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Festivals in the Network Society

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Albert Einstein once remarked that “The only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once”. In the contemporary network society, however, this system seems to have ceased working. We are constantly bombarded by events. The regular rhythms of events in traditional societies and the ordered series of events in industrial society seem to have given way to a chaotic cacophony of happenings, which we might characterise as ‘hyper-eventfulness’ or ‘hyperfestivity’. As Richards and Palmer (2010) noted, the slogan ‘festival city’ or ‘city of festivals’ has become a popular choice as part of a city’s brand image. Edmonton refers to itself as ‘Canada’s Festivals City’, setting itself in competition with Montreal and Quebec City that define themselves in similar terms. Milwaukee and Sacramento are two American cities, along with some 30 others, where being ‘cities of festivals’ has become a prime element of their destination marketing throughout the year. Guadalajara, Mexico’s second largest city, similarly tries to gain national and international standing by communicating itself as a festival centre. The world status of Edinburgh is claimed on the official website of the *Edinburgh Festivals*: “With the stunning Hogmanay celebrations heralding a brand new year and the start of Homecoming Scotland 2009, the World’s Leading Festival City is gearing up for spring, and more of its exciting festivals.”

The explosion of eventfulness and festivity evident in contemporary society was also one of the reasons that Dragan Klaić founded the European Festivals Research Project in 2004. The project was launched “believing that festivals have become emblematic for the issues, problems and contradictions of the current cultural practices, marked by globalization, European integration, institutional fatigue, dominance of cultural industry and shrinking public subsidies”. As these challenges have only become sharper during the past decade, festivals and events have emerged as an essential part of the contemporary cultural landscape.

This brief review considers why events have become so important in modern society and how events are shaped by and in turn influence the contemporary network society.¹

A brief history of pseudo-events

In the 1960s the American historian Daniel Boorstin was the first to comment on the gathering avalanche of events that seems to have overtaken modern society. Boorstin illustrated the development of what he called 'pseudo-events' through the rise of the media and tourism. He took the example of a hotel that wishes to increase its business. The hotel hires a public relations consultant, whose advice is that the hotel creates an event – a celebration of the hotel's thirtieth anniversary. "Once the celebration has been held, the celebration itself becomes evidence that the hotel really is a distinguished institution. The occasion actually gives the hotel the prestige to which it is pretending" (Boorstin, 1962: xx). According to Boorstin, such pseudo-events are distinguished from 'real' events by:

- ◆ A lack of spontaneity – they are purposefully planned
- ◆ An orientation towards the media – the purpose of a pseudo event is to be reported
- ◆ Their ambiguous relation to the underlying reality of the situation. Whether it is 'real' or not is less important than its newsworthiness and ability to gain favourable attention.
- ◆ Their inclination to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The result of the proliferation of pseudo-events, according to Boorstin was "the programming of our experiences", with "no peaks and valleys, no surprises". Somewhat ironically, Boorstin himself became something of an event organiser when he was appointed as Librarian of Congress in 1975, as he "installed picnic tables and benches out front, established a centre to encourage reading and arranged midday concerts and multimedia events for all" (McFadden, 2004).

Today Boorstin's predictions about the rise of the media and events seems to have become reality. Places everywhere are celebrating sport, culture and heritage, to the extent that 'eventfulness' has become an essential part of the cultural DNA of cities and regions worldwide (Richards and Palmer, 2010). Contemporary societies increasingly seem to be flooded with events, designed to meet a range of different needs, varying from economic development to stimulating creativity to supporting social cohesion. The result is a feeling of 'festivalisation' or 'hyperfestivity' in certain cities, to the extent that Einstein's vision of time as a separator of events seems to have collapsed.

Although individual events may have blurred into one another, their growth has defined a recognisable 'events industry', with increasing economic and political power. The OECD (2008) recently took an interest in 'global events'

and the European Commission (2007) undertook a study of the economic benefits of cultural and sporting events. Before the 2010 World Cup, it was estimated that a Dutch win in this one event alone would be worth €700 million to the national economy (and such was the confidence in a Dutch victory that nobody bothered to calculate what second place might be worth).

Events in the network society

Is the rise of eventfulness all hype and hyperfestivity, or is there a real need for events, beyond the seemingly ubiquitous appeals to economic benefit? Arguably, in modern society social relations have become increasingly 'dis-embedded' through the creation of abstract global systems (Giddens, 1984). Castells (1996) paints a picture of global society operating at two levels: the global 'space of flows' and the local 'space of places'. Through the rise of information technology we have increasingly become 'networked individuals', connected to people on the other side of the globe through the space of flows in cyberspace, but increasingly isolated from those around us in the space of places.

Castell's vision of the network society appears bleak. But the idea of increasingly isolated networked lives does not completely match reality. The Internet, rather than replacing face to face contact or 'physical co-presence' (Urry, 2002) has in fact generated more demand for social contact. Part of the evidence for this lies in the growth of events and festivals. People deprived of more traditional means of contact with their fellow human beings, such as the chat over the garden fence, the animated conversation of the local bar or the family discussions over a relaxed meal, seem to seek out new ones. One of the potential explanations for this has been provided by the work of Randall Collins (2004) on 'Interaction Ritual Chains' (IRC), or a "theory of individuals' motivation based on where they are located at any moment in time in the aggregate of (Interaction Ritual) chains that makes up their market of possible social relationships" (xiv).

Collins argues that Interaction Ritual Chains can help to explain individual motivation, since they cause people to seek the 'Emotional Energy' (EE) that is generated by participation in IRCs. Emotional Energy seeking is

the master motive across all institutional arenas; and thus it is the IRs that generate differing levels of EE in economic life that set the motivation to work at a level of intensity ranging from enthusiastically to slackly; to engage in entrepreneurship or shy away from it; to join a wave of investment or to pull one's money and one's emotional attention away from financial markets (Collins, 2006: xv).