

News media and collective memory construction after the death of King Michael I of Romania

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to use framing theory to examine how collectively significant events are incorporated into media representations and how collective memories are used in commemorating specific historical events, namely the death and the funeral of King Michael I. The paper aims at answering two research questions: 1- what are the frames used by journalists when covering the death of King Michael I of Romania and 2- what are the frames used by the readers in the comments to the above mentioned articles.

To analyze the factors involved, this paper employs framing theories and media events theory. For this aim of this paper, we have selected articles from two major Romanian online newspapers during 11 days, starting with December 5th, 2017, when the media announced the death of King Michael I, until December 16th, 2017, when the media covered his funeral. The methodology used is a qualitative content analysis of selected Romanian online media. Based on a preliminary research, we expect to find institutional frames and character attributions and inconsistency among media attributions. Also, we expect to identify media events characteristics in the coverage of the funeral.

Keywords

Framing, media events, collective memory studies.

Résumé

Le but de cette étude est d'utiliser la théorie des cadres pour examiner comment les médias couvrent les représentations collectives d'un événement et comment la mémoire collective est utilisée pour commémorer des événements historiques comme la mort et les funérailles du Roi Michel Ier de Roumanie.

L'étude se propose de répondre à deux questions de recherche: 1 – quels sont les cadres utilisés par les journalistes pour la couverture médiatique de la mort du roi Michel Ier et 2 – quels sont les cadres utilisés par les lecteurs dans leurs commentaires aux articles identifiés.

Pour analyser les facteurs impliqués, cette étude utilise la théorie des cadres et la théorie des événements médiatiques. À ce but, des articles des deux importantes publications roumaines en ligne ont été choisis pendant une période de 11 jours, du 5 Décembre 2017, le jour où les médias ont annoncé la mort du roi, jusqu'au 16 Décembre 2017, le jour des funérailles. La méthode de recherche utilisée a été l'analyse de contenu des articles en ligne choisis. Après une première recherche, nous nous attendons à retrouver des cadres institutionnels, des attributions de caractère et un décalage entre les attributions des médias. Nous nous attendons aussi à retrouver des éléments caractéristiques aux événements médiatiques.

Mots clés

Théorie des cadres, événements médiatiques, mémoire collective.

Introduction

On 5 December 2017 the press announced the death of former King Michael I of Romania at the age of 96, at his home in Switzerland. Immediately after, the news was followed by a flood of articles that spanned from his early life to details on his funeral. His death triggered an intense reflexive activity from the public, which started to bring back memories and construct the meaning of the event. His death came in a time of political anguish, when newspapers and the public were very much involved in discussions about the political future of the country and when thoughts about monarchy as a savior had become recurrent.

The purpose of this study is to use framing theory to examine how collectively significant events are incorporated into media representations and how collective memories are used in commemorating specific historical events, namely the death and the funeral of King Michael I. The paper aims at answering two research questions: 1- what are the frames used by journalists when covering the death of King Michael I of Romania and 2- what are the frames used by the readers in the comments to the above mentioned articles. Content analysis was done on two major quality online newspapers from Romania: *adevarul* and *hotnews*. Articles about the King's death and funeral and their subsequent comments were analyzed. The timeframe is 5-16 December 2017, from the day the media announced the King's death until the day of his funeral. For this analysis I have used message framing theory, media events theories and media and memory theories.

Literature review

Death and funerals of famous people have captured the interest of various researchers in connection to media events: Lady Diana (Dayan, 1999), King Baudouin of Belgium (Marion, 1994), Yitzhak Rabin (Peri, 1997), Michael Jackson (McCurdy, 2010) or J.F. Kennedy (Zelizer, 1992). Through media narratives, news media help us construct or revise collective memory in order to create a social construct of identity (Zelizer, 2004, p. 157). Furthermore, media also select what others recall or reinterpret from the collective memory, acting as a means of historical interpretation (Foner, 2002, p. 67).

News media coverage of funerals presents certain features that enable us to examine collective memories constructed by the media. Theorists have argued that funerals of public figures represent significant rituals that articulate social consensus (Durkheim & Swain, 2008, p. 35). This applies especially to presidents and royal figures, since their position in the Romanian political imagination is due to their cognitive association with specific political issues or ideologies (Dayan&Katz, 1992, p. 83). When covering funerals of presidents or royal figures, media are retrospective in order to contextualize an important figure's significance to the common political past.

Much of the recent literature has focused on how collective memories appear in commemorating

specific historical events (Parry-Giles & ParryGiles, 2000; Kitch, 2003; Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Peri, 1999). Thus, the definition of collective memory includes a plethora of cultural, ethnic and rhetorical theories. Less attention has been given to the construction of collective memory as a process, namely the dialogic interaction that emerges when societies create or revise memories. When it comes to public ceremonies or events with a ceremonial pattern, mass media change their usual procedures and their objective style. High standards of performance are combined with a sense of festivity and nostalgia for tradition (Katz, 1980, p. 86). The reporter is rather cynical or objective, while the media event presenter often takes a priestly role, acting as a master of ceremonies.

Media play a more complex role than just convey mythological stories to the masses: journalists also become part of the ritual. Thus, the content of their articles focuses less on information, which appeals to judgment, and more on affective allusions, appealing to reactions. This is why in the case of media events, the media have an ambiguous role between spectators and participants and find themselves as a consequence in a state of *liminality*, as explained by Turner (1969, p. 359). According to Turner, society manifests itself as a structured system. This structure, that he calls *societas*, feels threatened by all form of change. But when change occurs, be it social conflicts or life and death situations, collectivities put in place rituals that are designed to control the process of change. These rituals design what Turner calls *communitas*: an unstructured sense of communion between equal individuals, all under the authority of ritual performers. Because rituals establish a sort of connection between two social structures (before and after), they create a sense of frontier, called *liminality*. Thus, in a luminal situation, people take familiar situations, decompose them and recompose them by updating root paradigms. When the change that occurs marks the beginning or the end of an era, such as the death of the last Romanian king, the occasion of state (Katz, 1980, p. 89) is treated as a media event and the nation participates, transfixed, in the ceremony.

The journalistic discourse has the same cultural function as myths, because news stories cater to the same cognitive and psychological needs as myths (Coman, 2003, p. 47). Media events are public events covered by the media and because of this

mediatization, they trigger social and political transformations (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 89). Furthermore, are characterized by the interruption of daily life, which acts as basis for micro and macro social solidarity that determine the creation of subjects that reinforce collective memory (Coman, 2003, p. 63). Dayan and Katz (1992) have two premises: 1-there's a different attitude of the press towards certain events and 2-there are specific events that trigger this attitude. Usually highly objective, the press imposes a distance between the press and the event, while in media events, this distance is canceled through subjectivity and creates an affective fusion between the actors: participants, journalists and spectators. In order to become a media event, an event should be individual in time and space and could be observed and followed by different viewers. Then, the event should exert an influence on immediate and global environment and finally, the event should introduce discontinuity in the course of normal events. We can assert that the death of King Michael I of Romania was one of those hot moments, as Levi-Strauss called them, phenomena or events through which a society or culture assesses its own significance (1966, p. 112).

Sample

Data for the current study were collected from two most important quality online newspapers from Romania: *adevarul.ro* and *hotnews.ro*. These two online newspapers have been selected for a number of reasons. First, they cover a wide range of subjects and are seen as a reliable source of information. Second, they rank among the news websites with the most views and visitors. Finally, both of them have a forum section at the end of each article that enables readers to post their comments and express their opinion.

This study analyzes the coverage of the news about King Michael I's death and funeral, so we set our timeframe between the 5th of December 2017, the day the media announced the King's death, and the 16th of December 2017, the day of his funeral. The articles were selected by conducting a search using "King Michael" as keyword to narrow down the search results, within the limited timeframe mentioned above. The process resulted in 58 articles from *adevarul.ro* and 22 articles from *hotnews.ro*, giving a total of 80 articles with their subsequent comments. In these articles and comments, we searched for keywords or key phrases that should

answer the research questions, namely how King Michael is remembered after his death. For this purpose, we analyzed the traits and the actions ascribed to the King by journalists and then, readers. For this analysis message framing theory, media events theories and media and memory theories have been used as a theoretical framework.

Findings

Media covers the event in such an emotional way that the coverage is not about the event anymore, but about the emotions the events creates. Besides the emotion of the people following such a tragic event, there is also another type of emotion, namely the *media emotion* (Marion, 1994, p. 317). The event creates two elements: emotion-information, otherwise opposed. But in this case, emotion and information are brought together in a media narrative to be consumed by the readers. After analyzing all 80 articles, it was clear that the death of King Michael I had transformed into a media event, since it had all characteristics identified by Dayan & Katz, (1996, p. 5-10) as elements describing a media event.

Firstly, the event was prepared and announced by the media. Days before the funeral, both online newspapers discussed at length the preparations for the King's funeral, updated the information daily: "this is the program for the King's funeral", "rehearsals for King's funeral". On the day of the event, both online newspapers did live updates on the funeral. Moreover, journalists showed the importance of the event by putting emphasis on who was attending the funeral and which members of royal families all over Europe were expected to take part in the event. Secondly, the usual schedule didn't apply anymore. The daily life of the city was taken by storm and was interrupted by the preparations for the funeral. Journalists reported "traffic restrictions in Bucharest", "three days of national mourning" and even the most important Romanian TV channel interrupted its usual schedule and cancelled the broadcast for a comedy series in order to show its respect for the national mourning. The mourning period was more important than any other event during that time, since the Christmas lights were off for the whole three days. Journalists also reported about the huge number of people who were expected to be present at the funeral: "more trains added for people who want to take part in King's funeral". Then, it was clear that the event was presented in a festive manner, using highly subjective

language and tone: “the King is back home forever”, “the King united us for the last time”, “the impossible parting”, “the return of the King”. Finally, a number of spectacular elements were identified, messages that suggest unity between participants and readers: “hundreds of people waited with applause”, “thousands of people gathered to pay their respects”, “there are 4000 people in front of the train station”, “thousands of people say goodbye, in silence and tears”, “moment of silence in Unirii Square”. The public drew together for a secular ritual of national mourning in which the media played a key role. When media perform an important function and act as a primary source of social cohesion, the ritual itself grabs the attention of the media. Consequently, media does not just cover a secular ritual, but also shapes and creates it with secular symbolism that casts light on the core values of society and the components of the collective memory.

The first research question this study aims at answering relates to the frames used by journalists in their coverage of the death and funeral of King Michael I of Romania. For this purpose, 80 articles from two major online newspapers have been analyzed. The analysis focused on two aspects: the traits and actions ascribed to the King during his life, which could show us what attributes were characteristic and memorable about him. The main traits encountered in the articles were, in their order of importance: “symbol of Romanian people”, “having dignity”, he was also seen as a patriot, brave, experienced, he was described as a symbol of hope for the Romanian people and much focus was put on his education. The first articles reporting on the death of King Michael remembered the same events in the king’s life: the fact that he was king at a very young age, even before his father, that he saved thousands of lives by ending the war quicker, that when he had to leave the country he wasn’t afraid to work to support his family, and finally, both online newspapers praised his education, his patriotism and his love for his country.

The actions ascribed to the King in the 80 articles analyzed continue on the same page. Journalists recall how he helped shorten the Second World War and how he risked everything to save his country and gave up his throne only to save lives. His full-time job is mentioned as a proof of his dignity and finally, his patriotism is showed though the fact that he tried multiple times to come back to Romania, after being forced to give up his throne. It was equally important

to discern the types of sources/frames advocates who contributed to constructing memory frames during the funeral week. In order to have a complex picture of the King’s personality and actions, journalists used various sources. The dominant frame was represented by journalists, acting as sources, followed by officials, politico historians and citizens, the latter three distributed fairly consistently across the frames. Interestingly enough, the articles abounded in religious associations. This is to prove Tsaliki’s idea that media events create a tribal unity around a personality who becomes almost a saint (1995, p. 362). Media use a dramatic rhetoric that require autoreflexion moments on national destiny and brings together the nation in one body. Consequently, journalists become myth-makers by using common-sense categories (Coman, 2003, 70). The King is thus seen as a religious leader: “didn’t the King answer-just as patriarchs and prophets – Here I am! – when called to rise against totalitarian systems?” or “He rose to save his country and bring redemption to his people”, going even to the idea that he could be seen as a saint: “former director of the Royal House suggests King should be canonized”.

If the first research question focused on the frames used by journalists to construct the King’s memory, the second research question refers to the readers’ reaction to the articles and the frames they use when discussing the memory of the King. Next, the content analysis showed the traits characteristic of King Michael I or events of his life used to reflect traits characteristic of him. The list shows the traits most often used to depict King Michael I, both in terms of the number of times they were cited and the importance attributed to them by the readers. We can see that readers had divided opinions. While some of them see the King as the journalists did, saying he was a symbol for Romanians, that he had dignity and represented hope and patriotism, others criticized him mentioning that I lived all his life abroad and not in Romania, that he had plenty of money and got back his properties when he came back to Romania. Some readers considered that he was a traitor for giving up his throne and the last chance to monarchy.

Discussion and conclusion

Research Question One asked what are the dominant frames that appear in news media to construct memories of King Michael I. The main frames identified were: personality, morality,

experience, leadership and foreign policy with their subsequent traits and actions ascribed to the King. All 80 articles from the two major online publications analyzed portrayed the King in a positive way. Research Question two asked what are the dominant frames that appear in the comments as reaction to the articles in which news media construct memories of King Michael I. Though we can see the same frames, with their traits and actions, the associations with the King were both positive and negative. While journalists discussed his leadership in positive terms, remembering the times when he was brave enough to give up his throne to save lives, some of the readers considered the same situation as a proof of cowardice.

By taking a cultural constructivist approach, this study aimed to explain some of the dynamic processes that contribute to the building of memories in news media. This approach reflects James Carey's (2002) ritual view of communication, which emphasizes media as being integral to the socio-cultural function of a socially constructed reality of experience within communities. The conclusions of this study are consistent with Durkheim's theories of funerals serving as a collective social rite; the media treats the King not as a partisan figure, but as national, cultural symbol. Thus the media is induced to downplay the factors that express divisions and emphasize those that indicate shared experience.

As Zelizer (1993, p. 81) has argued, social researchers have made the mistake of seeing news as a product and not a process. For those reasons, most memory studies, especially those involving media, have concentrated on collective memories once they have been manifested in cultural products (e.g., museums, books, films) or cultural artifacts (e.g., street names, ceremonies, rituals, etc.) at a specific point and time, and not as a continuous process of transformation and change. The value of the current study lies in its evidence to support Zelizer's contention of the role of journalists (both as named sources and asserting memory within news stories) in constructing memories of national events.

Limitations and further research

The results of this study are limited to articles from only two online newspapers. We believe that further research on all media coverage on this subject should offer a more complex image of the correlation between the frames used in the articles and the ones in

the comments. Also, further research can be made over the years to analyze if the memory frames identified in this study are maintained or changed in articles remembering King Michael I.

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Revista română de
JURNALISM și
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