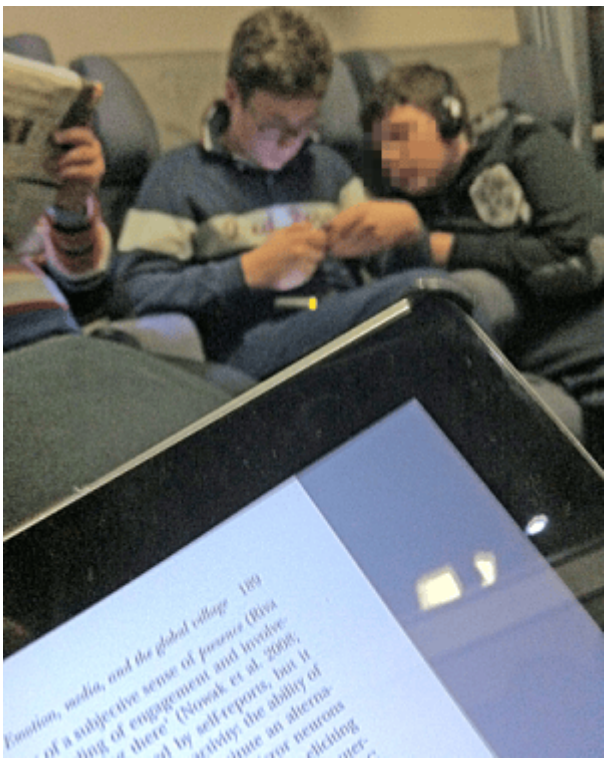


Ambient wit

Description

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Film, music and game sales from downloads reached Â£1bn in 2012 according to a BBC report. Travellers waiting patiently in airport lounges and couples and groups sitting in dulled silence access online news reports. They also stream, download and play movies, tv programmes, and other information content and entertainment on their smartphones, tablets and laptops



The inventive and media savvy, or the idle and mischievous, can of course contribute their own content, as well as review, copy, edit, rework, hack, remix, repeat, and multiply material through social video and audio services (eg YouTube).

Media offerings are also interactive, as in the case of video games, and tools for digital social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) highlight the convergence of work, play, communications and media. Display screens and digital audio populate lounges, bars, libraries, foyers and public and private spaces, and everyday objects are increasingly subject to mediatisation (the so-called internet of things).

Relatively prosperous societies are saturation with media, which we take for granted as part of the background to everyday life. Media consumers can direct their attention to, or choose to ignore, information and entertainment from multiple channel sources. This is **ambient media**.

Ambient persuasion

You can choose to disregard the weather or the atmosphere but it still affects you, like ambient media. In fact the term â??ambient mediaâ?• has been taken over by the advertising business to refer to ads that appear surreptitiously fixed to everyday objects and environments, such as lift doors, stair risers, and those straps passengers hold on to on crowded busses.

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In fact ambient ads operate in two modes. Thereâ??s the covert and possibly *subliminal* effect of ubiquitous logos, brands, brand associations and catchphrases that render a brand familiar, ready for recall, and operates as an influence on purchasing decisions. Then thereâ??s the conspicuous aspect of ambient advertisements that invites the double take, the second look, that becomes a topic of conversation, and may even â??go viralâ?• on other media: the advertising graphic on the lift doors that makes it look like you are entering a safe deposit box, the ad on the back of the taxi that appears to reveal its power source as two giant AA batteries, the holding straps in the bus that look like wristwatches â?? and other examples of *ambient wit,* or its attempt.

Media and emotion

Iâ??ve been reading the volume of articles *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media.* It addresses the big questions of how the human species benefits from the vicarious experiences presented in films, news reports, celebrity gossip, advertising and even art. The mass media, and what it has become in the Internet age, builds on the idea of entertainment, which is ultimately based on pleasurable emotions. Itâ??s there for our enjoyment.



The strong message of *The Routledge Handbook* is that mass media are not just tools for conveying information, but also for regulating peopleâ??s emotions. In any case, information that doesnâ??t pluck at the heartstrings will probably go unnoticed, and the art of persuasion doesnâ??t depend on the delivery of facts framed in unassailable logic. Emotion is a crucial part of the media experience.

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Furthermore, we adult media consumers donâ??t want to see happy bunnies and giggling children in order to be entertained. In fact, as any cartoon shows, we are more entertained by the misfortunes of others. Thrillers, romcoms and weepies present us with an array of emotional experiences â?? positive and negative.

The book reports on several experiments showing that the feelings from watching cinema or a tv show, though transitory, can be just as *real* as when facing our own peril, embarrassment, joy, and heartbreak. The central paradox of the mass media is that we choose to subject ourselves to sadness, shock, fear and disappointment, and even enjoy it. The book offers a range of explanations.

Here are some that stand out.

1. Imaginative story-telling, play acting, and now the mass media and the Internet act as means of rehearsing appropriate responses to situations we wouldnâ??t otherwise encounter on a day-to-day basis. We are drawn to the learning opportunities provided by the kind of vicarious activity provided by media entertainments. We like to learn and be emotionally prepared for everyday life events.
2. Story telling, gossip and art aids in the manufacture of social cohesion. They give us something to share and talk about. Solidarity brings positive feelings. (According to evolutionary psychologists, natural selection within the human species favours such empathy.)
3. The media present life in exaggerated form, creating â??super-displays.â?• The emotions felt through mediated presentations can apparently be even more compelling than real-life events. Thereâ??s something about mirror neurons here (p.189), and the hyperreality of CGI effects and digital interaction.

Most chapters in the book present insights into media and emotions that are supported by empirical evidence. But a chapter by Gerald Cupchik takes a phenomenological approach, stressing â??the active interpretive roles of individuals and communities.â?• Media consumption draws on our

imaginations, and imagination has a greater opportunity to take over when films and tv programmes â??are seen as polyvalent, indeterminate, and open-endedâ?• (p.340). In a way we are perverse creatures, seeking out complexity, paradox and contrasts.

Emotional resistance

The big question for me on the subject of media and the emotions has always been: why donâ??t we all share the same emotional response to a media offering? In other words, why do I sometimes feel an emotion contrary to what Iâ??m supposed to feel, or even, why do I not ***want*** to feel what Iâ??m ***meant*** to feel? As a more specific example: why do I personally find the sentimentalism of *Bicentennial Man* (1999) so irksome? According to Cupchik the answer lies in the issue of how a media offering relates to oneâ??s â??ongoing personal life themesâ?• (p.339) â?? or I would say our background of experience. As with any interpretation, our expectation and reception of a work of art is coloured by the kinds of memories and recollections it conjures up. Such is the potency for some audience members (not me) of the farewell scene at the end of *E.T.* (1982), or the eventual sight of Norman Batesâ?? mother in *Psycho* (1986), or the embarrassment of the late running Brian Stimpson in *Clockwise* (1986).

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The other factor often ignored in the empirical literature on the emotions is the extent to which we enjoy media content for its skill and artistry. At the end of a murder mystery I may feel pleasure as much for the clever resolution of the plot as at seeing the killer brought to justice. We can admire and enjoy the skill of the filmmaker and storyteller at the same time that we are repulsed by the horror of the stabbing in the shower (*Psycho*). Thereâ??s sometimes more pleasure from the telling of the tale, than the tale itself, or the events it depicts. The converse can be the case. I heard recently a professional film reviewer criticise the film *The Impossible* (2012). She felt her emotions were being overly manipulated.

And then thereâ??s resistance. We are not passive receivers of whatever is dished out, but critics and judges. Look at live twitter feeds for television programmes such as #downton (*Downton Abbey*). They usually include jokes about the characters, exclamations about unlikely plot twists, cynical asides about the emotion of the events, and criticisms and praises addressed to the playwright. These tweets echo the couch conversation that takes place in front of television sets. Itâ??s also ambient wit of the audiencesâ?? making, which to me provides the key to understanding emotions and the mass media.

References

- Buck, Ross, and Stacie Renfro Powers. 2010. Emotion, media and the global village. In K. DÃ¶velin, C. von Scheve, and E. A. Konijn (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*: 181-194. London: Routledge.
- Cupchik, Gerald C. 2010. Reactive and reflective responses to mass media. In K. DÃ¶velin, C. von Scheve, and E. A. Konijn (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*: 332-346. London: Routledge.

Notes

- For examples of ambient advertising campaigns search the web for images under â??ambient media.â?•
- Hereâ??s an example of how abrogation of artistry and professionalism can produce a different emotional effect to the one intended by the author: A professionally produced music track ripped

from a CD or download and planted on an amateur video does not usually move me, no matter how well it fits the mood of the piece. A home grown soundtrack in keeping with the ethos of the video might. Issues of IP and respect for creative endeavour overrides all.

- See a film review of *The Impossible* that refers to emotional manipulation.
- Thereâ??s also the social-political context that forms part of the emotional setting or mood of a media offering. However potent the artistry, and however emotional the story-telling, audiences may be â??put offâ?• by the focus on a middle class European family suffering from a ruined holiday, when all around are thousands of inhabitants losing life and livelihood under the devastation of a tsunami. A film goer can be angry in sympathy with an angry character, angry at some injustice being presented in the film, or angry at the film maker for poor artistry, manipulation, or political bias. Then thereâ??s the crass trailer for Arnold Schwarzeneggerâ??s latest film *Last Stand* sensationalising gunfire, that epitomises the social irresponsibility and insensitivity of some film making. What emotions does that invoke?
- *Wit* refers to mental faculties of reason, but also humour, saying the right thing at the right time, usually to amuse. Itâ??s the capacity to fine tune to context. The theme of tuning crops up in the *Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media.* The way media content is presented provides for â??emotional framingâ?• or â??fine tuningâ?• (p.304). The immediate, non voluntary emotional responses to situations provide â??preattunementsâ?• for the thinking processes that follow (p.186). Itâ??s as if emotions put you in the right musical key for the instrumentation that follows. You are in the right mood for action. Also see blog post Tuning as, and blogs tagged mood, audience, and brand.

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Category

1. Film and media

Tags

1. affect
2. ambient media
3. audience
4. emotion
5. mass media
6. media
7. mood

Date Created
January 5, 2013
Author
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