
News ethics in borderland country¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the hybridization of genres in the media from the perspective of the professional ethics of journalism. It first examines the moral basis of the various forms of social communication, the clearest and most robust of which is, precisely, the one that cements and safeguards the quality of information. It then looks at the ethical questions raised by the hybridisation between some of the genres that are considered fully journalism, and specifically the group of genres called “informative” and genre group of “opinion”. It then explores the borderland between journalism in the audiovisual landscape (advertising and propaganda, fiction and entertainment) to conclude that the mystification of these areas may entail risks to the integrity of the information.

Key words

Audiovisual media, journalism, genres, hybridization, ethics, advertising, fiction, entertainment.

Resum

En aquest article s'aborda el tema de la hibridació de gèneres als mitjans audiovisuals des de la perspectiva de l'ètica professional del periodisme. En primer lloc, s'analitzen els fonaments morals de les diverses modalitats de la comunicació social, el més clar i sòlid dels quals és, precisament, el que cementa i salvaguarda la informació de qualitat. A continuació es fa una incursió en els dubtes deontològics que suscita la hibridació entre alguns dels gèneres que són considerats com a plenament periodístics i, concretament, entre els grups de gèneres anomenats informatius i el grup de gèneres d'opinió. Després es fa una exploració dels terrenys fronterers amb el periodisme dins del panorama audiovisual -la publicitat i la propaganda, la ficció i l'entreteniment- per concloure que la mistificació d'aquests àmbits pot comportar perills per a la integritat de la informació.

Paraules clau

Mitjans audiovisuals, periodisme, gèneres, hibridació, deontologia, publicitat, ficció, entreteniment.

Introduction

From the perspective of ethics, the hybridisation of genres involves problems that must be tackled based on the moral foundations of the various types of social communication.

There is currently a very broad consensus between academics and professionals that, at the base of the ethics of journalism, we can find the right of citizens to complete and truthful information. This is a right contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in article 19, and specified in the constitutions of various countries.² The history of the ethics of journalism dates quite far back, with the popularisation of a mass press. As had to be the case, this being a moral question, highly diverse positions have been taken regarding the integrity of information, ranging from attitudes based on absolute imperative to ethics of a relativist nature or, as is usually said today, of variable geometry. But a contractual basis

has gradually gained ground. In other words, the ethics of information understood as a “contract” between the different agents in the information process (journalists, companies and the public) with a view to safeguarding the right to quality information. Along this line, journalistic information becomes a democratic value that must be especially protected.

Establishing the moral foundation of other types of social communication is quite an arduous task. With regard to the groups of messages of a persuasive nature, their very nature seems to oppose ethical conduct. If the sender's aim is to influence the receiver to initiate a certain behaviour or modify a previous one, won't that sender be distrustful of any rule that prevents it from having the greatest success possible in its intentions? This consideration is valid both within the sphere of advertising and political propaganda or any other type. The fact that we are sceptical regarding the possibility of channelling and coding a code of ethics for persuasive messages

does not mean that this code of ethics cannot exist. It is evident that, within such spheres, there can be moral values that must be taken into consideration and, especially, when they are disseminated within the framework of an aura of professionalism. And, in fact, in the advertising world there are highly estimable mechanisms of self-regulation that, for example, aim to exclude manifest deceit from advertising content. But in spite of all this, we must acknowledge that, when we work with the aim of convincing someone to do something in particular or to think in a certain way, many possible ethical proposals disappear.

The difficulty in establishing a solid ethical base for the world of fiction and of entertainment is even greater. There are audiovisual activities that are strongly regulated by positive law, in the first instance, and by a certain ethical doctrine, in the second instance. One of these, as we have seen, is information. Also, although to a lesser extent, advertising. But what happens with the rest? Generally speaking, the rest form part of what the Americans for many years have called *show business*: series, soaps, game shows, reality shows, etc. They all form an amalgam of offers from which viewers can make their choice. Here we can take the ethical value of truth as an emblem; fundamental in the sphere of journalism and (relatively) important in the field of advertising. The world of entertainment is precisely based on deception. We go to the cinema or theatre to allow ourselves to be taken in, ready to believe that that actor we see in magazines is a Roman emperor or ship's captain, or to accept as blood what is merely tomato sauce. We therefore find that one of the basic ethical values of social communication (that of truth) is called into question here, right from the very roots of the activity itself. But truth is not the only ethical value that falters in the world of entertainment. Because, if the aim is to entertain, those programmers and scriptwriters who wish to be minimally successful must give in to this aim with all their might. And it must be realised, for example, that TV programming filled with films and series in which the good guys always won would be very boring (assuming, of course, that we agree on who the good guys are). The transgression of commonly accepted values forms part of the world of entertainment and also of the world of artistic creation, and imposing on it certain ethical limitations would be a disaster for social progress and for culture, for which free speech is primordial.

We therefore find that the ethical bases of different spheres of communication are highly disparate. In this respect, it becomes very complicated to talk about the "ethics of social communication", unless we take this concept to a highly diffuse moral level. Naturally there is an ethics of communication and the great thinkers of our time have referred to this and have placed it at the forefront of philosophical reflection (Habermas 1987). But this is of little use to us when specifying the ethical doctrines of different sectors, if by this we understand not only the evocation of basic moral principles but also the definition of rules that serve professionals as boundaries for their everyday actions.

This leads us to conclude that, from an ethical perspective, any union is delicate between those formats that allow us to unequivocally identify the activity of informing and those formats that characterise advertising, propaganda, fiction and entertainment.

Mixing information and opinion

Before going on to review the borderline territories of information, we will take a look at strictly journalistic content to identify a kind of hybridisation that occurs there endogenously: namely the hybridisation between information and opinion.

Differentiated journalistic genres have been defined constantly since the press started to exist and, of course, since journalistic production started to be analysed systematically by academics (Kayser 1953). In the initial phase of genre studies, the aim was to distinguish journalistic genres from those considered to be of a literary nature (Gomis 1989). But an internal split immediately started to be made between genres recognised as journalistic. And, almost at the beginning, this gave way to a basic distinction between two broad types of genres: informative genres per se and argument- or opinion-based genres (Martínez Albertos 1974; Casasús and Ladeveze 1991).

The desire to single out strictly informative genres is a characteristic that, in one era, was particularly characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon press. For years the saying "comment is free but facts are sacred", attributed to C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, has served to summarise the desire of certain North American and British newspapers to protect their work, consisting of narrating clearly verifiable data and situations. In accordance with the terminology used in the journalistic style guides in the United States, one thing was *stories*, i.e. the pure narration of facts and situations, and another comments of an editorial nature, for which the editor was responsible, or those by a single person, such as columns and op-ed articles. Meanwhile, on the European continent the highly politicised press had made a stronger mark and all texts were clearly impregnated with subjective opinions. It was not until the interwar period that the French press became imbued with guidelines befitting a journalism that was considered to be of better quality and that had, among its indicators of quality, precisely a distinction between information-based and opinion-based genres (Chalaby 1998; Fernández Parrat 2001).

This bipolar classification has led several authors to test the classifications of genres that are more or less consolidated. In principle, news, reporting, interviews and chronicles fall on the side of information-based genres while background articles, columns, editorials and critiques, among others, would form the galaxy of opinion-based genres (Gomis 1989). Evidently, the problems start when we have to define each of these specific genres. Starting, for example, with reporting. There are many kinds of reports and it is difficult to imagine a report so lacking in personal opinion that it can be considered exclusive-

ly informative. The same can be said of interviews (from selecting the people who deserve to be interviewed, continuing with the kind of questions asked and the tone they are asked with and ending with how the interview is transcribed or edited). Chronicles come under even more suspicion, a genre that has yet to be defined to everyone's satisfaction but, if there is anything that defines it, this is precisely the existence of a certain point of view.

It's worth noting that this distinction has never been completely transparent. There has always been an ambiguous border between the two poles of information and opinion. There is at least what has been called "the interpretation of facts". It is acknowledged that a large part of the public receiving the information, in order to understand the sense of the things occurring (even when these can be explained to them "objectively") requires there to be mediators that offer contextual elements, that measure out the data offered and that make predictions regarding the possible consequences of these narrated facts. According to the opinion of some experts, this accumulation of added elements that can sometimes be found in differentiated journalistic pieces or, on other occasions, added to those with a basically informative purpose can be grouped together into so-called "interpretative genres" which emerge as a third type, midway between the information and opinion-based genres.

But what should therefore be put in the box of genres called interpretative? Are we referring to the reasoned explanation of some "sacred" facts of those narrated in the news or rather of the genres that we cannot classify, such as personalised reporting or chronicling? And what about a genre that is increasingly more in vogue, such as the audiovisual documentary?

Far from solving the problems of classification, adding "interpretation" as a defining element of a genre group could make this task even worse. In this case, of note is a debate started at the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya (Council of Information of Catalonia) regarding the first article of the *Codi deontològic dels periodistes de Catalunya* (Code of Ethics of the journalists of Catalonia). This article, in the very first version of the Code and as it was approved in 1992, states the following:

"1. Always observe a clear distinction between facts and opinions or interpretations, avoiding all confusion or deliberate distortion of both things, as well as the spreading of conjectures and rumours as if they were facts."

As can be seen, the conjunctions "and" and "or" make interpretation fall on the side of opinion so that, in fact, it supports the bipolarity of the two large genre groups. For some time now, the proposal has been made to modify this recommendation of the Code and word it thus:

"1. Always observe a clear distinction between facts or interpretations and opinions, avoiding all confusion or deliberate distortion of both things, as well as the spreading of conjectures and rumours as if they were facts."

In other words, some experts in the area have claimed that interpretations should be packaged together with pure information. This proposal has been formulated based on the acknowledgement that information "objectivity" does not exist but, at the same time, based on the belief that the biggest gap must be placed between those journalistic pieces that contain data that have been more or less passed through the sieve of interpretation and anything that can be placed fully in the clearly evaluative or "subjective" field.

The weakness of the borders is evident enough for there to also be experts who completely reject the viability of any classification of genres. This is the case of Francesc Burguet i Ardiaca, who has dedicated a good part of his intellectual efforts to proving that information and opinion are two worlds between which there is an inevitable continuity. The separation between these two worlds, he states, is unstable, different from how it is described, much thinner and permeable and particularly highly deceptive: "As the media present it, almost as simple as a line, it can only be an illusion, a misunderstanding or a fallacy, or perhaps all three things at the same time, that merely feed a rhetoric of objectivity that is, at times, naive, always equivocal and often fraudulent". (Burguet i Ardiaca 2002).

This sceptical attitude has very solid theoretical bases. Since Plato proposed the myth of the cave, there have been numerous thinkers who have questioned the possibility that humans might objectively grasp a supposed reality that is exterior to them. Berger and Luckmann pursued the same idea in their book *The social construction of reality*, written in the middle of the last century (1967) and which became an essential reference for the sociology of knowledge. Our perception of things, of facts and of events is always conditioned by the cultural patterns we apply to them (beliefs, values and norms of conduct) so that it would be conceptually impossible for anyone to restrict themselves to narrating "facts" to anyone else. Based on this statement, informative genres would effectively be a chimerical construction.

However, although the establishment of borders between genres may be doubted due to powerful reasons of an epistemological nature, it is also true that this distinction is of practical use in many ways: it serves as a convention between senders and receivers and is also very useful for pedagogical purposes. Moreover, in the field of journalism, the problem of objectivity was already dealt with by Walter Lippmann in the 1920s, when he claimed that a certain objectivity is achievable if journalists adopt attitudes and ways of working comparable to those of scientists. Anticipating, in some way, objections such as those of Berger and Luckmann, he claimed that an objective individual adopts a critical reflexive attitude towards one's own opinions and is aware of one's own stereotypes and how one's perception operates (Lippmann 1992). In fact, this supposition forms the basis of the formal development of the Anglo-Saxon press we referred to earlier.

The usefulness of a distinction between genres can also be defended by taking the situation to its absurd extreme. Imagine

that, it being impossible to separate information from opinion, it was decided that everything, always, would be completely mixed up in the media. Imagine that it was never possible for the public consuming information to know if what they were reading or hearing was meant to be the narration of facts or merely the pure confabulation of someone attempting to mould the surrounding reality to his or her way of thinking. This is truly unimaginable. The perception of the world that, in spite of everything, has been offered by the media since the mass press started to expand would have been impossible and this would have also made it impossible to organise society and live democratically.

Whatever the case, the idea that information and opinion must be made at least broadly identifiable is very much present in the ethical doctrine expressed in corporate codes, in the style books of journalistic firms and in professional statutes. We have already seen that the first principle of the *Codi deontològic dels periodistes de Catalunya* is devoted to this idea.

Several points in the articles of Resolution 1003 of the European Council on the ethics of journalism (from 1993) have the same focus:

“3. The basic principle of any ethical consideration of journalism is that a clear distinction must be drawn between news and opinions, making it impossible to confuse them. News is information about facts and data, while opinions convey thoughts, ideas, beliefs or value judgments on the part of media companies, publishers or journalists.

5. Expression of opinions may entail thoughts or comments on general ideas or remarks on news relating to actual events. Although opinions are necessarily subjective and therefore cannot and should not be made subject to the criterion of truthfulness, we must ensure that opinions are expressed honestly and ethically.

6. Opinions taking the form of comments on events or actions relating to individuals or institutions should not attempt to deny or conceal the reality of the facts or data.”

In the international principles of professional ethics in journalism promoted by UNESCO in 1980, the necessary trend towards objectivity in narrating facts was already being related to the public's right to information, an essential element to understanding the world:

“2. The journalist's dedication to objective reality:

The foremost task of the journalist is to serve the people's right to true and authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality whereby facts are reported conscientiously in their proper context, point out their essential connections and without causing distortions, with due deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist, so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate the formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and states of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.”

The idea that the reader, viewer or internet user must be able to clearly distinguish between information and opinion is clearly present in many media style books. With small variations in wording, this is referred to by the style books of the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (article 1.3.1.1), *La Vanguardia* (6.1.4. i 6.1.5.), *El País* (article 1.3.), *ABC* (third paragraph), RTVE-Radio Nacional de España (in the introduction) and Antena 3 TV (article 1), among others.

Obviously, even the almost absolute unanimity when proclaiming this principle does not automatically mean that the precept of clearly separating information and opinion is always respected. We only need to listen to certain morning radio news programmes to realise this.

Newspapers have a visual organisation and graphic design through which, at least on paper (and there was never more apt an expression), a certain attempt can be made to ensure readers can distinguish between genres. Some of their pages tend to be expressly dedicated to containing opinions in the form of editorials, articles, readers' letters to the editor, graphic jokes, etc. If there is any text based on opinion in the pages that mainly contain information, this can usually be identified because it is highlighted with a typographic element to differentiate it, with a certain family of letters, with the name of the author and sometimes with his or her photograph, etc. In other words, although sometimes, in chronicles and interviews or even in conventional information, a considerable dose of subjectivity can get through, there is usually at least a formal effort to make the due distinctions.

In the audiovisual media, the resources used to point out to the public the distinctions between genres are more subtle. And, consequently, they are also easier to miss. Firstly, it should be noted that some genres among those clearly within the group of opinion-based genres do not usually have a place in television news programmes, especially on public broadcasters. On the TV3 news there are no editorials or articles. Neither can we find critiques of films or plays. With regard to other “intermediate” genres, some formulas tend to be used to alert viewers to a possible subjective bias. For example, also on the TV3 news, when presenters introduce a chronicle, they do so by expressly saying that this is the genre underlying the information we are about to see and the chronicler him or herself usually makes a personal appearance and often ends the piece by giving his or her own name, like a visual, aural signature.

Genres are not so clearly separated on the radio, where some “star” journalists cannot help but give their own editorial comments (without it being sufficiently clear whether they are giving us their own opinion, that of the Editorial Board behind them, that of the radio station's management or that of the Board of the company or public organisation governing them). On the other hand, radio does not have the graphic resources of the press or the visual resources of television to formally mark genres and the perceptive conditions for listeners per se make it difficult to identify differences between various types of content.

In any case, it should be noted that, as a whole, the system of journalistic communication tends to establish its own typification of genres. And, taken as a whole, this system of communication can usually be distinguished from others that have no relation to news. In front of a newspaper stand, it's relatively easy for the public to distinguish the press that claims to provide information of a certain quality from other press that aspires merely to catch the attention or to simply entertain. And news programmes on the radio or television can usually be clearly identified by the listener or viewer by means of a series of explicit or implicit codes: specific musical pieces, specific language registers and, in the case of television, characteristic sets, globes, maps, etc.

All this is journalism's way of saying: these products or these spaces are made according to specific rules of play; here principles are observed that are not necessarily the same for other products or spaces. These principles, specified in rules of conduct and style standards, are precisely the ones that aim to safeguard ethics in journalism. These are no better or worse than the ethics of advertising or the ethics of other communication systems. They are simply a little different.

Regions peripheral to information

We will now look at what we might call the "borderlands" of information. We are referring to activities related to social communication that are adjacent to the informative task and that, in some cases, even intersect with it. We will talk about these intersections and analyse them from the perspective adopted here, namely that of the ethics of journalism. These types of communication are advertising, fiction-based audiovisual products and audiovisual products aimed at entertainment.

Information and advertising

A long time before talk began in Catalonia and Spain of codes of ethics in journalism, the cards given by the old Press Association of Barcelona to its member journalists contained the following phrase, by way of a code with a single article: "You are reminded that the exercise of journalism is strictly incompatible with dedication to advertising activities". In other words, it has always been commonly understood and accepted that those whose job it is to inform others of what is happening cannot do so with the same integrity if they are conditioned by interests of a commercial nature.

Extending this maxim to social communication as a whole, it is safe to say that accepting the contamination of informative spaces with advertising or propaganda messages can call into question the credibility of any medium. In a reference work on the role played by the media in the socio-economic system, Ben Bagdikian (1986) wrote:

"Advertising is not a luxury to large corporations but an activity with profound economic and political consequences. The media are now dependent upon these corporations for

most of their revenues and increasingly they are owned by such corporations. The media have become partners in achieving the social and economic goals of their patrons and owners. Yet it is the newspapers, general magazines, and broadcasters who are citizens' primary source of information and analysis of precisely this kind of economic and political issue. This raises the question whether our mass media are free to exercise their traditional role of mediating among the forces of society at a time when they have become an integral part of one of these forces. (p. 165)"

It is very difficult to summarise in ten lines any better than Ben Bagdikian has done what has traditionally been one of the most serious problems for the freedom of the press: the dependence of the news media on those who, in short, finance them. The old saying "he who pays the piper calls the tune" is particularly applicable to the world of communication.

This reality has many, highly varied consequences for the internal workings of the media but what we wish to highlight here is the growing tendency to impregnate various content of the media with messages of a commercial nature. Genre hybridisation encourages, most particularly on television, an "invasion" of advertising outside its habitual limits. Thirty years ago it would have been unimaginable for the news to be interrupted by advertising slots or to have certain news sections, such as sport, with a sponsor. This happens now. And it does not necessarily have to endanger the integrity of the information if this practice does not go any further. But the fact is that it is also becoming acceptable for journalists who enjoy great credibility to provide their faces for advertisements. Now, also in some so-called magazine programmes, more or less serious news items end up side by side with all kinds of advertising. And the technique of product placement is therefore becoming popular; in other words, the apparently casual appearance of commercial products in these spaces. This practice has not reached TV news yet but is becoming quite habitual in programmes where, next to chats about gossip, political or economic information is also provided.

The documents that contain the ruling ethics doctrine usually remind us of the importance of keeping information and advertising separate. Let us know take, as an example, the *Código deontológico de la profesión periodística* (Code of ethics of the journalistic profession) promulgated in 1994 by the Federation of Journalist Associations of Spain (FAPE), one of whose articles states the following:

"18. So as not to lead to error or confusion for users, journalists must make a strict, formal distinction between information and advertising.

To this end, the simultaneous exercising of journalistic and advertising professions is understood as ethically incompatible.

Similarly, this incompatibility shall apply to all those activities relative to social communication that suppose a conflict of interest in exercising the journalistic professional and its principles and ethical standards."

A style book that we have yet to mention is the one from Canal Sur. Andalusia's regional television broadcaster is one of the Spanish audiovisual media that has already defined, some years ago now, more specific rules of conduct. And regarding the area in question, it establishes, among other things, the following:

"2.5.10. Commercial interests.

The informative spaces of CSTV must not favour, recommend, insinuate or promote the acquisition or use of commercial products or services. Any reference must be fully justified in editorial terms and the commercial origin of any information must be cited no matter how deliberated or rigorous it may be. Any particular attitude in this respect is prohibited, especially if there is any compensation, be it economic or in kind.

9.10.1. Promotional videos. It is forbidden to edit and broadcast an informative video that has, in origin, any promotional connotation with the same audiovisual material of conventional advertising inserts, and even more strictly forbidden to do so with an identical order, structure and format or in such a similar way that it can lead to confusion. This may only be used as a resource and, even so, in a partial and limited way. If we are forced to differentiate data from opinions, we must also differentiate, before viewers, what is information from what is marketing.

Interest in or suggestion of promotions of an advertising campaign broadcast on Canal Sur TV or Canal 2 Andalucía will never be a reason for propaganda to become conventional information nor shall compensation be accepted in this respect.

A video may be broadcast whose nature is of artistic creation although the intent may be commercial. The most suitable procedure is to place this at the end of the news, as a final item and without any reference in the headlines."

At present, neither sports broadcasts nor fashion magazines nor cultural programmes about books or films can be above the suspicion of possible interests that go a long way beyond the noble desire to inform people about the winner of a bike race, about the length of skirts next season or the orientation given by Umberto Eco to his latest novel.

Companies are by no means without conflict due to the impositions of those who nurture them. Precisely because communication has become industrialised, companies (both private and public) are perfectly aware that they must safeguard the quality of the products they offer. And, among these products, the news is perhaps the most delicate, the one that is least able to withstand adulteration. Once more, credibility is at stake that, in addition to its ethical components, is also a commercial asset per se. The owners of private television channels and the managers of public channels know that they must strike a difficult balance between the need to keep the commercial department's clients happy and the need to preserve a minimum of quality in terms of the information they provide.

The tendency of information and advertising to mix together

is difficult to keep in check because there are many different forces in play that besiege the media to place their products or messages on them. And the agents dedicated to this need, making use of all their personal or professional abilities, find a highly fertile area precisely in those spaces on the radio, television or internet that are "no-man's land"; i.e. that are not subject to well-defined rules of play.

With regard to this point, of note is an article that forms part of the document "Els gabinets de comunicació. Criteris de bones pràctiques professionals" (Communication offices. Criteria of good professional practice), promoted by the Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya (College of Journalists of Catalonia), precisely by the professionals working in the industry.

"Advertisers analyse the commercial opportunities of their clients, turn them into advertising messages and buy space on the communication and other media to insert this kind of commercial message and information. Press officers and advertisers can live together in certain projects, fulfilling perhaps complementary functions but always differentiated in terms of their goals, methodology and the instruments used."

Information and fiction

"Anything seen or heard must be presented as it truly is". This idea is repeated numerous times in the codes of ethics of the large television networks in the United States, such as ABC, CBS and NBC. News journalism has always been biased against any system of expression that is not the narration of events as they have actually occurred. Literature, art or even other forms of journalism accomplish their communicative role but informers are proud of the fact that their mission is specific: telling the facts, stripped of any formal packaging that might demean them (Alsius 1999, 317).

But this does not mean, of course, that the methods used by journalists help us to better discover the truth than the methods used by a painter or novelist. Journalists must be aware that their informative work isn't a perfect mirror of reality either. No matter how much they strive to reflect things faithfully, the procedures of informers still contain a significant production process that conditions the message itself and its reception by the target. And, of course, it might be the case (and sometimes is) that the work of an artist or a novelist contributes better to grasping certain aspects of reality than the mere narration of facts.

But, as pointed out by Carl Hausman (1992, 115), the point is to see how the lines are drawn that distinguish the methods of one from those of the other. There are some communicative conventions that redress, to a certain extent, from epistemological problems involved. Each area of expression works with its own rules that have been culturally sanctioned. Polysemy and fantasy are the methods of the artist; unequivocal meaning and authenticity are the traits that characterise and identify the work of an informer. The public has different expectations regarding an informer than those of a novel or film. And, inso-

far as the public has the right to information, journalists are committed to not disappointing them.

Throughout the history of journalism there have been cases of deceit on the part of reporters, who have passed off as real stories that have only come out of their imagination. One of the classics is the story of the reporter published in *The Washington Post* on 28 September 1980. Entitled “Jimmy’s World”, the reporter Janet Cooke explained, in great detail, the story of an eight-year-old addicted to heroin. The report won the Pulitzer Prize but this was withdrawn when it was discovered that the author had invented the whole thing. Initially, in the investigation started by the newspaper itself, the reporter argued that the case of Jimmy was a combination of a number of real cases but finally she ended up confessing that it had all come out of her literary imagination. This case has been cited repeatedly as a clear example of violating the principle of truth. Other cases recorded in the world of the press are those involving Stephen Glass, who was found, in 1998, to have falsified a lot of his reports published in the magazine *The New Republic*, and that of Jayson Blair who, in 2003, published invented information in a newspaper considered to be one of the most credible and influential in the whole world, namely *The New York Times*.

On television the chance to totally “fabricate” a news item is practically zero but there have been cases of misleading descriptions of images. One that became sadly famous was the petrol-covered cormorant presented as the first victim of the first Gulf War. Also guilty of this kind of broadcast was France 2, in 2000, with images of a father protecting a Palestinian child, Muhammed Al-Durah, who had died in his arms while both were sheltering behind a barrel. The video, lasting three minutes, stated that the Israeli forces had been behind the child’s death. He became an icon of the Palestinian resistance, although the images were immediately suspected. A few years later, the German journalist, Esther Schiapira, found out that, in the rough recordings of the event, there had been no clear way of determining who had fired the shots.⁴

In all these more or less flagrant cases of deception, the reactions both of the public at large and those with a certain moral authority to judge the facts were unanimously disapproving. From the perspective of the ethics of news, manifest deception is one of the most censured conducts, both by most professionals and the public.⁵

However, opinion has always been more divided regarding some experiments carried out on the audiovisual media where the truthfulness has been tested of invented stories explained using a large part of the codes characteristic of news programmes. The great historical reference along these lines is the famous radio programme *War of the worlds*, conceived and produced by Orson Welles in 1938, when a large number of the audience of the CBS network believed that Martians were actually invading the Earth. An emulator of this prowess of mass communication was, several years later, the programme *Camaleó*, a TVE programme in Catalan, which in January

1991 faked a coup d’état in the Soviet Union, and journalists from the Walloon public television station, RTBF, who, in December 2006, caused alarm in Belgium when they announced, in what seemed like a special news programme, that Flanders had unilaterally proclaimed independence.

When they are told that something is a news space, readers, listeners, viewers and internet users expect the materials used to be authentic documents of what is actually happening. But the dividing line between what is authentic and what is not is not always well drawn. Between strict information and fiction there are a number of literary and dramatic genres that straddle both spheres. The so-called “new journalism” has upset conventional divisions and has been claimed as an excellent way to explain the present world. Who would deny, for example, that novels such as those by Truman Capote or Tom Wolfe contain values from informative journalism insofar as they attempt to investigate certain aspects of a specific reality? However, formulas have multiplied on television such as *docudramas*, *reality shows* and *mockumentaries* that are attempting to do the same, in their own way. Those that have encouraged this kind of genre have brandished the argument that a certain amount of formal “deception” can be a means to convey a certain dose of “truth” (Alsus 1989, 321). Nevertheless, there is a difference in degree between the various hybrid genres that must be taken into account. Thomas Fleming is one of those authors who claim, for example, that truth can be found more in some fiction genres, such as *docudramas*, than in *reality shows*, as, in his opinion, the former use the unreal to approximate the real, while the latter always move within a pseudo-reality (Fleming 1989).

In order to unravel the ambiguities, what ethics in journalism has often done is not so much to proscribe any use of fiction at all but to require what we mentioned at the beginning of this section: that nothing should be anything other than what it is presented as being. In the case of television, it even accepts the inclusion of fictitious elements in news providing the viewer is clear at all times that what they are seeing is or isn’t an authentic document.

In the new style book of the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (they are currently drawing up “operational manuals” that will probably provide further details for some of the rules in this area), this subject has been dealt with as follows:

“2.2.6 Distortion of reality

We strive to ensure that the presence of our media does not substantially modify the reality we wish to reflect and we do not encourage non-spontaneous actions or behaviours. If, nevertheless, we do not achieve this, we shall make an effort to ensure this circumstance does not distort the information we are giving.

2.2.7. Dramatisations and re-enactments

In general, the information we produce does not include deliberately made fictional scenes. If, in exceptional cases, any are included, the head of the news for the medium must authorise this and we must indicate this clearly.

The staging of habitual actions is not considered to be fiction when used as an image or sound resource for the news item and these do not form the basis of it."

The style book of Telemadrid refers in this, so restrictive way to the need not to play with misunderstandings that can confuse the viewers:

"4.d Any kind of staging that tends to make a re-enactment appear real is also forbidden."

In different documents, the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) has also warned of the danger of ambiguities in this area. This it has done in its *Guidelines on the News Treatment of Personal Tragedies* as well as its *Guidelines on trials and their Coverage on Television* where we can read the following, respectively:

"[C] 9. The distinction between direct coverage of a tragic event, documentary reconstruction (using pre-recorded images and sounds) and dramatised fictional recreations must be clearly marked in such a way that the audience cannot possibly confuse them.

6. The resource that some television programmes use that involves reconstructing what happens in court does not meet the procedural guarantees needed for total credibility. If reconstructions are used, the Council recommends the media warn viewers that reconstructions follow script criteria and are not vouchsafed by judges or judicial guarantee."

However, it would hypocritical to state that any kind of "representation" must be proscribed from the news. In many television reports sources agree, at least to some extent, to pretend they are performing some action that has convinced journalists in order to make the narrative more effective: from suggesting that someone is talking on the telephone to repeating a handshake to film it from another perspective. Few would dare to condemn this kind of action. But where are the limits?

The ethical chiaroscuro posed by this issue of representation comes largely from the recognition that, in today's media society, a lot of events occur and develop in relation to their subsequent presence in the media. If such scruples were taken to the extreme, the news capacity of these events would be very limited. On the other hand, the tendency towards genre hybridisation has allowed some television channels to embark on a slippery slope. It's true that some simulations can be useful in specific cases to better explain the facts (Linn 1991). But it's also true that, through the prejudices that can be caused among third parties, all forms of simulation that can be conceived entail a price for the media: the loss of credibility that can result should the deception be found out. The public, which has proved through audience ratings that it fully accepts certain genres based on simulation, has, on the other hand, quite rigid expectations regarding conventional news programme. It feels let down if it's made to believe something that isn't true.

Information and entertainment

In many aspects, the act of informing is not an exception among communicative processes and is governed by most of its rules. Broadcasters must catch the attention of receivers if they want the action and effect of informing to be effective. In this respect, we should not be surprised that information is presented in an increasingly attractive way in all the media. It wasn't so long ago that some newspapers that wanted to give the impression of being very thorough in how they offered news, such as *Le Monde* and *El País*, still resisted publishing colour photographs. Now they do and practically no-one is left who thinks that they have lost credibility by doing so. However, the informative media, both the press and television and websites, make an effort to help readers and viewers to understand better the data they provide with increasingly eye-catching graphics. In short, the media are undergoing a transformation that affects not only the content but also how the information is presented (Vilamor 1997).

Nevertheless, the tendency to disseminate news in a striking way has serious risks for the integrity of the information and its social value as the life force of the democratic system. As highlighted on several occasions by Gilles Lipovetsky, certain actions of the media help to degrade civic life and, in this, a particular role is played by the fact that news is presented in a dramatised way. In order to entertain and stir the public's emotions, information is now "constructed" so that TV news and reports are conceived as "hyper-realistic animation", focusing on what is more personal, on emotion and empathy (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2009, 237).

This phenomenon is not new. Nearly twenty years ago now, Av Westin, a veteran news director on American television, explained quite plainly the criteria that actually govern the selection of news on the medium. He said that, with his experience, he ended up developing a series of three successive questions to determine what goes into a news programme and what shouldn't. These questions are: 1) Is my world safe? 2) Are my city and home safe? 3) If my wife, children and loved ones are safe, then what has happened in the past twenty-four hours to shock them, amuse them or make them better off than they were? (Westin 1982, 62-63). It's certainly quite an ironic way of defining a method that, a decade or two ago in Europe, was considered to be only fitting for "American" television, something to which, on the other hand, we have become increasingly accustomed, especially since the expansion of private television.

Spectacularisation. This is the term with which many experts in this area have summed up the tendency to convert information into yet another tool for entertainment. This is used by the aforementioned Lipovetsky but is also used, among many others, by Bourdieu (1997), Langer (1998), González Requena (1989), Grabe (2001), Darley (2002), Imbert (2003), Uribe and Gunter (2007). In fact, in many contexts the term spectacularisation is used as the equivalent to sensationalism but, over the last few years and especially when it refers to the audiovisual media, the former is the preferred term.

With regard to codes of ethics, the terms spectacularisation and sensationalism exist side by side. But, in any case, the term is used to express a tendency defined as an opposing value to exhaustive, high quality information. Hence the style book of Barcelona TV establishes the following:

“2.2.11 Spectacularisation.

Beyond the images of disasters, the informer must be scrupulous in not presenting habitual news as if it were strictly new phenomena. This tendency towards the spectacle in information in order to entertain can lead to false expectations, social alarm and initiate a spiral of informative exaggeration.”

The warning regarding the hazard of resorting to spectacularisation in news programmes is often mentioned specifically in certain areas in which the danger of going too far is more evident. One of these areas is news on tragedies where, moreover, there is also people's right to privacy at stake. In this case, we return as an example, among other possibilities, to the CAC document *Guidelines on the News Treatment of Personal Tragedies*:

“[C] 4 When covering tragedies, it is advisable to avoid any type of special effect or resource that has a primarily sensationalist function.

[C] 15 When presenting information on tragedies, journalists should be particularly careful with the language they use. It is important to avoid using adjectives, sayings or clichés that unnecessarily dramatise and sensationalise the telling of an event and which could frighten victims, their relatives or people who could potentially be affected.”

Warnings are also given in various documents regarding the excesses that should be avoided when covering situations involving violence. In this respect, however, sometimes the doubt is raised as to what point the images of some facts might contribute to raising society's awareness of certain phenomena, such as war (Alcalà 2010, 247). This call for reflection can be found, for example, in the following article from the style book for Canal Sur:

“9 [...] Images that show violence in different facets and places in the world are inevitably an everyday occurrence. Sometime they move people, on occasion they make them indignant but they also help social conscience to be generalised against such evils. Or perhaps they help insensitivity to grow in a society increasingly seized by a syndrome of spectacle. Few aspects raise a greater public outcry regarding what can be shown and what should be hidden, what citizens wish to see and have a right to see in order to interpret for themselves a correctly shown fact, or what a medium, especially television, must restrict.”

The call to avoid sensationalist treatment or spectacularisation of information can also be found in documents containing guidelines made by various social sectors to get the media to behave in a certain way. This is the case of some codes refer-

ring to the news treatment of so-called “gender-based” or domestic violence, such as the *Recomanacions sobre el tractament de la violència de gènere en els mitjans de comunicació* (Recommendations on the treatment of gender-based violence in the media) promoted jointly by the College of Journalists of Catalonia, Barcelona City Council and the Catalan Institute for Women, and also the *Recomendaciones para las buenas prácticas en la información sobre violencia de género* (Recommendations for good practices in information on gender-based violence) produced by FAPE). Or, in other areas, the *Decálogo deontológico para los profesionales de los medios de comunicación para el trato de las realidades de gays, lesbianas y hombres y mujeres transexuales* (Ethical decalogue for media professionals on the treatment of the realities of gays, lesbians and transsexual men and women), the booklet *El poble gitano. Manual per a periodistes* (The gypsy people. Manual for journalists), the manual *Salud mental y medios de comunicación* (Mental health and the media), and the *Guia sobre el tractament de la diversitat cultural als mitjans de comunicació* (Guide to the treatment of cultural diversity in the media), to name but a few of the many different possibilities.

Towards the beginning of the 1980s, the mystification of news content with pure entertainment was baptised by some authors with the term *infotainment*. It should be noted that there is some ambiguity regarding the scope given to this concept. Some authors use it to explain how conventional news spaces tend to make themselves more enjoyable in order to attract larger audiences (Winston 2002; Lozano 2004; Sorrentino 2006; García Avilés 2007). Others, however, apply this concept more to the emergence of new genres that are placed directly at the service of entertainment but that exhibit documents that channel “real” facts and that are therefore false (Buonanno 1999). In this package we find proposals that, in the last twenty years, have proliferated on television channels the world over: on the one hand, the so-called *talk shows*, where interviews or debates focus on minor issues that are treated with high emotional voltage; on the other, the *reality shows*, which grant generous protagonism to anonymous people looking for their minute (or their twenty-four hours) of fame, and then spaces that, formally and aesthetically, are similar to news programmes but limit their content to highly specific issues, such as events, the lives of celebrities or sports.

It's difficult to decide which of these two facets of infotainment is more worrying. If we look at this from the quantitative point of view, the occupation of television channels by all these capsules of pseudo-reality we have just mentioned is certainly astounding. This is a phenomenon of global dimensions that has a provable relation with the commodification of the media universe (Thussu 2007). But the public has possibly already generated the appropriate antibodies to be able to handle this invasion and, ultimately, in general they are taken for what they are, namely mere entertainment. However, the deviation undergone by many spaces dedicated to general information by including “soft” content could be more dangerous from the per-

spective of the ethics of news. It is increasingly frequent for ostensibly serious news to offer any insignificant issue as its first item. And, with the subterfuge of “hooking” the audience, news on trifles are replacing other items of greater importance for society.

In any of its manifestations, infotainment represents a danger to the integrity of the news product. For large segments of the public, especially among those social sectors with a lower cultural level or young people, the importance of having access to quality information is becoming diluted, if “quality information” is understood as information that channels issues affecting the common interest.

Conclusions

It is a fact that, in the last few years, new genres and sub-genres have proliferated on the audiovisual media that, in many cases, are the result of the hybridisation of pre-existing genres. These new products are sometimes designed to be disseminated by the conventional media and, in other cases, are adapted (or have been created for this purpose) to new communication platforms, such as iPad, mobile phones, etc.

From the perspective of the ethics of journalism, ethical doubts appear when, in some of these new products, informative elements are significantly involved. Information has moral foundations that make it a social good of the first order and it can be dangerous to democratic health to contaminate or damage it. And, in this respect, there can be evident hazards when information is mixed with other activities within social communication, such as advertising, fiction or entertainment.

It would be too stern to state that, for reasons of an ethical nature, we must completely reject any hybridisation of genres that affect the activity of informing. The doors to innovation cannot be slammed shut. It is evident that the different ways of communicating facts and data, and also the way of communicating the interpretation made of these, has been changing over time, and some transformations really look like they cannot be stopped.

But it would also be dangerous to be content with “anything goes”. And, certainly, this is not done by what we might call the written “ethical doctrine”. In many ethical documents (codes of ethics of professional corporations, style books of public and private companies, recommendations by institutions, etc.), serious precautions are voiced regarding the mixing of genres, especially when one of the elements that may be affected is quality information.

These considerations can be transferred to the field of teaching. At this time of great transformations in communication systems, it is more important than ever to improve the training of future professionals. For the sake of the multi-skilled workers apparently required by the job market, the tendency is to increasingly accept the “hybridisation” of teaching, both at a graduate and postgraduate level, with courses and qualifica-

tions that are, in themselves, a mystification of content. We should probably remind ourselves that, while there is no evidence to the contrary, each facet of social communication (journalism, advertising, the production of fiction, etc.) has its own professional culture and values that should remain its own.

Notes

- 1 Some of this article contains findings from the research study “Ètica i excel·lència informativa. La deontologia periodística davant de les expectatives dels ciutadans” (2006-2010), which forms part of the R&D&I plan 2004-2007 of the Ministry of Science and Innovation (SEJ 2006-05631-C05).
- 2 Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.
<<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a19>>
- 3 The advertising code of ethics most widely recognised in Spain is by the Association for the Self-Regulation of Commercial Communication (Autocontrol). It was passed in 1996 and has subsequently been modified. The same association runs a very active reference website <<http://www.autocontrol.es>>.
- 4 This revelation is narrated in the documentary “The Child, the Death, and the Truth”, 53 min., Germany, 2009.
- 5 This is established in the conclusions to the research entitled “Ètica i excel·lència informativa. La deontologia periodística davant de les expectatives dels ciutadans” (Alsius [et al.] 2010; Alsius and Salgado, ed. 2010).

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