

HOW MUCH IS INFOTAINMENT THE NEW NEWS?

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Abstract: Infotainment has become a new approach to news reporting lately and introduced into the public sphere matters that seemed hard to crack, especially in terms of economic, financial and political analysis. The inner structure of news production has changed in terms of gathering, processing and disseminating novelties and in the way in which the public evaluated the shifts in media planning biased towards commercialization and entertainment. The «new news» will probably share the fate of the so-called new media (actually, new digital platforms that took over the signs and their significance from print, radio, cinematography and television): groundbreaking experiences will become gradually goods and gains of the journalistic trade while the useless ones will be shaken off in the media industry's search for new approaches to reality and truth.

Keywords: infotainment, hard/soft news, media communication, news packages, current-affairs magazine.

1. Introduction

The portmanteau word infotainment and its offspring, infotainer, were first quoted in 1980 during the Conference of the Institute of Information Scientists and Library Associations with a disparaging connotation it has carried ever since. In 1974 the Convention of the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System, which united college radio stations from the United States coined the word «infotainment» with a slightly limited meaning of a nexus between information and entertainment.

The popularity of the word expanded during the process of television formats diversification, encouraged by digitalization and global communication, carrying a disapproving meaning. However, infotainment productions multiplied and provided a “variety of functions and services” [Popescu, 2007, 207], addressed to and involving a growing number of people. Its richer meaning soon challenged researchers and practitioners to find a nickname for it. The outcome was «the new news», which tended to cover incoming developments in journalism in a more comprehensive manner.

2. The main issue

Supermarket tabloids saved the day for infotainment because they represented the lowest journalistic standards in any media market from the very beginning. Compared to their cheap performance, infotainment could pass as hard news, although criticism stuck to its products, nonetheless. Sometimes, infotainment invaded quite a few of the most sophisticated news departments for rating reasons. The public's points of interest pressed producers to stoop to conquer. When the pop star Janet Jackson exposed willingly or by accident part of her intimate anatomy during a show in 2004 even the sober CNN ran the story before a report on a chemical attack against a US senator. Obviously, there is a price to pay for such sideslips, especially in cases of media coverage of political games and players. More often than not, citizens may become

disillusioned and even cynical about those newsworthy figures the media would target regularly either for real or for imagined shortcomings. “Journalists have been blamed, for example – and the rise of hyperadversarialism process journalism and political infotainment have all been implicated in this trend – for declining rates of participation in Britain, the United States and comparable countries” [Barnett, 2001, 2]. Further research of the Romanian media will argue whether such a conclusion applies to them, as well.

The public’s whims and pleasures cannot be blamed indiscriminately for developments in the field of media communications, which sometimes bred a poor coverage of items from the hard news area. Some researchers felt and expressed their concern for the decline of “serious” news related to international or public affairs. “In its place, many suggest, news has dumbed down to become infotainment, focusing of human-interest stories about scandal, celebrities and sex” [Norris, 2000, 7].

While human-interest stories are part of serious news under the label of «soft», the other two topics belong permanently and irreversibly to the tabloid media. However, the required distinction between the two trends saved the day for both approaches. Infotainment kept the mainstream media from an erosion of professional journalism, while tabloidization represented a diversification of the market and answered public expectations at different levels, into distinctive formats. Pippa Norris stated in her study that “soft news and infotainment have undoubtedly grown in some sectors of the market, but serious coverage of the political events, international affairs, and financial news has also steadily expanded in availability elsewhere” [Norris, 2000, 8].

Anyhow, such developments go up and down following the public, which is not reacting to communication stunts only. What matters are the cultural level and the values individuals share in sifting and comprehending the information fed by the media. Researchers concluded that a more literate and educated audience can assimilate and evaluate diverse sources of messages on the way of making their own judgments, useful and beneficial only in an inclusive and interactive governing system, truly democratic, not in a hypocrites whitewash.

There is not very much room for debate on ethics, credibility and trustworthiness when commercialism slams the door in the face of a journalist willing to take the infotainment way only to make sure that his/her message that might not be soft in essence reaches the targeted public, even if the final editorial decision is the outright audience-revenue yardstick. From this perspective, “tabloidization can be seen as a subcategory of popular journalism and infotainment is, in fact, a new term for a much older development of quality popular journalism such as family-oriented variety shows on television. Infotainment is used as the overarching concept in the context of popular journalism” [Deuze, 2005, 880].

Television and print media (on paper or on screen) made the difference between infotainment and tabloids, and each of them adopted its own grammar and developed its own style. For obvious reasons, they both borrowed from each other, the «print» taking over visuals from television productions inserted to support its own stories. This interchange of ways and means helped infotainment to introduce hard news issues to a reluctant section of the public, more comfortable with novelties that did not upset common people already busy with solving current personal matters – employment, health, education. “The flight from the news by entertainment fans has a more profound influence than the slowing of this flight through infotainment. Soft news means items comprised in television programmes that cover politics at least occasionally but are not traditional news program to inform the viewer” [Peterson, 2000, 288].

The love-hate relationship between media providers and more and more sophisticated receivers or producers, as Bruns called the new communicators of the digital-platform era [Bruns, 2005, 2], stimulated media productions, which borrowed small tricks-of-the-trade from neighbouring media stakeholders: some powerful soundtracks of music and natural processed noises, a flood of strongly treated pictures and a special, short, brisk and even aggressive language.

Conservatives screamed “blasphemy!” and demanded that news and entertainment should go their separate ways. They failed in their claims of purity of form, of decency at all costs when the roller-coaster started to crash over most of the news departments during the late 1990s.

Infotainment was conquering audiences and producers in Romania and in the entire world. It substituted gradually stiff news presentations from the stringers in the mainstream media (read television) with a smoother approach bordering both the traditional “serious journalism” and something reminding audiences of soap opera story-telling. Several appalled die-hards argued that entertainment was suffocating the information flow and the educational factor that should have been imbedded to all media messages.

Libertines upholding more articulate and innovative views replied quite cunningly that infotainment is a mere shortcut to the introduction of novelties from politics, economics and public affairs, sugarcoated into a more palatable product. “Shying away from hard news towards entertainment can influence deeply the public’s perception of the news, especially through the accessible format of infotainment products. Soft news covering political or public events in a more detached manner may carry novelties to the public in a faster and more agreeable way” [Peterson, 2000, 280].

Media communicators attracted severely by the miracle of picture processing (more convincing in its final product, and a lot easier to broadcast through the web) discovered this new type of getting to know and be known by a larger though unpredictable and unsteady audience, once news packages are no longer the bleak doomsday-predictions of the Walter Cronkite-manner.

Infotainment brought to the front stage both news providers and news consumers in the new environment opened by the 24/7 news channels. Their journalists and video editors made news packages circulate around the globe with the speed of light in a format accessible to different areas of different cultures.

A new partnership between multimedia providers and a growing number of receivers/customers/clients has turned the tables and produced an accelerated expansion of the media market, once the digital platforms became more accessible to an increasing number of people from wider and wider areas. Interactive communication has been the core of an unprecedented process of transforming message producers into message users almost instantaneously, and the other way round. Such a trend has left some wound marks and a slight reluctance of the public in its approach to communicators mushrooming from inside social networks, from the PR industry of the great corporations and from among adventurous netizens.

A sustained attack against the public unleashed by the advertising industry, perpetrated with promotion messages disguised as news reports by spin-doctors together with political marketing in times of election campaigns generated a sort of media malaise engulfing the public/audience, a feeling that opened the gate and up surged the appetite for soft news and infotainment.

Once it set in, infotainment proved to be far from a dramatic, irreversible divorce of the “serious news production” from the mainstream of information and novelty. Mass

media communicators adjusted their approach to current events and became part of the public information landscape.

The professional training of each media communicator, and the media market feed-back developed some editorial patterns and behaviours which fulfill not only the common thirst for knowing the world about us and its major events, but also some new communicational standards for journalism as part of the public sphere mechanism which it relies on:

- Credibility and trust;
- Integrity based on differentiating good from bad stemming from the acknowledged and accepted responsibility deriving from such a partition
- Decency as an attitude of individual sacrifice, and the respect of the others hinged on norms and conventions generating community interaction [Olen 1988, 33].
- Disciplined or rebellious media messages called for a new professional order, requested by media researchers and practitioners. Their common efforts made Edward Tivnan identify several media essential responsibilities in the human society:
- To report newsworthy events truthfully in a clear and rational way [Tivnan, 1995, 263-265]. Sydney Callahan added that the media must not only report news stories with utmost accuracy. They must also draw a clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction, between news and opinion. "Only bare facts are not enough. News journalism must report the truth placing the story in perspective, in order to establish the credibility of several sources for the public's perception"[Callahan, 2003, 3-15];
- To provide a forum for public criticism and compromise. The media should set in motion a turntable of views and opinions, which journalists may not accept. However, media outlets should allow their practitioners to exercise their personal conscience [Tivnan];
- To present a significant image of the groups which constitute a social community.

Within this framework, Ted J. Smith concluded that media is responsible for the perception and the meanings the public attaches to the values a certain society shares. Media providers must contribute to the transfer of cultural traditions from one generation to the next. They may also consolidate generally accepted virtues and norms [Smith 1988, 39-40].

Instead of segregating infotainment from "serious journalism", this new trend should be regarded as a sophisticated and sometimes risky attempt to communicate. Besides, "no aspect of broadcasting calls for greater skills or harder work from producers, directors and performers than the business of capturing the audience with a smile or mounting an exciting production" [Dyer 2002, 8]. Such an approach would defend the news industry from criticism coming from puritans eager to contain journalism within rigid, professional guidelines.

For viewers who witnessed and followed the emergence of an alternative journalistic approach of events through a mixture of hard and soft news, infotainment may look like the other side of the coin for «serious» reporting. For younger generations, born and equipped with communication gadgets the danger of taking infotainment for serious news is huge and it stems from the very fact that today's youngsters no longer have reliable terms of comparison. Sober reporting on major issues is ornate every now and then with human-interest stories, more exciting, yet less significant for an individual's or a community's fate. Obviously, education may be

one of the pathfinders to lead teenagers out of the woods. Unfortunately, not all young people have an equal access to the best schools and the most performing universities. Not all of them are born and raised with a digital tablet or phablet on the night table. Families do not have the same background, the same life experience and the same moral values.

Infotainment and its stepbrother, the tabloid, hinge on popularity. They develop a sort of celebrity culture and their appeal to the public, which cannot be overlooked anymore, generated a new television format stemming from the print media: the current affairs magazine. In television production, this is a sort of news programme dotted with different audio-visual products like news packages, interviews and features covering novelties or bordering them in terms of time sequence. From an editorial perspective, all such brief «sub-chapters» vary from the most urgent hard news reported via live inserts related to a developing event to a background story that either follows up a previous event, or simply explains it and its consequences.

Journalistic habits and styles differ from one TV channel to the next. The Romanian public television adopted such an approach, given its status of a generalist station, assigned by the law to address the interests of as many social groups as possible, and to inform, educate and entertain its audience in a balanced and decent way. Quite surprisingly, the First channel of the public television pioneered infotainment productions even in the early 1980s with weekly programmes like “De la A la infinit”, or “Album duminical”. In the early 1990s, after the regime change, their popularity spurred younger producers to follow up with “Ora 25”, broadcast on Saturday afternoon and moderated by one of its producers. Commercial channels that mushroomed in Romania after 1995 quickly adopted the idea of such news magazines on current affairs and entertainment. They soon abandoned it and moved on to so-called talk shows, which unfortunately turned into collections of politically biased talking heads. Once more, the Romanian public television was the first to broadcast an 8 hours live programme during the U.S. Presidential elections in 1992. It was a balanced combination of real time reporting on the news and video flashes received via the Eurovision News Exchange, a number of features, the candidates’ bio-portraits, archive reminders about the American political scene and proceedings, about historic landmarks all intertwined with some American misc hits. Such a news marathon enjoyed a tremendous success, which was doubled in 1996, during the following U.S. Presidential elections. Such a professional performance followed the rules contained in a specific law on the duties and freedoms of the public radio and television services in Romania, which demanded journalists, producers and controllers to respect the public’s right to free, accurate and balanced information about domestic and international events relevant to the audience.

Commercial stations are free from specific legal constraints in Romania. All they must do is to fit into the general provisions regulating the media environment, as a whole. First, because they do not fall under the provisions of a specific legal act, and secondly because they gyrate around higher audience ratings translated into big money from advertising. Henceforth, the current affairs magazine-format has become even more appealing to them, as such stations cram together both real reporting of hard and soft news and some political gossip, projections and commercial promotions.

Popularity has become a very treacherous temptation, ebbing unexpectedly because it includes representations of people. In most cases, reason is overcome by emotional reactions, by likes and dislikes. No matter how perceptive producers may be, sometimes they are taken aback by the way programmes influence popularity rates among the public. Ultimately, emotion proved to be a journalistic engine setting in

motion new and unexpected areas of interest. Infotainment played the affect and sensation card in order to capture and preserve a larger audience. "As popular sovereignty became routine and the popular media [became] commercial, the use of sensation in the service of truth began to jar the modern sensibility" [Hartley 2012, 316].

At this point, two basic concepts support each other, up to a certain point, to divorce each other irreversibly in the end. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth, and its first loyalty is to people. A very noble edict, which has been the bright North Star, followed by most of those truly dedicated to media communications, irrespective of the selected medium.

Finding and especially reporting the truth is a tremendous task and the success in the attempt to get to the core of events is never certain, while the risk of failure is always there. For the very good reason that no matter how a dedicated journalist is to the cause of truth, he or she is a human being, living between reason and emotion. Even the most strenuous efforts to let the former prevail and to suppress the latter, or the other way round, they will both exist at different degrees. "Despite the empirical fact that no journalistic enterprise has ever succeeded in separating reason from emotion, information and entertainment, the real and the imagined, the facts and the story, nevertheless the idea persists that journalism should not deal with «naughty bits»" [Lumby 1999, 163]. True enough! What is naughty? Are scoops from the private life of a public figure naughty when reporters try to get between her/his bed sheets, or when biting criticism based on facts (and pictures) shows the dark side of the moon in a politician's career and his/her rise to fame? Hard to tell, but both the mainstream media and infotainment open promising options. First, to discard any attempt of naughtiness and stick to serious news. Second, to leave the topic in the care of tabloids feasting on sensational scoops. And thirdly, to allow infotainment to sugarcoat the story, make it newsworthy, yet keeping its distance from the Page 3 style. A compromise of the three may bring into the public space an exciting story mere by hint and not by description.

Balancing the scales between reason and emotion would have been easy sometime ago when most media outlets (dailies in the first place) managed very faithful sequences from the public. Digital platforms, the TV remote control, zapping have all brought a new consumption mobility for young and old, for Romanians, Argentinians, South Africans or Vietnamese. An American researcher concluded wisely that sticking to the middle of the road in the case of infotainment versus tabloidization is more than difficult but also for any form of communication. The very changes not only at different levels of society but also inside the communication industry itself generated a new process of inquiring, of research and prodding that has pushed things to the limit.

"The center of gravity for formal inquiry changes places, too. In an economy of staff [objects, n.a.] the disciplines that govern extracting material from earth's crust and making stuff out of it naturally stand at the centre: the physical sciences, engineering and economics as usually written. The arts and letters, however vital we all agree them to be, are peripheral. However, in an attention economy the two change places. The arts and the letters now stand at the center" [Lanham 2006. XII].

Both arts and letters are parts of the communication process and journalism has borrowed from each of them to the benefit of its best productions. Arts yielded emotions; letters lent style, language and meanings. Together, they promoted journalism to the centre stage. Since journalism is an island within the popular culture-flux, it is essential to detect the direction it is heading to, and to evaluate its contribution and its limits in disseminating reason and knowledge. Emotion will follow, anyway!

Market-oriented media (read commercial) have cast a long shadow over topics generally focused on the political environment. The effect is that commercialized products, with an emphasis on out-of-the-ordinary, have surrounded political news packages and reports, usually keeping the front page. "The dramatization of politics and the migration of the political discussion towards «infotainment» venues in which the voice of the ordinary citizen has a greater role are likely to increase popular involvement in politics" [Brants 1998, 320].

Obviously, taxpayers would only be too happy to jump onto the bandwagon because it may bring them closer to an inclusive and interactive governance system. Politicians, on their part, will hurt because they live in the spotlight, they love the show and they do not accept easily to be sidelined especially when they sponsor popular media outlets directly or via political parties and organizations. Losing control and the front seat in the theatre is a bitter pill to swallow by public figures who act in and for the public attention.

A major concern in the analysis of infotainment is that of its significance. It definitely brought along changes of perspective and approach in journalism, encouraged tremendously by the social (nonprofessional) media. From this point of view, infotainment may be regarded as an updating process of communication that some researchers identify with modernization of the industry [Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini 2010, 176].

Infotainment has been growing constantly and it blurred sometimes the line in the sand that isolated news from entertainment, from the PR industry and from the advertizing machinery. The inner mechanisms of news production have changed in terms of gathering, processing and disseminating novelties and in the way in which the public evaluated the shifts in media planning biased towards commercialization and entertainment.

The «new news» will probably share the fate of the so-called new media (actually, new digital platforms that took over the signs and their significance from print, radio, cinematography and television): groundbreaking experiences will become gradually goods and gains of the journalistic trade while the useless ones will be shaken off in the media industry's search for new approaches to reality and truth.

By mere chance, or perhaps by a shrewd maneuvering behind the scenes, the meaning of the very term «news» has been detoured towards a limited significance of «political news», everything else being dumped into «soft news» and ultimately into infotainment. There are three reasons for this segregation. First, the news value follows a sort of downgrading as the daily news programme unfolds. Priority comes to «hard news», mostly political, which will take the top place. As one goes through the run-down, one would navigate further among human-interest stories and the thrill dies out to the last news package in the programme that bears little interest for politicians, if not for the public. Second, a number of current affairs programmes do not focus on (political) news as such. For the sake of popularity and audience ratings, they employ a rather detached journalistic approach where politics is not a professional beacon. Soft news and entertainment come to the further end of the springboard to meet the expectations of a public favourable to good news. Thirdly, several fiction productions (films, serials, reenactments) foray into politics imagining what journalism is supposed to do but cannot: the trading behind closed doors (see "The House of Cards"). Investigative journalism should cover those stories, but that is a tedious, costly and risky side of the profession. Whenever this sort of journalistic work comes up with sensational scoops, they have been jump-started by unilateral interests of one political group intent to reveal the wrongdoings of its rivals. This is exactly where infotainment

comes in with flying colours! "Thanks to infotainment some viewers may learn more about some political issues than they would in the absence of news-entertainment mixtures" [Prior 2007, 275].

Infotainment's gains of popularity among producers and the members of the public should not be overlooked, overestimated or discarded out of hand for a very good reason. Most viewers watch hard news, serious news as a shift of gear in the information exercise. Researchers found it difficult to establish which of the two takes the first place. It is highly possible that entertainment and news change places according to each individual's state of mind, humour, environment, culture, education, beliefs and moods. Therefore, such a strict hierarchy could prove irrelevant as long as the alternation of hard news and infotainment proves that the public has accepted the newcomer (infotainment) and remains also attached to well-set patterns of serious news reporting on basic matters of social and individual interests.

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