Chapter 42
The Media Event as Enhanced News Story:
How User-Generated Content Determines the News Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Social media has, over the past decade, become a significant method of communication. People can now interact with each other more easily and more frequently than in the past thanks to websites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This chapter concerns itself with examining how social media has enabled the public and the news broadcasters to work more closely together. Explored are three key elements. Firstly, there is a review of literature which discusses issues of convergence and the changing nature of news production. Secondly, three major news stories from 2015 act as case studies to discuss how the public contributed to the "eventisation" of the stories through the use of social media platforms. These analytical elements of the chapter feed into the broader context, which is how a media event is now defined given the changing nature of the public's role in news production. The chapter concludes by offering an explanation as to how a media event can now be potentially driven by the public's interaction with the news organisations through social media. Therefore the overarching conclusion that is reached is that the media event as defined in the traditional sense (a live broadcast) has been superseded by 24 hour rolling news channels constant live coverage of news events and that the broadcasters are increasingly reliant on a public contribution. We now have a middle tier between a traditional news story and a media event, the enhanced news story. The final conclusion of the chapter is that it is possible that an enhanced news story can easily become a media event but we need to be cautious not to be seen to be "over eventising" some stories for the sake of filling schedules.

INTRODUCTION

If we take Dayan and Katz's (1992) work on media events as a starting point, insofar that a media event is a major happening that is broadcast live, we can see much correlation with news outputs. Indeed all the examples used by Dayan and Katz (1992) would have qualified as being worthy of being high up in the news agendas. However, Dayan and Katz's (1992) work was published before broadcasting underwent the transition towards digitalisation and the world wide web allowed greater interactivity and connectivity between the audience and producers of content. The eventisation of news has moved on since the days of the, now iconic, Zapruder home movie footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Social media sites and the development of smart phone technology has enabled the average citizen to have more means at their disposal to capture and disseminate still and moving images of news stories before the broadcasters can mobilise.

This chapter is framed within the context that the idea of the audience being passive observers merely absorbing what the media provides is long gone. Citizens are now active participants to the point of taking on the role of the journalist when necessary. What this chapter will explore is how that active participation has enabled broadcasters to work with their audience and vice versa in the creation of media events. While the chapter will take a discursive approach methodologically the discussion will be rooted in three news stories which became media events in the first half of 2015, namely the terrorist attacks on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris and the beaches of Tunisia in January and June respectively as well as the live on air murder of Alison Parker and Adam Ward in August 2015.

Theoretical Framework

While much has been written about the transformational nature of the audience (see for example, Bird, 2003; Lewis et. al. 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Silverstone, 2007; Ross, 2008), and on the transitional nature of broadcast media, particularly television, (see, Gripsrud (ed.) 1999; Ellis, 2002; Spigel and Olsson (eds.) 2004; McGrane and Gunderson, 2010) how the general public can not only influence but instigate a media event is a relatively new research area. Cui (2015) examines how smartphone applications enable enhanced communicative potential and can be used to precipitate a media event. My aim in this chapter is to combine this way of thinking with previous literature to further the argument that smartphone technology used by members of the public can work in tandem with broadcasters in covering news stories. As a result of this co-operation between the broadcasters and general public it will become apparent how it is now possible for user generated content to not only influence the news agenda but contribute to an extension of the story and enable a bona fide media event.

Therefore the work of Jenkins (2006) on the culture of fandom and Ross' (2008) idea of tele-participation are of particular importance in framing this chapter as both examine the way that the audience is evolving and becoming more involved in media constructs. Both authors speak ostensibly from the viewpoint of the fan but what becomes clear is that the onset of digital technologies have led to the emergence of a new kind of audience, as Andrejevic (2008) recognises with his idea of the savvy audience. What Ross (2008) explores is 'how tele-participation has begun to operate in relation to the rise of the Internet' (pg. 219), in terms of how fans are provided with a new sense of identity and ownership. For Jenkins (2006) the question is whether the participatory culture that the Internet has enabled has led to a new form of democratic exchange between producers and viewers. However, both concepts, in dealing with fandom, do not raise the question as to how members of the general public can become active

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