# Evaluation of the protagonist-antagonist dichotomy in Spanish television content targeting children

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**Abstract**: The goal of this study is to analyse the profile of the protagonist-antagonist dichotomy in all children's television content, of all genres, offered by Spanish television channels. The analysis of protagonist and antagonist characters focuses on variables such as: type and number, age, gender, nationality, skills, relationship between the characters, characterisation, means used to achieve goals, consequences of the action of the antagonist over the antagonist and vice versa. The sample consists of 168 series that were analysed using descriptive content analysis and multivariate analysis. The results showed that over 50% of the series do not have an antagonist and that when there is one the most common type is a single human, which appears in more than 15% of the analysed series, followed by the fantastic creature type, which is present in just 10%. In 80% of the series the skills of the protagonists are social and human, and in 45.24% the exhibited skill is intelligence.

**Keywords**: Children; television; protagonist; antagonist; evaluation.

**Summary**: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Results. 4. Discussion and Conclusions. 5. Bibliographic References. 6. Notes.

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## 1. Introduction

This article presents the results of a study aiming to identify and describe in details the profile of the protagonist and antagonist characters in all genres of television content offered in slots identified as "for children" by Spanish TV channels. This work is part of a R&D project that is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science and the FEDER [1] and aims to determine the variables involved in the quality assessment of TV programming aimed at children in Spain.

In this study, the protagonists and antagonists can be understood as the characters that lead the narrative of any children's television text, in a prominent manner and clearly stand above the rest of the cast. As pointed out by the literature on the effects of television on children, these figures have a great influence on children. Several authors have considered the media as transmitters of role models (Bandura, Walters, 1963; Casado, 2005), which help children's in the "construction of the self", and therefore personal identity. The audiences obtain certain psychological gratifications that connect them even more to the media products, their figures and what they represent (Pindado, 2004).

Television has been ratified as the most influential medium in the process of socialisation of children (Giddens, 1997; Thompson, 1998; Huertas and França, 2001; Livingstone, 2008), since it is much more natural to sit in front of a TV screen or a videogame than to get out of the house and play with friends (Tur, López-Sánchez and García del Castillo, 2009). Children are more credulous and vulnerable to the impacts of television because they are public whose personality is in the process of formation, evolution and configuration. Caballero et al. (2001: 32) worry about the effects of television "…especially when the people targeted by television have not fully and solidly developed their personal behaviour criteria, which is precisely the case of children and adolescents".

As Medrano, Palacios and Barandiaran (2007) have pointed out, in this fascinating relationship between children and television there are certain difficulties. The forms of information reception do not require any intellectual effort and can generate passivity. The quick watching of images does not facilitate reflection; the language of television is characterised by an essentially direct style and does not increments the cultural baggage of the viewer; watching television in excess may cause fatigue and anxiety, as well as eating and sleeping disorders, and finally, if young viewers watch TV in excess they may increasingly lack initiative.

As Sevillano and Perlado (2003: 167) have indicated, in many homes, television is part of the everyday language and contributes directly to the construction of the reality that children develop over time and under certain social conditions. This social construction process of reality is the result of the interaction and involves a certain notion of competence,

which is defined in children as a form of media knowledge.

On the same line, Orozco (1996: 35) affirms that children who watch television enter an interactive sequence, which involves diverse degrees of engagement with and processing of the television content. This sequence starts with the attention, continues with the processes of understanding, selection, and measurement of what is perceived, then the storage and integration with previous information, and ends with the appropriation and production of meaning. In this way, the author rightly and sequentially describes the process by which, through the watching of television, children integrate and assimilate the role models and information offered by the protagonist and antagonist characters, which shape their vision of the world.

As noted by Bandura (1977, 1986) and Bandura and Walters (1963) the behaviour of the protagonist and antagonist characters can have different effects in young viewers. Moreover, Huertas (1992) identifies these effects and highlights the transmission of new behaviours (the inhibitory/disinhibitory behaviours) and the facilitation of conducts. The probability of the imitation of the model of behaviour by the viewer changes depending on a set of elements (Mazur, 1986) such as the characteristics of the model, the characteristics of the viewer and the characteristics of the situation.

In children's favourite programmes the protagonist and antagonist characters appear acting, resolving conflicts, making decisions, and interacting with the group and the environment in which the narrative action develops. For this reason they can manage to set the trends, styles, and models to be imitated, which creates or reinforces thus certain stereotypes.

The influence of these characters can, in some cases, generate certain confusion in children at the moment of properly discerning between reality and fiction. Through media consumption, the favourite protagonists or antagonists reach relevance and great acceptance among this target audience. They can influence children's perception of the world and in turn become transmitters of values or anti-values. Television content and, to a lesser extent, children's programmes play, alternatively or simultaneously, with the mechanisms of identification and projection, which are values that motivate and cause children's identity construction through the characters that represent them.

We cannot dismiss the responsibility of the media (Núñez Ladevéze and Pérez Ornia, 2002). As Ellis (1990) has pointed out, there has been a crisis in the transmission of values and fundamental practices through the different generations of TV professionals. The conclusions of this author could be a good explanation for the current crisis in television content which has given rise to terms such as "trash TV".

Children's relationship with television can produce a conflict between the values transmitted by traditional socialising agents and the values transmitted by the media in the process of socialisation of the individual (Liebes, 1999; Badillo and Marenghi, 2003). A clear example in this respect can be observed in TV ads, regardless of whether they targeting children or not, which are based on conventional everyday situations (breakfast, lunch, experiences at home, school, etc.) which end up being transfigured thanks to the magic power of the commercial products and where the ordinary becomes a party and the child a hero. The rhetorical exaggeration, frequently used by advertising, is made clear with these practices.

While identification aims to make children to assume, assimilate, and incorporate the characteristic features of the hero, the presenter, or the pet they identify with, the projection consists in implanting in these "protagonist heroes" the desires, fears, or intentions that children feel or want to feel.

As indicated by Ferrés (1994), in the identification process the viewer often emotionally adopts a character's point of view because the former considers the latter to be a reflection of its own reality, or ideal dreams. These characters are part of the cultural and educational baggage of children in all their dimensions: language, disruptive and/or constructive behaviours, promotion of violence, discriminatory or accommodating attitudes towards different and minority groups (Garitaonandia, Juaristi and Oleada, 1998; Huertas and França, 2001).

Based on the previous reflections, it seems essential to grant a necessary and justified importance to the study of the characterisation of the protagonist characters and their counterparts, the antagonists. These opposing characters represent ideals and profiles comparable to the good and evil dichotomy. However, in an attempt to reflect the complexity of the real world, both characters are often intermingled in their characteristics. In other words, the constraints of their characterisation sometimes blur. For instance, the resources sometimes used by the good guy to defeat his opponent do not seem plausible or appropriate and thus the goodness of the protagonist could therefore be questionable.

If we focus on the antagonists, in some cases, the explicit or implicit justification of their actions can lead us to assess their behaviour positively, no matter how dishonest and selfish they are.

Linked to the great potential of influence that this kind of characters can have on children, it is necessary to consider this type of heroes not only as propellants of children's identity construction and, therefore, of their perception of the world; but also as major influentials in terms of styles, fashion, constitution of social groups and representation of stereotypes; because they are characters that, individually or in groups, constitute large groups of reference that can create and mark trends in children's behaviours and attitudes, apart from being a risk to the indigenous values when the configuration of the protagonists is based on series or cartoons of other cultures (Rajadell et al., 2005).

It is clear for us, then, that the groups of reference taken into account by children, and extracted from their favourite TV series, become major social mediators of special relevance.

## 2. Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyse and evaluate the profile of the protagonist and antagonist characters included in the diverse children's content broadcast by Spanish television channels.

The profiles of the protagonist and antagonist characters have been studied through the following variables: Type and number, age, gender, nationality, skills, relationship between the characters, portrayal of the characters, means used to achieve objectives, consequences of the action of the protagonist over the antagonist and vice versa.

The sample [2] consists of 168 series and programmes randomly recorded over four three-month periods. Two weeks were randomly selected, taking into account programming from Monday to Sunday from TVE1, La 2, ANT3, T5, C9 and Punt 2 (the last two are the regional channels from Valencia). From the second three-month period onwards the procedure also included the recording of all those series identified as "children's programming" and which had not been included previously. This is how out of a total of 285 series broadcast (according to the market research company Sofres) we completed the sample of 168 different series and programmes, broadcast in hours considered as "for children" by the networks.

For this simple random sample of 168 series, there is a sampling error of 5% with a confidence level for estimates of the population ratio of 95%.

The value allocation for the variables was made by experts and took into account the recommendations of Krippendorf (1980), Holsti (1969), and Wimmer and Dominick (1996). In relation to the reliability of the instrument used in this study, Krippendorf (1990) suggests that the persons who apply the instrument must be different from those who designed it. To meet this requirement, the identification of the value of the variables was performed by staff hired by the team project, not by the researchers. Similarly, Holsti, Wimmer and Dominick establish that the average percentage of agreement in the judgement of experts must be of 85%. In our research the expert judgment was performed in pairs and respecting this level of agreement. Where discrepancies arose, the definition of the variables was debated and clarified to ensure the staff had the same interpretation of what was going to be measured.

Regarding the data analysis, two types of studies were conducted: the descriptive study and the multivariate study of the data collected in the different variables. The multivariate technique used here is the characterisation of variables. We characterised the different categories of the illustrative variables according to the results achieved in the rest of variables for these categories. This technique involves categorising a (illustrative) response variable based on a set of explanatory variables. The method relies on implementing an algorithm that makes multiple comparisons between proportions to find related explanatory variables. These multiple comparisons are made [3].

The multivariate characterisation technique identifies the profiles, for example, according to age, gender, education, etc. of the members of the sample.

For the descriptive analysis we used SPSS (the Statistical Product and Service Solutions, version 12.0) and Microsoft Excel, and for the characterisation analysis we used SPAD (Système Portable pour l'Analyse de Données) version 4.5.

## 3. Results

Regarding each of the types of protagonist and antagonist characters, we can highlight that in more than 50% of the analysed series there was no antagonist and that when there was one the most frequent type was a single human, which appeared in more than 15% of the series, followed by the fantastic creature type which appeared in over 10% of the series. With regards to the protagonist, the most common type is also a single human, which appeared in more than 35% of the series, followed by animals and several humans with 20.24 and 18.45 per cent respectively. It is noteworthy that we did not find any vegetables or plants as protagonist or antagonist.

Regarding the age of protagonist and antagonist characters, there were adult protagonists in approximately 45% of the series and adult antagonists in 40%. In more than 30% of the series and programmes there were protagonists aged 7 to 9 years, while protagonists with other ages were distributed across 10% and 20% of the series. On the other hand, the percentage of series with non-adult antagonists is irrelevant: 3.57%. It is important to note that a TV series can have several protagonists and antagonists with different ages, and that this fact adds certain difficulty to the study.

In relation to the gender of the protagonist, the study revealed that 78.57% of the series had one male protagonist, while 49.4% had a female protagonist. Regarding the antagonists, 37.5% of the series had male protagonists while only 16.07% had female protagonists.

In 45.83% of the series the explicit nationality of the protagonist was North American, European in 20%, and non-explicit in 27.38%. For the antagonist the nationality was not explicit in 20.24% of the analysed series, North American in 13.69% of the cases, and European in less than 5%. There were no series with antagonists from Sub-Saharan Africa.

In 94.05% of the analysed series and programmes the protagonists exhibited skills, while the antagonists were skilful in only 25% of them. In 80% of the series the skills of the protagonists were human and social, and in 45.24% the type of skill was intelligence. However, the skills of the antagonists were magical or supernatural in 17.86% of the series, and physical in 16.07%. As table 1 shows, the skills related to personal image, knowledge and arts were relegated to a second level for both protagonists and antagonists.

Table 1: Predominant skills
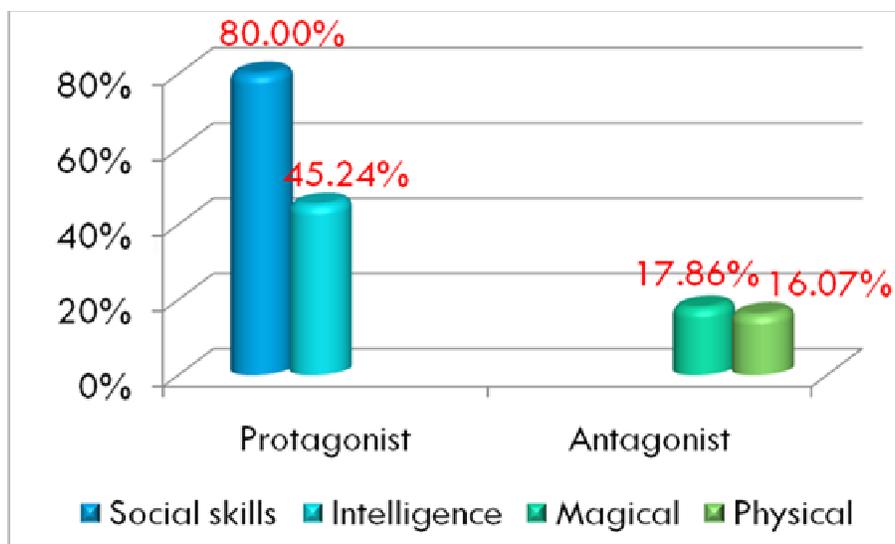


Regarding the relationship maintained between the characters, in 54.17% of the analysed programmes and series the protagonists maintained a shared leadership –i.e. the initiatives were taken by any protagonist- and in 19.05% of the sample the relationship between the antagonists was of leader and helpers/followers type (see table 2).

Table 2: Leadership Type
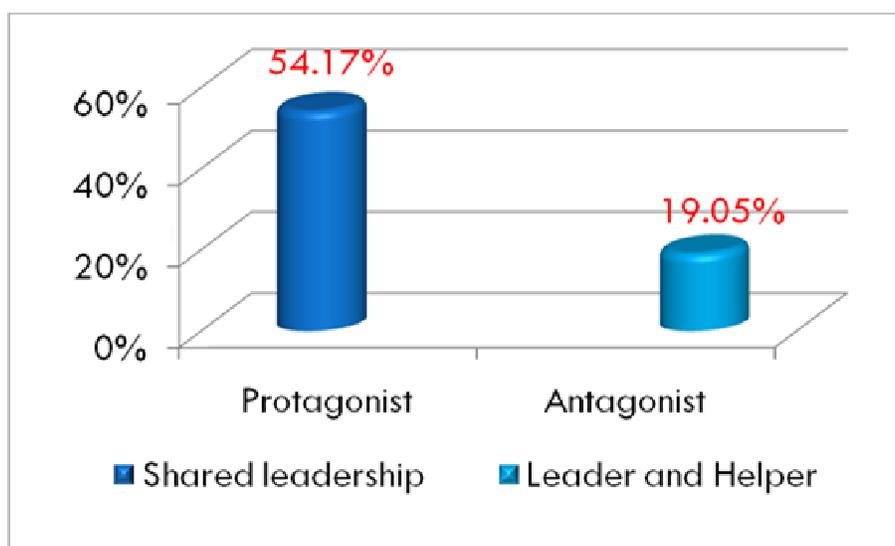


With regards to the characterisation of the protagonists and antagonists, none of the analysed series had a heroic antagonist and conversely there were heroic protagonists in 57.74% of the series. Very frequently the antagonists were hooligans: in 25% of the cases. It should be noted that there were naughty heroic protagonists in more than 24% of the studied series, while the figure of the naughty heroic antagonist only appeared in less than 10% (see table 3).

Table 3: Characterization of characters
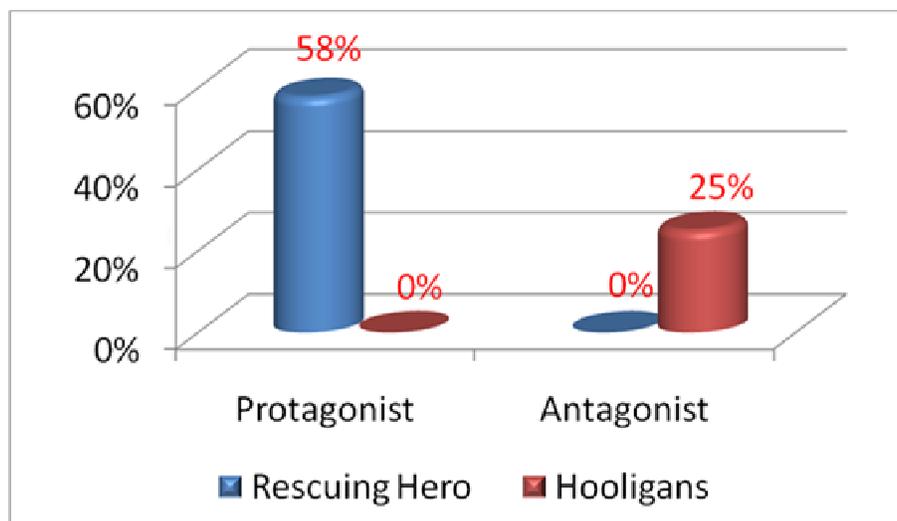
In terms of the means used by the antagonists and protagonists to achieve their objectives, it should be noted that in 60.12% of the series the protagonists used dialogue as the fundamental means to achieve their goals, followed by intelligence and exemplification in 41.67% and 32.74% of the series, respectively. On the other hand, the means used by the antagonists to achieve their objectives were mostly physical aggression (in 25.56%), threats (in 22.02%), physical force (in 20.83%) and deception (in 18.45%).

Looking at the different consequences of the actions of the protagonists on the antagonist, we can observe that the most recurring consequence is the momentary disappearance of their harmful potential (in more than 31% of the series). The situation remains stable, i.e. unchanged, in 27.98% of the series, and the antagonists completely abandoned their objective in 25%. On the other hand, regarding the consequences of the actions of the antagonists over the protagonists, we see that in 33.33% of the series the antagonist continued embracing anti-values and in 20.24% the antagonist is fully defeated. In none of the analysed series the antagonist defeated the protagonist or was rewarded for it.

For the characterisation analysis we crossed the values of the variables previously described with two variables for the identification of the studied TV content: country of production and decade of production. In this sense, we could argue that the majoritarian production continent is North America, with 45.24%, followed by Europe with 32%. Asian productions only reached 13%. There is a growing increase in co-productions (8%). Although it has always been said that the use of violence had an oriental origin, this study demonstrates that the American series have a predominance of physical violence.

In relation to the decade of production, we can highlight that in the productions of the 1990s the protagonists were mostly males and exercised their leadership alone. On the contrary, in the first decade of 21st century the protagonists are mostly women.

**4. Discussion and conclusions**

There is no doubt that children's television series and programmes have evolved in their treatment of protagonist and antagonist characters, by adopting new values and covering the spectrum, which is essential today, of very significant issues for children, like gender equality. However, there are still some important unresolved issues, which can be attributed to the lack of variety or originality from the people who produce and write children's programmes, or to the lack of importance currently given to the treatment of values.

It is important to highlight that 50% of the analysed programmes do not have an antagonist, which tends to introduce the parameters that contrast a primary value, when the game of values is well designed. The protagonists are mostly humans, both individuals and groups, which provides a much more rapid and integrated identification in children. According to Ramos (2007), human protagonists can transmit values of particular interest for the personality development of children and in a very educational and fun format. It is still surprising that the age of the protagonists and antagonists corresponds to adults, which is a situation that departs from the pattern of observation and social learning models promulgated by Bandura (1980).

The dominant nationality of the TV series watched by Spanish children continued to be mostly American. A similar result was also obtained by Vázquez (2009), in whose study the American nationality reached more than 58% of children's TV, whereas the domestic production only accounted for 28% of the sample and the European productions were far away from the percentages found in our study. In relation to the gender of the protagonists, the figures provided by Vázquez are close but exhibit more disparity between men and women (70% - 30%). However, we agree that the proportion of female roles is increasing in comparison to previous studies, which is in line with the dominant social attitude. To this increase we should add the fact that the female figure is being reinforced in comparison to its male counterpart, which breaks the classic stereotype (García Matilla et al., 2004).

It seems reasonable that the protagonists exhibited a greater number of skills in comparison to the antagonists. Furthermore, the skills of the protagonists are much more adjusted to realistic values such as intelligence and sociability, although there is still a lack of other important values for the development of children, such as artistic, cultural or knowledge values. The figure of the leader has an optimal treatment in the protagonists, since leadership can be shared and they always receive the unconditional support of their helpers, which does not happen with the antagonists. The protagonist leaders mostly embody heroic roles that increase the probability of children's identification, which contrasts with the portrayal of antagonists who follow more anti-social and less attractive patters of behaviours and end up defeated.

The protagonist vs. antagonist dichotomy only appears in 50% of the analysed content. There are authors who applaud this dichotomy and see it as responsible for the correct transmission of values. The study perceived a restraint in the use of physical violence, which is more present in American than in Asian productions, which used to be perceived as the most violent.

According to Sevillano and Perlado (2005), more than 80% of children aged 6 to 8 years would like to be like their favourite characters, which clearly indicates that the structure represented by protagonists and antagonists are of paramount importance for children's personality development. Similarly, Sevillano and Perlado have pointed out that for 60% of the children surveyed what was more important from the TV content was that it was fun and make them laugh, while the importance of violence, and other similar action signs occupied a second place (4%). However, despite more than 60% of the analysed protagonists used dialogue to achieve their goals, this aspect should be further improved to enhance this type of values, because children themselves prefer funny situations over those with more action and violence.

Finally, the work of writers of children's TV series is admirable because they are aware of the importance of the fulfilment of objectives of protagonists and antagonists, and give the former the capacity to defeat the latter in all cases, without ever leaving room for doubt. In short, the protagonists get recognition for their good work when they defeat the antagonists.

It would be interesting for future research to incorporate children's views in the study of children's programing, especially in some of the studied variables and to contrast the reported information.

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**6. Notes**

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[2] Sample sizes and accuracy for estimating a population ratio (Calculated with EPIDAT): Population size: 285. Sample size: 164. Expected ratio: 0.5%. Accuracy: 5.0%; Confidence level: 95.0%. Design effect: 1.0.

[3] Hypothesis contrast type
Ho: $p_{ij}=P_j$
Ha: $p_{ij}<>P_j$
with i=1,...,n y j=1,...,m

Where n is the number of categories of the response variable, m the number of categories of the explanatory variable, $P_j$ the total proportion of the characteristic of the explanatory variable in our sample and $p_{ij}$ the proportion of the characteristic j of the explanatory variable for the category