

*A discourse on the television quality in the INPUT's guide of 2003.*

**Maria Mercè Oliva Rota**

INPUT is an annual conference which reunites television professionals from all over the world with the objective to discuss quality television within the field of public service television. The conference has two objectives: to present public television program from all over the world, selected by the criterion of quality, and to spark off a series of discussions about their contents. Given the importance and prestige of INPUT, we believed it was interesting to analyse the types of discourse about quality television carried on there, wishing to achieve a major understanding of their and limitations.

The text we present here emerges from a larger work, elaborated within the course of the subject “The Quality television”, offered by Dr. Eva Pujadas, (in the Doctoral Program of Social Communication at The Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona). Here, we shall focus on the conclusions of that work.

This analysis is centered on the texts contained in the guide of the conference. This guide aims to present the sessions and the topics of discussion, to describe the selected programs, and to explain the main objectives of the conference... Altogether shows which are the elements valuable for INPUT and which are the conference's areas of interest. In view of the limitations of the present work, we have chosen to center the analysis of one year's bible: the 2003 edition (Aarhus, Denmark). It would certainly be more interesting to make a comparative analysis of various year's bibles in order to detect the evolution and different tendencies in the definition of quality television. We will leave this possibility open for a future research.

The methodology applied here is the analysis of discourse, following the model proposed by Teun A. Van Dijk<sup>1</sup>. This qualitative analysis allows not only to detect the explicit meaning of the text, but also to: *“discover, reveal and spread what is implicit, hidden or (...) not immediately obvious.”* (VAN DIJK 1997: 17). What we deal with is a multidisciplinary analysis, which focuses on *“all levels and dimensions of the discourse”* (VAN DIJK 1997: 16), considering both the textual and the contextual

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<sup>1</sup> Van Dijk applies this type of analysis to the discourse of the press. For a detailed description of this methodology frame, see: VAN DIJK T. A.: *La noticia como discurso*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1988. and VAN DIJK T.A.: *Racismo y análisis crítico de los medios*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1997.

implications of discourse. By doing so, can detect the concepts of the quality television lying behind the texts that form the INPUT's report.

### *Quality*

The first question to ask is whether the 2003 INPUT's report includes any reference to quality television. It is true that very few times quality is mentioned explicitly. The statement: "*INPUT has insisted on quality. Year after year we have selected the programming on an ideal channel that would adhere to this commitment*" found within the general objectives of the conference, makes clear that the programs selected are considered quality programs and that the most important part of the conference is the discussion about quality television.

Once we have clearly established this, let us see what that is to say about the quality itself.

### *The area of discourse*

The discourse on the quality television that found in the 2003 INPUT's report is based on criteria represented as universally accepted, though, in fact, it is quite specific. For this reason it is necessary to identify its context it falls within in order to understand the scope and the validity of its definition of quality television. Therefore, we shall depart from four aspects:

- The discussion is developed within the area of public service television
- The discourse of quality defended in the conference is not limited to a particular geographical context, so cultural and geographical differences are not considered
- The discussions (and, consequently, the discourses about quality) focus on the quality of programs themselves – disregarding the definitions of television quality based on quality broadcasting or any other
- We find ourselves before a discourse that belongs to the television professionals' area so that INPUT is defined as a conference organized by and for public television professionals. The category of "professionals", however, actually refers only to the directors and producers, whereas other professionals, such as directors of photography or art directors, are excluded.

The professional context where organisers, *shopstewards* and participants come from will be of fundamental importance for understanding INPUT's discourse about quality television. The coincidence between bible's context of publication and reception allows to share many ideas and points of view on quality television. This agreement on the definition of quality will, therefore, be a result of the *habitus*, so that the way of understanding , in television and quality is quite similar among the members of the same profession and goes beyond geographical differences.

*The discourse about the television quality: the quality of programs*

Within the guide we must distinguish two large groups of texts:

- The texts that explain general criteria which form the basis of the conference and its definition of quality television. These are the texts written by the conference staff so their nature is therefore institutional
- The abstracts from the debate sessions which describe the topics and selected programs. These abstracts are prepared by *shopstewards* who chair the debates of every session. The texts included in this part of the report deal with the selected programs, present the most interesting aspects, those which, in their opinion, are fundamental to the quality of the program. So the characteristics of programs underscored of these –are the key to analyze what is considered as a quality television.

Let's begin with the first group of texts. The main criteria for defining quality television is: to serve "public interest". That is, programs are to serve the viewers, treat them as intelligent persons and providing information, education and entertainment (three classical functions adscribed to public service). This public interest is contrasted with the simple commercial interest – which is regarded as a criterion of non-quality. The conclusion is that programs of private commercial televisions can rarely be of any quality, because their principal goal is profit

This recognition of public service as a criterion of quality is coincident in a context where public television service heavily contested and compared to the proliferation of commercial television channels. By doing so, the respect for the viewer is presented as a defining element of quality which characterizes public television and justifies its existence.

Tough this is a necessary criteria, it is not enough to consider a program as a quality program for, it will also depends on intrinsic characteristics of the program. These intrinsic criteria will be the innovation, originality and the capacity of a program to break the rules. The capacity of program to provoke reflection and create controversy are also appreciated.

All these criteria are considered necessary elements for one program to be considered of quality and are what the programs of the conference have in common.

These general criteria are completed by a series of 'particular' criteria that can be found in the texts which describe the programs and present the debate sessions. These are specific features which, according to the authors, make the selected program to be a 'good' one. It means that within the texts it is never said "*in order to be a quality program, it must have the following characteristics*", but "*these characteristics make this particular program a quality one*".

In this part of the report we can detect a huge heterogeneity of criteria and a certain disorganization on their formulation. This is a result from the differences among the authors and their different points of view about quality. At the same time, these texts do not seem to be based on real reflection on quality, but on assumptions and intuitive definitions of what is considered as a good program. However, although none of these elements appears to be very important in itself, when combined with the analysis of different sessions and programs, their significance grows as they become recurrent elements.

The definition of quality we can identify from this analysis is closely related to the areas of interest of the text authors, that is, the *shopstewards*. It is here where the concept of *shopstewards' habitus* intervenes, as they share similar interests.

Therefore, we can observe that the analysis of programs is basically focused on intrinsic aspects of programs (specially on contents, form and the relationship between them ) on the relationship that programs establish with the viewers, on political issues and professional practice (centered on the task of director/producer, that is, the person responsible for the program). These areas of interests are established in the discourse about the quality television observed in this part of the report. Therefore, the main elements that make the program a quality one are:

- Intrinsic criteria:
  - The Contents: relevance, cultural aspects...

- The form: specially the quality of writing (good script, good characters) and the technical quality (namely, production quality)

- The interaction between form and contents: it should be original, “fresh”, etc.

- Adaptation of these intrinsic criteria to the viewers’ tastes, so that the programs can reach the maximum audience. So that the idea of quality supported is not elitist, since the audience success is appreciated, but not at the expense of the programs integrity. In order to grab the viewers, preferences for what is entertaining, emotional, surprising, provocative, are used. These attributes are considered to make a program capable of capturing and holding the viewers’ attention and, at the same time, establish a strong emotional connection with them.

Therefore, internal and external criteria are placed on the same hierarchical level and need to compensate one another so that none of them may blur the other. To these “necessary” criteria, one could add other elements of quality, defined not as necessary as the previously mentioned, participant in public life, spreading knowledge about minorities, contributing to overcome social stereotypes, to provoke changes, or social and political reactions.

All these criteria are added to more general criteria as serving the viewer, offering innovations and controversy. These criteria, formulated in the institutional texts, make up the notion of quality television maintained by the INPUT conference.

However, INPUT discourse on quality television is of a limited scope since has a very specific professional origin (despite what is maintained in the report). Outside this specific origin, it partly loses its legitimacy and utility, which has to be taken into account when the concept is used to evaluate the quality of television programs.

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