Review essay: Simon Cottle on `mediatized rituals': a response
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Recent years have seen intensified debate about how the concept of ritual is best used in media research, and Simon Cottle’s recent article for this journal (Cottle, 2006) continues it. As two who have taken up positions in that debate, we want to respond to Cottle’s arguments. Sadly his formulations take the debate backwards, not forwards.

We start from common ground: something important is at stake in the term ‘ritual’. Cottle claims originality here, offering ‘a few words in defence of the concept of “ritual” itself, given the deep suspicions that surround it within current media academic discourse’ (p. 412). But this ignores the increasing, not decreasing, uses of the concept in the media and communications literature of the past 20 years. The critiques of ritual Cottle presents derive from Habermas, Benjamin and Baudrillard, not scholars who actually study ritual and media, and the prominence of ritual in modern societies has been a major topic of the ritual studies literature. In the area of Cottle’s primary application, political ritual, there is a voluminous literature from the 1970s on to today. (Space limits prohibit citation, but our books cited below provide reviews.) Nor is Cottle the first to resist the modern suspicion of ritual in communication and media studies: so too do Carey (1988), Couldry (2003), Dayan and Katz (1992), Hoover and Lundby (1997), Marvin and Ingle (1999), Rothenbuhler (1998), Rothenbuhler and Coman (2005), and Silverstone (1994). (See also the rapid growth of media studies in the anthropology literature, e.g. Askew and Wilk [2002], Ginsburg et al. [2002] and Hughes-Freeland [1998].)

In one of his very few references to discussions of ritual in the media and communications literature, Cottle cites Couldry (2003), Rothenbuhler (1998) and Silverstone (1994) among others as examples of the study of the “habitual and “ritualized” in media presentation and everyday media consumption … 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’ (p. 416, emphasis added). Any fair reading of those works, though,
would indicate that that is exactly what they were discussing, but without the awkward term ‘mediatized’. For example, Rothenbuhler explicitly rejects habit and routine as concepts of ritual (1998: 28–30) and explicitly includes symbolic, performative and subjunctive in his definitional discussion (1998: 7–27). While Cottle expresses a ‘special’ concern with exceptional types of ritual process, he fails to acknowledge that Dayan and Katz (1992) founded their conception of media events on exceptionality, their interruption of the routine.

Cottle offers ‘mediatized rituals’ as an ostensibly new concept to rectify the various shortcomings he claims characterize the literature. One problem, he claims, is that Dayan and Katz’s account of media events emphasizes events that ‘serve[e] to reconcile, rather than challenge or transform’ the social world, proposing that his concept of mediatized rituals may allow more conflict and political uncertainty. That Dayan and Katz’s book is vulnerable to such criticism, even with its discussion of contests and conquests, is already recognized (see Couldry, 2003: ch. 4 for discussion); indeed this is a problem Dayan and Katz raise themselves. Various commentators before Cottle have already sought to address more conflicted situations and processes of social change. In any case, the term Cottle introduces to the debate, ‘mediatized rituals’, is hardly new: Alexander and Jacobs (1998), whom Cottle quotes (p. 425), write of ‘mediatized public crises’, and attribute (their footnote 5) ‘mediatized public processes’ to earlier sources, apparently responding to Dayan and Katz.

Let us however examine Cottle’s term as he presents it. What types of things can be a ‘ritual’ for Cottle? Here’s a list: ‘media phenomena’ (p. 415), ‘reports on [pre-existing] institutional rituals’ (pp. 415, 417), ‘moral panics’, ‘media events’, ‘scandals’, ‘public crises’ (all on p. 416) and ‘media disasters’ (p. 421). For Cottle, it seems, ‘ritual’ can be almost anything, from a single newspaper report to a two-year television campaign to a prolonged social crisis.

It was exactly such indiscriminate usage that led Goody (1977: 32) to call for ‘ritual’ to be dropped from anthropology, a call Corner (1999) and Becker (1998) endorsed for media research unless a clear application could be found. It is not as if definitional options are lacking in the current anthropological literature. Rappaport (1999: 24) defines ritual as a specific type of action, with particular semantic features: ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’. Other approaches in the Durkheimian tradition link ritual’s formalization to transcendence of individual experience – ‘the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27) – from where Rothenbuhler has developed an account of ritual communication. Note in these definitions the consistent link of ritual to action; what varies is the wider meaning-frame within which ritual action signifies. Yet Cottle’s indiscriminate use of the term ‘ritual’ loses touch with the idea that ritual is a form of action. Philip Elliott in his early discussion of ritual in media – one of the few definitions of ‘ritual’ that Cottle (p. 427) mentions, if only in passing – also keeps hold of ritual’s relation to action, but interprets its meaning-frame as directly ideological (Elliott, 1982: 147). And there are other ways of seeing power in ritual: Couldry (2003: 29) has done this through analysing the categories condensed within the patterns through which ritual formalizes action.

Cottle’s use of the term ‘ritual’ lies stranded in a conceptual and disciplinary no-man’s-land. He neither discusses alternative definitions, nor explains how his thinking developed out of the existing literature. He is therefore in no position to connect to other interesting developments, to choose only a few obviously relevant to his concerns: work on processes of ritualization (Bell, 1992, 1997; Grimes, 1990, 1995), the application of ritualization in media analysis (Coman, 2005a, 2005b; Couldry, 2003), or work that links ritual to authority (Bloch, 1989), or to strategies of governmentality (Handelman, 1998).
What about ‘mediatized’? Can this narrow down Cottle’s vague use of ‘ritual’? Unfortunately not, since ‘mediatization’ too is left undefined by Cottle. He makes no mention of recent debates about ‘mediatization’ as a social process (Hjarvard, 2005), which draw in turn on earlier work on ‘media logics’ as socially transformative (Altheide and Snow, 1979). All that ‘mediatized’ seems to signify for Cottle is intense performance in media: in ‘mediatized’ performance, he writes, ‘the media will be doing something more than simply reporting or “mediating” them; they will be performatively enacting them and “mediatizing” them in a subjunctive mode’ (pp. 415–16, original emphasis). But what ‘performatively enacting’ means here is completely unclear – not surprisingly, since, as we just saw, Cottle gives no account of ritual as formalized (but also, of course, performative) action; on the anthropological literature on performance, Cottle is completely silent.

So mediatized rituals for Cottle are phenomena (of an unspecified type and scale) occurring in media and involving some performance element – distinguished only by their references to, and effects on, social solidarity, ‘invoking and sustaining public solidarities’ in a ‘subjunctive mode’ (p. 416). More on these distinguishing ‘effects’ shortly, but for now our point is that, by itself, the term ‘mediatized rituals’ captures almost nothing coherent or distinctive, and so can offer only the illusion of explanation.

Let’s assume, however, that ‘mediatized rituals’, as Cottle uses the term, means something. Does it do the work he wants it to do? Sadly not. Cottle’s proposal is to reconstruct Durkheim’s theory of the religious elements of modern society so we can analyse the role of ritual in conflict and change as well as social cohesion and order. Unfortunately, conceptualizing ‘mediatized rituals … [as] phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities’ (p. 415) merely repeats, not solves, a basic error of the mid-20th-century functionalist interpretation of Durkheim which served to downplay conflict and change, and left out ritual’s cognitive dimension (see Lukes, 1972, 1975). In that view, collective sentiments and solidarity were the foundation of social order, and ritual both expressed and reinforced them. Such a model of circularly reinforced commonality and positive affect cannot begin to explain conflict, change or even the everyday occurrence of rituals with multiple interpretations. For that we need attention to the cognitive and moral elements of ritual, as well as the affective. Indeed, the literature shows that ‘as rituals promulgate definitions of reality, forms of thought, and modes of evaluation, they also contribute to division and argument as well as commonality and solidarity’ (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 42).

Fortunately, Cottle’s project – to reconstruct Durkheim’s theory ‘to avoid Durkheim’s totalizing claims about the nature of “society” ’ (p. 415) – has already been undertaken by writers across sociology, anthropology and political science (we only have space to mention a few from media studies, but they include extensive bibliographies). Carey’s (1989) work uses a critical reconstruction of Durkheim; Dayan and Katz (1988) offered a reinterpretation for their own purposes; and Rothenbuhler (1988) showed how the cognitive implications of Durkheim’s theory enabled analysis of ritual aspects of factional conflict. Rothenbuhler (1998: 3–69) and Couldry (2003: 1–74) each provide extensive discussion; Rothenbuhler and Coman (2005) include further examples.

As to Cottle’s ambition of ‘pluraliz[ing] our view of social solidarity’ (p. 428), there can be no doubt of the value of this. Lukes (1972, 1975) had already suggested it and, in addition to the literature already cited, Gerd Baumann 15 years ago in an article on ‘Rereading Durkheim in Plural Society’ (1992) proposed exactly this and showed its implications for domestic and public rituals in Southall, a multi-ethnic suburb of London.

Finally, in his conclusion Cottle advises that ‘attending to the performative nature of mediatized rituals is crucial’. Once again, we can only say, of course: but Dayan and Katz (1992) had already included a full chapter on performance in their book, and the subsequent literature in media anthropology has extensively discussed this too.
Conclusion

To sum up: Cottle’s ‘new’ concept, ‘mediatized rituals’, is far from new and, as presented, largely without content or clarity. His concept repeats a mistake of sociological functionalism that should have become outmoded a generation ago (Couldry, 2005). Many of Cottle’s ambitions for his argument, by contrast, are valid: indeed they have been pursued in the literature on ritual in anthropology and media research for the past 30 years, a literature of which he makes too little use.

We cannot complain at the opportunity Cottle has provided us for debating ritual’s salience to media analysis. Debate is vital if media anthropology, like any other area of media research, is to be sustained. But we must remember the basic preconditions for such debate: clear concepts that address and reflect on the existing literature, applied in an argument that says something new and coherent about media’s relation to the social world. Sadly, for all its rhetorical flourishes, Cottle’s brand of ‘theory lite’ here fails us completely. If there is to be a debate, it must start elsewhere.

Note

1. Page references below are to Cottle (2006) unless otherwise indicated.

References


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