Chapter 1

Global Media Events: Kennedy, Titanic, and Fukushima

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will address the theory of the media event by Dayan & Katz from an international perspective. Both authors have studied and analysed a number of media events, but have ignored the global nature of these events. Furthermore, their focus on television as the prime medium has ignored historical approaches, namely, the sinking of the Titanic or was not yet applied to the range of new media, in particular social media, for instance, during the Fukushima disaster. This chapter will revisit these events, but discuss this event from a global perspective. How was it possible that the entire world would focus its attention to this event? What narratives, networks, symbols where required to create a density that made this event outstanding, created a before and after? How could a global audience be reached; culturally and technological? This research will look into material from various world regions, North America, Europe, Asia, Latin-America and Africa. On the basis of this material the chapter aims to extend Dayan & Katz original theory of the media event, through the dimension of the global media event, but also by opening this theory to research the role of other media technologies and settings. Theoretical considerations will address the role of global rituals and social media practices, but also the role of time and simultaneity of media messages and patterns, narratives and gestures of the media events’ audience. On the basis of this more analytical frame of reference the global nature of other media events and media technologies will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION: DAYAN AND KATZ REVISITED

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s (1994) publication, Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History, is the first comprehensive study that examines media events from a theoretical and empirical perspective. The theoretical core is marked by a combination of neo-Durkheimian sociology, cultural anthropology, and Max Weber’s typification of different types of authorities. The empirical analysis consists primar-
ily of video material of a number of events that stretch from the 1960s to the late 1980s; nine particular events are mentioned (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 4), as well as empirical research on five of these (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 236, footnote 3). These core theoretical features, material, and analysed events lead the authors to a definition that can, in principle, be summarised using the term “ceremonial television” (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 1). This term, which the 1996 French translation of the book, uses as its title, relates to three core aspects: the event (a) has a unifying quality (it is watched by millions), (b) is experienced in a live setting (these events are preplanned, so everyone can participate, and their occurrence is well-known), and (c) has an integrating quality, as it transcends conflicts and differences. More abstractly, the event consists of a factual, temporal, and social dimension (Luhmann, 1995). The factual dimension refers to a common theme or narrative, the temporal dimension addresses the flow of messages in a temporal setting that is always “now” (face-to-face communication), and the social dimension debates the integration of various people. It is the third aspect which takes the lead, limiting the book to ceremonial occasions, and this notion of the ritual and ceremonial has been applied and discussed in a range of studies (for an overview, see Couldry, Hepp, & Krotz, 2009).

**Context: The Missing Global Dimension of Media Events**

The application of the anthropology of ceremony to the process of mass communication constructs constraints which are not properly addressed in the research. Although, for instance, Dayan and Katz’s (1994) publication makes frequent reference to the all-inclusive nature of events, their global reputation, and the millions of viewers of these events worldwide, the analysis of the respected events bears no such references; they are analysed primarily within national contexts. It seems that the notion of the ceremony that relates to the ritual and the rehearsal of the core normative aspects of a society are not to be found at the global level; thus, the analysis of the events remains a mostly national matter. Furthermore, the construction of a common narrative requires that the event is “telescoped in time” (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 209). This means that certain density can be created, and the event itself is uninterrupted. Dayan and Katz seem to suggest that only the television is capable of organising such density (their brief remarks on radio broadcasts and newspapers remain inconclusive). The combination of an anthropology of ceremonies and mass communication (television) leads to a number of challenges and problems, which this approach is unable to assess, such as the global dimension of media events, the role of technologies, and their social embeddedness. Therefore, instead of researching the factual, temporal, and social dimensions of media events from a preconceived theoretical perspective, this article will develop theoretical arguments through a circular approach. The methodological strategy for this will be based on ground theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first part of the article will discuss the methodological implications and present a number of cases to be studied. In the second part, particular attention will be paid to three case studies—the sinking of the Titanic, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Fukushima catastrophe—based upon which a theoretical framework will be developed. This analysis will demonstrate that the notion of *commutative networks of meaning-laden ties* is a crucial theoretical concept which is derived from researching various empirical materials and which helps us to understand the role of technologies and the global rise of media events.
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