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New Television Narratives: Entertainment, Telling, Citizenship, Experimental

Nuevas narrativas televisivas: relajar, entretener, contar,
ciudadanizar, experimentar

ABSTRACT

Broadcasting and industrial television is a trip back to the past, to a space devoid of meaning, and to the boredom resulting from its moral conservatism, lack of creativity, thought and entertainment. But television's monopoly over public screening is over; now, anyone can be a producer, an audiovisual narrator with his or her own screen. New television and other screens are daring to change the way stories are told: a more subjective, testimonial and image-based journalism; a hyperrealist soap opera that dares to bring melodrama to comedy, documentary and local cultures; a bottom-up media with people in charge of breaking with the thematic and political homogeneity of the media, market and development machines. This essay will argue in favor of television as a space for expression by unstable identities, narrative experiments and unknown possibilities for audiovisual creation...only if «it takes the form» of women, indigenous peoples, African races, the environment, other sexualities...and plays on YouTube and new screens that are community-based and cellular. The most important thing is for television to move away from an obsession with content towards aesthetic and narrative explorations of other identities and into narratives that are more «collaborative», with the possibility that they become the stories we want them to be.

RESUMEN

La televisión generalista e industrial es un viaje al pasado, al vacío de sentido y al aburrimiento por su conservadurismo moral, su pereza creativa, su ausencia de pensamiento y su pobre modo de entender el entretenimiento. Pero el monopolio televisivo de la pantalla pública se acabó, pues ahora todo ciudadano puede ser un productor, narrador audiovisual y tener pantalla. Así aparecen nuevas televisiones y otras pantallas que se atreven a contar distinto: un periodismo más subjetivo, testimonial y pensado desde las imágenes; una telenovela hiperrealista que se atreve a intervenir el melodrama desde la comedia, el documental y las culturas locales; unos medios de abajo y con la gente que se hacen para romper con la homogeneidad temática y política de las máquinas mediática, del mercado y del desarrollo. En este ensayo se argumenta a favor de la televisión como lugar de expresión de identidades inestables, experimentos narrativos y posibilidades inéditas para la creación audiovisual... solo si «toma la forma» de mujer, de lo indígena, afro, medio ambiental, otras sexualidades... y juega en nuevas pantallas como Youtube, lo comunitario y el celular. Lo más urgente es que la televisión pase de la obsesión por los contenidos a las exploraciones estéticas y narrativas desde las identidades otras y en narrativas más «colaborativas» porque existe la posibilidad de ser los relatos que queremos ser.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Television, narrative, aesthetic, entertainment, identities, citizenships, new media, sensibilities.
Televisión, narrativa, estética, entretenimiento, identidades, ciudadanía, nuevos medios, sensibilidades.

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We are no longer amused by the enjoyment, pleasures, stories, aesthetics, politics and content served up by television. Television bores us. And it was supposedly made for entertainment! We flee; some of us to cable, to the Internet, to Facebook, to YouTube, to Twitter, many to the cell phone, fewer to books, and others go abroad to get to know other cultures. We all flee because the TV stations and their producers abuse their broadcasting power and produce stupid entertainment, information at the service of the power holders, fiction with bad acting, poorly dramatized formats, forgettable information...

And the excuse is that television is a conservative, restrained communication media in order to boost ratings by neither morally, creatively or narratively offending the viewer. Television has profound problems in the way it tells stories, in its contents and politics: it does not entertain or seduce, or make you think. But it does make money. Open-signal television has lost its value as «family entertainment». And it is not a matter of a lack of talent or possibilities of expression, but rather too many executives and businessmen selling us off «as audiences», executives who do not watch television and believe you have to dumb down the screen in order to gain viewers. For them, the world becomes a set of marketing formulas. These executives are a virus that is gradually converting the mass television screen into a void, a desert, a collective frustration. The result: confused executives and disillusioned television viewers. The only thing they achieve is to make us flee further.

The good news is that a multiple audiovisual media are emerging that can better adapt to each one of us: they take the form of what is being told – a narrative and aesthetic revolution.

1. The reinvention of television

Television is industrial in its processes, logic and forms of narration; its purpose in society is to relax, entertain and generate conversation. Its rebelliousness was made possible by YouTube and inspired by feminism, indigenous studies, citizen studies, the youth and others; it was revolutionized through the Internet, the cell phone and video because we acquired the capacity to participate in the screens and stories.

The television that was meant for everyone has failed to excite. New television follows the structure of hypertext and flow, where one program is mixed with another, where what happens in a soap opera or reality show becomes daily news and becomes a documentary of our time. We are moving from a primitive television that has been poorly copied from the film

model or in the image of old-fashioned journalism, to another that appears more like talk shows, reality shows, docudramas, video clips and landscape TV. Its tone is more exhibitionist, truculent and daring. Morals are no longer determined by the producers but rather by the viewers. Everything flows and is consolidated into one; there are no longer programs, or channels, or television – we inhabit the narrative burst of audiovisuals.

We live in a time of screen multiplicity, the business of formats, the logic of other emotions, the burst of audiovisual narratives, the multiplication of aesthetics, the diversity of awareness/identities – times in which each of us can make whatever we want out of television. What is meaningful is what is close, vital, emotional and unexpected. Truth is somewhere else, in a space that is neither Western nor male, but of other cultures. And the oral nature of the soap opera is mixed with Facebook images, YouTube mini-stories with an infinite number of aphorisms in Twitter, the Blackberry network with Skype and text messaging. We inhabit the multiplication of signals, and there is a channel for every interest, every population and every faith.

And everything becomes apt to be televised, no longer imitating film or artistic video, but rather television. For this reason, we talk about ourselves in terms of «zapping, surfing, scratching, zipping, DVD, linking». «TV zapping»: the mindless exercise of changing channels only to return to the same place we started off at. «TV surfing»: changing the channel while following a wave: sports, culture, children's shows, fiction, music, or pressing the fast forward button. «TV scratching»: the practice of introducing images and TV personalities in order to discover other values, bringing them again to light and discovering their multiple cynicisms. «TV-zipping»: going deeper-deeper-deeper into an idea, an image, a character, a tone in order to enjoy brief moments of ecstasy. «TV DVD», or when we decide to watch whatever we feel like watching. «Linking» videos in YouTube and to any other screen.

Audiovisual diversity made up of hysteria, repetitions, fragments, spontaneity. The audiovisual screens cry out once again and turn life into infinite entertainment; the celebration of pleasurable experiences and sentimental cultures. A television narration that documents a hysterical attitude (always overacted; always on camera, excited); aesthetics of repetition (variations of the same, for relaxed pleasure); a fragmented narration (creating the illusion of continuity on the basis of autonomous situations); an

everyday style (as if everything were live and spontaneous, and the viewer was right).

The new televisions are an invitation to nomadism, to unstable identities, to ephemeral senses, to telling through images while we are living, to non-linear transformation, the multiplayer rebirth, the virtuous perception, the visionary memory, the public creativity, the sustainable emotion and «body sense»¹. All forms of television are possible. Mass television is what we will not watch. Only religion and football will be left to mass, industrial television; for everything else a camera and a story will do. We inhabit the opulence of expressive diversity. Question: Are we ready to tell our stories?

2. Telling, narrating, experimenting

And the trend is to narrate. In order to narrate, we must recognize that each device is unique, and we have to learn/know how to narrate while respecting each specificity (film, TV, video, Internet, cell phone) and have something to tell (giving meaning to the life experience). Film will continue to light the path of celebrities but it will have little impact on the social life of ordinary people; everything looks bourgeois and from another time in the movies. Their language, logic, genres, duration, glamour and narrative model have fewer and fewer adherents. Film will continue to exist in its own church and with its own believers. It will continue to be one of the main areas of audiovisual study at universities; directors and authors, instead of gaining the art, will continue moving from festival to festival; their great works (no more than 10 a year) will make us think and imagine better. But either way, film will lose its hegemony and will no longer continue to impose its language and discourse on other audiovisual devices.

Now we have to practice a multiplicity of screens, and begin to search for how each screen narrates, what the criteria of temporality, image, sound, rhythm, duration, genre and format are. The narrative

specificities of each audiovisual device and each teller must be found. We must begin to think about each screen and how it contributes a narrative and discourse, which the following chart explains².

Each community is an audience. The industrial is an idea that is history, which constructs a format and is brought to the market. The format is an idea, with a way of producing according to set criteria of aesthetics and philosophy, in a specific dramaturgy with a storytelling style and ways of marketing. Each country, culture and society with their audiovisual knowledge will adapt the format to the interests/traditions/sensibility of their citizens.

On open-signal television and cable, the winning format is the series, fictional works concentrated in a few chapters. The best audiovisual product on offer is on cable, and its «avant-garde» is HBO; it is not television or film, but cult series that create global audiences and require a different type of television viewing³: watching with concentration, becoming a fan of each series, assuming audiovisual intelligence, paying for moral exploration (all topics), aesthetics (each series is a unique work) and narrative (complexity and choral stories). Additionally, the door is opened for made-for-TV movies that reintroduce film knowledge but with less pretension and more narrative heartiness. Documentary formats reign supreme when they seduce in the form of fiction and convert life into a story (something like a reality show). And with the arrival of digital television comes the emphasis on searching for other genres and narrative tones for children's shows, fantasy, eroticism, cultural, everyday life; these niches that had been abandoned in the name of the «masses» are now back in business to tell, gain and exploit industrially.

3. News as storytelling

The big news story in journalism in 2010 was that CNN was losing the ratings war. The informative television model has changed in form, style and

CRITERIA	FILM	TELEVISION	VIDEO	INTERNET	CELL PHONE
Communication	Expressive	Informative	Artistic	On network	Intimate
Ritual	Going to mass	Praying the rosary	Angels	New era	Celebration of «I»
Watching	Dreaming	Seeing	Searching	Connection	Flow
Actor	Author	Artisan	Experimenter	User	Subject
Production	Slow	Fast	Personal	On demand	Live
Duration	90 minutes	30 or 60 minutes	Diverse	Fragment	Instantaneous
Image	Wide angle	Close up	Mobile	Close	Unstable
Language	Art	Conversation	Resistance	Contextual	Personal

agenda, and CNN do not want to admit it (or Telesur, or any world or national news channel in our countries). In these times, no-one wants news «that appears» neutral, they want explicit subjectivity like on FOX News; the USA power agenda is no longer interesting, the empire is already a phenomenon of a past when there was supposedly only one world. Today, viewers want to be kept up-to-date with local news, with territory and perspective; before, there was only CNN, and now there are many news sources (including surprisingly, Aljazeera) and the Internet, Twitter, YouTube and the cell phone, which are more reliable.

The model for informing and doing journalism CNN-style is out-dated: serious poses, faces of

and more context and diversity of comprehending reality. If we do not change the informative television models, people will continue to flee from information, and we will be left with sensationalist news stories of death-accidents, sports-success and celebrities-sex which is the formula for success in television.

The good news is that there are new journalistic narratives. A case in particular is Guillermo Prieto, better known in Columbia as Pirry, who hosts a weekly program that is somewhere between a personal report and a television documentary for the RCN Channel, generating good ratings and better social conversation. His television talent is in discovering the narrative of existence, delving more into daily life and talking about the common man. His Ten Command-ments⁴ for producing reality television would be:

- Try a decent narrative on television: beyond the facts, telling with images and transmitting emotion.
- Stories are conceived from research and images.
- Stories are told from a subjective viewpoint and as an expression of opinion.
- You have to try literary journalism on television: novelize without inventing.
- Don't be repetitive; aim for innovation in topics, points

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appearance-truth, adulation of images in themselves, screens with telephone diagrams, reports from hotels, interviews with experts that talk about themselves, all dressed in the same clothes, hairstyles and smiles. Images without stories, only documentary images freely given by nature or warriors are saved. This CNN-style journalism is no longer valid, and business looks bad.

The news is that you have to experiment with other models of journalistic narration and other analyses of information; that you have to ditch the supposed objectivity (which is always misleading) and gain the diversity of subjectivities and of well-founded points of view; new agendas are required, which interest citizens more and go beyond political power. We do not want informative robots or readers off teleprompters (journalists that know how to read more than the script); we need human beings that tell us their vision/version/point of view, now that individual perspectives and having something to say are in demand. We are searching for histories, and not talking heads; we need more images and testimonies

of view and subjects.

- You must go to the movies, where you can find ideas and narrative lessons.
- You must read, only then will you learn to tell stories and write better.
- Television is an act of writing for the ear, and it must be spoken like people speak.
- It must be personalized, take a position without desecrating history.
- The only thing that you have to do is to tell stories, hopefully other types of stories.

Along the same lines operates Margarita Martínez, whose «La Sierra» reached the highest rating for a documentary in the history of Colombian television on Caracol TV. One year of filming (2003). One war. Three human stories: a warrior, a prostitute, an unconsciousness. A testimonial tale. An edition that allows silences to be felt, paradoxes to survive and to «wage war». A journalistic work that dares to look at life as it happens, and an observation of patience to wait for the stories to tell themselves.

4. The soap opera, our story

The soap opera is much more than love and tears, and this is why it accompanies our way of life in Latin America. It is the national product that industrialized Columbia in the 20th century (Café con aroma de mujer, «Coffee with the Scent of a Woman»), with new Colombian lifestyles in this world, beauty and women (Yo soy Betty la fea, «I Am Ugly Betty») and narcotrafficking «Sin tetas no hay paraíso» (Without Breasts There Is No Paradise) by Gustavo Bolívar (2006), «El Cártel» (The Cartel) by Andrés López (2008), Gustavo Bolívar's «El Capo» (The Boss) from 2009, «Las muñecas de la mafia» (Mafia Dolls) (2009) and «Rosario Tijeras» by Carlos Duplat (2010). Narco-soap operas are testimonial television: stories with a lot of rhythm, hyperrealist word games, exuberant landscapes, extreme architecture, street mafia, silicone queens, natural hit men, an enchanting sense of humor, amazing excesses, immoral acting and familiar music. Their authenticity is aesthetics – aesthetics that document a way of thinking and popular taste.

The soap opera is an anthropophagical format of formats, genres, aesthetics and ideas. For this reason, to understand reality you have to watch soap opera not the news. This would be the new formula:

- Ideas, scripts and formats are sold to be adapted to the cultures and local tones where they are to be presented.
- The Brazilian soap opera shows that fiction is an excellent public space for debate about representations and important national issues.
- The Colombian soap opera seeks tones other than melodrama: it could be comedy, suspense, documentary, tragedy, contests, documentary, talk show, reality.
- The soap opera must tell drama that generates identification with survivors in the target society and must explore the affective moment of society.
- The soap opera must continue exploring among the Mexican style (elevating the virtue of suffering and working on moral essences), contributions from Brazil (the search for who we are as a culture), the intuitions of Colombia (social ascent through the body and crime), searching from Chile (industrial modernity with historical imagination), and irreverence from Argentina (middle-class aesthetics within permissive and sexual morals).

• More soap opera series need to be produced, ideally in a made-for-TV movie format, with their concentrated drama, aesthetic adventure and daring topics that promote audiovisual innovation.

• Soap opera stories are no longer designed for 30-minute or one-hour chapters, but rather with an emphasis on flow, programming should be of varied duration. Each sequence must be meaningful in and of itself.

• People have watched so many soap operas and, therefore, know a lot about them. The soap opera, its stories and actors are «like family», so producers cannot be unfaithful or disrespectful to the audience's television memory.

• The power of the soap opera is in the characters who generate identification and magic; the idea is to humanize without losing the melodramatic point of reference.

• In the future as in the past, soap operas will need good storylines and close connection to reality.

5. Forming citizens through production

And leaving behind the media machine of the news and soap operas, we should focus on the most important thing that is happening now in Latin America: grassroots media, of the people, of the citizens. Media to break with the thematic, political homogeneity of the media machine, the market machine, the machine for development, the business machine, the machine that serves the interest of the financiers. The findings: communications media, all types, must be reinvented.

If there are stories, then reinvention will be possible. The inspiration is in blending the media machine with other aesthetics, other narratives, other methods of storytelling, other dramaturgies, other voices, other stories... and for this reason these media types must «take the shape» of a woman that is collaborative aesthetics, close-up, vital encounter, testimony-essay-proposal. We must understand those other ways of communicating that are not inscribed in the new collective sensitivities, called indigenous, afro, environmentalist, alternative sexualities, street, city, youth, and children. There is much awareness yet to be told, which is not for telling or to be «talked about», but to be communicated «from» their meaning, aesthetics and tales.

There are six simultaneous movements that we must take advantage of in order to generate new communications for all: 1) the Rights to Communications, in order to think practically about democracy and politics; 2) overcoming the fascination with technology in order to have the chance to produce our own messages; 3) practicing expressive radicalism: we do not consume, we produce; 4) trying out other aesthetics, other formats, other ways of expression; 5)

exercising the right to entertainment that means using free time, inhabiting leisure and experiencing «relaxation» from one's own emotional culture; 6) generating communications that develop the right to Identity, to go to the media to find out who we are and to produce/create ourselves according to our own interests, traditions and desires.

The greatest expectations and possibilities for the future are in local television, community television and YouTube. Community channels are making the best television possible, one that questions politics, looks for useful information, tries out other formats, does not buy the stories from canonical channels, and enjoys its own aesthetics. Wherever you go in Colombia and Latin America, you will find a local channel that talks about what each community is and what each wants. Useful communication is the key to community!⁵

If we have so many screens to talk about ourselves, then faithfulness to a brand, a channel, a program declines – unfaithfulness triumphs. We look to where we have the most emotion. We have to emphasize «what we have to say». We have to fill our heads with ideas and life experiences – telling something that needs to be told, that is the rule. History tells us that people chat and enjoy watching the lives of others. First came blogs, then MySpace. YouTube appeared and seduced us, and blogs were left behind with the visual effervescence of Facebook, and now we are all into Twitter, the biggest machine in the world for aphorisms. Each one a format: one's own story. And that story must be possible in any format from YouTube to «local TV» and from the cell phone to Twitter/Facebook/Skype. The idea is to bring together communities – to add, but not require all to be together.

The YouTube narrative searches for situational impact, the story that for once and for all has to be told. More than history, it is the situation that triumphs, and its daring to watch/experience life from the other side. Its tone is almost mocking, of resistance to mass television. Its potential is telling an absolutely personal version. Its realm is direct and live; its logic is the Net; its tone, the instability of the voyeur. YouTube is the channel of all channels, where we can see all programs from now and before, the bad and the good, those of worship and those of hate. On YouTube you can access the best videos made in the other America, the ones that do not appear on official television, those videos that tell stories and do not ask for permission, those that dare to try out other aesthetics, other rhythms, other textures and times. This is the case of the «Escuela Audiovisual Infantil Belén de los Anda-

quies» (<http://escuelaaudiovisualinfantil.blogspot.com>), the «Children's Audiovisual School of Belén de los Andaquies», that says in its style manual that without a story there is no camera; stories are told to generate happiness because war is scary; stories are told as gossip, with a moral at the end; they are told in local aesthetics; it is what is popular that is celebrated.

Communication inserted in culture, such as that of the indigenous communities of Cauca ACIN. This is an experience they call «the communications fabric», where they use a photo or video camera or cell phone camera to «defend» the life out of which they produce their testimony and memory. Their stories come from their own interests, «the word moves because communication is like water that flows and ebbs», they exhibit their audiovisual documents to make their reality public, and they make a documentary video to occupy the minds of the people from within (www.nasaacin.org).

The cell phone is the media of intimacy, of personal life records, of personal defense. It is an audiovisual device for combat, for fighting for the defense of interests, visions and one's own politics. It is a device for telling about oneself, to have a voice and image in the world of stories. It is image-text spoken word. It takes the shape of each one. Its realm is individual. Its logic is existing. Its tone is the celebration of oneself. On cell phones today, we can snap images that reflect us, and in their messages and aesthetics we can construct new subjectivities and new ways of being a community and public sphere – pure communication for personal freedom and autonomy. It is not possible to control these play-like aesthetics and passion-like politics; the cell phone represents the possibility of being a message with conformity – cellular TV, belonging to each of us.

The technological, communicative and political revolution of our time is that anyone can be a journalist, documentarian, message producer and creator of images, stories and information. We no longer depend on official channels, and we have less desire to be represented by journalists that do not know how to talk, who research little and tell nothing. The criteria that define these new televisions are: 1) stories told with the aesthetics of the storyteller; 2) stories and formats that take the form of what they are telling; 3) time is mobile, and lasts as long as each message must last; 3) all style types are accepted from essay to docu-fiction; 5) the atmospheric sound is real; 6) it looks for all screens: YouTube, Skype, local TV, festivals, pirated screens; 7) they pay attention to the audiences, they are the ones who tell the stories; 8) all

technologies are valid: cell phones, photography, video; 9) they produce and narrate from the street, with the people and without stars; 10) they have something to say, and then there is a message.

The most important thing is for the people's media to move from obsession with contents to aesthetic and narrative explorations. The issue is how we will give shape to our experience from our interests, cultural codes and aesthetic references. For that reason, the people's media must produce new formats of subject and collective narration, allowing for many voices, faces, ideas and styles, and existing within citizen communication.

The stage is full of hope and mined with private interests. It is time to risk believing in the citizens, in their competences, in their aesthetics, thematic charms and uncertain stories. And so it is that television is a mirror of the society that produces it; it says a lot about who we are, what we imagine and how we think as a community. Television must be citizenised!

6. Narratives of possibility

We are experiencing a burst of narratives, temporalities, languages, formats, audiences. Television is, therefore, more and more interested in finding a fictional direction, the spoken word as a narrative model, more collaborative than just the author.

Watching television should become an entertainment trip, in which each screen will contribute what it has to offer: the cell phone, intimacy; the internet, a quick but multiple connection; the video, personal expression; local TV, storytelling methods; regional TV will be on-site with the people and openly accessible; national TV will only aim for mass entertainment in the form of «joke-telling», soccer and soap operas; global TV will concentrate on small pleasures, great aesthetics and good series.

The television to come will have to have the narrative wisdom of the soap opera, the patience and realism of the documentary, the aesthetic force of fiction, the seductive conversation of talk shows and the adrenaline of reality shows. There will be various forms of television, not just one. The television of the future will have to find another business model that is

not aimed at selling mass audiences. It will be interested in joining communities rather than gaining masses. The key will be closeness to the awareness, understanding and desires of the communities.

The narrative compulsion inside us, the burst of audiovisual narratives call us to narrate in a diversity of temporalities, in unique languages, in formats that are mixed and fused, such as fusing the revival of the direct (old television) and spoken world (old tradition) with new screens (the Internet) and oral-digital flow (cell phones). As Jesus Martin-Barbero indicates, we must think with our own heads, have something to say and getting it heard. Thinking with our own heads means laying down the foundations of the world from

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the humanities, literature, art and cultures; having something to say means researching the world of the people, the pains of society, collective desires, experiencing life; and getting to be heard is knowing how to narrate, knowing how to tell, to excite and connect with people. Listening to the world is the best way to learn how to tell stories.

The future is near, it is here in the aesthetic inventions of other awareness/identities that have not been told or experienced. We will need to: exercise mobility, expressive flow and potential of technology; practice and adapt the entertainment imposed by the commercial media empire; find resistance in ethnic identities (afro, indigenous, oriental); search for social expression in forms of contemporaneous awareness (feminism, sexuality, ecology, urban, young).

They will be narratives that are more «collaborative» – aesthetic inventions placed on awareness/-

identities. The great audiovisual revolution will arrive the day we are able to tell stories from female, indigenous, afro, environmental, gay or oriental aesthetics/dramaturgy/tempo...when the shape that the audiovisual takes in its diverse devices includes storytelling methods that have not been experienced. New awareness, other identities, they are not just contents, they are above all ways of telling, narrative models, aesthetic proposals. And if we don't tell them, we don't exist!

Notes

¹ The seven global mega-trends presented by the Future Concept Lab (www.futureconceptlab.com) in a workshop held at Bogotá's Chamber of Commerce.

² This is an exercise based on the table presented in Rincon, O. (2002). *Televisión, vídeo y subjetividad*, Norma, Buenos Aires; 22-26.

³ The most famous series (there are many) are: *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Lost*, *24*, *Ally McBeal*, *South Park*, *The Big Bang Theory*... these are series that would be successful on a national public screen, for this reason they reign in global television and their

limit is the morals of each viewer.

⁴ Available at www.revistaarcadia.com/ediciones/32/television.-html.

⁵ Rodríguez, C. (2008). *Lo que le vamos quitando a la guerra [medios ciudadanos en contextos de conflicto armado en Colombia]*, Bogotá: C3 Fundación Friedrich Ebert (www.c3fes.net/docs/quitandoalaguerra.pdf).

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Series referidas: «Los sopranos», «Six feet under», «Lost, 24», «Ally Mc Beal», «South Park», «The Big Band Theory».