

Tour de France in a digital television paradigm

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Abstract

This article analyses sports events as mega-events with global appeal and increasing socio-economic and cultural significance, and as genres which have now become important in the television industry's transformation from broadcast to online streaming. It presents findings from a qualitative production analysis of how the Tour de France 2022 was shaped in a twofold strategic context. Genre specific aspects of the media event in the ongoing transformation of the television industry and wider strategic interests behind the hosting and organization of the start of the race in Denmark 2022 are discussed and their inter-twinements are described. Based on interviews, documents, observations, screenshots and select broadcasts, the article presents a thematic analysis of how the event in Denmark was shaped in a shared concern for television's ability to provide exposure of the race and the Danish context and public service broadcaster TV 2's particular strategic branding interests in the event.

Keywords

Sport, mega-event, television, streaming, public service, eventness.

Introduction

The Tour de France is an annual sporting event that, for long, has had an unquestionable prominence in professional cycling and been a major event in Europe. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the race has developed into a mega-event with increasing global appeal and socio-economic and cultural significance (Finceur et al., 2023; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Roche, 2000). Becoming a mega-event implies that a sporting event is not only large in size but is co-produced in a growing, dense network of strategic stakeholders with various economic, political, and civil society interests reaching far beyond sports. It also means that the media play a constitutive role, as “an unmediated mega-event would be a contradiction in terms” (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006, p. 2). This applies in particular to the Tour de France, which is both characterized by a unique relationship between sports, geographical space, and tourism, and a tight relationship with the media. The race was invented by French media in 1903, and it remains privately owned by the French media company Amaury Sport Organization (ASO). The race is mobile and takes place on public roads, which means its media coverage and, nowadays, television coverage in particular (Frandsen, 2017, 2023), underlies many decisions and practices involved in the organization, production, and experience of the race in its entirety.

Since the 1980s, broadcast television has become the central platform for covering and following the actions of the Tour de France – just as has been the case with other mega-events. Although the events are now communicated in a multilayered media ecology, broadcast television maintains its position (Haynes & Boyle, 2017; Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017; Hutchins et al., 2019; Olesen, 2023). However, as the internet takes over the distribution infrastructure, the television industry has consequently initiated its own process of transformation “from a broadcasting to an online medium” (Johnson, 2019, p. 7). Initially, fiction and on-demand content have been the primary drivers in attracting especially younger audiences to the online television services. More recently, however, scholars have underlined that liveness and sport are also crucial elements for “TV natives”, who extend their existing services to online platforms, as well as for new “online natives” or “over-the-top” (OTT) services, who are building a new global television and streaming market (Johnson, 2019; Hutchins et al., 2019). Still, in the context of this large industrial transformation, we do not know much about how sports, and mega-events in sports, are conceptualized and negotiated by the people in the television industry.

This article presents findings from a study of such negotiations. The analysis explores the case of a small, national public service television company in Denmark, TV 2, and aims to show how production practices of the Tour de France 2022 took form in a twofold strategic context, namely television’s ongoing transformation and the Danish hosting of the first three stages of the race.

The first context is media-specific and concerns sporting events as a particular genre in the above-mentioned shift in the television industry. Historically, sporting events have attained their strategic content value for television companies due to their very potent

combination of competitive drama and uncertainty, and the distribution to mass audiences via live broadcasting. In this sense, the primary appeal of sporting events for television companies clashes with emerging viewer habits in the digital age, in which access to time-flexible, on-demand content like fiction and documentaries was, until recently, perceived as key for success. Historically, sports have been crucial content for TV 2 in establishing and branding themselves as a leading broadcaster on the Danish television market. As competition has increased, live coverage of the Tour de France has become one of the company's most stable programs and a pivotal element in the company's channel brand (Johnson, 2012), establishing a tight relationship between the yellow color of the Tour, particular music segments, voices of Tour commentators, and the identity of the main broadcast channel (Frandsen, 2017). Today, live broadcasts of the Tour have, compared to most other sporting events, a well-aged audience (Van Reeth, 2023), and cycling as a sporting activity has a relatively strong appeal in the older segments of the Danish population (Rask et al., 2022). The historic marriage of live sporting events and TV broadcasting on linear platforms, and the ageing audience of Tour de France and cycling, raise a number of dilemmas for the integration of sporting events on streaming platforms in general, and for the potential branding qualities of the Tour de France in TV 2's ongoing transformation into a digital television paradigm in particular.

The unique circumstances of the Danish Tour de France coverage in the summer of 2022 constitute the second strategic context. That year, the Grand Départ (the beginning of the race) took place over three stages in Denmark, meaning various strategic Danish interests and actors influenced the planning and production of the event. Hosting and organizing the three stages in Denmark, producing television coverage for international broadcasters and for the Danish audience, respectively, were formally three distinct activities. Still, they were interconnected in the shared concern for producing exposure of both the race and the local Danish context. In this way, mega-events and major sports leagues are mediatized, produced as combined sports and media products. In collaboration with ASO, *the Grand Départ Copenhagen Denmark 2022 I/S* and a range of local municipalities and authorities were responsible for the preparation and organization of the race. The main television feed for the live transmissions to all broadcasters of the Tour was produced and delivered by France Télévision, and this signal has been the backbone of TV 2's production of a localized coverage for the Danish television audience.

Although TV 2's current contract with ASO obligates them to cover the event live on their main broadcasting channel, the race starting in Denmark was, in combination with the company's ongoing transformation, considered a unique opportunity to leverage a process of reflection and renegotiation among the television practitioners. The process would concern both the general interpretation of the event for Danes, the continued branding value of the tour for the television company, and long-established production and distribution practices on different platforms, which are changing as part of the company's adjustment to the digital condition.

Sport as a genre in a transforming television industry

Hutchins and Sanderson (2017) argue that the role of sports should be taken into serious consideration in any analysis of future television, and yet, our scholarly understanding of sports as a particular genre in the ongoing changes in the television industries is still limited. So far, attention has mainly been directed towards the emergence of internet-based streaming services and globally oriented OTT platforms, Amazon Prime and Tencent, on the one hand, and a rapidly growing number of sports-owned media like Manchester United Television and NFL Network, on the other. These new types of services, labelled by Johnson (2019) as “online natives” and “content natives”, respectively, originate from the internet and erode national boundaries of sports television. They have not only provided more and new sports content, they have produced new viewing practices (Burroughs & Rugg, 2014; Duncan, 2020; Fajak & Frawley, 2022; Hutchins et al., 2019; Kariyawasam & Tsai, 2017). Furthermore, they have initiated a change in the market for sports rights, raised concerns regarding access, citizenship, and the role of sports in the “‘society-making’ function of media” (Hutchins et al., 2019, p. 989), and given rise to calls for intervention from policy makers (Evens & Smith, 2022; Kariyawasam & Tsai, 2017).

Knowledge of the role of sports for established television industry actors – the “television natives” (Johnson, 2019) like the BBC, Discovery, and the Danish TV 2 – is limited. It is often stressed that the live broadcasting of big events on the broadcasting platforms of television natives remains their main business. However, sporting event viewership on the streaming platforms of these services is rapidly rising, and television coverage of big sporting events now strongly “intersects with the individuated address of ‘connective media’ platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (van Dijck, 2013) and the live streaming services provided by networks online” (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017, p. 33). Across the many screens and platforms used to follow big sporting events, live broadcasting has been described as the anchoring point in the coverage of the Olympic Games (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017). The linearity of live sports and strong ritualized viewing habits have been pointed out as elements that make sport a less relevant genre to use to attract audiences to streaming platforms (Hutchins et al., 2019).

A study of how genres are programmed on Norwegian public broadcasters’ linear TV and streaming platforms indicates that this is rapidly changing. Here, sport is not a high priority; however, it does have a markedly higher priority on one of the analyzed streaming platforms, namely the one with a commercial business model. As an increasing number of audiences prefer the flexibility and mobility of streaming platforms, it is nevertheless argued that live viewing may be the “next big frontier of streaming” (Sanson & Steirer, 2019, as cited in Spilker et al., 2020, p. 14). Johnson (2019) points out that, already in 2014, the BBC seemed to move in that direction by using their internet platforms to deliver the same content that their linear broadcast channels did. Johnson stresses that linear channels remain an important organizing principle in the television industry, and that these channels are now provided as part of a streaming service. In this way, she

argues, television services that provide access to linear television channels on a streaming platform represent “a collapse in the boundaries between linear and nonlinear television” (Johnson, 2019, p. 16). For Johnson, it is important to recognize that in an online environment, television will have very strong “continuities with older forms of television”, of which, we would argue, the live coverage of sports is a good example. Bruun (2023) and Michalis (2022) have a similar view, stating that public service companies pursue the strategic aim to make streaming platforms the “front door” to both linear channels and on-demand content, and the services “stick to linear publishing because of its continued popularity and the need to ensure the reach of television in all target groups as well as an increased emphasis on the public service brand” (Bruun, 2023, p. 238). Sports play several roles here. First, as mentioned above, big sports leagues’ serial dimension and well-known ability to attract engaged and loyal groups of viewers on a regular basis means that online natives have started acquiring rights to this particular type of “temporally significant content” (Johnson, 2019, p. 88) in competition with television natives. Sports provide a great diversity in content, and industry analyses reveal that serial rights to sports retain subscribers better than other genres (Bødker, 2021). Serial rights to cover sports leagues stabilize subscription bases for television services. For some years now, flagging specific genres with distinct national and cultural importance, like drama and documentaries (Bruun, 2022), has been part of public service companies’ strategy for streaming platforms. However, more recently, Danish TV 2 changed their strategy and increased program diversity on their streaming service, TV 2 Play, to give a markedly higher priority to genres, like sports and current affairs, which were previously “regarded as flow-only” (Bruun, 2023, p. 245). This reflects a mainstreaming process of the platform as older groups of audiences are adopting it. The analysis below will demonstrate how a mega-event in sports like the Tour de France, under the specific Danish circumstances in 2022, comes to play a significant role in TV 2’s strategy.

Temporality and attention in an online context

Big sporting events differ in important ways from the seriality of national and international sports leagues that comprise the ubiquity of everyday sports on television, featuring strong regularity in (inter)national matches that often span many months. In comparison, big sporting events have a different temporality, which needs new interpretations in the current transformation into streaming. Sporting events stand out because they happen less often and in intensive periods. Thus, they interrupt the everyday lives and time schedules of audiences, fans, and television practitioners. This discontinuity from everyday routine has historically contributed to their status as a particular genre, namely “media events” (Dayan & Katz, 1992), and to “being recognized as extraordinary”, showcasing absolute excellence in sporting achievement (Billings & Wenner, 2017, pp. 3–4). In combination with the ability of various media – particularly broadcast television – to transmit the

big sporting events globally with coverage that “makes things larger than life” (Billings & Wenner, 2017, p. 4), the events have an extraordinary appeal which attracts a wider audience. Subsequently, they have grown in cultural and geopolitical importance to become mega-events that attract a wide range of socio-cultural actors who want to utilize such temporarily enlarged attention for their own purposes and agendas. In the digital age, big sporting events still produce such mediated centers of attention. Nowadays, this is orchestrated by an ensemble of many media – in which live television may provide a core narrative – that “take on an active, performative role in constructing themselves as ‘the center’ (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 9), where various political, commercial, subjective, and visual interests are staged and performed in a struggle for influence and power” (Frandsen et al., 2022, p. 3). However, the production of attention towards the extraordinary, but ephemeral, live-actions must adapt to new conditions in an online context, not least on streaming platforms, where television content is distributed in a spatially organized context, and where prominence and attention are established in different ways. In an online context, channel identity or interruptions in time schedules can’t be used to establish the extraordinariness of big sporting events and, with that, the television service as the center of public attention. Streaming platforms are organized spatially, and they shape the attention and prioritize content for viewers through their layout, visual organization, and paratexts (Johnson, 2019). As linear television remains popular with large segments of viewers, while other segments are perceived as increasingly impatient (Bruun, 2023), the new front doors to the services of public service TV natives like Danish TV 2 now integrate linear channels and combine spatial and temporal strategies in a multiplatform strategy which includes their website.

Finally, compared to some of the more iconic mega-events, like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, the Tour de France has a different time and space structure, which matters in relation to television practices and strategic interests. First, the Tour is an annual event that takes place on a daily basis for three weeks in July during the European summer holiday. In some respects, the event is rather time intensive, as it contains daily long and unpredictable stages which may last 4–6 hours each over the course of three weeks. Yet, it is one long-running competition, with the same participants every day. Depending on the geography of a specific stage, it may also contain long periods with limited drama, which may pose a challenge for television companies. Scholars indicate that some viewers, due to an abundance of immediately available content, are becoming increasingly impatient (Bruun, 2019). Especially from the 1990s, French television producers developed an important visual strategy by which images from the context of the sporting competition, like spectators and performers along the route, natural sceneries, and cultural heritage buildings, were integrated into the live coverage. This complex visual narrative of the Tour, which included crosscutting between images of the peloton and individual riders, and images from the context of the sporting action, was designed to maintain the attention of the viewers, particularly during the less dramatic stages in flat

landscapes, similar to those of Denmark (Frandsen, 2023). In response to this production strategy developed by France Télévision, “spectators organize different sorts of visually-oriented performances, some of which are identity markers set into the scene by local and regional interests” (Frandsen, 2023, p. 229). In conclusion, the time-space structure of the event undergirds the production of a particularly complex transmission narrative that concerns more than sport and includes the interests of a diversity of stakeholders who wish to be integrated in and utilize the exposure inherent in the narrative for their own purposes.

The empirical study

The analysis presented below is a case-based, qualitative media production analysis (Neergaard, 2007; Redwall & Bruun, 2023) with a particular interest in uncovering how practices and negotiations behind the scenes in the media industries unfold and shape cultural products (Bruun & Frandsen, 2022; Frandsen, 2007; Redwall & Bruun, 2022; Ytreberg, 2000). In our case, the approach has been selective and theoretically driven, based on different types of material collected from 2016 – when the Danish bid for hosting the Grand Départ of the Tour de France was announced – until July 2022, when the Grand Départ Copenhagen finally took place. From the beginning, the collection of materials was rather exploratory and focused on identifying different types of strategic interests at stake in organizations and collaborations involved in producing a mega-event like the Tour de France. The materials therefore include:

- internal and external documents (Karppinen & Moe, 2012) collected from different actors involved in the organization of the Tour de France, the Grand Départ Copenhagen, and the production of Tour de France programs at TV 2
- in-depth interviews with exclusive informants (Bruun, 2014) who were directly involved in the process of planning and producing the Grand Départ Copenhagen (5 respondents) and the television production at TV 2 (6 respondents)
- observations and material from two internal hybrid (virtual and onsite) meetings, one at TV 2 and one in a group of Grand Départ organizers; observations in the public spaces established around the Tour de France in Copenhagen (the team presentation in Tivoli, stage 1) and in Sønderborg (stage 3)
- screenshots of front pages from TV 2’s streaming service, TV 2 Play, taken on an irregular basis before the event and twice a day during the three weeks of the race
- select television broadcasts from TV 2’s main broadcast channel’s coverage of the Tour, accessed via The Danish Royal Library’s digital archives

For this article, the analytical approach to this diverse material was a thematic analysis (Herzog et al., 2019), implicitly drawing on conceptualizations of media events, mega-events, and television in the digital age. The analysis only touches upon a limited number

of themes found in the rich material. Across the various sources, data that contribute to a twofold understanding of a) the integrated strategic significance of television for the Tour de France, and b) (and most importantly) the Tour's strategic role for television, historically and at present, have been coded and connected. The result is an analysis structured in four themes: 1) Exposure and structures of shared interests, 2) Grand Départ Copenhagen as a promotional asset, 3) Added content and distribution practices, and 4) Production of "eventness" and public service values.

Exposure and structures of shared interests

The production of the Tour de France is a matter of both spatial planning and mediation. Consequently, the decisions and pre-production processes leading up to the Tour de France in 2022 were complex and involved a range of actors, from the Danish political and sporting scene, local municipalities, and of course ASO and France Télévision. Underpinning this matrix of involved strategic interests is a shared, but implicit, strategic interest in television's continued unique ability to produce content that generates exposure and holds the attention of large audiences. In that sense, television coverage remains *the* motor behind many of the strategic decisions shaping the Tour de France – nowadays perhaps even more so, as part of the race is set to take place outside France. This happened for the first time in 1954, when the French owners of the Tour moved the Grand Départ to take place in Amsterdam. In the following decades, visits to neighboring countries took place from time to time, mainly in order to promote cycling and thus strengthen the interest in the Tour in the long term. Since the 1980s, and especially from the beginning of the 21st century, foreign Grand Départs have become more frequent (Bacik & Klobucnik, 2023). Increased television coverage, first in Europe and later globally, have turned the Grand Départ into a promotional tool in a class of its own. International coverage has generated new types of sponsors of both the race and the participating teams, and Grand Départs outside France have provided ASO new partners from cities or regions who are all willing to pay large sums for place branding – through television coverage – on an international or global marketplace. For ASO, this partial "outsourcing" of the event received a higher strategic priority in the new millennium, when managing director Christian Prudhomme, in 2007, explicitly announced that, going forward, Grand Départs were expected to take place outside France in three out of five years.

Moving the Grand Départ to its most northern location ever for the 2022 Tour and, in addition, to a small market like Denmark is not necessarily a logical step: "The small size of our country and the long distances to France have been a major disadvantage" (John Jäger, chief editor TV 2, personal communication, February 20, 2020). However, due to TV 2's coverage, television played an implicit role in the decision, as Denmark provides a particular, attractive context of popularity, which is valuable to ASO:

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Denmark is the nation with the highest or second highest share [of television viewing of the Tour]. The reason why we had TV 2 onboard at the time of bidding was to signal that the bid had support. (Alex Pedersen, director for Grand Départ Copenhagen 2022, personal communication, December 9, 2019)

For more than three decades, TV 2 has had the broadcasting rights for the Tour de France, and they have delivered a continuous and intensive coverage of the race. Despite several doping scandals, which, during specific periods, have reduced other broadcasters' interest in covering the Tour, TV 2 Denmark has sustained throughout the years. By integrating socio-cultural perspectives in their coverage, they have created a wider audience for the event over the years, and Denmark has seen a strong, continued interest in cycling – especially as a recreational sport. In comparison with other national markets, the popularity of the Tour de France among Danish television audiences has been exceptional (Van Reeth, 2023), and for many years, TV 2 has been among the largest television teams accredited to the event. ASO acknowledges this and has paid visits to the television station to discuss future developments of the television broadcasts (John Jäger, chief editor, TV 2, personal communication, June 12, 2015).

TV 2 was not an official partner in the bid, but the broadcaster was informally related to it in many ways, which served its own interests. The company provided a letter of recommendation for the bid, participated in regular meetings with the Danish organizers during the planning process, and one of the broadcaster's former iconic expert commentators of the Tour, Jørgen Leth, lent his voice to the video produced as part of the official bidding material. Furthermore, TV 2 supported the Danish status as host country financially, producing the international television feed for the official team presentation (which takes place two days before the start of the race) free of charge for Grand Départ Copenhagen Denmark I/S, who were responsible for delivering this television production to all international broadcasters (Alex Pedersen, personal communication, December 9, 2019). TV 2 considered this particular production to be minor, but it was a very attractive opportunity to showcase themselves professionally to the global community of television professionals. Among the production technicians, this had a high priority because the demonstration of strong skills through high production quality will strengthen their professional reputation and working relationships in a still more globalized industry (Sara Schultz Berg, production manager TV 2, personal communication, March 18, 2022).

TV 2's longstanding summer-time engagement with the Tour has transformed it into an essential part of the company's brand identity (Johnson, 2012; Frandsen, 2017). A few years ago, the centrality of the event was cemented even more as TV 2, for a period, lost broadcasting rights to other big, popular sports events (for example, the NFL and the Super Bowl, qualifying football matches for the men's Euro and FIFA World Cup, Giro d'Italia, Olympic Games, European Championship in men's and women's handball). Compared to those other events, which take place on a less frequent basis, the continued coverage and temporality of the Tour is therefore considered to be of particular value

– also in relation to streaming. Today, the company has acquired a broad range of new rights, which potentially could challenge the value of the Tour de France. Still, the Tour is considered an element in the company's DNA and a unique flagship for maintaining a close relationship with the audience at a particular time of year:

You don't organize your life around something that takes place every four years. There are people who organize their annual summer holidays around the Tour de France. [...] The importance for TV 2, I just want to stress this, is that *this is people's experience of TV 2*. (John Jäger, chief editor, TV 2, personal communication, February 20, 2020, emphasis added)

The recurring and frequent integration of the Tour/TV2 as important content in the audience's summer vacation seems to make the Tour de France "temporally significant content" (Johnson, 2019, p. 88) in a particular way. Here, qualities of the ordinary and the extraordinary fuse together in a shared brand identity exposed through the mediated event. The context of the summer holiday makes the audience more mobile, and streaming is considered an important option to support the company's aim of keeping in close touch with the audience. On the streaming platform, they can watch and follow the events from wherever they are. The particular circumstances in 2022 added to this endeavor to stay relevant to an audience in a vacation mood, as expressed by the chief editor: "We want to show Denmark to the Danes" (John Jäger, chief editor, TV 2, personal communication, February 20, 2020).

The consortium behind the Danish bid was a partnership of governmental, regional, local, and sporting actors, and the Grand Départ Copenhagen Denmark I/S, a partnership between five municipalities and the Ministry of Business, who became responsible for the actual organization and finances of the event in Denmark. The official name of the Tour in Denmark, The Grand Départ Copenhagen, was debated among the Danish partners because of the particular focus on Copenhagen. However, the decision was informed by ASO, who wanted the Tour de France to draw on the city of Copenhagen's established international brand.

In this consortium, professional cycling expertise was sparse. Only two such experts were explicitly involved, namely the initiator and director of Grand Depart Copenhagen, Alex Pedersen (former professional cyclist, team manager, and vice managing director in a Danish, regional media outlet), and Jesper Worre (a former professional cyclist and experienced race organizer in Denmark). The latter was hired solely as external consultant for the planning of the route in collaboration with the director. However, these two expert "agents of spatial practice" (Palmer, 2010) planned the route in an equal balance between sporting excitement and "place-making" in a "politics and pragmatics of selection" (Palmer, 2010, p. 869):

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We had to consider the characteristics of the roads, and how we could provide the peloton some challenges and simultaneously bring it through beautiful scenery, and get some great images from Denmark aired worldwide (Alex Pedersen, director for Grand Depart Copenhagen 2022 I/S, personal communication, December 9, 2019).

Planning the route is an important part of the preproduction process of the Tour de France, and, consequently, the final decision of the route stays with ASO. As part of that process, ASO made changes to both the route and organization at an early stage. They saw a lot of potential in combining the competition with the spectacular televisual qualities of crossing the Great Belt Bridge, and they insisted on having the finish line right after the bridge. This implied that one of the initial municipalities behind the bid, Odense, had to be replaced by the municipality of Nyborg. The top management of ASO visited Denmark a couple of times to experience and approve the route. For the local planners, considerations regarding the possible competitive impact of the weather and terrain were combined with strong genre-based knowledge about how landscapes and buildings/constructions have become increasingly important in television production (Frandsen, 2023),

STAGE 3

SUNDAY 3 JULY

> 182 KM

VEJLE >>>

Main town in the South Denmark region
Population: 59,600 (Vejliesians)
tour.vejle.dk - visitvejle.com

Tour de France: Stage town for the first time

- **Cycling:** Numerous cycle routes around the town
- **Sport and culture:** The runic stones of Jelling, on which the word Denmark first appeared in the 10th century during the reign of King Harald the Blue Tooth, are considered to be the country's birth certificate. *Sport:* Vejle Boldklub (football, Superligaen, five times Danish champions). *Athletes:* Allan Simonsen (football, Mönchengladbach and FC Barcelona, Ballon d'Or de France Football in 1977), Tony Rominger (cycling, Swiss but born in Vejle to a Danish mother, 3 stage wins and winner of the polka dot jersey in the Tour de France in 1993). Event: Jelling MusikFestival (rock festival)
- **Sights:** Jelling Stones UNESCO World Heritage Site, Give sculpture park, The Wave and numerous other buildings constructed using avant-garde architecture, Kongernes Jelling (home of the Viking kings), Legoland, amusement park
- **Gastronomy:** Stegt flæsh (roast pork in parsley sauce with potatoes) is considered the national dish. *Other specialties:* smorrebrod (slice of rye bread with cold meats, fish, cheese and condiments), wienerbrod (pastry)
- **Distinctions:** The town was nicknamed the Manchester of Denmark thanks to its cotton spinning industry



The Wave, Vejle @Getty Images/Frank Bach



The Jelling stones @Getty Images

Figure 1. Excerpt from the Roadbook 2022. Page 43 with touristic information on the start city of day three, Vejle, and the Jelling Stone UNESCO World Heritage site

as well as knowledge about local interests, often expressed by the Danish municipalities and regions. Later, tourism agencies from the municipalities along the route contributed significantly to the pre-production process. Using templates delivered from ASO, they produced briefs of contextual information on the history, culture, buildings, and scenery along the route. This material was collected and published in a so-called *Roadbook* sent out to all global broadcasters before the Tour to use in their preparation and narration of the race.

Finally, the route of the Tour de France was, as always, a matter of logistics (Palmer, 2010). Safety, the passage of cars, enough space for sponsors, media, parking, food, and accessibility for spectators and fans are also significant concerns in shaping a mobile event on public roads. The goal city of the last stage in Denmark was in the municipality of Sønderborg, because they have the southernmost airport in Denmark. Due to the concerns mentioned above, they had to accept that the finish line was located in an industrial district. In return, 10–12 extra kilometers were added to the route nearby and in the town, providing more time for exposure of strategically important places.

Grand Départ Copenhagen as promotional asset

Moving our focus more specifically to the transformation of the television industries and TV 2's strategic use of the Tour de France in such a context reveals how big sporting events play a different role than more serial content like national and international sports leagues. TV 2 is funded by subscription fees and advertising, and its main broadcast channel has public service obligations. However, in response to the continuous decline in ratings on the company's linear broadcasting channels, a long-term strategy has been determined to make the streaming platform, TV 2 Play, the front door to all of the company's services. Since 2021, TV 2 has focused on integrating live content like news, current affairs, and sports on their streaming platform in order to reach an ambitious goal of 1.3 million subscribers in a digitally advanced market consisting of 5.9 million inhabitants in total. In addition, the organizational framing of the platform has changed, for example, by giving greater editorial authority to the employees engaged in scheduling (Bruun, 2023). Employees have been called to prioritize TV 2 Play when producing content – but without missing sight of the linear channels as expressed by their managing sports news editor: “This means Play first, but not Play only” (Kirsten Nepper Rasmussen, personal communication, 8 March, 2022). TV 2's ongoing process of alignment of aesthetics and products across platforms is particularly significant in the context of broadcasting big events on television (Sara Schultz Berg, production manager TV 2, personal communication, March 18, 2022). As mentioned, the company has acquired a range of new rights to sports leagues and events that serve different strategic needs. Serial rights (like the NBA, La Liga, and UEFA Europa League) mainly serve commercial needs. This means the channel can attract groups of sports fans who are known for being willing to pay for access to

content, and whose unique engagement implies that they are more loyal subscribers who thus help sustain revenues for a longer term compared to other genres (Bødker, 2021). TV 2 considers broadcasting rights to big events (like the Tour de France, the Olympic Games, and the UEFA Euro and FIFA World Cup) to serve a combined commercial and public service mandate (Havens & Lotz, 2017). First, their extraordinary appeal to wider audiences make them important tools for attracting new subscribers and for upgrading existing subscriptions to the streaming platform. Second, live coverage of these events is considered pivotal for TV 2's ability to meet important parts of its public service obligations by creating a national identity and feeling of community across a fragmented national audience (Bødker, 2021). These strategic goals and live sports' strategic significance were clearly communicated to all employees involved in the Tour de France 2022 at a joint meeting for TV 2 employees a couple of weeks before the event: "With the Tour de France we will show that the big sports communities live with us, and emphasize that sport is a strength with TV 2 Play" (TV 2, June 2022, slide from internal meeting). The budget of the sports department for covering the three days of the Tour in Denmark was increased by 15% compared to the subsequent days in France, and the overall commercial aim of the channel's coverage was to get 12,000 new subscribers and 10,000 subscription upgrades. The starting days in Denmark were considered unique. They were communicated as a "once in a lifetime" event, and the company's tone of voice in their coverage should express "community excitement, greatness, humor" (TV 2, June 2022). The Grand Départ Copenhagen was clearly conceptualized as an "event in the event", as expressed in the chief editor's focus on communicating Denmark to the Danes, the increased budgets, and, in particular, by the significantly extended broadcasting schedules during those first days of the Tour, with all the daily Tour programs entitled "The Tour in Denmark".

The streaming service does not occupy much of TV 2's total time spent on production, but it currently demands a lot of attention (Sara Schulz Berg, project manager, personal communication, March 18, 2022). Bringing in new segments of audiences on the service produces a number of still unsolved challenges and shifting practices. TV 2 has made it very easy to terminate their streaming service subscriptions, raising concerns about their ability to retain new subscribers on the platform once the big events are over. Second, there is still uncertainty about how to adjust the streaming platforms to new segments of viewers who prefer curated content similar to linear television. Third, TV 2 is aware that they compete with international over-the-top platforms that provide live access to some of the same sporting events and leagues. Specifically in relation to the Tour de France, on the one hand, the start in Denmark meant that the editorial team was forced to rethink the coverage, as seen, for example, in the new layout which included particular elements for the days in Denmark (more on this below), music versioning, and an on-site studio in all programs. On the other hand, at the core of the production, we still find the "old" broadcasting logics of going live on linear television, which, the project manager stresses, has attained a distinct value in the larger transformation of the com-

pany. The live experience, she argues, brings the audiences closer together, closer to the event, and closer to the company. This is all intensified by the fact that the race takes place in Denmark and, in terms of the streaming platform, enhancing these qualities takes first-priority.

Added content and distribution practices

Using the Tour de France to support making TV 2's streaming platform the new front door for a mainstream audience requires the integration of the linear main channel. All of TV 2's linear channels have a high priority on the streaming platform, and during the Tour de France, live transmissions are announced every day in the "hero-deck" at the top of the service's front page. The strategy also implies developing and adding new on-demand content and new distribution strategies. Still, the overall content strategy is twofold:

People feel that the Tour de France is a matter for TV 2 [...] We must be very careful not to make the flow product poorer because it has to fit into Play [...] Flow is different from Play.
(Martin Høgstrup, Tour de France editor, personal communication, March 8, 2022)

The editor stresses that, in the long term, making sports content relevant in a streaming context requires both "rejuvenation" and innovation of all content. Ensuring added value to subscribers with particular interests in cycling, both during and in between cycling events, is a general concern. For the Tour de France 2022, this intention is reflected in an increased focus on making cycling and the Tour relevant to more and younger viewers through new time-flexible content and shorter formats.

Back in 2019, the service produced a special edition of the well-known Danish "pre-game" show *Rolf & Ritter på Tour* (*Rolf and Ritter on Tour*). Normally, the show stages TV 2's main commentators on the Tour de France, Rolf Sørensen and Dennis Ritter. The special edition was called *Chris & Hjalmar på Tour* (*Chris and Hjalmar on Tour*), and it is recurrently mentioned in the interviews as a way to build up a younger audience. It staged one of the young expert commentators, former rider Chris Anker Sørensen, and the then-upcoming popular young musician, Hjalmar Larsen, going on a bike ride and talking about their shared passion for cycling. The editors at TV 2 consider the involvement of young media celebrities essential for making cycling and the Tour a success in a streaming context, as these celebrities represent young and more modern values. For the build-up to the Tour de France 2022, TV 2 therefore produced a few celebrity-oriented documentaries, portraying select young, but well known and successful, Danish riders, and the commentator Chris Anker Sørensen (who died in an accident in Belgium during the World Road Championships in 2021). In addition, three episodes of *Rolf & Ritter på Tour* were produced in which two older and very popular celebrity cycling commentators ride their bikes and introduce each of the three Danish stages. To add to the strategic focus on celebrities and modern values, one of the episodes even featured the

Danish crown prince as a special guest. Besides being a national symbol, he is considered a modern royal with an image as a keen sportsman and promoter of sports for all. In contrast to earlier strategies, both the new documentaries and the established show *Rolf & Ritter på Tour* were initially produced and published as highly prioritized on-demand pregame content on the streaming platform in a suitable short format. Later on, the shows were produced in longer formats fitting the flow television schedules, and later, all programs were aired on flow TV.

Furthermore, TV 2 is focused on exploiting acquired live rights in a cross-platform strategy to create added value. In 2022, the production of highlights became a new high priority:

This is very much about loving the rights that we have [to live broadcasting] on Play, make more of them and get more shares. So, it is also about getting these highlights shared on social media and receiving mentions in the news programs [...] How do we keep the content that we have on Play alive for a longer time. (Kirsten-Nepper Rasmussen, managing editor, personal communication, March 8, 2022)

To support this strategy, a number of video reporters with strong skills in editing were hired in the spring of 2022, and 10-minute-long highlights from the lengthy live transmissions became a new particular focus point in the production during the Tour de France 2022. Highlight reels are not a new format in themselves, but they were now considered particularly relevant to the Tour because of the race's unique temporality. They were produced on a daily basis, featured in the hero-deck, and published in one of the top decks on the streaming service shortly after the riders crossed the finish line. The morning after the completed stage, they were published at 8:20 in the morning at the top of the landing page of the streaming service, together with the ordinary news offerings. The short format with immediate publication on a regular daily basis was considered a way for TV 2 to stay relevant to the audience after the live event, and the regular and high priority given to the Tour on the front page of TV 2 Play is considered an important reinterpretation of the Tour, adapting to a less patient audience. The daily highlight reels "meet expectations of getting something – every day, something with a pulse" (Martin Høgstrup, Tour de France editor, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Production of eventness and public service values

As briefly mentioned, the Tour in 2022 had a double event structure for the Danish television company, and the Grand Départ Copenhagen was considered an "event in the event" and a main asset in meeting the main channel's public service obligations to support national identity and a feeling of community by "showing Denmark to the Danes" (John Jäger, chief editor, TV 2, personal communication, February 20, 2020). Further, TV 2 called on viewers to contribute their tips and ideas for the production of an unofficial Tour

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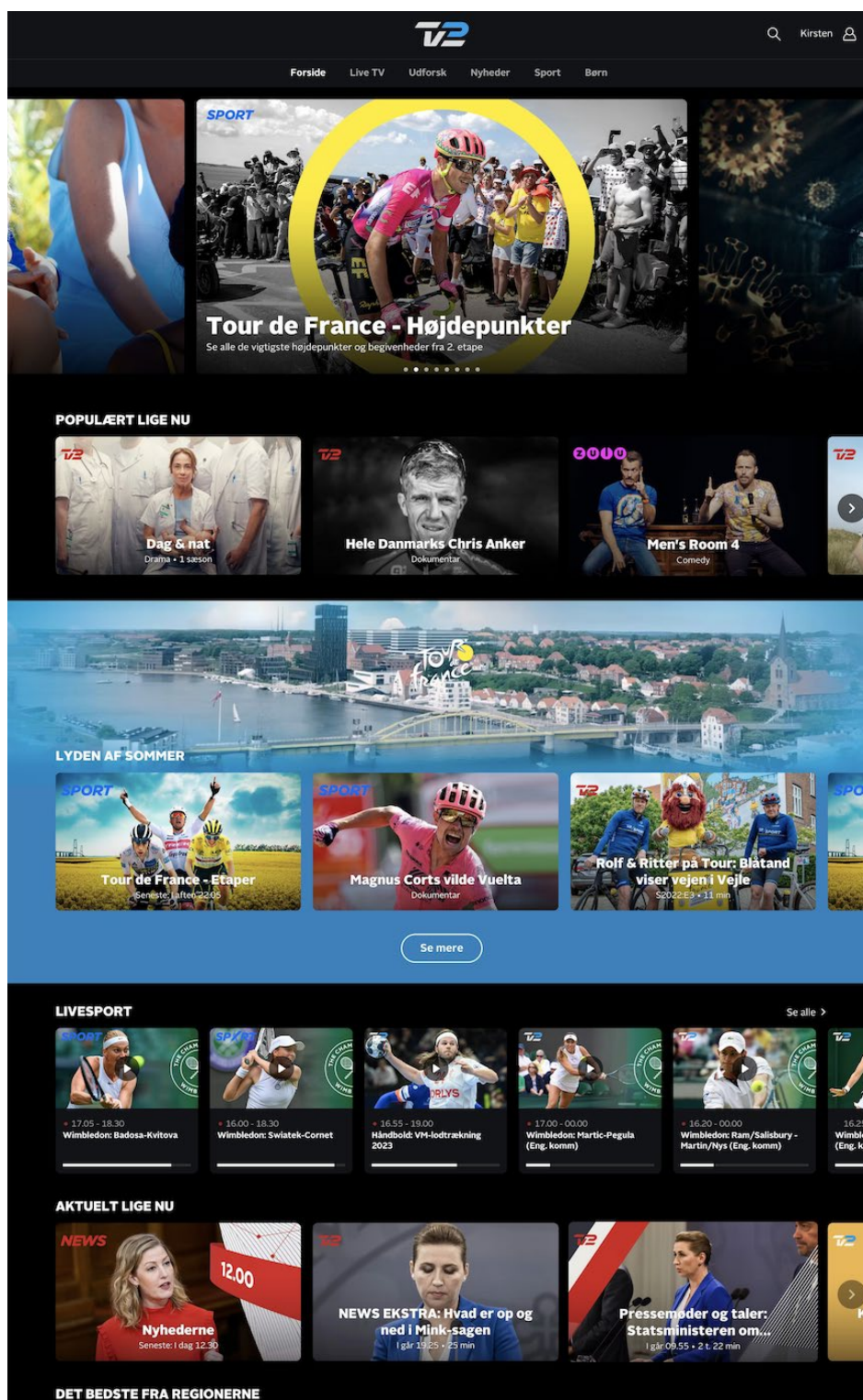


Figure 2: TV 2 Play landing page July 2 at 18:20, illustrating the blue Tour de France universe and the highlights from the day's stage announced in the hero deck

guide for international broadcasters one month before the event. The call was delivered in a humorous tone by the two main commentators in a short video clip, which was shared across platforms: “Send us your input for our unofficial Tour guide, so we can put much more than just the Little Mermaid on the global map” (TV 2, video clip on Facebook, June 4, 2022).

The clip puts TV 2 at the center of fostering a community feeling among the Danes, and it serves as a kind of popular corrective to the Tour’s traditional focus on official and commercially motivated narratives of social and cultural identities along the routes. For TV 2, the aim was to emphasize a close relationship with a broad audience and to support popular understandings of national identity among Danish audiences, expressed, for example, through the tradition of “naked runs” at festivals and anecdotes about local pizza bars particularly popular among Danish riders. At an internal meeting at TV 2, this strategy was explained as follows: “In this way, we can show Denmark to the whole world together with the Danes in a vernacular and funny way” (TV 2, June 2022). The input from viewers was mainly used to produce content on various social media as a build-up to the event itself, but it reflects how the company’s double mandate affects production. For branding purposes, the public service ethos is extended across platforms, and these calls communicate values of cultural equality that are essential ideological elements in the Nordic “media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Normally, eventness is produced in a linear broadcasting context through a reverent and/or festive tone and by changed time schedules (Dayan & Katz, 1992) that communicate to the audience that the event is of particular social and cultural significance. In 2022, this remains a crucial dimension of TV 2’s coverage of the Tour de France, and they employ eventness to stress the extraordinary nature of the three days in Denmark. The TV schedules are enhanced: the “pregame” programs are longer during those days and feature extra stories focusing on the Danish context.

On the streaming platform, eventness is produced through a combination of some of the temporal logics described above and spatial organization. Spatially, the “extraordinary” is produced, firstly, by the particular visual universe of the Tour de France, and secondly, by the breaking up of an established “everyday” hierarchy in the presentation of channels and genres in decks on the front page. In terms of the latter, the Tour de France universe has a highly prioritized third position from the top, just below the hero-deck and the deck labelled “Popular right now”.

The Tour de France universe stands out visually, covering a larger area than the ordinary decks organizing the rest of the content on the front page, and it contains only one deck under the headline “The sound of summer”. TV 2 has used this headline – the paratext – for years to promote spots of the Tour de France on broadcasting. In this way, the headline connects the streaming universe with the company’s long broadcasting history with the Tour de France. In Danish homes, the many hours of cycling transmissions from the Tour have been an integrated sound element during summer and vacation periods,

a backdrop of sound while viewers may be preoccupied with other activities. In contrast to the usual black background of the streaming platform's decks, the "event space" of the Tour has a bright blue background, displaying the official Tour de France logo in white and yellow, and alternating blurred images of landscapes, monuments, clouds, blue skies, and sunshine. The universe draws on a new graphic design identity rolled out across all of TV 2's platforms, developed as part of the company's reinterpretation of the Tour in light of the Danish Grand Départ. The intention was to achieve a more modern and Nordic look by combining yellow, white, and blue instead of black and yellow, using compositions of magnificent images instead of graphic elements, as well as new versions of the music jingle (Graphic designers Nina Colic and Jan Frederik, oral presentation at internal meeting at TV 2, June 17, 2022). A special edition of the graphic design identity was even developed for the three days in Denmark in order to further emphasize the live element. This was done through overlays and integrations of symbols and images, establishing an instant connection between the television station, the event, and the context. The development of a new graphic design reflects how coverage and branding in the digital age occur across platforms and relate to programs, not channels. In the context of sports, this applies not only to programs but also to big events, which adds new structural layers that must be taken into consideration. As is also the case with other big sporting events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, the television company and the organization who owns the event have shared branding interests. For this reason, TV 2 has had to develop and adapt its new graphic design in accordance with a graphics manual provided by ASO (and the organization's television and graphic partners) for the production of a unified visual representation of the event.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how the Danish production practices of the Tour de France 2022 took form in a two-fold strategic context. The argument underpinning the analysis is that the Tour is a mediatized event produced as a combined sports and media product. Thus, when the race commenced in Denmark, the event was shaped in a shared concern for television's ability to provide exposure of both the race and the socio-cultural context of the race to national and international viewers. During the race days in Denmark, the event was shaped by both a dense network of different political, commercial, and cultural stakeholders around the hosting of the Grand Départ of this mega-event, and the particular interests of the Danish public service broadcaster TV 2. The broadcasting company's ongoing transformation to a digital paradigm, in which their streaming service, TV 2 Play, will become the front door to all of their content, means that the importance of sport as a genre continues to grow, and they currently invest intensively in a broad portfolio of sports rights. For TV 2, covering the Tour de France has become part of the company's DNA. Because of the annual coverage during the summer holidays, the company has

established a unique relationship between audiences, the event, and TV 2 itself. This is of great value for the company in the current landscape of streaming services and the intensified competition for viewers.

The particular genre of a mega-event like the Tour de France plays a double role in the current situation. On the one hand, the Tour's Grand Départ in Denmark, and the success of the Danish rider Jonas Vingegaard, made it a good tool for selling and upgrading the streaming service's subscription base, which is now integrating wider segments of (older) viewers. On the other hand, new types of content adapted to viewer habits on streaming services and younger viewer profiles are also prioritized and produced. However, until now, production of new and shorter formats of content has mainly been done as a kind of experiment with limited scope. Because it remains uncertain for television practitioners what sort of extra value they can provide, which may make a difference on the competitive television and streaming market in the long term. In many ways, the Tour remains mainly conceptualized as a production for live broadcasting on the linear main channel, which is now highly prioritized on the streaming platform. However, the live event is enhanced through added content, and especially the production and distribution of highlights is considered a success. Further, through the production of eventness, national identity, and a feeling of community, the event serves as a means of branding the streaming service of the public service provider, communicated through content that emphasizes more modern values based on stylistic alignment across platforms.

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