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# Creation of a social awareness format for Spanish public television: *Héroes invisibles*

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Produced by RTVE in collaboration with Taifas Comunicación, *Héroes Invisibles* is a documentary series that portrays the life of expatriate Spaniards working on different humanitarian aid projects. Each episode focuses on one or several social conflicts such as: child malnutrition in Africa, the consequences of the war in Syria, irregular immigrants in the United States, and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean. **Methods:** Based on Nichols’s documentary modes of representing reality and the editing styles of Bordwell and Thompson, and Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet, the authors analyse the creation and evolution of this format produced for Spanish public television. The main objective is to evaluate, from a mix-methods approach, the evolution of the audiovisual narrative of this television format, which had an audience of over 110,000 viewers on the International Channel of TVE and RTVE 2, and on the official online platform of this channel. **Results:** The format has transitioned from the predominance of observational sequences and interviews in the first season to the use of expressive narrative dynamics during the second season. **Conclusions:** The format of *Héroes Invisibles* has evolved according to the demands of the channel, but it has not experienced significant changes in viewership from one season to another.

**Keywords:** Narrative; documentary; television; production; creativity; viewer.

**Contents:** 1. Introduction. 2. Objectives and methods. 2.1. Methodological strategies. 2.2. Object of study. 2.2.1. Kenya. 2.2.2. Jordan. 2.2.3. Mexico. 2.2.4. Zambia. 2.2.5. India. 2.2.6. Central Mediterranean. 3. Qualitative analysis. 3.1. Observational sequences. 3.2. Interview sequences. 3.3. Dynamic sequences. 3.4. Reflexive sequences. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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## 1. Introduction

The first season of *Héroes Invisibles* (“Invisible Heroes”) premiered in September 2016 with an episode about Kenya, focused on the life of Álvaro Pérez-Pla and his NGO Kubuka. The episode was watched by an audience share of 2.7, above the average of 2. The episodes titled Nepal and Honduras enjoyed positive viewership results too, with shares of 3.2 and 2.9, respectively. Each of these episodes explored the humanitarian aid work of an expatriate Spaniard (RTVE, 2016). The second season of the series premiered in October 2017, with the Zambia episode, which reached a similar audience share, with 2.9 and 108,000 viewers (RTVE, 2017). Both seasons were very similar in terms of characters and themes, but the format experienced a slight change in the second season.



Promotional poster for documentary TV series *Héroes Invisibles*.

After the renewal of the series in March 2017, RTVE producers imposed Taifas Comunicación some conditions to meet in the following season, including more dynamic sequences and more powerful characters, in comparison to the first season.

To achieve this task, the Taifas Comunicación team decided to choose characters whose humanitarian work could be depicted *in situ*. They chose Iñaqui Alegría, a doctor who works in an Ethiopian hospital, where every day he delivers babies, attends malnourished children and injuries of all kinds; and Guillermo Cañardo and his Open Arms crew, a Spanish NGO devoted to search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean (Cabezas, 2017). Then, the team searched for a more dynamic

storytelling style, from recording to editing (Cerdán, 2013). The result was the second season of *Héroes Invisibles*, a series chosen by RTVE for the FesTVal Vitoria 2017, in the out-of-competition section.

## 2. Objectives and methods

The main objective of this study is to analyse the creation of a social awareness format for Spanish public television through the analysis of the series' audiovisual narrative evolution. We aim to determine how this television format has changed throughout its first two seasons and to find a way to quantify these results.

When talking about audiovisual narrative it is impossible not to resort to the linguistic morphology of the concept. "Narrate" comes from the Latin *narrare*, which means to make one aware of something, and audiovisual, which refers to sight and hearing. Based on the very etymology of the word, we can establish that audiovisual narrative means to make someone aware of something through sight and hearing.

### 2.1. Methodological strategies

For the analysis of the audiovisual narrative of *Héroes Invisibles*, the authors will use a qualitative method based on the audiovisual theories of Bill Nichols (1997), David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1995), and Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet (1996), with the aim of being able to catalogue the narrative type of each episode sequence. This qualitative study will be followed by a quantitative analysis based on these interpretations. Finally, we will make a comparison between the types of audiovisual narratives used in the first and second seasons.

### 2.2. Object of study

For this article the authors will analyse three episodes of each season. From the first season: Kenya, Jordan and Mexico, and from the second: Zambia, India and Central Mediterranean. To help the reader understand the analysis, the selected episodes are summarised below.

#### 2.2.1. Kenya

Álvaro Pérez-Pla left Madrid to found an NGO in Kenya to help orphaned children on the streets of Kibera, Africa's second largest slum (RTVE, 2016). With the NGO *Más para ellos* ("More for them"), Álvaro and his team of young people from Madrid worked to support development projects such as microcredits and a music studio for unknown talents. One of the most prominent projects carried out by Álvaro's NGO is the aid provided to orphaned children who sniffing glue in the street.

#### 2.2.2. Jordan

Jerónimo Candela left Spain to embark on international development cooperation projects (*El Mundo*, 2016). For a year and a half, he has lived in Jordan with his Mexican wife, and their two small children. Just 60km off the cosmopolitan capital Amman and south of Syria, he works as head of operations and security in the Zaatari refugee camp, the second largest in the world and home to 80,000 people from Syria, 65% of whom are minors. Jerónimo strives every day to make rural Syrian families aware of the importance of taking their children to school to improve their chances of a better future.

### **2.2.3. Mexico**

Marta Rodríguez is a psychologist from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a city that has an average of thirty homicides per month (RTVE, 2016). Her job is to rehabilitate dozens of women who are victims of violence in her country, from femicides and abductions to the most terrible consequences of the fight against drug trafficking. Marta attends the classes of several teachers who claim that in their neighbourhoods, children are used to seeing dead people, some of whom have been even been eaten by dogs. “Sometimes, I have nightmares in which my brother is kidnapped at night and then killed in an alley”, says one of the minors.

### **2.2.4. Zambia**

Elena Gómez finished her medical degree and decided to give up her life in Moraleja in Madrid to help the least privileged in Zambia, where she founded the NGO Kubuka (Cabezas, 2017). With the support of a group of young Spaniards, she promotes different social projects in Livingston, such as school support for young people in the Zambian capital, as 60% of children are out of school and many of them collect trash to be able to buy water.

In Bantu dialect, Kubuka means “to get up”, and this is the purpose of Elena and her team: to help the most disadvantaged to overcome the misery that surrounds them, like difficulty in access to quality education, HIV in women and children, child prostitution at the country’s border, and drug and alcohol use.

After three intense years, Elena has decided to return to Spain for a while to relief the pressure of her work in Zambia. Sofia, an enthusiast and fighter, will continue running the project once her friend Elena leaves the country.

### **2.2.5. India**

Pablo Castells is a lawyer from Barcelona whose real vocation is international cooperation (*La Vanguardia*, 2017). In 2004, he landed in Kolkata as a volunteer for the Mother Teresa’s Sisters and that experience changed his life. Since then, he has been linked to the country and has been increasingly interested in creating a project of cooperation and humanitarian aid. In 2009, after learning how several NGOs worked, she founded Streets of India and moved to New Delhi to help children and women in poverty in one of the city’s slums. The development of education and the practice of sustainable tourism have attracted new Spanish volunteers to travel to India to collaborate with the project.

### **2.2.6. Central Mediterranean**

Guillermo Cañardo is the captain of the 25th mission that the NGO Proactiva Open Arms has carried out in the Central Mediterranean since the refugee crisis worsened in Europe in 2015 (Cabezas, 2017). Guillermo and his team of doctors and lifeguards rescue dozens of immigrants lost on the open seas and transport them to Italian shores. In addition, he faces the threat posed by a Libyan patrol boat that fires into the air to prevent them from doing their job.

### 3. Qualitative analysis

Bill Nichols (1997) establishes four documentary modes of representing reality: observational, expository, interactive and reflexive. The author defines each of these modes to classify the different ways in which reality can be captured on camera. We understand that the modes enunciated by Nichols (1997) are narratives that shape different storytelling styles in the documentary genre.

The documentary series *Héroes invisibles* does not belong to just one of the modes established by Nichols (1997), but combines several narrative styles, according to the theme of each episode and each sequence and according to producers' criteria. *Héroes invisibles* exhibits some of the characteristics that Reisz associates with the documentary film of ideas because of the multiplicity of elements that make up its structure (Reisz, 1960: 140). Therefore, we believe that it is convenient to find out which are the prevailing features of the series. Below, we describe the different modes proposed by Nichols (1997) and apply them to different examples of the *Héroes Invisibles* series.

#### 3.1. Observational sequences

The observational narrative, according to Nichols (1997:70-75), is the one where the characters interact with each other, without the apparent intervention of the filmmakers. “Observational documentaries are what Erik Barnouw refers to as direct cinema and what others like Stephen Mamber describe as cinema vérité” (Nichols, 1997: 72). The author believes that the observational mode emphasises the non-intervention of the filmmaker and that this mode creates the feeling that these kinds of sequences cede “control” over the events that unfold, so they appear to be more realistic. For Nichols (1997:72), this narrative, in its purest form, completely abandons voice-over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, reenactments and even interviews.

For example, in the Kenia episode of the first season, Álvaro Pérez-Pla and his team of fellow Spaniards talk in English with several young Kenyans about the consequences of Western colonisation in Africa. The sequence is recorded with two cameras that offer close ups and full shots of the characters. This type of narrative generates the feeling that filmmakers have no control over the content of the sequence (Palau-Sampio, Cuartero-Naranjo, 2018).

In the Jordan episode, also from the first season, Jerónimo Candela and a translator chat with one of the Zaatari camp refugees and ask her why she is not taking her children to school, to what she replies that it is because the school is far away and she does not like teachers.

Nichols (1997: 73) divides the observational narrative into two creative modes, Rouch's version of cinema vérité and the artist's version of direct cinema. While in the first mode the filmmaker acts as a provocateur, out of camera, in the second mode the filmmaker remains an uninvolved bystander. The observational sequences in *Héroes Invisibles* belongs to what Nichols (1997) refers to as cinema vérité, since both the reporter and the camera man prepare a series of topics to address before pressing the record button.

According to the typology of Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet (1996: 61-69), the editing of the observational sequences of *Héroes Invisibles* performs several functions. For syntactic purposes, they are sequences where linearity prevails through the connection. Editing tries to respect (within the duration imposed by the format) a temporary development as natural as possible, including pauses in



conversation and silences. This narrative enables the semantic function that creates denotative meaning, that is, it is the actions of the characters in that given space-time that shape the meaning of the sequence (Herrscher, 2012). Finally, its rhythmic functions are based on the time flow, since the plastic function does not appear significantly in *Héroes Invisibles*.



Still of the Kenya episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

Therefore, according to the division of Bordwell and Thompson (1995), such sequences lack graphic relationships. Something similar happens with spatial relationships. *Héroes Invisibles* does not try to build its own film space, different from the space where documentaries are recorded. Therefore, spatial relationships are intrinsically linked to the recording space (Diez Puertas, 2006). Rhythmic relationships are marked, in these kinds of sequences, by the tempo of the characters. In the Kenyan case, the conversation involves several speakers. Rhythm in this sequence is faster than in the sequences of the Mexico episode, where the observational sequences of two or even one characters abound. Finally, temporary order relationships respect the succession of events. The duration is significantly reduced compared to recording, but filmmakers try to cover up the ellipses by building a naturalistic and continuing temporal development. This point coincides in the intentionality and construction with the rhythmic functions of Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet noted above.

The making of such documentary sequences within a documentary series raises several ethical questions (Walker, 1983): Has the filmmaker interfered in people's lives and altered it through filmmaking? Is the filmmaker using the recorded subjects to build his career or reputation in the audiovisual sector? Do participants of the documentary understand the object and purpose of the story the filmmaker is telling? Does the filmmaker respect the lives of the recorded characters? Does the filmmaker have the responsibility to intervene if something traumatic happens or to continue filming? These approaches do not occur in the following types of narratives, since the interaction between filmmakers and characters is manifest in the image itself (Nichols, 1997).



Still of the Jordan episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

### 3.2. Interview sequences

The interview or classic documentary sequences belong to what Nichols (1997) refers to as expository texts, which take shape around commentary directed directly towards the viewer and images serve as illustration. “The rhetoric of the commentator’s argument serves as the textual dominant, moving the text forward in service of its persuasive needs” (Nichols, 1997: 68). Editing in this narrative mode usually serves to establish rhetorical continuity more than spatial or temporary continuity (Sánchez-Biosca, 1996: 231).

Mexico is the episode of *Héroes Invisibles* (first season) that contains the largest number of expository sequences or in the form of interviews. The series contains 36 minutes of interviews, whose content is combined with images related to the topics addressed.

When analysing the montage of these sequences (according to the typology of Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet, 1996), both their editing and juxtaposition throughout the series acquires importance. Therefore, its syntactic function varies depending on the previous or subsequent sequence, and may act as a connection, disjunction or punctuation. Therefore, they can create alternation or linearity. For semantic purposes, it has the function of creating connotative meaning, since such interviews relate the content and often serve as a common thread of the series, establishing causalities and parallels. Based on the conception of editing proposed by Bordwell and Thompson (1995), there is some plastic relationship in the interview sequences. Since they are filmed on the same place and edited throughout the series, they form a repetitive visual pattern that acts as visual anchoring and punctuation system. For graphic and content purposes, they split or unite sequences and sections of the series. This point derives into their rhythmic relationships, whose tempo usually matches that of the previous and subsequent sequences. The duration of the block to which they belong determines, along with the

content, part of its structure. Finally, the temporal relationships of the interviews imply an order subjected to the information flow of the series. In fact, they present some atemporality with respect to the other sequences, since the time in which they happen (with respect to the other events in the series) is irrelevant (Ortiz de Guinea, Villafañe and Caffarel-Serra, 2018).

For Nichols (1997), the expository mode emphasises the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgment. In other words, it is an internalised narrative in viewers that allows us to tell the general aspects of a story and encompass them in the same discourse. Through the expository mode the filmmaker can summarise or tell something specific about the story so that the viewer does not miss information necessary to understand the story. “Knowledge in the expository documentary is often epistemic knowledge in Foucault’s sense of those forms of transpersonal certainty that are in compliance with the categories and concepts accepted as given or true in a specific time and place, or with a dominant ideology of common sense such as the one our own discourses of sobriety support” (Nichols, 1997: 69).



Still of the Mexico episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

In the second season the distribution is very different than in the Mexico episode, despite the Zambia episode includes 24 minutes of interviews. In this episode expository sequences are mixed with observational and dynamic sequences that make the narrative content more agile. This is a fairly widespread formula in contemporary docu-realities (Palau Errando, 2004: 260). In the case of this series, the interviews are configured according to the rhythm and number of sequences that make up the series. In the Mexico episode the duration of the sequences is longer, so the interviews are longer too. The episode’s protagonist greatly determines the content of the sequences, by introducing them and developing them during the interview, which acts as a linearity system. The main syntactic function of the sequences is as a connection. However, in the Zambia episode, there is more than twice as many sequences, whose development is carried out within them. As in the Mexico episode, the same



connotative meaning is created. But for syntactic purposes, their function varies, even within each block. In some of them, the interviews act in the three syntactic modes, also combining alternation with linearity, although in most sequences the former predominates. They also create rhythmic variations and help structure their temporal relationship (Valenzano III, Wallace, Morreale, 2014).



Still of the Zambia episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

### 3.3. Dynamic sequences

Dynamic sequences are those in which the filmmaker establishes an interaction with the protagonists. The filmmaker's voice may be heard, or he may be the target of the gaze of the protagonists. This possibility was proposed in the 1920s by Dziga Vertov as *kino-pravda* and in the late 1950s this mode became technologically viable through the work of filmmakers at the National Film Board of Canada (particularly with the *Candid Eye* series, 1958-59, and Gilles Groulx and Michael Brault's *Les Racquetteurs* in 1958) (Nichols, 1997: 78). All this coincides with the availability of the first very portable synchronous sound recording equipment in the late 1950s, which made it possible for filmmakers to interact with the characters he recorded in real time. "The mode introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other" (Nichols, 1997: 79).

Despite the reporter's voice is not heard in *Héroes Invisibles*, at times the viewer can perceive the interactions with the recorded characters. In the minute 42 of the series, one of the rescuers says: "Right now, I don't even know what time it is". Then, it is suggested that the reporter shows the rescuer his mobile phone. "It's seven o'clock in the afternoon and I'm not tired, I didn't eat or drink, I'm fine, I'm happy."



Still of the Central Mediterranean Episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

Although in the interview sequences the syntactic function was determined by the surrounding sequences, in the case of this typology it is configured through its content. It also depends on the degree of interaction of the reporter with the characters. The more obvious it is, the greater the punctuation and disjunction and the more they will act as a system of alternation. Semantically, they create connotative meanings, given the intervention of the reporter that interrupts the narrative. There are no graphic or spatial relationships, but their rhythmic relationships set up certain accents and tempo variations derived from the breakdown of the narrative linearity of the characters. Given that the format of *Héroes Invisibles* does not allow the reporter to appear explicitly, elliptical temporal relationships are created within its sequences, where the order follows a linear structure but the duration is altered, not only by the selection of content, but also by the lack of commentary or intervention by the journalist. These characteristics bring the predominance of these sequences closer to the avant-garde documentary, although in this case applied to television (Campo, 2010: 9).

In the India episode, this narrative mode is present practically throughout its whole duration. There are 41 minutes of dynamic sequences in a 55-minute-long episode. The reporter's interaction with Pablo Castells is seen in all the sequences through the exchange of glances between the character and the person behind the camera. Just like with the secondary characters, it is normal to see children look at the camera and even touch it, the filmmaker's interaction with the people on camera is explicit.





Stills of the India episode of *Héroes Invisibles*

### 3.4. Reflexive sequences

In addition to these three documentary modes, Nichols (1997) includes a fourth: the reflexive mode. “Rather than hearing the filmmaker engage solely in an interactive (participatory, conversational or interrogative) fashion with other social actors, we now see or hear that the filmmaker also engages in metacommentary” (Nichols, 1997: 93). This mode cares more about the reflection on the very

construction of the documentary rather than on the story that is being narrated (Ortiz, 2000). In *Héroes Invisibles* this mode does not appear in all episodes, since there is no external voice that reflects on the creative process of the work (Breschand, 2002: 24), unlike in the documentaries of Werner Herzog, such as *Mein Liebster Feind* (1999), *Grizzly Man* (2005) and *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007). We will leave out of quantitative analysis of this narrative mode since it has no relevance in the study of *Héroes Invisibles*.

#### 4. Results

Based on the analysis of the selected episodes, the following tables display the quantitative data (time in minutes [1]) of the different types of narratives modes that compose the episodes of the first two seasons of the documentary series *Héroes Invisibles*.

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
14 minutes (25%)	5 minutes (9%)	36 minutes (66%)

Narratives of the Mexico episode of the first season

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
7 minutes (13%)	22 minutes (40%)	26 minutes (47%)

Narratives of the Kenya episode of the first season

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
5 minutes (9%)	22 minutes (40%)	28 minutes (51%)

Narratives of the Jordan of the first season

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
8 minutes (15%)	38 minutes (69%)	9 minutes (16%)

Narratives of the Mediterranean Central episode of the second season

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
9 minutes (16%)	41 minutes (75%)	5 minutes (9%)

Narratives of the India episode of the second season

<b>Observational</b>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<b>Interview</b>
1 minute (2%)	29 minutes (53%)	25 minutes (45%)

Narratives of the Zambia episode of the second season



<b>Audiovisual Narrative</b>	<b>Season 1</b>	<b>Season 2</b>
Observational	16%	11%
Dynamic	29%	66%
Interview	55%	23%

Comparison of narratives used in the first and second seasons of *Héroes Invisibles*

## 5. Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of the sequences of the selected episodes of *Héroes Invisibles* shows an evolution of the television format, transitioning from audiovisual narratives focused on the expository or interview mode towards a dynamic or interactive mode. In other words, the data show a shift from a classic or expository documentary structure, in the first few episodes, to dynamic sequences more typical of the reportage narrative.

The data show a reasonable change from the first to the second season of the series, which adopts a more dynamic (66%) and less expository (23%) audiovisual narrative. In the first season the distribution is different: 55% of interviews vs 29% of dynamic sequences. Observational sequences are present in similar percentages in both seasons: 16% in the first season vs 11% in the second season.

According to the typologies of Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet (1996), in the first season of the series, the syntactic functions of the sequences are oriented towards connection and linearity. On the other hand, the denotative meaning carries most of the semantic weight of the series. Taking into account the editing model of Bordwell and Thompson (1995), the rhythm is marked by the content, following a narrative order linked to the events of the recording with an ordering close to the actual chronology of events.

The second season tends in its syntactic functions towards alternation. The different types of sequences are presented in such a way that the link, the disjunction and the punctuation coexist, exhibiting greater syntactic variety. Syntactic functions tend globally towards connotation, mainly through the relationships that are established between sequence types. The rhythmic relationships that are created become more fast-paced, because the overall number of sequences tends to be higher. Since each episode lasts about 50 minutes in both seasons, increasing the number of sequences reduces their average duration, in comparison to the first season. Finally, the temporary relationships that are established are detached from the recording to construct a discourse where the *mise-en-scène* organises a different structure. The order of the sequences, the juxtaposition of interviews, observational and dynamic sequences, and the ellipses that occur within them tend to build an expressive temporality.

The narrative evolution reflected in the data obtained was not reflected in the audience data. Both the first and second seasons of the series enjoyed an above-average audience shares, but there is no significant evolution in terms of ratings after the second season implemented narrative changes. This

question makes us wonder whether the network placed the series in a good time slot and whether it promoted the series adequately.

### Nota

[1] Percentages are rounded without decimal places. Each episode lasts 55 minutes.

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