

## Media and Events after Media Events

Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski

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### Abstract:

Media Events is a key text in explicating the relation between media and event insofar as it provides an account of time experienced through the structures and practices of broadcasting. We suggest that Dayan and Katz's book investigates the heyday of a particular version of historicity, which is now giving way to a networked configuration of media events. Media witnessing introduces a bottom-up rather than top-down making of the event. The expansion of mobile digital technologies gives rise to multiple temporalities and trajectories of events through the media.

### Keywords:

Media Events, Media Witnessing, Temporality, Event, Liveness

*Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) is a key text in explicating the relation between media and event—the preconditions for the ontology and epistemology of events that are collectively experienced from afar and are felt by all as ‘historic occasions’ (1992: 1). It is also therefore a story of media and temporality—of a particular version of the human experience of time, enabled and performed through the structures and practices of live broadcasting. Dayan and Katz's book investigates the heyday of that particular version of historicity which, we suggest, is gradually giving way to a networked configuration of media events.

The language of time and temporality is an overt feature of *Media Events*, most obviously in the book's title and subtitle (the words ‘events’, ‘live’, ‘history’). Key arguments are also conspicuously temporal. Media events are the “*high holidays* of mass communication” and they tell a “*primordial* story about *current* affairs” (1992:

1, our italics); they are “*interruptions* of routine; they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives: (p. 5; original italics); and they are based on scripts—Contests, Conquests and Coronations—that while transmitted live are each oriented towards a different temporal dimension: the present, the future and the past, respectively.

Given the significance of these temporal characteristics, it is remarkable that the most prominent revisions and critiques of Dayan and Katz’s arguments to date have mainly focused on their work’s *spatial* claims. This applies most obviously to the discussions collected in Couldry, Hepp and Krotz’s *Media Events in a Global Age* (2010).

Especially noteworthy is the controversy over the spatial metaphor of the mediated social ‘center’ as a privileged site of shared symbols and values—and its affirmation through the experience of *communitas* produced by media events. It also applies to research on whether integrative accounts of media events can be stretched across the highly varied interpretative contexts of diverse cultures in a global media space. This does not mean that questions of time have been entirely ignored: Dayan (2008) and Katz (with Liebes, 2007) themselves considered the significant emergence of new forms of ‘disruptive’ media events (such as 9/11), one of whose key features was their unexpected and unplanned character. More recently, Sonnevend (2016) has proposed a model for understanding how certain ‘iconic’ mediated events become templates for symbolic re-enactment in later contexts. And yet, the temporal nature of the broadcast media event itself has remained largely underexplored.

At issue is the fundamental connection between ‘liveness’ and ‘history’, between the technocultural basis of broadcast television and the ‘event’ as a distinctive experience

with a particular kind of temporal structure. Through liveness, broadcast media events emphasize the historical stature of the present: their tense is close to what Stuart Hall called ‘the historic instantaneous’ (1972). While they can be re-viewed retroactively, revisited through reruns, such revisiting only confirms the experiential dependence of their historicity on their original liveness, the fact that they were once experienced as live. Reruns and recaps are shadows of the broadcast media event.

In contrast, when we first speculated about media witnessing, we intended it as a *post-media events* configuration. By that we meant that networked and mobile digital technologies brought about radically different relations between media and event than that which characterized broadcasting. From 9/11 to the Arab Spring, from the European migration crisis to worldwide terror attacks, from disaster to protest, and from citizen journalism to human rights activism—all these represent different modalities of media witnessing and, as such, new formations of event-temporalities. At the risk of oversimplification, these event-temporalities can be identified through a distinction between ‘eventfulness’ and ‘eventness’.

*Eventfulness* refers to possibilities for endowing event-status through media.

Ubiquitous media recording of the everyday (all those uploaded images, videos and posts from networked devices) means that all recorded moments are infused with their own futurity, pregnant with realizable importance, under conditions of chronic readiness and vigilance. This futurity is however also oriented to the past: the act of recording makes the flux of time available for *retrospective* discovery, as a future anterior. Where Dayan and Katz prescribe a single temporal dimension of liveness – ‘the events are transmitted as they occur, in real time: the French call this *en*

direct'(1992: 5) – media witnessing emphasizes the thickness of so-called real-time. The rhetoric and experience of broadcast liveness revolves around a temporal framework of chronological 'unfolding' – whether preplanned (as in the classic media event) or unexpected (as in a disruptive event). This unfolding is central to the power of shared synchronization that forges *communitas*: the intensified experience of a dispersed audience as a historical object travelling together through the duration of the event. The contemporary 'event' of digital media witnessing, in contrast, though it also 'occurs' in time, is multiply *enfolded*: the present is the contingent, never fully-formed node of multiple trajectories of repetition and anticipation. This is a shift from a heightened present of shared immediacy to a thickened present of potentiality, from a 'now' of televisual synchronous unfolding to a 'now' of networked immanent divergence.

*Eventness* refers to the shift to media events as distributed configurations rather than unified productions – a shift in what narrative theory calls 'focalization' (Bal, 1997: 142): the perspective through which the story is depicted. Broadcast media events are structured through their 'scripts', which determine the plot, figures and highpoint of the occasion. Based on broadcasting means of production, with a few transmitters and numerous receivers, these ceremonial scripts are all focalized through the apparatus of live transmission whereby broadcasting is cast as the 'master of ceremonies'. In contrast, the 'eventness' of contemporary media witnessing works through assemblages – interconnected points of agency arranged across dynamic networks of technologies, representations and persons. The multiplication of media devices capable of transmitting to others through networks means that there is no stable single perspective associated with the orchestration of the event. The 'center' of the event is

highly dynamic, fluctuating with the spreading and dissemination of feeds, streams, posts, tweets, images etc., which as such constitute the event both as a duration and as an aggregation. It is a bottom-up making of the event rather than the top-down orchestration of broadcasting. Even when ‘events’ emerge from these networks and are then broadcast on television, the ability for ordinary individuals either ‘at the scene’ or elsewhere to continue their own coverage and transmission (which can of course be retransmitted, edited or ignored by traditional broadcasters) suggests that conditions for creating the stable focalization required of synchronized ceremony become harder to fulfill. This does not mean that there are no hierarchies at work within the assemblages of contemporary media witnessing, or that professional media organizations do not occupy positions of power in the constitution of events. It means, rather, that such hierarchies are less capable of making their own distinctive technocultural apparatus co-extensive with the heightened ceremonial orchestration of events as discrete, collective historical units.

*Media Events* presupposes a certain conception of history: it is the history of royalties, heroes and leaders at their highest achievements, told to and simultaneously experienced remotely by ordinary viewers. The live broadcasting of these mythical structures for the modern age invites multitudes to partake in history-in-the making through televisual spectacle and involvement, ‘the experience of not being there’. It is a history implicitly formulated around a fundamental division between Kairos and Chronos, where the former refers to a heightened, punctual cosmic time (a time of divine action or opportunity), and the latter to time as a linear continuum. Both Kairos and Chronos are produced by broadcasting: the first as the specific ceremonial media event, and the second the routine television schedule which the event punctuates.

*Media Events* is not simply the story of Kairos via television, but more fundamentally of the significance of the very dichotomy between these orders (this distinction also parallels the Durkheimian division between sacred and profane time that infuses Dayan and Katz's work).

Media witnessing, in contrast, suggests a different sense of historicity: an ongoing ripeness of all time rather than intense temporal spikes interspersed with troughs of chronological routine. With mobile and networked media, every moment becomes pregnant with historical possibilities, even if the overwhelming majority of time is ordinary. Hence Kairos is immanent to Chronos, is always a possibility, though the form of its emergence from the mundane remains indeterminable because of the dynamism of the assemblage. It is also radically unstable: because it emerges from the mundane, from everyday media practices and widely distributed activities, it collapses the distinction between sacred and profane temporal orders. Just as Kairos can emerge suddenly from Chronos, it can equally as suddenly become re-routed into the ordinary, re-chronologized as it were.

*Media Events* can thus be read as documenting a distinctive historical period in which history and broadcasting intersected to produce historic time uniformly. Today, it seems, not only are the times of media events 'a-changin'— they are also multiplying.

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