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## Media rituals: beyond functionalism

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## **MEDIA RITUALS: BEYOND FUNCTIONALISM**

### **NICK COULDRY**

#### **Introduction**

In the past decade, a consensus has begun to emerge behind a new approach to media research that escapes the confines of earlier media studies.<sup>1</sup> This new approach seeks to work not just on the level of media texts and institutions, but on the broader and more subtle ways in which the very existence of media in our societies transforms them, for good or ill. If Joshua Meyrowitz's (1994) term 'medium theory' smacks too much of technological determinism, a better label for this shift is 'mediation':<sup>2</sup> what do we mean when we say our societies are 'mediated', and what are the long-term implications of this for their distribution of power? The question, if in different language, can be traced back to Lazarsfeld and Merton's classic essay 'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action' (1969) [1948]; it consolidates James Carey's later and better-known call for more attention to the 'ritual mode of communication' (1989). The radical nature of this shift, however, has largely been obscured by a particular reading of such questions, including the 'ritual' dimensions of media processes, within an all-too-comfortable functionalist understanding of how contemporary societies hold together, if they do. In this chapter, I want to show what it means to think about mediation beyond a functionalist framework.

The term 'ritual' inevitably brings with it the contested legacy of anthropology and the sociology of religion. In particular, it summons the highly ambiguous figure of Emile Durkheim: ambiguous because his ideas spanned the most urgent questions of contemporary sociology and an 'armchair anthropology' (Pickering, 1984) that seems rather quaint to us now; ambiguous also because the implications of Durkheim's analysis of the social bond (and its grounding in ritual forms) for our understanding of power are quite uncertain. Carey was right to be uneasy about the Durkheimian legacy, but wrong (as Eric Rothenbuhler (1993) pointed out) to suggest that he could or did work outside it. The way forward, rather, must lie through more (and more rigorous) examination of anthropological theory in media research, not less. While the blindness of most media researchers to anthropology has been noted before (Elliott, 1982; Dayan and Katz, 1992), the vision of anthropological theory that has so far been offered to media research is partial to say the least. It has foregrounded the functionalist aspects of Durkheim and the related work of Victor Turner, ignoring many other promising paths: for example, Maurice Bloch's (1989) work on ritual and power, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) reinterpretation of Durkheim and the study of media-making as a social process in contemporary cultural anthropology (see Ginsburg, 1994). Even less attention has been given to exciting recent work on ritual by anthropologists of religion (Smith, 1987; Bell, 1992, 1997; cf also Handelman, 1998). Once these new connections are opened up, other connections with social theory become possible, for example to the work of Foucault on 'rituals of confession' and governmentality (although I will not have space to pursue these here). The result, I believe, is to enrich media theory considerably and, perhaps, to contribute something to anthropological theory as well.

Before I go any further, let me get one definitional point out of the way. By media, I will mean not any media, or process of mediation, but particularly those central media (primarily television, radio and the press, but sometimes film and music, and increasingly also computer-mediated communication via the Internet) through which we imagine ourselves to be connected to the social world. This is the common sense notion of 'the media', although in the age of media digitalisation its precise reference-point is changing to some degree. The media (in this sense) are involved in what I will call 'the myth of the mediated centre': the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speak 'for' that centre. This myth underlies our orientation to television, radio and the press (and increasingly the Internet), and our tendency to regard the massive concentration of symbolic power in those media institutions as legitimate. Symbolic power (if concentrated in this way) is a socially sanctioned 'power of constructing reality' (Bourdieu, 1991: 166), and the practices I will call 'media rituals' draw upon and, in turn, reinforce the assumed legitimacy of the media's own concentration of symbolic power.

I will be working here both with and against our instinctive sense of what the term 'ritual' means. I want to rethink common sense notions of 'ritual' in order to address the complexity of contemporary media's impacts on social space. Understanding 'media rituals' is not simply a matter of isolating particular performances ('rituals') and interpreting them; it is a matter of grasping the whole social space within which anything like 'ritual' in relation to media becomes possible. The result is to enrich, but certainly not simplify, our account of ritual; this chapter presents merely some extracts from a longer, more detailed argument (see Couldry, 2003).

### ***Why We Still Need the Term 'Ritual'***

To introduce the term 'ritual' to the study of media requires some defence (cf Corner, 1998). It is as well to note at the outset how the term has been used by anthropologists.

There have been three broad approaches to 'ritual' in anthropology. These have understood 'ritual' respectively as (a) habitual action, (b) formalised action, and (c) action involving transcendent values. The first definition is uninteresting as it is unclear what 'ritual' here adds to the idea of regular action or habit; I won't pursue this further. The second and third approaches are more interesting. Formalised action is more than habit, since it insists that 'ritual' involves a pattern, form or shape, which gives meaning to that action. To see 'ritual' from the third perspective – as action involving or embodying broad, even transcendent, values – is compatible with the second approach, but shifts the emphasis away from questions of pure form and towards the particular values that ritual action embodies. It is the second and third senses of the term 'ritual' in which I am interested in this chapter.

Immediately, however, there is an objection to retaining a term such as 'ritual' in contemporary cultural analysis. Doesn't it fly in the face of many claims that we live in an age of 'de-traditionalisation' (Heelas, Lash and Morris, 1994) without anything so formalised as 'ritual', except as relics of the past? Doesn't it ignore, specifically, the progressive multiplication and diversification of media outputs and media technologies in an age of media 'plenty' (Ellis, 2000)?

Behind this objection is a rather unhistorical assumption, that 'ritual' including ritual in the media field, is simply a matter of preserving past forms such as religious ritual. Why ignore the possibility, however, that new forms of ritual may be being generated right now, perhaps especially through the media's operations? Ritual, I want to argue, remains an important term for grasping what media do and how social institutions work. Just as ritualised action turns our attention to 'something else', a wider, transcendent pattern 'over and above' the details of actions,<sup>3</sup> raising questions of form, so too it is the media's influence on the forms of contemporary social life - the transcendent patterns within which the details of social life make sense - that is puzzling, and which I intend to capture by the term 'media rituals'. 'Media rituals', in broad terms, refers to the whole range of situations where media themselves 'stand in' for something wider, something to do with the fundamental organisational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of a society. This can cover a range of situations: media events, pilgrimages at media sites, the media's claims to represent 'reality' as in 'reality TV', and media sites for individuals to make public disclosures of private aspects of their lives (talk shows): see Couldry (2003).

There is a greater flexibility to the term 'ritual' than is often realised. 'Ritual' has often been associated with claims that it produces, or maintains, social integration. This is a reading associated particularly with the tradition of social thought derived from the great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, or at least one reading of Durkheim. But there are other interpretations of ritual. Anthropological theorists such as Maurice Bloch and Pierre Bourdieu have connected ritual not with the affirmation of what we share in common (the affirmation of real 'community'), but with the management of conflict and the masking of social inequality. Unfortunately in media analysis, whenever 'ritual' has been introduced, it is the first, 'integrationist', understanding of 'ritual that has dominated - and it is precisely this association of ritual with social integration and with the standard 'integrationist' reading of Durkheim that we need to challenge.

Instead we need to rethink 'ritual', and particularly 'media ritual', to make room for new connections: between the power of contemporary media institutions and modern forms of government (Giddens, 1985). For too long, media theorists have analysed the most dramatic examples of media power (the great media events of televised coronations and state funerals) in isolation from questions of government. As Armand Mattelart (1994) argues, the result is an impoverished account of the media's role in modernity, and therefore a misreading of media's ambiguous contribution to the ritual dimension of modernity, including late modernity.

Implied in my approach, unavoidably, is a wider perspective on how media contribute to contemporary societies' holding together, if in fact they do. The approach I take to 'media rituals' will be post-Durkheimian and anti-functionalist. These terms require some explanation. To be 'post-Durkheimian' is not to abandon Durkheim's social theory as a reference-point, but to rethink our relation to Durkheim in a radical fashion, by dropping any assumptions that underlying and motivating ritual is always the achievement of social order. To be 'anti-functionalist' generalises the first point; it means opposing any form of essentialist thinking about society, not only functionalist accounts of society's workings (and media's role in them) but also the idea that society is essentially disordered and chaotic (indeed it is a rejection of any notion of social order that prevents some postmodern social theorists from seeing how much

Durkheim still has to offer in explaining contemporary media rhetorics, once we work outside functionalist assumptions). The point therefore (and here there is a clear difference with postmodern social theory: for example, Lash 2002: 215) is not that Durkheim is fundamentally wrong or outmoded in his prioritisation of ritual, sacred/profane and other related ideas, but that, in order to grasp the continuing power of Durkheim's ideas, we must discard the functionalist framework which shaped his work and think the question of social order (and its construction) from a new perspective.

### ***The Durkheimian Legacy***

Durkheim's sociology of religion (especially in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1995 [1912]) is the unavoidable reference-point for any account of ritual that is interested in wider questions of social order. It was Durkheim who insisted on the need to grasp the dimension of social life that transcends the everyday. He called this 'the serious life', *la vie sérieuse* (cf Rothenbuhler, 1998: 12-13, 25) and saw religion as its main, although not its only, manifestation. Durkheim, however, understood religion in a rather special sense. For him religion:

is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it. (1995: 227)

Religion, then, for Durkheim is not about cosmic order (its usual reference-point), but about the way social beings imagine the social bond that they share as members of a group. Durkheim argued that our experiences of being connected as members of a social world are at the root of our most important categorisations of that world; they are at the root in particular of the sacred/profane distinction, which Durkheim argues underlies all religion in the usual sense of the term.

This argument can be broken down into three stages:<sup>4</sup>

1. At certain key times, we experience ourselves explicitly as social beings, as members of a shared social whole;
2. What we do in those moments, at least in Durkheim's imagined Aboriginal case, is focussed upon certain shared objects of attention, such as totems, and certain rituals which confirm the meaning of these 'sacred' objects or protect them from the 'profane';
3. The distinctions around which those moments of shared experience are organised – above all, the distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane' – generate the most important categorisations through which social life is organised. This, in Durkheim's view, explains the social origin of religion and religious behaviour, and the centrality of the sacred/profane distinction in social life.

Needless to say, in seeking to draw insights from Durkheim's argument, I am not making claims here about the sociology of religion. If this seems cavalier on the face of it, it is justified by the breadth of implication built into Durkheim's original argument (cf Lukes, 1973: 484). Paradoxically, Durkheim's insights, although projected back into the past, were in fact directed at an urgent question for contemporary sociology: how, if at all, do societies cohere? More specifically: are

there certain central categories through which we perceive the social world, and what is their origin? These questions are as relevant to contemporary media as they are to contemporary religion.

I am of course not the first to seek to apply Durkheim's argument about religion in this way. Since the late 1970s, there have been a number of approaches that elsewhere I call 'neo-Durkheimian' (Couldry, 2003: 61), notably Dayan and Katz's (1992) famous thesis on media events. There is not the space here to explore these arguments in detail. Instead I want to emphasise that neo-Durkheimian arguments have a great asset: unlike many other approaches to the media, they take seriously our sense that much more is at stake in our relationship to the media than just distracted forms of image consumption. They share a concern to address the 'excessive' dimension of the media's social impacts, but they also diverge from my argument in a crucial way. What is distinctive about the 'post-Durkheimian' use of Durkheim that I propose is its emphasis not on any real social basis for media's integrative social role, but instead on the process of social construction that underlies the apparent fit of ritual analysis to modern societies of Durkheimian (or neo-Durkheimian) analyses, and particularly their media aspects.

We are not in fact gathered together by contemporary media in the way neo-Durkheimian arguments suggest. Even in the most dramatic cases of media events, this is only an approximation; in most others it is purely a 'conventional expectation' (Saenz, 1994: 576). On the contrary, I want to argue, we can only explain the ritual dimensions of media if we operate without mystifying functionalist assumptions. This means reading Durkheim against the grain, or at least against the grain of his most influential interpreters.

From this perspective Durkheim's concerns with social order are important, but as tools to prise open (rather than take at face value) contemporary claims, especially media claims, to represent social cohesion. Helpful here is Pierre Bourdieu's (1991: 166) reinterpretation of Durkheim as a thinker whose interest in social categories was based not on the assumption that they embody something 'universal' about the human mind or social fabric, but on the belief that the claims to universality inherent in such categories are a fundamental, and highly political, dimension of our contested social 'orders'. Far from assuming that contemporary mediated societies do hold together (with the help of media or otherwise) – a dangerous assumption (Lukes, 1975) – we should see the very idea of 'social order', mobilised in claims that rituals 'integrate' societies, as the result of a constant production (Hall, 1977: 340).

This might sound, at first blush, like another version of the very functionalism I am claiming to move beyond; but in fact it is quite different. There is nothing functionalist about taking the media's claims to have a function very seriously, not for their truth, but for their rhetorical and indeed social effects. Far from believing in a stable self-reproducing social macro-structure underlying these claims, we are simply recognising (as the anthropologist Don Handelman suggests) that social networks have:

media through which members communicate to themselves in concert about the characters of their collectivities, as if these do constitute entities that are temporarily coherent. (Handelman, 1998: 15)

In contemporary societies dominated by media forms, the rhetorical pressures to believe in such ‘convergences’ are particularly great. To the extent that ‘everything works as if’<sup>5</sup> there was a functioning social whole, media, and media rituals, are central to that construction. This is why we need to study them.

### *What and Where are Media Rituals?*

A non-functionalist approach to rituals (including media rituals) is less interested in them for themselves - as expressions of this or that idea - than in the wider social processes of ‘ritualization’, through which something like (media) ritual comes into being at all. The term ‘ritualization’ connects with a shift in thinking about ritual in recent anthropology of religion, especially the work of Catherine Bell (1992, 1997), who draws not only on Durkheim but on Bourdieu and Foucault. ‘Ritualization’ encourages us to look at the links between ritual actions and wider social space, and in particular at the practices, beliefs and categories,<sup>6</sup> found right across social life, that make specific ritual actions possible. In this section, I want to develop this idea both in terms of ritual in general and in terms of media rituals in particular.

The emphasis in ritual analysis needs to shift away from questions of meaning and towards questions of power.<sup>7</sup> Power is intertwined with the very possibility of contemporary ritual; similarly ‘media power’ (by which I mean: the particular concentration of symbolic power in media institutions)<sup>8</sup> is intertwined with the very possibility of media rituals. But how exactly can we understand this link, and where is it made? Since power, following Foucault and many others, is not just in one place, but dispersed across social space, the link cannot occur just through the workings of those exceptional moments we call ‘ritual’. The link between ritual and power must be more regular, more embedded in everyday practice than that. We need a concept (absent from Durkheim) of the wider social space where ritual is generated. It is there that key categories are generated so that they can be drawn upon in the formalised distinctions of ritual performance. I call this space the space of ritualisation (cf Bell, 1992).

What space might this be? I use the word ‘space’ here metaphorically, as a convenient term to refer to the whole interlocking mass of practices that must be ‘in place’ for there to be ritual action oriented to the media. In complex societies, the tightly defined contexts of formal ritual (religious ritual, and equally media ritual) are relatively rare: this is why theories of de-traditionalisation appear to make the persistence of ritual implausible. It is better however to think of the ritual process as stretched across multiple sites, indeed across social space as a whole (cf Silverstone, 1981: 66-67). We can expect that wider landscape of ritualisation to be highly uneven in terms of its power relations. In the media case, that space is formed around one central inequality - the historic concentration of symbolic power in media institutions – an equality which is naturalised through many detailed patterns, particularly the categories (such as those of ‘media’ and ‘ordinary’ person, of ‘liveness’, and so on: cf Couldry, 2000: 42-52) through which we understand our actions and orientations in relation to the media. Without this wider landscape, the patterned actions I will call ‘media rituals’ (to be clarified shortly!) would not make sense.

Studying media rituals in this non-functionalist way is the opposite of isolating particular moments and elevating them to special, even ‘magical’, significance. On the contrary, it means tracing the antecedents of media rituals in the patterns, categories and boundaries at work everywhere, from press and magazine comment to television newscasts to our everyday talk about celebrities, to the way we act when we go on television. Behind the patterns, however, lies the construction of an assumed value: the transcendental ‘value’ associated with ‘the media’ based on their presumed ability to represent the social whole. My emphasis on ‘categories’, which is Durkheimian in spirit, might seem strange. In complex social worlds, with so many contradictory belief-systems, can there really be any central categories that have a privileged relationship to social order, or what passes for it? Paradoxically there can, and a striking feature of contemporary media and media rituals is precisely the way they make natural (against all the odds) the idea that society is centred, and the related idea that some media-related categories (‘reality’, ‘liveness’, ‘media person’, and so on) are of overriding importance. This is the paradox of the media’s social role in late modernity, an age when the real basis of myth (in a unified social community) is less plausible than ever before, yet the apparent basis of myth is more actively worked upon and constructed than ever before.

To retain the term ‘ritual’ in this way, however, means resisting some powerful sceptics who have attacked the vagueness of the term in anthropology (Goody, 1977) and in media studies (Corner, 1999; Becker, 1998). All the more of a problem, you might think, when we qualify the notion of ritual so extensively as I have here. So let me be more specific about how I am using the term ‘ritual’ in relation to media.

Media rituals (in the sense I am using the term) are actions which are capable of standing in for wider values and frameworks of understanding connected with the media. This connection works as follows:

- (i) the formalised actions comprising media rituals are structured around certain media-related categories ;
- (ii) those categories (themselves, as already mentioned, reproduced much more widely across the whole ritual space of the media) encode, or stand in for, an underlying ‘value’ associated with the media; and
- (iii) this ‘value’ is the sense that media themselves represent the social itself (they are our ‘natural’ access-point to social space).

An example would be the organisation of ritualised meetings with celebrities around the distinction between the ‘media person’ (or celebrity) and the ‘ordinary person’. The wider resonance, or framing, of such acts derives from the way that the media person/ ordinary person distinction replicates a broader hierarchy between people/ things/ places ‘in’ the media over people/ things/ places not ‘in’ the media; this naturalised hierarchy, in turn, helps reinforce the special status of media themselves. This is what underlies, for example, the common reading of celebrities and their stories as if they stood for something more, something central about contemporary social life.

Media rituals, then, like all rituals, do not so much express order, as naturalise it. They formalise categories, and the differences or boundaries between categories, in performances that help them seem natural, even legitimate; in this case, the



boundaries and category differences on which the apparently ‘natural’ social legitimacy of media institutions is based (cf Couldry, 2000). This way of thinking about the relations between ritual and power is, of course, very much at odds with the implications of traditional Durkheimian readings of ritual. I am drawing instead on Pierre Bourdieu’s radical revision of Durkheimian notions of ritual in his article ‘Rites of Institution’ (Bourdieu, 1991). The ritual dimension, for Bourdieu, of the classic rite of passage (from boy to man) lies not in affirming community via the expression of certain transcendental values, but in naturalising the arbitrary boundaries on which the very possibility of the rite of passage depends: that is, the assumption that the male/female distinction (which divides in advance those who can undergo the rite of passage and those who can’t) is socially central (1991: 117-118). For Bourdieu, rituals are ‘rites of institution’, which institute as natural, and seemingly legitimate, certain key category differences and boundaries (for a fuller discussion, see Couldry, 2003: 27-28).

In developing this post-Durkheimian account of ritual, and media rituals, there are other links to areas of anthropological theory not usually associated at all with the Durkheimian tradition. Ritual appears to be both necessary and open to individual appropriation and reflection, since every ritual performance is always only a rough approximation to some imagined form. This potentially puzzling aspect of ritual is at the root of Maurice Bloch’s analysis. Maurice Bloch (turning usual approaches to ritual on their head in a way that recalls Barthes’ (1972) notion of myth as a ‘turnstile’ that alternates continually between ‘reality’ and ‘myth’) argues that this very ambiguity of ritual is central to its effectiveness (Bloch, 1989: 130). It is rituals’ oscillation between timeless history and contingent adaptation that allows us to believe in their overriding ‘truth’. It is precisely this type of ambiguity that we need to grasp in understanding some well-known contemporary ritual forms, for example reality game-shows like *Big Brother* (Couldry, 2002).

This argument is not however an attempt to reinstall ‘ideology’ in media analysis through the back door. The relationship between rituals and belief is a complex one, far from any simple notion that ritual action ‘expresses’ ideological contents which are explicitly believed. Clearly, in the media case there is no such explicit media ‘credo’ (even if someone claimed there was one, it would be quickly disavowed as such), but this does not contradict the idea that the media’s authority depends on the incessant work through which the categories underlying media rituals are reproduced.

### **The Media’s Ritual Categories**

In this section I want to explain more fully what are the categories of thought at play in media rituals, and so complete my account of what we can mean by the term ‘media rituals in a non-functionalist framework. For convenience, let’s call these categories ‘the media’s ritual categories’. What are they? First, and most important, the basic category difference between anything ‘in’ or ‘on’ or associated with ‘the media’, and anything which is not. There is no type of thing in principle to which this difference can not apply; that is what it means to say that it is a category difference. Like Durkheim’s distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, it cuts across everything in the social world; anything can be ‘in’ the media. The ‘difference’ between what is ‘in’ and not ‘in’ the media is therefore not natural, but a difference which, through continual usage, is constructed as natural (cf Couldry, 2000: 41).

We can observe ourselves and others constructing, as different, things, events, people, places or worlds 'in' the media. We see this in the construction of particular events as 'media events', or in the construction of specific media places, as places of 'pilgrimage', and in the category differences that get drawn between media people and non-media people, in the construction of celebrities, stars and 'personalities'.

So far we have looked at the category difference, and hierarchy, between what is in the media and what is not. This is the primary distinction through which the myth of the mediated centre is naturalised. But there are important secondary differences as well; these derive from the assumption that what is 'in' the media must have higher status than what is not, but are distinct in their reference-point. For example, the term 'liveness' derives from the status of what is presented in the media, but suggests a little more explicitly that the reason media things matter more is because they are part of society's current 'reality'. That 'reality' is changing from moment to moment, as media coverage changes, which means that whatever is being shown now must, relatively, have a higher status than what is no longer being shown: hence the status of live transmission. Even more explicit, but still naturalised, are the distinctions drawn between the 'reality' of the different things media present: the debates about 'reality TV', or the pursuit of the 'really real' moment of 'true' emotion in the televised talk show (cf Couldry, 2003, chs 6 and 7).

The media's ritual categories, like all important organising categories, are reproduced in countless different circumstances. It is these categories that in media rituals are worked upon and further naturalised through bodily performance. Once again, it is Bourdieu's work on ritual that is particularly helpful in understanding this link (particularly that part of Bourdieu's work which draws on Durkheim's close collaborator, Marcel Mauss). Ritual, Bourdieu argues, is not an abstract expression of an idea, but instead a pattern of thought realised through embodied performance; ritual enactment is inseparable from the 'practical mastery' of the ritual agent who has internalised the key distinctions and categories on which the ritual is based (Bourdieu, 1977: 87-95, discussed by Bell, 1992: 107-108).

The anthropologist of religion Catherine Bell has usefully developed these ideas to argue that it is such practical mastery that is the end-point of religious ritualisation, 'the body invested with a "sense" of ritual' (1992: 98). Our sense of ritual - of certain forms of action as having heightened significance - is one way in which broad hierarchies are reinforced through the details of local performance. In this way ritual performance suggests a 'higher' order of things:

Fundamental to all strategies of ritualization . . . is the appeal to a more embracing authoritative order that lies beyond the immediate situation. Ritualization is generally a way of engaging some wide consensus that those acting [in ritual] are doing so as a type of natural response to a world conceived and interpreted as affected by forces that transcend it. (Bell 1997: 169)

This notion of ritualisation is perfectly adapted, as already suggested, to help us understand media rituals and their deep hinterland in everyday media-oriented practice.

Now, at least, we are in a position to explain more specifically what types of action might count as media rituals. Let me first approach this through the types of places where we might look for media rituals (there are a number of possibilities, still little researched or studied):

- Sites where people cross from the non-media ‘world’ into the media ‘world’, such as studios, or any place where 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, even if this takes place in the course of action that is otherwise not formalised.

In all these situations, people act out category differences that reproduce in condensed form the idea, or derivatives of the idea, that media are our ‘natural’ access point to society’s ‘centre’. What types of action might these be? Here are some examples:

- people calling out as their presence ‘on air’ is acknowledged (the studio chat show host turns to them and asks them to clap, ‘show what they feel’);<sup>9</sup>
- people either holding back, or rushing forward, at the sight of a celebrity;
- people holding back before they enter a place connected with the media, so as to emphasise the boundary they cross by entering it;
- performances by media people that acknowledge their own specialness before a crowd of non-media people;
- performances by non-media people when they are in certain types of formalised media context, such as a talk show.

How far, in any particular situation, mere ritualisation flips over into the formality of a full-blown media ritual is a matter of empirical detail. The key point to understand however is that the anti-functionalist notion of media rituals developed here spans both media rituals as such and the wider space of ritualisation that lies behind them and that sustains them. The concept of media ritual/ ritualisation therefore links in a single explanatory arc intense moments of personal media performance (someone revealing private truths before unknown millions on a talk show) and the everyday banality of a whole room turning round because a celebrity is thought to have entered the room. Both - and everything that lies between them - are part of how we live out as truth the ‘myth of the mediated centre’.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The approach offered here aims to confound the conventional association of ‘ritual’ with the preservation of some assumed traditional social ‘order’. On the contrary, the complexities of this account - and particularly its resolute anti-functionalism - are designed to address a paradox that is profoundly and even distinctively modern. This is a paradox of ambiguity. It was Henri Lefebvre who fixed on the ambiguity of everyday life in his writings in the early days of electronic media (Lefebvre, 1991: 18): the ambiguity that comes from the way the private space of everyday life is already crossed by countless trajectories of power (the economy, political order, media narratives). So too in assessing the media’s wider social consequences, we cannot separate out our hopes, our myths, our moments of togetherness and personal

expression, on the one hand, or conflict, on the other hand, from the mediated social forms which they now, almost always, take, and the uneven power relations on which those forms are based. To understand this we need certainly a model of the media's ritual dimensions, but one that has moved beyond any vestiges of functionalism.

The result is to return to James Carey, but without either the functionalism or the neglect for questions of power which, because Carey attributed them to Durkheim, led him to deny the theoretical legacy he shared in common with Durkheim (cf Rothenbuhler, 1993). It was Carey who put the paradox and challenge of the media's social impacts better than anyone else:

reality is a scarce resource . . . the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display that resource. (1989: 87)

How can we doubt that the fundamental question about mediation is a question of power, the uneven distribution of the power to influence representations of social 'reality'? A post-Durkheimian view however holds onto Philip Elliott's insight in one of the first, but still one of the best, essays on media and ritual: 'ritual . . . is a structured performance in which not all participants are equal' (Elliott, 1980: 145). So too, inevitably, are even the most apparently unifying moments of our media experience. That is the point of applying Durkheim's insights to a world where all possibilities of 'acting in common'<sup>11</sup> are already mediated through social forms (media forms) that are inseparable from highly uneven effects of power.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf most recently Gitlin (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Martin-Barbero (1993), Couldry (2000), Silverstone (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For example Myerhoff (1977: 199), Lewis (1980: 25), Douglas (1984: 63-64), Smith (1987: 109-110), Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 88-89), Rappaport (1999: 24). Cf also Carey (1989: 21) and Rothenbuhler (1998: 57) in media theory.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail, see Couldry (2000: chapters 1 and 3) drawing on Durkheim (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Cf Bourdieu (1977: 203 n49).

<sup>6</sup> See Bell (1992, 1997); Asad (1993: 87-79); Handelman (1998: x) and above all Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1991). Cf in media studies Saenz (1994: 584).

<sup>7</sup> See Bourdieu (1991); Asad (1993: 53); Bell (1997: 81-2), Elliott (1982: 145), Bloch (1989).

<sup>8</sup> See Couldry (2000, chapter 1).

<sup>9</sup> This is one aspect of Karin Becker's excellent article (1995), which perhaps comes closest to the approach developed here.

<sup>10</sup> See Couldry 2003, chapter 3, for more discussion.

<sup>11</sup> I am referring here to Durkheim's fundamental claim that 'society can only feel its influence in action, and [society] is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled and act in common' (Durkheim, 1995: 421, emphases added, discussed Stedman Jones, 2001: 214).