

HEROES AND VILLAINS: THEORY-BUILDING IN TABLOID TALKSHOW STORYTELLING

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1. Introduction

According to Ochs *et al.* (1992), conversational narratives are the product of co-construction and of collaborative storytelling. Their claim is that "each story is potentially a theory of a set of events in that it contains an explanation which may be then overtly challenged and reworked by co-narrators." For Ochs *et al.* (1992:38) family storytelling is a particularly rich locus for the cultivation of skills critical to engagement in the world of theory. Those skills are *perspective-taking*, *metacognition*, *analytic* or *critical thinking* and *theory-construction*. The main aim of this paper is to describe TV tabloid talkshow storytelling as a locus in which these skills may be widely cultivated, in particular, that of *metacognition*. The skill of metacognition is here understood as "the ability to see one's own and other's stories as possible versions or theories rather than necessarily factual accounts of what has happened (i.e. metacognition)" (Ochs *et al.*, 1992:39).

Tabloid talkshows were conceived, in their origins, as talk-service (cf. Munson 1993). Nowadays, due to the polemic nature of the topics discussed and the principles under which the interaction proceeds, they have become a public forum, a commonplace medium for socialising perspective-taking and critical thinking, where social theories on various matters can be built or rebuilt. The social

theories discussed in such a forum are always related to conflict matters, since in the US, talkshows have become the venue for the airing of controversial issues. My claim here is that, however bizarre, the American tabloid talkshow (e.g. *Geraldo*) carries out the social function of questioning ideological and moral values by raising a number of potentially contentious social issues (Carbaugh 1983; Munson 1993; Penz 1996).

In such a context, the activity of storytelling functions as *argument-initiator*, which may then be used to build theories on social matters. Thus, storytelling serves as the starting point for the appraisal of specific social goals, values and moral principles (cf. Stein and Albro 1997:7); since, as argued by Thornborrow (1997), its function is to enhance the dynamic of the talk by enabling other speakers to respond with opposing points of view. In tabloid talkshow storytelling, one initial teller begins a narrative whose direction is negotiated by the co-participants (Ochs *et al.* 1992; Duranti 1986). The narrative is directly related to the topic of the day – a social problem in, for example, *Men who con women into relationships* with Montel Williams as a host – and each story illustrates an example of the situation evoked by the title of the programme: the stories inform the audience about the consequences of adopting or avoiding certain courses of action. Hence, each personal story should be interpreted not only as an individual experience but as the argument-initiator which provides the raw data that may be then used to build social theories (Ochs *et al.* 1992) on a particular matter.

In line of Ochs *et al.* (1992:37), I propose that the group of stories told in the same programme are, potentially, a theory of a set of events, in that each of them contains an explanation, which may then be overtly challenged and reworked by co-narrators. Tabloid talkshow storytelling is, at least potentially, an experience in dialectic theory-building, wherein interlocutors and, in turn the overhearing audience, are given the opportunity to construct, critique and reconstruct social theories on acceptable forms of behaviour in societies (cf. Ochs *et al.* 1992).

2. Tabloid Talkshows

Tabloid talkshows have been a familiar television genre since the 1960s. The term tabloid talkshow itself is used by many writers (cf. Fischhoff 1995) instead of *daytime talkshows* or *daytime talk*. Talkshows hosted by *Oprah*, *Montel Williams*, *Gordon Elliott*, *Donahue*, *Tempestt*, *Geraldo*, *Jenny Jones*, *Ricki Lake*, *Leeza*, *Oprah Winfrey*, *Maury Povich*, *Sally*, *Richard Bey* and *Mark Grauberg*, among others would fit into this description. The examples included here have been taken from Montel Williams (1996), *Men who con Women into relationships* and from Jenny Jones (1996) *Confronting Unfaithful Spouses*. These type of talkshows are audience discussion programmes (cf. Livingstone and Lunt 1994:38) in which ordinary citizens (cf. Carbaugh, 1988) are invited to tell about their problems. Topics are often sensationalist, personal and intimate.

The data excerpts cited in this article are representative of large collections of data assembled and transcribed out of a substantial number of programs randomly recorded during February-June 1995 and August 1996. The programme hosted by Montel Williams *Men who con women into relationships* is one of the programmes of which I have a full transcription and so is *Confronting unfaithful spouses*, which is also quoted in this study; that was one reason for choosing such programmes as examples of how the process of storytelling took place. Also, the fact that there was more than one story being told in the same programme was another reason for choosing both of them; since in that way, I could illustrate the similarities between different storytellers in the same context, at the same time and in the presence of the same audience.

In *Men who con women into relationships*, there are three girls on stage the moment the talkshow starts: Brandie (B), Danielle (D) and Brandie Ann (BR), all of them younger than 22 years old. They are sitting on the stage with their back turned to the audience. Montel introduces them all as women who have been "betrayed" or conned by their lovers, who promised them something when they started going out, but behaved in a completely different way afterwards. They came to the programme to find out why their men behaved like that. Brandie wants to know why Paul lied to her; Danielle is there for the same reason but also to take a paternity test, since her boyfriend denies being the father of her baby; and Brandie Ann wants

her boyfriend to admit he is at fault and wants a public apology. There are three types of participants or categories: the host (Montel Williams (W)); the guests (Brandie (B) Brandie Ann (BR) and Danielle (D)); the audience-group and individual members of the audience who also ask questions.

In *Confronting Unfaithful Spouses*, there are three guests on stage facing the audience. Later on two other couples are summoned on stage to tell about similar stories having to do with being unfaithful. The extracts here correspond to the first group of guests. They have come to sort out their differences. Theresa had an affair with Dori's husband Ken and they are there to confront each other. Dori blames Theresa for everything and, additionally, accuses her of having had affairs with her son and with her son-in-law. There are three types of participants or categories: Jenny Jones (J) is the host and the guests are: Dori (D), Theresa (T) and Ken (K), three women from the audience intervene and so does the studio-audience.

3. Confrontation talk: perspective-taking and critical thinking

American tabloid talkshows are an example of *confronttalk*, which has been a syndicated television talk genre since the 1960s (cf. Munson 1993:11). The basic pattern is that of an oppositional argument in which two or more speakers openly engage in disputing their positions across a series of turns (cf. Hutchby 1996). These oppositional arguments derive from the stories told by the participants. Each story is always related to the topic of the day (e.g. *Men who con women into relationships*, *Children who are ashamed of their parents*), and different versions of the same story, usually opposed, are provided by the storytellers (i.e., the guests invited to come to the show). In turn, different storytellers expose different interpretations of the main events of the story (e.g., one storyteller may believe it is perfectly legal to have sex for fun with a thirteen-year-old, while other co-protagonists of the story may not). Thus, each storyteller has a different perspective, which may cause those present in the interaction to reconsider their own and to exercise critical thinking. Furthermore, opposed arguments on the very same social matter may potentially lead to a reconstruction of all social rules and moral standards, since

they provide the external audience (i.e. society) with two opposed dialectic and argumentation processes. The acceptance or denial of such arguments requires some kind of social action or at least mental response (cf. Ilie 1999) with regard to the matter under discussion – which usually brings out the ideological struggle and the symbolic patterns and cultural structure circulating in mundane civil society (cf. Carbaugh 1988). It is often the case that only one of the versions of the story supports socially-accepted moral principles, so the storytellers will be characterised as *villains*, *victims* or *heroes*, according to whether they do wrong, they suffer from the actions of others or they restore order, respectively.

A thorough analysis of tabloid talkshow discourse, which emerges from the open confrontation of two people who defend opposite arguments shows, nevertheless, that examples of analytic or critical thinking and perspective taking do not necessarily emerge from the talkshow itself. Instead, the participants in the interaction often engage into the production of insults and threats or other kinds of face threatening acts against those who do not share their view.

4. Storytelling in tabloid talkshows

Elsewhere I have argued that the tabloid talkshow can be classified as a quasi-conversational or semi-institutional (cf. Gregori 2000b; Ilie 1999) type of face-to-face interaction which attempts to be informative and entertaining at the same time. Tabloid talkshow interaction is mainly verbal, it is a combination of brief monologues (e.g. opening turn/s by the host which serve/s to orient the viewers at home) and dialogue, as well as written parts (e.g. the topic appears on the screen in some talkshows); and it exhibits features that pertain to both institutional and conversational discourse. Although the interaction proceeds almost exclusively through chains of questions and answers, similar to more institutionalised types of discourse such as news interviews or courtroom interaction, there is also room in the talkshows for less predictable types of sequences characteristic of casual conversation where there are free comments on the part of the guests; and also confrontational sequences of the type illustrated in example 1 below, in which the guests are engaged in a discussion and the presence of the host is almost imperceptible (cf. Gregori 2000a):

prompts BR to tell her story. The story is completed later on with more questions and with the counter version, which, in this case, is provided by her boyfriend¹:

Example 2:

- W [TECUT] Brandi Ann, why don't you tell me about what's going on with you?
- BR OK. I was dating this guy named Dan. And in the beginning, he was, like, telling me how, like, he loved me and all the stuff, and he cared about me and that—I don't know. I don't know. I kind of—I guess I fell for it. And he moved into my house, and he didn't have a job or anything, and I paid for rent and I bought him clothes—I mean—and everything.
- And [then as soon as—
- W [& You paid all the bills]
- BR Yes, I paid for everything. And then as soon as the money ran out, he was out the door and decided he wanted to date other people so—[]
- W But now he went out the door, but you let him back in the door
- BR Hmm? Mm no I—well-kind of *[laughs]*
- [audience laughing]*
- W Was he in the door like last month?
- BR Yes and he also like messed around with my best friend.
- W Wait. But, Brandi Ann, he te—left you after the money ran out
- BR Mhmm.
- W Went out the door
- BR Mhmm.
- W You got a little bit of money back, he comes back in the door, so you let him like in your bed in your heart in your life. He leaves you again. He goes to hit on your best friend and then [used—
- BR [& He messed] around with her in my room. I was in the hallway. I saw the whole thing.
- W He messed around and then you let him
- [back into your bed again?
- BR [Then he—he—no, no, no, no, no.] Then he went go kiss me and I told him to get out.

¹ Transcription conventions are included in the appendix.

- W So what do you want to say to him?
 BR I just want him to admit what he did.
 W I got to tell you that I've talked to the guys, and they seem to think that, you know, I'm going to put it right out to you, that all three of you knew what was going on when you went into this relationship
 B No.
 W Never told, you wanted a baby, told you from the beginning all he wanted you for was sex.
 BR Oooh
 W That's what they say. And they also say, you know I'm sorry, if women are stuck on stupid, then men may as well take advantage of them. That's how they feel. So we're going to take you take little break. [acc] I'm going to give an opportunity to talk to them because they're going to come out here in a minute. When we come back, [acc] we're going to find out about this guy that was Brandie's boyfriend ex-boyfriend. His name is Paul. He's going to come out here to talk to us. I'm going to let the ladies go off the stage first. I want to hear Br – Paul 's side of this because Paul doesn't even know which girl is here. He's been out with so many and we said, how old are the women that you've been out with? He said, o:h thirteen to forty nine. How many have you been out in the last year? Over a hundred. Which one could it be? Who knows. We'll find out. We'll be back right after this.

Stories are a prominent discourse genre in all types of audience-participation programmes and, as Goodwin (1990) claims, they should be examined not as free-standing linguistic or discursive entities, but as elements within the wider context of the speech event in which they occur. Thornborrow (1997:258) states their importance as follows:

Stories seem to be particularly powerful discursive resources within the context of talk-show interaction, precisely because they contain evaluations which can function not only as positioning devices for the speaker who tells the story, but also as pivotal utterances which contribute to the dynamic of the talk by enabling other speakers to respond with opposing points of view.

As van Dijk (1997:3) argues, stories not only have abstract structures and not only involve mental processes and representations, but are at the same time a dimension of the communicative act of storytelling and arguing by real language users in real situations. In the American tabloid talkshow the language users are ordinary citizens who come to the show seeking public support and acceptance of their actions. By story, I understand the explanation of the facts that brought their protagonists to the condition in which they are when they come to the programme. The working definition of story adopted here is that found in Ochs *et al.* (1992:43):

Story: Narrative activity which articles a central problematic event or circumstance in the immediate or distant past and the subsequent past, present, and future actions/states relevant to interpreting and responding to the problem. Storytelling may entail the eliciting and/or supplying of the following Story Contributions: Abstracts, Settings, Initiating Events (IE), -Internal responses to IE, Attempts to deal with IE, Consequences and Reactions.

In sum, tabloid talkshow stories are usually elicited step by step, and opinions are developed and elaborated component by component (cf. Heritage 1985), through question-response adjacency pairs, produced by the host, the audience and the guests, respectively. Similar to family dinner storytelling, they are examples of co-narration (Ochs *et al.* 1992:38). That is, although there is one initial teller who introduces the story – usually the guests as a response to an information-eliciting question – the other participants (i.e. audience, guests, the expert and the host) contribute critically to the direction that the story takes (cf. Duranti 1986). Consequently, tabloid talkshow storytelling is not normatively

monologic but rather an interactionally achieved discourse and sense-making activity performed by the host, the guests, the expert and the studio-audience².

The hallmark of tabloid talkshow storytelling is the occurrence of *positional stories* (Thornborrow 1997:259) that illustrate different beliefs and values. These usually bring out aggressiveness among the participants, which is, in the opinion of the producers, what the

² These basic categories can be extended if we include *external participants* (those not physically present in the studio who take part in the narrative process: for example by phone-ins, or video extracts) or written testimonies (e.g. a letter, or a piece of news from a newspaper) which may be read aloud during the broadcast version of the programme.

audience expects and wants of the genre. Such violent and aggressive episodes – violence can be not only verbal but physical (e.g. Jerry Springer's shows) – are the reason why the genre itself is despised by many, since these 'dramatic' episodes are intentionally fostered rather than avoided by the producers of the show.

As argued above, each story offers explanations about one particular event or events related to the topic of the day. These explanatory accounts are treated not as facts but as *challengeable* by the other participants, who seem to come to the show with the intention of making guests reveal intimacies in the process of storytelling. These intimacies are key pieces of information and are essential to build social theories around the issue under discussion. The way to challenge the events being told or the ideology underlying a particular action or condition is through *group turns* (e.g. audience booing when they condemn some kind of behaviour) or *individual turns*, both *evaluative* in nature. Thornborrow (1997:257) claims that story evaluations (cf. McCarthy 1998) in this context function as contentious statements which may be taken up and responded to by other participants. In tabloid talkshows, challenges to the narrated events can often be interpreted as an implicit evaluation of the storyteller as a *villain*, a *victim* or even as a *hero*, since both the storytellers and the events are being judged according to whether they conform to or attack the social order. Ochs *et al.* (1992) refer to various types of challenges which occur in talkshows, which vary in terms of a) The target of the challenge (i.e. challenges to third-party perspectives; and challenges to co-narrators' perspectives); b) The nature of the challenge (i.e. challenges to 'matters of fact'; challenges to methodology; and challenges to ideology).

Challenges to methodology and ideology

All types of challenges described by Ochs *et al.* (1992) are likely to appear in American tabloid talkshows, although challenges to ideology and methodology seem to be especially relevant in such a context. Challenges to ideology reveal an underlying problem with a framing, or interpretation, of the events or responses. Challenges to methodology emerge from the fact that guests do not apply the right methods when dealing with the problem that has brought them to the talkshow. It is through challenges to both methodology and ideology that the host – or any other participant – prove that others are wrong, that they hold a politically or socially incorrect attitude or opinion, or simply,

that they have a different world ethic. The different points of view are debated during the programme and the participants position themselves with respect to the different versions of the same story and in relation to the issue at hand. The actions and conditions of each storyteller are challenged or agreed upon according to the socially accepted *mental representation* of acts and actions that the different participants consider 'correct' or 'incorrect'; and a conclusion is reached by which the viewholder is considered as a *villain*, a *hero* or a *victim*.

In the programme by Montel Williams, *Men who con women into relationships*, the topic of the day and the preface, as illustrated in example 3 below, seem to indicate that the goal of the programme is to confront those men who lure innocent women into false relationships, thus condemning one type of socially unacceptable behaviour.

Example 3:

[acc] Welcome, welcome, welcome, and thank you very much for joining us today. Now today we're gonna talk to women [acc] [p] who say that they are mad as hell at the men they say did nothing but con them into having sex. You know how these guys are [p] They CON [audience reaction] you, they take you out, they wine you and dine you, they tell you everything you want to hear from I love you, I'll marry you to whatever just to get you in bed, as soon as they do, where do they go? Pshew, they kick the ladies right to the curb. These women came here today to say, I wanna know why you kicked me to the curb. Please welcome Brandie, Danielle and Brandi Ann to the show. Brandie [applause still continues] I wanna start with you.

Montel Williams. 1995. *Men who con women into relationships*

The stories brought to the programme are those of three women (G1, G2, G3; G = guest) who want to confront their ex-boyfriends (G4, G6, G7) in order find out why they took them in. During the programme, they bring other people (e.g. G5 and G8) who have been witnesses to their relationship and who support either of the two versions: i.e. the one given by the girl or the one given by the boy.

In example 4 below, G4 tries to defend himself – after all the attacks he has received from other guests, from the host (H) and from the audience– by challenging the ideology and methodology thanks

to which he has been pictured as the *villain* of the story. He does so by stating that he should not be taken as the only culprit, but the woman should also be condemned; since without her permission, nothing would have taken place. Notwithstanding G4's challenge, the host still argues against him, and challenges his challenge with arguments that reaffirm the identification of G4 as the villain of the story, that is, as the one who did wrong and thus hurt a child; as illustrated in the example:

Example 4:

G4 Everybody says that I'm supposed to be, like, this, quote, "major dog". I mean, how can a man be a dog if a female don't let him? You know what I'm saying?

[TEUTCUT]

H and there is suspect of other ages of some of the other people you've gone out with. I'll say suspect. But from that age forward, to be a dog – whether – you know, just because woman may lay down, animals may lay down with any animal. People have a bit of common sense and they stop – they use something called restraint. They take responsibility for their actions, they don't deny and they give other people respect. So far you've exercised no restraint, you haven't taken responsibility for your actions and definitely have not shown this child any respect for what you did to her. [TEUTCUT] So don't get my blood pressure up.

As observed in example 4 above, it is the host who utters recriminatory remarks. A fact that is in clear contrast with other genres, such as news interviews, where the host has to remain or at least give the image of remaining neutral (Heritage 1985, Heritage and Greatbatch 1991). Tabloid talkshow hosts often identify themselves as law-abiding citizens and defenders of social order. As such, they seem ready to do anything in their hands to become the *hero* who punishes the *villain* and comforts the *victim*; even if that means breaking one of the principles of journalism, which constraints interviewers to maintain a stance of formal neutrality towards interviewee statements and positions when they are producing talk for an overhearing audience (Heritage and Greatbatch 1991:106). Thus, we find that hosts openly accuse guests of wrong doing, threaten them, even condone those who insult them in their try to bring those who have done wrong to justice, as illustrated in example 5:

Example 5:

G1 What about the letters and the cards and all that?
 G4 Man
 A1 A pig
 A2 A pig
 H I won't say it, but if you did.
 AG [in unison] Pig
 W **Thank you.** Now— now, P, now just in case you don't think this relationship took place, your aunt is here, who really gave you permission [to go out go out with her
 B- Mm-hmm]

Tabloid talkshows are conceived by its defenders as a public service and thus, the actions which take place, either in the talkshow or as a result of it, are aimed to do good and to restore social order. Therefore, it is common that in the talkshow they urge not only verbal response on the part of the villain, but also 'good' actions which are carried out thanks to the host's intervention. In *Men who con women into relationships*, for example, the host will make G4 apologise for hurting his girlfriend and make him admit that he did wrong, as illustrated in example 6 below

Example 6:

W OK. Start here. Start here then. If you want to talk about that, then why don't you look at her and tell her that what you did was wrong and apologize to her, because that's what she came here for – was to get something from what you said. 'I'm sorry for wrecking and hurting my heart'

PWell, Brandie, I mean, if I hurt you in any kind of way, I am sorry, you know. But as far as me getting off with all the 12-years-old whatever they said that's a lie, you know.

Montel Williams. *Men who con women into relationships*.

In the same way, thanks to the host's intervention and to the programme itself, G7 will take a paternity test in order to find out if he is the real father of the baby. At the end, previous to the credits, an on-screen written insert tells us that: "After the show, David agreed to go to counselling with Danielle while they awaited the answers to

their paternity test. We'll keep you posted about the results." These *actions* help picture the host as the hero who helps those victims in need, by making the villain react one way or another. One big problem, however, is that some guests have been paid to come on television and are known to lie about themselves and their relationship (cf. Raab 1995), that the good action is not really so and that sometimes it only lasts while they are in front of the camera.

Challenges of perspective

The host knows the details of each of the stories being told in the show, so if someone is presented initially as 'being conned' by someone else, we should understand that they are the victims who acted with honesty and good heart, and thus should be comforted rather than attacked. Nevertheless, this is not always the case, and confrontation applies even to the *victims*, as illustrated by example 7 below.

Example 7:

- [...] I'm going to put it right out to you, that all three of you knew what was going on when you went into this relationship.
- [...] And they also say, you know I'm sorry, if women are stuck on stupid, then men may as well take advantage of them.
- [...] So wait — now, Danielle, come on. Now, you want to confront him about him abusing you, but remember this old saying, it's like once — what is that? Once bitten their fault second time your fault?

M. Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*

With statements of this kind the host raises doubts about the perspectives and explanations of the three women by reporting an oppositional argument which, according to him, has been told by a third non-present party – in this case by the men accused of using them for sex. These challenging remarks make the audience doubt the genuineness of the girls' previous arguments, which depicted them as the victims. Their purpose is to warn the audience about the existence of different versions of the same story.

Once the story/ies have been introduced, comes the moment of confrontation with the audience and other participants. That is, in our example, the three girls on stage tell their version of the story and

afterwards, another version is provided by their boyfriends and/or other supporting guests. The audience usually takes an active part in the confrontation by positioning themselves in relation to each story. They make value judgements about one or more stories and ask questions in order to clarify 'obscure' parts of the story provided by the guests. Direct questions to the host from the audience are rare (cf. Gregori 2000b). In example 8 below, some members of the audience (A) insult G4 and the host supports them. Their actions and threats ratify G4's image as a villain, who needs to be punished one way or another (e.g. verbally):

Example 8:

Man #1 Brother, if you was to step to my house to mess with my daughter, I know what would happen to you.

Woman #4 I think you're dirt. I think you're dirt. And I also think that – I don't understand why you're proud of – why you're doing this.

Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*

The ultimate goal of the audience, the host and the other guests is to make G4 admit what seems to be the central narrative problem: that he had sex with a child and that he conned her. In order to make him do so they challenge his version of the story, as in example 9:

Example 9:

H Would you say again – I'm sorry – when I said 'Did you have an intimate relationship?' You said...

G4 Not really

H 'Not really'. So sex everyday isn't intimate?

Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*

With regard to other types of challenges, Ochs *et al.* (1992:46) claim that in family dinner stories participants have a preference for agreement in conversation, so most challenges are to non-present third parties' approach to past events. This is just the opposite in tabloid talkshow conflict-talk where challenges to co-narrators, rebuttals and ripostes (Hutchby 1996:76) are the unmarked type of interaction, as illustrated in the examples above in which we often

find challenges between the host and the guests and between the host and the audience.

5. Macrostructure vs. microstructure in tabloid talkshow storytelling

Following van Dijk (1977), discourse structures which may contain underlying ideological positions range from microstructures to macrostructures. The macrostructure relates to the overall content of a text – its *thematic structure* – and to the overall form of a text – its *schematic structure*. Thus, the thematic structure of the tabloid talkshow is pre-specified and openly announced at the beginning of the programme and so are the ordered parts that each programme is built out of. At a global level, the tabloid talkshow may be classified as an "open" rather than a "closed" genre, since each programme and story within the programme finishes with some degree of narrative indeterminacy with regard to problem-solving. This is due, in part, to the fact that the topics are complex, that there are too many people in the programme and there is not enough time to solve everything or even to find a possible solution. As a consequence, when they run out of time, the discussion is abruptly interrupted and utterances similar to those reproduced in example 10 below are common:

Example 10:

W [...] we're almost out of time, so I want to thank all our guests for being here.
And Dr. Rhoades, I....

Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*

The discursive function of storytelling in tabloid talkshows is that of an *argument-initiator*: i.e., the stories serve as the point of departure for constructing social theories about the society, morals, the world and human nature. The relation between each story and the topic of the day is openly manifested in the discourse, often in the preface – either to the whole programme or to each story – as illustrated in example 2 above. Thus, for example, the macrostructure of the programme analysed coincides with the title in *Men who con women into relationships* and each story is a subpart of it. Additionally, the

stories told intertwine and overlap with each other. Thus, in *Men who con women into relationships*, there are three girls on stage who tell their story one after the other in the order chosen by the host. The host imposes a storytelling style (i.e. microstructure) through a series of question-answer chains in which the question is almost invariably asked by the host and the answer uttered by the guests (see example 2 above). In *Men who con women into relationships*, the host decides to pay attention first to each of the stories individually, then bring on stage other guests who will support or present a counter position with regard to each story. In the closure, he will relate the three stories with the thematic structure of the programme, as illustrated in example 10:

Example 11:

H Period. With that being said, for those of you that are out there in the same kind of situation, learn today. Learn form them: learn form the guys, too, because there's a hundred of them, a million of them, waiting to prey on any one of you ladies that's here— you, your daughter, your mother, your sister, your brother. Somebody's got to do something about it. Join us on the next Montel Williams show.

Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*

6. Constructing social theories through tabloid talkshow storytelling

Van Dijk (1997:2) claims that discourse is a *practical, social and cultural*, phenomenon and that in engaging in discourse, language users accomplish social acts and participate in social interaction which is embedded in various social and cultural contexts. The talkshow guests are gathered in an institutional setting – a television programme – and have come with the purpose of telling their story; so in exchange, they may receive some kind of social support. As argued above, tabloid talkshows are examples of confrontation talk. Consequently, the two or more versions of the same story result in *positional stories* which hold two opposite arguments with regard to a conflictive social matter: each story is but one possible version of

experience and as such it will be called into question and challenged by the other participants (cf. Ochs *et al.* 1992:46). If both positions cannot be socially accepted, the defenders of those positions will be categorised as *heroes* or *villains*, according to whether they attack or defend social order or politically correct behaviour. Whatever the result, the tabloid talkshow claims to offer help (the concept of help being treated here in its broadest sense, i.e. ranging from advice to some kind of financial compensation, such as paying for the visits to a doctor, etc.) to those in need – or so it is argued by the defenders of the American tabloid talkshow.

Tabloid talkshow storytelling may be therefore characterised as one type of *social practice* which communicates different opinions about certain polemic topics. These opinions are discussed, supported or challenged by the participants present in the interaction. Because of that, the main aim of the talkshow should be to provide a clear picture of what should and what should not be socially accepted, which does not seem to be that case. Instead, the spectator of American tabloid talkshows is faced with a blurred picture on the topic under discussion due, partly, to the way in which the interaction proceeds, which makes it almost impossible to come to a conclusion.

Stories are an important genre of the tabloid talkshow since they provide the participants with different viewpoints for debate. They are co-narrated by the participants in the interaction mainly following an interview format, which permits the **co-construction** of each story (Ochs *et al.* 1992) by the participants and which favours the occurrence of co-narration, since the floor is shared by more than one speaker, as opposed to what seems to be common in conversations where one speaker holds the floor for an extended period of time (Labov and Fanshel 1967, Labov 1972, Polanyi 1982). In this sense, storytellers in tabloid talkshows are collaborative **theory-builders** who can reframe the perspectives offered in the interaction. In other words, although stories are of a personal nature and told by individual citizens, due to the public nature of the talkshow, they can be interpreted in a wider social context: American society, if not society in general. Thus, each statement becomes a potential weapon to build or alter socially accepted theories (e.g. inappropriate behaviour can become appropriate if they conclude so in the discussion). From such considerations derives the view that the tabloid talkshow is an ideal locus for the cultivation of metacognition and theory-construction, as well as perspective-taking and analytic or

critical thinking (Ochs *et al.* 1992:38). Since each story often leads not only to "the engendering of theories (theory construction) but also to the establishment of those theories as valid generalisations (theory critique) (Ochs *et al.* 1992:39). In the case of tabloid talkshow storytelling, theory construction and critique usually applies to social issues rather than scientific facts; thus, turning the talkshow into a vehicle by which citizens question social values.

Notwithstanding the potential that a genre such as the tabloid talkshows could offer for the cultivation of metacognition, theory construction and critical thinking, the American tabloid talkshow does not seem to take advantage of it. Talkshows are more a means of entertainment than a forum for the discussion of public affairs and critical thinking. In the public eye and in such a multicultural society as that of the US, where a diversity of races, religions and morals co-exist, the function of tabloid talkshows, their effects and consequences are almost unpredictable. The role of the tabloid talkshow according to its defenders is to encourage this plurality. As Munson (1993:4) affirms, "if any medium encourages the blurring of borders and the swapping of roles, it is the talkshow." Nonetheless, tabloid talkshows are despised by a great majority who point to the lack of *quality* and *manners*. They argue – and I fully agree – that the nature of the topics dealt with (sexual orientation; mental health; addictions; sexual infidelity; criminal acts; physical appearance; alienation; abuse, etc.), together with a debasement of the participants themselves, its vulgarity and its lack of respect towards the individuals trivialises human tragedy. Furthermore, they claim that a lot of the talkshow's good intentions go down the drain because of production constraints and money matters.

7. Conclusions

This article has examined the activity of storytelling in one particular television genre, the American tabloid talkshow. I have argued that each story is an example of a *positional co-narration* (e.g. constructed between the host and the guest), since each story is only one possible version whose counterpart is likely to be told by another participant. Tabloid talkshow storytelling is, nevertheless, different from the more *traditional* concept of storytelling, as argued by conversation analysts, in that the story is often elicited step by step through question-answer

sequences. Furthermore, contrary to expectations that apply in other settings – e.g. family dinner storytellings – the participants are not characterised by keeping in with the preference for agreement in conversation (cf. Ochs *et al.* 1992) but by challenging co-narrators.

During the process of storytelling, in which other participants may also take part, the protagonists stand the chance of being characterised as *victims*, *villains* or *heroes*. That is, for each story there is usually a wrongdoer, his/her victim, and a hero. The villain is the one who has inflicted 'pain' on the other protagonist/s of the story, the victim/s. The hero is usually the host (or the programme or the institution itself, of which the host is the representative) who is supposed to help punish the villain and force him/her to admit on national television that s/he did wrong. Such a characterisation is possible thanks to a systematic challenge of the different versions of each story – usually through confrontation – which permits knowing the 'truth' about the events being told.

Additionally, tabloid talkshows are an example of public discourse, and as such, the stories are not interpreted as an independent, individual presentation of facts, but are linked to the construction of social theories with regard to the issue at hand. In such a context, storytelling stands a good chance of becoming an experience in dialectic social theory-building, wherein interlocutors and, in turn the overhearing audience, construct, critique and reconstruct theories of acceptable forms of behaviour in society. Ultimately, tabloid talkshow storytelling offers the external audience the possibility of re-constructing a new story. In other words, when faced with different perspectives of the same story, their interpretation may yield to a new mental representation of what really happened. This interpretation will be influenced, no doubt, by the thematic structure of the talkshow – the topic under discussion – since that is the main linkage between the stories presented in the same programme. By bringing different stories related to the same topic and by offering different viewpoints of the main events in those stories the participants and the external audience are given the opportunity to cultivate the skills of perspective-taking, metacognition, analytic and critical thinking and theory construction. Specially that of metacognition, since each individual story is interpreted both as a version or a theory and as factual account of what happened. Whether the way in which the exercise of such skills in American tabloid talkshows is adequate or whether, on the contrary, it helps to debase humankind, is a matter which needs further discussion.

Appendix

=	when lack of space prevents continuous speech from A from being presented on a single line of text, then '=' at the end of the box and '=' at the beginning of the other shows that it is the same turn
(+)	Noticeable micropause (< 0.2. second)
(0.0)	Timed pauses longer than 0.2 seconds, applause, reactions from audience
wORd	very emphatic stress.
<i>italics</i>	used to indicate and explain non-verbal features, reactions, extralinguistic information in the transcript.
bold type	is used in the examples to highlight the feature being discussed
::	extended sound; lengthened syllables
(XXX)	unintelligible segment.
[overlap. A bracket connecting the talk of different speakers shows that overlapping talk begins at that point.
]	overlap finishes at this point.
wor(h)d	embedded laughter.
<i>hh</i>	indicates an audible out-breath and in-breath.
(())	used to specify "some phenomenon that the transcriber does not want to wrestle with" □.
—	Cut-off speech. Voluntarily: hanging discourse, speaker interrupts his/her own discourse, in order to produce a repair, paraphrase and leaves it grammatically incomplete. Or involuntarily when interrupted, placed at the end of an incomplete utterance.
&	Single interruption: exchange of turns; simultaneous speech; 1st speaker turn incomplete.
*	butting-in interruption (no exchange of turns).
Σ	silent interruption (exchange of turns; no simultaneous speech; 1st speaker turn incomplete).
Π	intonation contour shows that speaker wants to yield the turn. Only used in cases where it may appear confusing because the speaker's utterance is incomplete.
.	sentence final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation ("more to come").
<i>p</i>	spoken slowly
<i>acc...acc</i>	spoken quickly, and/or without the usual pauses between words.
Δ	Highly confrontational moments characterised by a total disruption of the turn-taking. It is perceived by the speaker as chaotic, verbal fighting, confrontational, aggressive etc. The transcription of these moments is sometimes merely representative since most of the discourse cannot be understood because of complex overlaps, shouting, censoring on the part of the programme itself, etc. contributions with no punctuation at the end, represent those contributions by H, which- regardless of intonation patterns (rise or fall)- are followed by an answer on the part of G, confirming or denying H's utterance.

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