

Becoming eventful through data: The mediated construction of historic events in the age of data

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Abstract: Media events theory and methods are particularly useful for understanding the role of mediation in the distribution of political power. I explain the significance of media events and set out major contributions to media events theory to date, outlining key areas of scholarly disagreement. I argue that most media events studies have repeated Dayan and Katz’s mistake of studying a single medium or actor and attributing effects to a small sample of the events that shake our societies. Events become historic or significant when common meanings are rapidly shared across communities, platforms, media and borders to reach consensus. Understanding how events are constructed as a) globally important through b) the travel or distribution of data, rather than how events are mediated across a single medium like broadcasting holds the key. I conclude with a series of research questions that are ripe for the study of media events today.

Keywords: media events, digital politics, data politics, facts, truthmaking

When asked what sort of thing was most likely to blow governments off course, British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan famously replied, “Events, dear boy, events.” Newsweek journalist George F. Will wrote about MacMillan in 2002: “He would know. The 1956 Suez crisis had catapulted Macmillan into the role of prime minister, and it was the Profumo scandal¹ that would usher him out.” But were the events themselves in charge? Were they, as Will wrote, “in the saddle, riding mankind”?

Media theorists would disagree. Events on their own don’t affect politics. The mediation of significant political events influences the ways in which they are experienced, interpreted and remembered. Not all events qualify. Global iconic events (both ceremonial and unexpected) involve major ruptures: upending social and political identities, ideological commitments, political orientations and power. Such events are political not only because they involve members of the political class (e.g. snap elections or historic press conferences) but because their outcomes affect the distribution of power and authority. They can include violent protests, online activism, natural disasters and human-made catastrophes that become political because they have an impact on the distribution of attention and resources.

Iconic global events are interesting sites of study for media and communication researchers because they enable us to understand what the role of media and mediation are in determining who are the winners and losers in battles over minds and resources. Mediation is central to the ways in which disruptive political events are experienced and the outcomes that result

¹ The Profumo scandal was a major controversy in British politics in which Secretary of State for War, John Profumo lied about an affair with a 19-year-old model Christine Keeler in 1961.

from them. How such events are framed and the narratives that drive their interpretation influence peoples' shared experiences and memories. Mediation influences who are recognised as the victims and who the oppressors. These framings ultimately influence how events play out over time.

In this chapter I set out major contributions to media events theory to date and outline key areas of scholarly disagreement. I go on to articulating the need to move beyond the analysis of how a medium represents historic or significant events to an understanding of how the media a) constructs an event as historic or significant and b) in the context of a web increasingly dominated by the logics and materialities of data. Focusing on the need for the meaning of an event's significance to be rapidly shared across communities, platforms, media and borders in order for it to gain historic status, I suggest methods from science and technology studies (STS) for achieving this understanding in the context of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). I conclude with a series of research questions that are ripe for the study of media events today.

In my work on online knowledge construction in the context of the Egyptian revolution, I highlight the important role of platforms and media that host and share *data* about historic events as key signifiers (Ford, 2022). The web is increasingly governed by the logics and materialities of data. Data now plays a key role both in constructing certain events rather than others as significant and in classifying and labelling them in ways that might enable their travel. Online venues in which data is created, curated, shared and translated by both humans and algorithms serve as important sites where the struggle over the meaning and importance of an event intensifies.

Media events: Consensus and debate

Interest in the media events phenomenon can be traced back to the earliest days of media research (e.g. see Cantril, 1940) but the phenomenon was brought to public consciousness with Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's pathbreaking 1992 book, "Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History". Exploring the role of television in the live broadcasting of historic events like the Olympic Games, the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, and the funeral of John F. Kennedy, the book demonstrated the transforming power of the live television broadcast. Dayan and Katz argued that media technology (in this case broadcasting) had the potential to transform "not only a "message", not only the nature of response, but an entire structure of social relations" (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 217).

Media events were powerful, argued Dayan and Katz, because they served as unifying rituals. Broadcast on television to transfixed viewers around the world, historic media events enabled the collective experience that served to bind societies together. Media events were "centering" performances, co-produced by broadcasters and organizers – the latter, according to Dayan and Katz, "typically" included "public bodies with whom the media cooperate, such as governments, parliaments..., political parties..., international bodies..., and the like." (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 6). Focusing on events that were "preplanned, announced and advertised in advance", Dayan and Katz defined media events as those presented "with *reverence and ceremony*" (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 7, emphasis in original).

Dayan and Katz's "Media Events" was revolutionary because it articulated the ways in which the media were an important feature of social life. It identified the mediation of historic, ceremonial events, in particular, as a useful demonstration of the media's importance.

According to Paddy Scannell, “(t)he originality and genius of Dayan and Katz lie in having identified media events as a topic for serious academic study” (2017, p. 153). And for Stuart M. Hoover, Dayan and Katz provided “a paradigm-shifting definition of an entirely new ground on which to understand the role of the media and of mediation” (2010: 284). Understanding how mediation had become so integral to societies and what were its effects became a popular project for media studies researchers on the back of “Media Events”.

Today, media events has become one of the most discussed and referenced topics in media studies. There has been a 25th anniversary special edition of *Media, Culture and Society* in celebration of Dayan and Katz’s 1992 text and an edited book collection about the concept in the context of global media cultures edited by Couldry, Hepp and Krotz in 2009. Despite the longevity and popularity of Dayan and Katz’s encapsulation of “media events”, it is not without its critics. In the book, “Media Events in a Global Age”, Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry set out two key criticisms of Dayan and Katz’s work in order to rethink and extend what they nonetheless believe was “pathbreaking” (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 1).

First, Hepp and Couldry (2010: 8) critique Dayan and Katz’s definition of media events as overly narrow. The “reverent and priestly” style that Dayan and Katz defined as characteristic of the ways in which media events were presented was not a given, they argued. Dayan and Katz’s typification of media events as contests, conquests and coronations were also overly limiting – especially given the increasing prevalence of “disaster marathons” (Liebes 1998: 72) where the public domain is overtaken by oppositional rather than hegemonic forces and popular media events like Big Brother involving celebratory culture (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 8). Out of this critique, Hepp and Couldry generate an expanded definition of media events as “situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants” (2010: 12).

Second, they disagreed with Dayan and Katz’s claim that the effect of media events was to reaffirm shared values and restore order in order to hold society together. There are neither a common set of shared values nor evidence of a society that is stable – especially considering the fragmented, globalized societies in which we currently live. It is important not to assume “an integrative role of ritual media events” (2010: 5), Hepp and Couldry argued. In many cases, audiences actually bypass or reinterpret the intended centering that the organisers of media events prioritized. The construction of a “mediated center”, therefore, remains “an uncertain and contested process, however totalizing the claims that such a construction involved.” (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 13) The effects of media events, in other words, cannot be known in advance but depend on how media events are used to “establish certain discursive positions and to maintain those actors’ power.” (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 12)

Rather, argued Hepp and Couldry, we need to investigate historic events as “media rituals” (Couldry, 2005) in a different sense. The outcomes of media events cannot be taken as a given or assumed in advance. In many cases, audiences actually bypass or reinterpret the intended centering that the organisers of media events prioritized. Media events are rituals that construct the myth of the mediated centre by articulating “the power-related, hegemonic imagination of the media as the center of present societies, as the expression of the important incidents within that society.” (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 5) The media, in other words, are so central that they don’t only represent important events but also actually construct events as important.

How, then, do we understand the role of the massive variety of actors that work together to construct and represent historic, globally important events? Dayan and Katz presented media events such as the wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles as orchestrated by the crown in collaboration with broadcasters. They write that “these events are not organized by the broadcasters even if they are planned with television “in mind.” The media are asked, or ask, to join.” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 6)

Since then, there has been a recognition of the growing variety of actors involved in co-producing media events. Hepp and Couldry point out that in the current “globalised media cultures” media events are “produced not only by the mass media (television, radio) but also by the Internet and other digital media” (2010: 11). The “organizers” of media events have also expanded. Rather than representatives of the state or the crown, event organisers include terrorists who use the media to hijack attention to highlight their cause. Unexpected events such as pandemics and natural disasters also introduce a range of institutional and civil society actors in their construction and representation.

Scholars have recognised that the internet has invited a number of new actors into the process of representing events. There is, however, debate about who the key actors are (and their relative influence) in the co-construction of media events. Previous accounts usually put a single actor in charge. Early accounts of the 2011 Egyptian revolution in the context of the Arab Spring were attributed to Twitter and Facebook with some calling this a “Facebook revolution”. And yet there is always a contingency to the outcomes of events that require multiple actors to work together to propel particular narratives towards consensus.

The mediation of events in the context of social media and data

Theories relating to media events try to unpick the role of the media in the context of significant events in history that are mediated for global audiences. This is nowhere nearly as important as in our current age of mediatisation (Hepp, 2020) in which everyday life and the events that punctuate it are steeped in media of multiple kinds. Global pandemics, natural disasters, protests, terrorist attacks, incidents and accidents are now represented by a myriad of actors on social and digital media platforms, often beginning minutes or hours after a bomb goes off, a shot is fired, a drone attacks, an earthquake hits, a pandemic is announced.

Technologies of real-time connection have facilitated the immediacy. The first reports of the air raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011 were made by IT consultant living in Abbottabad, Pakistan when he unknowingly tweeted details of the US-led operation as it happened (BBC, 2011). When the Tōhoku earthquake hit Japan in 2011, it took just minutes after the 6-minute earthquake stopped for Wikipedia editors to start an encyclopedic article documenting the event and its aftermath (Keegan et al., 2013). Active audiences relay their experiences of events on social media as immediate or remote witnesses. These messages are, in turn, re-presented in the traditional media as primary sources or a reflection of public opinion.

Digital media has also changed the sequencing of mediation. The #MeToo movement, for example, began with sexual assault survivor and activist Tarana Burke using the phrase “Me Too” in 2006 on Myspace (Ohlheiser, 2017). The SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (PROTECT IP act) blackout protests were constituted by a coordinated refusal of service by US digital media platforms on January 18, 2012 against the two proposed laws relating to intellectual property rights online. In these cases, events are not only followed by the media but actually catalyzed by the media.

Whereas Dayan and Katz's focus in the 1990s was on anticipated events (weddings, funerals, sporting events), today, unanticipated events seem to be the new normal. The defining characteristic of an unplanned event is that there is information vacuum and a corresponding need from publics for information in order to ease the sense of dis-ease. Unexpected events are followed by a public search for meaning. Why did it happen? What is happening as a result? How can we ensure that it doesn't happen again? As the events scholar, Robin Wagner-Pacifici writes, "The public rides the shockwave of the flow of an event, twisting and turning to find a center that will hold, or an authoritative voice that will define the situation, or a frame or a label that will settle the rupture into a set of predictable forms." (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017: 12)

Digital and social media have clearly changed the ways in which we experience and document historic events. Digital media has the power of "not only setting the agenda of transnational news outlets, but of creating transnational political events" (Volkmer and Deffner, 2010: 218) Such events are transnational because they expand beyond national boundaries and reach the attention of those whose identities and cultures are implicated by them. But it has been difficult to tease out the role of social media as opposed to traditional event stakeholders, including traditional media, activists, governments, institutions and all the other actors that co-produce the historic event.

The 2011 Egyptian revolution was the first major event to foreground the role of platforms in enabling social and political dissent and where the role of platforms has been heavily debated since. Some nominated social media as the lead actor in driving these events forward. There are now a host of accounts of how Facebook and Twitter proved instrumental for activists as an organizing tool for the daily protests that culminated in Hosni Mubarak's resignation. Jared Cohen cited an Egyptian activist summing up the roles of social media in the revolution: "facebook used to set the date, twitter used to share logistics, youtube to show the world, all to connect people."

In the book "Tweets and the Streets" (2012), Paolo Gerbaudo argues that the role of social media in the wave of social movements that took place in the early part of this century is much more expansive than merely facilitating the practical operations (setting dates, sharing logistics and showing the world) that Cohen's statement suggests. Social media is neither limited to facilitating practical operations common to activism before the internet, nor does social media result in "unrestrained participation" by all. Instead, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube enabled the symbolic construction of public space in which influential online activists could become "choreographers" of collective action, argues Gerbaudo. Not all individuals had equal agency to effect change. Influential activists used social media for "setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action (could) unfold." (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5)

There are now several articulate accounts of the ways in which digital and social media have been used in political protest (see, for example, Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). And yet, their limitations lie in starting with a focusing on (particular) social media platforms without being open to how the event itself is constructed and mediated by a variety of actors not usually recognised in these debates. Media events theory and methods as useful for understanding how multiple stakeholders catalyse and mediate the historic events that serve to reorganise social order. But the focus on particular types of media (Twitter, Facebook,

broadcasting etc.) have foregrounded certain media and ignored others that are playing a significant role in the ways that events are now constructed and represented.

Operationalising “mediated events”

Scholars like David Moats (2019) have proposed an alternative, “mediated events” framework inspired by Science and Technology Studies as a way of disclosing media technologies and practices at work in the mediation of an event. Moats believes that the disruptions from routine that are emblematic of mediated events enable privileged glimpses into how socio-technical assemblages work when they break down (Moats, 2019: 1166). They can help media scholars to break down dichotomies like producer/audience, social/technical, content/material that have been counterproductive for the field in the past.

Instead of following a particular medium (e.g. television or social media), Moats encourages asking what media matter in a particular case. Drawing from Actor Network Theory (ANT), Moats describes a method that entails not deciding in advance what types of actors are consequential for a controversy’s settlement but rather to study the event and understand who and what actors are enrolled in its evolution. “Thus, non-human entities, technologies and nature are not interesting for their own sake but only to the extent that they matter for the stabilization of knowledge and society, and are worth foregrounding to the extent that their role has been underappreciated in the past.” (Moats, 2019: 1166) Following ANT, the goal of studying mediated events is to merely “describe the development of the controversy using participants’ own (multiple, provisional) articulations of it.” (Moats, 2019: 1166)

Moats calls “mediated events” a “radically empiricist” interpretation of events “to emphasize that we are interested in how the event is mediated and translated while remaining agnostic about which sorts of actors are doing the mediating”. (Moats, 2019: 1172) Studying the event in this way enables us to answer important questions relating to the role of particular media in the evolution of the event and about how power is distributed within hybrid media systems. Questions like: How does the reliance on particular sources favour certain versions of events? Who are the primary definers’ and how do they get the upper hand in making their framings stick? What other actors are critical to constructing the event and/or issue?

Moats’ approach is useful for scholars interested in teasing out the role of all actors in the hybrid media system that become actively engaged in the mediation of events. Governments, civil society organisations, international governmental institutions and crowds play an increasing role in the mediation of significant events, along with traditional media. It is best, then, not to decide up front what media are important for the study of media events but rather to follow the event to see which media matter in its construction. Such an approach can bring to light actors we usually do not recognise as important.

The problem is that Moats doesn’t specify what to focus on in order to do justice to the myriad actors involved in representing iconic global events over time. Following the event as it is mediated across all media channels (including social media) quickly becomes overwhelming. Which representations does one focus on? Which actors across the millions that come to represent the event as they comment and report on it from multiple points around the world? I expand on Moats’ approach of following events as they are mediated by focusing on how key facts about the event stabilises over time.

Boundaries between news media and historical knowledge produced about catalytic events was determined by norms of temporality and expertise. The first draft of history was the newspaper story, but news was always treated as a primary source and therefore subservient to the expert work of professional historians; a work of opinion versus knowledge. Today, we see the merging of news and history both in terms of temporality and expertise. Encyclopedias like Wikipedia are no longer limiting themselves to the representation of events after they have occurred. Events are being documented as they take place (Keegan, , Ford, 2022). And it is no longer only professional historians who produce knowledge about catalytic events that is deemed authoritative. Today, a host of new actors has become enrolled in developing knowledge that is elevated to the status of consensus truth rather than mere opinion or primary reportage.

Following datafied facts as they travel

Moats suggests following catalytic events that disrupt media routines in order to understand “how socio-technical assemblages like media work when they break down” (Moats, 2019: 1166). I suggest three principles when analysing the mediation of catalytic events. First is to follow key facts about the event. Second is to focus on facts as they travel. Third is to pay close attention to locations (and practices) in which facts are translated across sites. In each case, we ask what media and actors matter to the stabilisation of knowledge about the event in question. I expand on each below.

I adopt Mary S. Morgan’s definition of facts as “autonomous, short, specific and reliable pieces of knowledge” (Morgan, 2010: 7). Morgan writes that these characteristics define the statements that come in a “bewildering variety of forms” (Morgan, 2010: 6) in a huge variety of fields. In the context of catalytic events, I define key facts as those that can answer a series of classificatory questions: What type of event is this? Who are its victims and perpetrators? What is the scale of their loss and success? These questions underly the facts that are created, debated, translated and made to travel between different sites. Facts that are born as data (or datafied when metadata is added to them) can more easily be transported across sites and are therefore particularly useful focal points.

Following facts as they travel is key to understanding the role of mediation in the construction of meaning. Facts need to travel beyond the communities of practice in which they originally created in order to reach consensus. Egyptians in Tahrir Square celebrating after the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on the 11th of February 2011 needed to have the knowledge that this event was a revolution translated into a fact that would travel beyond Egypt in order for it to become taken for granted as common knowledge. In order for facts about the event to attain consensus status, they need to be handed off by a variety of actors across different media.

Mary Morgan identifies a fact’s companions, allies, labels and packaging as key actors that help facts to travel. Companions and allies are particular individuals, groups, or institutions that help them in their travels. As Morgan writes, “We depend upon systems, conventions, authorities, and all sorts of good companions to get facts to travel well - in various senses - and danger may lurk when these are subverted or fail to work.” (Morgan, 2010: 7)

In the context of my Wikipedia work, I determine a fact’s allies as its authors (the Wikipedia editors who add, remove, and change facts as they work in small groups and large crowds) as well as nonhuman algorithms (or bots) that automatically select a fact and extract or copy it

across databases where it is represented in different contexts. A fact's traveling companions include the sources from which the fact originated. Given that facts' traveling companions are often discarded along the way in the context of data systems, this step requires qualitatively analysing conversations among editors about what sources they value and quantitatively assessing which sources survive innumerable editing attempts.

I also consider conventions that enable data from Wikipedia to travel to powerful knowledge platforms like the search engine (notably Google) and as an answer to a question in a question-answer machine such as Apple's Siri or Amazon Alexa. In order to reach the status of fact, claims need to be structured according to the rules of linked data. Data constitutes a fact's labels and packaging that explain its meaning to machines and provides instructions on how it should be translated to other sites across the web. Datafied facts will travel farther through the infrastructure of the internet than facts that are merely expressed as HTML code. Data is rocket fuel for facts because it enables machines to recognize and extract facts that can later be represented as answers to user queries.

One of the most popular travel routes for datafied facts organised this way is between Wikipedia and search engines like Google, and increasingly by question-answer machines in virtual assistants such as Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri and Google's Assistant. We ask what is happening in Ukraine, and our Google Assistant provides us with details. Current events are categorised as a "war". Deaths are calculated ("At least 46k" when I searched on the 17th of May, 2022). Property damage is estimated at "Approximately USD 600B". The source is "Reuters" updated "3 hours ago". The facts that are highlighted in the right hand side of the page in Google search and those that are spoken by smart speakers are recognised by many as the consensus truth, delivered from on high by automated machines untainted by the mess and politics of human institutions.

In the same way that Moats encourages asking what media (and actors) matter in a particular case, I traced how datafied facts about the 2011 Egyptian revolution crystallized and were made to travel across digital infrastructures in the days, weeks, months and years following the first protests on January 25 of 2011 (Ford, 2022). Instead of all media in general, I chose to focus on a particular travel route that has not yet been considered in relation to the mediation of events: the travel of semantic data from the moments in which it datafied facts are created, to the ways in which they travel to big data pools such as Google's knowledge graph.

Semantic data is data organised according to principles that enable computers to interpret them without human intervention. They are usually organised according to two objects and their relationship. For example, if one wanted to represent the country Egypt existing within the Middle East, the data organisation might look like this: EGYPT MIDDLE EAST. The objects (Egypt and Middle East) are interpreted with regard to their relationship (existing within). Google's knowledge graph is perhaps one of the most important semantic databases in the world because it powers new features of search engines and responses to user queries from its smart speakers and digital assistants. Paying attention to semantic data and its travels enabled me to foreground actors (human and non-human actors) that were essential for the stabilization of knowledge about the revolution that had been underappreciated in the past. In this case, I followed how the semantic connection between the events in Egypt in January and February 2011 became indelibly linked to the concept of revolution and what it took to achieve this task.

The final principle involves paying attention to the locations (and practices) in which facts are translated across sites. I followed facts as they were constructed, curated and edited, paying particular attention to moments and locations where facts are datafied for travel to other sites. In the path between Wikipedia and Google this includes locations such as Wikipedia's infobox, Wikipedia article titles (and their alternatives), category tags, interwiki links, Wikidata items, Google knowledge panels, Google's featured snippets and the "People also ask" feature. It required following debates and arguments, in what may appear to be tedious technical discussions but are actually passionate debates about who will control the narrative of an historic event.

During this following, I collected the activities and perspectives of actors who attached themselves to event data as it moved through Wikipedia (attended by sources on the web), to Wikidata (a new sister project to Wikipedia that houses data) and then to Google. I started this work with a single dominant representation – that of Google's representation of the event and its answer to the question: "What happened in Egypt in 2011?" I then moved to understand how the datafied facts highlighted by Google were originally created, starting with the first version of the English Wikipedia article from which Google is extracting its answers and featured snippets. These actors do not necessarily need to be human: they simply need to be consequential for "the stabilization of knowledge and society" (Moats, 2019: 1168).

This following of facts about events through internet infrastructures revealed actors that are not usually recognised as important but that emerge as critical to what becomes accepted as common knowledge about what happened and why. I focus, in particular, on how consensus is arrived at in relation to the categorisation of an event when there are multiple alternative options vying for favour. The result is a fine-grained analysis of how data mediates the production of knowledge about events and provides insights into the role of data and AI technologies in mediating our understanding of the world and of each other.

Doing this work, I recognised the importance of data (produced by key actors and at key locations) that played a significant role in the ways in which events are constructed and archived. Doing so reveals a series of new actors that are coming to play an important role not only in the representation of events and their dominant meanings, but also in the construction of certain events as significant and exceptional in the context of the many others that are not accorded with this status, despite the wishes of their stakeholders. I learned how sites like Wikipedia and Google are performing their representation of events in the totalizing way that characterises the centering performativity of media events discussed by Hepp and Couldry.

Conclusion

In 1992, it seemed impossible for historic events to have any public meaning without their transmission by television broadcasting. Today, it is impossible for historic events to have any public meaning without their transmission as *data*. In contrast to news reports, historic books, documentaries and other fact-based media, event data is a powerful representative force because it can travel most fruitfully to reach massive audiences and its prize location as the single answer to user queries on the web.

Today, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, protests and pandemics – incidents, and accidents – have been added to the weddings, funerals and sporting events that Dayan and Katz wrote

about in 1992. The events that seem to arise on a daily basis to upend our societies are unexpected rather than expected. Rather than unifying societies through a single narrative arc, media events are characterised by a fracturing of voices that compete to determine the meaning of what happened. In addition to television broadcasters, the live documentation of historic events as they happen is being conducted by a myriad of actors across digital platforms. The authority to determine the significance and meaning of the event, as well as its geographical scope, has been fundamentally altered.

Despite these changes, there are few accounts that adequately capture the kinds of actors involved in both catalysing and representing events in the context of data and the semantic web. This is largely because, as Moats states, researchers tend to follow particular types of actors (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, “social media”, newspapers etc.) rather than following the event itself and analysing how actors emerge as important mediators in the context of the event. The role of data that structures sources of multiple kinds, I argue, is yet to be fully explored and remains a key gap in terms of media events research. I identify three key research themes following from this.

The first set of questions relates to actors and their political struggles over the meaning of events. Who (or what) is involved in constructing, structuring and sharing data about political events? How do they resolve their differences? Are they making decisions driven by particular ideologies e.g. driven by governments or commerce etc?

Following the event according to its datafied facts surfaces a range of new actors involved in attempting to shape the meaning of political events. Their goal is to influence event data, some of the most powerful event representations. The resultant struggles reflect new tactics of power and knowledge. Facts’ allies and companions have much to gain in either enabling facts to travel or stopping them dead in their tracks. Skirmishes over the meaning of events are ramped up by the forces that would have them represented as simplified (and often singular) data about events. The web has catalysed a host of data representations by journalists, citizens, civil society and state actors, via social media and digital platforms. The battle over event data has intensified.

The second set of related questions involve the role of data specifically. What is the role of data in representing and catalysing media events? How are particular meanings of events encoded into data? How does data frame the narrative about what happened?

The restructuring of the event according to data doesn’t only influence who might become involved in shaping the event. It also influences the meaning of the event as data is used to re-represent it. The ways in which datafied representations differ from purely digital ones reflects a particular kind of logic and understanding that influences the events they represent directly. Finding answers to these questions requires understanding how actors producing and using data structures explain their value. It requires understanding how data sharing and processing in particular contexts works to surface certain datafied facts rather than others. Data is constructed out of both social and technical or material relations.

Finally, we need to understand human agency in the context of data-driven events. Does the wide access to data production means enable greater ability by publics to affect political change? What is the role of automation and AI in determining how events are reflected and remembered?

To many, the brute force of the algorithm in translating the meaning of events means that human history making has been ceded to automated technologies. “Where history was once written by its victors, and later by its nerds, it’s now being shaped by its algorithms,” wrote Washington Post journalist Caitlyn Dewey in an article about Google’s knowledge panels and their rapidly disappearing Wikipedia data sources (Dewey, 2019). But the event is produced by a number of (often opposing) forces, not by a single technology or platform.

In my work on Wikipedia’s representation of events, I’ve learned that forces both internal and external to Wikipedia help shape data representations of the event. Events in Egypt in January of 2011 drove crowds to the Wikipedia article on waves of media attention. They influenced the market of sources available to Wikipedia editors.

According to events scholar, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, “Great things are at stake (in the representation of an event) including the making, dissolution and remaking of social and political identities and the redistribution of power and resources.” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017:11) Tracing digital facts as they travel through the semantic web is a useful mechanism for understanding how truth is constructed in the age of data.

It is clear that there is still much to learn in the relations between the contingent, fluctuating knowledge that accompanies an unexpected media event as it evolves over time and the definitive, inflexible datafied fact on the other. Further investigations will yield important understandings on who and what are wresting control of these important phenomena and who is set to benefit from the events that serve to either rock the status quo from its foundations or to significantly reinforce the power of those who already hold sway.

Chapters and books that students of this topic should read

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