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Non-daily current affairs information in prime time: formats and programming strategies in Spanish generalist television (1990–2016)

Abstract

This paper investigates the evolution of non-daily current affairs formats –other than the news– in the prime time of Spanish generalist television between 1990 and 2016. Analysing the programming content of six channels (TVE, La2, Antena 3, Telecinco, Cuatro and La Sexta), we have studied the presence, typology and strategies of the programmers to incorporate them into the offer of prime time. The longitudinal sample allows us to detect the tendencies that have influenced the audiovisual treatment of the non-daily current affairs information in the most competitive television time slot. The result of the analysis shows that the most important topics on current affairs such as politics, or the economy, have been integrated into the prime time. In addition, there has been a recovery of analytical genres such as the television reportage to explain topics of current interest. This new informative offer, much more innovative in the treatment, has enabled new programming strategies to be applied to the non-daily current affairs formats in order to improve their profitability.

Keywords

Television, television programming, audiovisual information, current affairs formats, prime time, Spain.

1. Introduction

The television monopoly that existed in Spain during the Franco era and the first democratic decade did not make competitive programming necessary. It was the implementation of the mixed television system in 1989 and the arrival of private televisions in 1990 that led to competition between channels stimulating the emergence of the first programming strategies aimed at capturing an audience that was no longer captive, since it was able to choose. In this context, prime time (the interval between 8:00 p.m. and 12:00 a.m.) becomes a key time slot for programmers. These are four hours of broadcasting¹ that account for just over 25% of total daily television consumption; the time slot in which advertising space is most expensive (Pérez-Ruiz, 2006) and whose programming is essential in defining the brand image of a network (Cortes, 1999). The audience gained by the content broadcast on this period

¹ Data regarding the consumption of television by time bands in 2016 extracted from Special television audience in Spain. (2017, January). *Communication News*, p. 375.

significantly determines the audience ratings of TV networks (Contreras & Palacio, 2003), so their programming is especially careful and competitive (Adam & Eastman, 2013). When news and current affairs contents and programs enter prime time, they also enter the tactical game of television programming.

Regular news programmes have traditionally been the backbone of news programming in prime time television, and their presence has been, with few exceptions², unquestionable for generalist television, despite their high costs (Contreras & Palacio, 2003). As opposed to the news –essential and prestigious– the non-daily current affairs programs in prime time –interviews, reportages, debates, magazines...– have always been considered dispensable information products. They can go up and down or leave the schedule without questioning the network’s commitment to information. They are the most competition-stricken information offer, the most vulnerable to fashions, the one that competes for a slot –space on the schedule– with the successful entertainment and fiction formats. But not for that reason it is an irrelevant offer. Non-daily current affairs programs, within their different generic modalities, should provide analysis and reflection on the events narrated daily and briefly by the news (Prado & Delgado, 2010).

They also represent the least rigid offer in the treatment of current affairs, and the most permeable to the trends that have determined the evolution of audiovisual information. It was in these non-daily current affairs programs, the infotainment was strongly installed and transformed the medium after deregulation, giving rise to some “perversions” (Rodríguez-Pastoriza, 1997) and to a multitude of hybridisations (Gordillo, 2009, 2011) that ended up consolidating infotainment as the treatment model of current affairs in contemporary television (Casero-Ripollés & Marzal, 2011).

Among the effects of this process, one emerges as significantly relevant three decades later: citizens now give more credibility to some non-daily current affairs programs than to classic news (Casero-Ripollés, Ortells & Rosique, 2014). This is not the only indicator that warns about the renewed role of these information products. The suppression of Cuatro news –the second channel owned by Mediaset España– in February 2019 and their replacement by a long-lasting current affairs programme force us to look these products that have always been present in generalist programmations but which seem to be redefining their role.

2. Literature review

Television has been using the term format almost since its inception to designate certain technical methods of recording and broadcasting. The industry extended its meaning to refer also to structural and formal elements of broadcasting. However, with the emergence of neo-television, the concept acquired relevance as a referential category for the classification of television content (Buonanno, 2005). It is in this context, that the concept of format television appeared for the first time.

Format has usually been considered a complement of the genre connected to the formal structure. Jaime Barroso (1996), for example, uses this concept to define and catalogue all those “formal variations” of the same genre resulting from the “mixture” of the medium, and also from the need to incorporate other essential television elements such as the programming management or marketing of television products. For this author, the format is “the more or less fixed disposition [...] of the components of a certain discourse” (Barroso, 1996, p. 194); the specific expression of genre into programming. Cebrián-Herrerros (1998) also highlights the vision of the format as a form of content organisation that presents fixed elements –presentation, sections, approaches, genres– and others that vary in each delivery. Likewise, Saló (2003) understands format as the materialisation of an idea through its main

² Telecinco started its programming in 1990 without regular news throughout the day. Two months later incorporated a news programme in late night but did not have a twofold edition structure until 1993.

elements, enabling for it to be adapted multiple times without losing its properties. Saperas and Gifreu (1995, p. 38) attribute “explanatory claims” to the format and consider it a category widely recognized by the spectator.

These authors agree on the eminently formal nature of the format and on the existence of fixed elements –that determine its nature and make it recognisable– together with other variables that enable innovation. The format thus fulfils the two obligations that Jost (2005) attributes to television: to offer consumers new products and to do so without taking too many risks.

Other authors highlight the specific industrial significance of the format (Moran & Malborn, 2006) as well as its value as a “first-class asset” (Rogel, 2003, p. 389) that might be bought, sold, created, plagiarised and protected. In the words of Enrique Guerrero (2010b, p. 239) the format is “the content structure that serves as a reference in the adaptation of programs” in an international audiovisual market. Therefore, the term format includes the industrial aspect of television programs without losing status as a relational category (Lacalle, 2005). Despite the difficulties posed by the unfathomable genre in television (Dafonte, 2010), the format is presented as a more tangible and practical category for professional use (Buonnano, 2005). Hence the success it has enjoyed in the most competitive television.

Current affairs television has not remained oblivious to this evolution of the format. As Cebrián-Herreros (2004, p. 12) points out, information in the audiovisual media “adopts a variant in each case to reach the public.” These variants are the information formats, whose function is “to respond to the interests of journalistic or current affairs information through the procedures and forms characteristic of the television media” (Barroso, 1996, p. 379).

Seeking to surprise the viewer and to win the battle for the audience ratings, television networks have multiplied the variations and rehearsed hybridisations to the point of blurring the boundaries between regular information programs and other genres such as entertainment (Thussu, 2007) or fiction. In this context, the flexible nature of the format, capable of incorporating different genres and treatments in the same audiovisual product, makes it an ideal tool for expanding the formal diversity of television information, but also an access to innovations that pervert the informative nature of many television products: talk shows, debate shows, reality shows, reality games, documentary-series, info-satire, etc. These are some of the formats that emerged from the commercial success of infotainment, all agglutinated in the *info-show* (infotainment) macro genre (Prado, 2003). These are entertaining versions of classic formats of audiovisual journalism formats (Gordillo, 2009, 2011), along with new proposals for “current affairs entertainment” (Salgado, 2010, p. 64). Distinguishing in this magma what is a current affairs format is increasingly complex.

Ortega (2006) suggests that for what a media transmits to be considered information, three conditions must be met: first, there is something to tell, an external event; second, a journalist knowing the facts communicates them to an audience that, in principle, ignores them; and third, the transmission is developed through a story that describes and explains the event. Thus, information requires connection with reality, knowledge and narration. The first two conditions are common to all type of journalistic information transmitted by the media, but the third one, the narrative, is closely linked to the nature of the media. Therefore, television is presented as a complex medium of information. It combines “the abstract of human language with the specificity of images and sounds” (Rodríguez-Pastoriza, 2003, p. 38) and offers a fragmented view of reality. The television medium is unlikely to conduct a profound analysis of the events, their causes or consequences (Sartori, 1998). It seeks to reach broad and majority audiences, particularly in the case of generalist networks and therefore tends to simplify language and to address complex issues in a simple way. Furthermore, it is a medium in which information aspires to be “entertaining communication” (García-Avilés, 2007, p. 50).

A fourth trait that specifies journalistic information is its connection to topical issues. Current affairs must describe a reality containing what Díaz-Arias (2006, p. 20) defines as “topical notes, interest or relevance.” Among the characterising features of current affairs information these are significant: advertising, novelty, tempestivity, generality and periodicity are significant (Barroso, 1992). Díaz-Arias (2006) includes relevance, referring to the fact that certain events acquire importance for citizens as members of society. Current affairs are configured as the “significant present,” the one that concern us, or affect us among everything that happens around us (Aguirre, 2007).

As it happens with information, current affairs are determined by the medium that conveys them. Cebrián-Herreros (1998) points out the existence of two coexisting aspects of current affairs on television. The first is fleeting and immediate and brings together the four times of a narration: the time of the fact, the time of the elaboration, the time of the dissemination and the time of the reception. These current affairs are configured through the live television. The second, quieter, assesses facts in context and establishes whether they have journalistic relevance. Fontcuberta (1993) extends to three this categorisation of the current affairs –short, medium and long duration– depending on how long the narrated fact concerns citizens. Rost (2002) proposes a taxonomy of the current affairs in four stages: synchronous, recent, prolonged and permanent. The latter brings together facts that have a permanent interest for citizens given their significance and importance.

The combination of information –with all its thematic diversity– and current affairs –in its different degrees– together with the technical diversity and the generic treatment offered by the television as a medium, constitute the basis of current affairs formats. While enriching the information offer of generalist television, these products are also, to a large extent, protagonists of the transformation of the audiovisual information model.

3. Objectives, hypotheses and methodology

This research aims to observe the presence of non-daily current affairs formats in Spanish generalist television prime time, to analyse its typology and explore their programming –strategies and decision factors–. As a starting point, three working hypotheses are defined. Firstly, it is presumed that there is a growing presence on current affairs formats in prime time generalist Spanish television coinciding with the incorporation of new operators into the market from 2005. Secondly, it seeks to confirm that the evolution of formats –in terms of genres, themes and modes of production– has facilitated the access of hard news –about politics, or the economy– to prime time, the most competitive television time slot. Finally, a third hypothesis postulates that a change has taken place in the modes and programming strategies of these products due to their better adaptation to prime time.

Content analysis is the methodology recommended by Casseti and Di Chio (1999) for the study of programming schedules and is the one used for this research. The analysed period covers 27 years of television programming, since the start of the competition in 1990 until 2016. The analysis has been limited to the free generalist TV networks with state coverage –TVE, La2, Antena 3, Telecinco, La Sexta y Cuatro³– in prime time. To avoid the effects on the sample of the experienced delay on prime time in these 27 years, the prime time broadest range has been chosen, which goes from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 p.m. The most significant six months of programming in the making of the schedule have been analysed per year: October and November –the channels present their programming; February and March –the programming is adjusted according to the first results; May and June –part of the offer is renewed. Since the generalist programming follows a weekly scheme (Contreras & Palacio, 2003) (Cortes, 1999), the first week of each of the above month is revised plus ten randomly chosen days per year to include non-regular formats.

³ The period analysed in Cuatro is from 2005 to 2016 and the period analysed in La Sexta is from 2006 to 2016.

The collection units are non-daily current affairs formats, other than the news, which were broadcasted in prime time for at least 30 minutes. For the purpose of this research, broadcasting refers to a programme broadcast on a specific day and at a specific time on a given channel (Barroso, 1996). As format, we understand the configuration and combination of elements –sections, conductors, scenery, dynamics, thematic, genres rules, etc.– that make a television programme unique and differentiate it from others (Cebrián-Herreros, 1998) (Saló, 2003). In order to determine which formats are informative, the elaborated proposal for Euromonitor by Prado and Delgado (2010) has been considered and to limit those that are topical, the proposals of Fontcuberta (1999) and Rost (2004) have been considered as a starting point. Religious, bullfighting, cultural and sports formats that have traditionally been constituted as categories of differentiated programs, both in professional (Kantar Media) and academic classifications (Prado & Delgado, 2010), have not been considered for this study. The number of programming schedules analysed is 6713.

The final sample is configured by 1252 broadcasts, 397 formats per year, of which 191 are different formats. On this sample, a series of assembled variables have been studied around the three goals: on which it is intended to draw conclusions the presence of current affairs formats in the generalist prime time, their typology and their programming.

The first group of variables identifies the record units and connects them to their environment –programme name, date of issue, channel or ownership of the network. A second group investigates the typology of the formats. Genre and themes are studied. Genre, according to the classification of Prado and Delgado (2010) that distinguishes 12 sub-genres within the informative macro-genre: current affairs, container, face to face, debate, documentary, event, interview, magazine, mini magazine, news magazine, and reportage. For the analysis of the type of topics, the distinction raised by Tuchman (1978) is used. This classification was created for the news and has also been used by authors such as Baum and Jamison (2006) in the investigation of American television shows. There is a distinction between formats that address “hard” and “soft” issues. The first are difficult to interpret, need analysing and are related to national and international politics, the economy or social issues of general interest. The second relate to the concept of “soft” news, issues that are easy to understand and not require analysis, such as personal stories, events, local news or social information of little importance. In addition to these two categories, there is an intermediate category: mixed thematic formats, which those formats that combine “soft” and “hard” contents in their running order. Finally, we have followed the classification of Guerrero (2010a, p. 201) for the production model, which proposes three audiovisual production models: “in-house production,” in which the network assume the production of the format by its own means; “external production,” in which the network is associated with a producer or delegate in the production of content (it is presented in the form of co-production, financed production or delegated production) and “independent production,” in which the network acquires the broadcasting rights of a programme already produced without its intervention.

The third group of variables studies how current affairs formats are programmed in prime time: day and time of issue, who are their competitors and what strategies programmers use to maximise performance. To design them, the contributions of Contreras and Palacio (2003), Arana (2011) and Eastman and Ferguson (2013) have been reviewed. To define competition, the macro-genre to which the programme belongs will be used, adapting the proposal of Prado and Delgado (2010) that distinguishes between information, fiction, info-show (infotainment), show, competitions, sports, children programmes, youth programmes and diverse. In this investigation, children and youngsters’ formats have been unified in a single category since they show low presence in prime time. In addition, a clear distinction has been drawn between information formats depending on whether they deal with current affairs or not, to increase visibility of the results.

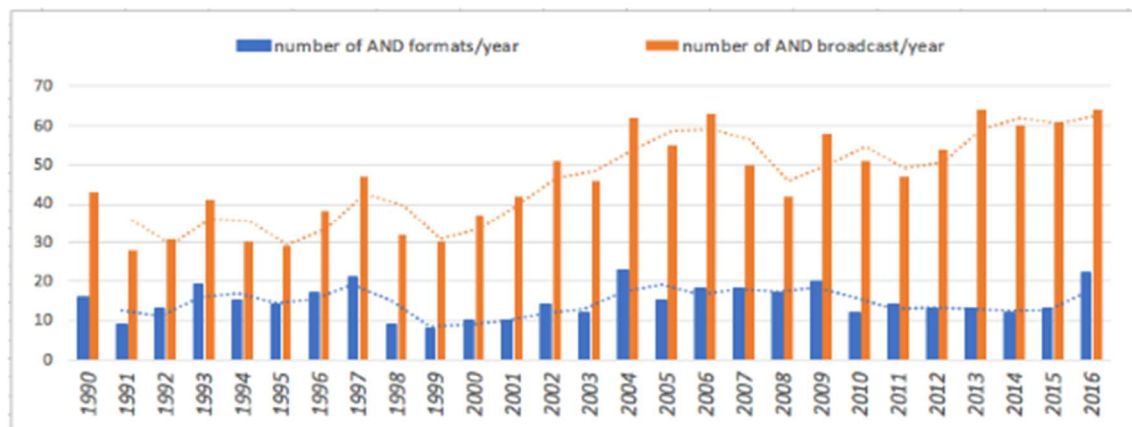
4. Analysis and results

This study demonstrates the presence of non-daily current affairs formats –AND formats in this analysis– in prime time of the Spanish generalist television over three decades, and it analyses its evolution as competitive products.

4.1. The presence of non-daily current affairs formats in the prime time of Spanish generalist television

The non-daily current affairs formats (AND) in prime time have been a constant in Spanish generalist television. The analysis shows that, on average, 15 formats have been broadcasted every year on all the channels analysed. Periods of greater offer –1990-1997, 2004-2009 and 2016– have given way to others with little informative presence –1991, 1998-2002– (Graph 1). However, their presence has remained stable during almost three decades of competitive programming. In contrast with this regularity, a particular growth in the number of broadcasts of these same formats is detected. 343 current affairs broadcasts were recorded in the 1990s, while the numbers increased to 505 in the period between 2000 and 2009. Within the first six years of the following decade the number of broadcasts programmed by the networks reached 404. This uneven evolution between formats and broadcasts expresses an increasing tendency towards regularity in the programming of current affairs formats in prime time.

Graph 1: Evolution of the number of formats and broadcasts of non-daily current affairs (AND) in the prime time of Spanish generalist television (1990-2016) and their ownerships.



Ownership of AND formats																												
(%)	68.8	88.9	84.6	68.4	73.3	71.4	58.8	71.4	55.6	87.5	80	70	71.4	83.3	69.6	80	50	66.7	58.8	65	58.3	50	61.5	53.8	50	46.2	40.9	
(%)	31.3	11.1	15.4	31.6	26.7	28.6	41.2	28.6	44.4	12.5	20	30	28.6	16.7	30.4	20	50	33.3	41.2	35	41.7	50	38.5	46.2	50	53.8	59.1	
Public																												
Private																												

Unit for formats and broadcasts: number of AND formats per year; number of AND broadcasts per year. Unit for ownership: % of ANN per year formats over total AND formats programmed in the year.

Source: Own elaboration.

Public television is the one that takes the most risks with prime time information. The study reveals that six out of ten non-daily current affairs formats have been broadcasted in the prime time of public tv networks (64.7%), compared to 35.3% programmed by private networks. TVE has led the public offer with 33.8% of the formats, shortly followed by La 2 (31%). Meanwhile, Antena 3 leads the private production, with 14.9% of the formats, followed by La Sexta with 9.3%, Telecinco with 7.1% and Cuatro, with 4%.

However, the diachronic analysis shows a significant change in trend in this distribution. The six networks analysed are active in broadcasting from 2006. From that point onwards the percentage of current affairs formats broadcasted in the schedule by all private channels has increased, while the number in public channels has decreased (Graph 1). The definitive turnaround occurs in 2015, when private channels broadcast more current affairs formats in the prime time than public channels (53.8% vs. 46.2%). During the last year studied (2016) almost six out of ten current affairs formats were programmed in prime time of private broadcasters.

This change in trend does not seem to derive from a sudden interest of private television for information. Instead, as the analysis demonstrates, youngest channels became protagonists as they bet on these products to incorporate the information into their prime time. La Sexta (21.6%) and Cuatro (9.3%) programmed more current affairs formats in prime time in this period than the traditional channels: Antena 3 (6.97%) and Telecinco (8%).

4.2. Genres, themes and modes of production of non-daily current affairs formats in prime time

4.2.1. Current affairs genres on prime time

TV reportage is, in global terms, the most used television genre to provide information about current affairs in prime time. 18.9% of the information formats broadcasted in the slot since the start of the competition are reportages. They are followed by the current affairs documentary (12.3%), the mini magazine (11.8%), the news magazine (11.3%) and the debate (10.8%).

Table 1: Genre distribution of non-daily (AND) current affairs formats broadcasted in the prime time of generalist channels (1990-2016).

	TVE		LA2		Antena3		T5		Cuatro		La Sexta		Total	
	n ²	(%)	n ²	(%)	n ²	(%)	n ²	(%)	n ²	%	n ²	%	n ²	% over total (1990-2016)
reportage	13	9.7	32	26	4	6.8	2	7.1	5	31.3	19	51.4	75	18.9
debates	10	7.5	12	9.8	10	16.9	6	21.4	1	6.3	4	10.8	43	10.8
news magazine	29	21.6	2	1.6	13	22	0	0	0	0	1	2.7	45	11.3
interviews	16	11.9	12	9.8	4	6.8	1	3.6	1	6.3	0	0	34	8.6
current affairs documentary	4	3	39	31.7	1	1.7	1	3.6	3	18.8	1	2.7	49	12.3
magazine	13	9.7	2	1.6	2	3.4	13	46.4	1	6.3	2	5.4	33	8.3
mini magazine	23	17.2	9	7.3	13	22	2	7.1	0	0	0	0	47	11.8
current affairs	5	3.7	4	3.3	4	6.8	2	7.1	0	0	7	18.9	22	5.5
event	13	9.7	7	5.7	4	6.8	1	3.6	2	12.5	1	2.7	28	7.1
face-to-face	1	0.7	0	0	2	3.4	0	0	2	12.5	2	5.4	7	1.8
others	7	5.2	4	3.3	2	3.4	0	0	1	6.3	0	0	14	3.5
Total													397	100%

Unit: number of AND formats / year of that genre broadcast by the channel in the analysed period (1990-2016) and % representing that genre over the total AND formats emitted by the channel in the analysed period (1990-2016).

Source: Own elaboration.

Knowing the global data (18.9%), it is surprising to see how for almost two decades, the reportage was under programmed in the time slot with the maximum audience. It barely represents 13% of the non-daily current affairs formats broadcasted in 1990 and its presence remains more or less stable until 2008 when this genre experiences a significant recovery (24%) that was consolidated in the subsequent years. From 2012 onwards, it represents more than 30% of the formats broadcasted and reaches a historical maximum in 2015. In that year, almost half of the prime time current affairs programs (46%) were reportages.

The explanation is revealed in the network's analysis (Table 1). Until 2005, only La 2 emits television reportages regularly. This genre represents 26% of its formats, compared to 13% of TVE; 4% of Antena 3 or 5% in Telecinco. This programming practice changes with the arrival of the last two operators (Cuatro and La Sexta). From the beginning of their broadcasts, Cuatro chooses the reportage (31.3%) and the current affairs documentary (18.9%) to explain real life. Both genres are rather similar and do not need a TV studio. In addition, La Sexta organises its informative offer in prime time all around the reportage. This genre represents 51.4% of non-daily current affairs formats. The channel is also characterised by diversity: they broadcast reportages formats about politics, research and social issues.

The narrative versatility of the reportage has been key in this process since allows minor channels, with reduced budgets, and younger and more educated audiences (Vaca, 2010), to innovate in prime time with new reporting formats (Moreno, 2012) of moderate cost. This entails a distinguished current affairs offer that breaks with the classic axiom of commercial television according to which stories of current interest that were suitable for prime time required a TV studio. This belief filled the schedules with magazines for years.

In fact, the study reveals that the magazine, in its different modalities, is the star genre in the traditional channels (Table 1). Its shortest version –mini magazine– is one of the most used by Antena 3 to treat current affairs (22%) and the second with more presence in TVE (17.2%). These two networks are also the ones that program it the most in their most informative variant –news magazine–: 21.6% on TVE and 22% on Antena 3. The longest modality –magazines– constitutes Telecinco's preferred bet to address the non-daily information about current affairs in prime time (46.4%).

A genre with a peculiar evolution in prime time is the debate. The arrival of private operators in the early 90s gave a new life to the dialectical genre. In 1992 and 1993 represents 23% and 26% of the formats broadcasted, respectively. However, in 1997 it disappeared from prime time. Along these years flourish a series of celebrity gossip programmes that cover those hours of television dialogue (Gutiérrez, 2005). The debate emerges renewed in 2004 (26% of the formats programmed that year belong to this genre). Since then, its presence in the most competitive slot of generalist schedules is moderate but regular.

Eventually, the current affairs interview (8.6% of the formats) has mainly been programmed by public television. Its offer multiplies almost by five that of all private tv networks (Table 1). From 2008 onwards it ceases to appear in prime time as an autonomous format, probably absorbed by the most entertaining versions of the genre (Gordillo, 2009).

4.2.2. Prime time current affairs topics

For the analysis of prime time topics, a distinction has been drawn between non-daily formats of regular broadcasts and special broadcasts. The latter are those broadcasted on a specific day to cover a particular and exceptional event without having regular presence on the schedules. This way, the evolution of regular programming of hard topics formats can be observed without the sample distortion caused by events such as electoral processes. These events cause a greater presence of television specials in prime time about hard topics to be registered in certain years, without networks having a sustained and regular commitment to formats containing hard issues of current affairs⁴ (Table 2).

⁴ As can be seen in Table 2, years with electoral processes are held on dates coinciding with the sampling –1993, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2015 (general elections), and 2009 (elections to the European Parliament) – record the largest number of special programs on hard issues because it coincides with the issuance of election specials. In the year 2000 and in 2015, general elections were also held (March 12, 2000) (December 20, 2015), but on days that are not included in the sampling – the first week of six months per year.

Table 2: Number and ownership of non-daily (AND) current formats of hard issues in the prime time of generalist channels (1990-2016).

	AND formats, hard issues and regular broadcasting		AND formats, hard issues and special broadcasting		Ownership of the AND formats hard issues (regular + special)	
	number of AND/year formats	% over the total AND formats/year of regular broadcasting	number of AND/year formats	% over the total AND formats/year of special broadcasting	Public ownership (%)	Private ownership (%)
1990	5	35.7	2	100	71.4	28.6
1991	4	44.4	0	100	100	0
1992	4	33.3	0	0	100	0
1993	2	16.7	7	100	66.7	33.3
1994	2	18.2	2	50	75	25
1995	3	33.3	4	80	71.4	28.6
1996	1	11.1	8	100	55.6	44.4
1997	1	12.5	4	30.7	100	0
1998	1	11.1	0	0	100	0
1999	1	14.3	1	100	100	0
2000	1	11.1	1	100	100	0
2001	1	10	0	0	100	0
2002	2	16.7	1	50	66.7	33.3
2003	1	10.0	2	100	100	0
2004	4	28.6	6	75	70	30
2005	2	16.7	3	100	80	20
2006	2	13.3	2	66.6	25	75
2007	2	13.3	3	100	60	40
2008	2	20.0	6	85.7	50	50
2009	2	20.0	7	70	66.7	33.3
2010	2	20.0	0	0	50	50
2011	0	0	6	85.7	33.3	66.7
2012	3	27.3	2	100	40	60
2013	4	30.8	0	0	0	100
2014	4	33.3	0	0	25	75
2015	6	46.2	0	0	50	50
2016	8	47.1	4	80	33.3	66.7

Unit for formats: number of AND/year formats (regular or special) of hard topics and % representing the total AND (regular or special) formats broadcasted by the channels that year. Unit for ownership: % of public or private ownership formats over the total AND formats of hard issues broadcasted that year.

Source: Own elaboration.

If the programmes of regular broadcast are observed under the three categories established in the thematic variable –soft, hard and mixed–, the most common in the current affairs formats in prime time in generalist television is the one that unifies topics of great implication for citizens (hard) with lighter themes (soft) –social, human, chronicle of events– in one same format (42.1%).

Programmes that exclusively report on hard issues with a fixed schedule and periodicity represent 35.5% of the total regular formats included in the prime time schedule (Table 2). However, they lack regular presence. At the beginning of the competition –1990, 1991, 1992 and 1995–, these contents fed more than 30% of the programs. Nevertheless, from 1996 onwards their presence decreased to levels from a minimum of 10% (2001 or 2003) to a maximum of 16.7% (2002). However, the situation changes in 2004. During this year, there is an exceptional rise in regular formats of information, debate or journalistic analysis on hard topics current affairs (28.6%). It is a moment of special informative relevance, the year of the 11M and the electoral turnaround that caused a change in the government.

However, it will not be until 2008, coinciding with the start of the biggest economic and institutional crisis experienced by the country since the beginning of democracy, when the television interest related to contents of politics and the economy propitiated the return of regular formats of hard issues at prime time (Table 2). Their presence increases up to 20% between 2008 and 2010. From 2012 onwards, they consolidate on the schedules and undergo a phase of expansion (27.3% in 2012; 30.8% in 2013 and 33.3% in 2014). In 2016, they already represent 47.1% of regular non-daily current affairs formats broadcasted. Only in the early 90's there was a similar volume of regular hard content formats in the maximum audience slot of the Spanish generalist television (Table 2).

Finally, current affairs formats on soft issues with regular broadcasts are less common in prime time (22.4%). This data may offer the wrong impression about the weight of these type of content in prime time. It is important to highlight that this research addresses only informational formats. To determine the overall weight of the soft contents in the maximum audience slot, infotainment formats excluded from this investigation should be added.

Another interesting concern is to observe who programs hard current affairs formats in prime time –including regular broadcast formats and special formats. For 15 years, public networks assumed the programming of hard contents in prime time as part of their responsibility towards citizens. However, in 2006, this historic trend was reversed and, for the first time since the establishment of the mixed system, private television included more hard topics in prime time. After a period of rebalancing –between 2007 and 2009– another turnaround happened in 2011. That year, 66.7% of hard current affairs formats were broadcasted on private television. The trend remains until the end of the analysed period (Table 2).

This change modifies the usual distribution of roles or programming models between public and private television in informative context. And again, young operators such as Cuatro and La Sexta, lead this transformation by opening prime time to the hardest current affairs.

4.2.3. The production of non-daily current affairs prime time formats

The most common production model for non-daily current affairs formats in prime time is in-house production. It represents on average 76.1% of the formats programmed every year. External production, the most commonly used in prime time fiction and entertainment (Guerrero, 2010c), is incorporated late into the informative content. During the first 16 years of the analysis, the tv networks hardly use external producers to create these products. However, between 2006 and 2008 the programs developed by external producers go from representing 18.8% to 30%. This progress coincides with the incorporation of new operators and the tightening of competition. Ten years later, in 2016, 44.4% of the current affairs formats programmed in prime time are external productions.

The bet to outsourced information content has not been alike in all channels. Telecinco does it in 72.2% of the cases; Cuatro in 75% and La Sexta in 69%. Amongst all the channels, Antena 3 is the one that maintains the highest in-house production for its current affairs formats during primetime (94.9%) above even the two public channels (TVE does it in 81.3% of cases and La2 in 72.9%).

The current affairs formats on hard issues that need careful treatment as a result of its connection to the editorial line of the network have also succumbed to the outsourcing trend of prime time. At first, networks reserved the production of these content to their own teams, but from 2004 onwards in-house production and external production coexist as well in the hardest and more complex thematic formats (60% and 36%, respectively).

4.3. Programming strategies for non-daily current affairs in prime time

Selecting the most suitable space in the programming based on the target audience, keeping the audience that was watching the previous program broadcast, choosing how we are going to face our content against other networks, are crucial decisions.

Table 3: Day, broadcast range and competence of the non-daily current affairs (AND) formats in prime time of the generalist networks (1990-2016).

Day	% broadcasts over total AND broadcasts (1990-2016)	Time-Slot	% broadcasts over total AND broadcasts (1990-2016)	Competence	% broadcasts over total AND broadcasts (1990-2016)
Monday	5.4 %	8:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.	25.9 %	Information	21.5 %
Tuesday	6.7 %	9:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m.	30.8 %	Non-current affairs information	4.4 %
Wednesday	11 %	10:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m.	26.2 %	fiction	40.8 %
Thursday	4.3 %	11:00 p.m.-12:00 a.m.	17.1 %	<i>infoshow</i>	12.2 %
Friday	9.4 %			<i>show</i>	2.2 %
Saturday	25.2 %			TV quiz show	9.3 %
Sunday	24.6 %			sports	6.5 %
Others ¹	13.3 %			children and youth programmes	0.7 %
				others	2.3 %

Unit: % broadcasts over total AND broadcasts (1990-2016).

Source: Own elaboration.

The study of generalist television schedules evidences that programmers reserve current affairs for weekends. Half of the current affairs programs in prime time have been broadcast on Saturday (25.2%) or Sunday (24.6%). If we add Friday, with 9.4% more, they are almost six out of ten (Table 3). These precisely are the least regular days in television consumption (Contreras & Palacio, 2003; Cortés, 1999) and those with less audience⁵.

⁵ SGAE. (2016). SGAE Yearbook of the performing, musical and audiovisual arts 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.anuariosgae.com/anuario2016/home.html>.

Table 4: Evolution of the broadcast range and programming strategies of the non-daily current (AND) affairs formats in prime time of the generalist networks (1990-2016).

	Broadcasting Time				Programming strategies	
	8:00 p.m./9:00 p.m. (%)	9:00 p.m./10:00 p.m. (%)	10:00 p.m./11:00 p.m. (%)	11:00 p.m./12:00 a.m. (%)	Vertical strategy (%)	Genres combination (%)
1990	0	50	21.4	28.6	18.6	81.4
1991	10.3	51.7	0	37.9	6.9	93.1
1992	19.4	45.2	6.5	29.0	3.2	96.8
1993	32.4	35.1	16.2	16.2	13.2	86.8
1994	22.2	51.9	3.7	22.2	16.1	83.9
1995	15	65	5	15	13.8	86.2
1996	24	48	16	12	16.2	83.8
1997	63.9	19.4	8.3	8.3	23.4	76.6
1998	37.5	29.2	29.2	4.1	26.7	73.3
1999	45.5	31.8	22.7	0	32.1	67.9
2000	32.1	25	25	17.9	38.9	61.1
2001	55.3	13.2	18.4	13.2	36.4	63.6
2002	56.5	13	10.9	19.6	23.1	76.9
2003	57.5	10	15	17.5	34.8	65.2
2004	47.2	18.9	15.1	18.9	42.4	57.6
2005	45.7	15.2	21.7	17.4	51.9	48.1
2006	47.1	17.6	29.4	5.9	46.8	53.2
2007	30	32.5	22.5	15	44.2	55.8
2008	27.8	30.6	33.3	8.3	45.2	54.8
2009	14.8	35.2	31.5	18.5	43.3	56.7
2010	13.3	31.1	37.8	17.8	47.1	52.9
2011	14.6	19.5	58.5	7.3	55.3	44.7
2012	2.0	28.6	55.1	14.3	65.5	34.5
2013	0	39.3	33.9	26.8	78.1	21.9
2014	9.4	32.1	37.7	20.8	83.1	16.9
2015	3.5	36.8	40.4	19.3	85.5	14.5
2016	5.3	42.1	35.1	17.5	76.6	23.4

Unit: % broadcasts over total broadcasts per year.

Source: Own elaboration.

Throughout the four hours that conform prime time, the audience sitting in front of the television changes. If the evolution of the broadcasting schedule is observed over time, the impact on the formats of the Spanish prime time delay becomes obvious.

The classic access prime time slot began at 8:00 p.m. and finished at the start of the news around 9:00 p.m. This short time slot hosted numerous current affairs formats during the second half of the 1990s until 2008. These were normally mini magazines combining information of society and chronicle of events. This time slot was usually filled with daily formats seeking to capture the viewer, redirect him towards the news and retain him the rest of the night. During the last decade studied, these formats have practically disappeared from this time slot and the next three hours have accumulated the highest number of current affairs broadcasts (Table 4). From 2012 to the end of the analysed period, almost 80% of the current affairs programmes were scheduled between 9:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. The first of these two hours was always informative, but not the one between 10:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Ten o'clock at night is the most competitive interval for programmers. It is where the peak time is allocated, the point of maximum audience, which in Spain is around 10:40 p.m. To place current affairs programmes in this time schedule is to confront them against the most ambitious programming proposals. Since 2008, more than 30% of the current affairs formats are located in this sub-range of prime time (Table 4).

Studying the programming of current affairs content in prime time also requires studying competitors (Table 3). Fiction is the main competitor of current affairs television programs. Almost half (40.8%) of contents programmed against them in prime time belong to the fictional genre. The second competitor is information on current issues itself (21.5%). Thirdly, the info-show, a macro-genre that brings together hybrid formats of information with entertainment or fiction (Prado, 2003), represents 12.2%. Current affairs programmes are programmed to a lesser extent against entertainment. Face with entertainment or show in prime time, programmers only risk with information on two out of every hundred times (2.2%).

Rivals of non-daily current affairs formats vary as the night goes on. Programs located between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. compete with fiction in 31.4% of the cases and with current affairs programmes in 30.3%. It is the time for the news, the daily appointment of the audience with information. In contrast, between 10:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., 60% of scheduled broadcasts against current affairs programmes are fiction. In this time period, information makes way to *info-show* (infotainment), in second place with 15.7%, and appears in a third place with 8.3%.

However, programming is also “a game of strategies” (Contreras & Palacio, 2003, p. 171). Prime time programmers try to protect their products from competitors, seducing and retaining the viewer. In the early nineties, just after releasing the mixed television model, prime time information formats were programmed in more than 80% of the times in combination with other genres (Table 4). Generalist television placed this content between films and entertainment programmes, humour or contests. The coexistence on the same night of two current affairs formats was always avoided. For the programmers of that time, generic balance was the perfect primetime menu.

Nevertheless, this way of programming the news in prime time has changed. The so-called vertical strategies (Arana, 2011) have been incorporated into the programming of the non-daily informative content. These seek to retain the viewer by offering a product compatible with his or her tastes to avoid that the spectator changes the channel, offering him more of the same or similar content. Not only that. Over the years, these strategies have established themselves as the most common option to program the information: to concentrate it on specific days offering the viewer full nights of current affairs without interruptions. Since 2011, current affairs formats were scheduled more in synchrony with content related to information than combined with fiction proposals or entertainment programmes. In 2014 and 2015, eight out of ten broadcasts of non-daily current affairs formats were scheduled this way (Table 4).

As the study reveals, even the tv reportage renewal has enabled to extend strategies usually employed in fiction to the field of information, such as the doubling. Doubling means the consecutive broadcast of two chapters of the same format, a new one and another replay (Contreras & Palacio, 2003). This allows covering two slots for the same price, lowering the cost of prime time. In the last eight years studied, 18% of current affairs formats on average were programmed using doubling. The audience thus accept current rebroadcasts as if they were fiction episodes.

5. Conclusions

Prime time of generalist television has experienced significant transformations in the almost three decades since the implementation of the mixed television system. One of these transformations has been led by non-daily current affairs formats.

These informative products have always been present in the hours of maximum audience of the Spanish generalist networks. However, the increasing number of broadcasts detected confirms, as the first hypothesis of this research pointed out, that these products had never been programmed as regularly and steadily as in the last decade studied.

The increase of current affairs formats at this stage is not an isolated event. British television, for example, recorded between 2006 and 2011 an increase of 541 hours of broadcasting dedicated to these formats (Huges, 2013). Nevertheless, it's less common for the increase to develop during the maximum audience time period.

In this evolution, public television has played an essential role as the main programmer of current affairs formats in prime time. Additionally, Cuatro and La Sexta, the last two operators that emerged in the audiovisual market, showed a far superior level of commitment to the one demonstrated by the traditional private channels (Antena 3 and Telecinco⁶) in so far as they incorporated these products into their prime time. This informative strategy could have been influenced by factors such as the low cost of these products lower than fiction and entertainment, so they were suitable for channels with limited budgets. The audience fragmentation caused by their arrival, lowered the prime time ratings requirements, particularly for these newcomers who had everything to gain. The information, with its moderate data, could achieve these more modest goals.

A second hypothesis declared the evolution of current affairs formats to adapt themselves to the most competitive slot in the schedule. The analysis has found three significant changes in the development of these products. First, the revival of genres that left prime time in the second half of the 90s and that propose a more analytical treatment of current affairs, such as the reportage, but in renewed versions and with new innovative treatments. This renewal also comes from the younger networks, probably encouraged by their need to propose a differentiated information offer in a very consolidated audiovisual landscape. Secondly, there is a thematic opening of the prime time that incorporates, after a long absence, the hardest topics of real life. Despite the fact that several works confirm that the abandonment of hard topics in prime time formats was a general trend in generalist television programs undergoing deregulation processes (Barnett & Seymour, 1999) (Holland, 2001) (Baker, 2006, 2016), the subsequent return detected in the Spanish television does not have a generalised character (Baker, 2016).

Finally, it has also been confirmed an evolution in the modes of production with an increasing intervention of the industry in certain contents that for years were the exclusive territory of the information services or the personnel of the channels. Even the hardest current affairs information is incorporated into the universe of the audiovisual industry.

As it was foreseen in the third hypothesis and the analysis confirms, as a result of this evolution, television programmers have found more versatile products with greater competitive capacity. Products that, while being scheduled on days of moderate television consumption, can already compete with fiction formats in the busiest hours of television. Formats that support programming strategies that were previously exclusive to entertainment and fiction and favour their profitability.

In short, the way how younger generalist operators, even with smaller audiences and lower budgetary capacity, have conceived and programmed their offer of non-daily current affairs content in prime time has caused a disruptive change in the treatment of information on generalist television. Three decades after the start of the competition, the current affairs content broadcast during prime time is more regular, less public, more analytical in its genres, harder in its subjects, more industrial in its production and more profitable in its programming.

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⁶ Throughout the period studied, there are two integration processes that lead to the merging of Cuatro and Telecinco and the incorporation of La Sexta with Antena 3.

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