

**Reconsidering the Fourth Estate:  
The functions of infotainment**

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Refereed paper presented to the  
Australian Political Studies Association  
University of Adelaide  
29 September – 1 October 2004

*It is hardly possible to write a history of information separately from a history of the corruption of the press.*

Walter Benjamin (1973:28)

### **Abstract**

Criticism that TV infotainment is "dumbing down" public discourse invites investigation into the relationship between journalists and their audiences and reflection on the applicability of "fourth estate" theory to contemporary conditions. Consideration is given to the genres of infotainment - lifestyle shows, reality TV, docu-soaps, docu-games, tabloid news, talk shows, documentary and news sit-coms. It is suggested that when considered as a totality, these genres actually offer greater diversity of viewpoints, acuity of representation and depth of critique than traditional news and current affairs programs presently provide.

### **Introduction**

Traditional TV news and current affairs programs are shrinking in terms of audience reach and thus significance to public discourse. The challenge to these traditional forms comes from an emerging, still-formless genre, infotainment. We might begin the work of defining infotainment by noting that it refers to a grab bag of styles, formats and sub-genres whose only common feature is that they fall somewhere in the space between the two traditional pillars of television, information and entertainment.

One striking indicator of infotainment's growth of influence was a promotional appearance by ABC *Four Corners*' Liz Jackson on Channel Ten's decidedly down-market *The Panel* on 19 July 2000. *Four Corners* has long been acknowledged as the national broadcaster's flagship program and its attempts to augment its traditionally highbrow audience with aficionados of infotainment show that at least the ABC's promotions department appreciates the power of this emerging genre.

Sydney's Olympic Games offered further indicators of infotainment's influence. The satirical, fly-on-the-wall documentary, *The Games* (ABC TV: 2000) often scooped the straight press with details of behind the scenes machinations at SOCOG, the all-powerful games co-ordination committee (Cohen 2000). *The Games* was read as such effective critique of SOCOG operations that the central character spent an entire episode assuring the audience that the program was just satire. Similarly, despite the multi-million dollar expenditure on traditional coverage of the Olympics, it was the late-night, satirical talk-show *The Dream* (Channel 7: 2000) that most effectively reported the athletes' own perceptions of the Games' experience. *The Dream* was almost alone in covering the secret re-assignment of medals after disqualifications for drug taking, it provided a stinging critique of the Games' commercialisation by promoting its own alternative mascot (Fatso the Wombat) and it counteracted the modern obsession with winning by highlighting valiant losers.

The recent critical and financial success of documentaries that bend that particular genre towards infotainment show that there is a continuing audience for programming that discusses serious issues where it has production values to which the audience can relate. Mike Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 911* still bear the mark of Moore's early politically-committed *cinema verite* (*Roger and Me*), but the multiplicity of sources, the fast "MTV" style editing, the use of music and his ability to "cut to the chase" have connected with a large audience keen to engage with important social and political issues. Those from the traditional journalistic institutions are keen to point out that whatever the value of Moore's work, "it is not journalism". While he may be dealing with serious issues, defenders of traditional journalism point to Moore's lack of balance, objectivity or even fairness, to distinguish his work from theirs. They are right, but it must be noted that Moore's passion is creating audiences to which traditional journalism is failing to communicate, perhaps because he has not allowed the process to dominate the purpose of journalism: to hold power accountable.

Journalism traditionally sees itself as having a central role in ensuring accountability in the democracy by revealing the detail of debate in the political process and

investigating the interests various positions in that debate serve. This account of journalism is based in the terminology of the fourth estate, a term first employed by Macaulay in Great Britain in 1828 to contrast the press to the Lord Spiritual, Lords Temporal and Commons but now used to contrast the press to the legislative, executive and judicial arms of government (EARC 1993:12). In this context, journalism is understood and justified as a watchdog on political institutions and the social processes those institutions create and defend. Fourth estate theory has, for journalists, the dual benefits of both placing them inside the political process yet outside the institutions of governance, it allows them power but not “that” sort of power, soft rather than hard power.

The problem for traditional accounts of journalism based in fourth estate explanations is that audiences no longer find traditional journalism as important and sustaining as they once did. News and current affairs are moving down the ratings. In Australia, the fate of Channel Nine’s flagship 60 Minutes, itself sometimes accused of tabloid tendencies, is instructive. Its ratings have dropped by almost half since its peak in the mid-1980s and by almost a third in the last decade (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 18 November 2000:35).

A similar phenomenon is apparent in the United States where the attraction of the flagship nightly news programs is in rapid decline. The independent Pew Research Centre asked people if they regularly watched the major TV network evening news with their big name anchors and the results indicate a rising level of dissatisfaction with mainstream news:

**Table 1: Pew Research Centre – do you regularly watch the major TV network evening news with named anchors?**

	May 1987	Aug 1989	May 1990	March 1995	April 1996	April 1998	April 2000	April 2002	April 2004
Yes	71	67	67	65	59	59	50	53	52
No	28	33	32	35	41	41	50	47	47
DK	1	*	1	*	*	*	*	*	1

Source: <http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=841>

As traditional news and current affairs is on the decline, infotainment is on the rise. There is a wide-spread concern that this rising flood of infotainment is overwhelming the informative function of television, turning the entire medium into mere entertainment and so 'dumbing down' the public discourse. The dumbing-down allegations are not new to television journalism which has always operated in a climate of suspicion that it does not have the serious purpose of print. Neil Postman (1982, 1989) warns that journalism has become part of show business where viewers are presented with decontextualised fragments that require little intellectual activity to digest. Carl Bernstein (1992: 21) explicitly grounds the problem in the epistemological: journalism has become '...illusionary and delusionary - disfigured, unreal and disconnected from the real context of our lives... distorted by celebrity and the worship of celebrity; by the reduction of news to gossip; by sensationalism...'. Rapping (1995:38) claims that by giving away to the audience's base desires, it was 'the infotainment monster that ate the news industry'. Sean Paige (1998) details the sensationalism of news magazine infotainment with its predilection for crime, soft personality stories and popular culture that produces thin news content dressed up as entertainment. Paul Kelly (1999) complains that politicians' reliance on tabloid talk shows is changing the nature of the political process. Michael Medved (2000) details the processes of dumbing down: titillation, lack of focus, superficiality, subjectivity and the propagation of self-pity and claims "the line between news and entertainment has been obliterated".

But is infotainment dumbing down TV or just producing 'a redefinition of television styles and formats' (Idato 2000b)? Could this redefinition be based in a 'shift', as John Corner (2000) argues, '...in the nature of public and private life... and the complex ways in which both the contours of social knowledge and emotional experience have been reconfigured.' Jefferey Brand et al (2001) notes that while current affairs production values have not changed since their inception, there is a shift in audience preferences where younger audiences are drawn to new forms of current affairs programming such as comical news and current affairs including *Frontline*, *Good News Week* and *The Panel* that offer a humorous and sarcastic approach to reviewing

contemporary news and current affairs reports in other media.

Perhaps the most effective journalism has always been a combination of news and entertainment. Leonard (1999) suggests that one archetype of liberal, scientific journalism, Benjamin Franklin, was also a founding father of infotainment who wrote news as ballads and sold them on the streets of Boston. The face of television is changing dramatically so that 'there are no rules in what is going to work and what's not.' (Schlosser 2000) By considering infotainment as a genre and by analysing the range of sub-genres from which it may be constituted, it is then possible to interrogate how infotainment is actually used by audiences and what impact it is having on public discourse.

### Defining Infotainment

The infotainment genre is a difficult beast to categorise. Corner's (2000) comments on the melding of documentary and entertainment techniques are relevant here:

'Extensive borrowing of the 'documentary look' by other kinds of programme, and extensive borrowing of non-documentary kinds of look (the dramatic look, the look of advertising, the look of the pop video) by documentary, have complicated the rules for recognising a documentary.' These observations are just as relevant if the word 'documentary' is replaced with 'news' in the above quotation.

Grabe et al (1998) note formal, quantitative differences between the tabloid, infotainment of *Hard Copy* and the standard news presentation of the US *60 Minutes* particularly with regard to five production techniques: music, sound effects, slow motion, the use of flash frames as transitions between shots, and the obtrusiveness of the reporter's voice tone. The table below summarises Grabe et al's findings with regard to sensationalising production technique:

**Table 2: Sensational Production Techniques**

	Hard Copy	60 Minutes
Slow motion content	7.14 percent	0.21 percent
Slow motion every	53.1 seconds	2279.1 seconds
Flash transitions	8.2 percent	0.1 percent
Flash transition every	46.5 seconds	5507.9 seconds

Music in segment	82.9 percent	0.4 percent
Sound effects every	83.1 seconds	4130.9 seconds

Source: Grabe et al 1998

In subsequent work, Grabe et al (2000) found that the flamboyant tabloid, or infotainment, style of packaging increased arousal and attention when compared to the same story prepared in a standard fashion. Further, viewers found standard versions to be more believable and informative than the tabloid versions of news stories but there was no significant difference between the styles with regard to recognition memory or delayed free recall of the stories. But the different receptions of different styles of packaging does not guide us as to where to draw the line between the substance of standard news and infotainment.

The clarification of the parameters of infotainment is crucial as various regulative forces seek to come to terms with the genre. Stern (1996) details how U.S. lawmakers and broadcasting executives bogged down in their discussions about the introduction of the V chip precisely on the point of how to classify reality-based TV programs. Should they be seen as entertainments, that would then not be available to children, or as news which would therefore make reality TV exempt from the chip's effects. In Australia Channel 9 has successfully argued that Channel 10's *The Panel* is entertainment so that its re-broadcast of segments of 9's programs is not for news, criticism or review and therefore in breach of copyright (Jackson 2000). This general area has already been canvassed by Justice Hill in the Federal Court case over rights to broadcast Sydney's new year celebration (*Nine Network Australia v ABC* [1999] FCA 1864) where it was found that "the fact that humour is used (and) news coverage is interesting or even to some entertaining... does not negate the fact that it could be news." The dividing line remains elusive and searching for it may be pointless given the plethora of programs seeking to plug the infotainment gap.

By its very nature infotainment occupies the space between the two main functions of television, information and entertainment, and it is important to consider that this interstitial genre may spread its tentacles in both directions. This paper argues that we should at least look to see whether these developments cut both ways to produce

not only a dilution of traditional information programs but also a counter-trend where entertainment programs are reaching for a more serious, informative purpose.

As with any emerging cultural phenomena, nomenclature in this area is still fluid. O'Regan (2000) equates infotainment with lifestyle television, as does Idato (2000a) who identifies it as one strand of reality TV along with shock video, docu-soaps and tabloid talk shows. Paige (1998) equates infotainment with down-market news magazine programs while Klein (1992) equates it with television talk shows.

The term infotainment is most useful to cover the whole loosely-connected range of sub-genres and has been endorsed as such by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (Given 2000). Infotainment occupies that entire space between traditional news and current affairs (dedicated to the production of serious information) and the movies, series, soaps, sit-coms and variety shows whose undisguised purpose is to entertain.

The following table is an attempt at a comprehensive statement of the full range of sub-genres that might be considered part of infotainment:

**Table 3: Sub-genres of Infotainment**

Format	Definition	Examples
<b>lifestyle shows</b>	Entertaining info relevant to audience needs	<b>Money, Better Homes &amp; Gardens, Backyard Blitz, Auction Squad, Getaway</b>
<b>reality TV</b>	Actuality of real-life events	<b>Sylvania Waters, Australia's Funniest Home Videos, COPS</b>
<b>docu-soaps</b>	Actuality of manufactured events	<b>The Real World, Single Girls, Judge Judy</b>
<b>docu-games</b>	Actuality of manufactured competition	<b>Big Brother, Survivor, Popstars, Temptation Island, The Mole</b>
<b>docu-lifestyle</b>	Actuality of competition with lifestyle focus	<b>The Block, The Amazing Race</b>
<b>tabloid news</b>	News format with mostly entertaining content	<b>E!, Hard Copy, Media Watch, Totally Ten News</b>
<b>talk shows</b>	Entertainment format with informative content	<b>The Panel, The Dream, Oprah Winfrey, Good News Week</b>

<b>mocu- mentary</b>	Faux documentary format with satirical purpose	<b>Frontline, The Games, Larry Sanders Show</b>
<b>news sit- com</b>	Sit-com format reflecting on media practices	<b>Murphy Brown, News Radio, Spin City</b>

Each of these sub-genres is at work within the information/entertainment divide, using elements from both to produce fresh connections to the audience.

Standard game shows are a liminal case. Some make the argument that game shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* contain information in an entertaining format and are “more educational, dramatic and positive than the vast majority of programming” (*Time* 17 January 2000:80). Nevertheless, game shows are excluded from further consideration in this paper because they comprise a distinct genre with formats as old as television (Schadewald 2000). Further, game shows exhibit little practical or critical purpose and cannot be seen as part of the new wave of activity that constitutes infotainment. *Good News Week* was another difficult case. While originally it took a game show format, the questions were merely opportunities to provide various levels of media analysis. Further, the scoring was haphazard and absolutely nothing rested on the outcome. So, while it was never the same after it went commercial (Molitorisz 2000), *GNW* in its hey day definitely fitted into the talk show category.

### **Lifestyle Shows - Money, Better Homes and Gardens, Backyard Blitz**

Gay Hawkins defines this sub-genre thus: ‘From Burke’s Backyard to Rick Stein’s Seafood Odyssey, to Sex-Life, we are swamped with advice on how to cook, prune, diet, worm the cat, put on a condom, or build a pergola.’ (O’Regan 2000) The lifestyle program is a sign that TV programmers are listening to the audience which has long called for ‘news you can use’. While the ABC’s *Gardening Australia* and its radio-based predecessors led the way in the presentation of useful information, in recent years it has been the commercial channels that have refined this format, particularly around personal finances and Australia’s biggest investment, the family home. Food and travel have also been popular topics (Littleton 1997).

Hawkins points out that lifestyle programs are very active in raising ethical issues that confront people in the everyday without supplying categorical instruction on how to behave: 'So these shows, while they appear to offer mere technical advice, the sorts of advice and techniques that are being promoted privilege certain sorts of ethical values: cooking is good; do-it-yourself, building your own pergola is good for you; recycling and composting in your garden is virtuous, using non-chemical sprays in your garden is ethically important.' (O'Regan 2000) Hawkins contrasts this ethical work of opening up debates about how we live with the moralising that occurs in news and current affairs when it seeks to dismiss and discipline groups of people like the unemployed.

Of course lifestyle programs have their own ethical problems when they seek to disguise the commercial imperatives inherent in their programs, an issue that caused the ABC to cut several infotainment programs following reports of backdoor advertising deals (Woods 1996).

### **Reality TV - *Sylvania Waters*, *Australia's Funniest Home Videos*, *COPS***

Reality TV is ostensibly an entertainment format that seeks to co-opt news and current affairs' claim to show real life (Lumby 1999). By compiling raw footage from low-key crews, the surveillance system and the audience itself, reality TV offers 'slices of life' that contrast with the abstracted representations of news and the manufactured products of 'Hollywood'.

Reality TV has deep roots in the avant garde film documentary style of *cinéma vérité* which used light-weight camera equipment and little overt direction in the attempt to capture the immediacy and truth of actuality. Of course, reality TV like *cinéma vérité* is never "the whole truth" because processes of editing require authorial intervention. Then there is the paradox that just as reality-based television programs celebrate the authenticity of the moment, digital image manipulation challenges the credibility of any representation (Fetveit 1999).

Even when it is 'exploiting catastrophe' (Hawkins in O'Regan 2000) or lapsing into 'shockumentary' (Vanderbilt 1998), the quotidian content of reality TV provides a more intense account of experience than either news or entertainment can supply and a deeper reading of what it is to be human. In a recent program about natural disasters, I was struck by the intensity of the actuality shot by a family had at their holiday home which caught a tornado picking up speed over nearby water, wavering in its direction before coming straight at the family and then destroying their home. To share the intensity as they wondered if the tornado was going to strike them and the experience of the house disintegrating around them provided a much deeper insight into the forces of nature than anything offered by *Twister* or a ninety second report on the news. Holland (1994:41) asks of a program 'which dwelt in unashamed detail on a real life traffic accident... Does it really reflect a hunger for democratic information?' The answer could well be that given the commercial interests in motor vehicle production and the public investment in roads, then yes, understanding the consequences of the road toll should be a crucial part of the discourse in our democracy.

Further, contrary readings of reality TV provide deeper analyses of events than might first be obvious. For example *Sylvania Waters*, while deeply flawed (Potts 2000), offered a striking reading of the complexities of family life and the dominant role of economics in everyday life. Programs based on surveillance and police operational footage educate the audience as to when they are under observation by the state apparatus and commercial enterprise and offers opportunities to reflect on how to avoid such occasions. *COPS* and its myriad of imitators (Littleton 1996) provide not only an insight into the tensions of urban policing (Katz 1993) but also graphic documentation of the state's war against the young, poor and homeless and its genocidal tendencies towards those of colour.

### **Docu-soaps - The Real World, Single Girls, Judge Judy**

The low cost of real TV in comparison to industry standard professional production has prompted exploration into the viability of minimally staged events with an amateur cast shot to reality TV production standards. While cast are carefully

selected to produce interesting footage (Marsh 2000), their interactions raise a plethora of ethical questions for consideration by the audience. The docu-soaps such as *Single Girls* and *The Villa* reveal the complexities inherent in the creation of relationships in a post-feminist environment (Probyn 2000).

This format has been used as an interesting way to “teach” history in *The 1900 House* which placed a family in the domestic conditions prevalent a hundred years previously and used historical exposition and elements of the game-show challenge in a way that “... was rarely trivialising and often very instructive” (Corner 2000) as it effectively critiqued contemporary cultural expectations in light of the relatively recent past.

A sub-set of the docu-soap are court shows such as *Judge Judy* and *The People’s Court* (Schlosser 1997) which pit complainant and defendant against each other in minor civil disputes. The programs teach viewers much about the production of a ‘truthful’ demeanour and the arbitrariness of the legal process.

### **Docu-games - Survivor, Popstars, Temptation Island**

While the traditional game show format has been excluded from consideration in this paper, there are a range of programmes that use actuality of manufactured competition to create a sub-genre that might be styled docu-games.

Docu-games are typically based around a complex and prolonged competition involving the elimination of contestants on a weekly basis, sometimes (as in *Survivor*) on the basis of contestant voting, sometimes (as in *Big Brother*) on the basis of viewer voting and sometimes (as in *The Mole*) on the basis in the contestant’s success in the competition.

In *Survivor*, the competitors are placed in a supposedly “wild” environment where they battle to be the last eliminated by the vote of their co-competitors and so win a million dollars. The action mimics the struggle for commercial success that underpins capitalism. As Miller (2000) notes: “...while the show purports to find the

person best equipped to live in this version of the wild, it is also about the nature of the individual in American business. Such an individual must communicate well with others through alliance and coordination while always maintaining his or her ambition as paramount." *Survivor* reveals much about the human, emotional cost of the competitive system while, surprisingly, establishing the benefits of solidarity (the group that made a compact produced the winner).

### **Docu-lifestyle - The Block, The Amazing Race**

As the genres of infotainment develop, it is hardly surprising that they begin to feed on each other. Docu-lifestyle take the substance of life-style programs and puts it into the context of docu-games to produce actuality of competition with lifestyle focus whether it is home renovation in the case of *The Block* or travel in the case of *The Amazing Race*.

### **Tabloid news - E!, Hard Copy, Media Watch**

Tabloid news programs take the format of traditional news and/or current affairs but focus not so much on the formal public sphere of politics, economics and business but rather on the tragedies, transgressions and sexuality of the private sphere, particularly as they are played out in celebrity scandal (Lumby 1999).

Charges of trivialisation and sensationalism against tabloid news programs (Paige 1998) are well founded but miss the point. Turner (1999) suggests new paths for cultural criticism in the analysis of contemporary television news and current affairs programming and they are useful here. One useful trajectory is to ask: what do audiences find useful in these programs? What, to those schooled in traditional journalistic practice, might appear as trivial, can be in fact quite important to the audience. Consumer stories, particularly those using hidden cameras, reveal the shortcomings of commercial practices and give the audience the opportunity to learn how to overcome them. Paige (1998) identifies as trivial stories on plastic surgery, sperm-bank children, husbands who are deaf to their wives and the health benefits of truth-telling but all these stories point to areas of key debate about emerging forms of personal identity and social interaction.

Further, while the use of celebrity wallows in sensationalism and its main purpose appears to be to provide integrated media corporations with the opportunity for cross-promotion (Corliss 1988), it offers something more to the audience. As traditional information-oriented news, celebrity coverage on tabloid TV makes little sense, but understood as ritual, symbol and myth (Langer 1998:5), celebrities may be seen as representing not so much their own individuality but the symbolic cultural and social meaning the audience attaches to their individuality (Lumby 1999:115). The role of celebrities is the same as the role of any character in any myth: to give the audience the opportunity to reflect about their own ethical and spiritual condition.

*Media Watch* provides an interesting case which tests the categories suggested in this paper. While ostensibly of serious purpose and reliant on the techniques of traditional investigative journalism, *Media Watch's* critique of journalistic practice uses the same "Gotcha" techniques of the tabloids it is quick to criticise. It is, by definition, exclusively about the media and has generated its own celebrity scandals. It celebrates the triviality of typographical error and relies on gossip to gather its stories. It is placed in this category not to demean its good work of improving the ethical conduct of the media, but to suggest that other tabloid shows may share its positive intent.

### **Talk shows - The Panel, Oprah Winfrey, Good News Week**

The open format and deliberative processes of the talk show offer the opportunity to address a more diverse group of issues at greater depth with more points of view represented in their complexity than is offered by traditional news and current affairs.

The crucial role of talk shows in the contemporary public sphere has been recognised by politicians who find not only respite from the combative one-upmanship of traditional news and current affairs but also the opportunities to explore policy issues in terms relevant to the audience and to present their character for close

analysis. Since Bill Clinton sought to define himself by playing saxophone on Arseino Hall's program, the political use of talk shows is common not only in the United States (Klein 1992, Hanson 1996 ) but also elsewhere in the world (Brants & Neijens 1998).

### **Mocumentary - Frontline, The Games, Larry Sanders Show**

Particularly since the movie *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), the mocumentary or faux-documentary has been particularly useful in exploring the pretensions and obsessions of the media. While the form makes no claim to actuality, its subversion of the documentary gives it the space to question the processes of the representation of reality. The satirical bent of programs like *Frontline*, *Drop the Dead Donkey* and *The Newsroom* do not disguise the important issues that the form raises: the politics of agenda-setting, the mechanics of celebrity journalism, the myriad of ethical decisions fudged in the rush to air. As much as *Media Watch*, these programs are responsible for the growing audience awareness of the manufacturing processes of the media industry.

### **News sit-com - Murphy Brown, News Radio, Spin City**

The news sit-com performs a function similar to the mocumentary though without the same satirical edge. Rather the more sympathetic characters draw the audience into a deeper appreciation of the inter-personal processes that produce news and current affairs, their arbitrary nature and their potential for manipulation. While predominantly an entertainment format, the news sit-com offers the opportunity to develop and popularise critiques of the production techniques of information programming.

### **Conclusion**

It is suggested in this paper that infotainment is an emerging television genre consisting of a range of mutually referential sub-genres which, rather than dumbing down public discourse actually offer something above and beyond traditional news and current affairs programmes. While it is easy to criticise particular infotainment programmes as light-weight, in its variety of ways and to the sum of its programmes'

audiences, it might offer better information than traditional news formats do to their putative audience of all citizens.

Perhaps the decline of news and current affairs may be a function of the distance that has developed between a relatively impotent, inarticulate and cynical audience and the powerful, assured and connected journalists. Walter Cronkite despairs that journalists 'are today following public opinion more than we are leading. I think we have a duty to lead.' (Kirtz 1998:8) This statement underlines the elitist attitude of traditional news and current affairs and it points to the source of its growing irrelevance to the audience. Audiences are no longer passive, if they ever were. They want journalism that communicates with them, rather than journalism designed to highlight the journalist's connections, intelligence and privileged world-view.

The question arises whether infotainment might better meet the responsibilities of a fourth estate than traditional news channels do. John Hartley (1996: 72) presents a compelling argument that television provides "a mechanism for communicating across class, gender, ethnic, national, and other boundaries" and allows the audience to become citizens of symbolic communities with a politics "produced and sustained in the interstices of drama serials, nature documentaries and current affairs, or in the relationships between certain stars, styles or musics and their fans".

When lifestyle programmes put the preoccupations of the audience at the centre of their endeavours and when reality TV puts the camera in the hands of the audience or privileges the everyday interactions caught by surveillance cameras, then the viewpoints offered by television extend far beyond the clubby preoccupations of a small group of executive producers. When the camera is left running and docu-soaps or talk shows capture something extra in the back-chat or body language of participants, then an issue or personality can come into a sharper focus than a journalist rushing to deadline can ever hope to achieve. When a documentary or news sit-com captures the complexity of media production process and the inter-personal competition behind the scenes, then it provides a deeper critique of reality

and its representation than is ever evident in the slick production values of mainstream news and current affairs.

This is not to say that hard news and in-depth analysis of politics, economics and business play an inconsequential role in the public sphere. Traditional journalism can, on its good days, hold power accountable and insist that it complies with its own rules. Nor should it be suggested that infotainment is a wholly positive force. Turner (1999) analyses cases of infotainment excess and establishes the ground for effective critique of tabloidization. In response, it might be said that the power inherent in infotainment suggests that, when it presents facts, it has the same responsibility to strive for accuracy, balance and ethical awareness as traditional journalism, even if it does it in different ways that would not even make sense on the six o'clock news. While there are a variety of codes of practice limiting journalistic work, infotainment tends to seek the cover of the codes when convenient but ignore them when those codes are felt to be constrictive. With increasing pressures on all media to bend to commercial imperatives and incorporate cross-promotional opportunities, infotainment genres must work to maintain a frank relationship with the audience which appreciates the force of the commercial imperative but expects that to be treated with the same honest but satirical approach that infotainment applies to all other matters.

But as governments and corporations become more practised and efficient at the management of traditional news media, infotainment provides possibilities for producers to present alternative viewpoints not so easily controlled by media managers and for audiences to find their own uses for the material provided innocuously. In these ways, infotainment offers opportunities for new forms of democracy to develop based in an expansion of social reflexivity. This new work invites a reconsideration of explanations of journalism in terms of the "fourth estate" and a new focus on the media as a set of practices that offer citizens not only a "watchdog" but also, and more importantly, access to new deliberative processes made possible by global media networks.

The discussion in this paper points to the opportunity for further work to establish the efficacy of infotainment as an information genre. A comparative content analysis of infotainment and hard news would be useful to test whether infotainment is in fact more informative than traditional journalism. Further qualitative work on how audiences use infotainment in creating public discourse would also be beneficial.

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