

Commodification and infotainment: the basis of new news

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Abstract

The commodification of information is a direct consequence of the television media battle for audiences. Audiovisual media have to renew their content and have no qualms about mixing journalistic genres in order to improve their audience share to ensure advertising investment. It seems that infotainment, with its particular technique and style, achieves this dual aim and news programme directors happily use certain features of the new hybrid genre in order to change the way in which information is treated. This change is needed to meet the needs of the new commercial model.

Key words

Information, infotainment, commodification, audience, news-worthy criteria.

Resum

La mercantilització de la informació és una conseqüència directa derivada de la competència televisiva. Els mitjans audiovisuals han de renovar els seus continguts i no dubten a hibridar gèneres periodístics per trobar nous productes que aconseguixin atreure l'audiència i d'aquesta manera assegurar les inversions publicitàries. L'infoentreteniment, amb la seva tècnica i els seu estil particulars, assoleix aquest doble objectiu; i els directors dels programes informatius no dubten a incloure trets del nou gènere híbrid per introduir canvis en el tractament de la informació. Una transformació necessària per satisfer les necessitats del nou model comercial.

Paraules clau

Informació, infoentreteniment, mercantilització, audiència, criteris de noticiabilitat.

Introduction

The digital switchover and emergence of thematic channels due to the offer provided by DTT modules lead to greater audience segmentation and make the battle for television supremacy almost unsustainable. The battle unleashed by competition is becoming increasingly aggressive and new content and techniques are being sought to offer information in a new and refreshing way in order to attract viewers who now, more than ever, enjoy a wealth of free options to use during their leisure time in front of the television. Thematic channels enable them to personalise and profile their schedule according to specific audience tastes, be it for children, young people, women, men, etc., and they ensure the inclusion of certain programmes that will interest their audience more and help define the range of investors according to the product being advertised.

In an attempt to recover their market position, TV channels have had to find new ways of attracting viewers. Content is renewed, reinvented and even transformed with a move towards hybrid genres. Information and television news which, in their early days, were considered neutral spaces, are becoming just another element in the market logic underlying

the media: they are becoming a commodity. The viewing public is becoming a consumer viewer (Mozoncillo 1997), i.e. viewers are no longer individuals who have to be informed, educated and entertained but are content consumers of incalculable value who provide the necessary investment to continue developing TV. This article examines the changes affecting how information is treated which, influenced by market logic and hybrid genres, are revolutionising the presentation of reality as we know it.

The commodification of information: news as product

The commodification of cultural goods, and by extension information, creates an imbalance between the ultimate goal of informative programmes and the economic aim sought by TV channels through these programmes. Since the beginnings of TV, schedulers have always considered news programmes to be untouchable within the scheduling, as they help define certain audience routines and habits (Cebrián Herreros 1998). In fact, they are the only TV space whose survival each season is assured, considered as necessary spaces since they perform a public service, keeping the audience informed through suppos-

edly "objective" content. For viewers, these spaces are sacred due to market logic. However, they are mistaken because these programmes are actually about to undergo changes due to commodification. They are established programmes recognised by all viewers. When we switch on, we know what we will find at this particular time. We do not expect to be surprised because what we want from the news is that it tells us about reality, to connect with that window on the world which provides us with significant knowledge as to what is happening. It is the most direct way of finding out about events and feeling that we have an overall knowledge of these in the rest of the world, giving us a general overview of the issues that the media has decided are current affairs. It is precisely this selection that is increasingly influenced by advertisers who demand high audience ratings in exchange for their investment. Television channels are at the mercy of commercial models in which audience ratings prevail over audience quality, who end up becoming numbers, seen as trading figures that are worth their weight in gold.

Everything revolves around the commodification model, this social phenomenon that has an overall effect on society and how it's organised. In today's world, everything operates according to market logic, to the value of products. Everything is reflected in a continuous commodification process in which tangible and intangible assets are valued according to the profit they make, because financial profit prevails over any purpose they may have. Studies in recent years have focused on defining the concept and analysing its consequences. Marxist theory states that commodification is the process by which the value of things is renewed, now starting to be measured by the extent it can promote change, i.e. by the general benefits it may bring to the market, instead of how it may be used, its ultimate purpose.

Defining the accepted meaning of the term a little further in order to bring it closer to the object of study, the commodification of cultural goods involves a sea change in how we conceive the work and the artist. Original ideas are no longer viewed as unique, since the new market logic encourages the creation of replicas. The original continues to be the genuine article but, for a modest price, anyone can have an exact copy of the original and enjoy it in their own individual way. Not only the music industry makes money through sales and the release of copies. The same is also true for the art world in general, with painting and sculpture, for example: creativity is ultimately at the service of the logic of commerce. Everything is designed to be devoured by the mass heterogeneous public (Bustamante 1999) which is our globalised society today.

Information is undergoing a similar change. It has to absorb certain changes to adapt to the new reality, a new model where the reason for presenting a newsworthy event is not just to broadcast knowledge but to succeed in terms of TV viewing figures. The contest began in the 1990s as a direct result of television deregulation, which led to the creation of other public and private TV channels, putting an end to the monopoly of Televisión Española. The aim of this fierce competition was not

to cultivate a loyal audience in exchange for quality content but rather to ensure high ratings shares at any cost to conquer investors, advertisers, the only source of income for Spanish TV channels (Mozoncillo 1997; Bustamante 1999; García Avilés 2007; Uribe and Gunter 2007). The commercial TV model was imposed, with all channels cutting back on their search, introducing easily digested content returning huge profits. This commercialised trend migrated to all areas of TV scheduling and, obviously, TV news also came under its spell, leading to a new type of more commercial news, which to a certain extent tends towards *tabloidisation* (Uribe and Gunter 2007). The aim is to inform the audience, as this is the basic *raison d'être* for this kind of programme, but this is achieved using a range of techniques that transform the content and the way in which information is treated.

Since this is a heterogeneous, mass audience, the news has become a commodity, viewed as just another product to be offered to this segmented audience that sees nothing wrong with changing channel if it does not like the type of information brought to it by a specific medium. This is why the news is no longer a public service and why it has become a product designed specifically to attract TV viewers and therefore obtain the advertising investment needed to ensure the survival of the medium.

Consequently, commodification has altered the value concept of audiovisual products, which are no longer valued according to their creative quality but their financial profit (Mosco 2006; Casero 2008). All TV scheduling is conceived and designed to achieve high ratings, the aim being to create mass audiences without worrying about demographic differences in order to attract advertisers. Moreover, communication on the media has become a special commodity because, apart from bringing financial profit, it also contains an informative message that affects the creation of society's awareness (Mosco 2009).

The media help the public to create a general idea of what's happening around the world; they dictate which current affairs stories we need to know and ones we don't, and this information is selected on the basis of a series of commodification they have to satisfy advertiser expectations that the media are forced to make changes to the way they handle information in order to surprise an audience that is used to new formats and quickly tires of seeing the same thing. News needs a new focus to adapt it to the needs of an audience that has unlimited resources at its fingertips, thanks to the internet and new technologies in general that keep it informed. TV media know this and are aware that they have to come up with and introduce changes that will capture audiences' attention and prove they are on top of events, that they too form part of the dynamic offered by new technologies that keep audiences informed 24 hours a day with updated information. They design their own websites and use social networks to capture another type of audience. All this helps to maintain the classic TV news format, which involves public participation through surveys that make users feel part of the news, that they can give their opinion in

real time and share it with other viewers. This participation encourages the public and cultivates its loyalty and that creates the desired ratings needed to secure advertising investment which ensures the medium's survival, thanks to a change in content that has been adapted to new audience needs, which may simply be due to a pressing need to gain investors rather than to satisfy their followers. There are exceptions, such as Televisión Española, which on 1 January 2010 gave up advertising investment to avoid this type of commercial television logic, where all content is designed to attract audiences, which are offered to advertisers who want to get their message across to the largest number of people possible.

In short, the commodification of cultural goods and, by extension, information transforms a newsworthy event into a product ready for consumption. The idea of news as a right to receive information and be informed is lost, exchanged for a more lax acceptance whereby lighter topics take up a large part of television news.

Infotainment, the new information focus

Information now plays an important role away from news programmes but it does so with other aims in mind and with its own particular style, which places it more alongside the entertainment genre rather than in the informative style of television news. The aim is to arouse any kind of emotion in the receiver (Uribe and Gunter 2007) because, according to research, this type of more dramatic and human-interest focused news boosts ratings (Lang 1998). Information, conceived as news on television, is changing, creating a new genre; infotainment. It's a formula that sells and is therefore extrapolated and used in different programmes broadcast by the same channel. We are witnessing a new approach to information (Thussu 2007) and authors such as Carlo Sorrentino attribute the emergence of this new hybrid genre to commodification, which forces us to rethink classic TV formats and redefine the current treatment given to information.

The appearance of television competition in the 1980s and even more so in the 1990s forced the audiovisual media to redesign the television model. They need a change, their content needs bringing up to date and, starting from the premise that television's basic functions were to inform, educate and entertain (Bustamante 1999), why not do all this in one single programme? An infallible formula for attracting audiences; one programme that keeps people informed about the events taking place in their more immediate surroundings while they enjoy watching it and learn new things. This is the successful formula of infotainment programmes that merge information and entertainment in the same space.

In these types of television programmes the viewer becomes the protagonist and the entire programme revolves around them. These spaces provide TV viewers with readily available information handled from a more intimate, more human-inter-

est point of view, with numerous personal accounts that lend support to a single idea; they all back a report which concerns the inhabitants of a village, they know that they have to work together for the message to be effective and achieve the desired value. These spaces have room for the type of news such as extremely local or personal subjects which, for reasons of space and time, cannot be included in traditional information programmes. All types of news can be broadcast from here, television at the service of the public without realising that, as always, it is actually the public that is controlled by television and, by extension, by advertisers. Viewers feel the overwhelming need to share their everyday lives; they want to be heard and share their fifteen minutes of fame with everyone they know, and they offer their stories for free. Advertisers get rich from this and achieve a much wider audience to target with their messages.

Having analysed these types of programmes that are broadcast each afternoon nationally and internationally, we can state that information is transformed within infotainment programmes. It changes and becomes something different: information-based entertainment. This new genre requires changes to newsworthy criteria. The public wants to know what is happening in its more immediate surroundings and, since the aim is to satisfy this curiosity in order to secure followers and thereby investors, the process changes. Trivial topics, anecdotes, as well as social reports and events are becoming the key to these types of programmes, a trend that is increasingly seen in television news programmes.

The newsworthy criteria for these types of television spaces are different from those used in conventional news programmes. The dynamics and production routines are essentially the same but the interest and aims change and, therefore, so does the selection process. As with television news, on these types of programmes the newness, quality of the material and story's potential are inexorable conditions for transforming any event into a newsworthy one. One of the most outstanding differences might be the fact that fame has no place here; the protagonists of the news stories are anonymous people who have been made into heroes or victims who share their stories. Famous names are relegated to second place because this is undoubtedly the space for anonymous people, the man in the street, not the star system, about which we always hear the same news stories. The aim is to find the human interest aspect of the information, to personalise stories to the extreme. The crux of each of these news stories is, in short, the person.

Not only do the criteria used to select the information change, but so does the way in which the reality is presented in images, as they have their own style, both in terms of how the information and the images are treated. The recording techniques for these types of programmes find, or rather, invent a new iconic style which shows reality as it is, warts and all, and resorts to recording with a hand-held camera, moving away from the perfectionist aesthetics of shots taken with a tripod, which present the stability and perfect framing of a limited part of the space

where the action takes place, thereby bringing dynamism and realism to what is being explained. A moving camera is now the preferred style, as the lens becomes the eyes of the TV viewer who is the direct witness of what is happening.

Live link-ups are one of the key elements to the success of infotainment programmes as they are a symbol of unequivocal proximity. They are used to prove to TV viewers that the events that are relevant to their own lives also awaken their interest and, by extension, that of other TV viewers. This ensures success when there is a live link-up to the popular fiesta of a village, however small it may be. Even the towns themselves adjust the times of their celebrations to fit in with the needs of the programme and they even delay these events or bring them forward to ensure that the cameras broadcast them live. This is an unprecedented tourist attraction for the modest price of zero euros, as the rate paid is indirect and it provides TV viewers who satisfy the needs of advertisers. In fact, live link-ups, together with moving cameras, have created a following and have become key factors in a new way of watching television, a new concept in presenting reality that rejects perfect framings, that shows things warts and all and enhances the force of the iconic message because things are presented how they are, good or bad, with the sole purpose of awakening some sort of emotion among the audience (Uribe and Gunter 2007). Having realised the effectiveness of all these techniques, news programme directors have taken them on board and now use them to achieve a profit. On television news programmes, it's no longer unusual to see continuously moving images or political topics turned into rather lightweight stories.

In the case of Spain, the first programme based wholly on infotainment was *Madrid directo*, first broadcast in 1993. Little could we imagine that the success of this programme, created entirely using the narrative and expressive techniques of the new hybrid genre, would be so overwhelming that it was subsequently imitated on almost all television channels.

This change in the presentation of current affairs in the media fosters a dual aim; on the one hand an economic one, as these types of programmes, given their simplicity in explaining events, attract high daily ratings, which give programmes such as *España directo*, *Madrid directo*, *Andalucía directo* and *En connexió* an average share of between 12% and 20%. On the other, these types of programmes provide a space where TV viewers can make their complaints public, where they can report things like unfair treatment; it's the perfect place to share their concerns or reveal the unique nature of their town's festivals. This is the "everyman" space which, free of charge, shows some of their routines and invites other TV viewers to become part of this for a few minutes so that they feel less lonely, seek understanding or display their abilities and skills. The audience participates actively in these programmes, not just as protagonists altruistically giving their opinions but also awakening an unprecedented desire to participate and, on a daily basis, suggesting a whole host of themes to programme editors by phone, email and, more recently, social networks. On

programmes such as *En connexió*, broadcast by Canal 9, 20% of the subjects have been suggested by the audience via social networks or email. A trend that can be seen on other programmes, including *España directo* and *Madrid directo*, whose email is completely overloaded almost every day. The public wants to make their small contribution to current affairs in the media and these types of programmes provide them with the ideal space in which to file their reports and ensure they grab the headlines; it's a way of giving themselves a voice, of opening a window on the media to make themselves heard.

New changes in traditional news programmes

Infotainment has started a process of irreversible change regarding the treatment of information, offering a new vision of reality which hooks the audience, and news programmes cannot ignore the success of this new technique. News programmes continue to be the star product; they are the brand image of the channels (García Avilés 2007), the only space that truly reveals the editorial line and outlines the subjects and values to which the medium is committed. But this doesn't mean they can escape the commercial logic and the need to make changes to their content to ensure the loyalty of their audiences while at the same time attracting new TV viewers to relaunch the programme's success.

The changes that news programmes have undergone in recent years can be divided into two main blocks: the redefinition of newsworthy criteria and the renewal of production techniques for news items.

First, as a consequence of the commodification of information at all levels, the classic newsworthy criteria (Sorrentino 2007a: 79-91, Peralta, 2005: 46-58, Saperas, 2000: 22-23, Casero, 2008: 194-197, Papuzzi 1998 and Díaz Arias 2006) have developed and new parameters have emerged that redefine the old ones. In this new view of news, where the man in the street plays an important role, the strength of a testimony will prove sufficient for the subject to be considered newsworthy and the quality of the information will prevail over the quality of the image, unthinkable in television where, until now, the image prevailed over everything; in fact, images recorded by the public are becoming much more valuable (Cebrián Herreros 2004). It does not matter whether the material is of low quality or even out of focus or a bit pixelated and neither does it matter if the images have been downloaded from YouTube; all that matters is that the information supplied is sufficiently relevant. Not only in instances where information only reaches the media via the internet, such as the uprising in Tunisia or the eviction from the Al-A'yun camp in the Sahara, because there is a news blackout against journalists, but also in those instances where YouTube videos are used to illustrate issues such as illegal racing. In both cases, social networks, and the internet in general, have become an inexhaustible source of stories and audiovisual resources for the media that, on these

pages, find fresh newsworthy events almost every day, as the public, in their never-ending and unconscious desire to share all their achievements, post their own videos on the net without considering the possible consequences of their actions.

And now that newsworthy criteria are being redefined, the topics included in news programmes are also changing. Topics as trivial as the death of Paul the octopus may even open news programmes, as was the case on Antena 3 TV, where it was the leading headline that opened the midday news. News programmes are beginning to establish a new news code dominated by soft news, which is news based on events or subjects that are capable of arousing all kinds of emotions among the audience; now, not only do we talk about sensationalised news (Cebrián Herreros 2004) but also emotion-based news, which manages to involve the audience and move it. This technique works and advertisers know this and are forcing the expansion of this emotional news system. In fact, even stories considered to be hard news are being tinged by these new techniques. In many instances, the serious approach in news stories about politics is being replaced by anecdotes and audiences seem to remember this kind of information the most. Politicians' press offices use this new method to present the media reality in their favour, encouraging these types of anecdotes to ensure they appear as many times as possible on TV channels. The important thing is to appear on screen, without the message being of any real importance, to simply show your face and become familiar; this appears to be a sure way of guaranteeing victory.

Newsworthy criteria change as a result of commodification and, if we compare the content of infotainment and news programmes, we can see that they have much in common in several areas, because topics are used that are of interest to both editors of news programme and directors of infotainment programmes when choosing events and social reporting that are newsworthy. However, there are programmes, such as *En conexión*, which in recent seasons have refused to present stories on events because they are looking for other, more social types of news with a single protagonist, namely the man in the street, and they try not to repeat the stories that appear in the news bulletins in order to ensure that the audience does not become bored. In those cases where a cultural item or human-interest story coincides on both infotainment and news programme schedules, the former will automatically be removed and kept in cold storage so that it can be served up a few days later, in greater depth and more detail.

Not only are there changes to the parameters used for selecting information in terms of the presentation, recording and editing techniques for news on information programmes. Changes are also beginning to be introduced in terms of presentation techniques, many from the new hybrid genre of infotainment. News programmes increasingly use live link-ups, mainly ones that involve movement, to demonstrate proximity and offer up-to-the-minute information to show the audience they are committed to keeping them informed. Link-ups are on the rise, they imitate the style of infotainment programmes,

which have been proven to attract audience attention. Infotainment recording techniques have also crossed over; there is movement in many news items because this kind of camera movement no longer distracts TV viewers, since their eyes have become used to it after seeing programmes such as *España directo*, *Callejeros* or *21 días*, where movement is the overriding factor and the journalists themselves record their material. Cultural videos are now introducing these recording techniques, such as editing techniques which use effects and insert music to add a sense of dynamism, techniques that can also be seen in videos dealing with serious issues, such as politics, broadcast by the latest channels to enter the Spanish television industry, including Cuatro and laSexta, which have a slightly different approach to the way in which they present information.

Conclusions

The commodification of information means we have to reassess the entire news production system and requires us to redefine newsworthy criteria and the aims of news programmes. Information conceived as a commodity within the new commercial logic is subject to change; in fact, it needs to be updated continuously in order to achieve a dual objective: to be attractive to the audience and achieve the necessary funding to continue developing. Television content is being restructured and in some cases reinvented, originality is rewarded with high ratings, an ephemeral victory that will disappear when the model has been imitated by all the other channels and when new changes will have to be introduced to set it apart from the competition.

Information is essential to today's society. The public need, or believe they need, to be kept informed and know what is happening in the world around them and this is why the new formats, the hybrid infotainment genre, take information as their basis and accessorise it with entertainment. This new genre is redesigning the way information is treated and the success of its style is spreading to such well-established programmes as the news, which is being forced to change its formats and content to meet the requirements of advertisers. Infotainment was initially included in news programmes at the beginning of the 1990s in the United States. Initial research (Kees 1998 and Blumer 1999) concentrated exclusively on analysing the changes made to political news, whose tone began to gradually change until becoming human interest stories, where politicians ceased to be unapproachable figures and became citizens whose private lives were more important than their political actions. It was at this time when infotainment began to establish itself as an independent genre, which for years now has had its own space on the TV schedules. Today its presence can be seen on every news programme. Its recording techniques, the use (sometimes abusive) of live link-ups, the selection of topics and the focus given to the information are undoubtedly influ-

Table 1. Changes to news programme information

Infotainment programme	Information programme
- Continual camera movement - Hand-held recordings	- Hand-held recording is on the increase. The technique is widely used in cultural news items and is now spreading to other news items in all areas.
- Live link-ups with movement - These last between one and three and a half minutes	- There are more and more live link-ups with movement, which offer a more comprehensive view of the <i>here and now</i>. These are combined with static links topped by backup videos. Live link-ups maintain their length, which can vary between forty seconds and about a minute. This is why there may be different link-ups from different places on a single programme.
- Editing techniques with effects, using pacing with short shots and inserting music.	- Cultural videos use the same techniques as infotainment, but these creative licences are spreading to and can be seen in other types of news. News items are shorter, lasting between 50 seconds and 1 minute 20 seconds; consequently, with brief and high-angle shots.
- Personalisation of subjects	- Personalised cases of news stories are being increasingly used to illustrate collective concern regarding a specific event.
- Programmes seek the human interest in the news	- Programmes seek the human interest in any event to hook the audience.
- Stories about events, social concerns and society form the basis of these programmes	-The gatekeeper selects stories according to renewed newsworthy criteria; stories about events, social concerns and society cram today's news programmes. However, despite this, politics and the economy continue to occupy a large slice of news schedules, even though the treatment given to this type of information is changing, tending more towards the humanisation of politics and the personalisation of economic concerns.

Source: Own creation.

enced by the success of infotainment, which has proved to be a format the audience likes, where the commodification of information is clear to see but appears not to bother TV viewers, because the way in which events are presented makes up for this. The table below shows the main changes introduced into news programmes as a result of the emergence of infotainment.

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