



Students in Ryan Marnane's Introduction to Literary Studies course at Bryant University, in Smithfield, Rhode Island, use Google cardboard and HP VR Headsets to explore 360-degree immersive narratives. Concluding a unit on literary journalism, students explore how various media, such as print, podcast, HTML-interactive, and virtual reality, impact audiences' experience and understanding of information in narrative form, culminating with a series of 360-degree immersive narratives from the *New York Times*.

## *Teaching/Digital LJ . . .*

### From Print to 360-Degree Immersive: On Introducing Literary Journalism across Media

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the author's pedagogical approach to narrative and, in particular, literary journalism across a wide variety of media (print, podcast, HTML-interactive, and 360-degree immersive) in first-year literary studies courses, as well as upper-level American literature, environmental humanities, and critical theory seminars. The method for both this essay and the teaching is qualitative and interdisciplinary, drawing upon literary studies, critical pedagogy, and philosophy, as well as history of technology, media studies, and the environmental humanities. The essay begins with a brief overview of the first assignment for Introduction to Literary Studies, wherein students listen to their favorite musical album in its entirety. The essay then frames four media explored throughout the unit to both creatively experience and critically examine literary journalism. Each medium explored in the seminar (and this essay) is accompanied by worksheets students complete, with scholarly sources also brought into the conversation. After working through print-based literary journalism, audio, HTML-interactive, and 360-degree immersion, the conclusion comprises a brief overview of student survey responses that express both the positive learning experience that VR/360-degree immersion has provided, as well as students' expressed desire to learn how to create 360-degree narratives.

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinary – teaching – experimental pedagogy – narrative – literary journalism – mixed media

This essay is written from the perspective of teaching a wide variety of courses under the umbrella of interdisciplinary literary studies and the environmental humanities. The courses include Introduction to Literary Studies, English Composition, Introduction to Environmental Humanities, Environmental Justice, Studies in Narrative, Interdisciplinary Studies in Technology and Science, and Contemporary Literature. In each of these seminars, narrative functions as the main vehicle for exploring course content, with literary journalism built into curricula as both supplementary and primary exhibit texts—it is all just a matter of what the course goals and learning outcomes happen to be. The argument for this essay, informed by training in interdisciplinary humanities, is that regardless of course content—from English composition, nature writing, and the novel, to the philosophy of technology and bioethics—is that exhibit texts can and ought to be read in tandem with current news feeds and the collective cultural moment: “What are the stakes,” students are asked to ponder, “of this particular text and its applications outside this classroom?” Literary journalism, as a form of reportage that employs narrative techniques more commonly associated with fiction, remains uniquely suited for bridging gaps between class content and contemporary, real-world applications.

A recurring concern for many teachers of the narrative arts is that reading comprehension appears quite low and often manifests as a resistance to sustained reading.<sup>1</sup> Because reading makes up the majority of the workload, focus must be kept on: (a) demystifying reading as a practice outside of everyday, non-academic life (framing close reading strategies and comprehensive narrative techniques as vehicles for success across disciplines and outside the classroom); and (b) presenting some practical reading strategies that students can adopt immediately.

### **Day One: “Reading Is Hard”**

After students look over the assignments and grading criteria, there is a collective realization that the course has a substantial amount of reading. In literature courses, most students appear intimidated by the reading load (anywhere from thirty to sixty pages per week in Introduction to Literature, for instance). Once the readings, course goals, and objectives are outlined and discussed, there is the inevitable pause for questions about the curriculum. After a couple of seconds of silence, the tone becomes more direct: “Who here is concerned about the amount of reading?” Without fail, more than a third of the class’s hands go up, no matter the students’ major or the course. What concerns do they have?

“Reading is hard.”

“I’m just not good at it.”

“Boring. I get bored. Especially when I don’t like what I’m reading.”

“I read very slow.”

“I have to reread a lot in order to understand what it all means.”

The reply is firm, and the dialogue becomes personal: “This is all good. Because I agree with each of you: reading *is* hard. I too read slowly. And yes, I often have to reread to understand what it all means.”

It takes a moment for them to realize no one is being facetious, followed by a discussion grounded in the overwhelming volume of stimuli our brains process at any given time, along with the paralyzing attention economy we are currently enmeshed in. Then comes the next question: “If you’re not good at reading, what then are you good at?”

“Golf,” says one student.

“Video games,” another.

“Math,” from the back corner.

“Sleeping!”

Responses are shouted and mumbled until, inevitably, one student utters the phrase this seemingly discursive discussion has been heading toward all along:

“I’m good at listening to music.”

Collective nods of agreement.

Pause.

The air settles.

“Who else here is good at listening to music?”

Without a beat, most hands shoot up into the air.

“Okay, then. Let’s start the semester off with an assignment you’re all good at. Here’s your homework for the night: listen to your favorite album. Okay?”

The response is mostly expressed with curious smiles and perplexed head tilts.

“I mean this quite literally. Instead of assigning a short reading for next class, you are required to listen to your favorite album in its entirety. No reading. Just listening. Pretty easy, right? Go to the library, sit at your desk, maybe lie on your bed or sit on a park bench—wherever you’d normally settle into reading—and instead of opening a page, simply put in your headphones and *listen* to your *favorite* album.”

“But there’s a caveat here. You must *actually listen* and do nothing other than listen. Put your phone on airplane mode, disconnect from Wi-Fi, and have no other electronic devices or media around: No Facebook, no Instagram, no social media whatsoever. No chatting with friends, no doing other homework. Simply sit and listen, from start to finish, to your favorite album. And come to class with a 200-word reflection on your experience: Was it difficult? Were you able to focus on the music and not be distracted?”

At what point, if any, did you forget that you were supposed to be listening and find yourself daydreaming? How much of the album's content, after one close listen, can you recall?"

Most students struggle with the exercise and return disgruntled, frustrated, concerned. Reactions are mixed, but there's often a handful of students who admittedly did not complete the assignment, succumbing instead to the allure of their cell phones, social media accounts, or the anxiety of having additional homework to do, figuring they could do both in tandem. The lesson here is simple: If students have difficulties listening to their favorite album, how can they expect to be "good at reading" when most, if not all, the assignments they will receive throughout their tenure at university will seemingly not be nearly as captivating and personable?

"Reading, for many of us, is like going to the gym," they are told. "Both working out and reading are difficult, each requiring discipline and repetition to see the effects and reap the benefits of either. Second, the act of lifting weights does not build muscle but rather tears it; muscle is built in the recovery process, when one supplies the body with nutrients and slumber.

"Reading, like lifting weights, is surely difficult, but when done correctly—that is, closely and attentively and with sustained practice—will tear the muscles of the brain. This is good. Because reflection, discussion, and writing are the required nutrients for the heavy lifting of reading."<sup>2</sup>

As briefly demonstrated above and further detailed in what follows, this pedagogy is grounded in fostering intrinsic educational motives and active participatory learning—not merely teaching *to* students, but also thinking *with* and learning *from* them. The argument is that students will focus a bit more on close and sustainable reading practices, not because their instructor tells them it is important, but rather because they see for themselves the benefits of sustained, close reading in other facets of their lives: From actively listening to a lecture, to preparing for a meeting, to, well, perhaps one day being able to truly listen to their favorite album without being distracted.

Second, as this essay is about teaching literary journalism, the lesson plans and worksheets that follow demonstrate how literary journalism can be an active, fluid, and dynamic form that continues to ebb and flow in tandem with both current news cycles and advancements in digital reading technology—not so easily divided from students' own digital and personal lives outside the classroom setting. The courses are descriptive, not prescriptive, encouraging students to become part of the meaning-making process with hands-on, scholarship-grounded activities that challenge old assumptions about what is and is not literary while also remaining open, always, to new possibilities of what narrative and literary journalism *might* mean in an age of increasing re-

mediation (via audio and multimedia technology) of the written word. The seminars are not concerned with framing the ambiguity and nuances of the form and the varying terminology associated with literary journalism, because these are primarily non-specialist students. The objectives and goals differ from those for teaching a magazine feature writing class to a group of upper-level journalism students. In any case, the hope here is to suggest some new strategies to adopt—for introducing the form in the classroom via emerging digital reading, listening, viewing, and virtual-immersive technologies.

### **Teaching Literary Journalism across Media**

For the past three years, a wide variety of immersive narrative media—print, audio, video, HTML-interactive, and 360-degree—have been introduced into the various classes mentioned above. Moving from print texts to 360-degree immersive, students set out to explore how both conventional and emerging media impact audiences' experiences and understanding of information differently. This is true of both fiction and nonfiction narratives. Moreover, when focusing on literary journalism, students explore how various media adhere to, expand, and outright omit the characteristics most commonly associated with the form.

Introduction to Literary Studies is one of a series of standard university first-year liberal arts courses wherein students strengthen their capacities to think critically, communicate clearly, and learn to harness the basic set of tools for reading, analyzing, and writing about literary texts. The course is divided into two major units: fiction and nonfiction, with the former split evenly between the novel, short stories, and drama, and the latter, while covering a wide variety of nonfiction forms, focuses principally on literary journalism across varying media. The learning objectives for the six-week nonfiction unit are: Students will obtain—

1. The capacity to differentiate between various modes of nonfiction narratives including, (a) conventional journalism, (b) literary journalism, and (c) creative nonfiction;
2. An understanding of literary journalism as a mode of narrative discourse fusing both reportage and rhetorical storytelling techniques;
3. An understanding of how conventional and emerging media impact audience experience and understanding of narrative—and information—differently;
4. An experience with 360-immersive literary journalism in tandem with critical insight into the medium's potential to draw upon narrative techniques while also maintaining the truth-telling covenants of conventional journalism.

- Literary journalism “is a form of nonfiction writing that adheres to all of the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of conventional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction. In short, it is journalism as literature.”<sup>1</sup>
  - “Among the shared characteristics of literary journalism are immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people...and accuracy. Literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.”<sup>2</sup>
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i. Immersion reporting

ii. Complicated structures

iii. Character development

iv. Symbolism

v. Voice

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Roiland, “By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism,” *Literary Journalism Studies* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2015, 71. (9/15/16 – [http://ialjs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/LJS-v7i2-60-89-Roiland\\_HYPERLINKED-1.pdf?6b8609](http://ialjs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/LJS-v7i2-60-89-Roiland_HYPERLINKED-1.pdf?6b8609))

<sup>2</sup> Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Northwestern University Press, 2008), 6-7.

**Figure 1.** Characteristics of Literary Journalism Worksheet

The introduction to the form begins with readings of Christopher Wilson's *Reading Narrative Journalism* and select chapters from Norman Sims's *True Stories*.<sup>3</sup> Once the basic terms and a working historical context have been established, discussions dive into any one of the many print texts that align with section themes and learning outcomes: for example, from John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (both books are included in the Introduction to Literary Studies, Environmental Humanities, and American Literature courses) to David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster," Kathryn Schulz's "The Really Big One," and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof" (included in both Introduction to Literary Studies and Studies in Narrative curricula).<sup>4</sup> Students first read and annotate, and then collaborate on in-class group work, wherein they fill out worksheets (Fig. 1) that ask them to identify how the authors use various characteristics of the form outlined by Sims (including complicated plot structure and character development, symbolism, voice, and accuracy) along with a working definition from Josh Roiland.<sup>5</sup>

Once the characteristics of the form and particular storytelling techniques used by author(s) via print have been identified, students are introduced to the next medium of exploration: podcasts. The initial listening experience is 2017's *S-Town*, which broke "new podcasting ground by being the first podcast to function much like a nonfiction novel," according to Nic Dobija-Nootens in the *LA Review of Books*.<sup>6</sup> Students work toward applying the characteristics found in print to this audio version of the form (Fig. 2). Released in its entirety on March 28, 2017, and downloaded a record-breaking ten million times in four days, *S-Town* tells the story of John B. McLemore, resident of Woodstock, Alabama (aka, "Shit Town, Alabama—hence the podcast's name), an antiquarian horologist and self-described "citizen of the world," nevertheless trapped in the static South: "I'm in an area that just hasn't advanced, for lack of a better word," McLemore tells Brian Reed, the narrator and guide through the podcast's divergent, seven-chapter narrative.<sup>7</sup>

While complicated plot structure and use of symbols are evident throughout *S-Town*, students struggle with the characteristics of voice and immersion, often conflating the literal voice of the narrator with the theoretical voice of Brian Reed himself, that is, how he *sounds* rather than analyzing his narrative approach to the story itself. Students then return to their engagement with any one of the print articles to discuss voice in greater detail. Moreover, as many readers of *LJS* are likely familiar with, students are quick to mistake immersion for their own inner-ear immersion of hearing a story unfold rather than, as immersion reporting is most often framed, via the narrator's being immersed in the very environment that is being reported on.



***S-Town***

**Hosted by Brian Reed**

**Part I: Form and Nomenclature**

“Among the shared characteristics of literary journalism,” writes Norman Sims, “are immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people...and accuracy. Literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.”<sup>1</sup>

- With the above definition in mind – in tandem w/ the license to apply the characteristics of the form to various mediums, including film and audio – would you situate *S-Town* as a form of audio narrative journalism? YES or NO
- Support your answer by exploring the below characteristics of the form

Immersion reporting:

Complicated structures:

Symbolism:

Character development:

Voice:

Focus on ordinary people:

Accuracy:

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*. Northwestern University Press, 2008. 8.

**Figure 2.** *S-Town* Literary Journalism Worksheet 1

Again, students return to previous engagements with print literary journalism to reorient to how they frame their exploration of audio, exploring both possibilities and limitations within the form and respective media. Students are warned that moving from medium to medium can feel like a roller coaster with loops, continually circling back to where they have been in order to advance forward.

Following an assessment of the podcast's structure, character development, and other characteristics of the form, students return to their engagement with Wilson's *Reading Narrative Journalism*. Wilson describes "Reading in 4-D," which stands for the four dimensions of analyzing narrative journalism, which are (1) reading for news content; (2) reading for the story form; (3) reading for the legwork (or, the journalist's own story); and (4) reading for the subject.<sup>8</sup> Students are required to connect this 4-D framework to any one scene from the podcast, as well as to both Lindsay Morton's "The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism" and Sven Birkerts's "Close Listening: The Metaphysics of Reading an Audio Book" (Fig. 3).

Morton's article, published in *Literary Journalism Studies* in Spring 2018, frames the historical and ethical dimensions of imagination (not to be mistaken for "invention") in the literary journalistic tradition. Students are first introduced to Morton's work during their engagement with print literary journalism and continue to apply her arguments to all media throughout the exploration of literary journalism. Birkerts's "Close Listening," published in *Harper's* magazine in 1993, is an epistemological exploration of audio hermeneutics in an age of increasing audiobook consumption. It provides students with a framework for thinking about (a) the relationship between oral storytelling and print narratives, with a focus on the continued growth and popularity of audiobooks and podcasts, and (b) shifting Morton's exploration of imagination *in* literary journalism toward a reflection of imagination in the *reception* thereof. Birkerts writes:

Reading is different from listening, yes, but in listening's limitations I have found unexpected pleasures. When you read, both eye and ear are engaged; when you listen, the eye is free. Slight though the freedom may seem, it can declare itself resoundingly. The listener can attain a peculiar exaltation—a vivid sense of doubleness, of standing poised on a wire between two different realities.<sup>10</sup>

Participatory learning, as noted above, takes precedence in introductory seminars. And after providing insight into not only *S-Town*, but also Morton and Birkerts's varied arguments and frameworks, students are tasked with making new and innovative connections between all three to determine how to best engage with the exhibit text itself. Moreover, students are given agency

*S-Town*

Hosted by Brian Reed

**Part II: Wilson, “Reading in 4-D,” *Reading Narrative Journalism***

Reading for News Content

What’s the journalism component of *S-Town*?

Reading for the Story-Form

What’s the inner, stylistic architecture of *S-Town*?

Reading for the Legwork (or, the journalist’s own story)

How does Brian Reed incorporate legwork into *S-Town*?

Reading for the Subject

Who is the “subject” of *S-Town*?

**Part III: Connecting Arguments to Exhibits**

Morton, “The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism”

Choose one passage from Morton’s article (w/ page #) and connect it to any one scene in *S-Town*.

Birkerts, “Close Listening Criticism: The Metaphysics of Reading an Audio Book”

Connect any one passage from Birkert’s article (w/ page #) to *S-Town*.

**Figure 3.** *S-Town* Literary Journalism Worksheet 2

to decide, for themselves and based on their own framework, whether or not *S-Town* qualifies as a work of literary journalism. However, as posed to students early on, the answer to the question “Is *S-Town* a work of literary journalism?” depends on both one’s understanding and approach to the form itself (in this case via Sims, Wilson, and Morton) as well as the working framework of what is and is not literary (in this case, via Birkerts). The framework is left open for students to interpret for themselves. The pedagogical concern here is not whether a documentary film, or podcast, or 360-degree narrative should be deemed literary journalism or not, but rather how students argue and support said claims one way or another. What texts are they drawing conclusions from and, moreover, how has the chosen framework informed their position? Is the imaginative capacity to listen and allow one’s eyes to roam freely unfavorable or constructive for information literacy and narrative engagement? What about when a transition is presented from audio alone to audio and video and text with HTML-interactive narratives concurrently, wherein reader agency ebbs and flows, based on the level of multimedia integration?

Once the *S-Town*/audio journalism segment concludes, students are presented with a series of HTML-interactive narratives, some of which have been explored in detail by David Dowling’s exceptional work on digital narrative journalism.<sup>11</sup> Students compare and contrast previous lessons in print and podcast to the addition of digital images and video, from the *New York Times*’s groundbreaking 2012 publication of “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” and 2015’s “Greenland Is Melting Away,” to the *Guardian*’s 2013 “Firestorm,” and the European Journalism Centre’s choose-your-own-adventure reportage game, “ReBuilding Haiti.”<sup>12</sup> To best frame the engagement with interactive literary journalism, and to provide students with additional materials to weave into their basket of literary journalism terminology, history, and applications, students then read Fiona Giles and Georgia Hitch’s “Multimedia Features as ‘Narra-descriptive’ Texts: Exploring the Relationship between Literary Journalism and Multimedia,”<sup>13</sup> which introduces students to the multimedia spectrum of literary journalism, comprising three levels of multimedia, each differentiated by the level of intrusion on reader’s imaginative autonomy (connected back, once again, to Morton’s work).

Giles and Hitch’s three terms are (1) multimedia enhanced, (2) multimedia integrated, and (3) multimedia interactive. Multimedia enhanced (for instance, “Snow Fall”), is when multimedia is secondary to the story; that is, when nonwritten media are not part of the story but rather situated alongside it (if removed, the narrative would remain intact).<sup>14</sup> In multimedia integrated (for instance, “Firestorm”), multimedia does not intrude on the

(Please circle select Exhibit)

“The Fight for Falluja,” Ben C. Solomon  
“The Displaced,” Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail  
“A Shifting Continent,” Graham Roberts  
“Remembering Emmett Till,” Audra D.S Burch

**Part II: Wilson, “Reading in 4-D,” *Reading Narrative Journalism***

Reading for News Content

What’s the journalism component of select exhibit?

Reading for the Story-Form

What’s the inner, stylistic architecture of select exhibit? Is it told via a complicated structure?

Reading for the Legwork (or, the journalist’s own story)

Is legwork incorporated into select exhibit? If so, how?

Reading for the Subject

Who or what is the “subject” of select exhibit?

**Part III: Connecting Arguments to Exhibits**

Morton, “The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism”

Choose one passage from Morton’s article (w/ page #) and connect it to any one scene from select exhibit:

Giles and Hitch, “Multimedia Features as “Narra-descriptive” Texts: Exploring the Relationship between Literary Journalism and Multimedia”

Connect any one passage from Giles and Hitch’s article (w/ page #) to any one scene from select exhibit:

**Figure 4.** 360-Degree Immersive Literary Journalism Worksheets

(Please circle select Exhibit)

"The Fight for Falluja," Ben C. Solomon  
 "The Displaced," Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail  
 "A Shifting Continent," Graham Roberts  
 "Remembering Emmett Till," Audra D.S Burch

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Given the continuing changes in technology, multimedia literary journalism will further evolve. Hybridity might itself become a characteristic of multimedia literary journalism, and where there is a critical current of written narrative, finer distinctions between sub-genres of multimedia literary journalism could be identified.

— Giles and Hitch, "Literary Journalism and Multimedia"

**WORKING QUESTIONS:** Can Virtual Reality journalism adhere to Giles and Hitch's framework of multimedia narrative journalism? Does multimedia storytelling enhance the narrative experience or deter the experience insofar as too much information blocks the imaginative processing integral to certain forms of storytelling?

**Part I: Form and Spectrums**

Does exhibit draw on narrative techniques while also remaining factual? If yes, what narrative techniques in particular? (e.g., emplotment, scene, characterization, symbolism, dramatic tension, etc.)

Grounded in Giles and Hitch, does exhibit source empower viewers imaginatively or does the multimedia intrude on one's imaginative autonomy?

With your above responses in mind, would you situate your select VR narrative on Giles and Hitch's spectrum? If not, why not? If yes, where:

*Literary Journalism Writing* ←-----X-----X-----X-----→ ?  
                                   Enhanced                  Integrated                  Interactive

- Please explain your answer (w/ Giles and Hitch as support)

reader's imaginative autonomy. Multimedia integrated, opposed to enhanced, includes media for which, if removed, the narrative would no longer make sense.<sup>15</sup> And lastly is multimedia interactive (for example, "ReBuilding Haiti"), for which, unlike enhanced or integrated, readers do not have agency to move freely around the narrative.<sup>16</sup> At this point in the seminar's engagement with both literary journalism and the various media in which one may encounter reportage of this style and range, more nuanced questions can become part of classroom discussions, even as the pedagogy moves toward 360-degree immersive narrative journalism:

1. What are the promises and perils of advancements in digital technology and, by mere extension, methods of both production and reception of narrative?
2. Does multimedia storytelling enhance the narrative experience or deter from the experience, insofar as too much information blocks the imaginative processing integral to certain forms of storytelling?
3. How might augmented and virtual reality challenge and reconstitute how a person receives both conventional and narrative journalism?

Exploring VR and 360-degree narratives, the first day begins with Google Cardboard, the virtual reality platform whereby a personal smart phone is placed inside a box and then worn over the user's face. Students bring their own headphones and fully charged cell phones. Whether Google Cardboard or high-tech HP headsets and backpack workstations, now that students have been immersed in four weeks of exploring how the form translates from print to audio, and from print/audio and print to HTML-interactive, they are prepared to examine how the form is being expanded from HTML-interactive to 360-degree immersive.

The main objective is to investigate how (and if at all) 360-degree immersive narratives can draw upon narrative techniques while also maintaining the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism. Students assess both the burdens and blessings of 360-degree immersive storytelling and compare the two forms to previously explored media and scholarship. Students are encouraged to look over four *New York Times* VR/AR narratives and choose one to experience in the full VR headsets. These narratives include: (1) "The Fight for Falluja" by Ben C. Solomon; (2) "The Displaced," cowritten and directed by Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail; (3) "A Shifting Continent" by Graham Roberts; and (4) "Remembering Emmett Till," narrated by Audra D. S. Burch.<sup>17</sup>

Once a text is chosen, students decide how they're going to frame and engage with their selected narrative and, as their first task, to use Giles and Hitch's spectrum as a guide for interpreting how reader agency functions with

full-immersion narratives (as opposed to, as Giles and Hitch's article explores, HTML-interactive narratives). This is an opportunity for students to take an existing theoretical framework and apply it to something other than its intended content—to create something new, original; that is, to be on the cutting edge of not only new technology but how they might engage with it on a critical and scholarly level.

As with HTML-interactive, audio, and print, following the experience of 360-immersion, the students proceed to fill out the VR Literary Journalism Worksheet (Fig. 4), which begins with the following questions: Does exhibit draw on narrative techniques while also remaining factual? If yes, what narrative techniques in particular (emplotment, scene, characterization, symbolism, dramatic tension, etc.)? Once students have explored the basic characteristics of the form as applied to 360-degree immersive narratives, they are then asked to situate 360-degree immersive narrative journalism on Giles and Hitch's spectrum of multimedia literary journalism (Fig. 4). As a working question: "Grounded in Giles and Hitch, does exhibit source empower viewers imaginatively or does the multimedia intrude on one's imaginative autonomy?"

The most common observation from students and subsequent class discussions is grounded in the lack of imaginative agency a viewer has when immersed in 360-degree narratives. In other words, as the culminating lesson from experiencing 360-degree narrative journalism, students can deduce for themselves the peculiar promise of print literary journalism as it relates to reader engagement levels. It is not that one medium is superior to another but

### Virtual reality was a positive addition to my learning experience.

65 responses

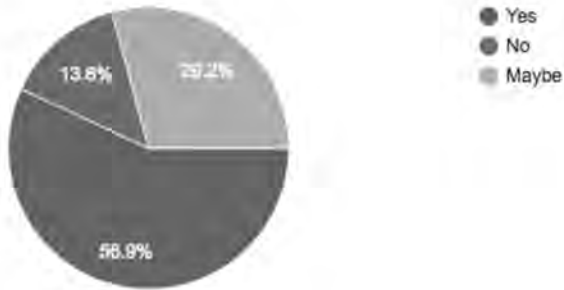


**Graph 1.** Virtual reality as a positive learning experience where 90.8% of 65=59, Yes; 9.2% of 65=5.98, Somewhat (Google Form survey, 05/02/19).



### I would like to learn how to create a virtual reality experience.

65 responses



**Graph 2.** Virtual reality experience leading to a desire to learn how to create virtual reality, where 56.9% of 65=36.9, Yes; 29.2% of 65=19.98, Maybe; and 13.8% of 65=8.97, No (Google Form survey, 05/02/19).

### More classes should include a virtual reality experience

65 responses



**Graph 3.** Virtual reality experience creating a desire to have similar experiences for learning in other academic areas. 78.5% of 65=51, Yes; 16.9% of 65=10.9, Maybe; and 00.0% of 65=00.0, No (Google Form survey, 05/02/19).

rather, as students conclude as well, that each medium functions differently and carries with it a wide array of problems and possibilities for present and future storytelling.

A brief survey passed out after the 360-degree lesson shows that of the sixty-five student responses more than ninety percent of students found VR to be a positive addition to the learning experience (Graph 1), with less than fourteen percent of students *not* interested in learning how to create VR themselves (Graph 2). And an overwhelming majority of students thought VR ought to be further incorporated into curricula across disciplines (Graph 3).

### Conclusions: On the Subjunctive

The concluding argument is that, amid growing environmental crises in tandem with the increasing digitalization of the written word, teachers of narrative must not dismiss nonwritten narrative forms such as film, audio, and mixed media, but work to further incorporate various media of storytelling into an ever-widening field of study within the form of literary journalism. Literary journalism can play a major role in whatever medium the characteristics of the form present themselves, especially when addressing a wide variety of ecological and, by way of mere extension, escalating humanitarian crises.

As a thematic backdrop for most of the courses mentioned above, the effects of global warming, the vehicles and corporations that drive it, and those who are displaced, distressed, and traumatized in its wake, take precedence. It is through literary journalism, semester after semester, that students most palpably respond to growing concerns of global warming and its second-order effects on both human and non-human species. Whereas environmental journalism, by mere professional and industry practice, shies away from the subjective, literary journalism remains well suited for framing the precarious place life in a threatened world rests by embracing the nuances of human subjectivity and emotion. Turning to Connery's "A Third Way to Tell the Story": "[Literary journalism does not] simply present facts, but the 'feel' of the facts . . . 'a rendering of felt detail'."<sup>18</sup>

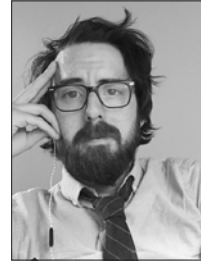
Students are reminded that while the sciences provide data framing what *is*, the humanities—and in this particular instance, literary journalism—renders these data into felt detail, framing what this *is* might *mean*. If the sciences and conventional journalism are thought of as embodying the grammatical mood of the indicative (the facts—the what *is*), then the humanities can be thought of as the grammatical mood of the subjunctive (how these facts might feel—what this *is* might *mean*). The humanities have a vital role to play in the fragile place life holds in a threatened world, and literary journalism remains

uniquely suited for telling the tale. The above reflections are not merely literary concerns, nor environmental concerns alone, but rather a fusion of the two, culminating as a moral imperative stance concerning all disciplines and life—the humanities and STEM, human and nonhuman species alike—each together inhabiting this stark, ecologically threatened world.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The question of developing reading skills is similarly explored (via first-year writing skills) in research that shows the increasing number of students who enter college without the needed writing skills to succeed. Neely et al., “The Write Stuff.” 141–58.
- <sup>2</sup> And, in a final moment of metaphorically driven, dad-joke humor, I tell them, “That’s right, this class is your protein shake. Let’s blend.”
- <sup>3</sup> Wilson, *Reading Narrative Journalism*; Sims, *True Stories*.
- <sup>4</sup> Hersey, *Hiroshima*; Carson, *Silent Spring*; Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”; Schulz, “The Really Big One”; Ghansah, “A Most American Terrorist.”
- <sup>5</sup> Sims, *True Stories*, 6–7; Roiland, “By Any Other Name,” 71.
- <sup>6</sup> Dobija-Nootens, “*S-Town*: When a Podcast Becomes a Book,” para. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Reed, *S-Town*, Chapter 1, 00:07:01. <https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/1>.
- <sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Reading Narrative Journalism*; See also, Wilson, “Reading in 4-D,” 174–89.
- <sup>9</sup> Suggested lesson pairs Schulz’s “The Really Big One,” 51–59, with Morton’s “The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism,” 92–111, and Birkert’s “Close Listening,” 86–91.
- <sup>10</sup> Birkerts, 91.
- <sup>11</sup> See Dowling, “Toward a New Aesthetic of Digital Literary Journalism,” and his 2019 *Immersive Longform Storytelling*.
- <sup>12</sup> Branch, “Snow Fall”; Davenport et al., “Greenland Is Melting Away”; Henley, “Firestorm”; Maurin et al., “ReBuilding Haiti.”
- <sup>13</sup> Giles and Hitch, “Multimedia Features as ‘Narra-descriptive’ Texts,” 74–91.
- <sup>14</sup> Giles and Hitch, 78–81.
- <sup>15</sup> Giles and Hitch, 81–83.
- <sup>16</sup> Giles and Hitch, 83–86.
- <sup>17</sup> Solomon, “The Fight for Falluja”; Solomon and Ismail, “The Displaced”; Roberts, “A Shifting Continent”; Shastri et al., “Remembering Emmett Till.”
- <sup>18</sup> Connery, “A Third Way to Tell the Story,” 6.

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