

Asia Pacific Media Educator

Issue 18

2007

Article 1

Editor's Note: Journalism and world making moments

M. O'Donnell*

*University of Wollongong, marcus.odonnell@uow.edu.au

Copyright ©2007. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Editor's Note: Journalism and world making moments

M. O'Donnell

Abstract

In my original call for papers for this special issue on Narrative Journalism I suggested: "Today's newspapers and magazines present an array of different news and feature styles that have taken journalism away from the traditional inverted pyramid approach that is still the mainstay of most journalism courses".

This prompted one spirited email exchange with an academic who took umbrage at what she regarded as the untested assumptions in that statement. "How do you know this?" she asked. "I hope proposals tackle your assumptions as well as your topic!"

Thirty-five years after Tom Woolfe's "New Journalism" manifesto, the idea that there might be something new happening in journalism, or that perhaps our approach to journalism education may not be new enough, still has the power to rankle.

Certainly a number of the papers gathered here provide a context for that original statement and begin to provide some research data that helps to clarify the extent of the "narrative turn" in journalism and journalism education.

Editor's Note

Journalism and world making moments

In my original call for papers for this special issue on Narrative Journalism I suggested: "Today's newspapers and magazines present an array of different news and feature styles that have taken journalism away from the traditional inverted pyramid approach that is still the mainstay of most journalism courses".

This prompted one spirited email exchange with an academic who took umbrage at what she regarded as the untested assumptions in that statement. "How do you know this?" she asked. "I hope proposals tackle your assumptions as well as your topic!"

Thirty-five years after Tom Woolfe's "New Journalism" manifesto, the idea that there might be something new happening in journalism, or that perhaps our approach to journalism education may not be new enough, still has the power to rankle.

Certainly a number of the papers gathered here provide a context for that original statement and begin to provide some research data that helps to clarify the extent of the "narrative turn" in journalism and journalism education.

Jane Johnston's analysis of a small sample of Australian newspapers shows that the inverted pyramid is still very much at the heart of these newspapers' story telling styles. However she does identify a strong set of other narrative voices at play, particularly in broadsheet publications. And Molly Blair provides some evidence from the education perspective. Her survey of Australian journalism schools show that very few are teaching narrative journalism in any concerted way but that there is surprisingly little resistance to creative non-fiction techniques being introduced into the journalism education curriculum. Many senior journalism educators believe these techniques could benefit their students but the bogeys of time, resources and to some extent expertise are cited as reasons for creative non-fiction's current absence from most journalism curricula.

This is important research that marks one of the few non-US empirical studies of literary styles in current newspaper journalism and one of the only extended accounts of attitudes to the teaching of literary journalism in university-based journalism education courses.

Janine Little and Michael Sankey look at narrative from a different perspective. For them and their colleagues at rural newspaper group APN the narrative approach to news is not a problem, it is a solution to the issue of reader engagement. Little and Sankey describe an educational approach that they have trialled in both a journalism undergraduate subject and a professional development program that takes narrative writing as the forgotten heart of news writing. Significantly they show the connection between getting students to write news narratives and reflective narratives about their own learning processes.

Bill Reynolds shows that even for very experienced practitioners of long form magazine journalism learning to write, or rather discovering the story – the real story – is at the heart of the literary journalism process. William Langewiesche, whose book length study of life during the reconstruction of New York's ground zero is

one of the subjects of Reynolds' analysis, says: "I'm not smart enough to stare at my navel and write. I have to go out into the world". Immersion journalism is a key strategy for contemporary literary journalists but as Reynolds points out this is about more than "hanging-out": "At a certain point in the immersion process, something clicks. A eureka moment occurs and the writer understands the depth of his story. At this stage, he declares: It is really about something else". The writer is looking both for a concrete story – the classic ingredients of scene, anecdote and dialogue – but they are also looking for a metaphor for a deep way of confronting and understanding the world.

Jan Whitt argues in her contribution to this issue that this larger story that is found in both fiction and non-fiction novels is one of the main reasons to teach novels as part of a journalism degree. She writes that journalism education must be about more than merely the teaching of form. It must also be about the "awakening of social conscience". The novelists and journalists that she recommends all "sought to transform the world in which they lived by challenging readers to explore new ideas and values". Interestingly and fortuitously in the non-themed section of this issue Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen and Robert Peaslee make a similar case for the use of film in journalism education.

Historically literary journalism has been about world making moments. This is clearly seen in Scott Dunn's account of Rolling Stone's coverage of the 1972 U.S. election and in Monica Fontana's analysis of Brazilian journalist Caco Barcellos' work on drugs and crime in Rio's Dona Marta favela. And in an innovative use of Alberto Melucci's social networking theory, Anja Zinke argues that the broader social domain as well as the more intimate social spaces of friendships and literary connections were the crucible for the birth of the new in new journalism.

Sue Joseph brings a special dimension to this issue. She presents a narrative and exegesis that is part of a recently completed PhD. Her moving story of Russell Sykes and his struggles to come to terms with the fact that he was born as a product of his mother's gang rape is an account of a world making moment of a different kind. Joseph presents us not only with a poignant story but a model of both narrative as journalism and narrative as research.

Siobhan McHugh also brings the practitioner's voice to this issue with her critical reflections on interviewing as "aerobic" listening – a terrific phrase that I have been quoting to my students ever since I read McHugh's submission. Like Joseph she is concerned with the issue of intimacy and how we do justice to the encounters that we have as journalists. She contrasts her experience of asking the "hard questions" with her commitment to empathy as a key requirement of good journalism: an exercise that requires an energetic engagement with both the person and the process of the interview.

Nancy Hamilton in a reflection on teaching for creativity agrees that it is engagement, with our world, our own inner lives and with others, that is critical in assisting students to go beyond the mastery of good technique towards creative and insightful writing.

These ideas, of story as process, narrative as discovery and journalism as engagement and change agent, are not new. As Grant Hannis points out in his essay on Daniel

Defoe's journalism, not only did the great English writer use a set of common literary techniques that many journalists still find useful today he is also a writer who was fond of writing about writing. But to truly focus on process, discovery, engagement and change as the heart of journalistic practice is to step beyond the world of the objectivity debate and the strictures of formal writing styles such as the inverted pyramid.

As educators we are constantly balancing the need to make our graduates work ready for the grimy world of daily news journalism and our desire to make our courses creative and transformative experiences. The literary journalist's movement towards the moment of insight – the moment in which as Bill Reynolds says, their experiences and their story become a “metaphor for the world” – is of course a perfect metaphor for the educational process. And the literary journalist's mode of moving towards that insight through engagement with the world is at the heart of all truly transformative pedagogy.

In this sense literary or narrative journalism – both the process and the content – have much to teach us as both journalists and educators. And this is reason enough to battle against the demons of time and resources to ensure that it is given a stronger and more enduring place in all journalism education courses.

– Marcus O'Donnell, Editor