

The dramatic action on television news

RICHARD MILLÁN TORRES¹

Article received on 27 February 2019,
approved for publication on 30 April 2018

*“... to understand the news on television
is consider them as what they are,
that is, authentic fictions representative of real life.*

Juan José García Noblejas

Abstract

In the late 70s the sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1976) drew attention to calling news information a story, ensuring that it is not a question of accusing the news as fictional, just of claiming its reality “built” and “selective.” Tuchman’s approach is the beginning of the contemporary discussion on the narrative structure of the news and which, today, are under the scrutiny of those who hold, as Van Dijk (1983), that the news must contain the classical categories of the narrative, such as the story, the drama, the event, etc. This article particularly consults García–Noblejas (2005) who supports his approach to news narratives as fictions that make a reality cut and, as such, they have a high content of subjectivity of the journalist – narrator, who decides on what society should or should not know about an event.

Keywords: News narratives; Fictions; News; Reality; Drama

1. By way of introduction

Traditionally the news have been considered pieces of communication, attached to a rigid structure, that are limited to telling the relevant facts that, in the opinion of the journalist, deserve to be counted. According to Alsina (1993), “the news is nothing more than narrating a fact”, meanwhile García–Noblejas (2005, p. 110) claims that “(are) authentic fictions representative of real life”. In the classrooms we insist on defining the news as the information of an event that is considered important and that happens in a time that we consider current,

1 Professor of the program of Social Communication and Journalism of the Universidad de Manizales, Social Communicator and Journalist, Master in Education Coordinator of the Media and Opinion Observatory of the Universidad de Manizales and PhD in Communication at the University of the Andes (Chile). Email: richardmillan@umanizales.edu.co

as stated in the journalistic style and ethics manual of the newspaper La Nación de Argentina (1997).

The attachment to the faithful account of the fact is a premise of journalism, and although it admits a hint of subjectivity in the informative treatment, when it is decided to edit the data, it insists on remaining faithful to what objectively occurred.

The story of the news is not always uniform or maintains the same structure, the formation and intention of the journalist, the importance and connotation of the fact, and even the need to capture audience, influence the way of narrating.

Ricoeur, in agreement with Aristotle, argues that: "Narration is imitation of actions" (Balaguer, 2002, p. 95), an affirmation that provokes us to scrutinize a controversial but pertinent issue that relates the story of reality (news), with the use of dramatic narrative forms.

"Information constitutes artistic, artificial works that act as life itself, as immanent, natural actions do in human persons [...]" (García-Noblejas, 2005, p. 87). This reflection raises the need to understand, as filmmakers and viewers, that audiovisual stories of reality or fiction are a bet of an issuer, with a definite intention and with the need to cut reality based on subjective criteria with implications direct in the hearings.

But, in addition to this circumstance, typical of a process of informative selection, it is also pertinent to consider that each medium has its aesthetic characteristics that lead it to make decisions, not only in substance, but also in form, and that is where it is necessary to analyze the influence of dramaturgy in the way of reporting news events. For this reflection, I will consider especially the work of Juan José García-Noblejas, in his reflection on the representation of reality in television news, and the work of Soledad Puente in a very interesting analysis of how the news has a dramatic structure that allows your understanding and closeness to the audience.

2. Theoretical discussion

The objective treatment or not of the audiovisual news, goes beyond the aesthetic dimension, the discussion arises from the need to fragment images and testimonies to make consumable an informative product². Television audiences demand more and more content that is comprehensible, complete and close. According to Gimeno, Jauset Berrocal and Peralta, this audience is made up of a heterogeneous audience who are interested in understanding the message well and that is why "when it is written, we must make assumptions about knowledge, values, norms and shared beliefs with this audience" (2008, p. 61).

2 According to the RAE is an adjective for something that can be consumed. I assume the audiovisual contents as consumer goods, since, in addition to fulfilling a social function, they also represent a good for an organization or, in our case, a cultural industry. According to the website <http://economipedia.com/definiciones/consumo.htm>: in economics, consumption is considered as the final phase of the production process, when the good obtained is capable of serving the consumer as a utility.

We could say that when news is produced, we must also consider, among many things specific to the protocol of an information structure, how to approach the viewer, who the viewer is, what interests he has, how to interact with him, and also how to keep him in tuning; seek the complacency of all is a subject that puts journalism in a bind, not only the audiovisual; nevertheless, the environment of images, audios, graphics and other elements typical of television, represent a certain degree of demand in the elaboration of the products.

When news stories are reported on television, we must consider that in audiovisual and written language is the key to capture the attention of the audience, "The editor has to write the news in such a way that the experts do not seem superficial and that those who are laymen in the subject do not seem too cryptic" (Gimeno et al., 2008, p. 61).

The matter of engaging the viewer is related to one of the functions of television³, entertain. The premise is to inform, educate, train and entertain but, above all, to do it in a pleasant way, which gives the viewer a reason not to change the channel.

On this, García-Noblejas insists that "[...] the news that appears on television are peculiar gnoseological, symbolic and allegorical fictions" (2005, p. 85). Journalists and media, assume the responsibility of being well informed, of having true knowledge of the facts but, in addition, they must know the ways to communicate them to their audiences in such a way that this knowledge reaches a transparent way to those who need it. When we talk about transparency in the information we refer to the considerations of language, mode, form and extension of the news, according to the channels used and the type of audience to which it is addressed. García-Noblejas is forceful when referring to this topic:

The margin of meaningful transparency of the media is really minimal: it is possible to ask that the quotes put in someone's mouth, have been effectively pronounced, but what one can no longer innocently assume is that those phrases are precisely the most relevant (García-Noblejas, 2000, p. 7).

The news are representations of a reality and, as such, interpret certain facts and give meaning to them. They are content that builds and contributes to information, they reveal a reality through symbolic devices that elaborate scenarios of social interpretation, giving the audience elements and judgment criteria about an everyday or extraordinary event. These elements are anchored to a dramaturgical narrative structure that includes a story with beginning, middle and end; although in reality that structure can become more complex in such a way that the news must use other dramatic elements that allow the understanding of the material fact of the coverage.

3 The hitch is its own strategy for television and is used as a general principle in any kind of content to retain viewer interest and ensure that they remain hooked to a given program. It has a strong heritage in fiction and entertainment programs, as Patricia says Marco, director of the television division of Telecinco: "The secret is in the cobweb effect in which you get stuck: short chapters and a surprising humor that allow you to get away and get hooked" (Taken from https://elpais.com/diario/2008/10/27/radiotv/1225062001_850215.html, accessed February 5, 2018).

In addition to being a content with a dramatic structure, the news is a social construction and, as such, represents human actions with a high degree of intersubjectivity, expanding the possibilities of overcrowding and, likewise, of distortion. Each receiver of the information becomes, immediately, a retransmitter of the same and, parodying the children's game of the broken phone⁴, the information is resignified and causes alterations in the original message. In the framework of the approach of Shannon and Weaver in their mathematical theory (Castro and Filippi, 2010), this alteration of the message, at the moment of reception and subsequent re-emission, is a noise that distorts⁵ and moves away from reality (initially the source primary information). It is not necessary to contemplate the prior knowledge of the audience, but it is important to know that these preconceptions affect the interpretation of the news. Van Dijk warns of the importance of considering individual experiences:

Personal models may be different due to different biographies and can therefore control processing in different ways [...] They may also have different opinions, attitudes and ideologies, which also influence the process of interpretation and the structures of the representations of the text (Van Dijk, 1996, p. 154).

In each alteration, the message receives new elements that change its meaning, a new representation of reality is made and appropriate dramatic elements that help to capture the attention of the audience. Each story of reality contemplates elements that are not specific to the story, it is necessary to contain fictions that help to raise their level of interest, which could be called dramatic action⁶.

Soledad Punte (1997) assures that: "Journalists when reporting stories, the most appropriate method for this is that which combines, like the novel, the resources of narrative art with those of dramatic art [...]" (p. 164). And the news needs a start that captures, a development that tells the action, and an end that allows understanding the outcome of the story. Contrary to what happens with fiction, as recounted by Punte (1997), which seeks to restore a balance of history in relation to the initial situation, the news does not necessarily have to end with a desired outcome, it can simply be concluded in such a way that gives part of a daily story or allows to start the story of another story that is related.

4 *The broken phone* is a children's game that consists of passing a message to the ear between several people, with the particularity that the message is distorted and changing direction as a receiver replicates it. The idea is that the original message totally change its meaning and a new one is constructed with a totally different and sometimes adverse meaning.

5 *The noise* in mathematical theory is an approach by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver who, in the middle of the 20th century, divided the communicative process into five elements. It is a theory of information, viewed from cybernetics, which contemplates a source, a transmitter, a channel, a receiver and a destination. In the middle of the communicative process, in which the content of the message does not matter, the noise is considered from the technical point of view, such as distortion of the signal and other elements that "dirty" the message, and the non-technical noise that is related to the social networks that surround the broadcast of the message and that cause distortion of the message.

6 *Dramatic action* is an Aristotelian concept contained in *La Poética*, which allows us to understand that each performance is dramatic in relation to the relationship between everyday events and actions that break the balance and, as such, allow us to construct a story that transcends the simple description.

Puente (1997) considers that the journalistic exercise manages to remain dramatic to the extent that it approaches the action and distances itself from the description. All news contains a history beyond the obvious; the simple news is the starting point for the journalistic story. The construction of that story is determined by dramatic elements that the journalist uses according to his intention in front of the spectator. There is no guarantee of the accuracy of the journalistic story, says Van Dijk: “[...] journalists rarely directly observe events. Events generally become known through the speeches already codified and interpreted by another, and most notably through the offices of the news agencies” (1996, p. 141).

The need to reach more people and obtain better results in the rating, leads journalists and media to consider various communication strategies that may lead to the alteration of reality and, therefore, increase the levels of subjectivity of the information coverage.

I assume that there is a relative objectivity in the information of the media, because the fact of selecting a fragment of an interview, or part of an image, establishing a certain point of view for the shots, choosing one or another background to frame the source, between other conditions, determine a sufficient degree of subjectivity to understand that what is told is not properly what happened, and there is manifested the intention of a news producer. To all the above we add the elements of the dramatic structure that help to narrate the story and inevitably add elements of subjectivity to that fact.

The ways to build the journalistic narrative are varied, there is not a single way to do it, nor an exact number; the news itself marks the narrative style that needs to be told. Some only require the organization of the data and, without further depth, it is disseminated. The structure is folded to the inverted pyramid⁷ news model that requires that the most important data go to the beginning and as the facts are reported, less relevant data are included, in such a way that the publisher or director of a medium can decide to cut part of the note, without affecting the important facts. Other news require greater dedication in their narrative structure, such as those in which facts close to society are involved and which, due to their proximity, demand⁸ greater attention from the audiences.

In each case, the journalist must consider the elements of poetics and rhetoric, added to those of the classical journalistic structure of audiovisual information (inn, voice-over and testimonies). Poetics (Chichi and Suñol, 2008), is embodied in the dramatic narrative that we dealt with previously and, in turn, also plays its role in this process

7 *The inverted pyramid is a model of journalistic structure “that was born out of a need of the war correspondents of American Secession to transmit with a certain order (of more or less importance) their telegraphic information”, “...has another fundamental objective: to inform the reader from the first lines of the fundamental nucleus of the news. If you are interested in your content, you will continue reading the rest of the information, otherwise you will have retained the necessary information to be informed of the news” (1981, p. 48).*

8 *Proximidad informativa* assumes that audiences have greater knowledge of the environment in which the event takes place, and this facilitates the understanding of the story, achieving in passing a greater affinity and interest in what is being broadcast in the media. *“Nearby events also provide better topics to tell stories in everyday conversation” (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 180).*

that, in addition to informing, seeks to engage the audience, persuade it with the form and the content.

One of the tools of communication theories that would allow analyzing and trying to understand the dramatic action in the informative story, is the model called *Dramatist Pentada* by Kenneth Burke. Manuel Martín Algarra in his text: *Theory of communication: a proposal* (2003) ensures that this method is based on a description of communication understood as a dramatic action that considers five essential elements: the scene, the act, the agent, the agency and the purpose.

The communicative model, when applied to a television news, allows to easily identifying each of the aspects of the news that are structurally related, with a dramatic configuration of the story. Every piece of news tells a fact from where the story (scene) starts, has an action that is relevant to that fact (act), has one or more subjects that interact, the party and the counterpart of the news (actors), the news uses different channels to be known (agency) and, without a doubt, there is an intention, a bias or an editorial approach in the treatment of the news that seeks an end (purpose).

The model proposed by Burke offers infinite possibilities to understand the dramaturgy with which the news and the properties of the story are narrated, far beyond the format in which one wishes to pigeonhole an audiovisual content. This means that no matter whether news, documentaries, short films, etc, are told, stories must be conceived by “signs with a high degree of standardization” (Algarra, 2003, p. 162), to overcome the gaps posed by the communicative interaction between subjects with diametrically distant narrative and interpretive codes.

Spanish academics (Gutiérrez et al., 2010) observed the narrative treatment of news on Spanish television for four decades, concluding that a change in the form of the story is evident. The study began with contents from 1980 and until now the date is summarized in that the news narrative goes “[...] from the journalistic chronicle as a reading of bulletins to the spectacularization of information with morbid images and to the present where the treatment is evidently narrative fiction [...]” (p. 5).

This research provides clues about what has been the evolution of the narrative model, starting with a story as a chronicle, in which the story was told by the official bulletins, especially those delivered by the police authorities. In the 90s and the beginning of the new century there is a significant change in the way of narrating given that technological advances make aesthetics, mark the course of the story, added to the irruption of communication technologies and the access more easily to images of news events. Finally, at the present time, the narrative continues to be based on technology, but with modifications in the narrative structure, marking the course of the way to relate the facts with a spine “[...] as a film, with an approach, knot and outcome using baits of interest for the spectator [...]” (Gutiérrez et al., 2010, p. 11).

The dramaturgy in the way of telling the news events, apparently, allows greater affinity with the form of consumption in the contemporary viewer, fictionalized forms pose a new challenge for the creator of content, a new way of telling the news, a new format to which some

equate it with a television show, also called *infoshow* or info - entertainment. The hybridization of genres and formats has given rise to new narrative possibilities that according to Luzó n & Ferrer (2008) have clear differences, defining Infoshow “[...] when entertainment is part of the information [...] “and Infotainment” [...] when the information becomes part of the entertainment” (p. 140).

This second meaning is closer to the questioning of the news story with a dramatic, critical structure that according to Prado (2003) has turned the news into “The spectacularization of reality [...]” (p. 181).

Prado’s affirmation has to do with the emotionality that is imprinted on news writing, the growing use of adjectives that also increase subjectivity, added to the aesthetic and performative management of the image that ,according to Luzó n & Ferrer (2008), “...becomes (the image) in the central axis of information, being more attractive not in terms of its informative content but by itself, because of its image condition” (p. 270).

Some authors (Gutiérrez et al., 2010) maintain that the journalistic rigor can be maintained in the informative content, nevertheless that content receives a treatment in its speech that, according to these authors, “[...] it is constructed from a reality and with precise codes. It deals with the organization of scattered elements from the environment, manipulating it and giving an absolute priority to the criterion of spectacularity” (p. 14).

The news as a spectacle is a phenomenon that occupies a growing focus on the screens. The live coverage of events, *in situ* narrative, the story of contexts (mostly private or intimate) treatment of the characters that make p art of the essential facts are increasingly more frequently in the news and in the preference of the spectators.

3. By way of closure

If we talk about dramatic action in the news text, not only could it be limited to the dramaturgy itself, but also rhetoric (Chichi and Suñol, 2008) provides elements of narrative construction with the clear purpose of raising concerns in the audience and provoke reflective attitudes about a news event.

“The fact is that television news always appear as events. But it is one thing that they really are, and quite another, and nothing difficult to achieve, that they are made and presented as if they were” (García-Noblejas, 2005, p. 86). The production of news, especially in the audio-visual media, will always have a character of staging, a halo of fictional reality that in pursuit of comprehension sacrifices part of the credibility that it needs. This circumstance is specific to the language and depends directly on the use given to the mixture of images, sounds and graphics, to the depth of journalistic data and to the credibility that the media and journalists have cultivated in society.

About this topic, García-Noblejas (2005) questions credibility in the media and argues, among other things, that the gene does not believe them because of the interest of the

media in a greater veró similarity rhetoric, sentimental, ideological, stylistic and economic profitability; and, in addition, the author maintains, these interests are superior to those that should exist for the truth.

Narrating news is a matter of experts, not everyone can do it in a good way; however, we are able to do so, assuming the risk of what it means to have infinite narrative tools available that help both the construction of a message and the distortion of it. The temptation to conquer audience based on attractive, cadenced and intentional messages should not lie only in the way, you also have to take care of the content, and address the elements of the same story, which tells us and the how you want to be told.

*“Not all journalists are in
conditions of saying everything, not all
the spectators are
in need of knowing everything . “*
Juan José García-Noblejas.

References

- Alsina, M. (1993). *La construcción de la noticia*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Balaguer, V. (2002). *La interpretación de la narración: la teoría de Paul Ricoeur*. Madrid: Eunsa.
- Castro, C. y Filippi, L. (2010). Modelos Matemáticos de Información y Comunicación, Cibernética (Wiener, Shannon y Weaver): Mejorar La Comunicación es el Desafío de Nuestro Destino Cultural. *Revista RE – Presentaciones*, 3 (6), 145-161.
- Chichi, Graciela Marta, & Suñol, Viviana. (2008). La Retórica y la Poética de Aristóteles: sus puntos de confluencia. *Diánoia*, 53(60), 79-111. Recuperado de http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-24502008000100004&lng=es&tng=es
- Fontcuberta, M. (1981). *Estructura de la noticia periodística*. Barcelona: A.T.E.
- García – Noblejas, J. (2005). *Comunicación y mundos posibles*. Madrid: Eunsa.
- García-Noblejas, J. (2000). *Comunicación borrosa. Sentido práctico del periodismo y de la ficción cinematográfica*. Madrid: Eunsa.
- Gutiérrez, B. G., Fidalgo, M. R., & del Camino Gallego Santos, M. (2010). El tratamiento de las noticias televisivas a debate: de la información a la dramatización. *The processing of TV news discussion: from the information to the dramatization*, (65), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-65-2010-888-126-145>
- Iki Media Communications (24 de febrero de 2017). *Cómo la televisión usa el Big Data para enganchar a la audiencia*. Recuperado de: <https://www.ikimedia.es/blog/big-data-para-enganchar-a-la-audiencia/>
- Jauset, J., Gimeno, G., & Peralta, M. (2008). *Las audiencias en la televisión y el lenguaje de las noticias de televisión*. Barcelona: OUC.
- Luzón, V. & Ferrer, I. (2008). Espectáculo informativo en noticias de sociedad: el caso de Madeleine McCann. *Trípodos. Facultat de Comunicació i Relacions Internacionals Blanquerna*, (22), 137-148.
- Periódico La Nación. (1997). *Manual de estilo y ética periodística*. Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe.

- Martín, M. (2003). *Teoría de la comunicación: una propuesta*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Prado, E. (2003). La espectacularización de la realidad. *El anuario de la televisión*, 178-186.
- Puente, S. (1997). *Televisión: el drama hecho noticia*. Santiago de Chile: Universidad Católica.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1983). Estructuras textuales de las noticias de la prensa. *Anàlisi: quaderns de comunicació i cultura*, (7), 77-105.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1996). *La noticia como discurso: comprensión, estructura y producción de la información*. Barcelona: Paidós.