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Reportage between Periodical and Journalism Studies: From Encounter to Exchange?

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ABSTRACT

This contribution starts from the assumption that reportage, as a genre positioned between documentary and literary modes, offers a unique opportunity for dialogue between periodical studies and journalism studies. Within journalism studies, reportage is often discussed as an epistemological challenge. How can the journalist be both witness and narrator? How is the tension between fact and interpretation negotiated, and in what ways is the reader's trust established? Although recent developments in journalism studies have questioned the long dominant notions of objectivity and standardization, pivotal to journalism as a profession, reportage is still frequently understood as a two-part entity in which information and its narration can be clearly distinguished. However, scholars such as Pascal Sigg have emphasized that reportage is not merely a journalistic genre but a way of understanding social reality through experience and engagement with reporters acting as 'human media'. Periodical studies, by contrast, offers a diachronic perspective that makes it possible to trace the complex evolution of genres over time in relation to both social context and media infrastructure. In this field note, I explore the development of reportage in the Yugoslav student newspaper *Student* over the course of three decades (1937–68) to show how the intersection and synergy of journalism studies and periodical studies methodologies reveal mechanisms of meaningmaking in reportage that would otherwise remain obscured. In this way, reportage becomes a site of encounter: a genre that demands theoretical reflection on knowledge and truth, but also empirical analysis of how it is produced, published, and read within the periodical context. Thus, this field note argues that the epistemological and methodological exchange between journalism studies and periodical studies, examined through the (fate of) reportage, can contribute to a more nuanced and profound understanding of publics in both the past and the present.

KEYWORDS

reportage, literary journalism, journalism studies, human media

Introduction: Why Reportage?

Reportage has long occupied an ambiguous position between journalism and literature, between documentation and narration, between witnessing and storytelling, which renders it an epitome of hybridity from the perspective of literary studies. Precisely because of this hybridity, reportage offers a productive site for methodological exchange between journalism studies and periodical studies. Although there are many theories of journalism, they share an interest in the position of a journalist as a common ground, while the media organization remains the macro-level of analysis. As Karmen Erjavec and Jožica Zajc conclude in their historical overview of approaches to journalism studies, the greatest challenge for journalism studies is 'the formulation of a basic epistemological consensus and laying out the integration theory of journalism that would include the link between the macro, medium, and micro level'.[1] The same challenge of epistemological (dis)agreement between the various levels of analysis can be observed in periodical studies. Reportage thus could be seen as an ideal case study to reflect on the relationship between the theory of journalism and periodical studies. Unlike other journalistic genres, such as news or interviews, reportage is an unambiguous example of *mediatized reality* because it usually presents lived experience or verifiable occurrences already shaped, framed, and transformed through the narrative, visual, and institutional logics of the media that produce it.[2] At first glance, the methodological intersections and crossroads of both fields can be observed in the way these fields conceptualize the very nature of reportage. *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* does not recognize the word 'reportage' as a separate term. Instead, it gives the following explanation for *the reporter*:

A journalist who gathers material to be published as a news report, i.e. a story, or a feature. The earliest usage recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary to denote people working for newspapers is from 1798, in the USA. This usage evolved from the British medieval use of the word to describe a recounter or narrator. A general news reporter is usually low-ranking in a media organization, though he/she may progress to be a specialist reporter with particular expertise e.g. a crime reporter, medical reporter, showbiz reporter, diplomatic correspondent.[3]

This explanation, especially the distinction between news reports, regarded as mere information about events, and feature articles, pieces of narration that offer interpretation and in-depth analysis, outlines reporting as a two-step process that includes gathering information and arranging it as two different activities. This perspective is primarily synchronic. In contrast, periodical studies, as expected, views historical evolution as a crucial aspect of defining the reportage as a genre. Dolores-Palau Sampio and Antonio Cuartero begin their essay 'The evolution and hybridization of reportage: characteristics of the genre in two of the oldest Spanish newspapers, *La Vanguardia* and *ABC* (1982–2018)' with the following summary:

> Thus, it is not mere chance that more complex categories such as reportage have been consolidated posterior to informative genres such as the news, as the press has begun to compete with other media that have a greater commitment to urgency. Publication of the first reportage pieces in the US press dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, and during the subsequent decades, it underwent a significant

1 Karmen Erjavec and Jožica Zajc, 'A Historical Overview of Approaches to Journalism Studies', *Medijska istraživanja,* 17.1–2 (2011), pp. 9–29 (p. 26).

2 Pascal Sigg, *Mediating the Real: Self-Reflection in Recent American Reportage* (Swiss National Science Foundation, 2024).

3 Bob Franklin, Martin Hamer, Mark Hanna, Marie Kinsey, and John E. Richardson, *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* (Sage, 2005), p. 234.

> evolution, coinciding with the conditions of the press itself and closely related to the design of news products. In Spain, this genre started to gain visibility in the 1930s, and it gradually achieved a strong position as one of the main narrative genres.[4]

While journalism studies approaches reportage as an epistemological and organizational problem, which is to say how journalists come to know, see, and narrate within a specific media structure, periodical studies foregrounds the material, institutional, and serial contexts in which reportage circulates. Most studies in journalism arrive at the insight that reportage equals literary journalism because it employs literary devices to narrate the story. This also means that journalism studies come into dialogue more frequently with literary studies (narratology) than periodical research. However, the hybridity so characteristic of reportage is not limited to its multiple discourses (informative vs. literary) but also refers to its generic complexity. As Palau-Sampio and Cuartero remark, reportage spontaneously tends to hybridize with other genres.[5] Roughly, we could say that journalism studies illuminates how reportage produces knowledge, while periodical studies reveals how reportage circulates and acts in a specific periodical context as part of a broader socio-intellectual environment.

Reportage Beyond Literary Text

This field note demonstrates how these two perspectives are not only compatible but can be mutually enriching. Starting from the idea that reportage is a genre uniquely suited to illustrate the complementarity between journalism studies and periodical studies, the first part of my analysis will show how periodical studies allows us to see what literary scholarship often overlooks: reportage's deep embeddedness in historical, social, and political contexts and its capacity to convey political messages through literary means. *Student*, the iconic Yugoslav student newspaper, illustrates this tendency. Known as the voice and primary platform of the students of Belgrade University, the paper launched its first issue on 15 March 1937, at the moment when the student movement in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was defining itself as explicitly antifascist. *Student* became the movement's official medium. This newspaper continued to be published well into the twentieth century. The politically mobilizing potential of reportage is evident in the fact that reportages published in *Student* played a crucial role in shaping the social consciousness of Belgrade University students on the eve of the Second World War, and later, that these became a fundamental instrument of public mobilization during the student demonstrations of June 1968. Given that *Student*'s discourse was centered around advocating class equality, social justice, and democracy, reportage became one of its most prominent genres, especially in historically turbulent periods such as the 1930s and the Yugoslav version of the New Left movement in the late 1960s. In the interwar period, *Student* operated under a monarchist regime that maintained semi-direct cooperation with the Axis powers. In 1968, it became the media platform of the student movement, which rebelled against the nominally socialist authorities who had in practice abandoned the ideals of solidarity and equality. On the eve of the mass demonstrations, *Student* regularly reported on impoverished and disenfranchised communities.

In the second part of the analysis, drawing on Pascal Sigg's insights into the reporter as a 'human medium', I show that the methodological tools of journalism

4 Dolores Palau-Sampio and Antonio Cuartero, 'The evolution and hybridization of reportage: characteristics of the genre in *La Vanguardia* and *ABC* (1982–2018)', *Communication & Society*, 35.4 (2022), pp. 55–70 (p. 55).

5 Ibid., p. 64.

studies shed light on an aspect that periodical studies alone cannot fully capture: the epistemological properties of reportage that enable a deeper, more intimate connection with readers, one that cannot be explained solely through propaganda or ideological effect.[6] Journalism studies helps us understand how the genre's reliance on embodied perception, subjective experience, and narrative self-positioning produces a mode of knowledge that is affective, relational, and grounded in human presence. In this sense, while periodical studies reveals *why* reportage mattered both culturally and politically within *Student*, journalism studies reveals *how* reportage works at the level of cognition, emotion, and trust established between reporters and readers. Together, these perspectives underscore that reportage is not only a vehicle of political communication but also a distinctive epistemic form capable of generating identification, emotional connection, and ethical engagement beyond the logic of persuasion and propaganda. A useful starting point is the way reportage has traditionally been defined in the Yugoslav scholarly context. In the second, extended edition of *Rečnik književnih termina* [*Dictionary of Literary Terms*] (1986), Slobodan Ž. Marković describes reportage as,

> A journalistic presentation of real events that evokes atmosphere and highlights the most essential moments of an occurrence or the most characteristic traits of people. The writer of a reportage uses literary devices to depict an event or a person: description, characterization, dialogue.[7]

This definition foregrounds two central features of this genre: the documentary nature of reportage and its tendency to present what is typical or paradigmatic in events and personalities. In doing so, it aligns itself with a theoretical position that emphasizes the unity of the journalistic and literary dimensions of reportage, in contrast to approaches that stress the dialectical tension between the two. Yet this definition also reveals its limitations. It reflects a canon oriented perspective that isolates reportage as a textual form rather than a practice embedded in the material and experiential conditions of periodical culture. What it overlooks is precisely what periodical studies has sought to restore: the fact that reportage emerged from direct contact with lived experience. As Cecilia Aare explains, reportage as a genre was born when journalists 'left the newsroom and began roaming the cities of Europe and the United States to depict whatever came their way'.[8] From the perspective of periodical studies, this experiential origin is not incidental but constitutive. It means that the meaning-making mechanism in reportage cannot be understood by relying primarily or solely on its stylistic features; it must also be situated within the social, political, and material contexts of the periodicals in which it appears. This is also the point where modern periodical studies becomes indispensable. Its function, as Patrick Collier argues, is 'to enrich our knowledge of the primary archive and the cultural, historical, and material contexts of modernism'.[9] When applied to Yugoslav periodicals, and even more specifically to reportage in *Student,* this approach reveals dimensions of this genre that literary definitions fail to recognize. *Student* offers a particularly illuminating case. Periodical studies allows us to see that reportage in *Student* functioned both as a means of apprehending reality and an

6 Sigg, *Mediating the Real*, 13.

7 'publicističko prikazivanje realnih događaja, kojim se dočarava atmosfera i predstavljaju najbitniji momenti nekog zbivanja ili najkarakterističnije odlike ljudi. Pisac r. koristi književna sredstva za prikazivanje nekog događaja ili ličnosti: opis, karakterizaciju, dijalog'. *Rečnik književnih termina* (Nolit, 1986), p. 697.

8 Cecilia Aare, 'A Typology of Literary Journalism', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* 14. 1 (2022), p. 1–33 (p. 2).

9 Patrick Collier, 'What is Modern Periodical Studies?', *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 6. 2 (2015), pp. 92–111 (p. 98).

instrument of political mobilization shaped by the rhythms, constraints, and ambitions of the periodical itself. It also helps explain a broader cultural phenomenon: the major return of realist poetics in Serbian and Yugoslav literature of the 1960s and 1970s. This new realism, often referred to as *stvarnosna proza* (the reality prose), was grounded in the demystification of socialist reality, challenging the one-sided representation of Yugoslavia as a progressive, democratic society of joy and abundance. In art history and film studies, this aesthetic became widely known as the 'Black Wave', remembered for its unflinching portrayal of social inequality and disillusionment.[10] Periodical research reveals that reportage, especially that published in *Student*, provided the thematic and poetic foundation for this new wave of realism. More importantly, it demonstrates *why* such a return was impactful in both literary circles and broader reading audiences.

Narrating Reality, Reporting Truth

Before the Second World War, reportage in *Student* closely followed the model of Ilya Ehrenburg and JeanRichard Bloch, journalists and reporters whose work was inextricably tied to the mobilization of antifascist forces and the Popular Front. In both cases, reportage aimed to prompt readers to action. Yet this was a moment in which, at least within democratic and leftwing circles, a broad consensus about what constituted social reality and how one ought to relate to it still existed. That consensus was strengthened in part by the fact that antifascist periodical culture functioned as a *counterpublic*, a sphere of discourse formed by marginalized or oppositional groups who create alternative channels of communication to oppose dominant narratives.[11] By the 1960s, however, Yugoslav society witnessed an ever-growing divergence between the socialist authorities, who presented themselves as the institutional Left, and the student movement, which increasingly aligned with the principles of the 'New Left', termed as a 'democratic socialism' or 'socialism from below'. As a result, the function of reportage was no longer limited to social activism and political opposition. It now genuinely *revealed* to readers the reality of poverty and social injustice, conditions that had become barely visible in the official public sphere. This is particularly evident in the reportages published by writer Milisav Savić in *Student* in 1968. Savić was also one of the most prominent representatives of the Serbian wave of 'reality prose'. In describing the journalistic profile of the texts published in *Student*, Savić used the phrase 'true reportage' to denote both his personal and the editorial board's collective commitment to veritable reporting and to expose the mechanisms and strategies that enabled corruption and acquisition of wealth at the expense of the working classes. Also, he remarked that 'the shortcomings of true reportage lie in the fact that some people, for various reasons, do not want to say what they really think'.[12] The most illustrative examples of 'true reportage' in *Student* during 1968 include Savić's striking depiction of student living standards and the reportage entitled 'From Shack to Shack' ['Iz barake u baraku'], coauthored with Branka Otašević. This article also carries the subtitle 'true reportage', accompanied by an introductory explanation of the term:

> Several workers wrote to us. They invited us to come and see where and how they live. Their letters encouraged us to open a section in which we will publish reportages predominantly of a social character. We want to offer a truthful picture

10 Radina Vučetić, 'Jugoslovenska 1968 – bunkerisanje filmske revolucije', *The Journal of Modern Art History Department Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade*, 14. 1. (2018), pp. 87–105.

11 Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Texts* 25. 2 (1990), pp. 56–80.

12 Milisav Savić, *Šestdesetosmaš: priče, reportaže i intervjui iz Studenta '68* (Službeni glasnik, 2016), p. 111.

> of the lives of those who earn 300 new dinars a month, who live in shacks, hovels, basements, and barracks, for whom it is a holiday when they have a piece of beef for lunch.[13]

What follows is a reportage on working-class families who had been living for years in substandard settlements, whose inhabitants were often suffering from malnutrition and tuberculosis while waiting for their enterprises to allocate social housing. Upon leaving the shack in which one of these poor people, Bogdan Tomović, a bricklayer and skilled worker, lived, the *Student* reporters observed: 'As we stepped outside, we met a middle-aged man in a red cotton shirt and a blue limestained sweater, torn at the elbows. Bogdan told us that the man in front of us lives with his family of seven in a single room.'[14]

Medium Level of Analysis: The Role of the Reporter

In the previous section, I demonstrated what periodical studies can grasp that literary studies often fails to acknowledge. Reportage in *Student* provided a sort of 'literacy training' through which readers learned to recognize and verbalize injustice, thus preparing the ground for 'reality prose' to emerge as a poetic tendency that would eventually become dominant and highly influential in its own time. This also explains why the realistic (re)turn has such a welcoming reception in Yugoslav culture. The passage quoted above, however, reveals aspects that are not frequently examined or emphasized in periodical studies. If the highest level of abstraction is the periodical as a meaningmaking infrastructure, and the lowest level is the text itself, periodical studies often overlooks the layer in between — in this case, the role of the reporter. As we can see in the example of Milisav Savić's reportage, the reporter does not merely record information about material conditions (for instance, torn clothing, a seven-member family living in a single room, a salary of 300 dinars), but also conveys the atmosphere that enables us to see the world from the perspective of a person living such a life. Recognizing the limitations of journalism studies in its sometimes excessive focus on professional standards of objectivity, Pascal Sigg, as I have previously suggested, developed a theory of the uniqueness of reportage within the system of journalistic genres precisely because the reporter functions as a human medium. Seen from this perspective, the methodological contribution of journalism studies offers a crucial complement to the insights gained from periodical studies. Sigg argues that reportage occupies a unique epistemological position within journalism because the reporter's embodied presence, sensory perception, and subjective engagement actively shape the knowledge the text produces.[15] Unlike standardized news formats that strive for neutrality and depersonalization, reportage integrates witnessing, interpretation, and affective response into a unified mode of knowing. Its credibility does not stem from claims to objectivity but from the transparency of the reporter's situated perspective and the invitation to perceive the world through another person's embodied experience.[16] When applied to Milisav

13 'Pisalo nam je nekoliko radnika. Pozvali su nas da vidimo gde i kako žive. Pisma su nas podstakla da otvorimo rubriku u kojoj ćemo objavljivati reportaže pretežno socijalnog karaktera. Želimo da pružimo istinitu sliku o životu onih koji primaju 300 novih dinara mesečno, koji stanuju u straćarama, ćumezima, podrumima i barakama, kojima je praznik kada za ručak imaju parče govedine'. Milisav Savić i Branka Otašević, 'Iz barake u baraku', *Student*, no. 21 (1 November 1968), p. 10.

14 Kada smo izašli, sreli smo sredovečnog čoveka u crvenoj platnenoj košulji i plavom krečnjavom džemperu, pocepanom na laktovima. Bogdan reče da čovek pred nama sa sedmočlanom porodicom stanuje u jednoj sobi. Ibid.

15 Sigg, *Mediatized realities*, pp. 45–47.

16 Ibid, p. 55.

Savić's 'true reportages', this framework illuminates precisely what periodical studies alone cannot fully capture. As shown earlier, periodical studies helps us understand *why* reportage in *Student* emerged as a crucial medium for articulating social injustice and for preparing the ground for the later rise of 'reality prose'. Yet Sigg's perspective reveals *how* Savić's reportages work at the level of mediation, which transcends propagandist or ideological persuasion: he does not merely document material conditions but conveys an atmosphere of despair and claustrophobia. Savić's insistence on the specificity of his own sensory and ethical engagement mirrors what Sigg identifies as the political force of self-reflexive reportage. It is the reporter's refusal to let human experience be reduced to reproducible journalistic routines or to an interpretive logic that eventually can naturalize inequality as an inevitable feature of human society.[17]

Towards Exchange

Periodical studies illuminates the infrastructural, social, and ideological conditions that made such reportages possible within *Student*, while Sigg's theory clarifies the epistemological and affective mechanisms through which reportage transforms lived experience into shared knowledge of society. The example of Savić thus demonstrates that only by combining these approaches can we fully grasp both the cultural function and the affective force of reportage in the Yugoslav context. The study of periodicals allows us to connect media codes, modalities, and individual texts with relative clarity, enabling a comprehensive perspective. Journalism studies, on the other hand, allows us to remain grounded in empirical material and to learn how to recognize the meso-level of meaning-making processes. The methodological exchange between periodical studies and journalism studies, thus, concretizes Patrick Collier's insight, which also sounds like a research manifesto: 'Empirical studies can ultimately become the material on which larger synoptic hypotheses are built. Conversely, they have the salutary effect of disrupting large and inevitably reductive historical narratives by insisting on the intransigent complexity of the particular.'[18] Both the epistemological position of a reporter and the historical development of the reportage as a genre embody such complexities of the particular.

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17 Ibid, p. 282.
18 Collier, 'What is Modern Periodical Studies?', p. 108.