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Fiction Based on Real Events as an Informative Experience: A Theoretical Proposal

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If fiction based on real events competes with media, social networks, and institutions in the task of making sense of reality within the same communicative ecosystem; if these fictions are often based on a specific journalistic piece or investigation and have the capacity to reach the screens of millions of viewers, wouldn't it be interesting to study this type of fiction from the perspective of journalism studies?

This theoretical article explores the possibilities of fiction based on real events as a means of interpreting reality. To this end, it delves into the concept of docudrama proposed by Paget (2011) and Lipkin (2009), analyses the crises in journalism identified by Mayoral (2018), and concludes that the idea of informative experience presented by Swart et al. (2022) should also be applied to these fictions. In other words, these types of productions should be studied from the perspective of journalism studies.

Keywords: *based on real events, journalism, informative experience, fiction, audience, communicative ecosystem.*

Si las ficciones basadas en hechos reales compiten con los medios, las redes sociales y las instituciones en la tarea de dar sentido a la realidad dentro de un mismo ecosistema comunicativo; si estas ficciones suelen basarse en una pieza o investigación periodística específica y tienen la capacidad de llegar a las pantallas de millones de espectadores, ¿no sería interesante estudiarlas desde la perspectiva de los estudios de periodismo?

Este artículo teórico explora las posibilidades de las ficciones basadas en hechos reales como medios para interpretar la realidad. Para ello, profundiza en el concepto de docudrama propuesto por Paget (2011) y Lipkin (2009), analiza las crisis del periodismo expuestas por Mayoral (2018) y concluye que la idea de experiencia informativa presentada por Swart et al. (2022) debería aplicarse a estas ficciones. Es decir, estas producciones deberían estudiarse desde la perspectiva de los estudios de periodismo.

Palabras clave: *basado en hechos reales, periodismo, experiencia informativa, ficción, audiencia, ecosistema comunicativo.*

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Fiction based on real events occupies a significant space within the audiovisual landscape. Four of the five productions nominated for Best Limited or Anthology Series at the 2022 Emmy Awards were miniseries based on real events (Television Academy, n.d.). Just a few months later, four of the five works nominated for the 2023 Golden Globes in the same category were also miniseries based on real events (Golden Globes, n.d.). In some cases, these miniseries are based on autobiographies or the testimonies of the protagonists themselves. In others, the fiction stems from prior journalistic research or documentation work, or is directly inspired by a specific piece produced by journalists.

While these works are not journalism, they enter the homes of millions of viewers worldwide to tell, through fiction and often inspired by what has already been told by journalism, a real story with real names. Thus, in an era when journalism, buried under the demands of immediacy, clickbait, and misinformation, loses its status as the primary source of reality and sense-making, they can fill that space and be capable of "modifying the social perception of reality"[1] (Pedregal, 2019). And they are doing it more and more everyday. But what happens if viewers have the fictionalized narration of a real story as their only version of events? Can a fiction based on real events "provide citizens with the information they need to be free and capable of self-governance" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2012, p. 18)?

Fiction based on real events has long been part of the audiovisual landscape, yet journalism has struggled to address the crises it faces for nearly two decades. While the relationship between journalism and fiction is not new, this paper proposes a shift in perspective: it argues that such fictions should be studied within Journalism Studies as an informative experience.

Traditionally, research has focused on how journalism uses fiction to enhance storytelling. However, this paper examines how audiovisual fiction now uses journalism —its narratives, themes, and even specific reports— to tell stories.

Journalism and fiction mix in a communicative and digital ecosystem where all agents compete for the audience's attention through narratives where the line between real and fiction blurs more each day, and where the overabundance of content makes it impossible for citizens to consume everything. This reality together with the lack of trust in the media make it worth analysing how narratives that are not journalism fulfill or can fulfil the functions historically attributed to this discipline. Especially those narratives that garner the audience successes that journalism no longer enjoys. And here, in particular, come series based on real events.

This article adopts a theoretical approach, focusing on the reflection and analysis of key concepts within communication and journalism studies. Instead of utilizing an empirical approach, the study connects previously separate notions through a process of conceptualization and critical analysis. Various theoretical frameworks and prior definitions, such as the notion of docudrama

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as a spectrum proposed by Woodhead (1999), the crisis in journalism within the digital environment (Mayoral, 2018), and Swart *et al*. (2022) concept of informational experience, were utilized.

All of these concepts are examined throughout the article in three main sections: the notion of docudrama, the position of journalism and fiction based on real events within an increasingly competitive communicative ecosystem, and the concept of informative experience and its potential application to fiction based on real events. It is considered that structuring the article in these three theoretical sections facilitates progress towards the conclusion, which proposes a new perspective for Journalism studies: fictions based on real events should be studied as an informational experience.

THE CONCEPT OF "BASED ON REAL EVENTS"

Fictions based on real events, or docudramas, emerged simultaneously in the second half of the 20th century in the United States and the United Kingdom, although not identically. Despite quickly making their way to cinemas and now proliferating on streaming platforms, they were born within the television discourse (Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012; Barroso, 2005; Paget, 2011).

Today, the term that seems to have permeated globally, resulting from the unification of the two Anglo-Saxon traditions, is "docudrama". However, as Raventós Mercadé *et al*. (2012, p. 124) assert, "it is not (...) just a terminological issue, but also defining the type of works that dominate today"[2]. Now, "the dominant model (...) is articulated (...) on three main features: the indexical roots of the British drama documentary, the melodramatic coding of the American documentary drama, and, consequently, greater social, moral, and ethical repercussions"[3] (Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012, p. 124). This conception of the docudrama is further enhanced by the golden age of television fiction, which in recent decades has resulted in an improvement in the quality of productions and has been accompanied by a key element: seriality (García-Martínez, 2014; Hudelet and Crémieux, 2021).

All these considerations make the term "docudrama" used to denote a wide range of dramatic forms, making it very complicated (if not impossible) to propose a definition capable of encompassing all its manifestations (Rosenthal, 1999; Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012). However, many proposals have been made (Hoffer and Nelson, 1978; 1980; Woodhead, 1999; Lipkin, 2002; 2011; Paget, 2011). Of all of them, perhaps the one most aligned with this research is that of Woodhead (1999, p. 103), who understands docudrama as "a spectrum that runs from journalistic reconstruction to relevant drama with infinite graduations along the way". Some authors like Rosenthal (1999, 2013) and Raventós Mercadé

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et al. (2012) support Woodhead's consideration and try to find a common denominator among all the forms included in that spectrum. Rosenthal (1999), for example, states that there are two common characteristics among all products that fall under the docudrama umbrella: "They are all based on or inspired by reality, by the lives of real people, or by events that have happened in the recent or not too distant past" (XV) and "they (...) seem to have a higher responsibility to accuracy and to truth than does fiction" (XV).

The difficulty with these considerations, as Woodhead points out, is that it is very difficult to establish absolute categories; there are very different works of fiction that could be included within this notion of docudrama. Thus, numerous studies consider productions under the term docudrama that do not respond to what is considered docudrama in this article (Barroso, 2005; Formenti, 2014; Augustine and Xavier, 2021; Donnelly and Shaw, 2020; Hudelet, 2018). This does not mean they are not docudramas. Simply, the productions they analyze are at a different point on the spectrum proposed by Woodhead.

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify what we mean in this article when we refer to fiction based on real events. We understand them as audiovisual fiction productions that carry out a dramatic reconstruction of a real event or events using, except for exceptions, the real names of the people, institutions, and places involved. This dramatic reconstruction involves the creation of a fictional script with the consequent licenses and narrative adaptations (temporal alterations; invention or alteration of scenes or sequences; plot simplification or elimination of subplots; invention of characters that encompass or represent a group; invention of dialogues and interpretations of the characters; etc.), but they start from journalistic research/documentation, carried out for the creation of the script or previously, serving as the piece that the fiction aims to adapt. These are, therefore, fictions that not only coexist with journalism in the current communicative ecosystem but also do so by telling the same stories.

JOURNALISM IN THE CURRENT COMMUNICATIVE ECOSYSTEM

According to the 2024 Digital News Report, 39 % of people interviewed in 47 different countries avoid the news and 40 % do not trust them (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). The increase in news disconnection goes hand in hand with a loss of interest in news. In fact, Spain is one of the countries that has experienced one of the largest falls in that matter (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.).

But people's news avoidance does not mean citizens do not seek to be informed. When asked about what they need from news, 72 % of interviewees say they need to be updated; 67 % think they also need to be educated; and 63 % say they want to have access to different perspectives (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). Citizens do seek to be informed. They turn to a predominantly digital environment to learn about what is happening, but also to consume non-journalistic stories that can help them understand their surroundings. Aramburu-Moncada states:

> The journalist, who for many years has operated alone in their role as interpreter of reality, now shares the informational stage with men and women who, without journalistic knowledge, have at their disposal a wide network of contacts and the necessary influence for the news they disseminate to generate opinions and comments in society[4] (Aramburu-Moncada, 2022, p. 134).

Thus, the digital ecosystem becomes a communicative ecosystem where everyone competes for the audience's attention through stories. Everything happens simultaneously and even on the same device, especially through the smartphone, which stands out as the ultimate meta-medium of the 21st century (Beckett and Deuze, 2016; Márquez, 2017). In this undoubtedly competitive ecosystem where everything is intertwined, distrust in the media and the growing trend of news avoidance contribute to the proliferation of journalism's looming threats, such as fake news, sensationalism, and the diminishing perception of journalism as a public service.

The Crisis of Journalism

Casero-Ripollés (2014, p. 256) states, "journalistic information is losing its exchange value"[5]. According to him, the overabundance of information brought by the Internet, the loss of credibility of conventional media, and the absence of a viable business model in the digital environment are causing journalistic information to become "a commodity that consumers are increasingly unwilling to pay for"[6] (Casero-Ripollés, 2014, p. 256). Similarly, Javier Mayoral (2018) identifies five crises threatening journalism.

Firstly, Mayoral (2018, p. 20) addresses the economic crisis that revolutionized the global economy in 2007 and particularly affected the media, which had anticipated "a scenario of grandeur and splendor"[7]. Journalism, whose business model had been in crisis for decades, faced an intensification of its problems at the beginning of the 21st century (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016) and could no longer deny the business model crisis (the second crisis identified by Mayoral). This crisis resulted from the loss of advertising revenue due to the growth of the Internet and the digital environment. Traditional media's difficulty in offering advertisers a personalized and segmented audience (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009; Mayoral, 2018) was compounded by the emergence of new competitors who could provide the desired audience.

Journalism then faced the challenge of overcoming a problem that was not just a "temporary setback" (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009, p. 19) but also a change

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in the environment requiring a "colossal transformation" (Fernández Barrero, 2022, p. 19). In this transformation, where information consumption becomes predominantly online, media outlets resorted to traditional measures: staff reductions, decreased print runs, company concentration, integration of media into non-journalistic businesses, salary adjustments, publication closures, etc. (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009; Sánchez de la Nieta, 2016; Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Fernández Barrero, 2022). The result? Another crisis (the third one), this time of a labor nature. Cuts and adjustments in media companies led to job instability within the profession, where journalists are forced to multitask, and freelancers play a prominent role (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). Job instability and budget cuts naturally lead to a decline in content quality (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). Additionally, content quality has been affected by the other two crises identified by Mayoral (2018): the digital revolution and the loss of media credibility.

Technological advancements have been a constant in journalism's evolution since its inception, often serving as its engine (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Micó *et al.*, 2022). However, despite the significance of all industrial revolutions, the advent of the Internet has posed the greatest technological challenge to date (Micó *et al.*, 2022). Who knows if Artificial Intelligence will surpass it.

The technological revolution brought by the Internet has disrupted traditional journalism models and introduced new agents and competitors (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016). It also enables new forms of journalism, such as immersive journalism, mobile journalism, and data journalism, and introduces new tools like drones, 360-degree videos, and gamification that can revolutionize traditional information presentation (Fernández Barrero, 2022). However, economic limitations facing media companies often hinder the implementation or evolution of these new tools (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Micó *et al.*, 2022).

Simultaneously, the technological revolution fosters an "extremely competitive" market (Bazaco *et al.*, 2019, p. 96) where journalists, immersed in an ecosystem where it is difficult to maintain their gatekeeper role, are forced to constantly update information, which can lead to errors. Additionally, the atomized style imposed by social media fragments the narrative and eliminates seriality, often resulting in incomplete and decontextualized information that hinders audience comprehension and retention (Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). It might be worth noting here that while journalism seems to fragment its narrative, fiction based on real events often maintains that serial narration, providing context and meaning for the same stories journalism tells. However, Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú's (2022) considerations only account for online journalistic information, especially that distributed via social media, so it would be unfair to extrapolate their conclusions to other journalistic works.

The journalist's task is "to select facts (important) and turn them into stories (interesting)"[8] (Mayoral, 2018, p. 103). However, if the scarcity of time and

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resources prevents proper verification, source checking, and contextualization, and if the journalist loses objectivity —not in an absolute sense but in relation to their procedures— they break the reading pact with the audience, who then strips them of the credibility previously granted (Mayoral, 2018).

Many authors identify the loss of credibility as one of journalism's fundamental problems (Brants and Haan, 2010; Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Mayoral, 2018; Fink, 2019; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). For decades, this credibility was taken for granted (Brants and Haan, 2010), but the demands of immediacy, with its associated errors and source reductions (Mayoral, 2018; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022); the rise of misinformation (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Sádaba-Chalezquer and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2022); the proliferation of attention-grabbing techniques like clickbait and the pursuit of virality through social media (Fink, 2019); and the increasing commodification and politicization of information in an environment where trust in public authorities and institutions is steadily declining (Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Fink, 2019), among other factors, have undermined the credibility the audience once placed in the journalistic profession.

According to the Digital News Report, only 40 % of global respondents claim to trust the veracity of the news (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). This scepticism, previously predominant only among younger generations, is now spreading to older age groups as well (Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2022). The Edelman Trust Barometer of 2023 reflects a similar sentiment. According to this study, promoted by the communication agency Edelman, only 48 % of respondents in Spain trust the media (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

The lack of economic resources to adapt to technological changes, the business model crisis caused by reduced advertising investment, and the widespread labour instability in media companies, among other realities, have led journalism to lose the credibility it once enjoyed and become just another agent in the current communicative ecosystem. Although this does not mean that other agents will replace journalistic work (as they do not share the same objectives and ethical commitments to the common good), it could imply a shift of the audience towards other content to understand reality.

Main Actors in the Current Communicative Ecosystem

Within the current communicative ecosystem, social networks are among the key actors with whom journalists must share the informational stage. Platforms like X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are now considered the primary competitors (or collaborators) of journalism and are the focus of numerous studies in the field of media studies (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016; Enguix Oliver, 2019; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2021; Aramburú-Moncada, 2022). This is not surprising. According to the Digital News Report, 37 % of respondents use Facebook to access news, 31 % use YouTube and 21 % use Whatsapp, among other social networks (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). This again is coherent with the information revealed by the Edelman Trust Barometer, which indicates that

44 % of respondents trust in social networks as sources of information (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

Social networks increase the dissemination capacity of information and allow journalists to build their personal brand through their accounts (Enguix Oliver, 2019). Media outlets also use these platforms to enhance their coverage and dissemination capabilities, as seen with the minute-by-minute updates on X. In fact, Spanish professionals view X, Facebook, and YouTube as the networks that have positively impacted their work the most (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016). However, these advantages turn into drawbacks when the demand for immediacy and the obsession with achieving good content positioning lead to errors, polarizations, and misinformation (Enguix Oliver, 2019; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022).

As Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú (2022, p. 33) state, "the Internet and social networks are a breeding ground for data and stories to tell"[9]. Although social networks do not always create journalistic content per se, understood as content generated by a professional journalist working in or for a media outlet and adhering to the principles of truthfulness and verification, they certainly generate content. Some of the creators of this content position themselves as professionals fulfilling some functions attributed to journalism (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2021; Maares and Hanusch, 2020). This claim, combined with their ability to reach massive audiences and the funding they receive from businesses and institutions (Micó *et al.*, 2022, p. 248), makes content creators another essential agent in the current communicative ecosystem. For example, the #MeToo movement on social media and the support from certain individuals has helped counteract the perception of rape culture within society (Armstrong and Mahone, 2021). In other words, content that is not traditionally journalistic has, through the unique opportunities offered by social media, succeeded in amplifying a previously marginalized social reality, allowing it to be heard in ways it had not been before.

In addition to social networks as content disseminators and creators using these networks to create content, sometimes with journalistic pretensions, public institutions and private companies have found an opportunity in the new digital world to create and disseminate their own narratives. The data supports this. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, a significant portion of the population in Spain does not trust businesses (49 %) or the government (36 %). However, 41 % believe that companies can address social challenges without being perceived as polarized, and 36 % of that 41 % think one key to achieving this is becoming a reliable source of information (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

Finally, entertainment platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Movistar+, and HBO, along with social networks, are the major contenders for audience attention and money. According to the Digital News Report 2024, only 12 % of respondents in Spain say they subscribe to a news outlet (Newman, 2022).

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In Spain, according to consulting firm Kantar, 66 % of Spanish households used a streaming platform in the third quarter of 2022. This 66 % (12.4 million households) accesses an average of 3.3 video-on-demand services, and 11 % use a minimum of six streaming platforms (Galindo, 2022). These platforms offer entertainment across almost all audiovisual genres: documentaries, reality TV, movies, and fictional series.

Of all these genres, only documentaries can be considered journalistic work (and perhaps not always). While any fiction can contribute to shaping the imaginary that guides the audience in their daily lives, and reality TV has a notable influence not only on the audience but also on the evolution of the television landscape (Aslama and Pantti, 2006; Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007; Deller, 2019), only fiction based in real events (as defined before) delve into telling stories whose characters have real names and surnames. In this sense, of all the content offered on streaming platforms (excluding documentaries, generally considered journalistic), only fiction based on real events can be considered direct competitors of journalism in the task of reporting what happens in the world. Following the example of the #MeToo movement on social media against sexual abuse, we could cite the based on real events drama *Unbelievable*. This miniseries, by fictionalizing a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative report, has not only achieved significant audience success but also contributed to challenging some of the most widespread myths about rape in society. It has done so precisely by filling gaps that journalism cannot address, areas that only fiction can reach and explore in depth (Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022a).

This is not to say that fiction based on real events can replace journalism or that they perform the same functions, adhere to the same ethical codes, or have the same reading pact with the audience. Absolutely not. Just as journalism competes with social networks, content creators, public institutions, and private companies for the audience's attention when it comes to discussing reality, so does fiction based on real events from its own perspective. And just as media studies examine how social networks, content creators, and the narratives of public institutions and private companies affect or intertwine with journalism and its functions, fiction based on real events should be studied for their relationship with journalism. After all, the journalist is just one of many actors participating in public communication in the current communicative ecosystem (Deuze, 2008), and it is worth determining if fiction based on real events is one of the accompanying agents.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE: FROM NEWS CONSUMPTION TO INFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Some might argue that the audience's perspective is not as significant as that of journalists. After all, it is journalists who possess the knowledge, experience, and time to perform their functions. Often, as Costera Meijer (2013) notes, paying attention to audience preferences is even considered detrimental to journalistic quality. So, why should the audience have any say in the matter? Heise *et al*. state:

> Journalism provides a public service for which it needs an audience. This is true not only from an economic perspective: one basic understanding of the normative function of journalism is that the public relies on journalistic services to provide orientation within society and everyday life. Thus, journalists have to take into account information about their audience in order to produce news that will be noticed. As a consequence, the audience has always influenced journalistic practice (Heise, 2014, p. 411).

However, before the digital revolution, this influence stemmed from journalists' own deductions and intuitions rather than real-time knowledge of public preferences. Now, with a fragmented and increasingly autonomous audience and a digital environment where every visit, like, and second spent on a news article can be measured, journalists have begun to embrace the real opinions of audiences in their work (Tandoc and Ferrucci, 2017). Yet, metrics are not the best way to understand how the audience values journalistic performance (Costera Meijer, 2013). Indeed, using the time a user spends on an open news article can be counterproductive, as it does not indicate the quality of attention or the reader's interest in the content. For instance, a user might click on a news article and keep the tab open for days without ever reading it (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020).

While these data may matter from an economic (what the audience is willing to pay for) or entertainment perspective (what makes them click on a news article), they overlook the normative interest in understanding the audience, as "journalism legitimizes itself in coherence with its democratic function and defense of civic freedoms that impact society" (Masip, 2014, p. 261). Thus, although the utility of metrics for studying consumer behaviours is not denied, information about the relationship between journalism and audience expectations is not found in measuring likes or time spent, but in asking what constitutes good journalism for the audience (Costera Meijer, 2013). In this sense, Swart *et al*. (2022) argue that in recent years, journalism studies have increasingly focused on the audience's perspective. Therefore, one can no longer say that journalism and communication research ignores it (Peters *et al*., 2022). However, Swart *et al*. (2022) believe the change has not been sufficient, as studies often focus on specific groups (particularly young people and those who avoid news consumption) while ignoring others deemed less attractive from a utilitarian perspective (e.g., lower socioeconomic groups expected to have less spending potential on information).

Swart *et al*. (2022) propose a more radical shift that requires accepting three uncomfortable truths. First, that journalists' output does not have to be meaningful to the audience. Second, the assumption that news consumption is inherently good for society and its avoidance is harmful is not evident and may not always be correct. Third, what the audience experiences as news sometimes exceeds the boundaries of news and even journalism. This third point is fundamental to this article. Swart *et al*. ask:

> If news does not equal journalism, this not only raises practical concerns for the journalistic profession. It also brings about more existential questions about the role and

> purpose of journalism studies as a field. What are journalism scholars to do, if from an audience perspective, journalism studies might not necessarily be about journalism? In other words, if journalism as an institution is no longer automatically the locus where audiences encounter what they experience as news, what does this mean for the object, boundaries, and aims of journalism studies? (Swart *et al*., 2022, p. 10).

In other words, if journalistic work is no longer the only piece the audience experiences as informative, if non-journalistic content serves as a total or complementary informational source, where are the boundaries of journalism studies?

Moe and Ytre-Arne (2022, p. 45) assert, "News is not the only thing citizens need to maintain their roles in a democracy". Similarly, Picone and Vandenplas (2022, p. 106) argue that the news repertoires audiences use to make sense of reality "are (...) integrated into broader media repertoires (...) that, along with informative content, also include fictional, political, and commercial content, shaping our window to the world".

But what if the audience does not differentiate the consumption of this fictional, political, or commercial content from news consumption? According to Costera Meijer (2007), young audiences experience news as just another genre in the content flow they consume and do not draw a strict boundary between information and entertainment. Banjac and Hanusch (2022) perceive a blurring of the boundaries the audience sets between journalists and content creators, and Wunderlich *et al*. (2022) state that younger audiences increasingly differentiate less between information produced by journalistic sources and that from other sources.

It seems that the current communicative ecosystem consists of a set of "blurry boundaries" (Loosen, 2015) —especially but not exclusively for young people— that can be studied in various ways and have different consequences. One of them, Loosen (2015) argues, is functional dedifferentiation, which not only implies that journalism's functions would no longer suffice to distinguish it from other digital environment actors but also suggests a partial or temporary loss of its functions. This does not mean journalism is indistinguishable from other actors like social networks or fiction based on real events, or that the audience is unaware of the difference between fiction and reality. On the contrary, as long as the debate about the boundaries between them continues, the differences will remain important (Loosen, 2015).

However, if functional dedifferentiation occurs, where other digital environment actors, through the narration of more or less current events, fulfil some historically attributed journalistic functions; if the audience increasingly blurs the line between information and entertainment, between content produced by journalists and that by content creators, what prevents these narrative agents from being studied or analysed within journalism studies?

This proposal does not intend for fiction based on real events to be studied as journalism or news because they are not journalism, nor do those who create them adhere to the same ethical code or reading pact. However, they could be studied, as Swart *et al*. (2022, p. 13) suggest, as an informative experience (they

refer to "what is experienced as informative", because what matters is not so much the news or its format but what the audience experiences as informative. Thus, the question would no longer be what citizens need from journalism but "what kind of information people need to orient themselves in society and everyday life" (Swart *et al.*, 2022, p. 16).

CONCLUSIONS

Through the theoretical approach undertaken in this article, it is concluded, as previously outlined in the introduction, that fictions based on real events should be examined within journalism studies as a form of informational experience. The justifications for this position are as follows:

1. Journalistic work and fiction based on real events coexist in the same communicative ecosystem where both compete for the audience's attention. It is an environment that citizens access through the same device —generally the smartphone— where all content can be consumed indistinctly and simultaneously.
2. Journalism is one agent among others in this ecosystem that faces a credibility crisis that has led to a loss of trust in the media by the audience. In this situation, other agents such as social networks, institutions, or fiction based on real events seem ready to take its place in making sense of reality.
3. Fiction based on real events is gaining more and more prominence in the current communicative ecosystem, becoming one of the star products of video-on-demand platforms. These fictions, on the rise due to their ability to reach large audiences, become a relevant agent —at least as much as others— in the task of telling real events, even though these events are fictionalized. In addition to the already mentioned *Unbelievable* (2018), other examples include *When They See Us* (2018), *Dopesick* (2021), *Painkiller* (2023), and, on a national level, *Fariña* (2018) or *El Caso Asunta* (2024). All of these series have achieved great success in terms of viewership and tackle some of the most significant topics or stories in the public sphere of contemporary society.
4. In this whirlwind of narratives and narrative agents, the audience, especially the younger one, seems not to differentiate and consumes news as just another element of the content flow at their disposal. Thus, everything indicates that fiction based on real events can constitute for the audience another element of this content flow and should therefore be considered a possible informative experience.

This consideration raises several dilemmas within journalism studies and questions what should be the object and objectives of study in this field (Swart *et al.*, 2022). If this type of fiction is studied from that perspective, issues arise regarding its ability to perform certain functions attributed to journalism (Gastón-Lorente *et al.*, 2024; Gastón-Lorente and Gómez Baceiredo, 2022a) or the risks of it becoming a narrator of reality (Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022b).

But there are also other ethical, legal, or even audience impact issues that are worth exploring from the perspective of journalism.

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