

### Journalism genres: hard news, interpretive journalism, and opinion journalism\*

Journalistic genres guide news producers and consumers on the aims and structure of textual content and the degree of subjectivity that is considered allowed or expected for each genre (Patterson 1998; Hjarvard 2010; see also Table 1). Journalism genres can be categorized, depending of the degree of presence of the journalist in the text (written, oral, or audiovisual), into news, news plus interpretation, interpretation, and opinion (Grijelmo 2014, 28). The presence of the journalist is very high in the genres of opinion journalism and low in news genres (Ibid.).

As stated in *The New York Times* manual of style (2015), in reference to newspapers, the term news should be reserved for “the factual reporting and analysis by the news staff”, reserving editorial and opinion for the opinion section (Siegal and Connolly 2015, 107). Wyatt and Badger proposed a different journalism taxonomy consisting on four modes of composition: description; narration; exposition; argumentation; and criticism (1993).

Benson and Hallin in a comparative study of the US and French national newspapers in the 1960s and 1990s, developed a classification of newspaper stories based on four journalistic functions: “reporting current facts or statements, giving background information, giving interpretation and giving opinion” (Benson and Hallin, 2007, 32). Current facts reporting is considered to be statements without adjectives or adverbs; news stripped of speculation or judgments. Similarly, background information is a news story that adds a temporal base to current facts by considering previous related events. Interpretation is considered as a kind of empirical statements that “goes beyond current facts, setting or historical context to speculate on such things as significance, outcomes and motives”, while the last category, opinion, consist on “the exercise of judgment, either normative (what is good or bad) or empirical (what is true or false)” (Ibid.). Based on this categorization, Esser and Humbritch differentiate between: “news items” (stories offering concise descriptions of events or –if longer–additional background information and broader circumstances), “information mixed with interpretation” (stories offering explanation, investigation or speculation about the motivations, tactics, and consequences of political events), “information mixed with opinion” (stories offering peripheral commentary, opinionated perspectives, or subjective viewpoints despite not being marked as commentary), and “commentary” (editorials, leaders, opinion columns). (Esser and Humbritch 2014, 239-240).

According to Brant Houston “interpretive journalism goes beyond the basics facts of an even or topic to provide context, analysis, and possible consequences” and reporters “are expected to have expertise about a subject and to look for motives and influences to explain what they are reporting” (Houston 2015, 301). For Thomas Patterson, descriptive journalism positions the journalist in the role of an observer while in interpretative journalism the practitioner is also required to be an analyst (Patterson, 2000, 250). And similarly to analysis in the field of intelligence, the analyses of events in interpretative journalism can be good or badly informed by the sources and contents reported by them. As Salgado and Strömbäck have noted, “these interpretations and

analyses can be well informed as well as uninformed, critical as well as uncritical, and providing context as well as distractions”. (Salgado and Strömbäck 2012, 147).

	<b>Detached</b>	<b>Interpretative</b>	<b>Partial</b>
<b>Passive</b>	<i>Disseminator: reports facts and events</i>	<i>Observer: Explains events and actions</i>	<i>Supporter: selectively partisan reporting of facts and events</i>
<b>Active</b>	<i>Watchdog: critical and investigative reporting</i>	<i>Commentator: Evaluation and prediction of actions and events</i>	<i>Advocate: criticism and advocacy</i>

Table 1. Hjarvard-Patterson framework of journalistic roles and forms of journalism, Adapted from: Hjarvard (2010, 32)

Esser and Umbricht use the notion of hard-news paradigm as the dominant shared mindset among members of the journalism community, which is characterized by the use of the inverted pyramid paragraph, balanced reporting, stressing verifiable facts, source attribution, a detached point of view, and a demarcation of functions between news and editorial (Esser and Umbricht, 2014: 230). According to these authors, the paradigm came under attack during the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of calls for blending “the hard-news paradigm with analytic and interpretative elements”, and resulting in a mixed approach that “retains from the hard-news paradigm a distance from political commitment but complements it with reflexive knowledge and critical expertise of the journalist” (Ibid: 232). Writing on the need for interpretation in journalism and its growth, Curtis MacDougall in his pioneering work on interpretative reporting already stated that:

“The successful journalist of the future is going to have to be more than a thoroughly trained journeyman if he is going to climb the ladder of success. He must be capable of more than routine coverage and to interpret as well as report what is going on” (MacDougall 1968, 13).

As for the meaning of “interpretation” an array of illustrative expressions can be found on MacDougall’s work, including: “Make sense out of the facts”, “put factual news in perspective”, “point up the significance of current events”, “expand the horizon of the news” (Ibid, 17). For Wyatt and Badger exposition is the form of composition “that operates mainly through logical and explanatory devices to provide a heightened perspective on or understanding of its subject” (1993, 7).

How does interpretative journalism look like? An example of interpretation mixed with information, providing background, explanation, implications, and perspective to the readers can be found on the following excerpts from an article published by The Wall

Street Journal on 22 December 2016 with the headline “Multibillion-Dollar Jet Deals With Iran Will Test Trump Policy”:

“European plane maker Airbus Group SE joined Boeing Co. in completing a multibillion-dollar plane deal with Iran’s state air carrier, creating another big test case for how the incoming Trump administration responds to the West’s accelerating economic opening with the Islamic Republic.

Airbus, the world’s No. 2 plane maker after Boeing, said Thursday it had completed an agreement—first announced in broad strokes in January—to sell 100 planes to Iran Air. The contract is valued at more than \$18 billion based on list price, which doesn’t include sometimes-big discounts. Airbus said it would start delivering planes early next year.

The agreement comes close on the heels of Boeing’s deal to sell Iran 80 jets for \$16.6 billion, based on list price. The two contracts are far and away the most valuable commercial agreements between Western firms and Iran since the completion of a nuclear pact between the U.S. and other world powers and Tehran. In exchange for Iran curbing its nuclear program, the international community agreed to lift many of the sanctions that have isolated Iran economically for years.

[...]

Uncertainty has heightened over the fate of many of these commercial inroads in Iran since the election of Donald Trump. On the campaign trail, Mr. Trump said he opposed the Iran nuclear deal. Critics in the U.S. Congress have said they would try to unwind the Boeing deal, in particular.

[...]

Even though it is a European company, Airbus is vulnerable to any big shift in U.S. policy toward Iran. Airbus requires specific U.S. approval for the sales because its jets include many American parts and technology that are subject to American export controls. It received that approval, from the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control, earlier this year [...]

Analysis can be defined as a process aimed at discovering what something means (Rosenwasser and Stephen 2012, 6). As indicated by Rosenwasser and Stephen a central activity of analysis is making explicit what is implicit or suggested, and we can make that thinking move by asking “so what?” and infer suggested meanings; implications derived from the observations made (2012, 33 and 62). Interpretation provides the leap for moving from description and summary to analysis. For these authors, a summary is analytical in the sense that it lays out the significant parts of a subject providing a focused description and perspective by explaining the meaning and relationship between the parts of a subject (Ibid, 76), but analysis brings a bigger “interpretive leap” though a creative process governed by logic and valid reasoning from evidences (Ibid, 78). Interpretation operates according to the following process:

“Offers a theory of what X means, not fact

Supplies a context for understanding X that is suggested by the details  
Strives for the plausible, not the certain: explains individual details and patterns of evidence  
Supplies reasons for why the evidence means what you claim it means”  
(Rossenwasser and Stephen 2012, 133).

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**\*Note**

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