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## INTRODUCTION

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At a talk I gave to a group of journalists from around the world who were attending a seminar at Oxford University's Reuters Institute on the state of television news and its tendency to trivialise public discourse, I was struck by the response: virtually all the Reuters Fellows present found echoes of what I was describing in the television landscape of their own country. Of course there were differences of emphasis and degree in the extent and nature of the change, but not about the underlying theme which connected television news across countries: the deleterious effect of marketization on broadcast journalism.

Renowned journalist C.P. Scott, the long-time editor of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, remarked on the arrival of television in 1936: 'The word is half Greek and half Latin. No good will come of it'. Seven decades later, television has become the world's most powerful medium for communication and one which continues to evoke strong positive and negative reactions among its producers and consumers, its champions and critics. Despite unprecedented growth in the worldwide expansion of the Internet – in 2007 only 17 per cent of the population was online – it is television that remains the most global and powerful of media. The number of television sets in the world has more than tripled since 1980, with Asia recording the highest growth. Industry estimates show that more than 2.5 billion people around the globe watch on average just over three hours of television a day, on more than 4,000 mostly private channels. Since visual images tend to cross linguistic and national boundaries relatively easily, television carries much more influence than other media, especially in developing countries, where millions cannot read or write (Herman and McChesney, 1997; McChesney, 1999; Thussu, 2006a).

According to an International public opinion poll conducted in ten major countries in 2006 by GlobeScan in conjunction with the BBC, Reuters and the Media Centre (a non-profit think tank), national television news was the

most trusted (by 82 per cent), while international satellite TV news was trusted by 56 per cent of those surveyed, who also deemed TV as the most 'important' news source. In Europe, television remains the primary provider of information for most people, notes a report on European television produced by the Open Society Institute (Open Society Institute, 2005). According to research conducted by Britain's media regulator Office of Communication (Ofcom), television was by far the most important source for news (68 per cent) among British citizens. For international news, Ofcom noted, television has consistently been the main point of information, with 72 per cent of the people saying it was their main source for world news (Ofcom, 2005).

If television is so important as a provider of public information, what is happening to television news, globally, becomes one of the key areas of concern, not only for those who study, consume or produce television news but for society as a whole. News is not merely a media product but a vehicle for engagement in the democratic process, feeding off and into domestic politics and international relations. The growing commercialism of airwaves as a result of the privatization of global communication hardware and software, the deregulation of broadcasting and the technological convergence between television, telecommunication and computing industries, has fundamentally changed the ecology of broadcasting. The satellite revolution has, as Lisa Parks argues, redefined the meaning and relations between television and 'the global,' creating convergences between televisual and satellite technologies and necessitating an expanded definition of 'television' – one encompassing military monitoring, public education as well as commercial entertainment and public broadcasting (Parks, 2005). The general shift from public to a ratings-conscious television, dependent on corporate advertising and broadcasting to a heterogeneous audience, has implications for news agendas and editorial priorities.

With the globalization of television, the commercial model of broadcasting – with its roots in the United States and largely dependent on advertising – has become the dominant model across the world. In most of the former communist countries, as well as developing nations, the privatization of the airwaves has opened up new territories for transnational media corporations, as the generally discredited state broadcasters have lost their monopolies, generating a debate about the ideological imperatives of a commercially driven media system, dominated by a few extremely powerful multimedia conglomerates (Betting and Hall, 2003; McChesney, 2004; Bagdikian, 2004; Thussu, 2006a; Baker, 2007). One result of the proliferation of news outlets is a growing competition for audiences and, crucially, advertising revenue, at a time when interest in news is generally waning. In

the US, audiences for network television peak-time news bulletins have declined substantially, from 85 per cent of the television audience in 1969 to 29 per cent in 2005, partly as a result of many, especially younger, viewers opting for on-line news sources (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006; Mindich, 2005). In Britain, audience for current affairs programming had fallen by nearly 32 per cent between 1994–2001 (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002).

As television news has been commercialized, the need to make it entertaining has become a crucial priority for broadcasters as they are forced to borrow and adapt characteristics from entertainment genres and modes of conversation that privilege an informal communicative style with its emphasis on personalities, style, storytelling skills and spectacles. Its tendency to follow a tabloid approach, its capacity to circulate trivia, blend fact with fiction and even distort the truth is troubling (Downie and Kaiser, 2002; Gitlin, 2002; Anderson, 2004). News-gathering, particularly foreign news, is an expensive operation requiring high levels of investment and, consequently, media executives are under constant pressure to deliver demographically desirable audiences for news and current affairs programming to contribute to profits or at least avoid losses. In the US, one major recent development has been the acquiring of key news networks by conglomerates whose primary interest is in the entertainment business: Viacom-Paramount owns CBS News; ABC News is part of the Disney empire; CNN is a key component of AOL-Time Warner (the world's biggest media and entertainment conglomerate), and Fox News is owned by News Corporation. This shift in ownership is reflected in the type of stories – about celebrities from the world of entertainment, for example – that often get prominence on news, thus strengthening corporate synergies (Bennett, 2003a). These are supplemented by the new genre of reality TV and its relatives – docudramas, celebrity talk shows, court and crime enactments, rescue missions. The growing global popularity of such infotainment-driven programming indicates the success of this hybrid formula. This media concentration has contributed to a tendency in journalism towards a socially dysfunctional focus on the 'bottom line' (Baker, 2007: 28–9).

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### Real-time news as 24/7 infotainment

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The perceived dilution of news and information as a result of market-driven television journalism globally, and its impact on the public sphere, has become a major concern for critical media theorists. In the early 1980s, years before media globalization and rampant commercialisation of the

airwaves, Neil Postman formulated the thesis that public discourse in the United States was assuming the form of entertainment. In his influential book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Postman argued that television had become:

the background radiation of the social and intellectual universe, the all-but-imperceptible residue of the electronic big bang of a century past, so familiar and so thoroughly integrated with American culture that we no longer hear its faint hissing in the background or see the flickering grey light. This, in turn, means that its epistemology goes largely unnoticed. And the peek-a-boo world it has constructed around us no longer seems even strange. (p. 80)

Postman also argued that the 'epistemology of television' militated against deeper knowledge and understanding as television's conversations promote 'incoherence and triviality' as television speaks in only one persistent voice – the voice of entertainment.' The very medium of television, argued Postman, is epistemologically compromised: 'Television does not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it' (Postman, 1985: 84).

In his book, *Bread and Circuses, Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* Patrick Brantlinger charted a trend to what he called 'negative classicism,' which found analogies between television as a popular medium and the Roman circuses: 'they both substitute immediate visual experience for anything deeper or less immediate; they both impinge from above or outside on mass audiences of non-participatory spectators; they both seem to substitute false experiences of community for something more general and the sex and violence of commercial television appeals like the Roman games to sadomasochistic instincts' (1985: 279).

By the early 1990s, the explosion in the number and reach of television channels, especially news, only reinforced this view of the negative impact of the medium on the polis. Investigative journalist Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, in an essay in *The New Republic*, lamented that the speed and quantity of news was undermining its quality, accuracy and context and normalising a 'sleazoid infotainment culture.' 'In this culture of journalistic titillation,' Bernstein wrote, 'we teach our readers and our viewers that the trivial is significant, that the lurid and the loopy are more important than real news. We do not serve our readers and viewers, we pander to them. And we condescend to them, giving them what we think they want and what we calculate will sell and boost ratings and readership' (Bernstein, 1992: 24–5). A forum of journalists and academics organized by the *Columbia Journalism Review* concluded that the US news media had reached a new low with the Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal and that this reflected 'the rise of the tabloid and the trivial on our pages and screens, and the increasing pressure

to conform to the values of our corporate owners' (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 1998: 44).

In Britain, Bob Franklin noted that 'news media have increasingly become part of the entertainment industry instead of providing a forum for informed debate of key issue of public concern.' He observed: 'journalism's priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities, from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family, are judged more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant' (Franklin, 1997: 4).

It was clear to many that television news was taking on the worst aspects of the tabloid newspapers, which had always understood their entertainment remit. For Colin Sparks, the tabloidization of news showed in it giving 'relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandals and popular entertainment,' and 'relatively much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes' (Sparks, 2000: 10). The proliferation of all-news channels and the fragmentation of their audiences was being accompanied, according to Tracey, by a 'linguistic poverty and therefore a mental and moral poverty, daytime soaps, tabloid television, the trivialization of public discourse, an evangelism of the ephemeral, the celebration of the insignificant, and the marginalization of the important' (Tracey, 1998: 264).

In Western Europe, too, though the home of public-service broadcasting, there was a tendency to move away from a public-service news agenda – privileging information and education over the entertainment value of news – to a more market-led, 'tabloid,' version of news, with its emphasis on consumer journalism, sports and entertainment. The growing intrusion of media into the political domain in many countries has led critics to worry about the approach of the 'media-driven republic,' in which media will usurp the functions of political institutions. German scholar Thomas Meyer detected trends towards depoliticization, noting that even 'in overtly political television broadcasts there is a preponderance of programming with extremely scanty informational content and little room for debate, with much of it offering an image of the political that would more likely distract viewers from actual events than help them understand what is happening.' The result of this, Meyer wrote, is that 'the most crucial informational inputs emanating from an important segment of the mass-media system, in

short, simply do not meet the standards of appropriate information for a democratic polity' (Meyer and Hinchman, 2002: 129). Commentators in Germany started talking of 'politainment' (Dorner, 2001).

A 2005 comparative survey of European television by the Open Society Institute noted that despite availability of thousands of channels, there was remarkable similarity of content across Europe. 'The distinction between public-service broadcasters and their commercial competition, in terms of programme content and quality,' the Survey, the largest of its kind, covering 20 countries, concluded, 'has become increasingly blurred. Investigative journalism and minority programming are scarce commodities in both public and commercial television. Newscasts have often become markedly tabloid, particularly on commercial television channels' (Open Society Institute, 2005: 22). In India, where television news has grown phenomenally in the last decade, infotainment was rife, as one well-known television critic observed: 'Currently TV news is a study in the poverty that comes with plenty. More channels means more frenzied competition, and the less sense the viewer gets of the reality behind the political spokesman's bluster, or the anchor's chummy wrapping up of some non-discussion' (Ninan, 2006a).

## Dumbing down?

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Some have blamed television for creating a 'lowest-common-denominator society', arguing that 'the news media have contributed to a decrease in attention span and the death of curiosity, optimism, civility, compassion for others, and abstract and conceptual reasoning' (Arden, 2003: 48). Richard Hoggart, the founder of the now-defunct Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, has lamented this 'dumbing down' in Britain and the tendency among the intelligentsia to practice 'a little cultural slumming' to claim to enjoy such programmes as *Big Brother* (Hoggart, 2004: 124).

John Simpson, the veteran BBC correspondent alleged that 'thanks to the diminishing effects of appealing to the lowest common denominator,' the United States 'is turning into an Alzheimer nation, unaware of its own or anyone else's past, ignorant of its own or anyone else's present' (Simpson, 2002: 288). Other senior journalists, including John Humphrys of the BBC, have expressed serious concerns about 'dumbing down' and called for the strengthening of the public-service ethos of news (Humphrys, 1999; Lloyd, 2004). Similarly Andrew Marr has commented: 'The idea of news has altered. It stopped being essentially information and became something designed to produce – at all costs, always – an emotional reaction, the more extreme the better' (2004: 381).

What seems to be at stake is the public-service ethos of journalism, critical for fostering democratic practices among citizens (Curran, 2002). This ethos was very much that of the founder of the BBC, John Reith, who argued that the role of the new broadcaster would not only be to 'inform educate and entertain,' but within that to provide information free from the influence of both government and commerce, unlike the print media: 'Broadcasting is now bringing direct information to the homes of the people, information which formerly was not obtainable, or only in a form which had suffered considerable adjustment [by the press]' (Reith, 1924: 112). According to a UNESCO definition: 'Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is broadcasting made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, public service broadcasting can serve as a cornerstone of democracy' (UNESCO, 2006a). In Britain, for example, the BBC has been partly financed through the licence fee paid by British citizens so that, at least in theory, programme makers do not have to chase ratings and can make quality programmes which 'inform, educate and entertain' in that order.

Supporters of popular communication paradigms have tended to valorise the rise of infotainment, suggesting that it expands and democratizes the public sphere. It has been argued that sex, scandal disaster and celebrity have been intrinsic to modern journalism since its inception, and discourses on 'dumbing down' and 'tabloidization' are associated with a rather pessimistic, not to say, elitist and idealised view of television news (Hartley, 1999). This reflects a tendency among Western democracies towards a post-modernist 'restyling' of politics centred around consumerism, celebrity and cynicism (Corner and Pels, 2003: 7). As this trend is replicated world over, the present work will attempt to make sense of what appears to be a dominant characteristic of television news and one that requires critical scrutiny, given the crucial significance of television in public life.

## Defining global infotainment

Infotainment – a neologism which emerged in the late 1980s to become a buzzword, a handy catchall for all that was wrong with contemporary television – refers to an explicit genre-mix of 'information' and 'entertainment' in news and current affairs programming. By 1992, the word 'Infotainment' had made it into *Roget's Thesaurus*. According to the *Oxford*

*English Dictionary*, infotainment is 'broadcast material which is intended both to entertain and to inform,' while the *Key Concepts in Political Communication* defines it as 'the combination of the words information and entertainment, suggesting a practice of blending together of their presentation within the broadcasting of news and current affairs' (Lilleker, 2006). The phenomenon of infotainment denotes a type of television news where style triumphs over substance, the mode of presentation becoming more important than the content.

This new news cannibalizes visual forms and styles borrowed from post-modernist TV commercials and a MTV-style visual aesthetics, including fast-paced visual action, in a post-modern studio, computer-animated logos, eye-catching visuals and rhetorical headlines from an, often glamorous, anchor person. Such news, particularly on the rolling 24/7 channels, appears to be the answer to attracting the 'me' generation of media users, prone to channel hopping and zapping as well as more inclined towards on-line and mobile news. This style of presentation, with its origins in the ratings-driven commercial television news culture of the US, is becoming increasingly global, as news channels attempt to reach more viewers and keep their target audiences from switching over.

For the purposes of this study I define 'global infotainment' 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.' The global circulation of such television news, made possible by the creation of an international infrastructure of policies, trade and hardware, has undermined the public-service ethos of television but, at the same time, a 'global infotainment sphere' is emerging as a potential site for competing versions of journalisms, including an increasingly vocal and visible blogosphere.

## Infotainment as diversion

In his book, *The Power of News*, Michael Schudson has shown how news media act as a central institution in the evolution of a modern society and a key repository of 'public knowledge' and cultural authority (Schudson, 1996). The mediatized politics and the symbiotic relationships between journalists, spin doctors, and politicians within contemporary tele-visualized politics makes television an extremely powerful medium for political persuasion (Louw, 2005). Building on Guy Debord's concept of the 'society of the spectacle,' Douglas Kellner has observed that we are increasingly becoming part of 'networked infotainment societies,' where 'media spectacle is invading every field of experience, from the economy to culture and everyday life to politics and war (2003: 10).



While this mode of communication may seem more inclusive and potentially liberatory, the implications for the transmission of the public information necessary for democratic discourse may be less reassuring. There is a concern that too much news is creating an information overload, contributing to a structural erosion of the public sphere in a Habermasian sense, where the viewer, bombarded with visuals, is unable to differentiate between public information and corporate propaganda. Some 40 years ago, the renowned British historian Eric Hobsbawm defined advertisers as 'the most effective mass ideologists since the decline of the churches' (Hobsbawm, 1968: 321). However, news 'should be a stimulus to new thinking' as Jean Seaton reminds us, 'not an anaesthetizing escape from it' (2005: 296).

Entertaining news entails much more than a carnivalesque communication experience. As Garcia Canclini has observed, 'argumentative and critical forms of participation cede their place to the pleasure taken in electronic media spectacles where narration or the simple accumulation of anecdotes prevails over reasoned solutions to problems' (2001: 24). There is also an important ideological dimension associated with such modes of interactions. Herbert Schiller argued that Western media corporations are integral to capitalist systems and thus play a core role as ideological agents: 'They provide in their imagery and messagery, the beliefs and perspectives that create and reinforce their audiences' attachments to the way things are in the system overall' (Schiller, 1976: 30). In this age of ever-shortening sound- and sight-bites, does television news allow a critical assessment and reflection of the content presented, or does the sensory overload reduce the very concept of information to a mere surface impulse? What are the social and political implications of such a news discourse?

This book argues that there is a pressing need to go beyond the debate about 'dumbing down,' which seems to have dominated critical commentary on marketization of television news, some of which is referred to above. Infotainment, especially in its global context, entails much more than dumbing down: it works as a powerful discourse of diversion, in both senses, taking the attention away from, and displacing from the airwaves, such grim realities of neo-liberal imperialism as witnessed in the US invasion and occupation of Iraq; the intellectual and cultural subjugation by the tyranny of technology; of free-market capitalism and globalization of a profligate and unsustainable consumerist lifestyle. In this 24/7 global cultural economy, the 'mechanisms of television,' which Adorno warned 'often operate under the guise of false realism,' (1991: 158), are creating a false global 'feel good' factor, predicated on the supremacy of the market as defined by the West, led by the United States.

In this multimodal communication era, new digital delivery mechanisms offer unprecedented levels of media as content flows from around the globe

from anywhere to anywhere at any time, creating what has been termed as a 'mobile network society' (Castells et al., 2006). In this broadcasting ecology, there will be little need for schedules and specific channels. Rupert Murdoch sees digitalization as 'the prelude to a new golden age of media,' noting that 'technology is liberating us from old constraints, lowering key costs, easing access to new customers and markets and multiplying the choices we can offer' (News Corporation, 2007: 9). As a market-driven broadcast journalism becomes the norm, this process is not just confined to homes: TV monitors in public places – railway stations, airports, shopping malls – are legion, making television a pervasive and ambient phenomenon, transforming 'waiting room populations' into advertising audiences, influencing brand visibility and consumer behaviour (McCarthy, 2001). This global infotainment culture will be increasingly supported by infomercials – combining information with a product or service placement, further blurring the distinctions between news and advertising, creating what is sometimes termed as 'advertainment.'

Such liberating technology has been harnessed by infotainment conglomerates who bestride the globe and the public imagination with a cornucopia of media products, the paradigm of which is Murdoch's News Corporation, a key player in creating global infotainment, undermining and in some countries replacing the public-service ethos of television. In this respect, it is not dissimilar to the 'bread and circuses' of the Roman Empire, when the spectacle of the arena gradually won out over the theatre: 'Tragedy and comedy had to compete with gladiatorial combats and chariot races for spectators ... Theatres themselves came to be used for combats and displays of wild beasts. Cruder types of dramatic entertainment, pantomime and farce, evolved partly to meet the competition of the games, and these relied heavily on stage effects, obscenity, and other forms of sensationalism. Gradually the viciousness of the stage approximated the viciousness of the arena' (cited in Brantlinger, 1983: 75).

## Structure of the book

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The key arguments of the book follow these propositions:

- Despite the unprecedented growth in on-line media, television continues to be the world's most powerful medium, and television news helps shape the world views of millions of people across the globe.
- In the battle between public-service and private, commercially driven television, the commercial model of broadcast journalism has won.
- As the epicentre of such a television journalism, the United States has a major role in the globalization of the commercial model of television news.

- In a market driven, 24/7 broadcasting ecology, television news is veering towards infotainment – soft news, lifestyle and consumer journalism are preeminent, a conduit for the corporate colonization of consciousness, while public journalism and the public sphere have been undermined.
- The globalization of infotainment is detectable across the world, most notably seen in new synergies between Hollywood-based and Bollywood-based television news cultures.
- Even conflict and wars are portrayed on television news in an entertaining manner, drawing on conventions of Hollywood and thus legitimizing a neo-imperial ideology predicated on the superiority of free-market democracy.
- New technologies and alternative modes of global communication have created possibilities of a 'global infotainment sphere.'

The book is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter, the infotainment phenomenon is discussed in its historical context. It is argued that infotainment has a long history and any standard text book of the history of journalism will show that 'tickling' the public has been central to the growth of journalism as a business and as a profession. The different frameworks within which television news has evolved are analysed: the public service model dominant in Western Europe; state-controlled television news in communist and many developing countries, and the commercial US model. The focus then moves on to the changing nature of television news in the United States, where commercial imperatives seem to have come to dominate broadcast journalism, and the impact of importing such a model on the public-service television in Europe is discussed.

The second chapter sets out the political, economic and technological context of this change, examining the impact of neo-liberal policies in the post-Cold War era – liberalization, deregulation and privatization of television – and the shift from public-service to private television journalism. This is framed within the macro structural changes in broadcasting as a result of the privatization of audiovisual and communications sectors as part of transnational liberalization undertaken under the auspices of the World Trade Organization. The chapter also maps the developments in communications technologies, such as satellites and the availability of digital broadcasting, that made the global expansion of news and current affairs channels possible. The creation of infotainment conglomerates through deregulating media ownership and the merger of entertainment and information corporations, and changes in the media marketplace are analysed, in their contribution to the growing commercialism of television news, primarily in the US as the centre of free-market media. The dependence of news channels on corporate advertising is also investigated to establish to what extent such factors influence news content. The impact of all these factors on infotainment in news is exemplified by Murdoch's Fox News.

The focus of the third chapter is on the globalization of this phenomenon of infotainment, as the US model of market-led broadcast journalism is imposed or is adopted across the world, influencing news and current affairs. As the key players in global television news – both as providers of raw footage as well as round the clock news through such channels as Cable News Network (CNN), part of AOL-Time Warner, the world's biggest media corporation, the US has a major role in this process. The implications of rolling 24/7 news operations for news agendas and priorities is analysed, drawing illustrative examples from Europe, Russia, Japan and many other countries. The chapter demonstrates how globalization and homogenization of a news culture is taking effect, with localized global infotainment gaining ground. The parallel rise of infotainment reality television, from documentaries to docusoaps, is also discussed through a case study that demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between these new factual entertainment genres and entertaining news.

Chapter 4 examines the impact of infotainment on television news in India, which, with 40 dedicated 24/7 television news networks is the world's largest television news market. The chapter provides an analysis of how the Indian newsscape has been transformed, looking at the main players in the field and their growing global ambitions. A special focus of the chapter is on what I term the 'Bollywoodization of television news,' examining the impact of a celebrity entertainment and ratings-driven environment on the broadcasting of news and current affairs. As India integrates in the world of global infotainment, the synergies between the US model and the Indian broadcasting experience are also discussed.

Given the characteristics of television news - arresting visuals, dramatic pictures – wars and civil conflicts are particularly susceptible to infotainment. Chapter 5 considers the representation of war on television news, where increasingly the trend is to show it as a form of macabre infotainment. The chapter examines the obsession of TV news with high-tech war reporting, analysing how it has evolved since the 1991 US invasion of Iraq, the first internationally televised war. The sanitisation of state-sponsored violence and its resistance by extremist Islamic groups, it is argued, is creating a greater degree of acceptance of violence in the popular imagination, helped in no small way by the growing popularity of digital war games. The chapter also notes the role of Siliwood (Hollywood and Silicon Valley) and the development of 'militainment' – the mutually beneficial collaboration between Hollywood and the Pentagon and how these have contributed to the rise of militaristic infotainment on the news and in factual entertainment.

In Chapter 6, the discussion takes a more theoretical turn, with its focus on the politics of global infotainment, and analysing the phenomenon as an

ideology for a neo-imperialism of neo-liberalism. It explores the relationship between television news and political, economic, military and cultural processes, and examines the role that TV plays in shaping our worldview. The global massification and the role of television as an apparatus of power and ideology is revisited, drawing on key theoretical approaches that inform the study of infotainment, from Marxist to postmodernist analysing infotainment as a 'feel good' vector in the corporate colonialism, masquerading as globalization. The chapter delineates the major implications of global infotainment for the formation of public opinion and its manipulation in an age of neo-imperialism, characterized by the display of US military might. The average consumer of the 24/7 infotainment bombardment may not be able to differentiate between public information and propaganda from a powerful military-industrial-entertainment complex. Global infotainment, the chapter argues, is the soft emissary of a hard-nosed new imperialism. It is also a form of diversion, distracting attention away from this project to dominate and control, as well as displacing alternative views and information that is essential for public debate. Given the growing power of global infotainment conglomerates and their local clones, there is a danger that the existence of an informed citizenry, essential for genuine democratic discourse, is undermined, while corporate propaganda masquerading as infotainment reaches billions of people in their living rooms.

Chapter 7 offers a more positive assessment, noting that infotainment has the capacity to provide greater diversity than traditional hard news, thus a liberatory potential and a more democratic character. It observes that popular factual television could be used to raise global awareness of contemporary issues and argues that a 'global infotainment sphere,' created through the globalization of television and growing importance of the Internet, could be harnessed for the public good. Despite their commercialization, such phenomena as web-casting and blogging and on-line infotainment sharing sites like YouTube and MySpace may have a role in influencing global news agendas. The chapter also examines the area of knowledge television – so-called 'edutainment' – a sector into which major international broadcasters such as the BBC are expanding. The book suggests a new approach for the study of international television news for the twenty-first century by developing the idea of 'global public media,' as a 'global public good' to counter the increasing power of commercial 'global infotainment,' which characterizes the 'bread and circuses' of the twenty-first century avatar of the Roman Empire – the US-managed neo-liberal imperialism.

As a former journalist with an academic background in International Relations, what is happening to global news has been the central concern of my research and writing over nearly two decades. At a time when infotainment is hailed as empowering individuals and societies around the world,

to argue that it may be a diversion, masking an covert agenda to embed neo-liberal imperialism, is unfashionable. Nevertheless, it is an argument that needs to be made and made unambiguously and without apology.

This book has had a long gestation period and in writing it I have accumulated a range of debts: first and foremost, to the writings of fellow academics, journalists and activists passionate about the need to defend public media. Colleagues at the University of Westminster – many of whom, especially Colin Sparks, still wedded to the idea of a critical communication project – provided a robust academic environment within which such scholarship can be sustained, and this book is a modest contribution to what James Curran has called ‘the Westminster School’ of research (Curran, 2004).

For her generosity and patience I want to thank Julia Hall, who commissioned this book but left Sage before it saw the light of day. Others at Sage, especially Gurdeep Mattu, Mila Steele and Ian Antcliff were extremely helpful and cooperative. Close to home, my family, including my mother, who would complain that I was always ‘cuddling the computer,’ coped very well with my extensive and intensive work schedule. During the final weeks of writing, my daughter Shivani, preparing for her GCSE exams, was a constant source of inspiration, reminding me the worth of hard work, while my son Rohan, meticulous as he is, helped with checking the references, as well as alerting me to the militaristic nature of many computer games. My deepest gratitude as ever goes to my wife Elizabeth for her intelligent and professional editing skills and to whom this book is dedicated.