Ritual and Media: the legacies of French Anthropology

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Abstract

This paper argues that Nick Couldry’s analysis of media rituals is a significant advance on the early work of James Carey who can be credited with having critiqued the pervasive ‘instrumentalism’ of communication studies in his exploration of ritual ontologies of communications. In Carey’s case, this involved undoing the entrenched dualism of thinking about communication in subject/object terms in which communications is a realm of that does not have its own culture. The title of his book Communication as Culture makes the basic point that communications do not exist as some kind of service or ‘apparatus’ for culture but constitutes its own system of culture. But Couldry, who is concerned that Carey retains a functionalist interpretation of media, wants to uphold sociologists of media who resists the functionalist interpretations of Durkheim (such as Pierre Bourdieu and Maurice Bloch). Media, in themselves, do not integrate populations, except in a mythical constructed sense. They may express something transcendental, beyond the everyday, but for Couldry the sacredness of media is a reflection of more extensive power relations in modern society. There is more at stake in media than just ‘distracted forms of image consumption’. What is ‘at stake’ in modern media can, I argue, best be evaluated by a re-reading of Jean Baudrillard, who is a key neo-Durkheimian theorist whom Couldry leaves out of his theoretical model. With Baudrillard, the ‘myth of the mediated centre’ is generated by the abolition of symbolic exchange where communication of the gift is replaced by the consumption of communications — whose only message is the communication of consumption.

The specificity of media rituals

Ritual communication and the redefinition of ‘ritual’ in relation to media has opened up a new branch of study in recent years. At least some of the impetus for the turn to ritual is frustration with the repetitive orthodoxy of ‘effects analysis’ and the transmission model of communication. However, apart from anthropology (see Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005), the
analysis of media ritual struggles to find a paradigmatic home, and part of this quandary is that media rituals are seen to be qualitatively different from the anthropological study of communal rituals or those that characterise the festivals of modernity.

Nick Couldry, who has taken the ritual perspective to new frontiers in recent times, argues that media rituals should not be seen as extensions or representations of other kinds of ceremonies. Oft used examples like a coronation does not capture what is involved in ritual media. Couldry distinguishes between three types of ritual: ritual as habitual action, ritual as formalized action, and ritual as action that is associated with transcendent values. It is this latter form of ritual which has the most bearing on the role of media in social integration. For Couldry, media represent a ‘wider space of ritualization’ which has a range of transcendental functions beyond individual habits of media consumption. Rather the rituals of media are distinguished by the way they reify a powerful boundary between a concentrated centre of media power and an excluded reality of everyday life.

The important feature of this division is however, that the ‘mediated centre’ is mythical — it is both imaginary and real. Media appear to occupy the centre of social life, an appearance that is convincing and therefore real. It is this ‘imaginary’ relationship to media, that media somehow are seen to legitimately sit at the centre of social life, that leads to a ritual relationship to them. Couldry describes a condition in which every member of modern society believes that the media are our ‘access point to society’s centre’. Because of this, the media itself enjoys a virtual monopoly over the power of naming (Couldry 2003a: 43), and ‘defining-the-situation’.

The concentration of power in the media, is ‘socially sanctioned’ by everyday practices of ritual. Media rituals for Couldry, differ from most definitions of ritual in that they are not just about ‘preserving’ the past (e.g. the transmission of culture) but rather they are a means of feeling connected to society ‘right now’, from minute to minute, hour to hour. But media rituals are not subservient to some underlying impulse to preserve the social order. Media is related to power — but not functionally. Media rituals do not just maintain social integration (‘community’) but enable the ‘management of conflict and the masking of inequality’ (2003a: 61)

The power of central media provides for ‘spaces of ritualisation’ rests on one ‘central inequality’ – the historic concentration of symbolic power in media institutions’ (2003a: 64) This inequality is naturalized though habitual daily practices – ‘liveness’, media events, media pilgrimages, reality TV, talk shows.
These rituals perpetuate the ‘myth of the mediated centre’ rather than society itself. The practices of genres and mediums that give us access to this mediated centre attain very high status whilst practices which do not connect with them are rendered mundane, ordinary and profane. Liveness is a particularly important aspect of this division.

**Liveness in media-centred Rituals**

For example, consider the newspaper, what Hegel called the ‘morning prayer of modernity’. Its power derives from its currency, its immediate relevance to the here and now, where its capacity to concentrate the specular consciousness of its readers is most intense. Few people would read yesterday’s newspaper if they have today’s edition, and if they did so it would be in order to review information in some kind of academic way.

Likewise, in an example Joshua Meyrowitz gives, it is an entirely different experience listening to pre-recorded music, unless it is the very latest ‘release’ as opposed to ‘tuning in’ to hear broadcasted music which we might relate to via a radio host or simply by stepping into the simultaneous current of event reception which re-determines such music as a mediated event. ‘There is a big difference between listening to a cassette tape while driving in a car and listening to a radio station, in that the cassette tape cuts you off from the outside world, while the radio ties you into it.’ (Meyrowitz, 1985:90)

Then there is also the study of spectacular events, which may be celebratory (for example: the Olympics or a political event) or otherwise of a kind which shocks and interrupts. (see Dayan and Katz 1992, Cottle 2006) The difference between these two kinds of events is that the celebratory one’s are planned and have a build up of weeks or months whilst the conflicted media events are generally unplanned and unexpected. (except perhaps by those who may have planned to highjack airtime by creating the spectacle in question). These kinds of media events may involve moral panics, disaster marathons, a so-called ‘media scandal’ or a mediatised public crisis. (see Cottle 2006)

**Media-oriented Rituals**

But the ritual event, still does not, according to Couldry, provide an appreciation of the mythical relationship audiences have to central media and their genres.
To this end, Couldry also gives examples of media-oriented (2006:43) practices which are not simply about directly consuming media performances, be these live or not, but indirect practices where the reification of the ‘media-ordinary’ boundary is re-created. Of all the available examples the most cited are those related to celebrities, who becomes a condensation point for the contemporary expression of the ‘cult of individualism.’ The pervasiveness of celebrity culture and discourses about celebrity inside and outside media, is not confined to everyday practices of viewing. The appearance of celebrities in magazines and high up in news values, communicates the idea that ‘celebrity actions demand special attention’ (Couldry 2006:46) This attention is formalized in fan cultures, but also in media-oriented practices like ‘media pilgrimages’ where fans visit a place made famous by a celebrity, a group or individuals who have themselves once made a miraculous pilgrimage from being ‘nobody’s’ to being ‘a name’. Regardless of our individual likes and dislike toward celebrities, every member of society is forced into practices where we are compelled to maintain ‘a constant point of reference with them.’ Actually, it is when the two worlds of having a media-centred relationship (watching a celebrity) and a media-oriented relationship, (talking about celebrities, media pilgrimages) that the threshold or boundary between the ordinary and the media field becomes visible. These world collapse and the boundary becomes an intense point of negotiation when a celebrity enters a room. As Couldry observes, this spontaneous negotiation involves whether to hold back and pretend not to notice the celebrity or to rush forward to greet someone who we have ‘known’ on screen for many years, before we remember that they do not have a clue who we are. (Couldry 2003:52)

Media-oriented practices, are those practices which are enacted in the great shadow that is cast by the totemic nature of media. Such practices need not simply be oriented to the identities that are sacralised by media (i.e. celebrities) but can be oriented to specific spaces, and knowledges. For example, highly mediatised spaces like sports grounds, or even tourist destinations, become cause for rituals that exceed the roll of the camera (indeed, the role of the camera also). Such places are sacralised, by the camera, as much as being visited in person by those who have hitherto shared such spaces only through the image that the camera makes possible. Couldry also gives examples of how particular forms of knowledge may become privileged because they are legitimated by a mediated centre: practices of using media sources in education; individuals’ use of media references in telling stories about themselves, their family or historical events; the uses of media in the legal system and indeed in work practices across the public world.” (Couldry 2004: 126)
Couldry’s departure from Carey

Couldry’s work provides an interesting new direction in the ritual media perspective. He is interested in some of the Durkeheimian legacy that Carey took up, particularly the idea of boundary maintenance, but is critical of functionalist tendencies in Carey’s work.

We can recall that Carey’s entire construction of the importance of ritual is set against the instrumentalism of the process model of communication. This instrumentalism, reproduces the positivist dualism of thinking about communication in subject-object terms, reality and representation, and its commitment to the transparency of media. Carey reminds us in Communication as Culture that human communication and later human systems of communication(s) develops its own system of culture which is not reducible to how simply representing social reality.

Without rehearsing too many of the most cited passages, for Carey, social reality is partly produced in communication, not simply reflected by it. Quoting from John Dewey Carey argues, 'Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication' (Carey, 1988: 14)

Thus, the role of communication in social reproduction is accented in Carey but in a non-functionalist way. For example the functionalism of the dominant ideology thesis or the culture industry argument, that media and communications are shaped by the logic of capital or ‘the needs of fractions of capital’ is qualitative different to the ritual perspective. Rather, communications are considered to be diffused in the very possibilities of sociability, not some kind of ‘moral improvement’ of the same. As such communications are indispensable to social reproduction.

In other words communication is not relegated to providing a medium for social integration, rather in the modern context of large-scale integration and complex systems of media and communications, it is both subject and object of such integration.

“A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey 1988: 18)

The problem Couldry has with Carey’s understanding of communications is that it retains a Durkheinian view of social totality. ‘To be “post-Durkheinian” 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’ (Couldry 2005: 61)

For Couldry, Carey’s commitment to a the macro-frame of a social whole, necessarily limits an understanding of how media rituals are practices which actually reify the idea of social order.

Secondly, Carey’s work downplays the conflict that is present in ritual. (Couldry 2006: 89) Couldry offers the work of Pierre Bourdieu as a theorist who can rescue media from a functionalist role. Drawing on field theory (see in particular Couldry 2003b), mass media are seen to influence practices in so many fields of social life, such as the visual arts, or, in responding to news agendas, the functioning of ‘schools, hospitals and law enforcement’ (2006: 44) But to see such institutions as each being tied together by a single agent and ascribing media with this agency is erroneous according to Couldry.

Couldry’s method turns away from seeing social categories as expressive of a universal human condition, (as in the dominant reading of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) but takes up Bourdieu’s insistence (which is also that of Michel Foucault) that the social construction of such categories are refracted through political forces, the latter of which are situational, discursive and conflictual.

For Couldry, the key Bourdieuan argument here is that modern symbolic power works through ‘symbolic violence’ which is an invisible, but political form of violence. This violence, which is mis-recognised, is the ‘production of just one limited sector society merely claiming to be the voice of us all’ (Couldry 2003a: 40) Symbolic violence appears in the form of a symbolic gift, which compensates for the exposure of economic or political domination. Couldry points to new corporate marketing strategies which are not about products at all but about boosting the goodwill of the company by displaying how much it cares about the disadvantaged or the environment without any disruption to returns on investment From this point of view, says Couldry, ‘the weakness of the Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian accounts of ritual become clearer. It is not that they lack a notion of symbolic power: what they lack is an understanding of that power’s inseparability from symbolic violence.’ (Couldry 2003a: 40)
From social integration to the abolition of the social — revisiting Baudrillard.

What is missing from Carey’s account of the role of media in social reproduction and Couldry’s claims that media are central to the belief that ‘everything works as if there were a functioning whole’, is an adequate examination of the exchanges that are possible within the architecture of traditional media.

The kinds of media rituals Carey and Couldry describe, are, as they acknowledge, only made possible by the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions. But such concentrations amounts to the abolition of symbolic exchange in the sense understood by the ritual legacy of French anthropology.

Here I argue, that is the much misunderstood Jean Baudrillard who can elucidate what is at stake in the abolition of such exchange the therefore why the belief in the myth of the mediated centre is able to perpetuate itself.

Baudrillard rejects the characterisation of his work as postmodern and the the most important influence on his work can be traced back to French anthropology. In an important book, William Merrin (2005) has salvaged Baurdillard’s work from his postmodern contemporaries by tracing the influences of Durkheim, Mauss and the College of Sociology influential in Paris in the 1930s. Merrin argues that the key to understanding the popularised concept of ‘simulacra’ is to understand the significance of ‘symbolic exchange’ in his work.

Rather than being a supporter of what many see as the decadent fatalism of postmodern thought, Baudrillard see the development of modern media in terms of a great fall in the history of human communication. The passage from symbolic gift exchange societies to modern mass societies has resulted in a steady decline of human communication. He makes the apparently absurd claim that ‘mass media facilitate non-communication’ (Baudrillard: 1983) This is because, for Baudrillard, there is no communication without an act of exchange. Modern mass media on the other hand, constitute a form of ‘speech without a response’ (Baudrillard, 1981b: 169) Thus Baudrillard goes further than Bourdieu .. it is not that the presence of symbolic violence is misrecognised in modern communications, it is that it annuls the possibility of communication in the first place. .

Traditional societies are based on the key ritual of symbolic gift exchange, ‘an act of exchange and a social relation’ (Baudillard, 1981a: 133). Bound up this exchange is the
opportunity for the giver to attain a kind of honour and prestige that is seldom seen in media societies in which the mass audience has no opportunity to ‘give’.

Thus mass media do not provide an environment in which there can be a group recognition of reciprocity which gives people access to the sacred and the divine. In several texts, Durkheim and Mauss describe how, in pre-modern societies, the organised offering of gifts and sacrificial goods at festivals and religious rituals results in an intense release of energy, convulsive and euphoric, which lifts individuals out of the mundane and the everyday.

In media societies, communication of the gift is replaced by the consumption of communications whose only message is the communication of consumption. ‘…. The media induce a social relation’…. that involves … ‘the abstraction, separation and abolition of exchange itself’ (Baudrillard, 1981b: 169) Television is a measure of people ‘no longer speaking to each other’, isolated in the face of a ‘speech without response’. (Baudrillard, 1981b:). In echoes of Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, the only recourse that audiences have to reclaim exchange is by an abstract circuit of consumption. Through consumption, individuals can realise the meaning of the image that is attached to the commodity but, for Baudrillard, when this becomes systemic it leads to the ‘total organization of everyday life’ what he calls the realm of the semiotic or simulacra.

From the Symbolic to the Semiotic

When the symbolic is translated into the semiotic ‘the lived, eventual character of the world is transformed into images of itself’ (Baudrillard, 1998) ‘We live, sheltered by signs in the denial of the real’ consuming reality as a sign. Consumer Society. Television, in particular, constitutes a vast simulation machine in which the displacement of communication by a ‘speech without response’ becomes total. For example, Baudrillard says: ‘In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver: technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system’ (Baudrillard, 1981b: 181) For Baudrillard, what the process model would call ‘feedback’ is part of the ‘cybernetic illusion’. Genres of media which formally appear to set up a ‘reversibility’ of circuits (such a letters to the editor, phone in programs, polls, etc) integrate the contingency of all possible responses in advance. These genres rely on the illusion of responsibility in exchange but they are in fact a co-option of a fraction of the audience for the benefit of cybernetic illusion.
In symbolic exchange power is accumulated by those who can give without being repaid. Reciprocity is however achieved over-time through the potlatch. In media societies, all of the power belongs to mass media as, the system of simulacra cannot be democratised.

This is why, for example, Baudrillard argues that the ‘abstraction’ of media constitutes a total system of power and control which cannot be subverted. In Requiem for the Media he says: All vague impulses to democratise content …. control the information process, contrive a reversibility of circuits, or take power over media are hopeless — unless the monopoly of speech is broken…” (Baudrillard, 1981b:170)

The common misconception that ‘feedback’ (the process model) is a form of reversibility, is a potent apologia for non-response, another device for the abolition of exchange, merely the simulation of a response.

Baudrillard discusses the futility of ‘using’ media as a form of protest in relation to the failed French revolution of May 1968. For Baudrillard, there was a brief moment of reversibility, where protestors appeared to use the media against the power structure, but for Baudrillard this just provided content destined to be coopted into the media’s system of power. When the discourse of the protest is ‘transformed into models, neutralized into signs’ their meaning is eviscerated. The momentum of the protest is short-circuited by being made over in the abstract bureaucratic model of ‘habitual social control’. Once transformed into the familiar models of meaning that are habituated by mass media, the ‘revolutionary’ events begin to be read according to the models and codes of particular mediums. Television in particular can never accommodate a model of subversion, and, on the contrary, finds a situation where ‘the media have never discharged their responsibilities with more efficiency’ (Baudrillard, 1981b: 173) In otherwords, what television is succeeds in most of all, is moulding the ephemerality and the spontaneity of events into a coded narrative which audiences are forced to make sense of according to other narratives (especially if they are spectacles) that are peculiar to TV. Thus the operation of symbolic communication which can only be successful off-screen either, always finds its way onto the screen or the screen becomes the totem via which people make sense of it. Baudrillard says of the failed French Revolution of 1968:

The real revolutionary media during May were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and the hand-painted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged — everything that was an immediate inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street is, in this sense, the alternative and subversive form of the mass media, since it isn’t, like the latter, an objectified
support for answerless messages, a transmission system at a distance. It is the frayed space of
the symbolic exchange of speech — ephemeral, mortal: a speech that is not reflected on the
Platonic screen of the media. Institutionalized by reproduction, reduced to a spectacle, this
speech is expiring. (Baudrillard, 1981b: 176-77)

What Baudrillard, doesn’t explain however, is how street forms of communication, even if
they are never televised, might nevertheless be made sense of by way of the code of
television. As with his romantic yearning for the tribal foundations of communication, the
street seems to represent the last remnant of symbolic exchange, at once glorified and
abolished. Baudrillard’s bleak view of media as totalitarian, displays a number of problems
which had become apparent by the 1990s:. One was the challenge of computer-mediated
communication to the unilinear model of media that Baudrillard complains of. Clearly, online
forms of contact and community allow for degrees of reciprocity which are not extinguished
by the semiotic code. Thus, Baudrillard’s account of simulacra becomes specific to mass
media rather than mediation in general as the status of the image in broadcast environments is
completely different to online media. But as perhaps the foremost theorist of the image in
modern society, Baudrillard is attune to the violences of symbolic power, in a non-
functionalist and profoundly anthropological sense, which continue to cast their shadow over
the modern possibilities of communication.

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