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⊟ Summary and Keywords

Feature journalism has developed from being a marginal and subordinate supplement to (hard) news in newspapers to becoming a significant part of journalism on all platforms. It emerged as a key force driving the popularization and tabloidization of the press.

Feature journalism can be defined as a family of genres that share a common exigence, understood as a publicly recognized need to be entertained and connected with other people on a mainly emotional level by accounts of personal experiences that are related to contemporary events of perceived public interest. This exigence is articulated through three characteristics that have dominated feature journalism from the very beginning: It is *intimate*, in the sense that it portrays people and milieus in close detail and that it allows the journalist to be subjective and therefore intimate with his or her audience; it is *literary* in the sense that it is closely connected with the art of writing, narrativity, storytelling, and worlds of fiction; and it is *adventurous*, in the sense that it takes the audiences on journeys to meet people and places that are interesting.

Traditional and well-established genres of feature journalism include the human-interest story, feature reportage, and the profile, which all promote subjectivity and emotions as key ingredients in feature journalism in contrast to the norm of objectivity found in professional news journalism. Feature journalism therefore establishes a conflict of norms that has existed throughout the history of journalism.

Feature journalism has become an increasingly popular part of digital news outlets. Online newspapers have experimented with digital formats for feature journalism since the late 1990s, first with technology-driven multimedia feature journalism and later with story-driven long-form feature journalism. Since 2010, podcasts and online templates for long-form journalism have increased the popularity of digital feature journalism.

Keywords: human-interest story, soft journalism, reportage, profile, popular journalism, feature writing, intimacy, narrative journalism, new journalism, journalism studies

The Many Faces of Feature Journalism

Feature Journalism

Feature journalism is a slippery concept. It is commonly associated with glossy magazines and newspapers' weekend sections, and it may describe anything from celebrity gossip to heavily researched background articles, personal columns, reviews, and stories of travel adventures. It also describes anything about journalism that is not (hard) news. Furthermore, feature journalism comes in many forms and shapes, has many names, and exists on all platforms, increasingly also online. Human-interest stories, soft news, lifestyle journalism, intimate journalism, immersive journalism, reportage, magazine journalism, long-form journalism, new journalism, narrative journalism, and literary journalism are just some of the labels often associated with feature journalism.

One of the first occurrences of the concept is found in a 1912 American textbook on journalism, in which a feature story is defined as "one in which the news element is made subordinate" (Harrington, 1912, p. 294). For some, this definition still holds true. However, feature journalism has undoubtedly developed in a news-oriented direction, and news in general has become increasingly featurized (Niblock, 2008; Steensen, 2011C). As competition from broadcast media in the 20th century and then online media and social media in the 21st century decreased the news value of newspapers, that medium underwent a transformation in which the hard news rationale increasingly was replaced by a feature journalism rationale, implying a softer, more human-centric, and subjective kind of journalism (Brett & Holmes, 2008; Gans, 2004). In a longitudinal study of British newspapers, Niblock (2008) found that the share of feature content had been stretched from 10% in the 1750s to as much as 70% in some papers at the beginning of the 21st century.

An Intimate, Literary, and Adventurous Family of Genres

Stephenson (1998) defines a feature as "an item or article in a newspaper or magazine that brings to light a distinctive part or aspect of an issue, event or person" (p. 64). This is a broad definition that points to the "feature" of feature journalism, but it does not take into account that feature journalism is not only a trait of the printed press, and it does not account for what social function feature journalism fulfills. Feature journalism is best defined as a family of genres that, according to Steensen (2011C), has three characteristics in common: intimacy, literality, and adventure. These three characteristics, or dimensions, of feature journalism have been at the core of feature journalism throughout its history. They are normative in that they provide norms for what is recognized as a *good* feature story.

Feature journalism, as with other kinds of journalism normally not associated with hard news, has been underresearched (Hanusch, 2010). Textbooks typically define feature reportage, the profile, the human-interest story, and the personal column as traditional and well-established genres of feature journalism. These genres are *intimate* in the sense that they seek to convey personal traits of people and milieus and allow the journalist to be more personal and subjective. They are *literary* in the sense that they contain colorful descriptions and characterizations and often follow a storytelling structure and borrow composition techniques from the world of fiction. Features also seek to provide the audience with *adventures*, as they often include entertaining reporting from places, people, and milieus of which the audience may have limited knowledge.

Feature Journalism in a Global Context

The genres of feature journalism are not universal. They are related to differing practices and understandings throughout the worlds and cultures of journalism. This is also the case with the very concept "feature journalism," which stems from American journalism and is used to varying degrees in Europe and other parts of the world.

Feature journalism is a commonly used concept in Great Britain and Northern European countries, with some variations. In most of these countries feature journalism is usually associated with the printed press, but in German-speaking cultures, feature journalism refers mostly to long-form radio journalism (Zindel & Rein, 2007). In Southern and Eastern Europe, feature journalism is not a familiar concept. It is commonly used in African journalism, especially in countries with historic ties to Britain, like South Africa and Kenya (Ogongo-Ongong'a & White, 2008), but also to some degree in countries with no such ties, like Ethiopia (Skjerdal, 2009). This also applies to Asian countries with similar connections to Britain, like India.

Even though the concepts and labels might differ in both significance and meaning throughout various cultures, journalism in most places—and at all times—has included practices of intimate, literary, and adventure communication.

Feature Journalism as a Family of Genres

The definition of feature journalism as a family of genres rests on the premise that genres are best understood as social phenomena that aid in structuring communication in specific social contexts (Jauss, 2000). Genres are therefore not primarily static structures that operate on a high level of cultural context where texts are embedded. They are understood as dynamic, but yet common features of texts in the lower level of situations where texts operate. This implies that genres change over time and that they are connected to social action (Miller, 1984). It also implies that genres are connected to both rhetorical forms and social functions, and that a specific rhetorical form provides a communicative vehicle to address a specific, but recurring, social need. Miller (1984) labeled this the exigence of genres. Furthermore, the exigence of genres makes genres as much about reception as about production of text. Genres are connected to what Jauss (2000) has labeled "horizons of expectations" (p. 143), in which both a producer's intention and the audiences' understanding are preconstituted. Producers and receivers of text enable genres to make communication work in recurring social situations.

Given such an understanding of what genres are, it makes sense to view feature journalism as a family of genres. The various genres of feature journalism are connected through a shared exigence that is understood as a recurring social need to which feature journalism responds. Steensen (2011C) has defined this social need as "a publicly recognized need to be entertained and connected with other people on a mainly emotional level by accounts of personal experiences that are related to contemporary events of perceived public interest" (p. 51). This social need has existed for a long time with varying significance throughout history.

The key elements of this definition of the exigence of feature journalism point to the three characteristics of feature journalism; emotional connection with people and personal experience make feature journalism *intimate*. Feature journalism uses *literary techniques* to entertain and conveys personal experiences related to contemporary events for a sense of *adventure*. Of course, these events need to be connected with perceptions of public interest (or what interests the public) or it would be difficult to argue it is journalism. It must also be noted that the various elements of this definition have changed meaning over time and mean different things in different cultures. Their importance is weighed differently across both cultures and time.

Furthermore, the exigence of feature journalism can be addressed through various rhetorical forms. Feature reportage, as one significant genre of feature journalism, is recognized through a rhetorical form that implies a narrative structure, first-person accounts of events, and colorful description (Carey, 1987A; Harbers, 2014). Genres like the novel, the motion picture film and others may fulfil similar social needs as feature journalism, but are different because they apply a fiction-based rhetorical form. Feature journalism is not fiction. A feature journalist adheres to the same norms of truthfulness and accuracy as a news journalist, even though there is an element of "artistic freedom" in feature journalism that sometimes can contradict such norms. See also the section on "FEATURE JOURNALISM AND THE LITERARY."

The Human-Interest Story

The human-interest story is the most common variety of feature journalism, according to Williamson (1977, p. 112). It deals with ordinary people who have experienced some sort of emotional drama the audience can relate to and identify with, and it is presented in a narrative form. The human-interest story is a common genre in American journalism, but even though the type of journalism it represents is common also in Europe and other parts of the world, the concept is not commonly used outside the Anglo-Saxon world. For instance, in Germany, human-interest stories have never become an important part of the press (Esser, 1999).

A seminal analysis of human-interest journalism in the United States, published in 1940, argues that the human-interest story emerged as a vital ingredient related to the commercialization of the press, starting with the penny press in the 1830s (Hughes, 1981). The discovery and exploitation of human interest made the press "rich and powerful" because it made newspapers relevant to the general public and not only elites (Hughes, 1981, p. 2). The term "human-interest" was first used in the *New York Sun* (established in 1833) to describe "the chatty little reports of tragic or comic incidents in the lives of people" (Hughes, 1981, p. 15). It grew in dominance as the press was further popularized with the yellow press of the late 1800s and the tabloid press established in Britain at the beginning of the 20th century and in the United States shortly after.

Hughes argued that the human-interest story originated from the folklore and ballads of previous times and that it fulfilled the same social function as these old genres. The human-interest story was entertaining, gossipy, and often based on core emotions like passion, betrayal, loyalty, and ambition. And most important, the human-interest story, like folklore, established moral order and guidelines for social behavior, which was especially important in times of social mobility and immigration. According to Hughes (1981), "moral speculations are not evoked by news of court procedure; they take form on the reading of intimate story that shows what impact of law and convention means as a private experience" (p. 278). She concluded that the increased

emphasis on human interest had made the newspaper "a common carrier of the mores; not of the traditional code, but of the living morality that is woven day by day of the private judgments which the news makes public" (pp. 283–284).

Being linked to the rise of the popular, tabloid press, the human-interest story has often been portrayed as a genre that ruined "proper" journalism because of its emphasis on ordinary people and personal affairs instead of politics and other affairs of perceived public interest. In the words of Curran, Douglas, and Whannel (1980):

> This process of personalization—with all the distortion and trivialization that it implies— has become a recognized and approved strategy for building circulation. The result is that coverage of public affairs has increasingly been reduced to the level of human-interest stories. (p. 303)

Such cultural critique of the human-interest story stands in stark contrast to how the genre has been portrayed in handbooks, in which the interest of the public takes precedence over elitist notions of what is in the public interest. Garrison (2004), for instance, legitimizes the human-interest story by stating that "people simply want to read about other people" (p. 138). In addition, Hughes (1981) recognized the educational function of the human-interest story, as it "taught people to read newspapers and made the press popular" (p. 12).

Feature Reportage

Reportage is often considered the oldest genre of journalism. It can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and the writings of Thucydides on the Athens plague in the year 430 BC (Carey, 1987B). The word "reportage" originates from the Latin word *reportare*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "carry back" (portare = carry, re = back). This etymological origin is important because it points to common definitions of reportage that emphasize the eyewitness account as a key ingredient (Bech-Karlsen, 2002; Carey, 1987A; Haller, 1987; Harbers, 2014). A reportage journalist is someone who uses observation as a key method and conveys these observations in descriptive, often narrative, accounts. A reportage journalist is a reporter in the true sense of the word.

Reportage is a common genre worldwide; much more so than the concept of feature journalism. In addition to its prevalence in the Anglo-Saxon world, reportage is used in Spanish, German, French, and Slavic-speaking journalistic cultures. However, the genre has developed differently in different cultures. In Eastern European and Mediterranean countries reportage journalism is often associated with an argumentative style of writing, which is not the case in Western or Northern Europe or in the United States (Hartsock, 2009). Its long prejournalistic history connects reportage with the art of writing more so than with journalism, and famous authors like Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, Hamsun, Strindberg, and Hemmingway either used techniques from reportage writing in their fiction or doubled as reportage writers (Bech-Karlsen, 2002; Carey, 1987A). Great reportage journalists are therefore often celebrated first and foremost as great writers, as was the case when Belarusian reportage journalist Svetlana Alexievitch became the first journalist to receive the Nobel prize for literature in 2015.

The reportage genre is not necessarily feature journalism. Roksvold (1997) distinguishes between news reportage, feature reportage, and background reportage. The primary purpose of news reportage is to inform, while background reportage explains and feature reportage entertains, argues Roksvold. A news reportage might be published as an ordinary news story in an inverted-pyramid structure, while feature reportage is more in line with the legacy of reportage writing, which emphasizes narrative structure and literary techniques.

The Profile

The profile is closely linked to the human-interest story. Pulitzer, the famous publisher of the yellow press newspaper *New York World* at one point wrote to his managing editor:

> Please impress on the men who write our interviews with prominent men the importance of giving a striking vivid pen-sketch of the subject; also a vivid picture of his domestic environment, his wife, his children, his animal pets, etc. . . . Those are the things that will bring him more clearly home to the average reader than would his imposing thoughts, purposes or statements.
>
> (cited in Hughes, 1981, p. 18)

The profile attempts to capture the person behind the public persona and to give the audience a glimpse of the subject's backstage life, to use Goffman's (1971) vocabulary. The profile is therefore closely connected to celebrity culture, as celebrities typically are the objects of

profiles. In an analysis of celebrity journalism in the United States, Ponce de Leon (2002) finds that celebrity profiles emerged as a specific form of feature journalism in the United States during the 1890s and reached its maturity in the 1930s. These celebrity profiles were marked by a master plot. The recurring motif was the struggle of celebrities to achieve "true success," meaning not material success, but personal fulfillment. Celebrity profiles of the time therefore resembled advice and inspirational literature, according to Ponce de Leon (2002, p. 108).

The profile emerged in Europe around the same time, but not necessarily as part of an emerging celebrity culture. An interesting example is the development of the genre in Norway, where the painter Christian Krohg conducted interviews with people he portrayed in paintings and drawings (both ordinary people and celebrities) and published those interviews as written "portraits" in the newspaper *Verdens Gang* in the 1890s. Consequently, the genre was labeled "portrait interviews" or "personal portraits" in Scandinavian journalism (Lamark, 2012; Siivonen, 2007).

Profiles normally have an element of tribute to them and have therefore been labeled the "genre of politeness" (Siivonen, 2007, p. 15), thereby contrasting the common critical mission of journalism. However, the genre has also been known for portraying people in invasive, sarcastic, caricaturelike and even insulting ways, both historically, as in the days of the early tabloid press (Ponce de Leon, 2002), and later, in, for example, Scandinavian feature journalism (Lamark, 2012).

The main method and rhetorical form behind a profile is the interview, but the interview does not necessarily need to be the only method utilized by a profile journalist. Observations of the profile subject's behavior and surroundings are common in profiles, as are expositions based on research conducted prior to the profile interview. Profiles can also be published as Q&As.

Feature Journalism and the Literary

The first important characteristic of feature journalism is its connection to the literary. The genres discussed in the section FEATURE JOURNALISM AS A FAMILY OF GENRES—the human-interest story, feature reportage, and the profile—are all connected with literary writing. Historically, feature journalism has close ties to creative writers and journalists with literary ambitions. In an analysis of historic and contemporary textbooks on feature journalism, Steensen (2011C) found that the origin of feature journalism as a concept is connected to writers' clubs in the United States in the early years of the 20th century. The members of such writers' clubs did not necessarily define themselves as journalists. They were writers. And the practice of feature *writing* was distinctly different from the practice of producing news.

One such writers' club was the Blue Pencil Club, of which Harry Franklin Harrington was a member. His 1925 book, *Chats on Feature Writing*, was dedicated to feature writing based on conversations with the other members of the club. Harrington underlines the need for feature writers to possess literary skills: "Because it releases the imagination and permits a certain freedom of execution, the feature story often lends itself to the tricks and insincerities of the literary fakir" (1925, p. 139).

This quote clearly connects feature writing to creative writing and the world of fiction, and disconnects it from contemporary (news) US journalism, which in the 1920s had become professionalized and thereby restricted to objective reporting of facts (Schudson, 2001). Contemporary norms of journalism in the United States in the 1920s would therefore make it unheard of for a news journalist to utilize his own imagination and use "tricks and insincerities of the literary fakir" in his reporting.

Conflict of Norms

The connection between feature writing/journalism and genres of fiction runs through the history of feature journalism. Reddick (1949) points out that the feature article initially took its place "alongside the short story and the essay" (p. 3). Reddick therefore finds it necessary to first and foremost remind his readers that the feature article "concerns truth and not fiction" (1949, p. 4). William E. Blundell (1988), a former feature editor for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote: "We can learn a great deal from fiction, and this book makes at least a modest start at connecting some techniques of fiction to the work we do" (p. xi). Similar connections between fiction writing and feature journalism are found in more recent books as well. Garrison (2004), for instance, argues that "some of the best feature writers incorporate the styles and techniques of fiction writers into their work," before he claims that "many writers will say that feature articles fall somewhere between news writing and short story writing" (2004, pp. 7–8).

This original separation of feature *writing* from journalism is important, because it establishes a conflict of norms. The norm of objectivity pushes the journalist to be a neutral, detached, rational reporter of facts, while feature journalism promotes subjectivity, engagement, emotion, and creativity as valid norms in journalism. These different norms have coexisted in most journalistic cultures during the 20th and the 21st centuries and it seems as if they are becoming increasingly intertwined. Wahl-Jorgensen (2012, 2013) has shown that Pulitzer prize–winning news journalism, which appears to be objective, contains subjectivity, emotions, and storytelling techniques. Peters (2011) has revealed how broadcast journalists play upon emotions and subjectivity in their seemingly neutral and detached reporting. Harbers (2014) has shown how the development of the reportage as a genre in Britain, France, and the Netherlands constitutes a long struggle between norms of objectivity and subjectivity. Steensen (2011C, 2017) has shown that news journalism has become increasingly featurized while subjectivity continues to be an important ideal in journalism, partly due to developments within the genres of feature journalism.

Linguistic and Literary Devices in Feature Journalism

How, then, does this literary connection manifest itself in feature journalism? First and foremost, it manifests itself in what is commonly labeled colorful writing, which implies using adjectives and adverbs to characterize things, people, situations, and actions; using metaphors, analogies, and other linguistic devices; and adding detail and description to "paint a picture" (Pape & Featherstone, 2006, p. 51). Second, it implies the use of storytelling composition techniques, which distinguishes feature journalism from the inverted-pyramid composition model used in conventional news journalism. Scene construction, plot, suspense, point-of-view, and other storytelling techniques are common in feature journalism, thereby making narration the dominant discourse mode in contrast to the exposition of conventional news journalism. The proverb "show, don't tell" is as common in textbooks on feature journalism as it is in textbooks on playwriting, movie making, and creating other kinds of fiction and nonfiction works. It implies that a story is experienced through actions, dialogues, and observations rather than through the author's interpretations.

Even though this literary dimension of feature journalism originates from the printed press, it is equally important in broadcast and online feature journalism. A radio or TV feature story utilizes storytelling techniques, and feature stories published online experiment with new forms of storytelling.

Feature Journalism and Intimacy

The second important dimension of feature journalism is its level of intimacy. Feature journalists seek intimate relations with sources and try to establish intimate connections with the audience.

Harrington (1925) provides the following definition of feature writing in which intimacy is key:

> the feature story deals with people handled intimately. Items not sufficiently important to appear in news may often be salvaged for good feature articles. The newspaper makes room for such non-news material because it strikes a human note and escapes the limitations of time and space. (pp. 138–139)

Harrington viewed intimacy as a criterion for why feature journalism was worth its share of ink and space in a newspaper. This norm of intimacy is most explicitly articulated in the human-interest story, which takes its name from this very norm (see FEATURE JOURNALISM AS A FAMILY OF GENRES), but it exists in other genres of feature journalism as well. The norm of intimacy implies that personal, even private, experiences and emotions are seen as valuable parts of a feature story. Coward (2013) argues that intimacy has been such an important ingredient in journalism throughout its history that it establishes its own brand of journalism; that is, "confessional journalism."

Intimacy and Subjectivity

Feature Journalism

The norm of intimacy implies that a feature writer reveals emotions rather than (or in addition to) facts, he portrays ordinary people rather than officials, and he is not afraid to use his own personal experiences in his stories. Intimacy in feature journalism therefore promotes subjectivity as an underlying ideal in the sense that the norm of intimacy pushes feature journalism to establish intersubjective connections between sources and the audience, and between the journalist and the audience. Steensen (2017) labels these two types of intersubjective relations source-subjectivity and byline-subjectivity. Source-subjectivity refers to the intimate and emotional bond that feature journalism seeks to establish between ordinary people and the audience. Byline-subjectivity refers to the bond established between the feature journalist and the audience.

These two kinds of intersubjective relations may occur simultaneously in a feature story, but a feature journalist may choose to utilize only one of them, for instance by placing himself as a detached, "invisible" reporter in order to make the intersubjective bond between the sources and the audience more visible and thereby more intimate and stronger.

Source-subjectivity may be the most common way of establishing intimacy in feature journalism, especially in the human-interest story and the profile, but byline-subjectivity is also common, even though it seemingly contradicts the well-established norm of the detached and neutral reporter found in news journalism. Steensen (2011C) finds many examples of how byline-subjectivity is promoted as a norm. Reddick (1949), argues that "many feature articles deal with the personal experience and observations of the writer" (p. 4). Alexander (1982) argues that the feature writer gets to "the heart of the reader" and "puts something of himself into the story" (p. 2). And according to Garrison (2004) "feature stories are . . . often less objective than conventional news writing, offering a particular point of view or the author's personal impression, perceptions and opinions" (p. 7).

Intimacy, the Interview, and Dialogue

There is one development in the history of journalism that more than anything else made intimacy a virtue: the introduction of the interview as both a journalistic method and a rhetorical form in journalistic texts. The interview did not become part of everyday journalistic practice until the latter parts of the 19th century in the United States and 20 years later or so in Europe, according to Schudson (2001, p. 157). Displaying interviews in journalistic texts made the distance between sources and the audience almost disappear, as it created an illusion of the sources speaking directly to the reader. Furthermore, displaying interviews between the sources and the journalist made public what appeared to be private conversations between two people, almost as if journalism thereby appealed to the readers' voyeurism.

According to Hughes (1981), the first newspaper interview published in the United States was by James Gordon Bennett, the founder of *The New York Herald*, in 1836. Bennett was reporting on a murder of a prostitute, and his reporting included the following scene:

> I knocked at the door. A Police Officer opened it, stealthily. I told him who I was. "Mr B., you can enter," said he with great politeness. The crowds rushed from behind seeking also an entrance.

> "No more comes in," said the Police Officer.

"Why do you let that man in?" asked one of the crowd.

"He is an editor—he is on public duty." (p. 11)

There are several aspects of this quote that make it stand out as a particular display of intimacy as a virtue. First, Bennett uses a first-person narrator and thereby positions himself as a point of identification for the reader. The effect is that the text establishes an "I-thou" relationship between himself and the audience. Hughes argues that by writing in such a style, Bennett "abandoned the role of a responsible editor for that of a chattering gossip. He was just the person his readers would have loved to have a long talk with" (1981, p. 11). This is a position also found in modern textbooks on feature journalism. For example, Pape and Featherstone (2006) argue that the most common voice of the feature journalist is the one of the "knowledgeable friend" (p. 54).

Second, by displaying direct quotes not only from the police officer he encountered but also from a dialogue between the police officer and "one in the crowd," Bennett put the reader in the midst of the scene, as if the reader was present and overhearing what was being said. This conversational style of writing narrows the distance between the reader and the events displayed, as is often done in fiction. Such a display of not only interviews, but also of conversations between people, makes the journalism highly dialogical. Soffer (2009) argues that dialogue and objectivity are competing ideals in journalism. Objectivity as an ideal in journalism objectifies social phenomenon and keeps the reader at a distance, from which the only perspective allowed is the one of the outsider. Dialogue as an ideal does the opposite, according to Soffer. By displaying dialogue, the journalistic communication process becomes much more privatized, as it promotes the insider perspective.

The intimacy of the insider perspective, displayed through dialogue, was one of the four key elements in how Wolfe (1975) described the "New Journalism." New Journalism emerged in the 1960s partly as a protest movement to the detached outsider perspective that dominated news journalism because of the hegemonic status the ideal of objectivity had gained in American and partly also European journalism. As an alternative, New Journalism promoted a literary, intimate, and adventure kind of journalism, very much in line with how feature writing had been portrayed. Perhaps one can say that New Journalism narrowed the gap between feature *writing* and journalism and thereby made feature writing a definite, and important, part of journalism.

Feature Journalism and Adventure

Perhaps the most striking feature of the New Journalism was the way in which it made journalism adventurous. Think of the so-called gonzo journalism of Hunter S. Thompson, in which he embarked on crazy travels and wrote about all the hilarious adventures he encountered (or created). Gonzo journalism, was Thompson's invention and was only one part of the New Journalism. It implied a very energetic first-person narrative with no claims of objectivity and a highly participatory journalist who as much created the events as reported them. Gonzo journalism has been called "wild reportage" (Hirst, 2004, p. 12), and the crazier the adventures were, the better.

Feature Journalism

Gonzo journalism might be the most adventurous type of journalism, but adventures have always been key to reportage as genre, and thereby to feature reportage in particular and feature journalism in general. In the previously mentioned analysis of textbooks on feature journalism, Steensen (2011C) found many examples of how adventure has been at the heart of descriptions and definitions of feature journalism. Harrington (1925) encourages a friend to "write up your adventures" in order to become a feature writer (p. 7). When asked to read and comment on a selection of articles written by a young writer who wondered if his writings were suited to get published, Harrington lamented that the articles were all descriptions of places. They lacked something crucial if they were to be good feature stories: "Not one human citation of zestful adventure had found its way into that dreary ledger of impression and observations; it was soggy as a loaf of bread without yeast" (Harrington, 1925, p. 202).

Adventure and Reportage

What Harrington missed in the young writer's stories was probably *action*. For a story to be adventurous and thereby an enjoyable piece of feature journalism, something needs to happen. The feature story needs to include "fresh manifestations of human activity" and "swiftly-moving narration" (Harrington, 1925, p. 201). We find similar calls in modern day textbooks as well. Garrison (2004), quoting Schoenfeld and Diegmueller (1982), argues that feature stories must "come alive" by adding activity (p. 37). Blundell (1988) stresses that the first and greatest command of feature writing is: "For Pete's sake, make it interesting. Tell me a story" (p. xii).

Adventure is therefore closely tied to the literary dimension and the norms of storytelling and narrativity. The feature journalist assumes that the audience would like to be entertained through the reporting of observable actions. This emphasis on reporting and observation connects feature writing to reportage. The skilled reportage journalist seeks out interesting places, people, and environments to observe and gather the facts before writing a story that takes the reader on a journey to the same place, to meet the people there and find out what they are doing. Good reportage journalism is built upon adventures, which is why it is such an important genre of feature journalism.

Adventure and Travel Journalism

Travel journalism has become increasingly important as the tourism industry has boomed and leisure has become a significant social practice (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001). In recent years, travel journalism has gained some scholarly attention (see for instance the edited volume Hanusch & Fursich, 2014B). Some studies suggest that travel journalism is mostly about the journalist's own experience and adventures, and not about the locals of the destination (Cocking, 2009; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2002; Santos, 2006). This promotes an orientalist discourse, in which intercultural knowledge and understanding might be sacrificed in order to promote entertainment and cultural self-affirmation.

A different, less critical view of travel journalism is that it might bring reportage, and the benefits of being present in the field associated with this genre, back to prominence in journalism. In the words of the foreign correspondent Robert D. Kaplan (2006),

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> Journalism desperately needs a return to *terrain*, to the kind of first-hand, solitary discovery of local knowledge best associated with old-fashioned travel writing. Travel writing is more important than ever as a means to reveal the vivid reality of places that gets lost in the elevator music of 24-hour media reports. (p. 49)

Feature Journalism in a Digital Age

The immediacy of web journalism combined with the massive drop in revenue from advertisements and subscriptions for the traditional news media institutions in liberal democracies since the turn of the millennium has made journalism less about reporting and more about desk-produced, copycat, click-bait journalism (Boczkowski, 2010). This development, often critically referred to as the "churnalism" of online news (Johnston & Forde, 2017; Van Hout & Van Leuven, 2016), implies that reporting from the field has become the exception rather than the rule in contemporary journalism (Van Leuven, Deprez, & Raeymaeckers, 2014).

Consequently, feature journalism—especially the adventurous, reportage-driven kind of feature journalism—was for a long period of time not prioritized by online newspapers. Or feature journalism was adapted to an online environment in a way that would transform or minimize its adventurous, literary, and intimate dimensions. An example of the latter is found in a study of how feature journalism was transformed to an online environment in a Norwegian newspaper (Steensen, 2009, 2011A). During this transformation, first-hand observation and thereby reportage as genre was replaced by an online discourse marked by long, desk-produced background stories aimed at provoking debate. Despite this development, online newspapers have shown interest in experimenting with new, web-based feature formats from the very beginning.

Interactive Multimedia Feature Packages

Concepts such as "multimedia packages" and "interactive features" emerged in the second half of the 1990s as a means to describe web-based feature journalism often made with Flash technology (Hernandez & Rue, 2015; McAdams, 2005). An example is the project *Virtual Voyager* created at the *Houston Chronicle* as early as in 1995. This project aimed at producing web-only, multimedia feature stories, which, in the words of project director Glenn Golightly, would take "a viewer as close to being on scene as possible without actually being there" (cited in Boczkowski, 2004, p. 105). An example is a "voyage" in which two journalists went on a month-long trip along Route 66 with cameras installed in the backseat of the car. The audience could thereby follow the action as it happened.

For three years, the *Virtual Voyager* project produced interactive multimedia feature stories. But it was costly, demanding lots of both human and technological recourses. Even though it was quite popular with the audience, the project contributed only 2% of the *Houston Chronicle* website's traffic, while spending about 5% of its budget (Boczkowski, 2004, p. 111). In 1998 it was shut down, not only for economic reasons, but also because of the way web journalism in general had developed. In a statement on why the project ended, Jim Townsend (1999), content

director at the *Houston Chronical* at the time, concluded that "customer expectations have changed. Clearly, utility drives Web traffic. People expect information at their fingertips 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we are regrouping to better provide."

Even though similar, albeit less ambitious, projects were launched by other online newspapers in the years to come (see Hernandez & Rue, 2015, for examples), web journalism continued to develop in a direction in which immediacy, speed, and 24/7 news discourse dominated. Projects like the *Virtual Voyager* had demonstrated the potential of utilizing multimedia and interactive technology to produce online feature journalism, but such technology was rarely utilized in online journalism during the first decade of the new millennium (Steensen, 2011B). There were, however, some exceptions. Steensen (2010) identified three emerging digital genres of feature journalism:

1. *Soundslides reportage*, based on the software Soundslides (launched in 2005), which provided an easy way of presenting images combined with audio in an online environment. The genre developed into what was later to be called audio slideshows (Lillie, 2011), mostly produced by using more advanced software like Final Cut, and refined by multimedia production companies like Mediastorm.
2. *Interactive Flash reportage*, made by combining multimedia elements in an interactive packaged assembled by using the software Adobe Flash, which was originally an animation software (McAdams, 2005). This genre culminated with the birth and soon after death of whole magazines produced with Flash, like New York-based *FlypMedia* and the magazines produced by the European company *Magwerk*.
3. *Database reportage*, which utilizes the database structure of the web to create interfaces to several stories combined in a hypertext structure. An example is a story published on *startribune.com* in 2007 preceding the collapse of the 35W bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This story comprises a database of stories revealing the personal experiences of those present on the bridge at the time of the collapse. These stories are expressed through an interface dominated by a photo of the bridge taken just after the collapse. The photo was made interactive—all cars were numbered and clickable. By clicking on a number, the stories of the people who were in that car were pulled from the database and loaded into the interface.

These emerging genres all utilized different aspects of online technology—immediacy, multimedia, interactivity, hypertext, and database structures—as rhetorical vehicles in order to represent the traditional exigence of feature journalism. These genres still exist, even though none of them can be said to have had a profound impact on either online journalism or feature journalism. However, in 2012 *The New York Times* published a feature story online that would spark the beginning of a new area of online feature journalism.

The "Snowfallification" of Digital Feature Journalism

The story "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek," published in the *New York Times*' web edition in December 2012 established a model for publishing long-form, interactive feature journalism that many online news sites have mimicked (Dowling & Vogan, 2015). The more than 17,000-word story was a suspense-building, intimate and adventurous narrative complemented by videos and interactive elements in an elegant, magazinelike design. Within a week, it had

attracted 3.5 million visitors who spent an average of 12 minutes on the site, which was much more attention than any story had previously attracted, according to *New York Times* executive editor Jill Abramson, as reported by Romenesko (2012).

The success of the "Snow Fall" story had of course to do with its compelling narrative, told within a traditional feature journalistic framework. However, the design elements that constituted the online publication were also important. The story was published on a separate site, without advertisements or other interrupting elements. All interactive features were embedded; there were no pop-up windows, not even links to other sites. The design looked very much like a traditional magazine layout and the story therefore represented a respectful remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) of a long print magazine feature story. Furthermore, it was responsive, implying that the design automatically adapted to whatever screen the user preferred (desktop, tablet, or mobile).

This minimalistic, responsive design was quite different from the mostly Flash-produced multimedia packages found in the previously emerging genres (see the section on INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA FEATURE PACKAGES). It was more conservative in that it was heavily text-based and did not display lots of technical features that craved attention. And, most important, it could be consumed on a smart phone, the platform that by 2012 had bypassed the desktop computer as the preferred way to consume online content.

The "Snow Fall" story became an inspiration for online newsrooms and feature departments all over the world. "To snowfall" became a verb for making a feature story come alive online, and the story has been labeled the "urtext of digital longform" (Dowling & Vogan, 2015, p. 212). The staff at the *New York Times* spent months developing the "Snow Fall" site from scratch, but companies like Adobe and CMS providers like WordPress soon developed templates that made it easy for even low-budget news sites to publish feature stories in similar formats.

Serialization and Podcasts

The "Snow Fall" story represented a conservative, yet innovative remediation of feature journalism to a digital environment, which promoted linear storytelling over hypertext structure and text over multimedia. A similar conservative remediation important to the development of digital feature journalism has been the rebirth of the serial feature. The serial, once a popular way of publishing feature stories (and other kinds of narratives) in newspapers and magazines, is based on episodic publication, thus emphasizing suspenseful storytelling techniques and long-form narratives.

Serials have in recent years become a popular format in many kinds of cultural production, most notably in reality TV, TV drama, and documentary (boosted by production/distribution companies like HBO and Netflix), and podcasts. The podcast format is of particular interest because it represents digital remediations of traditional radio formats implying a listener experience marked by what Berry (2016) labels "hyper-intimacy": "Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting (headphones), utilizing an intimate form of communication (human speech)" (p. 666). The podcast format therefore lends itself well to genres of feature journalism, in which intimacy is a key ingredient. Podcasts like *This American Life* and *Radiolab* contain almost exclusively

stories that fall within the definition of feature journalism used here. They have become immensely popular and reach a worldwide audience.

One of the most popular podcasts ever to be aired, is a *This America Life* spin-off series called *Serial*. Aired in 2014, the first season of *Serial* comprised ten episodes about the murder of an 18-year-old high school student in 1999. A new episode was published each week, and the podcast series became so popular it became a cultural phenomenon (Gamerman, 2014). Since the podcast format represents a kind of push-technology, which implies that listeners get new episodes automatically available on their favorite devices as long as they subscribe, it "lends itself to seriality," according to Durrani, Gotkin, and Laughlin (2015, p. 594). The popularity of podcasts in general, and *Serial* in particular, has therefore made seriality once again a popular form of feature journalism.

Concluding Discussion

The digitization of feature journalism has developed from early experimentation, and what Bolter and Grusin (1999) labeled radical remediation, to remediation that is more conservative and respectful. The successful and defining characteristics of feature journalism in digital media are still intimacy, literality, and adventure, as they were when Harrington published his *Chats on Feature Writing* in 1925.

This does not mean that the genres of feature journalism are completely static. One major development concerns the importance of the genre family. Harrington (1925) described feature journalism as an insignificant supplement to the much more important news journalism. In contrast, modern writers on feature journalism emphasize the growing importance of the family of genres. As early as 1977, Williamson wrote that "in the past two decades, the feature story has become an important tool in newspapers' efforts to compete with electronic media. The feature story is a big, extra dividend that newspapers can offer its readers" (p. 14).

Competition from first radio then TV made newspapers more aware of the advantages of feature journalism, since the immediacy of electronic media forced them to focus on content other than breaking news. Online and social media have of course further downscaled the role of newspapers as providers of breaking news, and as a result, newspapers in the 21st century are "using feature material in larger quantities," according to Garrison (2004, p. 11). Simultaneously, newspapers increasingly tend to "featurize" their news coverage. According to Niblock (2008), a significant trend in today's modern newspapers is "the 'featurisation' of news, whereby writers use feature-style techniques to cover 'hard' news stories" (p. 46).

This increasing featurization of newspapers has indeed changed the role of the feature journalist to no longer be subordinate to the role of the news journalist. In fact, being a feature journalist might in the 21st century be perceived as a more attractive role than being a news journalist. In 1975, Alexander (1982) argued that "a feature writer does everything a news writer does, but he also does more. . . . He becomes a narrator, a storyteller and an interpreter, not just a reporter". This view of the feature journalist as "not just a reporter" is supported by Garrison (2004), who argues that feature journalism goes "beyond" news journalism to be "special." In modern textbooks on feature journalism it is a common understanding that the feature journalist can

provide more in-depth coverage than news journalists can, and that the feature journalist thus has enhanced status (Steensen, 2011C).

The increased importance of feature journalism for newspapers might be viewed as a result of general developments in technology and thereby increased competition from new media; first television, then online and social media. Technological change has always been crucial for how newspapers have developed. Franklin (2008) argues that "adapting to change to increased competition, often driven by new technology, is historically what has triggered change in the newspaper industry" (p. 3). However, technological development is not the only factor that has influenced the development of feature journalism. The growing commercialization of all industries, cultural or not, reflecting the growing dominance of the market-driven economy has also paved the way for the increased influence of feature journalism in newspapers. This cultural change has forced journalism to become more market driven, relying to a greater extent on advertisers, and feature journalism is more suited to play "a key role in the marketing function" (Niblock, 2008, p. 53) because it can be utilized to explore topics that are off the news beat.

The increased importance of the discourse of intimacy in newspaper feature journalism is also paralleled by a more general cultural change. The borders between what is considered private and what is considered public are more blurred than ever before because of reality TV-shows, blogs, and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Sennett argued that the public sphere was to be invaded by matters of privacy through what he labeled "tyrannies of intimacy" (Sennett, 2002). In the 21st century, it seems that intimacy has become a virtue for all media (mass or private) and for everyone who wants to engage with them. The irony is that this kind of intimacy is partly caused by the increased popularity of feature journalism, while at the same time functioning as its prerequisite.

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Steen Steensen

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University