The journey of ritual communication

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THE JOURNEY OF RITUAL COMMUNICATION

This essay illustrates developments in the concept of ritual in American communication studies in the past three decades, beginning with James Carey's 1975 essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication." Ritual communication is no longer seen as a static concept counterposed for all time to a "transmission" view of communication, but rather as an independent, dynamic and increasingly deromanticized perspective on our contemporary media experience. The former emphasis on its idealized religious and ceremonial origins has given way to an acknowledgment of its complicated and ambiguous social role. While ritual has traditionally been perceived as uniting communities by reflecting and establishing shared meanings, Elihu Katz, Daniel Dayan, Eric Rothenbuhler and James Carey have enriched the concept with notions of power, authority and control. Ultimately, ritual communication is acknowledged today – alongside its integrative potentialities – as a tool for undemocratic manipulation and as a socially divisive mechanism. The essay concludes by suggesting that the cultural approach to communication should not shy away from the "transmission" view of communication, but instead embrace it as a means to concretely assess the ritualistic dimensions of the form, aesthetics and experience of media.

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Great theoretical concepts are sometimes a result of the happy encounter of a vague remark with a creative interpreter. It may be that one such remark was made by John Dewey in his *Experience and Nature* – "Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" (Dewey 1916: 5) – and that one such creative interpreter was James Carey, who saw in this cryptic statement the core of what was to become one of the more useful frameworks of communication theory. Carey expanded what he understood to be the difference between "*by* communication" and "*in* communication" to the seminal distinction between the *transmission* view of communication and the *ritual* view of communication. It is hard to find other concepts in communication theory that enjoy the universal applicability of the transmission vs. the ritual model, as Carey's simple dichotomy is gifted with explanatory powers; it encompasses all forms of communication and it is timeless – scholars will not miss the opportunity to debate how blogs or TiVo correspond to either the transmission or the ritual category. While it is nice to believe that Dewey's remark may have instigated Carey's model, it cannot take away from Carey's larger project – the institution of the cultural approach to communication as a dominating paradigm of the field.

The cultural approach that Carey offered in his 1975[1] essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication"[2] was not a theoretical framework[3] as much as it was a call for a particular "intellectual attitude" of the com-

[1] Carey, J. W. (1975). A Cultural Approach to Communication. *Communication* 2/2: 1–22.

[2] He later expanded it in his essays "Mass Communication and Cultural Studies" (1977), "Reconceiving 'Mass' and 'Media'" (1982) and "Overcoming Resistance to Cultural Studies" (1986), all reprinted as chapters in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (1992).

[3] Carey was aware that the path that he was drawing was not concretely illustrated. "Now I realize," he wrote, "that only the excessively adventurous, congenitally unhappy, or perpetually foolhardy are going to leave the cozy if not very interesting village of effects research for the uncharted but surprising savannah of cultural studies without a better map of the territory that I or anyone else has been able to provide. Filling that gap is a major task of the future. The best I can do at the moment is to encourage people to circle within an alternative conceptual vocabulary and an alternative body of literature that would help to mark out this unclaimed territory" (1992: 95).

munication discipline toward itself and society. Communication theory, Carey argued, has been too long overtaken by an unseemly preoccupation with power, instead of engaging itself with the baffling reality of human togetherness and the miraculous sustainability of communities. And indeed, communication research during the second half of the 20th century anatomized the "effectiveness" of mass media through functionalist and behaviorist approaches such as the "uses and gratifications" and "media effects" traditions. Carey found these to be symptomatic of a "power and anxiety" syndrome that emphasized the consequences of isolated units of communication over the place of communication in society; that despite rigorous empiricism, failed to reach any meaningful agreement and that degenerated into petty concerns with methodology.

The cultural approach, instead, was to engage in what Carey reckoned the great question of social order: "the problem of how persons and societies work when they are working effectively" (1992: 91). This reorientation of the field toward cultural studies required, Carey argued, a "change in the self image, self-consciousness and self-reflection we (communication scholars) have of the enterprise: ... This is both a little easier and much more painful a surrender than changing a reading list" (1992: 94). He advocated modesty, asking us, communication researchers, to be rid of "the alternating belief that we are either a neutral class of discoverers of the law of society or a new priesthood endowed with credentials that entitle us to run the social machinery" (1992: 94), and instead, to approach our communities from the standpoint of compassionate associates. Carey further championed openness and solidarity when he established the cultural approach as an interdisciplinary engagement of communication studies with the best in social thought and the humanities. He derived his inspirations from as diverse fields as Weberian sociology, anthropology (Clifford Geertz, more than anyone,) European and American cultural studies (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart) and even linguistics and literary theory (Kenneth Burke), all summoned for the formation of communication as a cultural construct, or, in his words, the "integrated relations of symbols and social structure" (1992: 110).

More to the interest of this essay, Carey suggested *ritual* as the core metaphor of the cultural approach to communication, as the notions and mental associations that the ritual evoked carried the essence of his funda-

mental argument: that it was through communication and only through communication that societies could be created and maintained.

The aim of this essay is to trace some of the American scholarly thinking about "ritual communication" since Carey laid out his interpretation of it in 1975. While Carey's transmission vs. ritual dichotomy was immediately celebrated as a powerful truth about the ways people experienced and perceived communication, the ritual metaphor gained a life of its own and assumed different interpretations. The following sections will illustrate the major developments that the ritual metaphor has undergone since "A Cultural Approach to Communication" and assess its place in communication theory today.

This interpretive survey will place a particular emphasis on the increasingly complex relationship of ritual communication with the concept of *authority*. Ritual rehearses a prescribed sequence of socially accepted conventions, and although it is essentially a voluntary act (setting aside frightening ritual forms of physical brutality), disobedience bears a risk of varying degrees of social isolation. Scholars from various disciplines have had differing ideas on the powers that conceived ritualistic conventions and established them as social imperatives. They considered potential uses and abuses of the authority of the ritual, and some even pondered whether the essentially imposing ritual was good or bad *per se*. The journey of ritual communication, as laid out in the following pages, tells of this growing concern over the moral potentialities – even dangers – of the authority of ritual communication. But first things first: let us begin the journey with James Carey, and his ritual vs. transmission view of communication.

1. Introduction: The Relationship between the Transmission View and the Ritual View of Communication

A short-list of related adjectives will suffice as a reminder of the essential characteristics of Carey's straightforward dichotomy: The transmission view, which looks at communication as means to achieve control over distance and people (1992: 15), is instrumental, scientific, utilitarian and message-oriented; it sees communication as a "process and technology that … spread, transmit and disseminate knowledge, ideas and informa-

tion" (ibid.: 17). The ritual view of communication, on the other hand, perceives communication as a representation of shared beliefs (ibid.: 18); it is communal, participatory, symbolic, experiential and – most importantly – it sees communication as culture. While the ritual perspective finds in communication the fundamental symbolic order in which we live, the transmission view reveals – or as Carey would argue, attempts to reveal – the inner workings of communication as an apparatus of persuasion.

From their moment of inception, the transmission view and the ritual view of communication were doomed to rivalry. Carey himself explicitly destined them to be "contrasting definitions" (ibid.: 14). However, this last statement was probably less indicative of his intentions than his later clarification, that an analysis of a specific form of communication should not necessarily result in its categorization into one of the two. "A ritual view," he explained, "does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except insofar as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order" (ibid.: 21). Kenneth Cmiel considered Carey's formulation of the relationship between the two views a demonstration of Carey's full commitment to the inclusive nature of ritual communication (Cmiel 1992: 287).

The ritual view and the transmission view are not mutually exclusive: Just as ritual communication transmits information, transmissive communication has a ritualistic dimension. This means that communication scholars need not bother with the question of whether our media as such adhere more to the transmission view or the ritual view. Rather, all forms of communication correspond to both views in various ways, and it is the field of communication studies that has been given the privilege of thinking about them either in terms of the transmission or the ritual perspective.

2. The Ritual View of Communication

Carey defined the archetypal ritual as "the sacred ceremony that [drew] persons together in fellowship and commonality" (1992: 18). The emphasis in the ritual metaphor was not on its "top-down" instructional or authoritative value, but rather on its ability to inspire comradeship on the basis of a common idea.

Of all of Carey's ideas on ritual, the religious ritual archetype[4] has been most often used over the years as a shorthand summary of the concept of ritual communication. Such over-use eventually threatened to turn the religious archetype into an academic cliché and to strip the ritual metaphor of its emotional substance. Let us try to put this erosion process on hold – even for a second – by attempting to identify the authentic notions that Carey associated with ritual. Indeed, the religious ritual is not some faraway anthropological curiosity, and most of us have had some experience with it, be it Communion, Seder, funerals or religious wedding ceremonies. Sometimes, if we are willing to take the ritual ceremony seriously, we may experience a moment where some symbolic act – or phrase – suddenly commands us to care, and strikes us with a profound sense of our place in history and in our community. Susanne Langer captured this prescribed response to ceremony when she called it an "attitude" rather than a "feeling," denoting in a very nuanced way our settled, pre-conceived, approach to the ritual. "This attitude," she wrote, "[could] not be recognized through any clearer medium than that of formalized gesture," (1957: 153) because words would not do as well as the ceremonial ritual to "symbolize great conceptions" (ibid.: 49). Instead, only the "cryptic form" of the ritual could embody this transcendence and "yield a strong sense of tribal or congregational unit, of rightness and security. [...] Ritual," she concluded, was "not a free expression of emotions, but a disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes'" (ibid.: 153).

The force of the religious ritual may be explicated even more thoroughly through a phenomenological description of the physical and mental experience that it entails.[5] Advanced phenomenology, as introduced by

[4] Carey's transmission view of communication similarly drew from religious sources. The quest for control over space and over people derived from the religious mission to "extend the kingdom of God." (1992: 15–16)

[5] Phenomenology, a European-based development in philosophy that presents itself as a scientific approach to philosophy (Husserl 1917/1981) explores the relationship between the human body, human consciousness and the external world that reveals itself to them. According to Husserl, the connecting element between human consciousness (termed "For Itself," because it is intrinsically relational to any objects under its consideration) and the objective world ("In Itself") is the human body, through which consciousness materializes and contends with the real world (Husserl 1962). The religious

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), has argued for the "embodiment" of the human experience, namely the essential inseparability of body, mind and action. Human communication could not be conceptually broken up into external physical "gestures," signifiers, on the one hand, and "meanings," signified, on the other hand. Rather, gestures and meanings were one: "expressions *contain* the meaning in the act of expressing. The shaking of the fist is not an external sign pointing to anger [...] The meaning of being angry is inseparable from the gesture itself" (Schrag 1986: 44, emphasis added). The phenomenological approach addresses the religious ritual as the physical embodiment of sublime content, and pays particular attention to the richness of its sensory elements. The intensity of sound, sight, smell, taste and touch within the religious ritual is commensurate with – and no less important than – its spiritual import.

Such analyses of the potency of the religious ritual correspond with the experience that James Carey contemplated as *ritual communication*. We should follow him by asking ourselves, what are the occasions of our own interaction with media that evoke the particular attitude that the ritual commands? I think that the answer is that there are many. If we are abroad, for example, and come across a newspaper from our home country, we read it with both familiarity and reverence. We are similarly caring and serious when a compatriot "represents us" in a televised contest. But beyond that, we attend our media ceremonially in the most mundane situations. James Carey, for example, cherished the act of reading the daily paper, which he saw "less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass" (1992: 20). He found the significance of journalistic stories, as Andie Tucher (2007) observed, in their ritualistic, "predictable,

ritual, from this perspective, is a bodily act that bears particular significance, inasmuch as it has both "In Itself" and "For Itself" qualities: "In Itself," because ritual requires no explanations – it is a distinct act, well-defined by way of positivistic set of rules; "For Itself," because these rules stand for a higher purpose, worthy of intellectual consideration. Situated in the physical and spiritual realms, the ritual effects a unique process, whereas one's consciousness meets one's own body performing a "pre-reflective" ritual act (Merleaut-Ponty 1945/1962), and then responds with an inquiry into the meaning of what it is that is being performed. This is how "sensation, emotion, and the other areas of pre-reflective consciousness are brought into harmony with clear thought and culture" (Zuesse 1975: 519).

clockwork recurrence" of mythical morality tales, rather than in their ever-changing exemplars. The great and ongoing task of cultural maintenance, the constant process of reminding and reinforcing values, could only be achieved through repetition and habit.

The problem, however, with the emphasis on the consensual aspects of ritual communication is that it posits a limitation on Carey's concept: "bonding" is static. *Ritual's theory of unity disregards the powers that change society over time.* Carey insisted that the ritual view was concerned with "the construction and maintenance of paradigms rather than experiments; presuppositions rather than propositions; the frame, not the picture" (1992: 85). By so defining the nature and purpose of ritual, he evaded the critical question of ritual's role in bringing about, or retarding, social change. He did so decisively, stating that "cultural studies [... offer] the real advantage of ... centering the mass media as a site [...] on which to engage the general question of social theory: How is it, through all sorts of change and diversity [...] that the miracle of social life is pulled off, that societies manage to produce and reproduce themselves?" (1992: 109–110). Carey found his inspiration for the cohesive role of ritual in Emilé Durkheim's (1912/2001) "collective representations" and "collective conscience." Durkheim's "mechanical solidarity" resided in pre-contractual integrative systems of shared beliefs and traditions. These ideological commonalities underlay modern society's tensions and power struggles, sustained its stability and enabled the capitalist economy to thrive.

Carey's reluctance to acknowledge ritual as a mechanism of social change can perhaps be explained by his attempt to dissociate ritual from the power-driven transmission view of communication. While ritual communication concerned itself with the ways society kept together *throughout* and *despite* social change, the transmission view concerned itself with nothing but change: not only did it seek to identify the optimal conditions that facilitated transformation of individual attitudes, it continued to participate in the enterprise by providing practical scientific methodology for the diffusion of control. As Cmiel summarily observed, the ritual view celebrated belonging; the transmission view celebrated conquest (1992: 286).

The authoritative dimensions of ritual communication, however, were later to be acknowledged – although not to their full, undemocratic, po-

tentialities – by Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan in their conceptualization of *media events*, where ritual achieved the form of a mass-mediated ceremony.

3. Media Events – Ceremonial Rituals

A central element in Katz and Dayan's *media events* framework, the concept of ritual was accepted and even popularized during the 1980s to the point of becoming a stock term in the communication jargon. Elihu Katz first conceptualized media events in a short essay in 1980 (Katz 1980: 84–89). In 1985, he joined Daniel Dayan to publish "Media Events: On the Experience of Not Being There" in the journal *Religion* (their book, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, would only publish later in 1992). *Religion* was an appropriate venue for "Media Events," as Katz and Dayan strongly emphasized the religious aspects of their concept. Media events – the "high holy days of mass communication" – were "television with a halo" (1992: 4).

Media events were live television broadcasts of nationally or internationally significant events, pre-planned and co-produced by well-established institutions (as governments and international sports committees) and broadcasters. Spectacular presentations of history in the making, media events received maximum exposure. Just as no network could afford to ignore them, citizens too felt obliged to bear witness. These institutional patriotic performances – the book's most famous examples included Prince Charles and Diana's wedding, John F. Kennedy's funeral and the moon landing – had a reverential aura, and as they dramatically enacted the sacred center of the status-quo, they evoked feelings of "communitas" and promoted solidarity and social order.

Media Events was a mostly cultural exploration (Katz and Dayan called their approach the "anthropology of ceremony," ibid.: 188). The authors engaged in a literary-interpretive analysis of the television programs that fit their media events criteria, showing how they projected crucial aspects of a nation's self-identity – its tradition, its governing institutions and its values. They went on to describe the technical and aesthetic means used to congratulate this self-image and augment its authority. Even though Katz and Dayan did not conduct systematic audience surveys or focus

groups, the book's examination of the "effects" of media events oriented it to some degree toward the transmission view of communication.

Katz and Dayan described media events as "rituals of coming and going" (ibid.: 119), rites of passage where audiences identified with the heroic transformations of the events' protagonists. The ritual metaphor was particularly pertinent in Coronations – ceremonies that followed, or rather performed, ritual traditions (1985: 307). While the authors did not make any explicit references to James Carey's work, their concept of ritual developed along the same lines that Carey outlined it, as a ceremonial and socially solidifying experience.

Media Events emphasized the participatory element of the ritual and filled it with substance. In what seemed like an attempt to stretch the possibilities of interaction with television, Katz and Dayan's media events' spectators were not only engulfed in the broadcast, but also assumed active ceremonial roles (such as mourners, pilgrims and philanthropists), which they were to perform in the privacy of their homes and in the company of close family and friends.

Media Events enriched the ritual metaphor not only by articulating it through a concrete, well-defined media phenomenon, but also by acknowledging its social authoritativeness. Clearly, media events were ritualistic displays of institutional power. Katz and Dayan explicitly used Weberian terminology to explain how Contests exerted rational authority, Conquests exploded with charisma and Coronations reinforced traditional authority. But media events clearly used their authority to deny opposition; they were consensual and peaceful because social conflict was always absent: it was either miniaturized (in Contests), resolved (in Conquests) or suspended (in Coronations).

The patently hegemonic workings of media events thus raised the inevitable question of whether they were a convenient brainwashing apparatus run by the incumbent regime. Katz and Dayan tried to answer their critics by arguing for a Durkheimian spirit of solidarity, and for the buffering capabilities of broadcasters' professional standards. "Free television," they argued, "acts as a brake on the temptation of government to mobilize mass support through political spectacle" (1992: 59). Eventually, it seemed as if Katz and Dayan were aware of the danger that lurked in media events, but more so, affected by the fact that their

media events were mostly celebrations of democracy (e.g. presidential debates) or celebrations in democracy (e.g. the moon landing). As Curran and Liebes (1998) put it, Katz and Dayan were motivated by the "belief that elites and public institutions have greater legitimacy in liberal democracies than in other political systems, and that therefore the values they extol and the collective identity that they celebrate are more likely to be authentic and widely shared by other members of society" (1998: 4–5). But such harmony between the collective identity and its reflection in media events could also be present in non-democratic environments. While it is easy to evoke spectacular totalitarian parades to demonstrate such possible harmony, it would be more helpful to consider media events that take place in democracies but celebrate values that are not necessarily democratic. Prince Charles and Diana's wedding, for example, reinforced the Royal Family's monarchical rule. The happy consensus surrounding it had nothing to do with democratic choice or democratic representation. Instead, this consensus may be to a great extent the outcome of the steady and glorious appearances of the Royal Family in a media event form. Consensus should be pointed to as the sign of ideological victory of media events, no less than it can serve as their justification.

Reviewing *Media Events* from the perspective of 25 years, its success can be attributed to the useful framework that it offered for analyzing instances of memorable media content. From *Media Events* on, scholarly analyses of mass-mediated dramatic occasions – ceremonial or not, news or fiction, televised or YouTubed – attempted to force the spectacle or the crisis to conform to the quite rigid media events criteria, and by that to win the halo that Katz and Dayan awarded their historic moments of television. The term "media events" itself has been irreversibly eroded. Not only is it used today to title the finals of the most marginal television contest, it has also become the leading catch phrase in corporate PR communiqués.

But back to our subject of interest: where did *Media Events* situate the ritual metaphor within American communication theory? Clearly, it infused ritual with authority, but it may also be, that by emphasizing the production process and the spectacle of media events, Katz and Dayan eventually reduced the ritual from a rich metaphor to a preplanned, ceremonial *television genre*. Something in Carey's encompassing vision of the-whole-of-communication-as-ceremony was lost. And so it seemed,

in the early 1990s, that it was time for some fresh thinking on ritual. Particularly, as new communication technologies were introduced, and as the media landscape became increasingly fragmented culturally and demographically, it made little sense to maintain the exclusive association of ritual communication with Katz and Dayan's dominating television events. No less, it was time to shift ritual's place of occurrence from television (where it was a joint project of institutions and broadcasters) back to the people, and to see it less as an interruption of normalcy and more as a part of everyday life.

4. Ritual Communication as an All Symbolic Activity

In his comprehensive work *Ritual Communication*, Eric Rothenbuhler (1998) argued for a definition of ritual communication that accommodated all patterns of symbolic behavior that humanity considered important. Ritual was "the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life" (1998: 27). There were rituals for every social occasion: "national rituals for the patriotic, relationship rituals for the romantic, friendship rituals for the loyal, authority rituals for the obedient, rituals of politeness for the civil" (ibid.: 129–130). Rothenbuhler's work integrated the ritual literature into a wide-ranging perspective of the concept. Not only did he settle theoretical discrepancies through a remarkable talent for interpretation, he also proposed a new and unidealized perspective on the relationship between ritual and authority. Unlike Carey, he did not see in ritual the pre-capitalist society that was "holding hands" symbolically; unlike Katz and Dayan, he did not trust it to merely celebrate the virtues of democracy. Rather, he approached ritual as the language that displayed the full spectrum of social attitudes, big as well as small. Power relations and manipulation existed on this spectrum and had their own ritualistic manifestations, but so did love and generosity.

Rothenbuhler argued that without ritual – "the symbolic means of crafting the self in social shape" – human society would have been limited to fortunate happy co-operations, utterly rational agreements or brutal coercions (ibid.: 130–131). As life was rarely about perfect peace nor bloodshed, ritual was there to manage all other social situations.

Rothenbuhler was sensitive to the "unthoughtfulness" of the ritual act and its inherent vulnerability to authority. But he rejected the claim that rituals were merely carrying out hegemonic work in the interest of the ruling class. There was a possibility for manipulation, he admitted, but it was merely a possibility, not a presumption. Identifying ritual with institutional maneuvering was, in his view, a grave allegation, because it implied that the cooperating community was blind or confused. Hegemonic, manipulative rituals, concluded Rothenbuhler, should only be identified carefully, on an empirical case-by-case basis (ibid.: 33–35). Ritual was powerful, and as all things powerful, certain circumstances made it dangerous. But at the end of the day, he said, "we have no evidence that we can live apart and plenty that we can only live together. Ritual is a means for managing that" (ibid.: 130).

By conceiving ritual as the symbolic behavior that constituted participation in the serious life – conversations, etiquettes, ceremonies – Rothenbuhler offered ritual as a sociological paradigm that dominated most forms of human communication.[6] His vision of the ritual as an "ordered component of nearly all social action" (1988: 4) suggested that it was the *symbolic* aspects of human conduct that enabled the existence and preservation of social life. Rothenbuhler's thinking – and in this respect it was similar to James Carey's idea of communication as culture – was well situated in 20th century developments in the history of ideas, where "symbols" replaced "facts" as the basic unit of intellectual and scientific investigation.[7]

Indeed, the expansion of the concept of ritual communication from a sacred ceremony to all symbolic aspects of social behavior was characteristic of the growing intellectual interest in symbolism during the previous century. The ascendance of symbolism was not coincidental: it was a response to the problem of positivist sciences, that were argued, by some, to reach their sensory limits of observation and were thus being succeeded

[6] This broad perspective on ritual communication gained much of its conceptual clarity when Rothenbuhler drew its limits. Ritual communication only took place in the "serious life" (in a subjective sense), and was absent where people were merely playing or engaging in recreational activity.

[7] Susanne Langer, for example, argued that symbols were "our elementary ideas" (1957: 42).

by symbol laden scientific data and scientific laws.[8] This increased preoccupation with abstraction was the backdrop to declarations by philosophers, anthropologists and psychiatrists of a basic human need for symbolization. So deep was this need, they argued, that symbolic expression took place even without rational justifications: arts, myths, ceremonial rituals and even dreams were all non-discursive symbolic expressions that were mostly futile in the practical sense and yet socially respected for their sheer symbolic merit (Cassirer 1925/1946: 11).

5. Rituals of Excommunication – A Threat to Society

In 1998, the same year that Rothenbuhler published *Ritual Communication*, an essay collection titled *Media, Ritual and Identity* was published as tribute to Elihu Katz. James Carey contributed to this volume his essay "Political Ritual on Television: Episodes in the History of Shame, Degradation and Excommunication," where he suggested a new classification of media events – *rituals of excommunication*. Carey used the unsuccessful confirmation hearings of Judge Robert H. Bork before the Senate Judiciary Committee to demonstrate ritualistic public displays of "social cruelty" (1998: 67). Such rituals performed the formal exclusion of people who transgressed the permissible range of beliefs, attitudes and morals, as defined by the excluding authority.

This new breed of mean-spirited media events, a modern version of Salem's witch-hunts, seemed very different from the celebrations of consensus that Carey had previously associated with the ritual metaphor. It also meant to explicitly challenge the rosiness of Katz and Dayan's mostly festive media events.[9] A ritual of excommunication was a "drama which

[8] The following discussion by Ernst Cassirer demonstrates this distrust of abstraction: "What are concepts save formulations and creations of thought, which, instead of giving us the true forms of objects, show us rather the forms of thought itself? Consequently, all schemata which science evolves in order to classify, organize, and summarize the phenomena of the real world turn out to be nothing but arbitrary schemes – airy fabrics of the mind, which express not the nature of things, but the nature of the mind" (1925/1946: 7).

[9] Alexander and Jacobs (1998) studied media rituals as sites of social conflict. Recognizing the media as civil society's primary place of "cultural contestation," which shaped and mobilized public opinion, they magnified the minor role Katz and Dayan had assigned

divides people more sharply and intensifies the perception of social difference, drama which separates rather than unites" (ibid.: 67). The particular ritual that governed the Bork hearings took place at one of the most sacred places of civil society – the Senate; it were conducted in accord with the epitome of the cultural project – the Law; and it concerned a nomination for a defining position within the civil society – a Supreme Court Justice. Yet, it was in this very democratic ritual, located at the heart of legitimacy, that Carey identified the "dangerous moment" of "high, systematic and sanctioned misanthropy" (1998: 42).

How can we reconcile Carey's initial concept of ritual – the bonding ceremony that keeps society together – with this later suggestion of a ritual that exacerbates internal conflicts and threatens to disintegrate society? Indeed, "Political Ritual on Television" is filled with contradiction, sometimes within a single phrase, such as the following: rituals of excommunication, Carey wrote, "touch on core, sacred values but are episodes in the production of dissensus, episodes in the recreation, indeed redefinition, of the civil religion by social demarcation and exclusion" (ibid.: 67). The tension between the explosive divisiveness of these rituals and the fact that they "[could] promote, however distastefully, states of social integration" (ibid.: 43) does not find resolution in Carey's text. It may simply reflect the inherent duality of the act of exclusion – it reinforces values by way of negation, dividing and uniting at the same time. In Carey's sad absence, we are left alone to try and extract from his essay a more decisive conclusion on whether rituals of excommunication eventually threatened or facilitated the continuous unity of the social.

The source of the essay's ambiguity, I believe, lies in a problematic incongruence between Carey's conceptualization of rituals of excommunication

to media events as agents of change. Alexander and Jacobs conceptualized some media events as "mediatized public crises," the culmination of social contestations, public victories of particular points of view and thus important moments in the re-definition of society. This frame of reference can explicate the significance of the liminal media rituals that ended the most tempestuous political dramas in American history, such as the U.S. Army-McCarthy hearings (1954), the Fulbright Hearings on Vietnam (1971) or the Watergate hearings (1973). Such rituals tended "to increase the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby giving to civil society its greatest power for social change. In these situations, the media create public narratives that emphasise not only the tragic distance between is and ought but the possibility of historically overcoming it" (1998: 28).

and the example that he chose to illustrate his concept. While the Bork hearings could well exemplify the institutional and media-oriented operation of such rituals, rituals of excommunication were infinitely more dangerous than what the Bork confirmation hearings could ever demonstrate.

Carey explained that Robert Bork lent himself to rejection by the Senate Judiciary Committee because he was a "clean slate," meaning that he did not represent any special interests as a female or an African-American nominee would. And since the Reagan administration chose to distance itself from the proceedings, Bork was left alone to fight for his confirmation without any substantial lobby to support him. The Democrat-dominated Committee felt that it could not disqualify Bork on the basis of his conservative worldview alone; instead, it had to portray him as a right-wing *extremist*. In order to maintain its institutional legitimacy and its place in the sacred center of American society, the Committee declared Bork as standing *outside* the existing boundaries of American morality. This is key to understanding rituals of excommunication: they redefine the center by sacrificing a real or a perceived deviant. But this is also where the Bork example reaches its illustrative limits.

Surely, the Bork proceedings could not explain why Carey spoke of rituals of excommunication with such a foreboding tone. I believe that the Bork confirmation hearings represented a quite harmless case of rituals of excommunication. While Robert Bork was personally humiliated and the discussion surrounding his defeat was exceptionally bitter, the hearings did not undermine the fundamental structure of the American political system and its governing institutions. Even more concretely, they did not prevent subsequent appointments of conservative justices to the Supreme Court.

Rituals of excommunication are dangerous, though not because they could ostracize individually proclaimed fanatics. Rather, their apparatus can be used to ostracize any disadvantaged population that is politically unable to defend itself from the damning authority of the ritual. Once a ritual of excommunication is established, there is no telling how the forces that control it and direct it would play out, and who would be their chosen subject of exclusion. They bear a risk of systematic cruelty not from the kind that forestalls a promotion, but the kind that disenfranchises and derogates minorities, and acts out institutionalized racism.

Political Ritual on Television was unique among Carey's works because it didn't confine itself to the theoretical conceptualization of his new ritual category but set out to apply it on the particular political episode of the Bork hearings. Much of Carey's cultural analysis of this media event was straightforward commentary, where he described and criticized the contending forces in that case. But more importantly, unlike in his earlier conceptualization of the ritual view of communication, here Carey directly confronted society's power struggles to the point of dedicating a particular ritual to institutionalized displays of bitter cultural wars. And he was right to point out that rituals of excommunication were especially dangerous for democracies, where the institutions that performed them drew their legitimacy from the democratic process, and were held to speak on behalf of the people. Indeed, once a ritual of excommunication followed a democratic procedure (such as a Senate vote), it was disturbingly shielded by the presumption of representation, and as such it was immune to legal – let alone strictly moral – opposition.

6. The Absorption of Disruption into Media Events

The explosive expansion of media during the past decade, and their flood of live content into the digital screens that besieged us – TVs, computers, cellular phones – deemed the traditional outlooks of ritual communication obsolete. Todd Gitlin (2001) described how the torrent of media reduced our media experience to cursory, fleeting sensations. Digital media created a big blur, whose individual communication units were close to meaningless. And indeed, in a supersaturated media environment, the single television program, Internet website or video game left us, if at all, with the most superficial impression. Today, no single ceremony or sports event could draw the devoted attention of a whole nation – or the whole world – as media events could during the first 50 years of television history. And in the past decade it became painfully clear that the only occasion that retained the ability to impose such attention was disaster: Princess Diana's death and the traumatic terror attacks of September 11th 2001 and July 7th 2005, are but a few examples.

Many communication scholars considered the media events framework conceptually adequate to contain ritualistic media treatments of di-

saster, pushing primarily for a media events analysis of mass-mediated terrorism (see Weimann 1987; Liebes 1998). But it was early in 2007 when the highest authority on media events finally spoke, and Elihu Katz – together with Tamar Liebes – offered a fundamental revision of media events that accommodated this new reality (Katz & Liebes 2007). Accepting a long-standing critique of the concept, Katz and Liebes conceded that shocking news events – mainly war, terror and disaster – constituted a new type of "disruptive" media events. While this much anticipated inclusion lent *Media Events* new relevance, it dispossessed the concept of its ritualistic characteristics. Disruptive media events were mesmerizing but sudden and messy. Preplanning was irrelevant here, as was the need for the usual co-production of media and establishments, and no ritualistic rules governed the coverage. In the end, Katz and Liebes's new version of media events was essentially ritual-less. Future scholarship will undoubtedly question the validity of the media events title now awarded to abrupt and unruly mass-mediated disasters. Particularly, communication scholars are expected to fill the gap by insisting on ritualistic components that still dominate the media treatment of the most explosive dramas – components such as the solemn journalistic narration, the reverential attitudes toward the officials handling the disaster, and the general reaffirmation of core values that journalists demonstrate in times of national crisis.

7. Conclusion

Through a selected body of works, this essay tried to illustrate the most significant developments in the idea of ritual communication in the past 30 some years. The journey of ritual communication began with its introduction by James Carey in 1975 as a metaphor for cultural commonality and social solidarity, narrowed down to a televised ceremonial ritual in Katz and Dayan's *Media Events*, expanded by Eric Rothenbuhler to all forms of socially significant symbolic behavior, revealed its potential for the performance of institutional cruelty in James Carey's 1998 theorization of rituals of excommunication, and was strangely absent from the mass-mediated displays of violence and disaster that Katz and Liebes conceptualized as "disruptive media events" in their 2007 afterthought on *Media Events*.

The journey of ritual communication further demonstrated the gradual acknowledgement of the authority of the ritual and, particularly, its capacity to signal and constitute dramatic shifts from the political status quo. James Carey first suggested ritual as a basis of solidarity that kept society together through political and economic power struggles. Carey, back then, refused to consider any aspects of the metaphor that potentially pointed to authoritative exertion of ideological control; *Media Events* signaled the beginning of the growing concern that mass-mediated rituals were spectacular hegemonic schemes; Eric Rothenbuhler was well aware of that charge, but offered it as a single dimension within a complex variety of ritual phenomena. For him, ritual communication was a symbolic yet pragmatic system necessary for society's self-coordination in its mundane and dramatic moments, and while ritual's origins were mostly sincere, it could be manipulative as well. Ritual's divisive power was unleashed in James Carey's rituals of excommunication, which were public performances of organized exclusion. More significant than the Bork hearings example that he provided, were other examples of ritualistic cruelty such as the "insignia of exclusion" on clothing, that bespoke of the endlessly terrifying prospects of any kind of institutionalized ostracism. Rituals of excommunication, Carey warned, were particularly perilous for democracies because they carried the full moral force of the *vox populi*. Finally, Katz and Liebes's disruptive media events lent their authority to the perpetrators of disaster. "If media events," Katz and Liebes warned, "cause journalists to feel queasy about being exploited in the service of establishments, they should also be wary – in marathon mode – of unwittingly serving the anti-establishment" (2007: 164).

In light of the growing association of the ritual with notions of authority and control, I suggest bringing the journey of ritual communication full circle by re-establishing a relationship between ritual communication and its original kin, *the transmission view of communication*. Particularly, the transmission view can be put to the service of the ritual view: The methodological expertise of the transmission view in detecting persuasion at play can illuminate the recently acknowledged authoritative dimensions of ritual communication. Here are some examples of how the transmission view could help us answer ritual-related questions that loomed large all along the journey:

The first question, emanating from *Media Events*: to what extent can ritual communication, in its ceremonial form (as opposed to the new media events category of Disruptions), be taken seriously as an effective means for political persuasion? While today's media environment is too diverse and fragmented to be conducive to media events of the type that Katz and Dayan envisioned, communication studies should yet question and examine the influence of institutional mass-mediated productions on public opinion. An example from fairly recent history would be the staged performances of the Bush administration – such as General Colin Powell's presentation before the United Nations Security Council on February 2003 – as it attempted, and clearly succeeded, to rally public support for the United States' invasion of Iraq.

A second question, emanating from Eric Rothenbuhler's *Ritual Communication*, is the one that had most troubled students of ritual: if ritual communication – that Rothenbuhler sees as an important dimension of most of what we say and do – embodies the symbolic system that allows for an orderly civil life, how could social change happen at all? The obvious answer is, that rituals slowly and organically absorb the changes in attitudes and beliefs of the community. One of the most intriguing and dramatic possibilities for change, however, lies in rituals that are in themselves bearers of social transformation, namely, rituals that are initially consensual but serve as venues for protest and resistance. Once looked at through the transmission perspective, we could try to assess whether and to what extent the ritual backdrop provides legitimacy and moral authority for the call for change. To name one example, Chinese protesters in 1989 took advantage of state funeral marches and holidays honoring patriotic heroes as occasions to stage protests against the regime in the name of common and quasi-sacred traditions. "The officially required ritual, once captured by the student actors, (became) the mechanism for attacking the authorities" (Esherick & Wasserstrom 1990: 840). Similarly, the Latino-originated Day of the Dead holiday in the United States has provided an occasion for Latinos to protest United States immigration policies and border policies in the context of a communal celebration (Marchi 2005). An empirical transmission-oriented study of such phenomena would compare the effectiveness of such ritual-based protests to more spontaneous ones, and try to identify the particular contributions of the ritual setting to a political demonstration.

A third question, emanating from James Carey's *Political Ritual on Television*, is the question that was left unanswered by the text: Do rituals of excommunication reaffirm core values, or shake and weaken the moral foundations of society? To take Carey's discussion of the Bork hearings as an example, a transmission-oriented empirical inquiry would be employed to discover whether the hearings indeed amplified the pubic dissensus surrounding the nomination, or rather that the hearings served to integrate Americans by strengthening the democratic establishment that brutally dismissed Bork.

The "effects" of rituals, as of all cultural representations, are obviously very hard to define and articulate. Yet, "sometimes culture 'works', sometimes it doesn't" (Schudson 1989: 158). Now that the ritual metaphor has matured, and the cultural approach to communication has gained self-confidence, it is also time to evaluate it through its sister, the transmission view of communication.

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