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“The whole world watching”? How news media create the myth of an audience of billions and foster imagined communities

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Abstract: By common understanding, media events attract a “huge audience—the whole world watching” (Katz Liebes, 2007, p. 158). Despite its conceptual importance, however, there is hardly any research on the size of global audiences. In a critical review of the state of research, this article shows that scholars studying media events obtain their information on audiences of billions primarily from media coverage. This coverage also influences the potential users of media events and stimulates imagined communities. It is therefore important to investigate how and on what basis news media report on global audiences. By means of a qualitative content analysis of the British coverage of Diana Spencer’s funeral, this study reveals that the global response is reported and defined even before a media event takes place and can thus be regarded as a myth. This leads to conceptual considerations on media events and suggestions for future studies.

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“The Whole World Watching”? How News Media Create the Myth of an Audience of Billions and Foster Imagined Communities

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By common understanding, media events attract the largest audiences in the history of the world. Despite its conceptual importance, however, there is hardly any research on the size of global audiences. In a critical review of the state of research, this article shows that scholars studying media events obtain their information on audiences of billions primarily from media coverage. This coverage also influences the potential users of media events and stimulates imagined communities. It is therefore important to investigate how and on what basis news media report on global audiences. By means of a qualitative content analysis of the British coverage of Diana Spencer’s funeral, this study reveals that the global response is reported and defined even before a media event takes place and can thus be regarded as a myth. This leads to conceptual considerations on media events and suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: media events, journalism, news coverage, audience, ratings, imagined community, history

Media Events (Dayan & Katz, 1992) has been inspiring research for the last 25 years. The canonic book provided numerous impulses for subsequent studies on media events and stimulated critical discussions (Couldry, 2003; Dekavalla, 2012; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Jiménez-Martínez, 2014; Peters, 2019; Scannell, 1995; Sonnevend, 2016, 2018). In recent years, Dayan and Katz have reacted to these critical debates and suggestions for conceptual advancements (Katz & Dayan, 2018; Katz & Liebes, 2007). As a result, not only preplanned integrative events (ceremonial events) but also unexpected events, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars, and scandals (disruptive events), are now potentially classified and analyzed as media events.

The conceptual understanding of the audience’s role, however, remained largely unchanged. Dayan and Katz (1992) stipulated the definitional criterion that media events “*electrify*” and “*enthrall very large audiences*” (pp. 8, 12, emphasis in original) or have “the largest audiences in the history of the world” (p. 13). The authors reaffirmed this defining feature in later works by stating that media events are about the need for a “collective heartbeat” (Katz & Dayan, 2018, p. 150) and reach a “huge audience—the whole world watching” (Katz & Liebes, 2007, p. 158). Other researchers also consider an extraordinarily large media

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audience as an important characteristic of media events (Couldry, 2003, pp. 61–64; Dekavalla, 2012; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Mitu, 2016; Rothenbuhler, 2001; Scannell, 1995). However, many researchers have questioned the assumption of an intense experience shared by all viewers (Couldry, 2003; Dekavalla, 2012; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Örnebring, 2004; Scannell, 1995; Sonnevend, 2016, 2018).

Because of this defining feature (the audience size and behavior), there is an ongoing discussion on whether media events have a place in the contemporary and future media landscape. Some scholars argued that because of the proliferation of media channels, the rise of social and mobile media, and growing audience cynicism, it is increasingly difficult to attract a very large audience and unite viewers in a widely shared mood (Katz & Dayan, 2018; Katz & Liebes, 2007; Scannell, 1995). Therefore, media events in general and ceremonial media events in particular are said to lose their importance. In contrast, other scholars stated that there have been several recent media events with huge audiences, so "ceremonial media events might be just as alive as they have been before" (Sonnevend, 2018, p. 125; see also Cui, 2013; Sonnevend, 2016; Webster, 2014, pp. 9, 65, 102–103).

Despite the importance of this discussion, however, it holds true that "audiences are usually a ghostly concept in the media events theoretical debate" (Kyriakidou, 2008, p. 274) and are rarely examined empirically (Cui, Rui, & Su, 2016; Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 120; Katz & Dayan, 2018; Scannell, 1995). So far, there are no critical reflections about what should be considered an extraordinarily large media audience and how researchers would even identify one. This article focuses on that precise point, first demonstrating how studies about media events reference the size of global media audiences. It is shown that media reports and public relations (PR) material are crucial resources for scientists and also shape users' perceptions of the audience. Next, I present a qualitative content analysis of the British press coverage of Diana Spencer's funeral. The analysis of this prominent case reveals that news reports describe and predefine the quantity and quality of global viewer behavior in the run-up to a media event. By analyzing the pre- and post-event newspaper coverage, this study also addresses the call for more studies that investigate "the narratives and imageries of media events" and "the larger media contexts" instead of focusing on the live broadcast (Sonnevend, 2016, pp. 10, 12; see also Robertson, 2018). The article concludes with conceptual implications for the research on media events and suggestions for future studies.

The Global Media Audience in Media Event Research

Dayan and Katz (1992) took an explicitly constructivist stance in their work. In contrast to pioneers in research on media events (Lang & Lang, 1953), they did not strive to compare the "reality" of the event and its television broadcast. Instead, Dayan and Katz argued that television plays a performative role and therefore must be analyzed in its use of rhetorical devices. However, they excluded the size and behavior of the media audience from this constructivist perspective. For Dayan and Katz (1992), these aspects can be determined and are not part of the media's rhetoric of the event. The authors not only used "*very large audiences*" (pp. 8, 12, emphasis in original) as a defining feature, but also considered it to be the particular relevance of their object of study: "Why study media events? . . . 1. The live broadcasting of these television events attracts the *largest audiences in the history of the world*" (p. 14, emphasis in original). This superlative ("largest") suggests the availability of global usage data to define media events. Do such numbers really exist, and how are they being calculated and verified?

Media Events contains several examples of events that were watched simultaneously by hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide and therefore are treated as media events: a speech by Pope John Paul II in 1987 with 1 or 1.5 billion viewers, the Live Aid concert in 1985 with 650 million, the royal wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson in 1986 with 400 million, and the moon landing with 500 million or more (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 127, 238, 250, 253, 271). For all these numbers, the book quoted only three articles from magazines and newspapers. This demonstrates a lack of sources and indicates that the media themselves are informing scientists about the extraordinary character of media events. What is absent is a critical reflection about the origin of such usage data or how and why it was generated. There is only a marginal remark that questions the validity of those numbers: "Estimates of the world audience reach 500 million or more . . . although nobody can certify these numbers" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 127).

This way of dealing with statements about global media audiences has become quite common. Many researchers give no sources when, for example, asserting that the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011 sparked "mass enthusiasm with a world-wide audience of some three billion" (Turner, 2012, p. 87), the Eurovision Song Contest regularly attracts "around one billion viewers worldwide" (Lemish, 2004, p. 42), and the Olympic Games in general (Rathke & Woitek, 2008) or the opening ceremony alone were watched by 4 billion people (Arning, 2013; Gong, 2012). With respect to the Olympics, the FIFA Soccer World Cup, and the rescue of the Chilean miners in 2010, other scholars supported such high viewer numbers with statements that event organizers published in PR materials, news articles reported, or television commentators expressed during the event broadcast (Baker, 2014, p. 87; Brassett, 2018, p. 21; Hartley, 2008, pp. 81, 219; Jiménez-Martínez, 2014; Panagiotopoulou, 2010; Tamir, 2019; Tomlinson, 1996). Some scientists (Hayashi et al., 2016; Meyrowitz, 2008; Pamment, 2014; Rowe, 1999, p. 34; Taylor, 2013) referred to audiences of billions and supported these numbers by citing other scientific publications that themselves cited PR material or press articles, gave no sources, or did not contain the given number at all.

For the Olympic Games, researchers also referred to numbers from Nielsen Media Research. For instance, they claimed that the Olympic Games 2008 broke all records with an audience of 4.7 billion (Brownell, 2013; Zion, Spaaij, & Nicholson, 2011). The remarks of these authors imply that this is data measured by Nielsen all over the world. However, the often-cited press release from Nielsen (2008) highlighted this number and a trend of ever-growing global audience figures for the Olympics without giving information concerning the measurements. Instead, there is a small footnote: "Estimates are based on data sourced across 37 markets from The Nielsen Company" (footnote 1). Therefore, this is not actual data, but estimates based on viewing figures of selected countries. In fact, there are no global audience measurements or consistent ratings methods (Bourdon & Méadel, 2014; Dyreson, 2017; Martin & Reeves, 2001). For that reason, global audience numbers—and statements such as "most watched event in history"—must be analyzed critically (de Moragas Spà, Rivenburgh, & Larson, 1995, pp. 209–221; Mytton, 2012).

A few researchers were somewhat skeptical and, similar to Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 127), remarked in brackets that global audience figures are rough estimates (Tomlinson, 1996). Other authors reported a figure and only mentioned in a footnote that it is "actually a *forecast*" intended to promote the media event without being verified afterward (Blain, Boyle, & O'Donnell, 1993, p. 186, emphasis in original).

Graham Mytton (2012), former head of audience research at the BBC World Service, also assumed that global audience numbers are "invented by the promoters, advertisers, and sponsors, often even before the event has happened" (p. 41). Hence, this goes beyond a lacking or nontransparent basis of global audience figures and concerns their role in the production of the media event itself. Who generates those numbers, and in what form and time frame are they shared with the public?

News Reports About Media Audiences and Imagined Communities

Research on media events is usually based on the assumption that the status as a media event is created by the actual attention of the audience—and that organizers and journalists report on this attention after the event (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 9–10, 54; 1995; de Moragas Spà et al., 1995, p. 209; Rothenbuhler, 2001; Turnock, 2000, p. 96). Furthermore, for ceremonial events, Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 189) assumed that predictions of the audience size happen in advance and influence the organization of the event, but are not made public. Nevertheless, Dayan and Katz (1992) and others (e.g., Cui et al., 2016; Krämer, 2008; Kyriakidou, 2008) assumed that media users have notions of the coaudience. From the assumption that "everybody else" is also watching, viewers perceive a "*norm of viewing*" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 8, 13, 197, emphasis in original). According to Dayan and Katz (1992, 1995), such norms emerge during the run-up to a media event as people tell each other that viewing is a must. Media events are considered to be particularly appealing because users feel part of a national or global community that is watching at the same time and with a strong emotional involvement. A few more recent studies have shown that some viewers feel connected to a national or global community and that this perception motivates and emotionally intensifies their own reception (Bodroghkozy, 2013; Cui et al., 2016; Kyriakidou, 2008). However, there are no in-depth considerations in media event research of how such norms of viewing and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) emerge.

This article aims to show that news reporting in the run-up to media events is a likely factor in the emergence of imagined communities. Potential users are told in advance what kind of community the media event will generate. This image of the audience can contribute to people wanting to be a part of that "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983; Cui et al., 2016)—or, in contrast, wanting to distance themselves from that community to establish social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Thomas, 2008). Research following Dayan and Katz (1992) often focused on television programs and live broadcasts of media events. However, scholars increasingly criticize this "television-centrism" (Sonnevend, 2016, p. 13) and emphasize the need for studies investigating the coverage of media events across various media (Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Morgner, 2016; Sonnevend, 2018) This includes shedding more light on the pre-event coverage and how this phase might be important for the construction of the media event (Örnebring, 2004; Puijk, 2009; Robertson, 2018). Television still is crucial with respect to broadcasting a media event, but "newspapers may be the most important media in building up towards a ceremony" (Puijk, 2009, p. 2).

A few sociologists, historians, and sports and media scientists noted that newspapers and magazines report on the (expected) global audience of media events, such as in the case of sports events, papal funerals, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Bartz, 2003; Dyreson, 2017; Martin & Reeves, 2001; Morgner, 2009, 2016; Schlott, 2013; Schneider, 2007). These studies rely on qualitative analyses, examples, and personal observations and imply that journalists publish global audience numbers, generalize

the extent of audience participation ("the whole world in shock"; Schneider, 2007, p. 175), and compare with global audiences of past media events to give an event an extraordinary dimension. Superlatives are used ("biggest TV audience ever"; Bartz, 2003, p. 44), and the historical uniqueness of the response is emphasized ("never before has there been such a grief"; Schlott, 2013, pp. 207–208). These studies provide no systematic analysis of the pre- and post-event coverage of a media event, but are a fruitful starting point for further investigation. Thus far, they have rarely received attention in research on media events.

One case in media event research has already garnered a great deal of attention with respect to media representations of audiences and rhetorics of national togetherness (Couldry, 2003, pp. 68–70): the funeral of Princess Diana. Studies on this media event have focused on how the news media reported on the British audience and the participating crowds in London. However, representations of the global media audience have been neglected. In the following, I outline the current state of research on this media event and then present the method and results of a qualitative content analysis that examines news reports on the global audience of the broadcasted funeral.

Case Study: Media Coverage of the Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales

Diana Spencer's funeral, on September 6, 1997, is considered an outstanding media event of the past decades and a typical example for a ceremonial media event (Dekavalla, 2012; Hepp, 2004, pp. 336–337; Peters, 2019). Researchers assume that billions of people worldwide watched it live on television. The attributed audience numbers range from 1.2 billion (Real, 2001) and 2 billion (Couldry, 2003, p. 66) to 2.5 billion, the most frequently cited number (Baker, 2014; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 47; Hepp, 2004, p. 337; Meyrowitz, 2008). These numbers are backed up either not at all or with few news articles, yet they are often cited to claim that the funeral was the most watched event in history and created a worldwide community united in grief (Baker, 2014, p. 64; Brown et al., 2003; Meyrowitz, 2008; Real, 2001).

Morgner (2009, pp. 310–314) assumed that the British and international reporting of Diana's funeral did not contain any statements about the global audience or worldwide grief. Beyond that, there are no studies that investigate this in more detail. However, some studies analyzed how news media reported on people's reactions in London and Great Britain (Couldry, 1999, 2003; Marriott, 2007; Morgner, 2009, pp. 306–314; Myers, 2000; Puijk, 2009; Thomas, 2008; Turnock, 2000). These studies showed that the coverage of her death and funeral was characterized by descriptions of strong and largely homogeneous emotions of the public. The entire nation was said to be united in deep mourning. Numerous reports depicted grieving crowds in London and mainly focused on people who displayed strong emotions or claimed to be part of an overarching community of mourners.

According to some researchers, this almost ubiquitous "rhetoric of national unity" and the numerous "prescriptions for appropriate public responses and behavior" (Turnock, 2000, p. 97) led to more Britons wanting to be part of that community and pay their respects in public, which in turn stimulated the reporting of public reactions (Couldry, 1999; McNair, 1998, pp. 48–49; Puijk, 2009). In a study by Turnock (2000, pp. 71–79), some interviewees admitted that they were drawn in by the reporting of grieving crowds and wanted to become a part of the collective experience. Despite these potentially self-reinforcing effects (cf.

Webster, 2014, pp. 92–95), a large proportion of the British population could not identify with the constructed national mourning and did not want to follow the extensive news coverage or the televised funeral. These people did not see their position as represented in the media, felt a strong social pressure, and therefore were more restrained in conversations about the subject. Even some people who were affected by Diana's death and watched the funeral found the scale of national grief excessive (Thomas, 2008; Turnock, 2000). After the funeral, television audience research revealed that only about half the British population, not the whole nation, watched parts of it (Turnock, 2000, pp. 91, 104). In the following weeks and months, a few media reports were published criticizing "the media's monolithic depiction of 'the people's grief'" (Thomas, 2008, p. 364; see also Couldry, 1999).

These insights are important to this study for two reasons. First, they clearly demonstrate that recipients notice media representations of the audience and that these can shape audience behavior. Second, against the background of the British audience figures, it is highly unlikely that half the world's population watched the media event (as most scholars assumed). This would imply that the interest in a British royal funeral and the opportunity to watch television were as extensive in the rest of the world as in Britain. Available knowledge about the diffusion of television in the 1990s, the influence of different time zones, and varying degrees of involvement in different countries clearly contradicts that notion (de Moragas Spà et al., 1995, pp. 209–221; Mytton, 2012; Webster & Phalen, 1997, pp. 26–27, 37). Hence, it is vital to ask how and on what basis the global audience was represented in the media coverage of the funeral and how these representations may have changed over time.

Method

I explored this question with a qualitative content analysis (Fürst, Jecker, & Schönhagen, 2016) of the British newspaper coverage. The British press is particularly relevant because it was likely in the focus of international public attention in the context of Diana's funeral and therefore influenced the media coverage in other countries.² Five newspapers (including their Sunday equivalents) were chosen that cover a broad range of political alignments, reporting styles, and readerships: *The Sun* [*Sun*], *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* [*Mirror*], *The Guardian* and *The Observer* [*Guardian*], *The Independent* and *The Independent on Sunday* [*Independent*], and *The Financial Times* [*FT*] (cf. Firmstone, 2008; MacMillan & Edwards, 1999). The abbreviations in parentheses appear throughout this article to indicate both daily and Sunday editions of each newspaper. Searches were conducted in the databases LexisNexis and Factiva.³ As these databases do not archive images or graphics, the analysis focused on text.

² Between August 31 and December 31, 1997, the news agencies *Associated Press* and *Reuters* alone published more than 200 articles referring to the British newspaper coverage in the context of Diana's funeral. This was determined by a search in the Factiva database using the Boolean search string: Diana AND (funera* OR funéraires OR Trauerfeier OR bestatt*) AND ("British press" OR "Presse britannique" OR "prensa británica" OR "Britische* Presse" OR Mirror OR Guardian OR Observer OR Independent OR "Financial Times" OR "The Sun").

³ Two search strings were used. First: Diana AND (funeral OR ceremony OR coffin OR television) AND (world OR billion*). Second: Diana AND global AND (audience* OR viewer*).

The period of analysis is from August 31, 1997 (Diana's death), to December 31, 1997, to capture both pre- and post-event coverage, including the typical end-of-year reviews. I selected only articles that contained statements about the global audience of the funeral held on September 6. This meant excluding reports that did not refer to the funeral service (e.g., "grief at Diana's tragic death") and the response of the media audience (e.g., "significant international occasion") beyond the United Kingdom (e.g., "millions will watch it on TV"). Articles that were very similar were included only if they appeared in different newspaper editions.

Based on the abovementioned state of research, I applied the following categories for analysis (with examples in parentheses): global audience numbers ("2.5 billion viewers"), emotions of the global media audience ("sorrow"), comparisons to the audience of past media events ("even more are expected to tune in" compared with the wedding of Charles and Diana), superlatives about the event character ("biggest TV event ever screened"), generalizations about the global audience response ("the world took part"), and quoted sources ("TV chiefs"). I inductively added the category "factuality," which considered whether statements about the global audience were limited in their validity and certainty ("two and a half billion alleged to be watching") or, by contrast, were particularly emphasized. Furthermore, I differentiated the category of emotions of the global media audience so that it includes not only attributed feelings but also actions known as ritualized expressions of grief (such as partaking in a minute's silence). Moreover, I inductively included the category "unity of/differences in emotions," which encompasses explicit statements about shared or different emotions of several groups. This category thus captures whether the articles illustrate the emotions of the global media audience by reference to other groups and construct a homogeneous effect of the media event.

Results

The five examined newspapers contained 94 articles that addressed the global media audience of Diana's funeral and were published between September 1 and December 26, 1997. With 16 and 17 articles respectively, the scope of reporting in *Guardian*, *Independent*, and *Sun* is almost identical. *FT* clearly deviates from this with only five articles. Considering its orientation toward economic topics, this was to be expected. The *Mirror*, however, published 40 articles. On the day of the funeral alone (September 6), the *Mirror* had 15 articles that made statements about the expected global audience of the media event. As MacMillan and Edwards (1999) showed, Diana Spencer had already been an especially important topic in the *Mirror* in previous weeks: It proudly claimed to have "won the battle" of the British press for intimate photographs of her and Dodi Fayed (see also Couldry, 1999).

Pre-event (September 1, 1997 to September 6, 1997) and post-event (September 7, 1997 to December 26, 1997) coverage each make up exactly one half of the published articles. Most articles contained global audience numbers, ranging from millions and tens of millions up to 1 billion, billions, 2 billion, 2.5 billion, and even 3 billion. All the newspapers studied published articles citing viewer numbers of several billion. The most prevalent number, mentioned in more than 20 articles, is 2.5 billion. In most cases, articles gave no source for the global audience figure, nor was there any indication of how said figure was calculated. In nearly 20 articles, the implied factuality of the numbers was slightly limited by the use of terms such as "estimated," "is expected," "was put at," or "believed to have numbered," suggesting that

there are actors who express these estimates, expectations, and assumptions. However, the articles never mentioned any speakers who provided those phrasings. The few sources cited for global audience numbers are broadcasters, journalists, and funeral participants, such as Earl Spencer (Diana's brother). Even then, the articles did not discuss the respective basis for the given numbers or how the actors arrived at these numbers. Many articles also contained statements that generalize the global audience response in its quantitative extent and/or emotional quality ("The world follows the funeral of Diana"; "A Grief-stricken [*sic*] world came to a standstill," *Mirror*, September 7, 1997). Some articles compared the funeral with previous media events or called it the largest media event in history. Only two articles mentioned the nonparticipation of parts of the global population, both published afterward. Remarkably, on September 7, the *Independent* reported that Chinese state television, with its 700 million potential viewers, did not broadcast the event and that the Chinese nation had therefore missed it.

On September 1, only one day after Diana's accidental death, *FT* reported that the funeral "is destined to be a landmark of global shared experience, comparable—but reaching far more people—to the 1953 coronation, Sir Winston Churchill's funeral in 1965 and Diana's own doomed wedding to the Prince of Wales in 1981" (p. 7). At that point, neither the general setup of the funeral nor any information concerning a television broadcast was known. Nevertheless, the newspaper was already comparing the event to previous media events and characterizing it based on its quality of collective experience. On September 3, the tabloid press introduced superlatives by talking about "one of the biggest worldwide TV audiences in history" (*Mirror*, p. 1) and "the biggest TV audience ever recorded in Britain" (*Sun*, p. 4). On the following day, several newspapers already determined that this would be "the biggest TV event" in history (*Independent*, p. 6; *Mirror*, pp. 8–9; *Sun*, p. 9). Such descriptions of an outstanding and unprecedented media event occurred especially between September 4 and 8. In their reports immediately following the event, journalists thus confirmed what they had predicted.

Comparisons to global audiences of previous media events played a role only until September 7 and thus are predominantly a characteristic of the pre-event coverage. In particular, there were references to the global audience of Charles and Diana's 1981 wedding. Without exception, the journalists assumed that the global audience of the funeral would far outnumber that of the wedding. According to the dominating narrative in reporting, other media events that had gone down in history for their audience records would also be eclipsed by the funeral, including the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, the funerals of U.S. President Kennedy in 1963 and Prime Minister Churchill in 1965, the Live Aid concert in 1985, and the 1994 Soccer World Cup final. The comparison to extraordinary past media events added to the upcoming funeral's gaining historical importance (in the sense that we and coming generations will remember this moment). One particularly striking example of such a comparison is an *Independent* article from September 4, two days before the funeral. The headline called the funeral the "biggest television event in history," and the article contained a ranking of the six most viewed media events with corresponding global viewer numbers. The predicted number of 2.5 billion viewers for the funeral far exceeds most of the listed media events. Paradoxically, however, this proclaimed "biggest television event" was surpassed by the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games with an alleged audience of 3.5 billion. This contradiction in the report could be due to a lack of journalistic diligence. Above all, however, it is an indication that the mentioned global viewer numbers and postulated superlatives do not have a solid foundation or provoke any objections from other actors but are mostly meant to generate attention and increase the importance of the issue.

This is also reflected in the published global audience numbers throughout the period of analysis. On September 2, the *Mirror* stated that only “few people will need encouraging to be part of this amazing event” (p. 6). Accordingly, “millions upon millions” of Britons were expected to watch, and the worldwide audience was said to be “beyond calculation.” This implies an enormous scope (so enormous that it cannot be calculated) but also conveys that there is no data about the global audience. Just two days later, however, a *Mirror* headline precisely quantified the global audience size: “2.5 billion will watch funeral in 187 countries . . . : TV coverage biggest television audience ever” (September 4, 1997, pp. 8–9). On the same day, the *Independent* and *Sun* also published articles that postulated an audience of billions, using superlatives and stating the number of countries in which the event was to be broadcast on television. All three articles cited spokespersons of television broadcasters planning to cover the event. Nevertheless, their statements referred to only parts of the audience; they do not serve as evidence for the global audience number. For example, it was reported that CNN alone reaches a “potential audience” of 500 million people. Moreover, this term was used without providing information that it refers to the maximum possible audience of a broadcaster (Webster & Phalen, 1997, pp. 24–25) and not to the presumed audience of the event. Finally, on September 6, all examined newspapers repeatedly stated that the funeral would be watched by at least 2 or 2.5 billion people worldwide. The latter is the highest number announced before the event. Up to and including September 6, the *Mirror* alone published five reports claiming that 2.5 billion people would watch.

In the days and weeks following the event, there was somewhat less emphasis on specific numbers. Instead, the terms “millions” and “billions” increasingly appeared. Now that descriptions of audience behavior were logically possible, reports conveyed these in more diffuse forms. There were also hardly any end-of-year reviews that mentioned the global audience of the funeral. Only the tabloid the *Mirror* published two articles on this topic on December 26. A quiz about the year’s events asked “how many people watched Princess Diana’s funeral—ten million, a hundred million or more?” (pp. 22–23). The number “one billion” appeared as the answer. The quiz lent the global audience number the appearance of a fact that had found its way into general knowledge and could easily be used as a valid quiz answer. Moreover, the answer exceeds the given numbers (“ten million, a hundred million”) and thereby acquires an enormous dimension. A report a few pages later in the same issue again mentioned 1 billion viewers as the global response of the funeral. This number is clearly below those dominating the pre-event coverage and not supported by any sources. Although statements about an audience of billions were only sporadically backed up with sources (broadcast journalists and spokespersons) in the run-up to the event, such sources were entirely omitted in the days and weeks after.

In contrast, emotions and grieving behavior of the global audience are an ongoing theme in the reporting. In most cases, articles attributed the audience with homogeneous emotions and behaviors. Most generalizations about the global audience (“the world,” “everyone,” “people all over the world”) are related to attributions of emotions. Typically, articles stated that the global audience or the world was moved or even shocked, was grieving and crying for Diana, admired her, and would remember her. In some cases, the media portrayed the global audience as having concrete intentions, such as wanting to say goodbye to Diana during the funeral. In addition to generalizations such as “worldwide grief,” some articles sweepingly referred to all television viewers as “mourners.” Strong emotions were assumed, but so was a particularly intense attention: “Millions will be glued to televisions” (*Guardian*, September 6, 1997, p. 6) and “all eyes

turn to Britain" (*Mirror*, September 6, 1997, p. 3). Some reports emphasized the simultaneity of action, such as by stating that people around the world take part or should participate in joint prayer during the funeral service and the subsequent minute of silence, which was expected to bring the world to a standstill.

Only rarely was there an explicit if rather crude differentiation of the emotions of different groups, as in the *Independent* on September 6: "Well, today the world is grieving...But who is really suffering in the wake of Diana's death? Her own people—the Brits" (p. 12). Typically, articles downplayed likely differences and constructed a unity of all groups. Many of those articles were based on the eulogies given by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Earl Spencer, printed in most newspapers. These speeches presented the royal family, the invited mourners, the gathered crowds in London, the British nation, and the television viewers all over the world as one community united in grief and bidding Diana farewell. Some articles constructed a unity of the British and the global audience ("minute's silence expected to bring the nation and much of the world to a halt," *Mirror*, September 5, 1997, pp. 6–7) or the media audience and the audience in situ: "There's no doubting the intensely personal quality of feeling that has drawn millions to the streets of the metropolis and global billions to their [*sic*] television sets this morning" (*Independent*, September 6, 1997, p. D1). Articles equated the sympathy of the people gathering in London, which is also reflected in the effort this involved, with that of the viewers and the act of switching on their televisions. It is suggested that the reactions of the invisible media audience can be derived from the visible audience on the streets of London. Remarkably, the cited *Independent* article presented the strong participation as an already completed action even though the newspaper was published hours before the event. Logically speaking, the statement must be speculation, but stylistic means (use of the present perfect and phrases such as "there's no doubting") conferred a pronounced factuality.

Conclusion

In recent years, many researchers have criticized the notion that media events are being perceived quite homogeneously and have a "gripping, enthralling" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 8) effect on the audience. Örnebring (2004) argues that this assumption was prevalent for many years because the media itself depicted the impact of media events as homogeneous and powerful, and scholars rarely questioned these media frames. Regarding the reception of media events, Katz and Dayan (2018) have even recently asserted that "we know, from the press, of the thrill of the Diana events, the World Cup, and other sporting events" (p. 150). The findings of this study highlight the need to critically reflect on the origin of descriptions of audience size and behavior and the media's role in spreading them.

First, this article reveals and discusses the mostly uncritical treatment of global audience numbers in media event research. Many scholars mention such numbers and use them to determine the status of a media event without reflecting on where and when the numbers were published, how they were generated, and which actors with what potential interests were involved in their publication. For Diana's funeral, researchers predominantly speak of 2.5 billion television viewers united in grief or "the most watched event in history" (Brown et al., 2003, p. 588), but support this by citing only a few news reports. This is problematic not only with regard to scientific standards but also in light of insights gained from studies investigating the representation of the national audience of the funeral. The depiction of a "national unity" (Thomas, 2008, p. 364) and "mass mourning" (Turnock, 2000, p. 97) that dominated the news media did not correspond to the

measured audience perceptions and behaviors. British users' behavior was considerably more diverse and critical than the British and international media depicted. Even so, these media representations influenced users' perceptions of the coaudience. Many Britons believed that the entire nation was grieving, which created an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) that shaped the reception of and conversation about the funeral.

Second, the qualitative content analysis reveals the potential influence of the British press on the creation of imagined communities and also illustrates that researchers cannot rely on news reports for statements about global media audiences. The results clearly demonstrate that the journalistic depiction of the global audience relied on speculative and biased statements, often claiming the participation of "the world" while almost never mentioning any nonparticipation. The scope of reporting on the global audience of one event alone, 94 articles in five newspapers, indicates that this is a relevant phenomenon that merits further research.

It seems particularly important to distinguish between pre- and post-event coverage. Essential characterizations of global response, such as viewer numbers, status in comparison with previous media events, and concrete audience behavior, including viewers' emotions, were defined before the event, but then mostly played a less important role in the post-event coverage. Most reports insufficiently disclosed both the speculative nature and the origin of these statements and numbers. This corresponds to general findings that journalism routinely reports on data on various issues and tends to uncritically rely on numbers provided by PR material (Curtin & Maier, 2001; McConway, 2016; Van Witsen, 2019). The results suggest that the numbers given for the funeral were influenced by PR efforts of broadcasting companies, therefore emphasizing the need to analyze their strategies and interests (Krämer, 2008). Moreover, journalists obviously used audience numbers to attract attention (Schneider, 2007), highlight the news value of the event (Fürst, 2013), and give the impression of a fact-oriented style of reporting—because numbers are commonly perceived as particularly objective (Beer, 2016; Van Witsen, 2019; Webster & Phalen, 1997, p. 4). The extensive cross-media coverage about the (record-breaking) billions of viewers and lack of cited sources contributed to a pre-event consensus that could hardly be challenged. After the funeral, no media researcher or organizational spokesperson needed to make public statements about the global audience—because the media coverage had set specific expectations and already established the funeral as a global media event (cf. Noelle-Neumann & Mathes, 1987; Sonnevend, 2016, pp. 26–27).

However, the absence of subsequent verifications and official statements left some leeway for descriptions of the global media audience. Even though the *Mirror* had intensely proclaimed the number of 2.5 billion viewers before the event, months later it presented 1 billion viewers as general knowledge. The BBC ("The Death of Princess Diana," 2017; "On This Day," n.d.), by contrast, still conveys the highest audience numbers mentioned in the pre-event coverage (2 billion and 2.5 billion) as part of the general knowledge about Diana's death and funeral. The BBC thereby elevates the importance of a media event for which it played a considerable role in broadcasting and producing. As is characteristic of post-event coverage of the funeral, no information is given regarding the origin or calculation of this figure.

This study is the first to investigate descriptions of a global audience in the pre- and post-event coverage of a media event. It shows in detail the interplay of preceding speculations and subsequent lack of critical reviews of global audience numbers, thereby underlining Robertson's (2018) recent argument about the crucial importance of the "media event build-up phase." This study's findings are in line with

observations regarding the coverage of the Super Bowl, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, and the funeral of Pope John Paul II (Blain et al., 1993, p. 186; Martin & Reeves, 2001; Schlott, 2013). Most recently, this point was also evident in the Thailand cave rescue and the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Over several days, news media reported that "the whole world is waiting to see what happens next" (CNN Live, 2018, 0:12) in the Thai cave. Similarly, journalists claimed weeks in advance that the wedding was watched by "more than 3 billion people" via television, smartphone, or social media, making it "the most viewed event in history" (Blott, 2018, para. 31). Thus, contrary to common assumptions (e.g., Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 54; 1995; Rothenbuhler, 2001), the status as a global media event seems to depend not on the global audience response that occurs during it and is subsequently determined, but rather on the vivid and exaggerated constructions of global audience response evolving and being reinforced in public discourse before the event. To be clear, it is not crucial whether news media report about an audience of 2.5 versus 3 billion. The key point is the creation of a myth that feeds attention and meaning to the media event: The preceding media coverage draws precise pictures of huge and unprecedented audience numbers, viewers' emotions, and the whole world's participation—and later mainly reiterates the descriptions that were disseminated in the build-up phase.

If the term "media event" is to cover events that become part of collective memory (Dayan & Katz, 1992, 1995; Dekavalla, 2012, p. 297; Garde-Hansen, 2011, pp. 37–38), it would be fruitful to consider cross-media reporting on the audience response as part of the conceptual determination of media events. In this sense, the definition of a ceremonial media event should rest not on how many millions or billions of people around the world were watching intently and emotionally but rather on the measurable fact that, over several days, an event is presented in public discourse as emotionally moving and generating a simultaneous (world) community. This does not diminish the importance of investigating the reception and effects of media events. Rather, it enables a critical approach to statements about the audience that circulate in public discourse as forecasts and speculations and are part of the production of media events. With this conceptual determination, researchers are further encouraged to scientifically examine the reception and effects of media events as well as investigate media representations of the audience. The latter is, according to Butsch and Livingstone (2014), a promising area of inquiry because "in today's globalized world we need to become aware of representations of and discourses about audiences across diverse cultures and languages around the world, today and back into the past" (p. 1). Studies that combine both areas could considerably improve our understanding of media events in terms of viewing norms (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 8, 13, 197) and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983; Cui et al., 2016).

This study has several limitations. It focused on one case study and the text of British newspapers. Future studies could include analyzing images and graphics in newspaper coverage and examine how the global audience is depicted in various media, including television, radio, and press coverage as well as social media content. Further studies could also compare the British media coverage with that in other countries and expand the analysis to recent and also past media events (e.g., those that were compared with the response of Diana's funeral).

The findings of this study suggest that journalism needs to be critically reflected upon as a (co)producer of media events—and should not be treated as a reliable source for global audience numbers. Therefore, research on media events could benefit from thoroughly analyzing myths of global audience

behavior and undertaking systematic audience studies that shed light on the emergence of imagined communities and the role played by various news media in the run-up to a media event.

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