

Media events, globalization and cultural change: An introduction to the special issue

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In 1992, the book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz was published. Based on a number of preceding articles (Katz, 1980; Katz and Dayan, 1985; Katz, Dayan, and Motyl, 1981), the book conceptualized media events as a distinct area within media and communication research, an area that has to be investigated by crossing the empirical traditions of mass communication research and cultural studies. The ongoing relevance of this book is manifested by the simple fact that it is still the main starting point for empirical media events research.

Interestingly, Dayan and Katz did not define a media event as a certain incident that is covered by the media, but rather as a specific media genre. As such, this genre takes shape across eight points (Dayan and Katz, 1992). First, media events are an interruption of routine in broadcasting as well as in the everyday life of the audiences. Second, they monopolize the media coverage across different media channels. Third, media events are characterized by the fact that they are broadcasted live. Fourth, they are organized not by the media themselves¹, but outside the media. Fifth, media events are pre-planned productions. Sixth, they are presented with reverence and ceremony. Seventh, the coverage of media events celebrates reconciliation. Eighth, they electrify wide audiences (such as a nation, several nations, or the world).

Drawing on Max Weber's (1972) three types of authority, within this genre of media events Dayan and Katz typified three basic scripts: the 'contest' (such as the Olympic Games and which focuses on the present in the sense of affirming existing rules), the 'conquest' (such the first step on the moon and which focuses on the future in the sense of changing existing rules) and the 'coronation' (such as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, although funerals also fall into this category, which focuses on the past in the sense of tradition-bound rules). These three scripts demonstrate the extent to which Dayan and Katz's study has a special

kind of media event in focus, that is, a media event we can call a ‘ritual media event’. This typology operates with an understanding that media events are, in the most general sense, focused on the ritual confirmation of social rules and values within a nation or society. ‘Contest’ and ‘coronation’ suggest that the rules shared in a society should be maintained because they are useful in the present or are traditionally relevant. The charismatic transgression of existing rules in ‘conquests’ also functions as a social form in order to transform shared rules and take them to a new level. All in all, the approach of ritual media events developed by Dayan and Katz is focused on questions of national (or potentially transnational) integration, or more concretely, on the role of media events as “high holidays of mass communication” (Dayan and Katz, 1992).

Reception and criticism of Dayan and Katz

This concept of media events has certainly provoked disagreements. While it is not practical to sum up the whole discussion within media and communication studies here (see Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz, 2009, and the articles in this special issue), at least three of the main points can be briefly mentioned. First, the approach to media events was criticized for its ritual perspective. Dayan and Katz define media events as rituals of a mediated communicative integration (cf. Hepp, 2004), and their considerations are marked by a neo-Durkheimian perspective focusing the question of possible (national) order (cf. Rothenbuhler, 1998; Couldry, 2003). As Couldry put it, “media events, as Dayan and Katz see them, are occasions where television makes possible an extraordinary shared experience of watching events at society’s ‘center’” (Couldry, 2003). The main point of these different arguments is that an exclusively neo-Durkheimian ritual perspective on media events, due to its unquestioned focus on integration and shared values, is unable to investigate the conflicting and diverse character of media events, as demonstrated in other research (cf. Fiske, 1994).

Second, the core definition of media events as genres has been problematized. In his review of the book by Dayan and Katz, Scannell (1995) criticized the aspect of the reverent and priestly style of presenting media events as something that is not necessary a given (or as a specific historical style)². Scannell (1999, 2002), together with others such as Silverstone (1999), works instead with a basic distinction between ‘happenings’ (such as earthquakes and plane crashes) and ‘events’ (things that we make happen), and focuses on media events as mediatized performances in their historical contexts. Cottle (2006) has also tried to extend the concept of media events to a more general approach of mediatized rituals

(of which the “celebratory media events” of Dayan and Katz are part), an approach which has been criticized as inappropriate in its use of the concept of the ritual (Couldry and Rothenbuhler, 2007). In addition, Cottle’s concept of mediatization has been called “undertheorized” (cf. Krotz, 2008).

Third, the narrowness of the three typified scenarios of media events has been criticized. In the context of Dayan and Katz’s early work on media events, Weimann (1987, 1990) discussed terror attacks as a disruptive kind of media event. Others have focused on war (Wark, 1994) or political unification as media events, thus placing them within a context of power and hegemony and subsequently giving history an interpretation (Krotz, 2000). In addition, the possible relevance of media events for a European public sphere is discussed (Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von Königslöw, and Sifft, 2008), and it is argued that in addition to “ritual media events” a second kind of media event called “popular media events” also matters (Hepp and Vogelgesang, 2003). An example is the television reality program *Big Brother*, which represents the trans-cultural phenomena of diverse and contested popular cultures. This discussion demonstrates that the scenarios of existing media events are much more diverse than the early typology of Dayan and Katz is able to describe. These arguments also resulted in an extension of the original concept (Katz and Liebes, 2007; Price and Dayan, 2008).

All in all, this limited overview indicates that we should theorize media events more precisely than as a distinct genre of television. A first step might be to understand media events as certain “thickened”³ performances of media communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, transgressing different media products and formats and reaching a multiplicity of audiences in their diversity. This thematic core can be variable, ranging from war and terror to sport contests and popular games in the media. The geographical extension of a media event can vary extensively, from regional to national and possibly to global media events. At the same time, it should be noted that media events are intended as certain performances by the media or by other social actors who have an interest in constructing reality in specific and perhaps conflicting ways, in order to establish certain discursive positions and to maintain power (cf. Zelizer, 1993). In any case, due to the factor of diversity, this is an uncertain matter.

Now the importance of Daniel Dayan’s and Elihu Katz’ book “Media Events” for media and communication research has become more concrete. While many arguments have been criticized in detail, the groundbreaking outcome of this study is not only that it defined media events as an important research area, but that it also has had a methodological impact. While in classical mass communication research the focus

was on average media coverage, its reception and effect, the methodological implication of Dayan and Katz' study is the necessity of detailed, multi-level empirical research on outstanding phenomena, such as specific media events. This necessary focus on the extraordinary is presumably the reason why research on media events is especially focused on case studies and uses qualitative methods or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (cf. Hepp, 2008). Standardized methods alone seem to be insufficient for the task of capturing the specificity of media events. In a certain sense, one can argue that all the different empirical studies on media events can be understood as a further acknowledgment of this basic methodological assumption of Dayan and Katz.

Special issue contents

The horizon of academic research into media events hints at two main trajectories. On the one hand, media events are investigated with questions of media globalization and transcultural communication in mind. If we do not have a global homogenization of media communication, can media events be a type of reference point for a 'global public sphere'? Can they develop integrative moments beyond the national sphere and be a reference point for transcultural identities, on the European level for instance, or are they a certain resource for transnational communities like political movements, youth cultures or religious movements? On the other hand, media events are investigated as indicators of an ongoing cultural change. Is the diffusion of consumer cultures related to an eventization of the media? Does the mediatization of different social and cultural spheres result in a necessity to stage certain performances, such as political party nominations, as media events? Is an eventization and a subsequent refocusing of media communication the downside of an ongoing fragmentation of media offerings, an inevitable accompaniment to the increase in the number of television and radio programs and print products available most countries since the 1980s?

Questions like these were the starting point for the international "Media Events, Globalization and Cultural Change" conference held in July 2007 at the Universität Bremen, Germany, and organised by Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp and Friedrich Krotz⁴. Based on empirical research and present theoretical work, the aim of the conference was to move our understanding of media events forward in order to evaluate their status in an increasingly globalized but nevertheless fragmented world marked by cultural change. Whereas extended and revised versions of all the main theoretical papers of the conference will be published in the volume *Media events in a global age* (Couldry, Hepp, and

Krotz, 2009), the present special issue comprises a selection of revised and extended empirical papers from the conference.

The particular focus of the selected articles is a discussion of the status of media events for European communicative space and cultural change, as embedded in the context of the increasing globalization of media communication. This also explains the sequence of the articles in the volume. While the first three articles focus on specific media events in reference to globalization, the last articles move transcultural questions of an European public sphere and a European identity into the foreground.

In her article, Kyriakidou analyses the appropriation of three natural disasters as global media events in Greece: the Southeast Asian Tsunami in December 2004, Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and the Kashmir Earthquake in October 2005. Based on group discussions with 57 individuals from different social and economic backgrounds in Greece, the article explores the meaning of these media events for the local articulation of a global public sphere and solidarity. The analyses demonstrate that when natural disasters become media events, and in their appropriation of 'global solidarity', people feel as though they are a part of a transcultural, imagined solidarity community. At the same time, this discourse occurs in a nationalizing frame. This is why the 'global sphere' should be understood as a fragmentary and conflicting space shaped by the intersection of a multiplicity of discourses.

A completely different perspective is taken by McCurdy. Based on the concepts of mediation and practice theory, he investigates the media event of the 2005 World Summit not on the level of its outcome (media coverage and its reception), but on the level of the inside practices. Taking the empirical data of 32 semi-structured interviews and a year-and-a-half's worth of participant observation, the article focuses on the struggle surrounding political media events and Dissent!'s Web portal, as well as further contextualisation within the anti-globalization movement. The conflict aspects of media events comes into focus on the level of practice, as the analysis demonstrates that media events are not only sites of struggle through the media but also sites of struggle with the media.

The article by Nossek focuses on a special kind of media event: the terror attacks on 9/11 and the Madrid bomb attacks, for example. Using ethnographic content analysis, the cultural myth underlying the news stories of these events, as well as their staging in Israeli media coverage, is analysed comparatively. In order to contextualise this, the study also refers to further studies on terrorism attacks and their media coverage in Israel from the 1970s onward. The main argument is that terror attacks are a special kind of media event called 'news media-media events'. Their common characteristic is that they are staged by terrorists, and as

such they are reported in the news as incidents that threaten society fundamentally. In relation to this, the reporting journalists abandon their professional practices of 'neutral reporting' and report the events by referring to the fundamental myths of the respective society. Thus, society is provided with an orientation as to how to interpret these happenings.

This focus is elaborated on in the article by Hahn, Mok, Rössler, Schmid and Schwendemann. The object of their research is the Festival of Europe, a special event during the German EU presidency on March 24 and 25, 2007. Investigating this media event by means of a multilevel methodology (standardized and non-standardized content analyses, surveys and qualitative interviews), the study discusses the festival's relevance within the context of political communication. Through this media event, agenda setting within political communication becomes possible, relating the fields of political actors and citizens. Provided in a special national context, it offers opportunities for public discussions on transnational European issues.

Trandafoiu's article covers the same example of the European Union's 50th birthday festivities in March 2007. In contrast to the article by Hahn et al., Trandafoiu contrasts the local event in Berlin with its media coverage in the Irish and British press. The main topic of this comparative discourse analysis is to investigate how the celebration of national dishes formed the media representation of this event. The analysis demonstrates that the national symbolism of the cakes resulted in a divisive reading of the event in the press. Thus, the article substantiates the general argument in present academic discussions that media events on the transcultural level do not stimulate a coherent and homogeneous public sphere (in this case, a European one), but rather a public sphere based on diverse discourses of the same incidents.

These five articles demonstrate the relevance of ongoing research on media events. We cannot understand the present media and communication landscapes on regional, national and global levels without investigating media events. One can argue that present empirical research confirms the basic assumption of Dayan and Katz that media events are important phenomena. At the same time, the articles also show the methodological and theoretical complexities of researching media events. This is the reason why further work is needed in this field. Further possible directions for this research will also be documented by two other articles to be published in the next numbers of 'Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research': One article by Roel Puijk on 'Intense media coverage', another by Václav Stětka on 'Media events and European visions'. Both articles are based on papers presented at the 'Media events, globalization and cultural change' conference.

Notes

1. See “pseudo-events”, as described by Daniel Boorstin (1963).
2. In addition, he argued that the concept of Dayan and Katz does not treat the variations in presenting one and the same media event in different channels, and that it is inappropriate to think of its audiences as *one* collective entity.
3. This means an understanding of cultural phenomena as a kind of “thickening” (Löfgren, 2001) of translocal processes of the articulation of meaning. This opens up the possibility of understanding territorialization and deterritorialization as contested practices through which specific cultures are articulated in their particularity, in the media and beyond (García Canclini, 1995, 2001; Hepp and Couldry, 2008).
4. The conference was supported by a number of institutions. We want to extend special thanks to the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the German Communications Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, DGPK), the IMKI (Institut für Medien, Kommunikation und Information), Universität Bremen, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group) and Herbert von Halem Verlag.

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