

DOSSIER

BETWEEN OBJECTIVITY AND EMOTIONALITY:

Proyecto Puente's disaster journalism



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ABSTRACT – This article presents a case study on an award-winning journalistic running story, that of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora by the Mexican digital-born news organization Proyecto Puente. This running story received the National Journalism Award in the News Coverage category in 2014 and it distinguished itself due to its emotional character. Based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis, as well as semi-structured interviews, it examines how the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality interacted in this running story. The results allow us to advance Tuchman and Wahl-Jorgensen's theorizations as they warn us about the centrality of “being there” and “being the voice of those who have no voice” in the coverage of environmental disasters from a citizen perspective.

Key words: Journalism. Disaster. Objectivity. Emotionality. Mexico.

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ENTRE A OBJETIVIDADE E A EMOCIONALIDADE: o jornalismo de desastre do Proyecto Puento

RESUMO – Este artigo apresenta um estudo de caso sobre uma cobertura jornalística premiada, a do vazamento tóxico no Rio Sonora pela organização jornalística digital mexicana Proyecto Puento. Essa cobertura recebeu o Prêmio Nacional de Jornalismo na categoria Cobertura de Notícias em 2014 e se distinguiu por seu caráter emocional. Com base na análise de conteúdo quantitativa e qualitativa, bem como em entrevistas semiestruturadas, examinamos como os rituais estratégicos de objetividade e emocionalidade interagiram nessa cobertura. Os resultados permitem avançar nas teorias de Tuchman e Wahl-Jorgensen, pois alertam sobre a centralidade de “estar lá” e “ser a voz de quem não tem voz” na cobertura dos desastres ambientais na perspectiva do cidadão.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Desastres. Objetividade. Emocionalidade. México.

ENTRE LA OBJETIVIDAD Y LA EMOCIONALIDAD: el periodismo de desastres de Proyecto Puento

RESUMEN – Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso sobre una cobertura periodística galardonada, la del derrame de tóxicos sobre el Río Sonora por parte de la organización periodística mexicana nacida digital Proyecto Puento. Esta cobertura recibió el Premio Nacional de Periodismo en la categoría de Cobertura Noticiosa en 2014 y se distinguió por su carácter emocional. A partir de análisis de contenido cuantitativo y cualitativo, así como entrevistas semiestructuradas, se examina cómo interactuaron los rituales estratégicos de la objetividad y la emocionalidad en esta cobertura. Los resultados permiten avanzar las teorizaciones de Tuchman y Wahl-Jorgensen, pues advierten sobre la centralidad de “estar ahí” y “ser la voz de los que no tienen voz” en la cobertura de desastres ambientales desde una perspectiva ciudadana.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Desastres. Objetividad. Emocionalidad. México.

1 Introduction

In Latin America, journalism studies tend to emphasize deficit, bias, or deviance (Reyna, 2016; García et al., 2018; Navia et al., 2013). This propensity responds to the fact that many of its authors have moved from practice to the study of journalism intending to contribute to the journalistic paradigm repair of their countries, states, or cities. Although they have participated in the improvement of the coverage of sensitive topics such as elections, violence, and inequality, they have also neglected the analysis of the journalism that is distinguished by the opposite of its shortcomings: award-winning journalism¹.

In response to this trend, which is not exclusive to Latin America, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) argues that studying award-winning

journalism is relevant not only because of its exemplary character but also because it allows us to approach the new quality standards of this professional field and to understand them on their own terms. This implies leaving behind normative approaches aimed at exposing journalism's deviations – in itself a methodological bias – to develop sociological or anthropological perspectives that are sensitive to the complexities and contradictions of the news production process. In this sense, it means asking ourselves what award-winning journalism is like and under what conditions it is possible.

With this in mind, this article presents a case study of an award-winning journalistic running story, that of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora² by the Mexican digital-born news organization Proyecto Puente³. This running story received the National Journalism Award, the most important in its field in Mexico, in the category of News Coverage in 2014 for its extensive and intensive nature, as it was the first news organization to cover “the biggest environmental disaster in [the history of] Mexico” (Barragán, 2022) and remained on the scene for a semester exposing the arbitrariness of the power groups and collecting the testimonies of the affected people.

Due to the characteristics of this coverage, which oscillated between detached observation, watchdog reporting, and empathetic narration, we propose to analyze it through a conceptual framework informed by the theorizations on the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality by Tuchman (1999) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2013). This will allow us to examine how the quintessential norm of professional journalism, objectivity, was negotiated by Proyecto Puente's reporters in an attempt to make sense of an anarchic event (Schudson, 2006). Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted to study the interaction of the patterns of objectivity and emotionality in this running story, as well as semi-structured interviews.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section presents a literature review of Latin American disaster journalism studies to demonstrate that the emphasis on the deficit of this field is not alien to them, but quite the opposite. The second section develops a conceptual framework to problematize the implications of the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality in the coverage of environmental disasters. The third section describes the research design, justifying the research techniques and the sampling that were used. Finally, the fourth section empirically analyzes Proyecto Puente's disaster journalism in order to characterize its distinctive elements.

2 Latin American disaster journalism studies

The emphasis on deficit, bias, or deviance that characterizes Latin American journalism studies as a field is also expressed in research on disaster coverage. On the tenth anniversary of the 1985 Mexico earthquake, Esteinou (1995) argued that “in the face of unpredictable disasters, the media have to report as objectively, timely, pluralistically and participatory as possible” (p. 60), recommending that they should move away from commercial dynamics. Two decades later, Toussaint and García (2017) criticized the “stagings that, far from attending to journalistic interest, take it upon themselves to exploit tragedies in the tone of reality shows or soap opera drama”.

In Chile, Pellegrini et al. (2015) have questioned the use of dramatic music and slow motion during the coverage of disasters such as the 2010 earthquake, as they reaffirm the perception that “journalism tends to resort to the exacerbation of emotions and pain in circumstances of catastrophes” (p. 263). On the other hand, Suing (2018) has argued that during the coverage of the 2016 Ecuador earthquake, “economistic and spectacle criteria prevailed, even in media called to privilege public service” (p. 386). Rivera (2021) has raised a similar approach by describing as “pornotragedy” the oversaturation of tragic material in the coverage of the 2017 Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

For Latin American disaster journalism scholars, such orientations are explained not only by the commercial nature of the region’s news organizations but also by the lack of specialization in disaster coverage of its journalists. In his study on the coverage of the 2017 Mexico earthquake, Padilla (2018) remarked that “in Mexico, there are very few courses for journalists in the subject of Civil Protection and Emergency Communication” (p. 44) to make sense of the little progress he finds in this area since the 1985 earthquake. This perspective is supported by authors who propose the *Gestión Integral de Riesgos y Desastres* (GIRD) as a solution to this problem (Barrios et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2013).

Even when, like Puente et al. (2013), they seek to go beyond content and discourse analysis to analyze news workers’ experiences and perceptions in disaster coverage through interviews, they fall into a normative perspective by seeking “a protocol of journalistic action to adequately address the coverage of a disaster” (p. 122).

In this sense, it can be concluded that disaster journalism scholars in this region still pretend to assume the function of repairing the journalistic paradigm of their countries, states, or cities from the academic field despite the resistance of the professional field of journalism. This is somewhat problematic because it assumes that journalism cannot reform itself.

Proposing that news organizations should adopt specific models for the coverage of disasters to avoid their deviation may seem laudable, but at the same time, it implies adhering to what Hallin (1992) has called “the high modernism of journalism”, a perspective that conceives change as linear and attached to the positivist ideal of objectivity. As such, the intention of contributing to the repair of the journalistic paradigm becomes an attempt to regulate journalistic practice; that is, social control. As we consider that it is not up to journalism scholars to reorient journalistic practice, in this article we limit ourselves to a sociological analysis of disaster journalism.

3 The strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality in disaster journalism

From a sociology of news production perspective, Schudson (2006) argues that, indeed, journalists frame facts according to the newsworthiness criteria of their organizations and their frameworks of interpretation of reality, but that the anarchic nature of certain events makes all planning go haywire and imposes certain frames on journalism. In other words, in the face of events they could not foresee, journalism professionals are dragged by reality and have to limit themselves to representing it through socially accepted frames. This is relevant for the study of disaster journalism, since in this type of coverage the anarchy of the event predominates and news routines are altered.

In contrast to Schudson, Lozano et al. (2012) characterize anarchic events as “unexpected breaks or ruptures in events” (p. 382). For these authors, it is essential to establish a clear distinction between situations of expected instability and situations of unforeseen instability because, in the latter, uncertainty reigns both in social life and in the news production process. However, unlike Schudson, Lozano et al. (2012) do not consider how the anarchy or unpredictability of a news event can determine its framing; instead,

they highlight the deficit by suggesting that news organizations often confuse risk and uncertainty.

In normal or planned events, particularly those organized by governments and political parties, news workers are expected to practice the norm of objectivity by not taking sides for or against the parties involved. Tuchman (1999) theorizes the strategic ritual of objectivity, understood as a set of practices that professionals in this field impose on themselves to present themselves as impartial, with these types of events in mind. So does Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) in developing the notion of the strategic ritual of emotionality, defined as the process of externalizing emotional labor⁴ (Hochschild, 2012) by describing the emotions of their sources.

But what about the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality in anarchic events such as an environmental disaster? How do journalists determine how to present this type of news? In the coverage of armed violence events, this pattern is usually followed: if the victims are presumably innocent, a “trauma and tragedy” framing is carried out, emphasizing the emotions of the people affected by the attack; on the other hand, if the victims are presumably part of organized crime, a “body count” framing is carried out, sticking to the description of the crime scene in a dispassionate manner, quantifying the lifeless bodies and providing general details about the onslaught (Reyna, 2014).

The coverage of an environmental disaster such as the toxic spill over the Río Sonora that concerns this article entails a different challenge. Proyecto Puente’s coverage began with a denunciation: “Cananea mining company spills sulfuric acid in the Río Sonora” (Redacción, 2014a). This news item was made from the capital of Sonora, Hermosillo, and exposed a news event that until that moment was not of public knowledge. Subsequently, when reporters from this news organization traveled to the scene, more attention was paid to the social and economic consequences of the spill through testimonies. Thus, the framing was transformed with the evolution of the event and the access to information sources.

Unlike the coverage of armed violence events, in a toxic spill, there are no victims that can be re-victimized, but there are data that can be presented to contextualize the environmental disaster. For the same purpose, the points of view of public officials and specialists can also be collected. It can be hypothesized that the strategic ritual of objectivity may prevail in these news items, while in those based on the victims’ testimonies, emotionality may be more prominent.

When there are no human and material resources to go deeper through a journalistic investigation, these strategies would be used to channel the discomfort generated by the injustice being reported.

According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality are not mutually exclusive, as journalists seek to be impartial even when they become emotionally involved in a story. That is why they strategically externalize what they feel and have their sources express them because they cannot do so according to the norms of their professional field. In this sense, the strategic ritual of emotionality is nothing else than the strategic ritual of objectivity processing the emotions of people, who in this case would be the victims of a toxic spill, as those who make the news present themselves as detached observers of reality.

As shown in table 1, the strategic ritual of emotionality presents some digressions concerning objectivity. First, although not described by Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), it does not necessarily present the possibilities in conflict, since its objective is not to balance the positions for and against, but to emphasize the emotions, usually of those who suffer some kind of injustice. Secondly, according to the same author, it tends not to show supporting evidence of the emotions that it describes, probably because of its imponderable nature. Finally, it is not dependent on the writing metaphor of the inverted pyramid and instead employs a wide range of narrative devices.

Table 1

Strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality

| | Objectivity | Emotionality |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Balance | Presents the two sides of a story | Does not necessarily present conflicting possibilities |
| Evidence | Presents supporting evidence | Does not necessarily present supporting evidence when describing emotions |
| Attribution | Uses quotes judiciously | Uses quotes judiciously |
| Structure | Structures the information in an appropriate sentence, usually in an inverted pyramid | Narrative diversity, predominance of anecdotes, and personalized writing to try to involve the public |

Source: elaboration based on Tuchman (1999) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2013).

At this point, it is important to emphasize that we understand the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality as ideal types in a Weberian sense. This means that we think of them as hypothetical constructs that allow us to distinguish between one type of framing of reality and another despite their similarities. As we will analyze in the results section, these ideal types serve those who make the news to define the orientation of their narratives even when they do not name them as objectivity and emotionality. Thus, they fulfill a function similar to that of genres in the organization of newswork because they allow editors and reporters to reach minimum agreements on the coverage to be developed (Grijelmo, 2014).

If we process the contents that appeal to the strategic ritual of emotionality through the objectivity norm, we will probably find deviance in them, as they will put more emphasis on subjective information than on objective information. This is what Latin American disaster journalism studies do when they define these coverages as sensationalist and lacking objectivity (Carreño, 2017; Esteinou, 1995; Toussaint & García, 2017). To avoid reaching the same conclusion and to understand disaster journalism on its terms, in this article we propose to change the emphasis on deficit and bias to one more aware of the anarchy of events and the anxiety of storytelling (Schudson, 2006).

4 Research design

This article has been conceived as a case study of an award-winning running story, that of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora, with which Proyecto Puente won the 2014 National Journalism Award in the category of News Coverage. Gerring (2017) states that a case study seeks to delve deeper into individuals, groups, or specific phenomena instead of generalizing through random sampling. We employed the typical case study strategy to analyze the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality in the coverage of such an environmental disaster, both to test the theorizations of Tuchman (1999) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) and to identify new expressions of these rituals.

The research techniques of quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2012), qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018)

were used. Through quantitative content analysis, the frequency of the emotional pattern and the type of input were measured. Through qualitative content analysis, the externalization of emotional labor was examined, as well as the ritual of “being there” and the enactment of the discourse of “being the voice of the voiceless”. The semi-structured interviews were focused on the experiences and perceptions of the tensions between objectivity and emotionality of Proyecto Puente’s reporters and editors (table 2).

Table 2

Research techniques and dimensions of analysis

| Technique | Dimensions of analysis |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quantitative content analysis | - Frequency of the emotionality pattern - Type of lead |
| Qualitative content analysis | - Externalization of emotional labor - “Being there” - “Be the voice of those who have no voice” |
| Semi-structured interview | - Experiences and perceptions regarding the tension between objectivity and emotionality |

We measured the frequency of the emotionality pattern by establishing a distinction between the contents that reflect some type of emotion of the inhabitants of the Río Sonora and those that do not. On the other hand, following Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), we quantified the type of lead also by making a difference between inverted pyramid leads and those that reject this type of writing structure, the predominant in news, to replace it with one of anecdotal style. Evaluating these variables has allowed us to carry out a minimal quantitative content analysis to focus on what interests us the most: the qualitative content analysis of the externalization of emotional labor.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), targeted qualitative content analysis differs from conventional content analysis in that it seeks to expand a conceptual framework, in this case, that of the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality, and not only to evaluate whether or not the content adheres to certain social norms. In the same sense, it differs from discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2009) in that it does not seek to examine the modes of representation of a given community in the news, but rather to identify key concepts in the content to deepen

the theorization. Thus, targeted qualitative content analysis becomes a tool for the sociological analysis of news production.

The sample of the content analysis consists of the 32 contents in the form of news items and chronicles that Proyecto Punte (2014) submitted to the National Journalism Award in the category of News Coverage. According to one of the editors of this news organization, more than 600 contents were produced on the toxic spill (Journalist 1, personal communication), so it can be deduced that the selection submitted to the Citizen Council of the National Journalism Award represents the best according to the quality criteria of the organization itself. At the time of this writing, these contents are no longer available online, which is why we have resorted to our database.

In contrast to Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), who takes Pulitzer Prize-winning features as an empirical reference, this article focuses on a corpus of mostly news items. The difference is not only quantitative but qualitative: a news story is produced in a hurry – usually in tandem with four or five other stories –, so it tends to be a less leisurely and documented journalistic genre than a feature. Following Schudson (2006), this would make news about anarchic events such as an environmental disaster more direct and raw emotional accounts than their long-form journalism counterparts because they do not enjoy the same production conditions.

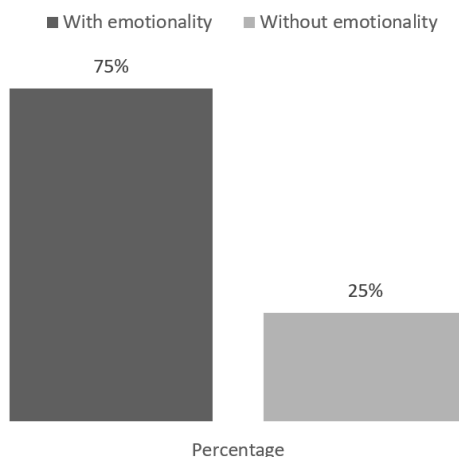
5 Between objectivity and emotionality: Proyecto Punte's disaster journalism

5.1 Emotionality in an Inverted Pyramid

The presence of the pattern of emotionality in the sample of news items that Proyecto Punte submitted to the 2014 National Journalism Award is significant: 75% (n=24) describe some type of emotion, while 25% (n=8) do not (figure 1). This demonstrates that most of the content that this news organization considered distinctive in its coverage of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora was not limited to “reporting things as they are” in the traditional sense and, instead, accounted for “the story behind the facts” by emphasizing the psychological impact of the environmental disaster. From a normative perspective, this would represent a deviation in that it would present subjective information instead of sticking to the “hard data”.

Figure 1

Frequency of the pattern of emotionality in Proyecto Puente's disaster journalism



In her study, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) examines six categories of features that won the Pulitzer Prize between 1995 and 2011. Her analysis reveals that anecdotal leads predominate in the categories of Narrative Journalism, Explanatory Journalism, International Journalism, National Journalism, and Public Service Journalism, but that in Investigative Journalism there is a greater balance between the anecdotal, inverted pyramid, and other leads. This serves the author to argue that the strategic ritual of objectivity theorized by Tuchman (1999) is partially suspended in award-winning journalism in an attempt to engage the reader through the description of anecdotal elements.

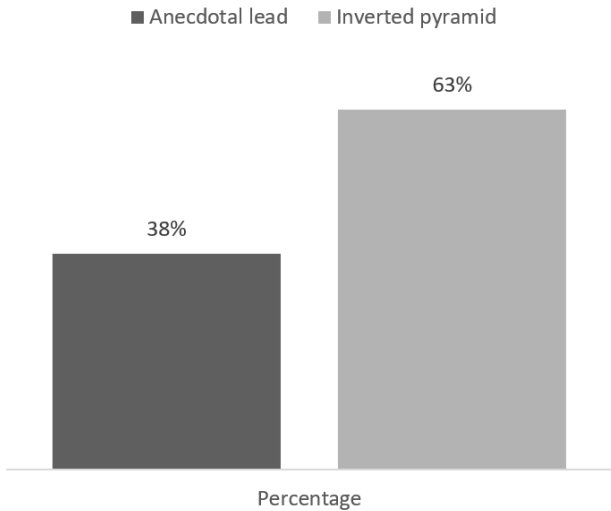
Among the news items that adhere to the pattern of emotionality in the coverage of the toxic spill by Proyecto Puente (figure 1), there are also contents with anecdotal entries, 38% (n=9), but those that resort to the inverted pyramid metaphor are more frequent, 63% (n=15), to respond to the what, who, when, where, how and why of the story from the first paragraph (figure 2). This is striking because it implies that such items are emotionally tinged, but without completely abandoning the inverted pyramid model of storytelling. Being a body of reporters socialized in the daily news, it can be inferred that they processed the anarchic event through their

usual schemas (Schudson, 2006).

In sum, the strategic ritual of emotionality and inverted pyramid writing are not mutually exclusive, since reporters can externalize their emotional labor by describing the emotions of their sources of information without transforming the structure of their journalistic narratives. In developing countries where inequality is prevalent, as in Mexico, this is part of news routines as news workers constantly have to generate social service stories to process citizens' requests for economic or material support. Although journalism professionals are moved by a situation, they know that they have to prepare a brief and concise article, in an inverted pyramid.

Figure 2

Frequency of anecdotal entry and inverted pyramid in Proyecto Puente's disaster journalism



5.2 Outsourcing of emotional labor

Covering an anarchic event often harms the mental health of journalists (Flores et al., 2012). Proyecto Puente's reporters who covered the toxic spill over the Río Sonora were no exception. In interviews they confessed having cried "when people [told them] how they lived there day by day, with sadness, uncertainty [...]; it did

affect me” (Journalist 1, personal communication). They also stated that they felt “anger and impotence [for] seeing how the authorities and Grupo Mexico tried to minimize the issue” (Journalist 2, personal communication). They felt impotence because they assumed that through journalism they could not change the way things were (Journalist 3, personal communication).

This emotional connection with the people affected by the environmental disaster generated an ethical conflict: how to give an account of what they observed without violating the objectivity norm of professional journalism, how to distance themselves from a reality that they were already part of, how to avoid being carried away by emotions? As Schudson (2006) suggests, the solution was to “make do” with the resources they had at their disposal by putting into practice – intuitively – what Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) calls the strategic ritual of emotionality: the externalization of emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012) through the description and attribution of the emotions of the inhabitants of the Río Sonora.

First, through the attribution of information – conceptualized by Tuchman (1999) as presentation of supporting evidence and judicious use of quotation marks – the emotional labor was externalized by making those who were authorized to express themselves in the first person: “I am already desperate, we are already tired of carrying water... my waist hurts from carrying buckets” (Inhabitant of the Río Sonora in Ayala, 2014) or “Politicians do not give us a solution; we can’t stand it anymore [...]. We are already desperate [...]. I don’t know if I’m saying something I shouldn’t, but that’s the truth. I am telling you what we feel and what we are suffering” (Inhabitant of the Río Sonora in Redacción, 2014b).

Secondly, by describing the emotions of the people affected by the environmental disaster, the testimonies collected were contextualized and expressed what could not be stated in the first person: instead of writing “I feel anger and impotence for what is happening in the Río Sonora”, they described scenes such as: “His gaze is always downward. He is saddened by the uncertainty of losing his two hectares of crops” (Rubio, 2014c). Even in the attribution of the news sources, such emotional state was described: “In addition to his illnesses, he said very sadly that they have not obtained economic income” (Rubio, 2014e) or “...we don’t have a way to work’, he said while waving his hands in despair” (Rubio, 2014f).

As Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) theorizes, the emotions described

in this running story are mostly negative. In this case, there is a link between the sadness, anger, and helplessness that the Proyecto Puente journalists reveal to have felt and the anger, despair, and uncertainty that they emphasized in their news items. This does not mean that they biased the information to their convenience, but that they appealed to the strategic ritual of objectivity to recover testimonies, describe emotions, and make sense of an anarchic event according to the news criteria of their organization. In this way, they managed to distance themselves from a reality in which they had already become emotionally involved.

Who feels in these journalistic accounts are not the reporters, but the “desperate producers” (Rubio & Ortega, 2014), the “chiltepín seller” (Rubio, 2014a), or the woman who “before the spill sold jamoncillos on the side of the road” (Ayala, 2014). This externalization of emotional labor is based on the idea that “journalists are not the news”, widely socialized in the professional field of journalism, as well as on the determination to “document, to put a face” (Journalist 4, personal communication) to the toxic spill over the Río Sonora. Although news workers also suffered the consequences of the environmental disaster by, for example, having to stay in hotels without water, they were careful not to become the story.

5.3 “Being there” and “being the voice of those who have no voice”

Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2013) content analysis reveals that Pulitzer Prize-winning features tend to be dominated by anecdotal leads rather than those that use the metaphor of the inverted pyramid to organize the news in descending order. Our content analysis has shown that in the case of Proyecto Puente’s disaster journalism, the inverted pyramid writing structure has prevailed even when the news items appeal to the strategic ritual of emotionality. Despite this, these contents also include anecdotal descriptions that are unusual in daily news to represent the victims of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora and the places they inhabit more closely:

Sergio Aureliano Yescas López, the producer of this dairy [milk], very kindly agrees to an interview in the [comfort] of the porch of his house.

He is seated in one of the two armchairs in this area of the house. His son Luis Yescas accompanies him. The home is warm

(Rubio, 2014b).

He sits in one of the three armchairs in his living room for the interview. His hair is short and grey. Friendly and helpful. He wears a white undershirt, blue jeans, and dark boots.

His house is made of material; it is clear that he has lived well. The smell of tamales emanates from the kitchen, as it is mealtime (Rubio, 2014d).

For Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), the function of anecdotes in Pulitzer Prize-winning stories is “to draw the reader into a story with broader sociopolitical implications through illustrating how it affected a particular individual or group” (p. 137). For us, however, the anecdotal descriptions in Proyecto Puente’s disaster journalism have to do first and foremost with the strategic ritual of “being there”, with demonstrating that the reporters of this news organization did indeed conduct fieldwork in the Río Sonora and were able to establish a rapport with diverse inhabitants that allowed them access to the intimacy of their homes and life stories.

In this sense, the anecdotes that construct the “being there” of this running story are linked to journalistic authority, to the authority that journalists have to go to the scene and report what happens on behalf of the citizenry (Carlson, 2017). This division of labor is not noticed by Tuchman or Wahl-Jorgensen, but it is key in our case study, as Proyecto Puente always remarked that it was the first news organization to reach the Río Sonora. Thus, their journalistic accounts reiterate “Proyecto Puente’s special coverage in the towns of the Río Sonora” (Rubio, 2014c), indicating that they are on the scene doing a different, “special”, coverage in contrast to the rest:

Whoever you ask, wherever you stop, wherever you go. On any street corner, in any house, or grocery store. No one in Aconchi is satisfied with the response of the federal and state authorities, much less with Grupo Mexico.

More than two months after the tragedy of the Río Sonora, the inhabitants feel the ravages and effects on their homes and economy. Small merchants, grocers, farmers, cattle ranchers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and low-income people have not been able to recover (Medina, 2014).

Through this strategic ritual, Proyecto Puente’s reporters authorized themselves to “be the voice of the voiceless” – another widely spread discourse in the professional field of journalism – by covering the environmental disaster from a citizen’s perspective. In this case, the characteristics of the population and the towns they live in led this group of journalism professionals to take on the mission of bringing them the loudspeakers of journalism to

allow them to amplify their experiences and perceptions of the environmental disaster. An interview conducted by the director of this news organization with a dairy farmer reaffirms this social function:

- What do you say to the Grupo Mexico authorities who monitor us? Is it important to open the microphones and go beyond the official?
- What do I tell them? That they should get their act together, that they should look out for us. Many are appearing in the newspapers, are appearing in the news... but, in reality, nobody puts themselves in our boots (Redacción, 2014b).

By “being there” permanently and empowering themselves to “be the voice of those who have no voice”, the Proyecto Puente reporters constructed themselves as the exception. One of them said, “one puts oneself in the shoes of [the inhabitants of the Río Sonora to give dimension to the fact] that, if one were in the same situation, one would also [be] desperate” (Journalist 5, personal communication). For him, visiting and interviewing these people repeatedly meant that they ended up becoming “part of [his life] and [becoming like] family”. This familiarity, it can be inferred, is what would authorize this body of reporters and editors to express themselves on behalf of the victims of the environmental disaster, but always through their testimonies and the description of their emotions.

In this sense, the externalization of the emotional labor of Proyecto Puente’s journalists is possible when by “being there” they are authorized by their sources of information to “be the voice of the voiceless”. Without this authorization they would not have been able to tell “the story behind the facts” or “put a face” (Journalist 4, personal communication) to the tragedy. Although the idea of “being the voice of the voiceless” is problematic for the social sciences (Boltanski, 2011), this division of labor is one of the pillars of the strategic ritual of emotionality, especially when the victims do not have the cultural, economic, social and technological means to express themselves directly in the public sphere.

6 Conclusions

This article has analyzed the coverage of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora with which Proyecto Puente won the National Journalism Award in the category of News Coverage in 2014. It

has focused on the study of the interaction between the strategic rituals of objectivity and emotionality, as it has observed that this news organization has emphasized the emotions of the victims of the environmental disaster in the sample of content that it submitted for this award. Through quantitative and qualitative content analysis, as well as semi-structured interviews, it has tested the approaches of Tuchman (1999) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) in light of Schudson's (2006) conceptualization of anarchic events.

Unlike previous studies (Esteinou, 1995; Padilla, 2018; Toussaint & Garcia, 2017), this article has challenged the dichotomy between objectivity and sensationalism by which it has been customary to analyze disaster coverage in Latin America. Rather than coverage lacking objectivity, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews have shown that Proyecto Puente's journalists have taken pains not to deviate from the norms of their profession even when they had become emotionally invested in the story that they were covering. This serves to problematize the scope and limitations of objectivity in the coverage of environmental disasters. What we found is that emotionality does not displace objectivity.

In conceptual terms, this article posits:

1. Objectivity as a strategic ritual is maintained in disaster coverage because, as Tuchman (1999) warned, news workers are aware that they may be accused of being unprofessional or sensationalist if they include their views.
2. Objectivity is understood as not including the opinion of those covering the disaster as "journalists are not the news". This is confirmed when two journalists interviewed stayed for a week in a hotel without water and did not write about it. What they experienced and felt in the Río Sonora was banned from their journalistic accounts.
3. In the coverage of the toxic spill over the Río Sonora, the balance is suspended. Instead, different sources of information from the same population are presented. At least in the sample submitted for the National Journalism Award, Proyecto Puente takes away the voice of the governmental information sources and the mining consortium Grupo Mexico, responsible for the disaster. The voice of the people affected is their sole interest.
4. The externalization of journalists' emotional labor can be defined as a protection mechanism against accusations of bias and at the same time a perspective that resists the idea of "reporting things as they are", simply through figures and official statements, in the coverage of disasters.
5. The strategic ritual of "being there", which is reiterated in the contents of Proyecto Puente, is a pillar of disaster coverage and should be analyzed not as a spectacle (Toussaint & García, 2017), but as an element through which both journalists and news organizations seek to emphasize their journalistic authority.

6. “Being the voice of the voiceless” becomes a mission for news workers covering disasters because they understand that the people affected are not in a position to express themselves in the public space and that someone has to do it for them. In a certain sense, these people concede their participation in the public sphere by trusting the journalistic authority of those who bring a microphone close to them.

Future studies may delve deeper into the interaction between objectivity and emotionality in the coverage of other types of disasters, in other types of news organizations, and other countries. They could take broader samples as empirical references or accentuate the conceptual character of the discussion. We consider it essential to distance ourselves from the normative perspectives that still predominate in Latin American disaster journalism studies in order to develop sociological or anthropological approaches that study this kind of running stories beyond deficit. As Schudson (2006) argues, anarchic events are difficult to cover because of the uncertainty in which they are framed and we cannot demand that those who cover them keep a cool head at all times.

NOTES

- 1 We understand award-winning journalism as a kind of journalism that has been recognized with an award (Collins Dictionary, 2023). In contrast to the concept of quality journalism, which Rivas de Roca et al. (2020) define based on the variables of commitment, transparency, reflexivity, social benefit, product-oriented quality, surveillance of power and limitation to facts, the notion of award-winning journalism is limited to having received some type of recognition. Although it is not the intention of this article to analyze journalistic quality, we believe it is important to highlight the commitment, social benefit and monitoring of the power in the running story that have we selected as case study.
- 2 On August 6, 2014, a spill of 40 thousand m³ of acidulated copper sulfate occurred on the Arroyo Tinajas, in the municipality of Cananea, Sonora, Mexico. The contaminants came from the facilities of the Buenavista del Cobre company, a subsidiary of the Grupo Mexico mining consortium. This spill has been defined as “the largest environmental disaster in [the history of] Mexico” (Barragán, 2022).

- 3 Proyecto Puente is a digital-born news organization founded in 2010 by Luis Alberto Medina in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. When the Río Sonora spill occurred in 2014, Proyecto Puente had joined UniRadio Noticias, maintaining its editorial independence. As Medina and the Proyecto Puente team directed the coverage of the environmental disaster with which they obtained the National Journalism Award in the News Coverage category in 2014, and as UniRadio Noticias removed the contents of this running story from its website at the end of its employment relationship with Medina in 2015, this article attributes this coverage to Proyecto Puente. We understand a news organizations as a group of journalists that may or may not work within a larger organization. A similar case is observed in the investigative journalism unit of the think tank Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, also in Mexico.
- 4 Developed by Hochschild (2012), the concept of emotional labor refers to the management of emotions that certain workers carry out to present themselves as professionals. In journalism studies, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) imports this notion from symbolic interactionism to describe the strategic ritual of emotionality through which journalists suppress their emotions from a news story to externalize them through their sources of information.

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