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‘Mediatized rituals’: a reply to Couldry and Rothenbuhler

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So what are we talking about? When 3-year-old Madeleine McCann was abducted in Portugal in May 2007 the British news media went into overdrive. Over the following days and weeks, newspaper front pages, extended television news packages and live updates from the scene enveloped the story with drama, trauma and emotion – positioning it centre-stage in the news public eye. We heard and saw Madeleine’s parents bravely confronting their ordeal while seeking to make best use of this media frenzy to help find their little girl, and we also witnessed public displays of sympathy and support in Portugal, the UK and elsewhere in Europe as communities came together to help look for Madeleine, offer their prayers and publicly identify with the plight of the McCann family. Many of us will have seen, and possibly felt, this media and collective outpouring, recognized its established news script but also observed the media performances embodied in the McCann’s media appearances which seemed, innovatively, to depart from this. Moral ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, the sanctity of family life, childhood innocence, community and other views and values all became condensed, refracted, symbolized and enacted in and through this mediated episode. And some too will have pondered the unprecedented attention granted to this personal tragedy in a world where, according to UNICEF, 29,000 children under the age of 5 die needlessly every day.

Consider this also. On Wednesday 27 June in the same year, Tony Blair stood down as the UK Prime Minister after 10 years in post. Throughout that day and into the next, the occasion was universally reported and commented on, at length, by the British news media. Standing at the dispatch box in a packed House of Commons at his last Prime Minister’s question time, the departing PM delivered his final statement. This was uttered with seemingly heart-felt and audibly faltering words that ended: ‘I wish everyone, friend or foe, well, and that is that. The end.’ Margaret Beckett, the Foreign Secretary, was in tears. Former political opponents sitting on the benches opposite followed the magnanimous gesture of the leader of the opposition, David Cameron, and, putting aside their political differences, rose to the occasion – symbolically and literally – to give Tony Blair an unprecedented standing ovation that lasted for over five minutes. The political centre apparently came together, united. The
momentousness of the occasion was not only constructed and communicated through the actions and performances of the House of Commons however, but in and through the media. The event was broadcast throughout and preceded by live anticipatory discussion and followed by a deluge of further media commentary that could keep discourse analysts busy for months. Later that evening, news packages reflected and reminisced, and film clips were choreographed and set to music, performatively helping to construct and communicate something of the possible pathos and gravitas of this special occasion – one that seemingly symbolized, among other things, the ending of a political era, the beginning of another and the enduring decency of Parliament and legitimacy of democracy. The media artifice that helped to publicly communicate this event seemed to meld perfectly with Parliament’s own publicly performed sense of special occasion.

Just one more. On Saturday 8 July, ‘Live Earth’, a 24-hour series of nine concerts staged around the world organized by Al Gore and the Alliance for Climate Protection, took place on seven continents and was watched by 2 billion people. The concerts were aimed at raising awareness about global warming. Notwithstanding the media’s exceptional coverage (the BBC alone scheduled over 16 hours, much of it live), as well as Al Gore’s public plea to ‘Put all of this energy in your heart and help us solve climate change’, these events in the UK received less than unanimous and enthusiastic media endorsement. This was summed up perhaps in the following British newspaper headlines: ‘Nice Gig, Shame About the Footprint’ (Independent on Sunday, 8 July 2007: 12), ‘Rockin’ All Over the World (But Just Watch Your Carbon Footprint)’ (Observer, 8 July 2007: 17) and ‘What on Earth? Political Bias, Lewd Jokes, Technical Glitches and Constant Plugs for Microsoft ...What Possessed the BBC to Air 15 Hours of Live Earth?’ (Mail on Sunday, 8 July 2007: 9).

As each of the above begins to suggest, high-profile media events periodically crash through normal news agendas, generate extensive and intensive forms of media coverage, and invariably embed or seek to elicit collective identities and a subjunctive view of how society should or could be. They are variously media enacted, performed and propelled, and can enter into the conduct and contests of contemporary societies – into its ‘serious life’ – sometimes disruptively so. My earlier article (Cottle, 2006) proposed that in order to better understand these differing media forms – their aetiology, performative agency, dynamics and possible impacts – it was essential to deploy some key ideas and arguments associated with ritual. Evidently Nick Couldry and Eric Rothenbuhler, two writers who, as they say, ‘have previously taken up positions in that debate’ (Couldry and Rothenbuhler, 2007: 691), disagree with my approach and its aim to signal the continuing, evolving and often consequential involvement of mediatized rituals in contemporary life. In the space allocated to me I’ll respond to their more important claims before commenting briefly on the tenor of their ‘critique’.

My starting point was, and remains, high-profile media phenomena and their participation in the conduct and contests of societies. As the three illustrations above suggest, these can exhibit wide variations and we need to better understand the determinants and dynamics involved. This demands theoretically informed, in-depth empirical studies and concepts fit for purpose. Nick Couldry defines media rituals as: ‘formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values’ (Couldry 2003: 29). On this categorical basis he proposes that we should look for rituals in such places as:

… sites where people cross from the non-media world into the media world, such as studios, or any place where media filming or media production goes on; sites
where non-media people expect to encounter people (or things) in the media (for example celebrities); moments where non-media people perform for the media, for example posing for a camera … (2003: 51)

It is not apparent how this categorical definition and its privileging of these ‘ritual places’ has theoretical relevance or explanatory purchase on the sorts of high-profile media phenomena that concern us here.

Matters of conceptualization, then, are important. We all need to refine and sharpen our concepts whenever we can, and one way of doing this is by engaging in definitional and conceptual dispute. However, I would also say that the idea of ‘ritual’, like that of ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’, has become an essentially contested concept and looks set to remain so given the differing theoretical, disciplinary and political standpoints that now lay claim to it. I am not convinced that the pursuit of a conceptual holy grail, a theoretically purged and pure concept of ritual, is either attainable or necessarily the most productive way to proceed. No concept of ritual – not Rothenbuhler’s, not Couldry’s, certainly not mine – is capable of providing the precision or completeness that could pre-empt the need for empirical engagement and elaboration across different instances and cases, or the necessity for continuing conceptual revision as media rituals evolve or transform through time and circumstance. My study of the Stephen Lawrence case and the ‘mediatized public crisis’ (after Alexander and Jacobs, 1998) that it unleashed, is possibly a case in point (Cottle, 2004). This attended to a massive media outpouring produced over a 10-year period, which ‘moved’ diachronically and emotionally, as well as symbolically and discursively, through a series of discernible stages and ritual forms to become a major public crisis embroiling public elites that led to far-reaching policy reforms. The case study was based on a sample of nearly 7000 UK newspaper items, international newspapers, a score of TV programmes and diverse internet sites as it examined how media performativity, contending discourses, high-energy symbols and reflexive media formats all served to propel the Stephen Lawrence case forward and deeper into the contested field of ‘race’, racism and British identity. This heavily ritualized mediatized public crisis was conveyed and contested through cognition, reason and discourses as well as symbols and sentiments and drama. It became an agent for change. Mediatized rituals, I argued, are not purely about symbols and sentiments, though they could hardly exist without them.

Fortunately there is a body of important work in our field, reviewed and discussed in my article, that has secured empirical, theoretical and in-depth purchase on a wide range of such high-profile media phenomena. Studies of moral panics, conflicted and celebratory media events, mediated scandals, disasters and major public crises, together, I suggested, provide an invaluable foundation for a more extensive and comparative project, pursuing how and why these differentiated, extensive and intensive media phenomena periodically intervene in the public life of societies. It was on this basis that I proposed a deliberately encompassing and broadly conceived definition of ‘mediatized ritual’ as: ‘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 was offered as an overarching, necessarily generalizing, but hopefully productive conceptualization that could serve as a useful starting point for more in-depth comparative and analytically differentiated studies of heavily ritualized news media events. As such my article neither claimed nor sought ‘originality’ in any theoretical sense and nor do I think, as suggested by my critics, that all academic writing should always seek to do so. This would make for a theoretically arid and empirically barren field where irrelevance or, worse, E.P. Thompson’s ‘orrery of errors’ can flourish. There is a necessary
conversation to be had between the theoretical and the empirical, and sometimes too there is heuristic value in mapping and contrasting extant work in the field with the modest aim of encouraging further comparative, empirically engaged and analytically refined understanding of the complexities, differences and dynamics involved.

My two critics claim that my encompassing notion of mediatized rituals is indiscriminate and incapable thereby of distinguishing what are media rituals. We are dealing here, as with so much else in the field of social inquiry, with a moving continuum of processual dynamics and often subtle gradations, with degrees and contingencies of ritualization, rather than measurable or static entities with clear boundaries and cut-off points. High-profile media phenomena do not always come with ritual placards conveniently tied around their necks. The development of typologies can help here, but they will never prove adequate to the task of analytically capturing all the distinctions and dynamics in play, or the need for a more hermeneutic methodology that seeks to recover something of the powered meanings and sentiments conveyed and contested. All this said, the concept of mediatized rituals does have more analytical purchase on a range of exceptional, high-profile media phenomena than my critics suggest, and it certainly does not refer to ‘almost anything’ as they claim. Clearly a single newspaper report would not meet my stated criteria of ‘exceptional’ in the sense of extensive media coverage, though a two-year television campaign or a prolonged social crisis might if either can be shown to demonstrate this and other characteristics of mediatized rituals defined above. Unlike, say, ‘media rituals’, the adjectival ‘mediatized’ helps to signal the performative agency of media in staging, enacting and propelling certain events and processes forward, and not simply their routine or habitual representation within media. This more performative understanding of media intervention, of ‘media doing’, helps to focus in on the media’s promotion of some events, and not others, as exceptional, and how the media inscribe these with ritual meaning through the panoply of ritual forms, symbols, performances and claims upon imagined and actual collective identities. As this should make clear, my definition of mediatized ritual puts ideas of ritual as form of action centre-stage, so it is baffling to read that this is said to be absent from my approach.

The study of mediatized rituals refers to a particular class of identifiable cases of high-profile media events displaying pronounced ritual forms and appeals, and not to any and all cases of media ritual, however others may want to define these. This delimited conception, then, can be contrasted with Couldry’s categorical definition referenced earlier, as well as Rothenbuhler’s quoted in review of my own, which states: ‘Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27). As he goes on to say in the original, this seeks to ‘capture the whole range of rituals from handshakes to coronations in the whole range of human societies’ (1998: 27). Now this surely wins in the catch-all ritual stakes and could conceivably be seen as a tad more indiscriminating than a concept which is delimited to a special class of mediatized ritual events.

What is also baffling is the repeated charge that my discussion and conceptualization of mediatized rituals is functionalist and pinpointed as emanating from sociology 50 years ago. Now I’m sure there are some good things to be rediscovered from earlier sociologists but, in this case, this wilfully ignores what my article actually stated and argued at length. I won’t repeat it again, but suffice it to say that this emphasized throughout how different high-profile mediatized phenomena today are often far from hegemonic or consensual in nature, exhibit important differentiations and processual dynamics, and are more politically contested and contingent in terms of outcomes than functionalist views of ritual could theoretically conceive or accommodate. It was for this reason, and seeking to map
something of the diversity of mediatized ritual forms and the political action conducted in and through them, that the article was subtitled ‘Beyond Manufacturing Consent’. I’m not sure how a clearer signal could be sent that mediatized rituals are not usefully confined to functionalist terms and thinking. If the claim of functionalism rests on the part of my definition that references how mediatized rituals serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities, this refers to plural entities not singular collectives and cannot, therefore, be presumed to simply express a pre-existent consensus as these are often in contention and/or formation. Without symbols, as Durkheim famously remarked, sentiments would only have a precarious existence, but this should not be interpreted today that symbols are pre-given, univocal or go uncontested. They are mobilized and accented, invented and superseded in the power plays of society and do not necessarily refer to some essentialist or consensual societal core.

It is, however, in the power of mediatized rituals to solicit imagined collectivities – and it is arguably in this moment of public recognition and imagined collective membership that the power of ritual comes into being. If this fundamental feature of ritual becomes theoretically eclipsed by recent attempts to reconceptualize ritual, or dissolved into the wider social space of everyday ritualized practices, it seems to me that we lose sight of something important about the powered nature of mediatized rituals, namely their continuing capacity to construct as well as communicate solidarities – a feature that may be more, not less, pronounced in detraditionalizing societies. It is for this reason that my encompassing definition also made reference to the subjunctive orientation to how society should or could be, which is premised on collective identities both actual and imagined and contending moral conceptions and projects oriented to ‘the good life’.

As with so much else in Couldry and Rothenbuhler’s response, their claims appear to wilfully misrepresent my argument and misinterpret my aims. The tenor of their remarks is also unremittingly disputatious, vexatious even, and begrudging of common ground. As such it reads as a departure from the usual ‘academic ritual’ of published debate which, if we take Rothenbuhler’s universalizing definition above, cannot in this instance be construed as ‘appropriately patterned behaviour’ that aims ‘to participate in the serious life’. Their attempt to police the mythical centre of the field of media ritual studies in this way is unworthy and unedifying.

Ideas of mediatized ritual remain necessary if we are to engage with the continuing ritualization of high-profile media events, and how these both emanate from and enter into the contests and contours of society. This requires not only clear concepts, but also concepts that are relevant to our times and fit for purpose, and theories informed by in-depth, empirical and preferably comparative research.¹

Note

¹. Since writing my article in 2004, collections edited by Rothenbuhler and Coman (2005) on media anthropology and Alexander et al. (2006) on social performance and ritual studies have made a welcome contribution to the field and include many contributions from authors who variously engage and theorize different high-profile media events and do so with recourse to ritual concepts and ideas. Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (2007) have also since produced a major statement differentiating between ‘media events’ and ‘mediated disasters’, underlining once again the need for analytical distinctions and increased attention to these evolving and consequential media genres.
References


