

REVIEW ESSAY

POLITICS AND ENTERTAINMENT: A HAPPY MARRIAGE?

ROSA VAN SANTEN

Arnsfeld, Andreas. 2005. *Medien – Politik – Gesellschaft: Aspekte ihrer Wechselwirkungen unter dem Stichwort Politainment*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag.

Jones, Jeffrey P. 2005. *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Rosa van Santen is a PhD candidate in ASCoR: The Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam; e-mail: R.A.vanSanten@uva.nl.

Introduction

In this essay I review five books about the role of the media in democratic societies and the role of entertainment in politics in particular. The premise of all five books is the much heard statement about “crisis of democracy”: a decline in political knowledge, a decreasing voter turnout, a reduction of trust in government, and a degeneration of public debate. This “crisis” has inspired much research and debate, in which the video malaise thesis is dominant. All authors under review take issue with the video malaise thesis, with diverging outcomes.

The debate about the transformations of political communication and the critique of news outlets can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when critique of the American “penny press” around 1830, and later of the smaller, tabloid-sized, “common man” newspapers in 1833 (*New York Sun*) and 1896 (*Daily Mail*) was first heard (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004). With the introduction of television the critique of tabloidisation, sensationalism or infotainment (to name just a few terms found in the literature) was also applied to television programmes or even to the medium itself, as for instance by Postman (1985). An article by Newton (2006) also provides a helpful overview of media malaise literature and arguments. In the last few decennia, other ideas are heard more often about the role of entertainment, the people’s voice and popular culture in political communication, with scholars arguing that it is not “all” bad. This argument is made very compelling by, for instance, Van Zoonen, whose book is reviewed in this article, but other examples are scholars such as Coleman (2003; 2006; 2008) and Street (1997).

I will now turn to a brief outline of the five books, followed by a thematic discussion – starting with the question of how the authors define the crisis of democracy, then followed by the question how they perceive the role of citizens therein and finished with the question how they see, in the future, a solution for the crisis –, and a conclusion and discussion about the value of these books for academic debate.

Van Zoonen (*Entertaining the Citizen*) provides a broad ranging analysis of the convergence of politics and popular culture, focusing on both the use of pop culture by politicians, and the relevance of political themes in TV shows, series, movies etc. Key to Van Zoonen’s argument is her connection of fandom with citizenship, arguing that they are very much alike as they are both built on the mobilisation of audiences, their cognitive and participatory activities, and their emotional investment. The fan democracy, Van Zoonen continues, revolves around personalisation and dramatisation through which politics is made entertaining. She analyses personalisation by constructing a typology of political personae in general and of women in particular. Dramatisation is examined through four narrative frames that organise political stories. An analysis of audience reactions to these stories shows that they enable people to express and discuss political reflections and judgments.

Jones (*Entertaining Politics*) also compares people’s engagement with television to democratic involvement and starts in the first part of his book by explaining changes in political communication. Citizenship nowadays is a mainly textual engagement and is performed in large part through the media. In the second part of the book he quickly “steps” from popular culture through entertainment, media and television, to talk shows, and analyses humorous versus pundit talk shows. He narrows down his research to the US context and three particular programmes: The Daily Show,

Dennis Miller Live and Politically Incorrect, emphasising the latter. In the third part of the book, an audience research (based on an analysis of viewer mail, online discussions and interviews) leads him in the final chapter of the book to discuss six preconditions of citizenship (based on Dahlgren), and equate them to democratic involvement. Jones concludes that humorous political talk shows integrate popular culture and politics in ways that enrich and enliven citizenship.

In his dissertation *Medien – Politik – Gesellschaft*, Arnsfeld points out both positive and negative aspects of what the German's call "politainment." The book starts with a discussion of the role of the media in democracies, the rise of television, various forms of political stage-setting and the process of image-building. The core of the book, however, is the rise of "politainment." Arnsfeld particularly asks whether television is to blame for political disengagement ("Politikverdrossenheit"), and concludes that a balance between entertainment and political information is the best possible solution because it may provide as many people as possible with political knowledge.

In *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur*, a variety of research is presented that demonstrates little coherence and ranges from, among other things, very general perspectives on media, politics and political communication to the current state of satire in Germany, political participation of students in Duisburg, political knowledge of children and the growing importance of soccer as a resource for political talk. "Fußballisierung" and "Talkshowisierung" are buzzwords certain authors propose to cover some of these processes, with some authors being optimistic about politainment, some pessimistic, and others somewhere in between.

Finally, Thussu (*News as Entertainment*) presents a classic Frankfurter argument against the convergence of serious information and entertainment programmes. He provocatively argues that entertainment formats exist to keep the people dumb, ignorant, and distracted. Adopting a global perspective, Thussu builds a lengthy argument claiming that global infotainment is a mask for neo-liberal imperialism led by the U.S. He inserts different case descriptions (war reporting, Indian TV news), but without providing the reader with any kind of content analysis or audience research to substantiate his claims.

Many differences can be found between the books with regard to geographical contexts, research methods, television genres, or a focus on either politics or the media. However, what really divides the books under review is whether the authors perceive the marriage between politics and popular culture as for better or for worse. To discuss the books in more detail, I will focus on three themes that run through all the books and on which the authors are divided: (1) elites versus the masses; (2) the performance of citizenship, and (3) the future of political discourse.

Elites and Masses

All the authors in some way disagree with the video malaise thesis but they address it in different ways, diverging in particular on the following questions: how is the convergence of politics and entertainment related to the (mal)functioning of the democratic system? Why is there such a concern about this convergence? And how does this concern relate to an apparent audience need for such convergence?

To start with the question of how the mixture of politics and entertainment is related to the functioning of democracy, all authors agree that information, or

knowledge, is a vehicle for engagement in the democratic process and of vital importance to the public sphere. Arnsfeld devotes his first chapter to this theme, “Die Rolle der Medien in der Demokratie,” and contends that democracy cannot exist without the media. In his second chapter Arnsfeld explains the importance of television. Thussu, in *News as Entertainment*, agrees that television has become the world’s most powerful medium for communication and that television carries much more influence than other media. Furthermore, “national television news was the most trusted” (p. 1), and “television has consistently been the primary point of information, with 72 per cent of the people saying it was their main source for world news” (p. 2). Thus (as Jones also explains in his second chapter) through television, citizens become informed and engaged.

How the current mixture of politics and entertainment on television affects democracy is a contested question among the authors. Thussu and Van Zoonen take extreme opposite positions in this debate. Thussu worries about the harmful effect of marketisation on broadcast journalism and the tendency in journalism towards a focus on the “bottom line.” For him, the public-service ethos of journalism, critical for fostering democratic practices among citizens, is at stake. The gap between the political elite and the mass is alarming; is caused by the growth of infotainment and in turn is supported by elites. Thussu contends that governments are not so troubled by the growth of infotainment, since it keeps the masses diverted. It is therefore important to understand the role of national elites (who benefit from neo-liberal economic activities) in the establishment and popularity of infotainment. After quoting Marx (“the ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas”) Thussu therefore states that although elites are the primary constituency for ideas, global “knowledge systems” perform the interpretive work for their wider consumption (p. 153). Van Zoonen too argues that a democratic crisis is caused by too big a gap between the representatives and the represented but suggests that politics has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens. Thussu and Van Zoonen seem to agree that politics needs to be communicated in order to gain the interest and involvement of the citizens, but Van Zoonen argues that since we live in an entertainment society the question is whether entertainment can make citizenship pleasurable, “close the gap” and “end the crisis.” So according to this author the mixture of information and entertainment is certainly connected to the functioning of democracy and it is not controversial to argue that modes of political communication have their basis in the particular culture of their time.

Van Zoonen argues, furthermore, that the video malaise thesis is an argument made by journalistic, academic and political elites for self-preservation, to position themselves “above” the mass, who enjoy entertainment television. The journalistic elite, pundits and established political reporters want to safeguard their position as intermediaries of the public sphere; the academic elite do not want to admit their possible misreading of the situation; and the political elite can blame the media for democratic malaise. As Van Zoonen says, in video malaise discourse “the authors implicitly proclaim themselves as the authorities who are able to see through the tricks television plays upon ‘us,’ and who will guide us out of the darkness” (p. 14-15). Their concern with the divergence of politics and entertainment is thus for self-protection. Thussu on the other hand claims that supporters of popular communication paradigms have wrongfully celebrated the emergence of infotainment

as expanding and democratising the public sphere. He contends that this trend towards a postmodernist “restyling” of politics is centred around consumerism, celebrity and cynicism, and needs critical scrutiny instead of naive celebration.

While the academics are debating, audiences readily tune into programmes that offer a combination of politics and entertainment. How can their preferences be explained? Some scholars claim that parliamentary and electoral politics are conducted in “elite” ways, which prevent ordinary people from participating on their own terms, through their own means. This results in a situation where people do not understand politics and feel that political problems don’t really have an effect on them. Van Zoonen stresses this argument rather heavily but we find it with other authors as well. Holtz-Bacha for instance (in *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur*) explains in her contribution that politics is a very complicated and abstract phenomenon for most people, which becomes more understandable (and as a result more interesting and engaging) when offered in a blend of information and entertainment. Jones too contends that “elite sense makes no sense” (p. 139). He discusses the appearance of pundits and politicians versus laymen and celebrities in talk shows, and argues that the latter are more capable of talking about politics in an engaging, commonsensical way. Celebrities tend to use the same means for making sense of public issues as the audience; they discuss politics in language more in common with that found around the kitchen table or in a bar.

To sum up: all authors accept the key role of television in democracy and assume that the boundaries between politics and entertainment have blurred. They point out different sources for this convergence that all centre on a perceived difference between elite and popular political discourse. The authors also agree that the video malaise thesis is dominant in public and academic debate, but their positions on whether this is a valid argument differ considerably. As a result, the perspectives on whether and how “politainment,” as the German authors in particular like to call it, is or should be relevant for politics and citizenship also differ widely, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

Citizenship through Information or Cultural Engagement?

Words like “citizen,” “citizenry” and “citizenship” have already been used several times. But what do different authors mean by “citizenship”? What elements of “citizenship” do they accentuate? And how is “citizenship” connected with “entertainment”? While all authors refer to political citizenship when using broader terms such as “citizenry,” Jones and Van Zoonen are most explicit about it. Jones devotes the entire second chapter of *Entertaining Politics* to “rethinking civic engagement in the age of popular culture” (p. 15) and contends that daily citizen engagement with politics is more often textual than organisational or “participatory” in a traditional sense. The most common and frequent form of political activity comes through their choosing, attending to, processing, and engaging with numerous media texts about politics. Van Zoonen defines citizenship rather narrowly describing it as the rights and duties of citizens in relation to the political process, the democratic project. Unlike Jones, who describes a mediated form of discursive citizenship, Van Zoonen contends that discussion, participation, judging, and voting (activities that take place around television programmes) would all qualify as civic activities or competences if they were performed in the context of politics.

While Jones explicitly contends that traditional forms of political participation like party or labour union membership have changed into textual engagement, Thussu, like Van Zoonen, seems implicitly to adhere to more widespread features. He regards “deliberation” or “discussion,” which nowadays is mainly executed through, with and via the media, as the ultimate form of engagement. This becomes apparent when he talks about the danger that an informed citizenry, essential for genuine democratic discourse, is undermined, and discusses global infotainment as a form of distraction, displacing the alternative views and information essential for public debate. The German authors are less clear about what they understand citizenship to be, but their concern with information, knowledge and political wisdom indicates a belief that being informed is crucial for citizen participation.

How is the notion of political citizenship, which the authors work with, connected to “entertainment”? And why? Jones explains by referring to Dahlgren, that politics is increasingly organised as a media phenomenon. Not only are politics and popular culture basically opposite sides of the same coin, but citizens have multiple identities and do not, in their media practice, distinguish between serious and entertainment purposes. Jones also argues that people make meaning of politics via common sense narratives that humorous television programmes supply: (political) programmes firmly grounded in popular culture. New Political TV (as he calls the shows) thus contributes to democracy and contemporary practices of citizenship through the circulation of ideas and an appeal to our common civic culture.

Van Zoonen also wonders what can be learned from popular culture to inform, engage and involve citizens in politics, particularly after showing how political and journalist elites use popular culture for their own benefit. Analyzing fandom and citizenship she shows three similarities: both fan communities and political constituencies come into being as a result of performance, both resemble each other in their cognitive and participating activities, and finally both rest on emotional investments that are linked to rationality and lead to “affective intelligence.” The comparison results in an exchange between the domains of politics and entertainment. Constructing a typology for political personae and describing four narrative frames in which political stories are organised (the quest, bureaucracy, conspiracy, soap opera) Van Zoonen shows how generic features from popular culture (personalisation, dramatisation), can be borrowed by politics. To support this claim she illustrates with an audience research that popular films and television series built from these political frames function as occasions for people to perform as citizens: watching these media stimulates people to describe what politics is about, reflect about the dilemmas in politics, express their judgements, and fantasise about utopian politics.

Van Zoonen and Jones thus propose that citizenship can be performed and encouraged through televised popular culture. Two contributions to *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur* also take this position but stress the provision of information more than emotional involvement. Brants and Dörner & Vogt believe that serious information cannot be separated from entertainment, because citizens make no such separation. Becoming informed and engaged can happen through various forms of television programmes. Brants suggests for instance, in his article about infotainment, that maybe programmes such as Big Brother have solved the dilemma of dealing with publicity and emotion. Big Brother might be the pioneer of a new,

“vox-pop-oriented” politics and create more engagement with and within politics. Or, as Dörner and Vogt argue more insistently, most of the public seek relaxation through entertainment. Because about one-third of the public switches off when politics is offered in an information format, to reach these people one has to consort with the logic of entertainment. In the next section of their article, Dörner and Vogt focus on talk shows (in particular personality shows) because they have become so important in political communication. The authors conclude that despite the problems that occur with an entertainment imperative (simplification and dulling of politics), entertaining politics appears to be necessary in our media societies to guarantee the inclusion of a broad spectrum of the population in the political discourse.

Holtz-Bacha, in the same book, also sees personalization as a solution for the complexity of politics because it makes politics understandable and concrete, and it works well on television. And not only can personalisation work to get support and sympathy, it can also be used to tackle political dissatisfaction. Politicians hope that with a demonstration of their private life, their emotional competence will transfer to their political position and engage people with politics. An argument similar to Arnfeld's suggestion in his final chapter, where he contends that “politainment” can have positive results for media, politics and society, when entertainment is used to provide the electorate with the necessary information.

Thussu opposes this “positive” line of argument and believes conversely that entertainment is detrimental to democratic life. The mechanisms of television create a false “feel good” sensation, based on the US market-driven economy, spreading global infotainment as a disguise for American neo-liberal imperialism. In contrast to the other authors, Thussu adopts an international perspective and claims that global infotainment has major implications for the formation of public opinion. He believes the average consumer cannot differentiate between public information and propaganda from a powerful military-industrial-entertainment complex and fears the ruin of an informed citizenry, of public debate.

The conclusion is that all authors refer to political citizenship but accentuate different aspects of its manifestation. Academics identify four main characteristics of citizenship: knowledge, deliberation, trust and political interest. Thussu emphasises knowledge and deliberation as fundamental for citizenship and fears the “entertainisation” of *news*. Van Zoonen and Jones subordinate knowledge and underline trust and political interest and the motivating role of *entertainment programmes*. The German scholars stress the importance of information, but hope that popular culture features in *infotainment programmes* will encourage people to (re-) engage with politics. These differences are also evident in their perspectives on the future of political discourse, as I will show in the next section.

The Future: Balance and Variety?

In discussing the “crisis of democracy” all authors accept the key role of television in democracy, assume that politics and entertainment have mingled, agree that the video malaise thesis is dominant in public and academic debate, and stress (different aspects of) political citizenship. The differences between the books on these various themes have been shown and differences are also evident in their vision of the future political discourse, as I will now show. Different authors in *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur* point out the status quo of contemporary

political communication and weigh the risks and advantages of “politainment” for both politicians and the democratic system. Without clearly judging the phenomenon most contributors have a mildly optimistic tone, probably not seeing the point of outright criticism. Arnsfeld, Van Zoonen, Jones and Thussu more explicitly predict, propose or fear future developments.

Arnsfeld and Van Zoonen both plead for “diversity” at the end of their books. They argue for respectively a balance between entertainment and information, and a variety of modernist and popular styles of political communication. Arnsfeld contends that a suitable supply of “politainment” on television has a positive outcome for everyone involved. Research has demonstrated that the more broadcasts with (any kind of) political content a person watches, the less dissatisfied he or she is with politics. With this statement Arnsfeld ends the discussion about the video malaise thesis. But he also warns of the danger of people mistaking media representations of politics for the much more complicated political and social reality. The simplification of politics on television risks a trivialisation and an unrealistic expectation of politics. The character of “politainment” is thus ambivalent. For the public it can be valuable when a balance between entertainment and information is attained within the political entertainment supply. For politicians there simply is no alternative.

Van Zoonen also claims that to regard personalisation and dramatisation as non-political underestimates the challenges faced by today’s politicians, and fails to appreciate the complex judgments people make of individual politicians. In one of the last sections of her book she introduces the concept of “deliberation”: a modernist theory to counter the gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. But Van Zoonen sides with its quest for “multiplicity,” “heterogeneity,” “diversity,” etc. Her point is that knowledge and arguments in deliberations of political issues should come from various sources, both modernist and popular. Of course there are good and bad expressions of politics in popular culture. Anti-democratic tendencies exist in popular culture, there seems to be no escape from gender and ethnic stereotypes and the public-private distinction appears to constrain the options and strategies of women and ethnic groups. But this is no different from other means and genres of political communication. Therefore popular culture needs to be acknowledged as a relevant source of political citizenship, to reach different people through different styles of political communication.

Jones states that television will not necessarily “save” democracy, but contends that its strengths are in the circulation of conversations, in a ritual attendance to our common culture. Both new and traditional political programmes offer different opportunities for political discussion, and both provide different types of narratives about politics which viewers can draw upon to make sense of politics. But new political television (NPTV) invites audiences to link their interests, habits, and pleasures to political life and to be engaged on their own terms. Comedian hosts have reinvigorated humour (with its semantic authority rooted in commonsense thinking) as a vehicle for serious political critiques of power and as a different way of making sense. And celebrities (e.g. comedians) serve as televisual representatives who vocalise issues, ideas and values in accessible and inviting language. NPTV thus integrates culture and politics in ways that enrich and enliven the processes of discursively active citizenship.

Thussu is very pessimistic about the current global state of political communication but acknowledges that infotainment has the capacity to provide greater diversity than traditional hard news, and thus has a more democratic character. Meanwhile he recognises global infotainment as the globalisation of a US-style ratings-driven television journalism which favours soft news, presenting politics as a form of spectacle, at the expense of information about political and public affairs. In his final chapter Thussu remains ambivalent, arguing both that the global circulation of soft news has undermined the public service ethos of television, and that a “global infotainment sphere” is emerging as a potential site for competing versions of journalism. But despite the fact that notions such as “diversity” and “competing versions” sound optimistic, Thussu’s last words sound almost desperate: “the spectre of spectacles is a resounding success, not unlike global infotainment” (p.179). His only real hope lies in a universal awareness of the United States hegemony and a recognition of the “feel-good-deceitfulness” of infotainment.

To conclude the thematic discussion, a final note: discussing the current state of democracy, all authors accept the key role of television in democracy and agree that politics and entertainment are “married.” Some authors stress enriching aspects, others also note impoverishing elements. Divergence exists on the degree of sickness and health, but Jones, Van Zoonen and the German contributors believe that politics and entertainment will (have to) “love and cherish each other as long as they both shall live.” I think it is fair to say that only Thussu believes the “marriage” between politics and popular culture is ultimately for worse. He stands out against other scholars, and not only those under review, in not truly believing in a diverse political discourse where both popular styles of communication and serious political communication coexist.

Discussion

One of the fundamental questions discussed in the five books is: what does entertainment, “politainment” or infotainment “do” to the political? In the previous paragraph, I summarised the answers the authors under review give, indicating that Thussu is the only one exceedingly concerned about the ideological effects. All others have a much more positive outlook, which I am inclined to follow, given the current status quo of the importance and relevance of popular culture in common people’s lives. To have an open mind for, and a positive attitude towards new and non-traditional forms of political communication, will be more helpful in thinking about solutions for political problems we encounter in modern, western democracies.

Having said this, I would like to make two remarks about fundamental difficulties not always explicated by the authors. Firstly, the matter of different definitions of what “political” is. Only Van Zoonen specifically defines “politics” as “a field that accommodates the continuous struggle about power relation in society” (2005, p. 5), whereas others have more foggy demarcations, as for instance the authors in *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur*. A distinction between narrow and broader definitions of politics and the field of the political (as often implicitly applied by the authors reviewed here) should have been made clear in order to comprehend the connection between entertainment and politics, as the authors under review imply. Secondly, although some propose information and entertainment as a dichotomy,

as political versus non-political (like Thussu), this distinction is problematic, not only because of the fuzziness about “the political.” The idea is that serious political journalism contributes to knowledge and involvement, whereas entertainment (or popular culture) does not. But, as becomes clear for example in the works of Jones and Van Zoonen, “politics needs to be communicated in order to acquire the interest and involvement of its external referents, the average citizens” (Van Zoonen, 2005, p. 7), and this might well happen through forms of communication other than traditional political journalism.

Besides these comments, the question emerges as to how the books contribute to the academic debate about the increasing existence of political entertainment television programmes. The following three issues arise and some further research suggestions come to mind.

Firstly, there are conceptual obscurities. Most authors talk at some point about elites, assuming a gap between elites and masses, without clearly defining either of them, for instance as national political elites and ordinary people. And in this respect, do they also see a gap between political knowledge and popular culture, between information and entertainment programmes? Are these gaps characterised by similar divisions? This does not become clear. Obviously some authors (like Arnsfeld) have what I call a realistic point of view, stating that politics cannot do without popular culture, whereas other authors (like Van Zoonen and Jones) have more normative considerations: that popular culture in itself is good, valuable, etc. This is not always made clear in the reviewed literature and I think it would be helpful if all scholars make the criteria by which they evaluate the media (or certain programmes, genres, etc.) more explicit. Take for example the concept “citizenship.” Different authors focus on different aspects of the performance of citizenship (textual, organisational) or different conditions of this performance (knowledge, deliberation, trust, political interest). Jones, for instance, talks about textual engagement but not about the importance of an informed citizenry. Thussu on the other hand contends that knowledge is crucial, but *what* citizens should “do” with this or *how*, he neglects to explain. Research in this area has to become more explicit about underlying theoretical assumptions. This will improve the theoretical shaping of the relatively new area of politics and popular culture, and allow for further development of ideas and understanding. It will also help to avoid repetition in future research. Within the volume by Nieland and Kamps, for instance, many authors repeat similar arguments, explaining the same contexts and occurrences.

The second point I want to raise concerns the various domains of research. The five books discuss different geographical areas (e.g. Germany, the US, Britain), different aspects of the phenomena (political entertainment, entertaining politics), different television genres as case studies (talk shows, soap opera’s, movies), different types of media (public, commercial), different media outlets (television, cinema), and different forms of popular culture (music, television). To take one of these differences, several authors seem to talk interchangeably about political entertainment (“politische Unterhaltung”) and entertaining politics (“unterhaltende Politik”). When you inspect these two phenomena more closely they appear to be very different things. The first is about the media using political themes and actors to make programmes more attractive and interesting to the audience; the latter is about politics and politicians using media and popular culture to distinguish,

present and sell themselves to the electorate (by using pop music, referring to soap operas, appearing in talk shows or other entertainment shows, by organising press events, conducting stage-setting, personalising their campaign, etc.). Sometimes therefore, media and politicians have a mutual interest in working together: for a politician, a talk show is an opportunity for public exposure and a means to attract attention of the audience. But political entertainment and entertaining politics are not in all instances the same thing. It is important to distinguish between these two phenomena, especially when talking about “effects” on citizens or society. Scholars need to ask themselves: am I looking at the role of politicians in a media society, or am I looking at media performance with regard to a political system? And then make their choice explicit.

The differences are very important for another reason: by not addressing the specific contexts of their studies (political system, media system, history, etc.), the existing research and literature is very hard to compare. This makes possible explanations and interpretations of “politainment” hard to come by. Jones, for instance, talks about the influence of cable networks and the power of advertisers, but this is only relevant in America. Arnsfeld, on the other hand, mentions the differences between America and Germany, which is the reason he focuses on the latter, but fails to interpret his results in a broader, for example European, context. More generally, it is noticeable that the German literature under review is very inward-looking. They talk about German media, programmes, and politics and almost exclusively refer to German research and literature. Thussu is really the only scholar with a wide research perspective (the world), but instead of comparing different countries, he narrows his vision on the US political and cultural hegemony.

My last point concerns the empirical evidence produced by the authors. Overall, it is weak. Both Jones and Van Zoonen use internet discussion forums for audience research, but this is rather specific and limited (to certain series, movies, talk shows). In *Politikdarstellung und Unterhaltungskultur*, a few articles present some evidence, but this is either vaguely qualitative or very limited in the sense that it is only relevant for (certain areas of) Germany (or, in the case of Brant’s article, the Netherlands). Neither Thussu nor Arnsfeld present any of their own empirical data, which unfortunately does not strengthen either of their books. This lack of (convincing) empirical evidence becomes problematic, for instance, for the supposition that politics and entertainment have mixed. Is this really true? And if so, to what extent? Past research has shown that, for instance, in the Netherlands most electoral television programmes had very few entertainment aspects (see for example Brants and Van Praag 2006). We can ask the same question about the video malaise thesis. Is it really dominant in academic and social debate, or do the authors simply state this to test their own ideas against it?

I conclude, after reading these five very interesting, well-written and entertaining books, that we need more empirical data and more historical and international comparative research on the matter of political entertainment, or entertaining politics.

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