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Disasters as Media Events: The Rescue of the Chilean Miners on National and Global Television

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Focusing on the 2010 rescue of Chilean miners, this article problematizes some current perspectives on media events, particularly in relation to disasters. An analysis of the narratives constructed during the live broadcast of the rescue by the Chilean government and a national and a global television station suggests that media events theories should go beyond the categories of “integrative” and “disruptive.” Additionally, it appears that the polyphony of media events introduced by global media organizations is not a guarantee of alternative voices. Finally, this story is a powerful reminder that disasters can be used for political purposes, overlooking in this case the responsibility of the company owning the mine and the communicative controls imposed by the authorities.

Keywords: media events, disasters, television, BBC, TVN, Chilean miners

Introduction

On August 5, 2010, the news of a sudden catastrophe swept across Chile. In the north of the country, the privately owned San José copper mine had collapsed, leaving 33 workers trapped 2,300 feet underground below tons of rock. With the nation still haunted by the earthquake and tsunami of the previous February, recently elected president Sebastián Piñera made a bold decision: His administration would assume the responsibility for the rescue, well aware that, from then on, the authorities would be held accountable for the success or failure of the operation (Prieto Larraín, 2011; Toro & Canales, 2010a). For over two weeks, several efforts to contact the men proved futile, and just as the country was preparing for the worst, something extraordinary occurred. A note was found attached to a drill, reading, “We are all well in the shelter—the 33 of us”—stunning evidence that the men had found a way to survive 17 days in complete isolation, with almost no food or water, and were waiting to be rescued.

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Although news of the accident immediately flooded Chilean television, the story took off on a global dimension only when the men were found alive (Franklin, 2011). From that moment on, Camp Hope—the improvised town that had sprung up around the mine—was visited by a growing number of foreign journalists, more than 1,500 professionals representing 250 media organizations (Bachman, 2010; Prieto Larraín, 2011). On October 12 and 13, after weeks of drilling deep into the earth, the final rescue was successfully executed in a dramatic ordeal that lasted more than 22 hours. Thanks to the official television broadcasting organized by the Chilean government—with images taken by cameras installed inside the mine—the operation was followed live by one billion spectators all over the world, becoming one of the most important media events ever (Bachman, 2010; Brooks, 2010). Some newspapers described the mission as “inspirational” and claimed that the world felt “a better place” (Stanford, 2010).

The historical relevance, omnipresence in the media, and apparent reconciliatory mood seem to make the story fit the classic definition of a media event: those extraordinary situations that monopolize the attention of the media, have a cohesive identity, and integrate societies (Dayan & Katz, 1992). However, although media events are “still alive” (Cui, 2013, p. 1220), in recent years there have been several debates regarding their supposed integrative characteristics, hegemonic identity, and reconciliatory effects, particularly in the current global and hypermediated environment (e.g., Couldry, 2003; Dayan, 2008; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Hunt, 1999; Katz & Liebes, 2007; Stepinska, 2010). One specific strand of argumentation has attempted to stretch the original framework of media events, categorizing them as “integrative” or “disruptive,” with terrorism, war, and disasters as examples of the latter group (e.g., Katz & Liebes, 2007; Liebes, 1998; Mihelj, 2008; Seeck & Rantanen, in press).

This article argues that the live broadcast of the rescue of the Chilean miners serves to problematize some current perspectives on media events, particularly in relation to disasters. An analysis of the narratives constructed by the government, a national television station, and a global broadcaster suggest that media events should go beyond the distinction between integrative and disruptive. In addition, it appears that the polyphony introduced by global media organizations is not a guarantee of disruptive or alternative voices. Finally, this story is a powerful reminder that disasters are not simply communicated through the media, but are in fact constituted by and within the media and can be used to promote specific political aims (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012). In this case, the narrative construction of the live broadcast of the rescue sought to benefit the Chilean authorities and the image of their country, overlooking issues such as the responsibility of the owners of the mine, the poor security conditions of the excavation site, and the fierce control of communications imposed by the government.

Integration, Hegemony and Reconciliation

Dayan and Katz’s study, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, is probably one of the most influential yet also contested theoretical approaches in media studies. Defined as “high holidays of mass communication” (1992, p. 1), the authors described these occurrences as extraordinary historical situations, planned outside the media and transmitted on television in real time, that reconcile and integrate the dispersed members of a society, highlighting a specific set of values. Although the array of

media events is vast, they are categorized into three basic narratives: *conquests*, *contests*, and *coronations*.

Although their work was regarded as innovative and influential, it has not been free of criticisms. For instance, some authors disputed the supposed integrative function of these events, given that media events would reflect the values of an alleged preexisting social order (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Furthermore, despite the efforts of the organizers to impose a preferred meaning, it has been argued that media events would not have a positive hegemonic identity and could actually have different characterizations and audience interpretations at local, national, and global levels (Dayan, 2006; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Kyriakidou, 2008; Stepinska, 2010; Volkmer, 2008). Finally, it has been pointed out that the media events framework has an exclusive focus on reconciliatory preplanned events, failing to consider those occurrences that fulfill the criteria of a media event but endorse controversy rather than harmony (Hunt, 1999).

Consequently, it has been argued that media events do not exist naturally, but are *constructions* made by organizations to create, maintain, or legitimize hegemonic relations and reinforce dominant power structures (Couldry, 2003; Krotz, 2010). Other authors assert that media events are communicative platforms used by either establishment or antiestablishment groups to draw attention to particular issues and potentially modify balances of power (Cottle, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014; Couldry & Rothenbuhler, 2007; Price, 2008).

These criticisms represent a significant contribution to the debate about media events, yet, on occasion, they seem to be based on a somewhat reductionist approach toward Dayan and Katz's original theory. For instance, in some early work on this topic, Dayan and Katz admitted that these occurrences could trigger multiple commentaries, particularly when comparing local and international readings (Dayan & Katz, 1985, 1988). They also observed that media events could be used as tools of political manipulation and propaganda (Dayan & Katz, 1985; Katz, Dayan, & Motyl, 1981) and warned that they portrayed only an idealized version of society, reminding it "of what it aspires to be rather than what it is" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. ix).

Media Events and Disasters

Different perspectives have been proposed to understand media events (e.g., Cottle, 2006, 2012; Couldry, 2003; Fiske, 1994; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Hepp, Höhn, & Vogelgesang, 2003; Kellner, 2010; Mihelj, 2008; Scannell, 2002; Seeck & Rantanen, in press). One line of argumentation that, with varying emphases and terminologies, has been embraced by several authors develops a dualistic model of media events, categorizing them as either integrative or disruptive. Although most of these authors avoid simplistic definitions, generally speaking, the original media events tend to be seen as integrative, while occurrences such as war, terror, or disasters are considered disruptive or traumatic (e.g., Katz & Liebes, 2007; Liebes, 1998; Mihelj, 2008; Seeck & Rantanen, in press).

Disruptive media events would be non-preplanned occurrences driven by tragedy, conflict, anxiety, and disagreement; they would affect ordinary citizens and not only authorities or members of the elite; they could potentially foster transformation and social conflict; and, in terms of their media coverage, they would be aligned with the interests of the antiestablishment rather than with the mainstream (e.g., Dayan, 2008; Katz & Liebes, 2007; Liebes, 1998; Mihelj, 2008; Seeck & Rantanen, in press).

However, it appears that, in regard to disasters, some of these approaches have adopted a somewhat limited perspective. For instance, it has been observed that disasters are not mere disruptions or exceptions to a prevalent social order, but have actually become an endemic feature of contemporary societies (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012). Thus, approaching disasters exclusively as disruptions seems to overlook the fact that they could be related to long-term social phenomena as well as to issues of cultural performativity, power, and structural determination (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, p. 8; see also Calhoun, 2008; Tierney, 2007).

Disasters, then, can be politically or culturally charged, may be signaled or symbolized in specific ways, and can be kept silent or become spectacles (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012). Thus, whereas some of them may prompt political, social, or cultural transformations (e.g., Mihelj, 2008; Seeck & Rantanen, in press), others can be appropriated by elites to promote particular agendas or reinforce their positions of power (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Klein, 2008; Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006; for a more detailed discussion about this point, see Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012).

Although the relationship between media and disasters is hardly new, recent years have seen a more critical reflection on how the reporting of disasters may construct particular public approaches and bring different kinds of responses to the fore (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Orgad, 2012; see also Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012). Moreover, it has been observed that disasters are not simply communicated by the media. In fact, they are constituted and performed within communication flows, are infused with cultural and political meanings, and are no longer restricted to national boundaries (Cottle, 2011, 2012, 2014; see also Orgad, 2012; Seeck & Rantanen, in press).

Thus, seeing disasters as mere disruptive or traumatic events may overlook some more complex issues. Disasters do not necessarily guarantee challenges or transformations in power relations. Additionally, they should not be considered as essentially opposed to the original framework of Dayan and Katz (Cui, 2013). In fact, although disasters may be unplanned, their subsequent political response can perfectly be scripted in advance (Pantti et al., 2012, p. 32).

The Rescue of the Miners as a Live Media Event

Based on the discussion above, there are many angles from which the rescue of the Chilean miners might have been explored. In this article, I adhere mainly to the reformulation proposed by Dayan (2008), who stripped down the original framework of media events to four relevant features: emphasis,

performativity, loyalty, and shared viewing experience. *Emphasis* is expressed through the omnipresence in media, lack of disruption, apparently endless repetition of some shots, and the liveness of the event; *performativity* refers to a lack of neutrality and gestural aspects; *loyalty* alludes to the endorsement by the media of the meaning proposed by the organizer; and *shared viewing experience* makes the participatory role of the audience explicit.

I chose this perspective because it overcomes some constraints discussed earlier, such as the categorization between integrative and disruptive events, and embraces some criticisms made to Dayan and Katz's original framework. Additionally, it still assigns relevance to the live aspect of these occurrences, a feature that has always been one of the essential characteristics of a media event (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Katz, 1980). In their attempt to stretch the definition of a media event, some literature has tended to overlook this live aspect (e.g., Eskjaer, 2007; Fiske, 1994; Krotz, 2010; Trandafoiu, 2008; Volkmer, 2008), describing instead the intense coverage of one specific story, more in the line of news waves or media hypes (Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009). Conversely, Dayan's approach allows examining the *performative details of a live event as it unfolds*, a matter which has not received much attention lately.

The four features proposed by Dayan (2008) can be observed in the rescue: *emphasis*, due to its omnipresence in local and global media, particularly television; *performativity*, due to, as it will be discussed later, the interest of the Chilean government in controlling the communicative aspects; *loyalty*, in the acceptance or rejection of the proposed meaning of the event by the media; and, although the exact manner in which audiences endorsed the event is beyond the scope of this research, it was arguably a *shared viewing experience* for the one billion people who watched the rescue in real time.

I will focus mainly on two elements: *performativity* and *loyalty*. Given that media events should not be seen as restricted within national boundaries (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Seeck & Rantanen, in press), I will examine these elements paying special attention to the narratives produced during the live coverage by one national and one global television station. To that aim, I have employed an interpretative qualitative method of analysis grounded on visual analysis and critical discourse analysis already used in media studies (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Orgad, 2012; see also Fairclough, 1995). This approach allows exploring the production and legitimization of meanings as well as the symbolic production, reproduction, and transformation of power relations, hierarchies, and authorities (Orgad, 2012).

The data consists of a selection of clips of the live rescue from two television stations: Televisión Nacional de Chile (TVN) and BBC World News. TVN is one of the main broadcasters in Chile, a state-owned but commercially funded television station available nationwide, and which, during the operation, topped the audience ratings of its country ("TVN volvió a imponerse," 2010). BBC World News is one of the leading global television news stations, watched by 71 million people in more than 200 countries and territories (BBC, 2010) and which spent more than \$160,000 to send a crew of 26 people to cover the story (Robinson & Carrington, 2010). In the United Kingdom alone, the rescue of the miners became at that time the third most viewed event ever, with an audience of 6.9 million people (Bakhurst, 2010).

Ideally, the analysis would have examined the 22-hour live coverage; however, constraints of time and space make this alternative impossible. Therefore, a smaller sample is proposed. On their websites, both TVN and BBC offer a selection of short clips that correspond to the live footage originally transmitted on October 12 and 13, 2010, with a length of between 2 and 12 minutes. From these, I have focused on the ones that feature the actual moment when the miners were rescued (more than 60 clips), to examine patterns that could highlight the narratives of each station. Additionally, these moments were precisely the ones of highest interest for the audience on global television (Pujol, 2010).

Performing the Rescue: The Base Narrative

The analysis of the performative character of a media event necessarily requires the identification of a base narrative (Price, 2008). This base narrative can be found in the official broadcast of the rescue produced by the Chilean government. Given that this official transmission was embedded *within* the TVN and BBC coverage, I have also analyzed a short video produced by the secretary of communications of the Chilean government.

As mentioned earlier, media events do not happen naturally, but have a performative aspect (Dayan, 2008). Inevitably, this poses the question of who controls or *owns* the event. The answer is usually not straightforward. For instance, who controls the Olympic Games? The International Olympic Committee, the organizing country, the sponsors, or the main broadcasters (Price, 2008)? In the case of the rescue of the Chilean miners, however, there is little doubt that the Chilean government is the *owner*—not only because it is in charge of the rescue operation but because of the communicative controls it imposed on the media.

Although the Chilean authorities denied any type of manipulation and insisted that their only commitment was “with the truth” (“Encargado de la transmisión,” 2010; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013), images on television—and particularly in media events—are never neutral or simply informative (Dayan, 2008). Furthermore, in media events, the owner tries to protect the situation from unwanted *uses*, through methods such as physical security, contractual rights, or intellectual property (Price, 2008).

In this case, the communicational protection was evident from the very beginning, with the authorities strictly supervising all the videos released after it was discovered that the workers were alive but still trapped underground, editing out images of the men ill or crying, and deciding which miner would be the main speaker (Franklin, 2011; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013). A similar control was exercised during the rescue, with the production of an official live television broadcast. Several restrictions were placed on the accredited media, and alternative shots were prevented through the adoption of measures such as blocking the view of cameras and photographers with a giant Chilean flag (Franklin, 2011; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013). Eight cameras were installed in the restricted areas (including one inside the mine), and a crew of 45 people worked under the guidelines of the secretary of communications (“Más de 1.600 periodistas,” 2010), instructed not to show close-ups of the miners if they were in particularly poor health

(Toro & Canales, 2010b). Consequently, most of the stations following the story around the world ended up using the same images, only adding their own narration and some complementary shots.

Officially, the main reason behind this control was to prevent the alleged chaos produced by the large number of journalists trying to cover the story at the same time (“Director de la transmisión oficial,” 2011; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013). However, some observers have suggested that the government saw the event as a perfect opportunity to send specific messages about the Chilean authorities and the country. At first, when the story was still exclusively a domestic matter, the decision to hold a rescue operation served to highlight—in the eyes of the Chilean audience—the efficiency of the nation’s first democratically elected right-wing government in 50 years (Franklin, 2011; Prieto Larraín, 2011).

Second, once the miners were found alive and the news flooded the global media, it has been argued that the authorities intended to expose the success of the operation as a means to represent the miners as heroes and highlight the country as an example of efficiency to the rest of the world (Franklin, 2011; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013; Toro & Canales, 2010b). Some authors have pointed out how survivors of disasters are sometimes represented in the media as the embodiment of a whole nation rather than as mere personal stories (Frosh & Wolfsfeld, 2007; Orgad, 2012). Again, although it is not possible to establish a direct relationship, this seems to be in line with some of the nation-branding efforts followed by Chile since the mid-2000s (Bradley, 2010; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013). A couple of interviews given by President Sebastián Piñera support this argument:

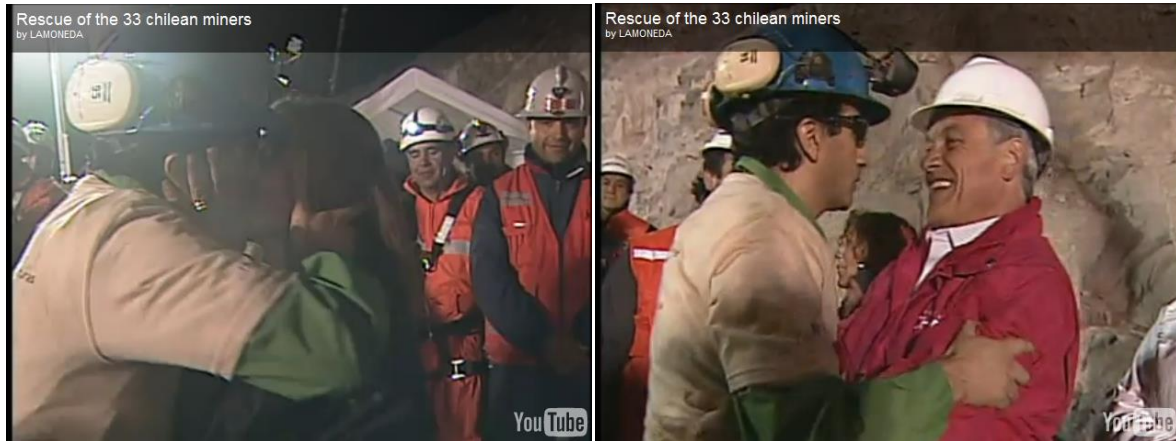
Piñera: I hope that from now on, when people around the world hear the word Chile, they will not remember the coup d’état or the dictatorship; they will remember what all we Chileans have achieved together, because all Chileans are united, committed to this rescue effort and that is an example for the whole world. (Wilcox, 2010)

Piñera: I think that today Chile is more united and is stronger than it was before . . . because of the example given to the whole world by the miners and their families . . . I am sure that today Chile is more respected and people know more about this small country, so far away from the rest of the world. (“Sebastian Pinera,” 2010)

The visual construction of the rescue aligns with these messages.² The repetitive nature of the operation makes the transmission somewhat formulaic: a few shots of the rescue capsule coming back to the surface; images of the one relative allowed to wait for each miner to surface; the man’s arrival and his first reactions; and a brief reunion, first with the family member and then with the Chilean president or another authority. The miners are always happy, and they usually spend more time with the president than with any other person. Furthermore, it is only when the miners speak to Piñera that the spectators can clearly hear the conversation. Several close-ups focus on the president’s face, perhaps suggesting to the audience some degree of intimacy with him. In contrast, when the miners meet their relatives, they

² See the following video produced by the Chilean government at <http://2010-2014.gob.cl/rescate-mineros-san-jose/rescue-of-the-33-chilean-miners>.

rarely speak—and when they do, they are barely audible—and the other family members are portrayed in groups, often standing in darker areas (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. A miner quickly kisses his wife and then talks to the president.
Source: Gobierno de Chile.**

There is a constant display of national symbols, in the form of Chilean flags of different sizes inside and outside the mine as well as on the clothes of the miners and on the machines used for the rescue (Figure 2). This emphasis on nationhood—a feature commonly found in media events—may not only be directed at local audiences but can serve to create a bond with the rest of the world (Dayan & Katz, 1992).



**Figure 2. Two examples of Chilean flags displayed, one inside the mine,
another one in a balloon. Source: Gobierno de Chile.**

Despite the authorities' claim of the neutrality of the official broadcasting ("Encargado de la transmisión," 2010), a base narrative arises from these patterns. The representation of this successful rescue operation showcases a united country with efficient and committed authorities; a nation leaving behind painful moments of its recent history and whose example is worthy of admiration. However, were the national and global media organizations analyzed loyal to this proposed narrative? Or did they build counternarratives?

TVN: "Go, Minerheart!"

While the government used equipment and crew belonging to TVN, the station did not limit itself to a simple retransmission of the official broadcasting. On the contrary, it had a permanent team of anchors and journalists commenting on the images.³ In media events, the role of the commentators is crucial, because they provide the audience with the first narrations and interpretations of what is seen on the screen (Dayan & Katz, 1985; Kennett & de Moragas, 2008).

The analysis of TVN's coverage suggests that its broadcast portrayed Chile as a nation in a celebratory mood, with the journalists adopting a cheerful tone at all times. In addition to what is seen and heard thanks to the official broadcasting, the commentators added constant descriptions of the applause and ovations that every miner received upon reaching the surface. Even images of apparent sadness were interpreted within this frame:

Reporter: A little boy cries . . . of happiness. (Rescue of Florencio Ávalos, 0:50)

Not surprisingly, the images coming from the official broadcast focused almost exclusively on the miners and authorities. The surroundings were rarely shown with the same level of detail, except in panoramic views. Only on a few occasions did TVN break this pattern, adding another camera displaying close-ups of relatives, interviews with them, or images of other cities. This additional camera, nonetheless, was relegated to a secondary role and never took full control of the screen, thus offering no challenge to the visual narrative proposed by the government (see Figure 3).

Although the images mainly focused on the San José mine, the descriptions given by the TVN reporters characterized the rest of Chile as a country united around this single event. Accordingly, as Dayan (2008) has observed in other cases, the spectators did not have a passive role, but rather became part of the media event:

³ The chosen videos were found on <http://www.24horas.cl/>.



Figure 3. The larger images correspond to the official broadcast; the smaller ones come from an additional camera used by TVN. Source: TVN.

Reporter: Applause everywhere, cheering, [people are singing] the national anthem, people are screaming *C-H-I* . . . (Rescue of Florencio Ávalos, 0:35)

Reporter: This is the moment when the country is about to explode. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 0:09)

Reporter 2: The sirens can be heard not only in the San José mine; there are horns and bells all over Chile, an immense happiness. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 1:02)

This feeling of unity can be found at a more individual level. For instance, when Franklin Lobos is rescued, the narrator explained that, during Lobos's underground captivity, he patched up his relationship with his estranged daughter; likewise, the hug between Luis Urzúa and the president was interpreted as the encounter of "the boss of the country" and "the boss of the 33"; and, interestingly, when the only non-Chilean of the group, Carlos Mamani, reached the surface, Bolivia was described as "our brother country," and the gesture of Sebastián Piñera carrying the Bolivian flag was read as an act of "fraternity and integrity." The display of nationhood was strengthened when the traditional Chilean cheer "*¡Viva Chile, mierda!*" (something like, "Long live Chile, damn it!") was shown on the screen and repeated on several occasions by the journalists.



Figure 4. "Viva Chile mierda" appears on screen. Source: TVN.

Accompanying this euphoric atmosphere were remarks about the *historicity* of the occasion. The commentators emphasized the unprecedented nature of the rescue, stressing the low chances of survival the men originally had or simply stating that all these were moments of enormous importance. This historicity was interpreted as both a source of pride for Chile and admiration from the rest of the world:

Reporter 2: Congratulations to the rescue team and to everyone who participated in this historic and heroic occasion, of which we are all proud. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 0:48)

Reporter 1: We are witnessing a very moving moment, a historical moment of international, planetary dimensions; this is a moment at which Chile must feel proud. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 2:03)

The heroism of the men was repeatedly stressed as well. In fact, during the broadcast, the commentators gradually began to refer to them affectionately as "*Corazón de Minero*" ("Minerheart"). Although the exact meaning of this expression is not clear, in other contexts it has been used to describe someone strong, noble, and sincere, capable of facing the harshest adversities (see, e.g., the poem in Maestranza Diesel, 2010). Furthermore, the endurance, sense of humor, and even the manners of the miners were praised:

Reporter: This man is a gentleman. He keeps his good manners even at these moments.
(Rescue of Mario Sepúlveda, 2:23)

This celebratory atmosphere was interrupted only at a few brief moments. When Mario Gómez reached the surface, one of the commentators adopted a more dramatic tone and announced, “this is a symbol of the strength, but also of the suffering of our country.” Later on, another commentator explains how, just a few days before the tragedy, Gómez had warned the management at the San José mine about the potential danger of an accident. Another mention of the owners of the mine was made after the rescue was completed:

Reporter: 70 days of overtime pay is what [the men] expect from the owners of the mine; this is another issue we will be analyzing in the following days, the level of responsibility behind this accident that the courts are already investigating. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 9:33)

However, this type of comment was not predominant during the rescue operation. In fact, it is perhaps revealing that this observation was only made once all the men had been rescued—that is, once the media event was over. Generally speaking, TVN tended to represent Chile as a united country that had successfully confronted an extremely difficult and unprecedented situation, winning the admiration of the entire world. The miners were heroes, and, fundamentally, the authorities were seen as the key actors behind this historic achievement. TVN’s account was *loyal* to the one proposed by the Chilean government.

BBC World News: “And Here They Are, United”

BBC and TVN shared some features, such as the historicity of the event, which was constantly emphasized by the commentators. For instance, when José Henríquez was rescued, BBC journalists highlighted the complexity and unprecedented nature of the operation; a similar observation was made when Franklin Lobos and Florencio Ávalos reached the surface, and when Luis Urzúa was saved, they affirmed that “this is the most exciting human drama you can imagine.”⁴ Furthermore, they highlighted how certain elements should be a source of pride for Chile, such as the capsule especially conceived for the occasion:

Reporter: Look at Fénix II. It’s a bit battered, the paint is cheap, but it’s worth its weight in gold. The Chilean Navy must be immensely proud of this. They designed this capsule.
(Rescue of Raúl Bustos, 0:36)

The miners were also portrayed as heroes, although different aspects were emphasized. While Mario Gómez was praised as a local legend in his native town Copiapó, most of the admiration was focused on the physical condition of the 33 men. In several situations—such as with Juan Illanes, José

⁴ The chosen videos were found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk>.

Ojeda, or Carlos Mamani—the commentators expressed their surprise and delight at their sturdy appearance, praising the diet the men received while still trapped underground, and perhaps implying that they *should* have been in a worse state.

Like TVN, the BBC based most of its transmission on the images of the official broadcast. Only rarely—much less frequently than TVN—it included a complementary camera. The reporters talked continuously and rarely allowed the images to speak for themselves. This might be due to linguistic reasons, because they had to not only narrate and interpret what was seen on screen but translate it. Although their tone was generally cheerful, repeatedly praising the rescue, on a few occasions—such as during the rescue of the first and the last miner—it reached the same heights of excitement as TVN. Interestingly, the BBC reporters' remarks were more descriptive and their position was more of observers, which was made particularly explicit when they were heard admiring *scenes* and *pictures*:

Reporter: Oh, fantastic pictures from here, from this mine. (Rescue of Juan Illanes, 1:14)

Reporter: Here we go, Jimmy Sánchez now. My goodness, what scenes here tonight. (Rescue of Jimmy Sánchez, 0:05)

Reporter: Fantastic pictures here from the top of this mine shaft. (Rescue of Carlos Mamani, 1:25)

Reporter: These extraordinarily close-up images, of the emotions that these people are going through, and always you have these beaming smiles. (Rescue of José Henríquez, 1:28)

As a global media organization, it is hardly surprising that the BBC did not adopt the same nationalistic tone of TVN. Conversely, most of the narrative seemed to focus on the emotions of the miners and their families, perhaps appealing in this way to apparent cosmopolitan values:

Reporter: [There are] always emotional hugs, kisses, tears. (Rescue of Carlos Barrios, 0:30)

Reporter: Big smile, big hug for his daughter, his partner, his mother. A cluster of reunion and affection. (Rescue of Claudio Acuña, 0:50)

Reporter: Oh, what can beat a mother and child reunion. (Rescue of Daniel Herrera, 1:30)

Although this emotional approach could be related to a limited knowledge of the local situation (Kennett & de Moragas, 2008), emotions can play social and political roles during the unfolding of a

disaster through the media (Pantti et al., 2012). In fact, this emotional perspective was extended to the authorities as well, with a much more personalized Chilean president portrayed in the BBC broadcast than in TVN coverage. He was praised for the way he handled the crisis, and there were references to his feelings and the popularity he gained due to the rescue; it was also remarked that, in contrast with the miners, he is a billionaire. This difference, however, was not seen as evidence of a conflict of classes in Chile, but as another element emphasizing the unity of the country. Although TVN had hinted at this point, the BBC made it much more evident during the rescue of the last miner, Luis Urzúa:

Reporter: The boss below ground hugging the boss above ground. They come from totally different backgrounds. One is a millionaire, born to great wealth and the other is a simple miner, not making bad money, but certainly not wealthy. They come from two totally different ends of the spectrum, and here they are, united. (Rescue of Luis Urzúa, 1:40)

The shots of this scene focused on Urzúa and the president, offering a few general images of the surroundings but several close-ups of the faces of both men, in what may give the impression that the miner and the authority were represented at the same level. However, a closer analysis shows that most of the time the shots were following the facial expressions of the president. A particularly revealing moment occurred when the screen was split in two, and the BBC's additional camera depicted the celebration of the families in a distant, barely visible panoramic shot, a huge contrast with the close-up centered on the face of Sebastián Piñera (Figure 5).



Figure 5. At the end of the rescue, the BBC portrayed in different ways the families and the president. Source: BBC World News.

This focus on the authority was strengthened by the commentators, who probably inadvertently avoided giving place to issues that might have disrupted the celebratory atmosphere. For instance, when miner Luis Urzúa talked to the president, one of the first statements he made was, "I hope this will never happen again." However, BBC reporters missed the translation of this phrase; instead, they commented on Sebastián Piñera's eyes (interpreting them as filled with emotion), the admiration he expressed toward the courage and loyalty of the miners, and his invitation to sing the national anthem. Although the BBC narrative was not exactly the same as TVN's, it still remained *loyal* to the one proposed by the government.

Variability Within Limits

TVN and the BBC did not narrate the story in exactly the same way, apparently confirming one of the criticisms made to Dayan and Katz's framework, about how the diversity of representations of the same media event increases when viewed from a global perspective (e.g., Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Furthermore, this could also be interpreted as evidence of the impossibility of controlling how media events are understood and interpreted by media organizations and the public at a global scale. However, the analysis shows that there was little space for more radical reinterpretations or "hijackings." In other words, despite some remarks made by TVN, both stations remained fairly *loyal* to the base narrative proposed by the Chilean government, representing the miners as heroes, displacing the families to a secondary role, and constantly praising the authorities.

To illustrate this point, it is interesting to consider what was not said *during* the event. Issues such as the responsibility of the mine owners, the poor security conditions at the excavation site, and the fierce control of communications imposed by the government were barely mentioned, despite the fact that some of these issues were public knowledge before and after the rescue (see, e.g., Macqueen, 2011; O'Shaughnessy, 2010). Consequently, a global perspective toward a media event does not necessarily guarantee the possibility of disruptive voices, counternarratives, or challenges to power structures, as it appears to be assumed by some authors (e.g., Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Price, 2008). Furthermore, this observation echoes recent studies about other media events, which demonstrated how, as mentioned earlier, despite the controversies surrounding the preparations for the Olympic Games in Beijing, their live broadcast remained largely apolitical (Fernández Peña, de Moragas, Lallana, & Rezende, 2010; Kennett & de Moragas, 2008).

Dayan and Katz (1992) argued that, due to the awe they inspire in journalists, media events tend to be exempt of criticisms. Likewise, in his reconceptualization of media events, Dayan (2008) makes an interesting observation when he argues that the Olympic Games resemble a *reality show*, in which, due to the organizer's legal and contractual impositions, "variability is accepted but only within limits" (p. 392). Relatedly, according to Panagiotopoulou (in Qing, 2010), the reason behind the absence of criticisms in the Games is the high cost of the broadcasting fees and the attraction they create in the audience.

These arguments may provide some insight into why, in the case of the rescue of the Chilean miners, the coverage of TVN and the BBC, although different, remained fairly *loyal* to the narrative

proposed by the organizer. This may have to do with the fact that both stations—like nearly every other television channel that transmitted the operation in real time—depended heavily on the images provided by the Chilean government. More importantly, some reports have stated that the authorities manipulated the images during specific moments of the live broadcast to cover up, for instance, the fact that an avalanche occurred inside the mine while they were still rescuing the workers (Franklin, 2011; Jiménez-Martínez, 2013). The fact that this issue remained unnoticed by the broadcasters around the world could be interpreted as a successful achievement for the organizer in terms of the communicative controls imposed during the event.

Because of the extraordinary nature of this event, it could be suggested that a “sphere of consensus” prevailed in the local and global media, in which the most contended issues regarding the accident and the rescue were suspended in favor of more important interests (Hallin, 1986; Schudson, 2006). However, as discussed earlier, if media events are *performative* constructions, who defines what that higher interest actually is? The Chilean government? The media? Dayan expresses concern about the persistence of this sphere of consensus *beyond* exceptional moments (Chin, 2010; Dayan, 2008), but what is the cost of its predominance *during* the live unfolding of the event?

It is interesting to observe how the authorities benefited from the rescue. Domestically, the popularity of Chilean president Sebastián Piñera temporarily rose to 63%, the highest level of support reached during his administration (Rayner, 2010; Terra, 2010). On a global level, the story was praised as a successful example of nation rebranding (Phillips, 2011), with the country jumping 19 places—from the 59th position to the 40th—in the Country Brand Index Report (This Is Chile, 2010).

However, all these apparent benefits were quite fleeting. Although the miners gained some celebrity status (Bronstein, 2010), a year after the rescue, some of them were unemployed, facing health difficulties, and, in fact, 31 of the 33 men sued the government and the owners of the mine (Macqueen, 2011; Steffan, 2011). In addition, around the same time, the popularity of Piñera plummeted to 27%, one of the worst evaluations received by any Chilean president after the return to democracy, due to the conflict with the students of the country (Adimark GFX, 2011).

Conclusion

Given the limited nature and scope of this article—a qualitative study, focused on the coverage of one specific event by two media organizations—any attempt to generalize may be problematic. Future research should consider the perspective of audiences and, perhaps, a comparative examination with other events in a wider array of media outlets. In this case, however, there is evidence that newspapers in English also tended to narrate the event under a positive light (Jiménez-Martínez, 2013; Prieto Larraín, 2011).

Still, some implications arise from the analysis. First, the understanding of media events should go beyond the traditional distinction between integrative and disruptive. That dualism seems to be based on a somewhat reductionist reading of the original framework of Dayan and Katz, but it also overlooks the

extremely complex nature of some events considered disruptive, such as disasters (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Cui, 2013; Pantti et al., 2012). The rescue of the Chilean miners problematizes that dualism, because, after all, the story can be considered an example of both integrative and disruptive events.

Second, although media events do not seem to have a hegemonic identity, it may be the case that—at least when considering the performative details of live events as they unfold—they are much more cohesive and restricted than what has been claimed by some recent literature. In other words, although Dayan (2008) may be right about the dubious single identity of media events, this does not mean they will necessarily be hijacked, given that a difference in narratives might not imply that media organizations are less *loyal* to the message proposed by the organizer. In fact, Dayan and Katz had already discussed in some of their early work the ambiguous characteristics of media events as well as how different interpretations by broadcasters and audiences can be united around one particular celebratory moment (Dayan & Katz, 1985, 1988).

Finally, despite the claims made by the government, the rescue of the Chilean miners serves as a reminder that this event was not simply communicated through the media, but was actually staged and performed through it (Cottle, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012). As such, the narratives constructed during the live broadcasting communicated specific messages aimed at promoting and showcasing in a positive light both the government and the country as a whole, overlooking issues such as the responsibility of the mine owners, the poor security conditions at the excavation site, and the fierce control of communications imposed by the government. Perhaps the absence of alternative voices was better summarized by Lily Gómez, one of the wives of the trapped miners, who said one year after the rescue: “We aren’t heroes and they aren’t heroes. They are victims of bad working conditions. And the bad management of the mine” (Macqueen, 2011).

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