



Hybrid media events as a heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure: The 2022 Tour de France

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Abstract

Although current debates on media events acknowledge that these episodes are produced by a variety of actors, they often lack a robust theorisation of the asymmetrical power relations between them. Using the hybrid media coverage of the Tour de France 2022 as a heuristic device, we argue that examining media events as a 'mediation opportunity structure' offers a productive way to advance these debates. By conceptualising this event as a heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure, comprised of both insider and outsider dynamics, we illuminate not only who these different actors are, but also their shifting interactions and unequal access to symbolic and material resources. Media events therefore emerge not only as contentious episodes of highly mediated visibility, but as arenas where the boundaries of visibility themselves are fought over and policed, thus exposing the shifting architectures of power that shape what can be known, seen and concealed.

Keywords

activism, hybrid media, media events, mediation, nation branding, sports, visibility

Introduction

The Tour de France (TdF) is the most prestigious and popular bicycle race in the world. Every European summer, nearly two dozen teams of eight riders gather for this multi-stage competition, cycling around 3,500 kilometres over three weeks, including

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challenging sections in the Alps and Pyrenees, and a grand finale on the Champs-Élysées. The cyclists are supported by a caravan of 4,500 people, including organisers, service providers, journalists, advertisers and staff. More than 10 million spectators follow the race on-site annually, alongside an estimated 1.4 to 3.5 billion viewers on television and other media (Frandsen, 2019).

On the surface, the TdF is the embodiment of a media event: an extraordinary, celebratory, homogeneous and integrative mediated ritual that renews shared values among members of a community (Dayan and Katz, 1992). It is a recurrent sports competition that interrupts regular media schedules, with broadcasters and digital platforms covering it live and producing surrounding content. It also celebrates the French nation-state and its national brand, with the route visibilising landscapes, towns, monuments and people (Campos, 2003; Palmer, 2001).

However, a closer look reveals a more complex picture. Through the race, a wide variety of competing actors – authorities, corporations, cyclists, media organisations, activists – engage in alliances and struggles to pursue political, economic and sportive goals. For instance, although the TdF is privately owned by the Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), French authorities support it as a symbol of national unity and provide security and infrastructure (Duff, 2022). Neighbouring countries also invest in hosting stages, hoping to boost tourism and revenue (Frandsen, 2019). Private corporations sponsor the competition and teams, using them as promotional devices, whereas activists employ performative tactics to highlight grievances (Palmer, 2001).

The TdF is thus a material and symbolic platform where various interests converge and clash. Crucially, these struggles unfold in and through the media. The race has in fact been highly mediatised since its inception, having been created in 1903 by sports magazine *L'Auto* to boost sales. Changes to teams, routes, sponsorship and activists' tactics have been shaped by media logics and technologies, especially since television began to cover the competition in the late 1940s (Frandsen, 2019). Although on-site spectators follow the competition for free, their experience is limited. Only through the media can the TdF – and the landscapes, locations and brands it promotes – be experienced fully (Campos, 2003; Frandsen, 2019).

The complex nature of the TdF echoes recent discussions on media events, which stress their contentious character, and hybrid communicational nature across legacy and digital media (e.g. Liebes, 1998; Mihelj, 2008; Sumiala et al., 2018; Valaskivi et al., 2022). While many of these works acknowledge the growing number of actors involved, they often lack a nuanced theorisation of the asymmetric access to symbolic and material resources, and of the intricate relationships between these actors. We argue that examining media events as a ‘mediation opportunity structure’ – originally proposed by one of us to study social movements (Cammaerts, 2012, 2018) – advances these debates. More concretely, we suggest that events such as the TdF constitute a *heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure*, operating differently for political, economic and media elites vis-à-vis activists and alternative media. This approach sheds light not only on the diverse, often competing individuals and organisations involved, but also on their strategic intents, mainstream representations, self-mediation practices, and audience reception. It underscores that media events are not only contentious episodes of highly mediated visibility, but also shifting arenas shaped by uneven dialectics between

agentic opportunities and structural constraints, thus exposing how the boundaries of visibility themselves are policed and contested.

The contentious, hybrid nature of global media events

The notion of *media events* emerged to describe live television broadcasts tied to nationally or globally significant episodes (Dayan and Katz, 1992). These events were portrayed as celebratory and integrative, and included the moon landing, the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana, the visits of Pope John Paul II to Central and Eastern Europe, and cyclical sports events like the Olympic Games (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The term gained prominence among media and communications scholars for capturing the ritualistic and performative nature of these episodes, and their interplay with social life (Frandsen et al., 2022; Sonnevend, 2018; Sumiala et al., 2018).

Criticisms soon followed, questioning their supposedly cohesive nature and limited set of identified scripts, namely ‘conquest’, ‘coronation’ and ‘contest’. Many argued that, rather than reinforcing dominant social arrangements, media events are often contentious, inviting disruption, violence and even national disintegration (Hepp and Couldry, 2010; Liebes, 1998; Mihelj, 2008; Sonnevend, 2018). Assumptions that media events are universally entralling were also challenged. Research on the wavering reception of the Olympic Games in the United States, for instance, showed that media events are not always integrative experiences (Rothenbuhler, 1988). Moreover, the rise of transnational and digital media led to competitive narratives and a more fragmented and participatory audience (Frandsen et al., 2022; Skey et al., 2016; Sumiala et al., 2018). Echoing Stuart Hall (1980), these debates confirmed that audiences decode ritualistic events differently, consuming and responding to them through varied genres and platforms.

These critical approaches sparked important debates about the nature, significance and even existence of media events. Notably, Katz and Dayan (2018: 151) themselves forecast the disappearance of media events in contemporary communication environments. Yet, such events – planned or unplanned, celebratory or disruptive – continue to attract broad national and global attention, as seen in recent royal funerals, wars, television series finales, and sports events (see Hepp and Couldry, 2010; Sonnevend, 2018; Sumiala et al., 2025). Calls have nonetheless been made to re-examine their features and implications. We draw on the work of Sumiala et al. (2018: 15), who highlight the *hybrid* nature of contemporary global media events, characterised by a ‘complex interplay between the different actors, messages and platforms’ that create ‘relatively fluid social intensifications between and among’ them.

Actors and visibility in global hybrid media events

In their conceptualisation of global hybrid media events, Sumiala et al. (2018) identify five elements: actors, affordance, attention, affect and acceleration. We build on the first three, as they constitute the ‘environment’ and ‘fuel’ of these episodes (Sumiala et al., 2018: 17). Regarding actors, Sumiala et al. note that global hybrid media events are shaped by shifting relationships between often antagonistic individuals, organisations,

and increasingly, non-human participants (Sumiala et al., 2018: 17–18). Although Dayan and Katz (1992: 26) acknowledged opposing actors, particularly in the ‘contest’ script, they did not consider these frictions as destabilising hegemonic arrangements. Similarly, while they noted that media events could be ‘hijacked’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 72), their terminology portrayed the interests of challenging actors as disruptive interferences rather than integral components. In contrast, discussions on hybrid media events emphasise that these episodes are not only assembled and communicated in and through multiple media but are constituted by symbolic and material struggles. Dissent and contestation are thus central, with actors engaging with the event in different ways and at different times (see Skey et al., 2016; Sumiala et al., 2025; Valaskivi et al., 2022).

Sumiala et al. (2018: 17) also argue that attention is the ‘fuel’ of hybrid media events. Despite diverging aims, actors converge in their desire to manage attention. While this is a key insight, we propose that focusing on *visibility* rather than *attention* is more productive. Drawing on Brightenti (2010a: 52), we understand visibility as a contentious political, technological and aesthetic field where power is produced and contested through ‘perceptual forms of noticing, managing attention and determining the significance of events and subjects’. As a result of asymmetric power, visibility also dovetails with invisibility and invisibilising practices. Visibility is thus a broader notion, encompassing the construction of ecologies of attention and inattention in the public domain, relationships of perception, and their articulation and structuration through technological and political ‘regimes’ (Brightenti, 2010b).

The rise of media industries and technologies has amplified the significance of *mediated* visibility, now believed to be a source of empowerment and profit but also control (Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023). Hybrid media events are in fact prime examples of temporal highly mediated visibility, synchronising the attention and affect of geographically dispersed individuals (Frandsen, 2023). Crucially, these efforts to capture and manage attention are not natural or spontaneous but strategic. Political and economic elites invest heavily in organising or sponsoring events like Eurovision or the Olympic Games to create, disseminate and make visible supposedly cohesive values or identities. Civil society actors and activists in turn leverage the same events to redirect attention towards grievances (see Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Skey et al., 2016).

Media events are thus constituted through ongoing struggles for and over visibility, prompting actors to strategically produce, manage and divert attention. The struggles are competitive and contentious, with tensions between control and contestation both central and palatable. Visibility is never guaranteed – outcomes are unpredictable, and misfiring, subversion or parody are constant risks (Brightenti, 2010b; Frandsen, 2023). Yet these risks do not imply actors are on an equal footing, as symbolic and material assets are unevenly distributed. It is therefore insufficient to note the growing number of actors in hybrid media events; we must also expose how resources are asymmetrically distributed, and how these asymmetries relate to broader structures of power.

The heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure

In their conceptualisation of hybrid media events, Sumiala et al. (2018) identify affordance as another key element shaping the environment where these episodes operate.

Although they understand affordance as a bridge between actors and structures, their emphasis is largely technological (Sumiala et al., 2018: 19). We suggest a broader and less technological deterministic approach by examining hybrid media events through what one of us calls the ‘mediation opportunity structure’ (Cammaerts, 2012, 2018). Situated at the intersection of media, communication and social movement studies, this framework underscores the dialectic interplay between agentic opportunities and structural constraints for activists and social movements across four moments: (1) *production* of movement discourses and framing efforts, (2) mainstream media *representations*, (3) *self-mediation* practices, often digital, and (4) audience and elite *reception*. The mediation opportunity structure captures how activists use media and communication infrastructures to visibilise their struggles, while also accounting for the way in which corporate, state and media power constrains these opportunities. It points to a dynamic relationship between mediation, political and economic opportunity structures, and, following previous discussions (Giddens, 1984; Gramsci, 1971), a dialectic between hegemony and counter-hegemonies, between agency and structure.

Viewing hybrid events as a mediation opportunity structure reveals, however, that non-social movement actors – such as states and corporations – also engage with and exploit a mediation opportunity structure, albeit one arranged differently. This echoes Silverstone’s (2002: 762) observation that mediation is essentially uneven, ‘precisely because the power to work with, or against, the dominant or deeply entrenched meanings that the media provide is unevenly distributed across and within societies’. We consequently argue that hybrid media events constitute a *heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure*, composed of an *insider* and an *outsider* structure. We use the term heteroglossic to illuminate different interpretations and articulations of a media event, as well as the frictions, struggles and interactions between two types of actors: (1) *insiders*, who use hybrid media events to frame, visibilise and propagate hegemonic narratives that perpetuate dominant social arrangements; and (2) *outsiders*, who generally – but not exclusively – craft counter-hegemonic narratives. Crucially, the heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure invites us to analyse actors’ messages, their strategic intents, their available resources, the interplay between mainstream representations and self-mediation, as well as how events, actors and narratives are received by audiences (Cammaerts, 2012, 2018). As such, this conceptual framework exposes visibility arrangements that often remain concealed (Brighenti, 2010b). Drawing on these insights, we examine: (1) how insider and outsider actors engaged with the TdF as a heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure; and (2) what this case reveals about the dynamics and implications of hybrid media events in the context of mediated visibility struggles.

The 2022 Tour de France as a heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure

Sumiala et al. (2018) propose a multi-method model – digital ethnography, automated content analysis and social network analytics – to trace how hybrid media events are constructed and contested across platforms. While this approach is insightful, ours is less

technologically deterministic. We follow a qualitative, exploratory methodology that foregrounds how meaning is produced, negotiated and challenged across digital and non-digital sites. We adopt a single-case study approach in the tradition of theory development (George and Bennett, 2004), aiming to rethink the concept of media events and the politics of visibility and invisibility that surround them. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011: 2–3) highlight the value of multi-layered case studies, noting that they produce ‘rich and messy data sets’ that are ‘rife with contradiction and paradox’. This enables, they argue, the identification of tensions and reconsidering of relations within the data.

Following Seawright and Gerring (2008), we selected the TdF 2022 as a heuristic case to explore the heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure. As a global sports event, the TdF is ceremonial, dramaturgical, spectacular and multi-layered (Palmer, 2001), shaped by ‘conflicting discourses, constituted by different regimes of truth [and] produced by various interest groups’ (de Kloet et al., 2008: 9). Its hybrid nature – spanning live broadcasts, social media, podcasts, and streaming platforms – makes it a fertile case for examining how visibility is pursued and rearticulated across actors and media. We focused on the 109th edition, held in 2022, one of the most politically charged in recent memory. The *Grand Départ* took place in Denmark (Copenhagen), followed by stages in Northern France, the Alps, and the Pyrenees, culminating on the Champs-Élysées. Twenty-two teams raced 3,349.8 km across 21 stages. The event was broadcast live by 60 networks worldwide and later re-narrated in a Netflix series (Becket, 2023). Environmental protests disrupted the competition twice, while pro-Palestinian activists and regional separatists sought to make grievances visible.

Our data collection and analysis were guided by three key steps: (1) identifying insider and outside actors; (2) situating their actions across the four moments of the mediation opportunity structure – *production*, *representation*, *self-mediation* and *reception* –, and (3) identifying visibility efforts as well as invisibilising strategies. Insider actors included the race organiser, the Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), a subsidiary of the Groupe Amaury, which also owns sports newspaper *L'Équipe*, *Vélo Magazine*, and other sports events (Duff, 2022; Frandsen, 2019). ASO commissions live coverage from EMG – Gravity Media since 2024 (EMG, n.d.) –, which subsequently distributes the images to broadcasters. We looked at the official race app, TdF’s Facebook and Instagram accounts, and the Netflix documentary series *Au Cœur du Peloton* (In the Heart of the Peloton), produced by ASO and Quad/BoxToBox, which premiered a year later and offered backstage access to eight teams (Netflix, 2022).

Media organisations formed the second major insider group. Television remains central to the race, with broadcasters relying on the same visual pool provided by ASO. However, narration and analysis vary, shaped by diverse pre- and post-race content and local commentators (Frandsen, 2023). We monitored the 2022 edition live between 1 and 22 July on Belgian public service broadcaster VRT/Sporza (in Dutch) and commercial broadcaster Eurosport (in English).

States and commercial sponsors were also key insider actors. Governments at various levels pay ASO to host starts and finishes, and they also provide police protection, medical support and volunteers. In France, ASO has four official institutional partners, including the Assembly of French Departments and the Ministry of the Interior, which

Table 1. Main sponsors of the TdF 2022 cycling teams.

States	Bahrain, Israel, Kazakhstan, UAE
Construction sector	Bora, Hansgrohe, Deceuninck, Quick-Step, Soudal, Wanty-Gobert Matériaux, Premier Tech, Alfa Vinyl
Credit and insurance sector	Arkéa, Groupama, Cofidis, AG2R La Mondiale
Cycling sector	Bike Exchange, KTM, Trek
Education sector	EF Education
Energy and chemical sector	DSM, Ineos, Samsic, Total Energies
Gambling sector	Française des Jeux, Lotto
Post, telecom and ICT sector	Easy Post, Movistar, Vismal
Retail sector	Alpecin, Intermarché, Jumbo, Segafredo
Travel and hospitality sector	B&B Hotels, Jayco
Car manufacturing sector	Citroën

mobilised a total of 28,000 police and firefighters in 2022 (Bailleul, 2022). Although shrouded by non-disclosure agreements, local authorities in Denmark reportedly paid €25 million to host the first three stages (Brock et al., 2022). Other states were named sponsors of cycling teams, such as Kazakhstan, Bahrain, UAE and Israel.¹ Alongside commercial sponsors, they play a crucial role in team financing. ASO does not share TV licensing income with teams (Duff, 2022), and prize money is relatively low,² making sponsorship essential. Sponsors cover a wide range of sectors, some politically problematic (see Table 1). Some support the TdF itself, with French bank LCL sponsoring the yellow jersey of the race leader, and supermarket chain E.Leclerc funding the polka-dot jersey for best mountain climber. Brands also participate in the 10 km promotional convoy that precedes the race, distributing merchandise to spectators (Reed, 2003). As examples of commercial sponsors, we chose the social media accounts of two brands supporting Belgian cycling teams, namely Quick-Step and Alpecin, to ascertain whether they referenced the race and/or promoted their sponsored cyclists. We also analysed official state social media accounts to, again, assess whether host and sponsoring states referenced the race or the teams they supported. In addition, we paid attention to whether narratives of collective identity unfolded through the media.

Unions represent a unique insider civil society actor. Since 1947, the communist union *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) has a guaranteed spot in the promotion convoy in recognition of their role in the resistance against fascism.³ These unions are largely confined within hegemonic narratives and have 'fully internalized the ways in which the Tour organizers manage protest and demonstrations' (Polo, 2003: 257). We examined their Facebook and Instagram accounts and French mainstream media coverage of their presence. The final insider actors are the cyclists. While they are the main protagonists, they are relatively minor players in the broader scheme of the TdF interests. Other than their collective refusal to race, they have limited power (Duff, 2022).

Outsider actors included activists seeking to make their grievances visible. In 2022, we identified three main groups: environmental activists, pro-Palestinian demonstrators, and regional separatists. French farmers also manifested themselves, but they did not disrupt

the race that year. We examined their social media accounts, searched for mainstream media coverage, and used the Google search engine to assess the popularity of their hashtags. Another set of outsider actors comprised individuals and organisations producing content *on* or *around* the race without formal ties to ASO, such as podcasts *Tour de Tietema*,⁴ *The Move*,⁵ and *Lanterne Rouge*.⁶ These peripheral media contents were supported by outsider sponsors like cycling training platform Zwift (*Lanterne Rouge*), bike brand Ventum and ketone drink company HVMN (*The Move*), Belgian gambling company B!nggoal and Czech car manufacturer Škoda (*Tour de Tietema*), with the latter being also an official sponsor of the race. We primarily examined their content and following on YouTube, though they are also active on other platforms.

Following previous studies (Cammaerts, 2018), our analysis consisted of an interpretive reading across different media. We traced how actors positioned themselves within the four moments of the mediation opportunity structure: *production*, *representation*, *self-mediation* and *reception*. For each actor, we examined narrative frames, symbolic tactics and strategies to gain visibility, as well as instances where visibility was denied or contested. We considered how opportunities and constraints were distributed, and how interactions between different actors illuminated an underlying ‘architecture of visibility’ (Brighenti, 2010b: 107). We do not claim to have exhausted all analytical possibilities. Time and resource constraints meant that our data collection was necessarily selective, focusing on the most prominent actors and content. Data availability was uneven, with outsider actors having limited media presence, and algorithmic metrics and audience reception were beyond the scope of this study. Our perspective was also situated: looking at the TdF from, for instance, Chile or New Zealand might have yielded different insights. Despite these limitations, we are confident that by focusing on the 2022 TdF we can shed light not only on the visibility struggles constitutive of this hybrid media event, but also on the broader implications for contemporary debates on hybrid media events.

Analysis: production, mainstream media representation, self-mediation and reception

Production of frames

The production of frames in the 2022 TdF was shaped by a dynamic interplay between insider and outsider actors, with competing claims to visibility. While organisers and sponsors sought to stabilise celebratory narratives of sports neutrality, national pride and commercial legitimacy, activists and marginalised groups attempted to disrupt these frames. Danish national and local governments used the *Grand Départ* to promote Denmark not only as a tourist destination, but as a modern, forward-looking cycling nation.⁷ Once the race returned to the French *motherland*, live broadcasts highlighted iconic and spectacular natural and urban landscapes such as the Col du Tourmalet and the Arc de Triomphe, accompanied by celebratory narratives of France as proud, unified and heroic. Confirming previous studies (see Campos, 2003; Palmer, 2001), while local

and regional identities were occasionally acknowledged, organisers and legacy media portrayed the race as the embodiment of the French nation-state. As such, it functioned as an insider mediation opportunity structure for city, regional and above all, nation branding, with promotional techniques used to circulate state-sponsored versions of national identity.

Nation branding extended beyond host nations. States like Bahrain and the UAE, involved through sponsorship deals, aimed to project neoliberal, modernising images of themselves (Dubinsky, 2024), in large part as a response to their questionable record on human rights. Commercial sponsors – particularly in energy, chemicals, gambling, banking and insurance – also sought reputational gains. As such, some state and commercial actors were engaged in what is commonly called *sportswashing*, using the ideology of sports neutrality to invisibilise abuse, as well as political and ethical concerns (see Dubinsky, 2024; Harvey et al., 2014).

In contrast, outsider actors attempted to disrupt these dominant narratives and visibilise alternative frames. Pro-Palestinian groups, inspired by the South-African Anti-Apartheid sports-boycott, called for a boycott of the Israel-Premier Tech team (Samidoun, 2022). Activists painted the slogan 'Israel Apartheid Out of the Tour' onto the road before the opening time trial in Copenhagen, and displayed banners with similar messages during key stages in Belgium and France (see Figure 1). Similarly, environmental activists such as *Dernière Rénovation* interrupted Stages 10 and 19 for 15 and 5 minutes respectively, while *Letzte Generation* attempted to disrupt Stage 3 in Denmark, before Danish fans pulled them off the road (Stockholm, 2022). A subsequent attempt by *Dernière Rénovation* to stop Stage 15 was also unsuccessful, as the *Gendarmerie* removed the activists. These interventions were often brief but intended to insert grievances into the media event.

Other actors relied more on symbolic visual tactics. Local farming communities did not unsettle the race but created large-scale visual displays – bike wheels or slogans such as *Vive le Tour* made of hay bales and people walking in circles – to subtly slide political messages into the live broadcast. Meanwhile, flagging was a prevalent tool for frame production. While French and Danish flags were employed by organisers, authorities and sponsors, regional separatists deployed the Flemish nationalist flag and Basque *Ikurriña* to assert alternative identities. Pro-Palestinian activists similarly used flags, as Figure 1 shows, to claim visibility and contest the presence of the Israeli team (Samidoun, 2022).

Mainstream representation of frames by insider and outsider actors

Mainstream representations of the 2022 TdF reveal a stark asymmetry in the mediation opportunity structure. Insider actors largely benefit from long-standing institutional ties, editorial alignment and commercial incentives that ensure their narratives dominate. The race organiser ASO maintains a long-standing, incestuous relationship with legacy media, especially public television, with open access live broadcasts pivotal to its business model (Duff, 2022; Frandsen, 2019; Reed, 2003; Wille, 2003). Until 2022 at least, ASO consistently prioritised its partnership with public service broadcasters, especially



Figure 1. Twitter posts of pro-Palestinian groups, 7 and 25 July 2022.

Source: Screenshots made at the end of August 2022 (additional check in August 2023 produced same number of likes).

France Télévisions, ties that served both political and commercial interests. The race has become instrumental to the soft power strategies of the French state (Arnould, 2024) and has provided organisers with television shots ‘worth tens of millions of euros in advertising’ (Duff, 2022: x). This logic extends beyond France. Although the Danish stages in 2022 were relatively uneventful in sportive terms, mainstream coverage highlighted massive crowds lining the parcours with a sea of Danish flags, reinforcing narratives of national pride and unity. Such representations align with organisers’ attempts to exploit media events as vehicles for political symbolism and commercial visibility (Hepp and Couldry, 2010).

Insider actors benefit from this alignment, as they have access to what Wolfsfeld (1991) called the ‘front door’. Sponsors are embedded in the language of coverage, with reporters and commentators referring to teams by their sponsors’ names, while riders themselves become ‘advertising mediums’ (Wille, 2003: 145). It is not uncommon that lower-ranked teams send riders into breakaways primarily to maximise brand exposure. The Netflix series *Au Cœur du Peloton* (Becket, 2023) further amplified this visibility, offering exposure to a few well-chosen cycling heroes⁸ and the brands that sponsor them, reinforcing the convergence of political, economic and media interests.

In contrast, outsider actors faced structural barriers to mediated visibility, with a hostile media environment that actively suppressed or reframed their interventions requiring them to develop strategies to gain visibility through the ‘back-door’ (Wolfsfeld, 1991). Pro-Palestinian activists’ calls for a boycott of the Israel-Premier Tech team were totally absent from live broadcasts and largely ignored by legacy media. Noteworthy in this regard is that *Doublet*, ASO’s subcontractor in charge of building and dismantling the parcours every day, employs two *effaceurs*⁹ or eraser men to overpaint disruptive

messages before the race, preserving the image of a harmonious, child-friendly, and apolitical event (Mouttet, 2021: n.p.). *France Télévisions* also made editorial decisions to minimise protest visibility; while in Stage 10 the environmental protest briefly appeared on screen, subsequent actions were deliberately concealed.¹⁰ This invisibilising is not uncommon, with broadcasters having the propensity ‘to be faithful to the agreed definition of the [media] event as a ceremony’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 72).

Some outsider interventions did receive limited coverage in print and online media, often framed within a broader history of protest at the Tour (e.g. *L'Équipe*, 2018). Yet even when acknowledged, these actions were typically condemned, reflecting the enduring ‘ideology of sport’s neutrality’ (Harvey et al., 2014: 2). The sparse presence of pro-Palestinian activists meant their flags were rarely visible in live or documentary coverage, apart from a fleeting appearance in *Au Cœur du Peloton* (Episode 2, 12'05''). In contrast, Flemish and Basque nationalists were more successful in gaining visibility, strategically deploying flags in mountainous and cobbled stages where camera exposure was more likely.

Self-mediation of frames by insider and outsider actors

Self-mediation reveals both the possibilities and limits of digital media to reconfigure visibility boundaries. Echoing their relationship with legacy media, insider actors used digital platforms to reinforce celebratory and commercial narratives, often omitting dissent. The 2022 TdF’s official app provided live updates, stage information and highlights, while on Facebook and Instagram ASO posted stage summaries, podium celebrations and picturesque imagery. Notably, these channels made no reference to environmental protests, effectively erasing them from the official narrative.

Commercial and state sponsors also used digital platforms to amplify their brands. Team sponsors such as Alpecin and Quick-Step posted celebratory content featuring riders and behind-the-scenes footage (see Figure 2). Yet not all insider actors relied on digital media: the CGT union, for example, used a branded van in the promotional caravan and distributed its newspaper *Vie Ouvrière* (Workers’ Life) to spectators on-site. Interestingly, apart from Denmark, we found no evidence of state-led digital nation branding by sponsors such as Kazakhstan, the UAE and Bahrain, nor by Israel.

As in other settings (Cammaerts, 2018), outsider actors turned to digital media to bypass structural exclusions and assert alternative frames. As Figures 1 and 3 show, pro-Palestinian and environmental activists used hashtags such as #BoycottIsrael and #IsraelApartheidTech, while some farmers displayed the popular #OnVousNourrit (#WeFeedYou) next to their displays. Their aim was arguably to create stories ‘in a way that is collective and recognized by the public’, but also to ‘challenge narratives in mainstream media’ (Yang, 2016: 14–15). *Dernière Rénovation* posted striking images of activists chained together or glued to the tarmac, framing their actions as urgent interventions against environmental collapse (Figure 3). Echoing what Rucht (2013) calls an *attack strategy*, they also directly criticised *France Télévisions* for censoring their protests:

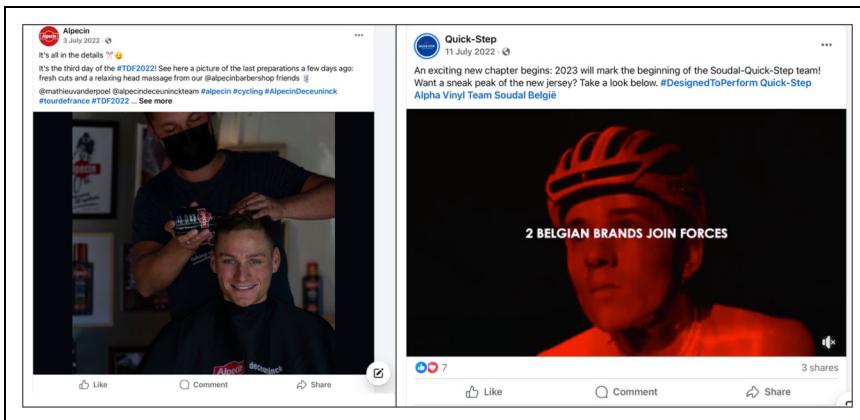


Figure 2. Examples of cycling stars used in sponsor social media posts during the 2022 TdF.
Source: Instagram accounts of Alpecin and Quick-Step.

Both during the interruption of Roland Garros [previously staged by *Dernière Rénovation*], and of the Tour de France @Francetele turns the cameras away. France Télévisions is a public service company which describes itself as being ‘at the service of society’. If the media play a key role in access to information, they are complicit when they decide to conceal it. (Twitter/X post on @derniere_renov, 22 July 2022 – translated by the authors)

Self-mediation also played a role in the growing ecosystem of independent pod/videocasts. While not overly political, these unaccredited creators – such as *Tour de Tietema* – initially clashed with ASO over copyright. In 2021, ASO requested YouTube to remove their content. However, by 2022, ASO reversed its stance and granted the vloggers an official accreditation. This shift illustrates how outsider voices can be incorporated into the insider category when their content complements rather than challenges dominant interests, under-scoring a porous boundary between resistance and co-optation.

Audience reception of frames

While scholarship on media events has traditionally focused on elite actors (Skey et al., 2016), the mediation opportunity structure foregrounds the importance of reception (see Cammaerts, 2012, 2018). Although visibility struggles in legacy and digital media are evident, assessing whether insider and outsider actors’ strategic intents succeed is more complex, especially when rejecting simplistic direct-effects models, as we do. A full reception study is beyond the scope of this article, but we can examine available data on reach and engagement.

This data suggests significant asymmetries on achieving visibility. Insider actors clearly benefited from expansive reach through broadcast partnerships, official apps, and streaming platforms, even if audience growth is plateauing. The 2022 TdF was broadcast in 190 countries across 100 channels, reaching approximately 150 million

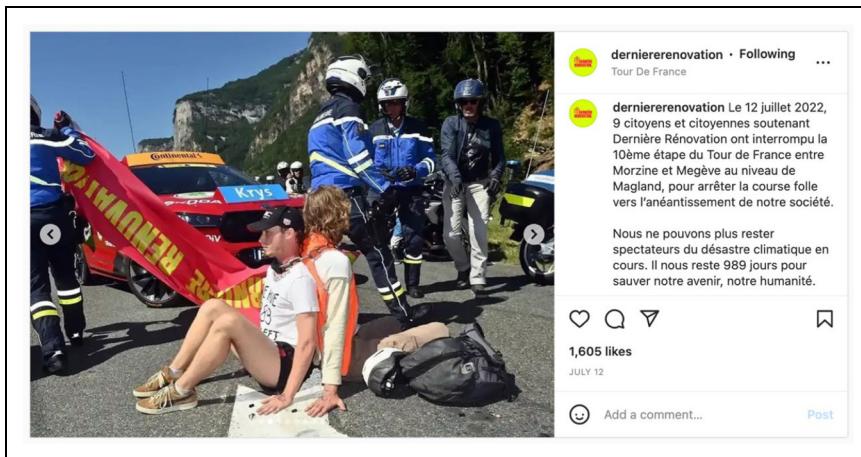


Figure 3. Instagram post of *Dernière Rénovation*, 12 July 2022.

Source: Screenshot made end of August 2022 (additional check in August 2023 produced same number of likes).

viewers in Europe alone (Bailleul, 2022). Many of these were free-to-air channels, strategically selected by ASO to maximise exposure for the race and its sponsors. The official race app was downloaded 12 million times, while its website attracted 42.5 million visitors and nearly 15 million unique users. By the end of the competition, its official social media accounts had amassed 9.2 million followers (Bailleul, 2022).

ASO's partnership with Netflix aimed to expand audiences further. When the first season of *Au Cœur du Peloton* was announced, ASO CEO Yann le Moënner described it as part of a broader ambition to make professional cycling 'more accessible and meet an even wider audience' (quoted in Becket, 2023: n.p.). Netflix does not release detailed viewership figures, but the series was reportedly watched for 36.1 million hours globally and remained in Denmark's top ten for eight weeks (Shift Active Media, 2024). However, it faced criticisms by some participant cyclists and failed to boost live television audiences, which remained flat when comparing 2022 and 2024 (ASO, 2024). After commissioning a second and third season, Netflix cancelled the series due to underwhelming performance, particularly in France, where it had hoped to increase its subscription base (Ostanek, 2025).

Measuring the effectiveness of promotional campaigns is always difficult. Being the lead-sponsor of the winning team – such as Jumbo-Visma in 2022 – is often seen as a 'marketing bullseye' (Duff, 2022: 271). Yet there is limited empirical evidence on the broader impact of such campaigns, especially nation branding ones. However, Dubinsky (2024: 793) found that Israel's involvement in the Tour allowed it to be referenced in legacy media 'without having the spotlight on its distancing image', suggesting some reputational benefit.

Outsider actors, in contrast, struggle to break through the noise, with limited social media traction and minimal mainstream resonance. While digital platforms offer

alternative routes to visibility, they rarely translate into mass engagement or narrative disruption. A Google Search one month after the race found only 520 tags of the hashtag #IsraelApartheidTech and 7,530 of #OnVousNourrit, relatively small numbers when it comes to social media resonance. Similarly, at the end of August 2022, *Dernière Rénovation* had a mere 5,000 Facebook followers, 9,200 on Twitter/X, 13,400 on Instagram, and just 56 on TikTok. The post referenced in Figure 3 had about 1,600 likes, while the pro-Palestinian Twitter/X posts on Figure 1 received between 40 to 70 likes. These figures suggest limited resonance beyond activist circles, a relevant point when considering that negative portrayals of disruptive protest in legacy media can lead to public rejection of such tactics (Cammaerts, 2024; Vlazakis et al., 2024).

It is important to note, however, that audience metrics – especially on digital platforms – are inherently limited. While outsider media actors such as *The Move*, *Tour de Tietema*, and *The Lanterne Rouge Cycling Podcast* averaged sizeable but limited numbers – respectively 66k, 191k and 23k views per episode on YouTube¹¹ – they cater to niche publics and are distributed across other platforms, thus increasing their reach. Moreover, while the overall structure remains skewed toward dominant interests, audiences interpret, contest and reframe content in diverse ways (Hall, 1980), potentially appropriating insider narratives for subversive purposes and engaging with outsider ones in more supportive ways.

Concluding discussion

Since Dayan and Katz (1992) introduced the concept of *media events* to describe extraordinary, integrative live broadcasts, the term has evolved significantly. While they later predicted the decline of such events (Katz and Dayan, 2018), large-scale mediated episodes like the TdF continue to attract global attention, albeit more scattered and fragmented currently than before. Recent scholarship has reconceptualised media events as hybrid, ambivalent and contested *events* shaped by both legacy and digital media, and animated by competing discourses aiming to reinforce, reconfigure or contest dominant social arrangements (Hepp and Couldry, 2010; Sonnevend, 2018; Sumiala et al., 2025). Yet, despite acknowledging the multiplicity of actors involved (see Skey et al., 2016; Valaskivi et al., 2022), existing debates often under-theorise the asymmetrical and dialectic power relations that underpin the mediation of hybrid media events. Our study addresses this gap by proposing the concept of a *heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure* – a framework that captures how contemporary media events offer an insider and outsider mediation opportunity structure and underscores that actors with divergent agendas and resources navigate uneven conditions of visibility.

Building on Sumiala et al. (2018), we tied the dynamics of actors, affordances and attention to broader material and symbolic struggles. By treating the multi-layered case of the 2022 TdF as a heuristic device, we illustrate how hybrid media events are shaped by intersecting political, economic and media structures that remain often invisible (see Brighenti, 2010b). A wide range of actors – states, corporations, unions, activists and content creators – use such events to visibilise distinct causes, such as nation and corporate branding, environmentalism, pro-Palestinian rights, state nationalism and separatism.

Insider actors, despite differing agendas, largely align to protect the event's political and commercial interests. *Outsider* actors, while often oppositional, are not uniformly so. For instance, podcasters and farmers engaged without disrupting the event.

While these categories of actors can be mapped onto the classic Gramscian triad of state, market and civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992), they are also fluid and hierarchical. State interests may align with the market, and civil society may draw on commercial logics. Some insider actors – like cyclists and journalists – have limited influence compared to event organisers or sponsors. Outsiders, in turn, are treated differently depending on whether they disrupt or complement the event. Some – like independent videocasters – can transition from outsider to insider status, although that depends on powerful insider actors deciding whether these outsiders align with their institutional interests.

The heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure operates differently for both categories of actors, with material and symbolic resources unequally distributed among them. Insider actors benefit from transactional, often incestuous relationships, for instance, with corporations and authorities subsidising the TdF as well as enjoying easy access to official legacy and social media channels. The Danish government paid handsomely to promote a state-sanctioned version of national identity, while corporate and state sponsors used the race for sportswashing or to counteract potential reputational damage. Outsiders had to be more inventive, using flags, hashtags or disruption to gain visibility.

While some, like regional nationalists, managed to exploit some mediation affordances for visibility, others – particularly environmental and pro-Palestinian activists – were largely marginalised and/or invisibilised. Despite its promise of behind-the-scenes access, the Netflix series reinforced these asymmetries, further entrenching visibility boundaries. Furthermore, the idea of social media enabling David to win against Goliath did not materialise, as the heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure was heavily skewed in favour of those with institutional power and technical means. This does not mean, however, that this is an impossibility. During the 2025 *Vuelta a España*, pro-Palestinian flags were ubiquitous, and activists not only disrupted the team time trial of Israel-Premier Tech, but several other stages too, with the final stage in Madrid cancelled altogether (Mallows and Skelton, 2025). Arguably the political opportunity structure and mobilising power for the Palestinian cause shifted between 2022 and 2025 due to a genocide being committed by Israel in Gaza.

The mediation opportunity structure thus intersects with the political and economic ones. Insider actors can leverage these structures not only to pursue their aims but also to render dissent invisible, as when broadcasters downplayed or omitted actions by environmentalist and pro-Palestinian activists. Facing these constraints, outsider actors are often required to 'punch above their weight', through staging spectacles impossible to ignore by legacy media or through self-mediation. Hybrid media events therefore still offer opportunities to challenge dominant narratives. In the case of the TdF, however, outsider actors struggled to offset their exclusion from legacy media. Relatedly, while commercial insiders relied on digital media to blend race imagery with branding, state sponsors rarely self-mediated, relying instead on legacy media. This points to the persistent relevance of legacy media and raises questions about the social value of visibility, suggesting that invisibility and anonymity may offer equally valid forms of dominance

and resistance (Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023). Still, while structural inequalities exist, audiences are not passive, and hybrid media events remain open to contestation and reappropriation.

Contemporary hybrid global media events are therefore constituted by and through a heteroglossic mediation opportunity structure, which intersects with the political opportunity structure. It is precisely this dialectic between both structures that transform a relatively national on-site competition into a global media event, illuminating how visibility operates not as a neutral or evenly distributed outcome, but as a strategic and contested resource embedded in asymmetrical power relations. As Brightenti argues (2010b), visibility is not merely the condition of seen and being seen, but a relational and political process that structures social hierarchies and governs access to the public sphere (see Dahlberg, 2018). Building on this observation, our framework underscores that actors and their narratives do not simply appear or disappear; they negotiate, are denied or claim visibility depending on their alignment with or resistance to dominant institutional interests. They may also transition between insider and outsider roles, with outsiders occasionally co-opted into insider status when their visibility serves political or commercial agendas. Understanding these dynamics contributes to a broader theorisation of media events, not merely as contested sites of highly mediated visibility (see Frandsen et al., 2022; Skey et al., 2016; Sumiala et al., 2018; Valaskivi et al., 2022), but as arenas where the boundaries of visibility themselves are fought over and policed. In doing so, it exposes the asymmetrical yet shifting architectures of power that shape what can be known, seen and concealed.

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Notes

1. Although the Israel Premier-Tech cycling team was not directly sponsored by the Israeli state but by the pro-Zionist Jewish-Canadian billionaire Sylvan Adams, its owner's investments do have very explicit 'public diplomacy and branding purposes to expose Israel to international audiences', and are seen to be an integral part of Israel's sport-tech diplomacy (Dubinsky, 2024: 780).
2. In 2022 this was €2.28 million for the whole 21 days of racing, of which 40 per cent went to the top three at the end of the race (respectively €500k, €300k and €100k).
3. Later on, two other unions, *Force Ouvrière* (since 1980) and the *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens* (since 1998) also received free spots in the promotion caravan.
4. See: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLV-LF43uCaubwj88N0yygtggaxoIAV045> (accessed 10 October 2025).

5. See: <https://www.youtube.com/@wedu/> (accessed 10 October 2025).
6. See: <https://www.youtube.com/@LanterneRougeCyclingPodcast> (accessed 10 October 2025).
7. Interestingly, in the context of the intertwining of commercial and state interests, it was French President Emmanuel Macron who negotiated the *Grand Départ* in Copenhagen during a state visit in 2018 to which he also invited Christian Prudhomme, the general director of the TdF (Arnould, 2024: 57).
8. Defending champion Tadej Pogačar's team (UAE Team Emirates) declined to participate in the first season, although he was part of the subsequent one.
9. In 2022 the eraser men were Patrick Dancoisne and Joël Gautriand.
10. Landscape images were shown instead.
11. Calculated from view figures on YouTube.

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