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The Featurization of Journalism

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Abstract

Feature journalism has developed from being an insignificant supplement to news journalism to a family of genres that today dominates newspapers. The present article explores the growing importance of feature journalism and attempts to understand its social function, how it has changed and why it has become so important. Based on an analysis of influential textbooks on feature journalism, the paper argues that feature journalism has traditionally been dominated by a literary discourse, and discourses of intimacy and adventure – discourses that thus have become increasingly important for newspapers, thereby transforming the social function of news in general. Today, however, the genres of feature journalism are undergoing significant changes, reflecting the technological, social, economic and cultural changes that affect the media industry and the role of journalism at large. The present article is framed by a social constructivist view of genre, and it outlines possible scenarios for future transformations of feature journalism.

Keywords: feature journalism, soft news, genre theory, discourse analysis

Introduction

It is often argued that feature journalism is becoming increasingly important for the news industry, especially newspapers. According to Brett and Holmes, newspapers have “gone through a dramatic transformation, abandoning to a certain degree their hard news rationale and adopting the ways of magazines” (2008: 190). In the preface of the 25th anniversary edition of the 1979 ethnographic study of news production, *Deciding what's news*, Gans argues that the greatest change in the newspaper industry since his classic study is the replacement of hard news with “an increase in soft (or feature) news” (2004: xiv). Niblock argues that the proportion of feature journalism in British newspapers has been stretched from 10 per cent in the 1750s to as much as 70 per cent in some papers today (2008: 46). In Scandinavia, major newspapers like *Aftenposten*, *VG*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagens næringsliv*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Industri* and *Jyllands-Posten* have all launched several new feature supplements within the past decade in order to minimize drops in circulation.

Feature journalism is generally associated with newspaper weekend sections and glossy magazines. Human interest stories, reportage, celebrity profiles, colourful background stories, lifestyle stories, personal columns – these are among the kinds of stories we call “feature journalism” or “soft news”, as it is most commonly referred to in broadcast journalism (Boyd 2001), where it also has proliferated (Baum 2002; Scott & Gobetz 1992).

This “featurization” of journalism is generally portrayed by academics (especially those engaged in the field of political communication) in a normative fashion. It is linked to the tabloidization and commercialization of the press, which is considered to have transformed news into “infotainment” (Allan 2004: 202ff). The general argument is that feature journalism thus represents a “dumbing-down” of journalism (Temple 2008: 73ff). Franklin (1997) argues, for instance, that increased emphasis on feature journalism (or “newszak”, in Franklin’s vocabulary) diverts journalism towards what might interest the public instead of what is in the public’s interest, hence weakening the role of the news media in a democracy. This kind of critique, however, tends to neglect the magnitude and complexity of both feature journalism and (hard) news. It rests on the premise that journalism can be divided into two groups: hard news, which is perceived as the serious, enlightening kind of journalism that enhances democracy, and soft news/feature stories, which potentially trivialize journalism and mock politics and democracy. Dahlgren (1992) has noted that hard news accounts for only a small part of the practice of journalism and that there exists a rapidly growing amount of other genres and styles in journalism. Still, the divide between academics and journalism practitioners concerning the value and significance of feature journalism remains profound. In contrast to the “dumbing-down” perspective, the increasing number of textbooks on feature journalism generally portray it as “high-value”, quality journalism. Randall, for instance, argues that the distinction between (hard) news and features is “positively dangerous” and that it “encourages the insidious idea that normal standards of precision and thorough research don’t apply [to feature stories] and that they can be a kind of low-fact product” (2000: 193-194).

This divide calls for a more careful and less normative examination of what feature journalism is and how its proliferation transforms the social function of journalism. The present paper therefore offers a comprehensive examination of what kind of communication feature journalism is and of the social function it has. I will argue that feature journalism is best understood as a family of genres that has traditionally shared a set of discourses: a *literary* discourse, a discourse of *intimacy* and a discourse of *adventure*. This family of genres has been surprisingly stable during the past hundred years, which I will demonstrate by tracing the generic history of feature journalism from the introduction of the term by H.F. Harrington in 1912 to modern-day understandings of this type of journalism in influential textbooks in the United States and Europe, predominantly Scandinavia. However, it seems that the genres of feature journalism today are more diversified and complex than ever before, and that their impact on the social function of news in general is greater than ever. In the concluding parts of the paper, I will reflect on the current – and future – state of feature journalism and how it potentially further transforms the social function of news and may leave journalism at large in a state of limbo.

The Social Function of Feature Journalism

As suggested in the introduction, feature journalism is related to concepts like genre, discourse and social function. These concepts are interlinked. The concept of genre has come to imply different things in different academic fields and traditions (see Berge & Ledin 2001; Freedman & Medway 1994 (Chapter 1) for overviews of different traditions in genre theory). However, modern genre theory has come to be dominated by a

social constructivist view of genres, implying that genres constitute some kind of *social action* (Miller 1994) that clarifies the relationship between text and society (Lüders et al. 2010). Feature journalism is a social act of communication that encompasses certain conventions and expectations as to how it is produced, distributed and consumed. These conventions and expectations are established through time in order to address a specific exigence, i.e. an “objectified social need” (Miller 1994: 30). Feature journalism as social action therefore comprises two things: First, a specific social function, understood as the response to a specific exigence, and second, a recognizable rhetorical form that this function is expressed through and the exigence addressed by.

Feature journalism is best understood as a family of genres that address a similar exigence but differ in rhetorical form. The shared exigence that traditional feature journalism seems to address comprises 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. The *differences* among the genres of feature journalism are related to the rhetorical forms that are used to address this exigence. The newspaper feature reportage genre, for instance, typically encompasses a narrative structure, first-person accounts of events and a “colourful” style of writing, while the profile interview genre typically contains the in-depth questions and answers of the journalist and the interviewee, colourful writing, personal characterizations and a profile picture or caricature drawing.

Because the present paper is primarily concerned with the social function of feature journalism, discourse analysis stands out as a fruitful approach to analysing how this social function has been portrayed over time. The shared social function of genres of feature journalism is expressed by certain discourses in a discursive practice. Discursive practice commonly refers to both the social and textual aspects that constitute and frame a line of communication, from the tacit knowledge of the producer and the social context in which the production of text is embedded, to the tacit knowledge of the audience and the social context in which the text or utterance and the reception of it are embedded. van Dijk (1997) outlines 12 different approaches to discourse analysis, one of them being discourse understood as *strategy*. This approach implies searching for the strategic purpose that frames and is expressed in an act of communication. In texts that are recognized as belonging to a specific genre, this strategic purpose (or their purposes) is shared across a discourse community, e.g. a newspaper and the audience it targets. Searching for the representation of such discourses in a text can therefore tell us something about the social function of that text and hence the genre it constitutes.

To illustrate the relationship between social function, discourse and rhetorical form, I will take a closer look at how one genre of feature journalism, the newspaper feature reportage, might address the shared exigence of feature journalism as presented above. The social function of the newspaper feature reportage is to address this exigence, and the journalist does so by evoking certain discourses through a specific rhetorical form. A newspaper feature reportage on, let’s say, the situation in Somalia might, for instance, encompass discourses of intimacy and solidarity in order to move the reader by evoking feelings of solidarity with the people of Somalia through intimate encounters with one or a few Somalis. Furthermore, the reportage might encompass discourses of actuality and quintessentialism (discourses that are also found in hard news) in order to provide and access factual and significant information on current events in Somalia – events that

are considered important to the discourse community. Finally, the reportage might encompass a literary discourse and a discourse of adventure in order to tell an adventurous and entertaining narrative from a remote place. The dominant *text norms* that constitute the rhetorical form of the feature reportage genre are most likely the use of first-person accounts of particular events in Somalia that are described in a colourful, narrative style of writing (Steensen 2009a; Carey 1987; Bech-Karlsen 2002).

As the example illustrates, multiple discourses may be represented within one genre and a discourse may be expressed in multiple genres. This is common in journalistic texts, which tend to be rather complex and thus belong to what Fairclough calls a “creative discursive practice” (1995: 60). Tracing the discourses that frame and are represented in feature journalism would therefore be a way of analysing the social function it has, and therefore the kind of genre or genre family it constitutes. This is therefore the analytical approach I will adopt here.

The Transformation of Genres

The dynamic character of genres that arises from the understanding of genre as social action also implies that genres change or transform over time. As discursive practices change, so do genres. Journalism as discursive practice has undergone several changes in recent decades, for instance, new technology has affected the way information diffuses in society. Journalists retrieve, produce and distribute information in a different manner today than they did in pre-Internet times. Likewise, the audience today perceives, uses and interacts with journalistic information in a different manner.

Todorov argues that a new genre “is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several” (1990: 15). According to Fowler (2000), such genre transformations occur through different processes, out of which the most significant are: topical invention, combination, aggregation, change of scale, change of function, counterstatement, inclusion, selection and generic mixture. For instance, the entrance of the private into the public, as described by Sennett (2002) among others, paved the way for several topical inventions in the genres of journalism, like the private confessions of publicly known persons in the profile interview genre, which is a genre of feature journalism. According to Siivonen (2007), women are now more frequently the subjects of profile interviews because of the increased intimacy of journalism. This genre has therefore transformed due to the “topification” of the private sphere. Furthermore, as digital technology boosts media proliferation and diversification, genres also multiply and become more diversified. Fagerjord’s concept of “rhetorical convergence” (2003) describes complex processes of genre transformations due to generic mixtures in new, digital media like online newspapers. In Steensen (2009b), I demonstrate how online feature journalism might represent such a complex convergence of rhetorical forms, and a mixture of seemingly incompatible discourses.

The Generic History of Feature Journalism

In order to trace the generic history of feature journalism and thus how the social function of this genre family has transformed, I have analysed a selection of influential textbooks on feature journalism. The textbook is of course a genre in itself. It is generally

considered to be a “blurred” genre, which represents “a miscegenation of scholarly fish and commercial fowl” (Swales 1995: 5). Textbooks on feature journalism generally position themselves in between the academic field and the news industry. They construct a very specific implied reader (the student becoming practitioner) and are often written by experienced practitioners. They convey a hegemonic view of contemporary knowledge on feature journalism, and are therefore suited to trace the perceived social function of feature journalism at different moments in time.

There are hundreds of textbooks on feature journalism in the United States and Europe. The following analysis is based on those textbooks that seem to have been the most influential, i.e. those textbooks that are often cited by others and that have gained high penetration in journalism programmes’ curricula in both the United States and Europe. In addition, the analysis will draw upon some other textbooks that have been influential within special branches of feature journalism, like Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* (1975) and Boynton’s *The New New Journalism* (2005), and textbooks with great regional influence in Scandinavia. The analysis is guided by the following questions: How is the social function of feature journalism portrayed in these textbooks? How has the understanding of feature journalism in these textbooks changed over time?

The Origins: Feature Writing and the Literary Discourse

According to a 1949 textbook on feature writing, the feature article is a “creation of the present century” (i.e. the 20th century) (Reddick 1949: 3). One of the first mentions of the concept I have come across is in a 1912 textbook on journalism by the American H.F. Harrington. H.F. Harrington does not provide a thorough definition of feature journalism, but simply states that “A *feature story* is one in which the news element is made subordinate” (1912: 294). H.F. Harrington belonged to a prestigious group of feature writers known as the “Blue pencil club”, and in 1925 he published a book dedicated to feature writing based on conversations with the other members of this club. In this book, H.F. Harrington discusses in greater detail what feature writing is all about:

[...] 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 (1925: 138-139).

He further underlines the need for feature writers to have literary skills: “the feature story often lends itself to the tricks and insincerities of the literary fakir” (1925: 139).

An interesting observation is how H.F. Harrington calls the feature writer not a journalist, but a *writer*. This may be interpreted to imply that feature writers were not part of the journalism community to the same degree as for, instance, news reporters – they were more likely to be part of writers’ communities, like the Blue Pencil Club – a club where the members discussed not journalism, but “literature and life”, according to H. F. Harrington (1925: 8).

This leaves an impression that feature writers traditionally have been closely tied to fiction writers and thus have based their writing on the techniques and skills of such writers. The same labelling of feature writers as *writers* instead of journalists and the link to fiction writing runs through all significant textbooks on feature journalism (see

for instance Blundell 1988; Garrison 2004; Reddick 1949; Williamson 1977). Garrison argues for instance that “[m]any writers will say that feature articles fall somewhere between news writing and short story writing” (2004: 8).

It therefore seems that a *literary discourse* has dominated feature journalism from the days of the Blue Pencil Club to modern-day feature writers. This literary discourse can be found in Scandinavian scholars’ writings about feature journalism as well. Roksvold argues that the feature journalist utilizes “techniques of writing that traditionally belong to fiction writing” (1989: 21, my translation).

Feature Journalism and the Discourse of Intimacy

As mentioned above, H.F. Harrington (1925) emphasized the importance of intimate relations with both sources and readers for feature writers. This is often referred to as the “human interest” of feature journalism. A feature writer reveals emotions rather than facts, she portrays ordinary people rather than officials, and she is not afraid to use her own personal experiences in her stories. “Many feature articles deal with the personal experience and observations of the writer,” writes Reddick (1949: 4). According to Williamson, “the human interest feature is, perhaps, the most common variety of the feature story” (1977: 112). Williamson also emphasizes the “subjective” nature of feature stories. Alexander argues that the feature writer gets to “the heart of the reader” and “puts something of himself into the story” (1982: 2). And according to Garrison

Feature stories are emotional, and they involve readers. [...] These articles tell us much about the human condition. [...] these articles are often less objective than conventional news writing, offering a particular point of view or the author’s personal impression, perceptions and opinions [...]. (2004: 7)

Some textbooks even emphasize this dimension of feature writing in the very title, like W. Harrington’s *Intimate journalism* (1997).

In Scandinavia, Roksvold (1989) argues that feature journalists mark their stories with a personal touch. Bech-Karlsen argues that a feature story “addresses the stomach as much as the brain, it appeals to all senses and feelings. It searches for the human aspect” (1988: 27, my translation). And according to Hvid (2004), a feature story should provide the reader with intimate encounters with other people.

In other words, it seems that a *discourse of intimacy* has been a dominant characteristic of feature journalism throughout its history. This discourse implies that the feature journalist gets intimate with her sources in order to portray their emotions in her stories, it implies that she seeks to connect with the reader on an intimate level, and that she allows herself to be personal in her writing, by for instance using the personal noun “I”.

Feature Journalism and the Discourse of Adventure

In his introduction to “Chats on feature journalism”, H.F. Harrington encourages a friend to “write up your adventures” in order to become a feature writer (1925: 7). When asked to read and comment on a selection of articles written by a young writer who wondered whether his writings were suitable for publication, H.F. 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” (1925: 202).

This suggests that a *discourse of adventure* has been present in feature journalism from the very beginning. This discourse is closely linked to the literary discourse – it is a result of the emphasis on not only good writing and poetic language, but on storytelling and thus human action as dominant parts of good feature stories. According to modern-day textbooks, the discourse of adventure is still a very dominant part of feature journalism. Garrison argues that feature stories must “come alive” by adding activity (2004: 37). The reading must be adventurous, and to achieve this, the feature story relies heavily on observations of action over time – i.e. reporting. Blundell (1988) emphasizes, for instance, that feature writing cannot be done without initial reporting. Others, like Reddick (1949) and Alexander (1982), underline how the feature writer uses personal observations as an ingredient in her stories. Garrison encourages his readers to “look around” and “explore” places.

This emphasis on reporting and observation makes it clear that the reportage genre is significant in feature journalism. The reportage is typically defined by the fact that it contains first-person observations made by the journalist (Bech-Karlsen 2002; Carey 1987; Steensen 2009a). The skilled reportage journalist seeks out interesting places, people and environments, she observes and gathers the facts, before writing a story that takes the reader on a journey to the same place, to meet the people there and get to know what they are doing. Good reportage writing, in other words, is built upon adventures. So is most of feature journalism. Bech-Karlsen’s definition of the reportage makes the relation to feature journalism obvious: “[t]he reportage is a personal narrative based on the journalist’s own real world adventures” (2002: 216, my translation). This definition encompasses all of the three discourses present in feature journalism: literary (“narrative”), intimacy (“personal”), and adventure.

The Transformations of Feature Journalism

When reading the works of H.F. Harrington on feature journalism in the 1910s and 1920s, one is struck by the similarities to how feature journalism is understood and practised today. Not much seems to have changed during the hundred years that have passed since feature journalism was first described. This slow transformation of feature journalism is also recognized by Ponce de Leon, who analysed human-interest features on celebrities in the pre-WWII American press. She notes that “it is striking how little has changed [...]... The obsession of the great majority of celebrity profiles, whether in print or on television, remains the subject’s ‘real self’” (2002: 277-278).

However, the genres of feature journalism have not been completely static. As I argued in the introduction, one major development concerns the *importance* of the genre. H.F. Harrington described feature journalism as a quite insignificant supplement to the much more important news journalism. By contrast, later textbooks on feature journalism emphasize the growing importance of the genre family. In 1977 Williamson wrote: “[i]n 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 their readers (1977: 14). Garrison argues that newspapers in the 21st century are “using feature material in larger quantities” (2004: 11).

Simultaneously, newspapers increasingly tend to “featurize” their news coverage. According to Niblock, a significant trend in modern newspapers is “the ‘featurisation’ of news, whereby writers use feature-style techniques to cover ‘hard’ news stories” (2008: 46). In Norway – the country with the second largest newspaper circulation per thousand inhabitants in the world (Harrie 2009: 133) – all major newspapers have established, during the past ten years, new supplements containing featurized hard news in order to minimize drops in circulation. The biggest Norwegian newspaper – the tabloid *VG* – launched, for the first time, a Saturday feature magazine in 2005 (*VG Helg*). Two years later, *VG* launched a second feature magazine on Sundays (*VG 7*), and from 2009 a third feature magazine was published on Fridays (*VG Fredag*).

This increasing featurization of newspapers has indeed changed the role of the feature journalist such that it is no longer subordinate to the role of the news journalist. Already in 1975, Alexander 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” (1982: 2-3). This view of the feature journalist as “not just a reporter” is also supported by Garrison, who argues that feature journalism goes “beyond” news journalism to be “special” (2004: 7). In today’s textbooks on feature journalism, it is a common understanding that the feature writer can provide more in-depth coverage than news journalists can, and that the feature journalist thus has enhanced status. Pape and Featherstone, for instance, argue that the feature journalist has “the opportunity to research more deeply, talk to more people – and quote them at much greater length” than the news journalist has (2006: 3).

This suggests that hard news discourses increasingly have been adopted in how feature journalism is perceived, and that the social function of some feature journalism genres thereby has been transformed to include not only entertainment but also enlightenment and insight into complex and quintessential matters of culture and society. This transformation has happened due to the *inclusion* of the discourses of the hard news genre, or a *genre mixture* of the two.

Another factor that has increased the status and importance of feature journalism is the influence the “new journalism” (Wolfe 1975) and recently the “new new journalism” (Boynton 2005) have had on modern-day feature writing and the role of the journalist in general. “New journalism” gained popularity in American magazine journalism in the 1960s as a protest movement against professionalized and “objective” news journalism. The new journalists applied techniques of narrative storytelling, scene construction and character development to their stories. They wrote adventure pieces of journalism, utilizing techniques of fiction writing to establish intimate relations with sources and readers. And they were highly successful. Journalists like Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe paved the way for a whole new generation of journalists inspired by such writing. And even though their journalism didn’t necessarily represent anything new – H.F. Harrington discussed many of the same techniques in 1925, and Shapiro (2005) shows how these techniques were utilized even earlier – they most certainly increased the status of feature writing and made it popular, both among journalists and readers in the United States and elsewhere.

In Scandinavia, the work of the new journalists greatly influences the modern-day understanding of feature journalism (Steensen 2009a). And the new wave of narrative journalism/new new journalism has made a deep impact on especially Danish feature journalism (Hvid 2004). This understanding of feature journalism implies a greater em-

phasis on the discourse of intimacy. These “new new journalists”, as Boynton describes them, “developed innovative immersion strategies” in order to lengthen and deepen “their involvement with characters to a point at which the public/private divide essentially disappeared” (2005: xiii). There are also other indicators of an increased emphasis on intimacy in feature journalism. Ponce de Leon argues that profile interviews in the American press have increasingly emphasized a “therapeutic discourse” (2002: 278).

The Diversified Future of Feature Journalism

As media proliferate and journalism today is “in a state of flux” (Preston 2009: 1), genres of journalism are more complex and more subjected to transformations than ever before. News is becoming diversified as new technologies and new practices arise both in the production and use of various media. Both news and feature journalism today encompasses a variety of established, transformed and emerging genres in all kinds of media – from the traditional newspaper, to magazines, broadcasting stations, online newspapers, weblogs and other “alternative media” (Atton 2002; 2003), mobile phone news applications, RSS feeds, web-based news agents, and so forth.

Concerning the future of feature journalism in this media landscape, Niblock argues that “competition from new technology may herald a resurgence in quality feature writing, as titles reflect upon the distinctiveness of their medium and its special relationship with readers” (2008: 54). It is easy to agree with the notion that feature journalism will be diversified in line with the general diversification of media. However, it remains to see whether this diversification will boost *quality* feature writing, whether it will entail an equal diversification of quality, or whether it will lead to an overall deterioration of feature journalism. The following sections will offer some perspectives on the further transformation of feature journalism on three different media platforms, implying a diversification of quality as well as genres in line with 1) commercialized and consumer-oriented feature journalism mainly in newspapers; 2) intimate and fiction-inspired feature journalism predominantly in books; and 3) innovative and experimental feature journalism mainly in online publications.

The Future of Feature Journalism in Newspaper

Newspapers in the Western world have become increasingly commercialized and part of a market-driven economy. Niblock argues that “it is the areas of feature articles that best lend themselves to playing a key role in the marketing function” (2008: 53). Feature journalism is, in other words, a kind of journalism more adapted to a market-driven newspaper industry, because it can be utilized to explore all kinds of topics off the news beat. Without feature journalism, it is unthinkable for newspapers to produce off-the-news-beat supplements, which target specific groups of readers that are attractive to advertisers – a branch of the newspaper business that has increased tremendously during recent decades (Brett & Holmes 2008). Given the current crisis in the newspaper industry in both the United States and Europe (see for instance Preston, 2009, for an analysis of the current state of the news industry in Europe), one could envision a future where high-cost quality feature journalism has disappeared and been replaced by low-cost feature journalism primarily suited to attracting advertisers. Supplements

targeting specific audiences attractive to advertisers – like supplements on travel, on lifestyle, on gardening, on housekeeping etc. – might be the only arenas left where feature journalism will flourish in newspapers. The Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* may serve as an example of this strategy. This newspaper today has as many as 11 weekly niche-oriented supplements.

However, given the nature of such supplements – their primary goal probably not being to enlighten and engage the audience in public discourse on matters of societal importance, but to provide a source of income with as minimal a cost as possible – this kind of feature journalism will likely not be attractive to ambitious feature journalists seeking to explore the literary discourse and the discourses of intimacy and adventure that seem to have dominated feature journalism since the beginning of the 20th century. Instead, this kind of market-driven feature journalism might direct feature journalism towards a more service-oriented kind of discursive practice that targets consumption as the strategic purpose of the communication and thus encompasses discourses of consumption and commercialization.

The dominant social function of this emerging genre of feature journalism is therefore to address an exigence that also includes consumer guidance, which is increasingly gaining significance in commercialized societies.

The Future of Feature Journalism in Books

In an analysis of book-length feature journalism in Norway, I conclude that this genre represents a growing market where feature journalists accustomed to writing for newspapers resurface as authors (Steenen 2009a). These books are driven by a plot-oriented, well-documented, immersive and subjective kind of journalism, emphasizing a literary discourse and a discourse of intimacy. Driving this development in Norway, and probably even more so in the United States (where the market for non-fiction literature and book-length feature journalism has always been strong) and other countries, is the wave of narrative journalism focusing on immersions in everyday life within local societies (Boynton 2005; W. Harrington 1997). Where book-length feature journalism previously tended to focus on faraway places, thus emphasizing a discourse of adventure, the book-length feature journalism of today tends to be more locally anchored. The discourse of adventure might therefore be minimized in book-length feature journalism and replaced by an even stronger discourse of intimacy.

The dominant social function of such book-length feature journalism might therefore be to address an exigence that includes a need to gain knowledge on the complexity of local societies through personalized narratives that blur the borders between reality and fiction.

The Future of Feature Journalism Online

Research on online journalism has tended to focus on the remediation of (hard) news journalism, especially the reporting of breaking news, thereby focusing on *immediacy* as the main virtue of online journalism (see for instance Domingo 2006; Paterson & Domingo (eds) 2008). However, there is no doubt that as online journalism evolves, a complexity of styles and genres is emerging, implying, for instance, the remediation of feature journalism online.

I have previously investigated how the discourses of (traditional) feature journalism clash with discourses of online communication when feature journalism is remediated online (Steensen 2009b). These clashes illustrate that feature journalism online is in its infancy, and that trial and error, experimentation and innovative initiatives are driving the development of feature journalism online into transformed and perhaps new genres. In Steensen (2009a), I outline four possible new genres of feature journalism that are under construction online: live feature stories, database feature stories, Flash feature stories and Soundslides feature stories. These genres all use different aspects of online technology – immediacy, multimedia, interactivity, hypertext and database structures – as rhetorical forms in order to represent the traditional discourses of feature journalism. They might therefore, at least in the phase of emergence, include a kind of “meta” social function, which aims at portraying journalism as technology-driven acts of communication that are suited to modern societies. They might therefore address an exigence dominated by a need to utilize technology in innovative ways in order to transform journalism to a modern form of communication.

In another study (Steensen 2009c), I point to how the remediation of feature journalism online might enhance the overall status of online journalism and its journalists, even though online feature journalism might eradicate the reportage as a genre and hence the discourse of adventure. Instead, online feature journalism might embrace discourses of online communication by inviting readers to participate on the production side of the discursive practice. Such online discourse might fundamentally change how the discourse of intimacy is represented in feature journalism – from intimacy with sources to intimacy with readers (see Steensen 2009a: 205-206 for a further discussion and an example of this transformation of intimacy).

This latter type of online feature journalism might therefore be dominated by a social function that addresses an exigence dominated by a (perceived) social need for freedom of expression and inclusion of the public in the general agenda-setting function of journalism.

Conclusion

A core argument in the present paper is that feature journalism is a family of genres that have traditionally been dominated by three discourses: a literary discourse and discourses of intimacy and adventure. The social function of feature journalism – which has been surprisingly stable during the past hundred years – has therefore primarily been to entertain the audience and connect people on an emotional level through the exposure of personal experiences of perceived public value.

However, feature journalism has become increasingly important to newspapers. This process has transformed the genres of feature journalism to include discourses of (hard) news journalism and an increased emphasis on the discourse of intimacy. Today, feature journalism is undergoing substantial change due to new market conditions for newspapers and competition from new media. The discourses of feature journalism are represented using totally different rhetorical forms online, new discourses are embedded in feature journalism in newspapers and online, and the literary discourse and the discourse of intimacy might overshadow the discourse of adventure in book-length feature stories.

There are at least three implications of this development: First, academics need to move beyond the hard news/soft news dichotomy and recognize the diversified nature of journalism and the multiple social functions it has. Second, the growing importance of feature journalism and its increasingly diverse nature suggests that the social function of news in general is transforming towards becoming more consumer-oriented, intimate and fiction-inspired. Third, this increasing diversity and complexity of feature journalism may imply some degree of communicative collapse in journalism, in the sense that journalistic texts might be interpreted and contextualized differently by producers and readers. According to Miller (1994: 37), novel or subtle combinations of form (which mark feature journalism today) might lead to a differently constructed rhetorical situation by the rhetor and the audience. A news journalist who utilizes feature techniques, and thus embeds for instance a literary discourse and a discourse of intimacy in her hard news story, might be met by an audience whose expectations do not include the discourses of hard news. Likewise, a feature journalist with literary ambitions who embeds a commercialized consumer discourse in her feature story might not be met with expectations of literary quality. And a feature journalist who utilizes techniques of fiction writing to produce book-length stories might be met with expectations of fiction rather than fact.

Such stories marked by a divide between intentions and expectations do not constitute a genre, according to Miller. The consequence might be that a greater divide will arise between journalists and their audience – a divide marked by misunderstandings and failed expectations. Such a divide might leave journalism in limbo. The audience might prefer texts that belong to genres with a more clear-cut social function, like the novel, the personal weblog, the commercial or the celebrity gossip magazine.

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