Simultaneous production and transmission: the immediacy of newsroom rundowns in the digital era

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Abstract
This article reports on one of the lines of a wider research project devoted to the study of television newscast scripting in the digital era. It explores the changes news rundowns undergo during live broadcasts. Data gathered through participant observation has been analysed from the perspective of journalism theory. Rather than exploring the impact of IT on organizational models (multi-tasking journalism, integrated newsrooms), the authors have chosen to focus on how news stories are currently presented. The findings of this study indicate that the lapse of time between news production and news broadcasting is narrowing sharply.

Keywords: Script, Audiovisual, Television, Digital, Rundown.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 1.1. The object of this study: the rundown. 1.2. The state of the question. 1.3. Hypothesis. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

1. Introduction

This paper is based upon academic research on television newscast scripts carried out during the first six months of 2012. For this project, researchers spent several days observing the general newsroom routines followed by the crew of TPA Noticias, a news program broadcast by the Asturian public broadcasting company Radiotelevisión del Principado de Asturias, and the rundowns for these programs. The objective of this study was to gain insight into how news scripts are subject to modification in digital newsroom environments and confirm researchers’ initial hypothesis that the gradual implementation of digital technology in
Spanish television newsrooms over the first decade of this century may have provoked substantial changes in the production methods of what is considered the paradigm of audiovisual news reporting: the television newscast.

1.1. The object of this study: the rundown

The television news rundown, which is the object of this research, is understood to be a script that notes everything that is needed, from a narrative point of view, to transform a day’s raw news into news stories prior to their broadcast to a public audience. Our investigation was grounded on the premise that “a daily TV news presentation or news bulletin is a narrative” (57 Gordillo, 1999) and the work of authors (Perez, 2003: 82) who have argued that a rundown is more than a simple chronological schedule of time slots and have pointed out the similarities between newscast scripts prepared by television journalists and those created by filmmakers.

This article sets out to demonstrate that there are observable parallels between the specifications for content laid out in a news broadcast rundown and those contained in a film script and that a newscast rundown is more than a simple list of news stories and the time slots they fill. These documents also contain brief commentaries regarding how content should be presented that shed light on process of television news production.

To begin with, a television news rundown provides technical indications such as whether a particular news item should be covered using video, text and video, NAT/VO, sound bytes, or live transmission. Its scope therefore extends beyond the mere scheduling and timing of news packages. In fact, Bandrés et al (2000: 266), who define it as «a newscast scheme», state that it «usually consists of the following elements: the placement of a story within the overall newscast, its title, the format to be used to cover it, the presenter and editor assigned to it, the source, and the time it is allotted in the program». On most occasions throughout this article, we will refer to this document as a rundown.

As Pérez has observed, the newscast rundown has its roots in a process developed by filmmakers; it is therefore logical to study and analyse it as a form of audiovisual script. By its nature and characteristics, a television newscast rundown squares with many authors’ definitions of a screenplay.

For example, to Valeria Selinger (2008: 15) a script is «(just like a camera), an essential tool for transforming an idea for a film into a reality.» She also describes it as «a temporary, unfinished work, a parenthesis, a necessary bridge between

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1 [In Spanish newsrooms] «VTR (Video Tape Recorder) […] designates, in the newscast, video editing which incorporates image and text» (Bandrés et al., 2000:274).

«NAT/VO (video only with natural sound), in television newscast parlance, refers to images that are accompanied by a presenter’s commentary» (Bandrés et al., 2000: 262).

«Live transmission: the broadcast of an event as it is happening» (Bandrés et al., 2000: 264).
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ideas or between the idea of making a film and actually shooting it [...] a dynamic work-in-progress that undergoes constant change» (Selinger, 2008: 17), which «allows you to sort through ideas as though you were performing a juggling act, spinning ideas like a vaudeville performer spins plates until they fall neatly down where the plot requires them» (Selinger, 2008: 21).

Carrière and Bonitzer support this perception (1991: 13), describing the script as «a transient state, a passing thing that undergoes a metamorphosis and later disappears, just as a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly». Other writers have described how scripts have become less rigid and more provisional, a theme closely related to the object of this research (Feldman, 1990: 18). In short, the definition of a script coincides with Cebrian Herreros’ (1998) notion of a newscast rundown.

1.2. The state of the question

Nevertheless, the modification of news stories during live broadcast has not been addressed in existing literature (Bandrés et al., 2000) (Pérez, 2003) devoted to the analysis of changes in television newsrooms wrought by the emergence of digital technology. A few scholars have explored the impact of digitisation on the quality of news (Bandrés, 2011). However, more attention has been paid to the impact of the digitisation of audiovisual media on document management and archiving (Tapia et al, 2006; García Avilés et al, 2007; Meana et al, 2010; Agir-rezaldegi, 2011).

The attention paid by scholars to digital journalism, especially as it is practiced in the newsrooms of online dailies (Domingo, 2003), has resulted in digitisation being identified as strictly an Internet phenomenon. However, digital technology is not exclusive to Internet communications. The scope of its applications is much wider. More importantly, this distinction must be kept in mind in order to understand digitisation’s true impact on the mass media as a whole. In fact, it appears that in the initial rush to explore the nexus between digitisation and Internet communications —which has been highly product-focused— other aspects its relationship to journalism have been left virtually unexplored, as though an examination of its impact on the newspaper industry were sufficient to provide an exhaustive overview of how journalism is exploiting digital technology.

For example, the effect of digital technology on current television discourse has hardly been addressed at all. Nor has the role of digitisation in the production of audiovisual texts been taken into account. Nonetheless, this is a critical issue, especially if one considers the importance that manuals place on the script in the initial development stages of a narrative (Selinger, 2008). The majority of scholarly works focusing on the screenplay (Brenes, 1987; Carrière & Bonitzer, 1991; Chion, 2000; Feldman, 1990; Field, 2002; Oubiña & Aguilar, 1997; Selinger, 2008; Vale, 1996) devote a great deal of attention to its role during the initial stages of the development of a story concept for a motion picture, stressing the impact of the script on the finished product. We therefore believe that any textual analysis such as the one undertaken in this study would be incomplete if it did not
examine the parallels between what film scholars refer to as the «idea» and its more prosaic counterpart in the field of journalism, news production.

Much of the abundant literature on digitisation (Barroso, 1992; Rodrigo Alsina, 1989; Tuchman, 1983) focuses on the impact new routines have had on news production. Although these scholarly works shed significant light on this aspect of digital journalism, our interest lies elsewhere. We have centred our research on the product rather than the producers by examining a particular form of output: the script of a newscast as it evolves throughout the process of production. Since most of the professionals who would be observed during this study had never practiced analogue broadcast journalism, it would have been useless to carry out a comparative analysis that tracked changes in their use of technology. Therefore, we have not made use of research techniques commonly employed in studies of socio-technical change such as in-depth interviewing, considering it more opportune to use existing literature as our main reference in making comparisons between analogue and digital practices.

1.3. Hypothesis

The starting hypothesis for the research reported in this article was that altering news content during a broadcast would affect the evolution of the newscast rundown and subsequently the final discourse of the news programme. Throughout this text, «news narrative» refers to the television newscast as a complete entity, rather than any of its separate parts, which we will also address. This hypothesis is part of a more general hypothesis regarding the role of technology in the evolution of a text as well as its fully realised form. With this in mind, we have tried to observe the potential impact of technological change from two epistemological viewpoints: literary theory and the theory of journalism.

A television news rundown and a film script are similar in that just as a film script cannot be considered finished and unalterable until the film is deemed ready for release, a rundown is subject to modification until the very end of a newscast. In today’s television newsrooms, run-downs remain flexible until broadcasts have concluded. However, prior to digitisation, they could only be modified up to the point that a broadcast began (Pérez, 2003).

The digitisation that has taken place in television newsrooms over the past few years has extended the time frame during which a rundown can be reshuffled, and although archetypal scenarios of integrated digital newsrooms are narrowly focused on the processes of news production (García Avilés, 2007), changes in news line-ups are now being made even while news shows are being broadcast. In today’s newsrooms, a rundown editor can change content seconds before it goes out to viewers. As García Avilés has pointed out (2007), news writers may have higher profiles in digital television journalism than editors, but it’s the editors who manage the overall presentation of the news and the two now carry out similar functions.

A more global look at the tasks audiovisual journalists in the digital era routinely perform reveals the new opportunities for controlling the overall narrative
of the news that modern advances in digital technology have opened up. As Fandino (2002: 3) observes, «the dysfunctional and dependent processes under which journalists in the analogue era laboured have given way to a new digital world in which a new kind of professional is emerging —a journalist with the technological capability of crafting news content autonomously».

This crucial shift has empowered editors to pump up the «live effect» of a programme, which is one of the top priorities of newscasters. The faster breaking news can be relayed to the viewer, the more effective a broadcast is. Until recently, there were two ways of accomplishing this: one was to have a anchor deliver news second hand from the newsroom (González Requena, 1989), and the other was to broadcast live transmissions received from reporters located where events were taking place (García Barroso, 1992).

The production of this type of audiovisual discourse has some very special characteristics —of which live transmission is only one example— that can only be explained if technology, or more specifically a newsroom’s use of this technology, is taken into account. Hence, participant observation techniques were used to collect the data employed in this study, as they best supported an analysis of the narrative dimension of television news. Another motive for using this method was that it allowed researchers to effectively address issues rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of our inquiry.

2. **Theoretical framework**

Gómez Tarín (2010:22) points out the «eclectic nature» of film analysis and classifies the wide variety of elements that must be considered when undertaking such work into three main categories: objective elements, non-objective elements and interpretation. Textual analysis (an exploration of a text and its structure), iconic analysis (an examination of the iconic use of expressive resources) and contextual analysis (an analysis of the environment constituted by both producer and audience) fall into the first of these categories.

As Gómez Tarín (2010:22) has noted, Román de la Calle (1981: 110) refers to the production environment as the site of a poetic productive sub-process wrought by the dialectical tension between the producer and the artistic «object» —in other words, a place of poiesis. This reasoning provides the standpoint for one approach to film analysis. In fact, in the opinion of Gómez Tarín (2010:25) «to analyze a film, one must do more than simply watch it.» It is important to examine «the smallest details» of it. We perceive this statement to be applicable not only to analyses of texts related to film (which are usually associated with fiction writing), but also those related to any other kind of audiovisual material.

Observing production processes as part an analysis of an audiovisual text becomes even more important if one agrees with Filippelli (1997:193), who has posited that a script «is in no way independent from the finished film». While this intertwined relationship may be detected in the script of any type of audiovisual production, it is perhaps most apparent in the television news rundown.
We believe that the evolution of a TV news rundown is inherently bound to the modifications it undergoes during the newscast for which it serves as a theoretical script.

The indissoluble unity of film and script described by Filippelli is mirrored in the relationship between a television newscast and its rundown, insofar that a rundown faithfully documents —apart from certain technical details— what has been related during a broadcast before, echoing the lingo of filmmakers, its usefulness has ended and it can be tossed in the wastebasket. That would seem be its role and purpose. However, contrary to what one would imagine at first glance, the narrative sustained throughout a newscast is not a slave to the script prepared for it. Digitisation, which has been gradually adopted by television newsrooms over the last quarter century and is now ubiquitous throughout the sector, has injected a new degree of freedom into the overall narrative of a news programme by making it possible to modify a script while the show is being aired.

This is clearly an innovation. According to Barroso García (1992: 269), prior to digitisation a newscast script was finalised «during the last stage of the production process», an imprecise description that nevertheless does not include airtime. While newscasters might have once dreamt in vain of being able to deviate from established rundowns, their situation is now radically different. Today’s digital newscasters are not only free from the tyranny of pre-established rundowns, they are also able to change these scripts to reflect changing priorities throughout the broadcast of the news programme. This shift has fuelled the idea that script analysis can be used to analyse other types of audiovisual material (Oubiña & Aguilar, 1997).

We have therefore incorporated both journalism and literary criticism into our research from the very outset, agreeing with Albert Chillón (1994) that literary criticism is extremely useful in the analysis of issues related to journalism. This author has noted a growing interest not only in comparative inter-literary studies (regardless of whether they are focused on linguistics), but also inter-media studies (that is to say, comparative analyses of media that may not be primarily literary or linguistic in nature). This author has repeatedly stressed the enormous value of applying a comparative approach to the study of the relationships between literature and other forms of communication, as it facilitates the analysis of both strictly literary and historiographical relationships. This approach opens new horizons for the examination of genres, themes and formal procedures, the last of which has been the focus of our work. This line of analysis has provided a suitable approach for exploring the object of our study precisely because it «has stressed the study of forms —in other words, the procedures or mechanisms that underpin the production and expression of artistic texts»2 (Chillón, 1994:128).

We have found those aspects of literary theory that focus on narratology to be enormously useful in our research. We believe that a narratological approach can be highly effective in the analysis of television news broadcasting because, as Mas

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2 Translation by author
Manchón (2011) has pointed out in his work on the categorisation of television genres, due to the stability of its structure, the newscast is one of the few television genres (the others being television series and television advertising) that are readily identifiable on programming schedules.

3. Methodology

Taking a cue from Oubiña and Aguilar’s injunction (1997:176) that «if theoretical dialogues exist between film soundtracks and music and between the visual components of cinematography and painting, the same link exists between screenplays and literature», we have used a comparative approach from the very beginning of our research. For example, the use of journalistic and literary comparativism, as defined by Chillón (1994), has been key in the definition of the object of this study and in the formulation of our starting hypothesis, which was that the newscast rundown can be considered a script and is analysable using the canons of filmmaking.

The research team also chose to apply an additional method of qualitative analysis: participant observation (PO). By using this technique, we have been able to trace the various developmental stages of newscast rundowns and pinpoint the motives for the changes they undergo. This was not done for the sake of documenting actions carried out by a specific group of individuals or to understand the motivations behind these actions, but rather to study the impact of these decisions on the evolution of a rundown over the period of a given news day. During this project, «the involvement of researchers in the social situation studied and their interaction with social actors» (Corbetta, 2003:326) has been extremely enlightening. As such, it has been an exercise in endogenous self-observation (SO) (Gutiérrez and Delgado, 1994).

This does not imply that PO and SO are conflicting methods. We agree with Valles (2003:145) that «the differences between PO and SO applied by a sociologist to his or her own cultural environment are not as marked as those employed in classical anthropology». When social scientists operate within their own cultures, they inevitably draw upon their own personal experiences. In such situations, participant observation does not only take place while data is being collected; it also comes into play —perhaps more intensely— during the process of interpretation. Thus, in this type of research, the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative approaches become somewhat tenuous.

However, although a researcher may be physically present in a newsroom (that is to say, in the natural habitat of the object studied) he or she will nevertheless analyse what occurs there from the viewpoint of an outsider. To strengthen this external viewpoint, researchers participating in this study opted to conduct a covert observation, given that openly declaring their status could possibly induce changes in the phenomenon observed. The professional relationship of a member of the research team to the environment under observation, albeit not directly to the object in question (which was in any case immune to possibility of being modified by his presence) allowed him to dissimulate the work he carried out as
a social researcher. Existing literature on this type of social research suggests that researchers should only reveal their professional intentions when «the group studied is a closed group with which researchers have no shared experience and that is accessible only to others who meet certain requisites» (Corbetta, 2003: 339). In other situations, concealing one’s status as a researcher may be the most effective means of gathering information needed for an analysis.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study owes much to the work of Blumer (1939). In his work as observer, the researcher gathering information for the study drew upon his professional and academic experience related to the object under study. However, although his background may have made him more sensitive to some aspects of what he observed rather than others, throughout his observation he consistently pursued the objectives established for this research.

Two types of information were documented by the observer: the sequence of events as they occurred and the possible reasoning behind the decisions that prompted these events. The first task was devoted exclusively to the empirical documentation of the evolution of daily rundowns, and the second involved exploring the possible editorial motives behind changes in this document. The researcher present repeated this process over a period of several days, noting modifications made to the rundown on an hourly basis. As a participant observer, he was able to determine whether such modifications had been effected for technical, editorial or other reasons.

The systematic recording of data ensured that the observation was scientific. To reduce the possibility of observer bias, all work was carried out in a planned, well-structured and uniform manner. Theory played very little part in this phase of research.

This study centred on the newscast rundowns produced by TPA Noticias, a television news programme broadcast by the Asturian public broadcasting company Radiotelevisión del Principado de Asturias. Field observation was carried out during a range of scheduled news programmes broadcast during the months of January, February and March 2012. In January, the observing researcher studied the rundowns for the station’s Monday through Friday 2pm news broadcast. Subsequent observations conducted in February focused on the station’s 2pm and 8:30pm weekend news programmes. During the last round of observations conducted in March, research was focused on weekday 8.30pm newscasts. All editions of the TPA’s newscast were observed in order to gain a more accurate view of the object under study and to avoid drawing conclusions based on impressions that had nothing to do with the television news rundown itself, but rather with conditioning factors related to particular production schedules or news teams.

Monthly analyses of newscasts were structured around these two considerations. All data analysed shared two common characteristics: all rundowns included in the sample were drawn from newscasts produced for the same time slot and all were the work of the same production team. TPA’s allocation of human resources coincides with the internal organisational policies of most broadcasting com-

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3 One of the researchers involved in this study has been a member of the newsroom observed since it began broadcasting in 2006.
panies. Most television news organisations have established schedules for news production and assign specific production teams to each time slot.

The participant observer was present in the newsroom while each newscast studied was being produced, noting changes made in the rundown on an hourly basis throughout the entire working day. In the case of the 2pm newscast rundown, changes were noted at 11am, noon, 1pm, 2pm and 3pm. Data capture for the 8:30pm newscast was carried out at 5pm, 6pm, 7pm, 8pm, and 9pm. Observations, and therefore data samples, were analogous to the story board or plot outline of a screenplay rather than a shooting script in that they focused exclusively content-related specifications and omitted technical directions.

Samples gathered were analysed from a predominantly qualitative perspective. The daylong evolution of each rundown was analysed by comparing its hourly status with the final version documented at the end of the broadcast. Before an editor starts working on it, a news rundown is nothing more than a blank template consisting of a succession of empty fields. As a day progresses, these fields are gradually filled in with video and text references. The first entries editors make are short «slugs» of about three words, which indicate the topics selected for production. The brevity of the information provided in a rundown in no way detracts its function as a script; film scripts also share this characteristic (Carrière & Bonitzer, 1991).

The presence or absence of slugs in a rundown indicates the degree to which the newscast has been developed. Looking at the following samples, one can observe that at 11am the opening segment of the rundown had not yet been determined and that an hour later an editor added a live transmission segment.

Table 1. Source: TPA News 1st Edition Wednesday, March 7, 2012 11am

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Estimated duration</th>
<th>Final length</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>00:00:31</td>
<td>+0:00:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Day’s Lead Story</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>+0:00:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>00:05:00</td>
<td>00:04:09</td>
<td>-0:00:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>00:00:00</td>
<td>-0:00:15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Source: TPA News 1st Edition Wednesday, March 7, 2012 12 noon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Estimated duration</th>
<th>Final length</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>00:00:31</td>
<td>+0:00:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Day’s Lead Story</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>+0:00:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>00:05:00</td>
<td>00:05:24</td>
<td>+0:00:24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>PP Programme live</td>
<td>00:01:00</td>
<td>00:01:00</td>
<td>+0:00:00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We can trace the degree to which the script for the newscast has been developed by the number of items defined in the rundown. From there, we can also observe whether the first part of the programme is more fully developed than the last, or even how the main section is coming together. It’s also possible to figure out if a news story has been completely fleshed out or not by comparing cue times noted on a rundown sheet. Digital systems make these calculations automatically.

Table 3. Source: TPA News 1st Edition Wednesday, March 7, 2012 2pm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Estimated duration</th>
<th>Final length</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>NAT/VO Rubalcaba and Rajoy</td>
<td>00:01:00</td>
<td>00:01:32</td>
<td>+0:00:32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the numbers in the first column of a rundown indicate the numerical order of news packets in the day’s line-up, shifts in the placement of a news item throughout a day can indicate its changing degree of importance in the eyes of a news editor. The indications regarding the format to be used to present news items also provide a glimpse of an editor’s opinion regarding their individual relevance. The column in which the format is indicated is sandwiched between the columns listing order numbers and slugs. Editors can format news as a summary, hook, video, video and text combination, live transmission or a NAT/VO plus sound byte. Of these options, editors consider the NAT/VO plus sound byte to be the least relevant and a live broadcast segment to the most relevant. The scale used to rank the journalistic relevance of audiovisual news formats noted in rundowns analysed for this study was based on criteria developed by Rodrigo Alsina (1996:109).

As elucidated by González Requena (1988), the ineluctably mobile character of the diverse segments that make up a day’s overall news narrative stems from the incredible flexibility of today’s television news programming. As we have pointed out in a previous study (Ruitiña, 2011), what makes a television news discourse different from that of other types of texts is a process of ordering and placement capable of establishing a narrative syllepsis that plays out «in the instance that there is no mediating chronological boundary between history and discourse» (García Jiménez, 1993:178). The criteria for including a story or giving it exposure do not necessarily imply a criterion of temporal priority. «Each has its now and its own regime of temporal relationships between history and discourse» (García Jiménez, 1993:179).

As has been noted by Immaculada Gordillo, the conditioning factor of newsworthiness explains the fragmentary nature of television news discourse. In fact, according to this author, «if the discourse of television has a number of specific features that make it different from other audiovisual discourses, its fragmentation is one of the most obvious and demonstrable (Gordillo, 1999:53). Two other of its characteristic features are repetition, and just as crucial, hierarchy (Cebrian Herreros, 1998).
4. Results

The first phenomenon observed during the analysis of our sample paralleled the findings of studies carried out during the analogue era: now, as then, rundown processes vary considerably from one edition of a newscast to another, depending on the day of the week and hour these programmes are scheduled for broadcast. The 2pm Monday through Friday newscast is the edition that remains the most fluid. In other words, it is the edition that deviates most from the prepared rundown during the broadcast itself. Weekend editions offer a completely different scenario: these programmes tend to follow the rundown provided at the beginning of the broadcast, or even a version prepared an hour or two before the show and undergo fewer modifications while the show is on the air.

The ability to capture and report news occurring simultaneous to the newscast opens up the possibility —observed during this study— of modifying the script on the fly and incorporating a number breaking news stories into the programme. While the sense of immediacy achieved by this improvisation is far from complete, it does represent an improvement over what was possible during the analogue era. Although breaking news could also be included in a newscast prior to digitisation, it was an option available to a privileged few. Advances in technology have since made this possible for television newsrooms across the board.

We have observed that digitisation has accelerated the presentation of breaking news that first began when stations started to broadcast live coverage provided by on-the-scene reporters. The final rundown for one of the newscasts we analysed for this study\(^4\) included several NAT/VO segments and a sound byte that had not been envisioned a mere half hour before the start of the 8pm programme but were added after the broadcast was underway to expand coverage of the day’s lead story. As previously noted, this option of including fresh material during a newscast sets a rundown apart from the type of scripts used in the film industry. However, according to Carrière (1997: 18), there are activities performed in a television newscast control room that are quite similar to those carried out in a film editing room, which he describes as «that dark cave full of the hidden mysteries of filmmaking [...]».

Digital technology offers the possibility of producing a story live. To begin with, it facilitates new ways of pumping up the immediacy of a newscast. For example, with a little tinkering, editors can include both postproduction video and pre-programmed production video in their broadcasts. The Dalet Plus software now used in most newsrooms is designed to recognise and release only video material previously scheduled into the rundown. However, as this software recognises material fed from the studio’s post-production system, editors can solve this problem by running any last-minute videos they want to insert into the newscast as postproduction material.

It was very common for the closing rundown of TPA’s hour-long 8 o’clock evening newscast to list news stories that had not been contemplated a half an

\(^4\) TPA Noticias Monday, January 23, 2012 8:30pm
hour before the show went on air. In the same fashion, news stories scheduled to run at 8:30pm could disappear from the rundown once the newscast was underway. It was also noted that as priorities changed over the course of a day, the order in which news stories were listed in the rundown also changed, which is to say that a story could be broadcast before or after it was originally scheduled to be aired. These types of modifications, which alter the order of the rundown, involve split-second switches to new material being produced on the fly and are made only when absolutely necessary. Such deviations from the most recent rundown are generally driven by shifts in priorities or the need to adjust the programme when a previously scheduled news item is not yet broadcast-ready. Thus, news stories originally scheduled for broadcast during the early part of a programme may end up going on the air near the close.

The findings of this study indicate that the earlier news stories are scheduled into a day's rundown the more apt they are to remain static within the final programme or be removed from the line-up. The fact that they tend to disappear as the day progresses suggests that they were never considered to be of great importance and were inserted more or less to fill in time slots until something more interesting came along to take their place. The station’s continuity department could assign content for 20, 25 or 30 minutes of the rundown, which was preferably used to cover late-breaking news. However, the very nature of television journalism makes it difficult to ensure that the availability of this type of news content aligns perfectly with production schedules. This explains why from quite early in the morning the rundowns had already been fleshed out with a good mix of news stories that may have been developed days earlier that were from that point on juggled with others developed hours, or even minutes, in advance of the broadcast. Stories placed earliest in a station’s rundown could form part of that day’s newscast, but were also likely to be eliminated as new material became available.

Last-minute news items that were added to the rundown shortly before broadcast were normally run at the head of a news block. They served to freshen up the overall news narrative and functioned as hooks, or as Field (2002) would describe them, plot points. The news stories that headed each block constituted the only content of a newscast that could be considered truly newsworthy. Other scheduled stories could in some way link up with these headliners, but they did not provide breaking news. The line-up had a clearly defined pecking order: less newsworthy items were placed lower on the block. The hook at the head of the following news block was placed to add a fresh burst of interest to the overall programme. Therefore, from a script analyst’s point of view, the news stories added or repositioned once a newscast was underway provided the plot points that drove the overall narrative of news programme forward.

For similar reasons, news block openers and news summaries were produced live. These are the slots in which editors position news items they decide to add to the rundown minutes, or even seconds, before the programme goes on the air. For this reason, the malleability of this type of script is distributed between its initial and final moments. How malleable they were in the case of TPA broadcasts varied according to each particular edition of the news. For example, the
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opening seconds of evening news broadcasts tended to be pre-programmed. This is because news production schedules and routines dictated that most headline news be covered in the morning edition of the newscast.

In terms of formats, the rundowns analysed for this study showed that sound bytes, which are short segments of news about 15 seconds in length, were frequently changed during airtime. As noted previously, video and NAT/VO segments can also be modified at the very last minute during a broadcast, but the main changes detected in the final rundowns in our sample, which reflected what had actually been broadcast during the period under study, were largely related to sound bytes. This makes sense, as these are the segments of a newscast that are technically the easiest to produce.

Format specifications noted in the rundowns analysed also changed. For example, video material originally scheduled for broadcast during the main portion of the newscast was occasionally later featured as a NAT/VO or a sound bite instead. Alterations in a newscast rundown are the result of deletions or additions. The actions noted in the rundowns studied indicate that news crews did not fully exploit the possibilities offered by the technology they worked with. Although digitisation has made it much easier to change presentation formats, professionals in the newsroom studied tended to edit segments down rather than change formats, a holdover from practices followed in the days of analogue technology.

Deciding how a particularly newsworthy late-breaking story should be presented requires skill and experience. At TPA, breaking news deemed too important to insert into the programme as a video segment, NAT/VO or sound bite was usually covered in a summary. It therefore follows that such additions not only altered the main body of the newscast, but the opening, and most likely the closing, as well. Nevertheless, changes in the hierarchy of news summaries were made during the hours leading up to airtime. While stories were sometimes added, deleted, or reshuffled during a broadcast, the order of priority established for summaries remained unchanged during the broadcast unless important breaking news needed to be covered.

The news items placed earliest in the rundown and that were most likely to survive to be part of the final overall broadcast narrative were live video segments. This was due more to the hefty investment the news organisation devoted to producing them than for the added value they actually brought to a day’s overall news narrative. Live segments have been traditionally used to add a sense of immediacy to newscasts, and their frequent unjustified inclusion in newscasts today is a holdover of analogue broadcasting practices. Digital technology has spawned a new convention of privileging images of scenes shot on location over images of the off-site reporters narrating the news segment. The fact that they were frequently incorporated into newscasts attests to advanced technology’s ability to give television news a greater immediacy.

Nevertheless, the practice of displacing the image of the reporter located at the scene of the story detracts from the overall effectiveness of a live broadcast, given that voice narration is a task that could perfectly well be carried out via a telephone connection. However, this trend seems to have run its course, and it is increasingly common for newscasts to provide on-location coverage in which the
reporter’s face is featured in an inset alongside other images. Digital technology once again demonstrates its versatility by providing editors with a way to highlight events covered live without sacrificing the humanising touch that an image of an on-the-scene reporter brings to a story.

Most of the changes effected in the rundowns studied were concentrated at the end. Normally, the first few minutes of a newscast followed the planned narrative laid out in the rundown set at the beginning of the news programme, or even established an hour prior to airtime. The first news block of the broadcast usually contained numerous pre-edited news stories. This was particularly true in the case of evening newscasts. In this time slot, most of the on-the-fly production was focused on the central core of the news programme. Sometimes scripts were altered during broadcast to include a news story that had not been listed in the rundown at the time the programme began. It is therefore clear that digitisation has made television newscast scripts more flexible and open to modification than those used in analogue broadcasting.

Furthermore, some modifications were driven by the need to reconcile the timing set out in local rundowns with network programming. Despite the technological possibilities now available, the inclusion of last-minute news stories tends to be very limited, as they inevitably force editors to delete other news items from the rundown as the programme progresses so as not to exceed established time constraints. Most of the shuffling done to keep a programme within its time limits is related to the variables of featured live segments. Of all the elements that make up a television newscast, these are the most difficult to deal with from the perspective of timing. Any digressions that on-the-scene reporters make from the time slot assigned for their stories may seriously alter the timing of the rest of the newscast. Moreover, if a newscast features more than one live report, the accumulated scheduling delays they provoke can seriously compromise the quality of the overall news narrative.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this study, we have observed changes in journalistic routines brought about by the introduction of digital technology in television newsrooms. These have included not only changes affecting news production at the micro level, which is to say the crafting of individual news stories, but also those affecting production at the macro level, that of the newscast as a whole. In this context, digitisation is changing the relationship between the discourse of news and the news itself. Technology is changing our traditional notions of live news broadcasting, which have been limited, in large part, to the presentation of periodic live segments and the performance of skilled news presenters. Our research has identified a clear, symbiotic relationship between news production and news presentation spawned by digital technology. Barroso (1992) has pointed out that according to the rules of analogue television news broadcasting, programming had to be finalised minutes before a news show went on the air. The new simultaneity made possible by digital technology may well be changing not only the
nature of journalists’ relationships with the environments they work in, but also the ways they report the news to television viewers.

The starting hypothesis for this study was that altering the flow of an overarching news narrative during broadcast could also imply altering the nature and content of the audiovisual script on which it was based, and in consequence, the discourse of the news itself. Throughout this inquiry, we have uncovered evidence that has confirmed this hypothesis, noting on numerous occasions how the new possibilities offered by digital technology have changed the way television journalists approach the news. Although journalists working in analogue audiovisual media could give their narratives a sense of immediacy through live broadcasts, in this area, as in so many others, they drew heavily from practices developed by radio professionals. Modern digital technology allows news editors to go further. Opportunities to create narratives that bring viewers closer to events as they happen are no longer limited to vocal reporting. Television journalism’s capacity to produce instantaneous audiovisual reports as events unfold has expanded dramatically over the past few years and continues to improve.

The feasibility of modifying newscasts during broadcast has moved the news rundown conceptually farther away from the canons of screenplay writing and brought it closer to the logic of journalism. It has given television news a dimension not provided by live remote transmission: a closer link to reality. According to Cebrian Herreros (1998: 296), a live broadcast is «the immediate transmission of an event». However, we agree with Martin Sabarís (2002) that the kind of live video that is inserted into newscasts rarely fulfils this function. This author has been quick to note the «total failure of live remote transmission to give the news any greater depth, richness, nuance, quality, etc., than that achieved through pre-recording and playback».

The changes in narrative forms brought about by digitisation are not only detectable in the live coverage of events. They can also be observed in traditionally more rigid and less spontaneous presentation formats such as the newscast. It was not so long ago that television anchors covering late-breaking news stories were obliged to interrupt an audiovisual news presentation already underway and fall back on the time-honoured practice inherited from radio of reading the content of news bulletin out loud. Digitisation has eliminated the need for such practices. It is now possible for anchors to report a news story as up-to-the-minute audiovisual content is being broadcast to viewers. In today’s digital society, the production of audiovisual news continues uninterrupted until the newscast is finally over.

6. References


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