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Media Events: The Sense of Occasion[1]

Elihu Katz

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Critics of broadcasting argue that it has robbed society of the sense of occasion. People used to dress up to go out, the critics say, and now they stay in to watch television only half-dressed and half-awake. The arts that brought people together-whether popular or highbrow-were associated with time and place and community, marking the passing of seasons, the boundaries between sacred and secular, and the structure of society. Now television provides culture nonstop, with nothing more than station breaks and commercials to frame an experience in time, and only the living room and the family to frame it spatially and socially. The dim awareness that everybody else is viewing the same programs surely does something to hold society together, but the sense of occasion--especially that of communal occasion-has been dulled. This is not a judgment on the quality of television programs, it must be emphasized, but on their ubiquity.

Like all generalizations about the atomizing, secularizing, and tranquilizing effects of broadcasting, this one too deserves more careful formulation. It is unlikely, first of all, that the media alone are to blame for the decline of the folk arts; all the pressures of modernization have had a share.[2] Moreover, the professional performing arts seem to be flourishing; some people do go out.[3] And as for occasions, the media are often at their best on holidays, such as Independence Day or Christmas, when high standards of performance are combined with a sense of festivity and a nostalgia for tradition.[4]

There is another sense, too, in which the media break the sun-never-sets pattern which they themselves have created. This history of broadcasting is punctuated with a series of programs which are so memorable that they captivated the attention of a nation or of the world. People dressed up to see them, and invited their friends to join them in listening or viewing. The tenth anniversary of the moon landing brings this *genre* of broadcasting to mind. Generically, the broadcasts are known as media events-though that is an ambiguous and overworked term. I call them the "high holidays" of the media. Each of them, for a brief moment, restored the sense of occasion to a society or to the world, and some of them may have had lasting effects.

I should like to recall these events, and to discuss them in this paper. They include the moon landings; the visit of Sadat to Jerusalem; the weekend of mourning following the assassination of Kennedy; the coronation of Elizabeth II; the presidential debates of 1960 and 1976; and certain sporting events.[5] Each nation will have its own list, although the number of such events is remarkably small. Occasionally, we get a glimpse of the potential of such an event which is denied us: the visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland, for example, or the Moscow Olympics.

Media Events Defined

There are a number of defining characteristics that are associated with these events. First of all, they are broadcast*live*. They are before our eyes as they are happening, and thus the unique attribute of broadcasting, as distinct from those of the other media, is brought into full play. The cameras and the microphones are on the spot and transport us simultaneously to where the event is taking place.

Second, we are talking about events which are typically *not* initiated by the media. Somebody else has organized them-the Space Agency, or a political leader, or the Olympic committee. To be sure, they are organized with media coverage *in mind,* but unlike Boorstin's pseudo-event[6], it is likely that these events would take place even if the cameras were not there. There may be certain exceptions to this: the Eurovision contest, for example, in which all Europe joins in the judging of popular songs. Such events might not happen at all if the media do not organize them, but they are borderline cases. The paradigmatic media event is one organized outside the media but which may well be transformed in the process of transmission.

The element of high drama or high ritual is essential: the process must be emotion-laden or symbol-laden, and the outcome be rife with consequence. Most fireside chats, like most parades or football games or political conventions, do not qualify in this sense. Although they may be broadcast live and may be organized by major political or social agencies, they lack the electrifying element which attracts a mass audience to something especially moving. Indeed, the essential characteristic of media events may be the communal insistence that one abandon one's other roles and commitments in favor of viewing TV. "Stop everything and join us in the making of history" is the compelling theme of these events. Viewing is obligatory; nothing is more important.

That means, of course, that the events must be preplanned. They are neither spontaneous nor unexpected. Part of the drama, of course, may be that the outcome is unknown, but the event itself is expected and well advertised. Typically, the media do the advertising, just as the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles (and, until the boycott, the Moscow Olympics of 1980) are already being advertised. Sadat came to Jerusalem on very short notice, but there was enough time to electrify the world with the news of his coming. His decision to come was news; his arrival was a media event. Kennedy's assassination was news; his funeral was a media event.

These events are framed in time and space. They do not, for example, include the Vietnam War, whatever one thinks of the role of the media in bringing its horror into the living room of the world. They do not include the films of the Khomeini revolution.[7] They do not include the broadcasting of Parliament, except on those very rare occasions when the fate of the nation is being debated. The Watergate Hearings, in which a president was faced with impeachment proceedings, or the un-American Activities Committee of Senator Joseph McCarthy, or the trial of Adolph Eichman may qualify. The event must be focused enough to sustain the attention of the audience--which can sometimes be held for days in a row-and circumscribed enough to permit a small number of television cameras to encompass it.

Finally, one must note the centrality of personality. Each event has a hero-an individual, two individuals, or a team. The Salt II talks, even if they had been offered to television, would have been accepted very reluctantly, for they dealt in abstractions

rather than personalities. This is not to deny television's ability to dramatize and personalize even abstract issues, when called upon to do so.

These, then, appear to be the necessary conditions: (1) live transmission, (2) of a preplanned event, (3) framed in time and space, (4) featuring a heroic personality or group, (5) having high dramatic or ritual significance, and (6) the force of a social norm which makes viewing mandatory. These conditions may not be sufficient to ensure the success of the event in sustaining the attention of a mass audience or in accomplishing its political or ritual purpose. But they are basic ingredients.

High Holidays

Events, of course, are central to individuals, families, and communities: birthdays, anniversaries, holidays. They are central, too, to the profession of journalism. Indeed, the daily newspaper or the evening newscast is a collation of essentially discrete events or happenings, and it is by no means certain-as we shall note below-that this is the best way to report what is going on in the world. It is like waiting for a hurricane to report the weather, or waiting for Mother's Day to decide how one feels about mother.

Western journalism differs from Eastern journalism in its emphasis on negative events, on things that go wrong. If the opening of a factory is news in Eastern Europe, it is the closing of a factory that is news in the West. Free-world journalism is about conflict: nation against nation, man against man, man against nature. A news event, typically, is the story of some conflict. The conflict may be institutionalized, as in parliaments or sports, or it may be spontaneous, as in a terrorist attack or an earthquake. Such stories, more than any other, define the news.

Media events, however, appear to differ. Rather than reporting conflict, they appear to celebrate the *resolution* or *overcoming* of conflict, or if they deal with conflict, it is conflict of the most institutionalized sort. Consider, for example, the moon landings *or* Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, or-even if we only had a glimpse of the *real* thing-the visit of John Paul II to Poland. All these celebrate the attempt to overcome conflict. Similarly, the mourning after Kennedy's death was a period of reuniting of the nation and reduction of tension. Even the Olympics, the presidential, debates, or events such as the Eurovision song contest are in the nature of a gathering together of rivals to watch a ritual conflict, rather than a story of bitter hostility.

Thus, media events appear to differ from news events in that they are more concerned with the bringing together of rivals, that is, with the process of reconciliation. Moreover, if one analyzes the rhetoric of media events one will find, I believe, a *reverence* which is wholly atypical of everyday journalism. In his daily rounds, the reporter, typically, is cynical: he distances himself from the event. The presenter of a media event, however, often takes *a priestly* role, acting as a master of ceremonies. He whispers as Mr. Sadat takes his place on the rostrum of the Knesset, or pronounces respectfully "the Egyptian national anthem" as the music begins. And then he is silent. There is no chatter or commentary while the ceremony is taking place. The narrator or commentator considers himself-and is often considered by participants-a member of the wedding, a celebrant.

Moreover, there are often no commercials. Even *Holocaust* was screened with commercials. But not during the speeches of Sadat and Begin in Jerusalem, and not for the whole of the weekend of mourning after John Kennedy's assassination.

It is in this sense, too, that it is useful to think of these media events as "high holidays." They have a sacred air, a reverential character which differs both from the everyday world of public affairs and from the minor holidays of everyday conflict or everyday merriment. It is as if they are trying to tell us something about the nobility of man and the unity of society.

Typology of Media Events

It is clear, of course, that there are different kinds of events grouped together here, and it is worth trying to sort them out. Three distinct forms seem discernible.

The most noble type is what might be called the *heroic mission.* It includes the astronauts, Sadat, John Paul II, perhaps Nixon's visit to China. It is the story of a hero defying natural1law-entering the enemy's camp unarmed, flying beyond the atmosphere of the earth-on a mission of exploration or reconciliation in the name of humanity. Of course, history is full of such exploits. What is new is our ability to follow the *process* of these heroic deeds, step by step, before anyone can know what the outcome will be.

A second type of media event is the occasion *of state.* But it is only under particular circumstances that such occasions will be treated as media events. When the occasion marks the beginning or end of an era, such as the funeral of Churchill, or when it opens a well of uncertainty, as in the funeral of Kennedy and the anxiety over the succession, the nation or the world will participate, transfixed, in the ceremony. Similarly, when the Israel-Egypt peace treaty was signed at the White House, there was a sense of a new beginning, and indeed many observers likened it to a wedding. Michael Arlen has likened all such events to parades, even including such secular and minor events as the Hollywood Academy Awards.

The third type of event is the more familiar *contest,* but only when the confrontation has important symbolic meaning. Thus, the Kennedy-Nixon or Ford-Carter debates, or the World Cup, or the Eurovision song contest are events of this sort. Traditional rivalries are enacted before audiences of hundreds of millions, but these rivalries are subject to shared and enforceable rules, and the *sense* of what there is in common typically outweighs the partisanship.

Dramatic Elements

Classifying media events in this way reveals the dramatic elements which inhere in them. There appear to be three such elements. First of all, there is the question of "programmedness": how much do we know in advance about the choreography of the event. The moon landing, in this sense, was highly programmed; the timetable of the Sadat visit was much less clear.

But even where we know exactly what is supposed to happen, there is a question of whether things will work out as planned. Thus the risk that the program might abort is a second element of drama: will they make it to the moon? Will moon men attack them? Will they infect the earth's atmosphere? Will they return safely? And similarly: Is Sadat

really on the plane or is it a Trojan horse? Will he leave Israel alive? Will there be a coup in Egypt before his return?

Even where we know the program, and the chances of aborting are small, there is a mystery in the actions of great men, even at their funerals, which enthrall us. Will somebody arise to attack the Queen on her coronation? Will the Pope be stricken by a heart attack? Is the body still in the coffin?'

The Live Documentary: Dilemmas of Telling the Story

Media events are live, including state funerals, and face the problem of how to tell a story while it is happening. The director must choose among various pictures, the narrator must decide what actions to remark upon, the commentators and instant-analysts must provide a context. The media must face up to a paradox which might be called "the live documentary."

Several major problems face the producers of such programs, and each of them is implicit in what has been said in these pages so far.

First of all, there is the problem of the choice of the event itself. Journalism, as was noted, deals in events but it is occupationally blind to the fact that historians do not. History, in recent times, has abandoned events as inadequate explanations. Thus, the impulse of the journalist is to see history in Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, while the impulse of the historian is to look to the plight of the Egyptian economy or to the hopelessness of another war with Israel, and so on. Historians would not assign the onset of World War I to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Sophisticated journalists, surely, are aware of this dilemma, and it must influence them, aware or not, in the narration of the media event. Is it merely ritual or really critical? Of course, ritual and the emotional response of an expectant world is more than enough justification for a media event. But how often should one use the word "historic?"

A second problem of the producer of media events is to cope with the tension between the journalist and priestly roles. The occasion, ostensibly, requires priestliness; there is something of an unwritten pact between the organizers of the event and media producers. The media are there to "celebrate" the event. But what if something goes wrong? Or, to take a more complicated example, what if there is something dissonant going on offstage which a journalist might be expected to cover?

An example of this dilemma could be seen in the coverage of the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Not far from the White House, there was a meeting of people protesting the signing of the treaty. The loudspeakers from the rally could be heard clearly as background against the voices of the participants and : the broadcasters. The journalist role obviously called for an interruption of the ceremony and the dispatching of a camera to the demonstration; the priestly role, however, implied a commitment to the integrity of the ceremony. *The Washington Post* suggests that two of the American networks indeed interrupted the ceremony to cover the demonstration while one of them did not. This difficult choice, incidentally, confronted the Westrn sportscasters present at the Moscow Olympics as well: should they keep their cameras fixed on the scheduled events, or report unprogrammed observations, even political ones, as well? It is obvious, from this discussion, why totalitarian countries are so wary of media events except for those over which they have complete control. It

is no coincidence that, even if John Paul II was shown live in Poland, we saw so little of the crowds who cheered him.

One can also be used to influence the outcome of the event: this, of course, is the aim of the participants. NASA could justify the cost of its space program by showing man's first step on the moon live; Sadat wanted to mobilize American public opinion. Sometimes it is more cunning than that, as when journalists thought they were misbriefed on the progress of President Carter's visit to Jerusalem in order to bring pressure on Israel, or at least, to enhance the drama of Carter's ultimate success.

Being used, of course, is a two-way street. The media have much to gain from the magic of their own presentation of far-away events. Legitimacy, power, glory devolve to the media in the performance of their role, and sometimes-not always-this credit outweighs the income foregone from the commercial sponsorship of the programs that have been canceled.' All the world is there to see the close association of the stars of the fourth estate with heroics and with majesty.

But the most difficult problem of all is what story to tell: how can one tell a story without knowing how it is going to progress and how it is going to end? Part of the anxiety over this problem is reflected in the search for criteria of what is to be judged as success and what to consider failure: the search for such criteria is evident in the days prior to the Sadat visit or in the days before any important presidential primary. But more interesting is the fact that one *cannot* tell a story without a "hypothesis" or a "model" to guide the story in the telling. The narrators need not necessarily have an explicit model in mind, but there is good reason to believe that they-and their listeners and viewers-must have recourse to such models. Academic analysis of journalistic coverage of the death of John XXIII, for example, reveals the latent conflict between the Pope and the angel of death, in one version, and between the doctors and death in another." If our typology of the subgenres of media events is correct, it is reasonable to suppose that the narrator draws on the heroic mission, the state occasion (or parade), and the contest in formulating his script and in placing his cameras. But beyond journalism, there are deeper sources for the telling of such stories. There is a fountain of folktales and sacred texts which narrators share with their audiences. The story of *Mission: Impossible,* which underlies the reporting of the moon landing of the astronauts and the meeting of Sadat and Begin, exists not only in the iconography of television, and not only in science fiction, but in my theology and perhaps in scripture. Such puzzles are attracting increasing attention in the scholarly community.

Effects of the Media

The problems just recounted reflect the effect of media events on the media and anticipate the kinds of effects which the media may have on the events themselves and on the vast audiences which attend them. Some research has been done on certain media events, and more research-including our own-is now in progress. For the moment, most of what there is to say is speculative.

As for the events themselves, it is evident, first of all, that they are shaped in part by the media. In totalitarian societies, perhaps, it may be possible to keep the camera focused squarely on the dials, without zooming in, or searching for reaction shots, or showing the behavior of the audience. The technology of the media is such, however, that this is probably impossible to control absolutely, and this is so, a *fortiori,* in free

societies. Media treatment of the event begins long before the official starting time, and while focusing attention and excitement on what is about to happen, also provides a context in terms of which the event will be presented and explained. The media edit the event even as it is being transmitted, and however reverent, show dimensions of the event which were unanticipated by the organizers and concealed from persons present. As the Langs established in their early study of MacArthur's return to the United States, the television viewer saw a story which built slowly to the climax of an emotional welcome at City Hall, while the onlooker at the street corner saw only a motorcade flashing by." Similarly, the millions of Americans watching Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem had seen and read days of preparatory messages, and just before the touchdown heard a commentator explain parallels in the careers of the two men and speculate about their "chemistry."One could see Sadat, from close-up, reacting to the playing of the Egyptian national anthem on Israeli soil, and be instructed in the symbolism of an El Al stairway being locked to the door of an airplane of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

It is equally well known that the presence of cameras makes a difference. This is as evident in the decorum of parliaments or of national political conventions as it was in the orchestration of angry enthusiasm from pro-Khomeini demonstrators in the streets of Tehran.

The live broadcast of an event shapes the event in the making and in the telling, and arouses emotion. This much is certain. But what difference does *that* make?

First of all, as has been argued from the outset, it creates a sense of occasion. People sense not only themselves but each other, and the unity of society, nation, world. They identify with heroes, and celebrate them and their achievements.

Thus, the media event provides a focus for the expression of emotion. It provided a focus for grief, as Schramm shows in his study of the weekend of mourning after Kennedy's assassination. It provided a focus for euphoria, as in the Sadat-Begin talks; or for the expression of wonder, as in the moon landing; or of loyalty, as in a contest. The emotionality of the media event is probably its central effect.

But there are also cognitive effects. Sadat's statements changed Israel's image of Egypt's intentions. While they did not succeed in changing attitudes toward the idea of a Palestinian state, there was a dramatic shift in the perception of Egypt. Sadat's image in the United States improved even more dramatically than in Israel.[12]

The channeling of aroused emotions and changed opinions may well have political effects. There is reason to believe, for example, that the mobilization of public support liberated Sadat and Begin-at least for a time from the constraints of their own bureaucracies and political parties; they were freer men. They may even have sensed that their constituencies had suddenly grown now that they were actors on the stage of the world.

Such speculation suggests that the broadcasting of events may make the events themselves not only different but more important. Perhaps historians will take more notice of the realm of the symbolic when the symbolic and the real become so interlaced. But there are dangers as well. The media transmit failure as well as success. They note error immediately, as when Gerald Ford was pinned to his mistaken statement about relations among countries in the Eastern bloc. They may exacerbate conflict, if the priestly role is abandoned to commentary and instant analysis. Abba Eban suggests that the danger of "open diplomacy" is that each side sees only what it is

losing and may despair of the bargain before it is made.[14] There is the danger that public opinion may become so inflamed that leadership may lose control, as was feared, apparently, when Willy Brandt visited East Berlin and when John Paul II visited Poland.

There is the danger that the media operating with the principal actors-may so dramatize an event as to increase its likelihood of failure. Consider Carter's much publicized retirement to Camp David to discover remedies for the American economy where the promise implicit therein is that he will succeed in doing so. Consider the pressure on the Camp David negotiations on the Middle East, however secret, with the media waiting in the wings for the negotiators to emerge.

But most of all consider the danger of blurring political and ceremonial processes. Walter Benjamin (1978) wrote that communism is the making of aesthetics into politics while fascism is the making of politics into aesthetics. With all the positive functions of media events, examples of media being impressed into the service of anesthetizing politics are still fresh in our minds. Common sense is sometimes more important than even the sense of occasion.

Notes

1 This paper grows out of a project generously supported by the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation. It was read at the Second World Encounter on Communication, in Acapulco, July 1979. I wish to thank Pierre Moty! and Daniel Dayan, my two closest associates on the "Media Events" project, for contributing to the ideas that went into the paper.

2 This point is discussed, and relevant writing reviewed, in Thelma McCormack (1969).

3 Audiences for the arts are discussed in Baumol and Bowen (1966) and in Dimaggio and Useem (1978).

4 The theme of nostalgia.is treated by Fred Oavis (1979). Also see Faris (1963).

5 Especially K. Lang and G. Lang (1968); Wilbur Schramm (1965); James Halloran et al. (1970); Michael Real (1977); Kraus (1962); Briggs (1979). See also Michael Arlen (1979).

6 This is the sense of Daniel Boorstin (1972).

7 A perceptive account of the communications strategies associated with the rise of Khomeini is Tehranian (1979).

8 This was rumored after Lincoln's funeral. See Lewis (1929).

9 The internal controversy *over* whether to cancel scheduled (and commercial) programs in favor of a critical congressional hearing is discussed by Friendly (1967).

10 This is the account of Jules Gritti (1966).

11 See the early paper, "The Unique Perspective of Television," expanded by Kurt and Gladys Lang (1968).

12 Findings from the Continuing Survey of the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research and the Communications Institute of the Hebrew University.

13 Thus, near the close of Sad at's grand day in Jerusalem and during a break in the private discussions of Sadat and Begin, Walter Cronkite asked the two men how they proposed to solve the problem of Palestinian representation in the autonomy talks, and Barbara Walters asked about the status of Jerusalem. These provocative questions which were circumvented in the public events-were posed to show that reality was fraught with unsolved difficulty. That journalists focus on conflict, even on such

ceremonial situations, was remarked by Professor Hilde Himmelweit in commenting on an early version of some of the ideas in this paper.
14 In a public lecture at the Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton. See Eban (1978).

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