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## CONCEPTS OF INFOTAINMENT AND POLITAINMENT: SHOWMEN IN MEDIA AND POLITICS

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This study examines the relationship between popular media and populism. It demonstrates how entertainment-oriented content fosters anti-elite sentiment and polarisation. Media formats that combine information with spectacle are capable of actively propelling populist leaders and ideologies. The research concludes that media formats blending information with spectacle serve as key mechanisms for propelling populist leaders and ideologies.

*Keywords:* audience, communication, dialogism, media, infotainment, politainment, populism, showman.

**Relevance and Problem Statement.** The nexus between media – specifically infotainment – and the rise of populism in politics can be viewed as a hypothesis requiring verification. The proliferation of information as entertainment correlates with a mass influx of showmen into politics. There is a noticeable series of cases involving the successful election of comedians, clowns, and professional jokers to the highest state offices. This is not merely a Ukrainian electoral phenomenon of 2019, but a global trend. This article attempts to trace this connection. Thus, the study of the concepts of *infotainment* and *politainment*, and their link to the emergence of entertainer-politicians, is extremely relevant for understanding modern mediatised politics.

**The Purpose of This Article.** The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between the concepts of infotainment and politainment and the phenomenon of electing professional showmen to high political positions, as well as to systematise scholarly perspectives on this issue.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks have been defined:

1. To conduct a review of scientific literature dedicated to the connection between infotainment and politainment.
2. To investigate the genealogy and etymological aspects of terms such as ‘infotainment’, ‘politainment’, ‘edutainment’, and similar derivatives.
3. To analyse key cases where comedians and entertainers have become high-level politicians.

**Methodology.** The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, using the following methods: Theoretical analysis (to study the concepts of *infotainment* and *politainment*, and to review scientific literature). Content analysis and case study (to examine and compare the political careers of showmen in different countries). Comparative-historical method (to trace the chronology of the emergence of the term *infotainment* and its derivatives).

**Main Body of the Research. Literature Review.** Let us consider fundamental works dedicated to this topic. One such work is Benjamin Moffitt's book '*The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*' (2016). Moffitt reinterprets populism not as a fixed ideology, but as a performative political style that flourishes in media-saturated environments. He argues that populists exploit new media technologies to create divisions between 'the people' and 'the elite', turning politics into a spectacle. This performance is amplified by infotainment, where emotional appeals and dramatic narratives dominate, making populism ubiquitous in an era of crisis and global media convergence. Moffitt's analysis draws on examples from around the world, showing how media penetrates political life, allowing populists to embody authenticity through unregulated, entertaining displays<sup>1</sup> (Moffitt, 2016).

The article by Michael Higgins, '*Mediated populism, culture and media form*' (2017), delves into cultural aspects, highlighting how participatory and entertainment media facilitate populism. Higgins links populism to weak party structures and non-traditional relationships with the media on both the left and right spectrums. He identifies a shift toward emotionality in media – anger, outrage, and empathy – as key drivers, with infotainment genres such as talk radio and satirical shows blending politics with popular culture. The brevity and interactivity of social networks encourage simplified, emotional language, legitimising populist rhetoric. Higgins warns of the 'fake news' trope as a tool for discrediting elites, while simultaneously calling on media to cultivate inclusive emotional engagement to counter the rise of populism<sup>2</sup>.

It is worth noting separately how the author interprets the concept of 'participatory', as for him, this word holds a deeper meaning than simply 'media involving audience participation'. It is not about democracy in its pure form, but about media formats that create the illusion of direct involvement of 'ordinary people' in the process. Traditional news (e.g., the evening broadcast on the BBC in the 1980s) was 'lecturing': the expert spoke, and the viewers listened. This is an elitist model. Participatory media (talk shows, reality shows, social networks, radio with call-ins) break down this wall. They say: 'Your opinion matters', 'Vote', 'Write a comment'. According to Higgins, this creates ideal ground for the populist who says: 'I hear you, while the elites do not'.

This also involves the validation of 'common sense'. Participatory formats often place the opinion of the 'person on the street' on the same level (or even higher) than the opinion of an expert. If a professor of economics sits in the studio, but a viewer calls in and says,

<sup>1</sup> Moffitt, B. (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford. Available at: [https://psi424.cankaya.edu.tr/uploads/files/Moffitt%2C%20The%20Global%20Rise%20of%20Populism%20\\_%20Performance%2C%20Political%20Style%20%28Stanford%20University%20Press%29.pdf](https://psi424.cankaya.edu.tr/uploads/files/Moffitt%2C%20The%20Global%20Rise%20of%20Populism%20_%20Performance%2C%20Political%20Style%20%28Stanford%20University%20Press%29.pdf) (Accessed: 1 December 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Higgins, M. (2017), 'Mediated populism, culture and media form', *Palgrave Communications*, 3, article number 3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0005-4> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

‘I don’t feel any improvement, prices are rising!’, then in participatory infotainment, the viewer’s emotional truth prevails. Populism feeds on this. It uses such media to show that the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ (*vox populi*) is more important than the complex theories of technocrats.

Finally, it concerns the aesthetics of reality TV. Michael Higgins frequently draws attention to the fact that politics borrows the rules of reality shows (which are the quintessence of participatory culture). In such shows (like *The X Factor* or *Big Brother*), the audience has power: they judge, evict, or save television characters. The populist plays by these rules: he behaves not as a boring administrator, but as a show participant appealing to the jury (the people) over the heads of the hosts (journalists/elites), asking for support.

When a politician reads tweets during a broadcast or answers aggressive questions from the audience, he demonstrates his ‘accessibility’. This is a performative act. It shows: ‘Look, I am not afraid to be among you’. This contrasts sharply with ‘cabinet’ politicians who avoid direct, uncontrolled contact. Thus, ‘participatory media’ according to Higgins is a mechanism that transforms the political process into an interactive spectacle, where emotional reaction and the personal experience of the audience (*the people*) become the main criterion of truth, displacing professional expertise (Higgins, 2017).

Further in the research, we will analyse works dedicated to the relationship between media infotainment and the growth of political populism over the last five years (2020–2025).

In the article ‘*The American Viewer: Political Consequences of Entertainment Media*’ (2024) Eunji Kim and Shawn Patterson Jr. investigate how ostensibly apolitical entertainment media build parasocial bonds, using Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* as an example. Through content analysis, surveys, and geographic variations in TV ratings, they demonstrate that exposure to such infotainment fosters trust in populist figures, branding them as competent leaders. This causal link increased the vote share for Trump in the 2016 Republican primaries, illustrating how entertainment media allow non-traditional politicians to bypass traditional channels and cultivate voter loyalty in primaries lacking strong partisan cues<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, the article by Florian Arendt et al. ‘*Popcorn politics: Entertainment appraisals predict support for populism*’ (2025), positions populism as ‘popcorn politics’, where entertainment value strongly predicts support for populist leaders over non-populists. Through experiments, they show how infotainment appraisals – fun, excitement – drive voter preferences, treating populism as a consumerist spectacle that entertains amidst political disillusionment. These works collectively highlight the role of infotainment in democratising but also polarising politics, allowing populists to leverage media for emotional, performative gains. They call for vigilant media practices to mitigate risks to democracy<sup>4</sup>.

**Etymological Aspect (Genealogy of the Term).** The concept of ‘infotainment’ is quite widely used in media circles. However, it is useful to clarify the chronology of its

<sup>3</sup> Kim, E. and Patterson, S. (2024), ‘The American Viewer: Political Consequences of Entertainment Media’, *American Political Science Review*. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000728> (Accessed: 11 December 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, F. et al. (2025), ‘Popcorn politics: Entertainment appraisals predict support for populism’, *PubMed Central*. Available at: doi: [10.1111/bjop.12791](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12791) (Accessed: 1 December 2025).

emergence and application. The first isolated cases of use are recorded in the mid-70s of the last century, specifically at a meeting of the association of university and college radio stations in the USA in 1974. Thus, this neologism is the work of students. A few years later, in 1980, as internet searches attest, the term surfaced at a joint conference of ASLIB (Association for Information Management) and the Library Association in Sheffield, UK, where it was defined as a *nexus* (from Latin – that which binds) between information and entertainment. And so, from 1983, almost a decade after its first appearance, the term ‘infotainment’ began to gain widespread use – as a synonym for ‘soft news’ in communication theory.

This occurred against the backdrop of television’s intensive efforts to actively blend informational content with entertainment formats. A group of British information scientists who called themselves ‘The Infotainers’ staged comedy shows at professional conferences between 1980 and 1990. Notably, in the early stages, the term often carried a negative connotation, as it implied a rejection of ‘lightened’ journalism by proponents of ‘serious’ media.

The reader may also notice some abuse of word formation based on the concept of infotainment over the last two decades. Here are the terms that have been identified:

- **Edutainment** (education + entertainment) – education as entertainment;
- **Advertainment** (advertising + entertainment) – advertising in the form of entertainment;
- **Docutainment** (documentary + entertainment) – documentary films with entertainment elements;
- **Sportainment** (sport + entertainment) – sport as show business.
- Among the less common, one can mention:
- **Retailtainment** (retail + entertainment) – shopping with entertainment elements;
- **Eatertainment** (eating + entertainment) – restaurants as entertainment venues;
- **Brandtainment** (brand + entertainment) – branding through entertainment;
- **Politainment** (politics + entertainment) – politics as entertainment, political talk shows.

There are also **Shockumentary** (shock + documentary) – shocking documentary programs, and **Mockumentary** (mock + documentary) – parodies of documentary films. As we can see, based on the *information + entertainment* model, a whole family of similar terms has been created, combining various spheres with entertainment. This trend reflects a general desire to turn almost everything into fun. In this sense, *politainment* is a completely logical consequence of the intensification of the aforementioned trend.

**Case Studies of Politicians.** As mentioned above, this concerns a global trend, not just the Ukrainian electoral phenomenon of 2019. While the latter is vivid, it somewhat fades against the background of similar cases in various countries around the world. The Ukrainian case is generally well known to our readers. Therefore, it makes sense to move immediately to other countries. The first that comes to mind is the political career of Donald Trump.

**From Reality Show Boss to the White House – or How ‘You’re Fired!’ Became a Political Slogan.** Imagine a billionaire sitting at a massive desk in a luxurious hall, surrounded by ambitious job applicants, and with a stone face uttering the phrase that became a meme: ‘You’re fired!’ This scene was the core of the show *The Apprentice* – a reality program that helped transform Donald Trump from a New York developer into a national TV star, and eventually into the US President. Born in 1946 in Queens, Trump always loved show business: from tabloid scandals in the 1980s to cameo roles in movies

like *Home Alone 2*. However, the real breakthrough happened in 2004 when NBC launched *The Apprentice*, a show where contestants competed in business tasks for a chance to work in the Trump Organisation. Trump was not just the host; he played the role of the all-powerful boss – stern, decisive, with an impeccable instinct for success. The show ran for 15 seasons, gathering millions of viewers and making Trump a symbol of the American dream: ‘I’m rich, smart, and can fire anyone’.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, Trump launched his first presidential campaign, and it is likely that the mentioned show played a key role. Similar to the series *Servant of the People* in the case of Volodymyr Zelensky, it formed his image as a ‘winner’ who is not afraid of tough decisions.

### **Other Famous Showmen**

Al Franken began as a writer and comedian on the legendary show *Saturday Night Live* (NBC), where he mocked politicians for their lies and hypocrisy, parodying conservatives and religious zealots. And then he became one of them – a US Senator. Even during parliamentary committee meetings, Franken displayed his signature humor, interrogating witnesses with comedic precision and turning boring hearings into a show. However, eight years later, in 2017 – just as the #MeToo wave was rising – eight women accused him of unwanted touching and kissing. Franken denied everything, but pressure from Democrats forced him to resign.

Now, let us move to Central America, specifically to Guatemala.

Jimmy Morales began his career as a TV clown and actor in a popular show. His characters were simple people fighting bureaucracy and corruption. In this role, Morales became a public favorite. And so, in 2015, when Guatemala was boiling over with scandals involving President Otto Pérez Molina, our comedian thought: why not turn a joke into reality? With the slogan ‘Neither corrupt, nor a thief’, he ran for president and won sensationally, promising to clean up the country. By the following year, 2016, he – seemingly an outsider with no political experience – was the newly elected president of the country (I hope the reader will draw the necessary parallels with Ukraine themselves). However, the comedian who promised ‘no corruption!’ eventually became its symbol, and his political career turned into a farce. Already in the following year, 2017, the activities of the anti-corruption commission were supported by the UN: Morales was accused of illegal campaign financing worth millions of dollars, bribes from the army, and abuse of power. Thousands of Guatemalans took to the streets with hashtags #FueraMorales (#OutWithMorales). The question remains open: who is Morales – a naive comedian ‘eaten’ by the system, or a cunning populist swindler?

Finally, the Italian politician Beppe Grillo. From the perspective of his supporters, Italy is a country where politics has always been a circus. So, why shouldn’t a new political party (Five Star Movement – M5S) be started by a stand-up comic with his explosive tirades against corruption, banks, and elites, with profanity and satire that made the audience laugh and think? Being banned from TV only added to his popularity as a blogger. Following this, the idea arose to create an anti-establishment party promising direct democracy through online voting, promoting environmental themes, and fighting corruption. As a result, M5S became the largest party in parliament in 2018.

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<sup>5</sup> Brockenbrough, M. (2019), *Unpresidented: A Biography of Donald Trump*, Feiwei and Friends. Available at: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/unpresidented-a-biography-of-donald-trump/> (Accessed: 1 December 2025).

However, the ‘guarantor’ of the party, Grillo, causing a whole chain of public scandals, soon turned into the Achilles’ heel of this movement. This included comparing immigrants to ‘rats’ and the controversial defense of his son, Ciro Grillo, accused of group rape. At an elite resort in Sardinia, he and three friends raped a 19-year-old girl of Italian-Norwegian origin, Silvia. After some time, all four received significant prison sentences. However, social networks, particularly Italian feminist movements, were outraged by the politician-father’s attempt to exonerate his son: ‘Why didn’t she go to the police immediately? Why did she wait eight days? If you are raped, you go and report it immediately! And she even went kitesurfing the next day!’ Grillo hinted that Silvia was raped with her consent, and the court case was a ‘farce’.

This was perceived as victim-blaming – feminist activists organised protests throughout Italy, coming out with placards ‘I believe Silvia’ and hashtags #IStandWithTheVictim and #GrilloShame. This put an end to the political career of Grillo, from whom the party he created distanced itself.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning the case of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky.

Simon Shuster, in his book *The Showman: Inside the Invasion That Shook the World and Made a Leader of Volodymyr Zelensky* (2024), depicts the transformation of the charismatic showman Volodymyr Zelensky from a comedian to a national leader. The author, a Time journalist who has known Zelensky since 2019, focuses on his evolution but also pays attention to the early periods: the comedy career before his election (until April 2019) and the first years of his presidency before the start of the full-scale invasion (February 2022). Shuster highlights how the actor’s skills – from slapstick comedy to the ability to ‘play’ to the audience – became the foundation of his political success, but also exposes naivety and mistakes.

Shuster begins with Zelensky’s roots in entertainment, portraying him as a ‘slapstick actor’ – a comedian who entertained audiences in variety shows full of ‘slapstick, jokes, standup, dancing, and musical numbers’. This is not just background: the author shows how Zelensky, starting in the 1990s, built an entertainment empire through the ‘Kvartal 95’ studio, where he mocked corruption and elites in satirical sketches. Most interesting is the backstage view: in 2019, during the premiere of a comedy show, Zelensky is nervous due to ‘stage fright’ and a fake bomb threat, pacing back and forth, while his team relaxedly drinks and eats in a chaotic, festive atmosphere. Shuster paints him as a ‘happy-go-lucky charmer’ – a carefree magician, optimist, and naive idealist, whom friends call by the school nickname ‘Volodya’. He creates a ‘chill’ environment around himself where everyone is equal, and even asks for advice about Donald Trump because he is ‘not familiar with international politics’. The 2019 campaign appears as a ‘blank slate’ onto which voters projected their dreams, inspired by the series *Servant of the People*, where Zelensky plays an honest teacher who becomes president and eradicates corruption. The author emphasizes the irony: this ‘clean-cut funnyman’ enters a world of ‘cynics, oligarchs and thugs’ who perceive him as easy prey.

He played the history teacher Vasyl Holoborodko, who unexpectedly becomes president. The series became a cultural phenomenon and created the ideal image of an ‘anti-politician’, which Zelensky then used in the real campaign. He built a multi-million dollar media business (*Kvartal 95*) on political satire and humorous shows, which prepared him for working with mass media and shaping public opinion. He was the star of a series of



popular New Year comedies, which made his face recognisable to millions of Ukrainians and contributed to the creation of the ‘regular guy’ image.

Simon Shuster argues that it was precisely the skills Zelensky acquired as a showman that became decisive after the start of the full-scale war. He characterises Zelensky not as a strong executive or commander in peacetime, but as a genius of information battles – a person who knows how to ‘sell images from the stage’. According to Simon Shuster, his mastery of communication, ability to hold himself before cameras, and ability to be a symbol proved key to mobilising global support for Ukraine after February 24, 2022<sup>6</sup>.

**Conclusions: Results and Perspectives.** In summary, we can state a correlation between the massive growth of information as entertainment and the influx of showmen into politics. This concerns a whole series of cases of successful elections to parliaments of various countries, as well as to the posts of presidents or prime ministers, of comedians, clowns, and professional jokers. This refers not only to the unprecedented success of ‘Kvartal’ politicians in Ukraine in 2019 (referring to the group of politicians who started their careers in Volodymyr Zelensky’s entertainment project ‘Kvartal-95’), but also to a global trend.

However, regardless of successful or not entirely successful political fortunes, the phenomenon of comedians in politics remains a vivid feature of mediatisation and the influence of infotainment on a society conditioned to seek entertainment in everything. Admittedly, such a desire often ends in a dramatic finale – both for political actors and for society itself. Theoretical analysis confirms that the convergence of *infotainment* and *populism* is not merely a stylistic shift, but a structural transformation of political communication that prioritises performance over policy. Future research should focus on the long-term institutional consequences of ‘politainment,’ specifically whether democratic institutions can withstand the pressure of constant spectacle without losing their functional efficacy.

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## КОНЦЕПТИ ІНФОТЕЙМЕНТУ І ПОЛІТЕЙМЕНТУ: ШОУМЕНИ В МЕДІА ТА ПОЛІТИЦІ

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У статті досліджується взаємозв'язок між стрімким розвитком розважальних медіа та глобальним зростанням політичного популізму. Автор аналізує, як медійний контент, орієнтований на видовищність та емоційне залучення, посилює антиелітні настрої, сприяє поляризації суспільства та створює сприятливий ґрунт для популістських лідерів. Метою роботи є вивчення концептів «інфотейнмент» (infotainment) та «політейнмент» (politainment) як теоретичного ключа до розуміння феномену масового приходу професійних шоуменів на вищі державні посади.

Методологічну основу дослідження становить теоретичний аналіз праць провідних західних науковців (зокрема, Б. Моффітта та М. Хігінса), етимологічний огляд термінології та порівняльний аналіз конкретних кейсів (case study). У роботі детально розглянуто генеалогію терміна «інфотейнмент» та його похідних. Особливий акцент зроблено на специфіці «партисипативних медіа», які, створюючи ілюзію прямої демократії та близькості до народу, валідують «буденне знання» і ставлять емоційну реакцію вище за раціональну фахову експертизу.

На прикладі політичних кар'єр Дональда Трампа та Ела Франкена (США), Джиммі Моралеса (Гватемала), Бeppe Грілло (Італія) та Володимира Зеленського (Україна) простежується, як навички сценічного перформансу та медійна впізнаваність конвертуються в реальний політичний капітал. Автор доходить висновку, що злиття політики та розваг є не локальним феноменом, а структурною трансформацією політичної комунікації. Сучасний популізм постає як перформативний стиль, що використовує механізми шоу-бізнесу, перетворюючи виборчий процес на інтерактивне видовище та підміняючи політичні програми сценічними образами.

**Ключові слова:** аудиторія, діалогізм, інфотейнмент, медіа, комунікація, політейнмент, популізм, шоумен.

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