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The narrative in literary journalism

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Abstract. Literary journalism offers a way to convey the truth of real-life events and issues in a more engaging and emotionally impactful manner than traditional news reporting. It bridges the gap between storytelling and journalism, appealing to audiences who seek both the depth of factual reporting and the immersive experience of narrative storytelling. Like any other type of journalism, it has its own features, to which belong immersion, text specific structure, accuracy in presenting content, voice or personal perspective. The purpose of the study is to consider one of storytelling's techniques, narrative, which covers the plot of the story, its characters, setting, topics and the author's point of view. The research is based on the analysis of the essays, opinions and reportages as typical examples of narratives in literary journalism. Contextual analysis of political narrative and social-psychological narrative, which are often found in analytical or rational journalism, aims at extracting information of social, political, historical, and culture-specific character. Stylistic analysis of the considered texts gave us possibility to visualize the examples of emotively charged words and stylistic devices. Qualitative content analysis shows that most vividly narrative communication is seen in such journalistic messages, as an essay, opinion, and reportage. Each narrative has a purpose, which dictates the narrative techniques.

Keywords: journalistic genres, narrative techniques, essay, opinion and comments, reportage

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Нарратив в литературной журналистике

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Аннотация. Литературная журналистика предлагает способ донесения информации о реальных событиях и проблемах более увлекательным и эмоционально эффективным способом, чем традиционные новостные жанры. Она соединяет разрыв между литературным повествованием и журналистикой, привлекая аудиторию, которая ищет как глубину освещения фактов, так и захватывающий нарратив. Литературная журналистика имеет свои особенности, к которым относятся иммерсивное погружение, специфическая структура текста, точность в подаче контента, личная интонация. Цель исследования – выявить медийные жанры, в которых наиболее ярко проявляется повествовательная коммуникация. В контексте журналистского творчества изучен феномен нарратива: повествование, сюжет истории, персонажи, пространство событий, темы и точка зрения рассказчика. Метод контекстуального анализа текстов применялся для извлечения информации политического, социального, исторического и культурологического характера. Стилистический анализ дал возможность визуализировать примеры с эмоционально окрашенными словами и стилистическими средствами. Метод качественного (квалитативного) контент-анализа позволил сделать вывод о том, что эссе, комментарии и репортажи являются типичными примерами журналистских жанров, в которых наиболее ярко проявляется повествовательная коммуникация. При этом отмечено, что цель нарратива диктует техники повествования.

Ключевые слова: жанры журналистики, техника повествования, эссе, мнение и комментарии, репортаж

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Introduction

Literary journalism, also known as narrative journalism or literary nonfiction, is a style of journalism that combines factual reporting with narrative storytelling techniques often found in literature. This form of journalism aims to present real-life events, people and issues in a compelling, narrative-driven manner, emphasizing storytelling elements to engage and inform readers. Nonfiction writers or journalists ought to choose the most suitable writing techniques to create a compelling narrative for a story that can leave an impression on the reader for further contemplation.

Journalistic messages are typically expected to be objective, impartial, and based on factual information. The primary goal of journalism is to provide the public with accurate and unbiased information, allowing individuals to form their own opinions.

Narrative in media refers to the storytelling techniques and structures used to convey a particular message, theme, or information through various forms of media, such as literature, film, television, video games, and even news reporting. It involves the arrangement of events, characters, and the overall plot to engage the audience and deliver a cohesive and meaningful story.

We claim that most popular journalistic messages containing narrative combined with expressing a journalist's point of view are the essay, opinion, and reportage, and a detailed analysis of some examples of these is presented below.

Methods of research

Our research deals with the examination of journalistic texts in which traces of literary technique can be seen. We use content analysis, which is widely used in the theory of communication and social sciences. The two main types of content analysis include quantitative and qualitative analyses. The former is determined by systematically gathering quantifiable data with an expectation to gain universally unambiguous and objective results (Panassenko, Greguš, 2022). We apply qualitative content analysis to consider the texts from a broader perspective, taking into consideration aspects like context (internal, external), structure, narrative, semiotics, discourse, rhetoric, and conversation.

Semantic analysis makes it possible to decipher and find out what meanings and references the media texts convey by taking into consideration both denotative, i.e. primary meaning and connotative meanings that depend on cultural traditions, and subjective evaluations of words.

Narrative analysis displays how different textual and grammatical units are related to one another and how shifts in the sequence of representation of a particular story may influence the ultimate meaning and interpretation of texts.

Literary journalism and its features

Scholars claim that there are various types of journalism: analytical and emotional (Panassenko, 2016), scientific (Vrabec, Pieš, 2023), online journalism, which can include many types (Višňovský, Radošinská, 2017), and literary (Sims, 1984), which is the object of our research.

Literary journalism is a form of factual journalistic writing, which implements the creative elements of literature such as character and scene description and dialogue, along with figurative language that enhances reading experience. It is still not recognised as an academic discipline, however, its impact on the journalistic entity cannot be questioned. A great amount of effort is put into the research of this new field by scholars of both literary theory and mass communication.

The first attempt to epitomize the purpose, principles and general characteristics of literary journalism was made by Wolfe in his 1973 essay, which appeared in an anthology of reports called “The New Journalism”. His work served as the foundation for a hybrid genre that combines literature and standard journalism.

Sims produced a more thorough description of literary journalism and identified its characteristic features, which in his view, are attributed to an eminent message of literary journalism: immersion, structure, accuracy, and voice (1984, pp. 10–16).

Immersion refers to the time spent on researching and being in close proximity with the subjects of a particular story. *Structure* is the arrangement of the different passages and parts that compose a story. The author may choose it according to what he or she wants to achieve by covering a specific issue and what its implicit message is. *Accuracy* is the aspect, for which literary journalism receives the most criticism. Factuality is the most significant part of journalism and facts should not be made up spontaneously just to amaze readers. *Voice* (or *Personal Perspective*) indicates the standpoint of the individual author or the newspaper/magazine for which he or she reports (Pickett, 2013).

Other key features of literary journalism include:

1. *Narrative techniques*. These employ literary elements such as plot development, character development, vivid descriptions, and scene-setting to tell a true story (Algavi et al., 2019; Panasenکو, 2017).

2. *Emphasis on storytelling*, focusing on crafting a narrative that immerses readers in the events, making the story more engaging and relatable.

3. *In-depth reporting*, often involving in-depth interviews, firsthand observations, and thorough investigation. Writers need to possess knowledge in diverse fields to be able to produce news stories, which leave behind an impression on the readership.

4. *Exploration of themes*. Like traditional literature, literary journalism often delves into deeper themes, offering insight into human experiences, societal issues, or broader implications behind reported events (Erofeeva, Ushnikova, 2017; Kryachkov, 2023).

5. *Long-form content*. It is frequently presented in long-form articles, essays, or even book-length works, allowing for a more detailed and comprehensive exploration of the subject matter (Genette, 1980).

6. Texts belonging to literary journalism use *plot-structuring devices* such as suspense, surprise, conflict, flashback, foreshadowing, minimalism, along with deep characterization and point-of-view narratives ranging from omission (third person), limited omission, first person and objective.

Analysis of literary journalism inevitably leads us to the contrastive analysis of literary and media texts (Panasenکو, Greguš, 2022). Well worked-out techniques of narrative in fiction (Savchuk, 2018; Tykhomyrova, 2018) are widely used in media text analysis (Panasenکو et al., 2020).

Narrative communication in creative nonfiction and its basic elements

Narrative communication is a substantial part of creative nonfiction i.e., it is the primary means of communication between the reader and author. When discussing narrative frameworks, Pickett (2013) in the first place states the importance of a suitable beginning that builds up interest between the reader and the forthcoming text. Openings may be written in first-degree narratives – descriptive narratives – which may come in form of solely matter-of-fact description or a more

vivid depiction of a scene or background using imagery that reflects on feelings and sensations. Mazzeo (2012, p. 11) refers to the narrative arc as a notion that revolves around a conflict and further differentiates between the following types of narrative: circular, frame, linear, protagonist, and quest narratives.

Wilson (2013) claims that in media studies, it is important to tell the difference between narrative and story, because a story is a sequence of events, known correctly as the plot, whereas a narrative is the way those events are put together to be presented to an audience¹.

Narrative in media is realized through intermediality theory, frame theory, and prototype semantics, allowing recipients to classify artefacts as more or less narrative, based on their recognition of “narremes” as features of prototypical narratives (Wolf, 2017).

Media narratives encompass several elements:

1. *Plot*: The sequence of events that make up the story. It typically involves a beginning, middle, and end, and includes the main conflict or challenges faced by the characters (Panasenko, 2017).

2. *Characters*: The individuals or entities that drive the story. Characters have distinct personalities, motivations, and roles within the narrative.

3. *Setting*: The environment or context in which the story takes place. It includes the time, location, and social/political atmosphere that can influence the narrative (Algavi et al., 2019).

4. *Themes*: The central ideas or messages conveyed by the story. Themes can be moral, political, social, or emotional and often reflect human experience or societal issues; they may be connected with transmedia storytelling (Algavi et al., 2023).

5. *Point of view*: The perspective from which the story is told. It can be first-person (from the viewpoint of a character), third-person omniscient (an all-knowing narrator), or third-person limited (narrating the story through a particular character's perspective) (after Berning, 2011; Huisman et al., 2005; Genette, 1980; Panasenko, 2016).

We see that some of the features coincide with those of literary journalism: plot development, exploration of themes, scene-setting, etc.

Narrative has many definitions. Bodhi Green (2021) claims that “a narrative is a story, an account of a string of events occurring in space and time. They do not unfold randomly, but rather as an ordered series of events connected by the logic of cause and effect”². His list of narrative examples is long and includes films and TV shows, cartoons (for more see: Zarifian et al., 2022), novels and plays, journalism and essays, myths and legends, biographies and memoirs, among others.

An interesting set of categories for analysing the narrative was offered by Genette (1980, p. 7–8). This set includes TENSE (order, duration, frequency), MOOD (focalization and distance), and VOICE (narrators and speech).

Describing the work of journalists, Fulton (2005, p. 242) explains how information they receive is processed by them and spun into narrative. She argues

¹ Wilson, K. (2013, April 24). *Narrative explained*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://wilsonkhoo.wordpress.com/tag/narration/>

² Bodhi Green, M. (2021). *What is a narrative – definition, examples in literature and film*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-a-narrative-definition/>

that both hard and soft news are forms of narratives; we disagree with the scholar, because our analysis of hard news shows that much depends on the structure and accuracy of the storytelling (Panasenکو et al., 2021).

Why do journalists use the narrative as a form of communication with the audience? Bodhi Green (2021) answers this question and explains that with the help of the narrative people express their individual thoughts and feelings (journalism of emotional type), create cautionary or morality tales, educate themselves and their children, inspire the readers to keep going during difficult times, etc.³

In Wilson's (2013) opinion⁴, analysing a narrative involves various codes: technical codes, which mainly concern the narrative in film, on TV, etc.; verbal codes, i.e., the use of language – written and spoken; symbolic codes, i.e., the signs contained in the narrative that we decode as being significant and having meaning.

Let us discuss some of genres of literary journalism.

Reportage, opinion, and essay as belletristic genres

How many belletristic genres exist in journalism and how should they be analysed? The list is not vast and includes the essay, comment, opinion, review, and reportage. We have processed printed texts and their electronic version. It gives us opportunity to add one more type – opinion, which has all the features of narrative and can be found in newspapers and journals. We concentrate our attention mainly on three types: reportage, opinion, and essay.

Reportage belongs to long-form journalism, considering its size and range. It gives the reader a fact-based and thoroughly researched report on events, however, the main aim of the reportage is to describe events in a lively and interesting way. People writing the report describe their own directly witnessed on-site experiences and observations. Even though the reporter uses personal experiences, reportages often remain objective, thus the reporter serves only as a communicator who passes the information to the readership. Usually, reportages aim to create an atmospheric reading experience. To achieve this, they are complemented and saturated with details of scenery and description of the appearances of people who are featured in the story. Reportages are usually supplemented by photographs, direct citations, documents, and so on.

Opinion. While opinion pieces, columns, and editorials exist in the realm of journalism, it is crucial to distinguish them from straight news reporting. Opinion pieces are explicitly labelled as such and are designed to express the views and perspectives of the author or the publication. In these cases, the readers are aware that they are engaging with subjective interpretations and analysis rather than straight facts.

Journalists, particularly in traditional news reporting, strive to maintain a separation between news and opinion to preserve the integrity of the information being presented. By doing so, they uphold the principles of fairness, balance, and accuracy, fostering trust with their audience.

Essay. Even though today it is one of the most common forms of journalistic writing, the roots of the essay can be found outside journalism. The first use of

³ Bodhi Green, M. (2021). *What is a narrative – definition, examples in literature and film*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-a-narrative-definition/>

⁴ Wilson, K. (2013, April 24). *Narrative explained*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://wilsonkoo.wordpress.com/tag/narration/>

this type of writing was seen in ancient Greece, but the man who first used the term *essay* in connection with writing was French philosopher M. de Montaigne in the 16th century. Since then, the essay has established itself as a literary form – falling in the realm of prose – its types ranging from moral to philosophical, descriptive, narrative and many more in-between. Although having various forms, there are several typical characteristics of every essay. A subjective layer is always present, i.e., the author of an essay is free to express and discuss their opinions and arguments. The structure and composition of the text of an essay is relatively free and depends on the author. It is not necessary to follow a logical line of storytelling, and various stylistic devices can be applied to suit the purpose of the essay. In journalism, the essay can be characterized as a scientific-creative and mainly reflective journalistic product, which offers and highlights a new perspective on a topic (Rusňáková, Bučková, 2017, p. 238).

From newspapers we have selected examples of the narrative in reportages, opinions, and essays. The topics discussed by the journalists are various, but what unites our examples is their considerable volume, e.g., a reportage by Ben Taub “A journalist's murder in Malta” published on December 14, 2020 in “The New Yorker” about Daphne Caruana Galizia, whom “Politico” named a “one-woman WikiLeaks”, comprises 29 pages and 9481 words; a reportage by Eren Orbey “A daughter's quest to free her father's killer” published on January 17, 2022 in “The New Yorker”, consists of 18 pages and 6407 words. To the largest in volume also belongs the reportage “A mysterious suicide cluster” by D.T. Max published on April 12, 2021 in “The New Yorker” (26 pages, 10063 words), etc. There is no need to explain what these reportages are about, because they have impressive and informative headlines and some comments in the sub-headlines.

Various methods of media text analysis are represented in the books by Panasenکو and Greguš (2022) and Mináriková et al. (2023). For this detailed analysis we have chosen several texts.

As in any other media text we may come across different ways of presenting information in the narrative: chronological, logical, and dynamic or emphatic, which the author chooses in connection with the topic of the narrative.

The first text is a *reportage* by Peter Canby from “The New Yorker” magazine titled “The murder of Mexican journalists spreads to a Magical Town”, published on January 10, 2022⁵; the volume of the text comprises five pages and 2721 words. The author tells us a story of the confrontation between honest journalists and drug dealers supported by the local authorities, which resulted in the assassinations of 12 journalists.

The person around whom the story revolves is described in a positive manner, mostly by presenting his previous good deeds (*descriptive character of the narrative*). From a compositional viewpoint, the author uses the emphatic structure to introduce the readers to the settings and people involved in the story. First, he describes the outer appearance and history of the environment in which the events took place, and only later continues with the actual murder cases. Noticeably, the author uses many personal details about the victim (dinner celebration, last

⁵ Canby, P. (2022, January 10). The murder of Mexican Journalists spreads to a magical town. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved November 2, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-murder-of-mexican-journalists-spreads-to-a-magical-town>

Facebook⁶ message, initials on the cap of the victim) to create a sympathetic response from the readers (*Internal focalization*). The author progressively explains what led to the murder (*Chronological order*).

Regarding the specific language of the text, the author uses the word *murder* and other negatively charged words (*violence, death, shot dead, victim*) plenty of times, but only a few words with positive connotations appear. By the *accumulation* and *repetition* of so many negative words, readers may feel concerned. In reportages, it is evident that a certain level of subjectivity will occur in the text. In this case, the author uses only a few subtle evaluative remarks that do not affect the overall objectivity of the text. In addition to this, the author uses police evidence, and direct speech to enhance and prove the accuracy of the story. According to these notes we can state that this reportage as a narrative is at the same time *descriptive, explanatory, and political*. It is a good example of *vivid focalization* that gives the reader a profound depiction of a scene or situation; and *factual-based focalization* which is written in lively language including many borrowings from Spanish and local expressions, so the reader becomes engaged in the story.

Another text under detailed analysis is *opinion*, under the title “Naomi Osaka and the power of ‘nope’” written by Lindsey Crouse, who is an Opinion writer and producer, which was published in “The New York Times” newspaper on June 1, 2021. This text consists of six pages and 2354 words⁷.

This text has an interesting composition. Judging by the title, it should be about Naomi Osaka, a Japanese professional tennis player, who has been ranked #1 by the Women's Tennis Association. In fact, a major part of this text is occupied by a story told by the young athlete Mary Cain. What unites their names was the fact of their belonging to *Nike*. As Lindsey Crouse writes, “*At 17, Mary Cain was already a record-breaking phenom: the fastest girl in a generation, and the youngest American track and field athlete to make a World Championships team. Then, everything changed*”. Her track coach Alberto Salazar created such conditions for her that she had to leave the sport for several years. As Mary claims, “*I joined Nike because I wanted to be the best female athlete, ever. Instead, I was emotionally and physically abused by a system designed by Alberto and endorsed by Nike*”. The coach gave her forbidden pills, weighed her in the presence of male athletes and constantly reminded her that she must “*become thinner, and thinner, and thinner*”. This hard system of training and humiliation created suicidal thoughts in her mind. There was nobody to help her, to support her, to protect her and she left the team and the sport.

This narrative is *informative*, because the author emphasizes facts; *explanatory*, because the author explains the causes of her leaving the sport and the effects and consequences of taking forbidden reagents given to her by her coach. It is a *social-psychological* narrative abounding in stylistic devices, such as epiphora, anaphora, polysyndeton and emotively charged words, mainly with negative meaning, e.g. *to feel trapped, to be scared, suicidal thoughts, to be horrified, to try*

⁶ The social networking service Facebook is recognized as extremist and banned in the Russian Federation.

⁷ Crouse, L. (2021, June 1). Naomi Osaka and the power of ‘nope’. *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 14, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/opinion/naomi-osaka-french-open-tennis.html>

to survive, etc. The *voice* here belongs to the narrator-participant (homodiegetic narration); the *temporal order* is chronological.

We have already considered *the essay* under the title “We must learn to look at grief, even when we want to run away” (written by a doctor of palliative medicine Sunita Puri and published in “The New York Times” newspaper in 2022⁸ (Panasenko, Petrovičová, 2022) focusing on text categories (emotivity and evaluation) and stylistic devices, which were widely employed by the author to create a vivid and painful picture of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. Compared to other essays, this one is not large in volume, three pages and 1116 words, but due to its vocabulary and abundance of stylistic devices it is very impressive. Now we will briefly outline the essence of this essay as the narrative.

The composition of the text is both *informative*, placing the emphasis on real facts, i.e. the damage COVID-19 brought to people (in American hospitals and other places and countries) and *descriptive* (mentioning static elements characterizing the setting and people, namely the final farewell of a woman who could only express her grief by pressing her palms on the glass door which was a barrier between the then happy married couple and now death and suffering).

We can consider this narrative as *social-psychological*, because COVID-19 touched upon various layers of society evoking deep emotions, namely negative emotions and feelings: grief (which is mentioned in the title), despair, pity, and discomfort of seeing one's pain and death. The aim of the author as a doctor of palliative medicine is also the intention to give hope to people who suffered so much, to show sympathy and compassion to each other. Sunita Puri writes that the whole “*country can be united by this suffering*” and “*our collective grief... can bind us together*” suggesting a hopeful outcome.

Voice in this essay is very important, because we have a case of the narrator-participant of the story, so called homodiegetic narration. *Focalization*, as a more comprehensive portrayal of narrative voices in creative nonfiction, refers in this text to the sad mood of the story evoking various emotions vividly realised in emotively charged words.

Conclusion

The narrative is widely used in literary journalism. There are various narrative techniques including types of plot development, emphasis in storytelling, surprise, conflict, figures of speech, rhetoric devices, foreshadowing and flashback. Media narrative is often based on the environment or context; it presents different characters that drive the story; for the narrator it is important to choose a proper topic (morality, politics, society, human being) and express one's point of view. The narrative can be found not only in printed media; many films and plays, podcasts, TV shows, memoirs, etc. include it. Each narrative always has a definite purpose and depends on its type: moral, social, political, historical, overt or first-person point of view narration, covert narration, among others. Reporting events, facts,

⁸ Puri, S. (2022, February 23). We must learn to look at grief, even when we want to run away. *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 14, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/opinion/death-grief-covid.html>

and information in a specific way, the author constructs a particular narrative or angle, influencing public opinion or understanding of events.

An important element of the narrative is focalization, a more comprehensive portrayal of narrative voices in creative nonfiction, which can be internal, vivid and factual-based.

Reporting and formulating real-life events in the way fiction does, and making it effective, takes not only talent in creative writing but also good observational skills. Choosing the right methods and corresponding techniques is crucial for efficient storytelling. Literary journalism gave a new perspective on the way readers gain a deeper understanding about the events and their core meanings, which influences both culture and society.

Successful narratives in media often have compelling storytelling, well-developed characters, and a clear structure that captivates the audience and leaves a lasting impact. They can entertain, educate, inspire, or provoke thought, depending on the intended purpose of the story.

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