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RITUAL AND JOURNALISM

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RITUAL AND JOURNALISM

Chris Peters

Summary

For millennia, the idea that rituals create a shared and conventional world of human sociality has been commonplace. From common rites of passage that exist around the world in various forms (weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies), to patterned actions that seem familiar only to members of the in-group (secret initiations, organizational routines), the voluntarily performance of ritual encourages people to participate and engage meaningfully in different spheres of society.

While attention to the concept was originally the purview of anthropology, sociology, and history, in recent decades many other academic disciplines have turned to ritual as a ‘window’ on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds. In terms of journalism studies in particular, the concept of ritual has been harnessed by scholars looking to understand the symbolic power of media to direct public attention, define issues and groups, and cause social cohesion or dissolution. Media rituals performed *in* and *through* news coverage indicate social norms, common and conflicting values, and different ways of being ‘in the world’. The idea of ritual in journalism is accordingly related to discussions around the societal power of journalism as an institution, the ceremonial aspects of news coverage (especially around elite persons and extraordinary ‘media events’), and the different techniques journalists use to ‘make the news’ and ‘construct reality’.

Journalism does more than merely cover events or chronicle history – it provides a mediated space for audiences and publics that both allows and extends rituals that can unite, challenge and affect society.

Keywords: Audiences, Culture, Emotion, Journalism Practice, Media Events, News Coverage, Objectivity, Performance, Power, Public, Ritual, Journalism Studies

Ritual, Culture and Mediated Communication

It is December, and strings of small lights appear on shopfront windows and in trees that line city streets. This practice is not confined to the commercial areas either; in many neighbourhoods, entire homes are given over to elaborate and, at times, ostentatious displays of lighting. In addition, large ornamental figures take over various front lawns. Sometimes it's people in old-fashioned robes huddled around a baby in a crib, sometimes an obese man in a sleigh pulled by reindeer – occasionally, it's both. Meanwhile, programs on TV start having a lot of snow in them, even in warm cities where snow never falls. The same songs begin to play in every store. People who normally don't go to church, all of a sudden, do. Everyone is buying things like mad. What on earth, a foreign observer might reasonably ask, has happened to the people in this land who now act differently from normal, and in such a precipitous fashion? The calendar turned to December and seemingly, out of the blue, everyone went mad.

Of course, most reading this description will recognize the various trappings of the Christmas season in many Western lands. Some of the more specific details – brazen lighting displays and brash front yard ornamentation – paint a clear image of a particular American way of doing Christmas. One way to gain explanatory purchase on these sorts of cultural practices is the concept of ritual. Long established in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and history, attention to the idea expanded over the past half century to other fields where scholars 'have turned to ritual as a "window" on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds' (Bell, 2009: 3). From common rites of passage that exist around the world in various forms (weddings, funerals, graduations, coming-of-age ceremonies) to rituals that seem familiar only to

members of the in-group (secret initiations, organizational routines in companies, sport team handshakes) ‘ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27). In terms of journalism more specifically, the familiarity of the opening story about the Christmas season tells us a fair bit about how closely ritual and media are interwoven in contemporary mediated societies, and highlights the media’s status as one of the main sense-making mechanisms of modernity (Hartley, 1996).

First and foremost, while not an especially vivid or engaging description, it was probably still evocative, even for readers who have never been to the United States. Popular culture and news coverage allow people around the globe to witness contemporary practices surrounding Christmas and observe its related imagery. A similar description of other religious occasions, such as Ramadan in Islam, Hanukkah in Judaism, Diwali in Hinduism and many others are also primarily known to those who live outside the countries that celebrate them through media. Such observations point us toward considerations of *power* in terms of how media extend rituals, make them visible, and direct public attention to what is perceived as important. That being said, it is fair to say that many religious holidays may not be as universally well-known, or be represented as faithfully, as Christmas. Indeed, oftentimes when ‘we’ see media coverage of people engaging in ‘their’ rituals, and contrast them with ‘ours’, it mostly serves to mark out their strangeness or otherness. So a second thing that ritual highlights is how media representations of events, groups, and activities both address and define us as specific *publics*. Finally, the celebration of Christmas is associated with a number of shared values, such as fraternity, piety, festivity, and consumerism, amongst others. Yet media do not merely represent these societal values – in many cases (i.e. Christmas carols, Christmas TV specials, televised Christmas speeches, Christmas shopping advertisements, etc.) media are an essential part of *performing* the rituals that constitute them. The familiarity of

these mediated representations points to the regularity of such media rituals as *patterned* activities that have a certain predictability of form. These key considerations – power, public, performance and pattern – are highlighted in this chapter to explain the various ways that scholars have conceptualized the importance of ritual to analyze mediated communication and how, in turn, this notion has been employed to understand journalism.

Before discussing this, the chapter first gives a brief background of the concept of ritual and the way it has been harnessed in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and the history of religion to explain different aspects of society over time. This basic foundation established, the chapter then moves on to key considerations of ritual for mediated communication and journalism in particular, outlining how scholars have utilized the concept of ritual to explain the symbolic power of media to direct public attention and define issues and groups (see especially: Couldry, 2003; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Sumiala, 2013). What is frequently referred to as the ‘subjunctive’ aspect of ritual – how ritual serves to indicate the imagined, the wished for, or the possible – has offered a productive lens to explain how a key part of media is its centrality to create and convey an ‘as-if’ world to us as publics. Rituals performed *in* and *through* news coverage indicate social norms, common and conflicting values, and different ways of being ‘in the world’. In this way, the idea of ritual in journalism is related to discussions around the societal power of journalism as an institution, the ceremonial aspects of news coverage (especially around elite persons and extraordinary events), and the different techniques journalists use to ‘make the news’ and ‘construct reality’. The third part of this chapter discusses two of the most prominent and influential themes where these insights have been taken up, namely ritualized *media events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Elliott, 1981) and the *strategic rituals of journalistic practice* (Tuchman, 1972; Fishman, 1980). In the concluding section, the chapter briefly illustrates how journalism studies can benefit from further attention to ritual in the current digital era by returning to the roots of the concept articulated

in the first half of the chapter more explicitly, in terms of considering how journalism provides a mediated space for audiences that both allows and extends rituals that can unite, challenge, and affect society.

Ritual – Background of a Concept

The investigation of ritual in academia can be traced back to fundamental questions around the formation of societies, such as: what binds human collectives together, which values are held in common, how are these demonstrated and learned, why do we perform social roles as we do, and so forth. As Seligman et al. (2008: 17) note, ‘The idea that ritual creates a shared and conventional world of human sociality goes back at least two millennia, as do insights about the resulting problems of self and society, individuality and convention.’ In this respect, it is not surprising that early efforts to explain its significance tended to focus on religion and its function for creating social cohesion. The sociologist Émile Durkheim’s (1912) well-known discussion of ritual in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* posited that such practices served primarily to produce social integration through the ‘collective effervescence’ they created. By marking the sacred off from the profane, Durkheim asserted that religious rituals – repeated regularly – served to simultaneously bind individuals within society and reaffirm collective beliefs. Affect and emotional sentiment, as opposed to instrumental rationality, were key to creating such bonds. As Goody (1961: 159) notes in a summary of post-Durkheimian debates around the relationship of religion to ritual, ‘by ritual we refer to a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the end is not “intrinsic”, i.e. is either irrational or non-rational.’ Durkheim’s work has been challenged since its introduction, especially for advancing a functionalist framework that privileges an affirmational, integrational understanding of ritual which neglects how rituals can mask social inequality or facilitate critique (Couldry, 2005). Despite such valid criticisms, this work still points toward the value of considering ritual in terms of the (attempted) maintenance of social

order, and encourages questions around what role journalism might play in this regard. In the century since Durkheim's work first appeared, ritual has been extended from an avowedly religious or magical focus to investigate the presence of rituals in secular societies and how they mirror, reorganize, and create social meanings (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977).

A second important line of work around ritual comes from the ethnographic tradition of studying ceremony, often in 'foreign' cultures. Unlike much social theory, the development of ritual as a concept is grounded in a wide variety of international research sites, although studies of the non-Western world that take an 'etic' approach have certainly been critiqued for eurocentrism (Turner, 1977). In *The Rites of Passage* (1960: 10), the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep argued for the societal importance of studying 'ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another.' Often tying such transitions to various stages in life, van Gennep proposed a schema which broke such rites down into their preliminary (rites of separation), liminal (rites of transition) and postliminal periods (rites of incorporation). This work was developed later, notably by Victor Turner (1977: vii), who studied rites of passage, 'social dramas', carnivals and the like, arguing that,

In order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create – by structural means – spaces and times in the calendar or, in the cultural cycles of their most cherished groups, which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action.'

The rituals surrounding social dramas in particular, Turner (1980: 149) argued, tend to revolve around four phases – breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of the societal schism – and 'occur within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history. The main actors are persons for whom the group has a high value priority'. This articulation of how ritual challenges social norms bears close affinity to how news

organizations identify and value newsworthy events (atypical, transgressive, familiarity of issue to public, etc.), and also suggests that journalistic narratives are often a key part of ritualized cultural processes (publicizing the crisis, interviewing elite persons, proposing solutions, etc.). While Turner's earlier work, like Durkheim, was critiqued for functionalism (Deflem, 1991), as it developed, he placed greater emphasis on 'ritual essentially as *performance*, as *enactment*, and not primarily as rules or rubrics. ... [The ritual] may conduce to hitherto unprecedented insights and even generate new symbols and meanings, which may be incorporated into subsequent performances' (Turner, 1980: 159-60). As Cottle (2006: 412) says of mediated rituals, 'the media's performative use of resonant symbols, dramatic visualization and embedding of emotions into some ritual forms and narratives can, for example, confront the strategic power of institutions and vested interests, and even lend moral gravitas to the projects of challenger groups within society.'

In sum, it is fair to say the foundation and development of ritual studies is an exceptionally rich theoretical landscape, grounded in empirical research situated in both the Western and non-Western world. From the late-19th century onwards, academics developed the concept from first questioning cultural origins (ritual as society's primal cultural form), to then religious function (ritual as social cohesion), to social transformation (ritual as a creative and subversive force for change), and, most recently, boundary issue (ritual as marking-off and social control) (Grimes, 2006: 11-13). In this regard, a number of complex and conflicting views about what ritual 'is', and how the concept should best be deployed, have arisen during this period (for an excellent overview see Bell, 2009). If we consider the broad swathe of research devoted to it across different academic disciplines, we can identify three general approaches that tend to conceptualize ritual as: habitual actions (repeated patterns, like making coffee in the morning), formalized actions (meaningful cultural forms, like sitting down as a family for dinner), and actions with transcendent values (social practices that embody a higher sense of purpose, such as Holy Communion or a wedding reception)

(Couldry, 2003). When it comes to media rituals, the latter two senses of ritual tend to be the most interesting, and for research into journalism in particular, this overlapping sense of ritual as formalized action with transcendent values has come together in two pertinent strands (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Elliott, 1981; Ettema, 1990; Tuchman, 1978; Zelizer, 1993). The first, building on and advancing the Durkheimian tradition, is to consider how ritual expresses and may cause social cohesion or dissolution. This parallels discussions on the impact of media events and societal significance of the representational aspects of news. The second, building more on the anthropological tradition, emphasizes the processual and performative aspects of ritual. This mirrors discussions in journalism studies around how journalists ‘make the news’ and thereby represent reality and social change.

Ritual in Communication, Media and Journalism Studies – Key Considerations

A useful starting point for understanding the applicability of ritual as a concept to analyse journalism can be found in James Carey’s influential contrast between what he termed the ‘transmission’ and ‘ritual’ views of communication. Writing in the opening essay of *Communication as Culture* (2008: 12), Carey noted:

The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture – perhaps in all industrial cultures – and dominates contemporary dictionary entries under the term. It is defined by terms such as ‘imparting,’ ‘sending,’ ‘transmitting,’ or ‘giving information to others.’ It is formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation. ... The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control.

This perspective in American public discourse, Carey argued, was often tied to a technological, morally-infused belief wherein improved communication (i.e. faster and further transmission, more

transparent, etc.) was equated to better functioning societies (more efficient, more enlightened, etc.).

However, Carey's stated goal in the essay (p. 18) was to get a 'fresh perspective' on communication, one more closely attuned to a cultural tradition that had greater resonance in European social theory. To do so, Carey (2008: 15) contrasted the transmission view of communication that had dominated (American) scholarship up to that point with what he termed a 'ritual perspective', which he linked:

to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith.' This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms 'commonness,' 'communion,' 'community,' and 'communication.' A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.

Contrasting the two perspectives, Carey (2008: 15) continued that the ritual view 'sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.' Both perspectives, Carey (2008: 18) was careful to note, were necessary to understand communication, 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.'

Carey's account has since been critiqued, for being a somewhat fuzzy definition of ritual (Grimes, 2006), for offering a rather thin account of the particular media mechanisms and structures that make such ritualized practices significant (Couldry, 2003), and for ignoring the more differentiated, unpredictable and contingent nature of communication rituals (Cottle, 2006). Yet despite such criticism, his influential and eloquent call for more attention in communication

scholarship to ritual puts ‘the media’s social impacts better than anyone else: “Reality is a scarce resource ... the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and display that resource (Carey, 1989: 87 cited in Couldry, 2003: 19). If ritual in classic sociological and anthropological thought is about repetitive, formalized actions in society that perform its values, ‘media rituals, put simply, are social forms that naturalize media’s consistent will-to-power, that is, media’s claim to offer privileged access to a common reality to which we must pay attention’ (Couldry, 2012: 66). As Sumiala (2013: 90) summarizes, the key dynamics of mediatized rituals in late modern societies are that,

the media play the key role in creating and maintaining collectively shared and recognized ritual practices. ... Audiences are invited to engage with the media and so to establish, consume and reproduce ritual practices that are bound up with particular media logic ... [and] the representation of mediatized rituals is a highly contentious matter. Mediatized rituals may well evoke social integration, but also conflict and social division.

In this respect, much of the work on ritual in communication scholarship – with journalism as a key institution (Zelizer, 1993) – emphasizes how media influence the ways we live together as social beings.

Power

The question of power is a central consideration when we think of the ‘why does it matter’ aspect of rituals performed in and through mediated communication. As the media theorist Nick Couldry (2003: 19) explains in *Media Rituals*,

The central paradox we have to grasp in assessing the media’s social consequences is that we cannot separate out *our* hopes, *our* myths, *our* moments of togetherness or conflict, from the mediated social forms which they now, almost always take. Those forms in turn cannot be separated from the uneven landscape of power on which the media process is founded.

The power of ritual beyond other communicative forms, in this respect, comes from the fact that it tends to communicate ‘about primordial things, making use of the most deeply encoded logics of our sign and meanings systems, built on the most basic beliefs and values’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 59). Rituals, in short, rely on the fundamental idea of a shared ‘us’. Most of the possible ways for people to act together and express a ‘common interest’ in contemporary societies are bound up in social forms, which are in turn bound up in media. The power of media, Couldry (2003: 38-40) goes on to note, is symbolic (as opposed to economic, political, etc.) and ‘impacts on society in an even more pervasive way, because the concentration of a society’s symbolic resources affects not just what we do, but our ability to *describe* the social itself.’ One of the key features of mediated rituals is this ‘potential to create a subjunctive universe, a shared social world of “as if” or “could be”’ (Sumiala, 2013: 9). In this respect, media not only impact our perception of social inequalities, as has long been recognized in many classic assessments of journalism (e.g. Hall et al., 1978, Tuchman, 1978). The *concentration of symbolic power wielded by media* helps determine the distribution of symbolic resources itself – who gets to speak, about what, and how. In the heyday of news organizations in the 20th century, such symbolic power was even represented in the buildings which housed broadcasters and publishers; imposing edifices that, in some cases, resembled religious structures.

Couldry (2003: 45) terms the centrality of media in defining social reality as ‘the myth of the mediated centre’, noting that beneath the various structuring forces of society exists a sense that there ‘is a core of “truth”, a “natural” centre (different “centres”, of course, depending on where we live) that we should value.’ The media’s symbolic power – paralleling religious institutions – comes from positing that its *privileged and natural position* is to capture and represent this core and its attendant values. As Sumiala (2013: 17) notes, when media cover events, especially when they are of apparent global significance, they ‘both mediate the event and provide the framework for the

community experience. They are the symbolic locus and space for events.’ Increasingly, in the digital era, it is not just journalistic media which are involved in this process of mediatized rituals but ‘numerous different public and virtual sites, such as online chat rooms, Facebook, the websites of mainstream media, news broadcasts and the front pages of newspapers. Out of an imagined presence, through a flow of bytes, is created a shared common space’ (ibid.) This power to bring together, and to create the appearance of multiple shared commonalities simultaneously (values, witnessed events, notable figures, the nation, etc.), is the foundational power of media ritual. In this respect, a term often associated with news coverage, journalistic discourse, and articulations about the broader societal purpose of journalism, ‘the public’, is tied to the ritual of presenting ‘the world’ to ‘us’ on a daily basis, bringing people as citizens together and enabling them to see and participate collectively.

Public

The symbolic power of media rituals – the claim to be able to represent a society and communicate its values – is closely tied to a second crucial aspect we can associate with the concept, namely how journalistic rituals speak to and identify us as publics, in both the social and spatial senses of the term. The active role by media of shaping the world as if there is coherent and a functioning whole, by definition, means crafting categorical distinctions between groups. At one level, this occurs when the boundary-exercises associated with media rituals serve to implicitly or explicitly make claims about what centre or social group is being brought together. For instance, while elections have a long history comprised of various ritualized actions, from displaying placards, to sloganeering, and marching (O’Gorman, 1992), the mediated coverage of contemporary political campaigns dramatically extends the ability for people to identify in common, both in time and space. Temporally, mediatized election rituals hearken back to shared ‘foundational’ values while simultaneously looking forward to a collective future that audiences, as a nation of voters, can

participate in creating. Spatially, political coverage outlines competing visions of how best to lead the country, and at the same time brings individuals at a distance together through shared issue or party affiliation. In other words, media election rituals demarcate both the collective (citizens of the nation state versus those outside it) as well as the publics within it that people can self-identify with (regional, party or interest-based). Similar analyses have been offered for sporting events (Birrell, 1981), state weddings and funerals (Dayan & Katz, 1992), war reporting (Allan & Zelizer, 2004) and other mediated, ceremonial, coverage. In this regard, the idea of media rituals has certain parallels with Benedict Anderson's (1983) well-known articulation of 'imagined communities' and the power of media to create a sense of national consciousness or identity. Of course, it is not only the national public that media rituals facilitate. Similar public imaginaries – a term that should not be misconstrued as implying such things exist 'only' in our imaginations (Sumiala, 2013) – are often closely tied up with rituals performed *in and through media* that have affective, material, and institutional power in everyday life. One can think of global fan communities (Jenkins, 2003), transnational diasporas (Georgiou, 2006), or local Facebook groups created to mourn the deceased (DeGroot, 2012) as other examples where the media simultaneously congregate and create 'a public' through ritualized communication practices.

These examples speak not just to how publics are assembled through media rituals but how said rituals communicate societal values and convey status about different groups in society to the people observing them. In election coverage, for instance, when the many (the citizens) view the few (the politicians), the latter are elevated as social figures because they are equated with leadership and vision, even if competing publics may disagree which leader best personifies these traits. Foreign groups or institutions in these same campaigns are often connected with threats to sacred values, loss of sovereignty, and the like. Outside media rituals associated with formal politics, one could similarly look at how athletes applauded by media as heroic in sporting contests

represent societal values such as courage, poise, strength, and sacrifice. The same holds true for first responders in a crisis or ('our') soldiers in military conflicts. And so on and so forth. Such claims can easily slip into overdetermined analyses which universalize the ideological effects of media coverage and their attendant myths (e.g. Lule, 2001), and thus, much like functionalist critiques of Durkheim, tend to overstate the cohesive social influence of media rituals. However, the status conferred by appearing *in* media, *to* observing publics is hard to deny – media direct public attention. This is not only the case for media rituals that surround 'grand' social events like elections, and wars. People generally realize, for example, that celebrities are 'ordinary' people in most ways except for their media profile (Couldry, 2003). Yet their media presence marks them off as different from 'normal' publics – people note celebrity sightings, use celebrities as reference points for purchasing and lifestyle decisions, and so forth. On the grimmer side, the desire for celebrity through media coverage seems an undercurrent of US school shootings (Couldry, 2012). Social status, in this way, is often bound up in media rituals. The primary difference between quotidian and celebrity funerals and weddings, in fact, is media coverage. Simply put, while the actions, meanings, and values of different rituals in a given society may be somewhat uniform, the extension and performance of such rituals in media mark them off as something different, and of greater 'public value'.

Performance and Pattern

If, somewhat crudely, questions of power underscore the 'why' it matters of ritual, and considerations of the public speak to the 'who' it creates and impacts, performance and pattern can almost be thought of as the 'how' of the concept. In other words, when considering the rituals of mediated communication and journalism, a key consideration is the forms they take. The spatiotemporal, 'when' and 'where' aspects of media rituals are situating aspects that, along with 'what', serve to explain context. But to understand what makes a given ritual meaningful, it is

important to consider how it is performed and for whom. ‘Ritual is never invented in the moment of its action, it is always action according to pre-existing [formal or latent] conceptions ... that serve as both guide for the performance and criteria for its evaluation’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 9). When it comes to rituals performed in and through media, such cultural practices are ‘recurring and patterned forms of symbolic communications that allow us, through performance, to attach ourselves to the surrounding media-related world’ (Sumiala, 2013: 9). A clear example of this would be the ‘lighter’ confessional culture of television emerging over the past few decades, where ‘normal’ people step forth to reveal their secrets and stories – and, by association, society. One can think here of the heavily personalized talk show (i.e. *Jerry Springer*, *Dr. Phil*, *Oprah*) or the ‘reality’ genre of television (*Big Brother*, *The Real World*, *The Bachelor(ette)*, etc.) as newer forms of media ritual where people ‘perform’ their private life, and in so doing express the norms of society for others to witness and engage with.

In this respect, media rituals are not performed simply for the individual, even when performed in private, but are socially-structured forms of communication. For journalism, this can encompass everything from the broadcasting of state funerals, a rare event whose mediated performance takes on significance for broader societal contemplation (Dayan and Katz, 1992); to live reporting of breaking news, a frequent practice whose mediated performance helps establish journalism’s claim to social contemporaneity (Seib, 2001); to passengers reading the newspaper on the morning commute, a (former) common occurrence whose mediated performance reinforced the idea of news consumption as a collective, widespread, and important cultural practice (Anderson, 1983). Sumiala (2013) argues that journalism has traditionally been the realm of ‘serious’ performance, where the aim is about revealing the truth of society. In other words, the media rituals associated with news coverage have historically performed the ‘real world’ for a broad swath of the public, and have performed it in a sober fashion that serves to underlie its

seriousness (Peters, 2011). Tabloid, sensational, and partisan journalism, in fact, has been roundly critiqued precisely because it eschews this ritualized script, and engages the audience with an ‘inappropriate’ (and potentially harmful) emotional journalistic performance (Peters, 2010). The enactment of a media ritual is, in this regard, somewhat meaningless without an associated pattern that shapes societal expectations and allows for its ‘successful’ performance. The familiarity of different media rituals in society relies on the fact that they are patterned actions, in which the media claim to be the public proxy for the social (Couldry, 2012). From the macro to micro levels of analysis, no definition of ritual is adequate without recognizing that ‘there is always something about ritual that is stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant, formal’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 20). In this respect, even for relatively extraordinary rituals, there is a sense that they have come before, and will come again. State funerals may be relatively infrequent media rituals but the broader funeral rite itself, is a regular and repetitive social occurrence.

Taken together, the idea of performance and pattern highlight the intertwining of form and public in the constitution of ritual. One of the clearest examples of this might be religious pilgrimages, which involve regular, repetitive patterning and pre-existing, public performances (Bell, 2009). Paralleling the development of ritual studies, it is interesting to note that scholarly understanding of pilgrimage is no longer restricted to the religious but has also expanded to the secular. Ritual can be used as a lens to study visits to film locations, celebrity graves, and scenes of tragedy (i.e. Ground Zero, Princess Diana’s crash site), as well as cultural practices like following bands on concert tours, attending fan conventions, and the like (see Couldry, 2003; Jenkins, 2003; Reijnders, 2013). In this respect, the idea of media rituals involves much more than the assertion that the media re-present pre-existing rituals like weddings, funerals, and so forth,

it involves the claim that certain complex practices around media have the transformative forces of ritual *in their own right* and constitute a distinctive *type* of ritual based in the distinctiveness of both media institutions and our relations to them. (Couldry, 2012: 71)

While the remainder of this chapter focuses specifically on journalism and rituals, such caveats about the increasingly mediated nature of contemporary public communication points to the value of considering the broader realm of the cultural industries when clarifying the cultural meaning and social significance of different rituals associated with news.

Rituals of Journalism Practice – Making the News

Attention to ritual has long received serious attention in anthropology, sociology and history (Bell, 2009, Turner, 1977), while sustained and critical discussion has been a more recent development across media and communication studies (see, for example, the debate between: Cottle, 2006, Couldry & Rothenbuhler, 2007, and Cottle, 2008). However, its incorporation as a concept to study journalism in particular has often been less rigorous (Zelizer, 1993), and likely for this reason, far less contentious. Indeed, a literature search for the term linked with journalism or the news turns up many results where ritual is casually utilized, almost synonymously in the generic sense of routine or repetition. This fairly commonsense usage has been deployed in relation to everything from institutional and organizational approaches to news production, to the influence of news content, and different practices of news consumption. Such a lack of systematic treatment may cast too wide a net, a lack of precision that renders the insights provided by the concept of ritual somewhat meaningless (Grimes, 2006). Ehrlich (1996: 14), however, argues that the different interpretive frameworks that have been used to consider the relationship of ritual to journalism might be better viewed as employing ‘ritual as a heuristic device to show the connections between the “journalistic cultural air” attached to the practices of individual newswriters and their organizations, and the “general cultural air” which the news media as an institution helps maintain.’ Whatever one’s

position on how strict a demarcation of the concept is advisable, there is little doubt of its potential to resonate broadly with different aspects of journalism.

In many cases, more sustained attention has been given to ritual and journalism, especially when it comes to prominent media events and the different ways that journalists construct reality through the news. While in much of this work the lengthy conceptual history surrounding the term is not brought expressly to bear, we can undoubtedly ‘read’ the cumulative academic insights surrounding ritual in many rich accounts that have looked into the societal impact of news. This is somewhat unsurprising, given the analytic thrust of ritual as a concept and its natural ‘fit’ with journalism. In this respect, it is telling that Carey’s initial call for academics to embrace a ‘ritual view’ of communication scholarship, in fact, used the newspaper as his exemplary illustration for such a research agenda. Contrasting it with the ‘mechanical analysis that normally accompanies a “transmission” argument’, Carey (2008: 16) noted that,

A ritual view of communication will focus on a different range of problems in examining a newspaper. It will, for example, view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world.

Broadly speaking, the interest in the relationship of ritual to journalism, then, is about how the news media, as a ‘shared symbolic system that constructs, organizes and shapes the social reality around us’ is able to provide ‘individuals with various opportunities to contribute to the construction of that social reality’ (Sumiala, 2013: 3). It is about how the news creates and performs social imagery, the meaning of which is then negotiated and interpreted by audiences in everyday life (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009). And it is about how journalism as an institution establishes and sustains the social

authority to be the self-declared arbiter of ‘reality’ (Carlson, 2012). The *power* of journalism to create an image of the social, the reach of the news media to define and address different *publics*, and the cultural familiarity of the *performance* and *patterns* of news narratives is a potent mix.

Media Events

Sporadically, when one turns on the television, there is a genuinely shocking and completely unexpected news story. Generally, these are events like revolutions (Tiananmen Square protests, fall of the Berlin Wall), dramatic instances of mass death (9/11, mass shootings), or natural/industrial disasters (Chernobyl, Asian Tsunami). The ‘agenda setting’ ability of media to direct public attention to certain issues has long been identified as a key institutional force of journalism (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and the zenith of journalism’s attention-generating capabilities is often thought to be coverage of the highly-impactful, unexpected event, which Tuchman (1978) famously referred to as a ‘what-a-story’ (see also Berkowitz, 2000). However, more often than not, the momentous newsworthy moment that becomes etched in history does not happen without warning but rather is pre-planned and anticipated long before it occurs. Political contests, royal weddings, state and celebrity funerals, culminating sport or entertainment events, and state visits are typical examples of moments that generate an overwhelming amount of coverage from the press, and rouse and maintain public attention and sentiment across broad swathes of society (Curran & Liebes, 2002). Understanding why such moments in time garner heightened media attention is the focus of the literature that concerns itself with the creation, promotion and performance of ‘media events’. Media events are the ‘high holidays of mass communication’, a ‘narrative genre that employs the unique potential of electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about human affairs (Dayan & Katz, 1992: 1). These historic events, ‘television with a halo’ as Dayan and Katz also refer to them, are ceremonial rituals performed in and through the news media that *generate*

collective sentiment. Contrary to well-known clichés that describe the unexpectedness of journalism – ‘news is what’s new’ – the rituals *performed* around such media events *inscribe* their ‘specialness’.

An early precursor to this analysis of media events was Boorstin’s (1961: 11) account of the ‘pseudo-event’ in *The Image*, in which he criticized the growing coverage of staged-for-news episodes that are ‘not quite real’. These types of events include press conferences, grand openings, galas, judicial decisions, releases of public reports, and political debates. One critical component that underlines the pseudo-event is that time is manipulated; the event is portrayed as ‘new’ despite months or even years of preplanning. Boorstin argues this effort to give the appearance of novelty and contemporaneousness, while at the same time portraying comprehensiveness and completeness, is necessary for journalism to maintain its institutional position and status in society – ‘all the news that’s fit to print’, in the famous words of the *New York Times*. Similarly, those typically associated with pseudo-events, such as politicians and celebrities, also rely on the oxygen of publicity to maintain their societal status. Put another way, pseudo-events arise precisely to be covered, in other words they are made-for-media messages that have a self-fulfilling aspect; in covering the ‘momentous’ occasion, the occasion becomes momentous. Situating this development in historical context, Boorstin noted that the first American newspaper, appearing in 1690, was published monthly and the editor was said to have cautioned his audience that the paper might come more frequently, but only ‘if any Glut of Occurrences happen.’ (Boorstin 1961: 7). Writing in the 1960s, Boorstin noted the dramatic change in audience expectations of when news should happen. With the advent of round-the-clock news, the daily newspaper needed to learn to manipulate the rituals of coverage, to make it seem that each new edition was justified. In Boorstin’s estimation, the changing rituals around news coverage had the effect that reporting ‘truth’ and the socially ‘significant’ became increasingly less important than being able to convey the *appearance* of truth

and significance. Conveying newsworthiness became increasingly dependent on the *performance of the news* ritual rather than the magnitude of the event itself.

A different, one might say less damning assessment of ritualized media events, was offered three decades later in Dayan and Katz's influential *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. While Boorstin's account of the pseudo-event implied they prevented 'real' occurrences from being reported, Dayan and Katz eschewed this realist position. Rather than focusing on the separation between pseudo-events and 'God-made' events, as Boorstin had, Dayan and Katz concentrated upon dramatic, ceremonial events, which they classified as typically either contests (i.e. the Olympics, elections), conquests (Berlin Wall, Apollo moon landing), or coronations (weddings or funerals). As ritualized media coverage, ceremonial events are planned often years in advance, and are surrounded by much pre-produced pomp and pageantry (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Their 'script' is a familiar one to both the journalists' who perform them and the audiences who observe them (Rothenbuhler, 1998), meaning their coverage is *consistent, predictable, and emotionally evocative* for the intended public. However, familiarity through patterned performance does not mean media events are a typical part of the audience's typical news diet. On the contrary, their special status is largely tied to the fact that 'they are *interruptions* of routine; they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives' (Dayan and Katz 1992: 5). In this way, the ritualized coverage of such media events can be considered a collective experience that both 'stops' time and 'reduces' space, allowing collective engagement. Some of the most watched global journalistic events in collective memory, from one-off occasions like the Apollo moon landing, and the wedding, and later funeral, of Princess Diana, to events that repeat themselves like New Year's Eve coverage and the quadrennial US Presidential elections, are these sorts of ceremonial occasions. Their societal importance comes from the fact that, 'like the holidays that halt everyday routines, television events propose exceptional things to think about, to witness, and to do' (Dayan & Katz,

1992: 5). Moreover, in the Durkheimian sense of ritual, they are said to promote social solidarity by focussing societal attention on its 'sacred centre' through ceremonial performance (see also Becker, 1995; Durham, 2008; Pantti & Sumiala, 2009).

Since its introduction, the idea of media events has been reconsidered on a few levels. Liebes (1998), for instance, questioned whether the rather restrictive focus on the positive and pre-planned aspects of such coverage limited the utility and 'sanitized' the ritualistic significance of media events. Looking to 'disaster marathons', live and uninterrupted news coverage on the heels of tragic events like terrorist bombings and assassinations that capture the attention of the public and interrupt life's daily routines, she argued that during the 'celebration of disaster',

television takes charge with live marathonic broadcasting from the moment when the disaster strikes (or immediately after) until the redressive ceremonial closure, which mobilizes the political establishment of the country or world.' (p. 74)

In other words, much like Turner's discussion of the function of 'social dramas', disaster marathons are mediatized rituals in the form of a crisis event which serves to confirm the ability of the powerful in society to offer solutions and closure (see also Kitch, 2003; Riegert & Olsson, 2007). Another line of critique comes from the assumption that media events generally affirm stable and shared values within society, a line of thinking that has always been tenuous, and is more evidently so in fragmented 'late' or 'post' modern societies. This issue become obvious when we consider the consumption of media events on a global level, where 'it is obvious that they are mediated very differently, depending on the region and nation where you live. (Hepp & Couldry, 2010: 5). In this respect, Sumiala (2013: 90) offers a useful disciplinary parallel when she explains that 'Anthropologists, the oldest experts in the study of culture, are always warning themselves and others about the dangers of generalization. An explanation that works in one culture doesn't not

necessarily apply in another. We should do wisely to heed this advice in the study of mediatized rituals, too.’

Strategic Rituals of Production

A second use of the idea of ritual to look at news practice comes from the literature surrounding the way journalists perform objectivity to insulate themselves from critique and display the tenets that characterize professionalism. Journalism has a somewhat challenging task in terms of balancing how it traditionally positions itself – the *impartial chronicler of reality* – with what this actually entails in daily practice, namely *coverage of the profane*: the emotionally-upsetting, non-conforming and transgressive within society. One of the ‘tricks’ of news coverage then, is for journalists to indicate to audiences that they are capable of *detaching themselves emotionally* from the news they report. The term most often associated with this, is objectivity. Gaye Tuchman’s (1972) consideration of how journalists actually perform this in practice, establishing recognizable conventions such as the use of quotation marks, external figures for stating opinion, and so forth, she called ‘the *strategic ritual of objectivity*’.

A ritual is discussed here as a routine procedure which has relatively little or only tangential relevance to the end sought. Adherence to the procedure is frequently compulsive. That such a procedure may be the best known means of attaining the sought end does not detract from its characterization as a ritual. ... Inasmuch as newspapermen invoke ritualistic procedures in order to deflect potential criticism and to follow routines bounded by the ‘cognitive limits of rationality,’ they are also performance ‘strategies’ (p. 661).

In this regard, the idea of objectivity as a strategic ritual is tied to the rise of the journalism as a profession, and the development of ritualistic practices of newsgathering that reflect certain scripted expectations of conduct, or performative ‘rules of truth’. In a later book length treatment on the topic, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, Tuchman (1978) outlined a typology of

different techniques of journalistic practice that form a ‘web of facticity’ to give a sense of accuracy, validity, and verisimilitude in the news.

Many of the noted news ethnographies of the 1970s and 1980s, which can almost be viewed as part of the de facto canon of journalism studies, provided similar accounts of how the performance of certain rituals allowed journalists to internalize the values associated with objectivity. Fishman (1980: 14), for instance, noted that, ‘News is a determinant form of knowledge not because the world out there already comes in determinant forms but because people employ specific methods which strive to organize that world into something coherent.’ Ericson *et al.* (1987) advanced a view that journalists simultaneously strive for objectivity while being aware of their performative role in its creation; they are aware that they are ‘in’ the story, they ‘are’ the content. Facts are thus not self-evident, but news-evident, involving ‘organisational resources and occupational routines of the craft to make news’ (p. 19) In sum, the grand tenets of journalism that developed over the 20th century, such as fairness, balance, accuracy and integrity, were central to establishing and maintaining the social influence and professional status of journalism, and were ritualistically signalled in news texts through a rational style of presentation that eschewed political affiliations, decried bias, and assumed neutrality (Schudson, 2001). The strategic rituals used to make the news allowed an appearance of objective reality to be made visible both for the journalist, and for the news audience, a practice which continues in the digital era (Karlsson, 2010, Shapiro *et al.*, 2013).

In the years since this formative work in journalism studies, the idea of ritualized strategies of production have been extended beyond objectivity (Mäenpää, & Seppänen, 2010). Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), building on Tuchman’s notion, investigated how critically-acclaimed pieces of Pulitzer Prize winning journalism, contrary to expectations, were not coldly rational as one might expect from the values signalled in journalistic discourse. Instead, such articles relied on ‘the

regimented use of emotionality’, infusing stories with emotion while outsourcing its articulation to non-journalists, a practice which ‘could be seen as a strategic ritual insofar as its correct display garners cultural capital in the field of journalism’ (p. 131). Peters (2011) similarly found indications that the ritualized performance of objectivity, which demanded the erasure of the journalist through emotional distance, was increasingly challenged at the end of the 20th century. Looking to the emergence and sudden popularity in the US of cable and satirical news programs, Peters (2010: 833) observed that,

through performing belief (much as Jon Stewart performs irony), Bill O’Reilly’s cable magazine ‘re-makes the news’ in a manner that lowers the threshold demanded under journalism’s traditional rules of truth while simultaneously appealing to his dedicated audience as a ‘superior’ form of news. ... This enables the programme to appear almost Janus-faced: claiming to uphold and respect journalism’s hallowed conventions (seen with Fox’s omnipresent ‘fair and balanced’ slogan) while simultaneously claiming to be forward-looking and redefining the profession.

By the carefully-articulated use of righteous anger and passionate involvement, cable news in particular used ritualized performance strategies to challenge the dominant ‘cool’ style of American television news, which had up till that point been the known script for performing the different societal values (honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, commitment) associated with journalistic professionalism.

Future Research on Journalism and Ritual – The ‘As If’ World

In what contexts will the concept of ritual provide profound explanatory purchase for journalism as it continues its journey into a digitalized, media future? Relatively mundane everyday media practices we know are commonplace, from checking one’s smartphone when waiting, to looking at the news online over lunchtime, or checking social media while commuting certainly contain

aspects of ritual, as they are regular, patterned actions which structure our everyday life and provide ontological security (Peters, 2015). Similarly, even though newswork is changing dramatically, there are clearly still repetitive aspects of digital journalism practice which are routinized to make the news on a daily basis and generate the appearance of factuality (Lecheler, & Kruikemeier, 2016). Are these the sorts of activities for which ritual is a helpful lens? To answer this means asking what added value the concept of ritual provides that alternative, well-established terms such as practice, use, and consumption (from the audiences' perspective) or routines, techniques, and processes (from the journalist's perspective) don't already provide. In this respect, returning to the roots of the concept is illustrative. All communication rituals 'contain a model of, and a model for, some reality', meaning that they simultaneously comment on and constitute the social (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 125-126). In other words, it is when we consider longstanding paradoxes associated with certain sociocultural practices – that are familiar *but* uncommon, expected *but* affective – that the concept of ritual provides particular insights that competing concepts have difficulties capturing.

Embracing such a perspective is quite easy and worthwhile to do when we consider prominent media rituals such as funerals, confessions, pilgrimages, pageants, revelations, and the like and the social sentiments of trauma, sadness, mourning, celebration, festiveness, national identity and similar feelings which are associated with them (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009). But it is also possible to apply such thinking to consider the significance of smaller everyday rituals, those moments of participation that involve the 'thoughtful acceptance of an imposed order of thought ... national rituals for the patriotic, relationship rituals for the romantic, friendship rituals for the loyal, authority rituals for the obedient' and so on (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 129). For journalism in particular, going back to Carey (2008: 17), 'the model here is not that of information acquisition, though such acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as

an observer at a play' (Carey, 2008:16-17). As a starting point for generating research questions, this means thinking about the symbolic meaning associated with a given journalistic ritual as opposed to the physical act itself, and the expressive and collective qualities generated by it. The common roots of all scholarship on ritual points to the necessity of considering these *emotional* aspects associated with the *public witnessing of its performance*.

In the current era, where fragmented, mobile and dispersed publics are increasingly the norm, there can be little doubt that media is still quite central as a prevailing site for both ritual performance and observation. However, we might question to what extent journalism still holds a dominant role. As Couldry (2012, 69) argues,

The struggles by media institutions (and by the institutions that depend upon them) to sustain attention and legitimacy are real *and intensifying* in the digital media era, creating the demand, on the production side, for new forms of media ritual. The picture of the 'social' that emerges in this process is shaped by the media institutions' overwhelming need to sustain *themselves* as central access points to the social in their quest for continued economic viability.

Going forth, journalism studies scholarship needs to grapple with what role journalism *continues to play* in these central rituals of society as 'an identifiable class of performative media enactments in which solidarities are called upon and moral ideas of the "social good" are unleashed' to constitute or challenge collective sentiments (Sumiala 2014: 943; see also: Cottle, 2006). To do so will undoubtedly mean more attention not to just what a given media ritual can potentially do, but to what it actually does *for audiences* amongst different media alternatives (Swart et al, 2017). Over the past two centuries, there can be little doubt that journalism established itself as the mass communication ritual *par excellence* for performing social reality (Curran, 1982). It did far more than merely cover events or chronicle history – journalism was the key mediated space for

audiences that both allowed and extended rituals that united, challenged and affected society.

Understanding to what extent it will continue to play this key role in defining the 'as if' world, demands audience research on the ongoing significance of journalism in society's key mediated rituals.

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