The 2008 U.S. Presidential election played out against the backdrop of two unpopular and deadly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a growing economic crisis spurred on by volatile oil prices and a meltdown in the sub-prime mortgage industries. Despite these trenchant problems serious policy discussions would have to wait. American broadcast news coverage clung to the now standard tropes: horserace politics, melodramatic narratives of triumph in the face of personal adversity, and imagined political gaffes relating to lipstick on pigs.

It is a commonplace of media criticism to suggest that political coverage is superficial. Some would argue it has been ever thus. Notwithstanding these claims, there has been a growing cultural-studies literature in recent years arguing that popular media, from tabloids to daytime talk shows such as *Oprah*, create spaces in which marginalized social actors are given voice and where vernacular forms of representation are afforded equal play alongside so-called elite discourse.

*News as Entertainment* enters the fray by suggesting it is time to move beyond the debate about the “dumbing down” of popular culture. Daya Kishan Thussu is concerned with what he calls “global infotainment,” which he defines as “the globalization of a US-style ratings-driven television journalism which privileges privatized soft news—about celebrities, crime, corruption and violence—and presents it as a form of spectacle, at the expense of news about political, civic and public affairs” (p. 8). His is an argument about diversion; as such, the book is part of a long line of both conservative and radical criticism that associates entertainment with distraction and passive spectatorship.

The book is a logical outgrowth of the work Thussu has produced over the past 20 years in the fields of international relations, and global news broadcasting. He argues that the globalization of market-driven news has helped to construct a “media ecology” saturated by infotainment. Moreover, he asserts that infotainment has colonized and displaced public-service broadcasting and with it public consciousness. Global infotainment is a massive diversion that “masks” a neoliberal agenda promoted by “infotainment conglomerates.”

The book begins by mapping the historical evolution of news and entertainment, from the early broadsheets to today’s 24/7 cable news networks. Thussu pays particular attention to the contrasting models of for-profit television and public service broadcasting (PSB), pioneered by the BBC. PSB, the dominant model throughout post-war Europe, was eventually undermined, he argues, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global triumph of capitalism. Neoliberal hegemony led to the privatization and commercialization of PSBs along the lines of the now dominant market-driven American model. This process was aided by active state involvement through deregulation and the technological convergence of television, telecommunication and computing.

Echoing the warnings of the late media critic Neil Postman, Thussu argues that the pervasive commercial logic shared among broadcasters creates a need for entertaining programming above all else. Soft news, lifestyle and consumer journalism abound. But Thussu does not stop here. He goes further to make the much stronger claim that the proliferation of crime, scandal and celebrity gossip has become “a conduit for the corporate colonization of consciousness, while public journalism and the public sphere have been undermined” (p. 11).

The book’s strength is found in its historical approach and the empirical evidence
Thussu produces to document the growth of global media conglomerates, such as Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and the important role played by 24-hour cable and satellite networks in changing the speed and character of broadcast journalism. A separate chapter on the Bollywood-based television news culture tracks the effect of deregulation and privatization in Indian broadcasting.

The book is less successful in how it handles the sticky and complex debates of ideological effect. The abundance of profitable sports news coverage of cricket is presented as evidence of the tabloidization thesis, without an extensive discussion of the cultural, political and social dimensions of the game and how these may or may not support his broader claim of neoliberal colonization. The international coverage of the controversial Celebrity Big Brother broadcast of January 2007 is another case in point. The program received worldwide attention after Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty became the target of racist remarks by other members of the program. Thussu effectively situates the program within the global circulation of news commodities; moreover, he demonstrates how the program is linked synergistically with the interests of news broadcasters and celebrity-commodities, such as Shetty. However, the issues of race and class raised by the brouhaha receive less attention. A stronger case is presented in the chapter on “War as Infotainment.” Here, Thussu’s use of empirical evidence makes the case that coverage by U.S. broadcasters was overly patriotic and propagandistic.

There is overwhelming evidence of the global proliferation of entertainment-oriented broadcast journalism. News as Entertainment documents the trend’s origins and the corporate and promotional interests attached to this form of cultural production. However, the book’s infotainment framework does not fully capture the dialectical nature of this phenomenon. The “bread and circuses” metaphor adopted here captures one side of the story of neoliberal hegemony. Throughout the book there is an assumption of a top-down, one-way communication flow from global infotainment conglomerates to the public. Consequently, evidence provided in the final chapter of how activists have used information and communication technologies to counter neoliberal hegemony appears out of place within the book’s overall argument, as does the surprising admission that not all entertaining stories are necessarily bad. A more dialectical approach could provide a broader synthesis of the economic, political, social and cultural structures within which social agency necessary resides; it also might show the politically ambiguous nature of popular culture.

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