

7 'Invisible' impacts and hybrid spaces of nature-based events: The case of a trail running marathon Fjällmaraton in Sweden

Lusine Margaryan and Axel Eriksson

Abstract

In this case study we illustrate the interplay of social-ecological factors and uncontrollable processes in an event context. We focus on trail running, the popularity of which is on the rise, and scrutinise the case of a nature-based event – the mountain trail running marathon *Fjällmaraton* in Sweden. We introduce pedagogical and theoretical perspectives of new materialism and the Anthropocene, building on the ontological stance of *hybridity* of social-cultural systems. To understand the role of events as active agents of the Anthropocene we focus on *infrastructure* and *feral effects*. By looking at the unintended consequences, we discuss the limitations of managerial frameworks, unable to account for processes beyond the control of event planners, entangled in the complex social-ecological systems.

Subjects: Event design; contemporary issues and trends; event impact management; event studies; Anthropocene

Introduction

Event studies, being a relatively young discipline, is yet to sufficiently acknowledge the relationships of events with their social-ecological contexts, and especially explicitly engage with non-human entities and processes. Mykletun (2009) noticed more than a decade ago that nature (referred to as natural resources, or natural capital) is overlooked in event studies. There is evidence that this disregard for events' dependence on natural phenomena persists (e.g., Margaryan & Fredman, 2021, 2021a). Specifically, event literature is dominated by an overwhelming

bias towards indoor events and their design in isolation and insulation from the social-ecological processes around them. Berridge (2007, p. 92), for example, states that event designers should start with “*four bare walls or empty space especially if outdoors and then start to envisage how this empty space will be developed and what decisions have to be taken to achieve that*”. This approach is recently repeated by Antchak and Ramsbottom (2019, p. 60), who state that “*a typical scenario for event designers is to think of the event space as four bare walls or an empty space*”. Imagination of an event space as an empty white box, where an event designer is free to manipulate any stimuli to achieve the desired visitor experience, stems from marketing concepts of servicescape and atmospherics, which in turn, rely on rather simplistic behaviourist theories and dualist ontologies (e.g., Mossberg, 2007). Even if the design of indoor events for practical purposes can be momentarily imagined in isolation from their surroundings, outdoor events do not allow for such thought experiments at all. If nature and non-human entities are mentioned in event studies at all, it most commonly occurs in a very limited context of environmental impact management, which would be presented as a separate, isolated segment of event planning (e.g., Fenich, 2014; Goldblatt, 2013; Lienhard & Preuss, 2014; Mair, 2018).

In this case study, we emphasise the importance of understanding events as human activities entangled in a complex social-ecological network or ‘mesh’, intentionally or unintentionally engaging with myriads of human and non-human entities, and mobilising them into new relations. In other words, we suggest viewing events not in isolation but rather as agents of the ongoing hybridisation and transformation of social-ecological relations, including its unintended, uncontrollable effects; as periodically ‘pulsating’ social-ecological assemblages, where “*non-human entities become tangled up with human infrastructure projects*” (Tsing et al., 2021, n.p.).

In order to understand the role of events as active agents of the Anthropocene, contributing to transformation of old and creation of new relations between human and non-human entities, we will use the following tools. First, as with all materiality, events can be understood as limited spatial-temporal expressions of ongoing social-ecological interactions, which creates a starting point for understating events. Second, based on the extensive innovative pedagogical effort by Tsing et al. (2021), we will use two key concepts aimed at better understanding the Anthropocene realities – *infrastructure* and *feral effects*. As argued by Tsing et al. (2021), watching the infrastructure is a key to understanding the Anthropocene, as infrastructure-mediated change is one of its key transformative processes. Similarly, watching the feral effects of the event, i.e., the unintended consequences, beyond the control of event planners, exposes the limitations of managerial frameworks, often unable to account for the undesirable agentic properties of non-human materialities, entangled in the complex social-ecological systems. In other words, we want event managers and scholars to explicitly engage with the event environment and event impacts right from the conception of the event, not leaving it as an afterthought, a disconnected segment in the end of a textbook, or a generic paragraph in a technical report.