendation. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

The concept of frame and its implementation allow us to interpret and discuss the media coverage of protests. Indeed, at the basis of the identification of the protest paradigm, is the recognition that there are forces that shape news production, including the biases of the individual journalist, the influence of the news outlet, the canons of the profession of journalism, the cultural and ideological stereotypes of the social system and the constraints of the channel. McLeod and Hertog identify five characteristics found in the protest paradigm represented by the media. These characteristics are: (1) *news frames*, in which the media frame social protests as a violation of socio-behavioral norms; (2) *reliance on official sources and definitions*, used as sources of information to lend prestige and objectivity to media stories; (3) *invocation of public opinion*, which generally counters the protesters' opinion, thus marginalizing the messages; (4) *delegitimization*, whereby the media often deem protests useless or even irrational; (5) *demonization*, whereby potential threats and their negative consequences are identified (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Research suggests that media coverage of protests has different levels: some communication products exhibit all five characteristics, while others do not (Leopold & Bell, 2017).

According to McLeod (2007), the established media coverage of the protest hinders the role of protesters as vital actors in the political arena, thus sometimes exacerbating social conflict. Hence, new perspectives and an alternative approach to current active communication agents have been developed with the aim of moving beyond the established protest paradigm in favor of a participatory communication perspective (Leopold & Bell, 2017). Currently, activism on social media offers everyone the opportunity to express themselves and to develop a sense of belonging to a broader community. Indeed, activist movements emerge and spread on the Internet and especially on social media. Specifically, social media are capable of enhancing the dynamics and outcomes of social debate moving beyond the traditional protest paradigm in favor of multi-perspective approaches that challenge the mainstream media protest paradigm (Stahal & Literat, 2023, Literat et al., 2023).

Methodology

Methodologically, we proceeded through the following steps:

a) the establishment of a frame matrix as a set of frames of media coverage of the protest in mediatic sporting events, applying the protest paradigm; b) quantitative analysis to measure the percentage of the presence of the matrix frames in the representations in some Italian newspapers, online magazines and social media; c) content analysis of protest coverage on social media to explore the role of digital activism and media criticism.

The following research questions were developed to guide the analysis:

RQ1: What frames are found in media coverage of protests at mediatic sporting events? (Application of the protest paradigm - establishment of a frame matrix);

RQ2: To what extent are these protest frames present in the selected media? (Testing the paradigm - measurement and comparison of media);

RQ3: How does the social media coverage of protests at sporting events show approval or criticism of the mainstream media coverage of the protest? (Challenge and paradigm shift).

Two case studies were examined:

Case study n.1: Naomi Osaka and the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Naomi Osaka wore seven masks at the 2020 US Open. Each mask represented a different victim of racial injustice and police brutality: Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice.

Case study n.2: Louis McKechnie and the "Take a stand" movement. During a Premier League match Louis McKechnie tied himself to a goal post in protest against the UK government's increased investment in fossil fuels.

The following materials present in mainstream media (Italian newspapers and online magazines), and social media were selected.

• 10 articles related to the selected case studies from the online sites of national Italian newspapers (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Corriere Adriatico*, *Il Messaggero*);

• 10 articles related to the selected case studies from the websites of specialized Italian magazines (*Fanpage*, *ZetaLuiss*, *Ecocultura*);

• 10 videos related to the selected case studies, as well as related comments on social media (Twitter, TikTok).

Some frames associated with media coverage of protests at sporting events were initially identified (RQ1). An analysis was then performed on how protests were represented in written texts and visual materials in the media. Five frames were identified applying the key frames of the protest paradigm, and a frame matrix was constructed (see Table 1). Encoding was then carried out with the guidance of a codebook with interpretive questions. These codes provided guidelines on how to code the content (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Matthes, 2009). The correspondence of the identified frames with the key frames of the protest paradigm was carefully checked. Specifically, searches were carried out for words, images and videos that matched the key frames of the protest paradigm.

Table 1

Frame Matrix of the Representation of Protests at Mediatic Sporting Events - RQ1

Media frames	Key frame – protest paradigm
Invasion and interruption	News frames
The League, The Sports Federation	Reliance on official sources
Attack on spectators' rights	Invocation of public opinion
Focus on the action not on the problem	Delegitimization
Economic damages and social risks	Demonization

In the quantitative analysis, the presence of protest frames was measured (RQ2). Specifically, in this phase, we measured the presence of protest frames at mediatic sporting events corresponding to the key frames of the protest paradigm in the two case studies examined in Italian mainstream and social media, which had been published during the two weeks following the protest event.

Finally, criticism of mainstream media coverage of the protests, and new social media representations of the protest were investigated (RQ3) through content analysis. Videos and related online comments were examined in terms of their content and construction (Shifman, 2013).

Results

Analyzing the presence of protest frames at mediatic sporting events, we found that the "Invasion and interruption" frame constituted the highest percentage (25%), followed by "Attack on spectators' rights" (19%), and "Focus on the action not on the problem" (12%). The highest percentage of frames confirming the protest paradigm were found in mainstream media, while a smaller percentage of such frames were found on social media (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frames Associated with Media Coverage of the Protest Paradigm (RQ2). (Percentage values)

(The sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because a message may contain multiple frames)

Media frame	Key frame – protest paradigm	Percentage (mainstream media)	Percentage (magazine)	Percentage (social media)
Invasion and interruption	News frames	62%	42%	25%
The League, The Sports Federation	Reliance on official sources	28%	21%	10%
Attack on spectators' rights	Invocation of public opinion	32%	34%	19%
Focus on the action not on the problem	Delegitimization	34%	20%	12%
Economic damages and social risks	Demonization	28%	22%	9%

Now turning to the analysis of social media content, three actions were associated with the videos and related comments: the representations of the news were selected and dissected with extrapolations and cuts; the mainstream media structure was criticized through notifications and the posting of comments and opinion; new narratives were performed in the guise of counter-narratives and expanded narratives. The first action mainly consisted of annotations of content about the protest; the second action involved the generation of new comments; and the third action involved the creation of videos of the protest. The functions available on the platforms being used (reviews, editing, blue screens, original video and audio recordings, video replays with comments, tagging) were employed in the various actions (see Table 3).

Table 3

Criticism of Mainstream Media Protest Coverage and New Social Media Representations of Protest (RQ3)

Actions	Forms	Functionality
Dissecting news representations (extrapolations and dissections)	Content annotations about the protest	Reviews, editing, blue screens
Criticize the structure of the mainstream media (notifications, comments, opinions)	New comments on the protest	Original video and audio recordings, video replays with comments, video effects
Performing new narratives (counter-narratives, expanded narratives)	Generation of videos starting from the protest	Original video and audio recordings, tagging

Discussion

The results of the present investigation show that mediatic sporting events are to be understood as a diverse range of generators of multiple political effects: from participation and public involvement, to social

mobilization and activism. The sporting events selected as case studies of protest in the media have proven to be representative in both mainstream and social media. Social media in particular offer opportunities for actions aimed at political change and social activism. This result confirms recent studies on the role of mediatic sporting events in pursuing and achieving social change (Darnell et al., 2021; Horne, 2017). Regarding the two cases under study, we found that the mainstream media mainly cover the protest with the aim of integration and confirmation of the existing social and political order, while social media use the opportunities provided by sporting events to push for political change.

The social media examined, especially TikTok, challenge the power of the mainstream media as arbiters of the acceptability of social movements and as gatekeepers of the representation of protest, sometimes taking on the role of an alternative and authentic source, criticizing mainstream media through videos, selfies and comments related to social media's own representations of the protest.

In a positive sense, social media can exercise "corrective" criticism, i.e., it can be used as a form of rectifying action on behalf of communities, which have the opportunity to shape their own self-representation, thus strengthening democracy (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020).

The results of the present study, are consistent with the findings of scholars of social media and their social effects (Literat et al., 2023; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), extending the scope of such research to the field of mediatic sporting events. In some ways, the research also touches on the issue of the place of sport in society in relation to re-production maintaining the status quo versus social change: the nature of the movements themselves that emerge in the field of sports has changed, with greater attention not only to racial inequality, but also to sexual and gender diversity, the environment and ecology (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018; Razack & Joseph, 2020).

Finally, the protest paradigm and frame analysis have enduring relevance, providing insights into the media representations of protests, including those that occur at sporting events. In the mainstream media, messages are indeed often used to promote social order and integration; nevertheless, in new digital media, counter-narratives are increasingly produced by activists through actions that are critical of the mainstream media, including social media representations of the protest at sporting events. Mainly using social media to spread their messages, these critics (athletes and activists) develop a lively conversation and articulate multifaceted positions to push their progressive agenda and to promote social development and participation, driving change through forms of resistance that challenge the protest paradigm mainly found in the mainstream media.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the protest paradigm and frame theory can still play an interpretative role but are not able to fully grasp the multi-perspective reality of new media communication and the complexity of the current society and political system, in which sport plays a leading role. Based on the insights gleaned from this analysis, it can be argued that society would benefit greatly if media practitioners abandoned the traditional protest paradigm in favor of multi-perspective approaches. Improving the coverage of protests in the media can lead to an improvement in the dynamics and outcomes of social conflicts thus enhancing public debate and democracy.

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