

Notes toward a Supreme Nonfiction: Teaching Literary Reportage in the Twenty-first Century

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Journalism education was born a bastard, and has spent most of its life trying to find a legitimate home. “This rough-hewn craft has never been very comfortable in the overstuffed chairs of the faculty commons upholstered for professors of the liberal arts and the traditional professions of theology, law and medicine,” the late, great media scholar James Carey wrote in 1996. He describes the contortions early journalism educators used “to graft journalism onto the university via history, ethics, and law. That is, they turned to the humanities, as they understood them, to ground the new educational enterprise.”

Doing so made sense at the time. If journalism were a profession, the thinking went, then it must have a history for journalism scholars to record. And if journalism were a discipline, the thinking continued, it should have a canon to be venerated and built upon by successive generations of scholars. In the end, “journalism educators fashioned themselves not only into teachers of students but tutors and shapers of the craft, dedicated to elevating journalism to an exalted station deserving a place in the university,” writes Carey. “The fit has always been a little uneasy,” he concludes.

Journalism’s uneasy fit with the university is precisely what drew me to it. I was an unhappy graduate student in the late 1980s, studying political

philosophy, after having majored in philosophy and religion (with a handful of poetry courses thrown in for substance)—a series of choices that terrified my parents. I was experiencing an “uneasy fit” of my own. Having adjusted from the shock of moving from a small, Quaker college to a large research university, I still believed in the power of ideas to alter perceptions, and perhaps even actions.

What I was having trouble getting used to was the professionalization process Carey describes so eloquently. The transformation of a practice (in my case, reading and writing about ideas) into a legitimate vocation. I wanted to *do* philosophy and political theory, whatever that meant, not become a second order (and, most likely, second rate) scholar of those disciplines.

My salvation came from Janet Malcolm. Like all New York pseudointellectuals, I had been reading the *New Yorker* magazine for most of my life. But it wasn't until I came across her two-part profile of Ingrid Sischy, then the editor of *Artforum* magazine, that I saw a form of journalism capable of bringing the ideas I loved to life. The piece opens in art critic Rosalind Krauss's gorgeous SoHo loft, which Malcolm quickly establishes as a character in the piece. “Its beauty has a dark, forceful, willful character. Each piece of furniture and every object of use or decoration has evidently had to pass a severe test before being admitted into this disdainfully interesting room—a long, mildly be-gloomed rectangle with tall windows at either end, a *sachlich* white kitchen area in the center, a study, and a sleeping balcony.” Malcolm takes the reader on a journey through New York's art world, using the history of a magazine as the backdrop for a reported meditation on the very idea of “art” itself.

What kind of writing *was* this, I wondered? It wasn't a “story” in a conventional way. It wasn't a straight profile, as Sischy is barely mentioned in the first ten pages. There was too much reporting for it to be an essay, and too many of Malcolm's reflections for it to be described simply as an article. A group portrait perhaps? I read it through several times, and even outlined sections on a legal pad. I'm not terribly interested in art criticism, but I was entranced by the way Malcolm summoned ideas from these miniature portraits and wove them into the kind of fabric I had never seen before. I knew then that, whatever this writing was, it was what I wanted to do, even if it meant abandoning my current trajectory.

Fast-forward twenty years. After a half dozen editorial jobs, a few dozen articles and one book, *The New New Journalism*, I found myself back in academia, running the magazine writing concentration at New York University's journalism department. After a decade of freelance writing, I was glad to have a base. I loved writing, but I'd missed being an editor, and enjoyed exercising

that part of my brain on student work. One of my only complaints was that my very best students didn't get around to producing their best work—rigorously reported, well written—until the final week of any given semester.

The problem, of course, was with the semester, not the students. After all, what were the chances that a well-conceived piece would fit neatly within the constraints of a fourteen-week period? I realized that the academic schedule was too, for lack of a better word, academic. To address this problem, my colleagues Brooke Kroeger, Jay Rosen, and I established the Portfolio program, a Knight Foundation-funded, spring-summer-fall seminar to teach students to build a body of work—profiles, reports, essays—around a proposed idea or subject. With ten months to work on project, they were able to take more chances and to report more creatively than they had in the fourteen-week semester system. They now had the luxury of failing, as well as trying to rescue a piece by reworking it in a different form. Each student was assigned a web page—a novelty in 2003—to showcase his/her work. We devised a credo—“Some reporters cover beats; we create them”—in order to encourage our students to come up with stories that other reporters wouldn't. We urged them to participate in their stories, and experiment with memoir. Thinking and reporting creatively made them feel more like they were *doing* literary journalism than studying it.

The Portfolio program was soon cited by some of our best applicants as the main reason they applied to NYU. Older students in particular were drawn to the opportunity to focus on a subject about which they'd grow passionate. We began to draw an entirely different kind of applicant: young reporters frustrated by the superficiality of daily journalism, law and medical school students who wanted to write about their profession. One student became fascinated with programs that claimed to help ex-convicts—mostly black, poor, and male—get jobs, find housing, and reenter mainstream society. Her dream was to trail several men who had served long prison terms (twenty-plus years) for murder. The result, *Among Murderers*, was published this spring by University of California Press. Another had been a local political reporter, and wanted to write a book about the intersection of sports, politics, real estate, and corruption on which Yankee Stadium was built. *The House That Ruth Built: Power, Politics and the Making of Yankee Stadium* will be published by Macmillan in 2016.

Less pleasing was the fact that we were losing some of our top students not so much to traditional journalism schools like Columbia and Berkeley, but to MFA programs in creative nonfiction, which offered them even more personal attention, as well as larger amounts of financial aid with which to live in less expensive cities than New York.

What those MFA programs didn't offer was any training in the basics of reporting and research. Rather, as MFA programs scrambled to take advantage of the popularity of memoir and so-called reported essays, they simply cloned their fiction and poetry writing options. Thus Readings in Fiction I and II became Readings in Nonfiction I and II. Poetry Workshop I and II became Nonfiction Workshop I and II. Some institutions threw in a stray research course, but not a single one offered anything having to do with reporting.

Those criticisms aside, there is a lot to be said in favor of the MFA approach. Its workshop model guarantees that one's work is read closely and consistently by one's colleagues and teachers. It encourages a kind of mentorship that sometimes gets lost in the standard academic setting. And it entails a self-selection process that separates those who simply love literature from those who want to learn how to write it. In order to be admitted to an MFA program in fiction, a student submits a sample of his or her work, whether that is a few stories or some poems. If an evaluator believes they show promise, you're in. If not, not. Most likely a better indication of success than standardized tests, grades, and a writing sample.

What if we were able to synthesize the best of traditional journalism education and the MFA? Require that applicants each propose a project, teach them the basics of reporting and research once they arrived at NYU, then workshop their pieces over the course of their last two semesters? What's more, what if we designed an advanced reporting course based on the ethnographic methods of anthropologists—something we were able to accomplish when Ted Conover joined the faculty.

Full of hope, we announced the Literary Reportage program in the spring of 2008—precisely the moment the global economy began to collapse. And even if we had known, I don't see anything we could have done differently. Even with such short notice, we drew thirty-plus applicants, accepted fourteen of them, and welcomed an entering class of twelve students to NYU to create a body of work, and perhaps even write a book.

Every fall I teach an Introduction to Literary Reportage course. The syllabus is not based on the "great books" of the journalistic tradition, although it includes works by George Orwell, Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross, Joan Didion, and other writers well known to the people in this room. It begins with works from seventeenth-century America, but is peppered with weeks devoted to various journalistic forms, and is not strictly chronological. Most important to me, the course questions the writer-centric focus that is the default mode of most journalism courses. Rather, it devotes half the semester to editors like the *New Yorker's* Harold Ross, the *Village Voice's* Dan Wolf, *Esquire's* Harold

Hayes, *Harper's* Willie Morris, and *New York's* Clay Felker. They and their magazines helped define twentieth-century American literary journalism. As every professional journalist knows, editors do at least as much to shape the literary landscape as writers.

When I greet the new group of Literary Reportage students, the first thing I do is welcome them to the house of journalism. It is a big house, I explain, with many differently shaped and designed rooms. The rooms have names like “blog post,” “feature,” “essay,” “foreign report,” and “book,” and the house seems to grow by a room or two every year. In order to have a long and enjoyable career, I continue, they must find one room they truly love, and decorate and design it so that it reflects their very best attributes. In addition, they need to find a few other rooms where they feel comfortable, since one can't live in a single room forever. Each of the rooms has a different function, and must be maintained in a way that makes sense for it. Sometimes we move to the living room, invite our friends over, and have a noisy party. Other times we want to be alone, so retire to the study to ponder a single subject in peace. And then there are times when we have a small dinner party, and then retire to the porch to continue a particularly intense conversation with a single interlocutor. The variations are, potentially, limitless.

My optimism has several sources. Empirically, I've noticed that, regardless of short-term macroeconomic circumstances, citizens of advanced industrial societies expect the tools they use to live their lives to improve, the faster the better. They want multifunction “smart” phones, cameras that produce clearer photographs and videos, lighter and more powerful computers, larger and thinner televisions, and, most recently, tablets and iPads. With the constant improvements in hardware with which to watch, listen, read, browse, and communicate, isn't it likely that people will want similarly high-quality material to watch, read, browse, and listen to?

Early evidence suggests that they do. Despite slightly slowed growth, eBooks accounted for twenty-three percent of book publishers' revenue in 2012, helping to buoy all of trade publishing, which saw revenue rise by six percent to \$7.1 billion.

I'll close with a few tentative conclusions, derived from the corner of the digital journalistic universe I know best. Apple released the iPad exactly three years ago, in April 2010. The aggregator, Longform.org, went live that same month, followed by two digital publishers: Atavist in January 2011 and Byliner in June 2011.

Although Atavist and Byliner have slightly different business models and publishing formats (Atavist titles include video, audio, and photographs), they offer writers a similar deal: we'll pay you a \$5,000 fee for your piece,

and then pay you fifty percent of every copy, and all rights, sold. The pieces average between 10,000 to 20,000 words, and Atavist estimates that it sells anywhere between 4,000 to 55,000 copies of each title, with most selling in the 20,000 to 30,000 range.

Byliner's first release, Jon Krakauer's *Three Cups of Deceit*, famously sold over 200,000 copies, with the first 90,000 given away for free. William Langewiesche's *Finding the Devil* has been at the top of the Amazon Kindle Singles list since it appeared. And *Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek*, the first result of Byliner's collaboration with the *New York Times*, won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

Byliner and Atavist are a small but important part of literary journalism's digital landscape. They are privately held and reluctant to share precise sales figures. Data from Longform are more indicative of the new editorial consumption habits. Founded by two young journalists on a lark, the website posts four 2,000-plus-word stories each day, drawing from thousands of magazines and websites. The website averages 400,000 unique visitors per month, and the mobile app has sold 35,000 copies, at \$2.99 per. They are releasing a free app this fall.

What Longform's metrics reveal about its readers is intriguing. Longform's demographic is the envy of any advertiser: young (fifty percent of the readers are under 34), mobile (thirty percent read primarily on phones or tablets), and well educated (forty-two percent have attended graduate school). Virtually every story posted receives at least a thousand reads, with the average being four thousand. These stories require commitment. They aren't the kinds of things you read while talking on the phone and pecking at your computer. Usage is heaviest between seven p.m. and two a.m., peaking at nine p.m. The number of visitors to Longform doubles during weekends. A full sixty-five percent of visitors complete every story they read.

What *kinds* of articles are people reading? Well, we're talking about young people on the internet, so stories having to do with sex are nine times as likely to end up among the year's fifty most read. Out of the eighteen stories about sex that Longform posted in the past two years, twelve made their way into the top fifty. In addition, articles that involve murders are three times more likely to be read than other crime stories. So, yes, sex and death still sell.

Perhaps most surprising is what readers *don't* care about: newness. This past April, the most read story on the site was Walter Kirn's "Lost in the Meritocracy," an *Atlantic* story first published in 2005. I guarantee that you won't find any other website where the most popular post is eight years old.

The best narrative nonfiction—unlike basically every other content type on the web—doesn't lose appeal as it ages. A 1993 murder story from *Texas*

Monthly was number nine on the 2012 list. George Orwell’s “Why I Write” (1946) was number twenty. A total of three dozen older stories made it into 2012’s top fifty list. In fact, Longform’s readers are ten percent *more* likely to read an older story than a new one. The publication date carries almost no weight. Readers care more about an article’s subject than whether it is new.

Finally, Longform’s metrics indicate that young readers may be more drawn by certain authors than the magazines that publish them. The top twenty publishers on Longform—magazines like the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ* and *Esquire*—account for fifty-two percent of its total archive. Yet those same twenty publishers are responsible for only fifty-five percent of the most-read stories, which is a negligible increase. A well-known publication name doesn’t move the needle much at all. That is, a *New Yorker* story is no more likely to get clicked than a piece from someone’s personal blog. In fact, unknown publications often do better than brand names because readers are intrigued to see something new.

However, an author’s reputation is a much better predictor. The eighty-seven writers who had at least five articles on Longform—Tom Junod, Jessica Lussenhop, Matt Taibbi, Michael Lewis, et cetera—are ten percent more likely to show up on one a top fifty lists. That is to say, readers appear to care much more about writers and their subjects than when, where, or in what medium a story has appeared.

While I don’t know whether projects like the ones I’ve mentioned can sustain the business of long-form nonfiction, I am optimistic. If nothing else, I’m certain that journalism’s sprawling house will continue to expand, and that my students will have a lot of renovating to do.

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