

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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Rethinking media events as a TV format: A study of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest

Michael Skey

Abstract

The literature on media events has grown dramatically in recent decades. More recent studies have looked to move beyond functionalist readings, noting the complexity of media environments and social settings and foregrounding relations of power. Notwithstanding their key contribution, these critical approaches present a rather one-dimensional vision of social change and, at times, risk losing their connection with Dayan & Katz's original formulation. We argue that events that are anticipated and involve external organizations in their design demand a specific set of analytical tools. In particular, we suggest that focusing on the production side and, in particular, conceptualizing such events as a specific type of TV format enables us to achieve two objectives. First, to move beyond textual analyses to focus on the struggles that take place inside the media events between different interest groups (organisers, producers, participants, fans). Second, to sharpen our thinking around the place and significance of media events in the contemporary era. We illustrate our arguments by drawing on ethnographic material from the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, held in Copenhagen.

Keywords: media events, TV formats, Eurovision Song Contest, television Producers, Denmark.

1. Media events: a critical overview

Recent work on media events has looked to expand the definition of the concept to incorporate a whole host of features, including disasters (Katz & Liebes, 2007: 416), ‘popular media events [tied to] ... celebrity culture’ (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 8) and ‘news events’ (Seeck & Rantanen, 2015: 175). The original definition proposed by Dayan & Katz in their groundbreaking work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) was far more parsimonious and referred to *live* events that *interrupt* daily routines and schedules, are *preplanned* and *organized outside the media* by large public or other bodies, involve *ceremonial* elements that are presented with *reverence* and *electrify very large audiences* (ibid.: 4-8). Crucially, they also drew on Durkheim’s (1976) seminal argument around the importance of religious festivals in strengthening social ties and applied it to the modern era of mass media broadcasts. As they wrote, media events ‘integrate societies in a collective heartbeat and evoke a *renewal of loyalty* to the society and its legitimate authority’ (emphasis in original, ibid.: 9).

This presumed integrative function of media events has been the focus of the most important critiques of the concept (see: Hepp and Couldry, 2010). The problem with such a functionalist reading is that it presents an unduly simplistic view of social order and overlooks struggles for power and the cleavages (ethnic, religious, class, gender and so on) that fragment even the most settled societies.

A second critique concerns the place of media and how we understand media power. In the original formulation, media events were viewed as ‘shared experiences uniting viewers with one another and with their societies’ (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 13). This top-down approach underplays the extent to which audiences and alternative media can ignore and challenge dominant readings of such events. Such criticisms are becoming even more salient in an era of digital technologies that blur the boundaries between producers and audiences, enable a range of competing narratives around particular events and contribute to the complexity of local, national and regional media landscapes.

2. Expanding the category: From disasters to ‘popular media events’

Another recent critique of the media events concept has been its narrow focus, with two broad arguments being made. First, scholars such as Liebes and Katz (2007) have taken issue with the idea that media events should be preplanned or

anticipated, arguing that this omits major news events that interrupt schedules and capture the public's attention for short periods of time. A related argument comes from those who observe a move towards 'eventization' (Hepp, 2004), as media producers look to interrupt regular schedules in order to capture the public's attention in a fiercely competitive marketplace. Hepp and his colleagues have argued for a new category of 'popular media events' that can capture the growing importance of 'consumer and celebrity cultures' (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 8). In doing so, they observe that such events 'break with the everyday but in a much more routine way', only monopolize media coverage in certain 'cultural segments' and 'do not happen 'live' but in a continuous development' (*ibid.*).

While it is obviously important to attend to 'events' or programmes that interrupt schedules in novel ways as well as audiences' increasingly complex engagements with a variety of media, we are not necessarily persuaded that this expansion helps to sharpen our understanding of these different phenomena. Indeed, we believe it is still important to draw an analytical distinction between events that are preplanned and those that are not. Although unexpected events, such as disasters or terrorist attacks, have become a notable feature of contemporary news reporting, it is also important to acknowledge the differences between the mediation of, say, a major natural disaster and a subsequent event designed to commemorate it. These differences include everything from the style of reporting to the ability of powerful institutions to shape a coherent narrative.

In a similar vein, we suggest making a further distinction between those 'events' produced by and for the media (such as the finals of reality TV shows) and those that are produced by the media but in collaboration with other institutions, whether state, supra-state or non-state. This is because, as we will see, the involvement of these 'external' actors impacts on the design of an event and how it is managed.

Part of the problem here may be that the vast majority of empirical research into media events has offered textual analyses of particular performances (Jones & Subotic, 2011), alongside a more limited number of audience studies (Georgiou, 2008). In other words, there have been relatively few studies of the production side of such events, despite the fact that Dayan and Katz (1992: 62-73) viewed the negotiations between organisers and broadcasters as a key element in their original conceptualization. Such a perspective allows us to restate the importance of events that are preplanned, as well as the need to study them in terms of design, organization, reception and evaluation. In the next section, we want to develop some of these ideas by drawing on another body of literature, studies of television formats.

We believe that conceptualizing media events as a specific type of television format can help us to sharpen our thinking about their continuing significance in the contemporary era.

3. TV formats

Put simply, television formats are programmes developed in one country that are sold to (and repurposed by) producers in other parts of the world. Popular examples include *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* In the last two decades, the popularity of television formats has risen dramatically, to the extent that they now form part of a multi-billion-dollar global industry and, in the process, have become some of the most watched television shows of all time (Waisbord, 2004). While there is no overriding consensus on how to define a television format, two key elements have been identified in the literature (Esser, 2010; Oren & Shahaf, 2013). First is the ‘distinctive narrative dimension’ (Chalaby, 2011: 294). This refers to the specific ways in which key elements of a television programme are arranged so that an identifiable ‘narrative progression is created’ (ibid.). The format has often been discussed as a set of rules or even a recipe that producers must follow in order to develop dramatic arcs, generate particular moments of tension and conflict (commonly called ‘trigger moments’) (Chalaby, 2011: 295) and highlight the ‘journey’ of key participants. The second key features are portability and adaptability, as formats are defined by the manner in which they cross borders and appeal to audiences in multiple locations (Esser, 2010). At the heart of this process lies what is called the production bible, which sets out key aspects of a show’s design, budget, marketing, organization and so on. For while some degree of local adaptation is permitted, the ‘bible’ is designed to ensure the programme remains faithful to the original and, in theory, has the best chance of success in new markets. In order to protect their brand, and ensure its continuing profitability in international markets, the format’s copyright holders may also send out consultant producers to provide advice to local teams (Chalaby, 2011: 296).

Although, to our knowledge, the concept of the television format has never been formally applied to media events, we believe that insights from the former may be usefully adapted to study the design, production and significance of the latter. This is particularly the case for events that are cyclical in nature and managed over time by a central authority (the European Broadcasting Union being a good example), but where each individual competition is hosted by a different, usually governmental, organisation (local, national or regional) and may involve a range of media producers, some state, some commercial.

4. Media events as TV formats

With these types of cyclical media events, the central organizing authority again looks to ensure consistency across time when it comes to many aspects of their design, organization and promotion. For instance, the Olympic Games features a range of clearly defined elements, the Olympic Torch relay, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, the lighting of the Olympic flame, a fixed schedule for the ‘blue riband’ competitions, medal ceremonies with anthems and flags, that cannot be tampered with, no matter where the host city. To this end, the International Olympic Committee has a 276 page ‘production bible’, entitled the Host City Contract, which ‘is designed to ensure that all parties understand and agree to a specific set of responsibilities that guarantee successful Olympic Games and, create a beneficial legacy for the Host City and the Olympic Movement’ (IOC, 2016: 13). This contract covers a panoply of issues, ranging from signage (sponsorship and branding is, of course, a major concern) to sustainability and ticketing. Moreover, while host cities and nations are obviously encouraged to emphasise their own unique attributes and cultural traditions, there are often quite ferocious struggles between the IOC and local organising committees when it comes to, for instance, what is featured in the various ceremonies, how an ‘Olympic legacy’ is developed and evaluated, how the various sporting competitions are mediated and so on. Similar patterns can be seen in relation to the organisation and promotion of the football world cup, where the main organising body, FIFA, uses its considerable power to primarily ensure: consistency in the way in which the competition is marketed, the pre-eminence of the various FIFA sponsors, and the global image of the game of football, sometimes at the expense of the hosts and football fans (Eisenhauer, 2013: 260). FIFA also produces guidelines for host cities (its production bible) which not only outline the rules of the competition but how it is to be organized and, of course, marketed (FIFA, 2017). There is some leeway for each host country when it comes to issues such as designing the official mascot and ‘look’ of the tournament (*ibid.*), but as for television formats, while ‘local producers can be allowed to alter the ‘flesh’ of a format [they] ... can never touch the “skeleton”’ (Chalaby, 2011: 295).

The second part of this paper will develop some of these arguments in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest, drawing on a range of empirical examples from inside the media event. In the next section, however, we provide a brief overview of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) and outline its relevance to our overall argument.

5. The Eurovision Song Contest: A brief overview

Ostensibly a competition to decide the best original pop song among member states of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the ESC has become the most popular international music event in the world, attracting annual audiences of over 150 million (Eurovision Song Contest 2014). As well as the live broadcast, the ESC also generates debates across other media. For instance, Twitter reported 5,384,678 tweets sent around the 2014 final (which compares with around 11 million for that year's Oscars ceremony) (Twitter, 2014).

In terms of its history, claims are often made (Bourdon, 2007: 264) that the ESC was part of a sociocultural project *designed* to unify Europe after the travails of the Second World War. but the historical record shows this to be largely wishful thinking (Henrich-Franke, 2012). Rather, the focus of the fledgling EBU (created in 1950) was to develop common technological and judicial frameworks for the new medium of television (ibid.: 35). When it comes to the significance of the contest, some have argued that it matters because it is one of the few occasions when substantial numbers of 'ordinary' people across Europe may come to reflect on what it means to be European (Skey et al., 2016, Kyriakidou et al., 2017). Leaving aside whether the ESC integrates (Bolin, 2006; Akin, 2013) or fragments (Jones & Subotic, 2011) European producers and audiences, the contest remains a notable feature of the European media landscape and continues to engage viewers, hosts, performers and sponsors.

In the following sections, we draw on data collected from the 2014 ESC with a particular focus on interviews carried out with senior Danish television producers employed by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR). These individuals are experienced producers of major television events and worked closely with the EBU on planning and organising the ESC in Copenhagen that year.

These discussions were significant in not only flagging up the tensions between the different stakeholders involved in producing the event, but also the idea of media events as a particular type of television format. In doing so we demonstrate that the pre-planned nature of such events, and the involvement of media producers and non-media stakeholders, is of absolute significance, marking them out from other forms of interruptive programming.

6. The EBU and the ESC production bible

As the long-term custodian of the ESC, the EBU is ‘directly responsible for overseeing and guiding all aspects of the finances, organization, creative planning and execution’ (European Broadcasting Union, 2015: 10). Each year it works closely with the member who won the previous year’s competition to identify a suitable venue, market the event, design a programme and ensure that the broadcast and other facilities are in order. Here, a production bible, which covers everything from the permitted content of songs and the eligibility of performers to the workings of the voting system, is again used to ensure that there is consistency over time and the competition retains a unique ‘brand’ within an increasingly competitive (and global) media landscape (more of which below). It is also designed to reduce the potential for disruptive elements that might damage the standing of the competition or cause problems for future hosts. The EBU has to deal with a range of governments and media organisations, both in Europe and beyond, and such a high profile event represents an ideal opportunity for many such groups to try and promote their interests. Therefore, the EBU is particularly concerned with trying to portray the ESC as an apolitical event and ensuring that overt political statements are omitted. To this end, the rules of the competition specifically state that:

The ESC is a non-political event ... No message promotion for any organization, institution, political cause or other cause, company, brand, product or service should be allowed in the Shows and within any official ESC premises (i.e. at the venue, during the Opening Ceremony, the Eurovision village, the Press Centre etc.). A breach of this rule may result in disqualification. (EBU, 2018)

Moreover, these are not idle threats. Georgia’s 2009 entry, a thinly disguised attack on the Russian leader Vladimir Putin, was banned from the competition. Likewise, Turkey was suspended for two years when the state broadcaster refused to transmit coverage of the Greek entry in 1976 (Akin, 2013).

The voting system is another element that is carefully managed by the EBU, with recent shifts to the current mixed system being an attempt to manage concerns over voting irregularities, improve audience engagement and ensure a wider range of winners after the dominance of newer entrants in the 2000s (Fricker and Gluhovic, 2013: 3-4).

7. Keeping the format intact

While the EBU is able to control many aspects of the ESC, from monitoring the activities of national broadcasters, through the use of undercover agents (Akin, 2013) to placing restrictions on the size of flags that fans are able to bring in to the venue, we should also be aware that different groups will want quite different things from the event and will attempt, where possible, to influence its design accordingly. For the hosts, the chance to promote the city, region and/or nation to a global audience is generally seen to offset the cost and effort of producing the event. The host broadcaster is given opportunities within the programme itself to market the country and will often use other techniques, the involvement of government officials or local celebrities, awe-inspiring facilities or production technologies, to further advertise its economic, political and cultural attributes to those watching (Bolin, 2006).

However, it is also worth noting that the EBU continues to place limits on these activities in order to both discourage an ongoing ‘arms race’ in relation to expenditure and ensure that the ‘format stays intact’. As we were told by the two producers from the Danish broadcaster, DR:

It is their [the EBU’s] job to make sure that the long-term vision for the show or the format stays intact. And each broadcaster has an incentive to try and make this year the best and wildest one yet, we want to break previous frames and patterns and we want to do something different and crazy. And they sit there and say yes, sure, but next year it will take place somewhere different and they will also want to do something crazy. And they therefore discourage the wildness and craziness ... So some kind of continuity has to be kept and they are in charge of that on a daily basis. The reference group comes in on a continuous structural checkup with a fixed cadence; and then, if there are some issues that you cannot agree on, then they intervene.

This extended extract highlights a number of key issues. First, it shows the extent to which cyclical media events, such as the ESC, are viewed as a format by the Danish producers of the show. Earlier we discussed how copyright holders of particular TV formats were primarily concerned with protecting their brand on a global stage to ensure its future profitability and, in the process, used consultant producers to give advice to local teams. This is exactly what we see happening in the case of the ESC, where an established reference group works with local organisers to ensure that the basic framework is adhered to. Second is the key issue of consistency across time. The literature on the topic often focuses only on individual events (Štětka, 2007; Akin, 2013), thereby failing to take into account the ways in which many of the most prominent are cyclical in nature, not only pre-planned

as individual events, but also within a wider framework that is the direct purview of the main organizing body and/or rights holder. The IOC, FIFA and the EBU have a longer-term perspective which, in most cases, will trump the shorter-term objectives of local hosts. Likewise, focusing on the production side not only highlights the tensions between different stakeholders but, above all, points to the very different nature of such a pre-planned, interruptive event.

8. The brand will continue to live on

The final extract we want to point to in this paper also deals with developments over time but, in this case, looks at how events such as the ESC are refined as a result of the contributions, and innovations, of different local organizers. We noted earlier that formats are often strengthened when they move into different markets as producers can evaluate particular features so as to better see which ones work and do not work. The following extract, again taken from our interview with the Danish television producers, highlights this very process in relation to a cyclical media event.

There is the core structure and core format – which looks the way it does – and then there are those 10 per cent that you might move a bit. And they ought to, if this Eurovision concept is to survive for many years to come, then it ought to year after year in certain areas be an innovative process. So ... you ... build on each other's work year after year by bringing along what worked the previous years. The Austrians have taken our postcard ideas – the postcards were previously this thing where you stand on a beach in Greece and wave – but we tried to get closer to the artists, to see them in their normal clothes and see them do something etc. They are taking our idea and developing it further. So we have to accept that they do a better job than us. But it is things like this that ensures that the brand will continue to live on

As TV formats travel, they start to contain a certain amount of local knowledge. Ideas that are tried out successfully in a market become part of the production bible, while subsequent licensees are warned against previous failures. According to Sue Green, an established producer, 'a format is a show that has "been debugged" to remove "the mistakes" that have been made that won't be made again' (Green quoted in Chalaby, 2011: 295). When it comes to the production of large-scale, pre-planned media events, tensions between different groups are a noticeable feature, but at the same time, those involved are generally interested in producing a spectacular and successful show. They are, therefore, also open to building on the achievements of previous iterations and incorporating noteworthy features that can help their own event run more smoothly or attract attention in what has become a

fiercely competitive media environment. This delicate balance between protecting the format and making each show a unique performance is what marks out major media events that are cyclical in nature. It is also something that distinguishes them from other disruptive media events.

9. Conclusion

Recent work on media events has been significant in calling into question the concept's functionalist origins and noting the growing complexity of global media landscapes. Notwithstanding these important critiques, the expansion of the concept to take in a growing range of interruptive events (disasters, news, reality TV shows and so on) is problematic, confusing issues where clarity and precision are required to make sense of these shifts. Therefore, we have first emphasised the cyclical nature of many of the most high-profile media events and the extent to which they are managed by a governing organisation that works in combination with local media producers and authorities. We then argued that such events could be viewed, and analysed, as a particular form of television format, defined by the use of a production bible, negotiations between rights-holders and local producers and the need to maintain a consistent brand over time, whilst allowing for local adaptations. Adopting such a position allows us to sharpen our thinking about the range of interruptive events that pattern, and increasingly complicate, media schedules and narratives around the globe, as well as focusing attention on the particular impact and significance of events that are pre-planned and organised by a range of media and non-media actors.

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