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# The Intervention of TV in the Chilean Earthquake

La intervención de la televisión en el terremoto chileno

## ABSTRACT

This paper has two purposes: one conceptual and the other practical. On a conceptual level, it outlines a model for understanding how TV operates as a social mediator in the event of natural disasters, and at the practical level, it recommends measures that can be used to optimize the role of TV and its ideal social function in contexts of crisis. This model views TV intervention as both «self-centered», that is, driven by its reproduction as a media consumption company; and «socially-centered», designed to respond swiftly and accurately to the social requirements that emerge in crisis situations. The suggested model is to be contrasted with the results of a research study conducted by the National TV Council of Chile that explored the role of TV broadcasting after the earthquake in February 2010. According to the results of the study, audiences value the amount of information broadcasted by TV networks but perceive that the predominance of its «self-centered» function creates a problem: the logic of the 'spectacle' is prevalent and exacerbates the audience's emotions. The primary purpose of this paper is to develop a strategy to recommend how TV and its associate services can respond to a crisis situation while respecting the tragedy of natural disasters.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo contempla a la vez un propósito conceptual y otro de orden práctico. En lo conceptual se propone un modelo para comprender el funcionamiento de la televisión en escenarios de catástrofe y consecutivamente se sugiere, desde este modelo, un conjunto de derivaciones prácticas destinadas a optimizar la funcionalidad de la televisión en estos escenarios. El modelo propuesto concibe la intervención televisiva con una doble funcionalidad, una de carácter «autocéntrico» focalizada en su reproducción como empresa y otra de carácter «sociocéntrico» orientada a responder a los requerimientos surgidos en el escenario de la crisis. Este modelo será contrastado con los resultados de un estudio del Consejo Nacional de Televisión de Chile que indagó sobre el rol que asumió la televisión en el terremoto acaecido en Chile el año 2010. Según este estudio, si bien se valora el rol informativo y orientador de la televisión, la doble funcionalidad de su intervención fue percibida como problemática, con predominio de la funcionalidad autocéntrica que, desde una lógica de la espectacularidad, buscó construir audiencias, empleando una estrategia basada en la hiperactivación emocional. Finalmente, se concluye con una propuesta para conducir la televisión desde una intervención en la crisis hacia una efectiva intervención en crisis optimizando su funcionalidad sociocéntrica.

## KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Intervention, television, earthquake, audience, autocentric, sociocentric.  
Intervención, televisión, terremoto, audiencia, autocéntrico, sociocéntrico.

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## 1. Introduction

On February 27, 2010, Chile suffered an 8.8-magnitude earthquake—considered the fifth largest of its kind—and a subsequent tsunami, which together left nearly eight hundred people dead, five hundred thousand homes destroyed or severely damaged, and around two million people homeless.

Free to air TV played an important role, but the way in which it covered this event has been the subject of much public debate. Although it excelled in its role of providing information about what was happening and the decisions made by the authorities at different moments throughout the tragedy and in its support in searching for missing people, it has also been questioned because of its supposed emphasis on the most tragic and violent consequences of the earthquake.

The debate has been tied to three fundamental issues: the role of TV in face of a natural disaster; journalistic ethics regarding the coverage of natural disasters; and the effects of TV broadcasting on the opinion of the audience. In response to these circumstances, the National TV Council of Chile (CNTV) carried out a study aimed at understanding the role assumed by TV during this catastrophe (National TV Council of Chile, 2010).

Within this context—and based on the results of this study—the purpose of this paper is to present the basis of a model that allows us, on the one hand, to understand the intervention of TV in disaster scenarios and, on the other, to see which elements are needed to make this intervention more planned, systematic and pertinent. Based on a dynamic concept of reality (that attempts to overcome the more passive and static focus of perception analysis), in this model we conceive the TV broadcastings as a kind of intervention in different scenarios caused by the earthquake.

This interventional component of TV is widely recognized by organizations such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which have come up with protocols aimed at regulating this intervention and directing it towards minimizing the psychological impact of crisis, respecting the dignity and self-esteem of the people and communities affected, and promoting solidarity and social cohesion, among others (Pan American Health Organization, 2006).

The logic behind TV intervention unfurls a double function. On the one hand, it plays a self-centered function, and on the other, a socially-centered one. Both functions are closely united within the logic of intervention.

Under its self-centered function, TV as a company

reproduces itself fundamentally through the construction of audiences. Under its socially-centered function, TV responds to the multiple and urgent requirements posed by the different scenarios caused by the crisis.

From this perspective, TV has the ability to act on its audiences, turning them into relevant actors in the construction of the chaotic social response generated by the earthquake. This interventionist capacity is based on its extensive and intensive power. TV is present in 92.4% of Chilean homes (Census, 2002) with an average of 2.4 TV sets and average consumption of 2.5 hours a day (National TV Council of Chile, 2008), which explains its extensive power: omnipresent in the daily lives of Chileans, it intervenes in the dynamics of coexistence. From its intensive power, TV acts on the identities, emotions, self-esteem, and the symbolic integration of people.

Under its socially-centered function, which is of primary interest to us in this text, TV can intervene in at least two ways. First, by providing people with important elements to construct their own actions in their immediate surroundings in time of crisis, and second, in the configuration of accustomed ways to react to these situations;—this is extremely important for future crisis scenarios that are fairly frequent in Chile—

From this «dynamic-active» perspective, we pose the following questions: How does TV intervention contribute to the construction of «adaptive» actions of the people and the development of coexistence in each of the situational scenarios generated by the crisis (affected areas, partly affected, and non-affected areas)? How do citizens react to this intervention? What were the positive aspects perceived in the intervention and what were the most questioned? What kind of intervention is expected of TV? The following data and reports help answer these questions, and therefore will gradually construct and validate the proposed model, which will be drawn from the results of the mentioned study carried out by the CNTV, whose design we will describe below.

## 2. Methodology

At first, we will systematize the main results of the study in order to then go deeper in their interpretation, taking from them some basic guidelines for the elaboration of the desired model. The main objective of the study was to understand and describe the role assumed by TV in this catastrophe. To do this, a double triangulation method was used: on the one hand, between quantitative (telephone survey,

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

SOURCES			
Techniques	Audiences	Channels	Key informants
Focus groups	6 groups of parents with children between 4 and 12 years old, in areas affected, partly affected and not affected by the earthquake.		
Interviews			7 interviews with: on-site journalists, editors that worked from the capital, representatives of the Journalist Association and the Media Ethics Council
Telephone survey	Men and Women, over 18 years old, from urban homes, in areas affected, partly affected and not affected by the earthquake 1,000 cases (+/- 3.1% of error). Sample period: between April 30 and May 12, 2010		
Analysis of contents		565 hours of continuous open signal TV broadcasting from channels that provided earthquake coverage: TVN, Megavisión, Chile Vision, Canal 13 Sample period: Continuous week from Saturday, February 27th to Friday, March 5th.	

analysis of screen contents) and qualitative techniques (focus groups and interviews); and on the other hand, between different sources (people in affected areas, partly affected areas and areas not affected by the earthquake; screen contents, and key informants).

### 3. Results

The results will be presented based on two categories: the way in which TV constructed its intervention and the reactions of audiences.

#### 3.1. Intervention

During the week immediately following the earthquake, 98% of all broadcasting was concentrated and continuously dedicated to the catastrophe and its consequences. The remaining time was used for movies and TV series. Based on the screen analysis, in this section, we will be referring to the most used format for coverage, the main issues discussed, the main participants and their evolution of appearance, and finally the TV resources that generated the most emotional impact for the audiences.

The most used format in TV broadcasting from February 27<sup>th</sup> to March 5<sup>th</sup> was «developing news» (76.8%), where the story was accompanied by images and active sources (reporting, commentary, interviews, home videos and others), followed at a great distance by the «interview» (7.9%). The majority of broadcasting included on-site reporting, but the highest percentage of images transmitted were pre-recorded

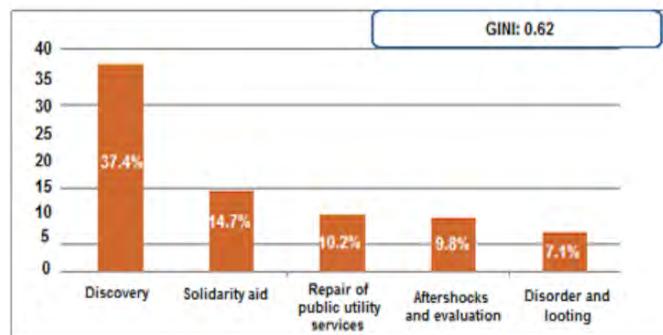
(65.9%), which, according to the study, shows that there was time to decide what information would be presented on-screen. The pre-recorded news stories were concentrated primarily on March 1<sup>st</sup>, (recapitulation of broadcast news), and on March 3<sup>rd</sup> (previews of the aid campaigns). What were the main issues covered?

As is shown in Graph 1, of the five most covered topics during the week of the earthquake (nearly 80% of all issues discussed on screen), the most frequent one was the «discovery and verification of material and human damage».

For this dimension, the Gini coefficient is calculated at 0.62, confirming a significant concentration of topics. How did the presence of these topics evolve during the first week?

Graph 2 shows a pronounced and sustained decrease in the topic of discovery and verification of

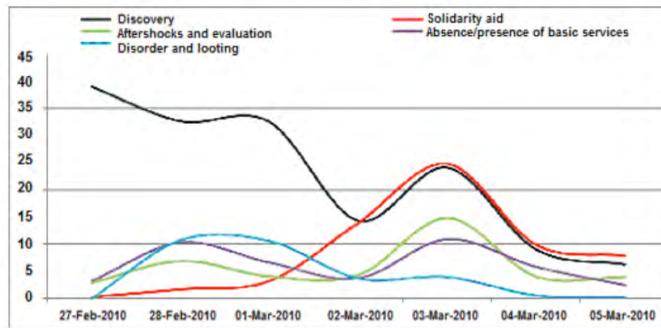
#### MAIN TOPICS DISCUSSED ON-SCREEN



material and human damage, and a gradual increase in the topic of solidarity aid. Both topics decreased towards the end of the week.

The issue of the absence/presence of basic services is seen to have two high points: on February 28<sup>th</sup> and on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. The first refers primarily to the absence of services, while the second informs the repair of services such as drinking water, supermarkets and electricity. The topic of disorder and looting obtained its highest point during the first few days, decreasing considerably later on in the week, when the most important topics were the evaluation of

## EVOLUTION OF TOPICS DISCUSSED ON-SCREEN



damages and repair of services. Who were the actors that participated in the discussion of these issues and how much time were they present on-screen?

As seen in the graph, individuals and Federal government sources account for more than half of the

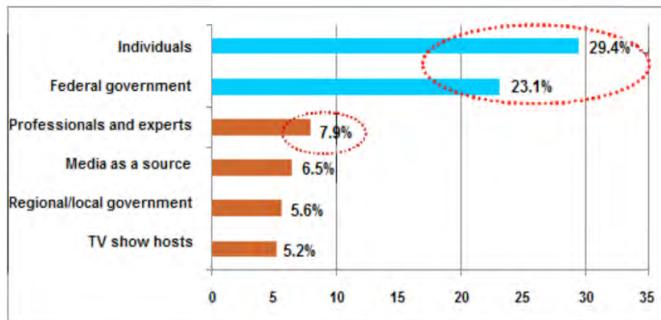
the local authorities. How did the participation of these actors evolve on-screen during the first week of the earthquake?

The graph shows a sharp change in the presence of institutional actors (central, regional and local government) in relation to the affected people, as a source of information. While the former were the most predominant actors in TV content during the first two days, the affected people increased their presence throughout the week, reaching a high point on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. On several occasions,

the communications media teams arrived on-site even before the authorities and rescue teams from Santiago, becoming the object of urgent demands for aid from the affected people, demands that these teams, on the one hand, were not prepared to meet, and on the other, had not contemplated in their work. An important aspect of the TV intervention is seen in the impact that it had on the emotions of the audiences. According to screen analysis, the resources used by TV that generated the most emotional impact were the following table n. 2.

The systematic use of these resources shows an emphasis on the dramatic construction of the news.

## ACTORS MOST PRESENT IN EARTHQUAKE COVERAGE DURING THE WEEK

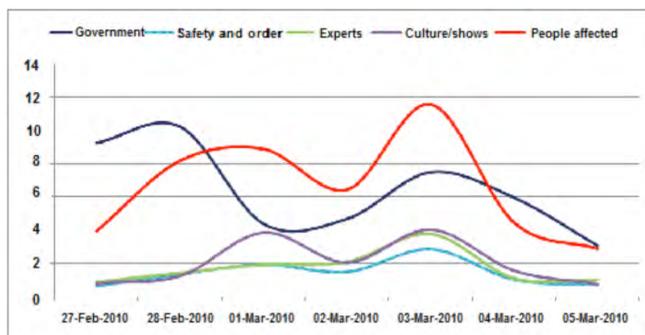


time dedicated to information sources (52.5%). This concentration (Gini coefficient: 0.65) is proof of how journalistic news is constructed based on testimonies and opinions of people affected, and the emotional sources of the victims, more than expert information of

the local authorities. How did the participation of these actors evolve on-screen during the first week of the earthquake?

Taking the survey and focus groups as a reference, in this section we will look at both, the most criticized aspects of TV intervention, that is, the emotional impact on children, the coverage of looting, sensationalism<sup>1</sup>, the invasion of privacy and lack of explanatory information, and the most valued aspects. Of those surveyed, 56% watched more TV than usual. Only 18% stated having watched less TV during the days following the earthquake. According to the survey, the images of destruction and general devastation (40%), coastal devastation (39%), suffering of the people affected (8%) and looting (5%) were those that most impacted the audiences. On the other hand, during the qualitative part of the study, it was the TV coverage of looting that most left an impression with those interviewed, independent of their

## EVOLUTION OF PRESENCE OF ACTORS ON-SCREEN

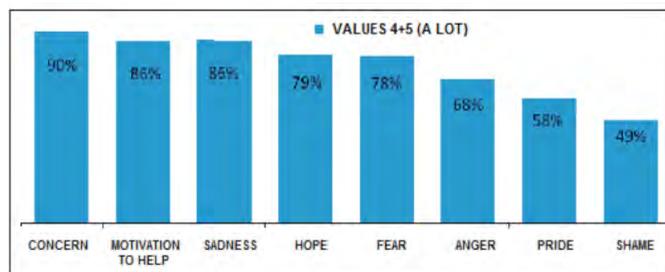


socioeconomic status or where they live. What emotional reactions did these images activate?

According to Graph, the emotional reactions activated went from concern (90%) to shame (49%), also including motivation to help (86%), sadness (86%), hope (79%), fear (78%), anger (68%) and pride (58%). It is on this level that TV intervention is most questioned, especially when it has to do with children, 68% of whom, according to the survey, followed the TV coverage of the catastrophe.

According to the qualitative part, the child population experienced recurring reactions of anguish,

EMOTIONS ACTIVATED BY TV



insecurity, nightmares, fear of being alone, insomnia and fear of visiting places such as the beach in the case of Iquique (a coastal city in an area of the country not affected by the earthquake). It seems that here there was an emotional saturation that caused parents to regulate their children's consumption of TV and led to a strong criticism of the TV channels because of the explicit content broadcast during viewing times dedicated to all audiences and the absence of more relaxing programs that would have benefited children and their families.

The images of looting fundamentally triggered reactions of surprise and shame. The surprise was associated with the unexpected (not only delinquents were involved) and their incomprehensible nature, from a moral standpoint, of these actions. The shame was associated with the country's loss of symbolic capital, a breakdown in self-esteem and a significant loss of community cohesion.

Criticism of sensationalism, where the dramatic construction of the news surpassed its informative component, was a recurrent theme for those interviewed, who believe that there was «exaggeration», «excess» and «manipulation» aimed to obtain higher

RESOURCES THAT GENERATED THE MOST EMOTIONAL IMPACT

RESOURCES	Percentage
Repetition of images	44.2%
Use of close-ups to emphasize the suffering	39.2%
Excessive use of adjectives in the stories	35.6%
Use of soundtrack or background music (for example, Schindler's List).	31.7%
Presence of real audio including expressions of pain and grief (screaming, crying)	20.2%
Aggressive intrusion into the privacy of the sources	6.3%
Disrespectful and rude treatment of socially vulnerable people or groups (victims, family members of the dead or disappeared, persons from most destitute sectors)	6.1%

ratings than the other channels that were covering the catastrophe. The excessive repetition of explicit and highly emotional images was one of the resources of TV construction that was most visible for the audiences (mentioned by 81% of the people consulted). This criticism by the audiences of «sensationalism» has been repeated over and over again with notable regularity (59%) in the tri-annual survey carried out by CNTV (National TV Council of Chile, 2008).

Likewise, TV viewers experienced the uncomfortable feeling that by including people from show-business<sup>2</sup> in the TV coverage of the earthquake entailed downplaying the seriousness of the situation and the tragic meaning of the events, and an attack against the dignity and respect of people who were experiencing the harsh reality of the catastrophe. Once more, this practice was associated with an (unscrupulous) attempt to obtain higher ratings.

Another form of TV intervention that was questioned was the invasion of intimacy with the repeated use of emotional sources motivated by an artificial search for news stories, without respecting the rhythm of the interviewees, their dignity or their right to privacy.

According to journalists consulted, one of the weaknesses shown by TV intervention was the predominance of a primarily descriptive discourse about the events, with detriment to «explanatory information»: journalists must be didactic. From this point of view, this weakness is particularly criticized in a context in which the people tend towards «pure emotions» and require elements to help them face the situation with a certain level of rationality.

What was most valued by TV viewers? The most valued aspect by the audiences was the information provided that allowed them to create a very complete view of what had happened and, depending upon the different scenarios and locations of the informants, to form an idea of concrete ways to take action during

this situation. In general, the people consulted considered that TV did a good job in its informative coverage of aspects related to the catastrophe, providing useful information for the situation.

At the same time, TV was considered more effective when presenting testimonies of the victims (62.7%), giving hope (51.4%) and calming people (43.7%). TV intervention can then be seen as having a calming and supportive effect, often meeting the function of companionship and facilitation of coexistence.

What did audiences expect from TV? For audiences, especially those located in areas of crisis, TV did not adequately respond to the more situational and urgent needs generated at the scene of the catastrophe. In fact, they complained that TV should serve a role of public service: personalized support, instrumental help and practical guidance. Its

merely informative to have a real impact on people. TV intervenes, so to speak, «on-site» at the scene of the catastrophe: although it acts individually on people, TV intervenes in what they have in common, in their coexistence, in their framework of action, in their shared emotions, in their support structures, in their symbolic capital, in the collective understanding of the situation, in their feelings of belonging and the psychological meaning of community.

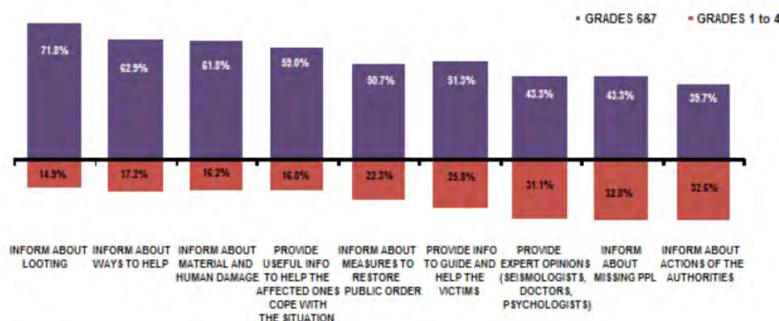
TV intervenes on-site from a double-function, one self-centered and the other socially-centered. Both functions are inseparable components in the same intervention process. However, this double function is perceived as problematic by the actors consulted in the study. Where TV, in a self-centered logic, gives priority to its own interests in the construction of its audience, this intervention generates problems for TV viewers. But where TV is a socially-centered logic and directs its intervention straight towards vital and urgent needs of the people and communities affected, its presence becomes essential for the configuration of adaptive actions and the management of coexistence at the scene of crisis.

From the language of Zubiri (2004: 197-207) we hypothesize that TV proposes for its viewers a perceptive field of the

catastrophe organized mainly from the «logic of spectacularity», from one that fixes its horizon, close-ups, background and surroundings. The earthquake generated a spectacular scenario, with buildings that collapsed, the ocean invading the coastal towns, boats transported to the town square, fatalities, people in the state of profound suffering and emotional activation. The spectacular nature of these images, associated with a degree of high uncertainty, became an opportunity that TV could not miss out on: it had before itself a «real reality show», at zero cost, that it really knew how to take advantage of effectively.

Within this context, one of the most «spectacular» events was the looting. What was spectacular here was the loss of community, the falling apart of social cohesion, the abrupt break with the routine course of life that, like all things that go against the norm, intensively moves the emotions (Tetu, 2004: 16). This TV strategy had the effect of spreading community distrust, increasingly confining communities that were

EVALUATION OF THE INFORMATIVE ROLE OF TV



intervention was perceived as more informative than giving guidance, more universal than local, more distant than close and many times catering to other priorities and interests rather than to those of the people, in contrast to the radio stations that provided practical and effective services, showing itself to be a much more situational media that is close to the local dynamics, of easy access to the immediate demands of the people and communities affected. Finally, TV is assigned a relevant role in the reconstruction (according to 95% of those interviewed) that includes other activities such as «supervising the completion of reconstruction programs» (40%), «organizing, supporting and promoting aid campaigns» (29%), and «showing the accomplishments and progress of reconstruction» (24%).

#### 4. Discussion

The main thesis of the proposed model conceives the role of TV as an intervention that goes beyond the

already closed off, giving them aggressive, violent and threatening closure. Paradoxically, TV produced social cohesion in its audiences precisely because of the breakdown in community social cohesion during the earthquake, exploiting here –from a more Hobbesian vision– the ghost of community loss, of man against both man and the supermarkets, of man's secret fear of insecurity and disorder, of man as a werewolf (*Homo Homini Lupus*) (Esposito, 2007: 55-58).

In the coverage of these «spectacular» events, journalists many times tend to be confused with TV hosts, and audiences cannot manage to differentiate collective solidarity from the promotion of the media brand's image. In this spectacular position of the world (in which the earthquake was confused with a stage production, journalists with TV hosts, and information with entertainment) the TV viewer becomes a mere spectator and information a mere spectacle (Mathien, 1993).

TV viewers clearly identify the strategy of emotional activation used by TV to meet its objective of constructing its audiences. This activation, fundamentally in a negative tone, operates upon a psycho-emotional surface that has already become hyperactive because of the real events of the earthquake, in this way generating a risk of emotional saturation, especially among children.

The live transmission, being both on-site and in real-time –a modality preferred by TV to show catastrophic events– contributed greatly to this over-activation. This type of broadcasting has generally been highly criticized because it offers a minimum distance in relation to the broadcast event. It is precisely this characteristic that makes live broadcasting an opportune area for intense emotional activation, since it gives a lot of room to the unexpected, presenting the reality of an event open to multiple and dramatic outcomes that will be resolved in real time and before the viewers' eyes. According to Tetu, this way of presenting an event hands over to the TV viewer the role and responsibility of interpreting the action taking place before their own eyes (Tetu, 2004). From the perspective of Mathien,

«in a logic of media exploitation of real events, the scenario of live broadcasting from the site of the catastrophe is practically no different from the transmission of a spectacle or show» (Mathien, 1993: 67).

But at the same time, the strong impact generated by the images of destruction and desolation, together with the impossibility of the TV viewer to act immediately in the area of the catastrophe and the unbearable emotion of remaining impassive to the suffering of others, activates different types of gestures of solidarity from the viewers, in this way contributing to the implementation of multiple forms of help (Tetu, 2004:13).

**TV must contribute to the emotional containment of the people affected and the development of a sense of security, self-confidence and tranquility to lessen the psychological impact of the crisis, making it possible for people to act from a more stable emotional state. This implies avoiding working from the logic of spectacularity, a shift towards sensationalism, the emotional over-activation and the systematic use of emotional sources of news.**

The study shows a critical and proactive TV viewer, with the ability to recognize the logic of TV intervention, anticipating and recognizing its objectives, and, in their own fields of action and control, to generate practices of self-regulation aimed to protect the mental health of their children, in order to prevent a stage of negatively-charged emotions. This new kind of viewer has shows a relatively autonomous confrontation with TV intervention, which can be highly relevant for a media education policy in this area.

TV intervenes, but its intervention is not planned. The results of this study allow us to see some operative elements for the design of a planned, systematic and pertinent intervention of TV in this type of catastrophe. During catastrophes, TV must maintain a predominant approach directed towards its socially-centered function, in this way giving secondary priority to its self-centered function.

On a more operative level, it must integrate itself into the local and national crisis intervention plan that coordinates and provides instructions for institutions, social organizations and communities under the following general guidelines:

- Respect for the dignity and rights of people affected.

- Constructive help and support for the development of adaptive actions: a central aspect of TV interaction is maintaining the population informed about what has happened (showing the material and human damage produced) and the evolution of events. This makes it possible for people to make the best possible decisions with regards to what actions they will take.

- In association with the above guideline, TV must contribute to the emotional containment of the people affected and the development of a sense of security, self-confidence and tranquility to lessen the psychological impact of the crisis, making it possible for people to act from a more stable emotional state. This implies avoiding working from the logic of spectacularity, a shift towards sensationalism, the emotional over-activation and the systematic use of emotional sources of news.

- TV must contribute at all times to adequate institutional-community (re)coordination at the scene of the crisis, avoiding unnecessary tensions and strengthening the community's trust in the institutions and organizations providing aid.

- The intervention must stimulate and strengthen community support as a source of security, aid, stability and belonging for the people, so as to contribute to the strengthening of the psychological sense of community.

- TV must play a crucial role in the reconstitution of national symbolic capital and the recuperation of social cohesion.

- It must also take on the functions of a public service channel, facilitating aid campaigns and

searches for missing people, providing information about the functioning of basic services and specialized information from experts in order to better understand the phenomenon.

- This all implies that we need to include within the formation and preparation of communications professionals contents related to media education, models of crisis intervention and networking with institutional and community organizations.

- The main idea is that TV must break away from its form of crisis intervention that is predominantly self-centered, which can bring with it the risks analyzed in this paper, and take on an effective form of crisis intervention that plays a socially-centered role, placing its constructive potential at the service of the community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Trend of communications media to exacerbate or abuse emotions with the objective of impacting the audience.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the Spanish term «farándula», which are programs with or about celebrities.

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