

Hybridisation strategies in reality TV in mass television programmes

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Abstract

The reality of a multi-platform setting, the fragmentation of the TV on offer and the recession are forcing channels to compete with low-cost products and to surprise viewers with novelties. Hybridisation is a basic premise for evolution and for innovation, hence the proliferation in recent years of genres that combine ingredients from a range of formats and provenances. Such neologisms as infotainment, docutainment, docufiction, docureality, mockumentary, etc. have entered TV schedules, increasingly established in an entertainment role.

Key words

Television, genres, formats, hybridisation, multi-platform, multi-format, multi-genre, factual, docutainment, infotainment, docureality, docufiction, coaching, mockumentary

Resum

La realitat d'un context multiplataforma, la fragmentació de l'oferta televisiva i la situació de crisi econòmica obliguen les cadenes a haver de competir amb productes de baix cost i a sorprendre les persones espectadores amb novetats. La hibridació és una premissa bàsica per a l'evolució i per a la innovació. D'aquí la proliferació, en els darrers anys, de gèneres que barregen ingredients de diversos formats i procedències. Neologismes com ara infotainment, docutainment, docuficció, docureality, mockumentary, etc., s'han incorporat de nou a les graelles de les televisions, cada cop més establertes en un rol d'entreteniment.

Paraules clau

Televisió, gèneres, formats, hibridació, multiplataforma, multi-format, multigènere, factual, docutainment, infotainment, docureality, docuficció, coaching, mockumentary

Factual, infotainment, docutainment, docureality... these are just some of the numerous terms in the TV slang used among media professionals and researchers. Some of them have even transcended the professional sphere to enter the vocabulary of some consumers. They are words of English origin, many of them recently-created, which show the level of evolution of TV genres in recent years and the need to define new concepts. They are all in response to two factors: on the one hand, the pressing realisation that television is basically entertainment and, on the other, that hybridisation is a basic premise for innovation.

Traditionally it was said that the basic functions of television were to educate, inform and entertain. Today, access to all sorts of sources of knowledge is at least reducing the role of education that television may have had in the past, perhaps even making it completely obsolete. However, this should not mean that television channels must give up their responsibilities in creating social or cultural values or yardsticks. Information is still an important asset in public television channels, but it is increasingly less exclusive to television as it is within reach of many global media, especially over the internet, and it is increasingly less of a priority for private channels, which do not want to spend the money that a good newsroom structure costs. Therefore, when the other objectives are in cri-

sis, entertainment becomes the principal aim. This milestone has already been widely taken on board as the most important feature of the medium: on television everything has to be "entertaining", even the news. This does not mean that information is at the service of the show or of entertainment (a phenomenon sadly on the rise) but that it has to generate maximum interest both in terms of content and form to be able to reach as many people as possible.

Understood as a blend, as a mix, as an intersection between ingredients, ideas or formats, hybridisation has traditionally been one of the tools for creation and innovation in all spheres, be it art, literature, business, design, music or communication. The need to surprise the viewer in such a sphere as the audiovisual, where one can sometimes think that everything has been invented, calls for the need to search for combinations that, at least in their form, appear to be innovative.

The early days of reality-based entertainment

A large part of the successful hybrid formats on television channels worldwide have their roots in the documentary or in reality-based programmes. The Anglo Saxons christened this *factual entertainment*, entertainment based on real facts. This

concept covers the non-fictionalised TV formats about human stories that became the first TV reality programmes. One of the pioneering programmes was the series entitled *The Family*, produced by the BBC in 1974, which showed the everyday life of a middle-class family. To modern eyes, it seems surprising that part of the British public criticised the protagonists of *The Family* for airing topics on television regarded at the time to belong to the private sphere. Another fact that shocks us now is that in Spain, prior to the 1990s, only celebrities (at that time, bullfighters and popular singers), politicians or experts in a field appeared on television. It was felt that the man in the street had nothing to say and that their experiences, being everyday and monotonous, would bore viewers. In that environment, by contrast, TV3 made programmes where people in the street and unknown people were one of its differentiating features. For a channel whose main value is closeness, the strategy was to conclude that, if you devote time to anonymous members of the public, treat them with respect and get "up close and personal", the viewer will also feel they are being treated with dignity. And more importantly: viewers discover that, behind other people's stories, there are universal values with which they can identify. Eye witness accounts are not used for a transitory show but have a social intention. The starting point for what would become the New Formats Department at TV3 were series with anonymous characters, such as *Ciudadans*, *Vides privades*, *Generació D* and *Explica'ns la teva vida*, produced between 1992 and 2000. In all of them, the narrative tone was that of a documentary, but with the intention of designing formats with elements of entertainment. This is attempted via the form, the challenges or the mix of ingredients that surprises viewers by its original approach, yet at the same time it does not lose any credibility or closeness. Hybrid formats already had their forerunners at TV3, such as the *La vida en un xip* talk show, directed and presented by Joaquim Maria Puyal between 1989 and 1992. Every week, the programme tackled a social issue that was first introduced with a short fictional piece called *La granja*.

Docusoaps: observing and sequencing reality

In 1996, the BBC also pioneered another hybrid product. In this case, with *Airport*, it was a documentary-based series on London's Heathrow airport. It was the first docusoap in the history of television. The word comes from the mix between documentary and soap opera (so-called because the first American serials were aimed at housewives and were sponsored by soap manufacturers). *Airport*, and the docusoaps that followed it, such as *Driving School*, *Animal Hospital* and almost 50 more titles, used observational techniques and only took from soaps the way of editing scenes as though the viewer were watching simultaneous events taking place in different places in real time and from the front row. In Spain, TV3 led the way in introducing this genre, with such emblematic titles as *Bellvitge*

Hospital, *Veterinaris*, *Jutjats*, *Aeroport*, *Mares*, *Barri*, *Estrena't* and *Un lloc per viure*. The advantages of these series are that, with a mix of information and entertainment, they allow channels to compete in prime time with low budgets, they fulfil a role of closeness and encourage audience loyalty. Of all these series, the most popular was *Veterinaris*, of which five seasons have been produced and whose values included being a format with a large and very much family-based target. The register of docusoaps is easy to decode as the viewer is used to similar narratives from both news reports and fiction.

The spectacle of information

Docusoaps are formats that should be included in infotainment and they have had a natural successor with subsequent products such as *Afers exteriors*, *Espanoles por el mundo*, *Callejeros*, *Comando actualidad* and many others. Infotainment mixes information and entertainment with the aim of achieving more competitive products in terms of audience. Many of them are based on presenters who "live" certain events first-hand and show them to the viewers. The interaction of the presenter with other people is a relatively cheap production system as it allows useful, long scenes with less effort than if they had to be produced without their intervention. Besides this, TV channels try to create a star system with the most charismatic presenters, enabling them to generate new products based on the attraction of the most well-known faces. In recent years, infotainment has increased its presence on all channels. First there were report-type programmes with live reporters, such as *Mi cámara y yo* and *Madrid directo*, both by Telemadrid, and all the subsequent nationwide or regional versions. Then came the ones with political irony, such as *Caiga quien caiga* on Telecinco and, more recently, *Salvados* on laSexta. There are no channels today that do not have a range of presenters with the ability to interact with celebrities, politicians or anonymous characters, and this supposedly no-holds-barred fever of the private channels in the infotainment sphere seems to be entering a spiral in which each new proposal has to go further than the previous one. The *21 días* format by Cuatro, presented by Adela Úcar, began in 2009 with reporter Samantha Villar living for three weeks with the poor, but very soon topics with a social focus gave way to others such as the world of porn movies, drugs and alcohol, where the reporter is the protagonist. The programme's website defines it as a space of "life challenges, shocking worlds, extreme situations...". The channel catalogues it as a reportage programme in the same way it does the successful *Callejeros*, a benchmark in the genre.

Callejeros seeks dynamism through the hand-held camera, a soundtrack created from the statements with the most impact, from which all the "chaff" has been removed, and a fragmented montage more in keeping with the video clip than the documentary. According to the programme, the topics are treated "in their true dimension and depth" but, behind this supposed

work of journalistic investigation there probably hides merely the intention to emphasise stereotypes, to shock, to sell sensationalism and highlight the unusual and startling. The marginal, freakish depiction provided by *Callejeros* has damaged television journalism since it trivialises information and annuls the ability to explain the reasons behind things and put them in context. However, it has, without a doubt, had this repercussion because it has achieved great ratings success.

Within this context of "anything for ratings", the trend for making a show out of information has also reached the news programmes on the private channels. The summaries of the news programmes on Telecinco, Antena 3 TV and laSexta prioritise impacting pictures, curious events and sensationalism over more important news items. Superficiality, anecdotes and immediate impact take priority over rigour and analysis. The time devoted to events, sports or the weather exceeds that spent on culture, the economy and international news. In this way, news programmes appear to be adopting the general tone of the rest of the schedules, where it seems that everything has to be in your face and trivial.

Coaching: the answer is on TV

Coaching programmes are new exponents of factual type hybrid programmes that have appeared in the last decade. They represent television as therapy, television for improving our lives. Having a rebellious child, not eating healthily, wanting to lose weight, having financial problems, suffering from phobias, wanting to renovate a house or having an aggressive dog: it does not matter what the problem is, television provides an answer with an expert willing to enter fleetingly into our lives and make us change. *Supernanny* was the pioneering programme of this type of format in Spain. In each episode, nanny Jo Frost helps a family with the behavioural problems of one of their children. TV3 broadcast the original British and American versions from Channel 4 and ABC, and Cuatro adapted the format with a Spanish psychologist, Rocío Ramos. Other European channels, such as M6 in France and RTL in the Netherlands, also have their "supernannies". Soon, coaching programmes in Spain multiplied: *Soy lo que como*, *Ajuste de cuentas*, *Terapia de pareja*, *Malas pulgas*, *SOS Adolescentes*, *¡Qué desperdicio!*, *Hermano mayor...* are just some of the titles made. Coaching shows mix ingredients from various formats, such as the documentary, insofar as the characters are real and they are recorded as reportage or using hidden cameras, talk show or entertainment magazine techniques, as the expert in question will adopt the role of star presenter, and fiction, due to the high level of staging of the situations.

The narrative structure is usually always the same: posing of a conflict, superficial intervention of the expert, emergence of certain difficulties, momentary overcoming of the difficulties and happy ending. The viewers witness the miraculous transformation of protagonists who are almost always middle class

in order to seek a high level of emotional identification with the audience. The intervention of the filming teams in supposedly intimate situations is very high and, therefore, so is the way in which reality is conditioned or altered, decontextualising it. The editing aids manipulation so that the viewer has the sensation of witnessing a real scene from a scene recorded as though it were reportage or an observational documentary, when in reality the genre has more elements of fiction or of reality TV than would appear.

Realities and docurealities: the spectacle of privacy

On the eve of 23 April 2000, Catalonia's Saint's Day, Mercedes Milá appeared on Telecinco presenting the first *Gran Hermano* (*Big Brother*). She did so with rather a lot of pretension: "It will be a sociological experiment that will change the history of television." After twelve seasons, no one expects Endemol's revolutionary format to have sociological intentions anymore, but what we must admit is that it has become a television benchmark and has changed the way in which television tackles privacy. Viewers have a generally very low level of identification with the contestants on reality competitions, who are selected not because they represent any social class but for their ability to create a spectacle, to offer a circus. It's more a case of the contestants being perceived as freaks or as actors in a drama or a depiction of reality. Neither are these programmes perceived as *teletrash*, a concept more invented by the media and academic circles to show scorn for the genre as a cultural sub-product rather than accepted as such by consumers. No one wants to admit to watching trash. For the majority, this type of programme is simply pure entertainment. Its followers know that the content is trivial and frivolous, some even admit a low level of dignity, but they see it as having no pretensions, as helping to pass the time and have a topic of conversation for the next day.

Reality shows are closer to drama than any other reality genre, especially to soaps, where story lines are also often based on feelings, emotions, conflicts of coexistence, tensions between characters, etc. In reality shows, reality is told as a drama, ambiguously, conveniently manipulated by the selection of participants, selecting excerpts via editing and with a defined script.

Reality shows also respond to a cost need: they are much cheaper than any drama production. They are also more profitable as they allow for other, even cheaper programmes to be scattered about the schedule to comment on, discuss or argue about their content. They have also proved to be more attractive than drama products for the 25 to 44 age range, the one most sought-after by advertisers.

The need to offer new formulas in the field of reality shows has led to TV creatives hybridising this genre with the historical documentary in the form of *docurealities* (*La masia* on TV3 and *A casa de 1907* on TVG, *Perdidos en la tribu*, on Cuatro,

and many products made by British TV channels in which the protagonists live under the conditions of the past). It has also been mixed with contests along the lines of *docugames* (*El conquistador del fin del mundo* on ETB, and *Pekín express* on Cuatro) and with coaching or overcoming personal challenges (*El aprendizaje* on laSexta, and *El cim* or *Casal rock* on TV3).

Hybridisation in social reality TV formats

The eye witness programmes broadcast by most channels are strongly decontextualised from the problems they are tackling. This means that the treatment, intimate confessions and feelings become gratuitous and are exclusively at the service of exhibitionism and spectacle. This implies an instrumentalisation or abuse of privacy. Most of the “eye witness” programmes such as *El Diario*, on Antena 3 TV, the *voyeur realities* and the pseudo-news genres such as *Callejeros*, are in response to objectives that are exclusively at the service of spectacle or exhibitionism. This has led to two reactions among the people taking part in them: those who would be willing to do almost anything for a few minutes of fleeting TV fame and those who are increasingly distrustful of the media in order to protect their privacy. With the former, motivated by new post-modern media heroes, such as Conde Lecquio and Belén Esteban, some channels have found new possibilities, which lie halfway between fiction and reality. The series *Princesas de barrio*, on laSexta, a spin-off from *Mujeres ricas*, is a clear exponent of this and of TV performativity, in other words, of the staging induced either by the roles to be imitated or by scripts proposed directly by the very people in charge of the programme.

Generally speaking, TV3 has preferred to avoid reality shows and eye witness programmes throughout its history. In their place, it has leaned towards reality TV products with more social intentionality. The strategy of this type of programme on TV3, now with over forty series made by the New Formats, Documentaries and Entertainment departments, focuses on a perspective of respect and mutuality towards unknown people and their stories. This has allowed a sort of implicit pact between the channel and the audience. Viewers can consume products that are less respectful towards the participants in some programmes on other channels, but they would not like it if TV3 were to do it, which they see as more theirs and with greater values of safety and of service.

After the first series with unknown protagonists mentioned above, such as *Ciudadans*, *Vides privades*, *Les coses com són*, *Explica'ns la teva vida*, *Amors* and *Generació D*, or all the docusoap titles, there were others, such as *Efecte mirall*, *Sense embuts* and *L'endemà*. All of them have been scheduled at peak times, they have all led to very good ratings and they have contributed to part of the channel's differential. The stories of unknown people in these programmes are an attempt to attain a process of identification via the emotions of others but beyond stereotypes or the fleeting instrumentalisation of sentiments.

Docutainment: reality as entertainment

Even in social reality TV programmes, which were initially more documentary in their approach, the context of competition in mass television forces us to be competitive in prime time. This means we have had to look for new formulas that, without betraying the style and perception of utility, enable us to compete with drama, reality shows and big-budget formats. These are *docutainment* programmes, i.e. they mix documentary and entertainment. One of the pioneers was the popular *Caçadors de bolets*, which combined following an excursion with unknown people in search of wild mushrooms with other ingredients such as sketches by Toni Albà, Teatre de Guerrilla and Bruno Oro, the ironic voice-overs of Òscar Dalmau, the acerbic performances of the elderly people from Viladrau, cookery recipes, etc. The programme has various successful ingredients: closeness, humour, education, cookery, region, the passion felt by Catalans for wild mushrooms... It is also a cheap product as it has fairly simple production values.

Caçadors de paraules bears little resemblance to its wild mushroom counterpart other than its name and could also be classed as *docutainment*. In this case, the challenge was to make a programme about language that would work in prime time. It also had to mix various ingredients to achieve a flowing and effective product. With his simple register, the presenter, Roger de Gràcia, enabled interaction with various characters throughout the Catalan-speaking regions in his search for words. At its heart, beyond the language focus, *Caçadors de paraules* was an excuse for anthropology and to bring the region together. The most important value was to achieve a very broad target audience, especially to overcome the challenge of getting young people interested, and for the public to see it as, essentially, an entertaining programme. The level of hybridisation in each case is different, but the technique has continued to be used in other products, such as *Un lloc estrany*, on how immigrants see us, *Sexes en guerra*, on the biological and behavioural differences between men and women, *El paisatge favorit de Catalunya*, which combined scenery, the region and celebrities, *Disculpin les molèsties*, which took a look at the role of television in our lives, and *No me la puc treure del cap*, which dissected popular Catalan songs to discover why they were successful.

Docufiction: fiction at the service of reality discourse

Docufiction formats mix elements of fiction amidst a documentary item. They may be historical representations, with classic fictional scenes that contain dialogues between actors, the creation of characters and continuity sections, or simple re-enactments to illustrate history. The main difficulty is in attaining a fluid language in the transitions between genres and for the changes of register not to disconnect viewers from the story. The representations have to be highly believable and that is not

always easy, as documentaries do not often have the budgets demanded by historical drama productions, with costumes, action scenes, a large cast and extras, etc. Audiences are used to seeing big-budget historical films that are high on realism at the cinema, and if they see a docufiction with less rounded sequences, the story being told immediately loses credibility. There are very good examples of TV docufiction, especially among British and North American productions. These are pieces that have been able to move fluidly from historical fictional scenes to interviews with experts or archive footage. Documentary makers usually adopt these hybridisation techniques due to the difficulty of competing with classic or newly created documentaries at peak audience times on mass channels. On TV3, series such as *Històries de Catalunya* and *Pecats capitals*, or documentaries such as *Anatomia d'un rei*, among others, have achieved good results with moderate budgets. On 33, programmes such as *Zona roja*, *El tresor del setè camió*, *Boira negra* and *Camp d'Argelers* have also experimented with the mix of historical documentary and fiction.

The ambiguity between reality and fiction

Peter Weir's 1998 film *The Truman Show* continued the theme of the novel *1984*. The *Big Brother* format was also inspired by the idea and name from George Orwell's book. In the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, reality shows proliferated to such an extent that, on TV channels worldwide and after just a few years, it is fiction that appears to be inspired by the reality shows. *Lost*, the legendary series by ABC, centred on the story of survivors of an air crash on an island. Many have seen a parallel here with the *Survivor* format, by CBS, which had its adaptation into *Supervivientes* on Telecinco. Even the flashbacks in *Lost* show the dual life of the characters, the one from the past and the one on the island, just like the contestants in a reality show.

The situation of a group of people in an enclosed space has often provided fiction with good dramatic possibilities. Antena 3 TV recently, and very successfully, broadcast the drama *El barco*, a series that combined the fantasy and romance genres and which shows, just like a reality show, the lives of the crew members of a training ship that is on the sea when a worldwide disaster has caused the land to disappear.

The use of TV documentary resources is also present in many other drama titles, both in the cinema and in television series. *The Office* (BBC and ABC), for example, is a documentary fiction or a fake documentary (*mockumentary*) about the employees of a company in the paper industry. The genre uses traditional documentary narrative resources, such as the roving hand-held camera, applied to fiction. However, the hybridisation of mockumentaries is no guarantee of success. Most of the experiences have not had much impact. Without a doubt, in the case of *The Office*, the acting and the surreal scripts are the keys to its having become a great comedy. More recently,

in another American series by ABC, *Modern Family*, the similarity between documentary and reality show is more evident: the protagonists look to camera to make statements, they explain how they feel and what they think of others and, when they interact with each other, a camera appears to be spying on them to show their conflicts.

Other productions have been halfway between docufiction and mockumentary. This could be the case of *Walking with Dinosaurs* by the BBC, which showed computer-generated animals from the Mesozoic age with narrative techniques taken from wildlife documentaries. A resounding hit in Belgium was the 2006 broadcast by French-language Belgian TV channel RTBF of the fake news *Bye, Bye Belgium*, in which the presenter of the news programme with the biggest ratings announced the end of Belgium after the Flemish Parliament supposedly declared independence. In 1991, on TVE in Catalunya, Josep Abril interrupted the *Camaleó* programme to present a fake piece of news on the assassination of Mikhail Gorbachev. In 2010 in France, state channel France2 broadcast *Le jeu de la mort*, a fake competition in which contestants were unwitting participants in an experiment to study the impact of authority – in this case, television itself – on public obedience.

In Spain, few television channels have dared experiment in the mockumentary genre with home-grown productions. Some of the few initiatives that have been produced are in the field of parody or satire. This was the case of *Herois quotidians*, broadcast by TV3 in 2008, with scripts by Empar Moliner and Juan Carlos Ortega, which took an acerbic look at things considered socially to be politically correct. Recently, Manuel Hueriga also directed *14 d'abril, Macià contra Companys* for TV3, a mockumentary that recalled the historical events after the proclamation of the Second Republic and which included anachronous interviews with the protagonists.

Conclusions

Not so long ago, many were predicting the end of television in light of fragmentation and of new screens. By contrast, these two new phenomena have not as yet reduced television consumption but have actually increased it. The multi-platform context and the ability of the public to generate information and content through social networks pose new challenges for TV channels, where perhaps the concept of prime time has to change very soon to give way to asynchronous consumption from multiple sources. This is why new formulas are needed now more than before.

The mix of narrative codes in the audiovisual enriches conventional forms. Nowadays, the boundaries between TV genres are ever more blurred. In fact, this is also the case in any other creative field. Hybridisation is effective for innovating, but the gratuitous mixing of ingredients does not guarantee success every time. The key will always be whether there's a good story to tell and it is well structured.