BREAKING BOUNDARIES IN ENTERTAINMENT AND LEARNING

Lluís Pastor

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Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Spain
lpastor@uoc.edu

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ABSTRACT

As societies change from industrial-based to knowledge-based economies, individuals are increasingly accessing lifelong and free-choice learning. In this context, entertainment – particularly media entertainment – provides an important source from which people can acquire information, develop ideas and construct new visions for themselves and their society. This paper seeks to explore the connections between education and entertainment, and contribute to a deeper understanding of conflicting theoretical arguments that have historically placed entertainment beyond the boundaries of valuable learning. By researching the mechanisms of pleasure and attraction of mass media, the paper suggests that the very nature of entertainment evokes optimal conditions to encourage engagement in learning, and indicates the need for further research in this area.

KEYWORDS

entertainment, mass media, engagement in learning, social cognition

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING IN AN ENTERTAINMENT SOCIETY

Mass media take up much of our leisure time and the time we devote to understanding the world. Through mass media, we learn, stay informed and are entertained. But despite the undeniable role that resources such as television, the internet and digital games have in building and sharing knowledge, entertainment is still a problematic concept from an academic perspective.

This article begins with a necessary review of the connections, interactions and separations between education and entertainment at a time in history when entertainment has become the driving force behind many everyday communication processes. In this context, I consider it essential to understand the main pleasure and attraction mechanisms employed by the mass media, and to rethink them in terms of cognitive strategies so that they may spark the interest and involvement of students in formal learning processes.

The key to the new information society is that it is an entertainment society; only as such can we understand the new role of information and the conversion of any person and institution into a comprehensive communication node (transmitter-receiver) in the network society. In this regard, I will use the concept coined by Manuel Castells (2005) and attempt to explain its implications from an entertainment perspective. In this network society, every transmitter or node struggles to draw people's attention. And only the most engaging and entertaining messages reach their target audience, because the inflation of information leads people to apply a kind of communication Darwinism. Thus, for the first time in the history of mankind, there is no dichotomy between work and entertainment, as entertainment becomes the primary persuasive

strategy for any serious communication (Bernstein, 1990).

To assess the significance of this change, we should keep in mind that, historically, entertainment has had a bad press (Singhal and Rogers, 1999) and that criticism of entertainment increased with the creation in the 20th century of the entertainment and mass media binomial. Guy Debord (1967) wrote a work that has become a benchmark for the harbingers of decline, *The Society of the Spectacle*. In his book, Debord argued that the spectacle is the dominant model of social life and blamed the mass media for procuring products that are far removed from what is really happening in the world. On the other side of these representations, Debord places the citizens-viewers who passively accept the messages they are offered. In his work *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard (1986) exposed what he called the "playful way", which he defines as a persuasive form of superficially drawing attention to certain objects and is contrary to passion as the absolute interest in any event, object or person. Debord and Baudrillard are symbols of the modern mainstream Western way of thinking that has discredited entertainment as a source of knowledge and as a vehicle for obtaining new knowledge.

Compared to the number of harbingers of decline, entertainment advocates have always been a minority. Among the earliest references are the contributions by Walter Benjamin (1973), who emphasised the democratising possibilities of the industrialisation of culture. In recent decades, Bell (1969) and Shils (1974) advocated mass culture and even stressed the educational role of mass media. David Morley (1992) argued that the mass media consumer is an active spectator, thus offsetting Debord's theories and anticipating the current findings of neuroscientists. Morley also defended TV entertainment as a bearer of messages on

society. From this perspective, no programme simply entertains; they all convey a certain view of the world. For the same reason, many authors who analyse the role of the mass media are against the dichotomy between entertainment programmes and educational programmes (Fischer and Melnik, 1979; Singhal, 1990; Singhal and Rogers, 1989; Singhal and Rogers, 1999).

The defence of entertainment coincides with the defence of the social function of mass media, but it is nonetheless a minor current in the history of ideas. Entertainment has traditionally been seen as something that is unnecessary. Entertaining has etymologically been regarded as a way to pass the time: time not spent at work, since the time spent at work cannot be regarded as "entertaining". And thus, entertainment has been identified with leisure time, which is also unfortunate because leisure has not been well regarded in Western history either and leisure time spent unproductively is destined to be discredited.

From this point of view, entertainment becomes a specific aspect of leisure and therefore leisure and entertainment are set against work and domestic concerns. In establishing these dichotomies, and setting entertainment up against work, entertainment is defined negatively in the modern day (Dyer, 2002). When set up against work, the central occupation in life, entertainment, like games, becomes superfluous (Huizinga, 1972).

But entertainment's bad reputation is not only a result of its clash with work time: it was also destined to lose in its confrontation with art. In this case, when art is confronted with entertainment, artistic expressions are considered to be of a higher order than expressions that only seek entertainment. This idea is deeply ingrained in our society, where works that provide entertainment are poorly considered compared to those deemed artistic. As suggested by Professor Richard Dyer (2002), entertainment has been identified as something that is not art and is neither serious nor refined. This distinction affects any current discussion regarding what is art and what is "merely" entertainment. According to Dyer, art is considered refined, elitist, uplifting and difficult, whereas entertainment is overly vulgar and simple.

Perhaps it is the implicit simplicity of entertainment that has condemned it. Entertainment cannot add to the degree of difficulty in its approach if it aims to be useful to a large number of people. And because it reaches many people, it is considered vulgar. Such is the crime of entertainment: to defend the idea that the principle of communication is at the core of any human production and that to get through to the public is worthy of praise rather than criticism.

Other variables may have a negative impact on the concept of entertainment in the eyes of those who set the rules. One element of demerit of entertainment derives from another dichotomy, one that confronts rationality and emotionality. Entertainment has an emotional component that has discredited it.

But beneath this layer of contempt, entertainment hides an attitude. Those who identify entertainment exclusively with certain topics are quite possibly mistaken. One of the keys to entertainment, as asserted by Professor Dyer (2002), is that it is best explained as an attitude: entertainment is not a category of things, but rather an attitude towards them. In other words, entertainment activates a series of cognitive mechanisms that inevitably attract us to it. Arousing such an attitude, which to some may appear to be simple and vulgar, happens to be the goal of any successful communication, be it one that aims to convince us to vote for a certain candidate or one that teaches us something we did not already know.

WHY DO MASS MEDIA ENTERTAIN US?

I believe it is important to question why the internet, mass media and games attract and entertain us. Marc Prensky (2007) responds to the question of why we are attracted to games in his book *Digital Game-Based Learning.* He says that games are a means of having fun: through games, we discover an intense and passionate link; they have rules, which provides structure; they have goals, which provides motivation; they are interactive, which allows us to act; they have consequences and provide feedback, which allows us to learn; they are adaptive and our skills grow with them; they enable us to win and feed our ego; they present conflicts, competitions and oppositions, which raises our adrenaline levels; they require us to solve problems and spark our creativity; and they require us to interact in social groups.

According to Prensky, it is normal for us to get caught up in games since they trigger multiple poles of attraction. Each of the features that make games a source of attraction and entertainment may well also apply to the mass media if we consider them in full: without limitations regarding format or channel (press, radio, television and internet) and devoted to both information and fiction. News, contests, magazines, series, documentaries, reality shows and sports programmes develop capabilities similar to those identified by Prensky in games. Thus, games, programmes and mass media contents become sources of attraction and entertainment that are difficult to surpass. In fact, the mass media take up much of the time we devote to leisure and understanding the world.

It is not difficult to ascertain which TV shows attract the largest number of viewers. Indeed, audience analysis is central to the television industry, since adverts cost more when shown during programmes with high ratings. In Spain,

Sofres is the company that conducts audience analyses of television programmes. Studies provided by Sofres indicate which programmes have the highest ratings of the year, the date they were shown, how many people watched them and their share (the percentage of people who watched them compared with the total number of people watching TV). To determine the programmes with the highest ratings and the variables that lead people to feel attracted to these programmes, I analysed the thirty most watched programmes of 2004–2007.

In 2007, seventeen of the thirty programmes were sports competitions (the majority), eight were episodes of the police investigation series *CSI,* two were episodes of the comedy series *Aida,* two were programmes in which citizens ask political leaders questions (*Tengo una pregunta para usted*), and one was the Christmas special *Navidad Shreketefeliz Navidad.*

Of the thirty most watched programmes of 2006, with at least 5,729,000 viewers each, twenty were sports competitions. The remaining eight were distributed as follows: seven were episodes of the series *Aquí no hay quien viva* and one was an episode of the series *Hospital Central.*

Of the thirty most watched programmes of 2005 (with up to 6,811,000 viewers), fourteen were episodes of the series *Aquí no hay quien viva,* ten were sports competitions, two were episodes of the series *Los Serrano,* one was an episode of *Cuéntame cómo pasó,* another of *Aida,* and two new shows joined the list: the reality show contest *Operación Triunfo* and the New Year's chimes.

Of the thirty programmes with the highest ratings in 2004, with at least seven million viewers, twenty-three were episodes of series and seven were sports broadcasts (six of which were among the top ten). The most

watched series were *Los Serrano* (with thirteen episodes), *Aquí no hay quien viva* (with nine episodes) and *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (with one episode).

The analysis of the most watched programmes in Spain from 2004 to 2007 reveals that a small number of programmes accumulate large viewer numbers. They are basically sports broadcasts involving Spanish sportspeople, police series, sitcoms that depict the social reality of Spain, programmes that combine contests with a reality show format, such as *Operación Triunfo*, and specials that have become TV classics, such as the New Year's chimes or the Christmas special.

FIRST HYPOTHESIS ON THE PRINCIPLES OF ATTRACTION

From the analysis of the most watched programmes on Spanish TV networks, I venture to advance certain principles that might explain why we are attracted to these prime time shows. My goal is to propose a set of cognitive mechanisms that explain why certain shows attract more viewers than others. The aim of this analysis has been to reveal some basic mechanisms of attraction, along with the findings by cognitive scientists and neuroscientists, which allow for some initial explanations regarding the mechanisms that lead us to be attracted to certain programmes.

Sports broadcasts activate three distinct mechanisms: the public's identification with the protagonist (sportsperson or team), surprise (no knowledge of the result and a continuous projection of the possible outcome) and contrast (excitement related to winning or losing). Moreover, the identification mechanism increases the flow of emotions in the public. Three more mechanisms should be added: intrigue (a plot that leads to an unexpected outcome), clarity and repetition.

Let us go over the six basic mechanisms, beginning with the contrast mechanism (Renvoise, P.; Morin, C., 2003). The contrast mechanism is based on the brain's ability to identify reality more easily by comparing opposites. We feel good or bad according to a contrast which in sport is channelled through victories and defeats. Winning or losing is the most obvious contrast. The chance of winning – of our team winning, of our favourite athlete coming in first place – irresistibly draws us in.

There are multiple ways of presenting us with contrasts in TV shows. It is not only sports that involve winning or losing: voting systems in contests or reality shows are based on the same element of attraction.

The contrast mechanism leads to a second, more complex mechanism: identification. In the case of video games, the identification mechanism is even more evident as players take on the form of a screen alter ego, an avatar, with which they are immersed in an adventure (Gee, 2003). Identification with the protagonist of a story is one of the most attractive cognitive mechanisms. This is clear in the case of video games, but we can trace this identification in any story, regardless of its format. The instant there is identification between the person who is told a story and its protagonist (or one of its protagonists), the attraction is enhanced. This identification is what causes the subjects' emotional response to fictional realities (Redolar, 2009).

Another principle that makes these programmes attractive is that of repetition. Repetition reassures the public into thinking that things will occur as usual. Repetition also allows the public-pleasing elements to be established, through facilitating them repeatedly. As stated by the neuroscientist Ignacio Morgado, "the conclusion is that most people prefer what they know and are wary of uncertainty" (2007: 110).

The principles of discovery and surprise respond to the same cognitive mechanism. The difference is that with the discovery principle, the public is given a narrative that has been decided in advance (an episode of a TV series, for example); there is no initial plot with the surprise principle, according to which a series of unforeseen but possible events occur (such is the case of a sporting event, for instance). This cognitive principle is in line with the explanation offered by neuroscientists regarding mirror neurons (Rizzolatti, 2006).

Finally, the mechanism of clarity attracts because what these programmes show can be easily understood. The programmes that garner such high ratings are designed to be understood.

The cognitive mechanisms triggered by entertainment draw the public's attention, and this involves controlling communication. The new information society is actually an entertainment society because communication is the most important phenomenon of our society. And entertaining is a complex exercise that allows everyone to be a transmitter and to reach their audience. In this regard, the historian Johan Huizinga (1972) provides a new framework of analysis: entertainment is something that certain people prepare to capture the attention and time of others. It is a biased activity, because if we look at its etymological root, entertainment has to do with capturing, or occupying, time. Thus, entertainment aims to occupy other people's time. Not only that: it aims to steal time from other people with their permission, and in exchange it gives them back more than what they would have had if they had not accessed it.

Entertainment also synthesises a series of techniques that can be applied to any area of human life in which communication is vital. These communication techniques aim to catch and hold the attention of the public and stir a

discussion and positive sentiment about that communication.

Furthermore, entertainment uses these communicative techniques to democratically disseminate content, knowledge and emotions. The same features that made entertainment vulgar and simple may be considered useful for making the information society more democratic, as entertaining is a means of making contents more democratic in that they reach more people, more people can share their opinions and social dialogue is strengthened. Entertainment helps to make content appealing and understandable to a wide audience (Dyer, 2002).

Moreover, entertainment is based on a radically free activity, perhaps the freest of all, since it cannot be mandated. Entertainment is dispensed through an activity that is chosen freely by the public. The basis of entertainment is that the public – the receiver – chooses what it wants to see and has all the power in this communicative situation. Entertainment is a noun with which the receiver labels a reality, it is not a descriptor decided by the issuer. Thus, an activity is entertaining if the recipient considers it to be so (Huizinga, 1972). Applying entertainment to work and education is a communicative derivative of the new information society, where the receiver has as much or more power than the issuer.

ENTERTAINMENT AND EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

To be able to speak of the link between entertainment and education, we must consider a previous step: the relationship between education and the mass media, as entertainment reaches education through the media. Although the theoretical debates on communication and education began to emerge in the second half of the 20th century (Aparicio, 2010), projects that

linked media and education were already being carried out in the first half of the century. One such project was the school newspaper created by Freinet (Kaplún, 2010).

More recently, there has been a growing concern to incorporate entertainment into learning. Gitlin (2003) argues that it is possible to gain knowledge and learn while being entertained through immersion in sights and sounds, a situation that is typical of media consumption. In addition, new student profiles and the use of video games (Prensky, 2006; 2007) have helped to expand the concept. The neologism "edutainment" has generated a natural semantic field in which education and entertainment are combined. In this sense, although there are some theoretical contributions of value regarding the definition of the "edutainment" concept (Garrett and Ezzo, 1996, delve into the cognitive mechanisms that are set in motion when learning while being entertained, while Okan, 2003, analyses the necessary multimedia resources), the fact is that the literature has often linked "edutainment" to software solutions applied to learning. Given this reductionist view of entertainment in education, this article argues that entertainment is a substantial element in the learning process.

Only education that is attractive and consistent with new uses and social interests can become a means for improvement throughout the life of a 21st century citizen. We must dare to say out loud that the learning process should arouse enthusiasm and interest and be entertaining (Prensky, 2007; Pastor, 2010). The challenge will be to bring the worlds of education and entertainment together. The advancement of our knowledge and skills must now be stimulated, just as our leisure time and our consumption of goods and services are (Pastor, 2010).

The media, the internet and video games are the best tools for bringing education closer to entertainment, since their true essence is entertainment, which is why they are valued and used (Forney, 2004; Gros, 2007). After all, the studies on media consumption show that all citizens spend a significant portion of their time on traditional media, the internet and computer games (Muzet, 2006).

Only an attractive education that is consistent with new uses and social interests can become a resource for improvement throughout the life of 21st century citizens; and only education that is integrated in daily life can become an accessible element for these citizens.

If the 21st century requires an economy different from that of the 20th century, if the new century requires a society geared not only toward production but also toward reinvention, research and development of new products and services, then education must take a new leap forward toward lifelong availability, interest and attraction. Lifelong education is equivalent to personal R&D and the basis of education must be modified for this programme of innovation and development to be implemented.

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