

Hybridisation between informative genres and spectacle in the Basque public television service (ETB)

ESTEFANÍA JIMÉNEZ

Lecturer in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

estefania.jimenez@ehu.es

Abstract

Any discourse genre is bound to evolve. Hybridisation between information and spectacle goes back a long way but, in recent years, a new factor has been the spectacularisation of classic TV information genres and the creation of information-based programmes that incorporate spectacle. This article analyses the hybridisation between spectacle and information in four types of programme broadcast by the Basque public television company (ETB): the news, informative magazines, entertainment programmes based on humour and current affairs, and finally TV reality shows. As we can see, stylistic hybridisation can give rise to highly diverse formats which are difficult to categorise and disparate as regards the quality of information.

Key words

Television, hybridisation, spectacularisation, information, Euskal Telebista.

PETXO IDOYAGA

Lecturer in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

petxo.idoyaga@ehu.es

Resum

L'evolució de qualsevol gènere discursiu és inevitable. La hibridació entre informació i espectacle ve de lluny i, la novetat, des de fa uns anys, és l'espectacularització dels gèneres informatius clàssics de la televisió i la creació de programes d'espectacle que tenen com a base la informació. En aquest article s'analitza la hibridació entre espectacle i informació en quatre tipus de programes emesos per la televisió pública basca (ETB): els informatius de notícies, els magazins informatius, els programes d'entreteniment basats en l'humor i l'actualitat i, finalment, la telereialitat. Com podem veure, la hibridació estilística dona lloc a formats molt diversos de categorització complexa, que també resulten dispars pel que fa a la qualitat informativa.

Paraules clau

Televisió, hibridació, espectacularització, informació, Euskal Telebista.

El hecho es que me acosté una noche autor de folletos y de comedias ajenas y amanecí periodista (In fact I went to bed one night as the author of pamphlets and unrelated comedies and woke up a journalist) ("Ya soy redactor", in La Revista Española no. 39, 19 March 1833) Mariano José de Larra (signed Fígaro)

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1999, 248) wrote that discourse genres of all kinds must constantly evolve "because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because every sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex".

Spectacularising the informative genre on television

There is no consensus on the use of the expression "genre" when referring to television. But, in the formulation of this medium from the public service perspective adopted by Western Europe, three "macro-genres" were referred to, name-

ly information, culture and entertainment, each divided into specific genres. It is clear that, in practice, these genre classifications have been coexisting with hybridisation for some time. But in the European tradition, it was information which marked the direction and personality of broadcasters. In parallel, academic and institutional circles sustained that the genre we call *information* should have special features that would facilitate the formation of responsible public opinion and even the control of dysfunctions created by the economic or political authorities.

It should certainly be borne in mind that, behind this centrality granted to information, the use of television for manipulation has a long history. In fact, the European model included *de facto* government control of the medium, although *de iure* declared its independence. And, in spite of everything, and even from the criticism of the subordination of information to spurious political interests, critical academic thinking (Thompson 1998, 303-340; Wolton 1999, 143-190; Castells 1998) continued to defend the public information space as an inseparable dimension of political democracy in the face of the commercial criteria which began to take hold in European television after its "deregulation" and the development of private tel-

evision companies in the 1980s (Costa 1986, Bustamante 1999).

However, the commercial space has continued to consolidate, with hybridisation between information and spectacle as one of the consequences. It is true that this is not only happening with television and that, for some time now (Esser 1999), we have been witnessing the “tabloidisation” of the news in the so-called quality press. Nor is this a totally new phenomenon. It is years since academic research reported that television was ceasing to be a tool for reproducing reality and becoming an artefact for its production, evolving from *paleo-television* into *neo-television* (Eco 1986; Casseti and Odin 1990). As far back as the mid-1990s the *infoshow* could be characterised as a hybrid genre whose “formulas subsume elements of the news, fiction and entertainment genres [...], a new kind of presence for information which is adopting spectacularised forms” (Prado 1999, 9). Nowadays, the most significant aspect is that this hybridisation has become a dominant phenomenon in television programming and we are already starting to see a third stage (Scolari 2008; Gordillo 2009), *hyper-television*, an extreme development of earlier stages.

Whatever its name, it is clear that the current model of television is determined by strategies of profitability in attracting viewers. The public channels are no exception to this operational model, in which television programming is subordinated to audience ratings. Over the last few years, television companies have developed a great variety of techniques and strategies to reduce the risk of launching television products: falling back on established formulas, including genre features which have proved their effectiveness and, obviously, borrowing formats that have been designed, approved and perfected in other countries. Channels with different broadcasting ranges (from international to local) are trying to adapt pragmatic formulas and stylistic features with proven effectiveness in other areas to their broadcasting context. The immediate result of these practices is programme uniformity practically throughout the world, with hybridisation between information and spectacle as an accepted fact (Prado 2002, 369-394).

But there is a further paradox. In Spain, rather than the cultural or communication bodies establishing a regulatory definition of television information as a genre, this has been imposed by the Ministry of Industry. On 25 November last year, the Ministry presented the Telecommunications and Information Society Advisory Board (CATSI) with a draft set of instructions concerning TV sponsorship. This specified that sponsorship was not acceptable in programmes with current news content and, along with news, the Ministry includes “other programmes on research, development or debates on political or economic news”. “However”, it added, “this prohibition need not be extended to other programmes on social or popular issues which, although they can broadcast current or recent information in the widest sense, the risk of sponsorship conditioning their content is much lower”.¹

Beyond the Ministry’s debatable criteria on sponsorship’s

ability to condition the content of these programmes, we believe the very effectiveness of the instruction can be called into question. “The prevalence of novelty as the driving force of the audiovisual industry prevents any classification arising at a specific time from being effective in the mid-term: attempting to identify genre types and definitions becomes an impossible task” (Jiménez 2011, 21). The constant renewal of programmes, their heterogeneity and the fact that pragmatic proposals usually consist of variations, mixtures or developments of earlier spaces adds to the difficulty of defining taxonomies built to last.

The combination of information and spectacle is a constant feature when launching programme proposals and has given rise to a range of genres and sub-genres. In this respect we can impose some order on the question by identifying the four major areas of genre present in most of today’s television services, in which both spheres, information and spectacle, are present.

1. News spaces. Programmes which historically and for obvious reasons have been the most genuinely informative are increasingly favouring soft, spectacular, exotic, amusing and gossipy news, often featuring ordinary people and socialites. No channel is exempt from this rule, which goes hand in hand with a substantial presence of information on events, which some authors had already identified as a trend in Spanish television in the late 1980s.² At the same time, events of great historical significance are being presented as pure visual spectacle, even if this prevents an understanding of what is going on, as seen in coverage of the wars in Iraq, the Balkans and Afghanistan. As Ramonet indicates (2002), it is undeniable that the phenomenal growth of the internet and its ability to provide real-time connection with news and images of events is accentuating the tendency of televised information towards spectacularisation, possibly due to a need to offer eye-catching content since viewers have other ways of finding the latest news. This trend is starting to place reality in a specific narrative framework which often helps to simplify it.

Following the methodological approach of Norman Fairclough (1995), one of the key authorities in critical discourse analysis, the combination of content analysis of TV texts, an analysis of their discourse practices (production, distribution and consumption) and an analysis of the discourse events as instances of sociocultural practice leads to the conclusion that hard news is gradually being replaced by soft news “to prevent information being used for reflection on key issues” (Ramonet 1998, 90). However, it is also clear that traditional news programmes are maintaining their presence and weight on generalist television channels, which would otherwise risk losing credibility and audience, and in the case of the public channels, one of their main *raison d’être* (Telediario, Telediario, Telenotícies and so on).

2. News magazines. News formats based on every-day events, anecdotes and stereotypes sometimes evolve into separate programmes which normally precede the news. Shows

like *España Directo* (Spain direct) following on from other similar programmes like *Andalucía Directo* and *Madrid Directo*, are defined as magazines covering human interest and social issues, gastronomy, folklore, events and novelty items, broadcast through connection to reporters on the spot. The concept of these programmes is clearly news-based since topicality sets the running order. However the way this information is handled verges on spectacularisation, and is usually characterised by a de-contextualising or scripted format, the participation of ordinary people or by homing in on eccentricities. These programmes must obviously be considered informative, but they clearly limit news to a very specific area.

3. Entertainment formats based on humour and current affairs. Hybridisation between information and spectacle can also result in programmes where mere trivia does not prevail and which make room for social criticism or at least humorous commentary based on the information. These aims can be structured in many ways: using sketches, monologues, interview-based formats, etc. A glance at the programming of almost all Spanish channels in recent decades reveals the presence of heterogeneous programmes based on the humorous and spectacular recreation of the news: *Caiga quien caiga*, *Buenafuente*, *El intermedio* and *Noche Hache* are just some of the more important recent examples of multi-format programmes of this type, virtually essential components of today's television as accessories of strictly news programmes. Their often editorialised intervention helps guide audiences in their interpretation of current affairs, and they also contribute to either playing down or highlighting important issues, putting them into context.

4. TV reality shows. Josep Maria Baget (2003, 88) defined the term *Reality TV* as the group of formats and sub-genres which makes reality the main reference for its images and narrations. Under this definition, the term becomes a large semantic umbrella that not only covers games shows with contestants sharing a house but also content based on current affairs, basic news and the spectacularisation of everyday life, always bearing in mind the importance of narrative structure used to entertain audiences. According to García Martínez (2009, 240), "Contemporary reality TV involves a unique, singular universe governed by its own aesthetic standards and benchmarks. In this hybrid terrain, there are two main strategies which shape the genre: simulation and performativity". Some time ago, Baudrillard (1978, 14) coined the post-modernist saying, according to which we are living in the final phase of the informative image which "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, it is its own pure simulacrum". But behind this simulacrum of the truth is a reality adapted to the needs of televised spectacle.

In fact, the objective of reality TV is none other than to arouse viewers' interest by interpreting fragments of reality according to the parameters of dramatic narration: exposition, climax and resolution. This involves simplifying content and giving internal consistency to the transformation of a public or private hap-

pening into spectacle. Many communication researchers consider that this phenomenon is transferred to the audience and that, as a consequence, the undeniable socialising function of television does not stem "from rational discourse or knowledge but from seduction and emotion, from narration rather than discourse, from its own reality and from the imaginary reality that awakens in the viewer [...]. These resources make the entertainment model the most effective system for socialisation, but also a complex instrument for selective manipulation" (Imbert 2003, 45).

These are undoubtedly the dominant trends in television programming. And Basque public television is no exception, although it has some other very interesting features.

Information programmes, the different facets of information on Basque public television

When ETB1 was inaugurated on 31 December 1982, authorised by the Statute of Autonomy which allows for the creation of a public communication body under the authority of Basque institutions, it became the first television channel to break the hegemony of the Spanish national television service, TVE. Since then, the corporation has extended its broadcasting supports, technical resources and social presence.³ From the start, ETB1 (the Basque-language channel) and ETB2 (the Spanish-language channel) decided to offer generalist programming which, as time available for broadcasting increased, included news, cultural, entertainment and fiction content, initially imported but later own productions or content commissioned from local producers.

ETB1's main flagships have been children's, sport and cultural programming, but news programmes have also had an important role to play. In the case of ETB2, its flagship has been information which, as we have already seen, has become a field where information and spectacle go hand in hand.

Interestingly, ETB2's daily news programmes used to compete with and even beat audiences in other channels, and for years they were an important reference in socialisation, as Rosa Díez Urrestarazu stated in her work documenting EITB's first twenty years:

"From the start, ETB2's daily news programme, *Teleberri*, tried to provide an alternative and point of reference for Basque citizens. It was launched with the handicap of having to battle the giants broadcasting news from Madrid, with many more technical resources and more experienced staff, apparently unbeatable in terms of audience" (Díez Urrestarazu 2003, 134).

The gradual growth of its daily news programmes can be quantified: between 1994 and 1997, the midday news rose from an average share of 17.2% to 22.7%, while prime-time evening news rose from 14.8% to 23.3%. Díez Urrestarazu calls it "quite an achievement for the history of the channel"

(*op. cit.*, 135) that, by the late 1990s, on some evenings *Teleberri* achieved a 32% audience share. The qualitative value of this success is reinforced by the fact that, during that time, news had tremendous social importance, underpinning the national identity and referents of the Basque people.

This modelling of national consciousness was certainly in sympathy with the line taken by the governing nationalist party, the PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco – Basque Nationalist Party). Particularly in its information services, EITB had always been subject to partisan control, which was to grow over the years in clear detriment to the professional independence of its news staff. These existing trends have only intensified with the change in the Basque government (now in the hands of the PSE-PSOE, the national and Basque socialist parties, sustained by an alliance with the centre-right PP). In this respect, moreover, overzealous efforts have been made to root out nationalist symbolism from the news which, although not the only culprit, has contributed to some degree of audience disaffection. Alberto Surio was appointed Director General of EITB on 18 June 2009 at the proposal of the PSOE and, in his first year of management, ETB2 changed from being one of the strongest of FORTA's channels in audience terms (around 15%, even up to 18% on occasion) to losing half its audience, with an average share in January of 8.6%.⁴

News magazines, trivia and talk shows, a clear interest in issues close to home

By changing its frame of reference and with an uncharted editorial line, EITB news has lost not only audience but also social legitimacy. This phenomenon has coincided with a period when, in general, emphasis on soft news and its handling as visual spectacle instead of through contextualisation have also had an effect. But information has not suffered anything like the trivialisation experienced by some other channels, and both the selection of news and its treatment have retained a fairly classic feel.

In spite of this, news magazines based on everyday life and novelty items have increased in presence. Today, ETB2 broadcasts two intensive editions of *Euskadi Directo* a day, one at midday and one in the afternoon. According to the programme's website, a team of reporters offers an on-the-spot overview of the latest events of the day. In practice this takes the form of items which exploit the appeal of street-level information and the spectacularisation of trivia. However, ETB already had some experience with long magazine-type portmanteau spaces which were excellent examples of genre hybridisation, combining information and talk pieces with varied sections ranging from fashion to do-it-yourself. In the early 1990s, *Egonean gir* (Enjoy doing nothing) had been aired as an afternoon magazine with current affairs and sections on health, decoration and beauty. Half-way through the decade, *Bertatik Bertara* (Very close), then a classic of ETB1, had been

launched as a daily local information programme in which various news items in the strict sense were given a local twist. The latter was described by *Revista Telebista*, the promotional tool which tells viewers about new features planned by EITB, as a “refreshing, fun and entertaining space, taking in current affairs and focussing news from a different viewpoint” (*Revista Telebista*, no. 9, 1999, 19).

Within this category but in Spanish is the 1996 programme *Arde la tarde* (The afternoon burns), although the best-known space in ETB2's programming was undoubtedly *Lo que faltava* (Just what I needed), by the producer K2000. Although the programme started off in the prime-time access slot, in 1999 it became a daily magazine focussing on the social scene and was broadcast following the midday news. After several seasons and still very popular, *Lo que faltava* disappeared, to be replaced in the same slot and with the same production team by *Pásalo* (Pass it on), broadcast from May 2004 to February 2010.

Interviewed for this article, Arri Granados, in charge of these two programmes and current director of content for K2000 and of a similar programme in ETB1, *Arratsaldero* (Every afternoon), emphasised the importance of the ‘spectacle’ factor when presenting a magazine programme that lasted several hours. She feels there must be a panel of commentators and talk guests because otherwise it would be impossible to cover so many topics for so long and with so much content. She also feels that the panel gives the audience someone to identify with, draws out and makes sense of the topics covered, and helps to boost the programme and the channel. In this respect, having a panel of commentators facilitates the use of a “flow format”, in which collaborators enter and leave, with topics taken up in a natural and fluent way and playing with the running order, always based on comments on current issues:

“In *Pásalo* we knew that our best chance would be in current affairs, because this would allow us to go on exploiting a resource which had already served us well both for celebrity issues and Basque current affairs: audience proximity. And that is what we thought we had to put on: an afternoon *infoshow* which could incorporate all existing and new genres, would give us flexibility to change the order depending on what was happening. In fact, we've managed to change the guest list up to an hour before the programme was broadcast”.

This hybrid, flexible structure has sometimes led to the ETB2 evening magazine's being adapted to cover particularly weighty news. *Lo que faltava* covered 11-S (the 2001 twin towers bombing), and *Pásalo* 11-M (the 2004 Madrid bombing) and 7-J (the 2005 London bombing), using agency images and ETB's global correspondent network. But even in these cases the main focus was not to tell the facts or analyse the context, but the experience of ordinary people:

“Trying to produce much more accessible information, we take the viewers' side, leaving other programmes to do the political analysis, offering the human side of information. If

anything similar happened anywhere else in the world, we would try to focus on how the Basques living there were affected by getting in touch with them. We have the resources to do that”.

With the change in management at EITB, *Pásalo* disappeared from the ETB2 schedule in February 2010, giving way to another magazine, *Aspaldiko* (So long since I've seen you!), with a similar structure but more frivolous content and more spectacular elements - dancing, singing, pop vox, etc. which has not been as popular as its predecessor.

In general, we could say that the magazines broadcast by ETB in recent years have gone for proximity and the use of the current affairs chat format and, as spin-offs from these, shows involving the heated discussion of political, social and economic issues, in a setting that encourages spectacularisation.

Formats based on humour and current affairs: the word at the service of entertainment

Entertainment is one of the bastions of Basque public television and this has conditioned information itself. In spite of this, it is true to say that ETB is proud of adhering to a concept of Basque public television in which the broadcast of programmes which could be considered aesthetically or morally objectionable is minimised. This can be illustrated by one example. Although the programme *Tómbola* was broadcast by Canal 9, Telemadrid and Canal Sur, other autonomous public corporations with which ETB holds commercial agreements, the Basque channel refused to air it. When it started *Tómbola* was a relatively new format, seen by some as the precursor of the present *Sálvame Deluxe* and *Dónde estás corazón* broadcast on Telecinco and Antena 3 TV respectively. The then Director General of the EITB corporation has stated that, although he knew it would attract good audience ratings, he refused to broadcast a space which, in his opinion, was out of place on Basque public television..

“The DGs of the other channels tried to convince me to put on this programme here. Because, of course, the more of us who got involved, the cheaper it became. But I saw from the start that it was absolutely not what we should be offering our public. [...] it is true that public television services have to include some of this kind of more commercial programming, but without turning their back on decent television. And there are also certain ethical red lines” (Díez Urrestarazu 2003, 131).

However, this does not mean that ETB has not offered formats based on oral confrontation. One example is *Rifi rafe*, 1994 precursor of *Moros y Cristianos* which was broadcast by Telecinco from 1997, discussing topics related to current affairs and whose staging favoured light-weight discussion and face-to-face confrontation.

As regards entertainment formats based on humour and current affairs, one programme stands out. *Vaya semanita* (What a week), which has become one of the figureheads of Basque public television in recent years. *Vaya semanita* is produced by Pausoka, is filmed in ETB's Miramon Studios and has been broadcast on ETB2 since September 2003. The programme's popularity goes beyond ETB's borders and some fragments can be seen in portmanteau programmes on other channels and on YouTube.

During the first of its 8 seasons on Thursday prime time, *Vaya semanita* became a communicative phenomenon which transcended its category to become the subject of conversation and comment, creating and confirming stereotypes of the Basque character and the country's political and social idiosyncrasies. The programme began as a relatively modest affair, described here for the first time in the *Revista Telebista* magazine:

“Every Thursday offers a no-holds-barred evening. A daring and uninhibited look at current affairs. This programme, presented by Óscar Terol, has a repertoire of well-known actors who interpret a series of sketches based on the week's news. It also includes the opinions of ordinary people”. (*Revista Telebista*, no.17, 2003, 19)

From its graphic treatment and the place assigned to it in this publication, it can readily be deduced that this was not yet a star programme. It was not until well into 2003/2004, and above all the following season, that the programme defined its structure and the tone of its content, becoming a reference point in the humorous treatment of current affairs and sociological portraits. *Vaya semanita* received awards from the Academy of Television in 2004 and 2007 as the best autonomous entertainment programme, and in 2006 an Ondas award for the best television programme.

Right from the start, the programme dealt with universal issues like amorous relationships, and ties of family and friendship, always seen from a local perspective. Real estate speculation, problems in finding a suitable job, current political issues, gender roles and caricatures of some sectors of society serve as the basis of its script, which alternate stories by the same team of actors in many different roles, with comments and settings based on contemporary events, and an interview with a public figure, ranging from the centre-right Partido Popular (PP) to Basque nationalist Arnaldo Otegi. In recent seasons, however, it has been more closely linked to television themes, the entertainment world or to promoting a programme, film or theatrical tour. Many of the sketches, grouped into series, have some continuity from one programme to another, and the personalities and their dramatic roles are repeated.

All these information-based issues are covered in what could be called a nonchalant or even insolent tone. This is particularly remarkable since the topics they are dealing with are difficult to handle even in conventional formats. *Vaya semanita* presents clichés and stereotypes and items of ongoing political and social interest, many of which were firmly entrenched not only

in the public arena but in many social and even interpersonal relationships. The programme has caricatured such topical aspects in Basque society as socio-demographic plurality: one of the series in the early seasons was entitled "Los Santxez", portraying a family made up of two immigrants to the Basque Country from Salamanca, with one son an *ertzaina* (member of the Basque police) and the other an independence activist. Some of the more radical positions of the *abertzale* (nationalists) were represented by the adventures of a pair of puppets, "Los Batasunnis", inspired by the children's favourites *Los Lunnis*, who went to demonstrations, dressed recognisably as independence activists and even took part in street violence. The exorbitant price of housing in the Basque Autonomous Community and abuses related to government-subsidised housing and rent were covered in "Los Buscapisos" (The house-hunters), a couple desperately seeking somewhere to live. The multi-faceted importance of Basque was exaggerated in a classroom used exclusively for teaching Basque and promote *euskaldun* culture (*Euskaltegi*) through a varied group of characters who attended the class to learn the language motivated by a range of reasons: admiration for the language, the need for linguistic accreditation to get a job, or due to presumed links between knowledge of Basque and promotion in a political party. Other series of interest have been "Los cuentos del aitite Arzalluz" featuring the former leader of the PNB nationalist party, caricatured as a teller of folk tales applied to the Basque life of the day. Also "Antxonix y Boronix" who, in a parody of Asterix and Obelix, defended the only *baskongalo* village from Roman (or here Madrid) aggression.

Vaya semanita has therefore contributed to highlighting many stereotypes related to the Basque way of life. It has aroused audience interest by taking an uninhibited look at a complex, heterogeneous and in many respects excessively polarised society. The use from the start of plots based on current affairs and caricatured figures with easily recognisable features reflecting Basque reality helped win it acceptance. It has sometimes risen above the level of mere entertainment to attract criticism and praise from the media and even political leaders, who have been largely satisfied with their doubles in this parody.

The audience ratings can also be considered very satisfactory for ETB itself, which has continued to renew the programme every season. As we have seen, *Vaya semanita* has brought fame to Basque television beyond its boundaries, although in recent seasons, due to natural wear and tear and influenced by the dramatic fall in the audience ratings, the phenomenon has lost some of its impetus.

At ETB1, *Kale Gorrian* (In the street) was presented in 1996 as an audacious programme partly based on comments on the most striking, spectacular or original images from the news during the week and open to comment in chat programmes (*Revista Telebista*, no. 3, 1996). *Sorginen Laratza* (The appeal of the hearth, or witch's bonfire), the first late show in Basque, was shown between 1999 and 2005. It consisted of interviews, current affairs features, humorous sketches and music,

combining news content with other more typical television entertainment.

Basque style reality TV

This account would not be complete without referring to the programmes known as reality TV shows. Most reality TV shows broadcast on ETB are produced by Globomedia and are typically rather harsher in their approach than the formats of other channels. At the Basque channel, *Basetxe* (More) had nine editions between 2002 and 2008, all based on variations of a contest involving strangers living together and having to do typical rural tasks in competition amongst themselves. On the Spanish channel from 2005 onwards, *El conquistador del fin del mundo* (Conqueror of the world's end) and its variant *El conquistador del Aconcagua* have offered extreme physical trials for contestants set in rugged landscapes in Argentina, as well as confrontations between contestants some of them induced by deliberate *agents provocateurs*.

There is another genre of reality TV which clearly involves the spectacularisation of the narrative: the talk show, where ETB has also had varied experience. The most important of these was *Esta es mi gente* (This is my people), which between 1999 and 2006 presented an evolved version of the classic interview format. It was based on the narration of the personal experiences of ordinary people, presented in a de-contextualised setting and guided by questions from a TV host. *Esta es mi gente*, a co-production between 3Koma93 and Boomerang and produced at ETB's Miramon studios, rejuvenated the genre by featuring young, uninhibited guests who were more prepared than in earlier programmes to forsake the dramatic approach and embrace the genre of spectacle.

The channel considers the space had a "clear vocation to bring human stories onto the set, rejecting sensationalism but accepting the dictates of our times" (*Revista Telebista*, no. 9, 1999, 20). It announced that the programme's intention was to feature colourful, human and heroic acts by ordinary people who had done extraordinary things or experienced exceptional situations. But in fact its real essence, as in other similar programmes, lay in the spectacularisation of the stories of anonymous ordinary people, and for seven years it was one of ETB2's figurehead programmes. In fact, for years it was one of its major draws in terms of audience, also becoming a flagship for the whole EITB group, for which it became a strategic programme.

By way of conclusion

For functionalist positivism, even the functional positivism adopted by many professors at international universities, the spectacularisation of televised information is nothing more than the adaptation of the public television service to the will of the majority. However, this only represents the traditional submis-

sion and service by part of the intellectual community to the powers that be, be they economic, political or communicative.

Among the huge amount of content currently circulating the internet today is a list of ten points concerning the manipulation of information based on the thinking of Noam Chomsky. Its first point, entitled "Strategy of distraction"⁵ is described as diverting public's attention from real social problems, from important issues and changes determined by the elites, keeping them captivated by issues of no real importance.

We think it is beyond all argument that hybridisation between information and spectacle in television programming performs this function. However, we do not think that the perspective of television as a public service entails rejecting the idea that information and entertainment or spectacle can be mixed in certain programmes. But we are certainly concerned about the overwhelming weight of these talk shows, in private and to an increasing extent public television, where aggression becomes the norm of human relationships. These and certain reality TV shows dedicated to relating ghoulish personal stories, the systematic spectacularisation of current affairs in supposedly serious debates and documentaries, and the trivialisation of news programmes, are all trends that bear out Chomsky's criticisms.

In Basque public television as in some others, information is a territory where current trends meet tensions between public service criteria, political manipulation and pure commercialisation. It is clear that the last of these criteria is acquiring increasing weight. In reality, the fact that *Basetxe* is broadcast in Basque and is based on carrying out rural tasks is only a variation in form. Essentially, its values are not very different from those of other programmes in which groups of isolated people compete among themselves. Competition between people as an absolute value, and the introduction of *agents provocateurs* to stir things up, as in *El conquistador del fin del mundo*, also matches the well-known schemes of reality TV. Specifically, the declared intention to ensure that the local talk show *Esta es mi me gente* should avoid sensationalism but without renouncing the dictates of current affairs, is just a long way of saying the same thing. The fact is that many aspects of Basque reality TV coincide with the same model of programming on other channels. It is not a question of denying space to problems of this kind. But one has to wonder about the problems of a public channel like ETB2 when, in identity terms, *El conquistador del fin del mundo* replaces the news. Similarly, it would not be amiss to meditate on the status acquired by magazines like *Euskadi Directo* or the increasingly Manichaean and superficial treatment of programmes which are still being presented as chat shows of political, social and cultural interest.

In spite of the above, the reference of INFORMATION (writ large) is still important to Basque public television, even if it sometimes bulks it out with unnecessary trivia or shows a recurrent tendency to spectacularise its telling of the news. Nevertheless, the most significant risks in this field for the Basque public service come from political manipulation and

the subordination of information to partisan interests. Some time ago, ETB made a formal commitment to set up an Editorial Board for news staff to guarantee their autonomy in the face of political or economic pressures. Unfortunately, this has not been put into practice.

Finally, it should also be recognised that television has some margin for creativity in all fields and almost all formulas. And within these, some real options for hybridisation between entertainment and information, giving magnificent results for what must ultimately be the main function of public information: to help us learn about and understand the world we live in. In many senses, *Vaya semana* is an example of these options, in spite of alternating between the fine use of irony to give a lively (and acidic) viewpoint on our society, and trivial witticisms. In its defence, it should be said that, during its years of existence, there has been more irony than witticism. A good use of the hybridisation of information and entertainment would undoubtedly link up to the work of the great Mariano José Larra, author of the introductory quotation to this article.

Notes

- 1 Press release by the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Trade (25.11.10).
- 2 Manuel Palacio puts forward the example of the news treatment for the Puerto Hurraco massacre in 1990 in a report broadcast on the current affairs programme *Informe semanal* (TVE) on 1 September that year. According to the author, this item, although forming part of a space considered to be serious, describes the pain of the victims by using dramatisations, lighting and editing to generate "the horror at night-time", aiming to show the reality in a spectacularly dramatic way (Palacio 2001, 176).
- 3 The Basque broadcasting body EITB owns several radio stations, a website and five television channels: ETB1 and ETB2, general channels which broadcast respectively in Euskera and Spanish from 1982 the first and from 1986 the second; ETB3, channel devoted exclusively to cultural, kids and teenagers programming, and it owns also two secondary channels, Canal Vasco, which broadcasts via satellite for America, and ETB Sat, which broadcasts to Europe.
- 4 During the same period of time, ETB1 has gone from 3.9% to 1.8% (<<http://www.deia.com/2011/02/02/ocio-y-cultura/comunicacion/etb-2-recupera-cuatro-decimas-en-enero>> and <<http://www.deia.com/2010/07/18/politica/euskadi/etb-1-un-futuro-incierto>> [Consulted: 2 February 2011].
- 5 "Chomsky y las 10 estrategias de manipulación mediática" (<<http://www.attacmadrid.org/?p=2738>>), [Consulted: 2 February 2011].

References

- BAJTÍN, M. *Estética de la creación verbal*. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1999. ISBN: 9789682311116.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Cultura y simulacro*. Barcelona: Kairós, 1978. ISBN: 84-7245-142-9.
- BUSTAMANTE, E. *La televisión económica. Financiación, estrategias y mercados*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 1999. ISBN: 84-7432-745-8.
- CASETTI, F.; ODIN, R. "De la paléo- a la néo-télévision. Approche sémio-pragmatique". In: *Communications*. Paris, June 1990, no. 51, p. 9-26. ISSN: 2102-5924.
- CASTELLS, M. "El poder de la identidad". In: *La era de la información. Economía, sociedad y cultura*, vol. 2. Madrid: Alianza, 1998. ISBN: 84-206-4246-0.
- COSTA, P. O. *La crisis de la televisión pública*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1986. ISBN: 84-7509-383-3.
- DÍEZ URRESTARAZU, R. *ETB. El inicio de una nueva era*. Bilbao: Euskal Irrati Telebista, 2003. ISBN: 84-6076-980-1.
- ECO, U. "La transparencia perdida". In: *La estrategia de la ilusión*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1986. ISBN: 84-2641-164-9.
- ESSER, F. "Tabloidization of News". In: *European Journal of Communication*. London, June 1999, vol. 14(3), p. 291-324. ISSN: 0267-3231.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Boston: Addison Wesley, 1995. ISBN: 0582219841.
- GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ, A. N. "La hibridación de lo real: simulacro y performatividad en la era de la postrealidad". In: *Anàlisi*. UAB, 2009, no. 38, p. 237-251. ISSN: 0211-2175.
- GORDILLO, I. *La hipertelevisión: géneros y formatos*. Quito: Intiyan, 2009. ISBN: 978-9978-55-071-7.
- IMBERT, G. *El zoo visual. De la televisión espectacular a la televisión especular*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2003. ISBN: 84-7432-797-0.
- JIMÉNEZ, E. *Talk show y audiencia: los procesos de recepción de un género de telerrealidad*. Leioa [Bilbao]: UPV/EHU, Servicio Editorial, 2011 (*in press*). ISBN: 978-84-9860-494-8.
- PALACIO, M. *Historia de la televisión en España*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001. ISBN: 84-7432-806-3.
- PRADO, E. "Traficantes de emociones". In: *Diálogos de la Comunicación*. FELAFACS, 1999, no. 51, p. 8-17. ISSN: 1813-9248
- PRADO, E. "Telerrealidad: globalización y uniformización". In: VIDAL BENEYTO, J. (Ed.) *La ventana global*. Madrid: Taurus, 2002. ISBN: 84-306-0464-2.
- RAMONET, I. *Un mundo sin rumbo: crisis de fin de siglo*. Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 1998. ISBN: 84-2267-325-8.
- RAMONET, I. *Multimedia, internet y globalización económica*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2002. ISBN: 84-7426-557-6.
- Revista Telebista*, EITB, no. 3, 1996.
- Revista Telebista*, EITB, no. 9, 1999.
- Revista Telebista*, EITB, no. 17, 2003.
- SCOLARI, C. A. "Hacia la hipertelevisión. Los primeros síntomas de una nueva configuración del dispositivo televisivo". In: *Diálogos de la Comunicación*. FELAFACS, 2008, no. 77, p. 8-17. ISSN: 1813-9248 [online] <<http://www.dialogosfelafacs.net/77/articulos/pdf/77CarlosScolari.pdf>>. [Consulted: 5 January 2011]
- THOMPSON, J. B. *Los medios y la modernidad*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1998. ISBN: 84-4930-578-0.
- WOLTON, D. *Sobre la comunicación*. Madrid: Acento, 1999. ISBN: 978-84-483-0420-1.