

The Media Event Build-Up Phase: A Site of Contestation and Counternarratives

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The media events and sports mega-events literatures show that celebratory media narratives dominate or dismiss criticism of events like the Olympics. Given this bias, this article explores how critics of the Games contest official and celebratory narratives around the Olympic media event. Through document analysis and interviews, I examine two alternative media projects that built extensive critiques of the 2016 Rio Olympics. These projects not only criticized the urban and social impacts of the mega-event but also explicitly deconstructed the event's official narratives, exposing the workings of the media event of which they themselves were coproducers. Contrary to the media event literature's focus on the live phase of events, I argue that that the "build-up phase" is a crucial period for the development and contestation of narratives about the Olympic event model and the media structures that sustain it.

Keywords: media events, alternative media, digital media, counternarratives, Olympics

Midway through the Rio Olympics, on August 15, 2016, columnist Roger Cohen of *The New York Times* wrote that he was "tired, very tired, of reading negative stories about these Brazilian Olympics—the anger in the slums, the violence that continues . . . the enduring gulf between rich and poor" (Cohen, 2016, para. 10). He implied that journalists should give Brazil a break. "These Olympics are good for Brazil and good for humanity," he wrote. "Watch Usain Bolt or Simone Biles and feel uplifted" (para. 13).

This kind of uncritical "good for humanity" assertion is not unusual at global sports media events. In their influential 1992 book, Dayan and Katz wrote that media events were historic events broadcast live on television to a massive, dispersed audience, disrupting and monopolizing normal broadcast routines. Organizers of a media event established a definition of the occasion. Journalists, the authors argued, "suspend[ed] their normally critical stance and treat[ed] their subject with respect, even awe" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 7).

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Many media scholars have since demonstrated that event organizers' narratives are not always adopted by all media producers (Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Puijk, 2000; Rivenburgh, 2010). Still, as Roger Cohen's (2016) article shows, for some journalists the Olympics still carry an element of being untouchable, a sense that the sports event should be a break from politics and media as usual. Cohen's column is not the rule for journalists, but neither is it an exception: The literature focused on sports mega-events suggests a trend for mainstream journalists to revere the Olympics while dismissing dissenting voices as attempts to ruin the party (Boykoff, 2014; Gaffney, 2014; Horne, 2017; Lenskyj, 2000).

Yet there is a lot to criticize about the Olympics' event model. From location to location, certain issues occur repeatedly, including evictions to clear the way for infrastructure, the transfer of public land to private ownership amid rising real estate speculation, the militarization of cities, rampant corruption, and ballooning public expenditures with little financial return for citizens.

Given the tendency of the mainstream media to celebrate the Olympics and drown out or dismiss dissent, this article asks the following: How do critics of the Olympics contest official and celebratory media narratives asserted through the Olympics media event, and what does this mean for our understanding of media events in the digital age? I examine two alternative media projects that built extensive critiques of the 2016 Olympics held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: (a) the dossiers on human rights violations produced by the Popular Committee of the World Cup and the Olympics (Popular Committee), and (b) *RioOnWatch*, the favela-focused news site produced by the NGO Catalytic Communities (CatComm).

In this article, I argue that ahead of the Rio Olympics the Popular Committee's dossiers and CatComm's *RioOnWatch* not only criticized many of the urban impacts of the mega-event's preparations but also explicitly criticized and deconstructed the event's official and mainstream narratives, exposing the workings of the media event. The two projects modeled alternative approaches to covering the physical media event site—the Olympic City—and seeing beyond official narratives. However, engaging mainstream media to get more visibility for critical counternarratives was still a core strategic activity for both groups, and they built their understanding of the media event phasing into their strategies.

Building on this analysis, in the conclusion I expand on the literature's concept of media events in the digital age by highlighting the planned media event's extension in time across not only a brief live phase but also a longer build-up phase, in which narratives about the event are developed and contested across alternative and mainstream media. A planned media event is constructed both by dominant producers working to maintain the image of an integrative, celebratory event and by critical producers simultaneously working to deconstruct what they see as the myths that sustain that image, fighting to draw the media event spotlight to different issues and temporal focuses. An element of the media event is therefore a self-reflexive debate about the role of the media and the media event itself.

Planned Media Events in the Digital Age

To account for the vast expansion of media platforms since the 1990s, Hepp and Couldry (2010) offer a revised definition of media events: "Media events are certain situated, thickened, centering performances of

mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants" (p. 22).

The emphasis on "thickenings" of coverage across "different media products" reflects that, unlike Dayan and Katz's (1992) focus on "broadcasters" and "audiences" as separate categories, digital media blur the lines between producers and consumers in a media event. This situates groups like the Popular Committee and CatComm as coproducers of the Rio Olympics media event, contributing to the thickening of coverage and even using it strategically, while simultaneously seeking to expose and criticize the media event's nature.

This definition also allows a broader range of events to be classified as media events. A number of scholars (e.g., Couldry, Hepp, & Krotz, 2010; Fox, 2016; Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016) have expanded the media event category beyond the "ritual" events that Dayan and Katz (1992) analyzed to include "disruptive" events like armed conflict, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. Not everyone is convinced, however, about the usefulness of grouping ritual and disruptive events together in a media event container category. Katz and Liebes (2007) argue that "the key difference between the two genres is in the element of preplanning" (p. 160) and the resulting "extent to which establishments, and even the media, are able to maintain control" (p. 163). Their distinction between "orderly" and "disruptive" events overlooks the contested nature of planned media events and the possibility that establishment actors may lose control of the narratives; as Hepp and Krönert (2010) observe, there are always spaces outside the main sites of planned media events that organizers simply cannot control. Yet the distinction is still crucial because it highlights that planned media events are sites where establishment organizers strategically attempt to exert and consolidate power.

The focus of the media event literature has been the live phase—the peak intensity of media "thickenings" as the scripted event is covered live. But contestation of the planned media event's narratives begins earlier, in what I call the "build-up phase," a temporal element that has been largely unconsidered in the literature. Dayan and Katz (1992) wrote that media events had "an active period of looking forward, abetted by the promotional activity of the broadcasters" (p. 7), but did not explore this further. Katz and Liebes (2007) suggest that the preplanning of a media event allows for the "comfort of orderliness" (p. 160), yet I aim to demonstrate that the build-up phase of planned media events is highly contested. Recent calls for further theorization of media events' temporality still center on the live phase (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2017; Ytreberg, 2017).

Like the live phase, the Olympics' seven-year build-up phase largely follows a familiar script in which mainstream media repeat certain themes ("Will the Games be ready in time?") and expect certain elements (press conferences, milestone dates, the arrival and relay of the torch) from one Olympics to the next. In the case of Rio, outlets like *The New York Times* moved their Latin American regional correspondents to the city, whereas others like the BBC set up regional offices in Rio (Williamson, 2016). Thus the "thickenings" of media coverage by which Hepp and Couldry (2010) define the contemporary media event also took place in the build-up phase. Although the live event offers new narratives based on the sports competitions, narratives about the event itself are articulated and challenged throughout the preceding years. The build-up phase is therefore an essential object of study to understand the planned media event.

Alternative Media and Counternarratives

In the Olympics media event, event organizers assert official narratives about sports values, international camaraderie, urban development, and the host city's moment on the global stage. These actors occupy "dominant positions" in terms of "privileged access" to resources and mainstream media outlets (Thompson, 1990), which in turn hold dominant positions in the field of media production. In contrast, alternative media are "practices of symbolic production which contest (in some way) media power itself i.e. the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions" (Couldry, 2002, p. 25). As such, narratives that dispute official messaging or mainstream media content can be considered "alternative narratives" or "counternarratives." Because the mainstream media "makes the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible" (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 374), it is imperative for Olympics' critics to make this social construction visible to justify alternative narratives.

The media event literature has examined protests (Sebastião, Lemos, & Soares, 2016) and social movements' use of social media (Bacallau-Pino, 2016; Heikka, Valaskivi, & Uskali, 2016), but because of the literature's focus on the live phase of media events, the role of longer term alternative media projects like the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* has largely been overlooked. More useful insight on longer term alternative media production's relationship to events comes from the mega-events literature: Boykoff's (2014) research on the 2010 Vancouver and 2012 London Olympics shows activists engaged with mainstream media while producing alternative media to circumvent perceived mainstream biases. Millington and Darnell's (2012) content analysis reveals that years before the Rio Olympics, critical blogs such as *RioOnWatch* were "challeng[ing] hegemonic depictions of Olympic development in Rio on a more symbolic level" (p. 202). Bailey, Oliver, Gaffney, and Kolvras (2017) conclude that ahead of Brazil's 2014 World Cup, the "labors of new media and organizations" including *RioOnWatch* and the Popular Committee "helped to bring a number of previously unexamined questions to the attention of the international media" and "[forced] mainstream media to rethink content and sources of information" (p. 84). This article builds on these works via a more in-depth look at the two selected projects through a media event framework, approaching them as coproducers of the media event and exploring what that means for the media event's extension in time beyond the live phase.

Method

Having worked for two years as CatComm's research coordinator, living in Rio from 2014 to 2016, I was familiar with the alternative media field in pre-Olympic Rio before studying it academically. Reflecting on the range of platforms that criticized the Olympics, I found the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* to be logical case studies: Unlike other alternative media initiatives, both emerged explicitly as a result of Rio's preparations for the sports mega-events, such that their objectives and content were strongly Olympics focused. The dossiers, *RioOnWatch*, and their respective producers were cited in many mainstream media outlets, meaning they not only challenged official narratives on their own platforms but also butted up against their opponents in mainstream arenas. Finally, the dossiers were published between 2011 and 2015, whereas *RioOnWatch* ran from 2010 through the Olympics (and continues today). Thus, both platforms had substantial material to analyze from along the pre-Olympic timeline.

Exploring how the platforms themselves asserted challenges to official and celebratory media required an examination of “the rhetorical work of the texts, how the specific issues it raises are structured and organized and chiefly how it seeks to persuade you about the authority of its understanding of the issue” (Rapley, 2007, p. 113). My analysis was guided by what Rapley (2007) identifies as the elements of such rhetorical work: “the range of sources of knowledge and evidence,” “the forms and modes of knowledge and evidence,” how “specific identities” are “produced, sustained or negotiated within texts,” and “the assumptions in these texts” (pp. 114–117). I coded the texts for these elements and for themes that emerged from the documents, as Corbin and Strauss (1990) insist is necessary “in order not to miss anything that may be salient” (p. 6). I analyzed all nine Popular Committee dossiers and the set of *RioOnWatch* articles filed under media-related tags such as “media narrative,” “mass media,” and “legacy myth.”

Additionally, the CatComm director and a leading dossiers coordinator helped identify participants who could speak knowledgeably about the initiative’s objectives, strategies, and processes, resulting in 15 semistructured interviews in March and April 2017. Thirteen were conducted in person in Rio and two on Skype, nine in Portuguese and six in English. CatComm representatives included three staff members and two contributing writers, reflecting the small number of core staff over the years. The 10 Popular Committee activists included researchers, NGO representatives, and a social movement organizer.

I asked each interviewee to talk through the project’s origins, objectives, methodologies, and strategies. Drawing on what Krippendorff (2004) labels “ethnographic content analysis,” which connects content choices to their meanings as understood by their producers, I also asked about specific parts of the texts with questions such as, “How did you collect this information,” or “Why did you do X this way?” Other questions about official narratives and consequences of the global spotlight were informed by the media events literature. Transcribing each interview in the language in which it was conducted, I coded for emerging analytical themes as I proceeded, incorporating prevalent ideas from early meetings into later meetings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Forde (2011) highlights that alternative media journalists themselves often grapple with whether someone involved in an issue can still write objectively about it, but she suggests this risk is counterbalanced by opportunities provided by insider insight: An active participant in a field may just as feasibly be “the best person” to write about it (p. 83). I believe studying the two projects in tandem mitigated some risk while harnessing opportunities. For example, I used a single interview guide including questions for a project I knew mainly as a reader and questions for a project I had worked on, forcing me to challenge my assumptions about *RioOnWatch* and enabling me to ask more insightful questions about the dossiers.

New Alternative Media Initiatives

Popular Committee Dossiers

After plans for World Cup constructions were revealed in late 2010, activists who had challenged Rio’s 2007 Pan-American Games found new momentum to reorganize around the perceived exclusive logic

of mega-event-driven development (Gaffney, 2016). Rio's Popular Committee emerged as an informal coalition of researchers, social movement members, residents of communities threatened by mega-event developments, media activists, and NGO representatives. Its weekly meetings drew 20 to 50 attendees on average, but hundreds over the years, and it organized many of the major protests and debates around the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics. The Rio group was part of the National Articulation of Popular Committees of the World Cup, which by late 2011 had collected data on human rights violations across the host cities and published findings in a single dossier to show the systematic nature of abuses across the country. Several Popular Committee activists I interviewed stated that this first dossier ruptured the dominant media narratives at a time when Brazilian and foreign press alike enthusiastically framed Brazil's sports mega-events as deserved feathers in the cap of a rising global economic power. Urban and Regional Planning professor and a key coordinator of the dossiers, Orlando Santos Junior, explained his view of the dossier's main objectives:

First, to bring visibility to the violations of collective social human rights linked to the Cup and the Olympics. So, to denounce. . . . Second, to construct a counternarrative about the Olympics. There was the official narrative: it's good for the city. . . . It has a legacy. With the dossier, we were constructing a counternarrative that denaturalized, that deconstructed the official narrative . . . showing that the Olympics and the Cup reflected an exclusionary city project. (Personal communication, March 24, 2017)

Rio's Popular Committee published the first Rio-focused dossier in early 2012, in print and online. They updated it each year through 2015 in addition to publishing three thematic dossiers on street vendors' rights, the right to sport, and the right to housing. One contributor, Marcelo Edmundo from the Center of Popular Movements, explained that the research and documentation served as a base for all the Popular Committee's other activism:

Those dossiers were the weight of all our processes. The whole debate was based on the dossiers. . . . It wasn't enough just to talk. . . . We had something to say, to show, and this created a really big force. (Personal communication, April 20, 2017)

Changes in the dossiers over time often reflected changes in the coalition's participants. The second version in 2013, for example, added a new chapter on the environment, reflecting the involvement of Baía Viva, an activist group focused on Rio's polluted water, and Ocupa Golfe, a campaign against the use of environmentally vulnerable land for the Olympic golf course.

RioOnWatch

Shortly after Rio was selected as the 2016 host in October 2009, the City announced that 119 favelas would be removed (Bastos & Schmidt, 2010). At that time, the Rio-based NGO CatComm had been working for nine years to build networks among the city's working-class favela neighborhoods to support the exchange of ideas and local solutions. CatComm's executive director Theresa Williamson recalled:

All of a sudden the most basic floor on which CatComm was based, which is that favelas have value and that they should be strengthened, all of a sudden the favelas we worked with were being threatened. Existentially. (Personal communication, March 30, 2017)

In 2010, CatComm offered a “Strategic Use of Social Media” course for community leaders and launched Rio Olympics Neighborhood Watch, or *RioOnWatch*, as a blog where course participants could reflect publicly on Olympic investments. At first, there was a sense among the CatComm team that the early evictions were going under mainstream media radars. Then journalists from major international publications began contacting CatComm about its videos of demolitions. The NGO’s institutional director Roseli Franco explained: “We saw we would have a gap, a window, to support the international press to give visibility to questions about favelas” (Personal communication, April 3, 2017). It was here that a more strategic vision for the site as a channel between favelas and the mainstream media emerged. *RioOnWatch* became an intervention to (a) highlight misrepresentations of pre-Olympic transformations in official and mainstream media, and (b) provide more nuanced portrayals of favelas and the Olympic City by prioritizing favela residents’ perspectives, countering a century of stigmatizing portrayals that have been used to justify evictions, police violence, and neglect. Favelas were the focus, but the Olympics’ build-up phase was the timeline and context that brought the project into existence.

With a staff of no more than five at any given time, CatComm’s network consisted of more than 1,000 favela residents who had participated in its activities by 2008, and hundreds more volunteers and contributors. As the quantity of monthly content expanded, more articles were written by international interns and researchers. Still, it was the perspectives and experiences of favela residents that informed the critical assessments of the Olympic City that grew across *RioOnWatch* articles over the years. When *RioOnWatch* began, for example, many community leaders were optimistic about the state’s “Pacification” program, which installed permanent police units in select favelas in an effort to increase security before the Olympics. Several early *RioOnWatch* articles reflected this cautious optimism. Over time, however, the site documented a growing negativity toward the Olympics, ranging from disappointment as proposed investments fell through to anger based on perceptions that Rio’s mega-events were driving development at the expense of its poorer residents. By striving to reflect favela residents’ perspectives, *RioOnWatch*’s critique of the Olympic media event built in intensity toward 2016.

Over the Olympics’ build-up phase, the Popular Committee and CatComm each established themselves as references that journalists and researchers would seek out for their insights on violations related to the Games’ preparations and their impacts on favelas, respectively. There was a growing awareness of each other and other critical actors too. *RioOnWatch* is not cited in the 2012 dossier but is credited in the housing section from the 2013 version onward. *RioOnWatch*, meanwhile, did not cover the first national or city dossiers, but reported on each dossier launch and key findings from 2013 onward.

Critiquing the Media Event

In addition to denouncing the Olympic City itself, the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* built a critique of the event organizers’ narratives and dominant mainstream media narratives as misrepresenting the

Olympic City. Through this critique, these alternative media projects framed the media event as a space for narratives that obscured or even justified an exclusionary urban regime and protected the political and economic interests wrapped up in the sports mega-event. As a result, the production of narratives questioning the workings of the media event was a part of the Rio Olympics media event itself.

"The Exclusion Games" Dossiers

The introduction of the 2015 Rio dossier states the following:

Four questions brought to light by this Dossier, which contradict the official discourse of the International Olympic Committee, the federal and state governments and, mainly, Rio de Janeiro's City Hall, deserve to be especially highlighted and reveal the direction of the ongoing transformations of the city. (Popular Committee, 2015, p. 7)

Here, the dossier explicitly identifies the architects of the Olympics' official narratives and signals that the document will deconstruct those official claims. This final version of the Rio dossier includes the word "discourse" 20 times across its nearly 200 pages; this increase from just six mentions in the 2012 version reflects activists' growing recognition of how the organizers' narratives played a role in justifying the form and impacts of the Rio mega-event. Other phrases like "narratives," "false premise," "false claims," and "fallacy" appear throughout the dossier text as well. Meanwhile, the chapters on housing and the Olympics' budget break down the City's own data to show what is missing and to argue the City manipulates data to support misleading narratives. The document does not just build its evidence of human rights violations, therefore, but articulates these abuses in contrast to the IOC and government's declarations that the Olympics were bringing positive change and building a more inclusive city.

Even the final dossier's title engages the narrative dispute. The IOC president and Rio's mayor had both publicly described Rio's Olympics as the "Inclusion Games," emphasizing the City's aim to use the event "to transform people's lives—above all, the lives of the poorest people" (Paes, 2015, para. 1). At the December 2015 dossier launch, a researcher explained that this official language inspired her team to title their publication "Rio 2016 Olympics: The Exclusion Games."

RioOnWatch and "For the English to See"

In May 2015, *RioOnWatch* published an article exploring the Brazilian phrase, "É para inglês ver," or, "It's for the English to see." The site defines a "para inglês ver" policy or project as something that

from the outside, appears to address a problem, but which in practice is merely a superficial change, a temporary fix or public relations exercise intended to appease community interests and appeal to domestic and international public opinion. ("PIV," n.d., para. 1)

The *RioOnWatch* article offers "the mega-events legacy projects that generate pleasing soundbites but have little connection to reality" (Ashcroft, 2015, para. 9) as an example.

The idea for this article was to provide context for the increasing number of *RioOnWatch* articles that contrasted City claims to what low-income citizens were experiencing on the ground. For example, a resident of Ramos in Rio's working-class North Zone wrote a "geographical analysis of the Olympic legacy," which investigates the mayor's claim that "there has never been so much transformation for poor people [in Rio]" (Costa, 2016, para. 1). He found overwhelming investment in wealthier regions of the city and the relative abandonment of poorer neighborhoods like his own. As a CatComm staff member in 2016, I wrote a *RioOnWatch* article showing how the City's marketing budget skyrocketed from 2011 to 2015, arguing that a series of international awards bestowed on the city during that period had resulted more from this marketing effort than from actual improvements on the ground (Robertson, 2016). A number of articles examining specific legacy promises were filed under the tag "legacy myth," which in itself carries a pointed statement about the official language around legacy.

Although the dossier lays out its critique of Olympic organizers' narratives explicitly in the introduction, and *RioOnWatch* advances its critique over the course of hundreds of articles, both platforms assert that what the City said and did were starkly different.

Exposing Mainstream Media Complicity

Perceptions of media bias were present early on in the dossiers and *RioOnWatch*. A 2010 *RioOnWatch* series titled "The 2016 Olympics: A Win for Rio?" is optimistic about some proposed investments but provides an early critique of evictions and mainstream media coverage:

Much like George Bush's "you're with us or against us" mentality, efforts at fighting evictions have been covered by the mainstream media, since last October, as practically traitorous." (Williamson, 2010, para. 2)

Even six years ahead of the media event's live phase, then, *RioOnWatch* already reflected a perception that mainstream media were filling the uncritical, booster role that was part of Dayan and Katz' (1992) media events definition.

The Popular Committee also argued the mainstream media took too rosy of a view on the City's promised legacy projects. The Rio dossier's introduction states:

Since the moment in which the choice of Rio de Janeiro as the 2016 Olympics host was announced, the mainstream media, politicians and several analysts have been emphasizing the opportunities from investment growth in the city, highlighting the possibilities in solving large problems such as those in urban mobility and the recovery of degraded areas for housing, commerce and tourism, as in the case of the harbour area. (Popular Committee, 2015, p. 8)

This passage suggests the mainstream media fulfill the role described by Dayan and Katz (1992) of adopting the organizers' definition of the media event. Popular Committee members acknowledged differences among specific journalists and publications and between national and international media, but expressed frustration

with the mainstream media overall. Mario Campagnani of the NGO Justiça Global argued that mainstream media “clearly fills a role. It has a side—the side of promoting mega-events as a good thing” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017).

Several interviewees pointed out that Globo, the biggest media conglomerate in Brazil, owns land, with one describing it as part of a “block of power with shared interests” (Personal communication, March 28, 2017) including government actors and construction and real estate industries. *RioOnWatch* editor Felicity Clarke pointed out that global media corporations also have “big business ties,” and that “the political and business ties between these mega-companies are an influence on the editorial line that they take” (Personal communication, April 5, 2017).

Although some media publications may have deliberately promoted official narratives because of business ties, another problem articulated in the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* was that foreign media and audiences might fall naively for the legacy projects “for the English to see.” A *RioOnWatch* article written by a PhD researcher two months before the Games explains:

The municipal government has spent the last seven years and billions of reais getting the city ready “for the English to see.” According to major international organizations such as the World Bank and C40, these preparations have been successful in improving the lives of residents of Rio’s many favela communities. Unfortunately, this does not reflect the reality on the ground. Instead of solving many of the complex urban and social issues that exist in the city, the City has instead swept them under the carpet, to stay out of sight during the 17-day Olympic party. (Talbot, 2016, para. 1)

This quote asserts that the government, as co-organizer of the Olympics, was motivated by global audiences’ perceptions and invested in superficial projects that would shine deceptively under the media spotlight; international audience-producer actors like the World Bank and C40 were deluded by the official narratives and, in turn, perpetuated them.

One *RioOnWatch* series on the “Best and Worst International Reporting on Favelas” primarily critiques media portrayals of favelas but also outlines examples of how some international reporters bought into official narratives about the Olympics’ positive impacts (“Best/Worst Reporting,” 2016). Although there is less space in the dossiers for this kind of critique, the 2015 dossier states that “the population of the city . . . has already realized that the project Rio Olympic City . . . will not bring the promised benefits” (Popular Committee, 2015, p. 8). This implies that those who were influenced by the official narratives were nonresidents of the city, such as international journalists and audiences who did not have extensive first-hand knowledge of the Olympic City. Most interviewees mentioned that international media were overly concerned with questions of whether the sports infrastructure would be ready on time; actual residents of Rio, they suggested, were always confident the works would somehow be completed on time. Furthermore, several argued, the hysteria about whether the stadiums would be ready on time set a bizarrely low bar for success—Rio organizers would be congratulated for literally holding the Games, even if the City failed to deliver promised transformative urban projects.

Without using the “media event” concept, these alternative media projects articulated that the unique media moment ahead of and during the Olympics was being used by organizers to impress, manipulate, and deceive audiences. As such, even as coproducers of the media event themselves, they exposed that the media event was constructed for political purposes, and that the most visible, dominant constructed images in the Olympic media event did not necessarily reflect reality.

Inverting Mainstream Practices

The methodologies used to produce the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* articles implicitly offer an approach to seeing beyond official media event narratives. Specifically, both platforms (a) involve an extended process of research and documentation over time, and (b) value knowledge that comes from communities’ lived experiences.

Extended Research and Documentation

One staff member responsible for *RioOnWatch*’s early video coverage of evictions mentioned many journalists would show up to eviction sites to “shoot for like five minutes and then before you know it, they’re gone” (Personal communication, April 11, 2017). Geographer and Popular Committee activist Christopher Gaffney expanded on the structural challenges facing foreign journalists covering the media event:

The international media, they’re typically trying to file a story that day. And they just want to get the basic data and just go along. Not all of them obviously. . . . It’s kind of a structurally imposed condition on the international media that . . . they’re not conditioned or not poised to ask really incisive questions about such big projects. (Personal communication, April 18, 2017)

In contrast, each dossier reflects months of research and writing. An individual or group would draft a chapter and share it with the wider group for additions or revisions. With each dossier, there was a team responsible for consolidating the parts and editing. Almost all Popular Committee members interviewed described it as a “collective work.” Although this level of cooperation undoubtedly slows some processes down, it also broadens and diversifies the sources of knowledge.

As for *RioOnWatch*, on occasion writers would camp out for days at communities facing evictions. Other articles were written by favela residents drawing on their own lived experiences. Whereas CatComm staff perceived that major publications avoided stories they had already reported, Theresa explained *RioOnWatch* functioned with the opposite approach:

The mainstream media, they’re like, we did that story two years ago. . . . For us, we’re going to keep hammering the same nail in a different way from a different angle until we get it in where it needs to go. . . . So [for] Vila Autódromo, [we published] hundreds of articles over the years and that was critical for the community. It created this documentation . . . of a process that the City was counting on being too confusing to journalists for them to cover it.

So by writing about it every turn and twist we were able to document it in a way that people could keep track and follow along. (Personal communication, March 30, 2017)

In the case of Vila Autódromo next to the Olympic Park, the City changed its reasons for the neighborhood's removal several times over the years. In the context of a media event that draws journalists from around the world not just for the live phase but in the years-long build-up phase, Theresa suggested that reporting norms make it hard for journalists to sustain the attention to a single story needed to see beyond the information the City gives, or to track how the City changes its story. In contrast, as a platform that is little concerned with the viewership for any individual article, *RioOnWatch* published update articles on each small development in the community. Even if some individual articles contained minimal new information, as a series of articles they traced a complicated process over time.

Valuing Community Knowledge

CatComm's Roseli suggested that many mainstream journalists have easier access to government and police sources than to favela residents, but that even "when [they] do have something from a resident, generally, it's an emotional testimony. . . . The information, analysis, is going to come from the sociologist, from the police, from the City." In contrast, she explained, "we invert that. We give the role of thinking to the resident and the leader" (Personal communication, April 3, 2017). Accordingly, the theme that linked all *RioOnWatch* materials together was the prioritizing of favela resident quotes and initiatives, an essential element of CatComm's strategy to destigmatize favelas.

Although packed with data collected from a range of sources, including government records and media reports, the dossiers also had research "missions" as a core part of their methodology. Missions included visiting communities facing eviction threats and collecting residents' testimonies. They contributed to the dossier section on housing, which breaks down the numbers of families removed for different reasons, explicitly disputing the City's claims that only one neighborhood was removed because of the Olympics. The communities and groups most affected by the Olympics were considered essential sources for studying and questioning the event's impacts.

As such, the methods of both initiatives included fixes for the flaws their producers believed lead many mainstream media journalists to fall for the official media event narratives "for the English to see."

Mainstreaming Counternarratives

Despite the Popular Committee and CatComm's strong criticisms of mainstream media structures, it was clear to both groups that the mainstream media was a crucial battleground for challenging official media narratives. As important as it was to build autonomous spaces where they could employ the practices described in the previous section, mainstream media remained key to reaching bigger audiences. As a result, both groups developed strategies to engage journalists. These strategies were heavily informed by the alternative media producers' lay theories of media—which McCurdy (2011) theorizes as perceived knowledge about how news media work—and, more specifically, lay theories of the media event.

Observing Media Event Timelines

Echoing conversations among CatComm staff, the Popular Committee's Mario drew distinctions between the "movement of foreign correspondents" to Rio in years leading up to the Olympics and the much later arrival of "parachute" journalists. He observed that the first group led to "more thorough coverage," since they lived in the city and came to know it well. In contrast, he estimated that in the two years before the Olympics there was an influx of journalists who came for rapid reporting trips with demands such as, "I need to speak to someone who was removed! A victim of police violence!" (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). The interest in critical reporting was there, but—several people I interviewed pointed out—many parachute journalists came with set scripts they wanted to report and did not have the time to dig further.

All interviewees said media interest in their work built in intensity throughout 2016 to the start of the Games on August 5. Some Popular Committee and CatComm participants reported doing so many interviews on a weekly basis in June and July 2016 that they lost track of who was interviewing them. Several interviewees suggested that peak media interest in critical stories dropped when the Games themselves began, but CatComm tracked more media coverage of favelas (Catalytic Communities, 2016a) and its own work (Catalytic Communities, 2016b) in August 2016 than in any prior month. Although coverage of critical issues may have technically increased during the Olympics, sports-related coverage increased significantly more, creating the sense that those critical social issues were drowned out. *RioOnWatch* editor Felicity observed:

Once the Games have started, that is going to overshadow the interest in the place and what's happening in the place. What's happening on the pitch, what's happening in the arena, what's happening on that track, is the event then. Leading up to the Games, the event is the lead-up to the games and what's happening in the place where the Games are being held. (Personal communication, April 5, 2017)

Her reflection suggests the sports event meets the Dayan and Katz's (1992) requirement that media events must dominate other media routines. But she and several others disputed their notion that coverage during the media event's live phase is uniformly focused uncritically on the main attraction, arguing instead that critical content never completely disappeared. All Popular Committee and CatComm interviewees drew a strong distinction between the pre-Games period and during-Games period in terms of opportunities to influence the media and public opinion, and correspondingly in terms of their own strategies and activities.

Strategies Informed by Lay Theories

In response to CatComm's growing theory that the international journalists arriving in Rio some years before the Games might shift the global image of favelas and influence the city's developments, the team began reaching out to reporters as they arrived. Theresa recalled:

I'd reach out and we'd meet up for coffee. Basically, I'd just let them pick my brain about whatever interested them. But I'd also give them perspectives that I thought were important, in terms of what is a favela and why their work [was] so important in Rio at the moment. (Personal communication, March 30, 2017)

CatComm developed a mailing list of journalist e-mails that it would blast with story recommendations and resources for reporting on favelas. Before the World Cup, the NGO disseminated contact information of favela leaders who wanted to tell their stories to the international press. Journalist feedback suggested that the resources were useful, but would have been more helpful several months prior, so the team added this knowledge to its set of lay theories of media events: for the Olympics, CatComm compiled a range of "Olympics Resources for Journalists" and shared these materials with journalists several months ahead of the Games ("RioOnWatch Resources," 2016). Despite some reservations about "parachute journalists," these resources reflected CatComm's lay theory that the massive influx of reporters in the final months of the build-up phase, and perhaps even the live phase, had great potential to improve favelas' global image and amplify counternarratives about the Olympics.

The Popular Committee developed its own journalist mailing list, built up in a similar fashion over the years from reporters who reached out to the group and contacts that members of the collective already had. The collective's communications team believed journalists might not have time to read the long dossiers, so they highlighted updated statistics and summarized key issues in press releases. Knowing that Olympics' organizers were blasting accredited journalists with material for ready-made reporting through mailing lists, press conferences, and even carefully coordinated tours of the city, the NGO Justiça Global also produced a guide for reporting on Rio, flush with snapshots of information from the dossiers and from across the network of actors criticizing the Olympics (Justiça Global, 2016).

Both groups used certain milestones they believed would be high-media-visibility occasions. In 2012, when the Olympic flag arrived in Rio, Popular Committee activists went to the airport dressed as swimmers and delivered a press release to journalists with critical questions they could ask at the City's press conference, encouraging mainstream reporters to use dossier data and look beyond the given official narratives.

Similarly, CatComm held an "alternative press conference" in October 2015, timed closely with the City's major press conference for international journalists. The NGO also organized an "alternative Olympics tour" the week before the Games, acting on a lay theory of media events that the days immediately preceding the opening ceremony would offer the maximum number of available journalists before their attention was grabbed by sports.

Popular Committee activist Larissa Lacerda reported that the collective also expected a decline in interest from journalists as soon as the Games began:

We didn't plan such a big schedule of protests [during the Games] because we knew, based on the experience of the World Cup, when there was very violent repression . . . the coverage, even by the international media, was all focused on the Games. (Personal communication, March 28, 2017)

The Popular Committee did plan a protest on the day of the opening ceremony, but also coordinated a week of protests before the start date, hoping to attract greater media attention. Thus, perceptions of the media

event's timeframe led both groups to concentrate efforts to attract visibility at the end of the build-up phase, rather than during the main live phase.

If mainstream media have some biases toward celebrating the Olympics, the mainstream media space is still actively contested by event critics strategizing how best to use media event opportunities to amplify counternarratives. The phasing of the media event over time affects the extent to which mainstream media producers seek critical narratives at different moments, and lay theories of this phasing determine event critics' strategies for engaging journalists.

Conclusion

The Olympics media event spurred the creation of new alternative media projects that, from their start, aimed to document negative aspects of the Olympic City that the projects' producers believed were ignored or under-covered in official and mainstream media. In addition to critiquing the mega-events' impacts, these two media projects built an explicit critique of the Olympic media event itself, asserting the complicity of mainstream media in perpetuating official narratives intended to deceive global audiences. The Popular Committee and CatComm perceived flaws in mainstream reporting norms that limited critical journalism about the Olympic media event. Over the course of the media event build-up phase, they each demonstrated alternative approaches to research and knowledge building that they believed were better suited to developing accurate representations of the Olympic City. By the time the media event's live phase rolled around, *RioOnWatch* was drawing close to 30,000 monthly visits (and 55,000 for the Olympic month itself), and both groups reached hundreds of thousands via social media.

In spite of their critiques of mainstream media, both groups viewed the mainstream media as an essential battleground for contesting official narratives. And in spite of their critiques of the event as a tool of powerful interests to advance certain narratives, both groups sought to use the increased spotlight strategically, contributing to the construction of the very same media event. The intense demand for interviews and data that each group received from journalists looking to produce critical stories, including from major global publications, speaks to their success in establishing themselves as credible, influential sources. During the period in which these two platforms emerged and developed their counternarratives, international public opinion about the Olympics spiraled downward, with fewer cities bidding to host and the IOC scrambling to shore up its battered public image. After the Games, several major global publications praised the sports but cautiously questioned whether it was all worth it for Rio's citizens. The narratives about the event produced by the theoretically "dominant" event organizers did not dominate the media's pre-Games anticipation or post-Games reflections.

What do these findings tell us about planned media events in the digital age? First, a media event is not confined to the period in which the intensive broadcasting of a scripted event takes place. Many of a planned media event's narratives are developed and contested before the live phase, in what I have called the build-up phase. If, in the years before 2016, the dossiers and *RioOnWatch* had not built certain critical narratives and established themselves as references in the debate about the Olympics, then they would not have drawn the intense media attention they received during the Olympic month and the months immediately prior. If the live phase is skewed toward celebratory content and away from critical content,

then the build-up phase takes on importance as the time for critics to seize an already above-average media spotlight, before the media event's main attraction hogs the stage in the live phase.

Second, a planned media event in the digital age is contested not only by counternarratives that dispute the content of organizers' narratives but also by counternarratives about the nature of the media event itself. The media event can be exposed as a powerful political moment for official organizers and mainstream media to perpetuate narratives that advance particular interests and simultaneously obscure other narratives. The media event demands that journalists and audiences "look here" and "look now," but within the Olympics media event actors like the Popular Committee and CatComm used autonomous media to tell journalists and audiences to look at other themes and other temporal focal points instead. Whereas the organizers and many mainstream media producers established the live phase as the marker of success ("Will the Games be ready in time?"), counternarratives insisted that the seven-year build-up phase was part and parcel of the broader project. Accordingly, they focused on questions such as "Olympics for whom?" or "At what cost?" which expanded the metrics for success and meant the Olympic project could be evaluated before the sports actually began. As such, within the media event there is a battle to shift the timeline of media attention. And because the authors of these counternarratives are coproducers of the media event, the media event itself is altered: The media event becomes a site of struggle about media, narratives, and media events themselves.

Criticizing the media event, rather than just the mega-event, may offer greater opportunities to activists looking to reform global megaprojects. Criticism of sports mega-event impacts has tended to focus on the host city's construction projects and policies. Criticism of the media event, however, is inherently a critique of structures beyond the municipal or national government in question, as it examines global media and business interests and structures. It highlights how the IOC relies on certain repeated Olympic narratives to protect the image of these events, even in light of sustained corruption scandals and human rights abuses. A critique of the media event may offer new opportunities for activists in different host cities to find common themes around which to build a more sustained global movement that pushes for structural changes to these events. The digital media platforms necessary to facilitate more global-scale activism—and to drive the mainstream media's focus in new temporal and thematic directions—exist, and perhaps will prove to shift the balance of power in global communications.

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