

# Critically Contextualising a Mega-Event: Nordic Sports Commentaries During the 2022 World Cup in Football

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## Abstract

Prior to the FIFA 2022 World Cup, Nordic news media emphasised their ambitions of persistently covering problematic aspects of this mega-event to be hosted in Qatar, a country subjected to severe criticism of its human rights breaches in the build-up to the event. Focusing on the genre of commentary journalism—a form committed to articulating opinions on social and cultural issues—this study illuminates how key Nordic news media argued for their views on the World Cup 2022. Drawing on empirical material from Danish and Norwegian broadcasters and tabloids, the study analyses commentaries (excluding “sports only” commentaries) published during the event, highlighting the types of arguments, the discourses they articulate or imply, and their attribution of agency to organisational actors. Although a critical and contextualising argumentation runs through commentaries made during the tournament, the reasoning changes its character to such a degree that it is pertinent to categorise the commentaries as reflecting two distinct discursive phases. Argumentation in the first phase sustains a critique of FIFA and the organiser. Arguments were typically formulated as personal attacks but tended to elaborate on their premises by providing fact-based background from investigations of power abuse. The argumentation in the second phase changes its character by more clearly emphasising the *action* needed to transform current problematic *circumstances* in accordance with stated *goals*, not least a reformation of FIFA. The commentators now tend to be less moralising and more diverse and reflective in how they argue for changes in the governance of mega-events in football.

## Keywords

FIFA; FIFA World Cup; mega-events; Nordic news media; political agency; sports commentaries; sportswashing

## 1. Introduction

Media coverage in the Nordic countries' build-up to the 2022 World Cup in football gave clear signals of a new tendency in sports journalists' approach to covering global sports events of this magnitude. Increasingly in the years after Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA's) decision in 2010 that Qatar was to host the event, sports journalists published critical stories raising awareness of problematic aspects of Qatar as a host nation, and the role of FIFA's executive committee in the decision process. If not by any means alone in doing so, Danish and Norwegian sports journalists were at the forefront with news stories about human rights breaches in Qatar, e.g., in the treatment of migrant workers, as well as stories on corruption in FIFA's executive committee (Molnes & Delebekk, 2022). In this way, they contributed to debates about boycotting the event among football supporters, corporations, organisations, and politicians.

The journalistic approach stood out as different from what had been seen as a traditional inclination of sports journalists to concentrate on the sports competition and the competitors involved when covering major sports events (Boyle, 2012; Broussard, 2020). Studies point to traditional failures to engage systematically in critical and investigative roles crucial to the profession, whether practised in Anglophone, Nordic, or other nations. This has earned sports journalism a reputation as the toy department of news media (Rowe, 2017), and more recently, of online sports journalism as the toy department within the toy department (McEnnis, 2020). According to Rowe (2017, p. 526), coverage of the politics and economics of sports "which might...illuminate corruption and questionable sports governance" has not been an integral part of sports journalism practice. Sports coverage has been "weighted to information provided to journalists through routine channels or by other institutional entities," and sports journalists "actively or passively collude with sports organisations by routinely neglecting or downplaying critical matters" (Rowe, 2017, p. 526). Sports organisations have become more financially powerful, particularly in the high-profile sports that dominate the market through broadcasting deals. Sports organisations also possess power over season schedules and fixture lists, access to key athletes, coaches, and administrators, and produce their own content. This provides them with the power to dominate other players in the field, including sports journalists (Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005).

### 1.1. Prerequisites for a More Critical Sports Journalism

When political and economic interests increasingly shape sports institutions and industries, this necessitates more socio-politically engaged journalism in the field. For a media scholar such as Boyle (2012), sports matters because of what it tells us about aspects of society rather than the nature of sports competition. Sports relates to all kinds of societal issues and discourses, e.g., economics, health, politics, environment, gender, climate change, and drug use. Based on an analysis of textbooks mostly authored by sports journalists with positions in North American and British universities, Weedon and Wilson (2020) call for sports journalism that highlights the social, cultural, and political significance of sports, and inherits more from a vision of journalism as a democratic project intended for the betterment of society, than from "the allure and prestige of covering sports" (p. 1396). In line with Rowe (2017), Weedon and Wilson emphasise the inclusion of sport-related societal issues and debates in sports journalism programmes as a precondition for an improved journalistic practice. According to interviews conducted by Broussard (2020), American sports journalists may now be moving towards a more critical and issue-based approach. Respondents "said they enjoy covering social or political issues related to sports" (Broussard, 2020, p. 1640), although lack of time and resources plays a role in whether reporters cover such issues.

### 1.1.1. Nordic Principles and Associations

Given sports reporters' traditional orientation, Nordic sports journalists' willingness to contribute to raising public awareness of problematic aspects of the 2022 World Cup in the build-up to this event was noteworthy. Their critical stance, however, did have its prerequisites in both thorough and expository journalism about international sports organisations such as FIFA, conducted by a few investigative journalists (e.g., Blake & Calvert, 2017; Jennings, 2015), and a gradual change in sports journalists' perception of their own role in the coverage of the sports field.

For example, in Norway, critical and investigative sports stories in recent years have increasingly appeared in newspapers such as *VG* and *Dagbladet*, some of them receiving awards (certificates) at the annual conference of the Norwegian Foundation for a Free and Investigative Press (SKUP). In 2016, *VG* received a Norwegian Foundation for a Free and Investigative Press award. Their journalists' series of articles, *Relentless Transparency (Nådeløs åpenhet)*, focused on a closed management culture in Norwegian sports federations (Welhaven et al., 2016).

A Nordic welfare model for sports practice and organisation (Giulianotti et al., 2019) provides a frame for understanding how Nordic sports journalists engaged in scrutinising and critically contextualising FIFA's and the Qatar organiser's role in the allocation and build-up to the FIFA World Cup 2022. Nordic nations have a tradition of promoting welfare society principles such as participatory democracy, political transparency, and human rights in low- and middle-income countries. Nordic welfare model values along with journalistic ideals are also reflected in the associations of Nordic sports journalists. These associations cooperate to secure transparency, free speech, and independence from economic and political interests in sports. Frandsen (2024) points out how the associations now engage more in the content produced, and in securing access for independent journalists to powerful sports organisations and athletes. She also draws attention to how the development of professional values is expressed through the Nordic associations' fellowships, annual conferences, and awards that may set standards of journalistic excellence and recognise the importance of teamwork in critical journalism.

### 1.2. Research Questions

Before the 2022 World Cup, key Nordic news media emphasised how they not only would cover the sporting competition but also maintain their critical and contextualising coverage of what they considered problematic aspects of the event's organisation (see, e.g., Davidsen, 2022; Nielsen, 2022). Several scholars argue that negative side effects receive more attention and resonance in Western media when the hosting country is non-Western (Grix & Kramareva, 2017; Swart & Hussain, 2023). It remains a question, however, how Nordic journalists followed up on their critical build-up coverage when the World Cup event finally unfolded in late 2022.

To illuminate the way perspectives and opinions were articulated in Nordic media commentaries during the competition, we pose the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: How did commentaries in key news media of Nordic countries argue for their views on the World Cup 2022 during the unfolding of the event?

RQ2: Are there any signs of an implicit reflection by the commentators on their role as the event unfolded?

We choose to focus our analysis on the genre of commentary journalism as this is the form that conventionally is most strongly committed to articulating opinions on social and cultural issues in news media. The journalistic commentary goes beyond the mere reporting of news in the interest of context, explanation, and analysis (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2022). In other words, it can illuminate and deliberate on social issues in a critical and contextualising manner. While investigative journalism often provides the factual basis and in-depth understanding of an issue, commentary can build upon these facts, offering interpretations, critiques, and personal perspectives.

### **1.3. Research Assumptions and Key Literature**

Commentaries may therefore ideally satisfy the criteria of being critical, as implied by Harding (2015) by her concept of “strong objectivity.” Harding ties her concept to scientific research, but it is also applicable to journalists, who tend to see themselves as an “outside group” needed to hold other social groups and institutions accountable (Weedon & Wilson, 2020). Based on Nordic sports editors and journalists explicitly stating their ambition of covering the whole of the World Cup 2022 critically, we assume that sports journalist commentators consider it their duty to write critical commentaries throughout this global mega-event. As Frandsen et al. (2022) point out, mega-events are driven by networks of national, political, and economic actors that are interested in obtaining exposure but often possess diverse and conflicting strategic interests and values. In accordance with Harding’s (2015) concept of strong objectivity applied to journalism, we expect that sports commentators in our material strive to disclose and contextualise conflicting values, interests, and assumptions of such key actors in the mega-event.

As several of the commentators in our material were personally present in Qatar and writing their commentaries based on first-hand experiences of the World Cup, this may have had an impact on how they developed their opinions and the arguments upon which they were based. One assumption is that being present and exposed to the event as it unfolded, as opposed to writing from the vantage point of their home nations, could contribute to more nuanced perceptions than the univocal negative criticism in the build-up to the event. Therefore, we expect that critical positions of the Nordic commentaries may encompass a reflective awareness of how the values they expose might be emanating from a specific cultural context and geocentric location.

The term “sportswashing” grew in prominence in journalistic media prior to the World Cup (Skey, 2022, p. 2). In recent literature on sportswashing, authors such as Boykoff (2022), Grix et al. (2023), and Skey (2022) have nuanced common conceptions of the dynamics of sportswashing, thereby informing our approach to understanding how the arguments made in journalistic commentaries in our material may have evolved or changed during the World Cup event. Grix et al. (2023) note that the term in general is used pejoratively towards large corporations or non-democratic regimes “with journalists making up one of the largest groups employing it” (p. 4). A similar pejorative usage is found in journalistic media of Nordic nations. When the Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) chose “sportswashing” as the word of the year in 2021 based on its media appearances, it was defined in the following way: “when officials in authoritarian countries use major sporting events to put themselves in a better light or seek to achieve the same by acquiring or sponsoring popular sports clubs” (Språkrådet, 2021).

Definitions in Danish media resemble the Norwegian one. For example, the daily *Kristeligt Dagbladet* (Frank, 2021) emphasises how sportswashing is a practice in which companies use sporting events, purchases, and sponsorship to improve their reputation. Theoretical literature may elaborate on such conceptions by drawing attention to how sportswashing resonates with the concept of “soft power.” According to Nye (2004, p. 5), soft power is about “attracting people to one’s values and ideas rather than compelling them with hard power in the form of military threats or economic penalties.” Mega-events such as the 2022 World Cup can provide the host country with an opportunity to rewrite its history. Boykoff (2022, p. 243) sees sportswashing as something political leaders use to appear “important or legitimate on the world stage” while “deflecting attention away from chronic social problems and human rights woes on the home front.”

Boykoff stresses that sportswashing can emerge in both authoritarian and democratic regimes. Skey (2022, p. 12) asserts that if sportswashing is to become a useful analytical concept it needs to be applied to other parts of the world than a narrow range of non-Western actors. For our analytical purposes, however, we find that Grix et al.’s (2023) conceptualisation of sportswashing is particularly useful. By providing empirical examples of sportswashing arrangements, such as the World Cup 2022, these authors conceptualise sportswashing as “a process involving an inherently bidirectional phenomenon which benefits both the illiberal regimes and the Western sports brands and organisations who collaborate in it” (Grix et al., 2023, p. 16).

They point out that it is through encouragement and opportunities afforded by democratic global capitalism and the “West” that sportswashing strategies are made available to non-democratic regimes. The arrangement consists of those who possess cultural power and prestige (usually the West) and those who wish to have it (usually non-Western states), and “equally, those in possession of cultural power and prestige want economic power and prestige in exchange” (Grix et al., 2023, p. 6). The authors further highlight distinct phases of a “sportswashing” arrangement. It usually passes through three “waves”:

1. It encounters sustained critique, buoyed by the media;
2. It is characterised by a prolonged period of negative narratives and counternarratives fought out in the press and social media, raising concerns about differences in values, norms, and culture of the actors involved;
3. It marks the “normalisation” of the arrangement in which the media coverage of “Wave 1” and the critique of “Wave 2” rarely feature (Grix et al., 2023, p. 20).

For our analysis, we assume that the authors’ presentation of this three-wave process is useful for tracing possible changes in the Nordic commentators’ stance through the event. A question for our discussion, then, is whether and how such waves apply to the commentaries of the event in our material.

In the following, we first elaborate on our material and our approach to analysing the texts. Then we present key analytical observations before we relate our findings to our initial assumptions in the concluding discussion.

## 2. Material and Methodological Approach

We have limited our material to commentaries presented by Danish and Norwegian broadcasters and tabloids. Media in these two nations are interesting to analyse because they voiced extensive criticism of FIFA and

the host nation Qatar in the build-up to the World Cup. Furthermore, both nations have strong traditions for sports coverage and commentary through their public broadcasters and tabloid newspapers. We have included broadcasters with TV rights to the games, one public and one commercial in both countries (DR and TV 2 in Denmark and NRK and TV 2 in Norway), and the tabloid papers with the most extensive sports coverage (VG in Norway and *Ekstra Bladet* in Denmark).

The material we included was produced from the day before the tournament started till the day after it ended. We chose individually written commentaries that expressed the author's own arguments and opinions, not reports reproducing opinions or primarily quoting other experts. We also excluded "sports only" commentaries. To be selected, they were to include a standpoint on a political, social, or cultural issue that the commentators tied to the event. Based on these criteria, we narrowed down our corpus from 64 commentaries to 39 relevant commentaries.

We chose our material for analysis based on our understanding of the commentary genre as deliberation by means of *argumentation* in which a standpoint, an idea, or a suggested way of acting is supported through reasoning. In our chosen sports commentaries, its *discourses*—understood as ways of signifying experience from a particular perspective (N. Fairclough, 1995a, p. 135)—may be identified in the premises of the arguments (I. Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Walton, 2007), or through the commentators' attribution of agency to the main actors they discuss in their texts. We use the term *agents* primarily in the sense of text participants (persons, groups, organisations, etc.) who are represented by the commentators as those who initiate actions that strongly influence the framing, organisation, and execution of the event. Identification and analysis of textual arguments, the discourses they articulate or imply, and the agency they attribute to different actors, are all considered components of critical discourse analytical approaches to media texts (N. Fairclough, 1995b; I. Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

We initially ordered the material by close reading of the 39 relevant articles. For each article, we identified the main topic(s), the commentators' main argument, their attribution of dominant discourses, and attribution of agency and patiency (those affected by agents' actions). As the main topics were suggested by the main arguments made, and patients (e.g., persons or organisations affected) were implied by the attribution of dominant agents, we chose to emphasise the above-mentioned discursive components of the texts. We then formatted tables of two different discursive phases of the tournament that we identified in the texts. We used the tables to present the main arguments extracted from the commentaries made in the different news media. This paved the way for analyses of forms of the arguments made in the two phases we observed, and how different discourses were articulated in the arguments and through attribution of agency to the main actors in the texts.

### 3. Analysis and Findings

Our identification of two distinct discursive clusters in the reading of the different media commentaries structure the following analysis and presentation of findings. Although discourses of the two different clusters may be identified at various stages of the tournament, we choose to designate them as respectively a first and a second phase because they are essentially expressed as such chronologically.

### 3.1. First Phase

The first phase is comprised of comments that maintain and perpetuate the criticism of FIFA and the host country Qatar which was dominant in the period leading up to the championship. In Table 1, we provide distillations of the commentators' main arguments in the first phase based on our interpretations. We present the arguments in a form that exhibits the claims of the arguments and premises that support them.

**Table 1.** Criticising FIFA, the organiser, and football teams' compliance with prohibitions.

	News media	Main argument(s) of commentators
Danish tabloid	<i>Ekstra Bladet</i> Commentaries: 8 Timespan: 19.11.2022– 10.12.2022	Organisers' and FIFA's PR campaign in the World Cup build-up is deceptive, as it covers up several criticisable aspects of the arrangement, not least human rights violations.  The Danish team and union are cowards as they do not use "one love" armbands signalling opposition to homophobia and racism.  There is no reason to trust media mogul and Qatar Investment Fund President Al-Khelaifi's argument of a non-political event, as he has partaken in political gambits leading up to and during the event.
Norwegian tabloid	VG Commentaries: 12 Timespan: 22.11.2022– 14.12.2022	The teams' compliance with FIFA's prohibitions of "one love" markings is a sign of cowardice, as endorsing all-encompassing values is an expression of human rights.  It is difficult to grasp what is genuine and "constructed" views of people that journalists interview in Doha, as the organisers strive to control the creation of an image of a successful event.  It is impossible to get a common trustworthy number on the death toll of migrant workers, as the organiser and FIFA lack a will to sufficiently map deaths and compensate bereaved families.
Norwegian broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 17.11.2022– 21.11.2022	FIFA president Infantino is devoid of credibility as he cooperates with Saudi to reach his goals and refuses to take criticism of his new home country, Qatar, seriously.  Qatar should not have been awarded the World Cup, as this has led to human rights violations and made football an attractive political weapon for authoritarian regimes.  Threatening players to silence is an abuse of power by FIFA, as its own statutes state that discrimination has no place in football.
	NRK Commentaries: 2 Timespan: 19.11.2022– 21.11.2022	Infantino's pre-opening rhetoric of a "football only/no politics" World Cup expresses a political gambit serving to polarise nations due to his accusations of Western football nations as hypocritical and to his silencing of human rights violations.  Infantino's ties to leaders of autocratic nations, e.g., Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, is an <i>ominous</i> sign of an awarding of the World Cup in 2030 to Saudi, given the country's willingness to use sportswashing to conceal severe human rights violations.
Danish broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 24.11.2022	A small but visible act of protest from the Danish team is desirable, as this may secure attention to freedom of speech and fair play with an impact on FIFA, Infantino, and football in general.
	DR Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 18.11.2022	Infantino's identifying himself as, for example, a homosexual and a migrant worker in his speech was absurd. If he were homosexual, he would have broken the region's law. Had he been a migrant worker, it is not certain he would be there today.



### 3.1.1. Arguments

In this first phase, negative criticism is highlighted by the arguments made in the various news media commentaries. The Qatar organisers and FIFA are criticised for their public relations campaign, which is alleged to obscure various objectionable aspects of the World Cup, especially concerning human rights abuses. This includes claims that the organiser lacks a will to map the death toll of migrant workers, and the initiative to compensate bereaved families. In the argumentation, commentators in news media as diverse as the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* and Norwegian public broadcaster NRK deconstruct and condemn the organiser's claims of the event being non-political, especially with reference to FIFA President Gianni Infantino's ties with autocratic leaders and his rhetoric of a "football only, no politics" World Cup.

This stance is seen as a political manoeuvre aimed at silencing discussions about human rights violations and polarising nations. The teams' compliance with FIFA's prohibitions, particularly regarding the "one love" armband, is regarded as a failure to stand up against discrimination. In this, they expose what a Danish commentary in *Ekstra Bladet* sees as "collective cowardice":

They should be ashamed. When the Danish national team players step onto the field for their first World Cup match today, both they and the entire Danish Football Association assume the figures of cowards. The Football Association is hereby tossing its entire whining strategy of "critical dialogue" with the "arch-regime" overboard faster than a Nepalese slave worker's passport can be confiscated. (Kastrup, 2022)

Although negative criticism of organisational actors abounds in the claims of the arguments, they emanate from a position that supports universal values and implicitly argues that human rights should be a fundamental aspect of international football. FIFA's actions, such as threatening to silence players and the alleged collaboration with countries known for human rights violations, are viewed as contradicting its own statutes that prohibit discrimination in football. Infantino's attempts in his pre-opening speech to empathise with marginalised groups (e.g., "gay" and "disabled") are seen as disingenuous, highlighting the dissonance between FIFA's public statements and the realities of the host region.

Several arguments made across the different news media in this first phase, then, may come across as variants of personal attack—or what rhetorical literature terms *ad hominem* arguments (Walton, 2007). Rhetoric literature tends to consider such arguments as fallacious and counterproductive by not inviting dialogue when the character of another person making an argument is attacked rather than the argument itself. We do find personal attacks in our material, particularly in *Ekstra Bladet* with its condescending descriptions of FIFA's president and key agents among World Cup organisers (e.g., Infantino and Al-Kelaifi as "spinning an idiotic gambit"; Jensen, 2022b). Nevertheless, the arguments made across the news media tend to elaborate on their premises, e.g., by providing fact-based background from investigations and revelations of breaches and power abuse in FIFA leadership and among the organisers in their build-up to the event. Frequent commentary attacks on the continued hollowness of the leadership's media rhetoric when the World Cup opens are careful to provide an allegation of inconsistency, thereby weakening the plausibility of the rhetoric. This kind of circumstantial *ad hominem* argument can be seen as a reasonable way of questioning the attacked person's credibility (Walton, 2007). Circumstantial allegations of inconsistency are typically of a kind characterised by the expression "he does not practice what he preaches," a form we trace in several of the arguments presented in Table 1.



### 3.1.2. Dominant Discourses

Our mapping of main arguments allows us to identify dominant discourses, as they are articulated or implied in the arguments of the first cluster/phase. In the commentaries' arguments, what we extract as the dominant discourses typically express the commentators' ways of seeing and experiencing the conduct of key powerful actors/agents of the tournament, whether they are based on how these actors have been represented in media or on more direct physical observation. Underlying the commentators' arguments are their own sets of values, such as transparency tied to democratic leadership and humans' rights to freely express their opinions.

We identify three dominant discourses: discourse of corruption and autocratic governance, discourse of political agency and sportswashing, and discourse of exclusion and selective inclusion. Discourse of corruption and autocratic governance is a dominant discourse articulated by repeated references to "corruption," "abuse of power," "authoritarian governance," and "strategic silence." It encompasses concerns about the democratic legitimacy of FIFA's leadership, as well as the accusation that FIFA and related authorities may be engaging in practices that lack transparency and accountability, often with reference to the host country's human rights record. This discourse of corruption and autocratic governance also includes commentators' ridiculing of the accusatory responses of local authorities to "Western" news media's "derogatory" coverage, and a critique of how FIFA's actions and affiliations negatively impact its reputation and governance.

Discourse of political agency and sportswashing is evident in the critique of FIFA presenting the event as non-political (e.g., Jensen, 2022a; Welhaven, 2022). It questions the sincerity of FIFA's claim to unity and inclusivity, particularly when excluding specific groups or when FIFA's leadership is accused of sympathising with oppressive regimes in a "discourse of selective political favouring." It challenges the notion that sports can be separated from politics, implying a "discourse of inseparability of politics and football" underlying the commentators' arguments. The recurring term "sportswashing" implies that the sporting event is being used to distract from or cleanse the negative aspects of the involved parties.

Related to the above, a discourse of exclusion and selective inclusion focuses on the selective nature of inclusivity purported by FIFA, as noted in the material by the exclusion of "homosexuals, women, and migrant workers" from the discourse of unity promoted by the organisers. It highlights a dissonance between the proclaimed values of inclusivity and the actual practices, which may exclude or silence certain groups and criticisms.

In sum, the dominant discourses and agency that the commentators attribute to key organisational actors in this first phase, suggest a dynamic where powerful organisations and individuals (such as FIFA, Qatar, and Infantino) enact policies and narratives that significantly and negatively impact various stakeholders in the football world, from individual players and teams to human rights advocates and actors in the football community pushing for more organisational transparency.

### 3.2. Second Phase

Table 2 provides a distillation of the main arguments made in a second discursive phase, in which commentaries to a larger extent reflect on future organisational changes in football and culturally divergent perspectives of

Western and Arab nations. We note that two of our Danish news media do not include commentaries that fit into this thematic pattern.

### 3.2.1. Arguments

In this second phase, which mainly appears in the last stages of the tournament, the criticism raised in the first phase persists. However, in this phase, we also identify commentaries that implicitly reflect upon, acknowledge, or propagate counterarguments against what may be perceived as Eurocentric or Western moralising, particularly regarding the host country's breaches of human rights and the corruption and undemocratic governance of FIFA. In this phase, commentaries also reflect on ways forward, contemplating how FIFA and international football can be reformed to ensure governance that is more democratic and in alignment with universal human rights.

**Table 2.** Commenting on culturally divergent perspectives and arguing for future changes in football's organisation.

	News media	Main argument(s) of commentators
Danish tabloid	<i>Ekstra Bladet</i>	None.
Norwegian tabloid	VG Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 08.12.2022– 19.12.2022	Reduced sponsor money may scare Infantino, as sponsors risk weakened market value due to FIFA's behaviour.  Claiming football and politics as separate entities is simplifying, since both "Western" and Arab voices have used matches to promote political viewpoints.  A corruption case against an EU parliament member can trigger a rematch on Qatar's reputation, as it could end with a conviction in which Qatari interests are central.
Norwegian broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 25.11.2022– 07.12.2022	Infantino will continue to divide and rule if European football leaders do not have credible suggestions to level the differences between Europe and other continents.  To reform FIFA, the North European countries need to change their old Eurocentric discourse of "we have a better understanding of how you should live your life."  The World Cup creates a sense of community and pride in the Arab world, but the main criticism of Qatar persists: violation of human rights and treatment of migrant workers.
	NRK Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 08.12.2022	The North European criticism of human rights breaches lacks sufficient force to have an impact on the reputation of Qatar, as most of the world is enjoying the matches.
Danish broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 2 Timespan: 07.12.2022– 12.12.2022	To avoid unfair elections and potentially corrupt leadership in the future of FIFA, changes must be initiated by its members, the Danish football organisation will have a slight impact on FIFA by itself.  Traditional football nations should not be favoured forever. Therefore, the coming World Cup tournaments should be expanded to 48 nations.  Sports organisations should not be tempted by bribery by autocratic regimes. Therefore, core democratic nations should put more pressure on the major international sports organisations (such as FIFA).
	DR	None.

Commentaries now more explicitly argue for the intertwined nature of football and politics, acknowledging the sport as a platform for political expression globally. A Norwegian TV 2 commentator (Berg, 2022b) argues for the football community's responsibility to put pressure on FIFA to follow explicit criteria with clear expectations when awarding football mega events to host nations. This commentator also draws attention to the sense of community and pride in the Arab world, necessitating a balanced approach that respects cultural differences while addressing legitimate criticisms regarding human rights. According to Norwegian TV 2's commentator:

It is...obvious that this year's World Cup builds community among people from the Arab world. Many Muslims feel an enormous pride over this championship. They also say that the World Cup feels safer and more comfortable because it avoids the prejudices and Islamophobia that unfortunately characterise Europe. At the same time, this World Cup feels much less safe for queer supporters. Both are true. (Berg, 2022b)

This strain of argumentation includes a call for ethical governance in sports, ensuring that international events like the World Cup are not used as tools for "sportswashing" by regimes with poor human rights records. A Danish TV 2 commentator argues that the Western world with its continued status as a core region of international sports must use this standing to reform international sports organisations (Andersen, 2022). In contrast to this, a guest commentator on Norwegian TV 2 with a Brazilian background argues for a shift away from a North-Eurocentric discourse towards a more inclusive and empathetic approach to understanding diverse cultural and governance perspectives. Advocating for more inclusivity and equity in international football, the argument emphasises the importance of broadening the understanding of diverse cultural contexts within international football governance, moving beyond traditional biases and favouritism towards Western nations to embrace a global perspective that recognises the significance of events like the World Cup in various cultures:

The debate about corruption in FIFA and human rights violations in Qatar fades the further away one gets from the well-functioning welfare states in the wealthiest part of the world. If FIFA is to be reformed, this debate must step out of the North European echo chamber and communicate with the rest of the world....To reach more of the member countries in FIFA, the North European countries that have been at the forefront of this campaign must understand the complexity of the issue and adapt their communication from a regional to a global, but also a local perspective. (Doria, 2022)

The arguments made in the second phase, then, tend to be less moralising in their continued critique of the organisers and FIFA, and more diverse and reflective in the way they argue for changes in the governance of mega-events of football. A political thrust now comes across in a more constructive form in some of the arguments made. Commentators more clearly reason about—and suggest—*actions* (e.g., clear allocation criteria in FIFA) needed to enable the transformation of current *circumstances* (e.g., unclear allocation criteria in FIFA) in accordance with some stated *goals* and *values* (e.g., greater organisational transparency). We observe far less critical arguments than "sports only"—commentaries in the last weeks of the tournament. However, several of the arguments made in this second discursive phase suggest that the sports journalists now more distinctly act as reasoning participants—or *agents of change*—in processes of deliberation.

### 3.2.2. Dominant Discourses and Agency

Consequently, although the “negative” discourses attributed to the organisers in the first phase reappear, discourses underlying arguments made in the second cluster may be different, and closely reflect the values of the commentators. These can for example be formulated as discourses of “diverse experiences and opinions,” “community and pride in the Arab world,” “the inseparability of politics and football,” and a deliberative discourse of “greater equality between different parts of the football world,” pointing to how the UEFA must be willing to redistribute more financial resources beyond Europe (Berg, 2022a). In other words, a desired *agency* implied in discourses of the second phase may be attributed to other key actors than in the first phase. In these discourses, bringing about changes towards more equality in the football world—and reform of FIFA—is seen as a chief responsibility of hegemonic bodies such as UEFA.

## 4. Concluding Discussion

We have analysed commentaries made by sports journalists in key Danish and Norwegian news media during the unfolding of the mega-event FIFA World Cup 2022. Although a persistent critical and contextualising argumentation runs through the commentaries made during the tournament, the commentators’ reasoning changes its character to such a degree that it is pertinent to categorise the commentaries as reflecting two distinct discursive clusters/phases. In these phases, changes can be traced in (a) the form of the arguments, (b) the discourses they articulate or imply, and (c) the agency they attribute to different actors. In the following, we elaborate on how our analysis answers RQ1.

As regards the form of the arguments, argumentation in the first phase repeats the critical attacks on FIFA and the organiser that were made during the build-up to the event. These are typically in the form of personal attacks, so-called *ad hominem* arguments, although commentators frequently elaborate on their premises or provide reasonable circumstantial allegations of inconsistency in the form: “He does not practice what he preaches.” The argumentation in the second phase changes its character by more frequently and clearly emphasising the *action* needed to transform current problematic *circumstances* in accordance with stated *goals* (e.g., reforming FIFA).

As regards (b) and (c) above, articulated or implied in arguments of the first phase are typically discourses of corruption in FIFA and political agency and sportswashing attributed to the organisers, suggesting how these actors effectuate policies and narratives that may cleanse negative aspects of the involved parties while also impacting various stakeholders in the football world negatively. In contrast, discourses in the second phase may more clearly express “diverse experiences and opinions” of distinct cultures participating in the World Cup and “greater equality between parts of the football world.” These discourses reflect how arguments—and counterarguments—of the commentaries now call for changes in the organisation of global mega-events, changes that can involve strengthening a self-critical stance of North European pundits of football and a desired new role and agency for European football organisations such as UEFA. We also observe a notable change in the *agency of commentators* implied in the second phase. The political thrust of arguments presented by some journalists makes their commentaries appear as intended to impact essential changes in the organisation of football.

Changes we detect in the second discursive phase also answer RQ2 (see Section 1.2) by confirming that there are signs of implicit reflection by the commentators on their own role as the event unfolded. Both Danish and Norwegian commentators increasingly display a willingness to take counterarguments into consideration, and some of them more clearly acknowledge and emphasise the value of cultural differences. By discussing the diverse cultural views and values expressed by supporters and teams during the event, they also practice a sports journalism that normatively aligns with Harding's (2015) concept of "strong objectivity" (see Section 1.3). In the case of Norwegian TV 2, we believe that the sports staff's inclusion of commentators with backgrounds in politics (Mina Finstad Berg) or a non-Western culture (Leo Doria) contributes to achieving such a multi-perspectival dimension in their texts.

Moreover, the two phases we identify correspond to the first and second "waves" typical of a sportswashing arrangement as suggested by Grix et al. (2023; see Section 1.3), that is, a first wave of sustained media critique followed by a prolonged wave of negative narratives and counternarratives raising concerns about different values/cultures of involved actors. However, although negative criticism of the organisers' "sportswashing" is maintained throughout the second discursive phase of the World Cup event, we have also noted how some commentators—if not explicitly reflecting on or acknowledging a bidirectionality of sportswashing as conceptualised by Grix et al. (2023)—afford a key responsibility to European football bodies to improve the conditions and organisation of international football by redistributing financial resources and modifying their own Eurocentric thinking.

In the aftermath of the mega-event, one could argue that the third wave conceptualised by Grix et al. (2023) as a "normalisation" of the arrangement—and a strengthened position of Qatar in international business—has occurred, due to a lack of critical comments about the World Cup organisers or Infantino's continued FIFA leadership in the opinion journalism of sports sections in Nordic news media. However, in concluding this case study, we choose to emphasise how several Nordic commentators not only followed up their criticism of the organisers in their build-up to the event in a way that we believe will contribute to a continued improvement of how migrant workers are treated in events arranged by regimes with poor human rights records. When commentators could also argue for how powerful European football organisations and actors need to develop their ways of seeing and acting in global football, this testifies to a strong willingness among Nordic sports journalists to rethink and strengthen their role as agents of change.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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