

René Schlott:

Papsttod und Weltöffentlichkeit seit 1878. Die Medialisierung eines Rituals,  
Paderborn [u. a.] 2013.

(= Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Reihe B: Forschungen, Bd. 123)

When John Paul II died on 2 April 2005, the world looked to Rome. Daily newspapers appeared in extra editions, radio and television stations interrupted their regular programming. Through the media's production and reporting, the pope's death became a media event that transcended borders and acquired a worldwide resonance. In the process, the media came to constitute a transnational communication community, a global public sphere that participated in the prolonged dying process, the death itself, and the funeral of the pope. The present study examines the media event of John Paul II's death in 2005, not, however, in isolation or, *a priori*, as something »unique, that never before existed« but by placing it within a historical context. This effort includes a systematic analysis of the media reporting on the deaths of John Paul II's nine predecessors between 1878 and 1978.

In examining the media communication of the deaths of the popes over the course of a century, it becomes apparent that these events attracted quantitatively ever more masses of pilgrims, state visitors, and media representatives to Rome. There was not, however, a continual increase of media attention that moved in any linear fashion toward a (possibly only temporary) climax with the expiration of John Paul II in 2005. The evolution history of the media event also featured instances of »retardation.« Two of the papal deaths examined here attracted far less attention than the others. In the case of Pius X (1903–1914), the succession in the Vatican following his death had to compete with another historical caesura, the outbreak of World War I, and was almost completely crowded out of media communication by that event. The death of John Paul I in 1978, after only 33 days in office, was widely covered, in large part because of its shock effect. But interest in the ensuing ceremonies rapidly waned, since the media had reported extensively on similar events only a month previously, when Paul VI had died.

The study of the papal deaths between 1878 and 1978 led to the following findings, summarized in briefest form:

1. the *crystallization of recurring patterns and motives in reporting*, such as in images of the ritual course of events that concentrated on the human masses and the body of the pope, in the staging of a death that was pleasing to God (»gottgefällig«), for example through the last words, and in the recurring narrative of the »pope of peace« in the obituaries;

2. *the media's own standards and rules* (»mediale Eigenlogiken«), which applied throughout the entire period examined here, independent of all technological developments, from the telegraph to the Internet, such as in continually occurring premature death announcements, in media communication of invented rituals, and in the manner of compensating for the »unshowability« of the actual moment of death;
3. the »*globalization*« of the death of popes as a simultaneously received event that transcended borders in its broad geographic distribution, its semantic conveyance at the highest possible level of attentiveness, and in the presence of the Catholic faithful, media representatives, state visitors, and delegates of other religions and international organizations »on the scene« in Rome;
4. the *mechanisms for constituting a media event*, such as dispatching special correspondents to Rome, interrupting established routines of programming and issuance, thematizing one's own journalistic efforts on the scene in Rome, and building up expectations in the pre-death reporting;
5. *multifarious adaptation efforts on the part of the Vatican* to these media requirements, in a ritual and institutional sense.

Rather than viewing the papacy and its rituals through the usual theological or church-historical prisms, this study examines both phenomena from the perspective of media events and mediatization. The relationship between the Vatican and the media at a moment of *sede vacante* can be understood as a story of losing and gaining control, of an ongoing struggle for sovereignty over images and news, and the growing symbiosis of ritual and media. In terms of losing control, the lowpoint for the Vatican were the scandalous images and intimate health reports from Pius XII's (1939–1958) deathbed. By the time of John Paul II's death in 2005, the Vatican operated its own television center, had its own camera technology and personnel, and could determine the »global images« of the ceremonies, which other television institutions had to use for their own direct broadcasts. For all its stubborn perseverance in theological, moral and social questions, the Catholic Church during the period examined here built up a comprehensive, highly modern media apparatus that ranges from a daily newspaper to an Internet presence. At the same time, the increased importance of media communication in the 20th century manifested itself in a more pronounced media influence on religious and ritual communication. This mediatization did not turn out to be a one-way street, however, but an open and ambivalent process.