

How Chilean Editors Perceive and Define the Role of Melodrama in Television News¹

Constanza Mujica²
Ingrid Bachmann³

Recibido: 2014-09-16
Enviado a pares: 2014-09-18

Aprobado por pares: 2014-11-18
Aceptado: 2015-01-12

DOI: 10.5294/pacla.2015.18.2.2

Para citar este artículo / To reference this article / Para citar este artigo

Mujica, C. Bachmann, I. Junio de 2015. How Chilean Editors Perceive and Define the Role of Melodrama in Television News. Palabra Clave 18(2), 312-340. DOI: 10.5294/pacla.2015.18.2.2

Abstract

Several studies have addressed the role of drama and emotion in television news, oftentimes regarding them as opposed to quality journalism. Such approaches ignore the cultural resonance of melodramatic features in television newscasts in regions like Latin America, and pay little attention to how newswriters perceive dramatic news and melodramatic treatment of news events. Based on in-depth interviews with 14 news editors from four major Chilean broadcasters, this study taps into their insights on audiovisual language and melodrama in television news. The findings suggest a common perception among Chilean editors of audiovisual language as inherently dramatic-emotional and close. Emotionalization and personalization are described as a communicative potential of television journalism, and melodrama is framed negatively as an excess of emotion that damages information.

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- 1 These results are part of the broader study "Melodramatic resources in television journalism" conducted by the authors and financed by the Chilean National Fund for Science and Technology (Fondecyt, Project N° 1110311).
 - 2 Ph.D., School of Journalism, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile. mcmujica@uc.cl
 - 3 Ph.D., School of Journalism, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile. ibachman@uc.cl

Keywords

Communication, journalism, television news, television production (Source: Unesco Thesaurus).

Cómo los editores chilenos perciben y definen el papel del melodrama en las noticias de televisión

Resumen

Varios estudios han abordado el rol del drama y emoción en las noticias de televisión, muchas veces con respecto a estos en lugar de un periodismo de calidad. Tales enfoques ignoran la resonancia cultural de características melodramáticas en los noticieros de televisión en regiones como América Latina, y prestan poca atención a cómo los trabajadores de noticias perciben noticias dramáticas y el tratamiento melodramático de los eventos del noticiero. Basándose en las entrevistas de profundidad con 14 editores de noticias de cuatro grandes emisoras chilenas, este estudio aprovechó sus ideas sobre el lenguaje audiovisual y el melodrama de noticias de la televisión. Los resultados sugieren una percepción común entre los editores chilenos del lenguaje audiovisual como inherentemente dramático-emocional y cercano. Emocionalización y personalización se describen como un potencial comunicativo del periodismo televisivo, y el melodrama se enmarca negativamente como un exceso de emoción que daña la información.

Palabras clave

Comunicación, periodismo, noticias de televisión, producción de televisión (Fuente: Unesco Tesauros).

Como editores chilenos percebem e definem o papel do melodrama nas notícias de televisão

Resumo

Diversos estudos têm abordado o papel do drama e da emoção nas notícias de televisão muitas vezes se referindo a eles como oposição ao jornalismo de qualidade. Tais abordagens ignoram a ressonância cultural das características melodramáticas em telejornais das regiões como a América Latina. Eles também dão pouca atenção às percepções dos jornalistas sobre os acontecimentos dramáticos e seu tratamento melodramático. Com base em entrevistas de profundidade com 14 editores de notícias a partir de quatro principais emissoras chilenas, este estudo baseia-se em suas ideias sobre a linguagem audiovisual e o melodrama nos noticiários da TV. Os resultados sugerem uma percepção comum entre os editores chilenos sobre a linguagem audiovisual como inerentemente dramática, emocional e próxima. Os papéis da emoção e da personalização são descritos como um potencial comunicativo do telejornalismo e o melodrama é enquadrado negativamente como um excesso de emoção que produz danos à informação.

Palavras-chave

Comunicação, jornalismo, notícias de televisão, produção de televisão. (Fonte: Tesouro da Unesco).

When a fire broke out in an overcrowded Chilean prison in December 2010, television crews filled the airwaves with live coverage of the tragedy. Live shots and sound bites of the victims' desperate pleas for help and their families' grief were mixed with crude images of corpses and the wounded, all accompanied by highly emotionalizing comments from reporters. Eighty-one inmates died because of the fire, and all four national television networks—including one state-owned, public-service broadcaster—were criticized for providing gruesome details and exacerbating emotions. Chile's National Television Council condemned the networks' coverage of the tragedy and, on October 29, 2012, the Supreme Court upheld a US\$16,000 fine against one of the broadcasters. According to the ruling, although the prison fire was indeed filled with dramatic overtones, the network's live coverage overemphasized the horrors of the tragedy (Emol, 2012).

Such exaggeration and overly emotional treatment of news events often has been linked in the literature to infotainment and tabloidization. Past research has examined the news media's focus on soft news and reliance on sensationalism, but has mostly ignored the role of melodrama in journalistic storytelling. Given the relevance of melodrama in Latin America (e.g., Martín-Barbero, 1995; Monsiváis, 2000), as well as its cultural resonance among Latin American audiences (Fuenzalida, 2002; Orozco & Vassallo de Lopes, 2012), it is important to address the connection between melodrama and news coverage, more so in countries and regions that are less prominent in the literature. Also, what television gatekeepers have to say about this topic will enrich our understanding of how news stories are reported and presented.

This study uses in-depth interviews with Chilean television editors to explore what TV journalists make of melodrama's role in newscasts. It addresses these media workers' thoughts on melodrama's main characteristics (i.e., personalization and emotionalization) and their opinions regarding audiovisual language in journalism. The focus is less on editorial processes and more on their understanding of the audiovisual nature of TV journalism and how they define (melo) drama in the news.

Media Sociology and Gatekeeping

Not everything suitable to be news media content actually gets into the media, and the characteristics of newswork practices end up defining the manufactured product known as “news” (Schudson, 1995). Media sociology addresses how news is made, and comparable research has analyzed the practices and routines of media workers. Accordingly, the literature identifies several influences on media content, and Shoemaker and Reese (1996) ranked hierarchically, from ideological and other macrosystem-level factors down to the more micro-characteristics of individual media workers.

Research exploring how news is made stresses the role of journalists and editors in the way a news story is selected, reported and presented (e.g., Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Since the seminal works of Lewin (1947), White (1950) and Breed (1955) highlighting the decision-making power of reporters and editors in processing the news, a number of scholars have underscored the role newsroom routines, organizational structure, journalistic norms, and cultural considerations play in influencing what becomes news (Preston, 2009; Schudson, 1995; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). However, there is no consensus on the relative importance of these factors.

Furthermore, while journalism differs greatly from one country to another other, there are systematic actions, practices and interactions that define newswork and news processes (Zelizer, 2004). Indeed, the news construction process requires journalists and editors to act as newsroom gatekeepers who regulate the flow of information and knowledge, and control which stories become news—and how—and are transmitted by news media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950). While not necessarily reporting the news themselves, editors have a say in how stories are presented to audiences (Sumpter, 2000). Even if not all the news is treated equally, journalists perform their duties within the framework of news norms, values, and routines they share; that is, “repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 105). To a great extent, news content presentation depends on these standardized forms of news production, editorial decision-making, and management characteris-

tics, as well as property structure (i.e., whether the news outlet is public or commercially-operated).

Serious Journalism and Melodramatic News

Since the launch of the so-called penny press in the United States during the 1830s, there is evidence that crime, celebrity and human-interest stories are more marketable than coverage of politics and public affairs (Alonso & Loke, 2010; Gitlin, 2002). This “yellow” journalism set the stage for both tabloidization and infotainment. The former refers to the prioritizing of entertainment, human interest and commercial profitability — oftentimes presented as oppositional to “serious” and socially responsible journalism (Parks, 2000) — and the later, to media content that blurs “traditional distinctions between information-oriented and entertainment-based genres” (Baym, 2008, p. 2276).

In recent decades, several authors have criticized and debated news coverage that favors entertainment, especially on television, arguing that news programming has turned to easy, amusing and superficial topics (Mujica & Bachmann, 2013) — a tendency toward tabloidization (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Gripsrud, 2000). The main argument behind this critique is that what historically has been deemed as quality journalism is meant to inform and educate citizens by appealing to reason (e.g., McManus, 1994, quoted in Uribe & Gunter, 2007; Pantti, 2010), and that an entertainment focus, emotional appeals and sensationalism are a deviation from the proper social role of journalism (Pantti, 2010; see also García Avilés, 2007; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). For instance, sensationalist stories can rely on vivid images, editing and production elements to present colorful news stories that are not necessarily informative (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; see also Gómez-Giraldo *et al.*, 2010), but can attract large audiences (Gripsrud, 2000).

This discussion often pits commercial media against public-service media. Indeed, increasing infotainment and emotionalization in television news has been linked to the property structure of broadcasters (Mujica & Bachmann, 2015). The underlying assumption is that news selection follows different criteria in each type of outlet, depending on its mission (Schulz, 1999;

Holtz-Bacha, 1990). Thus, privately-owned outlets, pressed for ratings and funds from advertising, would be more prone to personalization, soft news, and exaggerated emotional content, while public-service media would favor hard news and more traditional newsworthiness standards (Beam, 2003; Plasser, 2005; Thussu, 2008); in other words, serious journalism.

However, there is empirical evidence that news content does not always vary according to property structure, and the commercial/public divide does not necessarily predict (seemingly) superior or inferior coverage (e.g., Porath & Mujica, 2012).⁴ Along these lines, Hotelling's law asserts that competitive markets favor the homogenization of products (Van Cuienburg, 1999), and this includes broadcasting companies and their newscasts. Past research shows deregulated systems financed by advertisement lean toward programmatic homogeneity and simpler, superficial content that appeals to a wide audience (Godoy, 1997; Strömberg, 2004; Thussu, 2008) or to groups valued by advertisers (Strömberg, 2004), so much so that profit motives have an important impact on news stories and how they are presented (Mohd-Shariff, 2011; Sumpter, 2000). Not surprisingly, public broadcasters end up mimicking their commercial counterparts' shows (Tsourvakas, 2004), with both private and public television newscasts thus favoring spectacular news (Lozano, 2004; Vettehen *et al.*, 2005), attractive visuals, and emotion over social significance (Thussu, 2008).

Those critiquing tabloidization and infotainment in the news believe journalism —“an instrument for objective, dispassionate investigation and a forum for rational discussion” (Pantti, 2010, p. 169)— is being undermined by excessive coverage of events with scarce social relevance, the simplification of relevant events through a focus on personal stories, and the exacerbation of emotion through rhetorical procedures such as close-ups and music. However, these very same attributes also can be linked to the characterization of melodrama by Latin American authors such as Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987, 1995) and Carlos Monsiváis (2000), who describe this genre as moral polarization represented by archetypical cha-

4 Rather than property structure, news coverage and its quality are better explained by the characteristics of each country's national television system, including the amount of commercial competition allowed (Porath & Mujica, 2012).

acters —the damsel in distress, the villain, the lover— whose toils serve as examples of the triumph of good over evil (Martín-Barbero, 1987; see also Brooks, 1995). Melodrama also is characterized by emotional exacerbation through resources such as the use of background music, as it seeks to stimulate the audience's emotions (Aprea & Soto, 1998).

Melodramatic Traits and/in News

The presence of melodramatic traits does not necessarily imply that journalism belongs to melodrama as a genre, but that it can share some features —melodramatic traits— characteristic of it. These considerations frame the discussion on melodramatic coverage in television news with a more fluid definition of genres, where they are understood not as a fixed taxonomy (Frye, 1957 quoted in Paré, 2014), but as discursive practices, as ever-changing sets of definitions and meanings that can appear in multiple cultural products (Mittel, 2001). The recurrence of these definitions and meanings in many works shapes generic clusters (Mittel, 2001; Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009) where some works fit squarely within what Todorov defined as theoretical genres (the series of ideal characteristics of a genre at a certain time; Todorov, 1981), while others works share some of these characteristics and stand on the borders of certain generic clusters. Thus, the identification of some generic traits in a particular work - news stories, in this case - does not authorize “taxative definitions about its belonging to a particular genre, but it does suggest the use of tools that appeal to a particular generic ethos that is recognizable to the audience” (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009, p. 22).

One of the central characteristics of melodrama is the coexistence of the representation of commonplace subjects through emotional excess. In the Latin American academic tradition, this contradiction is understood as the tension between what is acceptable in the modern conception of the world and in openly pre-modern daily life. Television in general, and *telenovelas* in particular, are understood by Jesús Martín-Barbero as spaces of mediation between the logics of modernization —represented by industrial production reasoning— and cultural logic —represented in convoluted plots,

repetitive sequences, and anachronistic quests for love and familial identity (Martín-Barbero, 1987, 1995; see also Carriço Ferreira & Oliveira Santana, 2012).

It is precisely this anachronistic experience of modernity that is central to the reception of melodrama in Latin America, as melodrama loads the plot with a social sense (Rowe & Schelling, 1991), links traditional modes of representation and action, promises a sort of finality anchored in ethical certainty (Fernández & Paxman, 2000), and applies its modes of representation to many other cultural products. Thus, while melodrama is a staple of Latin American *telenovelas*, its features can be found in other cultural products (Herlinghaus, 2002; Monsiváis, 2000), including *auteur* films and television feature reports (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009).

To be sure, melodrama is not limited to fictional works. Television news coverage regularly includes two key melodramatic traits: personalization and emotionalization. The former refers to news focusing on the private/personal/concrete over the public/social/abstract (Mujica & Bachmann, 2012, 2013; MacDonald, 2000; Schultz & Zeh, 2005); the latter, to information about emotions and their exacerbation through audiovisual resources that appeal to the senses and emotional empathy over reason (Gómez-Giraldo *et al.*, 2010; Grabe, Zhou & Barnett, 2001; Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000). While personalization of news events allows audiences to feel close to people and their stories (Puente, 1997), it has been criticized for relying on simplified archetypes (Alatorre, 1986; Martín Barbero, 1987; Real, 2001). Emotionalization, in turn, has been perceived as both the delivery of information about emotions (Van Zoonen, 2005) and the elicitation of emotional reactions from the audience through the use of techniques such as close-ups, camera movements, dramatic music, and color changes (Grabe *et al.*, 2000; Grabe *et al.* 2001; Russo, 2003). Even though these rhetorical devices also characterize sensationalism, what makes their use melodramatic is their combined use with personalization *and* information about emotions. When defined in the literature as sensationalism, these rhetorical features are linked to gory images and detailed information about death or catastrophe, with the intent of morbid interest (Grabe *et al.*,

2000; Grabe *et al.*, 2001, Reineman *et al.*, 2012; Wang, 2012). However, in melodrama, these traits are combined with a focus on personal or even domestic stories, and information about emotions such as sadness, happiness and love. This is done in an attempt to generate pathetic identification with the emotions being displayed (Aprea & Soto, 1998).

Past research on the Chilean case found the inclusion of melodramatic features and resources was common to all networks, albeit not widespread (Mujica & Bachmann, 2013, 2015). For example, a content analysis of newscasts from 2009 and 2011 showed 38.5% of the stories included camera movements and 10% added dramatic music to the news items. In most cases, two or three emotionalizing techniques were used per story, out of more than ten different options (Mujica & Bachmann, 2013).

Those studies, however, did not address how media people and particularly editors —media workers who do not necessarily report the news, but have a say on how news content is delivered— explained the use or abuse of these features in their newscasts. This is not a trivial matter, as the capacity of audiovisual language to appeal emotionally to audiences is one of its main features. Research has shown, for instance, that people can extract more information from messages that combine images and audio than from verbal-only content (Graber, 1997), and the literature pays a great deal of attention to how musical cues guide the affective tone of a given image to the extent of exacerbating a particular emotional response, such as anxiety, humor or disgust. Yet, for all the acknowledgement and appraisal of the emotional appeal of audiovisual messages, there is an important line of inquiry that frowns on the use —or abuse— of these features in television news. One thing, seemingly, is the inherent drama and emotionality of certain stories; another is favoring emotion over rational appeals and factual information, or toying with the audience's emotions. Several authors see this exacerbation of emotion as a strategy to attract more viewers, and emotionality and melodrama often have been regarded as the opposite of quality coverage (García Avilés, 2007; Grabe *et al.*, 2000; Uribe & Gunter, 2007).

When looking at melodrama in the news, cultural parameters about emotional excess and personalization have to be taken into account, as do journalistic standards dictating what can be presented in melodramatic terms or how much emotion can be given to a particular news event. With these considerations in mind, this study aims to explore editors' perceptions of melodramatic features in television news coverage. The overarching research questions leading this study are how editors define melodrama and what they make of melodramatic features in the way news content is presented to audiences.

Methods

This study reports the results of an analysis of 14 in-depth interviews with male and female editors from the four largest national over-the-air television stations in Chile: Televisión Nacional (TVN), a publicly-owned network funded through advertisement and without major state subsidies (Fuenzalida, 2000); Canal 13 (C13), which belonged to the Catholic University—and assumed public service functions (Godoy, 2000)—up until August 2010, when it passed into private hands; and MEGA and Chilevisión (CHV), two commercial networks. Seven of the 14 editors interviewed were from TVN; three were from C13; two were from MEGA; and two from CHV. The editor's names have been deleted, but their network affiliation is reported.

The interviews were conducted in July and August 2012 by the researchers and a research assistant (all native Spanish speakers) at a location chosen by the subjects (most often the workplace). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. All the participants had a career of at least ten years in television. They were responsible for the morning and evening newscasts broadcast by their networks and oversaw the work of large news teams. All are college-educated, and agreed to participate with no compensation.

The outline of the questionnaire was based on the general premises of the study: perceptions on newsworthiness criteria; definitions and procedures for audiovisual storytelling, including thoughts on personalization and emotionalization of television news; and inquiries regarding the no-

tion of melodrama. After the interviews were transcribed, the researchers read them multiple times in an iterative process aimed at identifying commonalities and differences, as well as themes and patterns. The transcripts were coded and categorized to find the links and contexts of the meanings in the editors' accounts. The excerpts presented below exemplify the themes, meanings and ideas expressed by the interviewees.

Results

Audiovisual Language and Drama

All the interviewees described images as being essential to television as a medium and, thus, as a central consideration in the selection and production of television journalism. The Chilean editors in question insisted on the distinct nature of audiovisual journalism and frequently contrasted it to the work done by newspapers, where events can be described or merely “announced” (Editor 2, TVN). Hence, the availability of attractive images of an event was considered a paramount criterion for deciding on its newsworthiness and, consequently, its place on the news agenda and its “position within the newscast” (Editor 3, C13):

We work in a medium where the biggest strength is the moving image. And, if that is your strength, you obviously will search for interesting images that catch the audience's attention. The [dilemma . . .] is how to deliver hard news — news you care about because it is related to your mission, which is to inform and not to entertain—with a dramatic structure, good visuals and storytelling that ensures the viewer doesn't blink or grab the remote control and go to the next channel for entertainment when you delve into unexciting topics (Editor 3, C13).

Chilean editors across all the networks coincided in defining audiovisual language as having the inherent capacity to convey action and emotion. This characterization was positively framed as the potential of television news, a capacity that allows viewers to witness news events and to relate to them empathically. Audiovisual language was described as “closer” to the audience, more “emotional” (Editor 1, CHV), “sensory” (Editor 2, CHV), and “dramatic” (Editor 2, MEGA).

This was not seen as detrimental to the objective to inform about socially relevant events, but complementary and necessary to respond to that social mandate:

Every relevant story in life involves emotion [...]. If I had to explain an algorithm, you'll recall less [of it] than if I tell you who your colleague's boyfriend is. There are different brain hemispheres that work in different ways [when processing information] (Editor 1, TVN).

The interviewees used the term “drama” to refer to conflict and as synonym for emotion and sensation. In the first case, drama was described in an Aristotelian sense: quality television news stories were linked to storytelling with a “dramatic structure,” where general issues are portrayed through the struggle of a character or group of characters. Yet, these journalists also linked drama to information about emotions and to showing images of events that produce an impact, what could be better understood as melodrama. Thus, news items related to accidents, social turmoil and health were described as more audiovisual, whereas those related to the economy were characterized as “less dramatic.” For instance, one interviewee said, “Stories must have a dramatic structure. If they don't, they are not television; they are anything, a pasting of pictures stuck. [...] We intend for all our stories to have that same classic structure: presentation, conflict, development, climax, outcome” (Editor 1, TVN). According to another editor, things that “deal with drama [include] sexual abuse, especially when minors are involved, events where there is discrimination, where there are strong images, battered women...” (Editor 1, MEGA) The first interpretation also can be linked to the personalization of news events, whereas the second can be related to emotionalization.

Personalization as a Tool for Explaining the Noteworthy

The Chilean editors who were interviewed recognize the coverage of personal stories as an explicit intention within their newscasts: during news budget meetings journalists are clearly asked to look for the human factor. According to them, members of the audience facilitate this intent by submitting their own images and testimonies. The editors from MEGA and CHV, in particular, associate the incorporation of audience-produced ma-

terial with what they define as their citizen-oriented editorial profiles. Both networks recognize the predominance of the everyday struggles of average citizens as part of their editorial personality.

In this context, the role of journalists was described as taking a “second look” (Editor 2, TVN) at these personal stories and linking them to broader issues:

We believe very much in people [audience members] pitching stories. They are related to their everyday experiences, but we try to go beyond. [The discovery of a major loan fraud perpetrated by a retail company] came from a lady who wrote to journalists saying, “I owed 200 thousand pesos and now I owe a million pesos.” If you believe this to be an anecdote and don’t investigate further, you lose the opportunity to report a very important and scandalous story (Editor 2, CHV).

In keeping with some of the literature on personalization (e.g., Macdonald, 2000), most interviewees consider the narration of these stories as a way to connect their audiences to important issues, and vividly explain abstract elements and contexts through the empathy and understanding they might feel towards other individuals’ experiences. In the editors’ words, this chance to represent the audience by including “regular people’s stories” brings distant news events closer to viewers.

Interest rates are a very important topic, and all of us are affected by them. However, if we don’t have [personal] cases, it is very difficult to say “interest rates went down 2.5%” without explaining what all of this is in terms of flesh and blood. The story is not aired when we don’t have a protagonist to show how it affects him, why it affects him [and] how it is useful to him (Editor 3, C13).

Emotion as Part of Reality

In the opinion of the editors who were interviewed, emotion is an inextricable part of reality and, as such, reporting and portraying emotion is perceived as necessary for accurate news coverage. As one editor put it, “It doesn’t become any less real because some lady is sad about something [...] Nobody can say that it does. We all know [emotion]; we share it in real life” (Editor 1, CHV).

Information about people's feelings, their portrayal, and the empathy the audience might feel towards them also was viewed as a way to promote active citizenship and to spark a reaction from authorities in the interest of social change. For example, information about the difficulties confronting the poor or the disabled is seen as way to encourage donations —as in a telethon (Editor 1, TVN)— and the images of citizens' frustration over public utilities or government inaction in emergency situations was described as forcing a response to issues of public interest (Editor 1, CHV):

I was here [at work, in charge during the coverage of a big fire]. No one had reported there were 80 people dead; their families were desperate for information [...] and nobody was giving them answers, [just] saying "be calm, we will give you information in five, ten [minutes]." The journalists were the only ones there to transmit that despair. And, that is information. [...] I think people forget that it was useful, in that moment, to be there stalking [sources] to obtain an effect, and we accomplished that. And, people were asking: "Why is no one talking? Why are the authorities not talking?" (Editor 1, CHV).

Most of the interviewees recognized the use of audiovisual techniques as necessary to inform about emotions and to attract the audience's attention to news stories, as well as to arouse compassion. They spoke about the use of facial close-ups that "say it all" (Editor 1, C13), the repetition of "astonishing and emotional images to captivate the audience" (Editor 2, TVN), "slow motion to showcase significant images" (Editor 2, MEGA), "variation in rhythm from story to story" (Editor 2, MEGA; also Editor 3, C13), "recreation of historical events" where images were not available; and protection of the identity of sources through soft focus and voice distortion (Editor 1, MEGA).

Melodrama as Excess

Not surprisingly, none of the interviewees described their journalistic work as melodramatic. When prompted to define the concept, their first reaction usually was to associate it with "fiction," especially *telenovelas*, and to assign negative attributes to its presence in journalism. In their view, melodrama is an "adulteration of reality" through the intervention of a "clean showing" of news events (Editor 2, C13) in order to exacerbate emotions.

Personalization, however, was not recognized as being within this definition of melodrama. Though some editors acknowledged that certain stories had an excessive focus on the personal side, when they were not linked to general issues or when they became repetitive, this was seen as poor journalism, or a trivialization of news coverage, not necessarily as melodramatic or a particular way of storytelling.

In a journalistic context, melodrama is understood specifically as the rhetorical exaggeration of the dramatic attributes of reality, as an appeal to emotions over the rational core of information. In the words of TVN's Editor 1, "It's getting away from journalism. It is like a *telenovela*. Melodrama... is an exaggeration of emotion". Similarly, "Melodrama is a resource to produce emotion beyond the goal of delivering information. It stimulates the audience to the point where it is left with a certain emotion, with a yearned emotional proximity, but [that's] using a resource that is inappropriate". (Editor 3, C13) This excess of emotion usually was described by listing rhetorical resources that generally were perceived as inadequate in journalistic use; namely, quotes and images of suffering, negative emotions, and gory visuals, especially when shown through close-up; image repetition and slow motion footage; the use of adjectives and adverbs that intensify emotions, like words such as "shocking," "horrible" or "desolate"; and intensely dramatic or "editorializing" music, as TVN's Editor 1 defined it. Further:

There are many melodramatic resources you could use in television. I mean, first, the image. The ways in which you use the image, close-ups, zoom back... there are many ways to portray that. Hands, for example, eyes, mouth, face; that's a melodramatic resource. Ambience is a melodramatic resource, too. For example [...] you have an image of a man covered in blood and they show him in a very close shot, and the ambience was everyone crying, "Oh, my God" (Editor 1, C13).

We would never ask a cameraman to zoom in on the eyes of someone who is crying, or instruct a journalist, in the middle of an interview, to embrace the interviewee or to take his or her hand to make them cry (Editor 2, MEGA).

If I show an [act of] aggression in slow motion or repeat a slap ten times ¡Paf! ¡Paf! ¡Paf!... I wouldn't want that. If I zoom in when

someone's crying, I wouldn't want that. If they are already crying, what's the need for a close up of tears streaming from their eyes? That's abuse (Editor 1, TVN).

Even if the editors recognized these rhetorical devices as generally wrong for the classic two-minute news story, they described them as acceptable in longer stories. With all of the networks under study, these in-depth reports usually last over six minutes, consist of human interest stories, and are said to use more of these melodramatic resources to hold the audience's attention. They have been common in Chilean newscasts since 2010, when these four national broadcasters extended their prime time newscasts from 60 to 90 minutes.

I would dare say these resources are more useful in longer chronicles,⁵ but it is not about abusing the effects. It is about [...] creating nuances within the news story through the use of different resources. [...] One looks for ways to keep the story from ending up being plain, to avoid monotony. It is different in a minute and a half story, where people's attention [span] is longer. If you are eight minutes into an account, attention is lost if the story is not well constructed (Editor 2, TVN).

We also have longer reports everyday that last between seven and ten minutes. Those have a more detailed process of preparation and post production that allows for certain liberties, certain games... more music, [...] more effects (Editor 2, MEGA).

The Limits to Drama on Television

One of the areas where the answers differed along ownership lines was the distinction between drama and melodrama. While all the editors described melodrama as an excess of emotion, the editors from the commercial stations spoke of an approach that is more flexible and accepting of higher levels of emotionalization. Conversely, the editors from both the state-owned network (TVN) and the formerly university-owned channel (C13) described

5 TVN and C13 refer to longer news items as chronicles. This nomenclature usually refers to human interest features, social trends, audience complaints, and documentary-style travel reports. MEGA has three categories to describe these kinds of contents: complaints (audience reports of government or company abuses or local problems), stories (human interest) and trends (social trends).

their newscasts as having a “colder” audiovisual language that was explicitly shared by their news crews —journalists, cameramen, and image editors.

When discussing the limits of drama, the editors from TVN frequently referred to their mission as a state-owned network (specified in the by-laws): this broadcaster must guarantee pluralism and objectivity, representation of the country’s diversity and the promotion of democratic values such as tolerance, respect, and solidarity. In operative terms, this mission has been translated into a detailed document entitled *Program Guidelines*, an orientation manual that was quoted constantly during the interviews with TVN editors. The interviewees said they do not go into topics that degrade minorities and indicated they should protect citizens —understood as both the audience and news sources— and should avoid the use of music in the news, because it is considered “editorializing.”

These guiding principles were framed positively. Rather than restrictions to journalism’s communicative capacity, the guidelines were described as general recommendations that help decision-making and give some structure to journalistic “creation” and “work” (Editor 1, TVN). Hence, the editors still value professional prudence highly. As Editor 1 put it, “There’s a great deal of liberty. So, when mistakes are made, it is due to the use of that freedom [...] because someone [...] made a bad judgment call.” According to the TVN editors, *Program Guidelines* is readily available and frequently checked. All professionals working in the news department are expected to know it “by heart” (Editor 1, TVN).

C13 does not have written rules that include restrictions on personalization or emotionalization in the news. However, its editors said they rely on a common organizational culture that —while not necessarily explicit— is shared by all professionals in the news department. Editor 3 identified that *ethos* with their nature as a “network with a mission,” which means following guidelines similar to those assigned to public service channels; namely, providing citizens with relevant information for their participation in democratic public life.

As for the use of melodramatic resources, this organizational culture translates into a more detached form of audiovisual language. C13 was said to be “colder, less prone to whining and to the abuse of sensibility [...], respectful of the emotions of others [...] not invasive of other people’s pain.” (Editor 2, C13) They have clear orders banning the inclusion of music in their stories. The editors also said they are ultimately responsible for compliance with this *ethos*. Interestingly, the interviewees from other networks also recognized C13 as being less emotional in its audiovisual language.

The MEGA editors also referred to a somewhat common organizational culture, although they were far less clear in their description of what it entails. As one editor put it, there are no manuals identifying the limits to melodramatic resources; so, the criteria are flexible and change depending on the ownership structure of the network and each editor’s personal standards: “There are different instructions for different news stories, for different days, different times in history, and for different [network] administrations” (Editor 1, MEGA).

According to the MEGA editors, melodramatic rhetorical devices such as images depicting negative emotions, recreations, slow motion and the like are used only when “informational objectives” make it necessary to do so. Shaking the audience out of its comfort zone was understood as one such objective, because “you want to stir up society, so things like that don’t happen again”. (Editor 1, MEGA) In this sense, the use of emotion is considered excessive when it is unjustified and when it is self-evident to the audience.

The CHV editors defined themselves and their channel as less restrictive, but they referred more frequently to sensationalist elements rather than to melodramatic traits. While they use fewer audiovisual rhetorical devices, such as recreations or slow motion, the interviewees recognized that CHV is more likely than other networks to use shocking images that could be perceived as sensationalist. Regarding crude images, they said they abide by the limits imposed by Chile’s legal system. They also respond to the limitations established by their own audiences, as expressed in ratings:

“The audience is informed and is so involved that it can punish you. [...] The sanction is instantaneous. Social networks quickly pass on objections to some of your decisions. There’s also practical rejection, when they stop watching you” (Editor 1, CHV).

Even though the CHV editors said they accept these limitations, they were quick to clarify that legal restrictions and “cultural tastes” are becoming more permissive in this sense, even in “more developed societies” (Editor 2, CHV). Their way of covering the news was presented as a factor in this evolution toward a more open society:

Knowledge opens your mind and makes you more understanding, less rigid. We are not at that point yet in our society, but we are getting there. That’s what we do every day. We try to be ahead of people, not behind them (Editor 1, CHV).

Discussion and Conclusions

This study expands the literature on Latin American tradition concerning melodramatic traits and television news, specifically the practices and discourses of a specific subset of gatekeepers: the news editors of the four major over-the-air television networks in Chile. The findings suggest this is a line of inquiry worth pursuing.

Several common and widespread definitions of audiovisual language and its relation to personalization, emotionalization and journalism appear in the accounts of the editors. Most of them, regardless of the ownership structure of their stations, described audiovisual language and television journalism as inherently dramatic and emotional. This emotional nature is seen as positive, an expressive potential of television as a journalistic medium.

There also is some commonality on how drama-as-conflict is perceived: a trait that can be enhanced in television news. Emotionality is not just a feature ascribed to reality or an attribute inherent in the story itself. It also can be seen as a legitimate form of television news coverage, as both a selection tool and the use of melodramatic resources. In other words,

these editors believe not all facts/events are necessarily dramatic, but they can be treated and presented in a dramatic way and remain a work of journalistic non-fiction. This definition of drama could be related to the theoretical constructs of personalization and emotionalization.

In addition to these editors' definition of drama, there also is a widespread understanding of melodrama as crossing a line —an *exaggeration* of emotional content— which is usually described in negative terms. Furthermore, all the editors interviewed see any discussion linking melodrama and the news in general, and melodrama and their own newscasts in particular, as criticism.

The extent to which the interviewees agree on these issues suggests there is a common professional culture among Chilean television journalists, one that ascribes drama and melodramatic features a specific role in news narratives. This finding is consistent with the homogeneity levels (and the increasing homogenization) of television news content (Mujica & Bachmann, 2013, 2015).

That being said, some differences were found between the “mission oriented” networks —state-owned TVN and formerly university-owned C13— and the commercial stations —CHV and MEGA— in terms of the boundaries and limits they set on the inclusion of melodramatic features in the news. Editors from the state-owned broadcaster (TVN) and the public-service-oriented network (C13) showed more caution and favored a more contained visual language as a response to either written editorial guidelines or an organizational *ethos*. On the other hand, the editors' accounts speak of commercial channels imposing fewer restrictions on journalists' work and their understanding of how journalism should be exercised. In these cases, the editors interviewed insisted on a case-by-case-assessment and, at most, recognized restrictions imposed by legislation, not by the network managers.

For these Chilean television editors, it is possible to recognize the characteristics of melodrama in journalism. While journalists assign negative connotations to the concept of melodrama, they do regard persona-

lization and emotionalization in the news as important, to the extent that personalization is seen not as a melodramatic feature, but as a journalistic one. This lends supports to the theoretical viability of the concept, despite journalists' negative predisposition to the word. For these editors, the problem (or prejudice) is with the term "melodrama", the concept itself, not with the use of resources and techniques that previous literature and our own research have come to define as melodramatic.

This study is limited, as it includes only one subset of news media workers, and the findings cannot be generalized beyond their newscasts and their networks. Nevertheless, research of this type is important, since it provides a thorough account of routines and practices at major over-the-air networks in a developmentally and culturally distinct country that is outside the realm of traditional research on mass communication and journalism.

Such analysis could be furthered by replication in other contexts; e.g., other media, other countries or other news media professionals. For instance, conducting similar interviews in other Latin American countries where the literature suggests melodrama is central to cultural identity and manifests itself in a wide array of forms would serve to determine if these concepts and definitions of melodrama, drama and visual language hold in other (work) places as well. Expansion to other cultures beyond Latin America could enrich the findings presented in this paper.

Similarly, future research could explore whether television editors' perceptions of melodramatic traits and their effects—in their accounts, empathy, attention, ability to explain phenomena and recall, among other factors—are regarded as such from the audience's point of view. In short, another line of inquiry would be to explore how audiences receive melodramatic news and how they come to understand personalization and emotionalization. In any case, research along these lines should continue. In a context of constant changes in television network ownership, increasing competition for audiences and the globalization of markets and formats, examining the relationship between drama, melodrama and television news will enrich our understanding not only of television journalism, but of communication processes as well.

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