Article

Interruptions of time: The coverage of the missing Malaysian plane MH370 and the concept of 'events' in media research

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Abstract

The article makes a case for foregrounding 'event' as a key concept within journalism studies before, during, and after the digital age. The article's first part presents an overview of the existing research on events in philosophy, sociology, historiography, and journalism studies, arguing that the concept of 'event' has not received sufficient attention in journalism studies. The article's second part demonstrates the need to consider 'event' as an essential concept of journalism studies through an empirical case study: the news coverage of the disappeared Malaysian Airlines plane MH370 (8 March 2014) in four American news outlets, *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal* and *CNN*. This article argues that journalists employed two strategies in their coverage: (1) they created and/or covered what the article calls 'substitute events', defined as minor events in the present that journalists perceived as new happenings and that led to further reporting and (2) turned to the past and the future for events in their reporting, extending the scope of coverage from the relatively eventless present. Overall, the case study shows that journalists are limited in their narration by the power of events, and they are eager to construct and cover events, even when events are not readily available.

Keywords

Event, Malaysia, MH370, narrative, temporality, time

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Introduction

There is a symbiotic relationship between journalists and events that deserves more attention from journalism scholars. Journalism is often discussed through the lens of radical social constructionism, in which journalists shape events, but events rarely shape journalists. But what if journalists are less powerful as narrators or as members of an interpretive community? What if ultimately what they can write is limited by something much larger than themselves, something much larger than life, namely 'events'? This article's first part presents an overview of the existing research on events in sociology, historiography, and communication studies, arguing that the concept of 'event' has not received sufficient attention in journalism studies. The article's second part demonstrates the need to consider 'event' as a key concept within journalism studies through an empirical case study: the news coverage of the disappeared Malaysian Airlines plane MH370 in *The New York Times (NYT), The Washington Post (WP), The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, and *CNN*. The case study highlights that events set boundaries for journalistic storytelling. Events still define *what* and *how* journalists cover, and journalists are desperate to construct and find events even – or especially – in the digital age. At the same time, while highlighting the power of events, the article also acknowledges the power of journalistic interpretation in covering events and in filling the gaps when events provide little 'substance' to cover. Overall, the article argues for a delicate understanding of the relationship between journalism and events, which can only be achieved if we give more attention to 'events' in this complex power balance.

Part I: The concept of 'events'

Events offer a diverse and often unpredictable pool of research subjects and do not lend themselves easily to generalization.[1] Nonetheless, many disciplines, in both the humanities and the social sciences, have tried to challenge the 'unique-ness' of events and find structural repetition in them. Philosophy is the leading discipline in contemporary debates on events. Various subfields of philosophy have contributed to the conceptualization of events, including phenomenology (Marion, 2002; Romano, 2008), hermeneutic philosophy (Ricoeur, 1984), post-structuralism (Deleuze, 1969; Derrida, 1982), post-Marxism (Badiou, 2005, 2009), and psychoanalytic philosophy (Žižek, 2014). In these philosophical theories, events appear as transformations of both situations *and* meanings. Events are also presented as singular entities that resist replication and are not the 'outcome' of one or even multiple 'causes' (Takács, 2015). Some of these theories may prove challenging to scholars and practitioners of journalism because these conceptualizations are skeptical toward causal explanations of events, while journalism often relies on causality.

   In addition to philosophers, since the 1970s, many historians have also expressed renewed interest in the study of events. Disillusioned by the focus on patterns and statistical regularities, these historians suggested, as French historian Pierre Nora (1974) puts it, a 'return to events'. American historian William H. Sewell Jr.'s by now canonic article from 1996 was perhaps the most ambitious attempt to systematically theorize events. Looking for a structural understanding of events, Sewell (1996) defined 'historical event'

as a 'ramified sequence of occurrences that is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that results in a durable transformation of structures' (p. 844). He was interested only in events with 'momentous consequences', events that change the course of history. Sewell argued that each historic event begins with a rupture of routines, which then leads to a chain of occurrences that transform previous structures and practices in a lasting way. Sewell's arguments could be helpful for journalism studies due to its acceptance of the power of exceptional events, while still describing the repetitive inner structure of events, similar to the ways in which journalism looks for repetition in each exception, in order to find some form of explanation.

Sociology has also attempted to find structural similarities in events (Abbott, 1990; Alexander, 2002; Mast, 2012). American sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici's (2010) conceptualization seems the most extensive so far. Wagner-Pacifici developed a model of 'political semiosis' to describe the semiotic mechanisms that contribute to the development of events. In her view, political semiosis consists of three parts: (1) performative (a speech act or other performative that changes the social order), (2) demonstrative (that places the event at a given moment and space and draws the boundaries of 'us' and 'them'), and (3) representational (pictures and other symbolic representations of the original exchanges). By adding the representational feature, Wagner-Pacifici (2010) also considered how events can become readily transportable through space, for instance, with the help of journalism: '[e]very eventful transformation involves representational features – copies of the event, or aspects of the event, need to be generated and sent outward into the wider world of audiences and witnesses at a distance' (p. 1362).

Within communication studies, some researchers have also attempted to theorize events. Journalism scholars have examined diverse journalistic practices in the media coverage (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008; Schudson, 1986; Zelizer, 2011), commemoration (Kitch, 2009; Li and Lee, 2013; Meyers et al., 2009; Neiger et al., 2011; Niemeyer, 2014; Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), and witnessing of events (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009). Scholarship on the media coverage of events has discussed exceptionally memorable events, such as the Eichmann trial (Pinchevski and Liebes, 2010), the Kennedy assassination (Zelizer, 1992), the Vietnam War (Hallin, 1986; Sturken, 1997), the Watergate scandal (Schudson, 1992), 9/11 (Blondheim and Liebes, 2002; Scannell, 2014), and the 2008 financial crisis (Appadurai, 2015). Media historians have analyzed pre-television historical events, for instance, the 1911 South Pole conquest (Ytreberg, 2014), and the 1912 Titanic disaster (Bösch, 2008). Some media scholars have even defined genres of media events, for example, media scandals (Lull and Hinerman, 1997), disaster marathons (Liebes, 1998), and media spectacles (Kellner, 2003, 2012). Simon Cottle (2006) attempted to bring together these diverse set of media event genres under a larger conceptual umbrella which he called 'mediatized rituals'.

However, the most systematic theorizing in communication studies came from Dayan and Katz (1992) in *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Inspired by a magical moment of media diplomacy, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's televised visit to Israel in 1977, Dayan and Katz analyzed preplanned ceremonial events that have received extensive and *live* television coverage. The analyzed events were classified into three genres: conquests (e.g. the landing on the moon and Pope John Paul II's historic visit to

communist Poland), contests (presidential debates, Olympic games, and soccer tournaments), and coronations (royal weddings, presidential inaugurations, and major public funerals). *Media Events* led to influential debates in communication studies. Scholars questioned the historical depth of the book (Scannell, 1995), its limited focus on ceremonial events (Carey, 1998), and its emphasis on national – not sufficiently global and comparative – contexts (Couldry et al., 2010; Sonnevend, 2016a). The early critiques triggered responses from the authors of *Media Events*, most notably an article from Katz and Liebes (2007) that included unexpected and non-ceremonial events, particularly wars, disasters, and terrorist attacks, into the concept of media events. Overall, Dayan and Katz in *Media Events* and further publications *redeemed* events, showing that events are still essential in contemporary societies and their media coverage deserves serious scholarly attention beyond the critical dismissal of media-fabricated 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1962).

Most recently, in an attempt to systematically theorize events, I have developed the new concept of 'global iconic events', defining them as news events that the international media cover extensively and remember ritually (Sonnevend, 2016b). Through the media coverage and retelling of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I showed how events travel through time, space, and media in highly fragmented interpretive spaces. The concept of global iconic events enabled the analysis of events not only in their time of coverage but also over decades of narration. It also helped understand contrasting narratives of events in global media contexts.

The current article argues that building on these existing efforts of theorizing events, we need to foreground 'event' as a key concept of journalism studies. As Michael Schudson (2008) once put it,

> [n]ews is socially constructed, but it is constructed out of Something, not out of whole cloth. And the Somethings that journalists are most sensitive to and responsive to and that scholarship has barely begun to think about are what we call 'events'. (p. 88)

Based on the crucial influence of events on journalism and on the concept's proliferation and recognition across the humanities and the social sciences, it is time for journalism scholars to begin to consider events as a major aspect of any journalistic practice before, during, and after the digital age.

Part II: The news coverage of the disappeared Malaysian flight MH370

Through an empirical case study, the coverage of the disappearance of MH370, this part of the article hopes to demonstrate the importance of events in shaping journalistic practices. The disappearance of MH370 exhibited many of the key features of events as described in Part I of this article: it interrupted the flow of time, triggered meaningful international debates, and altered our understanding of the world by shaking our beliefs in the power of ubiquitous technology. The event's representational copies traveled around the world and found home in various media from online news sites to ad-hoc memorials to detailed policy proposals.

So what happened on 8 March 2014, and why was this event so significant to the international community? On this day, MH370, an international, red-eye passenger flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, disappeared without any trace. The plane took off at 00:42 a.m. local time, with 227 passengers, 10 cabin crew, and 2 captains on board. At 1:19 a.m., the captain made the last verbal contact with traffic control: 'Good night. Malaysian three seven zero'. Until 8:10 a.m., various military radars still picked up signs from the plane, but after then, in the age of surveillance and omnipotent technology, MH370 completely vanished. The massive Boeing 777 and all the people aboard were nowhere to be found with no apparent cause. Neither the passengers' cell phones, iPads, and other gadgets, nor the plane's high-tech communication systems and satellite affordances offered any clues about the whereabouts of MH370. Journalists were left with the seemingly impossible task to cover an event that had few developments and no closure. This unique event set boundaries for journalistic narration and forced journalists to find at least 'something' to cover.

This study is based on an examination of the coverage of MH370's disappearance in the first month of reporting, from 8 March 2014 until 8 April 2014. The research population was defined as all journalistic news articles in *NYT, WP, The WSJ*, and *CNN* during this period, identified through the search terms 'Malaysia', 'Malaysia airline', 'MH370' in *ProQuest* and on the website of *CNN*, respectively. For the *NYT, Proquest Digital Microfilm* was used, which is not searchable; therefore, articles were identified through reading all headlines on all pages. The search yielded 54 articles in the *WP*, 146 in *CNN*, 67 in the *WSJ*, and 56 in the *NYT*. Two research assistants coded the articles in terms of topics covered and temporal layers used (Potter, 1996).

The aim of the analysis was to identify what journalists do when they are confronted with the limits events set to their narratives. In this case, a major event needed coverage, but the event had neither explanation nor closure. In a strict sense, after the disappearance, '*nothing' happened*. Unlike in the case of other events without closure, for instance, captivity stories (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008, 2013), journalists had no direct way to influence the event's unfolding. With their coverage of captivity stories, journalists could potentially get the captive released through increased pressure on the relevant parties. The MH370 story, however, offered journalists minimal opportunity for intervention.

So what did journalists do in this precarious case, when nothing happened that would develop the story in a meaningful way? According to the data analyzed, journalists employed two strategies:

1. Journalists created and/or covered what this article calls 'substitute events', defined as *minor events in the present that journalists perceived as new happenings and that led to further reporting*. These substitute events exhibited many of the key features of eventfulness without offering closure to the main event, the unexplained disappearance of MH370.
2. Journalists also turned to the past and to the future for events in their reporting, extending the scope of coverage from the eventless present to the hopefully eventful past and future.

Table 1. Topics covered in the news coverage of MH370.

|	WP	CNN	NYT	WSJ
Technology/data	13	8	9	12
Technology explained	11	33	28	21
Speculation/theories	18	50	19	19
Search information	24	38	31	35
Recapitulation	5	20	7	6
Recommendations	2	12	1	5
Precedents	15	34	10	13
Pilot	3	10	9	7
Media critique	4	3	1	1
Incompetency	11	25	24	22
Global collaboration	16	13	19	15
Global conflict	8	6	16	13
Family grief	10	42	15	12
Experts	16	44	24	8
Passengers	0	15	8	7

WP: *The Washington Post*; NYT: *The New York Times*; WSJ: *The Wall Street Journal*; MH370: Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

General characteristics of the media coverage of MH370

In order to understand these strategies, first a general analysis of the coverage is needed. We found that the substance of the coverage focused on 15 topics, which we coded to measure their relative frequency (Table 1 and Figure 1). The codes were identified after careful assessment of the entire research population of articles. One article often exhibited multiple codes. The 15 codes were as follows: (1) technology/data, (2) detailed explanation of technology, (3) speculation and theories, (4) search information, (5) recapitulation (of already known pieces of information), (6) recommendations (for future practice), (7) precedents (analysis of previous relevant events), (8) pilot(s), (9) media critique, (10) incompetency of airline and/or government and related issues of global security, (11) global collaboration, (12) global conflict, (13) family grief, (14) experts, and (15) passengers.

'Technology/data' refers to the emergence of new technological information in connection with the disappearance of MH370. For instance, on 27 March, the *WP* reported that new satellite images had shown more than a 100 objects floating in the Indian Ocean that the Malaysian defense minister called 'the most credible lead so far' (Yang and Halsey, 2014: A.8). 'Detailed explanation of technology' marks those articles that provided extensive elaboration on particular technologies. For instance, on 13 March, the *NYT*'s front-page article's headline announced that 'signals on radar puzzle officials in hunt for jet' (Forsythe and Fuller, 2014: A1). The article analyzed signals, which suggested that the aircraft might have diverted from its original path, meaning that previous search and rescue areas would have to be radically extended.

'Speculation and theories' cover those articles that articulated some form of explanation for the disappearance and/or whereabouts of the plane, and also those that included
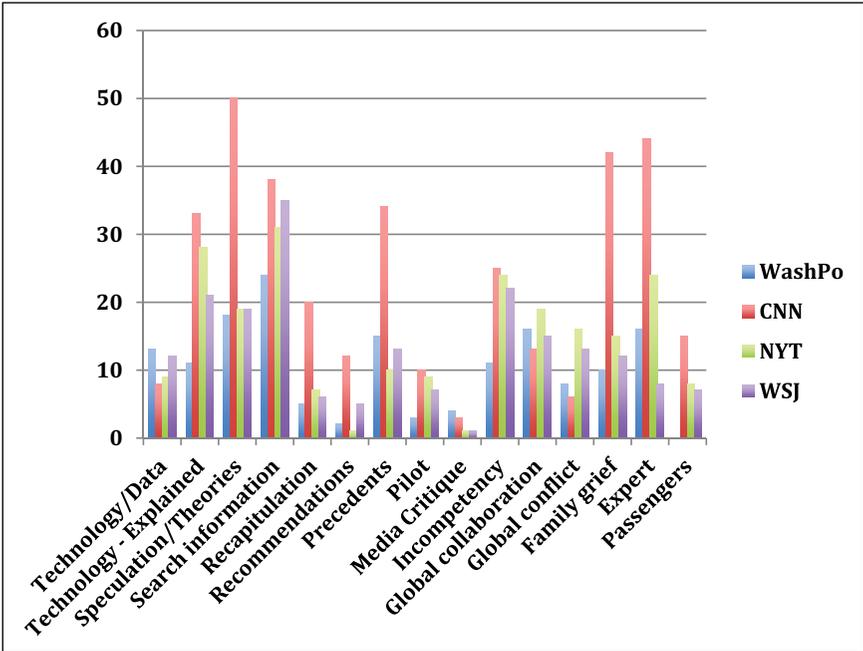
Figure 1. Graph of topics covered in the news coverage of MH370. MH370: Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

theories, both already failed and still 'valid' theories. For instance, on 10 March, the *WSJ* had discussed passengers with stolen passports as main suspects (Pasztor and Ostrower, 2014: A1), while by 15 March, the coverage shifted to sabotage (malicious involvement of the crew and/or passengers). Some of these articles also tried to answer perplexing questions about MH370. For example, on 19 March, *CNN* discussed why passengers did not make any emergency phone calls from the airplane (Cha, 2014). The most active in speculation and theories was *CNN*, likely due to the increased need to provide some *live* coverage even at times when new information was not available.

'Search information' as code was used for those articles that reported on developments in the search for the Malaysian plane. A clear example is the *WSJ*'s article on 15 March, which shared the information that '[t]he international search for Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 widened and moved drastically farther west into the Indian Ocean as new information showed the plane likely remained airborne for hours after it blinked off radar screens last weekend' (Sugden and Choudhury, 2014: A7).

'Recapitulation' refers to the repetition and reiteration of already known facts, without the adding of new information. This happened frequently as journalists lacked new facts to share. As this article will explain later in detail, journalists also often turned to past events to fill the information gap. Therefore, in our coding, 'precedent' covers those articles that revive events from the past, for instance, *CNN*'s article about the 'deadliest commercial airline crashes in history' (CNN, 2014).

The examined news outlets offered some self-critical comments and various forms of self-examination, and also the critique of other outlets' coverage. For instance, on 15 March, the *WP* published an article with the title: 'When there is no certainty, airtime fills with speculation' (Farhi, 2014: C1). The article argued that

> [n]o rumor was too small, no would-be scenario too outlandish to try it out: The plane had crashed. The plane had been hijacked. The plane had landed somewhere. Well, who really knew? Certainly not *CNN*, which used its international reporting resources to go wall-to-wall with the story for much of the week. Among its competitors, it also was the network that went the most wild, as well. (Farhi, 2014: C1)

Journalists were keenly aware of their responsibilities and frequently commented on any media failures.

'Incompetency of airline and/or government and related issues of global security' refers to those articles that covered failures by the airline, the government, and also those that related these failures to larger challenges of global security. A typical example was the *WSJ*'s article on the authorities' failure to prevent passengers with stolen passports from boarding the plane (Watcharasakwet et al., 2014). Some articles discussed the obstacles to 'global collaboration', for instance, a *NYT* article on 27 March argued that the search for the jet is 'complicated by geopolitics and rivalries', especially by the sharp tension between China and Malaysia. The article pointed out that many of the relevant data came from spying activities, which countries were reluctant to share (Wong, 2014a: A4).

Sometimes journalists covered clear 'global conflicts' that had erupted between countries. On 29 March, the *WSJ* spoke about the growing mistrust between Malaysia and the United States during the search. US investigators claimed that they did not get full flow of information from the Malaysians, while Malaysian investigators were wary of information leaks they associated with the US intelligence community (Pasztor and Paddock, 2014: A1).

Some articles shared stories about the victims and their families' grief. The coverage on families differed from typical disaster coverage, in the sense that relatives of the MH370 victims have not experienced any closure to their trauma (there was no explanation for the event and the remains of their loved ones have not been found). Therefore, much of the coverage focused on the families' anger and desperation. A characteristic example is an *NYT* article from 18 March on the tension among families as they held vigil (Wong, 2014b: A10).

Certain articles dedicated extra attention to another figure of the plot: the pilot(s), for instance, the *NYT* article entitled '[p]ossible role for pilots is "unthinkable" to friends' (Semple, 2014: A11). Finally, a substantial number of articles lined up experts to help make sense of the available information. This practice was most prevalent at *CNN*, which needed to fill airspace even without any developments in the event's story.

The construction and coverage of substitute events

While analyzing these general features of the coverage, a curious pattern seemed to have emerged. Journalists showed an interest in constructing or finding 'substitute events',

Table 2. Substitute events in the news coverage of MH370.

11 March – Families meet with officials and a semi-violent confrontation ensues
12 March – New data show plane veered off flight path, search moves
14 March 14 – New data show plane flew four hours off flight path after losing contact
15 March – investigation into the disappearance as a 'criminal event' begins
20 March – Australian search parties spot new debris
24 March – Malaysian Prime Minister announces all lives are lost through text message and press conference
27/28 March – New images of debris found, search area shifts again
31 March/2 April – Transcript of the last words from the cockpit released
6 April – Chinese ship detects signal that may be pings from the plane's black box

MH370: Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

which were *minor events in the present that they perceived as new happenings and that led to further reporting* (Table 2).

Two of the substitute events were carefully planned and timed: the press conference on 24 March and the release of the transcript of the pilots' last words on 31 March. The other seven substitute events offered the feeling of a completely 'new beginning': new data, new investigation or the spotting of new debris. Journalists were able to cover them as surprise 'events' that could shake the whole understanding of the MH370 mystery.

A characteristic example of a substitute event happened around 15 March 2014, when investigators began to suspect 'sabotage' as the main cause of the event, arguing that the plane's systems were likely disabled manually. As a major front-page article of *WSJ* stated the substitute event:

> the investigation into the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 sharpened its focus on sabotage, according to aviation and industry officials, amid strong indications that one or more people on the plane deliberately changed its course and tried to mask its location. (Pasztor and Ostrower, 2014: A1)

The new lead immediately resulted in four articles that covered related but distinct topics. These were as follows: (1) How expert knowledge was needed to disable the systems, (2) how the pilots have come under increased scrutiny, (3) the emerging 'tinge of hope' among family members, and that (4) the search was moved to the Indian Ocean based on the new data. In this case, and in the case of all other substitute events, journalists covered a 'new' event in a series of articles with great excitement.

Only one of the substitute events, the press conference, was a classical 'pseudo-event' as defined by Daniel Boorstin (1962), staged and scripted for the media (the families had already been notified before via text message). The other eight substitute events did not fit Boorstin's critical theory. From the perspective of the victims' families, information on new data or on spotting of new debris was anything but a 'pseudo-event'. These substitute events offered something to cling to in times of unimaginable uncertainty. Substitute events also offered journalists and their readers the illusion, the 'drug' of events. With the 'injection' of substitute events into public discourse, journalists and

their audiences felt that there was at least *something* happening. These substitute events directed attention away from the ultimate question of closure for the main event, and provided moments of temporary excitement and increased reporting. Substitute events also served, to use Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt's (2008) words, as devices to 'thicken the plot'. They kept up the audience's interest, even though a final closure of the event was still not available.

Substitute events typically involved some new pieces of information that either triggered hope and/or caused a shift in the search area. These 'smaller' events precipitated new stories. For instance, they led to more focus on families, a renewed interest in particular search technologies, or a seemingly better understanding of the search. Stories on substitute events also tended to be longer, as journalists likely perceived them as more substantial stories than their typical daily updates. These articles often were meeting points of a 'substitute event', a piece of already known information and some kind of human-interest angle. And articles sometimes visibly conveyed the excitement of journalists that finally they may have gotten somewhat closer to solving the puzzle. In this sense, substitute events directed attention both away from the closure of the event and towards it.

Overall, substitute events provided journalists and audiences with the feeling of experiencing an 'event', with the illusion of 'eventfulness', while the main question of what happened to the disappeared Malaysian flight remained unanswered.

Turning to the future and to the past for events

In addition to constructing and/or covering substitute events, journalists also used another method to find events for coverage: They scanned the past and mapped the future. Their coverage left the typical territory of the present and searched for events in 'time zones' where they were still available.

Recently, Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2016) have argued for the consideration of multiple nuanced temporal layers in our understanding of journalism and temporality. Their model covered 11 temporal layers: distant past, long-range past, midrange past, recent past, immediate past, present, immediate future, near future, midrange future, foreseeable future, distant, and unknown future (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016: 5). In the case of MH370, given the recentness and the mysterious character of the event, many of these layers were not present in the analyzed news sources, while other unique temporal layers emerged. Therefore, this article used a narrower model, analyzing the coverage of MH370 through the following five temporal layers: (1) past, (2) imagined past, (3) present, (4) future, and (5) imagined future (Figure 2 and Table 3).

'Past' referred to exact events that happened in the past, while imagined past covered those articles that speculated about what might have happened. 'Future' was used for those articles that talked about exact future happenings, for instance, 'there will be a press conference in two days' or 'countries will start to search this area tomorrow'. In contrast, 'imagined future' was used as code for those articles that imagined potential future scenarios. Most articles exhibited multiple temporal layers and were coded accordingly.
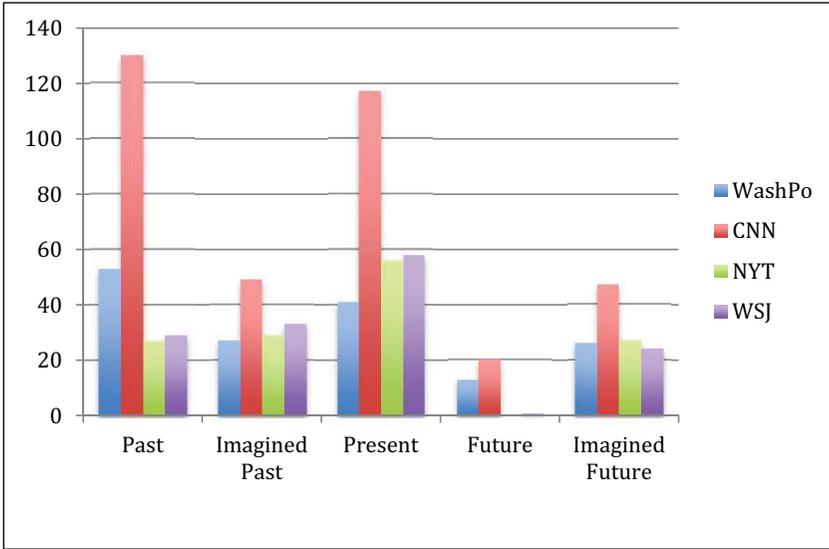
Figure 2. Graph of the five temporal layers in the news coverage of MH370. Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

Table 3. Table of the five temporal layers in the news coverage of MH370.

	WP	CNN	NYT	WSJ
Past	53	130	27	29
Imagined past	27	49	29	33
Present	41	117	56	58
Future	13	20	0	1
Imagined future	26	47	27	24

WP: *The Washington Post*; NYT: *The New York Times*; WSJ: *The Wall Street Journal*; MH370: Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

Despite great variation, there was an overall trend in journalists' usage of temporal layers. Logically, the coverage focused on the present during the beginning days as journalists were reporting on the families' desperation and on the investigative efforts of authorities. As one victim's family member eloquently summarized the experience:

'I don't understand', Mr. Zhang said over the sobs of relatives. 'We have all the technology in the world these days, and how is it that we can't locate them? GPS, phones, everything is so developed, and yet we can't find our families'. (Burkitt et al., 2014: A10)

But even at this time, coverage was intertwined with speculation about the past given the unusualness of the event. Journalists tried to come up with at least some speculative

answers based on the limited data available. Over time, the coverage bent back toward the past to look for similar events or relevant technological findings that could give guidance. Eventually, the coverage shifted its focus to the future and imagined future to picture what may await us.

The past offered journalists covering the MH370 disappearance with seemingly endless resources for events. Journalists researched events from the past and discussed them as precedents. For instance on 8 April, *CNN* presented a somewhat exotic list of precedents for the disappearance of MH370 under the telling title 'History knows many searches akin to missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370'. These included famous biblical searches (e.g. for Noah's Ark), the search for the Holy Grail, the Titanic disaster, Air France 447, and the search for Cleopatra's tomb (Martinez, 2014).

At other times, journalists speculated about potential past events and occurrences that may or may not have happened. Some of these imaginative articles pictured scenes that have likely occurred. A case in point is a *WSJ* human-interest piece about the passengers' final moments before getting on the plane. According to the article,

> dozens of interviews with friends, relatives and colleagues show that some passengers fretted about whether to get on the plane and then decided to. Other passengers were running late and rushed to the airport to make the flight. Still others changed their plans without knowing their decision would likely save their lives. (Te-Ping et al., 2014: A1)

In this case, journalists had some facts to work with and filled the remaining gaps with imagination.

In other cases, journalists had no credible information about particular events and had to build up possible scenarios. On 13 March, an *NYT* headline bluntly stated, 'Theories Grow Without Facts on Lost Plane'. The article quoted Nicholas DiFonzo, a social psychologist at Rochester Institute of Technology: 'A main ingredient for rumor generation and transmission is uncertainty' (Eckholm, 2014: A1 and A11). It seems that even the *NYT* was struggling to find something that deserved coverage; it presented a series of speculations, but could not offer much to its readers beyond an 'imagined past'.

In some cases, the speculations were particularly far-fetched. The most extreme example was an article by the *WSJ* that presented a possible link between one of the pilots and an oppositional leader of Malaysia. This article was mostly about the oppositional leader's denial of a meaningful relationship, but even so the article gave some news value to the speculation:

> Capt. Zaharie Ahmad Shah, one of the pilots of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, is distantly related to Mr. Anwar's daughter-in-law, and has voiced support for the politician's People's Justice Party. Mr. Anwar said he wasn't well acquainted with the 52-year-old pilot but rejected public speculation that the flight's disappearance may be due to foul play by Capt. Zaharie. (Hookway and Kan, 2014: A10)

Journalists also often used their imaginative power to picture potential future scenarios. For instance, *CNN* spent considerable amount of time (and space) imagining what would happen if searchers did not find the plane's black box. The black box, with its

general life expectancy of 30 days, fascinated journalists and their audiences, because it provided a frightening 'deadline' in an otherwise relatively eventless time. An article entitled 'Tick, tock: What happens after the Malaysian plane's pingers die?' imagined multiple potential futures. While doing so, it also turned to the past for guidance:

> So is all hope lost in finding a plane after the pinger dies? No. Take, for example, Air France Flight 447, which disappeared in 2009 as it was flying from Rio de Janeiro to Paris. A towed pinger locator looked – without success. But two years later, searchers using an autonomous underwater vehicle found the flight data recorder and the bulk of the wreckage hundreds of miles off Brazil. (Yan and Ahlers, 2014)

In this case, the past helped speculate about the future and provided a toolkit for answering perplexing questions. The article built on an 'expected future event' (that the pinger will die) and imagined how future could look like after this expected occurrence.

In other cases, journalists drew future scenarios without any supportive facts from the past or the present. For instance, on 21 March the *WSJ* speculated that

> [i]f authorities find that debris seen on satellite images in the deep ocean west of Australia belongs to missing Flight 370, questions about what happened to the jetliner and who if anyone caused its disappearance still may not be quickly answered. (Ng, 2014: A9)

This article presented a future scenario that may or may not occur. The future scenario that even discovered debris would not give answers to the mystery, seemed a likely outcome, but there was no way to know how much the debris would actually explain.

Overall, journalists of the analyzed news sources undertook a lot of 'time travel' to accommodate the need for events. They researched and imagined the near and distant past, and hoped to grasp at least some aspects of the future. Throughout these time travels, events emerged that captured the imagination of audiences. Some events served as precedents from the past, while other events helped picture a likely future. But in all of these cases, the relatively eventless present got populated with events from other times.

Conclusion

This article hoped to show the power of events in shaping journalistic narration. Using the case study of the disappearance of MH370, it highlighted that events are like 'drugs' that journalists and audiences crave. Therefore, when events are not easily available in the present, journalists may use the following two strategies: they (1) create and/or cover substitute events and (2) turn to the past and the future for events to simulate the feeling of eventfulness.

Events also limit what journalists can cover. The analyzed three print sources were remarkably coordinated in their coverage of MH370. For instance, *WP* pulled the MH370 story from the front page on 21 March, the *WSJ* on 18 March, and the *NYT* on 19 March 2014. Journalists of competing news outlets obviously did not coordinate on the phone; what shaped the rhythm of the coverage was the event, how much it still had to offer in relation to other events in the world. However, substitute events and meaningful

discoveries from the past occasionally did move the story of MH370 back to the front page, creating a feeling of sustained eventfulness.

The disappearance of MH370 shook many of our beliefs in the world. It questioned commonplaces like 'ubiquitous technology' and 'limitless surveillance', and challenged the argument that in the age of big data no mystery remains unanswered. It caused a numbing disappointment that technology and coordination do not provide reliable and safe knowledge of major events in the world.

Disappearance is a typical experience of our everyday lives: keys and earrings disappear in apartments, emails disappear in spam folders, and some social media tools, like Snapchat, are built for ephemeral messages. But the vanishing of a Boeing 777 with 239 people on board seemed unimaginable – until it happened. The range of possibilities has also added to the mystery. Was the plane shot down? Did a technical failure occur and the plane continued to fly on autopilot? Was it sabotage or maybe suicide by the pilots? These questions captured the attention of journalists and their audiences, who together participated in a frantic search for answers.

Journalism is built on 'developing stories', on stories that get deepened day by day. But the MH370 story violated everything that journalists, and human beings in general, expect. The only thing that developed was the *mystery*. This event reminded us that journalism communicates tragedies in life, but it is at the same time constitutionally unable to accept a tragic sense of life. Events need explanation in journalism; it is not enough to say that 'stuff happens'. This is where 'fatalistic' understandings of events in many academic disciplines clash with journalists' perceptions of events. While some philosophers, historians, and sociologists may be inclined to argue that stuff can indeed just happen, bricks can fall of on our heads, and wars can break out on irrational grounds, journalists are likely to insist that everything has or at least deserves an explanation. After all, what is a journalist without her quest for explanation?

However, the current chaos in many parts of the world may also convince many journalists that events are less explicable than they seem to be. A recent example is Scott Anderson's (2016) groundbreaking article in the *NYT Magazine* on how the 'Arab world came apart'. Covering more than 13 years of history from the origins of the invasion of Iraq to the ongoing refugee crisis, Anderson seemed to have developed a nuanced understanding of history:

> History never flows in a predictable way. It is always a result of seemingly random currents and incidents, the significance of which can be determined – or, more often, disputed – only in hindsight. But even accounting for history's capricious nature, the event credited with setting off the Arab Spring could hardly have been more improbable: the suicide by immolation of a poor Tunisian fruit-and-vegetable seller in protest over government harassment.

It was indeed rather improbable that a Tunisian fruit-and-vegetable seller could alter the history of a region, and most likely, of the entire world. But it happened. A careful consideration of these improbable yet influential events may alter journalists' understanding of history and journalism scholars' understanding of journalism. Conceptualizing events seems an essential step in this direction.

Events are powerful: They can lead to large headlines and their absence can make skillful storytellers, like journalists, rather speechless. Journalists and their audiences are

simply addicted to the 'breaking', the 'life-altering', the 'world-shaking'. In other words, events rock and rule the news. Sometimes events may even change our lives and alter our national and global histories. At the same time, events often leave us without explanation and without a 'probable cause'. Events can be equally enthralling as deeply disappointing. This article was able to show the power of events in connection with one global event as covered in four American news sources. Further studies are needed to show how 'events' and 'eventfulness' alter the journalistic landscape regionally, nationally, and transnationally in distinct contexts.

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