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Media and the ritual process

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Introduction

My aim in this article is to examine the role of media in the construction of ritual in contemporary urban settings. The concept of ritual has been used to explain different cultural practices and forms, including various aspects of the mass media, both in the analysis of media texts and to account for various patterns of production and reception. It is therefore important to clarify at the outset that I use the concept to refer to public events involving large numbers of participants. Ritualized events are characterized by being out of the ordinary, bounded and set apart from routines of daily life. At the same time, they are structured, carrying elements that participants recognize as repetitive and redundant, and constructed through complex and continual accretions of characteristics and meanings from previous events and from other domains. Rituals, in this sense, are instances of cultural performance (Singer, 1972: 71), recognizable to participants and observers as expressing societal values through symbolic forms. I consider ritual events as taking place along a continuum, from officially-sponsored festivals or occasions (events-that-present, in Handelmann's terminology, 1990), to events that include apparently spontaneous performances which lampoon or in other ways invert or deconstruct a dominant social hierarchy and its values (events that re-present, for Handelmann). Most rituals, at least in contemporary urban settings, contain elements of both.

I wish to argue here that media play a role in constituting public events as rituals, first, by marking them as set apart from everyday life and second, by contributing to the internal structure of the ritual through the recognizable patterns of activities involved in selecting and recording particular aspects of the events. With the presence of media, ritual participants become conscious that meta-narratives are being constructed,

that the event carries symbolic significance beyond the bounded sphere in which it is unfolding. This dislocation, the movement of an object — in this case a public event — from one domain into another, is central to symbolization and also, as Da Matta argues, to ritualization (1984: 214). An analysis of media's role within ritual events thus draws our attention to certain processes of transformation that construct the event as ritual and reminds us that ritualization is a creative process (see Da Matta, 1984).

The study takes place at the intersection of two research traditions, and addresses both. For the field of mass communication studies, conceptualizing ritual as *cultural performance* can clarify how media are used in the construction of meaning, without reverting to the problematic dichotomies (such as producers vs consumers, information vs entertainment) that have characterized much of media research. For ethnographers and ethnologists, on the other hand, this article contains a critique of the use of media as an unproblematic *source* in the study of ritual.

The concept of ritual has appeared in various forms in mass communication research over the past several decades. I begin, therefore, with a review of the concept of ritual within this body of work, focusing on studies of journalism as those most relevant to analyses of public events. The concept of the *media event* is critical, because it carries different meanings for journalists' and anthropologists' perspectives on public events, and raises the issue of the authenticity of media representations. A discussion of this concept is followed by a broadened definition of *media*, based on my field observations, and a brief description of the events that form the framework for my study. I then turn to the analysis where I divide the material into two sections. The first concerns how media contribute to the reframing of particular public events as instances of ritualized cultural performance. In the second section of analysis, I move into the events themselves, to examine how media are used in the internal structuring of these events. I conclude with a discussion of how focusing on the ways media are used reveals the reflexive qualities of ritual in urban settings, and highlights contradictions between ritual as an affirmation and as a threat to the social order.

The concept of ritual in media research

Ritual emerges frequently in journalism research to account for the routines and strategies used in constructing the news. Tuchman's sociological analysis (1978) of the practices of news reporting as 'strategic ritual' remains the classic study, and framing news production as a set of 'rites' continues to be a common research orientation (see Ross and Joslyn 1988). Ritual is used even more widely, however, in media research to explain the behaviours and interpretations of people watching, or 'consuming' news.

Nordenstreng (1972) was one of the first to refer to television news viewing as 'a mere ritual', a 'custom serving to maintain a feeling of security' in which the content of the news lacks importance (Nordenstreng, 1972: 391). The distinction here between media use as an active information-seeking process on the one hand, and as passive habitual behaviour on the other, is a major thread in mass communication research — a consequence of the traditional dichotomizing of media content between information and entertainment programmes. 'Instrumental' media use, as described by Rubin (1984) was 'goal-oriented' and served 'to gratify informational needs or motives'. Ritualized viewing behaviour, on the other hand, was cast as negative, as 'a more or less habitualized use of a medium to gratify diversionary needs or motives' (Rubin, 1984: 69). Whether in response to news or other more 'entertaining' media content, ritualized viewing was empty and non-selective which, at best, provided 'couch potato' viewers with a sense of security (see Hawkins and Pingree, 1981). With media scholars' increased interest in popular culture, the conception of viewers' media routines as inherently passive has been modified to include the active selection and integration of particular types of programming into viewing rituals (Rubin, 1984). Ethnographic approaches have also been instrumental in broadening the field of reception research to studies where the focus is on domestic patterns of media use (see Bausinger, 1984; Morley, 1986; Morley and Silverstone 1990).

Television has remained the dominant medium in mass communication research, and programmes viewed by large segments of the public are frequently conceptualized as ritual events. Examples include the annual broadcasting of the *Wizard of Oz* (Payne, 1989) and the US professional football playoffs on Super Bowl Sunday (Goethals, 1981). A Swedish parallel is the annual Christmas Eve broadcasting of Disney cartoons, fully integrated into the traditional holiday celebration for most families. The televising of national political events, such as the Watergate hearings (Alexander, 1982), political conventions (Goethals, 1981) and election returns (Ross and Joslyn, 1988; Bohm 1988) have also been analysed for their characteristics as ritual — large groups of people bound together in the experiencing of a common event. Studies of these phenomena, with their presumed significance for the political and social life of a nation, often are more broadly framed to include — alongside audience behaviours — the collaborative routines of media and political institutions.

Underlying all of this work, and even more central than its equating of ritual with various forms of routinized or habitualized behaviour, is the assumption that media serve religious functions in contemporary secular society. The weakening of traditional religious institutions has left a gap, according to this assumption, that must be filled as cultures face crises of belief and alienation. Within this framework, the media fulfil the same needs that ritual ceremonies provided in traditional tribal societies by

uniting members in a common system of beliefs and affirming the traditional values (see Cazaneuve 1974). The social symbolic functions of television, in particular, as a formula-bound, repetitive and nonselectively used system, resemble pre-industrial religion more than previous media forms (Gerbner, 1977). Goethals' book title, *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (1981), offers one of the more extreme examples of this conceptualization.

The overriding tendency has been to use ritual as a descriptive category in a functionalist model of media's role in modern society, without examining how ritualization works within the societies where the concept was first applied, nor how it has evolved as anthropologists and ethnographers have applied it to modern urban settings. Chaney's (1983) analysis of BBC's coverage of three major festivals (the Victory Parade of 1946, the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Coronation of 1953) is an exception. He analyses how institutional decisions *transformed* the civic ritual of the Coronation into a ceremony of participation for the mass television audience, thereby strengthening the sense of nation. Other scholars who have examined similar media transformations also find a breakdown, or a collapsing of the individual or private experience into a public and shared identity (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Katz and Dayan, 1985).

The transformation of the audience into a collectivity of viewers raises several issues critical to applying ritual analysis to media studies. The first is the extent to which this audience participation and transformation can be understood as *cultural performance*. As the concept has evolved within the anthropological literature, the enactment of ritual depends on participants who themselves are engaged in structuring the event as symbolically significant and set apart from the everyday. To what extent can the activities surrounding viewing an event at home on television be considered performative? A second issue is the ways media scholars have tied ritual to *conservative tradition*. In Carey's classic essay (1975, revised and reprinted in Carey, 1988) advocating 'the central role of culture and a ritual view of communication' in media studies, those communication processes are emphasized 'in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed' (Carey, 1975: 7-8), rooted in consensus and maintaining the social order. The import of ritual for secular, class-structured societies is thus ideological, confirming the effectiveness of the state and portraying the social hierarchy as natural (Elliot, 1982). Missing from this scenario is any account of the ways ritual transformations represent *reversals of power* and a threat to the social order, phenomena central to most anthropological analyses of ritual events. In one of the few studies which maintains this perspective, Ettema bases his analysis of press coverage of a political scandal on 'a definition of mass-mediated ritual as something more conceptually complex and more politically volatile than the transmission of mythic tales to mass audiences' (Ettema, 1990: 327). Ritual performance

always contains the potential for both reactionary and revolutionary outcomes.

The third issue raised by the ritual transformation of the media's public is its relationship to the *public sphere* as an arena where exchange of ideas and debate form the basis for democratic society (Habermas, 1989). The assumption of a rational discourse among a multiplicity of voices as the foundation of democratic citizenship, is strangely at odds with the picture of a society where public events involving large numbers of participants periodically erupt in cultural displays that disrupt, invert and deconstruct the social hierarchy. I do not intend in my analysis to bring these two views into harmony, but only to point out the disjuncture between their two discourses, and to suggest that a full analysis of the media's role in contemporary ritual can call into question the public sphere as a political and social ideal.

Media events and how they represent

The media's role in the construction of public events can be problematic from the journalist's perspective. 'Media events', within some quarters of the profession, are *events constructed in response to the media*. An event that is organized to coincide with press deadlines, or one that is timed to take place in conjunction with other events the press will be covering are examples of media events. They thus challenge a press which depends on the ideological construction of its position outside the events it covers. Behaviours that appear to be staged for or influenced by the presence of journalists are considered less 'authentic' because they are posed, arranged or lack spontaneity. Within the professional ideal, events unfold independent of the media, and conventions of journalistic coverage are designed to minimize evidence of the media's presence from the representation the public sees or reads.

Handelman describes the 'media event' in direct opposition to this journalistic ideal (Handelman, 1990: 266-9). Media events take place when the media play a transformative role in the construction of the public event that cannot be experienced directly by the public. Media coverage *overturns* the occasion or space, creating a meta-narrative. Handelman refers to the work of Katz and Dayan (1985, see also Dayan and Katz, 1992) who describe situations when live television lifts out a singular occasion, such as man walking on the moon, a royal wedding or the pope's visit, transforming it into a historical turning point. The media's meta-narrative becomes 'the marker of catastrophic time'.¹

One problem with treating Handelman's media event as ritualization is the apparent absence of repetition in the meta-narrative of the singular

occasion. Redundancy and the accretion of previous experience are critical ingredients in the layers of symbolic reference which constitute ritual performance. Handelman also ties the concept exclusively to television viewing in the domestic setting, overlooking the specific interplay between public and private and the links we create between texts or events of special significance. The audience of the media event is private only in the moment of reception, a moment which cannot be isolated from the broader context of ritual performance.

The media's power to transform private experience is a central issue in Benjamin's analysis of the nature and value of the original, singular artifact (Benjamin, 1969). If we broaden his notion of the 'work of art' to include out-of-the-ordinary events, his analysis provides helpful insights for the present study. The authenticity of the original work/event can be experienced only in its immediate presence, according to Benjamin. Only there can one experience its 'aura', that is, the unique power of the original which is rooted in its history and tradition. Once the work/event is copied or reproduced — Benjamin's case is the photographic copy — the aura's power is diminished or dispersed and transformed. Gradually, the notion of an authentic original loses power as copies are demanded and shared among greater numbers of people. The individual's private and unique experience is transformed through public display, which in turn creates a collective experience out of the multitude of reproductions. The function of the work/event, according to Benjamin, once grounded in ritual experience, becomes instead political.

The mass media's representations of events are not in their first instance works or artifacts in Benjamin's sense. They portray social process and structure. Like the camera portraits made on ritual occasions, media representations 'make palpable to the senses what might otherwise remain buried and tacit in the structure of social life' (Goffman, 1976: 78). The journalist's conventions, designed to mask the constructed character of these representations, are in fact intrinsic to the cultural performance. A full analysis of the performance requires that media routines be considered as integral, and in some respects constitutive, of the event as ritual.

Defining 'media' and choosing the events

I am using media here in very broad terms, but with some very specific intentions. I include both private and institutionalized means of documenting events — cameras and tape-recorders in the hands of amateurs, freelancers and professionals from a range of institutions — because the fieldwork I have done suggests that the performances elicited by these various forms of media are remarkably similar. In addition, since my aim is to analyse media as part of the events, a priori distinctions between, for

example, the roles of a newspaper photographer and a camera-bearing father at a school graduation ceremony can mask similarities in the ways their activities and the responses they elicit constitute the event. I do not argue that their roles are the same, however, only that the distinction between 'private' and 'public' documents remain fluid, as it is increasingly in practice. Television programmes broadcasting amateur videos, publishing a private photograph with a newspaper story and television news reports that include segments of amateur video are examples of occasions when amateurs' records enter the public sphere — occasionally because the documents are considered *more* authentic than those of the photographer's professional colleagues (see Goffman, 1976: 79). Nor can one successfully argue that participation in a ritual event by watching a television broadcast represents a deeper involvement than watching a home video of the same event. Examining the ritual event as a performance in which participants take various and often fluid roles also precludes privileging media in an external role as observer.

For the analysis of media's place in contemporary ritual performance, I draw on fieldnotes, photographs and examples of media coverage of events taking place in Stockholm between 1990 and 1994. No claim is being made that these events represent exclusively Swedish culture and custom, although the annual late-night pilgrimage to Medborgarplatsen (Citizens' Square) to deliver completed tax forms is difficult to imagine occurring anywhere else. The other events, including school graduations, May Day parades and the victorious homecoming of national sports teams have counterparts in other western European countries. These events were selected for their character of ritual performance, and my focus was on the roles media played first during the event and then in coverage following the event in the major media, which included the national daily newspapers and public service television news programs.² Since my primary interest is the various roles of media in the unfolding and marking of the events themselves as ritual, a systematic analysis of media content lies beyond the scope of the study.

Framing public events as ritual performance

First, it is evident that media belong to these public events. Their presence is expected and in some sense authenticates an event's significance. Further, media play a key role in the transformation of public space into an arena for performance. Their activities contribute to defining the bounded character of the event. Television news teams attract attention, and people vie for places in front of the camera, jumping and waving in order to have their performance included in the record being made of the ritual. Over the years, a ritual event may establish particular spaces as cleared for specific

types of performance, and which media can in turn 'plan' to document. During the annual May First parade through Stockholm, for example, the intersection of Kungsgatan and Wasagatan has been established as one such performance site. The bands and dance groups who are participating in the parade stop their march as they round that corner and occupy the intersection for several minutes as they perform. The number of cameras positioned there indicates that the spot has been staked out as a performance site, mutually established by both media and parade participants through the history of this event.

The special demands of the institutionalized media's access may play an important role in the way the event is structured. The space cleared for the victorious national hockey team's appearance at Sergel's Square in central Stockholm must be large enough to allow room for the mass media's camera-people, yet is high enough to allow the participating crowd a view of their heroes. This arrangement also gives these media a position from which they can photograph the assemblage of team members with the thousands of fans gathered below as a background. For these photographic moments, the hockey players collaborate by turning away from the crowd below to face the media's cameras (compare *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 May 1991: 1 and 12 May 1992: 4; *Expressen*, 12 May 1992: 24). For the amateur photographer, the favoured position is in the first row of the crowd gathered on the street opposite the team and above the square. From there one has a direct line of sight toward the team, with the crowd massed in the foreground.

The area immediately in front of the camera (or tape recorder) is recognized as a demarcated space. Raising a camera or microphone into a recording position is an act that selects, but also separates the event in front of the recording device from its surroundings. People do not consciously transgress the 'threshold' into this space; they go around, or wait until the camera is lowered. The media's lights are also a decisive factor in defining the ritual space, when events take place after dark or indoors. Television's lights create a circle in which performance becomes marked, often through exaggerated forms of the activities taking place outside the lighted circle. Even the flash from a still camera draws attention, and marks the immediate area as selected, set apart from its surroundings. There is no position outside of the event for media to stand and simply document — as in the idealized version of the journalist's stance.

In a larger sense, media help to establish the boundaries of these events, where they begin and end in space and time. An example is a prize-winning press photograph from 30 November 1992, the anniversary of the death of King Karl XII, which is celebrated each year by Swedish nationalists, including many skinheads, and has become notorious as an occasion for violent racist demonstrations to 'keep Sweden Swedish'. The photograph shows several passengers, including two hooded demonstrators, sitting on

what appears to be a city bus. This reading of the photograph was anchored by a caption that focuses attention on the hooded men to the exclusion of an elderly man seated behind them by stating that the passengers were headed home, 'perhaps to mum and dad' ['till mamma och pappa kanske']. The photograph and caption together define the bus as a liminal space where the performers begin the transition out of the ritual event. The boundary, the end of the event, was thus established by framing the racist demonstrators' movement back into 'ordinary' time on a public bus, among elderly gentlemen in everyday dress (*Dagens Nyheter*, 1 December 1992: A5 and 18 January 1993).

What participants saw that evening, however, was a crowd of mass media photographers surrounding a bus which had been chartered by the police to remove demonstrators from the site. A concluding boundary was thus created out of what was a highly charged moment in an ongoing ritual performance.³

Media and the internal structure of ritual events

The expectation that media belong to an event is evident in the ways participants respond to being included in the documentation. Within the routines of everyday life, strangers typically are not permitted to photograph; potential subjects duck, hide their faces, react with surprise or anger, even when 'caught' in the open sphere of public space. This is in marked contrast to behaviours during ritual events, when people wave, smile, make faces and in other ways arrange themselves for being photographed. Competitions frequently arise, a common characteristic of ritual performance, here taking the form of vying for a position in front of the camera. When the camera holds its gaze on a particular participant or a group, they can sense that they have 'succeeded' in their performance.

Participants also respect the media space as structuring their performance, for example, as they move to make room for the photographer who is trying to take pictures, even from an unusual position. On the night of the tax deadline, for example, people often crowded six to eight deep in front of the row of large deposit boxes. Yet the newspaper photographer crouched on the ground next to one of the boxes was not trampled, and was given a clear line of sight up to the people he was photographing. If a photographer takes 'too many' pictures, the person being photographed may ask, 'Is this for the newspaper?' but still does not object. Being documented is part of the play that marks the event as a ritual.

People using media, particularly cameras, within ritual contexts usually select specific aspects of the event to document. This selection serves, first, to mark those aspects as significant to the unfolding of the ritual and, second, to indicate what will be used and referred to in future present-

tations and performances. These selections can be seen as falling into several categories, which I call *peak moments*, the *general atmosphere* and *liminal moments* when people are moving into or out of the ritual performance.

Peak moments are instances that carry particular meaning for the ritual as a whole, serving as symbols that gather and condense the meanings that are dispersed throughout the rest of the event. In the celebration that occurs outside of the tax authorities' headquarters on the night of the filming deadline, for example, the peak moment is when the individual form is dropped into its slot. Private people may bring their own cameras to have this moment documented, and professional news photographers (and ethnologists with cameras) concentrate their efforts on this aspect of the event.

Pressure mounts as the midnight deadline nears, in order to record the last form as it is deposited. Newspapers co-ordinate assignments to be sure a photographer and reporter are present at that moment, and their results are featured in the next day's paper ('He was the last to file' [Han var sist att skicka in skedsticket] 16 February 1993: 12 with reporter Thomas Gustafsson and photographer Göran Åsl and 'He filed at five minutes to midnight' [Han skickade in i sju i snitt] *Expressen*, 16 February 1993: 12 with reporter Göran Åsl and photographer Jens Assar). This documentation and coverage are reinforced and heightened by the omnipresence of this event, the *general atmosphere*. Examples of peak moments during school graduations include the moment when the graduates emerge from the school with diplomas in hand, or when the graduate's new status is confirmed in the moment of family reunion, marked by hugs and tears.

Peak moments are anticipated and planned. Media seek clear vantage points and attempt to identify in advance where the best access will be. The May First parade up Kungsgatan in Stockholm provides one such moment. Newspaper photographers gather in front of the stately old bridge, in order to frame the mass of red flags under this mighty archway, and I have seen an older man standing on the curb with his tape recorder, recording the sound of 'Arbetets söner' as it echoes off the walls of Stockholm's old established business district.

These peak moments are recognized as most authentic when they are captured during the continuous flow of the event, unposed. But they can also be staged, or a gesture may be held for an extra moment, suspending time for the purpose of recording it. Interviews may also be considered a kind of 'posing', since interviewees are co-operating in the media's structuring of the event, positioned simultaneously within and outside of the ritual through their recorded responses. The posing that occurs when a person stops in mid-action — without any verbal request from a photographer — underscores the mutual recognition of the moment as significant. When, for example, a person suspends her tax form over the slot for the

moment it takes to snap the photograph, she is acknowledging the symbolic relationship of her act to the content of the ritual as a whole.

Recording the *general atmosphere* is also important to the media's construction of the event as ritual — who is participating and the size of the crowd, the various activities that constitute the event and its boundaries, special costumes or clothing, music and food. Here too, there appears to be general agreement among participants about the elements and activities that constitute the event. Selling red roses along the May First parade route, painting faces in Swedish colours while waiting for the hockey team to arrive, decorating a truck with birches and ribbons in the school yard on graduation day are some examples of the activities documented by participants in these rituals.

This media activity is concentrated on the range of *typical* participants and on *star performers*, those being honoured by the event. Of the roles and activities that are being performed, media may select outstanding or extreme examples — the very old or very young, the most outrageous costume or most elaborate sign or most unusual vehicle. On the other hand, officials or organizers of the event, including institutional representatives, are virtually ignored, unless they give a speech or present himself among a group of honorary participants. This pattern is probably more characteristic of the news media's documentation than of the records other participants make of the event, since the news professional's assignment is presumably to cover or select aspects that represent the event as a whole. Interviews with officials are of less importance than conducting a series of short interviews with a range of typical participants, for example, about why they came and what they think of the event. Media are thus contributing to the construction of the public event's significance as an *inclusive* cultural performance.

For the range of participants, the most important reason to record the general atmosphere of the event is to confirm that they were there. They use media primarily to create pictures of themselves and their group in the context of the event. This is evident both in the ways participants use their own cameras and in their efforts to perform before the news media's cameras. Here one sees an overturning of a hierarchy of participation in and access to the ritual event. Chaney observed that the BBC's coverage of the 1953 Coronation broke down the old hierarchy in which line of sight was determined by one's place during the event, by providing home viewers with an even better view (Chaney, 1983: 130). Media's role in public events goes further than this, however, by giving *all participants* potential line of sight to the camera and thereby expanding ritual participation to include the possibility of seeing themselves represented in another domain.

Media also seek *liminal moments* within the public event, moments when

participants are entering and leaving their ritualized roles or the arena of performance. The previously-mentioned photograph of bus passengers being taken from the demonstration site is one example. In various ways, media mark boundaries within the ritual that divide the event sequentially (see Anttonen, 1992: 46–7). The activities of preparation around the performance site, such as decorating cars or other conveyances of arrival and departure, the trash and the clean-up crews afterwards, all serve to sequence the event and point to its central significance. Such records are also useful for constructing a *narrative* of the event — of direct relevance to the professional demands of the news media, but in a less obvious way important to the meanings other participants are constructing of the event. Ideally liminal moments are not arranged; they are caught when their subjects are unself-conscious, since the individuals are either not yet actively participating (during the transition into the performance) or have dropped their performance role (as they leave the event). Because of this unposed, unself-conscious character, these states are seen as authentic, revealing the essential significance of the event.

Transformation, reflexivity and the social order

Anttonen reminds us of van Gennep's (1960) interest in the liminal condition as a 'more permanent space of in betweenness', and urges scholars to seek out 'places of exchange and transformation in which categorical boundaries are in constant flux' (Anttonen, 1992: 16). The media's varying positions and roles within the public events examined here provide a wealth of examples of boundaries that shift in the process of constructing contemporary urban events as instances of ritual performance. As the cultural commentator Ingela Lind noted in a recent article about the Nobel dinner, 'Before television transformed it into a public event, it had the character of a closed rite' ('Innan den via TV förvandlades till ett publikt evenemang hade den en karaktär av en sluten rit') (*Dagens Nyheter*, December 1993: B1). The passage character of media can be seen in the ways activities of documentation transform private and individual behaviours and experiences into public and collective ones. Through their framing activities, media shift both private and public action and behaviour into the realm of performance.

The active roles media play in the construction of ritual preclude the possibility of positioning them as external observers to these — and very possibly any — events. Through their actions, media signal when and where the performative character of the event begins and ends, and contribute to the ways the internal structure of the events is defined and sequenced. Yet their most critical role remains the ways their presence

continually shifts the focus of the event into reflexivity, pushing the performance into meta-narrative.

The most explicit way this occurs is also self-referential: the institutionalized news media first draw attention to an event and define it as ritual, then seek experts to comment on its significance for society. The expert is often the same professor or specialist whom the media have previously used and established as a reliable source for authoritative and 'quotable' comments. The result is often a statement that strengthens and reinforces the media's definition of the ritual character of the event, weaving it into a meta-narrative explaining its significance for the society. Following Sweden's 1994 victory in the World Cup quarter finals, the custom of celebrating a national sports victory by bathing in Stockholm's central fountain was the subject of an interview with ethnology professor Åke Daun. In response to questions such as 'where did we learn this?' and 'what does it mean?', Professor Daun denied links to Anita Ekberg's role, seeing bathing in fountains instead as an expression of Swedes' growing enchantment with the warmth and spontaneity of southern cultures and, possibly, an anxiety over the shadow of unemployment and the national economic situation (Kåll, *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 July 1994: A6). The following week, when the football team returned to Stockholm to a welcoming crowd of 100,000, ethnology Professor Jonas Frykman gave the newspaper a similar interpretation for the size and enthusiasm of the crowd — we were observing a custom learned from Sweden's new immigrants and increased contact with southern European culture (Mellbourn, *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 July 1994: A1). Such quotes and the authority the media attribute to their sources facilitate the meta-narratives the media weave to explain and reflect the ritual event's significance within the culture as a whole.

For all participants who are aware of the media's presence, whether they are documenting the event themselves, are the subjects of media documentation or are observing others being documented, the event becomes, in Handelman's terminology, one that re-presents the lived-in world (Handelman, 1990: 49). The knowledge that documents are being constructed which will 'offer propositions and counter-propositions . . . about the nature of these [social] realities', shifts participants into a reflexive attitude, which they use in shaping meanings for their experience of the event (Handelman, 1990: 49).

Media push this reflexive attitude simultaneously in at least two directions. One is a thrust into the experience of the event itself, like a wedge between the participants' lived experience and their witnessing of the ritual performance. The other is out of the event, into an attitude of anticipating how the media document will portray the performance and one's own participation in it. This second thrust, of course, includes both spatial and temporal dimensions, as media documents are re-experienced in new settings, in television news programmes or home videos, for

example, or as framing devices and background for subsequent events. Although media do not offer a valid substitute for the experience of participation in the event, they do extend the possibility of reflecting on the significance of the cultural performance to those who were not present. In this sense, media broaden the base of reflexivity through space and time.

This process undoubtedly holds true for both private and institutionally-based media, but is easier to trace through the mass media, where larger narratives are woven together out of otherwise discrete events. The national hockey team's 1991 victory was linked throughout the mass media to Sweden's winning entry in the Eurovision song contest and, a few days later, the table tennis championships. Carola, the recording artist who sang the winning song, appeared on the front page of the largest evening newspaper wearing a hockey shirt and helmet (*Expressen*, 5 May 1991). Performance becomes tradition as newspapers publish photographs of young men celebrating in the fountain at Sergel's Square in downtown Stockholm. As the caption of one such photograph stated, 'Yes, it really is Sweden, a Sweden which is quick to create traditions and has already learned that a gold medal in hockey must be celebrated with a victory bath, chaotic group song and delirious crowds in Sergel's Square' ('Jadå detta var Sverige — ett Sverige som är snabbt på att skapa traditioner, och som redan lärt sig att hockey guld ska firas med natliga segerbad, kaotisk allsång och folkmassor i glädjefnatt på Sergelstorg'). Two years later, the fountain was destroyed in the celebration following Sweden's victory in the quarter finals of the World Cup in football, and *Expressen* offered several alternative fountains in the event of a victory in the semi-finals (13 July 1994: 10–11).

Media play a crucial role in the ways ritual events accrue and gather new significance over time. Records are archived, both by media institutions and privately, setting the events in new relationships and contexts. Individuals refer to these records when they consider and plan their participation in a later cultural performance. Professional news media use rituals as a programming resource. Their coverage is used as a guide in planning future coverage and is often woven into their reports, as propositions or comparisons about continuity and change. In one such example a television news story reported on a commercial channel's (TV3) bid for exclusive rights to broadcast the 1992 ice hockey finals using aerial photographs of the crowds gathered for the victory celebration at Sergel's Square the previous May. If the commercial channel's bid were accepted, the news reader stated, then the two-thirds of the Swedish population who receive only the public channels would be denied the 'right to participate' in the hockey finals.

Institutionalized mass media are thus instrumental in ritualization by linking related events into larger narratives, typically accomplished by building redundancy into their reports. Studies of the patterned structure of amateur photography (see Chalfen, 1987; Becker, 1993) suggest

redundancy would also be a feature of non-professionals' documents of ritual events. These patterns underscore ritual events as affirming the continuity and stability of social order and, in the sense that most media scholars have understood the repetitive conventionalized structure of television, providing a sense of security.

However, large public events also represent specific challenges to the social order, challenges that are evident in the ways media structure and represent the event as ritual performance. The performances that are elicited in the space demarcated by media are not everyday behaviours. Whether carefully choreographed by participants or occurring as spontaneous outbursts, these performances 'for the camera' have a symbolic character, and raise the question 'who are we *really*'? The news media are often accused of calling forth violent or destructive behaviours for the purpose of getting more dramatic pictures. To the extent that this does occur, it must be seen as an extension, or additional transformation, of the performances that are inherent to ritual events. Participants *act out* behaviours that are inappropriate expressions in the context of daily life, and that are charged with meaning in the context of the ritual event.

Evidence of social and political control, such as the presence of police, official vehicles and street barricades, are continual reminders of the conflict built into many of these events. The news media often include these symbols in their reports, and interviews with police on the scene refer to the implicit threat to the social order. Regarding the large number of police in central Stockholm the night following the 1992 hockey victory, *Dagens Nyheter's* reporter wrote, 'They were not likely to act, since everyone appeared happy and no one destroyed anything' ('Sannolikt ville man inte heller göra något eftersom alla verkade lika glada och ingen slog sönder något'). The policeman who was asked about the men bathing in the fountain commented half ironically, 'We see that as a spontaneous expression of joy, which is permitted in this country' ('Vi betraktar detta som en spontan glädjeytning och sådana är tillåtna här i landet') (*Dagens Nyheter*, 11 May 1992: A5). Such reports imply how thin the line is that separates joyful celebration from destructive activity.

A central convention of news reporting is the seeking of opposing views or perspectives which introduce or draw attention to conflict. Action and drama are also important features of news, which means that the routines of news construction often produce stories and news agendas where instability and change in the social and political order are at least alluded to. Although these characteristics are most pronounced within the 'hard news' areas of political and economic reporting, they also provide a professional framework that is operative in much 'feature' journalism, which would include coverage of most public events.

At no time is the threat to the established order greater than when the ritual event includes large numbers of people. Crowd fires and aerial

photographs in the newspaper on tele- suggest the power contained within the human mass, and references to the presence of law enforcement officials emphasize the importance of control. For participants within the crowd the threat is palpable, in the press of bodies and the sense that one's individual safety is subject to the will of the mass. Reversals of power that could easily tip the social order feel immanent.

In recent years we have seen how the rise of nationalism throughout Europe has charged these events with new contradictions and heightened their reflexive power. As symbols of Swedish identity proliferate within cultural performances, the mass media reflect these symbols, make propositions about their meaning, and set them in new contexts. The conflictual agenda of nationalism now permeates the symbols and the enactment of cultural performances. This is not, of course, an exclusively Swedish phenomenon. Today, when tens of thousands of people are seen participating in a public event of national significance, the conflict within the ritual becomes painfully clear, that is, the conflict between ritual as an enactment of tradition and unity on the one hand and as a challenge to the established social and political order. Understanding this complex and contradictory relationship requires a perspective and tools of analysis that take account of how media make culture visible and, at the same time, themselves offer instances of cultural performance. Only from such a perspective can we see how media participate in the construction of public events as ritual performance, and, equally important, how media reflect and expand upon the contradictory meanings these events have as meta-narratives of contemporary urban life.

Notes

1. Dayan and Katz (1992: 119-46) describe examples of viewers who organize parties and in other ways prepare to 'participate' in media events via television.
2. Most of the fieldwork was collaborative, and grew out of a seminar on ritual led by Barbro Klein, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Ethnology, Stockholm University. I am grateful to my colleagues in the 'ritual group' for their generous help in relating their particular ritual events to my interest in media. The reports from this seminar are to appear in Swedish as Klein (1995).
3. Two ethnologists who were conducting fieldwork during the event wrote an article criticizing the press coverage and particularly the misleading caption which had played to the popular conception that racists are easily distinguishable from the rest of the population, when in fact the 'ordinary' elderly man had also been demonstrating to 'keep Sweden Swedish' (Lundström and Engman, 1993). When *Dagens Nyheter* refused their article, Lundström and Engman published it instead in *Svenska Dagbladet*, the competing morning newspaper. *Dagens Nyheter* subsequently admitted their error, blaming the haste of daily routine (26 January 1993: B2).

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Democracy and media ownership: a comparison of commercial, public and government broadcast news

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Introduction

In modern democratic states, citizens largely depend, directly and indirectly, on media of mass communication to provide most of the material out of which they construct their understanding and subsequently form their evaluations of political structures, policies, actors and events. In theory, mass media in democratic states, generally independent of direct government control, offer a vigorous 'marketplace of ideas' that stimulates the public's political interest and makes available the specific information it needs to hold government accountable.

As an important component of America's media system, radio and television broadcasters always have been seen by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC, which, since 1924 has been assigned the responsibility of allocating frequencies and licensing stations), as trustees of public property and obliged to serve the public interest. The Communications Act of 1934 'provided the FCC with discretion to promulgate regulations designed to "promote maximum diversification of program and service viewpoints and to prevent undue concentration of economic power contrary to public interest"' (Smith 1991: 54). The principle that the objective of laws governing the communications industry was to promote the widest possible dissemination of information from a diversity of sources was reaffirmed in the 1944 Supreme Court declaration that 'access to diverse and antagonistic information sources is essential to the public welfare' and again in 1975, when the FCC prohibited ownership or control of a daily newspaper and radio or television station by the same company