

Telejournalism, infotainment and sensationalism: an analysis of the National Alert Program on Rede TV!

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the National Alert program to understand how the spectacularization of news about crime interferes in the public's relationship with conventional professional journalism. The study was concatenated in four parts: observation of the content and profile of viewers; public analysis based on opinion polls; interview with the presenter of the National Alert program; and the analysis of the construction of belonging based on Hall's *et al.* (1980) coding-decoding model. It was concluded that the Programa Alerta Nacional brings with it several characteristic elements of political ideologization and influence on its viewers, based on a discourse that reflects an approach that denotes the perception of social behavior imbued with a process of humor based on the construction of the bond receptive communicational.

Keywords: Telejournalism. Infotainment. Sensationalism. Reception Theory. National Alert Program.

Introduction

Television journalism is currently trying to adapt to new market proposals. The emergence of new media has brought not only competition but also a change in viewer behavior. In this context, with public demand increasingly focused on entertainment, since it has already adapted to internet culture with instant and funny content, the owners of broadcasters, in their ideals, are broadening their vision to produce infotainment journalism with a touch of 'spectacle', creating new tricks to produce information, placing the mediator as the leading actor on a big stage.

Globalization in the post-modern world has brought a multitude of transformations to the television media. Television journalism, which once produced content for a 'stagnant' audience on the living room sofa, where the desire to express an opinion on a given subject ended right there, now deals with the majority of viewers who watch and, at the same time, comment on the news, share it and can easily cease to be interested in the program due to the plethora of content available on digital media. In this context, the profit-driven idealism of broadcasting entrepreneurs takes hold to propose and sell journalism based on the news of violence with a mix of spectacularization, where sensationalism inevitably adapts the criteria of newsworthiness to keep the public loyal. At the same time, it confuses the viewer's idea of ethical journalism.

According to Debord (1997), the theatricality expressed in the mass media represents a context of mediatization that is very noticeable in society, based on the appropriation of information as an instrument of spectacle. The author observes that the process of spectacularization denotes a social relationship between people and content, not just in a conceptual way, but by exposing the ability to interact and formalize a context: the information expressed in a medium is wrapped up in a means of domination to favor a particular argument.

Although these practices only attracted the mass public in the past, they are expanding and retaining other social groups. In this hybrid way, the mediator emerges as an attractor of audiences due to the unusual way he acts between the public and the interests of capital, thus establishing himself as a new phenomenon in communication for convenience under social disposition. Arbex's Jr. (2001) work argues about the business aspect of showrnlism as a practice of transposing information through journalistic news into a contextualized discourse to spectacularize a certain theme or approach - this clear characteristic of perception denotes journalism presented by Arbex Jr. (2001) as a scoundrel journalism (sic).

In Manaus, the Programa Alerta Nacional (National Alert Program), generated by TV A Crítica and broadcast nationally by RedeTV!, has shown significant audience growth, with expressive mediation of crime news with acting and humor in a hybrid format of journalism and entertainment. The presenter, Sikêra Júnior, stands out as the newest phenomenon on Brazilian television for his sensationalist mediation, so much so that the program has recently been shown on a national network.

The public's interest in crime news mixed with entertainment is instigating. It is necessary to investigate what makes it attractive for the public to watch journalism that appears only as an

ingredient in a comic recipe, in which professional ethics do not fit. Based on these arguments, some reflections fall on this research: does the journalism of the National Alert Program on TV A Crítica in partnership with RedeTV! treat serious issues with sensationalism to boost ratings without considering the profession's ethics? Does information and spectacularization, linked to journalism, discredit the news? Does professional journalism's scurrilous, sensationalist and uncompromising treatment weaken the public's interest in serious journalism?

In light of the above, this study aims to analyze the Programa Alerta Nacional (National Alert Program) on RedeTV! to understand how the spectacularization of crime news interferes with the public's relationship with conventional professional journalism, seeking to identify aspects of infotainment in the content produced involving crime, to present the public's relationship with the program through audience loyalty and the impact it has on viewers, and to observe aspects of professional ethics, ideologization and market interests in the content produced on the program.

Infotainment and the concept of journalism as entertainment

Infotainment is an English expression that combines information and entertainment. Infotainment journalism has been gaining ground in the television media since the 80s. The proposal was to mix light news with entertaining content. However, with the arrival of the new media, the dispute over the largest audience has led the media to take new routes of interest in mass communication (FONSECA, 2005).

The discussion on media-driven mass communication and its complexity requires study, which can be understood through the thoughts of Debord (1997) on the 'Society of the Spectacle', in which it is understood that the spectacular is seen as a factor of reciprocity between social need and the means of communication of capital. In this game of interests, viewers seek representation and visibility in the media to satisfy their ego and subject themselves to the domination and alienation of the media.

According to Duarte and Curvello (2009, p.33), with the new demands of a social system adapted to instant and funny news, the television media are devoting their plans to stimulating entertainment. As such, the information produced from the perspective of entertainment has the structure of perception of reaching an audience that "demands" content designed to entertain without there necessarily being a construction of this model based on critical reflection - on the contrary - it is a structure of news and content based on a basic marketing relationship.

Leite and Henriques (2015, p. 2) argue that to make a profit, television journalism looks for "communication strategies that expand the consumer market" according to viewers' interests. A new way of doing the sensational emerges, mixing crime news with a spectacle, with the "aim of obtaining the attention and loyalty of the audience, acting in the production of meanings, with strong emotional appeal through, mainly, the transmission and attractive

repetition of images and sounds”. The authors point out that this approach treats serious topics, such as death, with amusing overtones.

To this end, entertainment as a service has been involved in distraction since the earliest times. As Silva (2009, p. 3) points out, entertainment, by providing “distraction from the really serious”, has brought philosophical criticism into disagreement:

In the 18th century, authors such as Heidegger and especially Hegel, in their discussion of aesthetics, separated the rationality embedded in the enjoyment of popular art, an argument that was ratified by the authors of the Frankfurt School in the split between high culture and low culture (mass popular culture), with the former being responsible for intellectual exercise and the latter for distraction and pleasure. Therefore, entertainment and all its derivations (pleasure, amusement, and distraction) were dissociated from the serious spheres of society, among which journalism claims its place.

Appropriating Silva’s (2009) contextualization, in this linear of rationality that journalism was structured around between the 18th and 19th centuries, under the strengthening of institutionality, social responsibility, “for being a spokesperson for serious matters” and, primarily, for society from a political, economic and social point of view, it is then understood that the construction of journalism in its perception of social influence was objectified by its institutional use, thus forming a stylistic character shaped by social responsibility and the duty to fulfill the updating of society through its informational content.

Sensationalism and spectacularization in the media

It can be said that journalism and the “theatrical genre” drama are contemporary; in their genesis, they blossomed in the 18th century. “They were born in the context of the bourgeois revolution, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, and were soon committed to the search for realism and truth in the social sphere”. Under the expansion of thoughts “established by Plato and systematized by Aristotle” (NEVES, 2005, p. 5).

According to Bariani and Linhares (2015), sensationalism is based on transgression and punishment from the perspective of a paradoxical relationship of consumption, i.e., the viewer consumes the information, even if outraged by the violence, anesthetized on their sofa, but consumes passively, through a process of spectacularized media exploitation. In the view of Neves (2005), although television, with its importance in society’s daily life, has journalism as a tool for debating problems in society, it uses crime problems in a certain way as a bridge to supply the daydreams of a society that, although technological, is alienated, and which tries to extend its reach to the lower classes, as well as the more enlightened classes.

According to Leite and Henriques (2015, p. 3):

In sensationalist telejournalism (...), reality is projected through spectacle; the news consists of grotesque, controversial, and exaggerated sentimentality, transforming the facts into something sensational and extraordinary. The aim is to work with the emotional charge of the public through exaggeration, scandal, appeal, and repetition of images in the coverage of journalistic facts.

However, the circumstances experienced by journalism in entertainment programs are conditioned not only by “exaggerated and scandalous” characteristics but also by the mediator figure, the boundaries between the public, the profession, and the boss. For Canavilhas (2007), the figure of the journalist assumes an identity of mediation between reality and the receivers (public) to present fragments and expose the situation to the receiver through communication, thus being a perspective oriented towards mediating and presenting information. However, mediation can take on contours of manipulation.

At its apex in the French Revolution of 1789, the division between journalism and drama preceded the reactionary environment. However, the performances of the direct link between the two began along “North American” lines, as Neves (2005, p. 41) points out:

The origins of this model lie in North American journalism, especially audiovisual journalism. However, its reach is transnational, and its logic, to a greater or lesser extent, penetrates other media, becoming a hegemonic trend among general information journalistic products aimed at broad audiences. In this way, television, the earthly spectacle of information par excellence, is responsible for creating standards of taste and consumption, leading the whole news media to imitate it as much as possible in content and form.

For Canavilhas (2007), both the Anglo-Saxon and Latin television schools approach sensationalism in different ways, based on proven and controlled facts, because of its emphatic aspect from the audience’s point of view. The two schools raise pertinent questions, but the author considers the “pitfalls” of the Latin school, where sensationalism is based on hypotheses and the public’s lack of concern for what really matters.

According to Koff (2003), when used for sycophantic idealism, journalism can be seen as a ‘troubled marriage’ with entertainment. The understanding of the ills of the environment in which the news audience lives, with exhibitionist overtones, is replaced by contemplation. It can be understood that the ideologization of the content presented in the message makes the spectacle much more closely linked to its proposal for an audience with greater contact since the proposal in spectacularization is to increase the sharpness of the angle of perception for a “reality” of contemplation, not understanding.

As Canavilhas (2007, p. 8) points out, there are “vices” that make information-spectacle “inconsistent, fallacious and speculative”. For him, sensationalist practices “mixing” “blood,

sex, and money” is the mixture of “information-spectacle” that boosts ratings. In this way, the spectacularization of crime news on TV, for example, appropriates the intimate acceptance of the public, taking the content of the information into the particularities in which the viewer lives.

Considering the consequences of the direct manipulation of spectacular information, television journalism, in this sense, has been refuted for not censoring situations, going beyond reality. Leite and Henriques (2015) note that the spectacle’s primary objective is to attract the attention of viewers so that the so-called “spectacular coverage” to attract attention - quite common in police journalism with crime news - does not necessarily have the function of informing but rather of entering - “invading” - the viewer’s intimacy through commotion.

The National Alert Program

The National Alert Program first debuted as *Alerta Amazonas* under the presentation of journalist Emanuel Cardoso. After a month, it was presented by the expressive Sikêra Junior. As a historical reminder, *Alerta Amazonas* debuted on July 3, 2019, shortly after TV A Crítica disaffiliated from Record TV. Sikêra Júnior debuted on the program on July 23, 2019. This replacement of mediator, a transition from a serious journalism format to a transformation in the information transmitted in an irreverent way, where the hilarious figure of the presenter proves to attract more audience than the information itself.

The program’s schedule also involves comic panels with interacting characters and information from the police department. In this format, it took on larger audience proportions and began to be broadcast nationally by Rede TV! in January 2020. The performance (persona) of Sikêra Júnior, by presenting crime news humorously and sensationally, emerges as the newest phenomenon in the television market, catering to a social niche of consumers who seek an aspect of journalism that brings in its discourse the mixture of traditional journalism with humorous and satirical elements.

The National Alert Program’s structure intends to attract the public through the use of satirical elements with a characteristic based on humor and sensationalism, based on informal language with popular and impersonal connotations. Journalistic elements are present in the presentation of the news through police journalism with crime news. On another note, the show’s production team develops a series of humorous and entertaining programs during the show: “Cabaret do Sikera Jr.” “Battle of the Drags”, “CPF Cancelado”, among others. In the case of “CPF Cancelado”, there is a very emphatic representation of the discourse of social justice, tinged with humor, but expressing a narrative of acceptance of the deaths of criminals or other figures presented as “bad guys”. In the “Battle of the Drags” frame, there is a tone of debauchery with a provocative aspect about the clothing and characterizations of the LGBTQIAP+ public in an attempt to emit a comic discourse, with concern for the stereotyping of the drag queen figure.

This use of the comic format is a strategy to attract the public by trying to soften the context of the news presented through a humorous discourse.

Methodology

The method of analysis applied to construct this study was based on the Reception Theory from the perspective of media reception and the feeling of belonging and social identification. According to Braga (2008), Reception Theory (passive-receptive-active) is a theory whose analysis focuses on the artistic or cultural fact in a process directed at the receiver. For this study, the methodological basis for Reception Theory came from the analysis of Hall *et al.* (1980), whose analysis is based on a circular model of information contextualized within a model of encoding versus decoding: production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction.

Data analysis and study structure

The study was divided into four parts: Observation of the content and profile of the main program of the National Alert Program; Analysis of the public with opinion research: interviews with semi-structured questions with the program's viewers; Field study: Interview with presenter Sikêra Jr.; Analysis of the construction of belonging based on Hall's *et al.* (1980) encoding-decoding model -- Domination: construction of the concept of the product (TV program) by the public (consumer); Negotiation: The receiver (public) does not have an engaged position on the message (receiver); Opposition: The receiver (public) has a strong engaged position on the message (receiver); Aberrant decoding: Interpretation of messages and noisy context (analysis of the lack of recognition of the message received - the content of the program).

Data was collected in two stages: An interview with an opinion poll and an interview with presenter Sikêra Jr (presenter of the National Alert Program). The opinion poll was conducted with groups of viewers living in different city areas. The opinion poll's application period was from September 15 to October 13, 2020.

Results and discussions

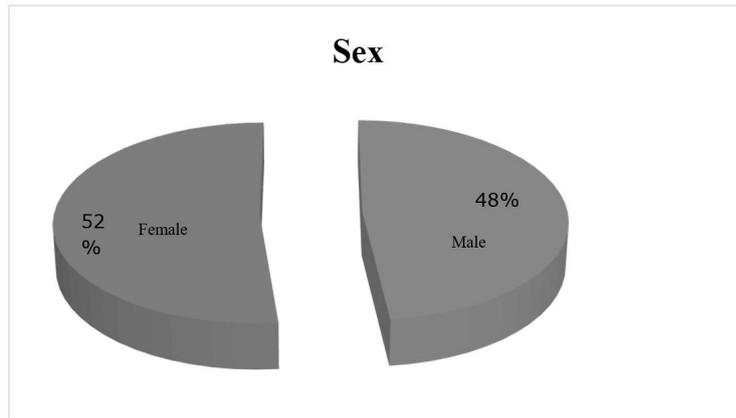
The process of interviewing the program's viewers was carried out in six (06) areas of the city, with ten (10) viewers in each, totaling sixty (60) interviewees. The zones are South, Center-South, North, East, West, and Center-West.

The categorization of the survey was defined in two aspects: Characterization of the respondent (quantitative); and Characterization as a viewer of the program (qualitative).

Graph 2 shows a variation in the age range of the viewers surveyed, with some more specific data being highlighted. Those aged between 36 and 45 were the most present (33%), followed by 46 and 59 (29%) and 26 and 35 (20%). This panorama can be observed as a reflection of the audience heterogeneity that follows the program Alerta Nacional, being a characteristic type of audience in an age group characterized as "Adult" and "Young Adult" for the most part.

As for gender:

Graph 3 – Sex

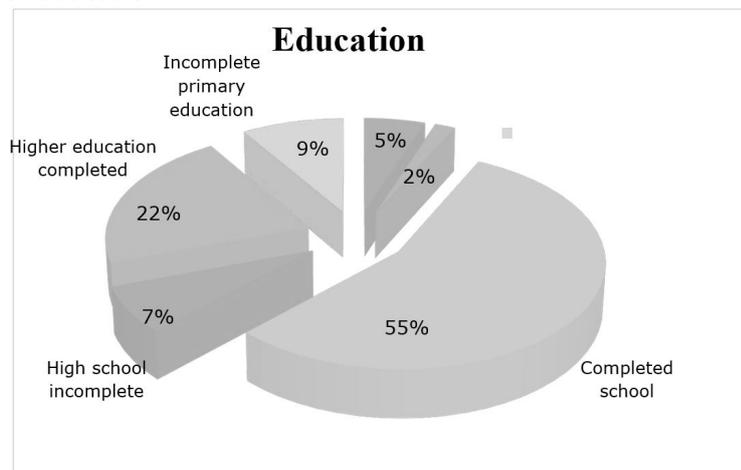


Source: Prepared by the authors

Graph 3 shows the gender of the viewers who responded. Here we can see that the majority are female (52%), followed by male (48%). However, it cannot be inferred that these results characterize a greater preference for female viewers, as the margin between the two genders is minimal.

As for the level of education:

Graph 4 – Level of education



Source: Prepared by the authors

Graph 4 shows the respondents' level of education. It can be seen that the majority have 'completed high school' (55%), followed by 'completed higher education' (22%), 'incomplete primary education' (9%) and 'incomplete high school' (7%). It can be inferred from this data that the niche of the program's level of education and schooling is present with greater emphasis in the group of individuals who have secondary education, which can also be interpreted from Graph 1 (Profession) with an observation for the respondents' profession niches.

Characterization of the show's viewers

Two (02) aspects were observed that are consistent with the context of the approach to the personification of the professional journalist in the program: credibility (professional conduct in transmitting information) and humor (satirical conduct). The responses showed that most of the viewers interviewed see the journalist in the program as a professional who brings credibility to the transmission of information, while they see the practice of communicating to society as an important tool.

Another aspect observed was the issue of satire, which viewers see in the professional view of the program, mainly due to the humorous content reported as a characteristic of the program. When watching the program to learn about crime news, viewers decode the information to suit their interests as passive-active receivers. Regarding the personality of presenter Sikêra Jr. as a factor in attracting the audience, we can mention the evidence of Schwartzberg's (1978) concept of the star system, presented within the concept of the spectacularization of the media and the process of forming the physiognomy of the so-called "political man".

According to the respondents, most of them believe that mixing entertainment with humor "improves the language for the people (sic)", "reduces the impact of information on crimes (sic)," and "takes all the tension out of the news (sic)". In this sense, it can be seen that changing the language used to transmit information is a communication strategy to attract the public by popularizing the message through a discourse aimed at a specific audience (receiver).

Most of the viewers pointed to humor and fun as the attractive aspects of the show: "I watch it just to have fun", "I watch it to laugh at the antics" (sic), and "I watch it just to laugh (sic)". However, those who responded specifically to journalistic information from the news as a motivation for watching the program focused on crime news as an attraction. The study focused on analyzing how the show's viewers see the role of professional journalists in social issues. At this point, the viewer's perception tends to be shaped by the image he or she observes of the presenters, in this case, Sikêra Jr., and how the viewer (receiver) constructs the image by consuming the type of information broadcast on the program.

It emerged that most viewers surveyed see journalism as an important tool for dealing with social issues, especially violence and crime. It was noted here that although the content aired on the program is humorous and sarcastic in treating relevant social issues, especially

violence, many of the viewers surveyed in the study believe that journalism denotes seriousness and relevance to society. This perception of media construction in order to attract the public's attention can be seen in Gasparetto's (2013) analysis when he observes that the construction of belonging denotes the process of domination, negotiation, position, and decoding in order to receive information and content from here that the receiver understands.

This construction is based on building an agenda based on an entertainment profile to reach the public - which is quite usual in police journalism. This characterization of the public's attraction to the crime presented in the program is "softened" by a decoding of the communication that includes elements of entertainment to interact and get closer to the viewer - what Hall (2003) understands as a cultural mediation between identities (messenger and receiver).

It was noted here that, for a large part of the respondents, the humorous aspect of the show's presenter is an attraction for the show, as it "softens" the transmission of the news: "I feel calmer (sic)", "I react very well (sic)", "I think it's a joke, but it's fun (sic)". These responses can be analyzed from the perspective of Hall (2003) when he observes that the message decoded by the messenger (producer) is expressed and presented to the receiver (audience) based on media intentionality, i.e., the aspect of humor in the transmission of news to "soften" it can be understood as an element of entertainment to capture the audience's attention so that there is no attention focused only on violence.

Noblat (2002) comments that the fact transmitted through the news can be imbued with an intentional cognitiveness; in other words, there is an intention in the body of the news or in the construction of the agenda's profile to attract the public in a relationship that distorts the perception of the shocking (news about crime and violence) into entertainment. The responses were quite diverse but within a context of similarity, so it can be analyzed that, based on most responses, viewers basically listed two aspects of motivation for watching the show: fun (entertainment) and crime news. These categorizations can provide the study's analysis with an important configuration of the viewer's relationship with the product they consume.

According to Gasparetto's (2013) perception of belonging, the phenomenon of mediatization tends to build communities of belonging, so the experiences presented by the media go hand in hand with everyday life, constituting what Reception Theory presents as effects that affect the social relations between the actors in the community. Most viewers were familiar with the show, with many saying that it was one of the "funniest parts of the program".

Analysis of the National Alert Program: an interview with presenter Sikêra Jr.

The study also analyzed the National Alert Program from a behind-the-scenes perspective and an interview with presenter Sikêra Jr. The interview was carried out by prior appointment with the program's producer, whose availability and the time of the interview were presented in advance.

The analysis was based on the interview with the presenter Sikêra Jr. using the following questions:

According to his perception, the profession has a considerable relevance and impact on society, but - in his view - the “journalist should not stand on the fence (sic)”. Despite his understanding of the importance of the journalist’s role, it can be seen here that his perception is not in the sense of impartiality; in other words, he believes that as an “opinion maker,” - according to him - the journalist’s role should also be to take a stand in his discourse.

This analysis fits in with what Noblat (2002) proposes when he argues that there is no such thing as impartial journalism, especially in the political sphere, thus mentioning the claimed impartiality - in which the neutrality of political journalistic positioning is almost nil or dissonant with the real purpose of an impartial evaluation required for a clear analysis of the facts. According to the presenter, there is a “naturalness to the program (sic)”. According to the presenter’s response, there is no directed script or intentional agenda to attract viewers to the program.

From the point of view of the analysis of behavior and the construction of the presenter’s profile, a parallel can be drawn here with Schwartzberg’s (1978) concept of the star system when observing the aspect of spectacularization in the physiognomy of the so-called “political man”, which is the personification based on elements and characteristics that form a marketable and agglutinable image for media consumption. In this sense, the propositional basis presented by de Schwartzberg (1978) - the star system - can be applied to the personification of the presenter Sikêra Jr., given that his characterization as a presenter carries clear and perceptible elements of entertainment that corroborate an expressible ease in communicating with the public: mannerisms, dress, language and the use of expressions and pictures of the program with a mocking sense and with mentions of a popularized nature.

This can be seen in Debord’s (1997) approach to the spectacularization of information in order to attract the masses and Gasparetto’s (2013) conception of the aspects of belonging to a community, where the elements of language and the use of jargon or informal terms can generate a degree of closeness with the audience, who in this case feel more familiar with this type of speech than with a more formal and traditional discourse.

Final considerations

Professional journalism and its relationship with the public through news outlets have always been the subject of research and analysis in academia and by analysts in the media and other areas, such as politics. Police journalism is one of Brazil’s most popular forms of journalism in recent times, especially with the rise of TV programs that use this journalism format to attract audiences through more informal language and extensive use of entertainment elements - known o infotainment.

This study sought to analyze the program *Alerta Nacional*, which is currently considered one of the most popular programs on regional and national television, based on aspects of its relationship with the public. It was then understood, based on the studies carried out and the perception evaluated by the interviews in the opinion polls, that a large part of the viewing public in the city of Manaus-AM sees the program as a reliable, entertaining, relevant and very important channel for reporting facts linked to the world of crime. It was noted here that the relationship between the program and the viewer can be analyzed from the point of view of belonging, as Hall (2003) discussed, thus presenting specific characteristics that bring the viewer closer to the message transmitted by the program.

Infotainment is the medium in which there is a clear relationship between the messenger (program) and the receiver (viewer) based on the involvement between the content presented by the program and the viewers' interest. He observed that most viewers see the relationship between humor and crime as a "softening bridge" of information; in other words, there is a consumption of this information - which is shocking and has strong characteristics from an emotional point of view - but without any guilt or remorse, thus having an understanding that the humor and entertainment presented in the program softens this moment. Proof of this relationship between "softening" the content of the show and humor is the "CPF Cancelado" panel, which, by dealing with the murder of individuals who are supposedly criminals or guilty of crimes committed, conveys serious information (crime) to the viewer through satire, but in a humorous tone.

The reception elements denote aspects that generate the public's interest in following the show, which is then presented as part of everyday life - which is consequently analyzed when looking at the audience figures. This community belonging presented by Gasparetto (2013) refers to a relationship between the messenger and receiver through the mediatization of information and communication established in this link so that the receiver (audience) feels the program is part of their daily lives.

It was then concluded that the National Alert Program, based on the perception of Reception Theory and studies that deal with infotainment and the mediatization of police journalism, brings with it various elements characteristic of political ideologization and influence over its viewers, based on a discourse that reflects an approach that denotes the perception of social behavior imbued with a process of humorization based on the construction of a communicational bond between the receiver (viewers) and the messenger, in order to guarantee a rapprochement with the type of audience one wishes to reach.

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Authors' contribution

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The authors confirm that data supporting the research is contained in the article and/or supplementary material.

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