Entertaining Experts
On the relevance of entertainment for understanding media representation of environmental politics.

Marian Adolf¹ & Markus Rhomberg¹ & Cornelia Wallner²
¹ Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, Germany
² Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, Germany

ABSTRACT

Our contribution seeks to clarify the role of media entertainment on the perception of environmental policy issues. While the importance of mediated communication for modern societies in general and for the transmission and dissemination of crucial information in particular is undisputed, investigations into the specific impact of popular culture and media entertainment remain scarce. The purpose of our discussion is to connect an analysis of the public discourse with media entertainment content. We will exemplify this especially for the communication of sustainability and environmental politics. Our investigation is theoretically embedded in the theory of Media Society and Knowledge Society while empirically based on media use and reception studies.

Theoretical Background

Today, as the media have become an “ubiquitous social force” (as exemplified e.g. by Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2009; Saxer, 2007), the recognition of the importance of fictional and non-fictional media content for understanding contemporary social discourse is crucial. In a Media Society the media serve as sources of societal knowledge and the major site of public debate. Thus, any inquiry into the information and knowledge structures – and thus also environmental policies – needs to take into account the role of the ideals, values, and opinions inherent in media depictions.

While political scientists and communication scholars have long been interested in analysing the role of political communication and scientific expertise in information media, we need to probe deeper into political and scientific communication in media entertainment. Indeed, there are a number of empirical studies that deal with isolated entertainment events on environmental issues (e.g. studies on the Al Gore movie “An inconvenient truth”, Roland Emmerich’s “The Day After Tomorrow” or Michael Crichton’s “State of Fear”). What is still largely lacking is research that would allow for a systematic conceptualization of such dispersed-event-based studies, especially with regard to the role entertainment content plays in perceiving environmental issues.

Modern society takes notice of climate issues dominantly through a socially defined filter, which is itself a discursive construct and not a mirror of the empirical climate (Stehr/von
Storch, 2009). This social construct of the climate is conferred by professional media routines, which select and shape scientific judgments, statements and agenda-building-attempts from politicians as well as from NGOs, interest and lobby groups. This holds true for news as well as for entertainment content. Additionally, sustainability issue – like for example the possible impacts of climate change – are in many aspects neither visible nor directly accessible for individual and therefore not approachable in our personal experience. Citizens depend on mass media content to get an image of scientific debates and anticipated risks (Beck, 1992).

Within the realm of mediated communication those segments that belong to entertainment programming are still growing ever more popular. As the sum total of media content continues to rise, more and more media content is used for entertainment purposes. In Germany for example 8 percent of TV-content belongs to entertainment (non-fiction), while it is used with 14 percent of the total TV-consumption. 46 percent of the TV-programm belongs to information, but it is only used at the rate of 35 percent of the total TV-consumption (Gerhards/Klingler 2009). Pioneering work, for example in the field of Cultural Studies established the importance of popular culture for shaping individual identities, social practice and public discourse. Entertainment content is relevant for interpreting “reality” in the same way as “information” content (Mikos 2001; Green et al 2006; Gripsrud 2007).

Thus a central question for social science research arises: What are the implications for the distribution of social knowledge among a democratic citizenry in the mode of entertainment?

**Aim and Structure of Our Presentation**

In our paper we propose to investigate that question with regard to topical environmental issues. The centrality of such an “entertainment public” or “cultural public sphere” requires us to better understand how communication is specifically shaped, disseminated and decoded.

Our goal is thus twofold: First, we are seeking to understand if and how politics in entertainment content are a relevant source for communicating environmental issues and how this could be empirically investigated. Second, we argue that scientific expertise in media entertainment is an important source for gaining knowledge about environmental politics.

Based on these these ideas our presentation is structured as followed: We will (I) discuss different argumentations and reasons, why we need to understand media entertainment in order to understand the media representation of environmental politics. Following, we will (II) give an outline for the empirical investigation on this topic and discuss methodological problems we might face in analysing media entertainment content.

**References**


