

A change is gonna come:

Media Events and the promise of transformation

The screenshot shows the CrisTin database interface. On the left is a navigation menu with options like 'Logg ut', 'Hovedside', 'Forskningsresultater/NVI', 'Søk i resultater', 'Forsker', 'Prosjekter', 'Forskningsenheter', 'Årsrapportering', 'Tilgang', 'Rapporter', 'Autoritetsdata', and 'Om CrisTin'. The main content area displays a record for an article. At the top, there are buttons for 'Tilbake til liste', 'Tilbake til sak', 'Kort format', and 'Fullt format'. Below these, it says 'Viser treff 1-1 av 1' and '2'. The record details are as follows:

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Abstract

This commentary on *Media Events* frames it as centrally being about societal transformation. The issue of transformation has been central in philosophical and historical approaches to the event, and *Media Events* can be considered an extension of those traditions into media studies. The commentary suggests ways that Dayan and Katz' thinking on transformation can be developed within a historical approach to the study of events and their mediations.

Key words

Event, media event, transformation, history

There've been times that I thought I couldn't last for long

But now I think I'm able to carry on

It's been a long time coming, but I know

A change is gonna come

This is the last verse from a soul classic I first heard accidentally on the radio, just as the surprise result of the 2016 American presidential election was reported by the media in the US, in my native Norway and just about everywhere else. 'A change is gonna come' was first recorded in 1964 and tells a personal history of repression and struggle; behind it lies the larger history of the Afro-American civil rights movement. Sam Cooke's tender, soaring rendition made a tremendous impression on me. At the same time, in that context, the song's message seemed ironic. The incumbent Trump presidency looked like such a wall set up against the change that Cooke was singing about.

That path of change, of course, was appealed to by Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, who sought to build on the Afro-American rhetorical tradition back to Martin Luther King and further. This tradition talks about the great event of change to come, when all men become equal, and free. It invests the past with heavy experience, the present with hope, and the future with a promise of transformation.

Transformation as endgame

Here I want to pay *Media Events* the compliment of taking it mostly at face value. This work has raised extensive discussions, but they do not always seem to me central to the book's own ambitions. A case in point is the question of conceptual boundaries, of what is and is not a media event. The relatively restricted definition in the book itself has been much criticised (e.g. in Couldry et al., 2010; Seeck and Rantanen, 2014) and later revised by its authors, in an easy manner suggesting to me that policing conceptual boundaries was not their main concern. Another case is the charge that *Media Events* is too functionalist and not critical enough (e.g. Couldry, 2003). The book states upfront that its framework is neo-Durkheimian, and so in a sense invites that charge. Still, the authors state explicitly that 'the question of hegemonic abuse must be asked continually' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 19). The critical stance is necessary to Dayan and Katz, then. At the same time it is not sufficient, since something genuinely innovative happens in certain events, '... leading to new perceptions of the possible', as they say (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 154). This is the moment of transformation, when for instance Pope John Paul's visit to Poland partakes in a move away from Soviet communism, or when the fall of the Berlin wall ushers in a new era for East-West relations.

To me, the book's chapter six on transformation is the endgame *Media Events* works toward, its moment of argumentative climax. Here, the issue of real and decisive change is posed from different angles: how to tell the genuinely transformative events from the reinforcing ones, what the former's characteristic forms and temporal modes are. To me it seems hard to deny that

the issue is a key one; given that major contemporary events are all in effect media events, any hope of real change in today's society will have to involve a belief that media events can be transformative. Faced with the question of transformation, it does not seem to me that critical media scholars and the 'neo-Durkheimians' Dayan and Katz will necessarily differ much in their assessments of concrete events. I suspect that both will be sceptical that the event may turn out to be an instrument of hegemony, perhaps an outright media concoction of the type Daniel Boorstin (1992) polemically called a 'pseudo-event'. And both may want to retain a hope for genuine transformation toward a freer, more just society.

What 'of History' means

'The Live Broadcasting of History', says the book's subtitle. Yet, *Media Events* has been criticised for being insufficiently historical. Notably, Paddy Scannell has argued that it is characterised by 'a lack of historical depth', resulting in temporal 'flatness' (Scannell, 1995: 152). It is true that *Media Events* lacks an explicitly historical framework, that the slice of time its examples cover is very thin and that its ethnographical approach often draws it toward the spatial and synchronic, rather than the temporal and historical. I myself have latched on to this critique, asserting that the word 'history' in the book's subtitle merely refers to a certain status, an enduring importance that qualifies for the event to be called 'historical' (Ytreberg, 2017). That may have been too narrowly conceived. A more generous reading might argue that a sense of history in *Media Events* is to

be found in its discussions of the temporalities of transformation. For instance, Dayan and Katz write suggestively of a momentary arrest of time, when the transformative event 'stops history in its tracks', and then sets it on a different course (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 161).

As François Dosse (2010) has demonstrated in his extended discussion of the general concept of the event, ideas of transformation lie at its heart. The event has a rich conceptual history of associations with rupture, with breakage and opening, going back at least to the seventeenth century. In philosophy, the event has been seen as a site of ontological process and difference throughout the 20th century, from Heidegger to Badiou. In the discipline of history, major events such as wars and revolutions have traditionally marked the crucial point of epochal transition from one historical period to the next. After a period of marginalisation by structures and 'longues durées' it has recently made something of a return, this time as a point of articulation for narratives, discourses and memories. In short, the association of events with fundamental transformation is a well-established and continuing tradition within the humanities. *Media Events* could be seen as an extension of that tradition into media studies.

The progressive's hope

Much of *Media Events* is dictated by ambitions of conceptual taxonomy: naming and systematising the types, stages, framings, functions and effects of events. This kind of approach is somewhat limited if what we want is to understand the

forces and potentials of individual historical events. They are after all often distinct and important phenomena in their own right. To my mind, a more historically informed approach to media events is a necessary supplement to *Media Events*, in several ways. One avenue for looking further into historical aspects is mentioned by Dayan and Katz (1992: 183) but not developed: that of memory. In significant ways, historical events become what they are via collective acts of remembering, a point that has been developed within the field of memory studies (e.g. Tamm, 2015). As for historical research into media events, a rich body of recent work has extended the range of relevant cases to the whole of the early and late modern period, greatly expanding our view of events and their mediation (e.g. Lenger and Nünning, 2008). Also, the relationship between events and mediations has been the subject of useful historiographic discussions (e.g. Nora, 1972) that have not as yet been much taken up in Anglo-American media event studies.

In the last instance I do not see Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz primarily as major media theorists or as coiners of a key concept, although they are of course both. I tend to look at them as democratic progressives whose intellectual lives have been intertwined with the Jewish experience and the troubled political trajectories of Israel. As they themselves say, 'It was television's Sadat who first aroused our interest in media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 25). The state visit of Anwar al-Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977 marked a point of transformation in their lives, somewhat as last year's election of Trump did in mine. I can identify with those two men who were keenly following how Menachem Begin responded to the Sadat initiative, how resistance and hope jostled in Israeli public life of the late 1970s, and how peace negotiations were brought to life after the visit.

Looking back, I remember how my own life trajectory has involved experiencing a string of historical events partly Norwegian and partly international, the last one of which was last year's Trump election. I believe I have in common with Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz a hope for our common events to deliver the kind of real change Sam Cooke sang about, a fear that the event might be a decisive turn for the worse, and the knowledge that whatever the outcome, media will have had a major hand in it.

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