

The media event: the future of television in New Zealand

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Abstract

With the fragmentation of the audience in the digital mediascape, television broadcasters are looking for ways to strengthen their brand and secure strong ratings. This article argues that media events, especially news events, are used by television broadcasters to promote journalistic cultural authority. The core elements of the media event genre (liveness, immediacy, intimacy, dramatic imagery) match the values of the medium, making the news event particularly powerful in its effect. Because of this alignment between medium and genre, and the genre's ability to attract large audiences, media events demonstrate the relevance of television as a broadcast medium and therefore its potential longevity within the digital mediascape. The Christchurch Earthquake on 22 February 2011 is used as a case study to reveal how TVNZ and TV3 pursued brand recognition through the journalistic cultural authority they could obtain by providing prompt, dramatic and informative rolling coverage to their audiences.

Introduction

On 22 February 2011 I was in Wellington for the day when I received a telephone call telling me there had been another significant earthquake at home – and this time people had died. For a couple of hours I tried to contact immediate family members to ensure everyone was safe and then retired to a hotel until I could return to Christchurch the next day. Immediately upon reaching my hotel room I turned on the television set and spent the next four hours glued to the coverage. I watched with horror as the once familiar cityscape crumbled in bricks, dust and tears and the well-known reporters and anchors from each broadcaster's news solemnly conveyed the latest information from the studio and on location.

I, like most people in New Zealand, experienced the earthquake as a media event.¹ My primary source of information was coming from the television, I was aware of being part of a collective watching the coverage and the images conveyed have come to constitute the Christchurch Earthquake for me. The specificity of the medium – its liveness, immediacy, and emphasis on the visual, its domestic situation and familiarity through its direct mode of address – made television the optimal choice for engaging with an important and ongoing event. Television has the advantage of offering the audience this powerful real time engagement with the event, whether it be a close-run rugby game, a landslide election or a natural disaster. This combination of attributes define the medium and, as Katz, Dayan and Motyl astutely assert in 1981, will secure its endurance well into the digital age: "Live media

events appear to have a future, not just a past. The new media will defer to television's unique ability to bring us historic and heroic events as they are happening" (68).

2011 was a remarkable year for media events, with a number of significant events taking place that were broadcast live on New Zealand's main free-to-air television channels, TVNZ and TV3: the Christchurch Earthquake, the Japanese Earthquake, the Royal Wedding, the Rugby World Cup (RWC), and the General Election. Nielsen research show that the 'PUTs' (People Using Television) spike when each of these events occurred, indicating that these breaking news stories and interruptions to normal programming generated great interest and viewership (Nielsen qtd. in thinkTV). These media events recall the viewer to the fundamental promise of the televisual medium: liveness, immediacy, intimacy, and dramatic images. However, not only do these extraordinary broadcasts invoke the value of television, they enhance the brand of the broadcaster.

The broadcaster's brand is paramount in the contemporary digital mediascape in which the same provider spreads content across different platforms. "In a crowded media environment," John Ellis writes, "the value of such a brand increases as it cuts through problems of consumer recognition" (167). According to economist and academic Dr. Gillian Doyle, "the digital environment favours strong and recognisable brands" (144) because consumers need guidance through the diversity of media options and having confidence in a particular media provider helps the public navigate the media clutter. Part of the branding for TVNZ and TV3, this article will argue, lies in the broadcaster being known for its reliability in bringing socially, culturally and politically important and interesting moments to its audience.

However, since its entry to the New Zealand marketplace in 1987 (as Sky Media Ltd) Sky TV has incrementally won rights to commercially amenable media events such as the 2012 Olympics and the main rights to the 2011 RWC which attract sponsors and admit advertising as well as monthly subscriptions. These events enjoy very large audiences and are celebratory by mode. How, then, do free-to-air broadcasters TVNZ and TV3 find value in the remaining financially draining news events? This article will examine TVNZ and TV3's responses to the Christchurch Earthquake on 22 February 2011, identifying branding and journalistic cultural authority as key motivators for providing the public service of rolling coverage of this event for New Zealand audiences. It is the competition between these two broadcasters and the desire to cement audience share through brand and journalistic cultural authority² that make news events and media events in general, a tenable, even valuable, genre.

I will first describe the media event genre according to Dayan and Katz's seminal research then consider how the genre has been extended to include the news event. This second section finds branding important to TVNZ and TV3's pursuit of news events, arguing that the public service and purported objectivity of the coverage has ramifications for perceptions of each broadcaster's reliability at times of calamity. The final section extends this argument to consider the journalistic cultural authority attached to news events: news events not only serve to transmit significant and timely information to their audience, they establish the technical expertise and journalistic integrity of the broadcaster. Thus media events help to differentiate television from other media and are intrinsic to the relevance and therefore potential longevity of television as a broadcast medium within the digital mediascape.

Defining Media Events

The live televised events that marked broadcast television in 2011 can be defined as media events, as coined by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in their book, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Dayan and Katz originally identified three categories of media events: coronation (the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 or Sir Edmund Hillary's funeral in 2008), conquest (the moon-landing in 1969), and contest (the Olympics). Each of these modes is ceremonial in nature and commands large audiences, and thus "they differ markedly from the genres of the everynight" (Dayan & Katz, "Defining Media Events" 403). Dayan and Katz claim that "like the holidays that halt everyday routines, television events propose exceptional things to think about, to witness, and to do" ("Defining Media Events" 403-4). They argue that these televisual events take us to the centre of society, reminding us in an uncritical and festive way of the rules and values upon which we conduct our daily lives. Indeed, they find the simultaneity³ and collectivity which are essential to the genre and facilitated by the medium enable television to "become custodian of the centre. Entitled to pronounce what belongs in the centre, television has become part of the centre, if not the centre itself. Its very presence bestows aura" (*Media Events* 101).

Dayan and Katz define the major characteristics of this genre as being "(1) live, (2) pre-planned and publicized, (3) interruptions of the schedules of television and of daily life, (4) organized outside the broadcasting organization. They (5) evoke the enthralled response of a willing audience, and (6) invoke deeply rooted narrative forms that are associated with heroics" (*Media Events* 102). These characteristics are evident in the RWC and the General Election, both conforming to the category of 'contests'. The RWC was televised live over six weeks (9 September to 23 October) and several channels while the 2011 Election was focused on the night of the polls (26 November) and also aired on the free-to-air broadcasters TVNZ, TV3 and Māori Television. Both media events were pre-planned and advertised to ensure the audiences were aware of the up-coming programming, generating an air of 'must see' television: to forgo these media events is to miss out on a cultural, social or political experience. Normal viewing and the daily schedules that go with that viewing were suspended for the time these media events were on, reinforcing the importance of the programming. The RWC was initiated by the IRB (International Rugby Board) and the General Election by the Prime Minister⁴ thus the broadcasters involved did not themselves create the events. The RWC and General Election would proceed without television coverage, although clearly broadcasters were regarded as essential to the success of each event: the RWC in terms of its entertainment and fiscal success and the Election in terms of open democratic process.

The characteristics of the media event as described by Dayan and Katz are therefore easily met by these events and others such as the Royal Wedding in April 2011. A key element of the genre for Dayan and Katz is the festive nature of the narrative. The celebration at the heart of these contests, conquests and coronations generate national unity: "ceremonial broadcasts," they write, "are not primarily informative, nor are they meant to provide mere entertainment. These broadcasts are, first of all, integrative" (*Media Events* 98). Dayan and Katz identify television as the medium and media events the genre by which national identity and communal values can be hegemonically agreed and social cohesion managed ("Defining Media Events" 414).

Located in the home, the television set brings the wider world and distant events into a private, familial space. Therefore the ceremonial events Dayan and Katz privilege “hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience” (“Defining Media Events” 401). Contemporary media events invoke early manifestations of live broadcast television. In 1936 the Berlin Olympics were broadcast live to special viewing booths called ‘Public Television Offices’ in Berlin and Potsdam (Olympic Broadcasting Services) and in 1953, when the technology of television had much progressed but the cultural and social value had yet to be determined, Queen Elizabeth II’s Coronation was televised live across Britain generating an audience of over 20 million (BBC).⁵ Both events conveyed the importance of the instigator (the Reich, the British Monarchy), the broadcaster (Telefunken and Fernseh, and the BBC) and television as an unparalleled medium through which previously privileged and momentous occasions were broadcast live to the masses.

As normal as it is to view major Royal events on television today, in 1953 this was a wholly new venture. It marked the medium as being for the masses and created expectations of accessibility and immediacy. These remain important features of television media events today: just as these early media events identified and augmented the value of television as culturally and hegemonically meaningful the significant run of newsworthy media events in 2011 reassert the value of the medium. With its capacity to reveal reality as it happens in the comfort of the home (thus suitable to long-term viewing as media events inevitably demand), television is shown to maintain its role in communicating significant events despite competition from alternative media.

The genre Dayan and Katz categorised has generally been acknowledged as productive: it helps to examine how and to what purpose media events are broadcast. Yet enduring genres evolve and theoretical critique has expanded the genre. Two notable critiques come from Gabriel Weimann and Nick Couldry. Weimann claims that news events such as terrorism are too closely aligned with the ceremonial media event to be omitted from the genre. Rather than taking the audience to the social centre, Couldry asserts that media events generate the ‘myth of the mediated centre’. That is, the idea that the media is itself at the centre of media events is a fallacy. These claims by Weimann and Couldry are of particular interest for this article as I examine how free-to-air broadcasters TVNZ and TV3 find value and return in the financially draining news events they aired in 2011 with Sky having successfully cornered commercially-oriented major sporting events.

News Events and Branding

Dayan and Katz contend that the breaking news of the American President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 was a news event whereas the broadcast of his funeral was a ceremonial media event as per the genre they describe: “The messages of these two broadcasts are quite different, their effects are different, they are presented in quite a different tone. Great news events speak of accidents, of disruption; great ceremonial events celebrate order and its restoration” (“Defining Media Events” 406). While not dismissive of news events, Dayan and Katz nevertheless wanted to differentiate the two types of event programming with reference to the integrative function of the media event.

Gabriel Weimann argues otherwise, advancing that coverage of natural disasters and acts of terrorism could be incorporated into the media event genre and defined as ‘coercions’. The news event fulfils most of the genre’s six conventions Dayan and Katz assert above: news

events are not organised by the media, but outside, they disrupt normal viewing, they attract large audiences, and they often reveal heroism in the wake of disaster such as the local workers who removed heavy debris and comforted strangers after the Christchurch Earthquake. The news event is not pre-planned⁶, however, and its ability to serve an integrative function is challenged by the gruelling coverage.

Weimann's coercions cannot conform to the overt celebratory mode of contests, conquests and coronations. Rather, coercions with their unrelenting traumatic images and the faltering reportage undermine the order that the structured narrative form of daily news programming itself promises (Blondheim & Liebes 187; Ellis 74). Even so, his position has been accepted, with Katz and Liebes writing in 2007 that "major news events deserved inclusion" (158) in the original categorisation of media events. Indeed, Katz and Liebes observe a recent increase in "disaster marathons" (160) over the celebratory events that marked the first 50 years of television and find that this shift in focus within the genre of media events is worthy of attention. Therefore the live coverage of the Christchurch Earthquake can be productively considered as a media event.

Natural disasters are newsworthy as well as meeting the specificity of television as a medium, which is a "highly visual and compact medium with little time for exposition" (Livingstone qtd. in Weimann 23). The Christchurch Earthquakes provided the drama, heroism, and unambiguity that befits television news-telling. Due to the earthquakes' proximity to the national audience and amplitude it is unsurprising that TVNZ and TV3 opted for rolling coverage. Earlier precedents of the London bombings (7/7/2005) and 9/11 (2001) reassured the broadcasters that viewers would expect and watch extended coverage of the disaster, and that any lost revenue from advertising would be mitigated by the journalistic cultural authority which would attach to the public service of prompt, dramatic and informative coverage.

The first major earthquake to hit the Canterbury region occurred at 4.45am on 4 September 2010. By 7am photographs were aired on TVNZ of the resulting damage followed by special news bulletins read by Rawdon Christie at 7.36am and 8am which included interviews with the Head of Civil Defence. By 8.13am continuous coverage was in place with information provided regarding, for example, how to access medical care and advice to stay off cellphones. Live interviews were aired with Geologist Mark Quigley and Al Steward of NZ Police. TV3 also aired intermittent special news bulletins before committing to rolling coverage at approximately 2pm. At 7am news journalist and presenter Mike McRoberts fronted a news bulletin that included video coverage and a live cross to Christchurch reporter Hamish Clark. As with TVNZ, regular programming continued between these bulletins as the broadcasters worked to secure links between studio and local reporters. TVNZ, however, began rolling coverage much earlier than TV3, drawing all potential audience share for this coverage to its broadcast during that period. Audience numbers increased for TVNZ throughout the day, with the initial *ONE News Special* earning 265,200 viewers which increased to 451,600 between 10am and 11am, and peaked at 902,500 viewers for *ONE News* (6pm to 7pm) (Nielsen).

Being first (and being right) is an important mantra for journalists. TV3 journalists Rachel Smalley and Mike McRoberts both tweeted their displeasure at the slowness of TV3 to bring rolling coverage to their audience, with the latter complaining that poor ratings reflect "a

poor decision by 3 not to go with continuous coverage throughout the day. No lead-in" ("TV Anchor lets rip"). TV3 Director of News, Mark Jennings observed that ideally TV3 would have had continuous coverage earlier, but the lack of a consistent power supply until about 2pm prevented this (ibid). Significantly, Jennings conceded that TVNZ won high ratings beyond the rolling coverage as a result. Although he felt that TVNZ's coverage suffered from repetition it was their early capture of the audience that bolstered their ratings for the Saturday night news bulletin: even though Jennings believed TV3's evening news that Saturday night was better, the "lack of a comprehensive lead-in" (ibid) denied the broadcaster ratings that better reflected the quality of the programme. TVNZ's *ONE News* attracted 902,500 viewers and TV3's *3 News* 307,400 (Nielsen). This data suggests audiences are likely to be persuaded by the broadcaster's performance, punishing TV3 in this instance and rewarding TVNZ.

Not surprisingly, then, when the Japanese Earthquake and ensuing tsunami struck at 6.46pm (local time) on 11 March 2011 TV3 was quick to drop strong rating regular Friday night programming to follow developments of this visually dramatic event. To emphasise the point, TV3 ran 'proof of performance' advertisements comparing the responsiveness of TV3 on this occasion (beginning its breaking news at 7.11pm) with TVNZ's continuation of scheduled programming on TVOne (the high-rating *Masterchef* franchise) until 8.30pm (TV3). Advertising consultant Martin Gillman notes that "news is an incredibly important ingredient" (qtd. in Taylor) through which TV3 look to break down TVNZ's dominance in the ratings. The "default setting" (ibid) for most viewers remains TVNZ and therefore the promotional advertisement is working to re-establish TV3's credibility in breaking major news stories. Both brand and ratings are at stake here, with brand conveying "not only the essence of the material offered by a channel, but also, as the brand becomes known, its claims to quality" (Ellis 165).⁷

Because the devastating 6.3 earthquake that struck on Tuesday 22 February 2011 occurred at 12.51pm journalists (and the public) were able to capture early images of the destruction and terror. Yet with the CBD where TV3 and TVNZ were housed being greatly affected by the earthquake, both broadcasters faced significant challenges in collecting that footage and taking it to air. TVNZ journalists, for example, were unable to return to their building after it was evacuated.

Nevertheless, both broadcasters brought rolling coverage to their audiences reasonably quickly: TV3 by 1.30pm (Quinn) and TVNZ soon after at 1.37pm. Coverage continued throughout the afternoon and into the evening, with both broadcasters wrapping up coverage at 11pm (Nielsen). Both returned to live coverage early the next morning: 5.30am for TVNZ and 6am for TV3. Significant air time was given to the earthquake over the coming days. TV3, for example, followed a pattern of *3 News* 6am-12.30pm, *3 News* 4.30pm-7pm, *Campbell Live* 7pm-8pm, *3 News* 8pm-8.30pm for Wednesday 23 February, Thursday 24 February and Friday 25 February. On Saturday the coverage reduced to 3 hours and 3.5 hours on the Sunday (Quinn). Live coverage continued into the following week Monday 28 February to Friday 4 March, a key component being the broadcaster's new morning news programme, *Firstline*.⁸ TVNZ devoted even more air time to the disaster. Wednesday 23 February's coverage began at 5.30am and ran through to 11pm that night. Thursday's coverage ran from 6am to 1.30pm commencing with the *Breakfast* show followed by a *ONE News Special*, then further news programming from 4.30pm to 8.30pm, and finally *Tonight*

from 10.30 to 11pm. While both channels attracted strong audiences to their coverage, overall TVNZ attracted bigger audiences. For example, *Breakfast* on Monday 28 February attracted 206,000 viewers and TV3's *3 News Special's* 48,000 (Nielsen)⁹.

News events such as the coverage of the Christchurch Earthquake focus on the audience as citizen bringing journalistic cultural authority to the broadcaster: a boon to brand in an era of audience dispersal. Jostein Gripsrud links the value of public service broadcasting to brand, writing, "the greater the number of channels the more valuable to viewers are those channels that experience has taught them can largely be trusted as suppliers of reliable information and genuinely high-quality engaging, relevant, and entertaining material" (220). Spoilt for choice the consumer looks for certainty, searching out recognisable and respected brands. Gripsrud claims further that "both traditional public service channels and commercial channels with public service obligations will consequently ... have a very strong position from which to fence off much of the new competition that digitization might bring" (220). This observation certainly applies to the state-owned, ex-public service broadcaster TVNZ, whose flagship news programme *ONE News* consistently rates in the top 10 programmes each week.

TVNZ's brand is identified with the early days of television in New Zealand. The New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation's (NZBC) one channel monopoly from 1961 was revoked in 1975 and the two channels TV One and TV Two (the latter soon renamed South Pacific Television [SPTV]) were launched. By 1980, though, "TVNZ [replaced] semi-independent TV One and SPTV corporations with a unified, fully complementary two-channel system" (Dunleavy, 110). TVNZ enjoys credibility as a result of this longevity and public service, although the broadcaster's remit as a public service broadcaster over this period has been complex and fraught. The last vestiges of legislated public service obligation have been dismissed with the revocation of the Charter in 2011. Nevertheless, TVNZ remains New Zealand's "national broadcaster" (TVNZ, "About TVNZ") and holds archives for 50 years of television in New Zealand. It has been responsible for important representations of national identity during this period. For example, up until 1996 TVNZ broadcast all rugby.¹⁰ Being the original provider of live and free-to-air broadcasts of the 'national religion' reinforces the cultural value of TVNZ, as the very high ratings for TVNZ's coverage of the 2011 RWC games attest.¹¹ Similarly, having news anchors as 'celebrity' personalities, such as past presenter and 'Mother of the Nation' Judy Bailey, lends credibility and authority to the content and the institution (Blondheim and Liebes 187). Irrespective of its status as commercial or public service broadcaster, TVNZ's long association with respected news anchors and national story-telling are important features of its brand.

By contrast, TV3 was launched as a commercial and national provider in 1989 with the intention of undermining TVNZ's monopoly of the market (Dunleavy). Prime time news was viewed as key to this project as establishing credibility through the news translates into high ratings and therefore strong advertising revenue. David Williams regards the 6pm news as "an important battleground. It is consistently the most watched time slot on both channels and attracts the highest advertising rates." TV3 "won 14 percent of the national audience" (Dunleavy 227) within its first four weeks, but this was far short of its target of 30 percent. TV3's early and ongoing financial difficulties impacted on its potential, going into receivership as early as 1990 and ensuing changes in ownership have not resolved the issue with "huge debts" leading to "cuts in its journalism budget" (Taylor). Ongoing restructuring

of loans by TV3's owner Mediaworks has highlighted the difficulty for the private media company to operate its way out of debt.¹² Yet, TV3 remains on air, employs respected news anchors and journalists, and is recognised by TVNZ as a threat to its domination of prime time news ratings.¹³ The challenge presented by a fresh and commercial news provider in the late 1980s prompted TVNZ to revisit its image in order to maintain its audience share in a deregulated and eventually digitised mediascape resulting in a "new, snappy entertainment oriented news program" (Comrie 43). TVNZ and TV3 therefore compete for audience share and media events are one way in which each broadcaster can convey their relevance and journalistic cultural authority in a cluttered media environment.

News Events and Journalistic Cultural Authority

The frustration shown by figures within TV3 about their late rolling coverage of the September 2010 earthquake points to the importance of such innovative programming, not only in terms of immediate audience ratings but in ongoing perceptions of being *the* news provider to turn to in times of crisis. For Tom Cotter (General Manager of Digital Media, TVNZ), "it is part of the obligation as a news broadcaster to make sure we cover those events in the right manner". The journalistic cultural authority attached to providing immediate, live, dramatic coverage of these disasters translates into daily recognition of the television news brand registered by ratings. Similarly, intrinsic to the value aligned with news events are immediacy, verisimilitude, setting and the reporter's relationship with the audience.

Providing coverage of a news event soon after it occurs indicates the broadcaster is able to identify a momentous event and dispatch resources (staff and equipment) efficiently in order to bring key information to the audience promptly. Steven Barnett, then Director of Media Group, Henley Centre for Broadcasting, observed back in 1993 "an increasing appetite amongst television audiences for the live and the unpredictable" which "should encourage the traditional rivalry between news providers to get their crews to where the action is before the competition" (110). The broadcaster needs to demonstrate its capacity to gather news to convince its audience that it is worthy of their attention and trust: as TV3's experience reveals, audiences will tune in to whoever is first if their preferred broadcaster doesn't deliver.

Reporting live on location offers "photographic verisimilitude" (Zelizer 163). The high modality of photography encourages equating the image with reality, thereby reinforcing the veracity of the report. The reporter at a home inundated with liquefaction, talking to distraught family members and co-workers as they wait for news of their wives, husbands, colleagues to be rescued, or standing in front of broken rubble that was once a landmark building all work to denote that the reporter is indeed at the scene of a disaster as well as connoting the damage and devastation wrought throughout the city. The rolling coverage is justified as reports come in from multiple locations and information is updated continuously.

The reporter's message of calamity is therefore affirmed by the setting: "setting thus becomes a guarantor of television's verisimilitude – its illusion of truth and reality – and it helps authenticate the reporter's interpretation of the event" (Butler 147). But the reporter him- or herself also lends credence to the story. Key news anchors and reporters create a rapport with the audience and so enlist their trust, thereby adding authenticity to their accounts. Meltzer writes that "the anchor is employed by the network to legitimate

journalistic authority through narrative and personalisation" (109) and consequently 'heavyweights' from TVNZ and TV3 were sent to Christchurch to reinforce the integrity of their coverage. Simon Dallow and Mark Sainsbury from TVNZ and Mike McRoberts and John Campbell from TV3 led the coverage on location for each broadcaster, bringing authority as interpreter of events and familiarity to their audiences. Those fronting the coverage are therefore performing an important function: "in addition to boosting audience ratings and rapport and the ability to obtain interviews, the anchor's fame is also central to the development and maintenance of journalistic cultural authority" (Meltzer 109).

The effect of the journalistic cultural authority ascribed to the news event is to make it constitutive of the event itself. That is, the representation of the event becomes the material out of which collective memory recalls the event rather than recollections of personal observations. Katz et al. observe that "the media function as our memory, are a simulation of it; they transform our experience into a visual cliché" (76). Televised events are thus powerful constructions of history-in-the-making.

In their original analysis of media events Dayan and Katz record the broadcasters' emphasis on the 'historicity' of the event and therefore of their important function in bringing momentous occasions to the masses. This can be found in then Head of News and Current Affairs Anthony Flannery's assessment of TVNZ's coverage of recent media events:

Just one big story puts pressure on a newsroom, but in the last 12 months we've had the Christchurch Earthquakes, the Pike River Mine disaster, a Royal Wedding, Tsunami and nuclear panic in Japan, the Rena grounding off Tauranga, the Rugby World Cup and now Election 2011.

We have thrown everything at these historic stories, and I hope we have proved beyond doubt that we are committed to bringing New Zealanders important news where and when it matters. (TVNZ, "Best Win TVNZ's One")

As Flannery's comment indicates, part of providing the public with access to each historic event is an acknowledgement of the technology and skill required to do so. Dayan and Katz note that "the professional networks of producers buzz with information on the extraordinary mobilization of manpower, technology, aesthetics, and security arrangements required to mount a media event" ("Defining Media Events" 411). A photograph of news anchor and reporter Simon Dallow in the Christchurch earthquake zone along with a technician in the TVNZ 2011 Annual Report are part of this projection of excellence in news gathering.

These acclamations of heroic efforts in bringing historic events to the television screen contribute to the sense that 'the media' is our sole access to the social centre, the locus of information and power (Dayan and Katz, "Defining Media Events" 410). Couldry problematises this concept, arguing instead that this is the "'myth of the mediated centre': the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks 'for' that centre" (*Media Rituals* 2). He argues elsewhere that his purpose is to critique "the idea that 'the media' stand in for a social centre" ("Does 'the Media' have a Future?" 440). Couldry is right to point out that there is no one centre to which the media producer can direct the audience, that this is an illusion, or myth, fostered by the process

itself in which pivotal figures – the Prime Minister, the Mayor, the head of the Earthquake Commission – are paraded and made accessible. Similarly, the media do not become the social centre, despite the acclamations of expertise and proficiency as TV3's proof of performance ads protest.

Such claims by Dayan and Katz are, according to Couldry, symptomatic of the uncritical stance of their theory. The real world is necessarily re-presented and given order and shape by the media, therefore the viewer (and theorist) should be sceptical of assertions of un-mediated reality, as is implied by live crosses to respected journalists on location. But there is a kernel of truth within any myth a society tells itself. As Bolin asks, "does it matter at all whether or not the media actually have access to a mediated center? ...If the media's true power, as Couldry argues, is their ability to construct reality for us, are they then not in fact one of the 'bases of authority' in society?" (135-6). For Bolin, the power of the media is not reduced by acknowledging the fact that the reality and societal centre conveyed are their product: indeed, if the media claim to reveal reality and the audience believes it, then there will be "real social effects" (135).

For some in the audience at least, the coverage of the Christchurch Earthquake provided by TVNZ and TV3 did facilitate a sense of national collectivity that is purportedly waning in the digital environment. For media blogger Tim Watkin, "It's one of the rare times when television can again be the home of shared experiences. When there were just one or two channels and just about everybody watched *A Dog's Show* or *Miss Universe*, we all shared the same cultural space. The narrowcast, pay TV world has obliterated that, except in these exceptional events. We come together again". He finds the rolling coverage by both TVNZ and TV3 to be uniquely unifying in an otherwise disparate mediascape without reference to a social centre, singular or plural, imagined or real.

This issue returns us to the distinction Dayan and Katz originally made: that the media event, with its emphasis on celebration and integration is not the same as a news event where chaos is demonstrated and social disintegration implied. Yet it is possible for a news event to be integrative because of the traumatic and disruptive narratives and images it projects. It is precisely the harrowing images the news event conveys that make it difficult to watch at the same time as evoking compassion for the victims. This empathy resulted in many constructive and generous acts of *communitas* in the case of the Christchurch Earthquakes, from the creation of the Student Volunteer and Army Armies to businesses providing discounts for Christchurch residents seeking respite in other towns to donations to aid the recovery.

While it would be erroneous to suggest it arose solely from television coverage, it is reasonable to claim that the rolling coverage played a significant part in conveying the magnitude of the event to those not immediately affected and hence the need for them to provide support. Indeed, media coverage is essential not only to inform the public but to 'advertise' any disaster to ensure aid arrives (Balaisyte, Besiou and Wassenhove). The efficacy of this coverage can be attributed to the values that underpin both the news event genre and the medium itself: live, immediate and dramatic imagery and narratives are delivered directly into the domestic sphere to a large and captivated national audience.

Conclusion

News events therefore achieve multiple outcomes: they can lead to positive and real social engagement, and they prove the innovation and integrity of the media provider, generating journalistic cultural authority and contributing to the broadcaster's brand. This result is particularly important for TVNZ and TV3 as they vie for the New Zealand public's recognition as being *the* national news provider across all digital media. The dramatic images conveyed in these news events, the loss of life, the potential for an earthquake to strike other cities or parts of New Zealand (aka the 'Shaky Isles') conspire to make compelling viewing – something the broadcasters will necessarily exploit for brand and ratings gain. As Gillman avers, "It's exploiting a series of disasters for commercial gain, but ultimately it is a commercial world" (qtd. in Taylor).

The variety of media events, their popularity with the audience and their efficacy and value for broadcasters' brands demonstrates how deeply the genre and its aligned medium is implicated in our understanding of momentous events and our subsequent social acts, and goes some way to explaining the current pervasiveness of news events that Katz and Liebes observed in 2007. A significant outcome of the fit between the values of the media event, the broadcaster's desire to transmit such events and the attributes of television as a medium is that broadcast television will endure. Katz et al. note that "it may be that the live television broadcast is the only form of television as we know it that will continue in the future. The real-time transmission of events as they occur and the swift correlation of news and current affairs may possibly stand a chance of competing with the new media technologies" (72). Media events demonstrate, then, the ongoing relevance of broadcast television in the digital age.

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Notes

¹ Television reviewer Trevor Agnew told the radio programme Mediawatch, "people outside of Christchurch probably saw through their television a much better idea of what was happening in Christchurch than many in the suburbs" due to the loss of power in many parts of the city for extended periods of time ("Mediawatch").

² For Ruggiero and Winch cultural authority in journalism is reliant upon "being truthful, honest, unbiased, and for performing a public service by informing people of the important events of the day."

³ Simultaneity refers to the fact that media events are often broadcast concurrently on multiple channels, thereby indicating the importance of the event.

⁴ The Prime Minister advises the Governor-General of the date of the upcoming election whose role it is to issue the writs for a general election.

⁵ 27 million viewers watched the coronation on television according to the Royal Household website, with 11 million people tuning into their radios for the ceremony. This marked shift in audience numbers reveals the way in which television was overtaking radio as the most popular medium in Britain in the 1950s.

⁶ Terrorism is, of course, pre-planned and arguably with the media in mind, but the media is not forewarned.

⁷ With TVNZ and TV3 competing for a reputation as being the most reliable source of news, both broadcasters have emphasised their journalistic achievements as recognised at the 2011 AFTA's (Aotearoa Film and Television Awards, previously Qantas Film and Television Awards). TVNZ's *ONE News* won 'Best News' for the fourth year in a row, which presenter Simon Dallow accredited to *ONE News*' coverage of the Christchurch Earthquake (TVNZ, 'Best News') while TV3's *3 News* won three awards aligned with the earthquake coverage: Hilary Barry for Best News or Current Affairs Presenter, and Hamish Clark won both Journalist of the Year and

Best News Reporting. TVNZ also won Media Brand of the Year in 2011 in recognition of its development from broadcaster to digital media company with “innovation at the core of its business model” (CAANZ).

⁸ *Firstline* replaced the unsuccessful *Sunrise* programme, aimed at giving morning viewers a ‘serious’ alternative to TVNZ’s *Breakfast*. Originally intended to launch in April 2011, the format was put to air on February 23 in response to the earthquake (Monk). It is noteworthy that TV3 ran a promo for this programme also, directly comparing the entertainment oriented *Breakfast* with Rachel Smalley interviewing the Prime Minister on *Firstline*.

⁹ Ratings figures reflect all viewers aged 5+.

¹⁰ Sky purchased the television rights to all All Black rugby games in 1996.

¹¹ TVNZ tops the list of the 20 most watched programmes for 2011, with 1,157,000 tuning in to view the RWC opening ceremony on the free-to-air service (Nielsen cited in thinkTV).

¹² John Drinnan follows Mediaworks’ financial issues in the *New Zealand Herald* and provides accessible and up to date information on the company’s efforts to overcome its financial woes.

13 Ratings are a complex and problematic measure of a programme’s success as David Williams’ article “TV news ratings war: Is the first casualty truth?” in the *NBR* attests. TVNZ’s *ONE News* is consistently rated in the top 10 programmes for viewers aged 5+ by Nielsen but when the figures are broken down to specific demographics, TV3’s *3 News* ratings improve relative to that of its competitor. For example, On Saturday 26 February 2011, viewers aged 5+ were 617,300 for *ONE News* and 254,700 for *3 News*. *3 News*’ share of audience increases when the 25-54 age group is considered, earning 154,000 viewers compared with *ONE News*’ 212,900.

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