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Events and the Means of Attention

Greg Richards[1,2*]

Abstract

In the contemporary network society, attracting public attention has become more challenging as the supply of information increases. Events arguably play an essential role in synchronizing personal, social and political agendas, helping to focus attention and frame places, objects and people. The event audience justifies the event by paying attention to it, but the event also has to reciprocate by paying attention to the audience. This paper looks at how contemporary rituals that are designed to focus attention and generate 'emotional energy' through shared co-presence and a mutual focus of attention, as suggested by Collins in 2004. The event itself, therefore, arguably mirrors practices in the wider network society, where sociality increasingly depends on generating and exchanging attention. The extent to which events and event places successfully create the conditions for successful event rituals by developing the means of attention is examined through examples of cultural and sporting events, focusing on the creative interplay between consumers and producers and their co-creation of event experiences.

Keywords

Events; Attention; Network society

Introduction

Events have become an increasingly important part of the cultural, social and economic life of the contemporary informational society. Events have become laden with a burgeoning weight of meaning as nations have sought to use them as a means of promoting national culture, as cities and regions have utilised them as a means of economic development and as local communities seek cohesion through events. The tendency towards event inflation, in terms of numbers, size, scope and significance has been noted by a number of authors [1,2].

Many of the explanations for the growing significance of events are related to single aspects of their development, such as economic imperatives, the search for cultural identity, or the need for social cohesion. In this paper I would like to present a more holistic approach that attempts to explain why events have become central to the contemporary network or informational society [3]. In essence, the contemporary approach to events can arguably be viewed from the perspective of the importance of generating and attracting attention, which has now become an essential economic, cultural and social currency. As Ritchie [4] noted 'events rely for their success on their uniqueness, status, or timely significance to create interest and attract attention'.

This paper draws together different strands of social theory in order to examine how events have become one of the essential elements of the means of attention.

The development of the economy and events

The rise of capitalist society was supported by the mass production of goods, shifting the logic of the economy from agrarian to industrial production. In this context, as Marx [5] pointed out, the control of the 'means of production' was the essential resource of the capitalist class. By applying capital to industrial production, labour was transformed into goods. While Marx's observations of industrial capitalist society have considerable power, his theories were less able to deal with the shift from the industrial society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, towards the emergence of the consumer society in the second half of the twentieth century. As Ritzer [6] describes in some detail, increasing efficiency of production meant that there was a surplus of goods, and economic growth had to be sought in stimulating consumption. As the ability to consumer goods is essentially finite, economic growth in the consumer society also increasingly came from the production of services. These changes meant that the focus of capitalist society shifted from the means of production towards what Ritzer termed the 'new means of consumption', or 'those things owned by capitalists and rendered by them as necessary to customers in order for them to consume'. Examples include fast-food restaurants, credit cards, mega-malls, home shopping television networks, and cybermalls. In tourism we are also familiar with the expansion of the means of consumption, for example the tourist bus, the city card, the hire bike and the guided tour [7]. The point is that each of these means of consumption changes the way people consume. Fast food restaurants, for example, changed the way that people consume food, and with it a whole culture of eating. Credit cards enable people to easily consume beyond their immediate financial means. The 'Cathedrals of Consumption', such as theme parks and shopping malls, are designed to maximise and direct consumption.

The new means of consumption helped to address the problem of the limited consumption abilities of individuals, and support mass consumption markets. Arguably, in the contemporary network society we are faced with a new challenge: the problem of attention. The work of Manuel Castells [8] has suggested that modern society is dominated by the circulation of information through networks, a process that has heightened with the growth of the Internet. In the Informational or 'network society', it becomes more difficult to see mass markets as uniform, well-defined and spatially-specific. There is convergence of consumption patterns across national boundaries as media becomes footloose and global trading blocks emerge. National publics have become spatially fragmented 'networked publics', dispersed across the globe but more coherent in terms of taste and external references.

***Corresponding author:** Greg Richards, Dept of Leisure Studies, University of Tilburg, PO Box 90153, 5000LE Tilburg, The Netherlands, E-mail: G.w.richards@uvt.nl

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In the network society, there is arguably a new logic of capital accumulation in operation. Because the former national power structures have been compromised by transnational systems dependent on the global 'space of flows' [8], the role of the media has become predominant. The deregulation of the media has stimulated an explosion of media production, which has placed a premium on the attention of consumers. In this context, attention itself has become an increasingly scarce 'good' which needs to be distributed. The competition for attention extends beyond the commercial media sector into the flows of information being distributed via the Internet and other new media. In fact, one could argue that the digital age has made the problem of attention more pronounced, as we now have a larger selection of information available to us anytime, anywhere. The scarcity of attention is therefore not just a problem of the finite capacity of attention of the consumer, but also the fact that the consumers themselves have begun competing in the same attention market. People are only as important as their number of Facebook friends, or Twitter followers or blog readers, since these are the new measures of attention in the network society.

As Herbert Simon [9] pointed out, "...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.". So in the information-rich network or informational society, attention scarcity is produced, which in turn increases the value of attention. Advertisers pay to attract our attention, celebrities perform or misbehave to get our attention, politicians squabble for our attention and cities compete to get attention.

In the network society, events therefore arguably take on a new social role. Originally, events functioned as local coordination mechanisms, fixing the seasons, providing symbolic calendars and celebrating momentous occurrences. As local communities became dispersed by agrarian and industrial development, events in the expanding cities had to create a new sense of community and develop local and national markets. As Richards and Palmer [10] explain, the transformation of the industrial city into the postmodern city or the entrepreneurial city also caused events to become more consumer-focussed and increasingly related to the creation and projection of images of places and communities. Competing places began to use events as a means of economic restructuring and of developing an attractive image to fix flows of economic, cultural and social capital, and increasingly, attention.

The logic of network attention also means that event become increasingly important as a coordinating mechanism. Events draw attention, and are increasing created with the purpose of generating attention. This process, originally described by Daniel Boorstin [11] in his classic work 'The Image' (1964), was originally viewed by him as a shallow process by which 'history' was replaced by 'psuedo-events', created for the purpose of generating attention. As a historian, Boorstin decried this process as a superficial interest in celebrities or 'people famous for being famous'. His work was largely rejected by Dean MacCannell and other postmodern scholars for its normative moralising and historicism. However, perhaps in hindsight we could see that Boorstin was on to something significant, although not for the reasons he imagined. What Boorstin arguably identified was the process by which the emerging network society was creating new forms of coordinating mechanisms related to the growth of the media. What Boorstin called the 'pseudo-event' is now commonplace – the press conference, the celebrity talk show, the newsreader who is more important than the news they report, the concern with the superficial landscape of fashion, the media and celebrities.

Boorstin effectively outlined the intimate relationship between events and attention. Events were designed to attract attention; events that got no attention were not successful. The new model of attention depended on events to attract attention in an increasingly crowded media landscape, and events increasingly used (media) attention as their measures of success. The biggest global events are no longer measured just in terms of co-present spectators, but terms of their TV and Internet audiences.

As attention becomes increasingly scarce, however, we develop problems of what to pay attention to. We also have a spatial dilemma: we can only physically be in one place at any one time. If one compounds the problem of attention scarcity with the problem of indivisible physical location, then there is a particularly high premium on paying attention through physical co-presence. This is arguably the reason why we see a multiplication of new arenas which emphasise relational aesthetics [12] and the development of relational capital [13]. Relational capital is rapidly becoming as important as cultural, social and economic capital in the network society. In fact, the other types of capital often depend on the ability of actors to accumulate relational capital. Without contacts, we are not able to develop our network, and we remain operating within a closed system with little change or innovation. We are therefore unable to keep up with the rapidly changing flows of cultural and symbolic capital that can be used to generate economic capital. The development of relational capital of course requires social skills; the ability to communicate and relate to others. In addition, however, successful development of relational capital requires an understanding of relational aesthetics. 'The mutual process of paying and receiving attention is intimately related to the development of relational aesthetics, the essential elements of which are intersubjectivity, the encounter, and the collective elaboration of meaning' [14]. The new relational arenas of the network society are therefore formed by places where people can engage in encounters and the collective elaboration of meaning, such as mega-discos, shopping centres and events of all kinds.

The advantage of events, in a social context, is that they can produce a difference between expectation and reality, which makes them 'special' because they result in a change in structures [15]. This shift in structures and perceptions is what makes events useful as attention-grabbers. They also make useful tools for dealing with social change, as well as for maintaining existing practices. The fragmentation of previous systems of distinction based on social class, ethnicity or age means that the network society requires new mechanisms to establish social position. In the increasingly horizontal world of networked information, distinction is created through what Collins [16] has termed 'interaction ritual chains'. Individuals are increasingly linked into a range of networks through the ties they develop with others through different forms of interaction. These interactions are organized in the form of a ritual in which the relative

position of the participants is established through the amount of 'emotional energy' they obtain through such rituals. Those with status in the network are those at the centre, or node, which also attracts most attention. Network power is obtained particularly by those who can link different networks together, therefore bridging 'structural holes' and creating new opportunities for themselves and others in the network. This is the function that Castells denotes as the 'switcher' role.

An event can therefore be seen as essentially a changed state of attention. An event draws attention by changing our perception of the ordering of time and space. Whereas these events were once produced 'naturally', through the flow of the seasons, or mechanistically through the uni-directional reordering of time and space, events now increasingly require the deliberate manipulation of attention. This in turn implies the utilisation of the 'means of attention', which are strategies and devices for drawing and fixing the attention of others.

The means of attention, in relation to events, can be characterised as those resources that are essential for attracting and holding the attention of consumers. These include elements that are embedded in the practices of ritual interaction chains [16]:

- A shared focus of attention
- Collective effervescence
- Synchronisation of individuals and networks
- Reciprocity of attention
- Ritual

In order to make the system work, there have to be driving and facilitating forces that generate and channel attention. These can include the role of lead actors or 'switchers' who link together or bridge different networks [3] and the relational spaces that provide the aesthetic motivation for co-presence [12]. Space is a necessary addition to our normally temporal conception of events, as Sewell [15] points out: 'We usually think of the event as a temporal category. But it is impossible to analyze an event without encountering spatial processes'. Spatial concentration as well as temporal concentration makes collective effervescence possible.

Events are also intimately connected to Collin's concept of Interaction Ritual Chains (IRC), because in order to generate Emotional Energy, or collective effervescence, it is necessary to have temporal and/or spatial boundaries to the rituals themselves. This becomes a means of concentrating and focussing attention on the central theme of the ritual. Events are also linked to IRC because they often form the catalyst which allows individuals to break free of the structural constraints imposed by one IRC or practice, and to become involved in another.

The role of events as concentrated moments of attention in which existing structures can be changed is also the reason why events are often grasped as a catalyst for change by social groups and communities. Major events such as the European Cultural Capital are harnessed as a means of focussing attention on the need for change, which is also an important step in achieving the changed required.

Examples of events as means of attention

The history of events arguably parallels that of the broader economy and society. For example, the first global 'mega-events', the world exhibitions, or Expos, began as showcases for goods and commerce. They were designed to show the superiority of the western imperialist powers, based on manufacturing industries, and the riches of their colonies, expressed in the production of raw materials. In the consumer society events have been increasingly used as a means of penetrating mass markets and circulating symbolic capital [17]. The pavilions of the expos became filled with the services and experiences that could be linked to different countries (tourism, culture, media). In essence, the means of consumption took over from the means of production as the major source of differentiation in international events. The same happened at national and local level as well. Consumer exhibitions overtook trade shows as the major generators of event visits. Cities began to compete to stage the Olympic Games, the World Cup and the European Capital of Culture as a means of underlining their consumption-based identities and generating tourism.

The emphasis is arguably now shifting again, away from pure consumption towards relational aesthetics and the generation of attention. One of the recent examples of this process was the staging of the Live Aid event. This was designed to re-focus attention on famine and poverty in Africa following the successful Band Aid initiative. As Rojek [18] remarks:

Special events like Live Aid (1985) and Live 8 (2007) made a contribution to the "psychology of empathy" for the plight of the emerging and developing world. Western audiences took store of their privileges and responsibilities as world citizens. This generated funds for Third World hunger relief, medical supplies, literacy programmes, and other types of aid.

The need to extend virtual attention into physical co-presence in order to develop emotional energy is now an important part of the way in which places relate to their publics. For example, Eindhoven, one of the candidate cities for the 2018 European Capital of Culture, talks in its bid document of the need to replace 'toe-rists' (literally, tourists that simply come to a place) with 'doe-rists' (visitors who participate, or in other word, build up a relationship with the city).

The shift from simple viewing to doing is also underlined by one of the most successful attention-generating events of recent years, the mega-picnic held on a motorway in the Ruhr region for the European Capital of Culture in 2010. Three million people attended the world's largest picnic, attracted by a rift between the expectation of a car-filled motorway that divided neighbours from each other and the reality of a new creative space filled with social interaction and relational capital.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the shifting of structures through events is the 'Schaustelle Berlin' ('Showcase Berlin') programme, which was launched in 1996 as a way of dealing with the frustrations caused for local residents dealing with life in Europe's biggest building site. With the slogan 'trespassing is allowed', the event gave access to construction sites using guided tours to open up these normally closed spaces, and provided viewing platforms to view many other sites. Cultural events were integrated into the programme to animate these new urban spaces and to reclaim them for local people who had been cut off from large parts of their city by the construction work [19].

A number of cities have now begun to apply the principle of

attention focussing in a broader context. For example, the planning process for major urban redevelopment projects is now often framed through an event or series of events designed to attract attention to these projects and to get people more involved in the planning process. This addresses one of the major problems of planning systems – the inordinate amount of time required to move from the initial proposals for development to actual completion of the project. It becomes very hard mobilise interest in such projects over the long term. Therefore these projects are increasingly beginning to take on aspects of events, with opening ceremonies, spectating opportunities, open days and exhibitions. By organising these elements in certain ways, project developers and politicians can present their projects in a favourable light and win the support of stakeholders at key moments in the development process.

In similar ways, whole cities can be said to have been transformed into spectacles, permanent events designed to attract attention and showcase their culture and distinctiveness for the world. Tschumi [20], borrowing from Derrida, refers to 'event cities', or cities that have adopted the 'architecture of the event', so that the physical landscape of the city becomes an event in itself. The 'eventualization' of the city opens up the fixed, physical landscape to the possibility of change and action. In this way attention is created for a physical setting usually taken for granted by its inhabitants.

Recentering attention on events

Current debates about the basis of event studies have tended to revolve around what elements should be included in this field of study. Given the extremely open nature of most definitions of 'event', however, it seems more appropriate to think about what should be at the heart of event studies – what should we pay attention to?

Getz [21] for example suggests that 'The core phenomenon of Event Studies (that which sets it apart from other fields) is the planned event experience and meanings attached to it'. This approach places the consumer at the heart of the event, suggesting perhaps that the event experience is the thing desired by the consumer and given meaning through the act of consumption. But this does not help us to explain why events and how events occur – there is no link to practice, to social structure, to action.

The virtue of an attention-centred approach to event theory is that it emphasises the essential connections between structure and action, between time and space and between spectacle and ritual. It also grounds event studies in a broader and more fruitful area of social theory, rather than making the link to a narrower, management-based view. To conceive of events as an essential element of the new means of attention reveals much about the function of events in the contemporary network society. Events are an enabling mechanism, a tool for dealing with the stimulation overload of the information age. Just as the means of production enable us to produce the commodities we need, and the means of consumption allow us to consume beyond our immediate needs, so the means of attention enable a focus in what we attend to. The interesting possibility of the event, however, as Sewell, Derrida and Foucault have argued, is that it opens up the possibility of creating new structures and settings.

Limitations to eventful readings of history

The thesis that events have become integrated into the means of attention as a result of their ability to contrast expectation and reality is also open to criticism of a confusion of cause and effect. Do events themselves represent a re-ordering of attention, or are they simply a reflection of the underlying system of power? The latter would certainly be closer to Manuel Castell's formulation of 'communication power' (2009) in which he illustrates how global media companies have manipulated events in order to suit their own forms of capital accumulation. The creation of a gap between expectation and reality may therefore also be a reflection of existing power relations rather than a challenge, as argued by Sewell [15]. Carnival has always operated in this way – the apparent inversion of power relations during carnival can only exist because it is permitted by the powers that be. In terms of contemporary events, the question therefore remains whether events such as the Arab Spring are a means of attracting attention to real social problems, or have just become another device for diverting attention. Whichever reading we may choose of the relationship, however, it is clear that events continue to play an important role in ordering schemes of attention in contemporary society.

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Author Affiliations

Top

[1]*Department of Leisure Studies, Tilburg University, The Netherlands*
[2]*Academy for Leisure, NHTV Breda, The Netherlands*