Wohin?

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Entertainment is Information!

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There are many examples for the social consequences of informative entertainment throughout history, e. g. in the course of the 17th and 18th century. At this time booksellers brought calendars, magazines and books to the countryside – much to the displeasure of the authority who considered reading material as the ruin of the »ordinary people« and an incentive for revolution. This is shown in one of the quotes of a character in Rudolf Schenda's writings, where many further examples can be found.

»The reading mania is a foolish, harmful abuse of a good thing, a great evil that is as contagious as the yellow fever in Philadelphia; it is the source of moral decay for our children and grandchildren. It brings mischief and mistakes into social life. The mind does not benefit because reading is a mechanical act; the mind becomes wild instead of noble.« (trans. from German; 1794, cited in Schenda 1977; p. 60).

This citation can be updated by simply inserting TV and Internet. Arguments against a »reading mania« as well as the distrust in questionable forms of information processing, which lead to a »false« perception and to »wrong« insights, can also be found in today's discussions regarding the Internet as a source of information. Surprisingly, in the 18th century it was precisely those »enlightened« pedagogues who supported campaigns against the reading mania and therefore contributed to state-imposed censorship. This can be seen in the initiative for »refinement« of reading material, especially of the popular calendar which counted as literature for the masses until the 19th century. Similar to daily soaps and telenovelas, which today aim to discuss topics such as contraception and AIDS, this initiative tried to include »useful« content into popular reading material at that time. As a result, the image of the travelling booksellers improved from the former spoilers to the propagandists of enlightenment, or in modern terms: the Edutainer. One problem was that the original forms of informative entertainment, which included e. g. health or sowing advice, as well as spooky, criminal or romantic stories, were to be »reformed«. Popular, fictive plots were replaced by information for a moral lifestyle, by pamphlets against superstition and texts of worship for the ruler in order to prevent revolutionary thoughts.

The readers did not like it and what followed was a crisis in calendar production. It seems that the audience did not want others to teach them, at least not in this way. One possible explanation for their resistance is the psychological concept of reactance (see Brehm, 1966) which according to theory occurs if the audience feels patronised and experiences attempts of indoctrination as a threat for their sovereignty and independence. It seems that entertainment has its own laws of popularity. It may and should include »information« but in a particular, entertaining manner. The audience resists indoctrination, especially if it includes a moral pointing finger or contradicts their needs. What are the »laws of entertainment« that set limits to pedagogic projects? And in how far is information involved?

Redefining the Theory of Entertainment

Entertainment has not been invented by television. Fairy tales, myths and novels have very similar content structures which can also be found in today's TV entertainment. The three cross-cultural main topics love, destiny and struggle get reproduced in many variations. This is also shown by the cross-cultural »Monomyth«, which Josef Campbell (1993, 1999) sees as common structure of antique storytelling and current film- and television productions: the journey of the hero is a series of challenging adventures triggered by a »state of emergency« for the community (mostly there is some kind of external threat). After the hero defeats the evil (e. g. after the victory over the monster) the community goes back to its →

→ regular state. The interested reader, listener or viewer is pleased and notices: everything is back to normal! This story line is repeated very often in entertainment culture. In a thriller, for example, crime triggers an action that ends in arresting or killing the perpetrator. In a horror movie the monster has to be run down before the viewers can overcome their fears. Similar applies to spy- or science fiction films that deal with megalomaniacs or aliens. In all cases it is about the threat for a community that can be overcome by the »heroic« act of an individual or a group. Even in a romantic comedy the everyday routine gets disturbed by accidents, conflicts or fateful involvements, so protagonists can reach a harmonic state of relationship in the end – either through heroic abandonment (no more escapades! Family comes first!) or personal maturity which eliminates insecurities (e. g. finding »true love« or deciding to get married).

It almost seems as if entertainment is following a script which creates problems and in the end leads to (fictional) solutions. But what is the purpose? Similar to fairy tales and myths, Louis Bosshart (1979) identified three main functions of entertainment which give it a kind of anthropological quality: (a) articulation function: entertainment expresses inner wishes and hopes, (b) release function: anxiety and compulsions can be reduced (c) integration function: social control can be enhanced through the communication of values. This is where Bosshart ends. In the context of the failed attempts to combine information and entertainment in the calendar reforms I would like to add: (d) the function of orientation is constitutive for entertainment.

Entertainment is information because it offers orientation for everyday life. The information value of a standard script and its problem-solving structure (see above) can be summarised in four points: motivation for problem solving; definition of problem solving; relating problems to solutions and fourth affirming problem-solving institutions.

Without information there is no articulation of wishes and thus also a relieving or integrating function of entertainment is impossible. In so far the function of orientation, which is fulfilled by information, is the basis for other functions of entertainment. In this context Brenda Dervin (1989) developed the sense-making approach which I want to describe briefly. She differentiates between four types of problematic situations of everyday life: (1) decision problems with more than one alternative (what should I do?); (2) situations of anxiety (how can I deal with that?); (3) obstructing situations that make problem solving difficult (how can I get out of here?]; (4) need for action due to environmental influences (what do people say? how can I resist them?). Brenda Dervin's theory regarding entertainment is the following: People turn towards entertainment in the course of problematic situations and entertaining content is what offers solutions for these problems. She talks about »gaps« of everyday life and entertainment as the bridge that helps viewers overcome this »gaps«.

In other words, entertainment is a playful form of information transfer – but the question remains: how does information look like in the context of entertainment and in how far is entertainment-information different from classical journalistic information?

What is information?

Following Gregory Bateson (1971), Niklas Luhman's (1996) definition is as follows: Information is a »difference which makes a difference« (Bateson 1971; cited by Luhmann 1996, p. 47). What does it mean? When I watch the news and the weather report I can learn: it is going to rain! A difference is made between rain and sunshine. This is an example of information because I have to decide whether to take along an umbrella or not. I take the umbrella and this makes the difference: I will not get wet. The moment I pack the umbrella, the information process ends. If one hears the same weather report over and over again then it is not about information any longer because it does not make a difference anymore (I have already packed my umbrella). Updated weather information ↙

→ on a smart phone, however, can be informative and again, make a difference. The former prognosis may be modified so I do not need the umbrella anymore. So I leave my umbrella in the office and am »relieved«. We are moving away from the assumption that information is something objective, something that can be transferred from A to B. Information is a process that should be enhanced by media offers and should take place within the viewer. The audience gets informed in order to master a real situation. Thus, the difference between information- and entertainment genres lies not in information as such but in the change of the frame of reference, which either serves as orientation on the systematic level or purposes of everyday life (lifeworld)[1]. In the case of journalistic information it is about orientation for citizens on the system level. The relevant difference which is made in the course of the information process is, for example, the preference of a party. On the other hand, entertainment satisfies information-needs of everyday life e. g. in the context of relationships or a bad mood. The difference that is made by entertainment information lies in a renewed relationship or a change of mood. With this understanding the issue of entertainment-education arises. If informational content of entertainment genres helps to better cope with everyday life, and if educational approaches are important to the level of knowledge in society, edutainment has to combine everyday- and systematic information – without logical breaks.

Conclusion

To sum up, I would like to formulate six postulates on the basis of the re-definition of entertainment in the context of the theory of information. Information and entertainment cannot be differentiated without overlap.

- The entertainment value of a show is not only dependent on emotion but also on information. Entertainment is information.
- First and foremost entertainment includes informative content for the everyday life of the viewer.
- Basically, the »mix of information and entertainment« is an integration problem of different levels of information.
- Trouble-free communication is possible if the information, which creates an experience of entertainment, is in balance with the intended (educative) transfer of information of the communicator.
- Ideal entertainment-education features a logical connection between informative content for everyday life and the systemic information content (e. g. politics, health topics).

The informative potential of entertainment is realised insufficiently because entertainment is still seen as »light« and »irrelevant« content »serious« people do not want to be associated with. Moreover, in feuilletons (and sometimes also TV stations) entertainment is seen as a domain for private channels, while public channels have to provide information. This is why some want the ORF or the ARD, for example, to focus on information programs only and waive entertainment. Such a radical solution in the sense of a fundamentalist separation of information and entertainment (or just a neglect of the informative aspects of entertainment) would take away legitimising ratings from public channels and would impoverish society on an informational level. Like political information also entertainment information is about quality. This quality is not indicated by a democratic gain but only by an increase of orientation in everyday life of the viewer. Finding an appropriate measurement for this quality which is based on the informational function of entertainment in everyday life is a desideratum that still lies in the future.[2] ▪

1 For »System« and „Lifeworld» see Habermas (1985); first applied to communication by Grimm (1994)

2 This text is a shortened version of the contribution in the 2015 edition of »TEXTE«. It is based on a lecture by Grimm, given as a part of the conference »Let me edutain you – Fit für die digitale Welt?« in Berlin on 22.05.2014 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?-v=EOoTe4ROeT8). This transcript was revised and completed by the author.