'Infosatire' and democratisation on television

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This study investigates the possible democratising features that a new television genre would contain, which I have called "infosátira" in Spanish. "Infosatire" mainly deals with political matters, is aimed at a young-adult target and uses humour to empathise with the audience. Its beginnings on Spanish television date back to the late nineties and its appearance has increased significantly since that time. Through a content and discourse analysis applied to three different topics from the media and political arena (the Iraqi Invasion, The Prestige disaster and the General Elections in 2004), the research concludes that 'infosatire' promotes the brand image of the television station over and above the genre's intention to democratise.

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Since the middle of the 90s, infosatire has been a novel infotainment formula on television. With this new genre, journalists take a parodying and satirical approach to public issues. The question we are asking ourselves about this new format is whether it has helped to create new relations between television stations and their audiences with regard to the democratisation of this relationship. There are two opposing stands that attempt to answer this question.

On the one hand, defenders of the genre claim that infosatire balances out audiences, in the democratic sense of the term. In other words, it provides a complicit relationship with the viewer in which the latter is benefited, both in news terms as well as in terms of involvement and entertainment. According to its supporters, infosatire creates a kind of trust with viewers where they can feel more comfortable with tackling daily issues. It reproduces aspects that are reminiscent and remind us of the private world of each individual, as it uses not so much the cold and distant language of the classic news genre but the warmth of humour that connects more deeply with most people.

On the other hand, those against infosatire claim that the genre is merely another television product created to reach specific *niche audiences* in order to rationalise costs and promote channels' *brand image*. In spite of the fact that the genre may hold democratising intentions, its opponents believe it trivialises public debate and encourages political cynicism among audiences.

The research I have carried out considers that the infosatire shown on Spanish television creates complicity more closely linked to the *brand image* of the channels than with a possible *democratising dimension* of the genre. This study was carried out on infosatire broadcast over a specific period of time and with regard to some specific themes. For this reason, the conclusion does not mean that, in theory, this genre cannot be used for what its supporters predict. In

fact, it is likely that the problem lies in the characteristic form taken by this genre within the Spanish political and media context.

First I'll focus on defining and highlighting the relevance of the new genre, appearing on Spanish television during the last decade of the 20th century. Secondly, I'll look at what I understand by the democratisation of television and will explain the methodology adopted for the study. As no reception study was available, I chose Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodology in order to focus on social involvement and the questioning of hegemonic discourses carried by television. Finally, I'll present the study's findings and their interpretation, in other words what the genre currently means within the sphere of public television.

1. Infosatire as a new television genre in Spain

2005 saw the tenth anniversary of the first broadcast of *Las noticias del Guiñol* on Canal +. This programme covered the daily news via representations in which the protagonists were puppets of popular public figures. Instead of providing the customary news programme, this satire employed the caricature of famous politicians to entertain and inform its audiences. Its promoters claimed that *El Guiñol* expressed what political correctness prevented people from seeing in ordinary forums. Consequently, for its promoters, the programme represented the world of politics stripped of the hypocrisy that the population accused it of having. This programme was on a private subscriber channel (although this programme specifically was broadcast unscrambled) and went out after the evening news. Other satirical journalistic programmes appeared after the successful experience of *El Guiñol*, such as *Caiga Quien Caiga* and *El Informal*.

These three programmes and other subsequent ones had common characteristics that meant they could be classified within the same category, as an independent genre. I coined the term of infosatire to characterise this genre in relation to the rest of infotainment. Its main features are as follows:

- In Spain, infosatire appeared on television at the end of

the 20th century as an evolution of the dumbing-down of information, present since the 80s.
- Viewers were provided with a satirical and parodying view of political information.
- Its programmes were aimed at a young and young-adult target.
- The aim of infosatire was to create an area of compli-city with viewers to catch their attention.
- Infosatire programmes are usually broadcast after the news and as a counterpoint to this.
- Their effect on the public can be controversial. Some believe that they encourage the political cynicism that already exists among citizens, others claim they democratise the news genre.

I will develop these points below.

With the appearance of private competition on Spanish television towards the beginning of the 90s, channels tried to increase their audience share in order to take over the advertising market. To achieve this, programmers followed a process of dumbing-down the traditional news genres, resulting in a hybrid of information and entertainment. Until this time, information on television had been mainly made up of hard news. Bennet (2003) claims that the journalistic discourse of *hard news* aimed to keep citizens informed of the activities of the government, the candidates in electoral campaigns, the foreign politics that might affect us, the inter-nal policies that might change our lives, emerging social problems or threats to the environment.

The dumbing down of this news stemmed from changes in how items were handled and their form.

- With regard to formal issues, the production setting and personal image of presenters took on particular relevance in the staging of news. The pace of news programmes tended to become more frenetic. Each news item had less time dedicated to it. The number of shots used increased, although their duration was cut, as happened with soundbites[1] (Dahlgren, 1995).
- With regard to how content was handled, news programmes looked for types of narrative that were more

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1 Term originating on the radio but equally applicable to television. It describes a segment of video and/or audio within a news item containing declarations by a source, be it a politician or witness of a newsworthy event (Watson and Hill, 2003).

familiar to the viewer, with recognisable emotions and people, avoiding "boring" data and figures and aiming to entertain audiences.

The evolution of infotainment per se led, in the middle of the 90s in Spain, to the emergence of infosatire, where political issues received a kind of specific dumbing-down: humorous. The humorous treatment focused on the power relations of the public sphere. In general, satire and paro-dy devalued and humanised respectable public figures, as well as reducing their charisma. The emotion of laughter arose from the difference in power that the viewer could per-ceive between the pretended image of the figure and their image given by the satirical programme. On the one hand, the satire helped the channels to connect with the political cynicism existing among the young audience. On the other, the parody appealed to the television-based memory of the young target.

Market surveys of television channels showed that young people were the segment of society least keen on conven-tional news (GECA, 1998). The television channels looked for young, urban, middle or middle-high class audience ni-ches, viewers sceptical of politics and who had been educa-ted in the language of television. *Caiga Quien Caiga* started broadcasting in May 1996 and its successive programming changes looked for and found the attention of its young target.[2] With regard to *El Informal*, "the audience profile for this satirical news programme showed a majority of female viewers and, by age, notable support from viewers under 45" (GECA, 2002:191). These data coincide with Telecinco's target, which was the first option among the 25

to 44 age group at that time. The data for *Pecado Original*[3] with the so-called commercial target (the young urban audience), achieved an average of 25.2% share" during its first year on the air.

Another significant fact with regard to infosatire is the ra-ting given by viewers for this kind of programme. This rating provides information on the quality perceived by audiences in different programmes. Out of more than one hundred and twenty programmes, those of infosatire rank among the top 30 in terms of ratings. Out of a total of ten points, *El Guiñol* ranked tenth (7.11), *CQC* ranked nineteenth (6.64) and *El Informal* 28 (6.47). By age, the viewers who rated *El Guiñol* most highly were in the 24 to 44 age group. Those aged between 14 and 24 rated *CQC* most highly. For its part, *El Informal* was rated more highly among the 14 to 21 age group. If we look at social class, both *El Guiñol* and *CQC* were rated higher by high-class viewers, while *El Informal* was rated more highly by the middle class segment.[4]

To complete our characterisation of this new genre, we need to examine its possible effects on audiences. Debate still goes on as to the possible impact of television info-tainment and, consequently, on the effects of infosatire. Essentially, the dilemma is between considering it as a gen-re that promotes the democratisation of television or as a series of programmes that only encourage TV business by attracting the attention of specific niche audiences. To deci-de on this issue, first we must clarify what we understand by democratisation and, second, we must prepare a study me-thodology to draw conclusions. These two tasks are covered below.

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2 "Its course [that of *CQC*] started in May 1996 with eight programmes broadcast on Friday evenings, with an approximate average of 18% share. Telecinco and Globo Media then decided to change it to the night-time slot on Sundays in an attempt to capture a greater share among the young, who *a priori* are at home in higher proportions than on Friday […] After a short and discrete voyage on prime time, this satirical news programme (*CQC*) has found its ideal slot after lunch on Sundays, directly competing with its rival news programmes. In this time slot its average share is 21.7%. It manages to attract... the young sector of the audience, although it also has significant support among the adult public" (GECA, 1998). When it reappeared in 2004, "the programme obtained an average audience of 3,197,000 viewers and 21.4% share, with 27.8% in the profile of 13 to 24 years, and 28.9% in the age group of 25 to 34. With regard to its commercial target, screen share has risen by 4.2 points compared with the national average and totals 25.6%" (http://www.cqc.telecinco.es, 23/05/05).

3 *Pecado Original* was another infosatire programme that replaced *El Informal* in 2002 and was broadcast until 2005.

4 To highlight a fact that distinguishes quality from quantity, a programme such as *Big Brother* has the highest audience figures of any programme but it's ratings have fallen, now ranked at 80 on the list.

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2. The concept of democratisation and the methodology employed

Dahl, one of the most important theorists today of democracy, pointed out two basic questions in the whole democratic process that are directly linked to the freedoms of expression and information guaranteed since the first illustrated Constitutions. With regard to the right to expression, Dahl noted that, throughout the whole process of taking obligatory decisions, citizens must have appropriate and fair opportunities to express their preferences with regard to the final solution. They must have appropriate and fair opportunities to include new themes to the action programme and to express the reasons behind them supporting one solution instead of another.

With regard to the right to information, which is directly related to the formation of opinion, Dahl observes that each citizen must have appropriate and fair opportunities to discover and verify (within a period of time allowed by the urgency of the decision) the choice of the issues to be debated that best serve the interests of citizens.

In order for the concept of infosatire's democratising potential to become operative, four normative conditions need to coincide in these programmes, which I shall detail below. Two of these are related to the aspects noted by Dahl (plurality of discourse in competition and participation of different identities). The other two are related to specific aspects of communication on television (audience ratings and the popularisation of information). I shall now discuss these in detail:

1. Infosatire should strengthen the thematic function[5] of journalism. The themes covered should be clarified so that they can be understood by the public. Journalists are responsible for defining the problem clearly, explaining its causes and concluding what can be done in this respect, as well as how and who can do it. In most cases, different actors and groups with conflicting interests usually construct social problems differently in terms of their definition, consequences and solutions, as well as wrapping them up indifferent persuasive strategies. It is usual for the social position of some agents to result in their discourse predominating the rest. Infosatire should provide audiences with tools to be able to criticise hegemonic positions with regard to the themes covered.

2. Programmes should guarantee the effective participation of different social groups with regard to their social identities and demands. In this research I aim to show how citizens or groups are represented in these infosatire programmes or, in other words, to examine the role these genres give to citizens. The research question I ask is as follows: Do these genres allow citizens to be positioned in the texts as political agents capable of taking part and altering the situations that arise?

3. The audiences of these genres should be broad. Although this condition is not enough, it does seem to be necessary.

4. The genres should take care of the pragmatic function of communication to connect as far as possible with the expressive style of the *world of life* (in Habermas's terms). Humour, satire or the narrative treatment of issues play a fundamental role in communicative pragmatics.

In order to carry out the research and to compare these issues noted above, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA; Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 1992) on a sample of television programmes. First, I shall explain briefly what CDA consists of and afterwards describe the sample. I analysed the discourse of infosatire pieces, assuming that, in these pieces, a discourse of the themes covered should be recognised. A discourse includes a frames and discursive strategies. I define discursive frames (Entman, 1993) as mental schema that organise a large amount of information about a social issue

• indicating its causes,

• proposing its solutions,

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5   Fiske distinguishes between the thematic and pragmatic dimensions of journalism. The former is identified with content and the "referential functions of journalism, with its representation of social reality". The pragmatic dimension, for its part, is concerned with "the relationship between journalism and audience, although also with promoting interaction among the audience itself... Journalism can be described as a factor that promotes or paralyses communication between citizens" (Dalhgren, 1995:50).

- identifying the agents who must carry these out and
- issuing a moral opinion on the theme.

The promoters[6] of information try to present frames using strategies that persuade the public. I am talking about strategies as the variety of possibilities for proposing the same *discursive frame* with persuasive intentions, to influence public opinion. All *discursive strategies* contain an underlying frame maintained by institutions with regard to the theme. Discursive strategies use ways of naming and operations with genres to articulate the frames they refer to.

The universe of the sample consisted of all the pieces[7] of all news programmes on the general Spanish channels (TVE-1, La 2, Antena 3 TV, unscrambled Canal + and Tele-5) and two infosatire[8] programmes (*Pecado Original*, broadcast on Tele 5 and *Las Noticias del Guiñol*, broadcast on Canal +) on workdays[9] for a period of nine months (from 1 October 2003 to 30 June 2004). This period is key for our aim of understanding how infosatire might affect the democratisation of the public sphere. During this time citizens had to chance to take part in public life conventionally via general elections (14 March 2004) and, less controlled, via the extensive involvement of civil society in the issues of the Iraq War and the consequences of the Prestige disaster

I chose the three workdays that contained infosatire pieces dealing with the war in Iraq, the Prestige disaster and the General Elections of March 2004.

3. Research findings

In order to make the concept of democratisation operational, I have explained four conditions that must be fulfilled by the pieces:
a) attend to the thematic function,
b) provide participation for civil society,
c) belong to programmes with notable audience ratings and
d) encourage the pragmatic function of journalism.
I present the findings below following this order.

3.1. Infosatire journalists did not construct their own frames for the issues they covered nor did they set frames against each other with regard to theme

- They did not establish causes that explain the problems or clarify the responsibility of the agents involved in them. For example, in the case of the Iraqi war, journalists limited themselves to trivialising the confrontation between police and social activists when Bush visited London in November 2003, without specifying the frames defended by each agent. Taking the Prestige disaster as a case in point, the probable conclusion that might be reached by a viewer watching the pieces is that the sinking of the petrol tanker was an accidental disaster, an uncontrollable and unpredictable catastrophe.
- Neither did they offer any kind of solution nor specify the agents that should carry these out. For example, regarding the Prestige disaster, the only solution possible for the problem seemed to consist of the solidarity-based resignation of civil society and the recovery of the zone

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6   Following Molotch and Lester (1974), I make a distinction between promoters and sources. Promoters deploy activities around the issues that concern them in order for these to be covered by the media. Sources provide information on these issues. For example, an ecologist group might demonstrate publicly to demand responsibilities are assigned concerning an ecological disaster. However, the media information on this theme may be provided by other social agents and not by the ecologists. In this case, the promoters are not the same as the sources.

7   I've excluded pieces from the sports sections in news programmes and pieces of gossip or society news in infosatire as they are not related to political life and even has their own sections within the programmes examined.

8   The only two infosatire programmes broadcast that could have been seen by any Spanish viewer during these nine months on general television channels.

9   Individual days have been chosen and not the whole week as the two infosatire programmes chosen were not broadcast at the weekend.

devastated after the oil spill, releasing the government of the time from any political responsibility.

- The infosatire did create an implicit frame concerning the functioning of public debate. Within this frame, political themes are eclipsed by the media aim of providing a show, where the most important thing is to ridicule public figures above any rational explanation of the issues under debate. For example, on *El Guiñol* and concerning the war in Iraq, the representation of the conflict between the positions of governments and public opinion removed civil society from the story. The pieces were focused on the figures of the political leaders of the nations involved and, specifically, on their personality traits. The issue was therefore not proposed in terms of public debate but rather around situations related to more intimate spheres. Setting this up in private terms had the advantage of humanising politicians and connecting with the interpersonal communication forms of the *world of life*. However, firstly the scriptwriters ridiculed all the politicians rather than humanising them and, secondly *El Guiñol* did not take advantage of this toning down of the issue and its expressions (humour, irony, parody…) to accompany viewers on an itinerary of burning public issues. Instead of this, it showed a conflict between the vanities of the leaders, in which Aznar tried very hard to win Bush and Blair's friendship, while they looked down on or did not acknowledge him.

3.2. The infosatire analysed did not offer access to civil society

The involvement of civil society in the pieces was practically inexistent. In the anti-war demonstrations, activists were presented as clowns or gregarious anti-globalisation tourists. In the pieces on the Prestige, "Nunca Mais" was ridiculed without allowing it to contextualise its discursive frame. Something similar happened with the groups of artists who did not agree with the government's handling of the issue. On other occasions the satirical journalists erased civil society from the scene in themes such as immigration, territorial debate or democratic regeneration. In this way the positioning of viewers in the texts as agents capable of taking on problems became complicated.

3.3. The screen shares of the genre were considerable

Between 1997 and 2002, the viewing figures for *CQC* remained stable, around 2,500,000 viewers, while *El Guiñol* stood at around half a million and *El Informal* achieved numbers close to 3,000,000. The average for the most widely seen news programmes during this period was close to 3,750,000 viewers. So the viewers of infosatire totalled approximately three quarters of the audience for the most popular news programme.

3.4. Infosatire deployed strategies to seduce viewers' attention

The genre caught the attention of audiences by emulating the very characteristics of interpersonal communication in spaces where individuals maintain their close and private relations (unlike the public space, where it is more likely that anonymity reigns supreme). Infosatire took on these charac-teristics to recreate the complicity inherent in this kind of relationship. Below I list the most common strategies used to simulate "intimate communication":

- Use of colloquial words and expressions in contrast with the formal language of news programmes.
- Construction of narrative based on public figures taking on well-known archetypes in popular culture, creating a perception of familiarity among the audience.
- Characterisation of politicians to appeal to the emotion of the audience. This mechanism works when the viewer perceives the *power differences* between the image politicians wish to give and how they are represented in satire.
- Infosatire invites viewers to share a political reality without seriousness. It is a reality that viewers can devalue and thereby feel symbolically powerful compared with those who hold authority.
- It exploits two kinds of implicit social knowledge (Dahlgren, 1995):
  - The widespread stereotype of the cynicism of politicians. The target for this genre has grown up on a political culture of scepticism with regard to the institutions that govern society. Infosatire limits itself to reaffirm this mistrust by ridiculing those in government.

- The collective memory of television and cinema. Infosatire operates with the conventions of audiovisual genres to connect with a segment of the population whose common cultural references come mainly from television.
- Infosatire causes humorous effects by decontextualising statements made by the ridiculed figures. Employing different combinations of image, sound, music and text, infosatire breaks with the audience's expectations.

4. Conclusions

It is highly likely that the infosatire analysed promotes a demobilising idea of politics. Its representations do not encourage citizens to get involved in issues that concern them as, since it does not construct any clear discursive frames, the themes being covered are not clarified for viewers. If we add to this the limited involvement of civil society in this kind of programme, viewers might find it complicated to place themselves symbolically against the power in these narratives. And it is even more complicated to feel motivated enough to change the course of events.

Some infosatire programmes have become a channel's brand image. The clearest example is *CQC* on Tele-5. As in the advertising genre, infosatire attracts audiences using strategies that work as in commercial advertising, with irony and humour, devaluing and taking seriousness away from public issues and its key figures. However, it does not employ this power to guide the viewer within public debate, in spite of the fact that it has the guaranteed attention of a significant sector of the audience, principally young people, precisely the segment that values traditional news programmes the least. It is clear that the audience ratings and rating given by the targets for these programmes confirm the appeal of the genre. However, in spite of making use of implicit knowledge and popular narratives where celebrities are key, its impact on public involvement and on the extent of agents and themes present in the public sphere is minimal.

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