Sports mega-events are not new. Mega media restrictions are not new either. The difference between the past and today might be, should be, that journalists refuse to be herded, prodded and force-fed with pre-masticated and sanitized information.

The difference might also be that journalists have thought twice about former sports mega-events where silence in the face of human rights violations and attacks against local colleagues compromised the integrity and the honor of journalism, a profession, I guess we all agree, that is premised not only on our self-interested use of press freedom but also on our commitment to defend it for everyone everywhere. As Columbia University president Lee Bollinger said: “in our globalized world, censorship anywhere is censorship everywhere”.

The coverage of sports mega-events is constrained by private as well as by state actors. CPJ has not really worked on these private restrictions but professional press associations have regularly protested attempts by global sports organizations eager to protect their commercial rights to impose restrictions on media coverage of mega-events. “These conditions are an infringement on the free access to information”, said Tim Balding, the executive director of the World Association of Newspapers, when in 2005 FIFA issued media guidelines limiting the right of non-rights holding media to publish World Cup pictures on their websites.

The News Media Coalition has been set up precisely to counter the increasing privatization of the public space orchestrated by mega-events organizers. This coalition, which includes major media organizations and trade associations, like Thomson Reuters, News International, Agence France-Presse, Associated Press, Getty Images, and the World Association of
Newspapers (WAN-IFRA), strives to fight “the specific threat to legitimate editorial, press and publishing freedoms from the controls placed on news-gathering and news-distribution practices by the organizers of major events of public interest”, in sports but also in the worlds of show-business, fashion or concerts. They strive to ensure that “their legal intellectual property rights are respected and not curtailed by event organizers denying access to news-gatherers unless restrictions on content are accepted”.

“Freedom of the press belongs to the one who owns one (press)”, famously said New Yorker press critic A.J. Liebling. But freedom of the press increasingly belongs to the one who owns one… mega event. The privatization of such public spaces and moments raises issues of press freedom if it means selecting and filtering out reporters, discriminating on the right to report or publish, establishing binding and crushing media and social media guidelines and eventually relinquishing the space and the timing of the event under the near complete control of the PR and spin doctors of the Games.

**State censors**

The privatization of censorship has not substituted good old state censorship. This well established tradition is all the more topical since, as Arch Puddington, Freedom House vice-president for research, recently stated, “Dictators continue to score in international sporting events”. Many of recent sports mega-events have taken place in dubious countries -the African Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea, the Formula One Race Grand Prix in Bahrain - and many of the next ones will also be hosted by rights abusing regimes, from the 2014 Olympic Games to the 2018 World Cup in Russia, from the 2015 European Games in Azerbaijan to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

This fact inevitably leads us back on the well-traveled debate on how to report, under what conditions, with what kinds of risks and challenges, in countries that do not happily flash the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the stadium’ scoreboards.
Of course there is the issue of security. All governments, democratic or authoritarian, are committed to assure the success and safety of the Games. They dedicate a lot of resources to provide security to the players and the spectators. No one in the press will object to these measures that are legitimately aimed at forestalling terrorist attacks or acts of hooliganism.

Governments however tend to maximize their security preparation, at the price of more restrictions on citizens’ freedoms and civil rights than are necessary for effective prevention. “Anti-terrorism laws in a democratic state ruled by law only serve their purpose if they improve the ability of the state to defend itself against terrorist attacks, without excessively restricting the civil rights of the citizens”, wrote Christoph Meyer in 2004.

Human rights groups and press freedom groups have bitterly learnt that they cannot expect host governments to be graced by the Olympic spirit and turn the Games into a lever to improve their record. The “spotlight effect” that was underlined this morning by FIFA director of communications Walter De Gregorio has not really been working. In fact as Arch Puddington says, “sports events give dictators a pretext to silence dissent”. The 2008 Beijing Games proves the point. “More than a year later, it is clear that awarding the 2008 Games to Beijing actually worsened the human rights climate in China”, Human Rights Watch’s director of Global Initiatives Minky Worden wrote in 2009. “They led to a deep freeze of civil society developments and unleashed a wave of xenophobia and nationalism”.

But at least could these events offer a temporary moment and a gated place for some respite from censorship and harassment? As both private and state censors convert host cities into artificial enclaves, into “cities of exception”, might life be better for a moment at least than in the surrounding state in which they are anchored?

The record of such exceptionalism however is not convincing. In fact organizers and authorities exempt themselves from any law or civil guarantees that might hamper the soft and slick development of the event. “Decrees, provisional measures and pieces of legislation are passed in
disregard of existing laws, as well as a tangled collection of low-level legislation and ordinances that create a system of institutionalized exception”, wrote last year the Brazilian Coalition of local communities for a people’s World cup and Olympics. “Through the imposition of these ad hoc norms, the principles of impartiality, universality, and transparency of the law and public administration are blatantly violated”.

In fact the alleged virtuous effect of international mega sports events, even during the parenthesis of the Cup or the Games, is a mirage. It did not materialize in China in 2008: during the Beijing Olympics, according to The Foreign Correspondents Club of China, more than 60 incidents of "reporting interference" were reported, including several cases where foreign journalists were physically harassed (Thomas, 2008). It did not happen in Bahrain in 2013. And I fear it is not going to happen in Sochi next year.

**The Sochi mega-event**

Will journalists be allowed or even be able to report freely in Sochi and roam around in order to carry out specific assignments that respond to their agenda and not necessarily to the PR plan of the organizers? The IOC and the Russian authorities have promised that press freedom will be upheld and that these events, in President Putin’s words, “will take place in a normal, businesslike and festive manner”. We will not prejudge but allow me, as a journalist and a human rights activist, to issue a few dissonant notes and raise some real concerns.

With the passing of their August 19, 2013 decree the Russian authorities have made it clear that they will cordon off Sochi to prevent terrorist attacks, a scenario heightened by real threats issued by radical Islamist groups. But these measures, because they are also meant to exclude legitimate dissent, may also cripple legitimate mainstream reporting.

During the Games the press corps will also be under high surveillance. Not only by the ubiquitous NSA, as Edgar Snowden would say…but primarily by the FSB, the heir of the state security agency KGB. According to Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, two well-known Russian investigative
journalists, the Russian security services have made sure that they can peep on anyone and listen to everyone in Sochi. The allegedly very efficient Sorms surveillance technology has been fitted to all the systems handling the traffic from and into Sochi.

More generally Russia is not a press freedom arcadia. It stands at number 148 on the 2013 RSF (Reporters without Borders) press freedom index. According to CPJ data 56 journalists have been killed since 1992. Russia is the fourth more dangerous country for journalists after Iraq, the Philippines and Algeria. And impunity is the rule.

According to all human rights groups, freedom of expression and press freedom have backtracked in Russia in the last two years, as a result of the re-criminalization of libel, new Internet regulations, the prohibition of “gay propaganda” and a chilling crackdown on civil society through the foreign agent law, that might be applied to Russians cooperating with or merely talking to foreign media.

A number of more specific measures focused on the Olympics have tightened the screws even further. Some Russian Establishment media and numerous online news and social media outlets have published stories that are critical of preparations for the Olympics. International journalists and Moscow-based correspondents have been allowed to report on Sochi, its delays, its cost overruns, its labor abuses and its geopolitical ambitions. Up to now only two foreign journalists have been sanctioned for their negativism: Fehim Tastekin, a Turkish journalist trying to report on the 19th century “Circassian genocide”, has been deported from Sochi International Airport and Dutch journalist Rob Hornstra, the author with Arnold van Bruggen of the Sochi photographic project, has been recently refused a visa to attend a cultural event in Moscow.

Most Russian mainstream media outlets however have been silent or very passive about issues surrounding the building of the Olympic city in Sochi and the preparations of the games, including the eviction of residents in relation to the Games venues’ construction, the exploitation of migrant
workers taking part in building the Olympic city, local corruption or the adverse environmental repercussions related to the building of the Olympic city.

As documented by Human Rights Watch in August and in a forthcoming CPJ report editors and media owners have discouraged their reporters from writing stories critical of the Olympic preparations. Self-censorship has spread in both Sochi- and Moscow-based media. Access to official sources on the Games construction and preparation has been given exclusively to the local affiliates of state/federal channels, who then “share” their footage with the rest of the journalists. Obviously, the picture they paint is flawless.

Jaywalking journalists and media outlets have paid a price, turning their job, as RSF said, into a “combat sports”. Such price includes administrative harassment, administrative or criminal prosecution for alleged law violations, office searches and confiscation of computers containing names of sources and contacts, and disabling denial of service attacks against critical websites. In some media inquisitive journalists have been taken off the Sochi story because they did not toe the rosy official line.

The niche of independent reporting has partly been filled by environmental activists and human rights defenders active in the region. Each of these activists and defenders have been using their personal blogs – on Russian blogging platforms, on YouTube, as well as on social networking sites such as Facebook, to blast out informational dispatches about the real situation in Sochi and to alert the society about the issues surrounding the Olympic prep.

Those bloggers have de-facto taken over the role of journalists and filled out the informational vacuum. “The trouble,” one blogger-environmental activist told CPJ, “is that even though we send our dispatches, the federal/mainstream media is silent, they don’t pick up our messages, and, if they do, they do that only when the problem becomes so gigantic that it crosses the Russian borders”, such as when HRW issued a big report on the situation with migrant workers in Sochi.
Don’t smoke hash

Let’s be candid. Some journalists are mainly concerned with the conditions related to their narrowly defined sports assignments. For them politics should be kept out of the stadium. They will only protest if draconian security measures, excessive surveillance, substandard telecommunications and unfair access to the sites hamper their own reporting. If the logistics is perfect and the official escorts polite and helpful they will remain in the bubble, on the right side of the tracks, and close their eyes to any other news that might distract them from their sports assignment and put them in trouble with the authorities. That is what many journalists did during the 1978 World Cup in Argentina or this is what they did at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Let us be candid but let us be pigheaded too. Sports mega-events are a mega-test of journalists’ integrity and independence. “All governments lie”, famously said US rebellious journalist I.F. Stone, “and disaster waits for these countries whose officials smoke the same hashish that they give out” to their own people.

Everyone of course has a choice but sports mega-events are eminently political events and journalism would be ill-served if reporters would “smoke the same hashish that governments give out” and pretend that these Games are only about scores and medals.

International journalists can have a real impact by pointing their searchlight at the stories that the authorities or the IOC would like to hide. They can take the lead and break the stories that local journalists and activists are shackled to cover.

Everyone, I repeat has a choice, but I trust that journalists, at least those journalists who made the trip to Aarhus, will candidly and pigheadedly “Play The Game”, play “their” game by following their own rules and code of honor and not the restrictions imposed by private or state censors.
“News”, press baron Lord Northcliffe said, “is what someone somewhere wants to suppress: all the rest is advertising”.

Thank you for your attention.