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Information treatment of gender-based violence in Andalusian public television. Breach of the code of ethics by Canal Sur

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Abstract

Introduction. The main objective of this research article is to evaluate the information treatment of gender-based violence by the Radio and Television of Andalusia (RTVA). The analysis of the information transmitted by this public medium focuses on the rigour as well as on the compliance with the recommendations made by regional institutions regarding the information treatment of this type of violence. **Methods.** This is a qualitative study based on critical discourse analysis in its multimodal version which addresses the different variables of the audiovisual discourse articulated in categories that allow for the identification of the implied and explicit intentions of the text and its relationship to the context. **Results and conclusions.** The results indicate that there are deviations with respect to the correction proposed by the code of ethics for the information treatment of violence against women, so it was concluded that this information can be improved through specialised training to deal with this type of information.

Keywords

Information treatment; gender-based violence; code of ethics; public television.

Content

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**

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1. Introduction

Macho violence is not just a few headlines, although its media coverage reflects a tendency to simplify this violation of women's rights through a police report section that presents these cases of violence again and again but never examines their structural causes. At least 2.5 million women in Spain suffer from gender-based violence inflicted by their partners or ex-partners, according to the latest macro-survey of 2015 [01]. These data clearly show that macho violence is not a simple sum of particular cases or a matter of a few evil men. Indeed, violence against women is a structural problem in our patriarchal societies.

In this context, we must be aware of the important role communication is playing in the current knowledge society as transmitter and generator not only of values and worldviews, but also of the plots in which we interact with other people [02]. It is a process whereby individuals incorporate information as messages “into their own understanding of themselves and others. Use it as a vehicle to reflect on themselves and others, as the basis for thinking about themselves, others and the world to which they belong (...). It creates some kind of social situation in which individuals connect with one another in a process of communication and symbolic exchange. It is a structured situation, in which some individuals are involved in the production of symbolic forms for others who are not physically present. While others are primarily involved in receiving symbolic forms produced by others which may not respond, but with those who can establish ties of friendship, affection or loyalty” (Thompson, 1998: 66 and 119). The information has, therefore, one anchoring dimension in reality that revolves around the news stories as a way to reproduce and legitimise the dominant stereotypes and power relations (Castells, 2009), shaping the way we see ourselves and the way we understand our behaviour in certain gender roles [03].

These ideas are, in good measure, an invitation to identify the role of the media in the coverage of gender-based violence.

This is a particularly urgent question for two reasons:

1. Violence occupies not only much of the time of the media, but also the best spaces of television programming (Garrido, 2004: 12), naturalising violence as an anthropological condition of human relations, within the framework of a progressive process of trivialisation of violence.
2. If the media “ever tried to correctly report on macho murders, they have returned to their fondness to inform in a morbid and apolitical way, to privatise such violence and to attempt to justify it” (Gimeno, 2014).

The dilemma of the media, as Alberdi and Matas (2002: 242) point out, lies between their responsibility as journalists and opinion-makers and their business interests to offer a product that the public wants and consumes; between respecting the seriousness of the news, taking into account the seriousness of the events and satisfying their need to attract the attention of the public, which is easier to achieve through the use of sensationalism.

There are many studies and researchers who have demonstrated that culture, entertainment, and information reproduce and legitimise or justify patriarchy and the symbolic violence against women (Calleja, 2015; Gámez, 2012; Vera, 2005).

“In Spain, the news about macho murders still use terms such as “crime of passion”, “he could not control himself”, “he was a good man”, “he had no reason to kill her”, and naturalise the violence exerted on women’s body” (Atencio, 2015: 245).

As *Femicidio.net* points out, the media should have protocols to produce news stories and journalists who are specialised in the treatment of patriarchal violence. “We ask the media for a more dignifying treatment of the victims and survivors (...) we ask for a change of perspective on the way of reporting and applying specialised deontological codes (which are conspicuous by their absence in newsrooms)” (Atencio, 2015: 216).

Ultimately, the objective is to make the media to fulfil its pedagogical and transforming role, to commit it to the promotion of an equalitarian society free from violence against women, by exposing the root causes of such violence, while dismantling all its ideological, cultural and symbolic frameworks.

Meanwhile, it is essential to decipher why the media continue to commit the same mistakes, which are regulated in the numerous regulations of good practices published so far about the treatment of news of gender-based violence, to denounce the hegemonic discourses that are still controlling the news, as well as to propose new tools and discursive elements that reinforce informative communication as well as social awareness of macho violence.

Our study focuses on the Radio and Television of Andalusia (RTVA), given that it is the main organ responsible for the application of the policies that promote equality and prohibit discrimination and it is the only operator with regional coverage in Andalusia. In addition, the transmission of stereotypes and incorrect information about gender-based violence in the news programmes of RTVA have greater significance than the transmission of these messages through other private channels, given the larger audience, public character and obligations of the former network.

More specifically, the objectives of this study are to analyse the discourses of gender included in the informational messages of RTVA, and to analyse the discourse of the news on gender-based violence in RTVA, and finally, to verify the degree with which *Canal Sur Televisión* has complied with the code against macho violence [04], both in terms of the information treatment and the use of images and terminology in news about gender-based violence.

2. Methods: critical discourse analysis

“This type of analysis is the one that seems to give better account of many of the forms of the conflict of power that exists in democratic societies. Thus, it is undeniable that men have, to the detriment of women, control over most of the forms of public discourse, and that such control contributes indirectly to machismo and sexism. However, recent decades have seen a significant increase in the access of women to public discourse and the minds of other women, and men; hence the increased power of women, and the decrease in inequality between genders, identically to the process that took place before with respect to the working class, in parallel with ethnic minority groups, homosexuals, and other dominated or marginalised groups in society (see for instance Hill, 1992). It is therefore an imperative necessity for CDA to study the complex interaction of dominant, dissident and opposing groups and their discourses within society, in order to clarify the contemporary variants of social inequality” (Van Dijk, 1999: 33).

For Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it is essential to analyse not only the text, but also the social context in which it is inserted. It provides a critical perspective that aims to reveal the relationships between power and discourse. It analyses the functions, the type of use and, of course, the effects of discourse in specific contexts. As result of this, it takes into account the relationship of reproduction or transformation of the beliefs and attitudes of the receivers. CDA approaches discourse as something more than a code between transmitter and receiver. It examines both the production and reception of messages as well as the historical and socio-political context of this production, reproduction and reception. CDA reveals the relationship between social action and discourse itself. The creation of meaning is linked, therefore, to modes of representation. Ultimately, it proposes relationships between messages, different social positions, and collective social practices (Fairclough, 2003).

Discourse is, thus, the social use of language, marked by the social conditions of production and use, and therefore by the relationships of domination and the consequences of discrimination and inequality on society. Also present is the emergence of claims and antagonistic positions which are inherent in any social context. From this perspective, discourse is also a social practice at the service of the construction of a new hegemony in the Gramscian sense of the term.

“Public opinion is strictly linked to political hegemony. It is the point of contact between civil society and political society, between consensus and force. The State, when it wants to initiate an unpopular action, preventively creates the adequate public opinion; that is, it organises and concentrates certain elements of civil society” (Gramsci, 1984: 192)

When we apply critical discourse analysis to the news media, we take into account the material conditions and the processes of production and reception, and sometimes of re-semantisation, of the discourse in a particular socio-political and cultural context, from a critical perspective (Van Dijk, 1996: 178).

This CDA contains explicit and systematic descriptions, so it is not as a generic non-categorised observation. We use textual and contextual categories that are related to our research objectives.

The textual dimensions dealt with the structures of the discourse at different levels (syntactic, semantic, rhetoric, etc.), and the contextual dimensions relate these descriptions of the text's structure with different properties of the context, such as the position of the different actors in the social order, the socially disseminated beliefs and stereotypes, ideologies, mental models and other sociocultural and cognitive factors.

The analysis reveals the relation between the text and the context from which it emanates. It is noteworthy that the lexicon used in relation to the actors is not always the same and that this has a clear cause/consequence relationship with the context. There are variations with respect to the use of the actors' name, initials, and emotional relationship and kinship with other actors, etc. These selections are never neutral, because they reinforce certain socio-mental ideas that have an influence on the context. Sometimes stereotypes are reinforced and this always has consequences on the perception of the status and prestige of the actors.

Therefore, each element or category under analysis should consider two aspects:

- Textual function (within the news): understand the semantic and rhetoric function of the identified elements. For example, emphasise a character's acts, reduce or ignore the agency of another actor, highlight his/her negative aspects, associate something else, etc.
- Contextual function: the language choices are not limited to the text and also have a relation and serve to understand or explain the role of the discourse on the greater social context. For example, in the sense of perpetuating values and ideologies, maintaining the social order, supporting or discrediting a group, justifying or validating decisions, promoting certain ideas or interests, etc.

Starting with the objectives of this research, and taking into account all dimensions, the aims is to: 1) understand how the informative discourses on violence against women operate: the representation of the actors and the events itself; 2) Identify the descriptions, diagnoses, explanations and possible attribution of predominant responsibilities, the different ideas transmitted in the video, the contextualisation, causes and consequences raised, etc.; 3) highlight the information sources and the way they are used.

Therefore, we propose a selection of categories that go from the textual to the contextual level, including the lexical, semantic, syntactic and style levels.

Categories of analysis

1. Discourse	
Headlines	Lexicon
Image	

2. Events	
Contextualisation	Degree of detail of descriptions
Stereotypes	Causes
Consequences	

3. Actors	
Inclusion/exclusion of actors	Activation/passivation
Specific or generic name	Individualisation/assimilation
Nomination/categorisation	Functionalisation/categorisation
Customisation/ <i>impersonalisation</i>	
3.1. The woman, victim	
<i>Role</i> social granted	Construction of the female figure
3.2. The man, aggressor	
<i>Role</i> social granted	Construction of the male figure
4. Sources of information	

“It creates some kind of social situation in which individuals connect with one another in a process of communication and symbolic exchange. It is a structured situation, in which some individuals are involved in the production of symbolic forms for others who are not physically present. While others are primarily involved in receiving symbolic forms produced by others which may not respond, but with those who can establish ties of friendship, affection or loyalty» (Thompson, J.B 1998: 1119).

3. Discussion and conclusions

The critical discourse analysis of the news on violence against women broadcast by the news services of *Canal Sur Televisión* is based on a sample of 192 news items broadcast during November

and December, 2013 and January 2014. These 192 news items were subjected to a technical analysis, from which we selected a sample of three items to be subjected to critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The three selected news respond to three items, whether they are repeated examples of poor practices or miss out aspects that we believe should be incorporated or strengthened. These three issues are in line with the objectives to counteract the hegemonic discourses in the news about gender-based violence and the power relationships exercised between politics and the media:

- The homogenisation of the treatment of macho violence that promotes an anodyne discourse that is distant from criteria of newsworthiness and media relevance.
- The absence of male voices within the news offered by experts and social agents against violence against women.
- The abuse and/or political instrumentalisation of violence against women through the media.

Of the sample of 192 news items, 114 correspond to news concerning cases of violence against women; 58 to policies against macho violence [campaigns / institutional events]; 13 to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women [25 November]; and 7 to the dissemination of issues related to violence against women [concerts, festivals]. Given that the larger thematic news groups are “cases” and “policies”, we selected two news about “cases” of macho violence and one about “policies” so that we could use them as representatives of the rest of the classified sample for the CDA.

The analysis of each of the three news took into account the following elements **[05]**: language and images; context in which it is located; sources used; representation of the victim/aggressor (construction of their stereotypes); and finally, the presence of public authorities, as well as the particular elements of each one of them.

- First news: “Fourth victim of gender-based violence in the province this year. Garden City (Malaga)”, broadcast by CSN1 Malaga on 06/11/2013.

This story reports on the death of a woman as a consequence of macho violence, and whose murderer committed suicide. The news opens and closes with the headline: “fourth victim”, a figure that leads us to question the appropriateness of counting the victims in this type of information. On the one hand, we understand that these data have an impact on the audience’s awareness of the dimension of the problem. However, this is one of the data to take into account in the trivialisation of this information as well as in the de-personalisation of the victim. This reduces the victim to a number with the consequent detachment of spectators.

We can divide this piece in two parts: on the one hand, the description of the crime and, on the other, the political concentration to protest for the events. This dichotomy in itself already marks a division between citizens (and the event itself) with respect to the institutions (responsible for preventing these events).

In the first part, most of the information relates to the detailed description of the crime, except for the intervention of Estefanía Martín (Provincial Coordinator of the Andalusian Women's Institute). The description is made by the editor, who takes the testimony of a female neighbour of the victim as a source. The eighth point of Canal Sur's Code against Macho Violence (2010) establishes that in the information treatment: "We shall contrast information and mention the source, also in the case of neighbours, family and friends...". However, we consider that these primary sources should be omitted, since their statements distort the information and add sensationalism and hype to a story that aims to be objective and firm in the fight against violence against women. The urgency and speed in giving out information should not prevail over the solvency and seriousness of this type of news. Nonetheless, when the use of these sources is necessary, there are superfluous details ("the man used to lock her up, starve her, beat her...") that should be deleted because they expand the victim's extent of victimisation without it being a proven fact, in an attempt to draw the attention of a segment of the public that may feel alien to this kind of attitudes. Moreover, the last comment made by the neighbour promotes the traditional conception of macho violence as a domestic and thus private act, and the institutions and the media are supposed to condemn and denounce this since it is not a "private" issue but a "social" and thus "public" problem.

Then, the news report includes a fragment of the intervention of Estefanía Martín (Provincial Coordinator of the Andalusian Women's Institute), to continue with the description of the murder. In this second intervention of the reporter, there is a detailed description of the murderer and the victim, which are unnecessary details that promote morbidity once again, and images that show the brutality of the deaths (blood on the floor and the corpses of the victim and her killer). In this case there is a flagrant breach of CSTV's own code, which recommends its editors to dismiss audiovisual material that promotes morbidity, sensationalism and spectacle, and to avoid explicit images of the victims, in order to preserve their dignity. These images, far from achieving the complicity of the spectator, reduce the problem to death and the concept of "violence against women" to an act whose only result is death.

The host appears once again to inform of the 016 telephone line and present the concentration of authorities in the City Council of Malaga, which is titled "Gender-based violence has been condemned in the street". The identification of the "street" with the authorities is not only false but also reduces the opposition on the street to the concentration of a small group of authorities. Visually, the images show an unidentified group that is given the category of "authorities", without showing any type of sign or banner to inform the viewer of the affiliation of the protesters. Instead the report simply shows the group as part of the un-identified "authorities", whose legitimacy is called into question.

Therefore, in this case we can identify three issues which lead to the narcotic effect of such news in the audiovisual media: the use of non-official sources, the explicitness of the images, and the group of unidentified political "authorities".

In terms of political presence within this news story, and its media use, it manifests itself in two main parts: the statements by Estefanía Martín (Provincial Coordinator of the Andalusian Women's Institute) and the concentration of authorities at the main gate of the City Council of Malaga. The

words of Estefanía Martín are reduced to a series of figures that fall in the numerical reductionism mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, which affects the relevance of the denounce as the only “way to eradicate macho violence”. In this sense, we consider that the public authorities, and in our case the media, should report on the consequences and the complaint procedure, but also and more importantly, should avoid to present “the complaint” as a single action against violence against women, which is an assertion that puts the blame on the victim and makes her responsible for her abuse or murder she suffered.

-Second news story. “Corpse of woman located by the Civil Guard this morning near a spot in Níjar (Almería)”, broadcast by CSN2 Almeria on 13/01/2014.

The story begins, as the previous one, by counting the number of the case. On this occasion, it is the “first case of violence against women this year in the province”, a statement which proves to be a constant in the sample and a determining factor in the homogenisation in the information treatment of the news. Another similarity with the former news story is its division into two parts: on the one hand, information relating to the murder and on the other, a brief collection of statistics of cases of violence against women in Almeria. The presenter introduces the story, then the reporter provides information, followed by statements of a political personality and, once again, the report is ended by the presenter.

The sources in this article are an official source: The Civil Guard. However, the reporter’s repetition on three occasions of the nationality of the victim and the murderer is striking. In this sense, the Code establishes, in the point 20 of the information treatment, that the nationality of the victims and the aggressors is little significant for a news story. What matters is the people and the events; the origin of those involved is not newsworthy. Again, this type of irrelevant data lead to the alienation of the public with the event represented, and should be deleted in the case of news on macho violence.

The only political and institutional presence here is the intervention of Carmen Crespo (Delegate of the Government of Andalusia), who once again emphasises the nationality of the victim. The inclusion of a political personality within these news is a constant. These interventions should come from experts who can provide useful information for the fight against gender-based violence. Therefore, we detected an absence of expert voices in news that specifically address cases of macho violence and an excessive representation of public authorities.

The presenter ends the news report with a count of the victims and the “false” hopeful message that there were no deaths for two years. However, this figure does not mean that there has not been macho violence during this time. The severity of both crimes must be the same in their information treatment, without distinguish whether the end result is “death” or not, because this quantification leads to messages that do not correspond with the reality that the medium is presupposed to transmit.

Rather than providing statistics from 2010 or 2011 -during a news report in 2013- the medium should present updated data of the situation at the moment the event takes place. Perhaps this is one of the basic keys to the information, the fact of “providing”, of adding or incorporating data that are useful

for viewers, and especially for the victims. The information is also accompanied by a series of explicit images of funeral services picking up a covered corpse. If the information presented leads people to think confusingly about the “good time” of the macho violence, the images respond to the dramatisation that tends to accompany this type of news.

In fact, in this particular occasion, and breaking with the regular dynamics of the code against macho violence of Canal Sur (2010), the news story does not inform at any time about the 016 phone line to report macho violence. Therefore, we believe that the message that emerges from this informative piece is wrong as it focuses the attention of viewers on the decreasing number of mortal victims since 2010, and does not dedicate space, which we consider “essential”, to the care and protection of victims.

-Third news story: “Index of convictions. Institutional statements”, broadcast by CSN2 on 12/11/2013.

This news, unlike the other two, is not about a case of macho violence but about the rate of convictions in Andalusia, which we could put in the categories “general-interest news stories”, in this case about political measures and even political “intentions”.

There are two aspects to be highlighted within this news: the number of figures that are quoted and the discourse employed by each of the represented sources. In terms of the number of figures, while data should be used, it is important to take into account the way it is offered and the target audience. In this case, beyond the amount of facts and figures that could be reduced, especially in a news programme targeting a large group of viewers, it is striking that these figures highlight the high number of acquittals.

If we understand that the news on violence against women should help making society aware and to help victims and future victims, the fear-mongering of this news report totally distorts the message, because although the Counsellor of Justice of the Government of Andalusia, Emilio de Llera, insists on the need for more severe sentences, the reporter subsequently provides more data on the high percentage of acquittals, what may reflect the ineffectiveness of the justice system in such cases and therefore the vulnerability of the victims.

As for the discourses of the represented sources, we distinguished the political interventions of Emilio de Llera (Counsellor of Justice of the Government of Andalusia) and Silvia Oñate (Director of the Andalusian Women’s Institute), and the representative of the only association included in the sample, Hilario Sáez (Men for Equality). The dichotomy presented by both groups of sources is clear; while the institutions are limited to offering a glimpse of the things that could be made or giving advice to the victims, without clarifying the real impact that this entails, the representative of the Association blames the current situation in the field of violence against women on the cuts suffered in recent years, in both campaigns and prevention programmes.

Plurality of sources is a key factor in determining the degree of neutrality of a medium. In this case, and based on the news under analysis, we must consider that the discourses of the institutions and the

(non-governmental) association are present, and in fact, in a critical manner. The structure of this news, being a general interest piece of information, contrasts notably with respect to the other two news in the sample. Another aspect to be highlighted is the number of sources, as we have noted, as well as the subjective tone of the female presenter, which empathises with the viewer, and the problem of macho violence.

As for the images, the news employ, in addition to videos of the interviewees, questionable stock resources. In this case, when speaking of the convictions the news employ images of courts and tribunals that also included decontextualised images of arrested people, which could confuse viewers learning about cases of macho violence.

Based on the analysis of the selected news, and by way of conclusion of the critical discourse analysis of the selected sample, we consider that the information treatment of violence against women needs to be improved in some aspects to comply with the code of ethics. We agree with the “2012 Report on the Presence of Gender-based Violence in the News Programmes of Andalusian Public Television Channels” issued by the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia with regards to the absence of male voices and the alarming narcotic effect of the news about macho violence.

With regards to the presence of male voices in these news stories, the sample only contained one: The Association of “Men for equality”. The rest of the included associations were linked to women. This fact suggests that violence against women is presented as a problem to be solved and fix by women, when in reality it is a problem to be corrected and solved by both men and women. Taking into account this factor could determine the current reception of these types of news.

There is a constant homogenisation of the news stories about violence against women, especially the news on “cases” of this type of violence, which are also the most frequent. The use of the same structure and treatment makes all cases to look the same, which generates disinterest in viewers and the reinforces the idea that this is just “another case”. Each victim is a case, and therefore, it should be treated with its own particularities and specifications. This homogenisation refers not only to the structure but also to the type of language, images and sources used. The public authorities are privileged over associations or non-governmental organisations, and this is noticeable across the sample. Similarly, although the Code of Good Practices of Canal Sur establishes the types of images that can be included or not, there are times that this recommendation is ignored. Nonetheless, there are certain types of images, like the covered corpses and crime scenes, that should be deleted and replaced by others.

The third and last aspect that we considered relevant to include in the analysis is the possible political instrumentalisation of violence against women by the public authorities and its coverage by the public channel Canal Sur. Although we have not perceived any kind of misuse of violence against women by the medium, we detected an excessive presence of public authorities to the detriment of other types of social organisations, associations and even the victims themselves. The presence of these political actors often makes macho violence to be used as a means of promotion for these institutions, which is something that should be left out of the news on macho violence.

- Project of Excellence funded by the Government of Andalusia: P11-TIC-7999. Observatory of the information treatment of gender-based violence with emphasis on cultural/ethnic identity. Website: www.obvio.uma.es
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4. Notes

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[02]. According to Pilar López Díez: “If the media changed the discourse about women there would not be gender-based violence”, in an interview with [Feminicidio.net](http://www.feminicidio.net/). Available at <http://www.feminicidio.net/articulo/%E2%80%9Csi-los-medios-cambiasen-el-discurso-sobre-las-mujeres-no-habr%C3%ADa-violencia-de-g%C3%A9nero%E2%80%9D>

[03]. This idea derives from a theory of the media which proposes that information is involved in the socialisation process of individuals, determining, largely, the symbolic representation systems and culture of social groups. The information is linked to the symbolic production of everyday life. See in this regard Benavides (1997).

[04]. Available in http://www.canalsur.es/resources/archivos/2012/1/31/1328025062927CODIGO_CONTRA_LA_VIOLENCIA_MACHISTA2_.pdf

[05]. These elements are in turn integrated in the three categories of the CSTV’s Code for the making of news on macho violence: terminology, information treatment and images.

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