Chapter 11
The Last Historic TV Star?
Nelson Mandela’s Funeral Broadcast, Social Media and the Future of Media Events

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ABSTRACT

History and the live broadcasting of ceremonial events have been linked throughout the 20th century. Events in the 21st century, however, especially since 9/11, suggest that the study of “media events” – those mesmerising broadcasts that have the power to historicise events instantly – cannot be limited to pre-planned, hegemonic and celebratory occasions (as was the case with Dayan and Katz’s 1992 book Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History). Instead, it must be extended to include the spontaneous live broadcasting of historical tragedies. More than this, in the early years of the new millennium, critics predicted that non-integrative broadcasts (of terror, war and disaster) would upstage traditional media events. This chapter examines Nelson Mandela’s funeral broadcast, and its implications for media events theory. It argues that, contrary to expectations of media events’ waning fate, in the age of social media, we should not be too hasty to dismiss audience desire for shared experience and the possibilities of integrative events.

INTRODUCTION

[Mandela] was, and by the time of his death was universally held to be, a great man; he may well be the last of the great men, as the concept of greatness retires into the historical shadows. – J.M. Coetzee
Sydney Morning Herald, 6 December 2013

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9967-0.ch011
How do we know when we’re experiencing “history”, when we’re caught up in a moment of time that will be recorded for future generations to read about? An intangible excitement attends such events, and a generally unopposed consensus that the event is important and historic. “Take note of where you are,” we tell ourselves, “of what you’re doing.”

“Media events”, as defined by Dayan and Katz in their groundbreaking book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992), are the television experiences of such moments. They are the broadcasting occasions that allow nations, and sometimes the world, to share in an integrative sense of “history in the making”.

Writing around the turn of the millennium suggested that such broadcasts are on the wane, however – variously threatened by new media technologies and the rise of multichannel broadcasting, by increased audience disenchantment and scepticism as well as the frequency and power of live broadcasts of disruptive, non-integrative historical tragedies and disasters (Katz & Liebes, 2007; Dayan, 2008).

But many of these predictions were made before the global growth of social media, a phenomenon that appears to have altered the ways in which audiences engage with television events. More recent writing about social media, particularly on Twitter and television audiences (Dellar, 2011; Bennett, 2012; Harrington et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2014), suggests that certain platforms are in fact being used to bring viewers together, particularly at moments of historic importance, countering some of the predictions about the segregating effects of new media.

Other scholars have looked specifically at the relationship between social media, mourning and ritual, concluding that, in an era of increasing mediatization, mourning remains a site of inclusiveness and integration, even if its ritualisation is constructed (Pantii & Sumiala, 2009; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).

This chapter examines these sets of claims in light of the 2013 live broadcasting of Nelson Mandela’s death and funeral, which, as predicted, played out as a massive global media event. Because of Mandela’s extraordinary nature and rare charisma, as well as his unique relationship with media events (both as a “star” performer and as the symbol behind many events), 91 heads of state in attended the memorial event, making the occasion one of the largest gatherings of world leaders in history. Both this event and the smaller and more intimate funeral service were broadcast live all around the world.

It is difficult to imagine a future ceremonial event on the same scale as what was witnessed with Mandela’s passing. Will we encounter the likes of such an individual again? In 2008, it appeared that Barack Obama might take on this role, and there was a seemingly electrified audience response to his election acceptance speech, watched by over 38 million viewers (James, 2012). But subsequent speeches attracted fewer viewers (*ibid.*) and, generally, reports reveal a much less enchanted reaction to the Obama phenomenon, as audiences find it increasingly difficult to believe in the concept of “greatness”.

As the conditions that have led to the demise of media events continue to flourish – as audiences become more cynical, as the proliferation of channels continues to disperse audience attention and as reporting on disruptive events continues to rise – it is tempting to see the Mandela funeral as the media event genre’s swan song, as the era, too, retires into the historical shadows.

Yet, the Mandela funeral showed the ways in which, with some mutations, and largely with the aid of social media, large television events can still subscribe to the Dayan-Katz media-event definition and the willingness – even desire – of audiences to share experiences. Responses to Mandela’s passing illustrated some of the interesting and innovative ways in which technologies can converge at times that are
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