MEDIA CULTURE & SOCIETY

Mediatized rituals: beyond manufacturing consent

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The study of mediatized rituals challenges entrenched theoretical views about media power, its locations and determinations, and the role of media in processes of manufacturing consent. Mediatized rituals, I will argue, have much to tell us about how media periodically intervene in the life of contemporary societies, their contending identities and contests of interest, and how media can contribute to the formation of plural solidarities or 'publics'. This article elaborates an encompassing conceptualization of 'mediatized rituals', defined more analytically below, and examines how this class of exceptional media phenomena variously sustain a subjunctive orientation to the 'social good' (of how society could or should be). It challenges conventionalized ideas of ritual delimited to ceremonies working in the service of dominant interests or manufacturing consent. While there are certainly grounds to say that some mediatized rituals work in this way, and do so by promoting a sense of social collectivity that legitimates the extant social order (though this is not to presume that such appeals are necessarily successful), some mediatized rituals are nonetheless decidedly less consensual and less unifying in both their media enactments and outcomes. These mediatized rituals, contrary to both Durkheimian and neo-Marxian traditions (still the dominant traditions in the field of ritual study), appear to open up productive spaces for social reflexivity and critique, and can be politically disruptive or even transformative in their reverberations within civil and wider society.

Mediatized rituals, I argue, are more productively conceptualized as an identifiable and variegated class of performative media enactments in which solidarities are summoned and moral ideas of the 'social good' are unleashed and exert agency in the public life of societies. In their social aetiology, composition, dynamics and outcomes mediatized rituals, as we

Media, Culture & Society © 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 28(3): 411–432
[ISSN: 0163-4437 DOI: 10.1177/0163443706062910]

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shall hear, are far more differentiated, unpredictable and politically contingent than functionalist and 'structured in dominance' views of the media allow. For the same reasons they challenge James Carey's eloquent, often-quoted, but too consensual understanding of media rituals approached as sacred ceremonies drawing people together in fellowship and commonality by 'the creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs' (Carey, 1989: 43).

Approached through the conceptual prism of mediatized ritual, assumptions about the media's involvement in celebrating 'shared even if illusory beliefs' and, in more neo-Marxian terms, in processes of 'manufacturing consent' are theoretically too delimited. 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. The different and sometimes disruptive phenomena that can be encompassed within the overarching categorization of mediatized rituals, elaborated in this article, require comparative empirical analysis and theorization. Before we move to define 'mediatized ritual' more analytically and examine some of its different expressions, forms and dynamics, however, it is first useful to say a few words in defence of the concept of 'ritual' itself, given the deep suspicions that surround it within current media academic discourse.

Ritual suspicions

Paddy Scannell has observed how:

> A resistance to rituals has a history as old as enlightenment opinion: it is a complex dislike of public life as theatre, a fear (perhaps resentment) of the politics of the spectacle. (Scannell, 2001: 700)

Perhaps three fundamental suspicions in particular deserve comment. These are that (1) ritual is essentially arational (and irrational) and therefore ideologically obfuscatory and/or politically dangerous; (2) that ritual is best seen as an anachronism confined to the maintenance of pre-democratic cults and that the meanings of ritual today are in any case eviscerated by modern mass media; and (3) that rituals are rendered socially irrelevant by the increasingly blasé attitude found within contemporary cosmopolitan, postmodern, societies. To take each in turn.

Jürgen Habermas's treatise on the historical rise, and modern demise, of the 'public sphere' gives full vent to rationalist concerns over the 'refeudalization' of modern forms of mediated publicness, where the powerful parade once again their power before a communicatively emasculated audience (Habermas, 1989; Peters, 1993). Habermas's treatise provides a

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foundational critique of the media and its contemporary propensity to ritual display and spectacle. But his view of deliberation and opinion formation is overly rationalistic and thereby fails to acknowledge the role of emotions, symbols and sentiments within communicative encounters, as well as their contribution to human understanding and democratic advance. Symbols, emotion, rhetoric and performance are constitutive of human communication (and communicative action) and these remain available for ritual expression across time and place.

Walter Benjamin's work on art in the age of mechanical reproduction has also proved influential in propagating suspicion of rituals. Benjamin argues that, historically, ritual has served to bolster the power of cults, but observes that modern mass media contribute to 'the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage' (Benjamin, 1977: 223) and, in this way, emancipate 'the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual' (1977: 226). Ritual, in this account, then, has no place in democratic politics and in any case is undermined by modern means of reproduction which contribute to the loss of 'aura' surrounding mediated public representations. This view, rightly I think, invites careful consideration of the means of communication and how these mediate in time and place and thereby transform meanings, but it also risks essentialist thinking in two major respects. First, in relation to 'mediums' as technologies of communication which are thought, inherently, to exert specific communicative impacts; and, second, in respect to 'ritual' that is conceived as inevitably bound up with conservative, pre-democratic, traditions. The different mediums and genres of today's media in fact demonstrate that they are capable of performing various roles and, given their embedded position within the contexts and flows of contemporary society, so too can they sustain different identities and relations to social power. Historically and across cultures we can also note how ritual assumes diverse forms and has served different political ends (Kertzer, 1988). Ritual need not, then, always be assumed to be confined to traditional ceremonies or the maintenance of hegemonic power. When enacted within a vortex of historical change, ritual can serve democratic impulses as well as conservative forces of continuity.

Some currents of contemporary social theory also challenge the idea and practice of ritual for being out of step with the postmodern condition of media-saturated societies. Essentially this argues that ritual has become irrelevant to the easily distracted gaze of viewers and readers who, surrounded by an incessant but always transitory kaleidoscope of mediated signs, remain oblivious to anything other than their surface effects. Today's media 'bombardment of signs' leads to 'semiotic excess', it is said, and proves incapable of penetrating to, or sustaining, deeper 'solidarities' (Baudrillard, 1983). Keith Tester (1994) has argued in the context of

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televised images of human suffering, for example, how 'increased visibility to the gaze seems to go hand in hand with increasing invisibility from the point of view of the responsibility of moral solidarity' and how 'media significance means moral insignificance' (Tester, 1994: 130). Again, we appear to be confronted by essentialist thinking about television approached as 'medium', as well as in respect of processes of reception that are curiously de-socialized. Audiences, in this account, seemingly bring no preceding identities or wider social commitments to the encounter with specific television images, and yet these are known to inform reception, generate felt obligations and, on occasion, can even prompt a preparedness to engage with 'the serious life'. Media-centrism, as much as medium essentialism, underestimates the processual nature of audience reception and the social dynamics involved, and short-circuits consideration of how media audiences can, on occasion, become constituted as 'publics'. To build on this defence of ritual and to better understand the power of mediatized ritual in contemporary societies we can do no better than revisit, and then critically reconstruct, the seminal ideas of Emile Durkheim.

Ritual, public ceremony, collective effervescence

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim elaborates how the 'idea of society is the soul of religion' (1965 [1915]: 466–7) and how this generates the distinctions of the sacred and profane and the role of symbols and rituals in sustaining collective solidarity. Durkheim's later sociology invites an understanding of the power of ritual and how public ceremonies – whether religious or secular – serve to revitalize collective sentiments and a sense of higher (sacred) purpose which, in turn, can generate powerful feelings of collective 'effervescence' – or transcendence through identification with a collective being (society) beyond the everyday world of individual and egotistic interests.

> . . . society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realises its position; it is before all else an active co-operation. The collective ideas and sentiments are even possible only owing to these exterior movements which symbolize them, as we have established. Then it is action which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society which is its source. (Durkheim, 1965 [1915]: 465–6)

Durkheim's writings are profound to this day, though clearly they demand careful reflection. Major criticisms of his work include its hypostatization of society as *sui generis*, as having its own separate essence or being; its totalizing view of collective solidarity; its dualistic thinking about the

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'sacred' and 'profane'; as well as its physiological-sounding interpretation of 'effervescence' (see, for example, Coser, 1977; Emirbayer, 2003; Giddens, 1971; Lukes, 1973, 1975; Thompson, 1988). To avoid Durkheim's totalizing claims about the nature of 'society' we would do better to situate our analysis in respect of a particular society or constellation of social relations at a particular moment in time and, importantly, to see these as structured and invariably conflicted (Kertzer, 1988; Lukes, 1975). It follows that the organizing force of rituals need not always be consensual nor uniformly inflected (Chaney, 1986; cf. Shils and Young, 1956), much less co-extensive with a singular collectivity resident within national borders (Kellner, 2003; Tomlinson, 1997). But, equally, we should not lose sight of Durkheim's original insights, including his fundamental understanding of ritual as 'society in action' and as a potent means by which solidarity (and 'sacred' sense of higher moral purpose) can be periodically secured and/or reaffirmed. These ideas continue to have explanatory purchase when trying to fathom the force of mediatized rituals and the communication of 'public dramas in late modern societies' (Chaney, 1995).

A neo-Durkheimian reading of ritual as 'society in action', but one that also anticipates the capacity to build particularized solidarities or 'publics' through the creation of sacred symbols and mobilization of collective sentiments, provides the foundation for a more temporally dynamic and politically contested view of ritual and one that may even permit, on occasion, transformative possibilities. Today, 'society in action' is often enacted in and through the media sphere.

Mediatized rituals

Mediatized rituals can now be defined analytically and in encompassing terms as follows:

> *Mediatized rituals are those exceptional and performative media phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be.*

This definition will be grounded and elaborated further below. But first we can note how mediatized rituals can variously make use of institutionalized ceremonies or rituals staged elsewhere, or they may not. And how they may also be dependent on and directed by social authorities and institutions outside the media sphere, or they may not. When reporting on institutional rituals or ceremonies elsewhere, however, to count as a 'mediatized ritual' the media will be doing something more than simply reporting or '*mediating*' them; they will be performatively enacting them, that is, 'doing

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something' over and above reporting or representing (Austin, 1975) and '*mediatizing*' them in a subjunctive mode – invoking and sustaining public solidarities based on ideas and feelings (collective sentiments) about how society should or ought to be. This definition, then, makes no prescriptions about whether mediatized rituals are essentially consensual or hegemonic, include contending views and conflicting interests, or whether they are potentially affirming of the existing social order or disruptive of it – or, even, potentially transformative. These are essentially empirical questions that cannot be theoretically known a priori or necessarily predicted in advance.

By definition, the types of media events that can be described as 'mediatized rituals' are 'exceptional'; that is, they are salient or obtrude in terms of high-level media exposure and collective media performativity across different media outlets in space and time. There is much, of course, that is habitual and 'ritualized' in media presentation and everyday media consumption (Becker, 1995; Couldry, 2003; Larsen and Tufte, 2003; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Silverstone, 1994), but this is not the stuff of those exceptional, symbol-laden, performative, subjunctively oriented and media-enacted 'mediatized rituals' that embed and elicit 'publics', and which concern us here. Anthropological approaches to ritual often seek to establish the nature of media ritual in relation to the spatial-temporal arrangements and/or phenomenology of media consumption in everyday life, but these often lose purchase on the political contexts and powered nature of exceptional media phenomena, and how these relate to the wider play of interests (and uncertain outcomes) of contending social relations. While the everyday is, without doubt, a terrain for the enactment of power, we cannot afford to lose sight of those exceptional 'rituals', both scripted and unscripted, that periodically crash through routine media conventions and seemingly galvanize sentiments and solidarities, and which speak to collective life beyond the mundane world of everyday consumption practices.

Within the field of media communications research six theoretical approaches, both established and emergent, have engaged with this class of exceptional media phenomena and each can be accommodated under an overarching conception of mediatized rituals. Theories of 'moral panics', celebrated 'media events', contested 'media events', 'media disasters', 'mediated scandals' and 'mediatized public crises' all constitute sub-classes of 'mediatized ritual' defined above, and each helps to refine our understanding of the potent and variegated ways in which mediatized rituals are deeply implicated in the public life of contemporary societies, give vent to ideas of the 'serious life' and variously summon collective solidarities. Comparatively and analytically each helps to ground the validity of the conceptualization of mediatized rituals.

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Mediatized ritual 1: moral panics

Stanley Cohen didn't frame his celebrated analysis of moral panics in terms of mediatized ritual (Cohen, 1972), but he could well have done. The theory of moral panics is premised, of course, on the idea of 'society in action', the mobilization of collective fears and anxieties, amplified and sensationalized through the media and focused in relation to a symbolic other, a folk devil, that ultimately serves processes of societal control through the policing of collective moral boundaries. In many respects, this is classic Durkheimian sociology of deviance; moral panics serve as a vehicle for the reassertion of consensual societal values in opposition to the media's depicted threat. Moral panic theory, notwithstanding mounting criticisms and refinements over the 30 years or so since its publication (e.g. Critcher, 2003; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; McRobbie, 1994; *Media International Australia*, 1997; Thompson 1998), continues to help focus analytical attention on an exceptional class of media reporting. Specifically, it provides a dynamic model of media–society interaction and how periodic 'moral panics' seemingly serve to focus and build collective solidarities, often set against a backdrop of historical change and in relation to a social field structured in dominance.

Today we may want to take issue with, or refine, the theory of moral panics on a number of conceptual, theoretical, historical and epistemological grounds. Conceptually, the idea of 'moral panic' appears to be in danger of losing its analytical precision when appropriated by the media and applied indiscriminately to any and all mediatized phenomena that happen to embody public concerns. Some public concerns, those incalculable but potentially catastrophic 'manufactured uncertainties' of 'risk society' for example, may be all too real (Beck, 1992; Thompson, 1998). The theory's original informing view of a dominant societal culture, and its positioning of moral panics as invariably elite-driven and functional for social order, can also be questioned on historical and empirical grounds. Historically, as later theorists have documented, moral panics have assumed diverse forms and served different functions and interests (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; cf. Hall et al., 1978). In today's globally dynamic and increasingly mediated societies notions of a uniform societal control culture also begin to creak under evident cultural heterogeneity and social differentiation and, at the same time, 'folk devils' have often learned to 'fight back' in both mainstream and alternative media (McRobbie, 1994). So too can ideas of moral panics as relatively discrete phenomena be questioned in a mediated world where cultural discourses intermingle and become overlaid and infused with each other (Watney, 1987), and where 'normal' as much as 'exceptional' media representations discursively constitute the nature of the 'real' without recourse to a presumed objectivist benchmark outside the realm of representation (Fiske, 1994; Watney, 1987).

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Even so, the theory of moral panics continues to have purchase on a class of periodic, exceptional media phenomena, and it reminds us of the capability of media (affectively and cognitively), in interaction with other social institutions, to invoke and police moral solidarities through the circulation of collective representations. As such, the theory remains theoretically relevant to this day and, in terms of our encompassing definition of mediatized ritual above, clearly represents an identifiable and important sub-class of this.

Mediatized ritual 2: celebratory media events

Durkheim's ideas also resonate in the more recent theorization of a different class of mediatized rituals, so-called 'media events'. The seminal study here is *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1994). This sets out to theorize 'the high holidays of mass communication', the defining features of which are: they are *interruptions* of broadcasting routines; they are often *monopolistic* – all channels refer to the media event; the happening is *live*; they are typically *organized outside the media* by those well within *the establishment*; they are pre-planned and presented with *reverence* and *ceremony*; they serve to celebrate not conflict but *reconciliation* and establishment initiatives, and are therefore *hegemonic*; they *electrify very large* (TV viewing) *audiences*; and they *integrate* societies and evoke a *renewal of loyalty* to the society and its legitimate authority (1994: 4–9, italics in original). This formulation, clearly, remains heavily indebted to Durkheim but, unlike moral panic theory, is principally concerned with ceremonial or celebratory occasions of state and government, and the ritualized affirmation of, and integrative appeals to, national collectivity. This is so notwithstanding the authors' identification of three genre types of 'media events': *contests*, the epic contests of politics and sports; *conquests*, or so-called charismatic missions; and *coronations* or the rites of passage of the great.

Each of these, including 'contests', is fundamentally taken as serving to reconcile, rather than challenge or transform, the political status quo and thereby buttress hegemonic interests and *the establishment*. Mediatized rituals, however, as already indicated, can assume diverse and often less consensual forms. Some 'media events' referenced below, for example, can prove to be more conflicted than consensual, more politically uncertain than hegemonic, more differentiated than monopolistic, and more disruptive than integrative, as well as of longer duration and more media-propelled than Katz and Dayan's special case of 'media events' would seem to allow for.

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Mediatized ritual 3: conflicted media events

The term 'media events' has also been used to describe such phenomena as the US mediated O.J Simpson case, the Los Angeles 'riots' and the Dan Quayle/Murphy Brown debate (see Fiske, 1994; Hunt, 1999). In such cases it appears that the exceptional media interest granted to these suffices as a definition of a 'media event', with the added qualification that such cases also appear to tap into deep-seated conflicts that normally remain subterranean. 'Media events' according to John Fiske, 'are sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence' (1994: 7), and it is this that principally gives them their electrifying charge. Contrary to Dayan and Katz's formulation, then, this class of conflicted 'media events' appears to be singled out precisely because such events involve deep conflictive undercurrents, whether those of 'race', class or gender. Here a more Gramscian theorization informs the analysis, which recognizes the contending discursive forces and different interests that struggle for cultural hegemony in and through the media event and its public representations.

> The Simpson case is most assuredly about more than just the murders and the trial outcomes. . . . [C]eremonial elements indeed pervaded the case and the public's reaction to it. But the case also tapped into enduring societal conflicts, into the struggles between counter-hegemonic projects for change and hegemonic projects for maintenance of the status quo. And much to the chagrin of authorities, 'reconciliation' was not always the outcome celebrated. (Hunt, 1999: 43)

John Fiske also places cultural struggles over meaning at the heart of media events as he moves towards a postmodern view which theorizes these as 'hyperreal' and where the distinction between 'events' in the world and 'media events' becomes less certain, or important.

> The term *media event* is an indication that in a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a 'real' event and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the 'real' is more important, significant, or even 'true' than the representation. A media event, then, is not a mere representation of what happened, but it has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it. (Fiske, 1994: 2)

This position usefully reminds us of the way that, for most of us, the media remain the only means we have of accessing the events referenced as well as the way in which important aspects of such hypervisual media spectacles often originate within the media itself. It also has the virtue of placing social antagonisms at the heart of 'media events', antagonisms that grant them their electrifying charge. However, when used in this way the term

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fails to discriminate analytically between very different cases of 'media events', both consensual and conflicted, and it also fails to address the longer-term dynamics of such mediatized phenomena.

These same criticisms can also be put to recent work on 'media spectacles' by Douglas Kellner (2003), which, building on Guy Debord's (1983) 'society as spectacle' thesis, argues that media spectacle is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society and everyday life. Kellner's work has the distinct virtue of grounding 'media spectacle' in relation to contemporary forces of globalization, technological revolution and the restructuring of capitalism but, notwithstanding his own criticisms of Debord's work for providing a 'rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle', his inclusion of such very different media spectacles as sports events, celebrities, musical extravaganzas, political scandals, 'Terror War' and TV series such as *The X-Files*, *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Big Brother*, as well as major Hollywood blockbusters and the publication of the Harry Potter children's novels leads, it has to be said, to a similar, totalizing, impression. Discussions of 'media spectacle', it seems, suffers from a lack of analytical precision and tend towards a presumed explanatory self-sufficiency located at the level of the cultural. *Hyper-visualization* as much as routine media visualization, we may want to argue, remains no less indebted to the world of contending interests and social forces condensed in the moment of production (Cottle, 2003a) and, contrary to Debord view of 'society as spectacle', nor should we underestimate the continuing communicative capacity of words, talk and print-based media to engage audiences.

Whether approached as essentially consensual (Dayan and Katz), conflicted (Hunt, Fiske) or spectacular (Kellner), the discussion of 'media events', then, too easily grants self-sufficiency to the media phenomenon, and the concept appears to be inherently ill-equipped to pursue developmental features of media representations over the longer term. Indeed, given the long duration, contingencies and dynamics of some 'media events', to name them as such is a misnomer. The category 'media events', like that of 'moral panics', has become a victim of its own success, suffering conceptual inflation and loss of analytical bite when applied too widely and too indiscriminately to different types of exceptional media phenomena. Nonetheless, 'media events', whether construed in essentially celebratory, conflicted or spectacular ways, can be subsumed under the overarching category of mediatized ritual in so far as all these refer to exceptional, media performative, symbol-laden and subjunctively oriented phenomena serving to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities. For a closer analysis of the temporal, narrative and social dynamics of mediatized rituals we must look to further sub-classes of such exceptional media phenomena.

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Mediatized ritual 4: media disasters

Media disasters, that is, disasters that are publicly signalled by different media as major, often traumatic and, on occasion, historically momentous happenings, also frequently exhibit high media performativity, circulate potent symbols, and invoke and/or mobilize solidarities. They are, therefore, a discernible if under-researched media 'genre' in their own right and constitute a further sub-class within our overarching category of mediatized rituals. Developing and differentiating their approach from Dayan and Katz's 'media events', Tamar Liebes and Menahem Blondheim (Blondheim and Liebes, 2002; Liebes, 1998), for example, elaborate an approach for the study of 'television's disaster marathons'.

> When major debacles occur, television interrupts its schedules for the live, open-ended, 'celebration' of the momentous event, featuring the disaster marathon. To qualify, a disaster needs victims in substantial numbers or victims of celebrity status, the dramatic failure of visible and supposedly foolproof technologies, or the collapse of well-established and salient institutional practice. Disaster marathons may be launched by natural disasters, such as the case of the Los Angeles earthquake; high-profile accidents, such as the failed-launch of the Challenger space shuttle; or purposive public acts of major public violence, such as terrorist attack. (Blondheim and Liebes, 2002: 271)

Confronted by such unpredictable and, from the government or authorities' viewpoint, unplanned events, the media often assumes a position of enhanced importance as publics seek reassurance and governments appear to have been caught off-guard and unprepared: 'disasters signify that things have gone out of control' and 'in such situations journalists are at their most powerful and can go to work as watchdogs' (Liebes, 1998: 75). Media disasters also open up opportunities for publicly aired conflict and dissent when institutions and authorities are rendered politically vulnerable by the tragedy, trauma and emotions that flow and circulate through them (and which can sometimes tip over into full-blown media scandals – see below).

> In contradistinction to media events, the shared collective space created by disaster time-out, zooming in on victims and their families, is the basis not for dignity and restraint but for the chaotic exploitation of the pain of participants on screen, and for the opportunistic fanning of establishment mismanagement, neglect, corruption, and so on. Whereas the principle of broadcast ceremony is to highlight emotions and solidarity and to bracket analysis, a disaster marathon constitutes a communal public forum where tragedy is the emotional motor which sizzles with conflict, emphasizing anxiety, argument and disagreement. (Liebes, 1998: 75–6)

Liebes' discussion and analysis of suicide bombings in Israel and the mediatized 9/11 attacks on the US provide grounded examples of 'television's disaster marathons', their media-performed and subjunctive nature,

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and also the basis for an argument about the democratic risks and dangers that follow major disasters when media fill the political vacuum in the immediate post-event period with the 'recycling of blood, tears and vengeance' as well as calls for instant responses or solutions.

Recent mediatized disasters, including the Asian tsunami in December 2004, Hurricane Katrina in the US and the Afghanistan earthquake in 2005, among many others, powerfully demonstrate recurrent cultural templates and media frames recycled and overlaid in their media representations. These include: 'calamity', 'scale and body counts', 'tragedy and trauma', 'heroism' and 'miraculous escapes' and 'elites on parade'. They also demonstrate how mediatized disasters can sometimes open up possibilities for social reflexivity, political critique and censure. The development of these more complex and politically challenging narratives are frequently based on allegations of corruption, incompetence or simply lack of care – criticisms not only directed at government and social authorities but also, increasingly it seems, at aid and emergency relief organizations (Cottle and Nolan, forthcoming).

The theorization of mediatized disasters, then, begins to move toward a more temporally protracted analysis and it also acknowledges, as was just mentioned, the potentially disruptive nature of responses to (and social constructions of) traumatic events (see Alexander et al., 2004). Both these dimensions receive increased theoretical salience in studies of other mediatized phenomena – though here the dynamic and temporal aspects move beyond the initial establishing event and its immediate aftermath, and analysts are less inclined to privilege any one medium, such as television, in their analysis.

Mediatized ritual 5: media scandals

Studies of media scandals, in contrast to media disasters, suggest an even more dynamic and interactive media role moving through time. Media scandals typically depend on revelations and claims that are then followed up by further disclosures and/or counter-claims, which often build to a climax and occasion some form of socially or morally approved sanction. James Lull and Stephen Hinerman usefully define media scandals as follows:

> Scandal serves as a term to delineate a breach in moral conduct and authority. *A media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change*. (Lull and Hinerman, 1997: 3, emphasis in original)

This formulation clearly positions media scandals under our covering definition of mediatized ritual. As with moral panics, social scandals

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invoke collective boundaries that serve to police perceived transgressions. In its mediatized enactment, collective solidarities are summoned and the media stage becomes populated by voices and views that reference an imagined moral community. Opprobrium and public censure implicitly summons an idealized sense of what public, private and moral behaviour should be. Interestingly, Lull and Hinerman make no prescriptive statement about the exact effects of media scandal since these may be variously integrative or disruptive, hegemonic or transformative. Media scandals, according to the same authors, can also be classified as types according to whether they involve (1) prominent individuals in public institutions, (2) stars and celebrities, or (3) ordinary people who have engaged in transgressive, sometimes heinous, acts and behaviour (Lull and Hinerman, 1997: 19–25). They all, however, serve to personify moral codes and behaviours for public and private consumption.

John Thompson helps to historicize the increased prevalence of political scandals specifically, and does so in terms of (1) the increased visibility of political leaders, (2) the changing technologies of communication and surveillance, (3) the changing culture of journalism, (4) the changing political culture and (5) the growing legalization of political life (Thompson, 2000: 108). In these ways he helps to ground the analysis of media scandals in wider processes of historical transformation, mediated publicness and contemporary media culture (cf. Kellner, 2003). Media scandals are often highly symbolic 'affairs' (both figuratively and literally) and involve public performances and ritual displays designed to salvage institutional and/or personal reputations, credibility, trust and legitimacy. As such, they are essentially struggles of symbolic power. They also have a dynamic quality that unfolds through time and often involves 'cover ups' and retractions, which can prove equally, if not more, damaging than the disclosure of the original infraction.

> Mediated scandals are not only stretched out in time: they also display a sequential structure in the sense that one phase of the scandal is typically followed by another, although this sequential pattern is by no means rigid or fixed . . . if one is situated in the midst of a mediated scandal and watching (or participating in) its development in real time, it is extremely difficult to predict how it will unfold. (Thompson, 2000: 72–3)

Thompson classifies political scandals as 'mediated events', though he is clearly attuned to their dynamic and sequential nature and extends their temporal reach well beyond, for example, that of Dayan and Katz's concern with public ceremonials.

Here, then, the theorization of media scandals begins to periodize the movement of these exceptional media phenomena through time, and invites an appreciation of the contingencies of outcome dependent on how these symbolic struggles are waged, won or lost in each of its various phases.

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Media scandals, clearly, can be positioned as a further sub-class of 'mediatized ritual' in that these too invoke and/or reaffirm moral boundaries and idealized collective norms of behaviour and involve performative (evaluative) responses to perceived transgressions.

Mediatized ritual 6: mediatized public crises

Finally, a number of further studies have thrown their analytical net wider than the focus on media scandals and sought to analyse the dynamics of 'mediatized public crises' more generally, and how these reverberate outwards and downwards into the cultural terrain of civil societies to produce consequential and sometimes disruptive effects. In contrast to the theorization of conflicted media events, or even television's 'disaster marathons', these mediated phenomena exhibit narrative progression, unfold over an extended period of time and are theorized in relation to discernible phases (Alexander, 1988; Alexander and Jacobs, 1998; Cottle, 2004, 2005; Elliott, 1980; Ettema, 1990; Jacobs, 2000; Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). These authors have often had recourse to the formative ideas of 'social drama' developed by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974, 1982).

> In previous studies I have used the notion of a social drama as a device for describing and analysing episodes that manifest social conflict. At its simplest, the drama consists of a four-stage model, proceeding from breach of some social relationship regarded as crucial in the relevant social group, which provides not only its setting but many of its goals, through a phase of rapidly mounting crisis in the direction of the group's major dichotomous cleavage, to the application of legal or ritual means of redress or reconciliation between the conflicting parties which compose the action set. The final stage is either the public and symbolic expression of reconciliation or else of irremediable schism. (Turner, 1974: 78–9)

When applied to mediatized rituals, Victor Turner's schema of 'social dramas' and associated concepts of 'liminality' and 'communitas' helps to capture evident temporal dynamics as well as potentially transformative impacts. It also encourages a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the contingencies of power – both strategic and symbolic – and how these are enacted through time and in relation to the possibilities of the unfolding 'social drama'. James Ettema (1990), for example, in his case study of the mediatized 'Cokely affair', a US conflict focusing on race and alleged corruption, observes how his study:

> . . . illustrates a definition of mass-mediated ritual as something more conceptually complex and more politically volatile than the transmission of mythic tales to mass audiences. Following Turner, the affair may be seen as a progression of rituals organised within the social drama paradigm. And following Elliott, that progression of rituals may also be seen to have been

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> enacted within and through the press by other institutions of social power. Indeed, the progression was a veritable catalogue of the means available to contemporary social institutions for the ritual cleansing of civic pollution . . . the affair also suggests that the social drama is an important cultural resource both for waging and for narrating politics. (Ettema, 1990: 477–8)

The work of Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs arguably provides one of the most sophisticated theorizations of 'mediatized public crises' to date. This incorporates a sense of narrative progression, the contested nature of many public crises, as well as the contingencies and opportunities for change that mediatized public crises can unleash.

> Celebratory media events of the type discussed by Dayan and Katz tend to narrow the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby legitimating the powers and authorities outside the civil sphere. Mediatized public crises, on the other hand, tend to increase the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby giving to civil society its greatest power for social change. In these situations, the media create public narratives that emphasise not only the tragic distance between is and ought but the possibility of historically overcoming it. Such narratives prescribe struggles to make 'real' institutional relationships more consistent with the normative standards of the utopian civil society discourse. (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 28)

This model of 'mediatized public crisis', then, captures the way in which mediatized rituals often involve contending forces of state and civil society played out over time, and how these can release potentially transformative effects within civil society (see also Cottle, 2004, 2005). Mediatized public crises, as already mentioned, can also be incorporated within our overarching theorization of mediatized rituals given their exceptional, symbolic, performative and subjunctive characteristics.

Mediatized rituals: a typology

To return to our earlier formal definition of mediatized ritual – 'mediatized rituals are those exceptional and performative media phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be' – it is now clear that all six cases of exceptional media phenomena discussed – moral panics, celebratory and conflicted media events, media disasters, media scandals and mediatized public crises – exhibit these defining features of 'mediatized ritual'. If we want to better understand how the media serve to sustain or mobilize collective sentiments and (pluralized) solidarities within structured fields of dominance, difference and inequality, so we need to attend to the variegated forms and expressions of mediatized rituals. We need to recognize, for example, how different 'mediatized rituals' can be event-focused or involve longer-term

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TABLE 1
Mediatized rituals: a typology

	Event focus	Story dynamic	Consensual	Conflicted	Affirming	Disruptive
Moral panics (Cohen, 1972)		X		X	X	
Celebratory media events (Dayan and Katz, 1994)	X		X		X	
Conflicted media events (Fiske, 1994; Hunt, 1999)	X			X		X
Media disasters (Liebes, 1998; Blondheim and Liebes, 2002)	X			X		X
Media scandals (Lull and Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000)		X		X		X
Mediatized public crises (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998)		X		X		X

dynamics; are essentially consensual or conflicted in nature; and whether they are principally affirming and legitimating, or disruptive and challenging, to established institutions and conventions in terms of their enactment and outcomes. Table 1 summarizes in ideal-typical terms the general thrust of each of our six classes of theorized 'mediatized ritual' (which is not to suggest, therefore, that on occasion these sub-categories of mediatized ritual cannot exhibit different features or combine and blend characteristics from more than one sub-category in any particular case).

Conclusion

Mediatized rituals, I have argued, remain a constitutive if surprisingly under-researched and under-theorized part of contemporary societies, and these exceptional mediated phenomena periodically serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities. Building on Durkheim's

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original insights into 'society as the soul of religion' and the importance of ritual in securing solidarity, this article has nonetheless moved to develop a view of mediatized ritual in more dynamic, differentiated and, sometimes, disruptive terms. These ideas have been elaborated and grounded for the first time in respect of influential studies of 'moral panics', 'media events' (consensual and conflicted), 'media disasters', 'media scandals' and 'mediatized public crises', and each has been found to share key defining characteristics of 'mediatized ritual'. The encompassing definition of mediatized ritual proposed here is productive in that it helps sensitize research to some of the common characteristics and evident differentiations of these ritual forms based on how they serve to sustain or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities in respect of 'the serious life' of societies.

The study of mediatized rituals also encourages a more complex view of the interplay between elites and non-elites than is often envisaged. The forms and dynamics of mediatized rituals can sometimes permit the institutionally disenfranchised and challenger groups within societies to mobilize powerful symbols and sentiments to confront the routine strategic power of dominant institutions. The unpredictable dynamics of some mediatized rituals, as well as their conflicted nature, can also render some elites and institutions vulnerable to public criticism and censure (Cottle, 2004). Here prominent people and authorities may be obliged to participate in public displays of contrition as they seek to ward off the 'molten lava' of moral pollution that can flow dangerously on such occasions (Alexander, 1988). At the height of some mediatized rituals, bodies can become stigmatized, reputations can be destroyed and public figures can become 'expelled into a guild of the guilty' (Carey, 1998: 45). There are grounds to suggest, then, that the symbolic power attached to 'challenger' groups rather than 'authorities' within the exceptional forms of mediatized rituals can sometimes be used to counter structural imbalances of power (Cottle, 2003b; Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2003).

The study of mediatized rituals also invites a less static view of media-society relations and opens up further insights into different forms of media agency.

> In short, while some press rites are run by the press itself, others are run by other social institutions, but developed and given their peculiar form by press presentation. . . . Not only does the press relay social ritual, it may also act as an instigator. (Elliott, 1980: 163–4)

Today we can argue that there are in fact many possible roles performed by the news media within mediatized rituals including: 'instigator', 'conductor', 'narrator', 'mediator', 'advocate', 'campaigner' and 'champion', just as there are diverse roles performed by the news media in situations of conflict more generally (Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2003). These can also change

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through time (Bennett, 1990; Butler 1995; Hallin, 1986), be mediated differently through various media and forms (Cottle, 2002, 2004; Elliott et al., 1986), and may also demonstrate varying degrees of reflexivity in respect of the media's own performative 'doing'. How media adopt different performative stances through time and reflexively respond to these in the enactments of mediatized public crises have yet to find sustained analysis.

Attending to the performative nature of mediatized rituals is crucial if we are to better understand how these can produce heightened affects in audiences and build or sustain solidaristic 'publics'. Ideas of performance and performativity invite analysis of the ways in which media purposefully deploy symbolization and sentiments, views and voices, and rhetorically embody solidaristic appeals. Theoretically, ideas of performance and performativity cannot, therefore, be confined to seemingly 'interior' acts of identity performance (Butler, 1990) and removed from the 'exterior' ensemble of social relations and wider socio-historical fields (Lovell, 2003), and nor can we evade the theoretical necessity to engage with the performative nature of institutions and processes of mediation. The study of mediatized rituals, then, provides fertile ground for returning the theorization of performance and performativity to the social world as well as the collective forces that contend within it.

If we are to move beyond Durkheim's views of public ceremonies and rituals as organically binding towards an appreciation of how exactly mediatized rituals work performatively to energize different 'social solidarities' – many of which are structurally and discursively positioned in contention – so we also have to pluralize our view of social solidarity or 'imagined community' and acknowledge that mediatized rituals are destined to have differential effects on different participants. While today's more complex, segmented, differentiated, and reflexive societies may well provide grounds less propitious for routinized rituals than those found in early, pre-modern, cults and collectives, 'rituals' and ritual performances continue to characterize late-modern societies and, in their mediatized expression, periodically summon and galvanize collective beliefs, myths and solidarities (Alexander, 2004) – collective sentiments and appeals increasingly performed on a global media stage.

We also need to acknowledge what I shall term the 'the ritual paradox'. Ritual, it has often been observed (Alexander, 2004; Elliott, 1980; Rothenbuhler, 1998), depends on the willing involvement of participants. The paradox of ritual, then, is that it only 'works' when we want it to, when we volunteer something of ourselves, our collective identities, sentiments and aspirations within it. This is not to say that media performance is thereby rendered irrelevant or impotent, since it is often only through this media performance that mediatized ritual can come into being and discharge its affects and effects. But we can say that ritual only comes alive experientially, emotionally, subjunctively, when actively read

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by audiences/readerships who are prepared to 'participate' within it as symbolically meaningful to them, and who are prepared to accept the imagined solidarities on offer. Performativity, then, is not confined to the performative 'doing' of media producers but includes the 'doing' of 'spectators' as well, who actively enter into ('commit themselves to') the proceedings and who can identify themselves and their sentiments within them (Carlson, 1996; Hughes-Freeland, 1998; Ryfe, 2001) – if only periodically or in momentary ways (Alexander 2004; Dayan, 2001). The study of mediatized ritual, therefore, is not necessarily coincident with the widest possible collectivity approached in undifferentiated terms and for it to 'work' involves emotional and intellectual/cognitive investment from all concerned (producers, performers *and* participating audiences). Here we also need to be sensitively attuned to how particular media enact and perform mediatized rituals in respect of differentiated 'publics' as well as in their positioning within wider media ecologies – from the local to the global – and in relation to surrounding fields of contention. There should be no doubting, however, the presence of mediatized rituals within contemporary societies, nor their capacity to enter into the 'serious life' of society. It is time to reconceptualize our understanding of 'ritual', acknowledging its complex forms and variegated expressions within late-modern, increasingly mediatized, societies and studying its powered dynamics and contingent outcomes. The study and theorization of contemporary mediatized rituals demand that we move beyond ideas of ritual as necessarily and by definition confined to notions of manufacturing consent.

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