



## Media events today

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### Abstract

Introduction to the Special Section on the 25th anniversary of the publication of Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*.

### Keywords

couldry, Dayan, events, globalization, Katz, media events, Scannell, television, time, witnessing

Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's canonic *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* is 25 years old. If it was a human being, she would be permitted to vote, drink, start a family or die in a war. But since it is a book, its ambitious possibility was to shake the field of communications and beyond – and it did just that. *Media Events* rehabilitated 'events' in media, highlighting their crucial role as 'high holidays of mass communication' in social life. The book provided us with a powerful and lasting definition of media events, and inspired streams of research in multiple disciplines ever since. *Media Events* originally focused on the live television coverage of major historic occasions, but its influence goes way beyond television studies. Its lasting legacy is showing that we just cannot live without events, that we structure our private and social lives around exceptional occasions, and media can help us join in the celebration or condemnation of events as members of communities.

*Media Events* has also highlighted the power of scholarly collaboration and friendship. Daniel Dayan (from France) and Elihu Katz (from Israel/United States) held media events workshops and talks in many parts of the world, spent around 10 years to co-write this book, perfecting the concept until the key media event categories – contests, conquests and coronations – alliterated. And more importantly, they are still friends after all

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this, no small feat given all the fights, break-ups and divorces that follow academic collaborations!

Perhaps as editor, I can allow myself a little personal anecdote as well. Eight years ago as a second-year PhD student, I really struggled with much of the literature in the foundational pro-seminar that introduced us to the ‘canon’. A lot of the material seemed hopelessly limited in scope, sadly uninterested in the symbolic components of social life, and surprisingly inattentive to the larger concerns of human existence. I was perplexed how something as exciting as media could be so often taken up with such limited imagination. Then came *Media Events*, which I read, practically without standing up, on one Saturday. I thought, finally, there is a book with charm, humor, and complexity! My love for *Media Events* has not diminished ever since, and I ended up writing my first book on ‘global iconic events’, rethinking the legacy of media events in our time.

Paddy Scannell asked me about a year ago whether I would be interested in editing a special *Crosscurrents* issue dedicated to the 25th anniversary of *Media Events*. It was a particular pleasure to edit this collection of essays that brings together junior and senior media events scholars from many parts of the world. Authors come from China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Israel, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. They all address different facets of media events.

The issue starts with an essay of Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, entitled ‘The Continuing Lure of the Mediated Centre in Times of Deep Mediatization: “Media Events” and its Enduring Legacy’. Their essay rethinks the legacy of the media event concept in the age of what they call ‘deep mediatization’, characterized by fragmented audiences, datafication, and threats to the economic viability of media event production. The authors also highlight that *Media Events* powerfully challenged the dominance of a narrow understanding of media effects in communication research. As a fun fact, readers can also learn that Dayan’s and Katz’s *Media Events* was a key influence for Nick Couldry to pursue doctoral research.

In ‘*Media Events, Solidarity, and the Rise and Fall of the Public Sphere*’, Jeffrey C. Goldfarb argues that despite our radically shifting technological environments, Dayan’s and Katz’ findings about media’s role in shaping social solidarity are just as relevant as they were in 1992. Taking a sociological perspective on media events and solidarity, in this essay Goldfarb revisits insights of Gabriel Tarde, Émile Durkheim, and Jürgen Habermas. At the end of the essay, he raises the question whether there are any ‘networked ceremonial acts beyond the algorithms of marketing’ in our time?

Julia Sonnevend’s article considers the lasting charm and enduring intellectual influence of *Media Events*. She argues that ceremonial media events are very much alive today, and she questions whether our media environment can only be described with the critical vocabulary of disenchantment, skepticism and fragmentation. While defending the concept of media events, Sonnevend also highlights three limitations of Dayan’s and Katz’s book: in her view *Media Events* has a present-centric perspective on events, a constrained understanding of conflicting narratives in the global context, and it is inattentive to how media events travel across multiple media.

The essay of Chin-Chuan Lee and Hongtao Li entitled “‘Media Events’: First Quarter of a Century and the Next” raises four questions about media events in our time. These questions touch on the appropriate typology of contemporary media events, the role

hegemony and contestation play in the shaping of media events, the perplexing usage of media events in support of anti-globalization and anti-immigrant sentiment, and finally, they also consider media events in the age of rising populism worldwide. Furthermore, the authors review their extensive work in the area of media events. The work of Lee and Li is a powerful example of non-Western rethinking of media events, including foundational studies on Tiananmen as a news icon.

Espen Ytreberg, in 'A Change is Gonna Come: *Media Events* and the Promise of Transformation', frames Dayan's and Katz's book as being mostly about societal transformation. Media events are powerful transformative moments when genuine innovation happens, for instance, the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the beginning of radically new East-West relations. Ytreberg looks at Dayan and Katz as 'democratic progressives whose intellectual lives have been intertwined with the Jewish experience and the troubled political trajectories of Israel'. He concludes that just as Sadat's visit to Jerusalem was a transformative moment in Dayan's and Katz's life, Ytreberg's life was also marked by a series of Norwegian and international media events, including Donald J. Trump's surprising election as President of the United States.

In 'Media and Events after Media Events', Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski argue that the temporal nature of the broadcast media event has remained largely unexplored in communication research. Media events as described by Dayan and Katz were experienced *live* on television, in a particular historical moment. In contrast, networked and mobile digital technologies bring distinctively different relations between media and event. These technologies gave rise to multiple temporalities and trajectories of events across a diversity of media platforms. With contemporary media witnessing, we experience a bottom-up making of events rather than the 'top-down orchestration of broadcasting'. Frosh and Pinchevski believe that today the temporalities of media events are both changing and multiplying.

Martha Evans' essay entitled 'Media Events in Contexts of Transition: Sites of Hope, Disruption and Protest' concludes this special issue by examining media events in the South African context. Evans argues that the media event format proved to be very useful in South Africa's desire to leave behind its apartheid past and build a new 'rainbow nation' under the motto 'unity in diversity'. But contemporary South African media events occur in fragmented political and media landscapes. Contemporary media events tend to have three distinct manifestations: the 'traditional' integrative media event, the disruptive event and the hijacked event, when media events are being targeted as sites of protest.

These articles are followed by responses and reflections. The first response is by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, entitled 'L'esprit de l'escalier: Twenty-five years of hindsight'. As signaled by the bilingual title, these are two complementary but independent responses, introduced by co-written remarks. Instead of reflecting on each article, Dayan and Katz selected keywords that were present in multiple essays; these keywords appear throughout their respective responses. They argue that media events must be compared to other types of 'expressive events', for instance, pseudo-events and conflictual events. Thinking about media events and globalization, they note the presence of many conflicting globalizations. Finally, they also consider the future of media events in light of new technologies and heightened audience skepticism.

Paddy Scannell's afterword begins with the surprising claim that 'media events' is probably the single most discussed and referenced topic in *Media, Culture and Society* in recent years. The topic slowly took off in the first decade, but then it started to become increasingly popular, and currently, we are seeing a proliferation of studies. Scannell points out that the tragic events of 11 September 2001 triggered a new stream of research on catastrophic events. And new ways of thinking about events have also emerged recently, most notably around the concepts of distant suffering and witnessing. At the end of his essay, Scannell emphasizes that the power of *Media Events* lies in its original way of looking at events in media, building on the 'hermeneutics of trust' in contrast to widespread accounts of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.

In addition to the above articles, we are hoping to receive further responses from all around the world. Brazil, India and Russia are particularly missing from the current lineup. In other words, this Special Section is just the beginning of the 25th anniversary celebrations of *Media Events*. Happy birthday, *Media Events*, and let the discussions begin!

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