

Theory, technique and ethics: radio and television information in the multimedia environment

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Teoría, técnica y lenguaje de la información en radio y televisión

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With the subtitle “Digital and analogue systems”, Iñaki Zabaleta Urkiola, professor at the Department of Journalism of the University of the Basque Country and director of television documentaries and news programmes, presents here his second *magnum opus* published by Bosch, the result of the compilation of various years of work and dedication to the world of communication from a very global perspective.

Although *Tecnología de la información audiovisual* (Bosch, 2003) revised audiovisual technologies from a comparative approach, without resorting to technologist infatuations and concerned with the systemic conception of communication, in this volume there is even more consideration of the social implications of communicative processes. The constant in his previous work, within the same collection and to which it is clearly complementary, is his desire to explain, systematically and thoroughly, a conglomeration that includes theory, techniques, technologies, industry, a look at the internet, etc. From an educational point of view, these works complete the content included in the theory and structure of various subjects.

Always a guide

Looking at the structure of the book, and evidently because of its size (736 pages), it also begins with a series of guides to lead us along this extensive path. First we find a conceptual plan (page 17) and also a map to find our way through the work (page 23), steering us from the more global and basic, the theoretical foundations of journalistic

information, to the more specific and procedural, such as news items on radio and television.

The theory, structure, programming and genres of radio and television news are explained in the four parts of the book. In other words, the approach, containers, products and format of what is offered on these media are arranged into chapters on these four steps: the theory of journalistic news, television techniques, radio techniques and the theory of audiovisual language. In the way it evaluates journalistic genres as well as its concept of news, the book both constantly informs and also provides innovative contributions (pages 163 and 202).

It is this across-the-board approach that makes the work particularly suitable for the bridging courses that students must take to access communication degrees from other areas of study.

Change of order

The author's concern for these social implications leads to a new approach that breaks with the classic triad of concepts of “theory, technique and structure” and replaces it with “theory, technique and ethics”, appearing as a constant throughout the book. We find (page 25) an initial and clarifying fragment of this desire to include media's social responsibility as one of the pillars that define them. We quote:

“The nature of a journalistic work is that of an asset in the public sphere that serves society; produced as a journalistic work thanks to a suitable theory, technique and ethic, which fulfils the characteristics of a public asset; which is treated as a journalistic product insofar as it requires a business production process to be made and produced and forms part of the content of news programming”.

Even the digital transition of radio and television does not vary the theory of information. Perhaps the roles of professionals have been affected by this technical shift but not the function of generating plural and objective information of high quality. For example, in the case of integrated productions (pages 40-41), we see how the media themselves already feed websites, portals, blogs, television channels and written publications. This is an absolute reality. So the professionals of the groups of Godó,

Zeta or Barcelona Televisió must be multidisciplinary (not always individually but certainly globally and increasingly so), with written versions, electronic versions, with information uploaded onto their websites, with means of entertainment and information on radio and television and even news items passed on to other news channels, such as the screens in the Barcelona underground system.

Right in the first part of the book, on information theory, the author tackles the different kinds of journalism and the constant of the responsibilities of editors, businessmen and professionals (page 33). The comments he makes regarding the objectivity of an ethical attitude, both from the point of view of how this is theorised as well as from the historical, technical and analytical perspectives applied (pages 169-198), may turn out to be very useful for preliminary education in journalistic practice. The inclusion of civic journalism is along the same lines, as one of the types cited (page 37). Perhaps more closely related to the North American (and by extension Latin American) denomination, civic journalism has been so prominent among us as citizen or involvement initiatives. Although it does not mean the same conceptually, citizen representation has come more from social groups in our setting.

Systemic news

With another of the outstanding features of this work, the balance between its aim as a compendium and its innovative contributions in the conceptual area, we find that it establishes a division in the nature of information according to its relationship with the socio-political system.

Note that *system* appears as a term with many meanings in Zabaleta's work, referring both to the theory that helped to order the previous book internally, as well as to the political, economic and social network generated by the administration and groups of stakeholders. *Intrasystemic* news would be the news that is inserted within this network and is non-conflictive in nature. *Systemic* news, on the other hand, would be news that supposedly endangers the socio-political system or that is presented as such.

Zabaleta compares this to war journalism and attributes the pseudo-political appointment of editors as the inclination of information towards simple propaganda. He bravely

mentions (page 93) the concealment of acts in Madrid supporting the peace process in the Basque Country. He tries to characterise clearly which information is of quality on radio and television (page 94) and neither does he abandon the historical perspective, explaining how news styles have evolved (page 100) and providing new data on the origins of applying an inverted pyramid structure (page 234).

The series of agreements in information and communicative terms is interesting, involved in the practice of journalism (page 133). In fact, Zabaleta proposes the use of a hidden camera as an absence of agreement and proposes a matrix to analyse this kind of "journalism" (pages 118-120).

More technical matters

His review of the technical aspects of radio and television and of the theory of audiovisual language is similarly extensive and painstaking, although, due to its nature, it does not lead to theoretical concepts that dialogue with society. However, the book's continuous ethical reflection does not escape this, as in the point on technical and human resources, in which he looks at the reliability of sources (pages 370-380).

Here we find a description of the system of Televisió Espanyola and of television channels from the autonomous communities (page 245) and, in the same part, the controversial issue of measuring television audiences in minority languages. In this respect, and by way of example, a more appropriate arrangement with regard to local television channels and those in Catalan has had to be negotiated with Sofres, one which takes linguistic aspects into account. All the theoretical and technological aspects that affect radio and television are here: from the resources already mentioned to the theory of language, without forgetting, and in great detail, those involving the management of lighting, colour, volume, time or sound.

In short, a compendium that completes Zabaleta's previous work which, in spite of his aim to give a global explanation, still provides personal contributions of use to professionals, students and academics, who will find in it an extensive world in delicate order.