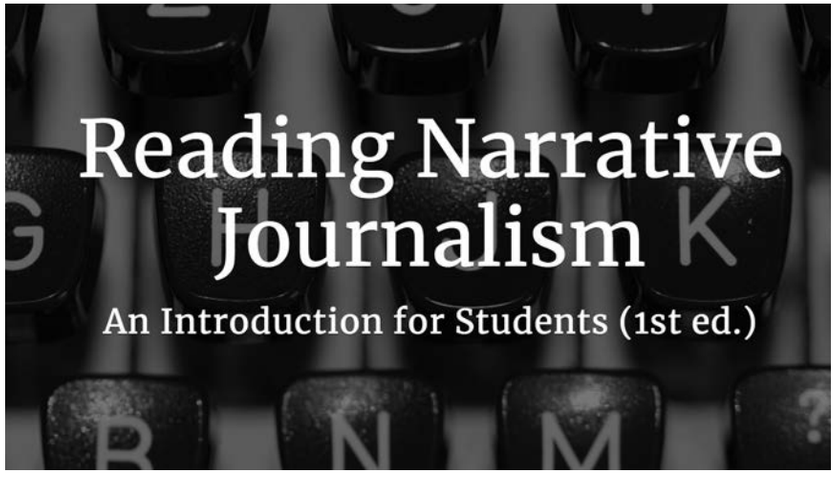


Home Page, Reading Narrative Journalism: An Introduction for Students. https://mediakron.bc.edu/readingnarrativejournalism. Background image of typewriter keys from Pixabay, https://pixabay.com/p-1227357/?no_redirect.

Digital LJ . . .

Reading in 4-D: Designing a Digital Multimedia Platform for Teaching Literary Journalism

Christopher P. Wilson
Boston College, United States

Abstract: This essay reflects on the goals and challenges of having designed an online, digital-multimedia platform that introduces undergraduate and beginning graduate students to interpreting literary and narrative journalism. This platform—titled Reading Narrative Journalism and designed with the user-friendly application known as MediaKron—aims to teach students how to become active, critical readers of four dimensions of reportage: the news content of a given journalistic text; the literary strategies shaping its story; the legwork and research behind the story; and the experiences of the "subjects" (persons) portrayed in it. Along with reviewing MediaKron's emphasis on multimedia storytelling and collaborative student engagement, the essay assesses the potential advantages of a multimedia textbook for teaching literary journalism. The pedagogical limitations and initially unforeseen effects of the platform are also considered. The essay explores, in particular, trade-offs in multimedia approaches generally. In all, a multimedia platform can create new opportunities for the classroom while still challenging scholars and students alike to consider what certain bywords of the digital age—"engagement," "interactivity," "multimodal" reading—will mean for the study of literary journalism.

Keywords: teaching literary journalism – multimedia platforms – journalistic authority – realism – reading pleasure

These days, the increasingly prohibitive cost of instructional materials in colleges and universities is probably reason enough for scholars and teachers of literary journalism to experiment with developing online multimedia platforms and digital resources for classroom use.[1] Reason enough, too, can be found in the oft-remarked-upon convergence of media forms: the inter- or multimodality that has come to characterize important elements of the contemporary reading experience itself, in short- and long-form news features, slow and fast journalism, digital and graphic *reportage*, and more.[2] Technologically sharper, more versatile, and younger scholars have had much to say about digital formats,[3] and how such platforms may already be extending the invaluable field-building work done, in recent decades, by organizations like the IALJS. This is evidenced in identifying and defining the objects of study in the field (still a contested matter); pushing back against marginalization within received disciplines (still an ongoing problem); and in building bridges both across international borders and (still challenging) the often-more closed boundaries of disciplines themselves. Commentaries on the value of including literary journalism in the training of professional journalists and nonfiction writers are now rightly part of this journal's own critical archive, as the articles cited above have amply demonstrated.

That said, questions about how to teach the *reading* of literary journalism—as opposed to teaching how to *write* it—still constitute relatively undeveloped territory. Indeed, as William Dow observed in his IALJS keynote in 2016, the subject of *reading* literary journalism "remains an undertreated and underexplored element in literary journalism studies" more generally.[4] Dow's observation, in fact, resonates with the goals behind the recent creation of an online, multimedia instructional tool called Reading Narrative Journalism (hereafter, RNJ).[5] Designed over the past four years, the result is a digital student guide to the unique challenges of reading long-form, "slow," or literary journalism. The project resulted not in an anthology, nor a collection of critical essays, nor another monograph for fellow scholars, but a practical attempt to offer what the site terms "active, critical reading" skills to advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students. Even if the option of teaching the reading of literary journalism is relatively rare these days—a privilege, even in a liberal arts curriculum—the questions posed by such an experiment may only become more germane to this field in coming decades. This report offers some reflections on what might be learned from this project.

First, some background. The multimedia platform used for this project is called MediaKron, "an online toolkit for digital curation and storytelling," with the platform created by Tim Lindgren and Brad Mering of Boston College.[6] The platform provides faculty and students a user-friendly way to

author, edit, and display their scholarly research or reflections in interactive multimedia formats. At its core, MediaKron allows designers/authors (working individually or collaboratively) to construct an archive of materials and then organize them in a variety of multimedia content in different formats (as video illustrations to text, in slide shows, as markers of timelines or maps, and more). Because materials can be "curated" (organized, annotated, contextualized, and so on) so that they can appear simultaneously in more than one location within a given project site, MediaKron enables the telling of multimodal stories with that content, and thus the drawing upon different learning modes students use (written, visual, auditory, temporal) to comprehend the ideas within such stories.

For instance, content can be organized around historical events (the bombing of Hiroshima, the Vietnam War) or topics (Disney and gender), and then displayed as slide shows, juxtaposed in visual "comparisons," or even located in positions on timelines that layer in political events, changes in media, and so on. MediaKron also facilitates collaboration by allowing *student* authoring and design, as well as the creation of group projects that, within certain copyright limits, can be posted online. To date, MediaKron has been used, among many other efforts, for collaborative, student-authored museum exhibitions, guides to Medieval alliterative poetry, a place-based travel course on London theater, as well as hands-on portable handbooks for professional training in nursing and education. In all these ways, MediaKron is designed especially to facilitate and stimulate thinking about the *connections* between collected materials, so that different juxtapositions can elicit different ways of interpreting given documents. In the case of RNJ, for instance, selections from YouTube interviews with journalists are used as stand-alone texts, and as "annotations" that parallel the explication of journalistic concepts. Similarly, an array of Jacob Riis photographs—which can be expanded to full-screen viewing—is placed next to a discussion of the rhetorical style of Riis's autobiography. Or, MediaKron makes it possible to isolate visual images and pinpoint effects of style or representation though mobile annotation boxes that allow the designer to insert comments on particular effects.

Relative late comers to digital design, may on balance, find taking a stylistically "conservative to moderate" approach on the digital-multimedia scale a good way to begin. That has been true for the present RNJ effort. For instance, rather than aiming for an immersive or nonlinear reading experience, the site was organized much like a book, with five chapters that guide student readers from introductory issues of definition and terminology, through different ways that journalists use the idea of "story," and then through some dominant styles (realist, multigenre, and testimonial; the New

Journalism and postmodern experimentation), within mostly contemporary, U.S.-based narrative journalism. A design premium was placed, that is, on a more familiar, text-heavy, and continuous experience of reading and learning, and on helping students understand the constructed nature of journalistic, print narrative.[7] The site now includes a glossary of critical terms, embedded links to scholarship, and expanded discussions of theoretical keywords. It encourages alternative itineraries that allow students to read selectively or in non-linear ways (if they choose to); and provides students and teachers with resources—classroom exercises, folders of video interviews, bibliographies of recommended scholarship, downloadable study sheets—and more.

The advantages to a digital platform are perhaps obvious. It is virtually free, after all; unlike a print text, it can be easily updated, corrected, and improved; the in-house version can create opportunities for student research, collaboration, and authoring. An instructor can "flip the classroom" by having students view a lecture, asking them fill out one of the worksheets on the site before coming to class for a discussion. The course instructor can also encourage students to design alternative pathways by tracing the site's discussions of different concepts in the glossary or main text. But what exactly were the objectives and goals for using such strategies, and what specifically did this platform aim to teach about literary journalism?

Well, perhaps most centrally, the platform's multimedia presentation tools are designed to help students understand certain *stylistic* conventions by suggesting analogies between graphic, visual, temporal (timeline) forms of representation and effects of print. So, for example, when IALJS scholars use the word "profile," RNJ can—as Ben Yagoda's history of the *New Yorker* documents—illustrate how the term was originally conceived in relation to a visual "side view" in a sketch. (Thus, a student is asked to consider matters of selection or depth in relation to written profiles and to infer their topical or satirical intent.)[8] In fact, over time, the visual register, in particular, gradually moved to the center of the plan for RNJ as a whole. For the most part, the goal

"A Study of F. Scott Fitzgerald," by Gordon Bryant. Published in *Shadowland* magazine in 1921, Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/F._Scott_Fitzgerald%2C_1921.png.

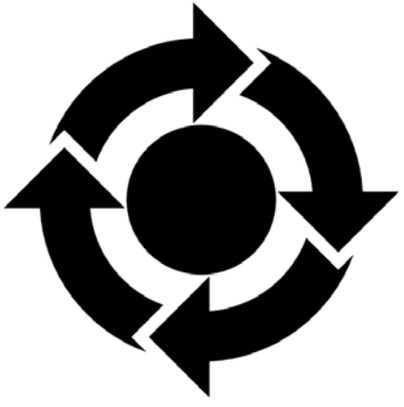
"My Point of View" (2014) by Francesco Petrungaro. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0), from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:My_point_of_view.jpg.

was not to create what is sometimes called *ekphrasis*, the sense of the synergy or mimicry between visual or print forms; rather, it was simply to ask students to compare aesthetic strategies across media forms. (RNJ's final chapter, however, explores the synergistic sense[9] via its discussion of Joan Didion's *Salvador.*) In particular, by using the visual analogy of a text to a lens (see above), it was possible to establish a core principle for the site: inviting students to think about how matters of a journalist's selection, focus, and framing typically have interpretive force on whatever substantive social issue a given journalist is addressing.

The next steps followed from that analogy: How would it be possible, then, to reconstruct the essential elements or dimensions of such a lens—what went into *building* any given text the student is being asked to read, and how might that student reader be led to examine those dimensions critically? As one student had put it, long ago, so directly and so succinctly to me: What was I asking my classes to "read *for*"?

Trying to answer that question, in turn, came to be the way that RNJ grapples with what is so often unique and challenging about reading a fact-based, literary narrative that entails engagement with flesh and blood persons and, as it does so, draws upon institutional norms about verification and truth telling. RNJ calls this the challenge of Reading in 4-D—what students needed to look for as they read:

1. *Reading for news content*: what the journalist suggests is or was the crux social or political issues within a set of story-givens—what *matters* about poverty or crime or war, for instance;
2. *Reading for literary effects of story form*: narrative elements (point of view, voice, plot design, and so on), including the styles adapted from famous works of fiction or the conventions of well-known genres;
3. *Reading for legwork and research*: descriptions of the on-the-ground conditions the journalist faced; and
4. *Reading for subject's story*: the real or imagined tales that particular news sources or subjects do (or might) tell, sometimes in contradiction or tension with the journalist's own tale. These subjects' stories, of course, are where ethical issues about journalistic responsibility often come into view.



Simpleicions Business Pie Chart with a Circle of Arrows, by Simpleicon. http.simpleicon.com/(http://www.flaticon.com/packs/simpleicon-business [CC BY 3.0] https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Simpleicons_Business_pie-chart-with-a-circle-of-arrows.svg.

Armed with these four dimensions of reading—what, in effect, to "look for" when they read—students are encouraged to bring such dimensions into conversation with each other. That is, they are asked to think about where the objectives of one dimension might overlap, be in tension with, or contradict one or more of the others. The goal here was not simply to create a grab bag of methods, nor to exhaust the different ways one might read works of literary journalism.[10] Rather, the intent was to use multimedia crosscutting to better reflect in the classroom the broad *interdisciplinary* discussion that has emerged around the reading of literary and narrative journalism. Indeed, the hope was that building in these four different ways of reading might help keep the *instructor* honest, too: If one's approach was, for example, that of a cultural-studies-oriented, liberal arts teacher—or, alternatively, that of a journalist or journalism educator—the hope was to avoid restricting the meaning of "reading" to, say, the imperatives of one discipline or another.[11]

Perhaps these objectives can be best illustrated by turning to the third chapter of RNJ, which discusses the aesthetics of realism, which are still at a premium in so much of narrative journalism, especially among writers and scholars who remain skeptical of postmodern or even New Journalism-style experimentation. But even more to the point, this chapter focuses on realism, because students commonly describe a text as "realistic," colloquially, to refer to the feeling of authenticity—and two consequences often result. First, by implicitly capitulating to empiricist thinking, students can approach a work of journalism as simply a transparent window rather than a lens—and, in turn, often uncritically accept the *authority* of a given piece. (If it feels real, in other words, it must be true.) But rather than simply debunk that assumption, RNJ asks students to recognize the reasons why they *do* invest authority in, say, direct witnessing, even though they may also recognize the limits of subjectivity and partial viewing.[12] And so—prompting the third dimension of reading described above—the site encourages students to tease out descriptions, explicit and otherwise, of the journalist's legwork and research, or perhaps watch a YouTube interview linked by the site. (Students expressed appreciation for hearing the journalist's backstories about a given project.) RNJ's third dimension can then be juxtaposed with its fourth—say, for example, by having students read testimonials from news subjects themselves. (For instance, students might compare Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* with a recent documentary featuring the testimonies of service workers.)[13] For many students, this kind of juxtaposition both clarifies the journalist's interpretive focus (the first dimension) and raises questions about what might have fallen *outside* his or her lens.

Simultaneously, RNJ encourages students to decipher the realism created by aesthetic effects of storytelling (the second dimension)—for example, by using visual analogies about so-called site lines and vanishing points in a line drawing or a realistic painting. On the RNJ website students can view materials from art history and literary studies that illustrate the conventions of realistic representation—for instance, how visual effects of perspective typically produce the illusion of depth as well as establish a "horizon," a textual parameter crucial for a critical reading as well. By using MediaKron's mobile-box annotation feature, for instance, students can explore other effects of positioning, backgrounding, and shading in creating the feeling of realism in works of art. RNJ also experiments with a few real-time feedback exercises wherein, for example, students are asked to imagine the conventions of a particular genre (such as a Western), and then click to see possible ways of answering the questions posed to them about conventions in journalism.

The goal of RNJ, again, is not merely to debunk the authority students

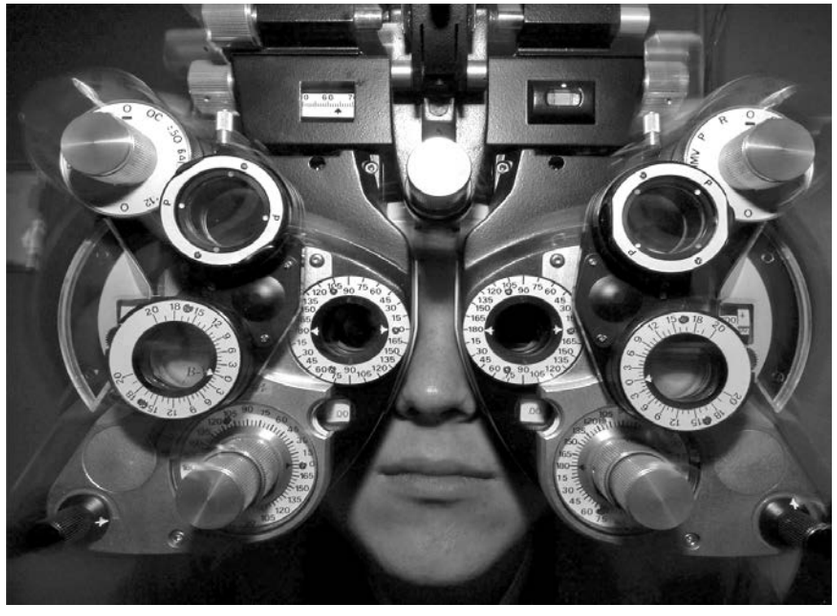
may invest in realism. Rather, as with its analogy of the lens, it is meant to remind them that even if readers assume they can only access a given news story, usually, through the text they may be reading, that is not the same thing as saying the event is not there, nor that one textual lens is simply as good as another. Again, the idea is to encourage students to read in 4-D. That is, to understand that the claim to realism in many works of literary journalism is a claim coming at them in many different dimensions: through the urgency of a given news frame, through the text's orchestration of literary "reality effects," through the journalist's direct witnessing and testimony and legwork, and from certain explicit or implied relationships with subjects (persons) represented in what they read. Furthermore, understanding the conventionality of realism can help students understand what takes place when more experimental forms *depart* from those conventions—as RNJ's final chapters explore.

A Few Personal Reflections

And what of my own learning curve? What were the limits I discovered in the multimedia approach, beyond the merely technical hassles and glitches one always encounters in digital design; and the endless layers of ignorance I discovered in myself, about responsible digital citizenship, the capacities and limits of VPN networks, learning a new narrative voice more suitable for student reading, and so on? What were the new or renewed questions my first attempt at the digital-multimedia format has led me to face?

Well, for one, it became obvious, over time, that the medium had begun to blur with the message. And I don't mean simply that I have started to incorporate graphic and digital journalism, for instance, into my classes more than in the past. Rather, it was that working in multimedia formats clearly began to influence the way I began to see even traditional print forms of journalistic authority as always already multimodal. Jacob Riis's crosscutting between everyday crime stories, documentary photography, health department statistics, and more, were evidence enough—repackaged, after all, into Riis's slide-lantern shows that eerily anticipated today's virtual reality technology.[14] But even more fundamentally, multimedia design caused me to think about how journalistic narrative was, so often, a mosaic of citations and reenvisioning of others' witnessing, and that reading it was often a matter of sifting through, as it were, "rotating" or alternate grounds of authority (and, in turn, style). You might say that the conventional, more static "picturing" of narrative had begun, in my eyes, to pixilate.

Or, if you prefer an analogy to literary categories, I came in thinking in terms of genres and static conventions; I have come out of the project thinking in modes, mainframes, and even narrative subroutines.



Hospital Corpsman Brian Long, of Sellersville, Pennsylvania, attempts to read a standard eye chart from twenty feet with the help of an Optical Refractor aboard the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67). "Geraet beim Optiker," Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geraet_beim_Optiker.jpg.

I also began to recognize that resorting to multimedia formats had exposed a long-standing limit or contradiction in my own teaching of literary journalism. For instance, I began to wonder *why* I had felt the need to supplement my students' reading of print with mobile, digital stimuli and cognitive remapping: Was not the print text, I now wondered, pleasurable enough on its own? This wasn't simply the customary worry about introducing yet more distracting stimuli into my students' reading lives. Rather, creating RNJ made me realize how much I had myself characteristically defined my pedagogical objectives as unmasking—and thus implicitly discounting—my students' initial pleasures in reading. That is, I had privileged *moving past their pleasure* into seeing the construction of a text, and thus arriving at "critique."[15] As a result of working on RNJ, however, I recognized that I didn't seem to have an adequate *understanding of that pleasure in the first place,* or whether or how I meant to cultivate *appreciation* of the print texts I had always assumed they liked for reasons I (in my arrogance) already thought I knew. Likewise, these contradictions made me realize that I didn't always have a reasonable account of where pleasure sits, as it were, in relation to our/my relentless investigations

of journalistic authority. If I weren't careful, I could subvert my own goals by implying that print journalism was not sufficiently pleasurable on its own. (Or, indeed, by reinforcing the testimony of some millennials who, while reading online, say that "giant blocks of text" are greeted with dread.)[16]

Meanwhile, I also learned that, however reliant RNJ was on the pedagogical strategy of working from print text to the visual mode, I just couldn't really make *everything* visible, at least at this stage. I now began to wonder exactly why, for instance, I had wanted the platform to present videos of journalists being interviewed. At times this tactic suggested to me that I was admitting to my students that sometimes a journalistic intention, or an account of legwork, is in fact *not* always visible within the printed narrative—any more than, say, subjects' experiences always were. (How variously we—and our students—use "subjectivity" is a topic also worthy of much deeper pedagogical thinking than I have space for here.) But perhaps most importantly of all, the rituals of verification behind some texts were also not always as visible as I had been assuming. These habitually and legitimately "slow" processes (to use Susan Greenberg's formulation)[17] are often enacted within a structure of production, yet not always discernable when a text is written up. My students were often simply forced to take my word for it—that such a structure was behind a given work. Institutional norms about truth verification matter to the field, in other words, however much an English professor like me might blather on about "reality effects." However, Kovach and Rosensteil in their *Elements of Journalism* account for objectivity as a process.[18] The often implicit presence of professional standards of verification made me recognize that I needed to think harder about why journalists do so often *cover* their tracks, and in turn, what we do as teachers to *un*cover them. (Journalists often cover up or discount their "literary" strategies as well.)[19] We do a lot of talking about what we say, as teachers, *about* the texts we read; we don't talk so much about what pedagogical strategies we design *around* those texts. Moreover, it has unsurprisingly proven easier to identify the four dimensions RNJ does than to actually get them to interact in a well-coordinated student reading. (Even scrolling on a screen may create an implicit "momentum" of working in one mode of reading rather than another.) And finally, more than anything else, this continuing challenge gets back to keeping me (relatively!) honest, as a teacher—multimedia cross-referencing was one of the ways that I had to work harder to avoid one of the pitfalls of interdisciplinary reading and teaching (and, I think, scholarly debate): using the norms or standards of one discipline to veto or cancel out the readings of another.

One Final Note

Which returns me to perhaps the most obvious point—one that I should not have needed multimedia formats or digital dazzle to teach me (again). Of all of the formulations I've come across in learning about digital design, perhaps none is as discomfiting as the habitual definition of "interactivity" as merely a matter of which "view" a given text allows a reader to choose—in this case, a student reader.[20] On the contrary: By far the most effective elements in the site were the classroom exercises and guides I designed (at the urging of anonymous peer review). And they were effective simply because they created more space for the reading practices my students *already* possessed and about which I find I *still* have much more to learn each time I enter a classroom. And so, whatever ways we hope to "wire" our students into the writing that gives us pleasure, pictures our world, testifies to its problems and its people—whatever kind of lens we hope to design—I am myself still grappling with my student's refrain: "What should we read *for*?"

Christopher P. Wilson is professor of English and American Studies at Boston College. He is the author of Learning to Live with Crime: American Crime Narrative in the Neoconservative Turn *(Columbus, 2010), and* Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth Century America *(Chicago, 2001). A past member of the editorial boards of* American Literature *and* American Quarterly*, he has published essays on narrative journalism in* Raritan*,* Twentieth-Century Literature*,* Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism*, and other journals. He serves on the advisory board of* Literary Journalism Studies*. He can be contacted at wilsonc@bc.edu.*

Notes

[1] The U.S. Government Accountability Office has reported that, "between 2002 and 2013," the cost of textbooks rose at "nearly three times the inflation rate"; meanwhile, up to two-thirds of students decided against buying a textbook because of cost. Weisbaum, "College Textbooks Costs More Outrageous than Ever," para. 3. See also Redden, "7 in 10 Students Have Skipped Buying a Textbook"; and Perez-Hernandez, "Open Textbooks Could Help Students." These generalizations are restricted to the United States and also to Canada, where these matters have been partly addressed by so-called "Affordable" or "Open" materials initiatives. See, for instance, "Funding boosts the B.C. Open Texbook Project."

[2] For a very thoughtful reflection on the potential role of multimedia in the current digital-news climate, see Ball, "Multimedia, Slow Journalism as Process," 432–44.

[3] See, for instance, Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, "The Digital Animation of Literary Journalism," 527–46; Dowling, "Toward a New Aesthetic," 101–16; and Giles and Hitch, "Multimedia Features," 75–91.

[4] Dow, "Reading Otherwise," 119. See also Roberts and Giles, "Mapping Nonfiction Narrative," 100–117.

[5] Wilson, Reading Narrative Journalism. The site is now "publically facing"—online, at no cost.

[6] MediaKron, "An Online Toolkit for Digital Curation and Storytelling," homepage. The platform was created by Tim Lindgren and Brad Mering of Boston College.

[7] To be specific: In RNJ, for example, so-called parallax scrolling is restricted to pop-up marginal annotation, and no hyperlink or video or illustrative exercise automatically interrupts the instructive text. Instead, such elements are merely supplements, and often "hidden" unless the user "hovers over" and clicks on the element with the cursor. The design principle reflects the awareness that interactive media can actually disrupt the immersive experience—and perhaps thwart simple intellectual engagement—an argument that has been cited in studies of digital reading; see, for instance, Dowling, "Toward a New Aesthetic," 106, 108; Giles and Hitch, "Multimedia Features," 76, 86.

[8] Yagoda, *About Town,* 133.

[9] cf. Dowling, "Toward a New Aesthetic," 109.

[10] "Reading" is used here in what may seem a traditional sense—not, for instance, as following eye-movements, or thinking about reading situations, or contrasting reading between and across print forms. My usage is closer to that described by Rita Felski: "In the act of reading, we encounter fresh ways of organizing perception, different patterns and models, rhythms of rapprochement and distancing, relaxation and suspense, movement and hesitation. We give form to our existence . . . ," *The Limits of Critique,* 176. Contrast Marino, "Reading Screens." The emphasis on form and perception is not intended to exclude other reading practices—e.g., contextualization or "resisting" readings (e.g., feminist readings).

[11] By "reading," similarly, Dow seems to suggest that his meaning is, in part, how scholars typically apply received literary categories and approaches to a text to which they have also granted journalistic status and authority, 119–20. My taxonomy of four different reading modes is therefore meant, in part, to supplement Dow's principal focus by including the field's interests in audience demographics, the production of texts (including reporting and editorial practices), and ethics regarding human subjects.

[12] On this byplay between witnessing and retrospect, see Zelizer, "On 'Having Been There'," 408–28.

[13] Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*. The documentary I typically use is Legere's "Immigrant Reflections: Three Boston College Service Workers Share Their Stories," housed at Boston College. A brief synopsis of a related exercise is posted on the IALJS site, Wilson, "What Do We Mean by 'The Story'? A Workshop."

[14] See Stange, "Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture," 274–303, for an exemplary account of Riis's practices.

[15] The place of "critique" in the humanities is, generally, under reexamination of late; see, for instance, the nine-article, special theory and methodology section, in response to Felski's book. *PMLA*, On Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, 331–91.

[16] Marino, "Reading Screens," 147. Here, I am referring to the testimonies gathered in Marino's "Reading Screens." See also, Felski's exploration of equating absorption with naiveté, and emphasizing cognition over pleasure, 176. John Hartsock also writes extensively on the subject of imaginative engagement in reading in *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*.

[17] Greenberg, "Slow Journalism"; and Greenberg, "Slow Journalism in the Digital Fast Lane," 381–93.

[18] Kovach and Rosensteil, *Elements of Journalism*, 72ff.

[19] Paradoxically—and this again was an informing idea in RNJ—"realism" is often a mode defined by this very covering over of work processes and subject relations. For a discussion of how trade reviewing customarily obscures the importance of aesthetics *in* interpretation, see, Wilson, "The Chronicler."

[20] See, for instance, Giles and Hitch, "Multimedia Features," 78.

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