



# The lasting charm of Media Events

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes the power, charm and limitations of Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Harvard, 1992). It argues that the book presented a uniquely compelling and alluring concept, but has three limitations: *Media Events* has a present-centric view of events, a constrained understanding of conflicting narratives in the global context, and it is inattentive to how media events travel across multiple platforms. But overall, this essay concludes that ceremonial media events as described by the canonic book of Dayan and Katz are still important in the 21st century, and will survive the passing of time and media.

## Keywords

ceremony, Dayan, digital media, events, globalization, Katz, media events, narrative, television

Very few pieces of media research have received the kind of sustained attention that has been bestowed upon *Media Events* since its publication. We are still trying to grasp its magic and are hoping to put our fingers on its unique charm. Eric W. Rothenbuhler (2010) has argued that the book benefited from bringing together a 'social scientist of the American tradition and a humanist of the French tradition' (p. 62).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, perhaps the best way to read *Media Events* is to picture Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in an endless dinner table conversation about those televised events that interested them the most. In addition to being charming, *Media Events* also performed a particularly compelling intellectual feat. The authors reframed a key topic of media research: they moved 'events' out of the critical-skeptical universe of Daniel Boorstin's (1962) *The Image*, which presented most of the events covered by contemporary mass media as manufactured,

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strategic ‘pseudo-events’. In contrast, inspired by the work of Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner, the authors of *Media Events* applied the anthropology of ceremony to mass communication, giving weight and appreciation to media occasions of public life.<sup>2</sup> The book wondered aloud whether Walter Benjamin’s critical thoughts on the ‘aesthetization of politics’ provided the only possible framework for thinking about ceremonial events that attract the attention of political communities. The authors also highlighted the power of the singular in a field that had, thus far, mostly been fascinated by the statistical study of processes and effects, the average and the ordinary (Couldry et al., 2010). *Media Events* presented all these theoretical innovations combined with a hopeful worldview, a certain taste of neo-Durkheimian social optimism, a belief in the possibility of social integration via television.

While a powerful account of a particular genre of events in media, *Media Events* had some important limitations. I will focus on three: *Media Events*’ present-centric view of events, its limited understanding of conflicting narratives in the global context, and its inattention to how the narratives and imageries of media events travel across multiple platforms. Scholars who have attempted to rethink events often speak of a need to ‘update’ *Media Events* in a globalized digital age. But these technological arguments for revision are misleading. Certain revisions were crucial even back then in the ‘stone age’ of the 1990s.

The event that inspired Dayan and Katz was the visit of Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat to Israel in 1977. The visit was filled with hopes for peace: it marked the first time an Arab leader visited the Jewish State. As the authors explained in their introduction, ‘[f]or more than a decade, we have boarded and reboarded Anwar el-Sadat’s plane for the flight to Ben Gurion Airport, trying to understand the magic of the event’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992: vii). The formulation was precise. Dayan and Katz imagined traveling back in time, but they did so without reflecting on the act of time traveling itself. Their eyes were focused on the event in its own historical moment; the years between the event, and the moment of Dayan’s and Katz’s reflection on it, were not part of their consideration. Perhaps due to the authors’ interest in the *live* television coverage of events, *Media Events* froze events in time, blocking out their pasts and their futures.

*Media Events* also paid little attention to conflicting narratives of events in the global context. The book employed two core concepts of space: national and international.<sup>3</sup> *Media Events* did acknowledge that some events attract large international audiences. *Media Events* also emphasized that particular nations can come together in a common viewing experience. But only on a few occasions in *Media Events* did Dayan and Katz acknowledge the existence of any other constituencies than the nation and the world. The problems with this concept of space do not stem from the fact that Dayan and Katz failed to consider globalization; they did, after all, pay attention to what they called ‘world communication’. But they mostly looked at both the global and the national as single and unified interpretive spaces. Indeed, the question of ‘counter-narration’ is strikingly absent from the book. In a chapter on the pathologies of media events, the authors considered cases in which organizers disagree about the meaning of the event, or in which the audience rejects the original script. But cases in which different national media have *contrasting* interpretations of an event got little mention. When the possibility of difference or variation did come up, its significance was played down. A key example is their

treatment of the moon landing that received vastly different media coverage in the United States and the Soviet Union, nonetheless Dayan and Katz kept their focus on the ceremonial American coverage.

*Media Events* also had a limited interest in how events travel from one medium to another. Already at the time of the book's publication, media content traveled across multiple platforms; media events received coverage from television, radio, and the printed press. With its focus on live television coverage, *Media Events* made itself vulnerable to the criticism that it was only the product of a particular time in media history. It is easy to argue, even if it is by no means true, that *Media Events* has little to offer in a digital era. Had the book paid at least some attention to how the stories of events travel across television, radio, and print, it might not have been labeled a 'television book'. That label does not do the book justice: its main intellectual achievements are not bound to television, and it is relatively easy to expand *Media Events* backward (to radio) or forward (to digital media) without compromising its basic tenets.

While contemporary students would not recognize the 'old' case studies of *Media Events*, except perhaps for the moon landing and the royal wedding of Charles and Diana as 'historic' parents of Prince William, they can still understand the concept of a 'media event'. When reading about contests, conquests, and coronations, they might think of the most recent Olympic Games, the inauguration of the first African American president, or a Kardashian wedding. They may or may not watch television anymore. But they still know the feeling of being immersed in a locally, nationally or transnationally shared event.

Regardless of some gaps in theorizing, *Media Events* provides us with an exceptionally compelling and – in my opinion – rather loveable book on 'events'. No scholarly writing on events since its publication has achieved similar depth or magnitude. While originally a presentation of a particular genre of events, *Media Events* over time has become the 'constitution' for researchers of events in media – a constitution that is, nonetheless, ripe for amendment.

In 2007, Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (2007) published a journal article that included 'dark' events in the media event concept, distinguishing these unexpected, disruptive events from the carefully scripted, integrative events that had been the sole focus of *Media Events*. They also argued that disruptive events – like disaster, terror, and war – have in fact upstaged 'classical' ceremonial media events. Daniel Dayan (2008) has articulated similarly pessimistic views on contemporary media events; arguing that 'their magic is dissipating' as they have become 'strategic venues' (pp. 395–397). Katz's and Dayan's revisions were published in a time of despair, after 9/11, the second intifada, and the London bombings.

The shadowed times in which these revisions were born rendered both essays darker than our contradictory reality. Since 2007 at least five major global media events have challenged the authors' claim that disruptive events have upstaged integrative ones: the first Obama inauguration (2009), the Michael Jackson memorial (2009), the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton (2011), the Queen's golden jubilee (2012), and the Nelson Mandela memorial (2013). The excitement over contests has not faded with time either: just consider the enduring popularity of the Olympic Games, the World Cup or the massive interest in recent presidential debates. In addition to these ceremonial media

events, revolutionary events can also unite large international media audiences in a common experience of hope. A relatively recent example is the live-covered resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 that people watched in many parts of the world.

All these events show that ceremonial media events might be just as alive as they have been before. People follow them on a variety of platforms and on a multiplicity of screens. The interpretations of ceremonial events are even more fragmented than they were in the 1990s. But there are still moments that glue millions and occasionally billions to screens, there are still events that are discussed for years to come, setting a standard for future occasions. Events still structure our global lives and times, sometimes offering hope, other times uniting many in a feeling of despair.

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### Notes

1. In addition to Rothenbuhler (2010), see also in the same edited volume the introductory chapter by Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz, which provides a thorough reconstruction of the intellectual milieu in which *Media Events* was born.
2. Paddy Scannell (2014: 179) offered the most comprehensive list of the various traditions that *Media Events* positioned itself against:

[t]hey took issue with the historians and their dismissal of what Fernand Braudel had dubbed *histoire événementielle*; with the critics of ‘the society of spectacle’ from Boorstin to Debord; with Cultural Studies and its hegemonic preoccupation with the ‘political’; with the social and political scientists – notably Gladys and Kurt Lang. They parted company with the Frankfurt School luminaries, including Walter Benjamin. They were at odds with all those, who one way or another, were dismissive of public life as theatre and television as its publicity agent.

(*Television and the Meaning of ‘Live’: An Inquiry into the Human Situation*, Cambridge, UK: Polity).

3. Dayan and Katz clearly stated this binary interest in either the ‘world’ or the ‘nation’ as audience in an article published in preparation for *Media Events*: ‘[t]he corpus of material we have collected – videotapes, films, research reports – relates to events that electrified a nation or the world’ (Katz et al., 1981: 43).

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