

Elements for studying TV reality in secondary education

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- *This is a contribution to the critical analysis of the media carried out in compulsory education, gathering together everyday experience in the classroom. The aim is to offer an example of didactic proposals, aimed at secondary education, to educate in communication and, specifically, to work on TV reality in the classroom, a practice where attempts have been made to make this motivating, interdisciplinary and with a clearly ethical content. I think that the ideal, most appealing and profitable formula, in educational terms, is to work on two film texts (a documentary and the film *The Truman Show*, from 1998) and a journalistic article. Using these, the aim is to gradually develop thoughts on TV reality from the point of view of ethics and communication.*

Keywords

CAC School Awards, education in communication, critical analysis, TV reality, dominant media, reflection and ethics.

The aim of this article is to summarise the work of the same title presented for the last "El CAC a l'escola" (CAC School Awards), based on concerns arising as a result of how the educational world in general, albeit with honourable exceptions, has ignored too much the dominant media, their products, their influence on children, especially young children and, particularly, has ignored education in communication, an area of knowledge which various countries in our sphere and Unesco itself have spent years looking for ways to implement.

The media are the main contemporary resource for expression and communication in cultural terms. Those that claim that the media have currently replaced the family, church and school as the main source of socialising influence in contemporary society are probably right. The media are positioned in the centre of experience, in the heart of our capacity or incapacity to make sense of the world we live in.

The work we refer to has three parts. Firstly, a brief review of how the genre of TV reality has evolved; afterwards, brief fieldwork on young people's perception of this TV format; and, finally, a number of didactic proposals on this issue. And we are going to present a summary of this third block below.

In the day-to-day work of schools and institutes, we have been able to observe, over the last few years, how the heroes of many children (probably more so girls) have emerged from these sordid universes of reality shows. This is a first step for other larger projects to develop the issues noted here.

In general terms, education has still not begun to ask itself what implications the media have in young people's perception of the world. On average, OECD countries spend approximately 0.25% of their educational budgets on research and development. Consequently, we hardly know anything about the effects of the media on our citizens.

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Definition

It is significant that, in the digital era, the pleasure of watching, reading and knowing about other people's private lives has shifted from the famous to ordinary people, who are prepared to expose their miseries and joys to millions of strangers. This phenomenon has been given the name of TV reality or reality shows.

Their success and development can be explained by the fact that reality shows are low-cost programmes, capable of generating a lot of advertising revenue and of feeding other programmes. On the other hand, the dominant channels, at the end of the nineties, reached a certain saturation point for some already traditional products and decided there was a need to change and renew the old fictional genres. Finally, they decided to create a non-fiction narrative genre.

The characteristics of reality shows are as follows:

- They have a broad audience that follows the everyday lives of the participants.
- They recount-observe the lives of men and women.
- The contestants-protagonists are ordinary people.
- This kind of programme is supposed to be a mixture of traditional formats or genres: the genres of entertainment, gossip (blame is suggested, events are selected that kindle morbid curiosity, stories don't have a happy ending), soap operas (the stories and plots ignore contemporary issues and are non-spatial).
- The supposed spontaneity does not occur, as the situations are manipulated in the television studio.

The audience is vital. They are invited not to suggest themes but to judge contestants. In this context, reality shows openly ask for participation and channel the desire to intervene, to show solidarity, to have a common cause. TV viewers vote to get rid of participants, as in a Roman circus. In some cases the audience for these shows of emotion, of psychological striptease, of misery, identify with the contestants, they are happy for them, it feeds their curiosity.

When, on a certain occasion, I asked my 4th year secondary pupils for their opinions about the programme *Big Brother*, one of them, Pau, I remember perfectly what he said, namely that it was a kind of programme that brought out the worst in each of us. I am borrowing the expression from my good pupil because I feel he hit the nail on the head and

that it provides a good definition of this kind of TV format.

A figure such as George Orwell, who firmly denounced the remotely programmed manipulation and alienation of power in the difficult times he lived in, would probably now react angrily against the use precisely of one of his concepts, that of the powerful *Big Brother*, i.e. the thousand eyes of authoritarian societies whose citizens are under a supervised freedom, for a TV format that treats low passions and a lack of civic values as normal and that alienate and sully the public.

Didactic proposals to work on reality shows in the secondary classroom

Proposal A

Title: *Estás nominado: cuando la realidad supera la ficción* (documentary)

Production: Canal + España. 2005

Direction: Fernando Martín and Eva Catalán

Duration: 52 minutes

Synopsis: With a very agile style, Canal + presents a report on the television phenomenon of reality shows, with different people in charge of this TV format in Spain and North America. It provides an overview of this new genre that is very well put together and structured, showing a minimal history of reality shows, as well as their dynamics, their commercial basis and future perspectives. A work of critique, reflection, useful to prepare and educate TV viewers.

Activities

1. Draw up a brief historical chart of reality shows.
2. At the start of the report they say that casting is fundamental for this kind of programme. The casting director for *Big Brother* says that it's logical to be vain and an exhibitionist if you are on this programme. How do you value these extremes if you think about the desire of reality shows to proclaim themselves as windows onto real life? Will the contestants of these programmes be representative of society?
3. What does it mean when we say that the first *Big Brother* in Spain made by Telecinco achieved a 50% share? What is share?

4. The presenter on *Big Brother*, Mercedes Milà, says that this programme's appeal is that it reflects reality and is unpredictable. A few minutes later, however, we hear a scriptwriter for this kind of product explain that, if they see that "nothing happens for a few days", the programme's directors intervene to make it more dynamic. They also say that the scriptwriters for these programmes play with emotions, that they are interested in playing with elements from classic narrative: love, humour, hate, the baddie, the princess, the funny one... Give your opinion about these two positions.
5. Mercedes Milà also says that these programmes are successful "because people get very bored". Do you think it's true? Why? Could other television products be found to combat boredom?
6. Josep Maria Mainat, from the production company Gestmusic, creators of *Operación Triunfo* (*Fame Academy* in Spain) says that one of the outstanding elements of these programmes is audience involvement, that they decide who continues and who gets thrown out, like in a Roman circus. In your opinion, is this a positive or a negative aspect?
7. On two occasions during the report, Andy Denhart appears, a lecturer from the United States who gives classes on reality shows. Would you attend these classes? Do you think they are important? Should media education be taught in schools and institutes in our country?
8. What kind of values or counter values can you see in the approach of programmes such as *The Bachelor*, *The Apprentice* or *The Swan*?
9. Why is this kind of programme so profitable for a TV channel?
10. The report ends by talking about the programme *Big Brother Forever*, where a town appears with three houses: one for rich people, one middle class and one poor, inhabited by different people. The audience, from home, can vote to change the contestants from house to house and social class. Could we make any kind of moral objection to this approach? Should there be any limits to being able to do this kind of television format?

Proposal B

Original title: *The Truman Show*

Production: Scott Rudin, Andrew Niccol. USA, 1998

Director: Peter Weir

Script: Andrew Niccol

Photography: Peter Biziou

Music: Burkhard Dallwitz and Philip Glass

Editing: William M. Anderson and Lee Smith

Actors: Jim Carrey (Truman Burbank), Laura Linney (Meryl), Ed Harris (Christoff), Natascha McElhone (Lauren/Silvia), Noah Emmerich (Marlon).

Duration: 102 minutes

Distribution: Universal Pictures International

Synopsis-comments

This film tells the story of Truman, a man of around thirty who has and still lives, since he was born and without realising it, within a television show. Truman was born in a television studio and his life is broadcast via satellite to the whole planet. Everyone around him, family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, are actors. Truman has become a genuine "guinea pig" in the laboratory of television.

But a point comes when he falls in love unexpectedly with an actress who regrets the whole macro-spectacle and who helps him discover the great lie Truman is living. Little by little he starts to notice the manipulation around him and wants to flee from this enormous bubble he's trapped in.

The programme is broadcast twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The audience experience the series as if it were their own family universe. In spite of continuity, there is a constant repetition of brief and almost identical scenes, such as the greeting of the neighbours in the morning, the newspaper stand, the twins, etc., there is even a Truman Catalogue and a tape of the highlights, with the most important moments in Truman's life: his first day at school, his first kiss, etc. But the audience's interest is maintained because they can always expect *new and exciting events*, as said by the enigmatic producer of the programme.

The character who has created the show is called Christoff (a brilliant Ed Harris, as always). He has created a huge studio with 5,000 cameras, an enormous structure that, according to the publicity, can be seen from space (together with the Great Wall of China). Christoff plays at being God. He

himself, at the end of the film, defines himself as the creator of the programme that fills millions of people with hope and happiness. He says that "we accept the reality of the world as it's presented to us". Peter Weir uses reflections on this idea to launch a far-reaching attack on television in this film. A film that attempts to reveal the emotive mechanisms used by television to fascinate viewers, as well as how it simplifies events.

The little old ladies who hug the cushion with Truman's face on it, the waitresses, the Japanese family, etc. are prototypes of the viewer of our time who, alienated, amuses him or herself, laughs, worries and cries with the show, which he or she experiences intensely but which doesn't actually exist.

The great point in the film is at the end. Once the programme ends, the car park attendants we've been watching throughout and who've been following everything happening to Truman, say "What's on now?", referring to the next programme they can watch.

Activities

1. In numerous scenes in the film we observe how the series *The Truman Show* is particularly interested in doing indirect or hidden advertising: characters talking about specific products and showing them to camera, secondary actors placing Truman next to an advertising poster so that the camera can show the image and viewers can see it clearly. Is there any indirect advertising in the series on our TV channels? And in films? Make a list and given your opinion on whether this is right or not.
2. In the film we hear sentences such as *Have you never thought your life is being steered in a certain direction? The world revolves around me.* Have you ever had this sensation? What do you think it's due to?
3. The scene when Truman meets his father again, which ends up with highly emotional tears on the part of the protagonists and the audience, is celebrated euphorically by the show's production team. Someone says *That's pure television.* What do you think about this statement? What kind of television does it refer to? Is it the only possible kind of television?
4. Evaluate the behaviour and path taken by the following characters: Truman, Meryl (the wife), Marlon (the friend), Silvia (the girl who defends Truman), the mother and Christoff.
5. The film is full of symbols. What do *True* and *Man* mean in English? And Seahaven (the artificial town where the action takes place)? The boat that Truman takes to escape is called the *Santa Maria*. What does this name mean?
6. The film explains that Truman was an unwanted child who was adopted by a corporation and, from then on, was used to star, every day, in the show. How do you rate this?
7. What's the meaning of Christoff's statement *We accept the reality of the world as it's presented to us?*
8. Why kind of TV programmes are there, existing today, with a similar theme to the plot of *The Truman Show*? What do you think of them?

New TV advertising market

In *The Truman Show* we can see how viewers have been reduced to mere clients. They are not citizens, they're consumers. The show, Christoff tells us, places on sale all the objects that appear on the screen, carries out hidden advertising (not so hidden, in fact) and publishes a large catalogue with all kinds of products. We sometimes think that films are an exaggeration, where ideas or facts are explained to us that are a bit crazy. Well, let's have a look at this news item published in newspaper *La Vanguardia*:

"With the slogan Product seen, product sold, a company in San Francisco allows TV viewers to buy products from their favourite programmes, a concept that could revolutionise the future of advertising. From crocodile skin handbags for around 10,000 dollars that the sophisticated Kate shows off in the series Will and Grace, to a simple pin for 12 dollars with the initials of General Hospital, the objects that appear on TV series and even films are within reach of viewers. Via the website of the programme in question, the platform Delivery Agent provides access to the clothes, furniture, cosmetics and even automobiles appearing in the most popular series and even films. However, this concept has raised a few hackles, as many believe this kind of advertising to be subliminal and dishonest, and they think there should be limits."

Efe (2005, 16 May). "Nuevo mercado publicitario televisivo". *La Vanguardia*. Barcelona section (page 49).

Activities

1. Has the advertising approach of *The Truman Show* become a reality? Debate whether this kind of advertising initiative might be successful among our audiences. Do you think that objects appearing in series on TV3, Telecinco, Antena 3 TV or TVE could be sold, via the Internet, for example? What ethical consequences would this have?
2. Investigate what subliminal advertising is. What kind of limits should be placed on advertising?
3. Some people say that television has become a technological mechanism to place viewers at the service of advertisers. What do you think?

The power of people meters

As explained in the film, the series created by Christoff, *The Truman Show*, has a large audience and dominates the ratings over half the world. What are people meters and how do they work, these devices that condition TV programming so much? Let us see:

“Every morning, the managers of the TV channels wake up with an implacable verdict: audience data, minute by minute, for their programmes. The people meter, the device that pinpoints viewers' behaviour, is the thermometer that determines life or death for a series, a celebrity gossip programme or game show. It acts as a barometer when establishing advertising rates, depending on the number of viewers in a specific time band. In Spain, audience is controlled by TNS Sofres, a multinational of French origin present in around twenty countries, including China. This is a source accepted by the whole sector, from the channels to the advertisers, including the media buying companies.

Every day Sofres records the avalanche of data from a panel made up of 3,305 homes recording the preferences of almost 9000 individuals. The company makes sure that its audience surveys are "accurate, thorough, transparent and innovative" and insists on the system's "reliability".

Audience data are a "kind of god" says Jesús Sánchez Tena, deputy Director General of the Audiovisual Communication Studies Office (GECA). "The people meter isn't reality but a representation. A map to orient ourselves. It reflects the streets but not the trees or traffic

lights". It's also a "highly precise" tool in quantitative research. "We know what the public is watching every minute. Fanaticism with data has become a tyrannical criterion when creating content" he adds.

Perhaps because of this, the Director General of RTVE, Carmen Caffarel, prefers to be guided by the qualitative evaluations carried out regularly by Ente to measure the acceptance of its programmes. In spite of everything, Sánchez Tena admits that there is no system that is "better or more reliable".

Panel. *The sample is representative of Spanish society. Andalusia and Catalonia (with 440 people meters each one) are the communities with the largest number of terminals. The panel is made up of main residences (not second homes) located on the Spanish mainland, Balearics and Canary Islands. It covers viewers from four years of age upwards. Its composition is one of the best-kept secrets to avoid any agents in the sector from influencing the select group of households that determine successes and failures.*

People meters. *Devices similar to a domestic video are installed in all receivers in the home. They control the television, video, analogue and digital decoders and cable synchronisers. They record whether the television is on or off (not if attention is being paid to the screen) and the channel being watched and they also detect whether a programme is being recorded or a videotape is being watched.*

Remote control. *This is one of the key pieces to determining the most watched programmes. Each person has been assigned a key on the remote that he or she must push every time they turn on or off the television, sit in front of the small screen or leave it. Other buttons are for guests.*

Sending data. *The activity recorded during 24 hours a day is sent in the early hours of the morning to Sofres' central computer, which tabulates the data and presents them clearly for its subscribers. The people meter allows questions to be asked concerning peoples' opinions on programmes in specific situations.*

Controls. *Sofres' work is supervised by two organisations: the User Committee and the Control Council, representing television operators, advertisers and advertising agencies, among others. The Association for Research*

and the Media (AIMC) also carries out permanent monitoring.”

Gómez, R. (2005, 27 March). “El poder de los audímetros”. *El País*. (page 76).

Activities

1. How can a commercial firm know how much it should pay per advertisement for its products broadcast, for example, at 9 pm on TV3?
2. The report says that audience data are "a kind of god". What does this mean?
3. What advantages and disadvantages can you see in this system for measuring audiences?
4. The fact that viewers watch a programme does not mean they are fully satisfied. What other kind of mechanism would you propose for analysing audiences?

Big Brother Forever

In March 2005, the German channels RTL II and Premiere (the latter a subscriber channel) started the sixth German season of *Big Brother* (*Big Brother Forever*), with one difference: there was no planned end and it could last forever. So the life in this TV microcosm that is Big Brother appears taken from a science fiction novel or a giant laboratory for psychosocial experiments. Premiere subscribers can buy daily tickets (five euros) or monthly tickets (fifteen euros) to watch the programme.

The refuge covering 25,000 square metres (4,925 square metres of residence), where 16 contestants and various animals live, is located on the outskirts of Cologne. Here they started a new life, which is observed by millions of viewers, until broadcasting *Big Brother Forever* is no longer profitable. Every year a million euros will be at stake and the contestant who wishes to continue to be watched 24 hours a day by 100 cameras can do so.

The latest edition of this programme also has the novelty that the contestants are divided into social classes: a poor class, a *normal* class and a rich class, as stated by RTL II itself. “It’s like real life. With the class struggle, jealousy, opportunities to go up and down the social ladder” says the German channel in the programme’s publicity.

The buildings are made of wood and combine different architectural styles. The poor contestants live in a workshop. They wash in cold water and have five euros to

eat. They do odd jobs for the rich contestants to help them survive. The *normal* contestants receive 15 euros a day. Norman, 25 years old and a member of the middle class, said when he started on the programme “If anyone asks me to carry shit for money, I’ll do it.”

The middle class contestants work as assistants for the rich contestants, the bosses. They are all between 20 and 30 years of age and most don’t know what to do with their lives, although many have a profession. Dissatisfaction leads them to put up with tasks such as having their legs tied together for days, drinking litres and litres of alcohol or remaining separated from the group for days.

It didn’t take long for the first criticisms to appear. The Federal Association for the Protection of Animals has complained that the town “is a prison for animals disguised with straw” and has claimed that the two cows, two goats, two pigs and two chickens suffer from pain and stress in the farm area. According to them “the grazing area hides the fact that it’s a prison for animals”. A spokesman for the programme replied that the animals are monitored by specialists.

Drafted by the author from various sources of information

Activities

1. Why do you think this kind of programme is profitable?
2. Before criticising the situation of the animals in the programme *Big Brother*, would you make any other criticism?
3. How do you value the division of the contestants into social classes? Do you see in it the transmission of any counter value?
4. Would you take part in this kind of programme? Why? And in any other? Which?

Proposal C

Mainat and Cruz: the magicians of audience

Josep Maria Mainat and Toni Cruz are two former members of the band La Trinca. Alchemists of success, their production company, Gestmusic-Endemol, has been behind a social phenomenon like *Operación Triunfo* (*Fame Academy*), which smashed all audience ratings. Its list of programmes is spectacular. In addition to *Operación Triunfo*

and *Crónicas marcianas* there is also *No te rías que es peor*, *Lluvia de estrellas* and *El bus*.

Is Operación Triunfo (OT) based on any already existing model or did you create it from scratch?

J.M.M. *It's based on formulas that have always existed. On the one hand, we wanted to do a TV musical and, on the other, it's based on reality shows or whatever you want to call them, which consist of watching an event minute by minute with interaction by the public who take part in how it evolves.*

Could the format of OT be applied to other areas of human activity?

T.C. *We have a format called People's Club, which is about to come out, and it's like an academy but applied to a modest football team, where the public can also take decisions about the line-up, for example.*

Does 'trash television' exist?

J.M.M. *Trash television exists if a programme is racist, for example.*

Critics have never been favourable to the work you have done. When you used to sing, they accused you of being frivolous, and when you have made television programmes, of being sensationalist. Do you take it all with resignation, rage or indifference?

J.M.M. *We have very thick skins. The most curious thing is that critics always talk about very successful programmes, which shows that critics and the public don't always agree.*

The only way to evaluate television seems to be the audience, a quantitative criterion. Is it enough?

J.M.M. *There is another parameter. People can watch television proudly or without admitting to it. There are programmes with big audiences that, in public, no-one ever admits to having seen.*

T.C. *Television is the most democratic thing in the world. If you don't like it, there's a black thing called the remote control, you press it and the television goes off. Instead of getting indignant or writing letters to the newspapers, you turn it off and go to bed.*

J.M.M. *The fact that a programme has a big audience simply means that people like it.*

T.C. *And if they like it, the channel has advertising revenue, it earns money and the programme continues. In*

other words, it's a business.

J.M.M. *And that means the industry can continue. Let's not forget that the aim of television is precisely that: to entertain and not to leave any trace behind.*

Pàmies, S (2002, 24 February). "Mainat y Cruz: los magos de la audiencia". *El País*. Supplement (pages 16-19). Adapted by the author.

Activities

1. Investigate the characteristics of the programme *Popstars*. Does it predate *OT*? Why is it that the interviewees didn't mention it when the interviewer asked them whether *OT* was based on an already existing model?
2. In your opinion, should audience ratings be the only criterion for making television programmes?
3. Why are there some people who don't admit in public that they have seen a certain programme?
4. From your perspective as TV viewers, do you agree that television is the most democratic thing in the world? What would truly democratic television be like?
5. Do you agree with the statement that the aim of television is to entertain and not leave any trace behind? Is it any old domestic appliance, like a dishwasher? Do you think that television has other objectives and possibilities?
6. Evaluate the interview in general and arrive at some conclusions regarding the approaches of the creators of *OT*.

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