

An Imaginative Exploration of German and U.S. Narrative Journalism at the Turn of the Nineteenth to Twentieth Century

Die Sozialreportage als Genre der Massenpresse: Erzählen im Journalismus und die Vermittlung städtischer Armut in Deutschland und den USA (1880–1910)

[The social reportage as a genre of the mass press. Storytelling in journalism and the mediation of urban poverty in Germany and the United States (1880–1910)]

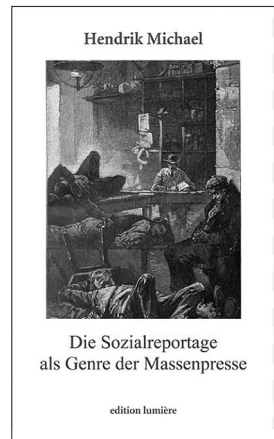
by Hendrik Michael. Bremen: Edition Lumière, 2020. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 536 pp., €44.80; USD\$22.

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In his book, *Die Sozialreportage als Genre der Massenpresse*, Hendrik Michael of the University of Bamberg in Germany offers a comparative analysis of narrative journalism in New York and Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century, showing the wide spectrum of narrative techniques, the variety of organizational settings, and the role of journalism in exploring social change. With a focus on representations of poverty, Michael draws from a sample of more than 400 stories in local newspapers, national magazines, and books. The book's core comprises six case studies, set up in a way so that a German case corresponds with a U.S. case. Michael contrasts newspaper series in *The World* ("True Stories of the News") with *Berliner Morgenpost* ("Aus dem Dunklen Berlin"). He also compares the book-length investigative journalism of Jacob Riis and Hans R. Fischer as well as the literary journalism of Abraham Cahan (*The Commercial Advertiser*) and Hans Hyan (*Welt am Montag*).

A sophisticated conceptual framework (mostly drawing from German scholars but also giving nods to the literary journalism studies community) adds further layers of analysis to explore the techniques, organizational contexts, and journalistic functions of what is called "reportage" in German, that is, the narrative news story. With this analytical approach, Michael challenges journalism scholars to evaluate narrative writing in all its variations (from the sensational to the literary) while encouraging scholars of narrative journalism to engage more often and more deeply with narratological analysis.

Following a historical overview of the evolution of narrative journalism in the United States and Germany, respectively, and a description of the book's methodological approach the book is organized around three major parts of analysis: a narratological analysis of news stories, a contextual analysis of conditions for news



production, and a functional examination of narrative journalism as a genre. The narratological analysis introduces four dimensions (narrative situation, character, time, and space) to differentiate between various stylistic effects inherent in the news stories. Michael is particularly interested in exploring how different authors create authenticity and establish their authority as reliable and trustworthy narrators. He finds a broad range of techniques across publications but provides evidence that the major differences are not cultural—that is, between German and U.S. styles. Rather, the analysis shows that particular kinds of journalism (sensational, investigative, literary) are fairly consistent across cultures, using narrative techniques to achieve specific effects. For example, Michael highlights how the varying ways of creating distance or proximity may lead to a range of possible reader responses, either exacerbating social distance or creating openings for empathy.

The contextual analysis pays attention to the economic situation of newspapers during that era. Michael examines if and to what extent the use of narrative journalism was a result of commercialization and market pressures. In a way, he is responding to the plea of the late John Pauly, who argued that what we needed was “a more institutionally situated history of literary journalism to place alongside our studies of writerly technique” (J. J. Pauly, “The New Journalism and the Struggle for Interpretation,” *Journalism* 15, no. 5, 2014, 590). Against this backdrop, the differences between journalism in the United States and Germany become more pronounced. The former was already more newsroom oriented, routinized, and open to various (if not all) social groups (women, for example, but not African Americans), while in Germany, news work was more individually driven, elitist, and restrained by censorship as well as unfavorable libel laws.

Building on the narratological and contextual analyses, Michael then examines the journalistic functions of narrative news stories in relation to their representations of poverty. He challenges common notions of mainstream journalism research that narrative news stories are soft, shallow, and superficial. In contrast, he develops a subtle framework to emphasize that these news stories fulfill key functions, depending on the sub-genre (sensationalism, investigative journalism, literary journalism). Again, it turns out that differences between these sub-genres are more articulated than any potential cultural differences between the United States and Germany. This central insight, that narrative journalists and their techniques were more similar than one would expect, points to globalizing tendencies and the strong currents of modernity that affected urban journalism in both the United States and Germany, in different yet similar ways.

Michael is a media scholar, but his approach reflects a central technique used by anthropologists: to make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar. His analysis validates narrative news stories in the popular press and emphasizes that their role was not accidental or peripheral in the early twentieth century but integral and central to mainstream journalism. At the same time, he demonstrates through narratological analysis that not all reportages are equal and thus need to be evaluated not just for their literary merit but their journalistic functions.

Yet, as much as Michael engages with a wealth of primary and secondary sources,

his treatment of the six case studies (as well as additional references) at times feels uneven. The analysis of U.S. sources is more expansive (also because there is more research to build on) but travels familiar terrain. The analysis of Berlin stories unearths some hidden gems and seems more original, especially because the study of German literary journalism, particularly from an institutionally situated perspective, has much room to expand. Another curiously underdeveloped aspect is the question of why the narrative styles in the United States and Germany were similar even though societal conditions were quite different.

Taken together, however, Michael has delivered a major piece of imaginative scholarship, identifying the elementary forms of narrative news writing in a pioneering era. His focus on narrative news stories as an integral part of local journalism in mainstream German newspapers especially offers a novel perspective that deserves wide attention and readership.