



FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL: TRANSFORMATION AND DYNAMICS OF CHANGE IN GONZO JOURNALISM

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Abstract

This article analyzes the dynamics of the transformation and change of the gonzo style as it transitions from the traditional to the digital media landscape. The gonzo style emerged in Western journalism in the second half of the 20th century and was characterized by the author's personal position, emotional approach, and subjective expression. In the digital era, this style has expanded through social media, the blogosphere, and multimedia tools, acquiring new forms of expression. The article analyzes the global factors influencing the transformation of the gonzo style—technological development, changing audience needs, and the need for speed. From this perspective, gonzo journalism is viewed not as a genre, but as a style expressing the author's subjective involvement and personal approach. This transformation reveals new aspects of contemporary journalistic communication in terms of content and form.

Keywords: Gonzo journalism, transformation, digital information space, blogosphere, social networks, dynamics of change.

Introduction

Gonzo journalism is an integral part of the "New Journalism" movement that emerged in the United States at the intersection of literature and journalism. Inspired by the spirit of the McCracken era in the 1960s and 1970s, the "New Journalism" movement emerged in the United States and became a significant phenomenon in journalism and prose.¹ This movement, which emerged at the intersection of journalism and literature, was a protest against the literary milieu, which was chasing hype and losing its influence in the American press at the time. Its main goal was to enrich journalism with literary and artistic methods and

¹ Прутков Г. В. "История зарубежной журналистики". – М.: Аспект пресс, 2011. – С.45.



strengthen its public role. Wikipedia uses the term "New Journalism" to describe the style of journalism in America in the 1960s and 1970s and defines it as a technique for writing articles in an alternative form.² Russian researcher Svetlana Marich, answering the question of what alternative media are, defines them as "the activity of creating new styles and genres, as well as developing new forms of presentation, reflecting the free conceptual creativity of individuals and small social groups. This type of media is based on new ideas, media skills, and experience."³

American professor John Hellman explains the concept of "new journalism" this way: "I think it would be correct to consider 'new journalism' as a literary genre. Because, like fiction, which is based on imaginary and real facts, 'new journalism' also has an aesthetic form and a purpose aimed at the spirit and spirituality."⁴ John Hellman's definition of "New Journalism" as a work of fiction is logically correct, yet paradoxical. Indeed, many examples of this movement combine fiction and lively reporting. Therefore, in our view, it is more accurate to view "New Journalism" as a literary experiment in journalism, embracing form, style, language, and content.

Gonzo journalism first "emerged" at the racetrack. That same year, reporter Hunter Thompson's dispatch to Kentucky to work for a sports magazine sparked an unexpected shift in the American press, particularly in sports journalism. The emergence of the gonzo style in American journalism can be attributed to two factors:

1. The author could not see the horse race.
2. The article was not completed by the deadline.

Journalist Hunter Thompson attempts to observe the races from the track to prepare a report. However, due to the large crowd gathered at the track and placing bets, Thompson is unable to participate in the races. Even so, the journalist manages to offer some criticism. Most interestingly, his sketches were not about the races themselves, but about the events unfolding around them: the parties, the drunkenness, the ridiculous and pathetic state of the celebrities, the crowd drowning in a swamp of immorality. Since the author wrote all the notes for

² New Journalism – URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Journalism).

³ Марич С. Альтернативные медиа: история и пути развития // Медиаальманах. – М., 2009. – №5. – С. 41.

⁴ Hellmann J. Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction. – Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981. – P. 172. – URL: <https://archive.org/details/fablesoffactnew00hell/page/161/mode/2up>.



himself, he does not formulate them in any methodical form or template. In this report, Thompson does not describe the chronology of events in the third person, but, as the protagonist, tells the reader a story about his impressions and feelings about the events around him, about everything he saw, heard, felt, and even tasted. This unique and unusual narrative of reality subsequently defined the fundamental principles of gonzo journalism.

*"They don't sell vodka here because it's too dangerous... there aren't even any toilets... Beach boats... Woodstock (the famous rock festival that took place from August 15th to 18th, 1969. It symbolized the "hippie era" and the "sexual revolution" of 1969)... a bunch of scum wandering around with white sticks in their hands, but no signs of trouble are foreseen. The clubhouse in the distance looks like a building from a Kentucky Derby postcard."*⁵

Although gonzo journalism is a distinct type of reportage within the news genre, its language is close to literary journalism. Gonzo journalists use emotional and expressive language to convey the events they witness to their audience. American researcher Matthew Winston, explaining the linguistic characteristics of this style in his doctoral dissertation, argues that gonzo writers employ literary devices, famous quotes as epigraphs, figurative language, hyperbole, and idioms to express their expression.⁶ Indeed, in this type of reporting, the author effectively uses the tools of artistic language in order to increase the emotionality, effectiveness, and reliability of the topic.

Professor and Doctor of Philological Sciences L.E. Kroychik considers reporting to be one of the most effective genres in journalism, as it is based on analysis and prompt transmission of information.⁷

Describing how an event unfolded is the primary goal of reporting, so truthfulness and accuracy are paramount. Although the reporter in a report is not a significant figure influencing or driving reality, they are always an active observer and commentator on this process. In a report, events are not staged but rather presented as they are. In a report, the journalist acts as an intermediary, a kind of "channel" between reality and the readers (listeners, viewers). In other words, the audience

⁵ Thompson H. //The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" // "Scanlan's Monthly". .№6. 1970

⁶ Winston M. "The Gonzo Text – The Literary Journalism of Hunter Thompson" PhD 2013. –P.18.

⁷ Кроичик Л.Е. Система журналистских жанров // Основы творческой деятельности журналиста / под ред. С.Г. Корконосенко. СПб., 2000. - С.125-168.



sees and perceives the events being reported through the eyes of the journalist. This requires a great deal of responsibility and professional skill from the journalist. The French magazine “Charlie Hebdo”, one of the exponents of gonzo journalism in contemporary Western Europe, has maintained subjectivity, radical criticism, satire, and openness of editorial position as its core principles throughout its history. First published in 1970, the magazine even then attempted to depart from traditional journalistic standards, openly ridiculing French politics, the Catholic Church, the military, and social institutions. In its early years, “Charlie Hebdo” approached the gonzo style, expanding traditional notions of press freedom and emphasizing the independence of the journalist's personality and position. This approach subsequently became the magazine's core content and aesthetic principle: to express not the events themselves, but a subjective position in their perception. Particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s, the magazine's cartoons, based on political and religious criticism, began to attract worldwide attention. Instead of aesthetic perfection, the magazine's authors sought to shake public consciousness through visual shock, shake people out of their apathy, and provoke heated debate. These aspects correspond to one of the key characteristics of gonzo journalism—the principle of reporting events not from a reality-based perspective, but through the eyes and emotions of the author. For example, although the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, published in the magazine in 2015, touched on religious sentiments, the magazine's authors defended their position as a radical form of gonzo style within the framework of “free speech.”⁸

In recent years, the magazine has maintained its politically active role, particularly through its satirical and open criticism of Emmanuel Macron in cartoons depicting the French protests against the 2023 pension reform⁹. As illustrated by the example of “Charlie Hebdo”, gonzo journalism in Western Europe is realized not only in text form but also in visual genres, particularly cartoons. This demonstrates that gonzo journalism is emerging in the contemporary information space not only as a style but also as a sharp form of critical culture.

⁸ ABC News. “Charlie Hebdo profile: Satirical French newspaper”. – URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/charlie-hebdo-profile-satirical-french-newspaper/story?id=28055374>.

⁹ Le Monde. “French pension reform: The bill has been officially promulgated. Le Monde”, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/french-pension-reform/article/2023/04/15/french-pension-reform-the-bill-has-been-officially-promulgated_6022995_234.html.



In October 2020, “Charlie Hebdo” magazine published a cartoon depicting Turkish President Erdogan with his wife.¹⁰ The cartoon depicts the president half-naked, lifting his wife's hijab, and behaving like a "whispering Islamist." Through this visual satirical material, the magazine delved into a completely personal and religious issue, which expresses the openly critical stance of gonzo journalism against censorship and religious taboos. The cartoon directly expresses the emotional state of the journalist's author - his dissatisfaction with Islamic conservatism and political authoritarianism. In particular, it uses the gonzo journalism strategy of "social awakening through provocation" by making not only official politicians but also their personal lives the object of satire. Although this cartoon caused a diplomatic scandal, it expresses the author's courage and the form of journalistic position that is consistent with the gonzo interpretation.

Furthermore, one of Europe's leading media outlets, Deutsche Welle, also publishes gonzo-style material. For example, in 2015, Deutsche Welle Español aired a report by journalist Fernando Lucena titled "Counterfeit Dollars in Lima: Peru Leads the World in Counterfeiting." It noted that Peru is the world leader in counterfeiting US dollars, and that in 2015, according to the US Secret Service, more than 16 million counterfeit dollars were discovered in the country, while Peruvian police confiscated millions of counterfeit euros. The report also noted that counterfeit money produced in Peru is often handmade and of exceptionally high quality. This explains why the country is the world leader in illegal currency trading. Journalist Fernando Lucena demonstrates these processes based on his own experience: he interacts with criminals, buys counterfeit dollars from them, and inspects them in public places to distinguish them from real ones. As a result, it turns out that in many cases, people are unable to distinguish counterfeit money from real ones. The reporter is directly involved in all processes related to this crime, from purchasing counterfeit money to counterfeiting it, and viewers, along with the reporter, observe the process from the inside.

Today, one of the main trends in journalism is the blurring of genre boundaries and the merging of different genres into one another. Therefore, styles such as "gonzo" or "human documentary" that have emerged within the framework of fiction journalism do not fit into the traditional concept of "genre". Because they do not

¹⁰ Charlie Hebdo. “Charlie accusé par Erdogan pour obscénité: C’est celui qui le dit qu’il l’est”, <https://charliehebdo.fr/2021/11/international/charlie-accuse-par-erdogan-pour-obscenite-cest-celui-qui-le-dit-quil-lest/>.



require a strict structure and can combine the features of several genres.¹¹ Therefore, the concept of “format” is considered more appropriate than the concept of “genre” to describe such journalistic phenomena. According to researcher L.A.Lazutina, “format” means a set of communicative features of an information product aimed at the audience.¹² O.Lashchuk defines format as a set of features that determine the technical parameters of content elements and the form of their presentation. G.Solganik gives a broader interpretation of format, explaining it as a set of signs that ensure the compliance of any event, event or incident with the rules and norms.¹³

Based on this, we offer the following definition: the format of journalistic material is a method of presenting information, a set of content structure elements, and a set of methodological features in the interpretation of the event. The concept of "format" is broader than "genre". For example, multimedia longrid is more of a format than a genre. Because it is a method of conveying information through multimedia means, it has a structure divided into certain blocks, it has its own style of interpretation, and it is formed according to the topic chosen by the author, the placement of multimedia elements and their analysis.

Initially, gonzo journalism was formed in print publications, in particular, in magazines such as “Rolling Stone” and “Mushtum”, but in the Internet era it acquired new communicative opportunities. The emergence of online platforms opened the way for the gonzo style to communicate directly and without censorship with the audience. This process began the transformation of gonzo journalism. Now the blog has become a natural environment for gonzo journalism. Because in the blog the author's personal voice, subjective experience and emotional approach take center stage. YouTube and other video platforms have allowed gonzo journalism to continue in a visual form. For example, Andrew Callaghan (Channel 5 project), “vDud” “GLINK”, Nick Robinson (Nick Robinson) or “Vice News” media network and YouTube projects, “gonzotoday.com”, “Snob.ru” sites, in the Uzbek media “Muhrim”, “TROLL.UZ”, “MA-News”, “Alimoff”, “Asanov

¹¹ Авдонина Н. С., Дорофеева А. А., Малахова А. М. «Человеческий документ» и «гонзо-журналистика» как форматы журналистского произведения, Северный (Арктический) федеральный университет им. М. В. Ломоносова, г. Архангельск, Россия. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/chelovecheskiy-dokument-i-gonzo-zhurnalistika-kak-formaty-zhurnalistikogo-proizvedeniya>.

¹² Лазутина Г. В. Жанр и формат в терминологии современной журналистики // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 10. Журналистика. - 2010. - № 6. - С. 14-21.

¹³ That source.



format”, “TektakMinds”, “Rais Buva”, “Devonayi Hakguy”, “Gonzo” telegram blogs, the “Subjective” project, the “Millar” TV program create modern interpretations of the gonzo style through the author’s immersion in the center of events, emotional analysis and satirical tone. In general, the Blogosphere serves as an effective platform for quickly bringing gonzo journalism to a wide audience.

According to Davit Dolidze, the development of digital media has broken the monopoly of traditional media and has given gonzo journalism new opportunities for expression and dissemination. He cites gonzo in the context of the global media market as a “new multimedia direction”, which gives grounds to see it as a rapidly developing format not only in the text section, but also on online platforms. Roksolana Bilous emphasizes that in the conditions of the information war in Ukraine, gonzo journalism is actively used as an interactive, emotional and subjective method of communication.¹⁴ This approach demonstrates that gonzo is a more flexible communicative format than its traditional form. Also, in *Online Journalism: Current Trends and Challenges*, written by Jan Wisniewski and Jana Radoszynska, the main features of online journalism are discussed, including democratic content creation, audience engagement, and the amplification of subjective voice.¹⁵ This process encourages the development of the gonzo format in digital form.

In short, today's digital media has fundamentally changed the way we transmit, consume, and respond to information. Unlike traditional journalism, modern gonzo journalism stands out as a format that has been able to adapt quickly to these transformations. In particular, blogs, social networks, podcasts, and video platforms have allowed gonzo journalism to reach a wider audience. Gonzo journalism strengthens the emotional connection with the reader through the author's participation, subjectivity, and artistic depiction of reality. Digital tools serve to amplify these characteristics. For example, gonzo journalism is now also expressed through video blogs (vlogs), Instagram posts with a “storytelling” approach, or real-time Twitter (X) analysis. However, gonzo journalism also faces certain dangers in the digital space: misinterpretations, the loss of moral responsibility behind a personal brand, or the relegation of facts to a secondary role

¹⁴ Bilous R. “Gonzo Media Texts in the Information Space of Ukraine”, *SJS*. 2025; Volume 1, Number 9: 10-18
<https://doi.org/10.23939/sjs2025.01.010>.

¹⁵ Ján Višňovský, Jana Radošinská. “Online Journalism: Current Trends and Challenges”, – URL:
<https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/54896?utm>.



in emotional news, and the rise of hate speech. Thus, the main task facing gonzo journalism in the digital information space is to balance subjectivity and emotional approach with informational accuracy, and to effectively use modern platforms while maintaining the trust of the reader.

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