

The Event: From the Media Event to the Sporting Event

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Abstract

The objective of this text is to develop the notion of the event, tracing the differences between fact and event, passing from the general concepts to arrive at the media event and the sporting event. We conduct a review of the theoretical concepts involved, sourced from books and articles by authors who have studied the subject. We conclude that the media do not simply and transparently recount events that are by their very nature newsworthy. Rather, “The News” is the final product of a complex process that starts with the systematic selection and choice of events and topics in accordance with a collection of categories that are socially constructed in many different social fields.

Keywords: Event, sport; the media

1. Introduction

In this theoretical review article, we will explore the differences between event and fact, delineating the media event and the sporting event with the objective of making explicit the praxis of media production in relation to the construction of events, with specific reference to sporting events.

The media’s preference for the sports field, especially at times of major sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup, has seen sports gain greater and greater exposure to large audiences through media coverage, thereby leveraging its opportunities for dissemination (Sanfelice, 2010).

By thematizing a given event, such as the FIFA Football World Cup (which can be considered a mega-event) and consequently framing it, the media offers itself as a “social thermometer”. This is not merely a matter of describing the event in an informative manner, but also involves highlighting its effects within society.

Sporting mega-events are major events that involve a collection of people and factors, mobilizing countries, governments and their economies, and stimulating the population in general (Taffarel, Santos Junior, and Silva, 2013). This phenomenon has been defined as one of the most significant, relevant and complex elements of contemporary society. Its importance is to a great extent the result of media coverage, “because of its capacity to construct significance and meanings within each culture” (Mezzaroba and Pires, 2011, p. 338).

Working from this basic premise, Fausto Neto (2002) tells us that Brazilian society, with its cultural and ethnic multiplicity, has its own modes of operating its particular agendas on sport. These movements capitalize social fields to the extent to which these modes of feeling serve as a reference for other fields to re-symbolize these records within the scope of their own agendas. The same author points out that in addition to being a cultural and entertainment activity, sport is also permeated by other themes that are not necessarily sporting, but which have an impact on the way that sport functions.

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2. Notion of the Event

As a preliminary, it is important to make clear that we understand the construction of facts and events to be interdependent with relation to the notion of the significance and meanings of social discourses. Although, in our understanding, there are a number of different levels, these levels are correlated when they pass to the level of discourses.

Facts are social actions configured by the definition of situation and by framings of moments of action. “The fact serves as an envelope for experience” (Mouillaud, 2002, p. 60). In turn, Mouillaud (2002) points out that experience is not reproducible and is anchored to a location, to a point in space and a given time. Charaudeau (2005) states that the fact is a concrete configuration of the event.

The event is mobile, it is a fragment extracted from a totality which by itself cannot be understood and needs to be framed, situated. Mouillaud (2002) states that this frame isolates a fragment of experience, separating it from its context and allowing its conservation and transport. Events are discursive constructions built from individuals’ socio-symbolic experiences or from a specific system, for example, the media system.

Mouillaud (2002) claims that “fact” and “event” do not have the same status. The “fact” is the universal paradigm that makes it possible to describe events, a rule for their description (the codification of all experience, irrespective of nature and origin). The controlled event (as is the case of the mediatization of sport) demands designation of a representation, i.e. the choice of one out many possible narratives.

We also consider that the fact is the primary significant of the event, but not its only significant, since the social meanings of discursive institutions or individuals will re-semanticize the fact, making it polymorphous.

Alsina (1989) believes that nowadays it is the media that establish the parameters delimiting facts that can be considered as events. The same author emphasizes the point that production of news begins with an event, which we should understand as something distinct from the social construction of reality by individual people. Alsina (1989) also refers to Hall’s insistence that to give meaning is to locate oneself in discourses. This assumption implies that it is the observer who gives meaning to an event.

Considering events to be social phenomena that are determined historically, Alsina (1989) draws on Lempen’s statement that “the event is the compound result of one fact with other facts, previously joined by means of information”. Alsina claims that if news of a fact does not reach the public, then this fact cannot be considered an event with social transcendence. Working from this, we claim that a fact is something from the plane of reality that requires discursivity, which in contemporary times is accomplished through the media, to be transformed into a socially-recognized event.

On this point, Rodrigues (1999) comments that the event is everything that disrupts the smooth surface of history within a random multiplicity of current facts. The discourse of the event is an anti-history, belonging to the world of accident, that changes the substance of the world of things, of people and of institutions. The same author considers that in journalistic discourse, the event constitutes the referent of what is said and that this is the effect of reality of the chain of signs, a type of zero point of meaning.

Henn (1996) states that the definition of what is an event must pass through the notion of what is newsworthy, since in societies events explode by the millions, but only some of them are interpreted as such and as worthy of being transformed into news (p.70).

The same author describes how the media utilizes social events as news and, by so doing, constructs and transmits the news which itself becomes a social event. This proposal made by Henn illustrates what we understand to be the circularity of events, which go from social events to media events and from media events to social events.

Unpredictability is an essential condition for determination of the status of an event. In this sense, the journalistic event is an event of special nature, distinguishing itself from an indeterminate number of other possible events. As such, it is part of a relatively restricted set that belongs to an immense universe (Rodrigues, 1999). All facts that are controlled by easily determinable causalities are beyond reach, whereas the journalistic event bursts in with no apparent connection or known cause and is, because of this, notable, worthy of being recorded in memory. When an event is chosen as a journalistic event, it enters the media’s order of the day and is added to the agenda. The construction of news from this event will tend to be more complex as a function of the depth of information, allied to its conceptualization.

Writing on the temporal aspects of the event, Alsina (1989) points out that any fact is an event in relation to time. If we take the world as a situation of relative stability, an event is that which appears and disappears in the center of the stability. The statement that an event is the improbable, the singular, is a reference to the separation of the fact from the norm. On this basis, the event is understood to be abnormal.

Social norms are fundamental to defining a fact as an event. Spectacularization is a determinant for stating that a fact goes beyond the ordinary, beyond normality.

Alsina considers that this rupture with normality represents the spectacular, and is an event. While abnormality and unpredictability are both determinants of events, something that is spectacular, but foreseen, is still an event. We can cite as examples the Olympic Games and Elections. There is a ritualization of the everyday, by means of spectacularization, which, logically, passes through the media, which schedules and mediates the Olympic Games every 4 years.

Thus, Alsina (1989) states that there is always a certain degree of the unpredictable in any variation, however predictable it may be. It is not known who is going to win or lose at the Olympics before the games are held. The spectacularity does not lie in the fact itself, but in the publicity that it receives.

The plane of meaning must be perceived as part of the discursive construction of the event. According to Alsina (1989), the event must be perceived as a social fact,¹ and the journalistic event even more so, since, for this author, communicability is a necessary condition. The journalistic event is an echo with several voices. When a fact is considered an event by multiple media and they transmit it as news, there is an effect of multiplication, of orchestration within the communication market. The news event has the characteristic of being repetitive (scheduled).

Molotch and Lester (1999) explain that people make reports on activities that become observable as real and standardized events every day. A spatial world with meaning is created and events are used as temporal points of reference for the sequence of past and future. "The past and future are constructed and reconstructed in a continuous process of daily routines. An infinite number of activities are not present in these constructions and some come to be observable. It is these that are transformed into available and truly necessary resources for dividing, demarcating and shaping life, history and the future" (Molotch and Lester, 1999, p.35).

These same authors consider that the daily activities of event construction are directed by the goals of each individual. In this sense, temporary points of reference are created, in that occurrences become events to the extent that they are of utility to an individual who is attempting to order their experiences. We believe that media events seek exactly this alignment of meaning, from production of news to its reception. Individual people's ordering of experiences passes through the media.

Based on these concepts, Hall et al. (1999) emphasized that the world is not to be represented as a confusion of disordered events and so events should be identified (related to events that are known to the public) and inserted into a social context (placed within a framework of meanings that are familiar to the public).

These authors consider that an event will only "make sense" if it can be placed within an environment of known social and cultural identifications. If journalists could not draw on these cultural "maps" of the social world, even in a routine manner, they would not be able to "give meaning" to the rare, unexpected and unpredictable events that are the basic content of what is "newsworthy".

Thus, when events are "delineated" by the media in frameworks of meaning and interpretation, it is assumed that all of us possess and know how to use these frameworks equally, since they are basically extracted from the same structures of comprehension for all social groups (Hall et al, 1999).

In the form of news, events are regularly interpreted within frameworks which, in part, are derived from the consensus notion of everyday life. They are elaborated through a variety of explanations, images and discourses which articulate what the public assumes it thinks and knows about society.

Since different individual people have different purposes, rooted in their different biographies, statutes, cultures, social origins and specific situations, they will also have different utilizations. Molotch and Lester (1999) emphasize how the media interposes itself into this space between interests to give a collective meaning to events. In our understanding, for an event to get on the agenda, it must have a strong relationship with the social media and must also fit with media logic.

Discourse about the event itself becomes a newsworthy event as soon as it becomes a device for universal visibility, guaranteeing identification and fame to the world, to people and to institutions (Rodrigues, 1999, p. 29). A secondary category of events emerges as a result of journalistic discourse: meta- events.

¹ Every social fact is part of an entirety, it is a fact of an entire society, with its own and different specificity, a "style" that impregnates every one of its moments (MAUSS apud BRUMANA, 1983, p.16).

Meta-events are secondary events provoked by the existence of the journalistic discourse itself. Excesses and failures are referential forms that simulate the discursive figures that define meta-events. They continue to be presented as facts, but their entire emergence is inscribed in the order of discourse, in the order of the symbolic visibility of theatrical representation (Rodrigues, 1999). They are controlled by the rules of the symbolic world, the world of enunciation. They connect enunciative instances of the subject and object of enunciation, whether individual or collective, the agents and the actors. This is discourse made action and action made discourse.

The construction of a victory of a team or individual athlete via media discursivity is an event constructed within the collective imaginarium – discourse made action – a symbolic construction. Defeat is another discursive construction which comes to be referred to as something “unplanned” within the discursive structure - action made discourse – re-signified on the basis of socio-symbolic elements that have already been or are yet to be constructed.

Although very often an event is “constructed” from a meta-discourse, this does not mean that it is not real. Very much on the contrary since, as Alsina (1989) points out, events transmit a “collective imaginarium” of emotions, habits and representations. Therefore, to a certain extent, events will define a given society. Firstly, because the value system is implicit in the transmission of the event. Secondly, because the events will be of the image a society has of itself and, in turn, each society will want to define what an event is for itself (Alsina, 1989, p. 91).

When the media reports on an event, in addition to the event being reported, and at the same time, the report of the event is itself a new event which is brought into the world (Rodrigues, 1999, p. 31). This meta-event triggers a Media Event, the essence of Mediatization.

3. The Media Event

The media event is part of the process of mediatization, which penetrates the spheres of multiple social fields. The media’s construction of meta-events provokes a different type of social organization by way of its discourse.

Working from this perspective, Katz (1999) claims that the paradigmatic media event is organized from the outside, but can be transformed during the process of transmission. Live transmissions and events that are not initiated by the media are the major defining factors of a media event. An element of high drama or ritual is essential and the process must be charged with emotions or symbols and the result must be replete with consequences.

Katz (1999) suggests that the most important characteristic of media events may be the decision a person makes to forego other tasks or commitments in favor of a televised transmission, in a process through which media events set the agenda for the everyday lives of individual people. This becomes explicit during the Olympic Games and, particularly, during Football World Cups. These events must be preplanned, and it is believed that one part of the drama is the fact that although the result may be unknown, the event itself is expected and published (it has been put on the agenda).

The same author states that events are situated in time and space and that it is necessary for them to be sufficiently centered to hold the public's attention. These media strategies are constructed on the basis of the structure of the events and the mediatized configuration comes afterwards. The production of a sporting event is constructed by the media within its logic of time and space.

Finally, Katz (1999) also points out that media events require a hero – one or two individuals, or a team. We extend this, to point out that the antagonistic element of sport is suited to this construction via media coverage, since, if we have a hero, consequently we will also have villains – the opposition. The presenter of a media event will often take on a sacerdotal role, acting as a master of ceremonies. During televised sports transmissions recourse to the narrator can often be observed. Here in Brazil, the classic example is members of a football crowd at a televised game who hold up placards sending messages to the presenter or the viewers, for example, “Galvão film us over here” and “Mom, I’m on Globo” (where Galvão is the name of the TV presenter and Globo is the name of the TV station), thereby becoming part of the media construction.

Katz (1999) considers major media events to be like important holy days, referring to the sacred feel that these events have. Within this structure, the author lists types of media events as follows: 1) heroic missions - (e.g. a Brazilian astronaut going into space or an athlete winning an Olympic gold); 2) State occasions – under certain circumstances State occasions are treated as media events; 3) competitions – but only when the confrontation has a symbolic significance. Traditional rivalries are played out – Olympic Games, Football World Cup.

There is an entire process involved in transforming a media event. The media agenda becomes a progenitor of collective symbolic construction. The pinnacle of this construction occurs in direct transmission of the event, arousing emotion. For Katz (1999), this suggests that transmission of events does not only change those events, but also makes them more important.

The media transmits both success and failure. There is a danger that the media, co-operating with the principal actors, may so dramatize an event that they increase the probability of failure. Athletes are the leading actors in their own stage plays. In turn, the media are at once spectators, producers and critics of these "works". They are producers when they schedule a result, constructing frames for the dramatization of the confrontation, with the possibility of victory, they are spectators as they await the result and, as soon as the result is known, they become producers once more.

In turn, Mouillaud (2002) states that a newspaper is just one operator in a set of socio-symbolic operators, and is only apparently the last of these: because the meaning that it offers to its readers can be reworked as a function of their own mental fields, bringing it back into circulation in the cultural environment. To state that the event is a cultural unit and that it is already codified within the information space, does not make the distinction between event and information meaningless.

On the other hand, Alsina (1989) quotes Hausser to state that "the newspaper does not adapt itself to the event, it is the event that is made to adapt by the newspaper". This approach, indicated by Hausser in 1973, is aligned with the idea of mediatization.

Alsina (1989) considers that the media society can be defined as an event-based society because of the multiplication of events, both in quantity and in diversity of types of event. Alsina quotes Tudesq to show that this multiplication is manifest in three elements:

- a) The speed of information flow accelerates the morphological process of the event, which means that the information itself has an effect on the event;
- b) The speed of information flow also has a spatial effect, amplifying itself to the global level. The event may refer to anywhere in the world;
- c) There is a propensity to diversification of types of sporting events, economic events, technical events, etc.

Alsina supplements the three elements identified by Tudesq, claiming that the event comes predefined by the importance of the message. Our understanding is that this importance is relativized by the discursive construction of journalists. Construction of an event is accomplished via the route of discursivity and interpretative frameworks, the second of which form symbolic references that give social meaning to social facts.

Charaudeau (2005) claims that there is no hidden social space behind the media discourse, deformed or broken down by this discourse. The author sees the social space as a composite empirical reality, that is not uniform and that depends for its meaning on the perspective from which the various different social actors are viewed and from which they view, through the discourses they produce in order to attempt to make it understandable. In the same reference, Charaudeau (2005) comments that an event must be named for it to exist and that an event does not have any meaning in itself, it can only have meaning within discourse. We therefore see the importance that the media has in construction of events through its discourse.

In view of this, construction of the news passes through thematization, which is a progenitor element of agenda-setting theory. Alsina (1989) believes that there are a series of characteristics that can determine the importance of the subject: proximity, spectacularity, abnormality, unpredictability, etc. During the transmission of a news item, it is not only information about the event that is transmitted, but also its importance. On this detail, the media are the determinant factor when they categorize facts as events, transforming them into news.

If a fact has geographical proximity it will assume greater prominence in the media, while distance reduces its prominence. However, prominence does not only function through mechanisms as simple as geography. It also functions through psychological effects of identification, an implied emotional connection with the athletes.

In view of this, the media's task is to report on the world's events that occur both in places that are near to or far from the locations of reception. However, it should be reiterated that spatial proximity confers on a news item a character of particular interest when the fact takes place in the same physical space as reception (Charaudeau, 2005).

However, we believe that the basis of the spatial relationship with the event itself lies in the construction of the journalistic discourse. To express it better, what makes the event “nearby” are the maps of meaning that the journalists draw in constructing the news. One example relevant to Brazil is the current conflict between Lebanon and Israel. The thousands of Brazilians who live in the conflict zone undoubtedly lead to a construction of proximity, in this case a proximity of compatriotism.

4. Sporting Events

The nature of the sporting event includes certain peculiarities, one of which is spectacularization. Sport as a social fact is in itself spectacular, so the media, interested in spectacular social facts, transforms the sporting facts into sporting events and media events.

Debord (1997) claims that a spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images (p. 14). We extend Debord’s point with the concept of mediatization, which is responsible for the reconfiguration of sporting events into media events and, as a result, for their dissemination into the social fabric.

Barreau and Morne (1991) consider that every spectacle is a type of fantasy of the senses in which the turbulence of the imaginarium both resuscitates the form of myth and materializes rituals. In our understanding, this contemporary ritual is orchestrated by the media.

The media appropriates (mobilizes singular symbolic strategies) the discursive scene of the fact to produce meanings. Sporting events are not limited to representation of a competition, since they also reflect cultural, economic, social, political, ethnic and religious characteristics, etc. Therefore, sporting events are complex facts that bring with them a set of dimensions of intercultural relations in which the social actors are not restricted to the competitors, but include the audience, the managers, the media, the sponsors, the sporting directors and etc.

Contemporarily speaking, for a social fact to become an event with significant penetration of other institutions, it must fit in with the logic of the media.

Charaudeau (2005) has emphasized how the public space is not only a place where events are produced. It is also a place where opinion is constructed and, in this sense, the event is provoked by the media. In the author’s understanding, the media are not content to restrict themselves to reporting the utterances that circulate in public spaces, they make an active contribution to holding the social debate, with access to their own space, providing a place in which diverse utterances can be confronted.

For Mouillaud (2002), talks about pre-constructed events. This author considers that media events are fitted into forms that are already constructions of space and of time. Therefore, social space and time bear marks that define areas and moments that impose their own nature and from on events.

In the same work, this author uses the sporting event as an example of the pre-constructed event, which he believes provides a striking example: the field is bounded by limits that prescribe the area of play. The fluid definitions of reality are substituted by limits that separate “in play” from “out of play”, “before” from “after”. It is not only the area or duration of the event that is pre-constructed since the field of play is also demarcated by interior limits that program partial events within the dominant event.

This logic is reflected in preparation for the game, the confrontation, in which several different segments that are orchestrated by the media “set the agenda” of perceptions of and responses to the game itself. What Borelli (2001) calls a micro-event is understood in this way. “The production of meanings is inherent to the process of construction of journalistic coverage, and so there cannot be objectivity. Each media will set its thematic agenda in its own way. Thus, a single fact (a sporting competition, for example) becomes a multiple event, since each media will read the fact, make an interpretation and produce its own unique event, in accordance with its own strategies. The sporting event is apprehended in a dynamic manner, as though it were composed of countless scenes or flashes, which are shown sequentially, each fitting to the other to create a whole. The event therefore appears to be a plurality of events (micro-events) that converge on a common, single and whole destination (p. 4).”

In our understanding, this single destination is polymorphous, made up of meanings coming from many different segments, representing the diversity of meanings.

Making a sporting event interesting for a range of fields is a media exercise, which, through discursivity, frames an event into many different micro-events, within the same field physically, but not semantically.

Charaudeau (2005) considers that the event is located within the “world to be commented on” as the emergence of a phenomenality that is imposed on the subject. The event is never transmitted instantaneously to its reception in its raw state, since its conversion into meaning is dependent on the perspective from which it is seen, the perspective of an individual who is a member of a system of thought, making it intelligible. Therefore, the media constructs maps of meaning, attempting to configure an event for many different individuals within diverse social and cultural contexts.

Thus, the social conversation will be mediatized around a given event. Even in the case of a sporting competition, for example, the delimitation of discursivity about the event is not restricted to the sporting facts, but also to the before and after of the event. The result on the sports field is a trigger for media discourse processes that produce meta-events.

Based on these concepts, Borelli (2001) has commented that when the media reports an event, it is not only a reproducer of information, but, more than anything, a producer of meanings, since the media is not a way of passage, but a place for the symbolic construction of events.

The configurations of micro-events, by necessity, pass through discourses uttered by multiple actors. These utterances are orchestrated through the media. On this detail, Gastaldo (2001) says that to a growing extent it is the mediatized meta-discourse that defines the reality of facts in the field of sports. The author points out that is common for supporters who are present in the stadium, personally witnessing the facts of the game, to follow plays on the radio, adding the authority of the commentators and experts to their own experience, “saying” (defining) what, at the end of the day, the spectator is actually watching – in other words defining reality (p. 03).

5. Final Comments

In this text we have discussed and illustrated the concepts of fact and media event, and their relationship to the world of sport. Our conclusion is that the media do not simply report, in a transparent manner, events which are in themselves naturally newsworthy. Rather “The News” is the final product of a complex process that starts with a systematic choice and selection of events and topics, in accordance with a set of socially constructed categories (Hall et al, 1999, p. 224).

Journalists organize newspapers into a series of given categories of interest to their readers. The journalists’ sense of news-value begins to structure the process. On the general level, this involves a focus on items that are “out of the ordinary”. Journalism attempts to highlight the extraordinary elements, dramatic elements, tragic elements, etc., into a popular folklore. A sporting confrontation would not of itself have these characteristics without the media’s discursivity.

Therefore, one significant aspect of the work of the media is the activity of transforming an event into a finished news item. This is aligned with the language that the media employ. Since, for the same topics, every newspaper has its own specific organizational framework, sources and inferential structures will appear differently even in newspapers with similar perspectives (Hall et al, 1999).

The discourse adopted will be the specific part of the spectrum of readers who the newspaper habitually addresses. With relation to the sporting event, these narratives will be aligned as maps of meaning for the readers. The thematization arising from the process of agenda setting gains form in these symbolic discursive constructions, tracing relationships with the readers’ world.

In the newspapers, the sports section is configured as a place of popular appreciation. Many people will start by reading this section when they buy a newspaper. This means that professionalization is essential. A lack of technical knowledge of a given sport will lead a journalist to construct maps of meaning via symbolic aspects, for example social representation, idolatry, personality traits, which, a priori, are secondary to the narrative of a sporting event.

We do not mean that the socio-symbolic features listed above are not part of a sporting event, but that the technical and tactical aspects of sports that very often define the results on the sports field are relegated by the apriorisms established by the media.

Specialized journalism is also a consequence of technical, political, ideological, linguistic, economic and cultural strategies, etc., through which the newspaper attempts to capture, elaborate and produce the event. The world of the sources (medicine, psychology, politics, publicity, marketing, economics, physical education, etc.) co-legitimizes the journalistic editing, together with the orchestrator of utterances – the journalist.

At each sporting event, the various different media "select" the most valuable player, the star, giving marks for each participant's performance, which facts can themselves end up reinforcing, feeding or demystifying the image of an idol. This fact can play a fundamental role in the social imaginarium, since sport is one of the principal protagonists in the construction of identities and subjectivities.

References to these arguments and theories reveal a buildup of tension with the construction of narratives of sporting mega-events, the World Cup and the Olympic Games. The discursive construction of the sporting event in contemporary society is produced via the media.

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