Longform Storytelling:
Multi-Media Perspectives

Immersive Longform Storytelling: Media, Technology, Audience
by David O. Dowling. New York: Routledge, 2019. Paperback, 208 pp., USD $39.95.

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Economic and aesthetic goals rarely converge, especially in journalism. But technological developments both in the production and consumption of news have raised the importance of immersive experiences for journalism. The more immersive the journalism, the higher its quality, and the more profitable it may be, especially in this disaggregated world that has taken the "mass" out of mass media. As David O. Dowling writes in *Immersive Longform Storytelling: Media, Technology, Audience*, quoting Henry Jenkins, "old media do not die; they converge" (50).

Dowling argues that we are experiencing what Dwayne Bray describes as a "golden age of documentary" (1), which literary journalism is particularly well positioned to take advantage of. Dowling conceives of literary journalism as encompassing more than books and magazine articles; it is "at the nexus of cinema, radio, and print, spawning newly minted genres capable of immersing mobile audiences in ways previously imaginable only in IMAX theaters" (2). He rebuts those, like Nicholas Carr, who decry what Dowling summarizes as the shallow, "manic Twitter-driven news cycle and its attendant superficial online reading practices" (1), using studies showing that "digital journalism has sparked a renaissance in deep reading and viewing associated with the literary mind" (3). Further, Dowling makes the stronger claim that "the digital ecosystem now . . . fulfills the promise of the New Journalism" (10) by reporting on "subjects and events from a deeper perspective, anatomizing them scientifically and psychologically, driving home both fact and the drama of lived human experience" (15). As long as you have a broad conception of literary journalism, Dowling argues that today is the best of times.

I've long held that much of today's most deeply reported, best told literary journalism is being produced in audio, so I was intrigued to see Dowling extend that claim to multimedia forms like online reading, interactive texts, on-demand television, native advertising, and 360 video. Each gets a chapter, the combination of which provides the reader an excellent overview of the way each form is testing journalism's technological, ethical, and aesthetic limits.
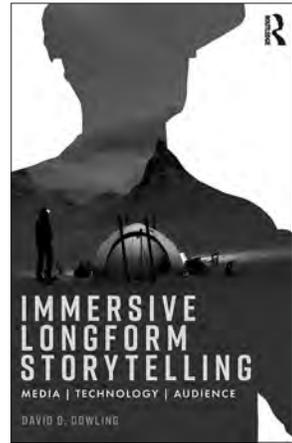
Chapter one focuses on the *New York Times*'s 2012 publication of "Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek." Although it was the most high-profile work of enhanced digital journalism (it won a Pulitzer and a Peabody), it was hardly the first. Dowling explains the differences between "Snow Fall" and clunky, earlier efforts, which were little more than the conventional print article ("shovelware") combined with the flashy tech du jour. "Unlike the conventional news template, its multimedia were not indiscriminately tacked on, but carefully integrated into the narrative world as a system of mutually reinforcing referents" (32). He uses "Snow Fall" to explore the way the latest iteration of multimedia immersion has upended conventional assumptions, such as the "lone wolf reporter." Dowling elaborates on "the increasingly collaborative nature of online narrative journalism" (29), which he likens to "film production" (30). In the new workflow, one often *starts* with the "multimedia elements and digital design" (34) rather than the writing. For example, the *Guardian* began its feature, "NSA Files: Decoded," by assembling the "multimedia elements first, leaving the writing of the text for last" (20).

In chapter two, Dowling takes on the claim that the internet and other technology have dumbed-down journalism content and diminished consumers' attention spans. In fact, he argues, the opposite is the case, and that "the latest wave of online reading communities has harnessed hypersocial participatory internet culture for sustained focus on long immersive works" (49). Social media between the distribution and discussion of longform stories (55), as well as new modes of media consumption, such as "radial reading," Jerome McGann's term for readers "delving deeply within the text and re-surfacing to access supporting data to aid and enrich interpretation" (59). Dowling contends that the new online reading experiences are more immersive than distracting, a " 'cognitive container,' "which holds the reader's attention through embedded multimedia elements rather than hyperlinks that send the reader out of text" (57). He cites eye tracking studies (58) showing that users are as drawn to text as they are to video—a claim that will surprise an industry increasingly turning toward video. Dowling reminds us of an essential truth: for all the chaos of the journalism business, there has never been a time when more people have consumed and discussed more journalism and literature. It is a phenomenon "reminiscent of the learned exchanges at coffee houses and bread-and-cheese clubs of the seventeenth century, carrying on the legacy of intellectual discussion and spirited debate with the benefit of online access to the richest data resources in media history, perhaps the most supreme gift of the digital age" (67–68).

Chapters three and four, about on-demand television and so-called native advertising, or advertorials, are weaker than the others. It is less clear how the explosion in the amount of available on-demand video via Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Apple represents an advance in immersive strategies. There is a lot more stuff to watch, but I'm not convinced that the ratio of good to bad quality has changed. Dowling's suggestion that "television narratives were shallower in the pre-digital era and evolved toward increasingly complex interwoven plot lines toward the end of the twentieth century" is intriguing, but never really explored (77). The *binge-watching* phenomenon says more about the consumer's ready access to content than the content

itself. And Dowling's claim that we shouldn't be concerned by brand-sponsored advertorial—"editorial content was always mediated by promotional discourse" (4); "much of the best journalistic reporting and writing now bears promotional functions" (5)—dismisses a complex issue too quickly. Simply employing the techniques of immersive journalism doesn't make the product journalism. The fact that longform marketing projects are "so well disguised as editorial content that they can commend viewer payment" (113) says more about economics than journalism.

The chapter on longform audio immersion is more satisfying because it addresses both the aesthetic and economic success of the medium. There was always plenty of nascent creativity in audio, but recent technical hardware innovations drive the podcast revolution. Digital recording and editing dramatically lowered production costs, the internet freed producers from radio stations, and Apple's iPod, iPhone, and iTunes allowed listeners to consume audio when and where they like (122–23). "With podcasting's dramatic growth, the once staid and remote bastion of public radio now finds itself at the epicenter of the digital ecosystem," he writes (117). It isn't just that there is so much more audio available, the form itself is in a "state of radical experimentation" (121), combining "traditional elements of news writing for longform radio with more latitude than ever for narrative creativity" (121). Like the best literary journalism, audio capitalizes on its qualities of voice and intimacy. "Passionate content renders a personal connection to establish a level of knowledge and trust between listener and narrator," writes Dowling, "one not seen since the unabashedly subjective work of such luminaries as Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion" (134).

The confluence of these developments allowed the 2014 podcast *Serial* to reach five million listeners in four weeks, compared to *This American Life*, the show that launched *Serial*, which took four years to reach one million listeners (116, 118). In 2017, *S-Town*, created by the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*, reached ten million listeners in four days (124).

Immersive Longform Storytelling's last two chapters cover, in sequence, interactive online documentary, and then, virtual reality and 360 video. These technologies have lagged behind streaming video and podcasting because they tether the viewer to equipment, whether it is a computer or an unwieldy set of virtual reality goggles. True, VR can transport and immerse the viewer to an unprecedented degree. But without subsidies from the manufacturers of the technical interfaces (Samsung, Facebook), few journalism organizations have made good use of them.

Dowling celebrates the autonomy these technologies grant the consumer, who is granted the freedom to ignore conventional journalism's narrative and explore. "The interactive user is immersed in the process of production, rather than consumption, of spatially oriented online media" (166); "the camera is in the hands of the user, as it were, who is free to view every shot of the film from any angle they choose" (170). Dowling discusses *Bear 71*, an online documentary that allows one to track grizzlies in Banff National Park. Engaging it, the user is as much the "creator" as those who designed the software. "While audio maintains narrative trajectory, open-world design encourages autonomous exploration through hundreds of thousands of pictures, clips, and images captured by motion-detector web cams revealing how

other tagged animals and humans encroach on the bear's territory and affect her life" (158). I don't doubt *Bear 71*'s immersive qualities, but I wonder whether it should be considered journalism, or even the "storytelling" in Dowling's title. At what point are the storyteller's intentions no longer relevant? When does a narrative—immersive or not—disintegrate into a snarl of dead-ends and databases?

In his conclusion, Dowling turns from the consumer's immersion to the producer's. Echoing arguments in favor of immersion journalism like Ted Conover's in *Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep*, Dowling celebrates the technique's transparency. "Rather than concealing the journalist's methods to render the subject from an omniscient perspective, storytelling from the vantage point of the immersed journalist brings the audience into the world of their subjectivity" (183). It is a needed reminder that a world that doesn't support reporters' ability to immerse themselves will have trouble convincing consumers to dive in alongside them.