

Telling Real Stories. Narrative Journalism in Romania: Between Normative Theory and Practice

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Abstract: *This study explores the editorial practices of Decât o Revistă (DoR), a publication that established narrative journalism in Romania and promoted a distinctive journalistic approach for 13 years, differing from mainstream media. Using content analysis on a corpus of 170 journalistic texts published between 2009–2022, this research examines how DoR’s style is constructed within the Romanian media ecosystem from the perspective of narrative journalism. The main findings of the study reveal a limited application of the writing techniques defined by the normative theory of narrative journalism in editorial practice.*

Keywords: *narrative journalism; normative theory; journalistic practice; journalistic genres; real stories; storytelling;*

Introduction

We crave stories in our lives. We need to hear, listen to, read, and pass them on. Stories help us get through each day, offering a lifeline that satisfies a hunger for knowledge, curiosity, and connection. Stories – ours and others’ – help us understand that we’re not alone, or, at times, that our differences are positive. Non-fictional stories that reach us as narrative journalism, stories we read or consume even therapeutically, become parts of our daily puzzles, our microcosms of information. Viewed through the lens of global practices, narrative journalism achieves what mainstream media often cannot. The use of storytelling techniques and narrative genres brings people closer together to better understand each other and society’s challenges.

In an era when information is compressed into the shortest possible formats for quick publication and reading – often leading to superficial coverage – narrative journalism takes the necessary time to deeply document the stories behind the issues that influence our lives. Scholarly literature highlights the factors that led to the genesis of narrative journalism. ‘Dehumanizing objectivity’ and the depersonalized style of news writing spurred the rise of narrative journalism as a response to the alienation of readers’ experiences and its goal is to engage readers through the journalist’s subjectivity (Hartsock, qtd. in Nousiainen 16).

Currently, according to the Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report 2024:

(...) while providing news that keeps people up to date with what is going on is a defining part of what the public wants and expects, many people want the news media to satisfy a range of needs, and few want ‘just the facts.’

Although young people and news avoiders are slightly more likely to want news that inspires or diverts them than older people or non-avoiders, the importance of knowledge and understanding remains. (Digital News Report 2024 48)

This highlights a clear global demand for a more complex journalistic approach – one that goes beyond merely delivering information. People also desire journalistic products that engage them emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Furthermore, voices in the scholarly literature argue that narrative journalism, alongside investigative journalism, may ensure the survival of journalism in its competition with digital media content, such as “the news supplied by blogs, aggregators, and short-format news sources” (Neveu 533).

On the other hand, while some practitioners believe that facts and storytelling coexist in collaboration rather than conflict (Lupșa, in Marinou), others argue that journalism as a profession does not inherently involve storytelling. Instead, journalism is about “the facts, all the facts, nothing but the facts” (Roeh 162). In this perspective, narrative journalism is not considered part of the journalist’s occupational identity and should not manifest as a practice within the professional field. This debate underscores the tensions created by narrative journalism “between ethics and aesthetics, fact and fiction, and objectivity and subjectivity” (Krieken, Sanders 1393).

In Romania, narrative journalism remains a less developed branch of journalism, both theoretically and practically. In this context, Cristian Lupșa, the founder of the *Decât o Revistă (DoR)* publication, notes:

In Romania, there is little tradition of deeply reported, well-told true stories, partly a result of an immature media culture, partly a symptom of 40-plus years of communism that has made people suspicious of sharing their lives with others. (Lupșa, *NF '14, on narrative's inroads in Romania*)

In Lupșa’s opinion the factors that are influencing narrative journalism in Romania are structural, cultural and historical. This reveals the untapped opportunities where improvements and changes in media practices could foster a richer, deeper informational ecosystem. Despite the relatively young and

immature pluralistic media culture in Romania – still shaped by path dependency – there is room to cultivate narrative journalism by fostering trust between journalists and the public and developing storytelling approaches that resonate with cultural specificities. Furthermore, Romania’s journalistic field has historically been marked by a literary expression driven by talent rather than solid professional education (Gross 119). These aspects can be explained with the concept of habitus. As Bourdieu says,

habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products - thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions: those limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning. (Bourdieu 55)

In other words, journalistic practices are set in a landscape defined by both freedom and determinism of expression.

Through this research, we aim to explore how the editorial style of *Decât o Revistă* is structured. In other words, we investigate *DoR*’s editorial practices regarding topics, genres, and the application of storytelling elements in narrative journalism.

In Romania, this magazine represented the first major journalistic effort focused on producing content that employs storytelling techniques, identifying itself with this area of media practices for 13 years. In this respect, the independent publication, established in 2009, described itself as one that “tells true stories to help its community understand, empathize, discover solutions, and take action” through quarterly narrative journalism magazines, live events, podcasts, and social media (*Despre DoR*).

In Romania’s media ecosystem, *DoR* gained legitimacy through professional recognition. According to its website, “*DoR* journalism has received 35 awards at the Superscrieri Awards, Romania’s most important journalistic competition, including the Newsroom of the Year award in 2018 and the Reader’s Revolution Award granted to the Bucharest Community Foundation for turning the problems highlighted in the article *The Vulnerable City* into a priority for the foundation. In 2017, *DoR* received the Special Award of the European Press Prize for reconstructing the Colectiv fire incident” (*Impact*). This award is granted by organizations promoting quality journalism in Europe (e.g., the Politiken Foundation, The Irish Times Trust Limited, and the Foundation for Democracy and Media).

Moreover, the magazine managed to prompt social actions and changes. According to *DoR*, its materials on topics such as domestic violence, endemic poverty, and Huntington’s disease have contributed to significant

legislative changes, were used as references for public policy development, and mobilized people to help through donations and emotional support (*Impact*).

However, despite its substantial and sustained efforts, *DoR* struggled to find a sustainable market position and ceased to exist at the end of 2022. Although audiences, as indicated earlier, desire more complex content, they tend not to reward journalistic efforts or financially support media organizations – a phenomenon observed both globally (*Digital News Report 2024*) and in Romania (*Starea mass-media în România 2020*). Due to financial reasons, *DoR* chose to discontinue its publication, citing that their goal was not mere survival but providing quality content (Lupșa, *Viitorul DoR: din 2023 nu vom mai publica povești noi*). In other words, the magazine's founders did not wish to continue their journalistic endeavour by compromising their editorial policy or the valuable particularities of their storytelling materials for potential economic growth.

Theoretical Framework

The Narrative Journalism Concept

Over time, narrative journalism has been referred to by various terms, such as “literary journalism, literary non-fiction, non-fiction novel, journalism-as-art, factual fiction, journalistic non-fiction, New Journalism, creative non-fiction, fact-based literature, journalit, and unimaginative literature” (Nousiainen 6). For the purposes of this study, we will use the term ‘narrative journalism’. Regardless of the terminology, specialists converge in defining the same type of journalism: ‘narrative journalism’.

In the literature, this form of journalism is defined as:

the genre that takes the techniques of fiction and applies them to non-fiction. The narrative form requires deep and sophisticated reporting, an appreciation for storytelling, a departure from the structural conventions of daily news, and an imaginative use of language. (Nieman Foundation, qtd. in Vanoost 77)

The above conceptualization highlights that narrative journalism is not easily accessible or within reach of every journalist. It demands sophistication, depth, and the ability to go beyond the first level of reading or decoding. Therefore, “narrative journalism is one of the most difficult genres of journalism” (Conover 36).

In the anthology *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, David Halberstam writes that the essence of narrative journalism lies in “taking an idea, a central point, pursuing it, and turning it into a story

that says something about how we live today” (11). Ted Cheney argues that “this type of narrative ‘does not merely relay facts – it conveys them in a way that brings people closer to a deeper understanding of the subject’” (Cheney qtd. in Hart 136-137). Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz define literary journalism in their work *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* as “a form of journalism that combines investigative documentation with personal voice, storytelling, and memorable language” (13–14). Referring to the complexity of this type of journalism, Norman Sims states, in his 1984 anthology *The Literary Journalism* that “unlike standard journalism, literary journalism requires immersion in complex, difficult subjects” (Sims, qtd. in Hartsock 8). What remains certain, according to Katherine Boo, is that the greatest potential of narrative journalism lies in: “its ability to communicate the most difficult news. (...) It can compel the public, against their will, to engage with critical issues of meritocracy and social justice” (14).

American and European narrative expressions are depicted in the literature as distinct forms of journalistic storytelling, each with specific features and objectives. The differences between these approaches highlight both the cultural origins of the two styles and the varying perceptions of journalism’s role in exploring reality and informing the public. “Many experts and practitioners of narrative journalism have long recognized the Anglo-American origins of the form”, notes John S. Bak (qtd. in Nousiainen 21). European journalists frequently mistake narrative journalism for what is referred to in Europe as literary reportage (Nousiainen 21–22). While the two share certain similarities, they are distinct concepts (Idem). American narrative journalism adopts a more open approach to storytelling, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions (Greenberg, qtd. in Nousiainen 21). It is predominantly narrative and descriptive. On the other hand, European literary reportage focuses on establishing the truth, adopting a polemic and expository style that emphasizes argumentation. It does not place the reader directly into the story but instead foregrounds the writer (Lupșa, in Nousiainen 22).

Using Fictional Elements to Write Non-Fiction

In theoretical works, we also noticed the fictional writing tools that are used in narrative journalism. Tom Wolfe identifies four key characteristics for narrative journalism, which he calls it New Journalism: “presenting the narrative through a series of scenes, using third-person perspective to allow readers to enter the minds of others besides the writer, employing dialogue instead of quotations typical of mainstream journalism, and providing detailed descriptions” (Wolfe, qtd. in Nousiainen 9–10). Similarly, Norman Sims suggests that instead of a strict definition, it is easier to explain narrative journalism through its defining characteristics (Sims, qtd. in Nousiainen 9–10). Sims identifies similar traits to those listed by Wolfe and others: “immersion

in the subject, structure, accuracy, the writer's voice (in contrast to mainstream journalism), responsibility toward the characters in the narrative, and symbolism or connotation" (Idem). Additionally, he highlights "access, attention to the ordinary lives of people, and the writer's special ability to connect with subjects" (Idem).

Mark Kramer, the founding director of the Nieman Program on Narrative Journalism, states:

Narrative writing involves: a) a set of scenes, b) characters, c) action unfolding over time, d) a discernible voice of a narrator with a perceptible personality, e) a relationship with the reader/viewer/listener, and f) all of these elements arranged to lead the audience to a point, realization, or destination. (Kramer, qtd. in Nousiainen 8)

This definition highlights the interplay between form and function in storytelling. It suggests that narrative writing is both an art (creative merit) and a craft (learned skills and technique), balancing creative expression with structured design to communicate effectively and resonate with its audience.

Good Practices in Narrative Journalism

Regarding the good practices, Mark Kramer, also one of the editors of the anthology *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* categorizes ethical concerns in narrative journalism into two groups: the journalist's relationship with readers and their relationship with sources (Kramer, qtd. in Nousiainen 12). Regarding the first category, Kramer asserts that narrative journalists "are not allowed to mix or improvise scenes, characters, (...) falsify the gravity of events, invent quotes, or attribute words to sources unless they have explicitly expressed those thoughts" (Kramer, qtd. in Nousiainen 12). Additionally, journalists occasionally using pseudonyms or avoiding identifiable details must clearly indicate this to their readers (Kramer, qtd. in Nousiainen 12). As for the relationship with sources, transparency is essential. However, Anu Nousiainen notes that "immersive journalism can evolve into something resembling a partnership or even friendship" (Nousiainen 13). On the other hand, Ted Conover argues that it is imperative for narrative journalists to establish their role with sources from the outset (Conover 36). While proximity to sources is necessary during documentation, journalists must avoid forming friendships with them. Moreover, Nousiainen emphasizes that journalists must maintain access to information throughout their research without deceiving sources about their intentions (Nousiainen 13).

In this study, we use the concept of narrative journalism as a distinct category of journalistic practices that employs storytelling, rather than considering it as a genre. Next, we will review the journalistic genres that incorporate narrative writing techniques to identify which ones predominate in *Decât o Revistă*.

Journalistic Genres in Narrative Journalism

The Reportage

According to Luminița Roșca, reportage is “a publicistic genre aimed at informing about current events of interest to a wide audience, based on on-the-spot investigation, often using literary modes of expression” (Roșca 329).

Yves Agnès highlights that reportage “illustrates the most beautiful attribute of writing in journalism: presenting life in all its forms, breadth, and circumstances” (Agnès 239). Reportage has the power to transform the reader into a spectator by recreating the events described, so the reader “feels personally connected to the events presented, even identifying with the characters depicted” (Agnès 240). This journalistic genre succeeds in showing “beyond strict information, presenting the event or situation in a more elaborate, original, and personalized form that is closer to real life” (Agnès 240). Agnès emphasizes that “reportage is not a superficial genre” (242). If it lacks verifiable and significant information, its value diminishes (Agnès 242). He also asserts that “remaining as close as possible to the facts, demonstrating rigor and sobriety, is not contrary to compelling reportage” (Agnès 242). In the volume *Presa scrisă: o introducere critică/ Print Media: A Critical Introduction*, coordinated by Richard Keeble, Tony Harcup explains that “reportages are often defined more by what they are not - namely, straight news - than by what they are” (Harcup 165). Unlike Luminița Roșca, who asserts that reportage should be about current information, Tony Harcup believes that any topic can become the subject of a reportage (Harcup 165). Harcup also notes that writing well is not sufficient for a journalist to craft a reportage. “If reportage journalists are also reporters, this means they must do everything this entails: verify facts, words, and spellings, and attribute sources for quoted statements. All of this constitutes good journalism” (Harcup 166).

The Portrait

Sorin Preda states that a portrait “is part of descriptive discourse and, broadly speaking, adheres to the same demands: capturing the subject (or face) and identifying its defining trait” (Preda 179). “From a narratological perspective, the portrait is a type of narrative discourse where the accumulation of information does not aim at the factual realm, as in news reports, investigations, or other journalistic formats, but at creating a depiction of the qualities, traits, and consequences of a character’s actions within the

narrative”, says Radu Bâlbâie in *Manual de jurnalism/ Journalism Manual*, coordinated by Mihai Coman (Bâlbâie 437). He adds that it “is an informative genre representing a narrative centred around an animated subject (who?), usually a living human being”, unlike descriptions, “which has as its subject a non-animate nucleus” (Idem).

In terms of portrait types, Yves Agnès says that “there are countless ways to talk about a person, to present them and make them known to readers” (Agnès 252). The author classifies the journalistic portrait in the following categories: “*identity bulletin*”, which must be short, simple, sharp, “emphasizing the key points of the character, those that make him interesting in the context of the current situation” (Idem); *the sketch*, “centered on physical description and prominent personality traits” (Idem); *biography/obituary*; *the portrait-interview*; *the portrait-investigation*; *the portrait-reportage*; *the photo album*, rarely used, which presents a person “with the help of a series of photographs depicting him at various stages and moments of his life and work, with his own comments or explanations of the journalist” (Agnès 253) and the useful *comparative portraits*, for example, during the election period.

Michel Voirol observes that “a well-written portrait leaves the reader with the impression of truly knowing the subject (the actant), in the case of a famous person, or the pleasure of discovering an interesting individual, in the case of an unknown figure” (Voirol, qtd. in Bâlbâie 442). Agnès concludes that “a successful portrait portrays a living character, just as a good reportage makes you experience an event” (Agnès 253).

Regarding the documentation technique, Radu Bâlbâie states that the portrait borrows personality investigation methods from sociology and that “it goes from the purely objective, cold, impersonal version (...) to the magazine portrait that adds a lot of information to the infofactual matrix of colour, atmosphere, particulars that give, through selection, an apparent note of subjectivity, of the reporter’s intervention” (Bâlbâie 440). In this context, the documentation for a portrait can draw on information from other press sources, the subject’s statements and reactions to a particular case, or by directly engaging with the subject (Bâlbâie 440).

The Essay

Aurelia Lăpușan defines the essay as “a concentrated piece of writing, containing original reflections, in an expressive style, on a wide variety of subjects - social-political, economic, philosophical, scientific, literary-artistic, aesthetic, ethical - of great topicality and interest without claiming to treat them systematically, exhaustively, or to impose a univocal solution” (Lăpușan 143). This opinion genre presents “a literary-publicistic way of conveying ideas of pressing current relevance without confining itself to the ephemeral, expressing an attitude toward life” (Idem). According to Lăpușan, the essay

fulfils functions of knowledge and influence, aiming to transform the human condition and “cultivate the public’s appetite for discovering correlations between facts and independent reflection” (Lăpușan 142).

Sorin Preda explains that the essay shares “all the features of the column and the chronicle: *prestigious authorship and total freedom of tone, style, and subject*” (Preda 44). The difference between an essay and a chronicle lies in the essay’s lack of a constraint to connect to immediate reality (Preda 44). Notably, Preda argues that “among all opinion genres, the essay seems the least journalistic. (...) For an essay to be hosted by the press, it must at least meet one major journalistic requirement - indirectly or subsidiarily, the text must address a current issue” (Preda 45). The essay remains an important journalistic opinion genre, using techniques that do not adhere to strict journalistic rules to encourage readers to reflect on the reality and relevance of their lives.

Methodology

In this study we explore how *Decât o Revistă* (DoR) practice narrative journalism and we address the following research questions:

- Q1. What topics does DoR address?
- Q2. What journalistic genres does DoR use in its narrative journalism?
- Q3. What narrative writing techniques does DoR use in its articles?
- Q4. What attitude does the publication adopt in the texts in which it uses narrative writing techniques?

Based on the research questions, we formulated the following hypotheses:

- H1. If DoR is a narrative journalism publication, it predominantly addresses major social issues.
- H2. If DoR is a narrative journalism publication, it primarily uses reportage and portrait as journalistic genres.
- H3. If DoR is a narrative journalism publication, it incorporates many of the narrative writing techniques.
- H4. DoR articles that include “(a) a series of scenes, (b) characters, (c) actions that unfold over time, (d) the interpretive voice of a narrator with a distinct personality, (e) a relationship with the reader, viewer, or listener, and (f) all elements organised to guide the audience toward a specific goal or destination” contain more textual cues that encourage action than those aimed at raising awareness.

The corpus of this study comprises issues of *Decât o Revistă* in its print version, available as PDFs on the *DoR* website archive.¹ Among the 50 issues published between 2009 and 2022, we investigated issues 1, 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 to capture various moments in the magazine’s timeline. In total, we

¹ <https://www.dor.ro/arhiva-revistei-in-pdf/>

examined 170 articles published in these issues. The corpus details can be observed in the next table:

Issue Number and Date	Number of Articles	Number of Pages
Issue 1, Autumn 2009	30	120
Issue 10, Autumn/Winter 2012	29	160
Issue 20, Summer 2015	16	216
Issue 30, Winter 2017/18	17	228
Issue 40, Summer 2020	43	223
Issue 50, Winter 2022/23	35	311

Table 1 – *Corpus of the study*. Source: authors.

For this research, we employed content analysis, and we measured the frequency of topics covered, the journalistic genres used, and the extent to which narrative journalism was practiced in the selected corpus. Additionally, we analysed the recurrence of indicators of awareness and call to action in articles that included all the normative elements of narrative journalism defined in H3. Our coding process assumed the use of the literature review from the theoretical background section to define analysis indicators.

Findings

1. Frequency of Major Social Issues

First, we examined how often major social issues were addressed in the 170 articles included in the selected corpus. Analysing the six DoR issues, we found that only 25 articles dealt with major social issues. These included topics such as: breast cancer, the struggles of millennials pursuing the American dream in the contemporary era, migrants fleeing conflict zones for the West, violent protests in January 2012 against healthcare reforms proposed by the Boc Government, endemic poverty, a family’s fight against Ceaușescu’s regime, surveillance by the Securitate, and exile. Additionally, these articles tackled topics such as sexual harassment, the #MeToo movement, sexual education in schools, misogyny, bullying, Romania’s measles epidemic, sexism, the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health impacts of the pandemic, and systemic issues such as racism, sexism, and inequality towards the Roma population during the pandemic. They also explored the exacerbation of domestic violence during the pandemic, the effects of pandemic on the working class, financial poverty, family crimes, and the experiences of abandoned children adopted internationally between 1990 and 2004.

The articles that address complex topics are depicted in the following table:

Issue	Articles
Issue 1, autumn 2009 ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 23 - “Fiecare femeie este o poveste despre sâni”/ “Every woman is a breast story”
Issue 10, autumn/winter 2012 ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 17 - “Visul american”/ “The American Dream” • Article 20 - “Un avion de hârtie care chiar zboară”/ “A paper airplane that really flies” • Article 27 - “Norii sunt prietenii tăi”/ “Clouds are your friends”
Issue 20, summer 2015 ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 6 - “Scrisoare din Sicilia”/ “Letter from Sicily” • Article 10 - “Cum mi-a urmărit Securitatea copilăria”/ “How the Security tracked my childhood” • Article 12 - “Piața”/ “The Square” • Article 14 - “Un sat pentru Mădălina”/ “A village for Mădălina”
Issue 30, winter 2017/18 ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 1 - “Alege-ți ficțiunea”/ “Choose Your Fiction” • Article 4 - “Sexul versus școala”/ “Sex versus School” • Article 5 - “Supus”/ “Submissive” • Article 6 - “A vorbi despre nedreptate”/ “Talking About Injustice” • Article 9 - “În loc de aripi”/ “Instead of Wings” • Article 11 - “O epidemie a neglijenței”/ “An Epidemic of Carelessness” • Article 13 - “Scuipatul lui Apollo”/ “Apollo’s Spit”
Issue 40, summer 2020 ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 1 - “În umbra pandemiei”/ “In the shadow of the pandemic”

² <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/qoye6xbx4x8q0nyti725w/DoR-1.pdf?rlkey=gexp7s4r5eqr8m0ial8nb4a53&e=2&dl=0>

³ <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/73sxcrbcpizc2k9mvchhx/DoR-10.pdf?rlkey=mszre73acxlr39k5jhuaakbg&e=2&dl=0>

⁴ <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/pbyoq2vho5b4k84y3drk0/DoR-20.pdf?rlkey=dygto2feypjgm7hqh3fzldxun&dl=0>

⁵ <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/2yvbvwlfdd6s408zvy5by/DoR-30.pdf?rlkey=n158954ug8c3gdoke6wxn835j&e=1&dl=0>

⁶ <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z58qrfax4opp25qbgyr/DoR-40.pdf?rlkey=ghyxnzaw43atki7nsn78ntrmf&e=1&dl=0>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 2 - “Adevărata valoare a fricii”/ “The true value of fear” • Article 6 - “O altfel de politică publică pentru romi”/ “A different public policy for Roma” • Article 12 - “Romi și etnicizarea Coronavirusului în România”/ “Roma and the ethnicization of the Coronavirus in Romania” • Article 27 - “Când virusul te bagă în șomaj”/ “When the virus puts you into unemployment” • Article 31 - “Fără adăpost”/ “Homeless” • Article 33 - “Când acasă e mai periculos decât afară”/ “When home is more dangerous than outside”
Issue 50, winter 2022/23 ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 24 - “În căutarea fantomelor”/ “Looking for ghosts” • Article 27 - “După o crimă în familie, ce se întâmplă cu copiii”/ “After a murder in the family, what happens to children” • Article 32 - “Să fii sărac e o rușine”/ “Being poor is a shame”

Table 2 – *Articles that address complex topics.* Source: authors.

Out of 170 articles, only 25 dealt with major social issues, while the remaining 145 addressed other subjects such as Romanian illusionists, post-apocalyptic fiction, filmmaker Cristian Mungiu, Romania’s recent progress, and tennis champion Simona Halep’s journey to world number one.

2. Frequency of Journalistic Genres

In the second stage of the analysis, we measured the frequency of journalistic genres used in the 170 articles analysed. The magazine published a wide range of journalistic formats, including reportages, essays, features, interviews, commentaries, portraits, testimonials, news articles, reviews, and humorous articles (Figure 1). The most frequently used genres were essays (68 articles), reportages (33 articles), and features (17 articles). The predominant use of essays as a genre suggests that authors exercise freedom the most.

⁷ <https://www.dropbox.com/s/nn5td4x7sxegpuh/DoR%20%2350.pdf?dl=0>

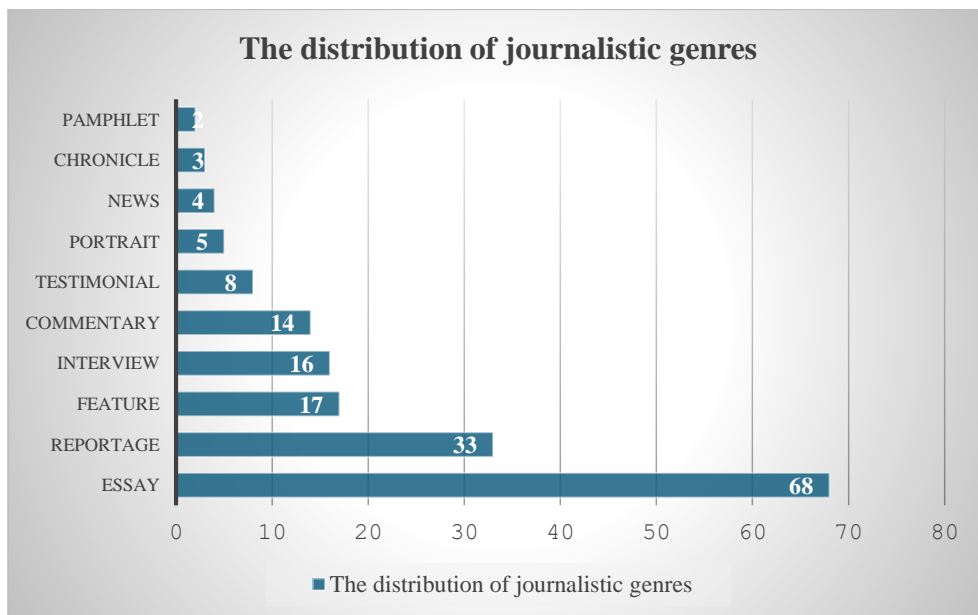


Figure 1 – *The distribution of journalistic genres*. Source: authors

3. Use of Narrative Writing

In the third stage, we identified articles that represent narrative journalism based on the following criteria: a) a set of scenes, b) characters, c) action unfolding over time, d) the interpretative voice of a storyteller, e) a relationship with the audience, f) arrangement of elements to lead to a realization or destination. We categorized articles into those that met all criteria, those that met some criteria (at least one), and those that met none. Out of 170 articles 26 met all criteria, 62 met at least one criterion, and 82 met none.

4. Awareness markers

In the 26 articles fully adhering to narrative writing criteria, we examined whether they included markers of awareness or call to action. Of these, only 14 articles contained awareness indicators. The journalistic pieces include themes like health and gender inequality, social division and political polarisation, autism and systemic barriers, historical trauma and oppression, state violence and protest, adoption and identity loss, domestic violence, cultural and artistic stagnation. Examples include:

- “Fiecare femeie este o poveste despre sânii”/ “Every woman is a story about breasts”, Crina Moșneagu, Issue 1, Fall 2009, pp. 48-53 – generates awareness about the sexist standards that objectify women’s bodies, even during their battles with breast cancer.
- “Noi, girafa”/ “We, the giraffe”, Gabriel Dobre, Issue 10, Autumn/Winter 2012, pp. 68-71 – raises awareness of the lack of

collaboration, listening, and understanding among people, divided by opposing political ideologies.

- “Norii sunt prietenii tăi”/ “Clouds are your friends”, Oana Sandu, Issue 10, Autumn/Winter 2012, pp. 134-151 – raises awareness regarding the lack of state and educational system support for integrating individuals with autism into society and schools.
- “Un sat pentru Mădălina”/ “A village for Mădălina”, Ana Maria Ciobanu, pp. 137-167, Issue 20, summer 2015 – generates awareness of how systemic poverty is difficult to navigate and overcome, not only by young mothers, but also by the rest of the people who end up caught in this vicious circle.
- “Să fii sărac e o rușine”/ “Being poor is a shame”, Andreea Vîlcu, Issue 50, Winter 2022/23, pp. 209-223 – raises awareness of how financial poverty affects personal development and decision-making.

5. Call to action markers

In the analysed corpus, only one article includes explicit markers calling for action. These markers are related to combat poverty through collective support. Ana Maria Ciobanu’s piece, “Un sat pentru Mădălina”/ “A Village for Mădălina” (no. 20, summer 2015, pp. 137–167), promotes action by highlighting the creation of a support network for a young mother. Through Mirela Oprea, the individual who takes the initiative to help Mădălina, a ‘village’ of donors is formed. This report also inspired the *Satul Mădălinei* podcast, produced by the *DoR* team, which later became a reference for shaping public policies aimed at alleviating poverty in Romania.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several key aspects about *DoR* and its approach to narrative journalism.

The research indicates that *DoR* does not predominantly address major social issues in the analysed articles. While the themes of these articles are varied and relevant to both Romanian and international societal contexts, their proportion within the corpus is relatively low.

The diversity of journalistic genres found in *DoR* – including essays, reportages, features, interviews, testimonials, and humorous articles – demonstrates an editorial strategy that embraces a variety of approaches to storytelling. The most frequently used genres, essays (68 articles), reportages (33 articles), and features (17 articles), contribute to the institutionalization of a specific narrative journalism style within the publication. Essays, characterized by their freedom of style and perspective, often invite interpretive engagement. Reportages, the second most common genre, highlight a commitment to in-depth documentation and detailed storytelling

based on direct field observations. Through these immersive narratives, *DoR* offers its audience access to underrepresented stories, often focusing on marginalized communities or individuals living in challenging conditions. Features, the third most frequent genre, are hybrid journalistic pieces blending informative and entertaining elements.

The study shows also that *DoR* employs all the elements of narrative journalism in relatively few articles. However, many texts apply some of the narrative elements defined by normative theory. By not strictly adhering to all elements of narrative journalism, *DoR* looks like a blend between American and European narrative traditions. This hybrid positioning may contribute to the magazine's distinct editorial identity.

The analysis also revealed no direct relation between articles meeting all criteria for narrative writing and the presence of textual markers indicating awareness or call to action. However, some standout articles successfully integrate narrative elements with such markers, demonstrating the potential of narrative journalism to foster societal engagement, though this outcome is not guaranteed. The findings indicate that the journal *DoR* employs markers of awareness more frequently than call to action in its narrative writing.

Conclusion

Founded in 2009, *Decât o Revistă* represented a pioneering effort in narrative journalism in Romania. Although the magazine did not exclusively produce content that fully adhered to the norms of narrative journalism, it practiced, for 13 years, a journalistic approach that was distinct from mainstream media. It sought to delve deeply into significant and sensitive topics relevant to contemporary society. The findings of this study demonstrate a fragile connection between the normative theory of narrative journalism, as defined in scholarly literature, and *DoR*'s editorial practice. The partial application of narrative writing elements within the publication suggests a deliberate choice to adapt its journalistic style to the unique demands of each story. This approach balances a commitment to narrative engagement with editorial flexibility and autonomy. By doing so, *DoR* managed to maintain a distinct editorial identity, offering content that was both relevant and accessible to a diverse audience. However, this adaptive strategy also highlights the challenges faced by the publication in establishing a sustainable market position, especially given its niche focus on a sophisticated and intellectually inclined demographic. Ultimately, *DoR* remains a paradox in the Romanian media landscape. On the one hand, it institutionalized itself as a model of excellence in providing stories, setting a standard for storytelling in the country. On the other hand, it failed to convince a broader public of its informational value, which contributed to its eventual closure. Despite its disappearance, *DoR*'s legacy endures as an example of the potential and

challenges of practicing narrative journalism in a developing pluralistic media ecosystem.

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