Mediatized Ritual – Expanding the Field in the Study of Media and Ritual

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Abstract
The purpose of the article Mediatized ritual – Expanding the field in the study of media and ritual is to identify the key debates in present-day scholarship on media and ritual and bring them into dialogue with current theorizing on the mediatization of society and culture. The article consists of three parts. The first presents a short outline of the study of media and ritual in modern life. The second discusses the idea of mediatized ritual as an evolving concept in the field. The third provides an empirical illustration of the mediatization of ritual by applying the concept to the analysis of the death of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013). In conclusion, it is argued that to study mediatized rituals in today’s society is to face the theoretical and empirical challenge of engaging the two social realms of ritual and media in a close interplay. This intellectual venture changes our understanding not only of rituals and media (what they are and what they do) but also of society. This said, to study mediatized rituals is, in fact, to study society in action.

Let us never cease from thinking – what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? (Woolf 1936, pp. 62–63)

Sketching the field of study
In recent years, we have witnessed a growing interest among media scholars, (media) anthropologists and sociologists in the interplay between media, ritual and modern society. Media scholars have focused their investigations on public rituals such as media events, media scandals, media disasters or mediatized crises (see, e.g. Becker 1995; Cottle 2006; Couldry, Hepp & Krotz 2010; Dayan & Katz 1992; Katz & Liebes 2007; Hepp & Krotz 2008; Liebes 1998). Studies on public rituals include those on the visits, weddings, deaths and funerals of world-famous people, such as royal family members, celebrities and political figures, and those on massive political events and spectacles, of which the September 11 attack on the Twin Towers is a paradigmatic example (see, e.g. Kitch 2003; Rothenbuhler 2010). Another area of concern in media studies has been the private rituals of everyday life, the mediatized, everyday practices and customs that punctuate our daily lives, such as TV viewing or reading a morning paper (see, e.g. Morley 1992; Rothenbuhler 1998; Silverstone 1988, 1994).

Alongside scholars of media, anthropologists have acknowledged a pressing need for studies disclosing ritual’s ambiguous role in media-saturated public life. In an anthology entitled Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain (Ginsburg et al., 2002), Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin discuss how, during the 1980s and 1990s, the geographic and theoretical focus of anthropology shifted from studying the past and the developing world to analyzing modern Western society and its culture, or what they call the anthropology of the present. At the same time, increasing attention was paid to the economic, political and cultural exchange between urban and rural worlds. Alongside these developments, anthropologists became interested in how mainstream and alternative media construct difference and/or otherness between ‘us’...
and ‘them’, between the majority population and minorities, and in the role alternative and indigenious media play in the construction of subject, identity and agency and in the mediation of national identity (see Spitulnik 1993, p. 294). Issues such as how media shape ritual practices in different ethnographic contexts, and how people use media for their ritual purposes and how that shapes their everyday lives, became significant (see, e.g. Altena et al., 2011; Hughes-Freeland 1998).

Media scholar Simon Cottle (2006, p. 426) maintains that regardless of the developing interest in the interplay between media and ritual, this area of study remains a surprisingly under-researched and under-theorized part of contemporary society. In general, anthropologists interested in media and ritual have been inclined to discuss the interplay at a micro level, with an explicit interest in thick ethnographic description, whereas media scholars have considered rituals typically in the framework of a power struggle, placing more emphasis on a macro-level social analysis of media rituals in society (see, e.g. Couldry 2003). Moreover, many of the studies tend to be divided in their understanding of the roles and functions rituals play in these highly media-saturated encounters. For one, rituals are perceived largely as ceremonies working in the service of social cohesion and/or masking power (while not always successful in their appeal). In the other, we find less consensual and less unifying views of rituals and the assumed social order (Cottle 2006, p. 2; Grimes 2011).

### Three key challenges

To advance our analysis of media and ritual in modern society, three challenges must be acknowledged (for a more extensive discussion, see Sumiala 2013). First, we need to seriously re-think what rituals are and what they do and do not do in today’s society. In other words, we must consider the possibilities and limits of this concept when brought to analyze modern society. When the anthropological and sociological interest in ritual first emerged during the late 19th century, Grimes (2006, pp. 10–13) explains the idea of ritual was heavily embedded in the question of origin: where does ritual come from? The main source of inspiration at this time was William Robertson Smith’s *The Religion of the Semites* (1889). In this evolutionary framework, religion was construed as a primal social and cultural activity, and ritual as its primary mode of expression. To put it simply, primal religion was acted, not thought. Second, during the early 20th century, ritual was largely seen in the framework of function; the focus turned to the question: what does ritual do? One of the most influential answers, often inspired by Émile Durkheim’s (1912) work *Les Formes Élémentaire de la Vie Religieuse* (trans. The Elementary Forms of Religious Life), was that ritual provides social cohesion and personal consolation (Grimes 2006, p. 12). The Durkheimian approach remained significant for a generation of anthropologists and sociologists, until the mid-20th century witnessed a shift in the study of ritual. Now, based on the work of Victor Turner (1969) and others, ritual was perceived as creative and potentially subversive, and its key function was social transformation. Ritual came to be seen as a cultural practice with the power to dissolve social hierarchies, and perceived in the frame of the constant dynamics between communitas and liminality, structure and anti-structure (Grimes 2006, p. 12).

In the present era, Grimes (2006, p. 12) argues that the question of ritual is conceived as an issue related to boundary, and that ritual is understood as an act of ‘marking off’. There are two main approaches here. On the one hand, there are scholars who maintain that the boundary protects the ritual by preserving its special characteristics (cf. Hughes-Freeland 1998). On the other hand, there are those who look upon ritual as a form of bridging: we make connections between different domains precisely through the work of ritual (see, e.g.; Seligman et al., 2008; Rothenbuhler 1998). Grimes (2006, p. 12) contends that a fruitful discussion on media, ritual and modern society is possible only when the two domains are ‘neither equated nor segregated but rather differentiated and conceived as sharing a common boundary’. Furthermore, he states that a
performance-oriented approach provides potential common ground for media and ritual scholarship in that both media and ritual can be seen as practices of performance. This invites a method of thinking in which both ritual and media are perceived as performative practice.

The second challenge for the study of media and ritual in modern society relates to the question of media, e.g. what it is and does in today’s society. This demands a shift in orientation. The analyses of media as an institution or infrastructure transmitting information or content needs to move forward to better acknowledge the media as a social practice. What we need, indeed, is practice-oriented media theory, to use the lexicon of Nick Couldry (2012).

One of the most prominent theoretical and methodological frameworks for assessing how the media today act as part of the wider culture and society is mediatization theory (see, e.g. Couldry & Hepp 2013; Hepp 2012; Hjarvard, 2012; Lundby 2014, 2009). In the literature, mediatization does not refer to any single theory but to a more general approach within media and communications research. Generally speaking, mediatization stands as the central concept in a theory of the intensified and changing importance of the media in culture and society. Hjarvard (2012) calls for mediatization to be perceived both as an empirical process that calls for mutual research efforts by media scholars and social and cultural analysts, and as a theoretical concept that needs to be developed and tested in different conceptual and empirical contexts. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2013, p. 196) identify the two main traditions of mediatization research as being ‘institutionalist’ and ‘social-constructivist’. In the institutionalist tradition, mediatization is typically understood as the process by which culture and society become dependent on the media and their logic to an increasing degree (see, e.g. Hjarvard, 2012). Hence, mediatization refers to the process of the adaptation of different social fields or systems to these institutionalized rules of the media, with ritual a case in point here (Couldry & Hepp 2013, p. 196). In the social-constructivist tradition, mediatization highlights the role of various media as part of the process of the communicative construction of social and cultural reality, and analyzes the status of various media within that process. Hence, the social-constructivist view could emphasize media as a form of communication in ritual practice. In the study of media and ritual, both institutional and social-constructivist views promise to offer valuable insight in the analysis.

Third, we must acknowledge the (contradictory) historical traditions and the related resistance associated with academic work on media and ritual. To put it simply, media studies as a field of research carries a history closely connected with the modernization of society, embedded in processes of urbanization, technological development, individualization and secularization, whereas ritual as a concept has traditionally been associated with anthropological studies of primitive social forms and related religious practices and belief systems. Ronald Grimes verbalizes the uneasy relationship between the two realms of social life in the following manner:

Not long ago, the terms ‘ritual’ and ‘media’ would have been regarded as labels for separate cultural domains – the one sacred, the other secular; the one term designating a religious activity and the other denoting tools and processes for transferring information. Media not only intruded upon but also profaned rituals. (Grimes 2006, pp. 3–4)

Paddy Scannell formulates this apparent mistrust of ritual in media studies by stating:

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, p. 700)
is assumed to be socially irrelevant within contemporary cosmopolitan societies. The authors of the seminal book *Media Anthropology*, Mihai Coman and Eric Rothenbuhler (2005, p. 10), respond to this type of criticism by stating that through applying concepts such as ritual in the study of modern society, we may achieve ‘more adequate understanding of a world that cannot be disenchanched’. This is to say that regardless of the long historical process of secularization, especially in the Western world, rational cause–effect analyses have not been fully able to replace mythical structures and narrative logics of human sense-making in the world. Choices continue to be made based on values, belief and faith, not only instrumental reasoning; hence, it is crucial to recognize this important dimension in the contemporary reality. Second, Coman and Rothenbuhler (2005) maintain that the study of rituals in a modern society offers us ‘new uses in new social worlds for concepts and methods that have already given a century of good service’. In other words, the argument is that a concept of ritual has proven useful for generations of scholars interested in different ways of maintaining social life. This tradition of applying well-tested concepts in new contexts with appropriate adaptations should not go unnoticed. Third, the study of rituals offers ‘an approach to media that is tuned to the particular in the general, the local in the global, the transient and circumstantial in the enduring and universal’ (Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005). Communication theorist James Carey provides a succinct and workable description of what the study of media and ritual in modern society should involve:

My suggestion, briefly, is this. We must begin with the attempt to identify the most durable features of our temporal condition, features that are, for good, or ill, the least vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modern age. … These durable features are of two different sorts or have two different disciplinary roots. On one side, these features are anthropological and must be recuperated into the present from societies that live outside history. On the other side, they must be recuperated from history, that is, from our own cultural tradition into which they are deeply but specifically embedded. … the starting point … of our analysis is this quest for lucidity and the task is to elucidate those forms and practices, those durable features, that withstand the vicissitudes of modern life. This recuperation is not merely a means of going primitive, of seeing quasi-universal practice reinscribed in modern life, but a means of constituting the grounds of intersubjectivity: of seeing the experience in the light of others. To grasp hold of the popular arts with terms like myth, ritual, pilgrimage, liminality, story, narrative, chronicle – is to see in a miraculously discontinuous world persistent practices by which that world is sedimented and held together. It is to enlarge the human conversation while deepening self-understanding. (Carey 1988, pp. 14–15)

To take a step further to advance its analytical potential, the study of media and ritual in modern society needs to develop a more nuanced understanding of what rituals and media are and what they do in a society, and how their relationship is acted out in different cases and contexts and with what kind of consequences. For this, in the following, I propose an approach I term the study of mediatized rituals.

**Towards the study of mediatized rituals**

This approach to the study of mediatized rituals builds on several sources, including the work of Grimes (2006, 2011) and Cottle (2006) on ritual, and Hjarvard (2012), Lundby (2014) and Couldry and Hepp (2013) on mediatization. It relies on the idea of ritual as an adaptable cultural and social practice flexible enough to constitute and/or challenge collective sentiments in certain conditions in a range of different media-related contexts. Simon Cottle provides a useful definition of mediatized rituals:
…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. (Cottle 2006, p. 415)

In this perception, mediatized rituals are conceptualized as an identifiable class of performative media enactments in which solidarities are called upon and moral ideas of the ‘social good’ are unleashed in the public life of societies (Cottle 2006, pp. 411–412). Mediatized rituals are typically recognized in events considered exceptional and hence powerful enough to grasp or nurture media attention. In addition, mediatized rituals consist of certain performative elements embedded in symbolic communication. In many cases, these ritual practices are scattered around different media platforms and sites, and appear dispersed in time and space. Consequently, it may be of value to discuss mediatized rituals in the framework of a relatively open-ended process rather than a strictly fixed (and hence closed) practice. It is the processes of mediatization and ritualization that we should focus on when discussing mediatized rituals.

To discuss mediatization of rituals in more detail, one must note that in mediatization, media does much more than ‘just’ reporting or mediating rituals (Cottle 2006, p. 415). Rituals are always mediated, as there is no human communication without mediation (see, e.g. Meyer 2013), but in the process of mediatization, media does much more. It also transforms and shapes the objects and practices about which it is communicating. From this perspective, mediatization of rituals is about change (Couldry & Hepp 2013; Lundby 2014). Furthermore, to examine mediatized rituals requires an approach that gives special emphasis to the process by which ritual, to an increasing degree, becomes dependent upon the media and their logic. This process, as pointed out by Hjarvard (2012), is characterized by a profound duality. First, the media become extensively integrated into the operations of ritual spheres and practices, and second, the media also take on ritual functions of their own. This said, there is a certain double dynamic, e.g. media saturation of rituals and ritualization of media at play in mediatization. This is particularly apparent in cases in which traditional rituals such as weddings, coronations or funerals of the ruling class are brought to the center of the media sphere.

One way to develop our understanding of mediatization of rituals further is to discuss them in empirical contexts. As Cottle (2006) claims, how mediatization of rituals works in a given situation should be an empirical question, not theoretically given a priori. One of the prominent areas of mediatized rituals in modern media-saturated society is death (see, e.g. Refslund Christensen & Sandvik 2014; Refslund Christensen & Willerslev 2013). In the present-day media logic, death is given public visibility if it has certain qualifications, such as if it is perceived exceptional or uncommon, the deceased has high symbolic value and/or the amount of victims is considerable (Hanusch 2010). Moreover, mediatization most typically affects rituals of mourning, funerary rituals and rituals of commemoration, of which rituals of mourning and funerary rituals tend to follow immediately after the death and rituals of commemoration appear later in time (e.g. one year after the death and so on) (Sumiala 2014a, 2014b).

Next, I wish to illustrate how mediatized rituals were played out in one particular ritual event substantially covered in and via the media, the death of the former British Prime Minister, Baroness Margaret Thatcher. This analysis includes a special focus on mediatized rituals as process, e.g. ritualization of media and media-saturation of rituals in a given case.

Ritualizing the death of Lady Thatcher

Lady Thatcher died of a stroke on 8 April 2013 at the age of 87, after having suffered poor health for several years. News of her death broke in Britain locally and nationally, and globally in the mainstream and social media, and immediately prompted mixed reactions among the British
public and elsewhere in the world. Her death brought about a rich variation of ritual practices that emerged in and via the diverse media on different scales. The ritualization began after Thatcher’s spokesman confirmed her death to the Press Association, which issued the first wire report to newsrooms. As a national symbol of mourning, the Union Flag was flown at half-mast at many sites associated with the late Prime Minister and the nation’s symbolic power centers, such as Downing Street, Buckingham Palace and Parliament. A site of pilgrimage emerged when people began to bring flower and candles to leave outside Thatcher’s home.

Perhaps the most characteristic element of this intensive ritualization was the level of controversy surrounding her personality and political heritage. All of these ritual performances were carried out in a deeply mediatized manner. While some mourning rituals were orchestrated by the mainstream media, with the BBC and national newspapers playing a key role as national institutions, others were organized by ordinary social media users. In many cases, the line between the two became blurred as ritual practices crossed over from one media-related context to another. Thatcher’s funeral took place on 17 April, and in line with her wishes, she received a ceremonial procession including full military honors. A church service was held at St Paul’s Cathedral, attended by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Later, Thatcher’s ashes were interred in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, next to those of her husband Denis. The service and interment were unpublicized private events, but the funeral ceremony was transformed into a media event, broadcast widely on television, and print newspapers followed the events online and updated material as the ceremony proceeded. One informant who had participated in the ceremony as part of the crowd described the atmosphere as ‘jolly’. Many came to pay their respects and share in the historic moment, while others criticized the public money spent on her funeral as, after all, in life she was in favor of privatization.

When analyzing Thatcher’s death rituals through the lens of mediatization, in which both media saturation of death ritual and ritualization of media are simultaneously at play, we may make at least the following observations. First, when looking from the perspective of mediatization, it is no exaggeration to say that Lady Thatcher’s death was ritualized in and via the media on a massive scale. The events surrounding her death and funeral were deeply embedded in the present-day logic of a media event. At the pinnacle of this hierarchy was the attention paid and visibility given to her death. As one British journalist informant pointed out, the media was well prepared for Thatcher’s death given her age and poor health, meaning the obituaries were pre-written and her funeral broadcast rehearsed by many professional media organizations. After her death, and during the funeral, the official tone of reporting in the mass media followed the mode and style typical following the death of a public figure. The media repeated a narrative of her life and political career from humble origins to the first female British Prime Minister. One element of the reporting focused on the public reaction to her death, and the mass media provided not only national but also global coverage of the contradictory and highly ritualized practices performed in the aftermath of Thatcher’s death, consequently transferring the media to the social center of the historic event (see, e.g. Couldry 2003).

Second, if we consider the mourning and celebration rituals played out by the people in and via the media, another type of interplay between media and ritual becomes apparent. Drawing on Roy Rappaport’s (2005) work on ritual, Altena and her colleagues (2011, p. 134) argue that the possibility of inventing new rituals is often limited, meaning mediatized rituals are typically connected with shared histories and draw on existing cultural traditions and conventions. When practicing mourning rituals in and via the media, people gathered to pay their respects to Thatcher’s personal and political achievements. Her supporters admired her, and in their rituals, her political ideas were praised and confirmed. In other rituals, a sense of togetherness was constructed around celebrating Thatcher’s death and mocking her political career, involving rituals in which people expressed their anger and frustration and claimed she had destroyed
In these rituals, Thatcher’s death was narrativized as a victory of good over evil, with the ritual center created around solidarities that could only be expressed in contrast to her and her achievements. In both cases – mediatized rituals of mourning and celebration – Thatcher’s death brought people together; however, the senses of togetherness, belonging and participation were constructed via the conflicting and converse values associated with her life.

Simon Cottle (2006, p. 415) reminds us that mediatized rituals ‘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’. A crucial aspect of mediatizing Thatcher’s death in a ritual setting was attention as a key stimulus for collective sentiments, hence enforcing the media’s own significance as the center of the social and cultural solidarities played out in this mediatized condition. However, when considering how individual people used the media for ritual purposes, a multiplicity of solidarities is evident. We might even say that the more intensive the ritualization and coherence felt inside of these mediatized ‘ritual communities’, the more divided the nation. In many cases, explicit conflicts between different solidarities associated with her life and achievements seemed to occur, meaning people had to make choices regarding which solidarities to follow, and different strategies for balancing the conflicted situation emerged. Some people managed the conflict between the different solidarities by ignoring them and the media event, while others participated in a negotiating process related to the different solidarities. One example of this negotiation was an ongoing debate on Twitter over whether or not the tweets celebrating Thatcher’s death were considered appropriate. In this case, the uncertainty of solidarities also seemed to be at stake. Interestingly, many believed there was a lack of social space for neutral or dispassionate views, as people felt they were expected to take sides and express their solidarities in public. Overall, we may agree that Thatcher’s death activated simultaneous tendencies of pushing and pulling between different solidarities and conflicting tendencies in the media and its ritual performances of the death.

**Mediatized rituals set society in action**

The case of the death of Margaret Thatcher explicitly reveals that mediatized rituals open up a subjunctive reality full of contradiction and contestation, and also the potential for shared solidarities among certain groups and factions in society. Mediatization of death rituals not only shapes the public perception of the dead individual (in this case Thatcher) and her value and meaning in the (British) society, but we may also see the influence of those ritual practices in what Mark Deuze (2012) famously calls media life in today’s society in general. This said, mediatized death rituals should be seen as a multi-layered performative practice closely connected with the workings of the media. Mediatization of death rituals in a given case plays an important role in maintaining shared social imaginaries of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in a society; retaining (media-related) memories associated with the nation’s (cultural, political and social) history; creating models for (appropriate) media action such as mourning, grieving, commemoration or even celebration; cultivating certain media-related values associated with good life and death; inculcating media-related attitudes towards public death (and life); communicating information about public death and the deceased person; forging conceptual and symbolic connections between the dead and the living, individual and society; and aiding social transformation related to public loss and continuation of life (cf. Grimes 2011, p. 15). In all its simplicity, to study mediatized rituals in today’s society is to face the theoretical and empirical challenge of engaging the two social realms of ritual and media in a close interplay. This intellectual venture changes our understanding not only of rituals and media (what they are and what they do) but also of society. To end with Simon Cottle’s (2006) notion, to study mediatized rituals is, in fact, to study society in action.
Short Biography

Johanna Sumiala is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Social Research/Media and Communication Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Currently, she works at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies as Kone Foundation Senior Fellow. Sumiala is a media scholar specializing in media anthropology, social theory and ritual studies. She has published widely including such journals as *Media, Culture & Society*, *Social Anthropology*, *M/C Journal* and *Communication, Culture and Critique*. Her latest book is *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2013).

Notes

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1 In the empirical analysis, I draw on my ongoing media ethnographic work on the death of Margaret Thatcher. In my fieldwork, I combine different forms of ethnography, ranging from urban ethnography, ethnography of representations and virtual ethnography. In addition to participation observation and collecting media materials, I have also conducted interviews relating to people’s reactions to Thatcher’s death in London and elsewhere in Britain.

References


