

Chapter 10

More Hope!

Ceremonial Media Events Are Still Powerful in the Twenty–First Century

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ABSTRACT

In a journal article entitled ‘No More Peace!’: How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events (2007), Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes offered a substantial revision of Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Katz and Liebes included “dark” events in the “media events” concept, distinguishing unexpected, disruptive events from the carefully scripted, integrative events that had been the sole focus of Media Events. They also claimed that disruptive events – like disaster, terror and war – have in fact upstaged more classical media events. In contrast, in this chapter I argue that ceremonial media events - as originally conceptualized by Dayan and Katz in the nineties - are still essential and powerful features of our social lives. First, I present an overview of the “pessimistic turn” of media events research and provide my criticism of it. Second, I discuss three contemporary case studies from three national contexts: the Obama inauguration (2009), the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011) and the most recent World Cup (2014). These three events represent the three basic scripts introduced by Dayan and Katz: “conquest,” “coronation” and “contest.” I argue that the selected case studies (and many other events) still bring societies and nations together in our “disillusioned” media environment, providing momentary hope for local and cosmopolitan citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s canonic *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) spoke of exceptional, “sparkling” occasions in social life that attract large audiences, receive live television coverage and change the rhythm of regular broadcasting. These events, according to Dayan and Katz, “hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience” (p. 1): they are “high holidays”

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of communication. Interestingly, the *Media Events* volume itself became something similar to media research: a unique intellectual achievement that interrupted the regular flow of communications research and captures our imagination in a lasting way. Among its many charms, *Media Events* communicated hope for momentary social unity through a common viewing experience of a magical event. Building on Emile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence" and Victor Turner's concept of "social drama," Dayan and Katz presented media events as exceptional moments that help us renew our loyalty to society. This hopeful tone of the book of course reflected the spirit of the time in which it was written in 1992: after the end of the Cold War and well before 9/11.

A global hope in a bright new future, however, did not last for long. In the early twenty-first century a series of disrupting events shattered beliefs in an optimistic narrative of progress. Wars, natural disasters, terrorist attacks and fears of a financial meltdown shook the world. The hope and optimism of *Media Events* suddenly seemed outdated for many. Reflecting on this shifting worldview, fifteen years after the publication of *Media Events*, both Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan offered updates of their original concept. They both claimed that media events as presented in 1992 are no longer as powerful and integrative as they used to be.

In this chapter I first discuss this "critical turn" in media events research. While many scholars have attempted to rethink *Media Events*, here I will focus on the changing views of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. I then briefly discuss three contemporary case studies from three national contexts: the Obama inauguration (2009), the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011) and the most recent World Cup (2014). These three events represent the three basic scripts introduced by Dayan and Katz: "conquest," "coronation" and "contest." The selected case studies and many other events as well, still bring societies and nations together in our "disillusioned" media environment, providing momentary hope for local and cosmopolitan citizens. With the help of the three case studies, I thus argue that ceremonial media events are still essential and powerful in what many scholars describe as a "fragmented" and "disillusioned" new media environment. They still provide moments of solidarity in a way that gives rise to hope, joy, or renewal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE "CRITICAL TURN" IN MEDIA EVENTS RESEARCH

In order to understand the recent theoretical reformulations of Dayan and Katz, we first need to recall their original concept of "media events." In *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992), an event had to fulfill a strict list of requirements in order to qualify as a media event: it had to constitute an interruption of everyday life and everyday broadcasting, receive live coverage, be preplanned and scripted, and be viewed by a large audience. There had to be a normative expectation that viewing was obligatory and a reverent, awe-filled narration. The event also had to be integrative of society and (mostly) conciliatory (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Katz & Liebes, 2007). Dayan and Katz also divided media events into three basic scripts: *contests* (for instance the Olympic Games) *conquests* (such as the landing on the Moon) and *coronations* (for example the royal wedding of Charles and Diana). The worldview of *Media Events* was equally clear and organized: a neo-Durkheimian belief in media events' ability to contribute to social cohesion based on shared values and common experiences.

A narrow taxonomy and an outspoken worldview are qualities that inevitably invite theoretical tinkering. It is not hard to guess what direction such rethinking took: media scholars either opened up the definition to include more events, or they challenged or abandoned the worldview presented in the book – mostly, they did both things at the same time (Carey, 1998; Blondheim & Liebes, 2002; Cottle, 2006; Price & Dayan, 2008; Couldry, Hepp & Krotz, 2010; Scannell, 2014; Evans, 2014). Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz did not stay on the sidelines, either: both separately wrote essays taking precisely these approaches toward theoretical reformulation.

In 2007 in an essay entitled *'No More Peace!': How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events*, Elihu Katz, together with co-author Tamar Liebes, revised *Media Events*, both its concept and worldview. Katz and Liebes included disruptive events in the media event concept, distinguishing disruptive events from the preplanned and integrative events that the original book focused on. The authors discussed three examples of disruptive events, disaster, terror and war, and argued that these events have in fact *upstaged* ceremonial media events. The authors mostly blamed this shift on the cynicism, disenchantment and segmentation that were undermining the interest in ceremonial media events. They also emphasized the mobility and ubiquity of television technology and the downgrading of scheduled programming, as recent changes contributing to “darker,” more conflict-oriented media events.

The Katz and Liebes article built on Liebes' concept of “disaster marathons” (Liebes, 1998; Blondheim & Liebes, 2002). Influenced by the television coverage of the first Palestinian intifada, Tamar Liebes argued that the non-stop broadcast of disasters led to a new genre of media events. In contrast to traditional media events that are preplanned and support the establishment, in Liebes' view these unplanned events tend to lend the center stage of media to anti-establishment forces (like terrorists) and therefore limit democratic processes in societies. The influence of Liebes' disaster marathon concept is particularly visible in Katz's and Liebes' claim that disruptive events may be “co-productions” of broadcasters and the perpetrators of disruption.

Daniel Dayan adopted a slightly different view on the changing culture of media events. Dayan's chapter, tellingly entitled *Beyond Media Events: Disenchantment, Derailment and Disruption* (2008), also mourned the waning power of integrative media events, but did not claim directly that disruptive events would upstage traditional, ceremonial media events. Dayan emphasized that the original media events concept showed that a “media event, as a contemporary form of ceremony, deals reverently with sacred matters (semantics), interrupts the flow of daily life (syntactics), and involves the response (pragmatics) of a committed audience” (Dayan, 2008, p. 395). In contrast, in Dayan's view, media events are now organized around “the semantics of conflictualization, the syntactics of banalization and the pragmatics of disenchantment.” In other words, the meaning, structure and audience of media events have all gone through a radical transformation, making the original genre weak in a culture of disagreement, fragmentation and inattention. Strong words from a scholar whose work had established the study of ceremonial media events mere sixteen years before!

Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan thus convincingly critiqued their original media events concept. But their “critical turn” might not accurately represent the complex landscape of contemporary media events. Since the publication of Katz's and Liebes' article and Daniel Dayan's chapter many global media events have challenged the authors' claim that disruptive events have upstaged integrative ones. Recent integrative events include US President Barack Obama's first inauguration (2009); the royal wedding

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of Prince William and Kate Middleton (2011); Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee (2012), South African anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela's memorial service (2013) and a series of globally popular World Cups. In addition to these ceremonial media events, unexpected revolutionary events can also unite large international media audiences in a common experience of hope. Just consider the live-covered resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 or the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2014 that received extensive live coverage and captivated audiences worldwide. Moreover, unexpected events of grief can also contribute to momentary global social cohesion, for instance Steve Jobs' and Michael Jackson's deaths attracted the interest of large international audiences and triggered commemorative practices in many parts of the globe.

Highlighting the limitations of the critical turn in media events research, I will now briefly present three case studies to show that ceremonial and integrative media events are very much alive and have not yet been transported to a "funeral home." These case studies are the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009 (a conquest), the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2011 (a coronation) and the 2014 FIFA World Cup (a contest). While seemingly very different events (an inauguration, a wedding and a sports event), they all provided international audiences with "high holidays of communication," reviving the classical genre of media events.

CASES STUDIES OF HOPE: THREE CONTEMPORARY CEREMONIAL MEDIA EVENTS

Conquest: The Inauguration of US President Barack Obama in 2009

The enthusiasm around the Obama Inauguration feels now like something from the distant past, but it is important to remember the widespread excitement that characterized the festivities on January 20, 2009. The election of Obama "amounted to a national catharsis" according to the *New York Times* (Nagourney, 2008), and the inaugural event was meant to reflect this emotional "earthquake." The inauguration of the first African-American president became a traditional, integrative and ceremonial media event that was presented as a conquest, a giant leap for mankind.

The ceremony set a new record in attendance in Washington. One million invitations were printed and for the first time in history, the entire length of the National

Mall in Washington served as public viewing area (Muir, 2008). The inauguration cost approximately 170 million US dollars, highlighting the importance of a ceremonial media event even in the middle of a global recession. Top celebrities attended the event from Oprah Winfrey to Beyonce to Denzel Washington, making the event popular not only on news sites but also in tabloids. The inauguration transfixed the nation and many parts of the globe with discussion topics ranging from Barack Hussein Obama's middle name to mistakes made during the presidential oath to Michelle Obama's dress.

The event continued even after the official ceremony ended as people took to the streets, celebrating the event in ad-hoc communities that were built on a single feeling: joy over the election of Obama. Anthropologist Karin van Demmel described the celebratory crowds who occupied the streets in Kogelo, Kenya:

After the presidential inauguration had finished, a wild party commenced. While the American national anthem was being played through the loudspeakers, Kenyan flags were being waved in time with the music. A pretty young woman was wearing a kitenge depicting the smiling face of Obama on her bosom. "Our hero!" she said while pointing at the picture. A few muddy steps further, a euphoric young man opened his fifth bottle of Tusker beer and proudly held his foot up, showing me his slippers decorated with an American motif. The enthusiastic ambiance was enjoyable, and countless strangers congratulated me on Obama's victory. A laughing drunken man held my hand a little too long, to the joy of those around us. "Brain beats color!" he shouted, showing a toothless smile. While I was observing the drinking, dancing mass, a boy came up to stand beside me. He was clasping a glue-filled bottle. As do many Kenyan street boys, he derived hope from this hallucinatory drug. "You know," he hoarsely murmured, "one day I, too, will become the president of America (p. 71).

Kogelo, as the hometown of Obama's ancestors had of course special reasons to celebrate, but these spontaneous parties happened in many parts of the world from New York to Berlin to Sydney, momentarily overcoming a strong sense of anti-Americanism after the Bush era. The event fulfilled all requirements of the original media event

concept of Dayan and Katz and represented much-needed "change" and "hope" for its international audience.

Coronation: The Royal Wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton

The royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton took place on April 29, 2011 in London. The wedding had over 24 million terrestrial viewers in the UK alone (Dekavalla, 2012) and attracted 72 million live streams on YouTube in as many as 188 countries. Some even speculated that the event could have had two billion viewers worldwide (Reuters, 2011). The cost of the event was also exceptionally high. According to the *Daily Mail*, it was the "most expensive security event in history," with a bill of approximately 20 million pounds. In comparison, the 1981 wedding between Prince Charles and Diana Spencer was estimated to have cost 4 million British pounds, which equates to around twelve million pounds today (*Daily Mail*, 2011).

The royal wedding of William and Kate also fulfilled all strict definitional requirements for a media event by Dayan and Katz. As communication scholar Marina Dekavalla summarized:

As a typical example of a media event (Dayan and Katz, 1992), namely a non-routine event, organized by elite institutions, staged as a historic occasion, transmitted in real time and watched by large – even global, as in this case – audiences, the wedding was a co-product of three 'partners': its organizers, the broadcasters and the audience, both watching at home and shown on camera celebrating in London and other locations (Dekavalla, 2012, p. 296).

This media event was a classic "coronation" according to the original media events concept. Dayan and Katz defined coronations as "parades," with one of their key examples being the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana. Both royal weddings were Cinderella stories, in which women of somewhat

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lower class backgrounds married a “prince.” Large international audiences followed the fairy tales in 1981 and 2011, accepting the power of “magic” in contemporary, post-modern societies. While the 2-billion-strong viewership is likely an exaggeration, the 2011 royal wedding clearly reached the level of a “global iconic event” (Sonnevend, 2013b): it was extensively covered and has been ritually remembered ever since by international media. International audiences were glued to their screens, happily celebrating the wedding of a couple they know only from media.

Contest: The World Cup in 2014

The twentieth FIFA World Cup lasted from June 12 until July 13, 2014. It was a highly popular global media event that rewrote some national records in viewership. Just to mention a few examples, the opening game between England and Italy attracted 14.2 million on *BBC1* in the United Kingdom and 12.8 million on *RAI 1*: these numbers marked the highest TV audiences in both countries in 2014. Some 34.1 million people watched Japan play against Ivory Coast on the Japanese public service broadcaster *NHK*. The soccer game between the USA and Ghana set a new record for *ESPN* coverage of a men’s FIFA World Cup match: it had more than eleven million viewers on *ESPN* in the United States. More than seven million people watched the Spain versus Netherlands game on the television channel *Ned1* in the Netherlands – attracting the highest TV audience since 2012 (FIFA, 2014). The event was also very popular on social networking sites. It resulted in more than three billion interactions on Facebook and 672 million tweets. These promising figures of digital participation inspired FIFA President Sepp Blatter to argue that “[t]his has been the first truly mobile and social World Cup” (ESPNFC, 2014).

The final’s viewership exceeded all expectations: in the United States approximately 26.5 million people watched it on television, while over 750,000 American fans were online watching the final game during a typical minute. In Germany, the figures were even higher: a record 34.6 million people watched the last game of the World Cup: these were “the highest-ever viewing figures for German television” (ESPNFC, 2014).

The cost of the 2014 FIFA World Cup also indicated that people are still willing to invest in traditional media events. The event in Brazil cost approximately 11.6 billion US dollars (in comparison: South Africa spent 4 billion in 2010 for the last FIFA World Cup) (Rapoza, 2014). The marketing of the event was widespread, ranging from songs to souvenirs to video games. The German airline “Lufthansa” even temporarily renamed eight planes “Fanhansa” – the planes flew fans, journalists and the German national team to Brazil (Drum, 2014).

The event fulfilled all requirements of a “contest” according to the original Dayan and Katz concept of “media events.” In fact, Dayan and Katz also mentioned sports events – in particular world cups and Olympic games - as key examples of this competitive genre of a media event. If we look at the example of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, it seems that “contests” are just as captivating to global audiences as they were in 1992. Moreover, due to technological progress, in fact larger audiences than ever can follow these events in new and legacy media, proving that celebratory media events are very much alive in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that ceremonial media events as presented by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in the early nineties in their canonic *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* are still powerful in our time. While media might be fragmented and audiences occasionally disenchanted, there are still events that bring us together in contemporary “risk societies” (Beck, 1992). We might follow media events on multiple screens and in multiple time zones, but these ceremonial occasions are still exceptional, integrative moments of communication (Schudson & Sonnevend, 2009). They connect people, societies and - occasionally - the globe in a common experience of hope.

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