

# The definition of gonzo journalism



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Gonzo journalism continues to be one of the most popular styles of writing that has ever been crafted in journalism. The interest that surrounds the published works of gonzo seems to be that it will always contort the general structure of 'normal' journalism. In a large majority of news stories today, there is the pyramid of information where by the news worthy information will be at the top with less interesting details going further down. In gonzo the balance went missing and an article was defined by what the author experienced more than what the actual story was trying to report.

The gonzo journalism style has always been widely accepted as being associated with the unusual and quirky writing of Dr Hunter S Thompson. (Wenner & Seymour, 2007) Thompson became one of the most popular journalists' ever thanks to writing in a simplistic style that consisted of telling a news story through the eyes of the author.

Despite having many differences, gonzo has long been shoved in the same pigeon-hole as the 'new journalism' revolution. (Weingarten, 2005)

Although the form of journalism has slipped out of the public eye since the death of Thompson, Gonzo still plays a vital part in making news interesting.

This is proven by how popular the works of Hunter S Thompson are today in comparison to when they were written and this shows the skill involved in creating this intricate art.

All areas of the media have, at some point, incorporated gonzo into their style because it keeps well reported subjects fresh and allows new angles to be examined.

While the style has remained popular, Thompson has concentered himself as the inventor and perfectionist of the gonzo craft - a writer to be imitated but never bettered.

Gonzo journalism is one of the most entertaining forms of writing and its continuation and development is extremely important for the future of journalism.

## **1. 2 Aims and Objectives**

The primary aim for this dissertation is to examine the origins and definition of gonzo journalism and to understand the implications of this style of writing on journalism and finally composing recommendations and conclusions.

The author's own aim is to use multiple research techniques to achieve an improved understanding of gonzo journalism and the implications for the use of this style.

The following objectives have been structured in order for the author to be able to achieve the aims set out above:

Thoroughly research all material which is related to gonzo journalism and/or

Hunter S Thompson

Investigate the origins and definition of gonzo journalism

Review multiple forms of literature relating to and including the works of

Hunter S Thompson

Understand the implications that gonzo created within the practice of journalism

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Examine relevant sources on gonzo to find whether the style has been productive to journalism

Explore what will be beneficial for gonzo journalism to continue being implicated in the future practice of journalism

## **1. 3 Methodology**

### **1. 3. 1 Selected method of research**

This dissertation is derived from research that has come from primary or secondary sources, or in some instances both of these sources. Primary research has many advantages over secondary sources as the researcher can modify the research question to focus on a tiny subject matter. Surveys and questionnaires are a great way of achieving relevant answers to a question that has not been asked before by a secondary source. The results from the surveys and questionnaires provide the author with up-to-date findings and results that help to meet the aims of the dissertation.

Secondary sources are readily available and take less time and energy to produce results that will help to meet the objectives. The majority of books and journals can be accessed through online academic databases such as Athens and this makes the reliability of the sources much higher. The search functions can track down relevant sources quickly and accurately to make sure that the sources used match all the objectives.

To complete the objectives set out above, primary research and secondary research were both adopted. The primary research would take the form of interviews and surveys as these were the most simplistic ways to achieve the dissertation aims. Secondary sources were gained through endless <https://assignbuster.com/the-definition-of-gonzo-journalism/>

searches of the Edinburgh Napier University libraries and the online databases available to the University through Athens. Background readings and definitions on gonzo were also obtained from online resources such as newspapers, magazines and blogs. The reason for including secondary sources was to add extra reliability to the results as primary sources can often have limitations.

### **1. 3. 2 Limitations of research method**

Limitations for this dissertation have surrounded the decision to include primary sources as often these have more disadvantages than advantages. Secondary sources were essential but, while the death of Hunter S Thompson is highly documented, there are very few sources that discuss gonzo journalism and the history behind it. This limitation meant that more primary sources such as interviews would need to be used to gain reliable research on the true definition of gonzo.

Surveys and questionnaires can be invaluable sources but are time consuming and provide many issues regarding the validity. There is a question over the knowledge of the respondents' answers and even a small chance that the respondent is unaware of the subject and are guess answering.

The limitations of secondary sources are mainly concerned with the unavailability of enough relevant sources and those sources that are found being non-academic and some even inaccurate. Many online sources have to be double checked for validity as blogs, newspapers and magazines can

sometimes be written by inexperienced writers who are not knowledgeable about the subject.

## **1. 4 Structure**

The dissertation shall begin with a literature review of gonzo

(This dissertation will start out with a literature review on Enterprise

Resource Planning

in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 is then dedicated to a literature review on

Organisational Culture.

The two topics will be combined in Chapter 4, first in a literature review and then in an

analysis of the discussed literature. The conclusions and recommendations out of this analysis

follow in Chapter 5.)

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2. 1 Literature review: Gonzo: a definition**

One reason Thompson hasn't shown up in journals much is his association with New

Journalism. In a 1989 survey of critical literature about New Journalism, James Stull<sup>1</sup> found

only sixteen scholarly works that address the genre. Since then, little has been added. New

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Journalism's general omission from critical consideration in literary journals may exist simply

because the genre is only forty years old, a baby in the eyes of academia. It is also regarded as

something of a bastard child, somewhere between fiction and journalism.

New Journalists are

notorious for blending fact and fiction, writing through overt subjectivity, and even instigating

events they report on. These factors make it difficult to point out exactly where journalism ends

1 Stull, James N. " New Journalism: Surveying the Critical Literature." North Dakota Quarterly 57 (1989), 164-74.

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and fiction begins.

While " gonzo" might be the best genre to file Thompson under, and the most commonly

employed to do so, it seems a shame to do so. " Gonzo," while an almost onomatopoeic hint at

what to expect, is something of an " Other" category. " Well, he's not quite this one, not quite

that one...oh, let's just toss him over there." The term also carries an implied inferiority.

"Gonzo" sounds unprepared, strung together, and madcap. Thompson himself has expressed an

uneasiness with the term. "I never really was entirely comfortable with the word 'gonzo,'" he

says in an interview<sup>50</sup>. "It was not mine originally."

Thompson's term was "outlaw journalism." This is much more appealing than gonzo.

"Gonzo" might as well be replaced with "wacky."

The realists (the safer group,

headed by Wolfe) are concerned with intense observation and the accurate reportage of what was

observed. They assume there exists a conventional, shared context between the writer and

reader. On the other hand, the modernists, such as Norman Mailer and Thompson, believe there

can be no single frame of reference and focus on breaking down that notion, which they see as a

false assumption (192).



## **2. 2 Literature review: the works of Hunter S. Thompson**

### **2. 3 Literature review - Gonzo: the implications for practice**

Four years after his death, Dr Hunter S. Thompson remains one of journalism's greatest cult figures. His work created a whole new genre of journalism entitled 'Gonzo' and his legacy still remains just as strong today as it did when he started his unique style in the 1970s.

The term 'gonzo' has more often than not been related back to Hunter S. Thompson and his unique style of reporting news. The term has become increasingly popular since the creation of gonzo journalism and was even accepted into the dictionary in 2003. The Oxford Dictionary states that gonzo is " 1 of or associated with journalism of an exaggerated, subjective, and fictionalized style. 2 bizarre or crazy". The first reported case of Thompson using this style was during the time he wrote the article " The Kentucky Derby" which was published in June 1970. The article was originally meant to be a straight sports story that told the outcome of a race but Thompson was disgusted by the " decadent and depraved" way in which the crowd behaved. According to his book *The Great Shark Hunt*, Thompson explained that he had scribbled down notes of everything he had witnessed that day and then faxed them through in a random order to his editor. The outcome was an incoherent, first-person rambling about society as a whole rather than anything to do with the Kentucky Derby.

Another journalist at the newspaper read over the article and told Thompson that his style was " totally gonzo".<sup>[1]</sup> Although Hunter later confessed he had no idea what the saying meant, he kept it as his own. In interviews with numerous magazines since then, he has given a literary meaning of the word <https://assignbuster.com/the-definition-of-gonzo-journalism/>

by saying " that it followed William Faulkner's dictum that 'the best fiction is more true than any kind of journalism'." [2]

In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, Thompson described stumbling upon gonzo journalism as like " falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool of mermaids". [3]

While gonzo journalism is a popular subject in society, it is not often talked about in academic literature other than to be " referenced when discussing larger movements, such as The New Journalism". (Hoover, 2009)

Thompson continually broke the rules throughout his career and for a long time was rejected by many publications because of his erratic style and behaviour. In the 2007 book by Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour entitled " Gonzo: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson, the people closest to Thompson give interviews surrounding his controversial life. It is a biography with a difference as it gives a detailed analysis of Hunter's entire life by the people who knew him best - the ones he grew up with and worked alongside. A different side to Thompson is found in this book because not all the people who are interviewed particularly like him. Ex-editors and his ex-wife tell tales of his erratic drink and drug fuelled trips that ended in him not contacting anyone for days. Editors talk brutally about Hunter being unpredictable and never on time which made him virtually unemployable. The reader gets a sense of why Thompson always freelanced and even when he was doing okay; why he would get up and find work elsewhere. It sums up why Hunter remains as idolised as he still is today, the man lived his life exactly how he wanted to and did things his own way. In his own right he managed to

become as famous as any 'rock icon' of his era and all the while by using a pen and typewriter.

Outlaw Journalist: The life of Hunter S. Thompson by William McKeen is another book that underlies the reason that people are still entranced by Thompson's life and personal style. This book looks closely at the relationship between Hunter as a writer and his rise to becoming a cult icon. The brutal truth that Hunter would write about offended most but at the same time encapsulated a large majority of readers. McKeen analyses Thompson's bad boy image and reputation and ties in the facts that people felt like they could trust Thompson because he spoke his mind and unveiled the darker side of a world people know exists. However, the author is quick to point out the irony of a man out of his mind on drugs talking about how much of a liar Nixon is and how the 'American dream' was all a farce. The book delves into Thompson's dark and violent past with interviews from his ex-wife explaining that his temper was the reason why they were divorced. Like all the people Hunter met in life, there are always good stories and bad stories about him and McKeen balances the two to create a book that shows both sides of Thompson. The work-aholic journalist who would give his all and even risk his own wellbeing to get a better story and the violent, drugged-up man who was shouting his head off while holding a shotgun. McKeen's conclusions are that Hunter gave the writing world a stand-alone figure who would dare to break all the rules and take risks just for the entertainment of others. Most of the conclusion on this analysis looks back at Thompson's book Hell's Angels and how he had risked his life and almost paid for it by trying to get an inside story.

Marc Weingarten's book, *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight*, focuses on gonzo journalism as a whole genre rather than just describing the works of Hunter Thompson. Around the time that Thompson had chiselled his unique style and found an appropriate title for it, there were already authors who had shown similar signs of creativity. Tom Wolfe and older writers such as Truman Capote had already published stories that were in many ways similar to Thompson's gonzo journalism but lacked the harsh truth that only Hunter could properly tell. The book is an interesting read because much of the books focus merely on Thompson and his career before and after the creation of gonzo journalism. This book looks at seven authors that helped shape the 'new journalism' revolution and then each of them brings their own memories and opinions of that time into each chapter.

When asked why he felt that he had become more famous out of gonzo, Hunter wrote, "Wolfe's problem is that he is too crusty to participate in his stories. The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to fascinate him as a writer are so weird that they make him nervous. The only thing new and unusual about Wolfe's journalism is that he's an abnormally good reporter".

There are a lot of quirky parts to the book that make it different to other gonzo pieces and another reason is that the authors give their reasons behind the stories. For Hunter, this meant going into great detail about what had gone through his head for wanting to join the Hell's Angels. The implications for practice today can certainly be understood from this chapter alone, as Hunter talks about his need to show the true side of human nature - no matter what the outcome was to him. At the time, everyone knew the

Hell's Angels were no good but no-one quite knew the extent of what they were capable until Hunter had gone along and unveiled everything. In his own book *Hell's Angels*, Thompson obviously tells the story how it was but it is fascinating getting inside the man's head to know why he wanted to report on something so dangerous. Probably another reason why Hunter remains a cult icon and gonzo journalism is still practiced today is because he constantly felt the urge to stand up to what most people would turn a blind eye to. Much like the way stories are found today, he was passionate about getting the truth and he would get involved with anyone with that information, just for the purpose of entertainment. Weingarten concludes that Hunter's success was because he was truly different from other investigative journalists at the time because once he had locked in on a story it would consume him. That would be to the point where he would take unnecessary risks and ask questions to people who anyone else would leave well alone. Hunter got away from the Hell's Angels with a severe beating but the legacy of that story remains Thompson's most hard-hitting gonzo classic.

Steven Hoover's journal article, *Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo Journalism: a guide to the research*, is essential for being able to find the best materials that are most relevant to researching and writing any articles on Thompson's work. As the article points out, " While " Gonzo" seems to be a unique word at first glance, it is not as uncommon as one might imagine. Gonzo is also a surname, a Muppet, a Japanese animation studio, and a Japanese Buddhist monk who lived in the Heian Period."

The research journal offers a great deal more than any Thompson bibliography could because years of literary reviews have already been carried out on the best research material by Hoover.

Hoover argues that because of technological advancements of the internet it has become increasingly difficult to get hold of Hunter's older material due to search results not flagging the right results up. When trying to get hold of proper gonzo journalism, search results more often than not bring up journalism websites that have a Hunter S Thompson obituary instead.

Hoover successfully points the way to the most helpful resources available and gives a detailed description of the materials that are found in each of them. This proves invaluable for being able to find reliable sources that can provide academic opinions for any research articles being conducted about Thompson.

In conclusion, it is a difficult task to find any academic opinion on Thompson because he was such a controversial figure. Very few academics have discussed Hunter's private life and the true meanings behind gonzo journalism - let alone how it has helped pave the way to journalism the way it is today. The authors who have the knowledge of Hunter's career are life-long fans of his work and know a great deal about his upbringing and personality. However, it is the lack of acknowledgment surrounding Hunter's involvement in forever changing the way reporters tell stories, that proves to be challenging. There are plenty of books and journals about 'new journalism' but these merely glide over the facts about Hunter's 'unusual' style and concentrate on how he is the creator of gonzo journalism.

I feel that the books I have read so far cover part of what I need to complete my dissertation but I will need to find other ways of analysing Hunter's impact on today's society.

### **3. Methodology**

### **4. Analysis**

### **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **6. Appendices**

### **7. References**