

# Media events in the age of global, digital media

## *Centring, scale, and participatory liveness*

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Many students of media studies have encountered the term “media events” early in their education and been preoccupied with core points of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s seminal work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, published in 1992. Media events have also been taught and studied by media scholars through the years. This now classic book continues to intrigue even in a digital media environment markedly different from when Dayan and Katz wrote their book in the heyday of mass communication, with broadcast television at the centre. While working on this special issue, it has become apparent that media scholars still find the concept crucial for understanding how major events are constructed through media as shared experiences and frames of reference. At the same time, it is considered challenging to adopt for analysis and discussion in a fragmented and hybrid global media landscape characterised by “eventization” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 8), which is understood as an ever-changing plurality of smaller and larger events, constructed bottom-up or top-down.

To substantiate the continuous explicatory force of the term media events in the current media culture, we must take into consideration the larger inventory of different media events. We also need to understand the more prominent role of audiences and the continuous pleasure of mediated centrings, however transient they may be: the sense created by media events of being part of larger or smaller communities and feeling the pleasure of shared experiences, focused attention, and joint belonging in the here and now. Moreover, we need to explore what scale means for our understanding of contemporary media events. Finally, we should look into how the trademark *liveness* of media events develops in a period of relentless social media postings and a temporality of the viral.

Applying the concept of media events to a globalised and datafied media en-

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vironment is certainly no easy task. Nonetheless, the six articles in the 2022 issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* take up this challenge. In this introduction, we focus on how this concept is still useful for understanding significant aspects of contemporary media culture. We also examine what has changed and what has remained the same as in the broadcast era when Dayan and Katz conceived their book. We address three key questions pertaining to the core, the scale, and the form of media events: 1) What is at the centre of media events, and do they even have a centre in today's fragmented media flow? 2) What are the upper and lower limits of media events when the world is (potentially) watching and taking active part in co-constructing and initiating media events; how do we conceive of their societal function as they are being supersized or downscaled? 3) How is live broadcast, the form defining media events, reconfigured by the constellations of liveness distinguishing contemporary media events? We conclude by introducing the five articles and one essay included in this issue.

### Where is the centre, and what is at the centre of media events?

The three editors of this issue, born in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, share the memory of witnessing the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997. This constituted one of the last genuine, "classic" ceremonial media events – in accordance with Dayan and Katz's original thinking – of almost monopolistic scale that captivated the world in front of the television screens and prompted people to abandon their own screens in favour of collective viewing with family members and others. Paradoxically though, this sense of consensus and condensed "collective attention" (Dayan, 2009) was performed on a fragile foundation of conflict pertaining to the highly publicised royal family drama, in which the princess's death was embedded. Even though we as viewers "came as mourners" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 125) to the event, and even though it might have been staged as an "occasion to repledge allegiance" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 42), we were also invited to engage in oppositional readings. In a sense, this ceremonial media event also foreboded Elihu Katz's prediction of a "coming demise of Media Events" (Katz & Dayan, 2018: 151) both in the sense of media events as a social phenomenon and as a well-defined scholarly concept.

A classic ceremonial media event like the funeral of Princess Diana epitomises what Daniel Dayan has called "television of the center" (2009: 20). The event "*transforms the ordinary roles of viewers, causing them to assume the roles proposed by the script of the ceremony [emphasis original]*" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 195). Dayan and Katz outlined the nodal points in the script, defining these ceremonial events as the large-scale interruption of everyday life and its televisual flow, the construction of a sense of awe and aura by the ritualised and ceremonially broadcast occasion, and the symbolic meaning attached to it by presenters' reverential tone of address. They also focused on the live staging of the occasion, be it a "contest", "coronation", or "conquest", and the imagined

societal unification of centre and periphery through the construction of an electrified collective we (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Thus, the media event script created a demarcated and definite position for the viewers – a “focused attentiveness”, in the words of Scannell (2009: 225). However, this position might not be as passive, as proposed by Seeck and Rantanen (2015). Dayan and Katz emphasised throughout their book that audiences are active. Media events transform audiences from “routine viewers” to participants involved in the performance of the ritual (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 120).

Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (e.g., Couldry, 2003; Hepp & Couldry, 2010) have recurrently argued against Dayan and Katz’s conceptualisation of media events as ritual communication constituted through a strong and enduring “myth of the mediated center”. Their line of argument is twofold: Firstly, they emphasise that it is “forms of media communication that *construct* ‘the myth of the centre’ [emphasis original]” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 5), and secondly, that the media have a related and integrative role. As Couldry writes:

[This] is connected with a second myth that “the media” has a privileged relationship to that “centre”, as a highly centralized system of symbolic production whose “natural” role is to represent and frame that “centre”. Call this *the myth of the mediated centre* [emphasis original]. (Couldry, 2003: 45)

These two myths are based on a Durkheimian perception that the societal role of rituals is to maintain a powerful status quo in combination with functionalist ideas of the role of mass media, which Couldry, like many others, has contested (Couldry & Rothenbuhler, 2007; Rothenbuhler, 1998, 2010; see also Bolin, 2010).

Today, media events are situated and contextualised in a radically different way. The understanding that media events communicate hegemonically from a centre to the peripheries of the social and geographical landscape is being challenged by discussions about forms of decentred communication. As Volkmer and Deffner contend, these discussions evolve around how “the center is not only deposed but the role of media powerfully defining this center is being renegotiated” (Volkmer & Deffner, 2010: 225). Or, in the words of Hepp and Couldry (2010: 12), the common globalised “we” includes “many varied national, ethnic, religious, subcultural and other voicings of that ‘we’” (see also Couldry & Hepp, 2018). The integrative, functionalistic idea of the role of media events has been replaced by more performative interpretations. From such a perspective, media take on an active, performative role in constructing themselves as “the center” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 9), where various political, commercial, subjective, and visual interests are staged and performed in a struggle for influence and power.

A range of alternative and supplementary categories of the ceremonial have been suggested in the wake of the critical exchanges on Dayan and Katz’s book, not least during the last decade and a half. Katz and Liebes (2007) propose regarding media events as either scripted, preplanned, and ceremonial, or unscripted, disruptive, and traumatic (wars, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks), thus

challenging Dayan and Katz's three original forms. Hepp and Couldry (2010) add commercialised popular media events, and Sonnevend (2018) puts forward the concept of hijacked events – originally coined by Dayan and Katz (1992) – to capture how activists might take advantage of an event to serve their own ends. Additionally, Maurice Roche (2000) has introduced the concept of a mega event to capture the remarkable growth in the size and cultural significance of certain transnational events. This term has later been operationalised by Billings and Wenner (2017). Volkmer and Deffner (2010) refer to eventspheres as transnational networks of remediated remembering of media events, and Mitu (2016: 241) adds user-generated media events, which are “constructed by the journalist and the people together via social networking sites” (see also Cottle, 2006, for an overview of different alternative terms). These examples are some of the most prominent expressions of the “continuing lure” of the concept, to borrow words from Couldry and Hepp (2018).

Despite the many critical discussions of Dayan and Katz's seminal book and its origin in a particular media historical period, its “lasting charm” is undeniable (Sonnevend, 2018). The continued attraction seems to relate specifically to a yearning for mediated centres among audiences. However, we need to think through new and continuing connections between media events and enactments of social and economic power. Hepp and Couldry (2010: 12) suggest the following widely cited definition of media events in a global age:

Media events are certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants.

This definition embraces traits from Dayan and Katz's original conceptualisation of the large-scale broadcast event insofar as it places emphasis on the situated, the centring, the performative, and a sense of scale. However, the definition does not delimit the scope of the event to broadcast television. It stipulates that the content must have a thematic core (a narrative of unification or catastrophe, for example). Moreover, it emphasises cross-mediality and the scope of address. The definition also describes the event as a culturally condensed communicative process by the suggestive metaphor of “thickening”, borrowed from Swedish ethnographer Orvar Löfgren (Hepp & Couldry, 2009). Indeed, Princess Diana's funeral is an illustrative example of a thickening in which the cultural realms of beauty, tragedy, youth, celebrity, wealth, (media) scandal, and royalty amalgamate into the ceremonial performance of a royal funeral. The metaphor bears resemblance to the classical term “high moments”, as pinpointed by Tamar Liebes (1998: 73): “such *high moments of integration* as the Prince Charles – Lady Di kiss on the royal balcony [emphasis added]”. However, whereas Liebes's high moments invoke the ceremonially affective, thickening points to discursive and thematic condensations; thickening may thus capture both contradictions and tensions

inherent in media events.

Let us finally note that the definition proposed by Hepp and Couldry (2010) emphasises that media events *reach* audiences. However, twelve years later, it makes sense for this issue on media events in a “platform society” (van Dijck, 2018) to suggest that many media events today are thickened cultural performances, while they are at the same time actively and collectively co-produced and negotiated by users on social media. Moreover, the “centre” may be moving, changing as the event unfolds and presenting various narrative peaks, such as the moment the bride and her wedding dress are revealed or the catastrophic image of a collapsing tower, a burning forest, or a flooded village (see also Marriott, 2001, 2007).

Other scholars have introduced different metaphors to describe processes of centring in the digital age. Garry Whannel (2006), for example, adds that increased speed in the circulation of information plays a central role in the centring of our attention. He suggests the term *vortextuality* to express how attention temporarily becomes centred around a core in a fragmented, but also much larger, digital media environment:

The various media constantly feed off each other (self-referentiality and inter-textuality). In an era of electronic and digital information exchange, the speed at which this happens has become very rapid. Certain super-major events come to dominate the headlines. It becomes temporarily difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else. They are drawn in, as if by a vortex. (Whannel, 2006: 69)

Whannel’s interest lies within news and popular culture rather than media events. However, he advises against completely dismissing the idea of mediated centres and points to many of the same issues as Hepp and Couldry (2010). These issues include the expansion of our media landscape and the speed of circulation, both of which enhance the intensity of news events, be they national or international, preplanned or spontaneous, large- or small-scale. He also stresses that the intensity of the vortextual moment contains oppositional voices: “It is a vortextual characteristic that, even in deriding the apparent importance given to such utter triviality, people contribute to the intensity of the vortextual moment” (Whannel, 2006: 70). In other words, the vortextual effect does not unite the audience in a shared set of values but rather establishes moments of shared attention across fragmented audiences. This constitutes a common trait of media events today.

## Scale and the ritual dimension

We claimed in the Call for papers for this issue that in today’s institutionally and technologically diverse media environment, some events still “stand out and gather attention and momentum on a greater scale, for example, large-scale sports events, presidential inaugurations, state funerals, the Eurovision Song Contest, major

terrorist attacks, and natural disasters”. According to Dayan and Katz (1992), it was precisely the scale of the event and the reverential mood surrounding its live unfolding which constituted the *mediated* event as a *media* event. However, in contemporary “times of disruptive events” (Seeck & Rantanen, 2015), ubiquitous (popular) small-scale events and “vortextual” moments, how can we define – or decide – what qualifies as a media event? This becomes all the more intricate as *live* has developed into a common competitive factor across media, the ceremonial is a rare occurrence, and news stories sell themselves as “breaking” on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Audiences are fragmented, overtly participatory, and – to quote the Call once more – navigating “between platforms that not only operate with many different time structures but are also based on datafied processes and logics of connectivity and popularity”.

One of the fundamental – and most criticised – points in Dayan and Katz’s original conceptualisation of media events is that they are societally important moments which serve ceremonial purposes, support social order, and undertake an integrative function in plural Western societies by means of their ritual structures. In their theory, Dayan and Katz try “to bring the anthropology of ceremony [...] to bear on the process of mass communication” (1992: 1–2). They base this on a positive reading of the role played by a particular mass medium, namely national broadcast television, which is considered especially vital in serving such ritual and integrative functions due to its ability to reach and “electrify very large audiences – a nation, several nations or the world” (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 8).

Media events are large and complex events taking place outside the medium, and as such, they are “hailed as ‘miracles’ by the broadcasters, as much for their technological as for their ceremonial triumphs” (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 6). The ritual function presupposes the scale and reach of both the events and the medium or media covering them. This is an important but also somewhat unspecified element in the media events theory. In contrast to much of the criticism referred to above, we argue that the integrative function of media events still exists in the digital age but is performed through more diverse articulations that work on different scales and unite people in various ways.

Hence, more nuanced analytical approaches and tools are called for that embrace both large-scale ceremonial events *and* smaller events. Large-scale events have lost some of their reverential appeal in line with a general decrease in respect for authorities and elites, and smaller events constitute significant moments but are more closely related to the everyday lives of media users.

Dayan and Katz’s theory is historically rooted in a scholarly context with a focus on broadcast television and discussions about mass society being increasingly dominated by large-scale public mass media. However, what sets Dayan and Katz apart from former theories on mass society is their positive perception of the societal role of media (Gruneau & Compton, 2017). This perceivably also reflects the period of hope in the early 1990s when their book was written: The Cold War had come to an end, Germany was reuniting, and the global economy was strong

(Evans, 2018: 139). New conceptualisations of media events naturally also reflect the time in which they are conceived. What we see today is a radical expansion of media events in terms of size, scale, and reach, resulting in a much greater span of media events. Some events, such as the Olympic Games, have grown and turned into mega- or giga-events. At the same time, smaller, more segmented events have become more common. Examples include the live broadcast of the national finals of the television show *X-Factor*, the premiere of the final season of a series on a streaming service, or events stretching in time, such as the ongoing #metoo campaign. The #metoo campaign possesses many “eventicising” features but seems primarily to gain momentum over time as it engages audiences across national boundaries. Such polarised expansion and increased heterogeneity in terms of scale and reach need to be reflected in our analysis of the ritual function uniting diverse media events.

While the ritual function might be said to be a matter for empirical exploration, the ritual as communication and mediated phenomenon still benefits from a broader theoretical conceptualisation. Eric Rothenbuhler, a former student of Dayan and Katz, has developed a framework in his book *Ritual Communication* (Rothenbuhler, 1998) and later analytical contributions (Rothenbuhler, 2009, 2010) that is useful for analysing the ritual dimension of media events in the digital age. He argues that the societal importance of the ritual as a communicative form lies in its ability to connect the individual with society on many levels. Ritual communication takes place both within large-scale, formal mediated ceremonies and in (mediated) everyday, informal micro-social interaction. Across handshakes, social gatherings, and mediated state funerals, Rothenbuhler (1998: 27) defines ritual as “the voluntarily performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life”. The ritual is a formal mode of action which has symbolic meaning, constitutes “an element of the moral regulation of social life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 5), and serves to emphasise and confirm social relationships on different scales. However, we also think it is important to include the ritual dimension in our understanding of popular media events and forms of eventisation, which use symbolic actions and stylistic conventions to express social contracts and engage audiences. As media users engage with rituals in patterned ways while seeking affective experiences or feelings of connectedness to more segmented or transitory groups, “some relation, idea or evaluation of social order” (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 111) is performed and confirmed.

Globalisation and digitisation have prompted scholars from different disciplines to debate the continued significance of media events, and a few have explicitly engaged in discussions of the scale and societal significance of media events. In terms of large-scale events, Maurice Roche, as already mentioned, has further developed Dayan and Katz’s term by adding the designation of mega-event (Roche, 2000, 2006). Mega-events are defined as “large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance” (Roche, 2000: 1). Roche’s concept is based

on a historical analysis of the development of Expos<sup>1</sup> and the Olympic Games as two cultural phenomena expressing a new type of social organisation associated with modernity and globalisation. However, the significance of Expos has decreased, and mega-events are today dominated by sporting events. Mega-events are distinctively international and large-scale, and in the case of sports, their growth is directly related to the global reach of digitised television. Moreover, mega-events are driven by networks of national, political, and economic actors all interested in obtaining exposure on a global scene but often possessing diverse and conflicting strategic interests and values. This became evident, for example, when athlete activists used the 2021 Summer Olympics in Tokyo as a platform for communicating identity politics. The interest in exposure was also evident during the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, when international political criticism and diplomatic boycotts against the hosting nation, China, prompted sponsors to adopt an unusually low profile before and during the event (Clayton & Dyer, 2022; Herships & Ma, 2022).

It has been argued that, in a globalised world, sport “in its mega-event form, comes to be an increasingly central, rather than peripheral, element of urban modernity” (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006: 2). Media are at the core, their reach and scale rendering the sport event attractive to various stakeholders and turning it “mega”. However, the increased cultural, economic, and political significance of contemporary large-scale mega-events complicates the idea that they serve integrative functions within and across nations. Inequalities and conflicts of identities and interests in and around such events have simultaneously become more manifest and visible. Even so, mega-events continue to attract a uniquely large and increasingly global mass audience. New streams of information on controversial issues surrounding mega-events mean that they may no longer evoke the celebratory “awe” in audiences. Nevertheless, in connection with mega-events like the Olympic Games, live broadcast television continues to “anchor the flow of content across screens” (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017: 32) and maintain a fascination for performative excellency with immediate appeal across social groups and nations. Therefore, it may be argued that recurring, historic mega-events still serve certain integrative functions, not least in a “changing societal environment that has the potential to destabilize and threaten these things” (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006: 1).

Media events today encompass a diverse range of recurrent popular media events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). These predominantly minor events typically address specific, devoted audiences and invite them to participate in the event’s coming into being as a media event. Audiences can participate either in front of their screens during a live transmission of a popular programme or series, or online when top-down eventisation strategies by marketers encourage excited participation. To name but one example, a frequently recurring popular online media event invites people to unite in the act of counting down to the premiere of a new season of a television series or film. The countdown to the premiere of the



final season of *Game of Thrones* is an example of how a media event was created as a marketing strategy to target a demarcated yet large, international audience eagerly awaiting the culmination of the narrative. On HBO Nordic's web page and Facebook page, a digital real-time clock ritually counted down months, weeks, days, minutes, and seconds on a poster featuring two dragon heads spurting fire and a caption claiming "The End is Near". Additionally, one of the trailers to Season 8, titled "The Countdown", ended with the caption "The Final Season starts in 8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 – The Final Season starts now". HBO even turned the very revelation of the premier date into an event. A *Hollywood Reporter* headline announced, "'Game of Thrones' Final Season Premiere Date Revealed", and a caption under the accompanying trailer urged the audience to "Start the countdown" (Wiggler, 2019). According to Merriam Webster, a countdown is a "backward counting in fixed units (such as seconds) from an arbitrary starting number to mark the time remaining before an event" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Time can count down to any occurrence, and the act of counting down transforms the occurrence into an exceptional event. Counting down constitutes a state of waiting but also generates excitement and arousal prior to the event. Thus, the act of counting down is a form of eventisation which constructs the anticipated event as a popular media event.

Despite the term "mega" and the pervasive eventisation of culture giving way to a range of smaller events, scale in itself is rarely discussed in the literature on media events. Cultural geographer Martin Müller (2015) makes a rare exception when suggesting a distinction between major, mega-, and giga-events. We could add minor events, such as the countdown. Due to Müller's scholarly background, however, he is mainly concerned with the impact of mega-events on economies and physical environments. Our interest as media and communication scholars lies in the role of scale in understanding the social and ideological function of media events, and the role of media in elevating a communicative event or activity into a higher status, allowing individuals to experience a meaningful connectedness with smaller or larger groups in society and with society at large. For Dayan and Katz, such an experience implicitly involved a live large-scale mass audience, often in a national framework. However, in the digital age, audiences are established and feel connected across national borders, media platforms, and different timespans. At the same time, media events may be more local, demarcated, and address segregated audiences.

## Participatory liveness

"The Live Broadcasting of History", the subtitle of Dayan and Katz's seminal book, accentuates how liveness has always been key to understanding media events; indeed, they appear "to demand" liveness (Marriott, 2007: 59). Claims to liveness are "ubiquitous" (van Es, 2017: 1245) in today's media landscape, which is "increasingly based on presence, on a 'fetishizing' of liveness", as remarked by

Marriott fifteen years ago (2007: 199). Social media have reconfigured the liveness of media events with various options for what we term participatory liveness: Users comment on social media in real time on the live broadcast of events, thus contributing to creating and negotiating the collective understanding and experience of such events. This is encouraged by broadcasters and becomes integral to their shaping and coverage of media events: They invite, refer to, and cite social media engagement. In some instances, events are livestreamed through social media. This has been an option since the launch around 2015 of services such as YouTube Live, Live by Facebook, and Periscope by Twitter, which enable users to simultaneously be present at, record, and transmit events (Artwick, 2019; Cooper, 2019; Mortensen, 2022; van Es, 2017); an example of this was the terror attack in 2019 on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

“Live” was first coined in relation to live media in 1934 to enable listeners to discern the status of the broadcast by distinguishing between radio recorded in advance and radio transmitted in real time (Auslander, 2008: 58–59). The term was introduced in response to an “ethical (and quasi-legal) obligation of radio broadcasters” (Auslander, 2012: 5). Auslander (2008: 60) argues that this initial conceptualisation defines the relationship between live and recorded as a “binary opposition rather than complementary”. Whether this still holds true is debatable, considering the diverse forms blurring the boundaries between live and pre-recorded (live on tape, reruns of live moments, disrupted liveness, etc.).

Scholars have attached different labels to the components of liveness (see, e.g., Couldry, 2004; Marriott, 2007; van Es, 2016). We understand liveness as a property of technology, a distinct media form, and a business strategy. First, new forms of liveness emerge with new media technologies, as we have seen most recently with livestreaming. However, it would of course be reductive to regard liveness only as a result of the facilitating technologies – or, perhaps it is the case, as Paddy Scannell (1991b: 94) has intriguingly pointed out, that “the essence of technology is nothing technological”. Second, liveness constitutes a distinct media form developing throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Across different historical manifestations of liveness, this form is distinguished by installing an enhanced sense of presence, immediacy, and authenticity (Auslander, 2008; Marriott, 2007; see also Scannell, 1991a, 1991b; van Es, 2016). However naturalized it might seem that events going on “over there” are being experienced “over here”, spatially distant and temporally proximate, liveness also “results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves”, as Auslander (2012: 8) contends. In other words, liveness is also generated through audience expectations and engagements with this distinct form. Third, in regard to liveness as a business strategy, media organisations use liveness to attract audiences by offering access to an exclusive experience of co-watching events occurring right now, right here. For example, “social television”, which combines flow television with the options for user involvement offered by social

media, constitutes a way for broadcasters to compete with streaming services (van Es, 2016: 11).

Participatory liveness seems to challenge the asymmetrical relationship that media events traditionally created between broadcast and audience, as Marriott explains: “I can see what there is to be seen on the screen, and hear what is coming out of my speakers, but I can be neither heard nor seen at the other end” (2007: 18). However, as mentioned, Dayan and Katz highlighted already in 1992 that watching media events constituted a participatory act, and Auslander adds that it involves an affective dimension: “The liveness of the experience of listening to or watching the recording is primarily affective: live recordings allow the listener a sense of participating in a specific performance” (Auslander, 2012: 5). This suggests that the liveness of media events in the mass-media era depended on and enrolled the audience as emotionally engaged, albeit distant participants. Today, participation is not only an implicit condition of media events, but, arguably, even a constituent of their liveness, as this is constructed in interplays between media organisations, platforms, and users. Power relations do not seem to have shifted fundamentally though, considering that media corporations still orchestrate and profit from most media events (and from users’ engagement with them as well).

Current media events are characterised by different forms of liveness co-existing and converging: They are “articulated in mutually rather different *constellations of liveness* [emphasis original]”, as Karin van Es remarks about contemporary media in general (2017: 1246). Participatory liveness includes the co-existence of and convergence between different forms of liveness. Broadcast television still constitutes the communicative mothership of media events that users turn to as the primary source of information. At the same time, users report on, discuss, and process events on social media, thus creating “online liveness”, which Nick Couldry defines as “social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites [*sic*], all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure” (2004: 356).

The countdown that we discussed above is one example of participatory liveness. It demonstrates the prominence of presentism as constitutive of a media event. It also exemplifies how a popular media event may be small in scale and yet inscribe large (designated and dedicated) audiences to participate collectively in the event as the precondition for its coming into being.

Another recent example of participatory liveness – and the assembly of forms involved – occurred during EURO 2020, the European championship in men’s football, which took place in the summer of 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During Denmark’s opening match against Finland on 12 June, played on the home stadium in Copenhagen, star player Christian Eriksen suddenly collapsed on the pitch with a cardiac arrest. The midfielder received life-saving treatment while his teammates formed a circle around him to shield him from the gaze of

the spectators at the stadium and the worldwide audiences watching the live broadcast of the match. When this serious incident happened, Danish public service broadcaster DR shifted from the main UEFA live feed to alternative helicopter footage of the stadium, while BBC and other television companies kept transmitting the main feed, showing images of Eriksen's partner in despair and teammates crying as doctors performed CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Users on social media communicated intensely about this event. The dramatic occurrence generated at least 76 million interactions on Instagram and a minimum of 46 million interactions on Facebook on the day of the event and the following two days. When Christian Eriksen uploaded an image from the hospital bed three days later, thanking well-wishers for their support, it received 7.3 million likes (as of February 2022; Eriksen, 2021). Meanwhile on Twitter, TikTok, and other social media, clips from the live transmission quickly began to circulate and obtained views in the hundreds of thousands. Criticism was levelled at the news media for turning the life-threatening incident into a "media spectacle" (Manavis, 2021), and psychologists warned that watching these types of disturbing images might have a harmful effect on children (Christensen, 2021).

Even though the opening match between Denmark and Finland in 2021 followed an unpredictable script, it was predictable in the sense that it has always been a condition of liveness that things can take unexpected turn. Dayan and Katz (1992: 5) pointed to this as a vital element of media events: "The events are transmitted as they occur, in real time [...]. They are therefore unpredictable, at least in the sense that something can go wrong". Media events might even be "hijacked", as already mentioned, since "the cameras are mounted, the lights are turned on, the ceremony begins. There is no stronger temptation to advocates of some revolutionary case than to turn these lights and cameras on themselves" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 72; see also Sonnevend, 2018). The risk of hijacking and the general unpredictability mean that the narrative of media events can suddenly change and transform one type of media event into another. As Dayan (2010: 30) has remarked, they "lend themselves to a rich grammar of appropriations" (see also Liebes, 1998; Mortensen, 2015). In the case of the Christian Eriksen incident, the event turned from being a contest – an integrative media event – to a disruptive media event, with a focus on saving a person's life rather than on the championship. This transformation occurs live and also as a condition of the live (cameras were present), and as the Danish broadcaster chose to shift to footage other than the live transmission of the stadium, they broke the usual contract of liveness – that is, that the production process must "conceal itself" (Scannell, 1991b: 161).

Media users played a key role in the transformation of this media event. On social media, users collectively experienced and tried to make sense of the highly unfortunate events transpiring in real time. They commented on the choices made by broadcasters, and on the gap between what was going on and what was being shown. They also crowdsourced the Internet, news sites, and television channels

to speculate about and procure information about the occurrences on the football field hidden from many television viewers. They published still photographs not shown on television of Eriksen carried away on a stretcher and of Eriksen's partner, while at the same time discussing the ethics of showing (or not showing) such images. Users (or trolls) also spread misinformation about Eriksen's cardiac arrest being caused by vaccination against Covid-19 (Monsell, 2021). Meanwhile, television hosts commented on the activity on social media, thereby pointing to the role of users in co-creating this disruptive media event. Participatory liveness, which included different live broadcasts and forms of online liveness, contributed to creating the disruptive media event while at the same time challenging the hegemony of television by exposing that the way the event was presented on television constituted just one of many narratives that could have been told. This brought the construction and co-construction of liveness to the fore.

The question is how and to which degree participatory liveness changes media events? Liveness has always defined media events as a particular configuration of proximity and distance. While distance prevails in spatial terms (we are still watching from afar), participatory liveness eliminates some of the formal distance created by the ceremonial element of media events, referred to by Paddy Scannell as "television with 'a halo', auratic television" (1991b: 179). As users engage, the ceremony of media events becomes intertwined with mundane practices and everyday media habits. This might create a greater sense of nearness to events. Moreover, users are no longer constituted as an imagined and more or less homogeneous group; participatory liveness makes their dispersion and diversity visible, and the same applies to their confirmative and disruptive contributions.

## Contributions to this special issue

What happens when we bring media events into discussion in a digitised media age characterised by datafication, audience fragmentation, and globalisation? This is the central question addressed by the five research articles and essay included in this issue. They conceptualise and contextualise, theorise, and study contemporary media events in the age of global, digital networks.

Anne Jerslev's article centres on temporality, on how liveness is performed in and by media events. Media events render time visible and explicate our situatedness in time, she argues. Jerslev proposes the concept of "temporality of liveness", which she develops theoretically as an umbrella term for various performances of temporality that construct the liveness of media events. She also explores the temporality of liveness empirically through case studies of three different media events: the Danish queen's 2020 New Year's speech; the Danish prime minister's speech in March 2020 to mark the first lockdown of Denmark due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and the inauguration of American president, Joe Biden, in January 2021. By studying the different temporalities unfolding in these three events, Jerslev demonstrates how liveness can serve as an entry point to analysing media

events. The three cases also serve as a reminder, Jerslev contends, that even in today's global and connective media environment, broadcast media still largely shape the liveness of media events and draw audiences to them precisely due to the shared experiences of live. This is also the case when users engage in participatory liveness, for instance, by creating memes, such as the ones of American senator Bernie Sanders wearing a face mask, knitted wool mittens, and looking far from impressed at Biden's inauguration.

Tapping into one of the core questions of this issue, Niels Brügger asks how the supplementing of television by a new media form, the Web, has affected the ways media events, understood by Dayan and Katz as a televisual genre, can be conceptualised. Building on medium theory, Brügger outlines aspects of the discussion about media events in a web-based media environment. He proceeds by discussing the reach of three core perspectives in media events theory – liveness, participation, and control – based on what he calls “a history of forms” of the Web. Brügger's point is that these terms have been crucial to Dayan and Katz's understanding of media events and are also recurrent in scholarly discussions of the history of the Web. In the last part of the article, Brügger analyses the entanglement of the three perspectives by focusing on the Olympic Summer Games from 1996 to 2016. Through the investigation of a range of different websites, including those of the shifting organisers of the Olympics and the BBC as an example of a television broadcaster, Brügger discusses how the Web's shifting environments cause liveness, control, and participation to unfold differently. He concludes that it is possible to transfer Dayan and Katz's concepts to digital media. However, he also emphasises that it is crucial to be precise about what is meant by “new” or “digital” media and how their fixed features are translated differently to various concrete forms.

Jessica Yarin Robinson and Gunn Enli's article addresses how online networks and social media like Twitter transform national media events into “deterritorialised” media events with a broader reach. Through an analysis of English-language tweets during the 2018 Swedish parliamentary election campaign, Robinson and Enli illustrate how national politics is simplified when interpreted in transnational networks and transferred to new cultural contexts. Their findings show how the transnational audience for this small national media event constitutes different ad hoc subnetworks, each engaging in particular themes. Most of these themes stem from the international sphere rather than from the issues at the thematic core in the national context. In these Twitter discussions, there is a continued reliance on the ability of traditional news media to construct a thematic core, while also an inclination among fractions of the participating audiences to construct counter-narratives.

In their article, Katja Valaskivi, Johanna Sumiala, and Minttu Tikka argue for the need to update media events theory in order to develop a conceptual and analytical framework for interpreting how a sense of belonging (and not belonging) emerges ritually in relation to hybrid and violent media events. Valaskivi, Sumiala,

and Tikka understand rituals of belonging as ambivalent, repetitive “media-related practices and performative media enactments”. To study how these ambivalent rituals of belonging form violent media events, they single out five analytical tools: actors, affordances, attention, affect, and acceleration. In order to also capture the hybridity of such violent media events, they propose three additional tools: assemblage, amplification, and accumulation. While their article is primarily a conceptual contribution, Valaskivi, Sumiala, and Tikka also apply these tools to a qualitative case study of the 2019 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. They conclude that today’s commodified communication environment encourages the ambivalence of rituals of belonging and renders violent, hybrid media events inherently unstable and also somewhat arbitrary.

Much of the criticism of Dayan and Katz’s original theory has focused on their ideas about media events as narratives serving to maintain the existing social order. However, Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg’s article points to a particular but mostly overlooked element in Dayan and Katz’s original work, namely the concept of transformative media events. Bolin and Ståhlberg discuss how this concept relates to later conceptualisations of disruptive events. To explore such concepts from the media event theory, and in particular how media narrate political actions into events, Bolin and Ståhlberg analyse political protests and revolutions taking place in Ukraine since the winter of 2013–2014. Their analysis shows that three events – revolutions – have been constructed as a long, transformative super-narrative by the media, which constructs an integrative myth of the Ukrainian nation-state. Still, Bolin and Ståhlberg’s analysis also raises serious questions about the conceptual and analytical distinction between events and media events, which becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as media increasingly permeate all aspects of late-modern social reality

Paddy Scannell’s essay, which concludes the issue, is a tribute to Elihu Katz, who passed away on 31 January 2022 at the age of 95. In his contribution, Scannell outlines how *Media Events* paved the way for thinking of television in new ways, and he offers a view on Katz’s contributions to media and communication studies throughout 42 years. Scannell goes back to Katz’s master’s thesis about happiness, which he discusses at some length. He also calls attention to a less well-known scholarly study about “The unique perspective of television and its effect” (Lang & Lang, 1952/2004), which precedes *Media Events* by four decades. Scannell provides insight into Dayan and Katz’s discussion of media events, and he contemplates connections between media and time by asking how broadcast television and media events keep an eye on the past. Two orders of time – “the time of life in the work of Elihu Katz, and the time of history through the book he wrote with Daniel Dayan” – are thus thought through in Scannell’s essay, which reminds us of the long history of the concept and its continuous usefulness for grappling with the challenges of contemporary media culture – as demonstrated by the articles in this issue.

## Note

1. The term Expo covers a range of global events, which have taken place since 1851. They are also known as world exhibitions or world fairs. They are public events organised by governments to showcase the most innovative and progressive ideas, practices, products, or technologies across countries and cultures.

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