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## What is feature journalism?

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### Introduction

It is often argued that feature journalism is becoming increasingly important for newspapers. As newspaper circulation drops worldwide and the competition from online news sites decreases the news value of newspapers, adding more feature journalism has been named a possible solution for the struggling newspaper industry. 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 [...]” (Brett and Holmes 2008, p. 190). Niblock argues that the feature content of (British) newspapers has been stretched from 10 per cent in the 1750s to as much as 70 per cent in some papers today (Niblock 2008, p. 46). During just one year, in 2004, the number of supplemental magazines containing mainly feature journalism in British newspapers increased by 48 per cent, according to a survey released by the Newspaper Society (Brett and Holmes 2008, p. 191). The same trend can be found elsewhere in Europe and in the US. 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 last decade in order to minimize drops in circulation.

Simultaneously, being a feature journalist seems to be the new hype. A new wave of narrative feature journalism swipes across US and Europe, inspired by idolized journalists like Tom French, Jon Krakauer, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, William Finnegan and others (Boynton 2005). Conferences like The Nieman Foundation’s annual conference on narrative journalism attracts a large audience from both the US and Europe, and faculties of journalism and communication at colleges and universities in both continents profile new programs on narrative journalism/literary journalism/feature journalism – or whatever the child is named. Surveys conducted among students of journalism in Norway and Britain reveal that being a

feature journalist is the most sought after position within the profession (Bjørnsen 2003, Hanna and Sanders 2007).

This “featurisation” of journalism in general and newspapers in particular needs to be addressed. Why is feature journalism considered suited to “save” the newspaper industry? What kind of communication is feature journalism and how does a stronger emphasis on this kind of communication affect what journalism is, what a newspaper is, and what being a journalist is all about? To what degree does the featurisation of newspapers reflect any broader cultural change?

In other words: What exactly is feature journalism?

In order to search for answers to these questions this paper will trace the historical roots of feature journalism and show how it has become increasingly important for newspapers. The analysis will be based on an examination of literature on feature journalism, from the 1912 introduction of the term by American Harry Franklin Harrington, to modern day understandings of the genre in influential textbooks on feature journalism in US and Europe, predominantly Britain and Scandinavia. Through genre and discourses analysis of how feature journalism has been portrayed in these textbooks during the last hundred years, the aim is to uncover what kind of communication feature journalism represents and how this communication has changed into what it is perceived as today. The paper will be framed by a pragmatist and social constructivist understanding of genre and genre development.

## **What is genre?**

This paper is based on the assumption that feature journalism best can be understood and treated like a genre. This assumption calls for a theoretical discussion on what genre is and how this concept best can be understood in order to clarify what feature journalism exactly is and how it has developed into playing such an important role in the newspaper industry today.

The concept of genre is difficult to grasp. As Swales states: "The word is highly attractive [...] but extremely slippery" (1990, p. 33). Swales and also Berge and Ledin (2001), have given excellent overviews of the different understandings of genre. They describe a major dividend in the history of genre theory between those who understand genres as structuring principles on a high level of cultural context where texts are embedded, and those who understand genres as dynamic but yet common features of texts in the lower level of situations where texts operate. The school of American new-rhetoric is an example of the

latter, the Australian genre school an example of the former, according to Berge and Ledin (ibid.). The most fruitful view of genres must lie somewhere in between, they argue.

These two positions mirror the dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* as first described by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure a hundred years ago. E. D. Hirsch argues that that the concept of genre lies somewhere in between *langue* and *parole*. According to David Duff, Hirsch labels this middle term “type of utterance”, which is “distinct from individual utterance (*parole*) and the language system itself (*langue*)” (Duff 2000, p. 15). Bakhtin and also Hans Robert Jauss argue that genre is neither system (*langue*) nor individual utterances (*parole*), and Jauss argues further that this middle position makes genre more of a social phenomenon:

Literary forms and genres are thus neither subjective creations of the author, nor merely retrospective ordering-concepts, but rather primarily social phenomena, which means they depend on functions in the lived world. (Jauss 2000, p. 135)

Jauss’ argument implies a pragmatic and dynamic view of genre that can be traced all the way back to the Russian formalism of the 1920s. As Yury Tynyanov stated in 1922:

A work which is ripped out of the context of the given literary system and transposed into another one receives another coloring, clothes itself with other characteristics, enters into another genre, loses its genre; in other words, its function is shifted. (Cited in Jauss 2000, p. 141)

Even though Tynnyanov’s view might be considered a bit too extreme since it implies that the same text or utterance might belong to one genre in one social context and another genre in another context, this dynamic situatedness of genres has dominated modern genre theory. It is for instance a core element in how Carolyn Miller understand the concept of genre in her often cited 1984 article “Genre as social action” (Miller 2001). Miller emphasised the importance of social context when understanding genre, and she underlined the need to study genres in the situations where they are acted out, thus implying a need for genre researcher to gather empirical material not only from within the individual text, but also from the surrounding social context.

This “social turn” in modern genre theory, is paralleled by what has been labelled *the linguistic turn* in sociology. Duff describes this turning point as “a shift from the *morphology* of genre concerned primarily with *form* to a *sociology* of genre concerned primarily with *function*” (Duff 2000, p. 14).

Another important turning point in the history of genre theory in line with the “social turn” is a shift of attention from the point of *production* to the point of *reception* in genre studies. Jauss was one of the first genre theorists who argued for such a shift of attention. He introduced the phrase “horizon of expectation” as a way of describing genres from a receptionist perspective, a phrase that has gained considerable status in modern genre theory. Genre as horizons of expectations “pre-constitutes the intention of the work as well as the understanding of the audience”, according to Jauss (2000, p. 143).

Genre as social function together with a focus on reception constitute genre as “social action”, as Miller argued (2001). This makes genre part of a larger social system, which perhaps best can be described by the concept of *discursive practice*. Discursive practice commonly refers to both the social and textual aspects that constitute and frame a line of communication, from the presuppositions and pre-conceived knowledge of the producer and the social context in which the production of communication is embedded, to the pre-conceived knowledge of the audience and the social context in which the text or utterance and the reception of it is embedded.

However, discourse and hence discursive practice are concepts used in many different ways by scholars of widely different fields. In sociological oriented fields, the term is usually used in relation to the social context of language use, while in linguistics the concept is traditionally reserved for language use isolated (Garrett and Bell 2005, p. 2). In line with the “linguistic turn” in sociology, attempts have been made to fuse these two different understandings of discourse. One example is Norman Fairclough who defines discourse as a “way of signifying experience from a particular point of view” (Fairclough 1995a, p. 135). Faircloughs approach implies searching for traces of outer-textual viewpoints and experiences (which are elements belonging to the social context) in the text itself. His approach thereby bridges the traditional sociological and linguistic approaches to discourses analysis.

A similar approach can be found in Teunen van Dijk's work. van Dijk outlines 12 different approaches to discourse analysis, one of them being discourse understood as *strategy* (van Dijk 1997). This approach implies searching for the strategies that lay behind the communication, i.e. what strategic purpose the communication embeds both in-text and as part of a social context including both the production and reception of the communication. A core question in such discourse analysis is in other words: What is the (strategic) purpose of the communication?

Searching for the representation of such discourses in a text can therefore tell us something about the social function of that text and thereby what genre it constitutes. A genre

can thereby be understood as the sum of the discourses represented in a text combined with the rhetorical vehicles, or text norms, used to represent these discourses.

Discourses are in other words traceable in texts but they originate from outside of the text in the social context surrounding the communication, i.e. aspects of the text production, distribution and reception (Fairclough 1995b)

However, the two concepts (genre and discourse) work independently; a discourse can be expressed in multiple genres and multiple discourses can be represented within one genre. A reportage (genre) on the situation in Somalia can for instance embed a discourse of solidarity (where the strategic purpose of the communication is to evoke feelings of solidarity towards the people of Somalia), a discourse of actuality (where the strategic purpose is to provide and access updated and accurate information on the situation in Somalia) and a discourse of adventure (where the strategic purpose is to tell and read an adventures story from a remote place). Simultaneously, the dominant text norm, or rhetorical vehicle of the reportage genre, is most likely the use of first person accounts of particular happenings in Somalia (Bech-Karlsen 2002, Carey 1987, Steensen 2009c).

In order to answer what feature journalism is and how it has developed in newspapers, this paper will examine influential textbooks on feature journalism. How is the strategic purpose of feature journalism as communication portrayed in these textbooks? What discourses seem to be represented in these understandings of feature journalism and what are the rhetorical vehicles used to express these discourses? And how has the understanding of feature journalism changed in these textbooks?

There are hundreds of textbooks on feature journalism in the US and Europe. I have chosen to focus the analysis 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 programs' curriculums in both US and Europe. These textbooks are: Harry Franklin Harrington's *Chats on Feature Writing* (Harrington 1925), D. W. C Reddick's *Modern Feature Writing* (Reddick 1949), Daniel R. Williamson's *Feature Writing for Newspapers* (Williamson 1977), William E. Blundell's *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* (Blundell 1988) and Bruce Garrison's *Professional Feature Writing* (Garrison 2004). In addition I draw upon several other textbooks which have been influential within special branches of feature journalism, like Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* (Wolfe 1975) and Robert S. Boynton's *The New New Journalism* (Boynton 2005), and textbooks with great regional influence, like Jo Bech-Karlsen's *Reportasjen* (Bech-Karlsen 2002) and Mikkel Hvid's *Fascinerende fortæling* (Hvid 2004) in Scandinavia.

## **The origins: Feature *writing* and the discourse of fiction**

According to Reddick's 1949 textbook on feature writing, the feature article is a "creation of the present century" (i.e. the 20th century) (Reddick 1949, p. 3). One of the first mentioning of the concept I have come across, is in a 1912 textbook on journalism by American Harry Franklin Harrington. 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" (Harrington 1912, p. 294). 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 Harrington in greater detail discusses 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. (Harrington 1925, p. 138-39)

It seems that Harrington views feature writing as something that is not as "important" as news journalism. He further emphasizes the "human interest" aspect of feature writing and also 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. (Harrington 1925, p. 139)

A feature writer should, in other words, utilize his own imagination to such an extent that it provides him with more freedom in his writing than a news writer has. The most likely interpretation of what Harrington means by "freedom" is that the feature writer uses literary techniques common in genres of fiction writing, such as novels and short stories.

An interesting observation is how Harrington labels the feature writer not as a journalist, but as a *writer*. This might be interpreted as if feature writers were not part of the journalism community in the same degree as for instance news reporters – they were more likely to be part of writers' communities, like for instance the Blue pencil club – a club where

the members discussed not journalism, but “literature and life”, according to Harrington (1925, p. 8).

The same labelling of feature writers as *writers* instead of journalists runs through all significant textbooks on feature journalism, from the 1949 classic *Modern Feature Writing* (Reddick 1949), via the much cited *Feature Writing for Newspapers* (Williamson 1977) and *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* (Blundell 1988), to the modern day classic *Professional feature writing* (Garrison 2004) and recent publications like *Feature Writing for Journalists* (Kebble and Wheeler 2006).<sup>1</sup> The latter book title illustrates the point with unintended irony: Feature writing and journalism are not considered two of the same kind - the authors found it necessary to underline that their book is intended for journalists. This indicates a view of feature writing implying that it can be practiced by all kinds of writers, not only journalists. A similar view of news writing is hardly thinkable in any textbook.

The same separation of feature writing from journalism can be found in the history of reportage writing – a genre closely related to feature writing. In John Carey’s anthology on the history of reportage writing one gets the impression that the genre has been very much shaped by writers not commonly associated with journalism. Writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson and even Winston Churchill are given prominence when the history of the reportage is written. Likewise, in Scandinavia, well-known authors of fiction like Knut Hamsun and August Strindberg are attributed with important roles in the development of the reportage as genre (Bech-Karlsen 2002, Roksvold 1997).

This leaves an impression that reportage and feature writers traditionally have been closely tied to fiction writers and thus very much have based their writing on the techniques and skills of such writers. Reddick points out that the feature article initially (in the US) took its place “along side the short story and the essay” (Reddick 1949, p. 3), which also indicates a close relationship to genres of fiction. In fact, when searching for a definition of feature journalism, Reddick finds it necessary to first and foremost remind his readers that the feature article “concerns truth and not fiction” (Reddick 1949, p. 4). One can only assume that Reddick would not have bothered to mention this if it was not a commonly made mistake.

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<sup>1</sup> A search on amazon.com illustrates the representativeness of these titles. Searching for books with “feature writing” in the title yields 39 titles, while a similar search on “feature journalism” yields two titles. (Search conducted, using the advanced search option, on <http://www.amazon.com>, 26 June 2009.)

It therefore seems safe to say that a *discourse of fiction* has dominated feature journalism from the days of the Blue pencil club to modern day feature writers. All textbooks on feature writing I have come across emphasize literary techniques and/or storytelling abilities as significant skills for feature writers. Garrison argues for instance that “some of the best feature writers incorporate the styles and techniques of fiction writers into their work” (Garrison 2004, p. 7). He also writes that “Many writers will say that feature articles fall somewhere between news writing and short story writing.” (Garrison 2004, p. 8). Blundell writes in his introduction: “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.”(Blundell 1988, p. xi)

This discourse of fiction can be found in Scandinavian scholars’ writings about feature journalism as well. Thore Roksvold argues that:

In feature journalism we find the sparkling pens. The journalist imprints his product with the art of writing – for instance by utilizing techniques of writing that traditionally belong to fiction writing. (Roksvold 1989, p. 21, my translation)

### **Feature journalism as a discourse of intimacy**

The discourse of fiction is not the only discourse that seems to have dominated feature journalism from the very beginning. As mentioned above, Harrington 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, he portrays ordinary people rather than officials, and he is not afraid to use his own personal experiences in his stories. “Many feature articles deal with the personal experience and observations of the writer”, writes Reddick (1949, p. 4). According to Williamson, “the human interest feature is, perhaps, the most common variety of the feature story” (1977, p. 112). Williamson also emphasizes the “subjective” nature of feature stories (1977, p. 12). Louis Alexander argues that the feature writer gets to “the heart of the reader” and “puts something of himself into the story”(Alexander 1982, p. 2). And according to Bruce 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 [...]. (Garrison 2004, p. 7)

In Scandinavia, Thore Roksvold argues that feature journalists imprint their stories with a personal touch (Roksvold 1989). Jo 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 [...]” (Bech-Karlsen 1988, p. 27, my translation). And according to Mikkel Hvid a feature story should provide the reader with intimate encounters with other people (Hvid 2004).

Some textbooks even emphasize this dimension of feature writing in the very title, like Walt Harrington's *Intimate journalism* (Harrington 1997). A special branch of modern day feature journalism, depicted by Robert Boynton as “The New New Journalism” (Boynton 2005), focuses on how these journalists have “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” (Boynton 2005, p. xiii). Feature journalists like Adrian Nicole LeBlanc and William Finnegan spent years immersing themselves into their characters' lives before writing their stories.<sup>2</sup>

There is in other words no doubt 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 his sources in order to portray their emotions and perhaps personal lives in his stories, it implies that he seeks to connect with the reader on an intimate level, and that he allows himself to be personal in his writing, by for instance using the personal pronoun “I”.

Perhaps one could argue that the new new journalists have made this discourse even more important than before.

## **Feature journalism as a discourse of adventure**

In his introduction to “Chats on feature journalism”, Harrington encourages a friend to “write up your adventures” in order to become a feature writer (Harrington 1925, 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

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<sup>2</sup> See LEBLANC, ADRIAN NICOLE (2003) *Random Family. Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx*, New York: Scribner. and FINNEGAN, WILLIAM (1998) *Cold new world growing up in a harder country*, New York: Random House.

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).

This suggests that a discourse of adventure has been present in feature journalism from the very beginning. This discourse is closely linked to the discourse of fiction – 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. Harrington understands this craving for adventure as a characteristic of modern times:

We are not greatly interested in static scenery, but in fresh manifestations of human activity everywhere. Books, newspapers, mechanical inventions have nurtured this insatiable craving for action, action, action. The motion picture and the news photograph make life still more tense and dramatic, indeed have in many instances usurped the function of the descriptive writer a generation ago. In a word, swiftly-moving narration is to-day’s most popular literary mood, expressive of a new art. (Harrington 1925, p. 201)

This observation seems to hold true even today, almost 90 years later. The discourse of adventure is still a very dominant part of feature journalism according to modern day textbooks. Garrison, quoting Schoenfeld and Diegmüller (1982), argues that feature stories must “come alive” by adding activity (Garrison 2004, p. 37). Blundell stresses that the first and greatest command of feature writing is: “For Pete’s sake, make it interesting. Tell me a *story*.” (Blundell 1988, p. xii). This implies that readers expect to be entertained when reading feature stories. The reading must be adventures, and to achieve this, the feature story relies heavily on observations of action over time – i.e. reporting. Blundell emphasizes for instance that feature writing cannot be done without initial reporting. Others, like Reddick (1949) and Alexander (1982) underline that the feature writer uses personal observations as an ingredient in his stories. Garrison encourages his readers to “look around” and “explore” places.

This emphasis on reporting and observation connects feature writing with reportage writing. The reportage is typically defined by it containing first person observations made by the journalist (Bech-Karlsen 2002, Carey 1987, Steensen 2009c). The skilled reportage journalist seeks out interesting places, people and environments, he 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 is in other words build upon adventures. So is most of feature journalism. Bech-Karlsen's definition of the reportage makes the relation to feature journalism obvious: "The reportage is a personal narrative based on the journalist's own real world adventures." (Bech-Karlsen 2002, p. 216, my translation). This definition embeds all the three discourses present in feature journalism: Fiction ("narrative"), Intimacy ("personal") and adventure.

The difference between reportage and feature journalism might be that the reportage *requires* this kind of reporting, while feature journalism is a broader term also including other kinds of writing where first person accounts might not be as common - like profiles, columns and service writing. Likewise, the reportage might not be perceived as *only* personal narratives and adventures, like Bech-Karlsen argues, but can for instance be divided into news reportage, feature reportage and background reportage, like Roksvold (1989) and Steensen (2009) argue.

Nonetheless, the reportage plays a major role in feature journalism and might perhaps best be perceived as a sub-genre to feature journalism – a sub-genre that has made the discourse of adventure a core characteristic of feature journalism.

## **The growing importance of feature journalism**

When reading the works of Harrington on feature journalism in the 1910s and 1920s, one is struck by the similarities to how feature journalism is understood and practices today. Not much seems to have changed in the hundred years that have passed since the genre first was described. The purpose of feature journalism as communication is today, as it was then, guided by the discourses of fiction, intimacy and adventure.

However, the genre has not been completely static. One major development concerns the importance of the genre. Harrington described feature journalism as a quite insignificant supplement to the much more important news journalism. In contrast, modern writers on feature journalism emphasize the growing importance of the genre. In 1977, Williamson wrote:

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. (Williamson 1977, 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 other

kinds of content than breaking news. This led to what professor William Rives at Stanford University has labelled the “magazining of newspapers” (cited in Garrison 2004, p. 12). Internet and other new media have of course further downscaled the role of newspapers as providers of breaking news, and as a result, newspapers in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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, a significant trend in today’s modern newspapers is “the ‘featurisation’ of news, whereby writers use feature-style techniques to cover ‘hard’ news stories” (Niblock 2008, p. 46). For example, the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror* recently changed its strategy “to make the paper more like a magazine with predominantly feature coverage” (Niblock 2008, p. 46). In Norway – the country with the highest level of newspaper readership in the world, according to the European Journalism Center<sup>3</sup> - all major newspapers have during the last ten years established new supplements containing featurized hard news in order to minimize drops in circulation. The biggest Norwegian newspaper – the tabloid *VG* – for the first time launched a Saturday feature magazine in 2005 (*VG Helg*). Two years later *VG* launched a second feature magazine on Sundays (*VG 7*).

This increasing featurisation of newspapers has indeed changed the role of the feature journalist to no longer be subordinate to that of the news journalist. In fact, being a feature journalist might today be perceived as a more attractive role than being a news journalist. All ready in 1975, Alexander argued that:

A feature writer does everything a news writer does, but he also does more. He observes and gathers the facts, then writes a story that gets it all across, correctly and objectively, to the reader. Just as a reporter does in writing a news story. But the feature writer then draws upon his feelings. [...] He puts something of himself into the story. [...] He becomes a narrator, a storyteller and an interpreter, not just a reporter. (Alexander 1982, p. 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, p. 7). Australian Leo Granato makes similar arguments (Granato 2002). In today’s textbooks on feature journalism it is a common understanding that the feature writer can provide more in-

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<sup>3</sup> See url: [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/norway/](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/norway/)

depth coverage than news journalists can, and that the feature journalist thus has enhanced status. Susan Pape and Sue Featherstone for instance write:

Where a hard-pressed news hack, racing against the clock to meet today's deadline, might expect to quote one, perhaps, at the most, two sources in a piece of copy, feature writers, with (generally) longer lead-in times, have the opportunity to research more deeply, talk to more people – and quote them at much greater length. (Pape and Featherstone 2006, p. 3).

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) has had on modern day feature writing and the role of the journalist in general. “New journalism” gained popularity in American magazine journalism in 1960s as a protest movement to the professionalised and “objective” news journalism. The new journalists applied techniques of narrative storytelling, scene construction and character development to their journalism. They wrote adventures 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 feature writings. And even though their journalism didn't necessarily represent anything new – Harrington discussed many of the same techniques in 1925, and Shapiro shows how these techniques were utilized even earlier (Shapiro 2005) – they most certainly increased the status of feature writing and made it popular, both among journalists and readers – in the US and elsewhere.

In Scandinavia, for instance, the works of the new journalists heavily influences the modern day understanding of feature journalism (Hvid 2004, Steensen 2009c). And the new wave of narrative journalism/new new journalism swiping across the US has made a deep impact on especially Danish feature journalism. Hvid (2004) argues that a feature story today should be more of an adventure containing close encounters with people on a personal level through their actions, which should be reconstructed in dramaturgically composed scenes – arguments well known from the area of new journalism.

### **Feature journalism as genre**

The discussion above leaves no doubt that feature journalism has been dominated by discourses of fiction, intimacy and adventure ever since Harrington discussed the concept 90

years ago. Feature journalism as a discursive practice embeds the social context surrounding the production, the distribution and the reception of texts where these discourses are represented. On the production side, the social context comprises of journalists – or freelancers – working for newspapers and magazines. They benefit from a partly deadline-detached “freedom” to research and express themselves subjectively with a “licence” to utilize techniques of fiction writing. The texts they produce are mainly distributed in newspaper supplements usually published on weekends, or magazines published weekly, monthly or bi-monthly, and the reception is traditionally embedded in a social context of relaxed weekend readings in private spaces.

In order to represent the discourses of fiction, intimacy and adventure in texts in ways that make them recognisable as feature journalism to producers and readers, certain rhetorical vehicles have traditionally been utilized. Based on the discussion above, we can pinpoint these vehicles (or text norms) as:

- Feature journalism is often *narrative*, and is thereby distinguished from the inverted-pyramid structure of news journalism.
- Feature journalists are allowed to *colour their texts with subjective descriptions, reflections and assessments*.
- Feature journalism often portrays people and milieus and is therefore usually *personal and emotional*.
- Feature journalism is usually *visually attractive* and presented in delicate layouts using multiple illustrations, mainly still photos.

Not all these rhetorical vehicles will be present in every feature story, but we can expect that one or more of them will dominate stories we perceive as feature journalism.

Furthermore, it seems that the genre has developed along these lines in newspapers:

- Feature journalism has become more important for newspapers and the status of feature journalism and feature journalists therefore has increased.
- Feature journalism is more news oriented than before, implying that the genre today is based on more in depth research and reporting.
- The discourse of intimacy has become increasingly dominant in feature journalism.

## Feature journalism as a reflection of cultural change

From the analysis above it seems clear that feature journalism is a complex genre mixing several discourses and traces of other genres, like genres of fiction, educational genres and news genres. A text mixing different genres and discourses belongs to what Fairclough labels a *creative discursive practice* (1995 p. 60). Texts – especially media texts – that are part of such practices are according to Fairclough "sensitive barometers of cultural change" (1995 p. 60).

It might therefore be fruitful to view the development of feature journalism in light of more general cultural developments. The increased *importance* of feature journalism for newspapers might for instance be viewed as a result of general developments in technology and thereby increased competition from new media, first television, than the Internet. Such conditions have always been crucial for how newspapers have developed. Bob Franklin argues that "adapting to change to increased competition, often driven by new technology, is historically what has triggered change in the newspaper industry" (2008, p. 3).

Technological developments is however not the only factor that have influenced the development of feature journalism. The growing commercialisation 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 forces newspapers to become more market driven, relaying to a greater extent on advertiser. Niblock argues that

Whereas news can to some extent fulfil the targeting function, through such means as choice of angle and vocabulary, it is the areas of feature articles that best lend themselves to playing a key role in the marketing function. (2008, p. 53)

Feature journalism is in other words a kind of journalism more adapt 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 produced off the news beat supplements targeting specific groups of readers who are attractive to advertisers – a branch of the newspaper business which have increased tremendously during the last decades (Brett and Holmes 2008).

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

shows like “Big Brother”, “The Bachelor” and “Temptation Island”, by private weblogs in public spaces, and by social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Sennett argued already in the 1970s that the public sphere was to be invaded by matters of privacy through what he labelled “tyrannies of intimacy” (Sennett 2002). Today it seems that intimacy has become a virtue for all media (mass or private) and everyone who wants to participate in them.

### **The future of feature journalism: a scenario**

When the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University arranged its 8<sup>th</sup> conference on narrative journalism in March 2009, one could make three striking observations, which in sum made up a paradox: First, even though the conference was held in the midst of the financial crises – a crisis that fast forwarded the already down spiralling economy of the US newspaper industry – it attracted an as large audience as ever before in spite of the rather high conference fee (425 \$). Second, the general theme of the conference (“Telling true stories in turbulent times”) focused on how producing more narrative feature journalism could convince readers to stick with newspapers. Third, most of the speakers at the conference had gained their recent successes as narrative feature journalists not by writing for newspapers, but by writing books or by publishing stuff online.

The conference was in other words a reflection of the still growing popularity of feature journalism and the beliefs in feature journalism as a saviour of newspapers in “turbulent times”. The paradox is buried in the third observation: The speakers, and the enthusiasm, were focused on other media than newspapers – perhaps reflecting an unspoken presupposition that the newspaper industry is beyond salvation.

For there is no doubt that feature journalism – at least quality feature journalism – is a resource-consuming kind of journalism implying in-depth research and reporting that reflects the “special” nature of feature journalism (Garrison 2004), which takes it beyond the ordinary and more cost effective news reporting. To save newspapers by applying more feature journalism might simply be too risky – the investments needed are too big. Ironically, and perhaps reflecting this paradox, the Nieman Foundation just three months after the 2009 conference ended announced that there would be no conference in 2010 – due to a need for “a major reduction in spending”.<sup>4</sup>

I shall not jump to any conclusions suggesting the death of newspapers and thereby the evaporation of newspaper feature journalism. However, current trends in the industry –

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<sup>4</sup> According to an e-mail sent out by the Nieman Foundation Curator, Robert H. Giles, on 29 May 2009.

reflected in the discussions above and the misfortunes of the Nieman Conference on Narrative Journalism – allows for some speculations on the future of feature journalism.

It is possible to argue, like Niblock does, 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” (Niblock 2008, p. 54). However, I find it more plausible that feature journalism in the future will develop along three distinct lines, which all change the genre in different ways; Consumer oriented feature journalism in newspapers; Intimate and fiction-inspired feature journalism in books, and finally; Innovative and experimental feature journalism in online publications.

*The future of feature journalism in newspapers:* Given the crises in the newspaper industry in both the US and Europe, one could envision a future where high-cost quality feature journalism is evaporated and replaced by low cost feature journalism primarily suited to attract 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. Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* can serve as an example of this strategy. This newspaper today has as much as 11 weekly niche-oriented supplements.

However, given the nature of such supplements – their primary goal not being to enlighten and engage the audience in public discourse on societal matters of importance, but to provide a source of income with as minimal costs as possible – this kind of feature journalism will not likely be attractive to ambitious feature journalists seeking to explore the discourses of fiction, intimacy and adventure. Instead, this kind of market-driven feature journalism will direct the genre towards a more service-oriented kind of discursive practice, which targets consumption as the strategic purpose of the communication and thus embeds a discourse of consumption.

*The future of feature journalism in books:* There is a long tradition in the US for journalists to write books – the US market for non-fiction literature has always been strong. The high concentration of journalists-turned-authors at the 2009 Nieman Conference on Narrative Journalism suggests that in order to be an acclaimed feature writer worth listening to, you have to have published a book. It also suggests that as newspapers are struggling to keep the genre alive with high quality pieces of journalism, book publishers might seize the opportunity to take control over the market for quality feature stories.

Books of feature journalism have been pushed on to the market in increasing numbers in recent years, not only in the US, but in Europe as well. In an analysis of the Norwegian market for book-length feature journalism, I have previously concluded that this is a growing market where feature journalists accustomed to write for newspapers re-surface as authors. The growing market of book-length feature journalism in Norway is driven by a plot oriented, well-documented, immersive and subjective kind of journalism, emphasising the discourse of fiction and intimacy (Steensen 2009c). Driving this development in Norway, and even more in the US and other countries, is the wave of narrative journalism focusing on immersions in everyday life within local societies (Boynton 2005, Harrington 1997). Where book-length feature journalism previously tended to focus on the worlds far away, thus emphasising the discourse of adventure, the book-length feature journalism of today tends to be more locally oriented. The discourse of adventure might therefore be minimized in book-length feature journalism and replaced by an even stronger discourse of intimacy.

*The future of feature journalism online:* Research on online journalism has tended to focus on the remediation of news journalism, and especially the reporting of breaking news, thereby focusing on *immediacy* as the main virtue of online journalism (see for instance Domingo 2006, and the anthology Paterson and Domingo 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 at a stage of infancy, and that trial and error, experimentation and innovative initiatives are driving the development of feature journalism online into different and perhaps new genres. In Steensen (2009c) I outline four possible new sub-genres of feature journalism which are under construction online: Live feature stories, database feature stories, Flash feature stories and Soundslides feature stories. These sub-genres all utilize different aspects of online technology – immediacy, multimedia, interactivity, hypertext and database structures – as rhetorical vehicles in order to represent the traditional discourses of feature journalism. I have also pointed to how the remediation of feature journalism online might enhance the overall status of online journalism and its journalists (Steensen 2009d), even though online feature journalism might evaporate the reportage as genre and hence the discourse of adventure (Steensen 2009a). In stead, online feature journalism might embrace a discourse of

networking by inviting readers to participate on the production side of the discursive practice – and it might fundamentally change how the discourse of immediacy is represented. In Steensen (2009c) I point to an example of a feature story published in the Norwegian online newspaper *dagbladet.no* on the difficulties of being gay in peripheral places in Norway.<sup>5</sup> In stead of travelling to those peripheral places in order to observe an interview gay people there – like a traditional newspaper feature journalist would do – the online feature journalist wrote a story based on two MA thesis addressing the topic before she opened up for readers to comment on the story. What then happened was that readers with first hand experiences of being gay in remote places in Norway contributed with their personal stories as comments to the article – thus representing the discourse of intimacy in a totally different – and perhaps more nuanced and truthful – way.

## Conclusion

I have in this paper argued that feature journalism is a genre dominated by discourses – i.e. communicative purposes – of fiction, intimacy and adventure. I have shown how this genre has become increasingly important for newspapers due to technological changes and other changes in market conditions, even though the discourses dominating feature journalism, and its generic characteristics, have been surprisingly stable since the beginning of the 20th century.

Today we however see that the genre is undergoing substantial change due to new market conditions for newspapers and competition from new media and also from the non-fiction book market. The discourses of feature journalism are represented using totally different rhetorical vehicles online, new discourses are embedded in feature journalism in newspapers and online, and the discourse of fiction and intimacy might overshadow the discourse of adventure in book-length feature stories.

No doubt, feature journalism will exit and flourish in all kinds of media in the future. But the newspaper might no longer be the preferred medium for feature, and as new sub-genres of feature journalism continues to emerge online and elsewhere, it might be difficult to argue that feature journalism continues to exist as a genre. More likely, a more complex mixture of genres and discourses will be represented in different texts – formerly known as feature journalism, in different media – formerly known as the newspaper industry.

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<sup>5</sup> Url: <http://www.dagbladet.no/magasinet/2007/02/07/491170.html>

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