

Genres and journalistic formats: a classification model

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José Marques de Melo

(Universidade Metodista de São Paulo, Escola de Comunicação, Educação e Humanidades, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social. Cátedra Unesco/Metodista de Comunicação para o Desenvolvimento Regional. São Bernardo do Campo – SP, Brasil)

Francisco de Assis

(Centro Universitário Fiam-Faam, Escola de Comunicação, Mestrado Profissional em Jornalismo. São Paulo – SP, Brasil)

Abstract

Amongst conceptual divergences about regular press production, this article aims to propose a classification model to improve the understanding on such matter, deep-rooted on a communicational perspective, paying attention to Journalism particular rituals. Based on bibliographical research and considering empirical investigation results, systematically attained during several years, the defense here presented states that journalistic messages must be understood from two steps subdivisions: the genres and the formats subjected to them. From this point of view, the aim is to organize the parameters that orientate one of the most adopted classifications in Brazil, avoiding distorted appreciations.

Keywords: Journalism theory. Brazilian Journalism. Journalistic genres. Journalistic formats. Journalistic practice.

The introduction

This article presents the systematization of a classification model to recognize and organize the materials classes regularly practiced within the press – especially the Brazilian press, to which we have devoted special attention to our research.

Our goal here is to reflect on the theoretical foundations that support this proposal of Journalism classification, placing more properly the perspective which we have worked with and hence clarifying questions which are possibly not well understood and/or often misinterpreted.

In methodological terms, we make use of literature and consider a large extent, the results of empirical research that we have conducted and accompanied over the years¹, which offer us the main subsidies to the definitions and boundaries here in.

The object and the territory

Classification of news events, in time and space, has been the subject of exciting debate among theorists, since Journalism has become an academic reflection object. There are those who advocate criteria based on empirical observation, in other words, anchored in the daily practices of companies. Others build schemes based on exogenous variables, dependent on the nature of current linguistic expressions in society. And there are even those who endorse postmodern categories, characterized by hybrid forms and the contamination of the contents.

Clashes of ideas and positions are explained as a result of multiple places of observation that houses the Communication scholars field and related areas. The diversity of assumptions and diagnostics results in a range of classifications that aims to understand how the press is articulated, while they also risk giving names and assigning status to many textual classes that journalists and contributors regularly produce.

Basing ourselves on investigative experiences and the follow-up of classification exercises focused on other natures' manifestations – such as literature – we understand that the journalistic work, organized and regulated according to pre-established standards, is subdivided into, at least², two complementary stages: the genres and formats. Before recognizing them, however, it is essential to clarify that the reference used here inserts these two elements in the larger sphere of Communication processes, especially with respect to media messages distribution flows, that is, those which necessarily rely on the mass or digital media to process collectively. In a previously presented scheme, we find the places occupied by them:

The communication field consists of procedural sets, including the *massive* communication, organized in *significant modalities*, including *periodical* communication (newspaper/magazine). That is structured into functional *categories*, like in journalism, whose message units are grouped into *classes*, better known as *genres*, extension that is divided in others,

¹ We suggest, in particular, the reading of Marques de Melo and Assis (2010), Marques de Melo (2009; 2010) and Assis (2010; 2014).

² Although we take only the cutout of journalistic “genres” and “formats” as a basis for discussion in this text, we see that the second of these classes supports another split – called “type”, as we shall see – characterized according to the nature of each form of journalistic expression, as well as by the demands of its use .

known as *formats*, those, in relation to the first one, are broken down into species, called *types* (MARQUES DE MELO, 2009, p.35, *our translation*).

From this perspective, there is an overview of the territory where the journalistic activity takes place and, consequently, the productions originated from it. Prepared by one of this paper's authors³, the outline above shows the complexity of the issue, declining the idea, often widespread, that deal with genres and formats practiced by the press is the same of dealing only with the linguistic and/or textual particularities of the article that the media circulates. We are aware that Journalism content shouldn't be leveled only by what is manifested in the texts. We do not deny that they are important factors and often decisive for the formation of certain messages classes; but we argue that they are insufficient for assessing a professional activity that requires the adoption of appropriate techniques in its actions, with their own ways of working and it is still linked to "cultural and ideological universes" (MARQUES DE MELO, 2003a, p.17, *our translation*), drivers of forms and contents that the society has access.

Therefore, our assumption is that the journalistic genres and its extensions understanding only makes sense if it is inserted in its peculiar environment, that is, the technological supports and productive gears that allow the designed messages flow, produced and disseminated by news corporation, which evidently includes the interaction mechanisms with the target-audience – readers, listeners, viewers, Internet users etc.

Terminologies and meanings

Firstly, we should consider that the exercise we set out for ourselves – to highlight the concerns identified so far – runs into not only conceptual controversies but also in ambiguous terms, which evokes different meanings. Reside in this controversy, certainly, the reasons that inhibit the advancement of joints and empirical research on the discussed topic. It is evident that these observations accompany the evolution of the journalistic activity, in a constant changing process. Clearly, this excessive allocation of nomenclatures and the way of conceiving certain evidences, if not based on solid perspectives and their own practice, result in inconsistencies, or they fall into the traps of common sense and the used jargon in professional environments. To have nuances noticed and understood, the

³ The passage quoted above is the background horizon that customarily is called "Marques de Melo Classification". The proposal, drawn up by the Professor, based on empirical studies and research carried out for years, was first announced in class scripts used in courses geared to mass communication genres taught at the Post-graduate Program in Social Communication at the Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (PósCom-Umesp), and subsequently documented in the book *Jornalismo: compreensão e reinvenção* (MARQUES DE MELO, 2009, p.35-37).

critical thinking and reflexive capacity should prevail on us, because only from that we will look at what actually happens in daily newsrooms.

In Portuguese, genres appears as a term that ranges from biological species to the Communication objects. Aurélio Buarque de Holanda Ferreira (1999, p.980) identifies three current meanings: structure, form and content. The first case has biological anchoring; corresponding to the set of species that have a number of common characters conventionally established, that is, “any group of people, objects, facts, ideas having common characters”. In the second case, the relation is aesthetic, comprising “manner, mode, style”. The third hypothesis is technological, referring to the class or category of subject matter or technique used.

In English, on the other hand, there are two distinct words: gender (biological sense) and genre (aesthetic sense). William Morris (1973, p.548-550) thus defines them:

- *gender*: ‘combination of two or more categories, such as male, female, in which words are divided by sex [...] or other grammatical forms’;
- *genre*: ‘type, class variety. Artistic category noticeable by style, form or content. Class or category of literary composition’.

To understand the genres meaning in the Communication sciences literature, is valid to resume here the concept coined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p.60, *our translation*), because it is a reference cited by most scholars of this Communication object. According to author, genres are “relatively stable types of linguistic expressions developed in specific communicative situations which reflect in the form, content and structure”.

In the author’s perspective, two factors determine the configuration of the Communication genres: stylistic and organic. While the stylistic represent expression forms whether individuals or collectives –, the organic are characterized by “functional adaptation to different spheres of human activity” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.60, *our translation*), such as scientific production, business documents or even news stories.

Bakhtin elaborated in accordance with this conceptual framework, a classification that includes two genres categories: primary, the genres of oral Communication (hall talks, family talks, philosophical dialogues, socio-political dialogues etc.); and secondary, belonging to the written Communication universe (literary, scientific, journalistic etc.).

Integrating the “secondary” group, the journalistic genres also belong to a wider context, the “media genres”, whose configuration is determined by technological supports

(media) that condition the use of linguistic expression codes. If they do not vary substantially due to the different substrates that emit the content embedded in them, ensuring their reception by dispersed, heterogeneous and anonymous audience (WRIGHT, 1968, p.16), the Journalism genres do not go beyond the typical pattern of media genres.

Content categories

In the review that presents the genres as “categories” that congregate “similar works”, Ana Carolina Temer (2009, p.180-181) points out that, despite this common grouping notion to various circles, starting by the literature – discipline in which the term genre has consolidated itself – there are certain fundamental differences to be noted. Although the structure and the textual aesthetic may be factors to be considered, the media genres are characterized primarily by being a “content promise or a content possibility, a kind of pre-agreed contract between the transmitter and receiver”. It is “a key concept” from which “an issuer may act on the basis of a semantic framework – or a set of defined linguistic and visual possibilities”.

These considerations are in line with the positioning of Denis McQuail (2003, p.336), for whom a media genre is defined, basically, by its framework as “content category” that has the following characteristics:

- a) a “collective identity”, capable of being recognized by both producers and consumers;
- b) the interrelation of this identity with its explicit function (information, entertainment or related), aligning form and content;
- c) the permanence of that identity through the ages, attaining to the agreed parameters, aimed at preserving cultural patterns;
- d) a narrative structure or a predictable sequential order, molded by stereotypes, but incorporating a “repertoire of variants of the basic issues”.

It means that the genres should be considered as instrumental artifacts that help the media industry to produce consistent and effective content, in line with the audience expectations. They consist, in other words, in a “communicability strategy” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2008, p.303), a kind of pact between those who produce and those who receive what the media broadcasts.

In the journalistic scope, McQuail (2003, p.341) gives to the daily newspaper a seminal role, acting as an “archetype” or rather as “prototype” of other media. It is therefore understandable that the radio and television, and also traditional electronic media like internet, more recently, have played or sought regarding Journalism model enshrined in the daily press. And it is equally acceptable that genres ratings practiced in electronic media (REZENDE, 2000; TEMER, 2002) or digital media (SEIXAS, 2009; BERTOCCHI, 2010) are based on diagnoses focused on print media.

Theoretical horizons

All these perceptions are properly incorporated into the theory of media genres, which has received substantial contributions from different schools of thoughts. Here, especially, we will only consider the two most evident – functionalism and critical theory – in an attempt to extract from their emplacements the subsidies needed for the assessment of genres, especially regarding their nature and their purposes.

The functionalism makes the genres a kind of “war horse”, as they are structured reflecting the basic social functions assimilated by the media and updated according to the social changes. Thus, their contents are molded by functional categories (including Journalism) which reproduce into classes (or genres), arranged in expression forms with certain common characteristics (formats) and subdivided into species (types).

The main media functions provided by the heralds of this school – Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, Charles Wright etc. – were summarized by McQuail (2003, p.82) as follows:

- *information*: the media provides data about events and situations; indicates power relations; facilitates innovation, adaptation and progress;
- *correlation*: interprets meanings; shares values; suggests consensus; prioritizes routes;
- *continuity*: reinforces the hegemonic culture, though attentive to the counterculture alternatives; strengthens and preserves consensual values;
- *entertainment*: provides distraction, fun and relaxation; reduce social tensions;
- *mobilization*: supports collective actions, based on citizenship decisions (political participation, religious, cultural) or consumption (goods and services, brands and symbols).

The functionalist theory thus reveals that the media in general, and the Journalism, consequently, do not meet a single function nor restrict its production capacity to only one way of dealing with events and other facets. The logic is simple: if, in society, there are many demands generated by multiple social actors performances in their daily activities, it is natural that the media are organized to meet these needs – if not all, at least the main ones – with appropriate content for each of them.

However, the critical theory sees the genres as a “necessary evil”, serving as mystifying substitute of the “enlightenment” intended by the “cultural” industry. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1969, p.172), the mass domination strategy by the cultural industry makes use of multiple tactics, among them stereotyping.

Stereotypes are indispensable to anticipate the social reality experiences of the recipients. The stereotyping is not restricted to the ideological messages content, but is extended to also include its forms, their designs, their characteristics; in short, everything that is responsible for giving identity to media products. It also enables the audience, consciously or unconsciously, to identify the different messages addressed to them and can fathom, for example, the difference between a soap opera and TV news or from a weekly news magazine and a comic book.

In the press, the clearest trace of the stereotype action consists in writing manuals that dictate to professionals which procedures should be considered in the materials preparation for a vehicle or to a network. Emerged in the late 19th century, when the present information started to have marketing character (MARQUES DE MELO, 2003a, p.24), these grammars predict and standardize styles and guide behavior and help to “strengthen” the links between vehicles and audiences, “establishing a kind of agreement” among the parts (CAPRINO, 2001, p.45). Not coincidentally, the guidelines provide, among their standards, items designed to clarify that informational classes can be produced in a certain journalistic company, and how they should be conducted, both from an ethical point of view to the corresponding technical aspects.

In this perspective, therefore, genres and their subdivisions – formats and types – are relatively rigid, flat shaped, defining the viewer’s attitude model, before a previous questioning about any specific content, determining in a large extent, how this content is perceived.

Forms of expression

As the genre, according to the concept used here, is a word that refers to grouping, there are certain elements related to it, which can be understood as forms of expression,

those who perceive and translate the social life – and creations that raise it – through texts, programs and materials with different characteristics. To these compositions, we give the *format* name, a word that, according to Ferreira (1999, p.929), is closely related to “shape” feature. It is therefore the concrete article published in print, electronic or digital form.

The media formats are variants of genres, being subordinated to them, while they develop themselves according to their internal and proper logic, multiplying potentialities. They are, in short, the instrument – the way – which emitters adopt to manifest and to circulate produced content in harmony with different circumstances.

This assertion suggests that media production is, entirely, a format production. Then, everything originated from this scope does not have a unique identity. There are multiplicity of doings, intentions, sayings, in short, of mechanisms that the media industry communicates with its receptors, people who hope – charge in some cases – this forms diversity, because they depend on them for their actions in the social environment.

To McQuail (2003, p.340, *our translation*), formats are “subroutines to handle specific issues within a genre”. They would be, thus, conditioned to their used situations. The adoption of the miniseries format, for example, is related to the purpose of genre television drama, engaging in entertaining the viewer. Similarly, the article format, in the Journalism, is built from the moment they want an opinionated genre appreciation which aims evaluate events.

This constant intervention in what the media produces is identified by McQuail (2003, p 339-340) – based on studies of David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow – as a “media logic”, so a series of specifications that adjust the media to their own needs and to the audience. It refer, therefore, to “an implicit set of rules and standards that rules how the content should be processed and presented to take advantage of a certain media”. The formats, ultimately always obey this logic.

In a study on Brazilian television programming, José Carlos Aronchi de Souza (2004, p.45) establishes an analogy between the media organization and the living beings organization, noticing that while “in biology, various species constitute a genre” on TV, “various formats constitute a genre program”. The format, however, is the substantial unity or material, with determined configuration and certain peculiar characteristics that distinguish the items of the same nature.

It is true, however, that the term format appears much more in the jargon of television professionals than in newsrooms. But in the newspaper market, little attention is conferred to the identity of the materials produced by professionals and/or contributors as well. The manuals determinations, when assimilated, are hardly revised; and there is no apparent

effort in discussing new textual classes (they certainly appear, but with no major reflections and/or ratings by its followers). The discussion on these topics is reserved to the academic environment. For this reason, although not introduced with emphasis on professional space, the idea of “shape” helps us to understand the limits and possibilities of the genres units.

Journalistic genres and formats

Resuming from our starting point, it is worth emphasizing that we understand the Journalism as a *category* belonging to the periodic Communication *mode*, inserted in the *set* of mass Communication within the Communication *field*. This is *Communication category* set by *classes*, here understood as *genres*, those express themselves in different *forms*, known as *formats*, replicated in *species*, labeled as *types*⁴.

From this framework, we can define the journalistic process and its subsequent ramifications, according to the structural Communication concept. Its importance as a theoretical mark is exactly to indicate that we are dealing with a not only human or linguistic activity, but mainly, a Communication one, which is why we should stick to the particularities of this universe.

Following this reasoning line, *journalistic genre* is the periodic mass Communication class of units which brings together different forms and their respective transmission species and timely recovery of time-sensitive information through mechanical or electronic supports (here referred as media), potentially eligible to achieve anonymous, vast and scattered audience.

As documented in the interview that opens a dossier on the question of genres, published in the 5th edition of *Pauta Geral* magazine, “journalistic genres correspond to a daily work organization system of current-time messages codification, from the expression forms adopted in enterprises and reflecting in a sense of corporatist consensus” (MARQUES DE MELO, 2003b, p.11, *our translation*). They consist, above all taxonomy, in journalistic industry engines, that move it according to the consumers’ expectations of information about the present.

Two basic characteristics define a genre: its ability to group different formats – all with common characters, though different from each other – and their social function.

⁴ In this discussion, we are not stuck in its last stage. However, it is recorded that journalistic type is the model assumed by today’s message in order to better fulfill the social role that corresponds to it in the media gear. An example: the genre information comprises the reporting *format*, whereby, can be developed in the major report type. The species – that is, the type – varies according to its necessities of working an event in a certain way, but it can also imply in a copyright or institutional decision and even follow a standard required by the support that conveys.

When we refer to this latter requirement, we corroborate, of course, with the functionalist perspective, previously mentioned, according to which the media operate to meet the demands arising in the society context. Especially considering the assumptions of Lasswell (1987) and Wright (1968), authors of this school, but also assimilating the contributions of Raymond Nixon (1963), we have the following overview of journalistic genres and their respective functions:

- *informative*: social surveillance;
- *opinionative*: ideas forum;
- *interpretation*: educational role, enlightening;
- *diversional*: distraction, leisure;
- *utilitarian* : assistance in everyday's decisions.

These roles, strictly performed daily, are clearly willing to meet “social needs” (BELTRÃO, 2006, p.14) for the formation of Journalism. Genres reflect what citizens want and need to know/understand/follow, precisely because in genres the audience finds support for their daily actions or even to the exercise of citizenship. Meet condensed purposes in these five sections is the reason of the press work, which has been built while the very development of society.

If we observe the evolution of these classes, beginning with the hegemonic genres – the informative (emerged in the 17th century) and opinionative (18th century) – and added to them the complementary – interpretive, diversional and utility, which were legitimized in the 20th century (MARQUES DE MELO, 2010) – we will see that its emergence and/or consolidation are always responses to social demands, many of them evidenced in specific historical times, especially in crisis or major changes (ASSIS, 2010). Journalism and society undergo concomitant evolutionary processes.

Journalistic format, as a result, is the shape of the information transmitted by the media construction, whereby the present message fulfills social functions legitimized by historical juncture in each national society. This construction takes place in agreement with the regulations that establish structural parameters for each form, which includes textual aspects and also procedures and circumstances related to the *modus operandi* of each unit.

In the “Marques de Melo Classification”, probably one of the most widespread in Brazil – and that is based “on empirical observations of the Brazilian journalism in the five-year period 2002-2007” (MARQUES DE MELO, 2009, p.35) – the distribution of formats it is thus suggested⁵:

⁵ The definition of each of these formats, by José Marques de Melo, until then, only in original material, was recorded by Lailton Alves da Costa (2010), in didactically organized tables.

1. Informative genre
 - 1.1. Notice
 - 1.2. News
 - 1.3. Report
 - 1.4. Interview
2. Opinionative Genre
 - 2.1. Editorial
 - 2.2. Comment
 - 2.3. Article
 - 2.4. Review
 - 2.5. Column
 - 2.6. Caricature
 - 2.7. Letter
 - 2.8. Chronicle
3. Interpretive Genre
 - 3.1. Analysis
 - 3.2. Profile
 - 3.3. Survey
 - 3.4. Chronology
 - 3.5. Dossier
4. Diversional genre
 - 4.1. Human interest history
 - 4.2. Color history
5. Utility genre
 - 5.1. Indicator
 - 5.2. Quotation
 - 5.3. Script
 - 5.4. Service

Each of these items has its own characteristics, which makes it unique, although equated to another format of the same genre. These logics, historically established, over the profession advance, define the formats and distinguish each other. Because of this, we award the fact that only textual analysis are unsatisfactory to the understanding of the object. It is necessary to reach the heart of the matter, namely the practice. The correct and consistent forms of journalistic expression reading – regardless of the purpose – is only possible with the seizure of the process, the background and history. If not, there is a risk of being taken by the intonation or the apparent text intention.

Take for example the opinionative genre. There are few external differences between formats editorial, article and comment. Perhaps the first one is the most distant, due to the non signature of an author, as one records an institutional positioning. The others are almost identical: signed texts in which they are exposed points of view about something. The circumstantial difference is further than the fact of being argumentative materials. It happens because the article is generally elaborated by an expert, which judges an event subject of controversy from its repertoire; while the comment is a production of a referenced journalist with extensive experience, who analyzes certain occurrence – usually related to some subject worked in the same edition, for an informative format – relating it to previous events and making projections of possible developments.

Obviously, the defining aspects of a format is also expressed on the surface of vehicles, such as, for example, in the signature, or even in the arguments conduction (the article tends to be more direct in its conclusions, the comment acts to guide the audience, leading it to reflect). But without the knowledge of all the elements that make up the formats structure, it is difficult to analyze them accurately, as there are major obstacles to its learning.

The biggest challenge, however, is the identification and classification of formats that are emerging as the proper course of the event. After all, a journalistic form does not come from nothing. It is generally a signal of an improvement of the process that is rooted in the very constitution of the press, located temporarily in the 17th century. It is from the primary information treatment – proposed only to report what is real – that the “subroutines” of genres unfold themselves. Some of them receive validation. Others, however, disappears as soon as they arise. Our task is to constantly watch them, for only thus can glimpse the evolution of Journalism.

Proximity to the practice

The problematic here presented is not close to be concluded or fully resolved. According to what we recognized at the beginning of this article, there are many other

views of the same phenomenon, all of them eager to their own commitment and defenders of their positioning. To us, it seems that the division here established, supported by the cited references, is very close to what is practiced – even if intuitively – in the national press.

It is worth highlighting that the geographical tonic is significant when we refer to the practice of journalistic genres and formats. The international literature presents practices that diverge from what we know in our country, that is, indicates the existence of other possibilities and demonstrates that situations do arise and retain peculiar forms to certain localities. The “Marques de Melo Classification” refers specifically to the Brazilian press, and, as indicated, mirrors a time frame – not that its validity will be lost soon, but its relevance should be monitored and, when necessary, should be added new items to the assembly.

We cannot ignore the fact that we propose a taxonomy, a classification established according to scientific standards, although stuck to market reality. There are still obvious clashes, and not only among peers from academy, but also when we compare what we have researched to what the common sense and market jargon guide. An example: it is still common that citizens refer to all journalistic text as “article”; or, in the very professional environment people entitle any regularly published section as “column”. All these speculations should be pondered, as they signalize mismatches to be set.

There is no doubt that the best way to be followed is what brings us closer to the praxis. Even if it is necessary to critically evaluate the professionals’ terminology addictions and common sense distortions, the reflections on genres and formats existing in the press only make sense if they help us to improve the production and/or to better monitor these productions. Otherwise, any systematization exercise will not be, in fact, more than the “anachronistic pastime” that Tzvetan Todorov (1981, p.45) referred himself in the 20th century.

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José Marques de Melo

PhD in Journalism from Universidade de São Paulo (USP), institution in which also became a lecturer. Professor of the Post-graduate Program in Social Communication at Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (Umesp), director of Unesco Chair in Communication for Regional Development, and honorary president of Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Interdisciplinares da Comunicação (Intercom), where he has created the research group Journalistic Genres, in 2009. Email: marquesmelo@uol.com.br

Francisco de Assis

PhD in Social Communication from Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (Umesp). Professor of the Professional Masters Program in Journalism at Centro Universitário Fiam-Faam. Vice coordenador of the working group Estudios sobre Periodismo at Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores de la Comunicación (Alaic). Email: francisco@assis.jor.br

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