Chapter 12

The Black Panther Has Died: Or How Ceremonial Television Hosted Public Mourning

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ABSTRACT

Media ecology is characterized today by the frequent airing of disruptive events. The shared experience of broadcasting is thus taken by disenchantment, fragmentation and individualization. Does this mean that integrative and ceremonial media events are condemned to disappear? What about media rituals and collective consensus? In this chapter, we argue that the Media Events category is not just an invaluable frame to understand contemporary television but it is also a vital process on the way societies re-work their solidarities, negotiate collective belonging and publicly stage social rituals. Analysing the live coverage of the funerary ceremonies of Eusébio, the Portuguese world-wide football legend, we address this major social occurrence approaching it as a death media event, a public mourning ceremonial and a tele-ritual. Media events are still a powerful example of how media plays a major role on social integration and national identity. The television broadcast of Eusébio’s funeral - it is claimed - constitutes a key example, in the Portuguese society, of the integrative dimension of public events.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of technological and institutional structures led to important changes on the television industry. The multiplication of channels, new modes of selecting broadcasts (zapping) and the ubiquitous presence of technical devices (multiple screens like computers, smartphones or tablets) have been key factors to the dispersion of audiences and the fragmented experience of broadcasting (Katz & Liebes, 2007: 159). Scolari (2009), in a paper comparing the hypertextual experience of Internet to contemporary viewing experience of television, draws attention to “hypertelevision”. In fact, the constant use of infographics, the rupture of linear narrative, the interactivity and the increasing of pace on editing pushes television into a new direction.

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These variations on television’s gravity-centre were crucial on a major transformation: from broadcasting (an universal access to a set of channels) to narrowcasting (only those who pay subscription are given access), or even to egocasting (Rosen, 2005) associating television with Web 3.0 where spectators can create their own public channel (as is the case of You Tube). Contrasting to a massified, synchronized and uni-directional broadcast, there is a logic of segmentation and individualization based on customization, control and participation.

Seen together, these changes have socialized us to a norm of interruption rather than of schedule (Cui, 2013: 1221), to disruption rather than continuity, to diversity rather than unity, to desynchronization rather than synchronization.

In face of these upheavals one must ask about the destiny of the ceremonial television. Does the transition from a paleo-television to a neo-television (Eco, 1985), with its individualization and fragmentation (messages are multiple; contents are individually received; audiences are selective), signifies the destruction of a certain rituality associated with television? Do we no longer assist to a convergence of society? Do civic rituals loose importance in the era of consumer societies (Bauman, 2007: 52)? Where is the place for collective memory and national belonging? In other words, does individualization, (technical) fragmentation and (social) disenchantment leave space to the unifying dimension of Media Events?

Media do not simply communicate and foster social belonging; media also communicate and create social belonging. This means that the integrative role of media must not be assumed, it must also be investigated (Couldry, 2003: 37).

Television is not just a medium that represents a social existing harmony. In the celebration of collective memory, media such as television re-presents it and strengthens the social belonging. Thus, one must look to the ways mass communication articulates contingent and historical specific patterns of (symbolic) power (Couldry, 2003: 37). Hence, one needs to connect social rituals enacted by and enacted through media to symbolic power. Social integration does not exist per se. We should study the making of symbolic forms that media events put forth, enabling them to reconnect the dispersed and disjointed society.

In this chapter we will take on these interrogations and ask whether the Media Events genre is still a major theory for understanding contemporary forms of social integration attained through mediated communication. We will claim Media Events are well alive (Cui, 2013: 1231), and are among the (few) television genres that may consolidate society’s public dimension. Despite the disruption and individualization of media reception, the Media Event, seen as a ceremonial happening, is not in jeopardy. Ritual communication (Rothenbuhler, 2010) still flows in society even if it occurs through new modes of symbolic (and mediated) structuring.

We will ponder on the rallying effect of society permitted by Media Events, through the analysis of symbolic production and reproduction on the national broadcasting of Eusebio’s funeral, a Portuguese football legend popularly known as the Black Panther. Eusebio’s exequies may be seen, in the context of Portuguese society, as a key media event and a public ritual carefully fashioned around a national pride and a historic collective memory narrative.

Employing a theoretical-informed methodology based on ceremonial media, we will explore the integrative power of social meaning involved Eusébio’s demise by a descriptive analysis of the social rituals enacted by media. We do not analyse symbolic forms such as images or discourses of social agents.