Methodology of the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia for monitoring pluralism in news broadcasts

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When drawing up reports on pluralism, the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia has always followed a conscientious methodology refined throughout its years of existence. This article outlines the theoretical and regulatory foundation that characterises these regular surveys and describes the basic concepts, items of analysis and type of programmes included in the sample. Finally, the author presents a debate as to the suitability of quantitative and/or qualitative studies.

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The origins of pluralism reports

The Decision of the Parliament of Catalonia 341/VI, 23 November 2000, is the legal origin of the CAC's pluralism studies. This decision states that:

> "The Parliament of Catalonia, in accordance with Act 2/2000, dated 4 May, asks the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia to prepare a report on the news pluralism of the public radio and television media in Catalonia and to present this report to the Parliament during the first quarter of 2001"

So the Catalan legislator asked for an analysis of news pluralism in the public media. The first step after this request was obviously to define the concept. The report on news pluralism in the public radio and television media of Catalonia, approved by the Full Assembly of the Council on 14 June 2001, fulfilled this mission.

This document provides an interesting review of the different concepts involved in the request, where both the first term, *pluralism*, as well as the second, *news*, were analysed thoroughly.

In short, the document is based on two assumptions in order to state an initial hypothesis. The two assumptions were that the request referred to internal pluralism ("regarding the content of the information transmitted")[1] as opposed to external pluralism ("the existence of plurality in the supply of broadcasters")[2] and that *news* "does not only apply to programmes transmitted that are called news

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[1]   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 5.

[2]   Ibid.

programmes but also to the news content transmitted by the public media in all their programming"[3]. From this point on, the initial hypothesis is stated in the form of a definition of news pluralism:

> "News pluralism consists of the capacity of the media to represent a faithful reflection of Catalan society in all its constituent areas"

Moreover, the text approved by the Full Assembly of the Council states the need for the report to include an analysis of private media:

> "In any case, and ahead of the conclusions presented, we believe that any general proposal to manage and regulate pluralism in the news media must also include previsions related to privately-owned media." [4]

The conclusions reaffirmed this position, and consequently the pluralism reports produced as from this time have always included an analysis of private media.

The report accompanied the theoretical reflection of an arduous task analysing the social situation (a survey on the perception of pluralism in the media carried out by the Opina Institute[5], interviews held with 41 experts and professionals from the communication sector and a questionnaire answered by 34 organisations and social groups), and an empirical study analysing the content of broadcasts on 10 media (more than 400 hours of news broadcasts and non-daily information programmes). And, based on this comparison with reality, the document proposed a series of definitions for pluralism.

On closer reading, the document reveals a certain shift between the base assumptions and the definitions finally given for pluralism. In effect, although originating from positions that are close to liberal political theory (in the more European sense of the term), a compromise was finally reached between this doctrine and others closer to Rawls' theory of justice. Applied to the area in question, this would be reflected in a conception of pluralism in terms of giving voice to all political and social agents, without any lineal correspondence with their capacity to influence the media or their electoral or institutional presence.

A conception that, on the other hand, can already be found in the beginnings of the report when it talks about the media as a mirror but also as a "lighthouse, a guide, a platform from which images, desires, ways of life or ways of thinking are projected (...). Whereas the function of a mirror is to bring news content closer to the pre-existing reality, the function of a lighthouse is to look towards the future: it outlines the possible lines-forces of development for collective life."[6]

This statement is related to studies on the cognitive effects of the media, insofar as communication conditions and influences individuals and how they perceive their social environment: agenda setting as an effect that can shape public opinion.

But this view becomes normalised in the final part of the document:

> "The defence and promotion of pluralism, understood as a practice aimed at giving voice and presence to all existing forms of expression in society, requires a variety of resources and instruments to be set up, aimed at different groups and levels." [7]

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3   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 5 and subsequent pages.

4   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 8.

5   Telephone survey carried out on the 16 and 17 February 2001 on 1600 people aged over 16 with a 2.45% margin of error and a 95% confidence level (for p=q=50%).

6   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 7.

7   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 77.

Finally, and in order to make the concept initially operational, the document proposes the following resources:

> "a. Ensuring the presence of the different political forces in daily news broadcasts by means of objective and impartial information on all of them, of proportioned duration (which does not strictly mean proportional) in line with their respective electoral and institutional implantation in the territorial area corresponding to the medium in question. Although this may be considered a proposal that tends to reproduce the current state of affairs, it is a clear and objectifiable criterion.
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> b. Guaranteeing right of access for the most relevant social groups. (...) The time of intervention for certain social groups would be attributed according to the extent they are established in society, their degree of representation, etc. and also taking into account considerations of contemporary importance.
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> c. The presence of diversity in the relevant political forces and social collectives in non-daily news programmes (debates, etc.) as a means of helping to form public opinion. (...)
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> d. (...) The presentation of a significant initiative to public opinion in terms of national politics (or local, in the case of municipal media), an essential part of government's political action, must be followed immediately by the possibility to formulate alternative proposals on the part of the different political forces. This is the so-called 'right to political reply' in the case of significant declarations or important initiatives on the part of governments. (...) it is undoubtedly a significant manifestation of the principle of political pluralism in terms of news activity." [8]

And the whole conceptual and methodological structure that has formed the basis of four years of monitoring pluralisms is founded on these elements.

The methodology of the reports

As an appendix, the report includes a *Pilot study on the pluralism of news on radio and television*, one of whose objectives was to establish the basis on which the observance of pluralism in audiovisual media could be systemised (in compliance with that established by point d) of article 10 in Act 2/2000).

So, in order to gather objective data on the observance of pluralism, a study method was designed based on content analysis techniques, "a research technique that identifies and describes the properties of a text objectively and systematically"[9]. With regard to objectivity, it should be remembered that content analysis only allows considers what is clearly present in the text, with no room for interpretation or inference.

The choice of one technique or another, and of certain instruments of analysis, is not circumstantial nor by chance. Quite the opposite. This constitutes the first stone in a methodological building that always aims to answer the research questions being asked. In the case of pluralism reports, we could simplify this by saying that the question was who and what is on television and radio and when. This question was in ideological terms: the answer had to be in scientific terms, defining a methodological construct. In our case we had to quantify in time and/or frequency the appearance of themes (thematic pluralism), towns, cities and countries (territorial pluralism), social agents of information (social and religious pluralism) and political agents (political pluralism).

The basic concepts

One of the virtues of the pluralism reports' methodological design is their conceptual simplicity. Basically, the analysis boils down to three unique concepts (news time, speaking time and frequency of appearance), which we shall now define.

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8   *Report on news pluralism of the public radio and television media of Catalonia*, page 78 and 79.

9   MAYNTZ, R.; HOLM, K; HÜBNER, P. *Introducción a los métodos de la sociología empírica*. Madrid: Editorial Alianza Universidad, 1975, page 198.

News time is understood as the total sum of the duration of the news referring to a specific theme or place, i.e. the time a broadcaster dedicates to providing information on a specific item.

Speaking time is the total sum of the duration of the sequences in which an agent intervenes, as a subject, by making an insert (insertion of images and voice of a political or non-political agent, without there being any kind of voiceover on the part of the channel). This time therefore measures the direct presence of the agents, with their voice and their image, in the media space.

Frequency of appearance is the number of times an agent appears, political or non-political, in chat programmes, interviews or debates.

The pilot pluralism study included a fourth concept, screen time, which is defined as the total sum of the duration of sequences in which a specific agent intervenes or appears. With regard to this concept, a distinction was made between two possible types: active screen time (total duration of the sequences in which a specific agent intervenes as subject, i.e. playing an active role) and passive screen time (total duration of the sequences in which a specific agent appears as object, i.e. playing a passive role).

A comparative study of data for news time, screen time and speaking time showed that this concept did not provide enough extra information on the observance of pluralism in television broadcasts to justify the enormous increase in work it entailed (50% extra workload). For this reason it was never used in the systematic pluralism studies.

The items of analysis

Based on these three core concepts, the pluralism reports introduced other items of analysis: geographic indicator, thematic indicator, political agent, non-political agent, agent group and agent gender.

Agents

Agent means a person who appears on the audiovisual medium representing an interested party, an association or organisation, a political party or an institution.

In turn, agents form **agent groups**, broad categories that can contain various agents who meet their defining criteria. In this way, agents appear in groups as well as individually and provide us with data on the different groupings established. Two types of agent groups have been defined: those of political agents (institutional and party) and those of non-political agents (see tables 1 and 2).

In order to understand whether an agent belongs to a group, the concept of *agent position* was created, defined as the public role each agent plays in the news item in question. So the same agent can adopt different roles simultaneously in his or her public life: as a member of a political party, as a member of a government, as the member of a coalition, for example. In each news items the agent is assigned to a certain group.

With regard to political party groupings, any party or coalition also constitutes a group per se. The rules for assigning these groups are as follows:

1. Political agents that have been elected to their position belong to the coalition group, irrespective of their specific assignment to one political party or another. So, for example, the members of the Catalan parliament chosen from the lists of the party Convergència i Unió (CiU) are included in this group, even though they might belong, individually, to the party Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya or to the party Unió Democràtica de Catalunya. When the action is understood as being within the context of one of the coalition parties, then the party will be noted (UDC or CDC).

2. Two series of party groups are established according to whether they belong to the Catalan party system or to the party system in the rest of the state of Spain. That is why there are groups defined for the Catalan Conservative party, the Partit Popular de Catalunya (PPC) and for the Spanish Conservative party, the Partido Popular (PP), for the Catalan Socialist party, the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC) and for the Spanish Socialist party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).

The second big division established with regard to groups affects non-political agents. These agents are grouped into the following categories:

Table 1. Group of political institutional agents

Government of Catalonia	Agents that belong to the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat), understood as higher bodies and positions.
Administration of the Government of Catalonia	Agents of the administrative structure of the Government of Catalonia, under - stood as all positions below the high position category.
Parliament of Catalonia	Agents that represent the Parliament of Catalonia (Presidency and Bureau).
Government of Barcelona City Council	Agents that form part of the team of the municipal government and command positions up to management or equivalent.
Opposition to Barcelona City Council	Agents that belong to political groups not included in the municipal portfolio of Barcelona.
Administration of Barcelona City Council	Agents of the administrative structure of Barcelona City Council, understood as positions below management or equivalent.
Government of the Catalan local administrations	Agents that belong to the government of Catalan councils (except Barcelona), county councils and provincial coun cils of Catalonia.
Opposition of the Catalan local administrations	Agents that belong to political groups not included in the governments of Catalan councils (except Barcelona), county councils and provincial councils of Catalonia.
Catalan local administ ration	Agents that represent the administrative structure of the different Catalan local administrations (except Barcelona City Council).
Other institutions	Agents of the autonomous community organisations originating from the Parlia - ment of Catalonia, su ch as the Accounts Offices, Ombudsman or the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia.
Other Spanish institutions	Agents of the autonomous community organisations originating from the Spanish parliament, such as the Ombudsman or the Accounts Offices.
Other publi c bodies	Agents that represent public institutions made up of administrations of a diverse nature (local, autonomous community, state) and institutions with joint public and private participation.
The crown	Members of the Royal Household.
Spanish parliam ent	Agents that represent the Spanish parliament (Presidency and Bureau).
Spanish government	Agents that belong to the government of the Spanish state, understood as all higher bodies and executive bodies with a high position.
Administration of the Spani sh state	Agents that represent the administrative structure of the Spanish state, under - stood as all positions below the high position category.
Non-Catalan autonomous community administration	Agents that belong to the government and administration of the various autono - mous communities that go to make up the Spanish state (except Catalonia).
Non-Catalan local administration	Agents that belong to the municipal government and various administrations of the Spanish state (except Catalonia).
Justice adminis tration	Agents from bodies of the judicial system of the Spanish state.
Bodies of the European Union	Agents that represent institutions that go to make up the structure of the Euro - pean Union.

Source: in-house.

Table 2. Groups of non-political agents

Cultural agents	Groups together the agents that intervene in the news item because they carry out a cultural activity in the broad sense.
Healthcare agents	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item as professionals from the world of traditi onal medicine.
Economic agents	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item as they carry out a spe - cific economic activity.
Sports agents	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item because they are professionally related to the wo rld of sport.
Resident associations	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item as members of the resi - dent association of a specific place.
Professional associations and collectives	Groups together associated agents due to their professional activity and who intervene in the news item precisely to represent this collective.
Catholic church	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item to represent the eccle - siastical hierarchy of the Spanish state.
Experts	Groups together agents t hat intervene in the news item as specialists in a specific area but that cannot be assigned to another group.
Associations	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item to represent an associa - tion for various reasons.
Business organisations	Groups together agents that intervene in the news item to represent a collective of business people or companies based on the profit motive, irrespective of their size or economic sector.
Non-Catholic religions and churches	Groups together agents that int ervene in the news item as representatives of any religious structure other than Catholic.
Trade unions	Groups together agents that, within the context of the news item, act as members of a trade union organisation.
University and teaching	Groups togethe r agents that intervene in the news item because they are related to the world of teaching and education in any of its forms.
Other	Groups together those occasional agents that intervene in the news item because they are involved in the event but that ca nnot be assigned to any other group.

Source: in-house.

The thematic classification of information
Three indicators are used to classify news items by theme: the headline of the news item, a Particularly Relevant Theme (PRT), if there is one, and a third theme assigned according to a previously approved list (see table 3).

Table 3. Thematic indicators

Theme
Art and culture
Science and technology
Social conflicts
International story
Political story
Economy and business
Education and teaching
Sports
Environment
Media and telecommunications
Health
Society
Weather
Work
Other

Source: in-house.

The headline of the news item is the first and immediate classification for all information and provides specific data on the daily events. On the other hand, PRT, defined as a group of news items that form part of the same sequence of facts, allows longer term monitoring to be carried out and particularly provides a more comprehensive view of the current affairs offered by each channel. It therefore means that the 30, 40 or 50 news items broadcast during one month by a broadcaster can be grouped under generic term (e.g. *Iraq conflict*), which otherwise would have been diluted into a large number of small news items.

The geographical classification of information
In order to obtain the territorial distribution of information, the news items receive one or more geographical indicators that specify the place associated with the information. The assignment of names of places varies according to the location referred to. So the minimum units recordable are district in Barcelona city, municipality in Catalonia, provincial capital in the state of Spain and the state in the case of foreign countries. Moreover, non-administrative geographical references can also be used when this is required for reasons of accuracy, such as *Terres de l'Ebre (Lands of the Ebro River), Metropolitan Area of Barcelona* or *Pyrenees*.

The report sample

Pluralism reports analyse two kinds of programme:
1. Television news programmes, where the basic concepts of news and speaking time are applied. The speaking time and number of inserts are calculated for each agent and group. News coverage in these programmes is also analysed using thematic indicators, the territorial distribution of the information and the gender variable applied to political and non-political agents. The data are provided monthly but include a sliding quarter system so that the data can be placed within a broader timescale.
2. Debates, chat shows and interviews, in which the information is limited to the frequency of appearance of the agents for each of the types of intervention, as well as their gender.

Although the sample has varied over the years, the criterion for selection aims to include the two main news broadcasts of the channels (one at midday and one in the evening, if there is one) covering Catalonia, as well as some local broadcasters from Barcelona. That is why the following have been analysed: TVC, TVE in Catalonia, Catalan broadcasts by Tele-5 and Antena 3 TV, when these occur, Citytv (now 8tv), BTV and Localia broadcasts in Barcelona.

By way of conclusion: quantitative studies and qualitative studies

Using this methodology and these instruments of analysis, the Audiovisual Council has produced systematic monthly reports on the observance of pluralism, volumes of more than considerable size where information is provided in tables and graphs for primary data.

The decidedly quantitative nature of the reports has led to questions concerning the absence of qualitative elements. A qualitative analyse has often been demanded because this absence has been seen as a lack, as incomplete design. From a technical point of view, however, this view is not accurate, given that the choice to produce quantitative reports has been a conscious methodological decision. The discussion should therefore focus on the field of research methodology design and, specifically, on the requirement for the research question, the technique and the analytical tools to complement each other.

Therefore, and as we have mentioned above, each question, each research question has a certain methodological response. And in the period examined here (2003-2005), the question asked (who appears and how much) requires a description in quantitative terms. In this respect, the pluralism reports have fulfilled their research objective in providing a series of primary data that are classified and ordered.

Moving towards a qualitative analysis of these data is more an option than a technical requirement. We agree with Ortí[10] when he states that we must avoid both "the triumphalist ingenuity of qualitative-based imperialism in sociological research" as well as "qualitative-based triumphalism".

Quantitative or qualitative? Is the distance that separates these two views of reality a continuum that can be traced with these data or is there a gap that makes such a move impossible? Is it possible to approach the data qualitatively using our current tools and concepts? Undoubtedly, and with the limits established by the data themselves, it is methodologically correct. It is therefore necessary to formulate a new research question: what is required of the pluralism reports beyond that already formulated (who appears, etc.)?

Undoubtedly, the background to the pluralism reports already contains an area of qualitative analysis that would involve carrying out *norm verification* studies on the pluralism reports. So the research question could be asked in the following terms: does television programming safeguard the principle of pluralism (political, social, territorial, etc.)?

Answering this question would require the definition of norms[11], not so much at a theoretical level (the definition the Council has produced for pluralism contains theoretical elements that would allow a technical answer to be founded) but rather at a methodological level, in order to achieve reliable and accurate analyses. The primary data from the current analytical tools would, however, be fully valid in order to carry out verification studies.

In conclusion, we may state that four years of quantitative experience have provided a basis that we believe is sufficiently solid to construct other approaches to pluralism in the media and that could also include some kind of qualitative analysis.

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10 ORTÍ, A. "La apertura y el enfoque cualitativo o estructural". In: GARCÍA FERRANDO, M; IBÁÑEZ, J.; ALVIRA, F. (comp.): *El análisis de la realidad social (Analysis of social reality),* Madrid, Alianza, 1986, page 23.

11 "The objective of analysing content is to make inferences (deductions) and inferences can be linked to systems (conceptual devices used to describe a part of reality) or to norms (criteria used to compare objects, in order to determine their suitability or category) or to indexes (variables that can be correlated with other phenomena)" KRIPPENDORF, K. *Metodología del anàlisis de contenido. Teoría y práctica.* Barcelona, Paidós, 1990, page 55.