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# From Home to Public Forum: Media Events and the Public Sphere

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# From Home to Public Forum: Media Events and the Public Sphere

## **Disciplines**

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# FROM HOME TO PUBLIC FORUM: MEDIA EVENTS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

BARBIE ZELIZER

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Whether the mass media inhibit or enhance audience interaction is a question that has drawn the eye of more than one communication theorist. Junior-the-apatetic-viewer concerns researchers today as much as Junior-the-sponge-for-violence did 10 years ago or as much as Junior-the-bleary-eyed-TV-addict did a decade before that. Since Lazarsfeld and Merton first clarified the beauty (connectiveness) and the beast (privatization) in mass communication, theorists have scrambled in an often circular attempt to prove that the media do what we all thought they would do nearly half a century earlier. In other words, research trends have transported communication researchers from privatization to connectiveness and back through privatization again.

That scramble continues here. In this essay, I consider the television viewing practices of audiences engaged in special-event viewing. The locus for this discussion is the genre of media events, or what Katz and Dayan have called the live television coverage of largely pre-planned ceremonial occasions. I have selected media events because they typically provide a directed and focused viewing situation, and I use media events to consider two issues: (1) how audiences organize around special-event television programming; and (2) whether such organization changes the

understanding of audience connectiveness. In the following pages, I consider notions of connectiveness and privatization in audience research in conjunction with conceptions of the public sphere, review literature on the genre of media events, and apply these notions to the behaviors and practices of audiences when viewing media events.

## To Connect or Not: The Cyclical Nature of Audience Research

At least two camps on viewer-television interaction exist. One side maintains that modern society is paradoxical because it is both the most and least connected. Television antennas bring the public world into homes, but people feel no bond with the thousands of others with whom they are electronically wired. Warnings about retreats into privacy maintain that by broadcasting within the home, the electronic media have created a social group that has nothing in common other than its use of the same commodity. Lamentations over privatization range from micro-level issues about the media's great effects to wide societal concerns, such as Garnham's cautionary notes about an information-poor caste or Hallin and Mancini's warnings about shackling TV audiences into anonymous political passivity.

A second camp on media-audience interaction points to a durable tradition of connectiveness. Already in the nineteenth century, de Tocqueville pointed to the media's "unifying capacity," maintaining that newspapers organize people who

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want to connect but who need assistance in finding others who want the same thing. A number of contemporary studies on media behavior, viewing setting, and type of audience buttress the idea that people do not exist in isolated relations with the media. Marvin, for instance, argues that existing social groups simply reorganize around a new medium's introduction, and that media act as new instruments in ongoing negotiations for power and authority. Turow suggests that the media provide a stage for cultural argumentation, while Newcomb and Hirsch contend that television serves as a cultural forum, a way of helping society consider important cultural topics. People use television to articulate culture, matching their meanings for events with those adopted by members of other "interpretive communities." These studies stretch from the limited effects paradigm of uses and gratifications research to recent work on reader response and interpretive communities—all of which assume the presence of an active audience. Each suggests that people interpret, discuss, and react to what they see, and they do so with others.

Certain work on media audiences, such as that of Lull or Lindlof, also focuses more directly on the activities of audiences in natural settings. But even these studies have not adequately clarified the range of things people actually do when they are said "to connect." Is connecting sitting in front of the same screen together? Is it talking about the same TV program at work? Is it buying the right kind of paraphernalia to suit the right kind of program?

### **Conceptualizing the Public Sphere**

The notion of connectiveness can be somewhat clarified by existing research on the public sphere. Whether or not the media facilitate connectiveness among viewers depends in large part on where one positions the boundaries of the public sphere. Traditionally, the extent and na-

ture of outside intervention has been used as a marker and index of the public sphere. For example, Coontz argues that "the home," the ultimate private domain, is that sphere where actors are separated—in space and time—from the intervention of other social forces, while the "public domain" is a space that invites intervention and community. Arendt similarly holds that the public is a domain for "plurality" and shared experience. Assumptions like these—which suggest that connectiveness is possible in the public sphere and untenable in the private—create a rigid distinction between public domains and connectiveness on one hand, and private domains and privatization on the other.

Yet closer examination reveals that the public sphere has historically always been intertwined with the private. Marvin, for example, explores how the medium of the telephone was the first to mix private and public in the home, changing the cues by which people entered in to and out of social relations. Similarly, Saenger discusses the evolution in medieval society from public acts of reading aloud (twelfth century) to the practice of silent reading (fourteenth century), with public lectures in medieval universities offering a mix of private and public domains. Stout holds that religious sermons changed public and private configurations in seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England, much like the technology of printing did later, in Eisenstein's view. Other perspectives, such as those of Le Bon or Noelle-Neumann, maintain that the public and private are less a physical place and more a perspective, with intervention from other social networks affected without physical presence. This is most aptly exemplified by Habermas, who defines the public domain as that "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed." The public sphere exists "in every conversation in which private individuals assemble . . . to confer in an unrestricted fashion . . .

about matters of general interest" (49). It therefore exists in any arena where private individuals discuss or attend to public affairs.

How do these notions affect understandings of connectiveness? By undoing the link between actual physical places—the home or public stage—and boundaries of private and public, they imply that people can act as part of a public while situated in private settings. They can "connect" without the presence of others, their connectiveness depending little on physical locus or setting. This means that connectiveness—seen here as a combination of perceptual, social, and experiential dimensions of practice—can take place in the ultimate private domain, the home.

The media, in particular, play a critical part in moving boundaries between private and public worlds in such a fashion. Meyrowitz, for instance, discusses how situations created by the electronic media—such as the homogenization of experience, or the fact that access to information is no longer dependent on physical location—have all undermined traditional distinctions between private and public. Instead, the outside world is brought into the home and the home into the outside world (by television, computer, telephone), creating shared arenas that do not exist in physical space. According to de Certeau, this means that the "private" no longer remains the sanctuary it was originally believed to be.

These flexible distinctions between public and private domains also differ across cultures. For example, Gouldner contends that the private domain *complemented* the public in eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, while it *substituted* for the public sphere in Germany. Similarly, Hallin and Mancini discuss how Italians transport the information they get from TV to public discussions in their coffeehouse, party, or trade union. Americans have largely allowed their public spaces to

fall into disrepair, relying on journalists to give meaning to the events of public life. Israeli institutions of political opinion and interpretive journalism are so strong that when crises of any sort rock the consensus, both become more articulate and volatile.

What does all of this mean for discussions of connectiveness? It suggests that in such discussions, conceptualizations of public and private space require a certain degree of elasticity. They do not mean the same thing in all situations; nor do they always require the involvement of the same people in the same way. It is difficult to imagine the British press lashing out at the royal wedding, or letting the trade unions publicly have their say on royal expenditures while the wedding was being broadcast. Likewise, Israelis hardly need the mass media to discuss their country's inflationary economic policies, because other forums for conferring about the public sphere are so active.

Thus, there is a need to address a number of unexplored questions about how the media help audiences undo public and private distinctions. For example, does connectiveness in the private domain make it into a public domain? Upon which types of actors do cultures generally depend for the articulation of public concerns? And do different types of issues invoke the involvement of different types of actors? Questions like these suggest that the notion of connectiveness should be explored as an intersection of many levels of traditionally-defined public and private activity. Television audiences view, watch, and witness on one level. On another, they might physically interact with others. On yet another, they might attend to larger ready-made meanings for what they are seeing. On each level, it is possible that activity undertaken within the viewing situation "connects" them with others.

## Why Media Events?

Media events typically provide a focused setting for television viewing that bears considerable potential for connectiveness. They range from sports events (the Olympics or Superbowl) to official political or cultural events (the moon landings or Sadat's trip to Israel) to state occasions (the royal weddings or state funerals). While audiences might be psychologically, culturally, and ideologically positioned in different ways around them, media events offer possibilities for sustained behavior that is typically more focused or directed than everyday viewing. Viewing the Superbowl, for instance, might allow audiences to simply follow everyday viewing routines. But it might also simultaneously give them a chance to physically come together—by viewing collectively—or to impose a cognitive moratorium on unrelated tasks or concerns. Media events thereby allow audiences the choice of framing a number of occasions in ways that make the use of focused viewing behavior not only an appropriate but a preferred way of connecting with others.

Connectiveness is also potentially significant to many media events because they often function as rites of passage. Members of societies use media events to enter into negotiation with themselves or others about their values, beliefs, and priorities. The visit of Sadat caused many Israelis, Egyptians, and other interested parties to rethink basic notions about peace in the Middle East. The moon landings prompted Americans to reconsider the potentials of space exploration. Media events also encourage behavior that is directed and focused in ways that influence people to connect with each other. Because media events are organized around specific programming, they also offer audiences viewing situations which have an identifiable beginning and end, allowing for the adoption of activities that are different from everyday routines. Katz and Dayan have formally defined media

events as pre-planned, live, remote, and monopolistic interruptions in scheduling, which are initiated and organized outside the mass media. They are historic, reverential, and ceremonial performances which excite and generate large audiences. Such audiences typically celebrate the event and adhere to a social norm that makes viewing mandatory and integrates them with others in society. Within these parameters, audiences act in specific and strategic ways that facilitate their connections with others. Thus, the selection of media events as a focus for this analysis makes sense.

## Practices of Media Event Viewing

The viewing of media events is in itself a contract of sorts. Diana is set to marry Charles, and British royalists flock to their TV sets because they know they will receive a better version of events. This does not imply that audiences choose to view an event when they could attend it instead. But by definition, the "original" of a media event is often unavailable to publics without the assistance of media organizers or their political or cultural elites. The viewing of media events thereby constitutes *an agreement by audiences to recognize the event's copy as a viable substitute for its original*. As Katz and Dayan have posited, media events imply assumptions among audiences that the copy they are seeing is preferable to its original. Media event viewing thereby constitutes one type of viewing by which audiences can traverse boundaries between public and private worlds, staying in their homes to have a collective viewing experience.

The audiences of media events may be among the largest in the world. Rothenbuhler maintains that 95% of the viewing public watched the 1984 Olympics. An average of 44% of all households were tuned to the Olympics non-stop. These numbers also increase world-wide. Esti-

mates by MacAloon hold that an Olympics broadcast and print audience now exceeds half the world's population. For live broadcasts of the royal wedding, the Kennedy funeral, and the Apollo XI space missions, estimates reach upward of 500 million people.

In many ways, the "copy" of the event that these audiences receive is better than its original. Television shapes its story in familiar dramatic forms, offering context, explanation, reverence, a sense of belonging. Techniques like close-ups, montage, split-screens, or multiple cameras increase the possibility that home viewers see better than they would were they physically present at the event. Said one viewer of the Kennedy funeral, quoted in Mindak and Hursch:

It [television] brought you there as if you were one of the close spectators—closer than had you been on the street watching what was taking place. Each time it took you into the rotunda you felt as if you were one of the people passing in review. (134)

Viewers thus often see more, with on-screen vision preferable to (and better than) on-site vision. It is as if the home holds the preferred version of events, while the street-wanderer settles for fragments of a less than satisfying original.

What certainly is paradoxical here is that people might experience the togetherness of media events even when they are separate. This creates a different type of connectiveness, one that relocates the locus of the public within the private viewing situation. Experiences of "not being there" allow audiences to partake in the thrill of "being there" while at home (and next to the television). Audiences are called upon to participate in the event but from afar. They attend media events knowing that it is possible, and indeed preferred, to connect with others via their television set. By dressing up in their

homes, rearranging their furniture, or inviting people over to share in a collective viewing experience, audiences are *mixing private and public viewing practices*. Each activity makes it possible for them to connect with others in different ways.

Practices of media event viewing can be divided into two groups—practices that are *in media event time* and practices that are *beyond media event time*.

*Practices In Media Event Time.* Literature on viewing in public places already hints at what these practices might be. Lemish, for instance, discusses how a dominant mood of TV viewing censures non-conformist behavior. The "party breaking routine," where viewers wait for others to leave before leaving themselves, emerges from a "respect toward TV in public places [that] does not assume freedom of choice of behavior" (765). This collective nature of TV viewing intrudes upon every field of behavior common to the home.

—*Dress.* People dress up or down, but they do so collectively. Baseball caps or university tee-shirts afford a way of pinning down this collectivity. Usually, the choice of dress reflects fashion that is distinct from the apparel of "other" time.

—*Food.* Refreshments are popular items at media events. Frequent choices include beer and potato chips (as in sports events) or wine, cheese, and crackers. In Israel, people often consume large bags of sunflower seeds while viewing media events.

—*Furniture.* Often the den or family room furniture is rearranged so as to accommodate large circles of people around the television set. In Israel, in particular, televisions may be brought to work, and doors of all homes are proverbially left open.

—*Collective viewing.* People come together with others, either in their own homes or at those of their friends. Groups of British expatriates in Philadelphia (and

probably elsewhere) arise together at dawn to toast as Sarah Ferguson becomes the Duchess of York. Hundreds of Israelis crowd into cramped apartments to watch the coming of Sadat. In his discussion of 1984 Olympics viewers, Rothenbuhler found that one third watched with guests in their homes, one third watched at someone else's home, and 15% watched at public viewing places.

What do practices "in media event time" suggest? They offer audiences the option of turning media event viewing into a collective experience. Its focus, while still centered around the television set, leaks into other arenas of behavior. It allows audiences the opportunity of treating the event as a multi-media text (in the unconventional sense of the word) through its effect on dress, food, and furniture. Practices that are "in media event time" give audiences a focal point through which to organize complementary sets or arenas of behavior that go beyond actual television viewing. The fact that this can happen from home to home has bearing on the potential for connectiveness, and on the kinds of circumstances in which it thrives.

*Practices Beyond Media Event Time.* In the time that stretches beyond the actual media event, collective viewing behavior is translated into both symbolic and material practice, often of a consumerist nature. This can exist both prior to events and after them. Typical practices include:

—*Mementos.* Mementos can include Israeli-Egyptian flags (Sadat mission to Israel), three dimensional eye-glasses (Super-bowl), miniature rockets (moon landing), or cups bearing pictures of Diana and Charles (royal wedding). One Olympics aficionado maintains that she recalls her symbolic attendance at the 1984 contests by keeping a hat crowned with buttons from participating countries.

—*Symbolic replications.* Symbolic replications are practices that engage viewers

in replicating some part of the event in their personal lives. These include wedding breakfast recipes and wedding dress patterns (royal weddings), or haircuts (copied from certain Olympics gymnasts).

—*Retellings.* Retelling some aspect of the event engages viewers in it. Examples include the publication of timetables so as to be able to re-tell the event (in that re-scheduling private agendas prior to it enables one to meet the event's agenda), or more general retellings ("Did Diana really say Charles' name wrong?"). Retellings often occupy both media and private agendas long after the event is over.

What do practices that are "beyond media event time" do? Basically, they extend the life of the media event. Residuals of the event persist to mark the collective experience as much as public viewing of it did in the beginning. In other words, practices "beyond media event time" take up where practices "in media event time" leave off. They function much like the saving of napkins from bar mitzvahs or weddings—less to recall the actual wedding than to remember the fact of attendance. Material and consumerist practices frame the media event into a special collective experience that keeps it from fading into the repertoire of everyday life.

### **Connecting Through Public Roles of Viewing**

How do practices in and beyond media event time help viewers connect? In a Habermasian sense, they allow people to use the viewing situation to create their own publics. By engaging in behavior in the home that is generally reserved for public domains, they use the media event as a background, catalyst, and justification for connecting with others. This is most aptly seen in the adoption by viewers of public roles of viewing. By abandoning the privatized mode typical of everyday TV viewing, audiences themselves become



celebrants, mourners, or revellers. Sharing these roles from home to home allows them to connect with others via the event they are all simultaneously watching.

Audiences assume public roles in different forms. They are invoked when viewers push aside their private roles, a feat facilitated by the temporal interruptiveness that is typical of most media events. For the hour or two or three that it takes the event to unfold, viewers stop functioning as husbands or mothers, consumers or teachers. They arise at dawn to watch the royal wedding. They bring portable televisions to work to watch Sadat in the Israeli Parliament.

The roles one takes differ from culture to culture. In England, viewers might become *members of a (royal) wedding* or *subjects* (to the Queen). In the U.S., they might act as *cheerleaders* to the moon landing or *citizens* dedicated to post-Watergate America. In Israel, they might become *witnesses* to the Sadat trip to Israel. There is usually little doubt about which role to assume, for the ready-made meanings offered by media events ensure that preferred roles are not ambiguous. Just as people rarely attend celebrations in mourning apparel, so too do viewers generally bring to media events roles that are compatible with the scenario that television is about to offer them. They come to

mourn, and they are given a focus for mourning. They come to celebrate when they know celebration is in order. This does not imply that attending comes without effort, or that it comes in every case. Sometimes attending does not come at all, and people can refuse to invoke the special mood that media events call for. But when they do invoke it, the media event becomes most effective. It allows viewers to connect through the collective experience that viewing becomes.

Roles metaphorically take audiences both to the locus of the journalist and to the locus of the event itself. When audiences serve in their home a replica of the wedding breakfast, they may be trying to reduce the distance between themselves and the royal family and metaphorically perform as members of the wedding. The fact that these roles are shared from home to home means that media event practices help viewers *create publics* around them. By sharing the experience of the media event, including the roles that it suggests, *viewers transform the home into one level of public space*.

Yet the symbolic repositioning of actors around the event has other consequences as well. The different mode of organization it promotes encourages the entry of different actors into the public sphere (see table below).

Table I  
Size of Public Sphere as Indicator for Salience of Event

Viewing Roles	Who Participates in Public Space	Relationship Between Constructed and Real
A. Public as Nonexistent: No Roles of Viewing	Individuals in Institutions of Public and Political Debate	Everyday Life (Pre-Media): Real Displaces Constructed
B. Public as Consumer/ Escapist: Private Roles of Viewing	(A) Plus Individuals in Media	News: Constructed Reflects Real
C. Public as Journalist/ Performer: Public Roles of Viewing	(A) Plus (B) Plus Individuals At Home	Media Event: Constructed Displaces Real

This metaphoric portrayal of public involvement in events suggests a range of possible types of involvement, with entry changing according to event. For instance, Israelis awaiting the arrival of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Jerusalem might need more than just journalists' words for the event to work. When Sadat steps off his plane, the public sphere preferably stretches to include not only individuals in public institutions or the media, but individuals in their homes. Other events might need less the intervention of actors usually involved in giving meaning to events, and more the involvement of generally non-involved actors, such as audiences. Still other events, by definition non-media events, need only the involvement of officials in order to work: the Camp David peace talks is one example where both press and audience intervention was frowned upon. Important here is that media events appear to mobilize certain social actors, while keeping others passive. This suggests that the more inclusive the public sphere, the more an event functions to connect the people watching it.

Central here is the part played by the real and the constructed in forging connectiveness. This is illustrated by the suggestion that as the public sphere grows, the real is displaced. In events where the public sphere is most inclusive—that is, includes individuals connecting with each other in their homes—the constructed version of the event appears to play a more active role than the event's original version. In other words, when viewing media events, audiences ultimately connect through a mode of the event that is highly constructed. This not only supports the idea that the copy is preferable to the original; it also suggests that the copy remains a preferred mode of representation for individuals wishing to connect via television viewing. In contrast, experiencing the original version of the event remains aligned with activities of privatization.

In this context, audiences use the domesticated public domain that is created by media events to connect with additional publics. We can consider Sadat's trip to Jerusalem as an example. It generated a number of social movements and activities among new actors who had no previous experience in the public sphere yet who encountered the potential for peace through the media event that Sadat's arrival originally constituted. Reservist soldiers formed a political movement called "Peace Now"; mothers of soldiers stood on Jerusalem street corners every Friday, dressed in black to protest the war. Through the connections proposed by the media event, audiences were transformed into public actors, actively propagating the values which the event signified. This suggests yet another connective function of the media event. Its qualitative transformation of the public sphere helps audiences use *the home as a bridge to other more traditionally-defined "public" domains*. It allows viewers to use the home as a first-order entry into other public settings that they might otherwise have thought beyond their reach.

These activities—mixing private and public viewing practices, creating viewing publics inside the home and using the home as a bridge to other public domains—suggest that existing research on media-audience interaction has overemphasized the dichotomy between privatization and connectiveness. To distinguish between privatization and connectiveness may be as simplistic (and erroneous) as trying to distinguish between private and public. It may, therefore, be necessary to stratify conceptions of media-viewer interaction in accordance with the types of content audiences watch. For in the viewing situations created by such content, audiences may be actively promoting their own kinds of publics and their own way of connecting that has little to do with traditionally defined public settings or activities.

### **From Home to Public Forum: The Fluidity of the Public Sphere**

The preceding pages suggest that audiences organize around media events in a strategic and directed fashion that allows them to connect effectively with others. In the viewing invoked by media events, audience activities in a range of domains are organized in a way that suggests different modes of connecting. The food viewers eat, apparel they wear, or ways they rearrange their furniture all reflect ways of coming together. Domains of practice are reorganized by allowing some aspect of the media event to intrude into the home. The result is an intrusion of the public sphere into the private domain that allows audiences in many homes to connect in a symbolic as well as physical fashion.

Suggested here is the idea that certain home-bound practices may be the first link in a chain of other activities by which actors use TV content to connect with others. This suggests that the effect of the media event does not end when the event does. It extends beyond the event's temporal frame, not only by fixating residuals of the event within the home (the royal wedding cups or posters of Begin and Sadat), but by transporting the negotiation of values which initially constituted the event into other more traditionally-defined "public" domains. Connectiveness, then, is accomplished around and through activities of privatization and "privatized" settings.

What does this suggest for traditional audience research? By extending the limited effects tradition into symbolic practices, it weds much of the existing theoretical work on limited effects (particularly uses and gratifications) with a more critical perspective on the interpretive capabilities of media audiences. It suggests that audiences do not automatically privatize the viewing experience. This idea—that it is possible to connect through what have

always been seen as activities in private settings—should lay to rest at least certain cries of domestic privatization. Theorists are agreed that television has hooked everyone up and that the potential for connectiveness is there. The media event, in particular, connects networks of interacting individuals, from house to house, across very large territories. This connectiveness works to an extent, for people choose to set up real opportunities for association around media events. By privileging the home with the original version of the event, and by aggregating the private roles of television viewing with public roles, media events help audiences blur an already existing mix of public and private. This public context invites viewers to organize themselves differently while drawing audiences with a compelling public message.

While the issues discussed here are directly applicable to special-event television viewing, they also raise questions about the implications of potentially less-focused everyday viewing as well, where audiences may employ many of the same patterns. The ability of audiences to organize themselves in an independent fashion around television content has been touched upon by theorists like Lull and Lindlof, who have examined immediate viewing contexts like families. But there is a need to better examine the symbolic publics that audiences create around the viewing situation as well.

For questions still remain as to whether—or at which level—connectiveness constitutes real feedback in the political realm. In certain events, mobilization breeds real effectual feedback, in that parts of the status quo are opened up for public (re)negotiation. Sadat's trip to Israel addressed a certain unanswered need for peace among Israelis that was insufficiently addressed by the government. The Pope's trip to Poland was a similar attempt to sidestep Polish officialdom and thereby address a growing domestic interest in

religion. But other events are characterized by ineffective political feedback. As Lukes suggests, they coax viewers to internalize representative paradigms by freezing them in the frame of public observers and telling them that it's OK to stay at home. The Kennedy assassination invoked upheaval, but the media event following it, the funeral, awakened a sense of continuity, a rededication of faith and loyalty that remained long after one November weekend. The Watergate scandal pulled apart the very fiber of the nation, but the hearings that followed called on many home viewers to rebuild their trust in the American democratic process. At the heart of these events was the reaffirmation of the status quo.

Audiences of certain events thus appear captivated by the public nature of viewing roles, yet often precluded from pushing themselves into real political action. This suggests that media events offer a number of options of "choice," many of them within a hegemonic envelope. They allow audiences to choose to come together, to celebrate or mourn, to dress up or not. In certain cases, by opening up taboo subjects for discussion, and possibly negotiation, they offer audiences the choice of connecting through cultural argumentation and, in even more specified cases, they bring new actors onto public stages of discourse and activity. In the most limited of cases, they simply reaffirm what is already there.

All of this does not suggest that the home is the only place for shaping the public sphere and connecting with others. That happens just as easily in offices, bars, or dormitory rooms. But given the distinct priority that people give to home television viewing, the kinds of practices detailed here suggest a different kind of viewing behavior through which people connect via the domestic setting. Media event practices generate a way of connecting without leaving home. What needs to be considered is the significance of their connections.

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