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Infotainment

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Infotainment is the umbrella term that covers the fusion of entertainment and journalism within different media genres. Infotainment—a linguistic blend of *information* and *entertainment*—can be understood as two related developments: (a) news becoming more entertaining, and (b) entertainment taking up political topics. Thus, infotainment should *not* be understood as one separate news genre. Instead infotainment is an umbrella term for a range of genres that provide a softened form of political communication by combining information and entertainment within one outlet (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017). Figure 1 illustrates the infotainment concept: Infotainment is *not* a genre in itself, but a construct encompassing various underlying genres that represent entertaining formats of political information. There are five infotainment genres in the media landscape as well as in academic work: soft news, opinionated news, political satire, entertainment talk shows, and political fiction.

The rise of infotainment began in the late 1980s when government regulations were relaxed in multiple countries that had not—until that time—permitted private parties to broadcast television. With the advent of commercial television channels, audiences gradually fragmented and competition for viewers increased. News outlets, therefore, could no longer simply assume that people would tune in; the new media environment provides so many alternatives that citizens not interested in politics can easily avoid the news. To maintain advertising revenues, an audience-centered approach to news-making has allegedly become dominant in which the public is considered to consist of consumers who *want* to be entertained rather than citizens who *should* be informed. Accordingly, news producers have begun to tailor their product to the needs of the market.

News coverage has thus become a potential source of revenue for media companies instead of just a societal duty. Consequently, many producers of news are guided by a *media logic* in which news outlets aim to commercially survive, rather than by a *public logic* in which informing the audience would be the primary goal. A review of scholarly definitions reveals three dimensions in which news coverage can be categorized as less or more entertaining (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012): (a) whether the covered subject matter is politically relevant or not; (b) whether political news items stress public relevance or personal consequences; and (c) whether political news coverage is objective and factual or explicitly includes the opinions and interpretations of journalists.

People have increasingly tuned out from the traditional forms of news coverage and instead turned to lighter alternatives (i.e., infotainment) or they use these new news formats in addition to their consumption of traditional news. Infotainment may draw wider and/or different audiences than regular journalism; following uses-and-gratifications theory, people consume media (including news programs) not only to gain information but also to be entertained, form opinions, and be prepared for future social interactions. Soft news and infotainment, while not necessarily devoid of

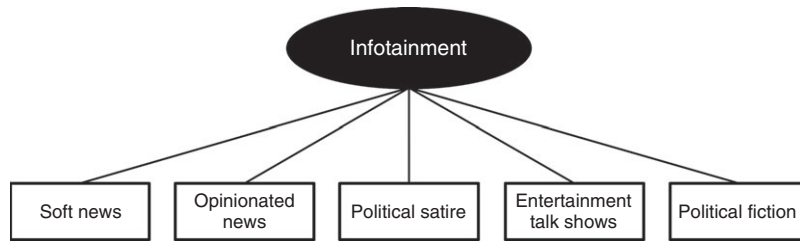


Figure 1 Infotainment concept.

political substance, provide content that also meets these needs while simultaneously transferring information. Political satire shows, such as *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight* can be watched both to learn and to laugh. Accordingly, infotainment potentially plays an important role to inform citizens about politics and eventually engage them democratically.

The infotainment phenomenon can be understood from two perspectives: news coverage becoming entertaining, but also vice versa. On the one hand, ratings battles among media outlets have moved news reporting toward softer and more sensational styles to keep audiences interested in their news coverage. Several quantitative content analyses have confirmed that news coverage over time and across borders has become less policy oriented and more sensational such as with human interest elements (in the United States: Patterson, 2000). In Europe, similar trends have been observed; for example, an increasing use of arousing features, personalization, and close-ups (Netherlands: Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011).

On the other hand, the phenomenon that political matters are addressed entertainingly is not restricted to news outlets only. Instead, several subgenres are to be found under the umbrella term “infotainment.” Think, for example, of entertainment talk shows, fictional political drama, and political satire. These infotainment subgenres vary in political nature and implicitness of political statements (Holbert, 2005). Yet, what sets them apart from the above (i.e., news taking up entertaining elements) is that they—in the eyes of the audience and many scholars—in the first place are considered entertainment instead of journalism. The increasing prominence and popularity of infotainment outlets has, however, eradicated the monopoly enjoyed by traditional journalistic outlets to inform the public about political affairs.

Research on infotainment, though, has been relatively scarce. Previous studies into journalism and political communication have mainly addressed the content and effects of traditional hard news media, such as newspapers and regular newscasts. By ignoring more popular formats and keeping this research marginal, infotainment has apparently been considered politically irrelevant. However, as “a shift from programs in the public interest to programs the public is interested in” has undeniably occurred (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 150), it is currently difficult to say which media are and which are not politically relevant. Genres have collapsed and the political relevance of a program is frequently not just either-or, but “one of degree rather than kind” (Baum, 2003, p. 6). Hard news, for example, can easily be turned soft (Graber, 1994), and vice versa. Serious topics can be covered in entertaining manners, whereas softer topics can be placed in

a wider societal context or political perspective. Accordingly, it is often impossible to categorize news programs as being only entertaining or only information.

The impact of infotainment genres that are an important source of political information for many citizens will be neglected by too narrowly defining which media outlets are democratically relevant. Popular forms of political communication have substantial democratic potential because they are part of citizens' most important resources of political sense making (Van Zoonen, 2007): media discourse, experiential knowledge, and popular wisdom. By investigating the effects of other genres than the traditional news, scientific work may help tear down the artificial hierarchy in political information sources and acknowledge the role that infotainment has in today's democracy.

Infotainment may positively contribute to democracy by attracting an audience otherwise not following the news; additionally, it may facilitate citizens' understanding of political affairs by making it more accessible in terms of language, presentation, or framing. Regular news coverage has been shown to be too fast-paced and too complicated for many citizens, and citizens also often perceive its content as largely irrelevant to their lives or simply dull. Framing news in abstract terms rather than by means of personal experiences hampers understanding, and the lack of emotional appeals and obvious links to one's personal life restrain people from paying the necessary attention. This implies that the traditional journalistic way of dealing with politics is not as accessible to (all) citizens as it ideally would be. A detached, rational style is the usual manner in which traditional news media cover politics (Baum, 2003), but a large share of the citizenry may be, or feels, excluded by such communication, because they are only familiar with other styles of communication, such as narrative or emotional appeals.

To evoke engagement of all citizens, political content should be produced in a diverse range of styles, modes, and combinations of topics that match the capacities, experiences, and interests of everybody, including the "nonelite" citizens. Infotainment, arguably, does so. One example is the rise of tabloid newspapers in the nineteenth century, which coincided with the first introduction of political life to the masses. Thus, news coverage that is appealing to more citizens could be beneficial for democracy, as "preaching to an increasingly empty church" (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011, p. 94) or in a language that many citizens do not understand is not particularly helpful. An entertainment approach toward news production can make obscure political topics relevant for a broader but initially uninterested audience and may thus play a democratizing role.

Not out of democratic ideals, but instead because of economic motives, two developments have occurred that may thus be celebrated when considered from the schools of thought that news should be less demanding of citizens to let them engage with democracy (Althaus, 2012). On the one hand, the traditional news media have (at least partially) softened their content and thereby have become more accessible and, on the other hand, entertaining formats have embraced political topics to create compelling content that still attracts a large share of the citizenry.

Baum's (2003) *gateway hypothesis* predicted that viewers of soft news and infotainment would be exposed to political information as a by-product of entertainment-oriented content and thereby would "accidentally" acquire knowledge

of political matters. Extant research has, however, only revealed weak learning effects of infotainment exposure; only among politically inattentive citizens and with regard to topics that are easily made sensational, but not for more complicated topics such as primaries or policy debates. Infotainment, thus, does not seem to foster much learning about politics. However, numerous studies have repeatedly shown that the consumption of infotainment affects a range of relevant outcome variables, such as attitudes, trust, efficacy, or even participation. Infotainment, accordingly, is important for other elements of political reasoning than just knowledge acquisition and, therefore, will still be crucial for the formation of political attitudes, which subsequently could encourage political engagement.

As explained before, infotainment should not be understood as a single genre but instead as an *overarching construct* under which one can identify various genres that combine political information and entertainment in one outlet. The following paragraphs provide more information about the five most prominent infotainment genres: soft news, opinionated news, political satire, entertainment talk shows, and political fiction.

Soft News

Many different definitions of soft news have been coined. Otto et al. (2017) defined soft news at the individual news items level, which could be “harder” or “softer.” Soft news programs, at the infotainment genre level, would then be outlets that predominantly consist of soft news items. Soft news items overall contain more sensational elements, which provoke arousal and emotions as well as naturally draw the attention of audiences. Examples are the use of sound effects, a higher frequency of different camera shots, or zoom-ins (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011).

Soft news programs, thus, contain relatively more of such items. Yet, it is important to realize that the soft news genre is still considered one kind of journalism. In that sense, soft news is very similar to tabloid journalism when specifically applied to newspapers. Reinemann et al.’s (2012) conceptualization clearly separates the different dimensions at which soft news outlets can be recognized. First, the topics that are being presented are mostly of a rather unpolitical nature: disasters, crime, sex, gossip, or animals (e.g., “cat in tree”) would be considered typical soft news topics. Political topics, such as conflicts in the government or new policy proposals, will rarely be part of the coverage in soft news outlets.

But, second, if the topics discussed are political, this will mostly be covered by means of a personalized style of newsmaking. The soft news genre is characterized by a frequent use of human interest or so-called episodic frames. This means that wider societal issues are reduced to single cases of individuals who are affected by the news. A story about the government reducing societal welfare for unemployed citizens, for example, will not inform the audience about the negotiations between parties on this issue or the consequences for the national budget, but instead interview an unemployed single mom whose financial situation will be seriously threatened by the new policy. Exemplifying

political topics with real-life cases makes the news more emotional and allows for identification with the involved actors.

A third characteristic of the soft news genre, not mentioned by Reinemann et al. (2012), is the dominant focus on domestic news. Whereas traditional newscasts normally include a decent amount of news on foreign affairs, most soft news programs are overly occupied with national topics. Altogether, soft news is a journalistic genre that generally covers unpolitical news in a sensational and personalized manner.

Opinionated News

Although frequently understood as a form of regular journalism, one could argue that opinionated or partisan forms of journalism are an infotainment genre as well (see Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & De Vreese, 2014). Well-known examples of opinionated news are outlets, such as FoxNews and Breitbart, which clearly relate to the final dimension of soft news characteristics as described by Reinemann et al. (2012): whereas news and opinion in regular journalism are strictly separated, they are intertwined within the opinionated news genre.

Economic models show that it is financially profitable for news corporations to reflect the political leaning of a specific political orientation present in society. Selective exposure and in-versus-out group processes will almost automatically draw a considerable audience. Rather than to provide information alone, such outlets also perform a social role for their audience by creating a comfortable sphere in which one can see his or her opinions be reaffirmed. Accordingly, opinionated news appeals to the need of belonging to a community and if viewers perceive the bias within this kind of journalism they consider this a sign of authenticity. In contrast to regular news production that aims to be objective, opinionated news departs in their “search for truth” from the beliefs of their target audience. Using symbolic language, ridiculing opponents, framing news as polar contrasts and portraying their viewers or readers as victims of wider societal patterns or elitists conspiracies, opinionated news has become a successful commercial product.

Political Satire

Political satire, in particular, has been considered an important form of infotainment. Although satirists consciously label themselves as “fake news” providers, this moniker definitely does not fully cover their political relevance. Several content analyses have shown that political satire programs provide relatively substantive political content that goes beyond just the personal but also covers political policy. Political satire has been described as “the reinvention of political journalism” (Baym, 2005) and may engage with roles that traditional news media have failed to perform. By being humorous and denying that they are journalists, satirists create for themselves the space to reject the objectivity standard and the detached role that is expected from regular news (Jones & Baym, 2010). This role allows satirists to critically interrogate

those in power and to resist the professional ways that politicians and their spin doctors have developed to address the traditional news media and routines of regular journalists.

Journalists in traditional news media have difficulties controlling those in power because they are faced with the media logic to produce easy-to-swallow, quickly manufactured, and inexpensive content. Satire, instead, openly critiques this development and has blown new life into the search for political truth by critically examining political representatives. Humor allows an escape from power structures, which removes any restrictions that journalists are confronted with. Moreover, by spreading dissident interpretations of political situations in primarily analytical, critical, and rational ways, their audience can overcome the dominant messages of the elite and form political opinions independently and on their own (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Thus, those who accuse political satirists of being cynical toward democracy seem to miss the joke. In particular, this infotainment genre enables political deliberation, calls for informed participation, and encourages a revival of journalistic inquiry by being a watchdog of the journalistic watchdogs.

Talk Shows

Day-time and prime-time entertainment talk shows, for example, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* or previously *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, regularly feature political candidates or discuss political topics alongside musical performances, celebrity chefs, or other acts of popular culture. Politicians make use of the opportunities that are provided in this infotainment genre by visiting these shows—especially in times of election campaigns—to reach other audiences than those served by the news media and to portray themselves in a more positive light than is possible in journalistic outlets.

Producers of entertainment talk shows want to entertain their audience through a feel-good atmosphere. Clearly related to the trend of political personalization (Adam & Maier, 2010), the interviews within this genre are lighter, encouraging, and non-interrupting, rather than critical or interrogative. The content of these talk shows, nevertheless, does not completely lack political substance. By agreeing on topics and questions beforehand, politicians are unlikely to be surprised by the issues that are raised in these programs, which allows for a solid preparation. Accordingly, it has been found that exposure to political performances in entertainment talk shows improves the image of politicians. There is only one danger involved: because of the informal and cozy atmosphere in these shows, politicians have to adapt the discourse that they usually employ in public (rational and serious) to match the format—otherwise they may be perceived as cold and impersonal. Yet, in an age where politicians, almost by definition, are media personalities, this is rarely a problem.

Political Fiction

Political fiction is the infotainment genre that is least obliged to follow traditional journalistic standards of portraying “the truth.” Although fictional in nature, the viewer might still get the impression that shows, such as *The West Wing* and *Borgen*, reflect reality to a certain extent—and producers also try to make it as “real” as possible, within the limitations of their narrative. The few content analyses conducted on political fiction demonstrate that these programs consciously meld political reality with fictional elements. Although fictional, this genre still has a strong real-life link with a focus on the political machinery as well as private persona of politicians. Even closer to traditional than these fiction series journalism are the so-called “based-on-a-true-story” movies, such as *Thirteen Days*, *Lincoln*, and *Milk*, which mold political events that have really occurred into a Hollywood format.

Studies have shown that viewers indeed let their real-world political issues be influenced by exposure to fictional narratives about politics. Previous research found that fictional programs influence perceptions and attitudes toward politics and real-world political issues, such as crime, policy preferences, and abortion. The potential influence of the genre may be strengthened by its wide reach. About 5 million U.S. citizens watched the first episode of *House of Cards*, which is comparable to the average network newscasts in the United States. *Borgen* was even more popular, reaching on average 30% of the Danish population per episode.

Especially interesting with regards to journalism are movies like *All the President's Men* (about the Watergate scandal) or *Spotlight* (about journalists uncovering systemic child sex abuse by Roman Catholic priests) or a series such as *The Newsroom*. These productions give insights in the work of journalists and may (positively) influence the public opinion with regards to journalism.

Future Research

Future research should expand conceptually in considering what entertaining media genres are politically relevant and could be considered infotainment. This entry focused on soft news, opinionated news, political satire, talk shows, and political fiction as the most prominent genres under the infotainment umbrella. However, there are many media genres that have received much less scholarly attention, although their content obviously is also of political nature and they attract large nonelite audiences.

Think, for example, of cartoon series, such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. Characters in these series often deal with political or journalistic issues and engage with the democratic system. Thus, watching these shows may influence viewers' political attitudes just as strongly as the genres described in more detail. Pop music, accordingly, may bring politics and political arguments to the masses as is exemplified by *The Wall* of Pink Floyd, Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*, and Eminem's protest song *Mosh*. In line with this, public performances of celebrities—think of Beyoncé's Super Bowl XLVII halftime show in 2013 as a Black Panthers homage—that aim to spread a political message are a clear example of infotainment. Finally, some computer games,

such as *SimCity* and *World of Warcraft*, are also highly political and let players actively deal with political or democratic issues. There are, thus, many more entertaining media genres that deserve empirical investigation of communication scholars, but have not received much attention yet.

With regards to infotainment as a form of journalism more generally, there are many research questions still to be answered. For example, how do the infotainment genres differ in objectively quantifiable measurements from traditional news coverage? It is also important to compare the different infotainment genres in relation to each other. Can we, for example, claim that political satire would be more substantive than opinionated news? Interesting would also be to know more about the development of these genres: for example, has infotainment content become more politically relevant over the years? Finally, very little is known about the motivations of infotainment producers. Theory on the role conceptions that are known of interviews with journalists can be applied to talk show hosts or satirists to study which outcomes they strive for in their work.

SEE ALSO: Elite versus Popular Press; Hard and Soft News; News as Comedy; Tabloid Journalism; Talk Show Journalism; Vox Pops

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