Media events in an age of the Web and television
Dayan and Katz revisited

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Abstract

When Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz published their seminal book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* in 1992, television occupied centre stage, whereas computer networks were only beginning to be used. Since the late 1990s, television and digital media have co-existed and co-evolved in still more entangled ways. In this article, I ask how the supplementing of television by a new media form, the Web, has affected the ways media events as understood by Dayan and Katz can unfold and be conceptualised. Based on a medium theory perspective where focus is more on "media" and less on "event", I introduce the article by tracing how Dayan and Katz understand television as a medium. Then follows a brief account of the vast literature about *Media Events*, with a particular focus on how digital media are conceptualised. With these two sections as a stepping stone, the Web's digital features are outlined, followed by a historical analysis of the interplay of the development of the Web and a concrete media event: the Olympics from 1996 to 2016. Finally, this web historical outline is used to re-evaluate Dayan and Katz's conceptualisation of media events. The analysis is guided by three themes – liveness, control, and participation – pivotal for Dayan and Katz's understanding of media events as well as the history of the Web.

Keywords: media event, history of the Web, Olympics, liveness, control, participation

Introduction

> Our basic presupposition was that this form of events depended on the nature of the dominant media at a given time. [...] Such a history of forms is more relevant than ever now that events are changing shape again, morphing from broadcast mode to digital mode. (Katz & Dayan, 2018: 146)

When Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz published their seminal book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* in 1992, television occupied centre stage, whereas computer networks were only used by a limited number of dedicated

nerds for sending e-mails or as newsgroups. But as indicated in the quote above by Daniel Dayan, when looking back on 25 years of *Media Events*, media events are a function of the forms made available by the media at different points in time. Things have changed since 1992, and in particular, since the late 1990s, television and digital media have co-existed and co-evolved in still more entangled ways. Therefore, it is relevant to ask how the supplementing of television by a new media form, the Web, has affected the ways in which media events can unfold and be conceptualised.

The following focuses more on "media" and less on "event", in particular how the Web as a medium has changed. Therefore, a suitable theoretical approach is that of medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994), which aims at understanding which forms of communicating each media type enables, irrespective of ownership, content, and viewers. According to Meyrowitz (1994: 50), one of the goals of a medium theory approach is to identify "the relatively fixed features of each means of communicating".

With this idea as an inspiration, I begin this article by tracing how Dayan and Katz understand television as a medium. Then follows a brief account of the vast literature about *Media Events* with a particular focus on how digital media are conceptualised. With these two sections as a stepping stone, I outline the Web's digital features, followed by a historical analysis of the interplay of the development of the Web and a concrete media event: the Olympics from 1996 to 2016. Finally, I use this historical outline of the Web to re-evaluate Dayan and Katz's conceptualisation of media events.

Almost all aspects of *Media Events* have been challenged in the literature, additional concepts or approaches have been asked for, and shortcomings have been identified. Instead of highlighting flaws and deficiencies, I take the concepts at face value and discuss their reach based on "a history of forms" of the Web. The analysis is guided by three themes – liveness, control, and participation – that are pivotal in Dayan and Katz's understanding of media events as well as in the history of the Web.

Television in *Media Events* – liveness, control, participation

Based on the book title, *Media Events*, one would expect to find reflections about the media that mediate events. However, to a large extent this is not the case, at least not in a medium theoretical sense. On the contrary, media events are considered a specific genre with characteristic aesthetics and dramaturgy, and this genre is found within one medium only: television. To identify what is understood by "media" in "media events", one must reverse-engineer based on what is written about television as the medium of media events.

According to Dayan and Katz, the televised genre of media events comes with a number of distinct features that must be there in order for mediated events to be media events. As with all events, they constitute a break from everyday life, but

in addition, they must be "occasions of state", be "presented with reverence and ceremony", and "integrate societies in a collective heartbeat" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 1, 7, 9, see also viii–ix). Although media events use television's everyday format as a template, they must be claimed to be "historic" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 8, 32). Also, media events must be live, but still preplanned and highly scripted, announced, and advertised in advance. Not only do media events interrupt the viewers' everyday routines, but they also interrupt those of the broadcaster. Therefore, any event is not a media event just because it breaks everyday life and is broadcast live: It must be transformed into a historic ceremony by the broadcaster. The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 was a news event when it happened, and despite its catastrophic character, it was simply added to the flow of other news events, whereas the funeral of Kennedy three days later was a media event, with its ceremony and historic character.

Media events include three actor types: the organisers (mainly large actors like public bodies), the broadcaster, and the audience. The organiser initiates and "names" the event (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 45), the broadcaster decides which ceremonies qualify for media event treatment (Dayan & Katz, 1992: ix), thus turning the event into a media event, and the audience views, celebrates, and authenticates the event. These actor types largely mirror three elements in a traditional communication model: the sender (the organiser and the broadcaster), the televised text (the dramaturgic forms and the content conveyed through television), and the receiver (the audience attending the event via their television set). Finally, a distinction is made between three types of media events: "epic contests of politics and sports, charismatic missions, and the rites of passage of the great — what we call Contests, Conquests, and Coronations" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 1).

Although media events are identified as televised events, Dayan and Katz do not pay much attention to television as a medium. On the contrary, "television" tends to equate with the wide-ranging term "broadcaster", which can cover anything from technical features and cameras to journalists, the organisation, and the legal and economic conditions under which broadcasters operate. However, two characteristics of television as a medium can be identified, the first of which is related to medium and sender, and the second to medium and text, or receiver.

As a medium, television enables the broadcaster to have a high degree of control over the mediated event and the televised text. Dayan and Katz (1992: 79–80) discuss television's loyalty to the event, and they maintain the following:

> Television's commitment to an event is, first of all, definitional. It […] explores what the event is about and offers "instant interpretation" [and it] is protective of the event […] An aesthetic watchdog, television makes sure that the event's unity of tone and action are preserved from interference.

Television defines and controls the media event through its characteristics as a medium: the scripting of the event, the positioning of cameras, deciding what is (not) shown, the switching between studio and on-site, and so on. Loyalty to the

event even includes plans for handling the unexpected within a planned event (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 89–90). These reflections on loyalty to the event indirectly tell us that television is a medium that enables a high degree of control over all aspects of the media event.

As a medium, television does not allow for direct participation of or interactivity with the audience, according to Dayan and Katz. Participation is established through the textual and dramaturgic means provided by the medium, despite the fact that the viewer is located at home: behind-the-scenes information can be revealed (e.g., the menu at the breakfast party in connection with the royal wedding); viewers can participate in a more "total" way than by being there; and the narration and rhythm create "a feeling of togetherness" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 113). Viewers participate indirectly by being "dragged" into the broadcast by and through television's means of expression. A few examples of direct participation are mentioned, though: first, "a telethon", where people "made contact with the studio by special telephone lines" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 49–50); and second, that the "audience 'on the home front' sends messages of undivided approval to its team, even if the efficient transmission of such messages must await the day of interactive television" (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 136, see also 50–51).

Tracing digital media in the reception of *Media Events*

Since its publication, *Media Events* has generated a vast literature with comments, critical remarks, and suggestions for extensions of the theoretical framework, including several comments by Dayan and Katz themselves (e.g., Dayan, 2008; Katz & Dayan, 2018; Katz & Liebes, 2007; Sumiala et al., 2018), edited volumes (e.g., Couldry et al., 2010; Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016b), and special issues or sections of journals (e.g., Averbeck-Lietz & d'Haenens, 2008; Media Events, 2018). This is not the place to review this diverse literature; rather, "the digital" will be traced in the reception of *Media Events* by investigating how Dayan and Katz's conceptual framework has been combined with reflections on digital media (for general overviews, see Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Hepp & Krotz, 2008; Hoover, 2010; Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016a).

In the edited volume *Media Events in a Global Age*, Hepp and Couldry (2010) extend the concept of media events to also include media events before and after television (e.g., as in Mitu, 2016; Ytreberg, 2014). Although digital media had been around for more than a decade in 2010, "the global age" frames the book (as reflected in the book title), whereas digital media play a minor role, including in the concluding chapter about the "move to the next stage" (Hoover, 2010: 290). However, the chapter by Volkmer and Deffner (2010: 217–230) briefly reflects on the "advanced global digital landscape", "video clips posted on websites", "interactivity of the worldwide web", and the Internet and YouTube, and it concludes that events take place not only on television but also on personal websites, blogs, *myspace.com*, citizen journalism sites, and mobile media in an

"interplay between mainstream/traditional/mass/public service/corporate media and 'nonmarket actors'" (Volkmer & Deffner, 2010: 227).

The last section of *Media Events: A Critical Contemporary Approach* (Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016b) presents empirical cases in which digital media play a role, but little is added to the conceptual framework, the exception being by Mitu (2016: 238), who argues the following:

> User-generated media events [are] exceptional events that gain global coverage created by the people on the web […] People have access to these events at any time throughout the day; they do not need to wait for the live television broadcast. Furthermore, they can easily contribute to the event by creating new content. As opposed to the passive watching of television, people become active participants in the events.

In a special section of an issue of *Media, Culture & Society* celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Media Events* (Media Events, 2018), Couldry and Hepp (2018: 116) highlight the importance of datafication, of algorithms that "become part of constructing media events", and of social media like Twitter that become entwined with traditional broadcast media. Goldfarb (2018: 121) concludes by asking "whether there is a digital equivalent of televisual media events to be found somewhere in the universe of Twitter or Facebook". And Sonnevend (2018: 124) ends her article by claiming that "its main intellectual achievements are not bound to television, and it is relatively easy to expand *Media Events* backward (to radio) or forward (to digital media) without compromising its basic tenets". Frosh and Pinchevski (2018: 137) highlight the following:

> [The] multiplication of media devices capable of transmitting to others through networks means that there is no stable single perspective associated with the orchestration of the event. The "center"of the event is highly dynamic, fluctuating with the spreading and dissemination of feeds, streams, posts, tweets, images, and so on, which as such constitute the event both as a duration and as an aggregation.

In the reception of *Media Events*, much more attention is given to "event" than to "media", and as shown, the literature about digital media's impact on the theoretical framework is sparse, and it tends to be exclusively rooted in the digital media of that age. But digital media evolve rapidly, and media that were at the cutting edge at the time of writing are likely to be obsolete just a few years later. Blogs, citizen journalism, user-generated content, and *myspace.com* seem out of tune with today's digital media landscape, whereas datafication, algorithms, and social media may still resonate (but will they in ten years' time?). Thus, the analyses of digital media and their potential impact on the theoretical concepts tend to become a simple function of the state of digital media at any given point in time, and thereby inadequate just a few years later. One way of mitigating this limitation is to start by identifying some fundamental features of "the digital", and

to analyse the historical trajectories of concrete digital media and media events to identify trends, similarities, and differences, continuities, and breaks. This way, taking the flickering and ever-changing digital landscape of today as a point of departure can be avoided.

The relatively fixed features of the Web as a medium

Within a medium theory perspective that aims at identifying "the relatively fixed features" of a medium, it is important to qualify the discussion of digital media's fixed features. First, the fixed features can be identified as such, and second, one can investigate how these features have been (trans)formed in concrete media artefacts throughout their historical development, that is, how they have materialised as relatively fixed.

Each digital media form comes with a number of fixed features on layers "above" the four fundamental building blocks of all digital online media: a mechanical operative digital alphabet, an algorithmic syntax, an interface, and direct connectedness (see Brügger, 2002: 19–20, 2018: 17–21). The World Wide Web (or just, the Web) comes with three fixed features: It is composed of 1) two layers, the invisible layer (the machine-readable HTML code) and the visible layer (the HTML code as interpreted in the web browser where a web page is shown); 2) fragments (tags in the HTML code, the variety of files attached to the HTML file); and 3) hyperlinks that can connect any web entity on one computer with any web entity on another computer (Brügger, 2018: 23–30). These three fixed features characterise all instances of the Web, but not necessarily in the same form, as the hyperlink can illustrate. The hyperlink is a defining feature of the Web, but its function and form change: "the hyperlink is not a timeless object", as maintained by Helmond (2019: 228), when identifying six key periods in the hyperlink's web history.

Identifying the fixed features of digital media, including the Web, reveals a lot about the fundamental condition that makes digital media specific, as opposed to analogue television, for instance, but it is only through the historical forms that the fixed features can be seen. Therefore, the next step is to investigate how the invariant traits condition and are translated into concrete web media forms in recent media history, and how this has affected the staging of a media event on the Web.

The Olympics 1996–2016: A media event in the age of the Web

By focusing on a recurring contest event, the Olympic Summer Games, this section traces the shifting digital media environments of the Web and how they enable the Olympics to unfold, including how liveness, control, and participation materialise. To examine how the Web as a medium is used to form the Olympics' "web sphere" (Foot & Schneider, 2006: 20) – that is, web activities related to

the Olympics – different websites are investigated, including those of the shifting organisers of the Olympics, and the BBC is used as an example of a television broadcaster. "Conquests" and "coronations" could have been included, but the aim is not to discuss media events as such, including their differences, but rather to focus on the medium, and the Web as a medium is expected to have the same characteristics in each of the investigated periods, irrespective of the type of event it mediates. That said, it is important to stress that the exclusive focus on the medium cannot fully explain all changes in the forms of use, which is particularly important to have in mind with the Olympics, since some of the main actors – the Olympic Committee, sports federations, sponsors, and broadcasters – are governed by socioeconomic and legal constraints in their approach to media (e.g., broadcasting agreements, rights, sponsorships, etc.). Obviously, these constraints and the dilemmas they raise can blur the picture regarding the understanding and potential use of the Web as a medium, and in that respect, the Olympics constitute a special case. This is also why the following subsections do not pretend to constitute an analysis of the Olympics on the Web. Rather, the aim is limited to bringing the changing web environments into focus (about the Olympics as events, see, e.g., Roche, 2000; Cui, 2013).

To better understand the changing role of the Web, it is necessary to briefly outline how the parallel lives of the Web and television on the Web have co-evolved and intersected in the years leading up to each Olympics event. In doing so, the starting point is the Web's development, not the development of television as digital television, as done by Lotz (2014) in connection with television in the post-network era, Johnson (2019) in connection with Internet-enabled online-TV, or Bruun (2020) in connection with the merging of linear and non-linear television. The following analysis builds on the archived Web as found in the US-based Internet Archive (see Brügger, 2018: 92–93; copyright restrictions prevent reproducing the websites, but all web addresses are listed in the Appendix).

Atlanta 1996: The Web before digitised television

The World Wide Web was invented in the early 1990s (Berners-Lee, 1999; Brügger, 2016), but it was not until 1995–1996 that it started to expand. It enabled the mediated presence of a variety of actors, since anyone with an Internet connection and a web editor or browser could establish a website and visit all other websites. The Web made it possible to communicate on a scale from local to global, and it enabled (close to) instant communication along with the archiving of information to be retrieved at any time. One of the defining features of the Web, the hyperlink (as discussed earlier as a fixed feature of the Web), made it possible to rapidly travel through the Web's many pages in a seamless way, and it brought the different actors close to each other in the same medium, since websites of individuals, families, public authorities, companies, and the media were potentially only one click away.

In this period of poor connectivity through telephone landlines and modems,

the Web was not ripe enough to include television's moving images, although video files for download were available; therefore, only broadcasters went online, while television did not. For instance, the BBC experimented with websites as early as 1993 (Thorsen, 2010), and websites were established by the Australian ABC in 1995 (Burns, 2000) and the Danish DR in 1996 (Brügger, 2012).

Already at the Olympics in Atlanta in 1996, one of the characteristics of the Web as a medium became clear, namely its ability to allow for a wide range of actors to create a Web presence related to an event. July–August 1996 were very early days for the BBC, and they did not have a dedicated Olympics web page on *bbc.co.uk*. Therefore, in contrast to television – at least with regard to the BBC – only the organiser in Atlanta mediated the event with a website, *atlanta.olympic.org*. But the official website was by no means the only voice on the Web related to the 1996 Olympics. A variety of dedicated event websites emerged, including by media outlets, athletes, fans, sports organisations, sponsors and merchandise vendors, as well as companies that were not directly related to the event but wanted to brand themselves, such as the tech company Apple. Apple's website *Atlanta '96 Street Scene* showcased cutting-edge web technologies of the time, including video webcast, a magazine, a chat forum, and "spy cams" from the staff rooms at Apple. Several of these actors also had a media presence before the Web, most notably media outlets and companies, but many did not, in particular athlete fan sites.

The 1996 Olympics also experienced web activities related to an unplanned event within the planned event. On 27 July, a pipe bomb exploded at the Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, and a dedicated web page with news about the event was established on the official 1996 Olympics website, and a "Centennial Park Explosion Message Board" was set up (unfortunately not preserved in the Internet Archive).

Since television was not combined with the Web until the late 1990s, the BBC website only provided practical information for viewers and listeners about the BBC as well as radio and television programme information (the first BBC video-stream was in June 1997; Thorsen, 2012: 19). Video was used on the official 1996 Olympics website, although not very widespread, but it was possible to select daily news clips provided by major broadcasting companies (e.g., CBC, NBC, ZDF) (large video files had to be downloaded and played in a multimedia player).

The different actors mentioned above offered various forms of participation with the viewers (users), as the following examples illustrate: the sponsor IBM offered a service where you could "send a message of encouragement to your favorite athlete or team"; a number of dedicated newsgroups were established on USENET; Apple's *Atlanta '96 Street Scene* offered a chat function and message boards; children could e-mail questions to the swimmer Janet Evans; and the NBC Olympics website offered an "NBC interactive poll", including posting of comments from readers.

Sydney 2000 & Athens 2004: Digitised television on the Web

When television became embedded in the Web, from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s, it was transplanted to a very different and foreign media context, with its own dynamics and characteristics already in place. In its first years on the Web, television was a supplement that had to find its place on the broadcaster's website where structures and forms were already established. In addition, it inherited the Web's spatial and temporal features – from local to global and from live to archived – and it was placed in a wider web environment with a great variety of actor types, who could refer and connect to the broadcaster via hyperlinks in a much more direct fashion than known from television as a stand-alone medium. These web features involved a loss of control for the broadcaster. Also, fragments of programmes were published as video snippets, and the Web enabled new ways of direct participation and interaction, like web pages with blogs or discussion fora related to individual programmes.

The Olympics in Sydney and Athens took place after television met the Web, but although television in the form of video snippets was used more than in 1996 in the Olympics web sphere as a whole, it was not widespread. The official website at *olympics.com* (Sydney) and *athens2004* (Athens) did not include video, but the BBC, on their extensive *Sydney Olympics* website, provided a web page with video (and audio) to be viewed in a downloadable player (and similar in 2004); some commercial broadcasters had video snippets in 2000 (e.g., Fox), whereas others did not (e.g., CBS).

Several new actor types populated the Web with Olympics websites, such as a portal for fans, humoristic websites like *Silly 2000* conveying breaking news like "Torch relay revitalises rural community for 17.5 minutes", NGOs like Greenpeace, and alternative voices vis-à-vis the event, like The Anti-Olympics Alliance or People Ingeniously Subverting the Sydney Olympic Farce (PISSOFF).

The above-mentioned websites included several forms of direct participation with viewers, like polls, quizzes, chat functions, and discussion fora, the exception being *bbc.co.uk* in 2000, where no participation was possible except for sending e-mails with feedback about the website (but in 2004, the menu item "Have Your Say" was available).

Beijing 2008: Mobile phones and video sharing

In the mid-2000s, mobile phones with a crude video camera became widespread (Goggin, 2006), and video-sharing services – most notably YouTube – emerged on the Web (Burgess & Green, 2018). This established a media ecology where televised content could be detached from its original medium: Video content could easily travel out of the broadcaster's website, broadcasters could themselves set up a channel on a video-sharing platform, and mobile phones also allowed for more direct communication with the television viewers, either by the broadcaster

sending text messages, or video content being uploaded from viewers to be viewed on the website or even integrated in programmes (e.g., Thorsen, 2012: 21). In this period, the Web as a medium allowed for a flow of content in and out of the broadcaster's website, and eventually in and out of television. Also, social media started to emerge, although they were not widespread.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics involved several new trends, in particular regarding direct participation of and interaction with viewers. The BBC's Olympics website can serve as an example. Television was still only present as archived video clips, but it was used extensively compared with earlier. There was a wish to send live coverage, but due to a lack of the necessary technical means, the heading "Live action" showed a live text commentary from the games with automatically updated written text, minute by minute.

In particular, the many ways of interacting with the audience stood out. The service "606 Sports Forum" allowed people to send input via text messages to be displayed on the website; it was possible to insert comments and ratings below articles, and with the initiative *My Games*, the BBC was "looking for fans from all around the world. Do you have a webcam? If so, you could appear live on BBC World News during the Games. […] you can send us photos and videos from wherever you are in the world". This content was fed into the live television broadcast of *My Games* or to the website as *My Games* viewers' diaries. Also, the sharing of content was made easy, including "E-mail this to a friend" and a Facebook share button, and website and RSS feeds were available on mobile phones. In addition, social media started to be used for video sharing, for example, an official YouTube channel was set up by the organisers.

London 2012 & Rio de Janeiro 2016: Social media and smart devices

The social media that emerged in the late 2000s were characterised by new ways of integrating well-known web technologies to support the rapid spread and sharing of content, and their pre-formed and ready-to-use profile pages lowered the barrier for establishing a web presence considerably (in contrast to setting up a website), thus resulting in a rapid growth of online actors. Smartphones and tablet computers were produced (Goggin, 2019), and wireless networks spread in homes and elsewhere. Smart devices' high-quality video cameras enabled easy recording and distribution of video content at high speed and volume through the Web and eventually into television programmes as sources, and at the same time, they functioned as a distribution device for the broadcaster through apps, whereby the home was no longer the sole place to watch television.

At the 2012 London Olympics, social media together with mobile smart devices took centre stage. The official Olympics website sets an example. In addition to the simple sending of e-mail updates, two menu items related to social media were prominent: "Olympic Pulse", with a sophisticated interactive map displaying

the number of tweets per day and the tweet content at specific venues, and also making it possible to send tweets; and "Social", to which Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ accounts were listed and linked, along with Twitter-relevant hashtags and the latest tweets – and many web activities were moved to these social media platforms, in particular time-sensitive reporting and image sharing, but also videos to be watched and commented on on a dedicated YouTube channel or embedded on the website. Smartphones and apps took over from mobile phones, and an "Official London 2012 App" became available for download. Social media were also included on the BBC Olympics website, but less predominantly, whereas comments below articles were widespread. Also, video snippets figured on the front page.

Four years later in Rio de Janeiro, mobile- and social media still played a role, but they seemed to have become part of everyday digital life, since they were not highlighted to any great extent on the organiser's website. However, the organiser was present on all social media platforms, and in particular among athletes and teams, the number of social media profiles was high. It is also worth noting that on the BBC website, live reporting was still available as written text, but now along with the possibility of watching "live video from across the Games".

The development of the Olympics on the Web

This brief web historical analysis outlines how changes of the Web and of television on the Web enabled different forms of liveness, control, and participation. At the early Olympics, televised liveness was not an option on the Web, but gradually, "written live" was used, whereas web-based video livecasts were not feasible until later in the period; in contrast, television-on-demand has been an integrated part of the Web almost since its inception.

Television on the Web must adapt to contexts that with stand-alone television are media-external, but now are part of the same medium's space and time and that are therefore not controlled, including the broadcaster's website, all sorts of actors, the viewers, and the Web as such, with its hyperlinking and algorithms governing search, rankings, and recommendations.

The need of the broadcaster and the organiser of the Olympics to involve viewers is continuously there, but in different forms, depending on what the Web as a medium enables, from e-mails, newsgroups, chats, message boards, and polls, to discussion fora, text messages, and video content to be shared on websites or integrated into television programmes.

As mentioned above, the possibility of some of the actors to adapt to and interact with the web environment is part of a wider socioeconomic environment that in many cases must be included to fully explain the adoption (or exclusion) of any given feature of the Web that enables liveness, control, and participation in new ways. Thus, the dilemmas concerning whether to include the many changing new actor types and content forms on the Web can only fully be investigated in an

exhaustive analysis of the Olympics in the digital media landscape. However, as mentioned, the aim of this section is not to investigate these complex dynamics.

The concept of media events revisited in the light of the Web's history

Based on the historical overview of how a media event such as the Olympics has unfolded at the shifting intersections of the Web and television on the Web, the following section discusses the reach of Dayan and Katz's concept of media events with a particular focus on liveness, control, and participation.

Liveness and web events

The obvious challenge with regard to Dayan and Katz's (1992) concept of media events is its close links to television, in the sense that it is considered a specific aesthetic genre within television, closely related to the specific dramaturgy that television as a medium enables. Therefore, strictly speaking, the concept of media events cannot be used, as it is outside of television, be that in the printed press or in digital media. But some of the detailed characteristics of the media event may very well apply to other media, for instance, the break from everyday life and the ceremonial and historic character, but then they have to be mediated through other dramaturgic means, whereby they would not be media events if one takes Dayan and Katz's text literally.

However, one of the defining subcategories of the concept does not translate well to the Web, namely the demand for media events to be live. There are two reasons for this, and both emerge from the ability of the Web to be live as well as an archive.

First, although the Web is a speedy medium compared with the printed press, the brief overview of its development as a medium and the outline of the Olympics as a Web event have shown that live television on the Web was not possible until the late 2000s. For almost two decades, the Web's "live" was "live with written text" (and a few still images), either live updates on a website or via social media, whereas archived video clips were by far the most predominant form of television and have been continuously since 1996. In the case of the Olympics, the dilemma regarding live web television cannibalising television broadcasts may also have played a role.

Second, although the broadcaster makes an event live television on the Web (once this is possible), the nature of the Web as a medium enables viewers to watch the programme from the beginning after it has started (thus lagging behind the live broadcast), or viewers may want to see the broadcast later, in case it has been archived and made available for on-demand viewing. Such a time delay was also possible previously with video cassette recorders (Lotz, 2014), but recording was only done by the viewer and not by the broadcaster, whereas with television on the

Web, the delayed watching is based on archiving taking place on the broadcaster's side as an integrated part of the playing mechanism on the Web, and with a much higher degree of convenience for the viewer.

Thus, with television on the Web, there is a risk that live television's unity of broadcast time and viewing time is lost. Either live television is not possible at all, or it is hard to remedy and adapt televised live to televised Web live, because on-demand and (potentially) deferred viewing has always been an integrated part of television in the digital landscape, from video file download to streaming.

As mentioned above, mediated events are not media events strictly speaking if they are mediated by media other than television. But since television as embedded in the Web is not just television, it is worth speculating how (parts of) the concept of media events could be remedied to fit television on the Web anyway. One could investigate how the break from everyday life, the ceremonial, the historicity, and the liveness have been transferred to event websites with television, including social media websites. Although the dramaturgy and the aesthetic means are obviously different on a website, it would be somewhat surprising if different event websites did not show some similarities that could be analysed and systematised with a view to identifying media events as a genre on the Web. Instead of discarding the concept of media events as a television genre that cannot travel to other media, it is relevant to try to remake Dayan and Katz's meticulous analysis on event websites, with the history of the Web landscape in mind, and despite the differences compared with television – in brief, to identify the dramaturgic means that characterise a web event in as clearly and distinct a manner as the (televised) media event can be distinguished from the news event (e.g., how are the BBC's Olympic event websites different from BBC's news website?). The brief historical analysis of the Olympics on the Web highlights some key moments in such a history, and it can serve as a stepping stone to investigating the differences and similarities compared to the two types of media events that were left out above, that is, conquests and coronations.

Control and participation

The idea of media events as events that can be defined and controlled by and with television as a medium is challenged in various ways by the Web. It is exactly television's embeddedness in a new media context that challenges the concept of "loyalty to the event". When Dayan and Katz published their book, television as a medium was identical to its context, or rather, it was not placed in a context within the same medium. But when television is embedded in the Web, it is placed in a context that has its own structures, dynamics, and functionalities that are foreign to television as a stand-alone medium, and which are much harder to control. The Web medium as a context comes in various forms: 1) the broadcaster's website where television is dependent on technical as well as organisational aspects; and 2) the many new types of actors that may affect television in more direct ways than what was previously the case, through linkings, embed-

dings, recommendations, and so on, and they come in forms and shapes that are familiar to the Web, but unfamiliar to television, from professionals who set up an entire website related to a media event to amateurs who establish a fan website, or anyone with a social media user profile who posts a message. These actors are part of the same medium's space and time, right next to each other, just one hyperlink or embedding away, and they may suddenly come and go, because of the relatively speedy establishment of an actor in the digital landscape. In addition, what is "aired" also tends to be harder to control, because video content must be controlled as fragments that can legally (or illegally) be captured, reproduced, and circulated – and faster and faster, leaving less time to react. And the connecting of actors and circulation of television content is highly affected by search and ranking algorithms that are not controlled by the broadcaster.

Obviously, on the Web it is difficult to use the concept of a media event as defined and controlled through the medium. Since the very first days of the Web's existence, television as embedded in the Web has had to co-exist with a number of other web entities within an uncontrollable medium, and instead of being able to stay loyal to the event within a medium that enables this, it is bound to constantly react to the changing conditions and activities of the Web as a medium – and in the case of the Olympics, also to align these reactions with the socioeconomic environment in which this particular event is embedded.

With television, viewer participation must be established indirectly through television's visual means of expression, but this is different when television is embedded in the Web. Because of the many ways of involving users directly in a media event, the concept of participation can take on forms which Dayan and Katz only dreamt of (see the statement quoted earlier about "the efficient transmission of such messages must await the day of interactive television"; Dayan & Katz, 1992: 136). But in contrast to television, where alternative and potentially competing interpretations could easily be pushed aside (see Dayan & Katz, 1992: 82), participation in the digital landscape is much harder to manage and control, with its diversity of actors and stakeholders who want to have their say, and who can do this easily at high speed and with a wide reach. Thus, the concept of participation needs not be discarded as such, but should rather be supplemented. The indirect involvement of the audience during a media event is still valid, but in the digital landscape, it can co-exist with a wide range of direct forms of engagement, although this still leads to a loss of control because participation takes place within a media environment of uncertainty.

Conclusion

One of the articles in the journal celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Media Events* concluded that it "is relatively easy to expand *Media Events* backward (to radio) or forward (to digital media) without compromising its basic tenets" (Sonnevend, 2018: 124). This claim may hold some truth, but nuances must be added.

The fundamental idea of media events as a televised genre can be used as an inspiration to investigate media events as genres in other media types, obviously not as a genre based on the same aesthetic and dramaturgic means as television, but still, as a genre. And some of the original characteristics – the break from everyday life, the ceremonial, the historicness – may very well reappear in media events as a web genre, but expressed by other means.

Other parts of the conceptual framework of *Media Events* are difficult to translate to fit the digital media landscape on the Web, most notably the demand for liveness, since the unity of broadcasting time and viewing time is challenged. Also, "loyalty to the event", the power of defining the event, is hard to maintain in an uncontrollable medium environment where an opaque and ever-changing mesh of actors, textual fragments, and algorithms pushes the broadcaster to be more reactive than proactive.

Finally, when it comes to viewers' involvement in the event, Dayan and Katz's idea of indirect participation still works for television on the Web, but in the digital landscape, it can be extended with more direct interaction forms. It appears that their concept was ahead of its time and has now found an appropriate medium.

With medium theory as a starting point, this article has focused on historical changes in the Web as a medium, with the Olympics as an example of a media event. The brief historical overview can be used as a stepping stone for further investigations that place this particular event in a wider context and examine how other events – be that conquests and coronations, or other contests – unfold in the Web's history. Hutchins and Mikosza (2010) and Marshall and colleagues (2010) provide valuable insights into the economy of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and new media, including the tensions that digital media infuse in the television-based understanding of liveness, control, and participation. However, Dayan and Katz's concept of media events is not debated, and the studies are not embedded in a history of the Web that can highlight the continuity of how the Web as a medium is used (see also Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017, about the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro).

In the text quoted in the beginning of this article, Elihu Katz asks if media events will "survive post modernity" and concludes "that they won't. One of the reasons has to do with the proliferation of new media" (Katz & Dayan, 2018: 151). However, it is also possible to conclude on a more positive note. When debating to what extent the conceptualisation of media events can be transferred to a digital media landscape, it is important to be precise about what is actually meant by "new" or "digital" media. Digital media are not just digital media: Their fixed features are translated differently in various concrete forms, and these translations change through complex lineages. Therefore, a discussion of the reach of the concept must be sensitive to the historical changes. Maybe media events survive, but changed.

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Appendix

Archived web sources

The web addresses below link to material in the Internet Archive (and in one case to the Australian web archive).

1996

https://web.archive.org/web/19961022174839/http://atlanta.olympic.org/
https://web.archive.org/web/19980110172657/http://olympics.nbc.com/
https://web.archive.org/web/19970109091652/http://ironkids.com/board.htm
https://web.archive.org/web/19970329130317/http://www.michaeljohnson.com/
https://web.archive.org/web/19981206052924/http://www.northernlife.com/olympics/
https://web.archive.org/web/19980211052150/http://olympic-usa.org/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961112235914/http://www.olympic.ibm.com/
https://web.archive.org/web/19980110172427/http://olympic.att.com/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961113000109/http://www.olympiccatalog.com/catalog.cgi
https://web.archive.org/web/19990429091545/http://www.olympiade.de/index1.htm
https://web.archive.org/web/19961109170152/http://live.apple.com/atlanta96/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961223012826/http://www.atlanta.olympic.org/acog/news/d-explosion.html
https://web.archive.org/web/19961128105728/http://www8.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/Current_Events/Olympic_Park_Pipe_Bomb/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961221203254/http://www0.bbc.co.uk/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961025082616/http://www.atlanta.olympic.org/acog/multimedia/d-index.html
https://web.archive.org/web/19961220000612/http://www.atlanta.olympic.org/acog/multimedia/d-tools.html
https://web.archive.org/web/19961219233430/http://www.cybersuperstores.com/olympic/cover.html
https://web.archive.org/web/19961129191658/http://www8.yahoo.com/Recreation/Sports/Olympic_Games/1996_Summer_Games___Atlanta/Spy_Cameras/
https://web.archive.org/web/19980524052054fw_/http://www.fanmail.olympic.ibm.com/enf/eflash_02.html
https://web.archive.org/web/19961201072356/http://www8.yahoo.com/Recreation/Sports/Olympic_Games/Usenet/
https://web.archive.org/web/19961201072051/http://www8.yahoo.com/Recreation/Sports/Olympic_Games/1996_Summer_Games___Atlanta/Message_Boards/
https://web.archive.org/web/19970109091930/http://ironkids.com/question.htm
https://web.archive.org/web/19961026221354/http://www.olympic.nbc.com/bbs/poll.html

2000 and 2004

https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20000914130000/http://www.olympics.com/eng/index.html
https://web.archive.org/web/20040815083128/http://www.athens2004.com:80/
https://web.archive.org/web/20000815110507/http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport/hi/english/olympics2000/default.stm
https://web.archive.org/web/20040823164504/http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics_2004/default.stm#
https://web.archive.org/web/20000815071929/http://www.sydney2000fans.com:80/
https://web.archive.org/web/20000823023636/http://www.silly2000.com:80/
https://web.archive.org/web/20001018170842/http://www.greenpeace.org.au/campaigns/olympics/index.php3
https://web.archive.org/web/20000815233724/http://www.cat.org.au/aoa/
https://web.archive.org/web/20010619174919/http://www.cat.org.au/pissoff/
https://web.archive.org/web/20000815071709/http://foxsports.com/olympics/2000/index.sml
https://web.archive.org/web/20001017130520/http://olympics.sportsline.com/) no video, only audio

2008

https://web.archive.org/web/20080828152836/http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics

https://web.archive.org/web/20080828073301/http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/7497182.stm

https://web.archive.org/web/20090428201639/www.youtube.com/user/beijing2008

2012 and 2016

https://web.archive.org/web/20120801064917/http://www.london2012.com/join-in/olympic-pulse/

https://web.archive.org/web/20120801064919/http://www.london2012.com/social/

https://web.archive.org/web/20120802133103/www.youtube.com/user/london2012

https://web.archive.org/web/20120730020409/http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/olympics/2012/

https://web.archive.org/web/20160818024217/https://www.rio2016.com/en

https://web.archive.org/web/20160809203423/http://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/rio-2016