

The dumbing-down of television news

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Abstract

Over the last ten years, television news has changed unimaginably, both worldwide and in Spain. There are two distinct types of news product: one that seeks its audience through spectacle and the other by maintaining journalistic thoroughness and the ethical principles of the profession. Studies carried out in the United States show that the prospects of having an audience are better for news programmes that are loyal to good journalism. This article explains how Telecinco, La 1 and TV3 news programmes were analysed to assess their quality and how this quality relates to the audience or share.

Key words

Television news, television, infotainment, soft news, news quality.

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Resum

Els informatius de televisió han canviat en els darrers deu anys d'una manera imprevisible a tot el món, però també a l'Estat espanyol. Es poden distingir dos tipus de producte informatiu: el que busca l'audiència a través de l'espectacle i el que la busca mantenint el rigor periodístic i els principis ètics de la professió. Estudis als Estats Units demostren que les perspectives de tenir audiència són millors per als informatius fidels al bon periodisme. Aquest article explica com s'han analitzat informatius de Telecinco, La 1 i TV3 per avaluar-ne la qualitat i com es relaciona aquesta qualitat amb l'audiència o share.

Paraules clau

Informatius, televisió, infoentreteniment, notícies toves, qualitat informativa.

One of America's leading TV journalists, Christiane Amanpour,¹ caused a huge furore when about ten years ago she publicly announced the demise of journalism as she had always known it and would like to have seen it continue. According to Amanpour, audiences had stopped watching news programmes because they did not like the content; in other words, irrelevant sensationalism, with low-quality material, the gutter press and gossip, boring and badly written, instead of news that helps them understand the world and participate in democracy. Amanpour accused television companies of causing the fall in public interest in the news due to their desire to produce news programmes geared more towards business – and, therefore, ratings – than towards the public's right to information.

Ten years on, this reality has reached us. Television news has also changed a lot in Spain and, over the last decade, we have seen two trends emerge: news programmes that try to maintain the traditional journalistic tone and content and those that have opted for a new television news model, a sensationalist model that tries to pass off infotainment, scandal and the most irrelevant stories as news. Throughout most of the private media, information has become just another product. There is a greater interest in selling rather than in providing a quality public service, which was the still prevailing idea in public and private television in 2000, as we will show in this article.

Returning to the United States, it could be said that it was

during the last decade of the twentieth century when the change in television news set in. Information took the infotainment route in terms of structure and content.² Competition between communications companies, new technologies, the formation of large companies with multiple media and multiple businesses, journalists losing their grip on information in these new companies and the transformation of news into just another product for sale led to the many-named phenomenon: new news, market-centred journalism, infotainment and soft news. Critics said that news programmes were concentrating on issues that interested audiences, rather than on what the public needed to know.³

Changes to the content and tone of television news also coincided with the arrival of advisers presented as television news experts who advised journalists as to what they should do to increase audiences. Generally speaking, these advisers are marketing experts and not journalists, and their advice does not deal with how to achieve quality, honest, thorough news aimed at serving the public in their right to know. It's no longer a question of reporting corruption and injustice, of being concerned for the well-being of the country and the planet and for the weakest and most vulnerable sectors of the population, as Amanpour said (2000).

At the end of the twentieth century, with new technologies showing when audience numbers rose or dropped, certain ele-

ments were introduced into television news which it was felt would keep the public hooked emotionally on a certain channel and forget the competition and keep them watching what most attracted them. These advisers concluded that what attracted the public is news that relates to them, news that arouses all kinds of emotions among the viewing public, news about famous and popular people and the things that happen to them, as well as programmes that explain interesting but unimportant news. The problem is that at the same time as television news became more irrelevant, it also began to become more critical of political institutions (Patterson 2000), with the consequent erosion of the credibility of politicians and democracy.

In 1996, changes in local television news, as well as the so-called networks in the United States, was all too apparent. The quality and attention paid to international news had reduced considerably, which explains, for example, why on 11 September 2001, American society could not understand who could have cultivated such a hatred of their country and why. Communications experts and numerous journalists began to be concerned about news quality and tone of it. The more apocalyptic among them said that the 1990s marked the demise of news and journalism as we had known it to date (Amanpour 2000). Parallel to this, the number of television viewers watching the news dropped.

This moment saw a series of research projects (Patterson 2000, Project for Excellence in Journalism 1997, NewsLab 2000), the aim of which was to find out whether this new type of more entertaining and irrelevant news is truly capable of stopping the slump in television audiences. In general terms, they questioned whether greater sensationalism meant greater audiences, or whether it requires good journalism to maintain and increase audiences. They wanted to ascertain whether quality television news can also earn money for communications companies. At the same time, these researchers were also studying the impact this so-called new news or infotainment may have on the public and democracy (Patterson 2000).

Patterson's work⁴ shows that the sensationalist and irrelevant news items that constitute the usual content of much television news do not increase audiences, but that soft news, together with a systematic critique of politicians and institutions, distort the public's perception of reality. This new news (Patterson 2000) presents a less attractive world that is less worth inhabiting. "There is less interest in public matters and also less interest in the news" and Patterson concludes by saying that it weakens the foundations of democracy by reducing the amount of information that reaches the public regarding politics and undermines interest in it.

The final years of the last century can be seen as a key moment in the United States. Journalists, experts and communications companies agree that this is a worrying situation for local news programmes.⁵ Audiences are plummeting in the major cities and news editors are searching for a way to change the trend. This was the context for the creation of the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ)⁶, the aim of which was to

study television news programmes and see how, according to their quality, they position themselves among audience rankings. In 1999, the television news programmes from 59 television channels in 10 cities were studied to assess their quality.⁷ The result is disappointing: there is increasingly less substance to local television news. It concludes that graphics and music do not manage to hide the fact that serious journalism and investigation in newsrooms is plummeting. Ironically, the study noted that in-house news, the news that TV channel journalists pursued and investigated themselves, was what people liked most and is more likely to create loyalty among viewers and so increase the audience.

However, 1999 brought some good news: the Project for Excellence in Journalism⁸ shows that quality also attracts audiences. New programmes at the top of the quality rankings are twice as likely to achieve commercial success and, in fact, most of the quality news programmes were increasing their audience (PEJ 1999). However, inferior quality news programmes, full of crimes, scandals and celebrities, are twice as likely to fail.

One of the most interesting features of this project is that it commissioned a number of television journalists, university lecturers and non-profit organisations, specialists in television news programmes, to establish an indicator to define the quality of a television news programme; i.e. to create a scale to measure the quality of these news programmes and analyse them.

According to this scale,⁹ a quality news programme reflects the whole community that is its target: it provides a context and depth to the news; it searches out news stories and investigates them; it includes the necessary sources to achieve balanced, credible, honest and accurate news; it seeks all points of view involved in a story and disregards violence and sleaze. Lastly, they agree that the best news programmes are those that include ideas, more in-depth topics, that discuss politics and relevant and more important events.

In 2000, the NewsLab non-profit organisation, run by Deborah Potter,¹⁰ used these concepts to draw up a model news programme to be used to train newsrooms. Two years later, the model, as well as the concepts of quality, were also in place¹¹ in the TVE central Madrid newsroom in the shape of courses run by the Official Radio and Television Institute. At TVE at that time, it was the experts from the Marketing Department who advised news editors as to the content of TVE's *Telediarios*, based on audience studies. Their conclusion was that news that connected with the audience was needed, with less politics and fewer politicians, with more topics that touched on the interests of the public and more emotions.

Content analysis of Telecinco, TV3 and TVE

The involvement of Marketing Departments in television newsrooms and the ratings imposed as the ideal work standard is a common feature of public and private television channels. It is

one of the consequences of the changes to television newsrooms that we set out to analyse between 1996 and 2011.

Using the television journalism quality scale established by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ 1999), we first analysed the evolution of newsrooms on the private channel Telecinco,¹² - focusing on 1996, 2000, 2010 and 2011. We also analysed news programme content on the public channels TVE (in 2000 and 2010-2011) and TV3 (2010-2011 only), to measure their quality and compare them. We also wanted to compare the results from measuring the quality of these channels with each of their results to see whether we too had the same findings as the PEJ (1999).

To analyse these news programmes, we concentrated on the following points, in accordance with the work by NewsLab (2000):

1. The range of topics covered: the best news programmes cover a wider range.
2. The type of topics covered, bearing in mind that the best news programmes include news about ideas, important social trends, politics, institutions and relevant events.
3. The length of the news: the best news programmes do not really include any news stories of less than 20 seconds. The average length of the news should be more than a minute and some news stories should be longer than two minutes.
4. Information sources: the best news uses a wide variety of sources. Reflecting different points of view and displaying their credibility, including experts and the right sources for each topic.

Analysis of Telecinco news programmes

In 1996, Telecinco was six years old. Even though it was a private channel, its news programmes were clearly designed to serve the public, as can be seen from their content. Analysing the programmes reveals a desire to explain to viewers events that are happening and why they are happening, a great effort is made to inform and educate them. Here is a television news programme format hugely inspired by newspapers, with commentators who pick over and debate current affairs and experts who analyse topics, such as health, the environment and consumerism. It also includes the typical daily anecdote, but enlivened in the way that television does.

1. The range of topics covered by these news programmes on Telecinco in 1996 is relatively wide, 9 groups of different topics, not counting the election block, sport and weather.
2. The most important feature is that politics plays an important role in this news (around 20% of the stories reflect this, with the remaining topics also part of the concept of quality news programmes, as they include information about ideas, politics, social trends, with national institutions enjoying a 15% presence in the news). The inclusion of events and violence is minimal. In addition, the presentation of politics is highly explanatory and educational.

3. The average length of a news story is little over a minute, but each news programme includes about 10 stories of over 1 minute 40 seconds, the scale for quality news programmes.

4. If quality news programmes are considered to have many and varied sources, this was the format of Telecinco news programmes in 1996. Many different people would appear, giving their opinions and explanations about events. Those who appeared on the news were mainly members of the government and civil servants from different administrations and people who were in some way connected to the events being explained (23%), as well as politicians and the public (around 5%). Also appearing were representatives of civil organisations, all types of professionals, trade unionists, etc.

In 2000, changes were being detected in Telecinco news programmes, even though written press routines were still in place, such as comments and lively witticisms, and still continue to exceed the quality threshold. There is a constant desire to explain and to analyse, helping the audience understand what is happening and what the consequences might be. News programmes continue to last about 45 minutes.

1. There continues to be a wide range of topics.
2. There has been a slight drop in the number of political topics (this type of political news story now accounts for 15% of news programmes), news about different events and facts appear to a small extent (4%), the category in which we have included accidents and crime, bearing in mind that we have put natural disasters (rain, floods and droughts) under the heading of *the environment* (21% of all news stories). This year, 2000, has seen increased competition between television channels with the appearance of society news (18%), which it is felt will attract audiences as it moves away from politics and focuses on issues that affect people and, in theory, is more interesting to audiences. However in 2000 at Telecinco topics about society covered social advancement and trends, specific community concerns, international cooperation and acts of solidarity. For example, specific events were used (such as International Women's Day) to cover the position of women in the workplace. National institutions appeared in around 17% of news stories.

3. At that time, over 50% of news stories were more than a minute and a half long, which gave time to explain the news and include different points of view.

4. In terms of information sources, these continue to be suitable and authorised to speak about the topic: government representatives and civil servants constitute the largest number of sources. However, we should not forget the trend towards fewer institutional sources (the number of government representatives and representatives from the different administrations, politicians and trades unionists). For example, fewer than half the number of politicians and trades unionists now appear than in 1996. These experts on different topics have been replaced by more journalists and correspondents, who are now in charge of interpreting events. The voices of civil society also made their presence known in these news programmes from 2000,

as did professionals from all types of fields. The appearance of the man on the street giving his opinion has increased and will continue to grow in the future.

The year 2000 could be considered as one of transition at Telecinco. Although there is a range of topics, of sources - what is important is that they are suitable and authorised to discuss the topic - sufficient time is spent on explaining the news, with time also devoted to international information and not just about Spain. These news programmes would still make the grade of quality television news.

When Telecinco's news programmes for 2010-2011 were analysed, the fundamental change had already occurred (see graph 1). News programmes from this season lasted 45 minutes and were sensationalist, seeking to arouse the audience's emotions at any cost, both in terms of content and tone. They have lost their desire to serve the public.

1. The range of topics has not been reduced, but stories about society, occurrences and different events take up a large slice of the news: they occupy 44% of all news stories on Telecinco. These are news stories about accidents, violence, different types of crime and corruption.

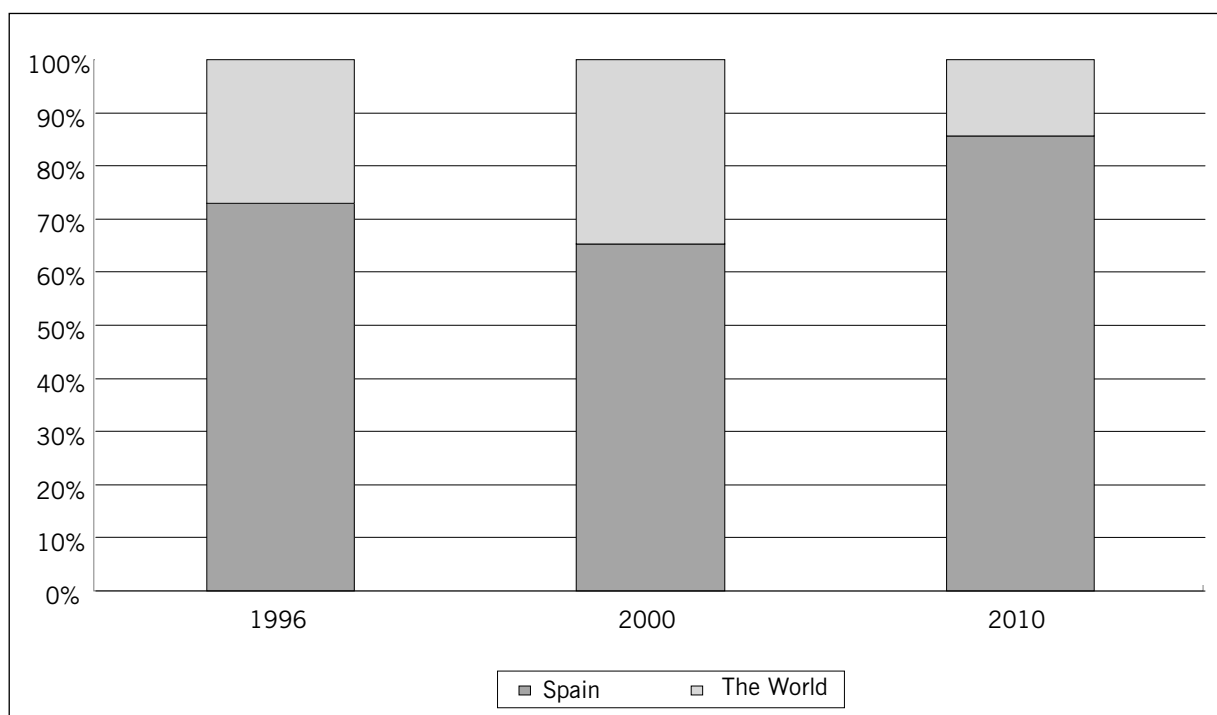
2. Less time is given to political topics, the news programmes during which ideas, relevant events and institutions are discussed. Culture, the environment, health and the unions are discussed less (see graph 2). In terms of political information, more emphasis is given to the more unsavoury, amusing and anecdotal aspects, such as Hillary Clinton falling over while boarding a plane.¹³ In fact, for any topic, there is a desire to

find the entertainment side, the more sensationalist and shocking aspect to it. For example, the news focused on a political event by former minister Francisco Álvarez Cascos banned in the press only because Telecinco had obtained images of the event.¹⁴ The fact they got images was highly emphasised at the news programme.

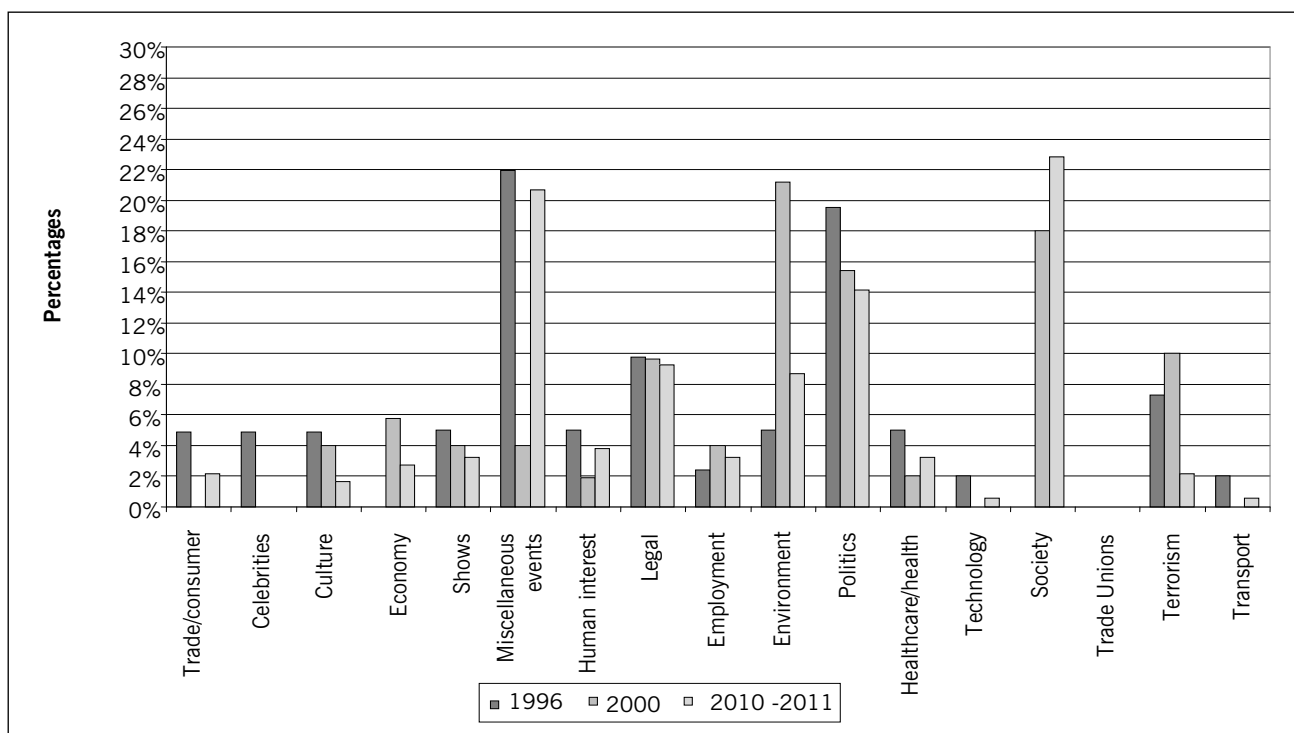
3. In terms of the length of news programmes, they still contain long stories (about 30% of news stories are over one and a half minutes), but the remainder include a great number of 20- and 30-second stories.

4. We stated that quality news programmes stand out as they contain an extensive range of sources which reflect different points of view. However, instead of using the more authorised and suitable sources to explain a news story, news programmes on Telecinco in 2010 turned to the public, who, together with the people affected by the events or neighbours, accounted for over half the opinions heard on these news programmes. These are instant opinions, ones that are little or hardly ever debated, and generally formulated by people who are not experts in the matter under discussion, broadcast in short sharp bursts designed to create a flexible and tight news programme (see graph 3). Another feature of quality news programmes is the production of investigative stories born from the creativity and professionalism of news editors, be they linked to current affairs or not. Over the years, Telecinco has always strived to offer in-house news but, although its clear desire was to explain the context, origin and consequences of the news up to 2000, all that had changed in 2010. It habitually offers in-house

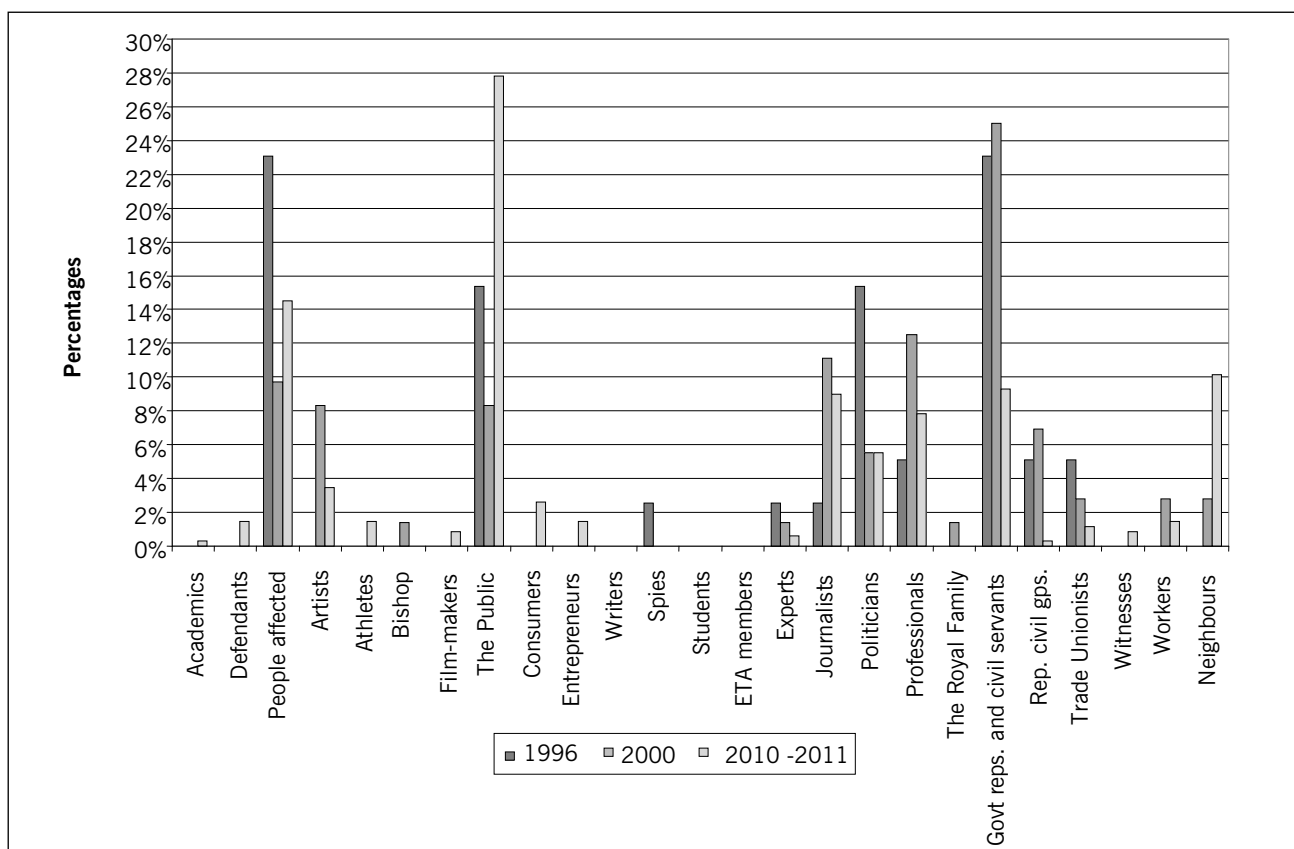
Graph 1. Comparison of international coverage on Telecinco. 1996, 2000 and 2010-2011



Source: Authors.

Graph 2. Trends in topics on Telecinco news programmes. 1996, 2000, 2010-2011

Source: Authors.

Graph 3. Trends in speakers on Telecinco news programmes. 1996, 2000 and 2010-2011

Source: Authors.

news that is useful to viewers, known in the United States as “news you can use”. This reveals a creativity and a desire to explain things that are happening. These stories tend to be irrelevant; interesting, but not particularly important in terms of the knowledge that they contribute.

We believe that Telecinco has now positioned itself and is now geared towards soft news or infotainment. The sounds of conflict and gunfire, screams heard during violent situations, these are the everyday soundtrack to these news programmes that hide neither blood nor pain nor the emotional images caused by all kinds of disasters. All this is served up in the main headlines and then in the subsequent headlines that appear during the news programme.

Analysis of public television: TV3

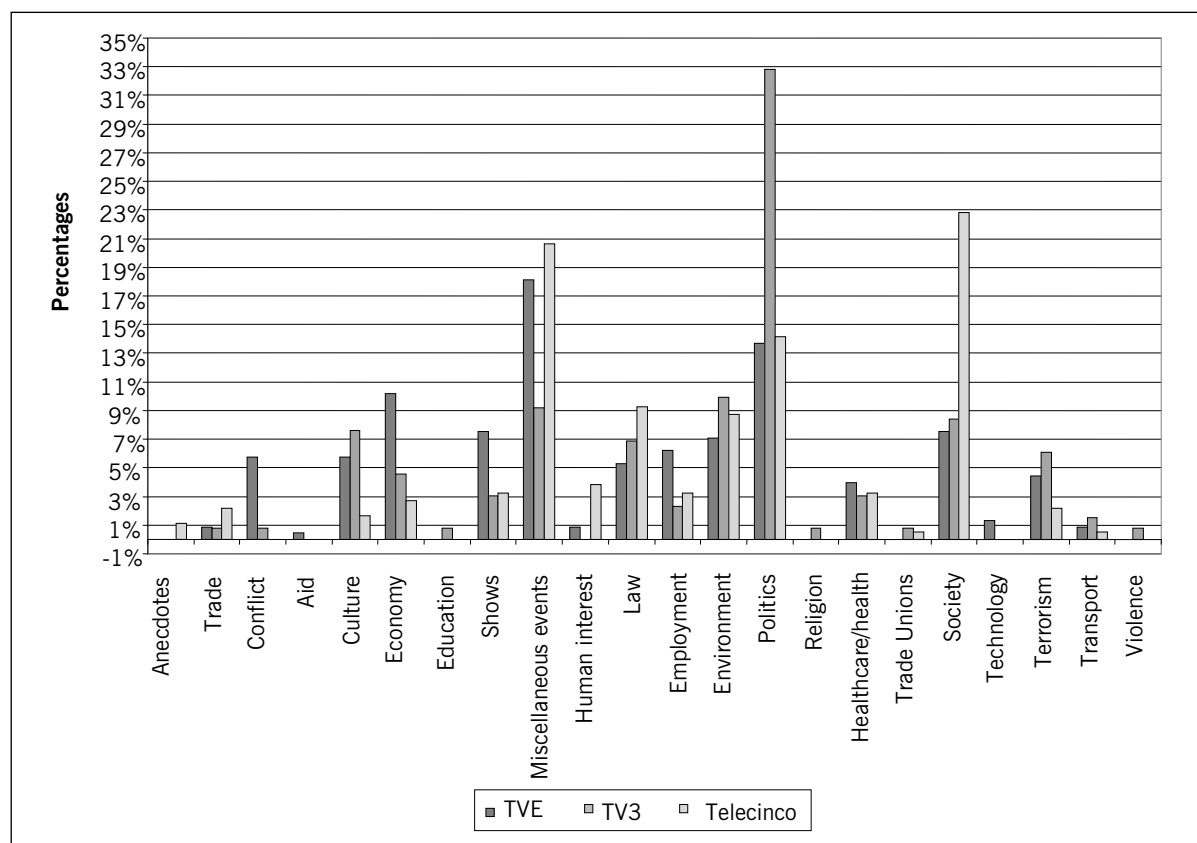
After analysing the evening news programmes on the public channels, TV3 and TVE, from December 2010 and January 2011, we see that these come under the quality news programme criterion. These offer a wide range of topics (an average of 17 on TVE and 19 on TV3, not counting sport and weather), they include many news stories that go beyond the event, beyond a sensational image, accidents and irrelevant topics and they provide a balance between the public's inter-

ests and concerns and institutional issues (see graph 4). On TV3, the most popular topic is politics (about 33% of news stories are related to this) and far removed from others. There is a highly balanced presence of different topics: culture, legal, the environment, etc. alongside topics about events and society. On TV3, society topics cover questions that relate to a large part of the audience, such as the policy regarding the burkha in Lleida or the dispute about animal rights. These news programmes also educate and do not simply provide information about traditions (two important stories about the farmer's year), history and social trends.

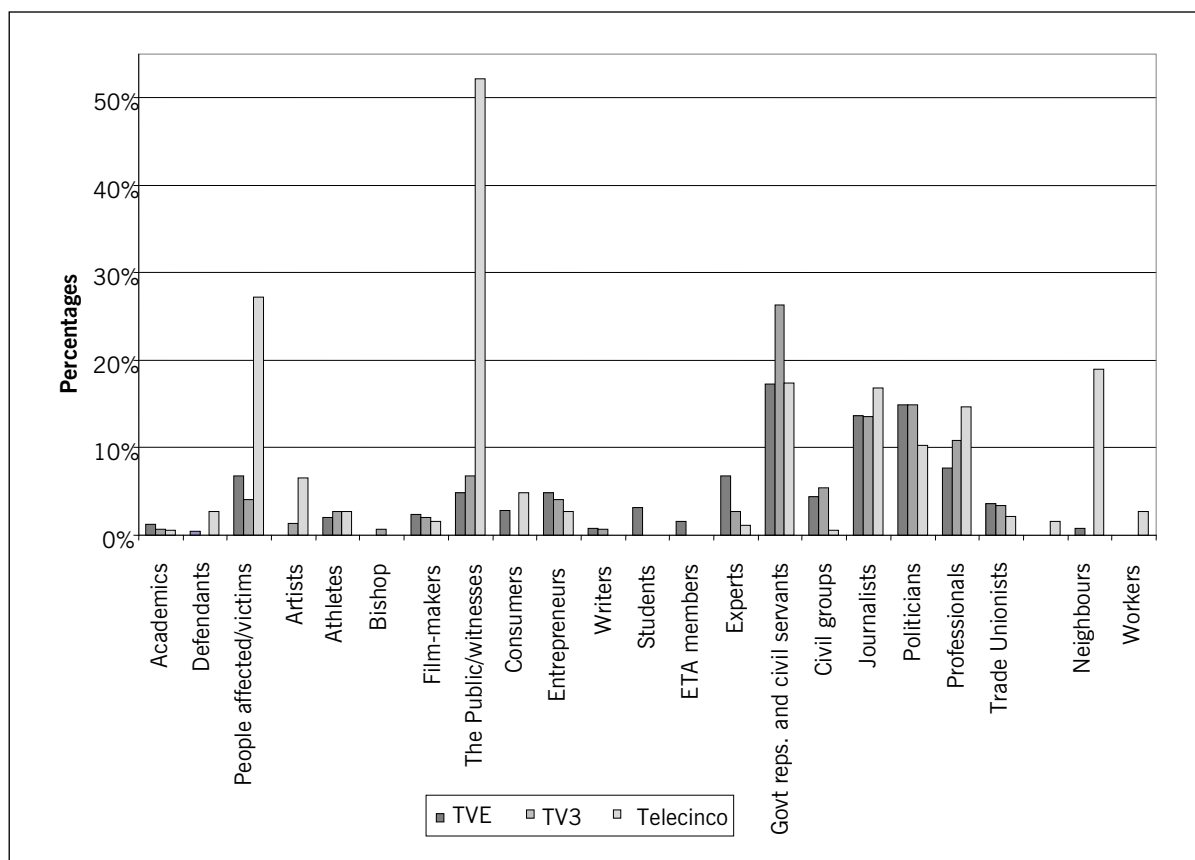
Government representatives and representatives of civil servants from the different administrations accounted for 25% of actors appearing on TV3's *Telenotícies vespre* (evening news). Politicians constitute another large group at around 15%, with journalists and correspondents (14%). Generally speaking, there is a wide range of information sources, which include all types of professionals and experts, from which we can deduce that professionals working for the channel take great care to find the most suitable and authorised sources to speak about each news story. Around 31% of these people who speak do so in Catalan (see graph 5).

In addition, in terms of the topic and presence of leading figures who speak, we can conclude that news programmes on TV3 are especially interested in including institutions from the

Graph 4. Comparing the range of topics covered by TVE, TV3 and Telecinco. 2010-2011 Season



Source: Authors.

Graph 5. Who speaks on television news programmes. Comparing TVE, TV3 and Telecinco. 2010-2011 Season

Source: Authors.

democratic society in their content. The majority of news stories last a minute and a half, although there is a small number that are longer.

Analysis of public television: TVE

With regard to TVE, this can also be said to follow the quality television news format, as shown by the range of topics, which include institutional information, debates about ideas and social and political trends. Unlike TV3, on TVE news programmes you become aware of the competition created by the main private channels: a third of news stories cover occurrences and also so-called miscellaneous events (half this kind of information is about accidents and all types of violence and crime) and society (ranging from frivolous and irrelevant stories about people going to the beach because it's hot, to more in-depth stories about the difficulty of educating today's teenagers, using suitable and authorised sources).

In 2010-2011, on TVE, politics takes up a large slice of news programmes (around 13% of stories), almost the same as on Telecinco, although the treatment on TVE is serious and the points of view and sources are balanced and appropriate

to the news story. In terms of information sources, the people who appear most often talking on news programmes are still government representatives and representatives from the different institutions (18%), followed by politicians (15%), but there are many professional voices of all kinds to be heard, as well as those of experts on the different topics under debate, all strictly following the quality news programmes scale. Stories have become longer compared with other times: most last between a minute and a minute and a half, but 14% are longer.

Conclusions

In Catalonia, *TN vespre*, from January 2011, enjoyed the largest audience for news programmes in its timeslot with a 23.1% share;¹⁵ Telecinco's evening news, broadcast at the same time, was next with a 16.6% screen share, followed by the second edition of *Telediario*, with 13.9%.¹⁶ In terms of the programme quality assessment panel conducted by GFK, TV3 was awarded an 8.01 in January, the best mark achieved since September 2008, when it joined this survey. One of the most highly regarded programmes is *Telenotícies vespre*.

In Spain in January 2011, TVE news programmes occupied

the top position among audience rankings for 41 consecutive months. *Telediario 2* (TD2) is the only evening news programme (9 pm) to achieve over three million (3,076,000) viewers. It enjoys a 3.9 points advantage over its nearest rival.¹⁷ On 31 January 2011, TD2 had an 18.4% share, followed by Telecinco's news programme broadcast at the same time, which on 1 February enjoyed a 15.3% share.¹⁸

The conclusion is that television viewers value quality news, designed as a public service, aimed at asserting the public's right to know and understand things that are happening in their world. In this sense, they agree with the report on the Project for Excellence in Journalism (November/December 1999),¹⁹ which states that quality leads to success and is rewarded with good audience ratings, as is the case of TV3 and TVE. This analysis shows that, as in the case of the United States, Telecinco's infotainment also attracts viewers, although with fewer possibilities of beating audience figures on the public channels analysed. It has been stuck in second place in terms of audience in Spain for almost three and a half years and at a stand-still in Catalonia for months.

Notes

- 1 AMANPOUR, C. *Keynote Speech at the 2000 Murrow Awards Ceremony*. September 2000. Minneapolis, United States. [Online] <<http://gos.sbc.edu/a/amanpour.html>> [Consulted: September 2000 and December 2010]
- 2 PATTERSON, T. E. "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism are shrinking the News Audiences and Weakening Democracy– and What News Outlets can do about it". In: *KSG Working Paper*, no. 01-001. December 2000. [Online] <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/reports/soft_news_and_critical_journalism_2000.pdf> [Consulted: December 2003]
- 3 *Loc. cit.*
- 4 *Loc. cit.*
- 5 POTTER, D.; GANTZ, W. *Bringing Viewers Back to Local TV News. What Could Reverse the Ratings Slide*. [Online] <<http://www.newslab.org/research/bringback.htm>> [Consulted: 22 September 2000]
- 6 The Project for Excellence in Journalism is a sister project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, in which journalists, communications experts and non-profit institutions devoted to journalism take part. After 9 years in existence, the project was incorporated into the Pew Research Center in 2006, where it continues today. [Online] <http://www.journalism.org/about_pej/about_us> [Consulted: 9 January 2001 and 15 December 2010]
- 7 ROSENSTIEL, T.; GOTTLIEB, C.; BRADY, A. L. "Special Report: Local TV News, Quality Brings Higher Ratings, But Enterprise is Disappearing". In: *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1999, p. 84-89.
- 8 *Loc. cit.*
- 9 Local TV News Project 2002. What Is a "Good" Newscast? [Online] <<http://www.journalism.org/node/235>> [Consulted: 19 June 2001].
- 10 "What it Takes. Cultivating Quality in Local TV News". In: *NewsLab*. Washington DC, 2000.
- 11 The author's personal experience.
- 12 The following evening television news programmes were analysed using the scales described:
Telecinco: 17/2/96-27/2/96-1/3/96-25/2/2000-7/3/2000-8/3/2000-10/12/2010-11/12/2010-11/1/2011-12/1/2011 and 12/2/2011.
TVE: 6/3/2000-7/3/2000-8/3/2000-9/12/2010-10/12/2010-11/1/2011-12/1/2011 and 12/2/2011.
TV3: 9/12/2010-10/12/2010-11/12/2010-11/1/2011-12/1/2011 i 12/2/2011
- 13 Telecinco evening news programme from 12/1/2011.
- 14 *Idem*.
- 15 [Online] <<http://www.tns-media.es/actualidad/audiencia-tv/audiencia-semanal>> [Consulted: February 2011]
- 16 [Online] <<http://www.tv3.cat/actualitat/122839/TV3-lider-dauidencia-el-gener>> [Consulted: February 2011]
- 17 [Online] <<http://www.rtve.es/rtve/20110201/1-152-arranca-2011-como-television-mas-vista-mas-distancia-respecto-competidores-2010/400136.shtml>> [Consulted: February 2011]
- 18 [Online] <<http://www.tns-media.es/actualidad/audiencia-tv/audiencia-semanal>> [Consulted: February 2011]
- 19 ROSENSTIEL, T.; GOTTLIEB, C.; BRADY, A. L. "Special Report: Local TV News, Quality Brings Higher Ratings, But Enterprise is Disappearing". In: *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December, 1999, p. 84-89.