Infotainment

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The term infotainment refers to a cluster of program types that blur traditional distinctions between information-oriented and entertainment-based genres of television programming. Primarily a pejorative term, infotainment is often used to denote the decline of hard news and public affairs discussion programs and the corresponding development of a variety of entertainment shows that mimic the style of news. At the same time, however, the early years of the twenty-first century have seen the increasing emergence of programs that more thoroughly blend the content and form of various genres of public affairs and entertainment. This has created a complex spectrum of hybrid programming with a potentially wide range of implications for public information, political communication, and democratic discourse.

Much scholarly concern with the phenomenon of infotainment has focused on the encroachment of entertainment on the domain of news. In his seminal work, Postman (1985) feared that we were “amusing ourselves to death” by forsaking print-based, rational-critical information in favor of entertaining televisual spectacle with its short attention span and dramatic storylines. Altheide (2004) has argued that news and politics must now conform to an entertainment-driven “media logic” and are disseminated to the public through an “infotainment news perspective” that packages events and issues into narrative form. Graber (1994) has identified several dramatic elements that have become common to routine news, including an emphasis on conflict, emotion, evocative visual imagery, and interpersonal interaction. The conflation of news with entertainment – what Graber called the “infotainment quotient” in television news – also is indicated by news producers’ frequent use of music, fast-paced editing, and a variety of visual and aural effects to build a sense of drama in the news story; a disproportionate interest in celebrity, sports, and lifestyle topics; and a celebration of individual newscasters as marketable personalities.

Recently, scholarly attention has turned to the other side of infotainment: the increasing penetration of news form and content into entertainment programming. A number of factually based entertainment shows now look like news, featuring “anchors” who read voice-over copy and introduce reporter packages, often with the ubiquitous graphic box over the shoulder. Further, a range of fictional programs construct storylines that refer to, draw from, or dramatize politics, current events, or issues of contemporary social importance. Delli Carpini and Williams (1994, 2001) argue that such programming challenges the familiar dichotomy that sees news and entertainment as oppositional terms, offering both entertainment and an alternative location for informational content and political discourse. They suggest infotainment is best understood as a phenomenon of border-crossing that problematizes common assumptions that news is necessarily
serious and that entertainment shows contain little in the way of socio-political significance. Further, they and others argue that **infotainment** calls into question a number of other traditional distinctions, including those between politics and show business, public affairs and popular culture, and even factual and fictional media forms.

**EMERGENCE**

The emergence of **infotainment** has been enabled by a confluence of technological, economic, and cultural changes that have created a media landscape structured by the competing forces of fragmentation and integration. In terms of technology, the large-scale adoption of **cable television**, the development of satellite and digital delivery systems, and the continued expansion of the **Internet** have led to an unprecedented multiplicity of channels and informational sources. Further, advances in personal computer-based technologies of media production have significantly lowered barriers to entry, in terms of both the capital and expertise required to create and distribute informational content. This has resulted in a diverse communicative sphere marked by the segmentation of the audience, the circulation of a potentially infinite range of text, images, and video, and the fracturing of the hegemony of US network television and European public service broadcasting systems over the informational environment.

Economically, the turn toward source multiplicity and audience fragmentation has been countered by the consolidation of ownership into the hands of a small number of giant corporate conglomerates (**Media Conglomerates**). Driven by the interest of increasing shareholder value, conglomerations have been accompanied by widespread commercialization – the reconceptualization of all media forms not as public service, but as for-profit products (**Commercialization of the Media**). Owning a wide variety of previously distinct media outlets, contemporary media companies further seek to maximize economic efficiencies through the sharing of resources, personnel, and approaches to content across what were once considered to be incompatible forms. The line between informational and entertainment programming, once a hallmark of media practice, has been obscured by the synergistic interweaving of content across multiple channels and genres.

All of this has occurred within a wider cultural context defined by multicultural diversity and a recognition of the relativism of many cultural traditions and standards. Contemporary media function in a cultural environment marked by disagreement over the modernist ideals of objective inquiry and dispassionate expertise that once authorized the serious national news broadcast. So too have many become wary of the paternalism of public service broadcasting and its assessment not just of *what* the public needs to know, but also of *how* they should know it. The conventions governing public discourse have become porous, with the logic of “hard” news no longer assumed to be the privileged way of talking about and making sense of social and political reality. Instead, television programming and public discourse have become shaped by hybridization: the thorough melding of once-differentiated discourses of news, politics, show business, and marketing in a media landscape defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content.

**INFOTAINMENT SCALE**

It is difficult to consider **infotainment** a singular, clearly definable **Genre**. **Brants (1998)** instead suggests an “**infotainment scale**” that takes into account the topical focus of a given program as well as its format and style. On one end of the continuum are those programs that contain factual content about policy matters packaged within a serious format that makes minimal use of televisial style. On the opposite end are shows that emphasize dramatic, personalized content within an informal and heavily stylistic format. Those two poles, however, are idealized types, with various **infotainment** programs occupying a wide range of positions in between. In US media, these include,
among others, the “news lite” offered by network television and 24-hour cable; talk radio; local, tabloid, and other forms of “soft” news; contemporary documentary such as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*; daytime talk shows; late-night comedy news such as *The Daily Show*; and issue-oriented prime-time dramas such as *The West Wing*. Any typology – including this one – inevitably is incomplete, however. The integration of news and entertainment varies across national media systems and continually shifts with each new programmatic innovation. Even similar program types (e.g., late-night comedy) can articulate the conjunction of information and entertainment in markedly different ways.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

The difficulties in precisely defining *infotainment* likewise render it a challenging object of study. Scholarly approaches to *infotainment* can be grouped broadly into two camps, which vary in methodology but share the goal of identifying the significance of the phenomenon for public information, political communication, and the democratic process. Scholars working within the domain of media effects are interested in the outcomes of exposure to various types of *infotainment* content. Specifically, empirical studies have examined the effects of *infotainment* consumption on factual political knowledge, candidate evaluation, issue salience, and political engagement, the last including voting, volunteering in campaigns, and discussing politics with family and friends. Findings have been relatively consistent: that *infotainment* does have the potential to reach people who otherwise would pay little or no attention to news and political information, that exposure can result in increased factual knowledge among the otherwise politically disengaged (e.g., *Baum 2003*), and that consumption can correlate with increased levels of political engagement among certain types of audiences (*Moy et al. 2005*). However, studies equally show that any direct effects are moderated by prior levels of political sophistication, partisanship, and individual-level differences. Further, the wide diversity of *infotainment* programming resists efforts to generalize effects across specific programs.

The second scholarly approach turns from a focus on individual effects to a concern for political culture: to popular understandings of the democratic system, political authority, and the nature of citizenship as constructed through various discourses of *infotainment*. A number of scholars have argued that *infotainment* is incompatible with the needs of a democracy, degrading the quality of public information, dissuading from critical inquiry, and transforming rational argument into emotive spectacle. The result, some argue, is a “crisis of public communication” (*Blumler & Gurevitch 1995*) – a citizenry that lacks both the discursive resources to functionally participate in the political process and any interest in doing so.

An expanding body of scholarship, however, is developing the counterargument: that *infotainment* is not just good for democracy, but perhaps necessary. Various forms of this argument suggest that *infotainment* is democratizing political discourse by legitimizing narrative and affective forms of reasoning, acknowledging the irreversible interconnection between politics and popular culture, and drawing linkages between politics and the audience's everyday lives (*Corner & Pels 2003*). Here *infotainment* is seen as a counterweight to traditional expert- and insider-dominated forms of political talk that have little apparent relevance to the life-world of the audience (*Jones 2005; van Zoonen 2005*). Others suggest that particular forms of *infotainment* are offering a corrective to a news discourse that has become co-opted by political communication professionals and seeded with scripted sound bites and spin (*Baym 2005*). Finally, *infotainment* is argued to have the potential to make news and politics pleasurable, which itself may be a prerequisite for political participation.

Despite uncertainty about its effects and disagreement about its significance, it is clear that *infotainment* is becoming an increasingly important phenomenon for democratic politics and public
information. Informative and entertaining formats continue to become more deeply integrated; politicians have embraced such hybrid programming in their efforts to influence the citizenry; and for their part, members of the public continue to turn to the full range of program types in their efforts to learn about the world around them and to make political decisions. In turn, communication scholars increasingly are recognizing the need to develop sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches to grapple with the fundamentally changing nature of mediated information.

SEE ALSO: ▸ Alternative Journalism ▸ Cable Television ▸ Commercialization of the Media ▸ Exposure to Communication Content ▸ Genre ▸ Internet ▸ Media Conglomerates ▸ Media Logic ▸ News as Discourse ▸ Politainment ▸ Postmodernism and Communication ▸ Public Sphere ▸ Soft News ▸ Tabloidization


CITE

Politainment

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Subject Politics
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Politainment refers to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication. The portmanteau word is composed of “politics” and “entertainment,” analogously to the term infotainment. As well as infotainment, which is used as a label for a specific television program type, the term “politainment” denotes, in a broader sense, the entangling of political actors, topics, and processes with the entertainment culture. According to Dörner (2001), two different, though interrelated forms (or levels) of politainment may be distinguished: entertaining politics and political entertainment. Both take advantage of the mass media's potential to attract wide audiences and to create celebrity (Celebrity Culture). Politainment may be seen as resulting from an increasing mediatization and professionalization of politics that characterize modern democracies (Mediatization of Politics; Political Consultant; Spin Doctor).

Governments, parties, and politicians cope with these developments by adapting to the media logic, particularly to the selection criteria and presentation formats of Television (Television News; Television News, Visual Components of). entertaining politics serves political actors to get media access in order to enhance their public images and to promote political issues. This is quite obvious during election campaigns (Election Campaign Communication), when, for example, party conventions are staged by movie directors mimicking the dramaturgy of pop concerts, and when political candidates appear on popular television talk shows. Politicians presenting themselves in an entertainment setting, exposing their personal characteristics and private lives, are catering especially to voters with little interest in politics.

A certain type of politainment exploits for political purposes the popularity of showbiz celebrities. This is the case when pop stars engage in politics, endorse political candidates, or even move into political offices. For example, well-known singers such as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, and Bruce Springsteen, as well as bands such as the Clash, Rage Against the Machine, and Public Enemy, are known for expressing political viewpoints. Others, like Bono and Bob Geldof, seek publicity in the context of world economic forums or G8 summits in order to advocate political goals. Famous movie stars like Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger gained top political office in the United States and thus succeeded in transmuting popularity into political influence. Silvio Berlusconi's career took him from solo entertainer to Italian prime minister, after having been successful in the television business. The Berlusconi case exemplifies how commanding television entertainment can be transformed into political power.
Political entertainment, a somewhat different type of politainment, refers to political topics in various entertainment formats of → popular music, film (→ Film as Popular Culture), and television. The entertainment industry tends to exploit the world of politics with its sometimes interesting personalities, prestigious figures, and exciting scandals (→ Scandalization in the News). Movies and television plays take up political matters as raw material for drama or satire plots, as illustrated by movies such as Wag the Dog and Primary Colors, and by serials like West Wing and Yes, Prime Minister. Late-night television, following the model of NBC's Tonight Show (made famous by Johnny Carson) and now well established in many countries, presents political issues and celebrities in an entertaining format mixed with showbiz and comedy. It is assumed that Jay Leno's Tonight Show had a decisive role in promoting Schwarzenegger's candidacy for governorate of California.

This example illustrates quite well the symbiotic relationship between politics and entertainment. Politainment offers political actors effective means for reaching the public and pursuing political goals and, in exchange, provides the entertainment industry with celebrity figures and exciting stories. As a result, politics appears entertaining while public affairs enter popular media, so that the distinction between fact and fiction erodes. The Clinton–Lewinsky scandal and its media coverage are perhaps the best-known example of the blurring line between hard news and tabloid-style entertainment (Carpini & Williams 2001).

Politainment seems to serve political functions, as it brings political actors and issues to the attention of a wide and partly apolitical audience and may thus stimulate political participation and contribute to agenda-setting processes. The legendary Live Aid and Live 8 concerts reached millions of people worldwide and directed public attention to famine and poverty in the third world. The Live Earth concerts in 2007 followed this model to promote the issue of global warming. There is empirical evidence that the strategy of using entertainment as a vehicle for political matters is successful, particularly in media environments such as the US, dominated by entertainment formats and → soft news (Baum & Jamison 2006). Van Zoonen (2005) draws a parallel between engaged citizens and the behavior of fans of popular music, claiming that entertainment makes citizenship pleasurable. Politainment may stimulate interpersonal communication and Internet interaction, give an emotional access to the world of politics, and thus strengthen political values.

More often, however, politainment is regarded as a problematic development, criticized for downgrading civic culture and for contributing to → political cynicism. Politainment as a communication strategy designed by political marketing specialists is suspected of leading to excessive personalization, even “celebritization,” of politics and of fostering political populism (→ Mediated Populism; Political Marketing). Staging political events as spectacles and presenting politics through the art forms of popular culture may create a fake picture of the political reality, a political “fantasyland” (Nimmo & Combs 1983), impeding rather than advancing citizens’ understanding and deliberation of politics.


Cite this article

The nature of news content has changed during the past decades due to the changes in media environment. As new media such as cable television, satellite television, and the Internet have appeared, the news media market has become more competitive than ever and news contents have tended to be more audience-oriented and softer. The problem is that soft news is not only “weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public’s information about public affairs and its interest in politics” but also “has increased dramatically as a proportion of news coverage” (Patterson 2000, 2).

The definition of soft news varies, but one of its common characterizations is “all the news that is not hard news” (Davis 1996, 108–109). Hard news may then be defined by coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster (Smith 1985).

One difference between hard and soft news is the tone of presentation. While a hard news story tells its audience the facts regarding what happens and leaves it up to the audience to decide what to do with the information, a soft news story tries instead to entertain or advise the reader. For instance, newspaper or TV stories may promise “news you can use.” Examples might be tips on how to stretch properly before exercising, or what to look for when buying a new computer. Soft news has also been identified by certain characteristics. It has been described, e.g., as news that is typically more sensational, more personality oriented, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news (Spragens 1995). Knowing the difference between hard and soft news helps the audience develop a sense of how news is covered and what sorts of stories different news media tend to publish or broadcast.

The examples of soft news abound in the real media world. These include tabloid, syndicated, US-based programs like Hard Copy, and nightly network newscast features on personal finance, consumer affairs, and health. The regular features of network news magazines – Dateline NBC, ABC Primetime Live, CBS 48 Hours, and the made-for-soft-news spin-off ABC 20/20 Downtown – are “notorious” for their soft news formats.

Major print media outlets rate only marginally better than television at providing hard news over soft news coverage. The leading example of newspaper soft news journalism is USA Today, which from its inception has adopted an editorial direction that seeks a “television in print” style, with a heavy emphasis on color, photos, flashy graphics, brief articles, and coverage of lifestyle, entertainment, and “news you can use.” Many newspapers around the world have copied the model.
Elite newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post in the US, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in Germany, or Le Monde in France have avoided the USA Today approach, making purposive editorial decisions to build readership through in-depth journalism focused on public affairs. Other newspapers, however, like the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in the US or the Independent in the United Kingdom, have weakened their strong journalistic traditions by attempting to compete with television on television's terms, and by combining business with editorial departments (Underwood 2001).

In the magazine industry, many publications have taken a soft news approach to public affairs. Newsweek and Time routinely feature soft journalism cover stories. For example, across the eight issues released in March and April 2001, Time ran cover stories on phobias, yoga, Jesus (an annual Easter rite), how to raise a “superkid,” and the death of race car driver, Dale Earnhardt, Sr.

In another perspective, Patterson (2000) found that soft news has increased while hard news has decreased. He proposed that soft news has been defined as more personal and familiar in its form of presentation and less distant and institutional. He found a dramatic change in the vocabulary, consistent with the soft news thesis: collectives and self-references. That is, during the past two decades, reporters’ use of collective words (crowd, army, congress, country, etc.), which are part of the vocabulary of hard news, has declined substantially, while their use of the self-references category (I, me, myself, etc.), from the vocabulary of soft news, has increased substantially.

The growth of soft news is rooted in marketing studies that indicate entertainment-based news can attract and hold audiences. According to Patterson (2000), Americans tend to believe the news has declined in quality. People who think the news has gone “soft” are more likely to say its quality has deteriorated.

Then do people prefer soft news to hard news in general? Some have insisted that the increase of soft news has occurred because it can attract more audience attention. The play theory and the uses and gratification model explain that the consumption of soft news can be viewed as a vehicle by which such enjoyment is obtained, and therefore audiences prefer soft news (Palmgreen & Rayburn 1985; Rayburn et al. 1984; Stephenson 1988). The results of Patterson's survey, however, suggest otherwise. The report indicated that “hard news is more appealing than soft news to most people” (Patterson 2000, 7). This suggests that hard news consumers are the foundation of the news audience and those who prefer hard news devote a lot more time to news.

Thus, although soft news has been the industry's answer to the problem of shrinking audiences, it may be diminishing the overall level of interest in news. Furthermore, it may be causing, ironically, the decrease in the news audience, with serious implications for democracy. Soft news distorts the public's perception of what the journalist Walter Lippmann called “the world outside.” As Patterson (2000, 15) pointed out, “the irony is that, in the long run, these distortions also make that world a less attractive and inviting one. Interest in public affairs declines and so, too, does interest in news.”

SEE ALSO: ▸ Infotainment ▸ Politainment ▸ Sensationalism ▸ Tabloid Press


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