
The editors assemble seven contributions, each written by two or more scholars from diverse academic backgrounds and each including one to four case studies. This set of thematic articles is framed by an introduction by Ronald L. Grimes and a final theoretical reflection by Michael Houseman.

After a period of intense discussions, the group of authors decided to focus on one crucial question for all contributions: “When ritual and media interact (either by the mediatizing of ritual or by the ritualizing of media), how do the patterns of conflict change?” (p. 6). In his introduction Grimes depicts the challenges and theoretical struggles the group faced ‘backstage,’ dealing mostly with the tension between specific insights of case studies and an overall perspective. Rather than to debate whether or not an action qualifies to be a ritual, the contributors found it more fruitful to analyze the dynamic levels of ritualization (repetition, prescription, sacralization, and formalization). A broad understanding of media (“even ritual itself can appear to be a primal multimedium,” p. 10) leads to questioning what happens when rituals are mediatized and vice versa when media are ritualized.

In the article “Insurgents and Icons,” Anna-Karina Hermkens and Eric Venbrux portray two examples of conflicts in local and global mass media: the secessionist movement of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (1989–1998) and the act of dyeing the water of Rome’s Trevi fountain red by a political activist (2007). While the first case is centered on the instrumentalization of Virgin Mary and her worship (e.g. prayer, pilgrimage) by the violent rebellion and its media coverage, the latter case lacks of a clear link to the ritual dimension.

The five authors (Robert Langer, Thomas Quartier, Udo Simon, Gerard Wiegers, and Jan Snoek) of the chapter “Ritual as a Source of Conflict” introduce a refreshing perspective on rituals initiated predominantly by minority status groups which have the potential to cause and fuel conflict. Only two of the four case studies qualify for the consideration of all three dimensions of media, conflict, and ritual: the Alevi cem rituals in Turkey and the controversial discourse on the US documentary movie Jesus Camp (2006).

In their contribution Werner Binder, Tom F. Driver, and Barry Stephenson examine whether the recent phenomenon of torture in general and with special regard to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal (Iraq 2003) can be viewed as ritualized violence. Based mainly on the analysis of photographs it intends to reveal that torture is less a technique of interrogation but more a means of presenting power and control. But we may question if the example of Abu Ghraib is appropriate to support the authors’ hypothesis, since the empirical evidence in the history of torture (e.g. in modern Europe) shows highly ritualized methods (with elaborate handbooks,
tools, and facilities) with the main goal of destroying people physically and mentally and to spread fear in the whole society. ‘Interrogation’ has always served as a sort of juridical legitimation of this destructive power play.

Two informative articles deal with ritual issues on the Internet: “Place, Action, and Community in Internet Rituals” (by Marga Altena, Catrien Notermans, and Thomas Widlok) and “Contested Rituals in Virtual Worlds” (by Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek, and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler). The contributors offer a set of examples (Australian Aboriginal smoking ceremonies, Marian pilgrimage, etc.) but the link to ‘conflict’ is marginal. This is the case as well for the article “From Ritual Ground to Stage” by Fletcher DuBois, Erik de Maaker, Karin Polit, and Marianne Riphagen. They present interesting case studies on processes of mediatization and re-enactment or transformation of traditional rituals from India and Australia.

The article “Media on the Ritual Battlefield” (Ignace de Haes, Ute Hüsken, and Paul van der Velde) examines media representations of political manifestations. The first is the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2003, the second a protest of Buddhist monks in Myanmar in 2007. The first is analyzed as a global media event in a sophisticated manner but, as Michael Houseman puts it, “Indeed, the only ritual act that actually took place was the Iraqi shoe throwing” (p. 277). In the protests of Myanmar, the monks perform canonical Buddhist rituals of denial, which were completely ignored by the media in line with Myanmar’s government. The authors consider their conclusion on the role of media as disturbing: in times of crises the dominant discourse is ritualized and broadcasted by the mainline media in both systems, democratic or despotic.

Houseman sets a counterpoint to the collection questioning the differentiation of ritual and ritualization. He proposes an “upside-down framework” which does not define a ritual by a set of formal characteristics but interprets a ritual as a certain mode of participation: “In ritual, participant’s attention is focused less on how their actions may be construed as expressing their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs than on how their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs may be informed by the accomplishment of certain actions” (p. 259).

As a general impression, this volume contains a great number of sophisticated essays, many focus on the relation of media and conflict, some on the relation of ritual and media or conflict, and only a few of the single case studies succeed to cover all three aspects of the triad, in accord with the initial aim outlined by Grimes’ introduction. The structure of this anthology is not clear. Why are (up to four) examples from various backgrounds assembled in seven thematic chapters? The grouping of single case studies by transparent categories would have been of greater plausibility. Based on a wide range of understandings of ‘media,’ ‘ritual,’ and ‘conflict’ the volume fails to establish a common perspective or even hypothesis on the relations within this triangle. The consideration of contemporary media theory and communication studies could have proven to be instructive for the