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## REVIEW AND CRITICISM IN ONLINE JOURNALISM

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### Abstract

The article deals with the problematic field of distinguishing journalism genres, in an attempt to fill in the empty spaces in the theoretical reflection related to online journalism and its specific genres – review and criticism. The author presents the theoretical knowledge on etymology and history, and compares the structure, composition, audience (readers) and specific elements/attributes of the selected journalistic genres. Special emphasis is placed on the contemporary Slovak theory of journalism that has not been paying enough attention to various new phenomena related to multi-media (online) journalism. The author of the article works with a basic assumption that the existing body of Slovak literature does not take into consideration the contemporary trends in publishing reviews, critiques and other opinion-based journalistic genres. The aim of the text is to address the issue by offering both a historical overview of the related scholarly knowledge and an analysis of the current state of matters.

*Keywords:* online, journalism, opinion genres, review, journalistic theory

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### 1. Introduction

The journalistic genres are dynamical phenomena responding to all kind of inputs and suggestions. They are influenced by a given period of time, social situation, or by various inventions, new technologies, and communication resources. All of these influences lead to change in the final form of journalism genres. They can develop, interconnect, hybridise (mix), or even perish.

J. Mistrík defines a journalistic genre as a text unit that is enclosed formally. Each of such units differs from other text units (so that we can see and define different elements that appear in various texts of the same form). The genre is defined as follows: “It can be characterised by the length (difference between a novel and a short story), outer segmentation (article and contract), frequency of connectors (fairy tale and programme), stylistics (lecture – message), headline (dissertation thesis – feuilleton), extra-linguistic resources (story – official document), topic (tragedy – timetable), etc.” [1]. A. Tušer defines a genre as an abstract concept (located in the mind of an author/creator – writer, composer, artist, musician, dancer, director), which is remelted into a

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particular work (literary – novel, poem, music – ballet, opera, musical; work of art – paintings, ceramics, jewellery, etc.). Due to constant pressures of extensive information dissemination, the current trend in journalistic practice is to prioritise the content over the form of a journalistic text (a genre). This situation often causes reduction of a text's quality (since it is supposed to be a synthesis of form and content quality which results in the creation of a specific genre). Individual genres have their typical features according to which they differ from one another. Based on these, the author of the text chooses the right form, the plot, language approach, style and so on [2]. If a journalist selects a proper genre, it has positive influence on the readers.

The term 'genre' has its roots in French. We could translate it as 'kind', 'category' or 'type'. In Slovak media environment, as well as in many other national media systems, we distinguish two basic groups of journalistic genres – news (newscast) and opinion genres (concerning current affairs and more publicistic style of writing). The selected genre (review) belongs to the subcategory of so-called 'opinion genres of rational type'. In addition to the review we can find genres such as *comment*, *commentary*, *editorial*, *reflection*, various forms of *analysis*, *journalistic interviews*, *editorial discussion* and *controversy (polemics)* [3]. Authors of such texts usually incorporate logical and conceptual rendering (analysis – synthesis, induction – deduction, abstraction – concreteness, exploration, comparison, questioning and arguing). They also often use interpretative stylistic approach, such text being closer to the so-called educational style [2, p. 144-145]. The mentioned division is used in and applied mainly to the print newspapers, but not in case of the online media (however, it is necessary to bear in mind that the Internet has influenced also the journalistic genres in print media – their form, length, language tools, stylistic procedures but also topics – since the print media have started to pay more attention to more complicated current affairs, interviews and mostly commentaries, because 'instant' news is the main 'domain' of online journalism). We argue that the current situation which includes major increase of various online news portals, online periodicals, weblogs, open access to citizen journalism etc., requires the revitalisation, respectively the update of the categorization of journalism genres – both in print and online journalism.

## 2. Review

The term 'review' has its roots in the Latin word '*recensio*' which refers to testimonials and reports. The genesis of this genre is associated primarily with so-called 'annotation note'. It was (and still exists as) a short text used by librarians when they wanted to differentiate titles. It was needed because of a rapid increase in book production. Evidence of regular (weekly) based reviews (analyses and criticisms) of new publications is associated with the French journal *Journal des Savants* (1665) [4]. In Slovakia this genre comes to life and gets more attention much later – in 1809. Back then, a pioneering study of Ján Feješ, called *Of Reviewers and Reviews*, was published. He devoted his text to

explanation of a role and basic attributes and attitudes of a proper evaluation of literary works and a role of reviewers (critics). He warned them: “Let every reviewer himself to try to deliver the book that would not contain anything of what once has been told by others, that would be full of new truths,...” and put on these essential requirements: *modesty* (not to override an author of a work), *patience and perseverance* (while evaluating emphasise deficiency, but also raise its qualities), *justification* (good arguments and evidences that support claims of a reviewer), *author* (necessity of stating name of a particular reviewer, signing texts, so that the audience and authors – writers of books – know who is criticising and praising their work) and *not pettiness* (because, according to him, a reviewer should not pay too much attention to little things that are not dominant). He also advised them to remember the basic fact – it is easier to criticise rather than to write it [5].

According to the current situation of journalistic genres (considering reviews published in daily newspapers, weekly or monthly magazines and online portals), a review is a genre that is used by authors who want to introduce selected works (usually pieces of art) to a wider audience and evaluate (criticise, comment or praise) their content, form and their overall benefits. It usually associates with texts that judge concrete artistic artefacts (from various fields – for example literature, theatre, visual arts, music, film, TV, PC games, CDs, DVDs and others), cultural events (concerts, festivals, exhibitions, shows, etc.) or scientific works (monographs, textbooks, studies, et al.). A current (Slovak) theoretical reflection, however, ignores the increasing trend of writing reviews on services (e.g. assessment of qualities of restaurants, bars, cafes, hotels), technological developments (mobile phones, tablets, cameras, PCs, applications, GPS, multifunction devices, etc.) which are an important part of contemporary newspapers (their both – print and online – forms) [6]

We have argued before that the review is one of the most universal journalistic genres [6, p. 44]. Although it does not have a fixed (requested) structure (the exact definition of what kind of information it should contain and in what way/how should they be sorted out), it has a similar form in all countries so readers of newspapers/websites automatically know what kind of genre they encounter. Slovak theorists (linguists, journalists, genre experts) mention the theoretical grasp of the review – its inclusion in subcategory of opinion genres (specifically in the journalism of the rational type), its classification (review – expert’s reference, review – critique, review – with a teaser, critical reviews, publicistic reviews, self-review, internal review and others). In relation to English news and opinion genres (that can be also applied to the Slovak practice) J. Vojtek recognises review as including news reporting, so-called *reportorial review* and review in which dominates an author’s personal impression (which is reflected in the language – using subjective judgements, more emotional expressions and less attention is paid to information, this kind of review occurs more frequently) [7]. The interesting fact is that English-writing authors do not focus on theoretical grasp of a genre; their publications are of more practical nature. They often offer advice about how to write reviews and criticism, to what

reviewers should pay attention, what kind of elements they should include into their texts, etc. [8-10]. This kind of information would be very useful, especially for journalists – and other people who would like to improve the expression of their opinions, ideas and remarks.

### **2.1. Form, respectively subgenres of the review**

Review may be divided, depending on a target audience, into a few basic forms. We still pertract the older typology by Š. Veľas, even though some of the contemporary authors (including the author of the present article) consider this division an older concept that needs to be updated. Š. Veľas recognises three basic forms of the genre: 1. *Review – Qualified Opinion* (sub-genre, which falls under so-called ‘mini-reviews’ and short reviews of films on programme-pages of dailies, weeklies or magazines with lower periodicity) 2. *Review – Criticism* and 3. *Review – With Examples* (specific texts/documents/additions that support arguments of a reviewer) [3, p. 20].

*Reviews – Qualified Opinions* are texts which can be found in universal magazines (in Slovakia, for example dailies *Sme*, *Pravda*, *Hospodárske noviny*, *Denník N*, as well as weeklies and lifestyle weekly magazines, periodicals published on bi-weekly or monthly basis, from foreign newspapers we can mention daily *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*). The main aim of these texts is to inform readers and introduce them to important or interesting, usually new cultural events. The language of such texts is also adapted to this goal (e.g. avoiding difficult expressions, using professional terminology, in-depth analysis is also required). After reading of a review a reader usually gets the essential information regarding a type of art, a selected genre, the place and time of an event/product/service, the quality or lagging sites of the works, cons but also its attractions and aesthetical benefits. So while writing a text, an author (reviewer) thinks about the audience. The author has to adapt means of expression, formulations, structure of sentences and so on (e.g. not use too long sentences, too many technical and professional terms, and to omit the ambiguous expressions, etc.). In what concerns the length of reviews, it tends to be conceived differently – depending on whether they are published in printed periodicals (often only a quarter or half of a newspaper page) or online (usually longer texts with more pictures and often with videos). Overall, reviews tend to be shorter than criticisms. Majority of the public knows this subgenre and refers to it as ‘review’.

*Criticism* (also known as *critique*) is a subgenre that readers find mostly on pages of specialised periodicals (in Slovakia bi-weeklies, monthlies – *film.sk*, *Musical Life*, *PC Revue*, bi-monthlies – *Kinečko*, *Atrium*). Sometimes it occurs also in daily newspapers (mostly in Saturday’s expanded editions of quality newspapers – *Pravda*, *Sme*, *Denník N*). The origin of the word comes from the Greek concept *kriteion* (considering)/*kritein* (to select, motivate, evaluate, judge) [11]. We can distinguish this form from ‘review’ by several aspects. 1. The target audience is not the general public, but professional public (thus recipients who

are interested in selected field of problematics and they know about it) as well as authors of criticised works (e.g. directors, writers, composers, actors, etc.). 2. While in the 'review' the informative character was dominant, the criticism is more about evaluating and expressing personal impressions, defying pros and cons, supporting claims by concrete examples from the works. 3. It also covers a range of means of expression of an author who incorporates technical and professional terminology, deeper and more consistent analysis, arguments of his claims, and often uses complicated compound sentences and rugged expressions (because he/she knows he/she may do so, the target audience will understand since it is seriously interested and its members know such terminology, history, important personalities, etc.). 4. Since it is deeper, the role of an author is not only to inform but also to guide readers to understand the assessed work, he/she supports his/her individual judgments by giving specific examples, criticism is longer (than review). As in the case of reviews, it can be assigned to different forms of various arts – and so we distinguish literary, book, theatre, film, music, media, television criticism and many others.

The third form of review (according to Š. Veľas) is '*review with examples*'. The author of the article, however, inclines to the opinion of A. Tušer and T. Rončáková who, in light of the current journalism practice, operate only with the previous two forms – review and criticism. A subgenre of 'review with demonstrations' was important especially in the last decades before increase of online journalism that has become an important part of daily life. It was the interconnection of a text with various previews (usually photos, the quotes – concrete passages – from novels or other books which were evaluated). Nowadays it is very rare situation to see a review that does not consist of an attachment of this kind.

We argue to include into the Slovak division of the genre of the review a 'new' form/subgenre. This is an intermediate stage between review and criticism where an author (reviewer) uses simpler language and he/she informs readers about new artefacts/services/products. It already exists (has existed for a long time) in Anglo-Saxon terminology where it is called '*review criticism*'. This sub-genre occurs in the daily press, various weeklies, magazines and in online environment as well. It combines elements of the two above-mentioned forms (reviews and critiques/criticisms). It usually informs readers about an artistic work, pays attention to its core strengths and weaknesses, and it is often accompanied by supporting arguments and statements. For instance, if we talk about reviews of films, a reviewer can focus on a previous work of the director, cast (in case of discussing a leading role of the main actor and its features, a reviewer can mention also his previous projects), compare the reviewed work with other contemporary art works or movies that were shot in the past, he/she can mention the quality of script, set design, special effects, music and others. Although the text is written in simple language (for the general public), it provides more information and better orientation, clarification than typical review.

The Internet and online journalism era has brought new ways of thinking, options, surveys, advantages, but also disadvantages. One of the increasingly emerging debates about journalistic genres is the problem of their hybridisation. This can be also applied to the genre of review. Readers (and also the professional audience) can often be confused with a news genre – most often with ‘news’ genre so-called ‘report’, also with ‘referring news’ as well as with various journalistic genres; e.g. reviews can take a form of ‘notes’, sometimes also ‘analyses’, they may work with specific elements of ‘journalism interview’ (genres of journalism of rational type), ‘feuilletons’ and even ‘essays’ (journalistic genres of emotional type).

### **3. Reviews in the traditional and online journalism**

The Internet and the development of online journalism have brought a significant turn in writing and publishing all journalistic genres and journalistic texts, including reviews. It provides new opportunities to influence the final form of journalistic (and other) texts. For more information see also the contribution from authors Ján Višňovský, Jana Radošinská and Anna Predmerská [12]. The Czech theorist V. Bednář states that the most evident changes that came with the Internet are as follows: *disconnection of time* (while journalists in the print media, TV or radio have to keep the deadlines, the work in online editorial offices is non-sequential), *the convergence of formats* (linking different kinds and types of content – text and image – which can be divided into *static*, photographs and illustrations, and *mobile*, video or *audio*, audio recordings), *feedback* (reactions, particularly from readers), *interactivity* (e.g. discussions about pros and cons, arguing, etc.), *the existence of virtual genres* (possibilities of continuous updating), and *different criteria of success* (while print periodicals depend on price, number of readers, price of advertising and others, the criterion of success for the electronic media is viewership, the ability to sell advertising but also encourage quoting and sharing) [13]. Addressing the issue of writing reviews we cannot omit the main advantages of online journalism that have changed a lot:

- *hyperlinks* – and options of ‘click-throughs’ mediated content, disseminating knowledge, possibility of identifying a specific set of topics a reader is interested in;
- *convergence of formats* – usage of text documents combined with photographs and audio recordings or videos (e.g. for movie reviews/critiques a reviewer can attach a trailer, interviews with filmmakers/actors, capture special effects, attach chosen musical examples in phonetic form and so on);
- *length* – it is not limited by characters (as in the case of print media), but options of publications are open (the range is chosen according to needs of an author, the width of his knowledge);
- *interactivity* (communicative audience and its members may express their opinions, decide to oppose a thesis outlined by an author).

The increase of online journalism is deeply interconnected and related to the above-mentioned fact – the emergence of a new sub-genre ‘Review Criticism’: that still becomes a more and more widespread form of review, distinguished by length, attachments and broader range of text content. It is a popular genre that is published in traditional periodicals as well as on various websites dedicated to art, new technologies and advances in science as well (e.g. [www.kinema.sk](http://www.kinema.sk), [cinemaview.sk](http://www.cinemaview.sk), <http://filmkult.refresher.sk/filmy>, <http://www.sector.sk/recenzie>).

Depending on the target audience (readers), the situation in the case of print periodicals (newspapers and magazines) is the same as in terms of online periodicals – we distinguish between two (in the Anglo-Saxon concept between three) basic groups of periodicals: *quality broadsheets* and *tabloids /red-tops*. The first of these groups (the elite press) is also referred to as ‘opinion-making’ kind of press. It is characterised by a serious approach to the processing of topics, by delivering significant current matters which affect functioning of the society, verification of sources, cultivated language (stylistics, correct grammar, literary words, not by sensational expressions and slangs), more consistent emphasis is placed on language and speech as well. Their readership usually consists of university educated readers who are interested in domestic and foreign news, topics related to economics, finance, social life, cultural life, advances in science and technology as well as sports. In the case of daily newspapers (dailies) news genres prevail but some space is devoted also to opinion genres (review is one of the most common of these genres making a stable part of dailies). Criticisms (critiques) occur only occasionally, in some cases they are a part of extended weekend editions. Representatives of daily newspapers on the Slovak market are the dailies *SME* (in English *We Are*), *Denník N* (in English *Daily N*), *Pravda* (in English *The Truth*) and *Hospodárske noviny* (in English *Economic News*).

On the other hand, the opposite of the serious press is a group of periodicals called ‘tabloids’. The most popular Slovak tabloid newspapers are represented by the dailies *Nový Čas* (in English *New Time*) and *Plus jeden deň* (in English *Plus One Day*). A typical feature is its formal division – dynamic structure, expressive graphics, ‘catchy’ headlines with frequent punctuation, continuous minimisation (shortening) of the text, visualization (increasing amount and emphasis on image attachments, clarity achieved by stoking tables, graphs and various illustrations). The dominant part of its content is characterised by ‘sensational’ topics about domestic and foreign political and social events that bring a lot of gossip, information from private lives of celebrities, politicians, athletes and others. Apart from news you can find here also the opinion genres but just to a lower extent, reviews are very rare (they almost do not occur in these periodicals).

The so-called mid-market/middle-market press consists of periodicals in which the reader can find serious news, but also fun and leisure reading and non-journalistic texts. In terms of content we could define them as ‘weaker’ reputable/elite periodicals (but they are still at a higher level of overall quality

and put different focus on topics than tabloids). Formally they are closer to the tabloid press – dynamic graphics, expressive colour, work with headlines, different fonts, visualisation, etc.). The famous representatives of this group of the press are the English *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. Reviews appear regularly, on a daily basis.

#### 4. Conclusions

Review is one of a very few journalistic genres which are very similar (in terms of their structure and content) in different countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, England, United States, Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, Romania, etc.). It can be defined as an analytical and evaluating text, written for a wider or specific audience (depending on its particular form – Review vs. Criticism). Authors usually use it in case of evaluating works of art (literature, theatre, music, film, television and radio broadcasting), cultural events (concerts, openings, festivals, warm-ups and the like) but also to assess new technologies, services (bars, cafes, restaurants), holiday destinations (hotels, resorts, programmes, etc.). The Slovak theory of journalism genres is treated in detail and thoroughly, it recognises various groups and sub-groups of journalistic genres, and defines basic attributes (of their main groups and specific genres as well). The Anglo-Saxon concept focuses on bringing practical advice for novice journalists (in this case reviewers), so experienced critics and reviewers offer many useful comments on how to approach to the creation of texts, what they should consider, what should they be aware of. The Slovak theory (considering journalistic genres) still lacks these ‘practical guides’ – sources that would include practical information, not only theoretical categorisations.

The theoretical reflection on journalistic genres in the English written journalism [14] also brings another interesting concept. It would be appropriate to integrate it into the domestic theory – to theoretically anchor a thus scholarly establish a new sub-genre, a Slovak version of the English ‘review criticism’ – a kind of combination of reviews and criticisms. These texts frequently occur in practice, but they are absent in theoretical contributions.

Another important and major factor is the lack of theoretical processing of journalistic genres published online (on various portals). Not only reviews, but in many aspects also other works of journalists and thus content of all kinds of texts show great variation under the influence of the Internet. The most significant recent trends include:

- *visualisation* – forefront of the visual side of periodicals (online periodicals use options of visualisation to full extent, they work with galleries, accompanied by visual, audio-visual but also audio materials);
- *hybridisation* – mingling, crossing, passing away of various journalistic genres (and their forms);

- *tabloidization* – connected with penetration of ‘improper’/not suitable topics into serious issues of periodicals (bringing more sensational subjects, paying attention to less significant details even on pages of quality periodicals);
- *internationalization* [15], mostly *Americanisation and Anglicisation* – bringing and using foreign words into the Slovak periodicals (the audience often gets used to these terms and uses them also in their daily communication).

For more information about advantages and disadvantages of the Internet in relation to journalism and media production, see also the contribution of A. Plencner [16]. Several authors perceive review and criticism as synonymous terms but this approach, as we suggest, is not quite adequate. We can clearly distinguish between a review (a genre used for informing an audience about current cultural events, works of art, scientific publications but also – and the theorists forget about it frequently – new technologies, services and others. Readers may find these types of text on pages of quality dailies, but, of course, also on pages of various leisure weeklies and other periodicals). The language of such texts is simpler so that the wide audience could understand it. Its character is more informative (they provide basic information about products – place, date, information about author/s, protagonist/s, etc.).

Criticism can be defined as evaluation, as expression of opinions of its author which is more complex than just an information summary. It also shows the impact and impression of a piece of work (film, literary work), often comparing the current and previous production of an author and the like. The combination of Review and Criticism, i.e. Review Criticism, includes elements of both and occurs most often [17].

The current situation concerning the online journalism necessarily requires revitalisation and the update of the categorisation of journalism genres – both in print and online journalism.

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