

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

This research essay will be analysing New/Literary Journalism; it will explore the history of New/Literary journalism: the current issues, the angles and areas of controversy and its strengths and weaknesses. The analysis of the history will lead to an identical analysis of the *Sydney Morning Herald's News Review* section also looking at their current issues, the angles and areas of controversy in their stories and the sections strengths and weaknesses as well as analysing which issues are covered strongly, the problems in its current coverage and gaps in current coverage. This research essay's conclusion will lead into my project proposal. For the purposes of this research essay, my project proposal and my major work, I will be combining the terms of New/Literary journalism.

"Literary journalism has developed its styles and standards in a long evolution over several centuries—an evolution in which the most dramatic changes came in response to disruptive cultural forces such as revolution, economic depression, war and liberation—and has its basis in the origins of non-fiction prose." (Sims, 2007, p20)

To complete a major project inspired and based on New/Literary Journalism, one has to understand the history of the form as well as the qualities and traits needed to write quality New/Literary Journalism articles.

Tom Wolfe's manifesto, *The New Journalism* is famous for defining the devices, rules and qualities of New/Literary journalism as well as presenting an anthology of work by famous writers and journalists that proved these devices, rules and qualities. Although New/Literary journalism was established itself as a popular form in the 1960s and 1970s and it's where it was at its best, the form was not invented during that time.

Wolfe and other writers, journalists and researchers of the form believe the earliest examples of New/Literary journalism date back to the nineteenth century with sketches, in which similar to Literary journalism had journalists write about everyday life as a result of immersion, which would be later known as a staple quality of Literary journalism, only it was "short, done in a day" (Sims, 2007, p49) as opposed to journalists spending several weeks, months and even years that the Literary journalists of the 1960s and 1970s and even today,

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

on a story. However the sketch eventually lost popularity and traction due to a change in newspaper trends at the beginning of the twentieth century.

“The sketch as a standard news story did not survive the facts trend at the beginning of the twentieth century. Newspapers increasingly avoided personal reporting and sketches; editors wanted readers to believe that the newspaper was the narrator and the newspaper was a somber (and sober) ever-trustworthy citizen.” (Sims, 2007, p59)

This pattern of the style of New/Literary journalism changing due to trends didn't end with the beginning of the twentieth century. The biggest changes in New/Literary journalism came with World War I, the Depression and the Vietnam War. During the Depression, text-and-picture books were popular.

“As is common in an age of planned obsolescence, the New Journalism didn't remain new for long. ‘Whatever happened to the New Journalism?’ wondered Thomas Powers in Commonweal, two years after Wolfe's manifesto appeared. By the 1980s the consensus was that the New Journalism was dead.” (Boynton, 2005, pp xix-xx)

The fact that magazines that specialise in New/Literary journalism such as *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, *the Atlantic* and *the New Yorker* as well as Australian examples; *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, *News Review* (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and *the Monthly* adequately prove that this statement is not entirely true, however the form may not be as popular as it was in Wolfe's time purely because it is no longer “new.”

“Wolfe's manifesto has long been considered the New Journalism's bible; and as with the bible, it contains a creation story and a set of guiding principles. The principles are fairly straightforward. The New Journalism uses complete dialogue, rather than the snippets quoted in daily journalism; proceeds scene by scene, much as in a movie; incorporates varying points of view, rather than telling a story solely from the perspective of the narrator; and pays close attention to status details about the appearance and behaviour of its characters. Rigorously reported, the New Journalism reads ‘like a story’.” (Boynton, 2005, p xvi)

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

It has become clear due to the nature of New/Literary journalism that journalists who write to this form do not have to stick to the strict inverted pyramid style that is enforced into journalists when they become part of the journalistic world. Journalists were allowed to involve themselves in their stories, in fact, it was encouraged as journalists learnt during the development and popularity of New/Literary journalism is that readers want quality storytelling so they began to focus on “why” and the “how” news values rather than the who, what, where and when—that is the focus for the daily newspaper reports.

“At its best literary journalism is about storytelling that re-creates a compelling narrative, celebrates detail, explores the perspective of the characters and taps into themes that are universal and thereby endure.” (Eisenhuth, 2007 p 41).

Due to journalists writing stories catering to those two specific news values, the stories tap into universal themes that the reader can relate to; especially since Literary journalists would immerse themselves into the lives of their subjects.

Due to the necessary techniques of Literary journalism articles being descriptive and “reading like a story”, there have been accusations of journalists being fictitious with some of their work.

“New Journalism, as described by Wolfe, involved ‘scene-by-scene construction’, recording dialogue ‘in full’ and ‘presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character.’ But you should remember that while the journalist may aim to produce the work that reads like a novel, this work should never stray from the truth. It is clearly non-fiction and as such, should never include fabricated facts, composite characters or invented scenarios (that bag of tricks is for the fiction writer).” (Kasinger 2009, pg xi)

This description by Wolfe is accurate and as previously stated, New/Literary journalists had to undertake more in-depth reporting and be on assignment for longer, often spending weeks, months and sometimes years with their subjects, in order to immerse themselves in their lives and therefore write a quality Literary article, one example of this is from Australian author, Evan Whitton. In 1967, Whitton wrote a feature article for *Truth*, a

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

Melbourne newspaper on the lives of pensioners. Instead of just interviewing pensioners, he lived the life of one. “He dressed in old clothes, lived on the equivalent of a government hand out, was fed by charities and slept in a Fitzroy doss house, spending his days as a down-and-out pensioner, looking in shop windows and lounging in public libraries to stave off the boredom and the cold.” (Kasinger, 2009, pg xiii) Whitton won a Walkley Award for this feature.

What this example demonstrates is a journalist’s dedication to accurately reporting and writing a story on an issue that anyone can relate to, again touching on the crucial universality needed for literary journalism, which is the main strength of the form. However due to the need for journalists to immerse themselves in their subject’s lives, they can also suffer from some ramifications.

“Capote, Herr and Didion all suffered personal and psychological reaction as a result of such intense involvement with the people and the cultures they were reporting on. As they researched their stories, they were not separate from the worlds they were researching; they were participants.” (Sims, 2007, p257)

“Credible, thoughtful, intelligent—News Review provides incisive commentary on key news and events. This informative section delivers thought provoking analysis of the week’s events and puts a spin on the news, dissecting the arguments and defining the issues. Stylishly presented and committed to quality journalism, News Review is a refreshing weekend read. Fast becoming one of Saturday’s most popular sections, News Review attracts a broadly based readership and consistently delivers discerning and involved readers, with the ability and desire to purchase across a wide range of products and services.”¹

Although *News Review* may not be purely literary journalism; I believe it is a combination of extended news features with New/Literary journalism qualities. Paul McGeough demonstrates extended news feature and Literary writing qualities at the same time in his recent *News Review* piece; *Best We Forget*, which was published in the March 16-17th edition.

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

“These road trips early last month, hundreds of kilometres over 10 days, reveal the stunning beauty of the craggy mountains where the light and mood change by the minute. Unseen, but seeping through villages tucked into the folds of each valley, are all the elements of a cultural and political force-field little altered after more than a decade in the embrace of what the Afghan people were assured would be the civilised arms of the West.” (Paul McGeough, 2013, p 8).

Here, McGeough is describing the physical traits of the mountains and villages, but also the cultural, political and emotional environment within the physical environment that is present after a decade of war.

Due to the weekly frequency of *News Review* as well as the news constantly changing on a daily (sometimes more than once and twice a day) basis, journalists writing for *News Review* would not necessarily be able to invest months or years on a subject and/or a story. However, the journalists who do write for *News Review* and the stories that they write are experts in their field. *“New Direction a must for any hopes of survival”* one of the stories focusing on the leadership spill, in this story, focusing on former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his choice to not challenge Prime Minister Julia Gillard was written by James Button, a former speechwriter for Kevin Rudd. Other political stories are also written by political correspondents.

The variety of stories that the *News Review* choose to publish; stories that range from politics and the recent leadership spill, to proposed new laws for L-Plater drivers, to well-educated and intelligent people becoming drug addicts and what it means to have a non-European Pope, is a strength for the publication. It is a strength as it focuses on these news issues in more depth and can provide readers with more information and provide them with an understanding on the issue. However due to the frequency of the publication and that it is a section of the newspaper and not a stand-alone publication, it has to maintain a newspaper writing style and consistency and therefore is not as literary as it should or could be.

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

The issues that are covered strongly in *News Review* are clearly news stories that are prominent during that week, especially stories that could affect readers' perspective on the world and the daily decisions that they make, such as politics and who to vote for in this year's Federal election. Some problems that could come from this coverage is, as much as each article would be unique, there is the possibility of repetition and what would be classed as "newsworthy" for *News Review* could be pushing other stories that may not be as newsworthy, but worth publishing in *News Review* aside. As *News Review* obviously is a news publication, there aren't many "light hearted" stories in the publication, they are not stories that readers would find in lifestyle magazines. However, the avid and loyal reader of *News Review* would not be reading the publication for light hearted stories.

Due to the lack of Australian Literary journalism examples in comparison to the examples of the American Literary journalism, where the form was most prominent that have appeared during the course of my research, as well as the different Literary styles for the different types of content, this essay has lead to my interest in completing a *News Review*-like portfolio of work. My challenge will be to explore and find out whether a combination of News, Features and Opinions on different issues; serious and light hearted can work as a Literary journalism publication.

Research Essay: New/Literary Journalism

REFERENCE LIST:

FOOTNOTE:

¹ This quote was directly taken from the Fairfax Media Ad Centre Website about the *News Review* section of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This quote can be found here:

<http://ffx.adcentre.com.au/the-sydney-morning-herald/news/news-review-section.aspx>

REFERENCES:

BOOKS

Boynton, R, 2005, *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on their craft*, Random House, Canada.

Chance, J & McKeen, W, 2001, *Literary Journalism A Reader*, Wadsworth Thomson Learning, USA.

Eisenhuth, S & McDonald, W (eds), 2007, *The Writer's Reader Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, New York, United States of America.

Kasinger, M, Richardson, N & Tanner, S, 2009, *Feature Writing (Telling the Story)*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia.

Sims, N, 2007, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, Northwestern University Press, United States of America.

Wolfe, T, 1973, *The New Journalism*, Picador/Pan Books, London, United Kingdom.

WEBSITE

Fairfax Media: The Sydney Morning Herald, Sections, News Review, 2008, News Review, viewed 28 March 2013, <http://ffx.adcentre.com.au/the-sydney-morning-herald/news/news-review-section.aspx>