

# Gonzo Journalism - An Ethnography Study

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**Abstract:** 'Gonzo' as refers to a particular type of approach that involves a researcher taking position as close to the subject without being a part of it and using that position to present a vivid and personalized account. This paper describes an ethnographic case study on Gonzo Journalism to be used in Media Studies. This technique provides an experimental approach towards solving the problems of New Media Journalism and Citizen Journalism, New Process of News and News Values, and Defining the New Age Role of Journalism along with its Principles of Ethics. The Ethnographic Study will enable students to understand the link between the theories with the practice of Journalism. Along with that, it instigates the use of your own knowledge to develop an understanding of people, issues, and environment.

**Keywords:** Gonzo Journalism, Interpretivism, Ethnography New media, Citizen Journalism, New values

## 1. Introduction

The paper intends to discuss the study of News Media, News Writing, Feature Writing, News Reporting, as well as Editing, etc. There is one top convergence about this whole scenario, the uproar about the changes that have taken place in the media. There is no doubt that journalism has changed its form, ranging from print media to social media. Hence, this paper is designed to cover almost all aspects related to journalism, showcasing the ever changing and ever evolving Online Journalism. Although it is evident that in today's world, social media is gaining its power in the foreground, that doesn't mean that Newspaper industry isn't growing. In our country, the latter is doing even better than the foreign countries.

The prime focus of this paper is the changing forms of journalism. The different styles of News Writing like Articles, Features, Reports, and Editorial Writing. The main feature, however, remains Gonzo Journalism –An Ethnography Study.

## 2. The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to identify and annotate resources related to Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo Journalism.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** - Numerous searches are performed in online library catalogs, online database and web search engines to identify monographs, journal articles, multimedia titles, and web sites relevant to the topic. Resources located in the searches are then reviewed and annotated by the author and selected for inclusion in the paper based on their relative quality.

**Findings** - A great deal of popular work has been devoted to Thompson and Gonzo Journalism, but also a surprising amount of scholarly analysis has been added on. Most primary source material is now available in the form of monographs, and critical literature is fairly and evenly distributed between journal articles and monographs. Search results for Thompson and Gonzo Journalism are often

complicated by a number of factors, but using search limiters can always compensate these for.

**Research Limitations/Implications** - Because of the sheer volume of work, scholarly and popular articles were devoted to Thompson and Gonzo Journalism, and hence it is not possible to provide a comprehensive evaluation on all the materials of the topic. While every attempt is made to be inclusive, the goal of the guide was to include the best sources on the topic, and some resources are reviewed but not included because of quality issues. A number of un-annotated bibliographies are referenced. This would be helpful towards directing the readers to additional resources that are not included here.

**Originality/Value** - Although these are bibliographies of Thompson's work, none are annotated or prepared with academic researchers in mind. In addition, none of the bibliographies located in the course of researching the paper attempted to identify academic journal literature related to Thompson or Gonzo Journalism.

### What is Gonzo Journalism?

To start this article, we first need to know about the very topic's meaning and what its essence stands for. Gonzo journalism is a specific form of new-age journalism that one writes without any claim of objectivity. The reporter is usually an essential part of the story via a first-person narrative. It is believed that the word "gonzo" was used in 1970 in order to describe an article by the great Hunter S. Thompson. He was the man behind popularizing the article to what it is known today as.

Now what exactly is Gonzo Journalism you may wonder? It is a first-person writing style that is energetic and participatory in nature and style. A first-person narrative is a mode of story-telling in which a narrator relays events from their own point of view using the first person i.e., "I" or "We", etc. It may be narrated by a first person witness or first person peripheral (called as peripheral narrator). Narration is the use of a written or spoken commentary to convey a story to an audience. Narration encompasses a set of techniques through which the creator of the story presents, their own story, including:

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- 1) **Narrative Point of View** - The perspective (or type of personal or non-personal views) through a story is communicated.
- 2) **Narrative Voice** - The format through which a story is communicated.
- 3) **Narrative Tense** - The grammatical placement of the story's time-frame in the past, the present, or the future. In Gonzo Journalism, the first person narrative is very important and crucial.

The author is the "hero" in this picture, as in, he/she is the protagonist in all sense, drawing all its power from a combination of self-satire and social critique. Ever since, its use has been evidently found in all kinds of subjective artistic endeavors.

### Historical Background/Perspective

Historian Douglas Brinkley claims that Hunter S. Thompson went to the Kentucky Derby in 1970 and changed sports journalism and broadcasting forever. The word "Gonzo" is believed to have been first used in 1970 to describe an article - "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved". This was a famous sports article written by the man himself in Kentucky Derby in Louisville, first appearing in an issue of Scanlan's Monthly in June that year. Although, not much was known at that time, the article surely marked the first appearance of Gonzo Journalism, the style that Thompson came to epitomize through the 1970s.

### Who is Hunter S. Thompson?

The man behind the concept, Hunter S. Thompson, or in full, Hunter Stockton Thompson, was born on 18th July, 1937, in Louisville, Kentucky, in the U.S. He died on 20th February, 2005 in Woody Creek, Colorado. Thompson was an American journalist and author known for creating the genre of Gonzo Journalism. Due to this genre of high personal style, Thompson was soon considered to be a countercultural icon.

As a young man, Thompson had a number of run-ins with the law, and later joined the U.S. Air Force in 1956. He initially served for a base newspaper as a sports editor and continued his career in journalism after being discharged in 1957. He even wrote two autobiographical novels in the following years, but both of those were rejected by publishing houses. One of the autobiographies out of two was "The Rum Diary" that eventually published in 1998 and was adapted into a film in 2011. Thompson infiltrated the Hells Angels motorcycle gang in 1965. This was an experience he recounted in Hell's Angels (1965). Assignments were started being allocated due to this book, which were for "Harper's", "Esquire", "Rolling Stone", and other numerous magazines. Having a larger-than-life persona, highlighted by the constant use of drug and alcohol-fueled adventures, Thompson began to attract a lot of attention, in addition to his irreverent cultural and political criticism. He even possessed a great distaste for authority...cherry on the cake!

He is also best remembered for writing the 1971s "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas". This book is based on a true story that depicts what happened behind the scenes that led the

man to write his side of the story in the Great American novel.

### An Ecological Analysis of the Relationship between Risk and Reward

Since time immemorial, thinkers, writers, and scholars have been describing the intimate relationship between risk and reward. While considering satisfaction in life, the writer Hunter S. Thompson (1955) stated, "So we shall let the reader answer this question for himself: who is a happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived or he who has stayed securely on shore a merely existed?"

Similarly Machiavelli, the famous Italian statesman and political philosopher once noted that in politics, "Never was anything great achieved without any danger."

A casual search on the internet in the area of finance of self-help books reveals statements like "misunderstanding the relationship between risk and reward is a key piece in building your personal investment philosophy." (Little, 2018). All of these statements and facts point us toward the direction of wisdom that are key to success. It helps us know how to trade risk for reward. Yet, even the risk and reward trade-off can be achieved only in the presence of a systematic relationship between the two.

### What is Ethnography?

**Ethnography** stands for an illuminative account of cultural and social life, and in particular, a social system based on a number of detailed observations of what people actually do in a social setting. This is all personally observed and noted. Sociologists use Ethnography as both qualitative and quantitative research method while studying specific communities, institutions, or groups. This is found as being part of a larger and complex society. Sociologists could possibly observe and analyze these larger societies that are also entities. For example, a gang.

Sociologists make the most use of ethnography as they take a more specific look into society as well as proposed research for studies that involve participant observation. It can be further used for communities, organizations, cults, and more within a society.

### Gonzo Journalism in relation to New Age Media

Gonzo journalism has taken over the world of media. The world was taken by a storm after the 1970s Discovery of this term by Hunter S. Thompson. He was the journalist who once famously stated that, "If I'd written the truth I knew for the past ten years, about 600 people, including me, would be rotting in prison cells from Rio to Seattle today. Absolute truth is a very rare and dangerous commodity in the context of professional journalism". Now the question arises, what is Gonzo journalism and how it is affecting the media nowadays?

The two aspects, or rather, the two postulates that are key in Gonzo Journalism are:

- 1) "Exposing the truth by lying"
- 2) "becoming part of the story"

In the world of Journalism, Gonzo normalized not telling the truth. This style contributes greatly towards validating “assumptions” and proving great points in an argument or situation.

From calling Donald Trump an idiot to criticizing Madonna “to not have it anymore,” and that “she is not a queen of pop” are similar headlines to have become the norm in journalism nowadays.

We often hear terms like “Just the facts”, and the “facts are sacred”, but make no mistake, these are no longer norms associated with journalism. It was unthinkable for a journalist to write an article just based on personal opinions some 40 or 50 years ago. In order to back up a story one had to have some hard-core facts. Nowadays, this is not the case.

### **GONZO as a Culture, a Cult!**

Gonzo journalism, in its purest form, is a style where the journalists report without any claim of objectivity, and does so in a first-person narrative. This style of journalism is the total opposite from that of traditional journalism. The reporter writes from personal emotions and personal experience. Gonzo is all about striving for a personal approach to a story and on the way, throws facts and objectivity through the window. An article written in gonzo style is rich in sarcasm, humor, exaggeration, and profanity.

The best way to describe the style is by going back to Thompson and his writing in his “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” book. In it, he describes an event, writing “But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas”. Traditional journalists wouldn’t even dare to write a claim like that, not without facts verified by a third party. But Thompson did it, and journalism is richer because of that.

### **Pre Gonzo**

Let’s take a look at a headline from the World War II, a period when Gonzo was not known to the media. Back in those days of traditional journalism, a headline in the American newspapers read “Japanese surrender: World War II ends”. Can you imagine how would the headline read in gonzo style?

### **What made it possible?**

As we saw, Thompson rightfully said that he might have ended in prison. The reason was simple, telling the world “someone was a drug addict”, without any harsh facts, calls for vilification prosecution. But thanks to several international laws, freedom of speech is essential human right.

Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, and many regional laws that countries enforce to be in line with the Universal declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration was proclaimed on 10 December 1948, and in the preamble, it states “human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and

belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people”. Later, in Article 2, it states “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.

### **What is the TRUTH?**

Gonzo journalism helped media and newspapers today to get the truth out, as mentioned earlier. It sometimes occurs to us that the truth is more than just the facts that are presented to us. An example of Thompson’s that is yet again, “spot on”. Thompson became a full participator instead of just observing, during the 1971 Republican National Convention. Although he was attending the convention with his fellow journalist and friend Ron Rosenbaum, he didn't leave the chance to throw him under the bus.

It happened so that during a Nixon Youth riot, the people at the convention were yelling “No press”. Thompson's exact statement was, “no press, get that bastard out of here, no press allowed”, in clear reference to Rosenbaum. He later exclaimed that more than being a journalist he was a political observer. Yes, this exact length and bounds that defined gonzo journalism. There would've been no inside information available to make the story work Gonzo style, had Thompson stayed with his friend and out of the convention.

### **Risk Factors**

Speculation is by far the biggest risk associated with gonzo journalism. Once the facts in the story are thrown away, it becomes a subjective view on the matter and pure speculation. But in this era of wars, protests, riots, and tensions, we need exactly gonzo journalism to get the story out.

Why so you ask? This is because writing about a war, protest, riot, tension, or similar situation is almost impossible without being a part of it. Gonzo’s motive is to stimulate and encourage exactly that. Becoming an active participant in an event, and not just a passive observer or viewer, and becoming part of the problem and the solution, is what Gonzo stands for in all its essence.

### **Do we really need Gonzo?**

It is crucial to the success of the story that we understand the nuances of the protest, the tension and the crisis, and believe me, it requires patience. As every university’s professor will tell you, the best research is rooted in participation. In today’s media, journalists have become not just observers, but participants, and that is a good thing!

This will stand true and legitimate till the story isn’t exaggerated to the point it becomes a movie. There is a thin line between exaggeration and reality, one that journalists are walking every day. The style of Gonzo tends to favor exaggeration. While this is the case, it is also true that there is a reason why CNN, BBC, and other major news networks are sending journalists in the midst of action. To report live from the scene is another hyper-reality altogether, and hence can be profane or outlandish at times, in relation to Gonzo.

## Examples

### 1) 'No Extradition, Abducted and Brought to India': Corporate Lobbyist Deepak Talwar's Startling Claim

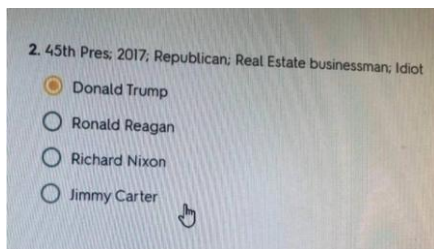
Talwar is wanted by the ED and the CBI in a case of misusing over Rs 90 crore taken through foreign funding route as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Source - News18.com, Updated: February 5, 2019, 12:13 PM IST,

An image attached below is from the same source.



### 2) Palm Beach Gardens teacher under investigation after referring to Trump as an 'idiot', BY C. ISAIAH SMALLS II, September 26, 2019 05:35 PM



A teacher at a Palm Beach County middle school is being investigated for referring to Donald Trump as an “idiot” on a quiz, according to multiple reports. *PALM BEACH POST*

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- [3] <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/article23513812.html>